

THE FINAL SOLITUDE OF THE POET ANTONIO MACHADO

(Memories of his Brother, José)

(Part 3)

DON MIGUEL DE UNAMUNO

The affection and sincere admiration he always felt for “the great Don Miguel,” as he called him, is shown throughout the work of the Poet, both in poetry and in prose. He was always his greatest admirer and friend.

As for Unamuno, he hardly ever came from Salamanca to Madrid without trying to find the two poets, Manuel and Antonio, in whatever café where they were gathering. I remember distinctly the afternoon he bid goodbye to Antonio, telling him: “There is a fog that is so thick you can’t distinguish anything.”

At the time he said this, it was shortly before the war broke out. Afterward he moved away, walking rapidly between a double row of mirrors that multiplied his figure all the way through the Café Varela. The poet followed him with his eyes until he disappeared through the door.

It was the last time they saw each other.

Just a few years after that, when we were in exile, we received the notice of his death, and I will never forget the sad sound of his words when, with the newspaper in his hand, he told me: “Unamuno has died!”

I think that few things in his life had ever affected him as deeply as that.

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The high esteem that Don Miguel Unamuno felt for Antonio is shown very clearly in the insightful and profound remarks he makes in response to a letter the Poet wrote him while he was still young, in which he comments on his struggle with Modernism.

But first, I will include here what Don Miguel says when he received it: “I was busy with a letter (from José Ortega y Gasset) to which I had just responded, when I received another that contained a few lines of poetry from a young friend of mine, the poet Antonio Machado, the brother of Manuel. The poems of these two brothers are more spiritual than anything one can read in Spain today. Antonio Machado, who felt he was dreaming with the tranquility of one who is asleep, says one must wake up and dream while he is awake, while he is working.”

In Antonio’s letter there are some passages that are worth repeating, such as the following:

“I do not want to be accused of insincerity because that would be slandering me. However, I am rather skeptical, and I often contradict myself. Why should we try to hide our doubts and hesitations? Why should we seem to have more faith in our own thoughts, or in another’s, than we really have? Why should we act like men who are convinced, before we are? I see poetry as something related to a constant spiritual activity, not as a forum for dogmatic rules decorated with more or less brilliant images.”

“It is true, we must dream while we are awake. We must not create a separate world in which we feel an imaginary and selfish pleasure from contemplating ourselves; we must not try to escape life in order to create a better world, which is sterile for others.”

One can see how long Antonio has had this idea of giving himself completely to others, of giving them the best and the most intimate part of his spirit. And one can also see that this feeling is sincere. This attitude has been the spiritual norm his work obeyed more and more completely as it has developed.

One must keep in mind that these paragraphs were written when he was young and he was still struggling.

We can also see that he was unwilling to accept the criticism which Mallarmé directed at the Parnassian poets. As Antonio put it:

“There is nothing more nonsensical than thinking, like some French poets, that mystery can be an esthetic element. Mallarmé seems to believe this when he criticizes the Parnassians for the clarity of their forms. However, beauty is not found in mystery, but in the desire to penetrate it, and taking this path is very dangerous; it can lead us to create chaos in ourselves, if we do not then fall into the vanity of systematically creating a fog where in reality none exists, and where none should exist.”

Here I have copied some paragraphs from the letter to Unamuno by the Poet, who was one his most fervent admirers.

(See volume I of *The Complete Works of Unamuno*, pp. 538 to 540, in the edition of M. Aguilar, Madrid.)

THE FAMILY LIVING ROOM

I remember times during the Modernist period when there was a constant parade of rather Bohemian figures, some interesting and some with rare talent, who were always passing through our old family living room to visit Antonio and Manuel. But the really important thing is that among them were sometimes the true luminaries of Modernism such as Unamuno, Juan Ramon Jimenez, Valle Inclan, Maeztu and, especially, Francisco Villaespesa, the easy-going poet whose generous impulses and feverish activity did so much that I am tempted to call him the “prime mover” who, with his great enthusiasm, encouraged all his followers who came to our house almost every day.

