

## CHAPTER III: Another Life

With the possible exception of Miguel de Unamuno, no other writer of the Generation of '98 was as deeply interested in the theme of death as Antonio Machado. Some critics have seen a similarity between Machado and Heidegger, noting that each showed an attitude of calm resignation toward the idea of death. Pablo de A. Cobos says that Machado had an attitude of "serene stoicism" toward the death of people he knew,<sup>1</sup> and Juan Ramón Jiménez states that the poet was one of the few people who were able to accept the idea of their own death: "As a poet of death, both in thought and in feeling, hour after hour, I have never known anyone like him who has been so prepared for death, who has been able to balance the pros and cons of living... All our life normally consists of fearing death and trying to distance it from ourselves, or to distance ourselves from it. Antonio Machado recognized it in himself and was able to resign himself to it for the most part."<sup>2</sup> One might ask, therefore, if this calm acceptance of death was the result of his faith in the possibility of another life? Juan Ramón Jiménez seems to think so when he states that Machado "had mastered the secret of resurrection."<sup>3</sup> The poet's brother José also recognizes this faith when he says: "I once heard him say that although reason is not able to prove the continued existence of our spirit, intuition seems to affirm it."<sup>4</sup> Even though he cannot find rational proof of survival, we will see that Machado never loses his hope for another life. And this attitude was not limited to the period following the death of his beloved wife, Leonor; it was also present in his earliest poems, and it continued until the moment of his own death.

### 1. AFTERLIFE AS RENEWAL

Before we study the poems in which Machado refers to life after death, I will try to answer two questions regarding his opinion of death: 1) in what sense is death a reality?; and 2) what were his personal feelings about death?

#### THE DUALITY OF SUBSTANCE AND THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL

Without contradicting Machado's pantheistic conception of reality according to which the universe is "a single unique monad" of conscious energy, it is evident that he

---

<sup>1</sup> Pablo de A. Cobos, *Sobre la muerte en Antonio Machado* (Madrid: Ínsula, 1972), p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Juan Ramón Jiménez, "Españoles de tres mundos," *Sur*, X 79 (1941), pp. 9-10.

<sup>3</sup> Juan Ramón Jiménez, *Op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> José Machado, *Últimas soledades del poeta Antonio Machado (Recuerdos de su hermano José)* (Santiago de Chile, multigrafiado, 1958), p. 85.

was able to draw a distinction between spirit and matter; as an example of this feeling, he states in an autobiographical account published by Francisco Vega Díaz: "I am a believer in the existence of a spiritual reality that is opposed to the world of the senses."<sup>5</sup> In physical terms, then, death is indeed a reality; this is what Machado means when he speaks of the "drinking glass"—representing our physical body—in the following poem from "Proverbs and Songs":

You say nothing is lost?  
If this drinking glass breaks  
on me, I will never, ever  
drink from it again.<sup>6</sup>

And this is also what Juan de Mairena has in mind when he declares: "Death goes with us, it accompanies us in life; it is, as it were, a thing of our body" (OPP, p. 464). So by emphasizing the death of the physical body Machado implies that the soul is immortal, as Dámaso Alonso recognized when he comments on the passage from Mairena that was just quoted: "Here Machado confirms the possibility of believing in the duality of substance—body and soul—that constitute the being called man, thus raising the problem of the immortality of the soul without rejecting it. A possibility he not only does not reject, but also refuses to acknowledge that the problem even can be rejected."<sup>7</sup> And I repeat that the duality of substance does not contradict the concept of pantheism since the soul and the body are two manifestations of the same divine being.

## DEATH AND THE TWO MODES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Knowing that Machado distinguishes between spirit and matter also helps us understand what he means when he speaks of the relation between death and the two modes of consciousness: reason and intuition. Reason helps us understand the nature of material existence, but only our non-rational, intuitive consciousness permits us to know the spiritual reality which transcends the limits of our physical senses. This explains why reason denies the reality of life after death, while our intuition supports it. We already know that Machado's brother José had heard him express this opinion—"I once heard him say that although our reason is not able to prove the continued existence of the spirit, our intuition seems to affirm it"—and the poetic version of this idea is also expressed in poem XII:

---

<sup>5</sup> Francisco Vega Díaz, "A propósito de unos documentos autobiográficos inéditos de Antonio Machado," *Papeles de Son Armadáns*, LIV (1969), p. 70.

<sup>6</sup> Antonio Machado, *Obras, Poesía y Prosa*, 2ª Edición (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1973), CXXXVI, xliii, p. 221.

<sup>7</sup> Dámaso Alonso, "Muerte y trasmuerte en la poesía de Antonio Machado," *Revista de Occidente*, 5-6 (marzo y abril), p. 18.

