

LITERARY LETTERS TO A WOMAN

I

You once asked me:

“What is poetry?”

Do you remember? I no longer know why it was, but I had just been speaking of my great love for it.

“What is poetry?” you asked me.

I am not very good at giving this kind of definition, and I hesitated as I was trying to answer your question:

“Poetry is... it is...”

Without being able to finish the sentence, I tried and tried to think of some term that would serve as a good explanation, but I could not think of anything appropriate.

While I was speaking, you leaned forward a little in order to hear what I was going to say; your black curls, those curls with which you are able to cover your head with such charm, were falling down around your cheeks until they rested on your bosom; in your eyes that are blue like the sky at night, a spark was glowing, and your half-open lips were about to emit a sigh.

Because of my uncertainty, my eyes began to search for something; then, not finding anything, they instinctively fixed on yours, and I insisted:

“Poetry..., poetry is you!”

Do you remember? I can still see your cute frown of frustrated curiosity, mixed with passion and bitterness, when you said to me:

“Do you think my question is only the foolish curiosity of an ignorant woman? Well, you are mistaken. I want to know what poetry is because I want to think like you, I want to speak like you, and feel what you feel; mostly, I want to find some way to enter that mysterious sanctuary where your soul sometimes take refuge, and whose threshold I have never been able to cross.”

When we reached that point our conversation was interrupted. You already know why. Some days have passed. Neither you nor I have talked about it again, but for my part, I have not stopped thinking about it. You undoubtedly thought the way I answered your strange question amounted to some sort of gallant evasion.

But why not be frank? I gave that definition because I felt it, without ever thinking that it might be nonsense. Since then, I have thought about it some more, and I am even more certain that it was correct: poetry *is* you. You smile? So much the worse for both of us. Your incredulity is going to cost us; for you, the time to read a book, and for me, the task of writing it.

“A book!” you exclaim, letting this letter fall out of your hands. But don’t worry. You know that one of my books will not be very long. Erudite, probably not; dull, perhaps. But since I am writing it for you, I presume that will not be the case.

Hardly any poet has ever tried to describe what poetry really is. But nevertheless, there are lots of things that are said by people who are not poets.

The poet who feels something is possessed by an idea, he gives it a form, he thinks about it for a moment, and lets it go. Then, without fail, the critics pounce on this idea;

they study it, they dissect it, and they believe they have understood it, once they have finished their analysis.

Dissection can reveal the mechanism of the body, but the nature of the soul, the secret of life... how can you find those things in a dead body?

Nevertheless, they have made rules concerning poetry, they have written a vast number of books, they study it in universities, they discuss it in literary forums, and explain it in cultural centers.

Don't be surprised. An illustrious German has had the nerve to reduce the mysterious song of a nightingale to a rigid pattern of words and a limit of five lines. To tell the truth, I still do not know exactly what I am going to do, and that is why I cannot tell you about it beforehand.

To make you feel better, I can tell you that I will not inundate you with a multitude of erudite terms, nor will I quote from authors that I do not know, or express opinions in languages that neither of us understands.

I have told you before. I know nothing, nor have I studied anything; I have read a bit, and I have felt and thought a great deal, although I would not be able to tell you if it was good or bad. Since I can only tell you about what I have felt or thought, all you have to do is think and feel in order to understand me.

I will probably tell you many historical, philosophical, and literary heresies. But that is not important. I am not trying to teach, or present myself as an authority, or write a famous book. I would like to tell you a little about literature, even if it is only to satisfy your curiosity; I want to tell you what I know intuitively, express my opinion, and have at least the pleasure of knowing that if we are mistaken, it is because we both have made the same mistake, which means that, as far as we were concerned, it was correct.

I have told you that poetry is you, because poetry is feeling, and feeling is something that is female.

Poetry is you, because this vague aspiration for beauty that characterizes it and which in a man is the result of reason, for you, is something instinctive.

Poetry is you because feelings, which in men are a brief phenomenon that passes like a breath of air, are intimately connected with your essential nature, and they constitute part of your real self.

And, finally, poetry is you, because you are the focal point from which its inspiration emerges.

The true genius has some extraordinary attributes which Balzac considers feminine, which, in fact, they are. In the scale of intelligence of a poet there are notes that relate to those of a woman, and they are the ones that express tenderness, passion, and feeling. I don't know why poets and women do not understand each other more completely. Their way of feeling has so many points of contact... Perhaps it is because... But forget these digressions, and let's get back to what is important.

We were saying... Ah, yes..., we were speaking of poetry!

