

THE FINAL SOLITUDE OF THE POET ANTONIO MACHADO

(Memories of his Brother, José)

(Part 9)

AT NIGHT

Almost every night sitting next to his mother Antonio would listen to the reading of *Don Quijote*, a work which he always kept close at hand, and in which every day we would find something new.

I would also read to them from Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Charles Dickens, the great English novelist whom he admired so much for his imaginative stories. Of poetry, Becquer and Ruben Dario. So very different!

At about eleven o'clock when the hour for reading was over, it would be time for bed or, I should say, for his nightly labors to begin. With slow, uncertain steps he would begin to move through the large deserted rooms that he had to pass through in order to reach the bedrooms, holding onto his mother, who could now barely walk, with infinite carefulness. This is the way our family would slide through the night almost weightlessly over the floors of this old palace, of which he would say jokingly that it was enchanted; one afternoon when he was alone he saw a black dog pass through the salon: "I saw the Devil," he told me smiling. That was the same Devil that, as a child, he imagined being located in the brazier which was enclosed by a wire netting.

He endured the penetrating cold with stoicism. During the dead of night there was only one light burning in the Torre de Castaner: that of the Poet.

Sometimes, when we brought him his breakfast, he would still be hard at work.

One Sunday afternoon—the last one he would spend in Barcelona—several good friends came to visit him as they often did.

In the atmosphere of the room there was a feeling of dire foreboding, a feeling that some grave, far-reaching event was about to occur. By the time night fell the visits had ended. Then, something which seldom happened, the young custodian of the old Tower came to see him; he sank exhaustedly into an armchair and announced that the enemy troops were about to enter Barcelona.

Unfortunately, these were the final days of the Catalan resistance. Until now, no one had said anything to the Poet concerning the danger which threatened him.

The following day, which was Monday, the Dean of the University of Barcelona came to tell him he must prepare to leave with a group of professors. And, as an indication of the extent to which he was still ready to support the cause, he spent his final

day in Barcelona, the 22nd of January of 1939, finishing an article he was asked to write about General Rojo.

Since no one had come to get it, he telephoned, asking them to send someone. An hour later a man on a bicycle from the Ministry of Communication came to take the article to its proper destination. He had no idea that in the envelope was the last work Antonio Machado would ever write in Spain. And so only hours before he would have to depart, he worked until the last minute, devoting his entire energy to the defense of his homeland.

And without the slightest sign of boasting, he could have repeated the words he once had written:

After all, I owe you nothing; for all I have written
you owe me...

With the awareness that he had fulfilled his duty, but with the anguish caused by the fact that he was leaving Spain for the last time, he waited for the car which would take him to the border of France. The same France from which, long ago, he returned to Spain with a sick, young wife to wait for “another miracle of spring.”

This time it is he who is going to France to die and then remain there until his homeland is free from domination and is able to reclaim him forever.

LEAVING THE TORRE DE CASTAÑER

Around midnight a car arrived which had been sent by Dr. Puche, the Minister of Health. Antonio got in, accompanied by his family, including our mother and Matea, the wife of the one who writes this. He never ceased to offer the most tender solicitations to his mother who was suffering much more than he was.

The car set out for the Department of Health. Once there, he walked up the stairs painfully to await the final departure of the convoy.

The people who were there during those nightmare hours walked back and forth through the different offices like ghosts; as soon as they disappeared others would appear. Everything—suitcases and hearts—was jumbled together during the bad dream of that terrible night.

Finally, the moment came when we must go down and get into the car once again. And this would be our final departure.

LEAVING BARCELONA

The convoy left under searchlight beams during an unexpected alarm. Streaks of light stretched back and forth through the sky of the dark night. Soon afterward we heard the distant sound of explosions that made the ground tremble.

On that turbulent night we set out for Gerona.

GERONA

On the following morning, which was the 23rd of January, we arrived at this city. Such a large number of vehicles had arrived at this point that it was necessary to wait for some time before being able to continue. It seemed a miracle that no bombs hit our car since they were falling with regularity all around us.