Beloved, the breeze tells  
 of your pure white cloak...  
 My eyes will not see you;  
 my heart waits for you!  
 The wind brought me  
 your name in the morning;  
 the mountain repeats  
 the echo of your steps...  
 My eyes will not see you;  
 my heart waits for you!  
 In the gloomy towers  
 the bells are ringing...  
 My eyes will not see you;  
 my heart waits for you!  
 The blows of the hammer  
 on the black casket,  
 and the sound of the shovel  
 tell the location of the grave...  
 My eyes will not see you;  
 my heart waits for you! (OPP, p. 72).

In Machado's writing—both his poetry and his prose—the "beloved" represents that part of his soul with which he hopes to be reunited at the moment of death. This explains what is meant in the last two lines of each stanza where he talks to his soul about what will happen after his death. When they place his body in the "black casket," his eyes—a symbol of his rational self—will no longer see it in the world of matter: "My eyes will not see you." But his intuition, or his non-rational self symbolized by the heart, knows that his soul will continue to exist on another level of reality: "my heart waits for you."

Years later, the poet repeats the idea in a poem which describes his feelings about the death of his wife:

Hope tells me: one day  
 you will see her if you keep on waiting.  
 Desperation tells me:  
 only your bitterness remains.  
 Beat on, heart... Not everything  
 is swallowed by the ground! (OPP, p. 190).

What is real for the poet is the death of the body, as seen by the rational mind which is the cause of his "desperation." But the "hope" that his heart feels in moments of intuitive awareness makes him realize that the destruction of the body does not mean the loss of the soul: "Beat on, heart... Not everything / is swallowed by the ground." And now that we have evidence of his faith in the survival of the soul, we can finally begin to examine the poems where he speaks of life after death.

## ONE PURE MORNING

In several poems from *Solitude* and from *Solitude, galleries and other poems*, Machado describes the vision of a pure morning which will be the beginning of a new life

after his death. The best example of this luminous vision is found in poem XXI, where the poet is thinking once again about the moment of his own death:

The clock was striking twelve... like twelve  
blows of a shovel in the earth...  
..."My time!" I shouted. ...The silence  
answered: "Don't be afraid;  
you will not see the last drop fall  
that is trembling in the water clock.  
You will sleep for many hours yet  
on the old coast,  
and one pure morning you will find  
your boat tied to another shore" (OPP, p. 80).

The "silence"—the voice of his intuition that he hears when the rational mind is quiet—tells the poet he must not fear death because he will not feel it, and because his passing will not be the end of living. Then, it promises that after his death he will see the light of a new day when his soul begins a purer existence. When Dámaso Alonso comments on this poem, he says: "that morning and that arrival at a new shore are what the silence promises to him, and to all men. That is to say, there is no doubt that the poet imagines, believes, that there is something immortal in all human beings, and that that something waits for him in an extraordinary virginal purity—a new day, an unknown shore."<sup>8</sup>

Then, there is another group of poems where the same images—the "pure morning" and the "new day"—are used once again to represent the poet's faith in another life. Here is a quick look at some of these poems.

In the concluding lines of poem XVII, entitled "Horizon," the poet walks toward the "sunset"—the end of the day and, by extension, a symbol of death—and he feel the promise of a new beginning:

...And I heard the sound of my steps  
reverberate far away in the bleeding sunset,  
and beyond, the happy song of a new dawn (OPP, p. 76).

In poem XXVII the "afternoon" represents the end of life, which is also a beginning:

...The afternoon will still  
give a golden response to your prayer,  
and perhaps the zenith of a new day  
will diminish your solitary shadow (OPP, p. 83).

In poem XXXIV, when the poet listens to the voice of a "spring morning," there is another reference to the broken "drinking glass" representing the death of the physical body; the "morning" tells him to wait for the pure day of a new existence when the "luminous fairy" of his dreams will return to him the flowers from the "garden" of his divine origin:

---

<sup>8</sup> Dámaso Alonso, *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

But if you wait for the pure morning  
after the drinking glass is broken,  
perhaps the fairy will return your roses,  
and my heart, your lilies (OPP, p. 87).

Then, in poem LXX, the moment of death brings with it the promise of a paradisiacal renewal:

You know the secret galleries  
of the soul, the path of dreams,  
and the calm afternoon  
where they go to die... That is where  
the silent fairies of life wait for you,  
and one day they will take you to  
a garden of eternal springtime (OPP, p. 119).

Dámaso Alonso believes that these poems offer the vision of afterlife that is pagan, rather than the heaven of Christianity.<sup>9</sup> I agree that Machado was not thinking of the traditional concept of heaven, but rather than a pagan afterlife it seems more likely that he had in mind a different type of afterlife which I will discuss in the following chapter. And none of this means that Machado was not a Christian—his work shows that he was a sincere Christian, although perhaps not an orthodox one—but his belief was based on a tolerant attitude that accepts all true religions, precisely because he recognizes in them the same ideas that he saw in Christianity—those of the Christ, and not necessarily those of the ecclesiastical establishment.