In a man, poetry is directly related to his spirit; it resides in the soul and lives in the intangible life of the idea, and to reveal it he must give it form, which is why he writes it.

But in a woman poetry is an intimate part of her being; her aspirations, her passions, and her Destiny are poetry; she lives, moves, and breathes in an indefinable atmosphere of romanticism that emerges from her like a luminous and magnetic fluid; it is, in other words, a poetic word made flesh.

Nevertheless, a woman is commonly accused of being prosaic. That is not surprising. In a woman almost everything she thinks is poetry, but very little of what she says. The reason for that is something I can guess, and you must already know. Perhaps everything I have told you will seem vague and confusing. But on the other hand, it shouldn't amaze you. Poetry is, to the wisdom of Humanity, what love is to the other passions. Love is a mystery. Everything in it is a phenomenon which is mostly inexplicable; everything in it is illogical, and everything in it is vague and uncertain.

Ambition, envy, avarice, and all other passions, have their explanation, and also their objective; but not what inspires the feeling and then sustains it.

I, on the other hand, can understand it; I can understand it because of an intense, confusing, and inexplicable revelation.

Put down this letter and close your eyes to the outside world which surrounds you, direct them toward your inner self, pay attention to the vague feelings that emerge from it, and perhaps you will understand it as I do.

II

In my previous letter I told you that poetry is you, because you are the most beautiful personification of feeling, and the true spirit of what is poetic.

And while I was trying to explain, the word "love" slipped out of my pen in one of the paragraphs of my letter.

There is nothing more natural than what I said in that paragraph. I will try to explain why that is. There is a fairly common perception, even among those who make an effort to give form to what they think, and in my opinion, it is one of the most important.

If we are going to believe all those who share it, it is a truth that is so undeniable it could be raised to the category of an axiom, namely, that an idea never flourishes with so much vitality and clarity as at the moment when it arises like a flame and ignites the imagination, causing all our feelings to vibrate as if they had been struck by some sort of an electric shock.

I do not deny that happens. I do not deny anything. But as far as I am concerned, I can assure you that when I feel, I do not write. I do have in my awareness some feelings that have left an imprint, as though they were written in a mysterious book; these delicate and passionate children of sensation sleep there, huddled in the depths of my memory, until the moment when they are evoked by my spirit, pure, calm, serene, and cloaked, as it were, by some supernatural power; then, they spread their transparent wings that flutter with a strange vibration, and they pass once more in front of my eyes, like a brilliant and magnificent vision.

At that point, I no longer feel with my nerves, with my heart, nor any of the physical organs that are agitated by the rude shock of sensations caused by passion and its effects; I do feel, but in a way that might be called artificial; I write like one who is copying a page that is already written; I draw like a painter who reproduces a landscape that has expanded before his eyes and vanishes in the mist over the horizon.

Everyone feels. But only a few people have the ability to retain the living memory of what they have felt, like a precious relic. I think those are the poets. And moreover, I think that it is precisely because of this, that they are poets.

For most people, it is gratifying to imagine the genius, consumed by his feeling and his inspiration, his hand trembling with passion, his eyes filled with tears or moved with pity, writing those lines of poetry that are so greatly admired by those who read them. But, what can I say?... the truth is not always so sublime.

Do you remember? A short time ago, I was telling you the same thing in relation to a similar matter.

When a poet describes his love with those marvelous words, he doubts. But when he tells you about it in prose, and does it poorly, he believes it.

There is something mechanical, trifling, and material in all the efforts of man, that true inspiration disdains, in its burning moments of ecstasy.

But now, without realizing it, I have gotten away from what I wanted to say. Since I did it in order to give you some satisfaction, I hope you will excuse me. What better way can there be to express this to a woman?

Don't be annoyed. This is one of many things you have in common with poets, or they, with women.

Even though you never told me, I could tell that you were frustrated with me because, when I was writing about love, I didn't continue discussing it, as though I had gotten tired of the subject.

But why deny it?... you undoubtedly thought this vital idea became dormant in my mind for lack of interest. I think I have now demonstrated that you were wrong.

When I thought about it, a swarm of confused and nameless ideas began to circulate in my mind, and they spun around my head in a dizzying procession of bizarre visions that clouded my eyes.

But write about it?... If only I could have written then, I might have become the best poet in the world!

However... then I thought about it, and now I talk about it. If I feel what I feel in order to do what I do, what huge oceans of inspiration and light must swirl around in the minds of those who have written the things we admire so much?