Why try to describe the heated disputes, the interminable discussions and arguments that are so common among these people of letters. And even more so, in those times when they were planning to start new journals and to decide who would be chosen to collaborate in them. “But why include this... and this?” Valle Inclán would shout, beside himself, as he expressed his disagreement with some of the works that were being considered for the journal. And immediately you would hear the opposite point of view which was equally furious.

Those were the times when *Electra* was founded, with Ramiro de Maeztu as the editor; and the *Revista Ibérica*, was one of the many projects that resulted from those that were seething within the head of that ebullient literary activist, Villaespesa.

This was also the moment when there was an assault, as it were, on the power of some older literary figures, often in the form of a personal insult. For example, some of the most outspoken neophytes referred to Echegaray as “the old idiot.” Of course, these loudmouths never have been, nor will they ever be, the best or the most intelligent but the most daring. They usually miss the mark without saying anything that really matters, very different from the true masters of literary criticism.

A few years after that, when they were trying to become more firmly established, they founded what was rather pompously called “The Academy of Poetry.” The truth is that using a term like “Academy of Poetry” did not mean very much at that time. Actually, what they were trying to do was compete with the Royal Academy of Language which was reserved for erudite scholars and for whom, in those iconoclastic times, they felt the greatest literary scorn.

Naturally, they themselves chose the officers of this new “Academy” and those who managed to get elected were some of the most mediocre. However, it turned out that these were the real activists in this new Organization, the ones who took the first steps to attract the favor of the higher-ups.

The meetings, where an attempt was made to put these ideas in practice, were held quite frequently, and they were sometimes truly indescribable. I remember one that took place in our family living room that must have even been audible from the side-walk on the opposite side of the street.

This heated and stormy discussion did not end until late at night when a disorderly mob of people made their way down the stairs which were creaking more than usual. They had decided to continue their discussions in a nearby café, and little by little the tumultuous sound of their voices disappeared as they moved down the street.

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Moments after this, our living room was empty and silent, but the tables and chairs were in a complete state of disorder. The floor was covered with cigarette butts which the poor maid then had to sweep up. With a broom in her hand she began to sweep; however, to keep from suffocating she first had to open all the windows to let out

the smoke which still filled the room. In fact, on more than one occasion there was so much smoke that it caused alarm among the neighbors.

This family living room which was “assaulted” by the modernists was the same room where, some hours later and, in the silence of the night, Antonio would write his poem, “The Traveler,” and Manuel, the only other poet who was his equal, would also write “Castile,” to which the great Unamuno would dedicate an entire page in the evening newspaper, “El Heraldo de Madrid.”

And I wonder who could now be living in the rooms of that house that is still so fresh in my memory, and which I still see so vividly.

HIS GREAT UNDERSTANDING

He was caring and considerate. His tolerant, good will—in the highest degree—was always extended to everything and everyone in the most exemplary manner.

He was often bothered by the confusion which clouds the understanding of others; he felt this unfortunate omission resulted from the mistaken belief that they understood everything. And because they listen only to their own voice—which blocks everything—they never hear what others are saying, arriving at the arrogant conclusion that the world begins and ends with them. Being so narrow-minded creates such a state of mental impoverishment which makes it seem useless for nature to have created all the different paths our thoughts can take, while these minds seem so empty.

For this reason, his thoughts were never one-sided, and he was always eager to reach the greatest understanding. His work is a good example of this. However, just because he was tolerant did not mean he would agree with someone who was wrong.

He insisted that in most cases a lack of sympathy for other people is unjustified. This broad and complex understanding, which might be called kind-hearted intelligence, is expressed with the following lines which say:

And he felt compassion for the deer and for the hunter,
for the robber and the victim,
for the frantic bird
and the bloodthirsty falcon.