## TWO PROBLEMATIC POEMS

Before we leave our study of Machado's early poems, I want to say something about two poems that some critics have mentioned as proof that the poet did not believe in life after death. The first is poem IV, "The burial of a friend," where the concluding lines offer some problems which have not always been resolved successfully:

...On the black casket were breaking  
the heavy, dusty clumps of earth...  
The wind carried a whitish breath  
out of the deep hole of the grave.  
"And you, without a shadow now, sleep and rest.  
A lasting peace to your bones...  
Definitely,  
sleep a true and tranquil dream" (OPP, p. 64).

What is the "whitish breath" which rises out of the grave? Is it only the dust from the broken clumps of earth, or is it also the soul that is beginning to recover its original purity after the death of the body? Could the phrase "without a shadow now" mean that the soul

---

<sup>9</sup> Dámaso Alonso, *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

has been freed from the imperfections of physical existence? And then, what is it that is definitely sleeping: is it the soul, or only the bones? It is possible that this poem is the product of a moment of pessimism when the poet's rational mind makes him doubt the possibility of survival. However, in view of the distinction between body and soul that we have seen in other poems, it is also possible that the poet wanted to say something more hopeful about the death of his friend. Perhaps he only referred to the death of the body—the "bones"—while he believes that the soul—the "whitish breath"—continued on toward the light of a new dawn.

Then, in poem LXXVIII Machado asks his soul if his individual consciousness, and with it the memory of his divine origin, will be lost at the moment of death:

Will the mysterious world die with you,  
and with it the memory  
of the purest breath of life,  
the white shadow of my first love...? (OPP, p. 123).

According to the concept of pantheism which is always present in the poet's thought, a small part of the absolute being took on new form when it manifested as the poet Antonio Machado. But he wants to know if the personal identity which contains the intimate memory of his divine origin will be erased with the death of his body. In this early poem he only asks, but in a later poem he offers an optimistic response to this question:

Memory of my loves,  
perhaps you should not tremble:  
when the ground swallows me,  
the ground will set you free (OPP, p. 820).

## 2. THE SOUL TRIUMPHS OVER DEATH

The faith in life after death that we have seen in some of Machado's early poems is the same as that which gives him strength at the tragic moment of his wife's death. "There is something immortal in us," Machado wrote in a letter to Unamuno shortly after her death, "that would like to die with the one who dies. Perhaps that is why God entered the world. Thinking of that gives me some consolation. Sometimes I have hope. A negative faith is also absurd... Anyway, today she lives on in me more than ever, and sometimes I am certain that I will again have her by my side" (OPP, p. 1,016).<sup>10</sup> This same hope is also expressed in the concluding lines of another poem where he talks about the death of Leonor:

...Live on, hope: who knows  
what the ground swallows up (CXXII, OPP, P. 191).

---

<sup>10</sup> Dámaso Alonso also mentions the death of Leonor and its effect on the attitude of the poet: "Machado feels—perhaps contrary to his upbringing and his usual habit of serenity—that something is growing inside of him, something like tenderness, like springtime, like faith in an afterlife that permits him to recover his child bride, his wife, his Leonor"; Op. cit., p. 18.

Since we really do not know what happens when we die and we have no actual proof that death is the end of life, it is absurd to accept a "negative faith." If reason cannot tell us, any explanation—positive or negative—is equally logical. Because of that, Machado does not hesitate to hope for a positive outcome.

Among all of Machado's poems, one that offers the strongest affirmation of the soul's immortality is poem CXLIX, "To Narciso Alonso Cortés, poet of Castile," written in 1914, two years after his wife's death. In the opening lines of this poem there is a powerful description of the corrosive effects of time on the world of physical existence:

Time wraps the heart of man in a subtle  
net, like the river fog that enshrouds a grove of trees.  
Don't look: everything passes; forget: nothing returns!  
And man's heart is filled with anguish... Nothing remains!...

But time is an illusion of logical thinking, the veil through which we are forced to perceive the ultimate reality. And here, as on other occasions, Machado is not willing to accept the limits of logic—"We trust / that there is no truth / in anything we think"—and he turns once again to "poetic thought":

But the poet confronts inexorable time,  
like David, the fierce gigantic Philistine...

And though its existence has been put in doubt during the age of reason, that which permits him to triumph over time is the *soul*:

The soul. The soul triumphs—that poor Cinderella  
who in this vain, cruel century, is confined  
to this world, wandering neglected and starved!—  
over the angel of death and the waters of forgetfulness.  
Its strength opposes time like stone arches of a bridge  
resist the impetus of the river's current;  
underneath it the roaring torrent carries  
the muddy waters onward toward the sea.  
Poet, only the soul is an anchor on the shore... (OPP, pp. 241-242).

The soul, which is part of absolute being, is not affected by the disintegration of time, and its permanence allows the poet to trust in the promise of eternal life.