If you only knew how the greatest ideas are diminished when they are locked into the rigid confines of a word; if you only knew how diaphanous and how impalpable is the golden glow that envelopes the mysterious objects my imagination creates, and which I can only reproduce in their skeletal form; if you only knew how fragile is the thread that ties together the most unusual ideas; if you knew... But what am I saying? Of course you know... You *must* know all this.

Have you never dreamed? When you woke up, have you ever found it possible to describe, with all their inexplicable vagueness and poetry, the things you have dreamed about?

Our spirit has a special way of feeling and understanding; mysterious, because it is an unknown; immense, because it is infinite; divine, because its essence is sacred.

How could a mere word, how could an awkward and mundane term that is insufficient to describe even our material needs, ever serve as an accurate form of communication between two souls?

Impossible.

Nevertheless, I will try in passing to make note of some of the different things that inspired me during the magnificent vision in which I saw love enveloping Humanity like a sea of fire, passing from century to century, forming an incomprehensible attraction

between spirits, like that between two stars, and revealing its existence to the outside world by means of poetry, the only language that is capable of uttering a few words of its immense poem.

But do you see? Perhaps even now you will not understand me, nor will I even know what I say. But then we can only speak the way we speak. We can only express what is logical. Logic! I detest it, and nevertheless, it is so necessary for everything!...

Poetry is feeling, but feeling is nothing more than an effect, and all effects come from a cause that is more or less known. But what is it? What could be the cause of this divine burst of enthusiasm, this vague and melancholy inspiration of the soul that men express with the most subtle harmonies, but love?

Yes, love is the perennial source of all poetry, the prolific origin of all that is great, the eternal foundation of all that is beautiful; and I say love, because religion, our religion in particular, is also love; it is a love which is the most pure, the most beautiful, the only infinite one that we know; and man can only turn to these two stars, when he wants a light that will illuminate his path and enliven his sterile and tired spirit.

Love is the cause of feeling. But, what is love? Now you can see: there is not enough room, the topic is immense, and... you are smiling?... Do you think I am going to give you a trivial excuse to stop writing my letter at this point?

No; I will no longer resort to any of my tricks to excuse me for not speaking of love. But will tell you frankly: I am afraid...

One of these days, only just a few, I promise, I will tell you about love, at the risk of saying a million crazy things.

You will probably ask me, "Why are you hesitating? Don't people who don't know anything about love, speak of it all the time? Why shouldn't you talk about it, and say what you feel?"

Alas! Perhaps it is precisely because they do not know what it is that they dare to try and describe it.

You're smiling again?... Believe me: life is full of nonsense like this.

III

What is love?

In spite of the time that has passed, I think you will remember what I am now going to talk about. The date when it took place will never be consigned to History, but it will always be a memorable date for us.

We had only known each other a few months; it was summer when we met in Cadiz. The rigors of the season only allowed us to go for walks during the early morning, or during the evening. One day... no, that is not right, it wasn't day yet: the dim light of dawn was just beginning to turn the sky to blue, the moon was setting, surrounded by a violet mist, and far away, very far away in the distance, the horizon was beginning to be filled with red and yellow clouds, while the breeze from the ocean carried the fresh smell of the waves, and gently caressed our brows as it passed.

Nature was beginning to rise out of its lethargy with a soft murmur. Everything around us was suspended, as though it was waiting for some mysterious signal to break out with a joyful hymn of happiness, coming from a world that was waking up.

We were standing on top of the massive wall that surrounds and defends the city, and at its foot the waves were breaking; we were contemplating the solemn spectacle that greeted our eyes with great interest. We were both silent, but nevertheless, we were both thinking about the same thing.

You expressed what I was thinking, when you asked me:

“What is the sun?”

At that moment, the disc of the sun was just beginning to rise over the distant horizon. Its rays spread rapidly over the immense waters; the sky, the water, and the land, began to be filled with brightness, and everything sparkled as though an ocean of light had covered the world.

On the crest of the waves, on the edge of the clouds, on the walls of the city, in the morning dew that covered our heads and feet, everywhere, the pure light of the sun was creating a translucent atmosphere that was filled with glowing sparks of light.

Your words still echo in my ears:

“What is the sun,” you had asked me.

“That,” I said, pointing to the globe fringed with fire in the middle of a diaphanous aura of gold. Your eyes and your soul became filled with light, and I could tell that you understood what I meant.

I ignored the scientific definitions I could have used to answer your question; at that moment, anyway, I am sure they would not have satisfied you.

Definitions! There is nothing that has more than those things which are undefinable. The reason is simple: none is satisfactory, none is exact and, therefore, everyone believes he is justified in making his own.

