

KILLING TIME

I have drunk a cup of coffee, as I always do after finishing a meal. I have lighted a cigarette and am resting in my easy chair, and I will wait for a moment until I leave for the Royal Theater, where tonight they are performing another opera. I didn't bother to try and find out which one it was, since I was certain that, as usual, it would be one that we all know from memory.

As a consequence, my current occupation is reduced to one that is the easiest, and also one that is quite common in Spain: I am killing time.

Killing time!... This is one of the crazy absurdities expressed in a phrase that you hear many times every day. However, when we say that this phrase is absurd, it doesn't mean that we think the one who *does* what this person is *doing*, is actually *losing* time. For me, this apparent inertia is often more productive, and more useful in getting results, than many activities which are more energetic.

Think of all the great ideas and all the useful discoveries that have begun, or have been developed, during one these moments when a person gives himself over to the joys of *slothfulness*. Because, although our will can reduce our body to inactivity, it will never be able to deter the flights of fancy which sometimes produce the greatest fruits when we are less excited, just like the best fruits that a tree gives spontaneously.

What I consider absurd, is the thought which suggests that a person should be able to finish what he has in his hands, about which he has scarcely had time to form an idea.

Thinking of that, I remembered something I read a short time ago in a book written by Saint Augustine. Time, says the Holy Father, has three modes: the present, the past, and the future. But the past is something that no longer exists, and the future is something that hasn't happened; the present is the only one of these modes which offers something positive. And how to define the present? Whatever period of time you try to place it in will be a time which has passed, or one which hasn't begun. Between these two *nothings* is the present. But who can get a grip on it? The minute we believe we have grasped it, it has already disappeared; and that is because the present escapes even more quickly than our thoughts.

And there is also a great deal to say with regard to the length of time. Since I have the misfortune of being guided by my impressions, no length seems exact to me. I never feel like the days are the same, since some seem very long, and others seem very short. If we ask a man whose subsistence depends on his monthly salary if a month is longer than a year, he will tell us that it certainly is; in a month you get paid just one time, and in a year, twelve. But the thirty days you have to wait until you're paid always last more than a year, or a century, or an eternity.

However, an insolvent debtor who is asked to pay his bill will not be convinced that a year has passed since he signed it, and he will be inclined to believe that the calendar has been altered, thanks to an intrigue by his creditor. We can hear him say: "It's already been a year? That's impossible! I would swear it was just last week."

This is why a friend of mine once said that he could not recognize the official legality of the calendar, since he played no part in its formation, just like the liberals when they rejected the Constitution of 1845.

But the unfortunate and unavoidable truth is that time passes, and my reflections are enough to convince me that this is true for me as well. A few years ago, when I was reclining in an easy chair while smoking a cigar and killing time, it would have been easy for me to philosophize about such things. But then, my thoughts fluttered about among the flowers like the butterflies, thinking that the world was nothing more than a place for love and poetry. I did not remember the past, or worry about the future, nor did I think about the present, except to take advantage of whatever pleasures it offered me without trying to define it. I still have some of those tendencies, but, as the years pass, I am changing and becoming more thoughtful... The effects of time.

Now I am afraid I will think about things when I am in the Royal Theater: about the length of time, about the music, and especially, Mr. Sckozdopole. That's a lot of baton! The movement of his arm has the same mechanical precision as that of a steam engine. We all know that Mr. Sckozdopole makes an elaborate effort to emphasize the rhythm, feeling that the other accidentals are of less importance. So, for this man, it can be said that all the accidentals that are used to compose a piece of music can be reduced to two, like the basic rules of the Decalogue: *weak and strong*.

And if we want to listen to an opera, there is no way to avoid it; we will have to put up with an orchestra of excellent musicians who, when they enter the Royal Theater, take their seats and go through a transformation that is equal to the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid. We will have to be prepared to watch the presentation of a scene with costumes that seem to be taken from a flea market in Madrid, showing a wandering *antique dealer* carrying a crook and a basket, who would seem out of place, even in the theaters of Getafe and Valdemoro. In other words, we will have to humble ourselves before the absolute will of a privileged impresario, be content with what he offers us, and then give him thanks for fear that next year he will bring us something even worse.

Against the tyranny of Mr. Bagier, there is only one policy that could produce a result: that of *retirement*. As long as the aforementioned impresario sees the seats occupied and the money coming in, there will be no attention paid to public opinion, and the criticisms of the Press. At least, until now, that is how it has been. *A voice crying in the desert*.

As long as I live, I will never forget the last performance of *The Puritans*. That is my favorite opera, which is part of the brief, but sublime, repertory of Bellini. And, in it, the immortal maestro definitely shows us the most consummate manifestation of his genius. In order to appreciate the importance of that work, it helps to remember something that happened before its appearance. When Bellini brought the opera to the Italian Theater in Paris, at the beginning of last season, three other works had already been performed, among them, the popular *Marino Faliero* of Donizetti. A panel of experts was chosen to decide which one of those performances would deserve their approval. Their agreement was unanimous, and *The Puritans* was voted the best.

Since then, there have been thousands of performances of that delightful musical score in the theaters of Europe, and it has always been greeted with enthusiasm, until it came to the Royal Theater, in the year of the great misfortune... 1864!

And this is why, for several days, *El Contemporáneo* hasn't published any musical reviews, which its readers miss. If you are always going to mention the same operas, to point out the same defects, and find only one small reason for praise among a hundred criticisms, it is better not to write anything. But we will still go to the Royal Theater; maybe we'll be lucky and have a decent performance, and if we don't hear a good opera,

perhaps we will be compensated by being able to admire the opera hall, which is always beautiful, always brilliant, and always filled with an atmosphere of beauty and good taste. All this, provided that it is not sunken in darkness, which could very well happen.

Then, to get there I will find one of those instruments of torture called public coaches, since it is better to go to the theater on wheels, than to walk stepping on the filthy ground that has been muddied by the rain, and the droppings of the horse patrol.

It is said that, when a sylph decides to devote his love to some earthly beauty, he has to give up his immortality, as well as the wings that permit him to fly through the air. That is no small sacrifice. But whether it is true that a sylph's love does not include all the desirable attributes or, and this is what I think, there are some beautiful women who are worthy of the greatest sacrifice, we know that legends have many stories about sylphs who have heroically renounced their privileges in order to experience the love offered by a daughter of men. I understand completely: there are women for whom I would give up the wings of a sylph, and those of Mercury, and any other wings; but on the condition that they be returned to me when it rains, especially, if I live in Madrid.

Victor Hugo has a beautiful poem entitled *The Sylph* that could be used as a basis for composing a legend about the love of those spirits of the air. However, I still don't know what I am going to write for tomorrow's edition of *El Contemporáneo*, and it would be nice if, instead of being here like a nitwit staring into space, I could pick up my pen and write something meaningful. For example... *The Love Affairs of a Sylph*. But that is a topic, which would require much thought and consideration, and it would be best to leave it for another time. But still..., what am I going to write today?

The readers of *El Contemporáneo* are used to my lackluster efforts, and they won't be surprised if I add to the long list. Besides, they are kind enough to pardon me for them. So let's go to the theater. When I come back, I can write about what passed through my imagination while I was there, and I will have solved my problem. The subject of the article will be... "Killing time."