In February of 1915, Machado learns of the death of Francisco Giner de los Ríos, his teacher in the Free Institution of Learning, and also a friend of his family. He then writes an article (this composition serves as the basis for a poem which is mentioned in the following chapter) in which he declares emphatically that he does not believe in the death of his former teacher: "Several days ago he passed on to an unknown destination. I believe he went toward the light. I will never believe in his death. Only those shadowy beings who are not really alive, actually vanish forever."<sup>11</sup> No one knows where

---

<sup>11</sup> From "Don Francisco Giner de los Ríos," in *Antonio Machado: Antología de su prosa*, Volume I, "Cultura y Sociedad" (Madrid: Edicusa, 1970), PP. 154-155.

Don Francisco has gone, but Machado feels, or intuits, that he is moving toward the light, the "divine light" that is the destiny of every soul who has finally been purified.

Then, in another article which was written almost 25 years later, Machado talks about the death of his friend, Don Blas Zambrano. He describes his last encounter with Don Blas in Barcelona and says that on this occasion he noticed some signs of old age. Then he continues: "It seemed to me, nevertheless, that his real self—that indefinable something which allows us to identify and recognize a person—not only had not been diminished, but seemed more solid than ever... And now I am thinking that if that is what Don Blas brought with himself into the world and what he still had as he approached the threshold of death, perhaps it is precisely that... which he now takes with him. And that is truly consoling if, as many of us think, the destiny of all men is more or less the same."<sup>12</sup> In what was perhaps his last article (it appeared in "Hora de España" in Barcelona at the end of January of 1939, only a few days before his own death in Collioure) Machado expressed the same attitude of hope that we have seen in the rest of his work. It consoled him that Don Blas had kept his soul—"that indefinable something which allows us to identify and recognize a person"—in spite of old age and death, and he thinks it is "precisely that," which he has kept "more solid than ever" and then "takes with him" at the moment of death.

### 3. THE PROBLEM OF INDIVIDUAL CONTINUITY

#### DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Before we continue our study of Machado's thoughts about death in the poems which were written in the final years of his life, we must examine another aspect of the soul's immortality. Because it is immortal, the essence of the soul will always exist as part of the absolute being. However, the question remains of whether the identity of the individual self is lost when the soul is finally reunited with the whole. Machado raised this question in poem LXXVIII, already mentioned in this chapter, and it appears again in poem XVIII:

He knows that a powerful God  
is playing games of death with the immortal substance  
like a bloodthirsty child. He thinks  
that he must fall like a branch that floats in the water,  
only to disappear, a drop  
of the sea, in the immense sea... (OPP, p. 77).

It is clear that the poet has no doubt regarding the soul's permanence since it is composed of "immortal substance," but he fears that a capricious God will condemn him to an impersonal immortality. Now we must determine if Machado ever manages to resolve this problem in his later work.

---

<sup>12</sup> "Don Blas Zambrano," in *Antonio Machado: Antología de su prosa*, Tomo I, Op. cit., p. 170.



## TWO ALTERNATIVES

In a short poem from "Proverbs and Songs" in *Fields of Castile*, Machado once again discusses the problem of individual continuity, and on this occasion he raises the possibility of two completely different alternatives:

To die... To fall like a drop  
of the sea in the immense sea?  
Or be what I have never been:  
one, without a shadow and without a dream,  
a solitary figure that progresses  
without a road and without a mirror? (OPP, p. 222).

Some critics who discuss this poem have not seen that these questions represent two completely different alternatives, one of which is negative and the other, positive.<sup>13</sup> Both questions take for granted that existence continues after death. The first refers to the same situation that was described in poem XVIII; the poet wants to know if the result of death is an impersonal immortality when individuality is lost and the soul becomes an anonymous part of the absolute being. The second question describes a complex situation which refers to something the poet has come to understand through the use of his poetic thought, that is, intuitively or non-rationally. The phrase to "be what I have never been" means that Machado is thinking of a type of being which is completely new. But how is this different from the life he has led up to this point? If we examine this alternative carefully we will see that there are five things which constitute the difference: his soul will be 1) without a shadow, 2) without a dream, 3) without a road, 4) without a mirror, and 5) he will be "one" who is "a solitary figure that progresses." If we consider what Machado has stated in other parts of his work, it becomes clear that these five things—shadow, dream, road, mirror, and lack of individuality—constitute a type of life which he hopes to avoid and, therefore, their elimination will result in a superior form of existence. Now let us consider these five points separately.

When the poet refers to a shadow he is talking of not being able to see the "light": the truth, the divine reality, the meaning of life, etc. This is the situation he describes in the poem "Galleries," when the poet is forced to move through a "dimly lit corridor" toward "an illuminated foundation" that he can never reach in this life. However, the shadow also represents the imperfections that darken the pure waters of his divine origin. As Machado says in the poem dedicated to the memory of his wife, these waters emanate from a "pristine source," but they are filled with "greenish slime and murky silt" before they reach the unknown sea which is death (OPP, p. 309). This is also why the dead friend described in poem IV is "without a shadow" when the "whitish breath" of his soul leaves the imperfect physical body, and for this reason Machado insists that his former teacher, Giner de los Ríos, is moving toward a "purer light" at the moment of his death.