“What is love?” I concluded my letter with that phrase yesterday, and I began with it today. Nothing would be easier than for me to answer, citing some recognized authority to explain the question I raised by saying it is the source of feeling. Books are full of attempts to examine this topic. They exist in Greek, in Arabic, in Chinese, in Latin, in Coptic, and in Russian... what do I know?... in every known language, dead or alive, wise or unwise. I have read some of them, and I have asked for translations of others. After reading most of them, I have placed my hand over my heart to see what I was feeling and could not help but repeat, like Hamlet: “Words, words, words!”

Because of that, I thought it was a good idea to remind you of that earlier occasion which has some analogies with our present situation, and for me to say to you now, as I advised you then:

“Do you want to know what love is? Then look within your own self, and if what you find in your soul is true, feel it, and you will understand it without having to ask me.

The only thing I can say is that love is the supreme law of the universe, a mysterious law by which everything is governed, from the smallest atom to the rational creature; everything arises from it and all our thoughts and actions converge in it, as in a center of irresistible attraction; it is hidden inside all things, and—the result of a first cause: God—it is the origin of the thousands of unknown thoughts which are true, spontaneous poetry, which a woman is not able to express, but which she feels and understands much better than all the rest of us.

Yes. Poetry is nothing more than that melancholy and vague desire that floats in your spirit, together with an impossible desire for perfection. Poetry is those involuntary tears that tremble for a moment in your eyes, until they fall down in silence and evaporate like

perfume. Poetry is the unexpected joy that lights your face with a gentle smile and whose cause is unknown to you.

Poetry, finally, is all those inexplicable things that affect the soul of a woman when she is filled with feelings, and with passion.

Sweet words that germinate from the heart, emerge from the lips, and then die, hardly making a sound, while a blush reddens the cheeks! Strange murmurs of the night that resemble the footsteps of a lover who is approaching! Moans of the wind, that sound like a loving voice that calls to us from the shadows! Confusing images that appear, singing a song without rhythm or words, that only the spirit can understand! Burning exaltations of passion that give color and form to abstract ideas! Incomprehensible premonitions that illuminate our future with a flash of light! Limitless spaces that open before the eyes of the soul and reach for the vastness in search of infinity! Smiles, tears, sighs, desires, that are the mysterious expression of love! All of these are poetry, true poetry that can find an echo, produce a sensation, or awaken an idea!

And all of this inexhaustible wealth of feeling, all of this animated poem of hopes and self-denials, of dreams and sadness, of happiness and tears, where each one is a stanza, and each passion a song, all this is contained in your heart as a woman. A French writer once said, referring to a well-known musician, the author of *Tannhauser*: “He is a man of talent who does everything he can to hide it, but sometimes is unable and demonstrates it, in spite of himself.”

The same can be said with regard to the poetry of a woman’s soul.

But, what is that?... you frown and throw away this letter? Bah! Don’t get upset... You must recognize, once and for all, that just as you manifest it, and as everyone knows it, women are the poetry of this world.

IV

Love is poetry; religion is love. And two things that are similar to a third thing are equal to each other.

Here we have an axiom that ought to save me the trouble of writing another letter. But I also know this mathematic conclusion, which seems to be true, can also be a sophism.

Logic is able to make irrefutable rationalizations that, in spite of everything, do not convince us. How easy it can be for someone to make a precise deduction on the basis of something which is false!

However, a personal conviction often persuades us, even though it contradicts the use of reason. This demonstrates the irresistible power of faith!

Religion is love, and because it is love, it is poetry. And this is the theme that I want to develop today.

In dealing with such an enormous topic in so little space, and with the little knowledge that I possess, there is only one thing that I can hope for: if believing in something can be enough to persuade, I can say that I definitely feel the thing I am writing about.

*

Some time ago—I didn’t know you yet, and in this way I excuse the fact that I still did not love you—I felt something inexplicable. I won’t say that what I felt was emptiness,

because, besides being a cliché, this is not is not an appropriate phrase. I felt in my soul, and in all my being, something like an abundance of life, an outpouring of moral activity. Since this feeling had no specific object or purpose, it took the form of dreams and fantasies... dreams and fantasies in which I was searching in vain for some way to enlarge them, since they were only within myself.

Place a lid on a vessel, fill it with any liquid, and place it over a fire. A harsh cloud of steam rises up from the bottom and struggles to get out, until it falls down, condensed into little drops of water, which rise up and fall down again, until it finally explodes and destroys the prison which holds it. This is the secret of the mysterious, premature death of some women and of some poets, harps that are broken before anyone is able to pluck a melody from their golden strings.

Something like this is what my spirit was experiencing, when what I am going to tell you occurred.