HIS GENEROSITY WITH THE YOUNGER GENERATION

His generosity had no limits. Whenever anyone needed assistance, he was always ready to help if he was able.

Even without thinking about it or giving it great importance, he would try to help those who came to visit him, not only in a material, but also in a spiritual sense. For this

reason, on many different occasions, he wrote about some of the young writers who asked him to take an interest in their work.

Of course, he never failed to have great affection for the young people who had such great expectations of him, and he would always read the books of these young writers with a great deal of sympathy. And when some of these works did not achieve the level of acceptance which, in his judgment, they deserved, he would try to help by discussing them, not as they had been, but as he felt they should be.

Therefore, with his great kindness and understanding, it bothered him when these efforts did not achieve complete success. But nobody was happier when one of the works he had praised was finally accepted. For which he recommended:

Write slowly and carefully;
doing things well
matters more than doing them.

THE POET'S HANDWRITING

The fact that I have often prepared the final version of the Poet's work for the printer permits me to write about this topic with full understanding.

His handwriting was usually quite small, like that of our father. As it progressed down the sheet of paper, it kept getting smaller and more complicated until at times even he had difficulty understanding what he had written. Also, since his rough drafts were full of erasures and words that had been crossed out, it was often very difficult to make a copy of them.

But the curious thing was that, when he wanted to, he could produce a very elegant and clear cursive handwriting. However, he did this only on the envelope of his letters, or when he had to prepare a final manuscript to be reproduced. He also did this when he had to send something directly to the printer. Then, he made a great effort to write letters that were intricate and clear, in comparison with his usual writing style.

In this way he achieved the miracle of writing very clearly with dark letters, just the opposite of those who write very darkly with clear letters.

HIS GREAT EFFORT

When there was something in which he had a great interest—and this is true of almost everything he did—he made every possible effort to accomplish it successfully.

He gave, as an example: when you have to jump a meter, be prepared to jump ten, and even then... don't be too confident.

SOLVING LIFE'S PROBLEMS

With the far-sightedness that he possessed all of his life, he found a solution for earning a living in the most efficient way possible. He decided to search for a position as a teacher of French, since that was something he already knew quite well. When the opportunity came he chose Soria although, like a good Andalusian, he could have chosen Baeza. But this decision merits another short comment.

THE REASON FOR THIS CHOICE

This choice, which became so beneficial for his work was, according to him, because of the tiresome use of Andalusian dialect in the theater which he could not stand. Especially in those works which the critics considered light-hearted, which for him were as heavy as lead. It becomes obvious, then, why after some time, he became one of the authors of *Lola goes to the Ports*. A work that is distinguished for being one which shows the real Andalusia.

Of course, this could only be accomplished by those who have great talent as dramatists, together with the Poet's cleansing vision, a unique quality which reveals the definitive essence of things. This is what happens with *Lola goes to the Ports*, but like many other things, this should be left to what, in the final analysis, is the best critic of all, which is time.

HIS LIFE IN THE PROVINCES

As a teacher, he was always faithful to his classes; he never failed to be there. He only traveled to Madrid during his regular vacations. Of course, he never spent the summer in the provinces, since as soon as classes ended he returned to the capital.

Because of his exceptional qualities he was never completely influenced by the provinces, nor did he ever acquire that provincial air which many people retain during their entire life. However, he took good advantage of the time he spent there.

Only a man like him who loved nature so much, who dedicated so much time to his walks through the countryside, and who had such a rich and intense interior life could avoid being overwhelmed by the boring routines of provincial life. So, what for others perhaps would have been disastrous, he used to his advantage by adapting it to his work.

In his well-known book, *Fields of Castile*—which by the way he wrote in part while in Paris—one can see very clearly the influence of the time he spent in the Castilian countryside.

He delved so deeply into the soul of these lands that the moment came when he asked himself with surprise: have you reached into my soul, or were you perhaps already present in it?