We finally were able to reach the town of Cervia del Ter. Not far from there was a large, run-down country house where we had to stop for some time before we could continue our journey.

Those of us in the group we were traveling with stayed in that old house on the outskirts of town from the 23rd of January to the afternoon of January 26th, and then when it was almost nighttime a truck came to pick up the luggage and we were told to go out to the road and wait for an ambulance which would take us to a Farm.

As always happened, those who were the strongest and the most agile arrived first and took the best seats. Therefore, the Poet and his mother, both of whom could hardly walk, were left behind. Since by then it had become almost completely dark they became disoriented and moved slowly, feeling their way over the ground with great uncertainty, accompanied only by my wife and me.

When they finally reached the vehicle, they crowded between the other bodies and continued their sad exodus.

After traveling for a long and painful length of time down the road in the dark of night, the ambulance arrived at the Farm which was located near the road.

THE FARM

As soon as we got there we all got out and entered this new dwelling to wait for the dawn of another day.

In the farmhouse there was a large kitchen, and in the center was a large wooden table surrounded by long, narrow benches. Placed against the wall on both sides of a

wood-burning fireplace there were several small stoves which were blackened by smoke. That was smoke from the times when things were better.

In this large enclosure the newcomers began to mix with those who had already arrived, and among these were some friends, like Corpus Barga. This diverse and picturesque group mingled together confusedly. They moved from one place to the other nervously, without stopping. In this new refuge there was a constant feeling of disquiet that did not permit anyone to feel at ease. Once they arrived, it seemed like they bore the weight of centuries and that, for them, time was no longer passing. In circumstances like these, time measured by the heart never agrees with clocks; then, the latter don't measure more than a rhythm of... of nothingness.

Some people were making a desperate effort to get some sleep. You could see them leaning over the table with their head in their hands as though they were trying to keep it from escaping and, for a moment, it appeared that they were asleep. Then, suddenly they would change their position and would lean forward once again, still trying desperately to capture a moment of sleep.

It was all in vain. The war had killed the possibility of sleep for all of us.

During the bad dream of this horrible night, the Poet seemed like a soul in torment among that restless multitude of people. He looked in silence at the different groups of people that had gathered here and there amid the general confusion and the smoke from cigars (there is always someone who smokes), seeing a few familiar faces among many others that he saw for the first time in that chaotic environment.

Before long that kitchen began to look like a strange house of madness, and dawn was going to find us all much older than when we had arrived. But still, in some corners of the room you could hear the youthful laughter of those who responded to the courting of admirers on a night that would never return. There is no way to avoid it. No matter where you are, the urge to perpetuate the species will always appear. And never expect that it will have the least pity for its creatures. What does it matter that men and women are dying in droves? As long as the seed remains...

On that hellish night members of the militia went in and out with their ponchos and their rifles, carrying large branches to build up the fire that was about to go out.

The coldness of dawn was felt in the marrow of our bones, as thin threads of light began to filter through unexpected cracks in the walls before our tired eyes.

The Poet, numb and exhausted, looked on in complete silence, surrounded by all these people who, as though they were entering the last phase of an infernal dance, made a final spasm of movement as they picked up their poor collection of suitcases, sacks, and odd-shaped bundles, in order to continue their sad journey of exile.

And so the Poet spent the last night in Spain with his mother and two other family members, all of whom were overwhelmed by exhaustion and anxiety.

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

When the light of a dismal dawn began to show in the sky, we set out again. Our car continued to devour the kilometers on the long road in front of us, with occasional interruptions caused by the constant threat of airplanes passing overhead.

On one occasion when our vehicle stopped, someone who was sitting near the driver became the victim of an uncontrollable fear caused by the sound of an airplane and made a frantic effort to clamber over the other passengers in order to get out. The Poet who was always the last to exit said that it was only natural to be afraid but, if only as a matter of politeness, it wasn't necessary to make such a spectacle, and... besides, if a bomb was going to fall, that would provide the solution to all our problems and there was no need to be in such a rush.

