

Solitudes and Other Early Poems

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(translated by Michael Smith & Valentino Gianuzzi)

Antonio Machado

Solitudes
& Other Early Poems

Translated from Spanish by
Michael Smith & Luis Ingelmo

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Foreword

Antonio Machado is, without a doubt, the father of modern Spanish lyric poetry: a bridge that stretches between Bécquer, Rubén Darío and Jiménez, Lorca, Alberti, Guillén, Cernuda, Aleixandre and Otero. While the work of Lorca, which is much better known, depicts the extravagant violence and gaiety that is one aspect of Spain (one aspect, incidentally—the Andalusian—that is frequently taken for more than it is), Machado expresses a quiet, meditative and enduring Spain that is no less real, no less present. More, much more than this, Machado was a great humanitarian poet whose poetic imagination was broad and deep, disdaining nothing except meanness and insincerity; fearing nothing... neither the masses and the modern world nor the metaphysical abyss.

Machado's life, like that of many writers of genius, was not externally very eventful if we except the last tragic events. He was born in Seville in 1875. His father, Antonio Machado Álvarez, was the great compiler of Andalusian folk poetry. Antonio's brother, Manuel, was also destined to become a leading poet of modern Spain. When Antonio was eight, the family moved to Madrid where the Machado brothers attended the progressive *Institución Libre de Enseñanza* where they were happy. Soon after their move to Madrid, the father died.

Given their background, their father's interests and the lively literary gatherings frequently held in their home—it was natural that the two brothers should early become interested in writing poetry. They were also interested in art and the theatre (in fact, their first writings were about the theatre and they collaborated in writing a number of plays). Although always bound by affection and respect, they were markedly different in many ways. Manuel was carefree and drawn to the pleasures of life, something of a dandy, delighting in entertainments, flirtations and the bohemian café life, happy enough to write a light, undemanding literary journalism. Antonio, on the other hand, was moody and introverted, preoccupied with ideas about life and art, a profound student of philosophy.

In 1899 the brothers went to Paris, then the cultural capital of Europe. There they earned a living translating for the publishing house of Garnier while absorbing the poetic methodologies of the various literary schools of the day: Symbolism, Parnassianism and Impressionism. Manuel naturally delighted in the carefree social life which Paris offered, while Antonio, true to his own nature, engaged in a study of the intuitionism of Henri

Bergson whose lectures he attended at the French College and whose ideas deeply influenced all his later work.

‘Paris (of 1899),’ Machado wrote, ‘was still the city of the “Dreyfus affair” in the ambience of politics, of symbolism in poetry, of impressionism in painting, of elegant scepticism in criticism.’ He met Oscar Wilde and Jean Moréas; and it was in Paris, too, in 1902, that he met the Nicaraguan poet—father of all modern poetry in Spanish—Rubén Darío.

Machado’s own modest account of his life up to 1917, to be found in his own prologue to his *Collected Poems* is as follows:

I was born in Seville one night in July 1875, in the celebrated *Palacio de las Dueñas*, located in the street of the same name. My memories of my native city are those of a child, since at eight I moved with my parents to live in Madrid. There I was educated at the *Institución Libre de Enseñanza*—by teachers whom I hold in real affection and for whom I feel deep gratitude.

My adolescence and early manhood are Madrilenian. I have travelled somewhat in France and Spain. In 1907 I obtained a post of head of department in the French language which I taught for five years in Soria. There I married: there my wife died, whose memory always goes with me.

I moved to Baeza, where I now reside. My pastimes are walking and reading.

In the ’20s and ’30s Machado spent his time schoolmastering in provincial towns, travelling round Spain and writing his poems. By the time the Civil War took place, his reputation was made. That catastrophe, however, put an end to more than Machado’s poetry; it also killed him. Machado, along with the majority of Spanish intellectuals, supported the Republic and the new Spain it was hopefully and painfully ushering in; and he stayed in Spain to the bitter end, despite an offer from England of a lucrative position as a teacher of Spanish Literature. At the fall of Madrid, Antonio, with his mother, his youngest brother José and José’s family, made his way, in the most appalling circumstances and with thousands of other starving and destitute refugees, to the small French border town of Collioure.

Neither Antonio nor his old mother survived the terrible journey. Antonio died of pneumonia, and his mother who was herself dying in another room in the same hotel at the same time without knowledge of her son’s illness, followed him within three days.

A book on Machado's work—*Antonio Machado, poeta simbolista*—by J. M. Aguirre, places the poet, with irrefutable argument and illustration, in the great French Symbolist tradition. It is a tradition that gives Machado's work its most meaningful frame of reference. Machado was intent on discovering and appreciating that mysterious transcendence which gives life its depth and meaning. A few images—of fountains, roads, pine groves, poplars, light and shadow, sounds of water, deserted town squares—are tested again and again until they are proved, for him, to work as ways into that spiritual order where the soul enjoys its own profound and redemptive freedom.