I was in Toledo; in Toledo, a gloomy and melancholy city par excellence. There, each place recalls an historical event; each stone, a century; each monument, a civilization; events, centuries, and civilizations that have passed, and whose people perhaps are now the dark clouds of dust that are blown by gusts of wind that whistle through the narrow streets. Nevertheless, through a marvelous contrast, there, where all seems to have died, where all you see are ruins, where your eyes are greeted by fallen columns and broken arches, the sad result of man's hope to live on, it is also true that souls filled with fear and thirsting for immortality are searching for something eternal in which to take refuge and, like a castaway who holds onto a board to keep from drowning, are calmed when they think of their origin.

One day I entered the ancient convent of San Juan de los Reyes. I sat down on one of the stones of the dilapidated cloister and began to draw. The scene which greeted my eyes was truly magnificent. Long rows of columns supported an arched vault filled with thousands of fanciful designs; wide, pointed arches, decorated like the laces of a veil; sumptuous granite canopies with strips of ivy that climb up between the stonework, and seem like they are challenging the work of the chisel when they are rocked by the wind; statues draped with long cloths that float as though they were walking; strange figures, gnomes, dragons, winged horses, and reptiles that look out over the capital of a column, or creep over the cornices, or swarm in the wreath of a trefoil; long galleries that are lost from sight; trees whose branches bend over a fountain, beautiful flowers and noisy birds that contrast with the gloomy ruins and the silent naves; and, finally, the sky, a piece of the blue sky, that is seen through the openings in a window.

You have my drawing in your album; a pale reproduction which, nevertheless, can still give you an idea of the melancholy beauty of that place. I will, therefore, not try to use more words to describe it, since they cannot really do it justice.

So, as I said, seated on one of the broken stones I worked on my drawing during the morning, and I continued that afternoon, absorbed in my task until the light began to fail. Then, setting aside my pencil and my sketchpad, I gazed into the depths of the solitary galleries and became immersed in my thoughts.

The sun had set, and the only thing that disturbed the silence of those ruins was the sound of water flowing from the fountain, the soft murmur of the wind that sighed through the cloisters, and the rustling of the leaves in the trees that seemed to be talking among themselves in a soft voice.

My thoughts began to swell and rise up in a flood of fantasies. I looked around for a woman, a person with whom I could share my feelings, but I was alone. Then, I recalled something I read once, but whose author I can no longer remember: "Solitude is quite beautiful..., when you are next to someone you can discuss it with."

I had no sooner thought of that celebrated idea when, next to me among the shadows, I seemed to see a strange figure wrapped in a floating tunic, its head hidden by a veil. It was one of the statues of the ruined cloister that had fallen off its pedestal near the wall where I was sitting; it was lying there covered with dust, half-hidden among the weeds, next to the broken slab of a tomb and the capital of a column. Farther away, veiled by the darkness under the long vaults, other confused figures could be seen: virgins with their palms and their halos; monks with their staffs and their hoods; hermits with their books and their crosses; martyrs with their emblems and their mantles, an entire generation of granite figures, silent and immobile, on whose faces the chisel had engraved a trace of asceticism, and an ineffable expression of beatitude and serenity.

"This," I exclaimed, "is an entire world of stone; inanimate spirits of other beings who have lived, and whose memory bequeathed to the future a gift of enthusiasm and faith. Solitary virgins, austere monks, courageous martyrs, who, like me, lived a life without loves or pleasures; who, like me, struggled through a dark and miserable existence, alone with their thoughts and a burning heart under their cloak, like a body in a tomb.

I looked again at the angular and expressive faces, and while I studied their serenely spiritual features, I continued, saying:

"Could it be possible that you lived without passions, or fears, or hopes, or desires? Who has captured the emanations of love, like an effluvium, that flows from your souls? Who satisfied the thirst for tenderness that burned in your hearts when you were young? What limitless spaces opened before the eyes of your spirits, hoping for immensity, as they awakened to sensation?..."

It was gradually getting dark. The dim light of dusk had replaced the blue light of day: the light of the moon, hidden momentarily by the dark column of the tower, bathed the pillars of the deserted gallery in a silvery glow.

Then, I was able to see that on all of those figures, whose long shadows were projected over the walls, whose floating gowns seemed to be moving, whose gaunt features were shining with an indescribable expression of holiness and joy, all had their granite eyes raised to heaven, as if the sculptor wanted it to look like their gaze was lost in infinity as they searched for God.

For God, the eternal and living source of beauty, on which the eyes of the soul were focused, as the source of love.

The end of
"Literary Letters to a Woman"