---

<sup>13</sup> When he discusses this poem, Dámaso Alonso writes: "In this little poem from 1913 doubt is expressed with two possibilities: the dissolution of the self when it is absorbed by the Whole, or a prolongation of existence with a change of personality, a strange, solitary creature like an asteroid which is lost in an infinite void without an orbit and without a shadow" (OP. cit., p. 22).

When Machado refers to a dream it represents our finite understanding which is not able to encompass the infinite scope of the divine reality. This does not mean, however, that everything is unreal. Once again, it is not possible to have a clear understanding of this concept if it is not considered in the context of his pantheistic view of reality. Because if our soul is part of the "integral consciousness" of the absolute being which is God, our birth within the confines of the world of matter is, in effect, the beginning of an extended "dream." And precisely because life *is* a dream, the moment of death must be an *awakening* when our soul escapes the limits of our finite mind and once again is able to participate consciously in the divine reality. The poet describes this awakening in several different poems:

After the living and the dreaming  
comes what is most important:  
waking up (CLXI, liii, OPP, p. 280).

If living is good,  
dreaming is better,  
and the best of all,  
mother, is waking up (CLIX, lxxxii, OPP, p. 285).

...when it was time to die,  
the old man asked his heart:  
are you a dream?  
Who knows, perhaps he woke up! (CXXXVII, OPP, p. 225).

Machado frequently refers to the road or the path which the pilgrim follows on his journey through life, but in the context of the second alternative expressed in this poem to be without a road does not mean that the soul is lost. To travel on a "road" represents the idea of having to follow a predetermined path within the limits of material existence. This is what Machado refers to in the poem "Galleries" when he says that his life is moving through the dim light of a "narrow" corridor. Therefore, the fact that he is "without a road" at the moment of death means that he has now entered another level of existence where he can finally move more freely. Without the limits of the body, he can now choose the direction of his life with greater freedom.

Like dreaming, the mirror is a symbol of the illusory nature of physical reality. Machado has made it clear that reality is always seen through the "deceptive mirror" of appearances. For that reason, the person who looks out at himself "no longer is seen in the mirror / because he is the mirror itself" (CLXI, vi, OPP, p. 271); and he who looks for himself within also perceives a "hazy / labyrinth of mirrors" (XXXVII, OPP, p. 89). Only the person who awakens to a state of "integral consciousness"—during an altered state of awareness, or after the moment of death—is able to penetrate the veil of appearances. Then, as Machado tells us: "without a single false image / there are no mirrors; only a fountain" (OPP, p. 337).

Finally, to understand the last two lines of the poem, we must keep in mind what was said in the first chapter about the difference between pantheism and panentheism. What I called "pure pantheism"—the complete identification of God with the world—rejects the concept of individuality. The soul (the microcosm) reflects the image of God

(the macrocosm) without existing as a separate, individual being. On the other hand, panentheism—based on the concept of the world "in God"—permits individuals to move freely within the divine totality. Therefore, when Machado's poem concludes with the word "one" as well as the phrase "a solitary figure that progresses," instead of being lost in the anonymity of the whole, it means that the soul now achieves its true individuality and continues to evolve on a higher level of existence.

The difference between the two alternatives in this poem, therefore, is the same as that which exists between pantheism and panentheism. If we agree with the doctrine of Spinoza and those who believe in an absolute identification of God and the world, our death brings with it the loss of personal identity when our soul is absorbed by the whole. However, if we accept the panentheistic concept that our world is only a part of the absolute being which is God, the end of this life can also be the beginning of a new awareness of our relation to the divine reality. But which of these two alternatives is the one which our poet and philosopher finally accepts?

#### HOPE IS POSSIBLE

Although his metaphysics is based on the concept of Krausist panentheism, Machado continues to struggle with the problem of individual continuity. But if he never completely avoids the influence of rational skepticism, as we saw in the quotation from his brother, he also never loses sight of the hope offered by his intuitive consciousness. One of the most important passages on the subject of death is found in a letter that Machado wrote to Unamuno. Here he not only expresses his hope for life after death, but that this life will also contain the same type of personal renewal described in the short poem we examined in the previous section:

What is so terrible about death? To die, or to keep on living in the same way without seeing? If we don't get new eyes when these are closed, it matters little if the Devil takes them. But maybe that is not what happens... There is also the hope that we will not only conserve our personality, but that we will achieve it. So let the mask be removed, let us find out what game the universe is playing with us, or we are playing with it, and let us remove this uncertainty about what it all means and what the purpose is... So we are sleeping? Okay. So we are dreaming? Agreed. But it is possible to wake up. Hope is possible; we can doubt and still have faith... (OPP, p. 1,022).

Perhaps Machado never finds a satisfactory rational explanation for the problem of individual continuity, but these words to Unamuno are a sincere expression of the intuitive, or non-rational answer to his questions about death and afterlife. And this is more than just wishful thinking. It is a hope for something that is *possible*, in terms of the panentheistic metaphysics we have discussed in this book.