We pressed on with our journey. On another occasion when we had to stop to get gasoline, a militiaman got on, and when he became aware that Antonio Machado was in the car, he stretched out his strong and generous hand, saying to the others, "Please forgive me, but what is most important in here," he said pointing, "is this gentleman." Everyone smiled, some more some less, at such rude frankness. But not content with expressing himself in those terms, he called to the other militiamen who by then were tired of pumping the gas we needed to continue our journey, insisting that since Antonio Machado was traveling in this car, nothing could be denied.

So, still within the boundaries of the territory of Spain, this soldier stepped forward with this rude friendliness and said goodbye to Antonio, gripping his hand tightly as if to impress on it forever the love of the Spanish people.

Then it was the other soldiers who, with their open hearts and their dusty and sunburned hands extended, came to tell him goodbye.

WE CONTINUE TRAVELING

On both sides of the highway you could see trunks and suitcases that had been abandoned by their owners. They had been carried this far with great effort, only to be discarded under the unbearable stress of the constant bombardments. And there they lay, plundered by their very owners who had anxiously extracted the few things they hoped to save. Thousands of intimate and personal belongings were strewn here and there all along the road under the implacable light of the sun.

There was still a long way to travel, but this was the final stretch. We began to sense the air of a foreign land. The moment had come when we must leave Spain behind.

So near and yet so far! Women's eyes were filled with tears. Handkerchiefs were pressed against faces to smother the unequal rhythm of sobs.

The Poet was hiding his deepest emotions in complete silence. His head leaned forward, supported by trembling hands that rested on the crook of his cane. His face was hidden by the shadow of his hat.

Our car finally stopped, but without having arrived at the celebrated chain, on the other side of which was France. It was impossible to continue any further. In front of us were all sorts of vehicles crowded together forming a barrier that prevented all forward progress. Here we were forced to stop in the middle of the road without any chance of going farther. Night was falling. It was totally impossible to begin moving again.

People began to get out of their cars and trucks and start walking on foot by the edge of the road in order to cover, as best they could, the long distance which remained before they reached the chain. Frightened and bewildered women and children traveled in disorderly groups. Everyone pressed forward in an anxious jumble of people who were driven by the desperate urge to arrive.

Since we had no other choice, my wife and I, and a good friend who came across the border to assist us, helped Antonio and our mother get out of the car with difficulty, and we began to follow the confused multitude of anxious people.

The darkness, complicated by the rain which was falling in torrents, made it very difficult to travel. It was under those conditions, sick and faltering, that we began to advance painfully on our sad way forward.

Thinking only of saving our persons, we were forced to leave behind forever the suitcases which contained the books and the final papers of the Poet. There was nothing else we could do. We were just thankful that we could escape with our lives from that Calvary. We moved slowly between the cars and carts of the halted convoy, stumbling here and there against the wheels, sometimes blinded by headlights that illuminated the slanting lines of falling rain.

Always silent and resigned, Antonio watched his mother with her thin, white hair pressed against her temples by the rain that poured over her beautiful face like a veil of tears. And so, dripping and soaked to the bone, rather than walking, they were pushed and jostled by the multitude of those who, like an avalanche, were struggling to reach the frontier at all costs.

Exhausted and drained by fatigue, they were finally able to pass under the heavy iron chain which was held by two corpulent black men whose skin was shining in the rain as though it was made from the same iron as the chain that marked the dividing line between Spain and France. It was also the line between life and death now that fate had uprooted them from their homeland, and their final destiny would be fulfilled somewhere outside of it. Or as Antonio has expressed it elsewhere:

We now live in the present, and we only care
about the desperate poses we assume in order
to wait... But She will not be late for our date.

For some reason, with his far-reaching vision, Antonio had always felt an inexplicable aversion to France. He arrived on the night of the 27th of January of 1939, for what would be only a very short time in France, going first to the French Consulate where they checked the document of his exit from Spain. They put a new stamp on it with the words: "Bon pour entree en France."