Machado, however, unlike many of the French symbolists and perhaps because he was Spanish, never turned his back on common reality. Rather, reality and natural images were sacred to him as mysterious cyphers, flickering shadows at the mouth of the Cave. He was a deeply humanitarian poet; he believed in human emotions and intuitions, and he was always opposed to the baroque in Spanish poetry because he saw it as cerebral or conceptual and therefore an inadequate means of receiving significances from the temporal flux in which human beings live. He was Unamuno's compatriot.

In a prologue to the 1917 edition of the *Soledades*, Machado briefly described his poetics, and it is worth giving it here because it tells us, better than any critical essay could, what Machado was striving for in his poetry:

I thought that the poetic element was not the word in its phonetic value, nor the colour, nor the line, nor a complex of sensations, but a deep stirring of the spirit—what the soul contributes, if it contributes anything, what it says, if it says anything, with its own voice, in a living response to its contact with the world.

The vital strength of Machado's poetry does not derive, essentially, from any formal metrics or subtle effects of rhythm (though these are generally accountable), but in the collocation, juxtaposition and often miraculous verbalisation of images, achieving in effect what Machado calls *la honda palpitación del espíritu*. Thus the present translators felt confident in opting, in the main, for a careful, cautious rendering guided by their own multi-mood experience of Machado's Spain—the landscapes and villages of Castile. It is but one of many possible methods: for Machado it seems to us to be the correct one.

The versions were undertaken to communicate, primarily, to the English-speaking reader without Spanish some of the pleasure the translators derived from the poems of Antonio Machado.

Finally, three acknowledgements must be made: to the late Paulino González, O.P., to Luis Huerga and to the American poet and translator, the late Anthony Kerrigan.

Michael Smith, *Dublin*
Luis Ingelmo, *Zamora*

Note on the Text

The Spanish text used for this edition of Antonio Machado's early poetry derives from *Poesía y prosa, Tomo II: Poesías completas* [Edición del cincuentenario], Oreste Macrì (ed.), Madrid: Espasa-Calpe / Fundación Antonio Machado, 1989. The poems have also been collated with those from *Soledades. Galerías. Otros poemas*, Geoffrey Ribbans (ed.), Madrid: Cátedra, 1988.

SOLEDADES

SOLITUDES

I

(EL VIAJERO)

Está en la sala familiar, sombría,
y entre nosotros, el querido hermano
que en el sueño infantil de un claro día
vimos partir hacia un país lejano.

Hoy tiene ya las sienes plateadas,
un gris mechón sobre la angosta frente;
y la fría inquietud de sus miradas
revela un alma casi toda ausente.

Deshójanse las copas otoñales
del parque mustio y viejo.
La tarde, tras los húmedos cristales,
se pinta, y en el fondo del espejo.

El rostro del hermano se ilumina
suavemente. ¿Floridos desengaños
dorados por la tarde que declina?
¿Ansias de vida nueva en nuevos años?

¿Lamentará la juventud perdida?
Lejos quedó—la pobre loba—muerta.
¿La blanca juventud nunca vivida
teme, que ha de cantar ante su puerta?

¿Sonríe al sol de oro
de la tierra de un sueño no encontrada;
y ve su nave hender el mar sonoro,
de viento y luz la blanca vela hinchada?

Él ha visto las hojas otoñales,
amarillas, rodar, las olorosas
ramas del eucalipto, los rosales
que enseñan otra vez sus blancas rosas...

I

(THE TRAVELLER)

He is among us in the shady family room,
the dear brother we saw—
in the childhood dream of a clear day—
departing for a distant country.

Now his temples are silvery,
a tuft of grey over his narrow brow;
and his cold, uneasy stare
reveals a soul almost wholly gone.

The old and withered park
is stripped bare of its autumn leaves.
The evening paints itself behind damp
window panes and in the mirror's depths.

The face of the brother is softly lit.
Elegant disillusiones gilded
by the close of evening?
The will for another life in years to come?

Does he, perhaps, lament the loss of youth?
Faraway—dead—lies that wretched she-wolf.
Is he afraid that pale, unlived youth
may now sing before his door?

Does he smile to the golden sun
of a dreamland not yet found
and see his ship cleave the resounding sea,
the white sail billowing with light and wind?

He has seen the whirl of the sere,
autumnal leaves, the fragrant branches
of the eucalyptus, the rosebushes
again revealing their white roses...

Y este dolor que añora o desconfía
el temblor de una lágrima reprime,
y un resto de viril hipocresía
en el semblante pálido se imprime.

Serio retrato en la pared clarea
todavía. Nosotros divagamos.
En la tristeza del hogar golpea
el tictac del reloj. Todos callamos.

And this grief, of longing or distrust,
holds back the trembling of a tear,
and a residue of virile hypocrisy
is stamped on his pallid face.

The grave portrait on the wall
is still going grey. We digress.
In the sadness of the home strikes
the tick-tock of the clock. We are all silent.

II

He andado muchos caminos,
he abierto muchas veredas;
he navegado en cien mares
y atracado en cien riberas.