And so these landscapes, which he describes so masterfully, have achieved the miracle of being reflected in a living mirror: the Poet. And as time passes, they will continue to vibrate in this mirror, even though we can no longer see them.

A FAVORITE PASSAGE

Antonio seemed to have some favorite lines from “Proverbs and Songs” that he would write on young ladies’ notebooks, when he could not get away from them. Then, he would write:

Our Spaniard is yawning.
Is it hunger? Fatigue? Boredom?
Doctor, can he have an empty stomach?
No, the emptiness is in his head.

In spite of the fact that these insistent female autograph collectors would have preferred something more flattering to themselves, they had to laugh at the words: “No, the emptiness is in his head.” They would not have done it so willingly had they been able to hear from his own lips what the Poet thought about the claims made by feminists regarding the dubious intellectual capacity of women; “Don’t fool yourself,” he would say, “the woman who reaches the highest level of intelligence will never reach that of the man who lacks it most.” “You will say there are exceptions. That is true, but they do nothing more than confirm the rule. Of course,” he continued, “each and every one of them would feel they are that exception. And then, everything will be fixed, everything except... the emptiness that will always remain in the same place.”

As the faithful chronicler, I can do nothing more than give a strict transcription of this criterion which, besides, is confirmed on many other occasions by what is said throughout the Poet’s work.

BAPTISM

The Poet described this beautiful, symbolic ceremony, speaking of the seriousness with which priests considered the social class of the child and, above all, the economic situation of the parents. He said, with his usual sense of humor—so full of charm—that this solemn act could be divided into three social categories.

Category one: the baptism of well-to-do children, and saying this he was of course referring to truly rich people, since this term could hardly be applied to the offspring of day laborers. During the ceremony of these people of good fortune all the bells would ring, and the church would be filled with flowers and candles. The priest would wear his

very best cassock, covered with two or more sumptuous stoles embroidered with gold. Everything would be truly beautiful and magnificent. The baptismal water would also be warm, and as clean as possible; everything really first class.

After that would come the second class baptismal waters, as it were. Then, there would be no ringing of bells; the flowers would be a little wilted, and the candles partly burned. The celebrant would wear just one modest stole which would be a little dingy.

Following that, in the third class the priest wears simple clothing: his cassock is rather shabby and he will not have shaved for two days or more. And finally, he said, there could even be a fourth category, a baptism this time... without water. Or perhaps the priest would moisten his fingers with a bit of saliva so the ceremony would not be completely dry. Of course, he said all this jokingly, so as not to annoy anyone.

CLASSICAL OR ROMANTIC?

I often heard this Poet say that emotion is everything in art. It is so essential, he added, that without it nothing worthwhile is ever produced, since things that are abstract and purely cerebral have no interest, nor do they have anything to do with true poetry. They are merely ingenious vessels that contain nothing of interest for me, and I don't think they really interest anyone else except those who create them.

These are the words of a Poet who always put the deepest emotion into everything he wrote. Some would say that he was all heart. Others would suggest that he was all head perhaps, but with a deeper vision.

In fact, he was constantly on guard against excesses of emotion which can go beyond the limit where feelings get out of control. And this is precisely what we see in his poetry: controlled emotion which is never overstated. More than once I have seen tears in the eyes of Manuel when he read the poems of his brother, and he once said to me afterward: "I don't know what there is in the poems of Antonio that I have to make such an effort to control myself when I read them."

Such a great emotional impact only seems to be present in the case of poets like Antonio, in whom the mind takes hold of a deep feeling and then gradually carries it to just the place it should be. Thus, in this exceptional Poet, the preeminence of his intelligence acts, and is always acting to control the emotions of his heart. And because of this very important quality, in my opinion he is both classical and romantic. As to that, the professional critics can discuss this topic as they will. Here I do nothing more than make this observation.