From there, the rest of the group we were traveling with set out on foot in the direction of Cerbère. Thankfully, a good friend said he could get a car, and he promised to send it for us as soon as he got there. So we had to wait. He finally returned, but so heavily loaded with luggage that there was only room for one person next to the driver.

Antonio painfully climbed in and sat his mother on his knees. With an ironic twist of fate it was now he, with his trembling knees and weak arms, who must support his suffering mother.

My wife and I, who had accompanied them during the entire trip, agreed to meet them in the café where the driver said he would leave them. Then, under the constantly falling rain, the car drove away through the mud until it disappeared in the blackness of that unforgettable night. We were finally able to join them at the café. We tried in vain to pay for the small amount of the bill. But it was useless. They would not even accept a bill for one hundred pesetas. They would rather not receive anything than accept money that had now completely lost its value. But there was nothing else we could offer.

CERBÉRE

We set out once again, this time for the railroad station of Cerbère where we sought refuge in the cafeteria. There the spectacle that greeted our eyes was devastating. The poor, beleaguered Spaniards with no money were treated like dogs by the waiters of that establishment who asked us immediately if we would be able to pay. When we were forced to say no, they would not even give us a glass of water. This was what happened at the cafeteria. On the train platform it was even worse, because there we were pursued by gendarmes whose only wish was to divide the people into groups for the concentration camps, separating children from their parents, and women from their husbands. All of this was done in a way that was callous and brutal.

It was a miracle that we were able to escape the claws of these officials who were casting such a shameful light on the human race. We were dismayed by all of this, not knowing what to do nor how we would spend that interminable night until a good friend, a distinguished professor, was able to get the station manager to promise that, after a few more hours when the trains stopped moving, we could spend the rest of the night in one of the train cars. When it reached the promised time we went out onto the platform where, buffeted by the cruel mountain winds and shivering with cold, we had to stand

and wait for the promise to be fulfilled. Finally, they directed us to a train which had stopped on a dead-end track at the rear of the station.

We made our way across the tracks, stumbling here and there and then, because the steps were quite high off the ground, we climbed into the train car with difficulty. When the Poet and his mother finally entered the dark car, they collapsed into the seats, completely exhausted after the long and terrible odyssey.

The wind continued to blow with uncontrollable fury during the rest of that long and bitter night.

And that is how the Spanish Poet, Antonio Machado, with his mother and those who accompanied him, entered France when he was gravely ill, without a single Franc in his pockets:

...almost naked, like the children of the sea.

THE FOLLOWING DAY

This was one more night in the course of our life. But it was one day less in the life of the Poet.

On the afternoon of the following day the situation changed. Corpus Barga, one of the good friends who accompanied us on that exodus, was able to get to Perpignan. From there he returned to where we were still in difficult circumstances (in Cerbère), and he was able to take us to the nearby town of Collioure.

Once we arrived, the actions of this excellent friend even went so far as carrying our elderly mother in his arms like a feather all the way from the train station along the main thoroughfare of the town toward the sea. As we followed him down the street to the center of town, on our right was the Central Plaza where, next to a small stream, was the modest “Hotel Bougnol Quintana” where we were able to find lodgings.

COLLIOURE

Where the poor river ends the immense sea awaits us.

The night of the 28th of January of 1939 was the first night that the Poet and his family spent in Collioure. He had now reached the last stage of his life.

In these final moments it was through the assistance of a very good friend that he was able to receive the financial means to meet his most urgent needs. This friend, whom the Poet always held in great esteem, was Luis A. Santullano, who was now the Ambassador of Spain in Paris.

For a few days the opportunity to rest seemed to lessen the effects of the heart ailment which had been weakening the Poet's health for some time now. Nevertheless, it was becoming quite clear that he was approaching the end of his life. Thinking of that, he said: "when there is no longer any future because all chance of hope has disappeared, it means that death is coming."