#### 4. THE DEATH OF ABEL MARTÍN

##### THE GLASS OF PURE SHADOWS

In his study of life after death in the poetry of Machado from which I have quoted several times, Dámaso Alonso states that the poet mentions his belief in life after death in

some of his early poems and in several others written shortly after the death of his wife. However, the best example of what Machado felt in later years, according to Dámaso Alonso, can be found in the concluding lines of his poem, "The Death of Abel Martín":

...His entire life,  
his unalterable history appeared  
to be written in soft wax.  
And will you be erased by the sun of a new day?  
Abel reached out his hand  
toward the reddish light  
of a warm summer dawn,  
now on the threshold of his former abode.  
Blind, he asked for the light he could not see.  
He calmly lifted up  
to his cold mouth the clear glass,  
with pure shadows—oh, pure shadows!—overflowing (OPP, p. 377).

In this poem Machado wonders whether Abel Martín's identity will be "erased," and then he concludes with a description of the apocryphal poet's death, which Dámaso Alonso interprets in this way: "This glass 'with pure shadows overflowing' from which Abel Martín drinks at the moment of death speaks unmistakably and, I believe, eloquently, of the 'purest glass of shadows' which our mind can possibly conceive: nothingness. I do not know if, after this late definition of death (it appeared in a book in 1936) Machado ever got around to writing another, and I think that this is the best expression of his true feelings at this time."<sup>14</sup>

First, I would like to say that Machado's article about the death of Blas Zambrano was published some three years after the "The Death of Abel Martín" in January of 1939. Then, there is also something Juan de Mairena said about the death of his teacher, which must be considered if we are to understand the "true feelings" that Machado wished to express with the concluding lines of this poem. When Mairena commented on the death of Abel Martín, he declared that his teacher was "perhaps more interested in the Buddhist state of nirvana than the paradise of the righteous" (OPP, p. 494). Dámaso Alonso may be correct when he says that this description of death corresponds to what Machado felt at this moment. However, if this is actually the case, it means that Machado was thinking of a manner of death that is equivalent, as Mairena has said, to the Buddhist concept of nirvana. But what exactly is nirvana? Dámaso Alonso says that the conclusion of the poem means that the poet "apparently wants to enter a total emptiness, the chemically pure 'shadows' of Nothingness."<sup>15</sup> That is to say that Machado no longer believes in the possibility of keeping his individuality because he thinks that his soul will be lost when it returns to its source. There are many people who have felt that this is a correct description of nirvana. Nevertheless, to think this is to misunderstand the teachings of Buddhism and, as I hope to demonstrate in what follows, it does not correspond to what the poet meant to say with the conclusion of his poem.

---

<sup>14</sup> Dámaso Alonso, *Op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>15</sup> Dámaso Alonso, *Op. cit.*, p. 22.

## THE BUDDHIST CONCEPT OF NIRVANA

During the past century there has been an increasing interest in oriental religions, but because of the predominance of rational thought during this same period, many people have attempted to interpret Buddhist teachings too literally and, for that reason, they have defined nirvana as the total annihilation of the self. More recently, however, some Western writers have come to understand that nirvana does not mean loss of self, nor is it equivalent to absolute nothingness.

Nirvana is the Void, or Nothingness, only from the point of view of our rational mind. This is because it is an aspect of being which cannot be understood intellectually, since it transcends intellectual thought; it can be felt or experienced, but it cannot be explained or defined in rational terms. (This corresponds to what Abel Martín said about the limits of human thought: "Whoever thinks of pure being, that is being as it *is not*, thinks in fact of pure nothingness" [OPP, p. 333].) For the person who has overcome the limits of all transitory phenomena (*sangsa*), what the intellect defines as a Void is revealed as Absolute Fullness, or as the British orientalist W. Y. Evans-Wentz has described it, "The Transcendent Fullness of the Emptiness."<sup>16</sup> One who enters nirvana learns that the Void is the cause, and the result of All That Is. Thus, as Evans-Wentz describes it, we see that nirvana is equivalent to the idea of absolute being:

*Nirvana*, as the Voidness, is the Source of *sangsa* existence, yet it transcends it. Even as the Sun remains unchangedly the Sun, notwithstanding its emanations of light and energy, so *Nirvana* remains the Quiescent, although [it is] the ultimate initiator of mundane activities. Man, mundane mind, life, energy, are illusorily individualized aspects, or manifestations, of That, which is the unique and indivisible At-one-ment of All Things; they are... of the One Mind. Man *per se* is and has been eternally immersed in the One Mind, in the Voidness.<sup>17</sup>

And to those who say that nirvana is the annihilation of being, Evans-Wentz has said:

*Nirvana* is a state beyond, or transcendent over the *Sangsa*, or over the Realm of Birth, Illness, Old Age, and Death; it is emancipation from... existence as man knows existence. *Nirvana* is not, therefore, as some misinformed writers have assumed, synonymous with total annihilation of being; it is a transcendence over *Maya*, over Ignorance, over the Realm of Phenomena and of Transitory Appearances, a blowing out, by an act of will, of the flame of sensuous existence, an emergence from a lower into a higher consciousness, a triumph over the *sangsa* animal mentality, the attaining of the Higher Evolution, of True Beingness.<sup>18</sup>

In his book, *Mystics and Zen masters*, the north American Trappist monk Thomas Merton has also offered a more accurate definition of the state of consciousness which is the goal of the Buddhist:

---

<sup>16</sup> W. Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*, with commentary by C. G. Jung (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Evans-Wentz, *Op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Evans-Wentz, *Op. cit.*, p. 227n.