TECHNIQUE

To those who would talk about the excellence of poetic technique in his work he would say that he preferred “techniques,” in plural, because each topic demands its own. Otherwise, a generalized technique would result in an intolerable affectation.

And so, he would add, whatever mold is suitable for each theme must be cast or rejected immediately, because it can be used only once. This method of creating and thinking can be appreciated throughout his work and, especially, in his plays.

There is an exceptional and admirable quality that makes the theater of Manuel and Antonio completely different from that of other authors. This was a quality that was never grasped by professional critics. When speaking of these critics, Manuel would say, and Antonio would agree, that “they always said something before they *got it*, and only after they didn’t *get it*.” Here we can of course make an exception with regard to the articles of Joaquin Aznar, Director of “La Libertad,” in Madrid.

These articles were perfect with regard to form and content, and especially because he always was able to *get it*. But then... it must be said... this gentleman was not a professional critic.

AN AVARICIOUS DESIRE

On the many occasions when he would write while I was making studies for his portrait, I was able to observe the way in which he worked. For a few moments he would bend over the paper to write something. After that he would become immersed in thought as though he were looking at something far away which was not in this world. He would be so lost in thought that only his physical presence would show that he was actually there. Finally, he would begin to write again, adding several lines to what he had already written; then, he would raise the paper to the level of his eyes, and his lips would move without making a sound. It seemed almost like prayer, as he read to himself what he had written.

At times like this you could almost say you could see him think. But this mental labor to bring together all of his thoughts had in him a painful and exhausting intensity, almost like giving birth to a child.

This thought process is something I would compare to the constant, silent growth of plants with a creative power that is not less vital, just because it is invisible. If a rose is the miracle of a rose bush, true poetry is the miracle created by a poet. With the difference that rose bushes are much more numerous than great poets.

Antonio’s powerful concentration on what he was writing helps to explain the quiet murmur that came from his lips as he wrote. In moments like this he only lacked a halo to appear like a saint who was praying.

But changing the subject, I do not want to complete this comment without repeating something interesting—like all of his thoughts—which he said about the problems of this sad world we live in.

He would sometimes comment on how depressing and how unfair it was that an artist's work was not given the same value as that of other professions. And to this he responded—with a tone that was somewhere between good-natured and ironic—if in addition to the satisfaction he gets from a rich spiritual life and the pleasure he receives again and again from his work, someone were to also give the artist money... that would be too much; and of course it would cause an avaricious desire even to think of it. To earn money—he said—people sell chick peas. We were all silent.

A TENDENCY

A curious thing occurred with both Manuel and Antonio during their early youth. Their friends were almost always much older than they were. This occurred naturally, of course, without any special effort on their part.

This was something that neither of them realized until much later.

Perhaps they found these people more interesting, since intelligence usually increases with time, and it has a great influence on young people who are eager to learn.

HIS WORK HABITS

Not even in the most difficult moments did he ever stop working. When some activity kept him from spending time on his work during the day or even during part of the night, he always began working once he returned home.

If it was at night, instead of putting out the lamp in order to go to sleep, he would leave it burning and continue to stay awake.

In this way he kept on writing, and erasing, leaning over his papers, until that indefinite time when the light of dawn begins to drive away the shadows of night.

Anyone who happened to pass by our house in Madrid (No. 4, General Aranda), during the time when the overnighiter meets the early riser, would always see a light in the Poet's window.

More important than all his preoccupations and vicissitudes, he never ceased to find time for his solitude:

Oh, solitude, my only companion...

There was never anything or anyone who could change these habits during his entire life. And while most of us mortals were sleeping, with his pen in his hand, he kept his vigil in a state of perpetual and fertile spiritual wakefulness. And during this time of dreaming-while-awake, the bells of dawn would awaken him:

I will awaken
when the bells of dawn
are ringing.