He was not able to recover from the loss of Spain. Nor could he overcome the anguish of his exile. This was the state of his mind during the final days in Collioure.

However, a few days before his death, when in front of the mirror he was trying in vain to rearrange the disorderly state of his hair, he said to me: "Let's go to the sea."

This was the first and last time he left the hotel to go outside. We walked slowly toward the beach. When we got there, we sat down on one of the benches on the sand.

The midday sun gave very little warmth. It was during that exact moment when one could say that his body buried the shadow under his feet.

The wind was quite strong but he took off his hat and placed it on his knee with one hand while the other, with a gesture that was so typical of him, was resting on the head of his cane. He remained that way silently for a long time, as he watched the back and forth movement of the waves which never ceased, as though they had been placed under a curse which never permitted them to rest. After a long period of contemplation he said to me, pointing to the humble shacks of some fishermen: "If I could only live there behind one of those windows, free of all cares." Then, a moment later he made the effort to get up and, moving with great difficulty over the soft sand into which his feet sank almost completely, we began to walk back to the hotel in complete silence.

Here in Collioure was the one who, years ago, had listened in his cradle to the subtle murmur of water in the fountain of the Palacio de las Dueñas in Seville where he was born. Now when he was sad and tired he had come to see the constantly moving waves whose continuous motion seemed to envelope everything. One could see that in these moments he had once again been deeply influenced by the bitter voice of the sea.

During the days of his exile which followed, his state of mind was filled more and more with the same feeling of sadness he had experienced since he was a child:

Yes, I was a child and you were my only companion.

Nevertheless, he reacted stoically, never making the slightest complaint in spite of the fact that he knew the end was approaching.

And in those days before his death, using a pen that moved very slowly over the paper, he wrote his signature for the last time in a letter he was sending to his dear friend, Luis A. Santullano.

HIS DEATH

Antonio still had all of his faculties until the final hours of the afternoon when his death finally came.

Sunken into the pillow, the noble head of the Poet had an august serenity which made it appear that the thread of life was hardly broken. His inert body was lying under the flag of the Republic of Spain for which, like any other soldier, he had given his life.

This happened in Collioure on the afternoon of the 22nd of February, which was Ash Wednesday, of the year of 1939.

THE BURIAL

The news of the Poet's death spread with great rapidity. In the early hours of the following day I received a moving and heartfelt letter of condolence from the renowned writer, Jean Cassou requesting, in his name and in those of other French writers, that the burial be held in Paris. It concluded with these words: "In short, we would like to have the burial here, in Paris. As French writers, it is our duty to take responsibility for the ashes of the great Antonio Machado who passed away here on French soil where he had sought refuge."

This old friend and admirer of the Poet had expressed himself with great devotion. But, with the infinite gratitude which the sincere expression of French character deserved, I decided not to accept this honor, since in these moments when I was far away from our brothers I thought I could best satisfy their wishes by having a burial which would be in harmony with the simple and austere manner of the Poet's life. And so we preferred that he should dream his final dream in the humble fisherman's town of Collioure. He could wait there until the war ended with the triumph of freedom, and his body could finally be transferred along with that of his mother to the heroic city of Madrid, Capital of all the Spains, of which he had written so often.

We also received numerous other telegrams of condolence, as well as two wreaths of flowers: one from the government, and another from the Ambassador of Spain in Paris.

The burial took place at five o'clock in the afternoon on Thursday, the 23rd of February. Many friends and admirers came from outside. It was also especially moving that almost the entire town of Collioure led by the Mayor was present. But the most moving thing was when six Spanish militiamen carried the coffin that had been covered with the flag of the Republic of Spain all the way to the cemetery. And it must be noted that in order to do this they had to escape the relentless vigilance of the infamous Castle of Collioure where they had been so unjustly detained. They are also to be commended for the fact that they fulfilled this unselfish task without even giving their names.

Nevertheless, in a photograph that was made of the burial they are seen carrying the coffin with the same sad and serious demeanor they would have shown if they had been carrying a companion who had fallen in battle.