En todas partes he visto
caravanas de tristeza,
soberbios y melancólicos
borrachos de sombra negra,

y pedantones al paño
que miran, callan, y piensan
que saben, porque no beben
el vino de las tabernas.

Mala gente que camina
y va apestando la tierra...

Y en todas partes he visto
gentes que danzan o juegan,
cuando pueden, y laboran
sus cuatro palmos de tierra.

Nunca, si llegan a un sitio,
preguntan a dónde llegan.
Cuando caminan, cabalgan
a lomos de mula vieja,

y no conocen la prisa
ni aun en los días de fiesta.
Donde hay vino, beben vino;
donde no hay vino, agua fresca.

Son buenas gentes que viven,
laboran, pasan y sueñan,
y en un día como tantos
descansan bajo la tierra.

II

I have travelled many roads,
cleared many footpaths;
I have sailed a hundred seas,
berthed at a hundred shores.

Everywhere I have seen
caravans of sadness,
proud and melancholy people
drunk with black shadow;

and off-stage big fat pedants
who watch, in silence, thinking
they know because they don't drink
their wine in taverns.

Evil people who travel on
fouling the earth...

And everywhere I have seen
people who dance and play,
when allowed, and work
their small patches of land.

Never, having reached a place,
do they ask where they are.
When they travel they ride
on the back of an old mule,

knowing no haste—
even on feast days.
Wherever there is wine, they drink wine;
where there is no wine, fresh water.

They are good folk, living,
working, passing and dreaming,
and, on any given day,
they rest under ground.

III

La plaza y los naranjos encendidos
con sus frutas redondas y risueñas.

Tumulto de pequeños colegiales
que, al salir en desorden de la escuela,
llenar el aire de la plaza en sombra
con la algazara de sus voces nuevas.

¡Alegría infantil en los rincones
de las ciudades muertas!...
¡Y algo nuestro de ayer, que todavía
vemos vagar por estas calles viejas!

III

The square, and the orange trees in flame
with their round and bright fruit.

Tumult of small schoolboys
bursts from the school,
filling the air of the shady plaza
with the din of their young voices.

Childhood joy in the nooks
of the dead towns!
And our past selves, which we see
still roaming through these old streets!

IV

(EN EL ENTIERRO DE UN AMIGO)

Tierra le dieron una tarde horrible
del mes de julio, bajo el sol de fuego.

A un paso de la abierta sepultura,
había rosas de podridos pétalos,
entre geranios de áspera fragancia
y roja flor. El cielo
puro y azul. Corría
un aire fuerte y seco.

De los gruesos cordeles suspendido,
pesadamente, descender hicieron
el ataúd al fondo de la fosa
los dos sepultureros...

Y al reposar sonó con recio golpe,
solemne, en el silencio.

Un golpe de ataúd en tierra es algo
perfectamente serio.

Sobre la negra caja se rompían
los pesados terrones polvorientos...

El aire se llevaba
de la honda fosa el blanquecino aliento.

—Y tú, sin sombra ya, duermes y reposas,
larga paz a tus huesos...

Definitivamente,
duermes un sueño tranquilo y verdadero.

IV

(AT A FRIEND'S BURIAL)

They buried him on a terrible noon
in the month of July, under a fiery sun.

A step away from the open grave
there were roses with rotten petals,
among geraniums of bitter fragrance
and red blooms. The sky
clear and blue. The wind
was blowing harsh and dry.

Suspended from thick ropes,
ponderously they lowered
the coffin to the bottom of the grave,
those two gravediggers...

And it landed with a sharp
solemn thud in the quiet.

The thud of a coffin on the earth
is something altogether serious.

Over the black box broke
heavy clods of dirt...

The air bore from the deep grave
a whitish breath.

'And you, now without shade, sleep and rest,
long peace to your bones...'

Sleep forever
a dream, peaceful and true.

V

(RECUERDO INFANTIL)

Una tarde parda y fría
de invierno. Los colegiales
estudian. Monotonía
de lluvia tras los cristales.

Es la clase. En un cartel
se representa a Caín
fugitivo, y muerto Abel,
junto a una mancha carmín.

Con timbre sonoro y hueco
truenan el maestro, un anciano
mal vestido, enjuto y seco,
que lleva un libro en la mano.

Y todo un coro infantil
va cantando la lección:
«mil veces ciento, cien mil;
mil veces mil, un millón».

Una tarde parda y fría
de invierno. Los colegiales
estudian. Monotonía
de la lluvia en los cristales.

V

(CHILDHOOD MEMORY)

A cold, grey winter's evening.
The schoolchildren study.
Monotony of rain
behind the windows.

The classroom. A poster
pictures Cain fleeing
and the body of Abel
beside a stain of blood.

With hollow and resonant timbre
the teacher thunders: an old man,
dry, lean, badly dressed,
holding a book in his hand.

And the whole children's chorus
chants the lesson:
'A thousand times a hundred, a hundred thousand;
a thousand times a thousand, a million.'

A cold, grey winter's evening.
The schoolchildren study.
Monotony of rain
on the windows.