The Zen experience is first of all a liberation from the notion of "I" and of "mind"; yet it is not annihilation and pure unconsciousness (as Westerners sometimes imagine "nirvana" to be). It is, on the contrary, a kind of super-consciousness in which one experiences reality not indirectly or mediately but directly, and in which, clinging to no experience and to no awareness as such, one is simply "aware."<sup>19</sup>

Nirvana, in short, is not only a state of pure consciousness, but also an aspect of absolute being. Therefore, from Machado's point of view, entering nirvana would be equivalent to being one with God, or being part of the divine consciousness.<sup>20</sup>

## THE PHILOSOPHY OF SCHOPENHAUER

Before we return to Machado's poetry, I want to make a brief reference to some ideas of Arthur Schopenhauer which are similar to those of Buddhism,<sup>21</sup> and which Machado also knew quite well. (Beside numerous points of similarity between his own ideas and those of Schopenhauer Machado mentions the German philosopher on several occasions; for example, his essay "Some ideas of Pío Baroja" [OPP, pp. 798-800] in which he examines the influence of Schopenhauer on Baroja's work, and also another article entitled "Leibniz and Schopenhauer" [OPP, pp. 774-775]). We will see that Schopenhauer does not refer to nirvana as the absence of being when he describes what must be done in order to reach this superior state of awareness.

In his work *The World as Will and Idea*, Schopenhauer bases his thinking on the concept that the underlying foundation of being is the *Will*, a sort of cosmic energy that is more or less equivalent to the concept of absolute being. As he puts it: "The world is self-knowledge of the will"; and in another passage: "We have recognized the inmost nature of the world as will, and all its phenomena as only the objectivity of will."<sup>22</sup> What we call "the world of reality" which is the product of the will to live, is only an illusion which traps man and makes him suffer. As in the teaching of Buddhism, the only way to

---

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Delta, 1978), p. 237. Merton also has something to say about the belief that individuality is lost when entering a higher level of consciousness: "The absolutely pure consciousness of the Zen experience is not negation and annihilation of concrete existent beings. It implies the complete acceptance of them as they are, but with the totally transformed consciousness which does not see them as objects, but which, so to speak, 'gazes out' from the midst of them. The final awakening of the Zen consciousness is not simply the loss of self but, the finding and gift of self in and through all"; Op. cit., p. 253. Buddhists deny the existence of the self as it is conceived by our rational mind, but as Evans-Wentz and Jung have said in their study of *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*, the continuity of the self is preserved. It is also said that, after becoming the Buddha, Gautama himself recalled his previous lives, which indicates that the person who reaches a state of nirvana does not lose the memory of his individual self.

<sup>20</sup> After his own transformation of consciousness, Franklin Merrill Wolff writes: "it suddenly dawned on me that Nirvana is not a field or a place where man enters or is enclosed, as in a space which envelops bodies, but I Recognized that 'I am Nirvana.' In other words, the Real Self is not other than Nirvana..."; *Pathways Trough to Space* (New York: Warner Books, 1976), p. 45.

<sup>21</sup> For a study of the relation between the philosophy of Schopenhauer and Buddhism see the book of Dorothea W. Dauer, *Schopenhauer as Transmitter of Buddhist Ideas* (Berne: Herbert Lang, 1969).

<sup>22</sup> From *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* (New York: Modern Library, 1928), p. 333 and p. 334.

stop suffering is to give up the will to live which creates in us the desire for things which are transitory and unreal. Schopenhauer recognizes that this seems to lead us in the direction of nothingness; but it is also true that "behind our illusory existence there is something that can only be known if we renounce this world." And that "something" can only be described in negative terms because it does not correspond to any intellectual concept. But if one insists on finding a way to describe positively what philosophy can only describe in negative terms, Schopenhauer says we must refer to "that state which all those who have attained to complete denial of the will have experienced, and which has been variously denoted by the names ecstasy, rapture, illumination, union with God, and so forth; a state however which cannot properly be called knowledge... and is moreover, only attainable in one's own experience and cannot be further communicated."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, it may seem that we are confronted with nothingness; however,