The procession traveled down the main street of the town which led to the sea. Before reaching the end it turned into another street where the Town Hall was located and there the cortege stopped for a moment. After that, it returned by the same street until it reached the Cemetery.

A kind woman from the Republic of France, who was a close friend of the owner of the Hotel Bougnol-Quintana where all of us had received such solicitous care, graciously offered a spot in the burial ground of her family for the interment of the Poet. And there his body rested, next to the sea.

Someone made a few moving remarks which concluded with these words by the Poet:

Heart that once was vibrant,
does your golden coin
no longer jingle?

We left the sad burial site in silence, but before leaving the cemetery the Mayor of Collioure gave a short but moving funeral speech, after which the mourners began to depart. They moved off in small groups until the street finally was empty.

HIS MOTHER

Gravely ill and suffering under the weight of her many years, his mother was so weak that she was not able to leave her bed. The fact that she slept almost constantly kept her from realizing that her son had died.

Two days later she recovered her awareness for a moment and with the effort of one who emerges from a horrible nightmare she looked at the empty bed and asked me full of anguish: “What has happened? What has happened?”

I tried in vain to hide it from her. But a mother cannot be deceived, and she began to cry like a poor little girl!

That very night her beautiful blue eyes finally closed forever.

And so the mother, who had given birth to the Poet in Seville many years ago on the night of Santa Ana—her personal Saint—also passed away.

THE FINAL WORDS WRITTEN BY THE POET

A few days later in the pocket of his overcoat I found a small, wrinkled sheet of paper. On it he had written three brief notes with a pencil which he asked for shortly before his death.

The first repeated the words said at the beginning of the famous monologue of Hamlet: "To be or not to be..." The second was only one line. But in this line were the last words of poetry that the Poet would write:

The sunny days and this sun of my childhood

And in the third and last note he repeated some lines from one of his poems that had already been published, in which he made a small correction:

And I will give you my song,
with a green parrot
who says it on your balcony:
"One sings of what is lost."

The correction consisted of saying "And I will give you my song," instead of "And I will send you my song," as it appears in his *Complete Works*.

This shows that until the last moment he was following his usual pattern of thinking, creating, and correcting.

Since they are very appropriate, I also want to include here these lines from one of his poems showing the path he chose to follow which allowed him to create the miracle of eternal resonance with the living word. They are:

Not the ageless hardness of marble,
nor music or painting,
but the word in time.

* * * * *

And now, before I finish this task, I have to add one more impression which has become so deeply engraved in my consciousness that I think I will never forget it as long as I live.

It happened one afternoon in 1940 when it was getting dark here in Santiago de Chile, shortly after we arrived. I was standing on the balcony of the house and in the distance I could see the beautiful trees of the wooded park behind which you could hear the sound of the river flowing by.

The day was finally coming to an end, and shadows were descending under the weight of the coming night.

Suddenly before my astonished eyes a figure appeared; at first it was difficult to see as it moved slowly through the trees in the direction where I was standing. I had the feeling that it had come from somewhere far away. As it walked it seemed to reveal an infinite tiredness. One hand was resting on a cane, and another could barely hold onto a hat. The figure was *so familiar* that at that moment I was ready to accept the impossible, that it was my brother Antonio! It was a moment in which I could not tell if what I was seeing was a dream, or if it was real. I felt an irresistible urge to leave the house. I moved in the direction where I hoped I would be able to see that figure which had seemed so extraordinary. But under the shadows which now enveloped everything, that dream had disappeared. The traveler had vanished...

Disoriented and exhausted by the emotions I had just experienced, I returned to the house. The balcony was still open. But now it displayed only the blue of the night.

My wife was sewing under the lamp which cast its light over the silver tresses of her hair. I sat down at her side and, lost in thought, I remembered those lines of the Poet who asked of an April afternoon that was ending:

Is happiness finally coming to my house?
The April afternoon smiled: "Happiness already
came to your door. It doesn't come twice."

THE END

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