HIS FONDNESS FOR BOOKS

Ever since he was a child he had an extraordinary love of reading. So much so that every day he went to the National Library. And there he would remain, immersed in his reading for hours and hours, preferring that to all other kinds of distractions common to people of his age.

With the passage of time this fondness increased until all the money he was able to earn was spent on books. And to the extent that his finances permitted, he went on acquiring as many as he could.

They all had the signs of having been read over and over again.

But no one was ever further from being a careful collector. In his impatience to read what he had just purchased, he would tear apart the pages with his hands, while complaining that the book had been sold without cutting the pages.

His bookshelves were so full of books that, more than once, the poor boards collapsed under the weight. To which he would say: "it's no wonder; the density of all these philosophical thinkers is something serious."

And not only the poor bookshelves, but the tables, chairs and even the floor were all completely covered with books.

And in this mountain of books, the most numerous were works of philosophy.

THE CAFÉS WHERE HE WORKED

He liked to write in cafés, and he always searched for those which were least frequented and solitary. In them he would spend the morning writing. Normally, from eleven to two he would return home to eat lunch.

Of course, he had to keep on finding new cafés because, with so few customers, these establishments inevitably had to close.

I remember one which was called “The Café of Good Hope.” It was the hope, Antonio said, that the business would be successful. The owner must have had a great deal of it because, in order to make the café more attractive, he had reserved a room for lovers. The Poet called it “The garden of love.” However, with garden, love and all one morning he found it too was closed. Like so many others!

HIS URGE FOR PERFECTION

In his urge for perfection he exercised the most stringent and severe censure over everything he wrote. And one could be certain that he was never completely satisfied with what he had accomplished, always discontented with all that had not been *what it should have been*.

Thus, as he looks back on the paths that life has taken, he says:

Ah, to be born again and to travel
once more on the path that was lost!

He always had this same urge for perfection. No one was ever more certain that art is not the realm of intentions, but of full realization.

HIS ATTITUDE OF STOICISM

He was able to bear physical pain better than almost anyone. The discomforts that other people would have barely been able to tolerate, he accepted with an astonishing degree of stoicism. Always in complete control of himself, he never complained of suffering to anyone. When he was about to die, he realized what was happening, but he waited unafraid and resigned.

HIS INNER LIFE

His life was always completely dedicated to the task of giving form to his inner thoughts in order to bring them to light. Everything else was less important. Nor did the physical suffering caused by his bad health bother him when he was immersed in abstraction. And he gave himself completely to others, with a generosity that he never reserved for himself. But this is something his most dearly beloved brother can tell you with these wonderful lines—written some time ago—which describe this characteristic:

And he gave away
what others tried to win.
And his life,
for lack of wanting
and excess of giving,
was finally destroyed.

It was indeed true that “he gave away what others tried to win,” with such a limitless generosity that when he was absorbed in his thoughts, he never had the slightest concern or interest in what was around him. All those things which most people, with overwhelming certainty, consider most important were of no interest for him—not even those things which might damage his health. Even now I can remember when he would come home, sometimes late at night, with his face flushed and his hair blown by the cold wind of the Guadarramas, so absorbed and lost in thought that no one dared to break his formidable silence, for fear of making him sever the thread of an enchanted life.

This, in spite of the fact that it could have serious consequences to travel on a winter night in Madrid, when the wind was blowing so hard, as they say, “it kills a man, even before it blows out the lamp.” But his tormented spirit was so dominated by his interior voice that he was completely oblivious to everything else.

Leaning forward, with one hand on his cane while the other held on to his hat which was about to blow away, he walked on, impervious and indifferent: “as though he were a ghost.”

In these moments, so common in him and which spiritualists might refer to as a trance, one couldn't speak to him of anything until the moment had passed. And this was how he spent his life, which was generously given so that others could win the benefit of the emotions which are now eternalized in his poetry.

Perhaps some would feel that the honor and the recognition given to these men is excessive. But in reality we give nothing... in exchange for everything.

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