if we turn our glance from our own needy and embarrassed condition to those who have overcome the world, in whom the will, having attained to perfect self-knowledge, found itself again in all, and then freely denied itself, and who then merely wait to see the last trace of it vanish with the body which it animates; then, instead of the restless striving and effort... instead of the never-satisfied and never-dying hope which constitutes the life of the man who wills, we shall see that peace which is above all reason, that perfect calm of the spirit, that deep rest, that inviolable confidence and serenity, the mere reflection of which in the countenance, as Raphael and Correggio have represented it, is an entire and certain gospel... Thus... we freely acknowledge that what remains after the entire abolition of will is, for all those who are still full of will, certainly nothing; but conversely, to those in whom the will has turned and has denied itself, this our world, which is so real, with all its suns and milky ways—is nothing.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, in spite of the fact that our intellect makes us think of nirvana in negative terms, we must give up our desire for transitory things and not fear this "nothingness," because it is the only ultimate and absolute Reality.

Now, after these philosophical digressions, it will be possible to clarify two key aspects of the poem about the death of Abel Martín. The first has to do with what Abel feels at the moment of death; the other is what Machado wished to say when he used the term "nirvana" to describe the final wish of his apocryphal poet.

#### FREEDOM FROM EMOTIONS

What we have just seen in the philosophy of Schopenhauer is similar to the words of Abel Martín when he expresses his wish to experience peace at the moment of death. In a poem entitled "Abel Martín's Last Lamentations," Machado describes the poet's final attempt to control the emotions which destroy the serenity of his spirit:

Oh, to rest in the blue light of day  
like the eagle rests in the wind,  
far above the cold earth,  
sure of his wings and of his breath!

From you, nature, I ask for  
august confidence and peace,  
my release from fear and from hope,  
a grain of happiness, a sea of forgetfulness... (OPP, p. 358).

Then, the wish to escape the self-centered desires of the will to live is expressed once more in "The Death of Abel Martín":

Before I reach—if I reach it—the Day,  
the uncreated light which sees,  
choke out my selfish whining,  
Lord, with the essence of your Nothingness... (OPP, p. 376).

Before returning to the absolute being—"the uncreated light which sees"—Abel Martín wishes to free himself from desires—from the "fear," the "hope," and also the "selfish whining" that these emotions produce in his voice. In this context, both "forgetfulness" and "nothingness" are positive states because they reveal the tranquility of one who has eliminated desire, so that he can harmonize his will with that of God.

After speaking of Abel Martín's wish for nirvana, Juan de Mairena goes on to tell us that his teacher probably achieved his goal because he accepted death with serenity: "At any rate, he must have finally been saved, judging by his final gesture, which was that of a person who accepts death calmly without whining or bellyaching" (OPP, p. 494). The coldness of his mouth—"he calmly lifted up / to his cold mouth"—does not indicate lack of life, but rather absence of emotion. And because this refers to his desire for nirvana—according to Mairena—the fact that he was "saved" indicates that Abel Martín was finally able to achieve the state of ecstasy which is the goal of the Buddhist, and also the Christian mystic.

#### EMPTINESS OR FULLNESS?

Now we still must try to determine if, for Machado, nirvana represents the total annihilation of self, or the state of absolute fullness described by the Buddhists. In order to do that we must try to interpret the exact meaning of the final line of the poem:

"with pure shadows—oh, pure shadows!—overflowing."

It is appropriate to emphasize, first of all, that Machado does not use the words "void" or "nothingness," but rather the word "shadows." (As we learned, when speaking of nirvana, the words "nothingness" or "void" do not mean absence of life or lack of being, but since rational thinkers sometimes misunderstand this point, perhaps Machado wished to avoid these terms.) Because of that the word "shadows," mentioned two times, has great importance as an indication of what Machado really meant to say with the final line of the poem. And "shadows" do not indicate lack of being, but lack of light, or lack of vision. So when Machado described the act of drinking a glass of "pure shadows," he was not referring to nothingness or the absence of life, but rather to the impossibility of describing the absolute being, which is Abel Martín's term for God. Reinforcing this interpretation is the positive, or religious connotation of the word "pure," which is also mentioned twice. Then the last line, and indeed the entire poem, concludes with the word, "overflowing," a crucial term which suggests the idea of a state of fullness which is beyond the limits of the senses. This state of *transcendent fullness* which Abel Martín enters upon the moment of death is a clear indication that, for Machado, neither death nor



nirvana are the annihilation of being. No effort is made to describe this continued existence since, as Schopenhauer says, it can only be referred to in negative terms, but Machado seems to affirm its reality with the final word of his poem.

Besides the ideas I have just mentioned, perhaps the best justification for this interpretation of the poem is that it agrees with the faith in life after death which we found in Machado's earlier poems, in the letter to Unamuno, and in the essays about the death of Giner de los Ríos and Blas Zambrano. And now since we have determined that Machado retains his hope to continue living after the death of the body, in the following chapter I will examine another aspect of the afterlife which is often considered as part of the pantheistic view of life.

70

Posted at: <http://armandfbaker.com/publications.html>