

A FEW NOTES ON
ANTONIO MACHADO

ANTONIO MACHADO is the most thoughtful, modest, and lovable poet of the twentieth century. His quiet labor on sound and rhythm over many years, his emphasis on the suffering of others rather than his own, the passageways that he creates inside his poems that lead back to the ancient Mediterranean past, his inner calm, even joyfulness—all of these gifts nourish people wherever he is read.

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His poetry secretes in itself the rhythm of the walker. When John Dos Passos, just out of college, traveled to see Machado in Segovia, he found an awkward man with a deep voice, “an old-fashioned teacher,” dressed in a black double-breasted suit, who walked for hours in Segovia and the countryside. When a person walks, he experiences objects one by one at a pace agreeable to the body. And every walk ends; sooner or later the walk is over and we are back home.

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Yeats connected true poetry with trance. And when Lorca says:

*one day . . . the enraged ants
will throw themselves on the yellow skies that have
taken refuge in the eyes of cows*

we fall into a trance immediately. But Machado has vowed not to soar too much; he wants to “go down to the hells” or stick to the low and ordinary: flies, blind mules working the water wheels, stony earth, dogs, old men who stare straight ahead for hours astonished by nothing, boring schoolrooms, unsolvable philosophical problems. How does he help the reader to fall into a trance then? By his vowel sounds, exquisite,

astonishing, magical, and by his care in measuring time inside the line. Sometimes a hypnotist swings a watch; Machado does that: the beats return regularly, the vowels come again, time passes so slowly it can be measured; we listen. The trance of ordinary life, chaotic, gives way to an ordered trance, and water goes on flowing while we are asleep. Perhaps water flows best in the river while we are asleep. Water through the fountain lifts itself in the air. But we are asleep.

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Machado had an answer to what poetry is: “la palabra en el tiempo.” We could translate this cryptic phrase as: “the word in time,” “human language in which we feel time passing,” or “words that pick up the energy of time,” or “words that take their place, like drumbeats, in time already counted.” He loved to get a phrase like “la palabra en el tiempo” and repeat it until no one could understand what it meant. Of course he adored narrative in poems, which contains time as a jar of water contains water.

And doesn't form move through time? “A Chinese jar still moves perpetually in its stillness.” Doesn't a snail develop its gorgeous logorhythmic shell-curve by moving through time? We could say that only when the snail agrees not to be eternal, when it accepts the descent into earth time that unfolds slowly, only then does the snail achieve that form which we foolishly associate with eternity. Machado adored the well-made thing:

*Form your letters slowly and well:
making things well
is more important than making them.*

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One of the first poems of Machado's that attracted me was his poem on the bean fields, which I saw in 1959 in Willis Barnstone's translation:

*The blue mountain, the river, the erect
coppery staffs of slender aspens,
and the white of the almond tree on the hill.
O flowering snow and butterfly on the tree!*

[2]

*With the aroma of the bean plants, the wind
runs in the joyful solitude of the fields!*

We feel that Machado is laying a relatively light hand on nature here. I was more accustomed to poems in which the author uses nature to make philosophical points: What a certain ape did is brought in to bolster an argument, the swan sailing becomes a symbol of pride, the snake is either evil or wisdom, but seldom a real snake. John Donne writes well, but his fleas always seem to fit into some elaborate human system, alchemical, Christian, or occult. There is nothing the matter with that, except that we may not have asked the snake or the flea how he feels about it.

It seems that in the West, in general, when we write about a field, we bring the field into our study and close the door. Not all poets do, of course. But one feels that Machado doesn't ask the field to come to his poem, but he brings his poem to the bean field . . . and even more amazing, he leaves it there!

*With the aroma of the bean plants, the wind
runs in the joyful solitude of the fields!*

That doesn't mean that Machado is a nature Romantic; (he is in fact suspicious of the Romantics;) nor that he undervalues the intellect; (he took in fact his advanced degree in philosophy). I think it means that he wishes to give to the fields a respect similar to the respect he gives to an idea.

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His favorite philosopher was Pythagoras. Pythagoras appears in his poetry from beginning to end. Pythagoras' doctrine of the "music of the spheres" is probably present, along with God, in the early poem:

*It's possible that while sleeping the hand
that sows the seeds of stars
started the ancient music going again*

*—like a note from a great harp—
and the frail wave came to our lips
as one or two honest words.*

Pythagoras gave him confidence to write brief poems, for Pythagoras left only sayings. And yet his sayings suggest a secret bond between the “sower of the stars,” and the lyre-player on earth. We see a gesture of someone sowing grain, whose hand sweeps the strings of a lyre, and from it comes a wave of music that reaches even to Spain. When Spain lost the remains of her empire in 1898, the writers of that generation realized that the old rhetorical bluff was over, and they had to live now with reduced expectations, a diminished thing, sadness, grief, limited resources, a few words that were honest.

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Reading Machado, one is moved by his firm and persistent efforts to see and to listen. He does not want to be caught as the narcissist is, in an interior world, alone with his consciousness, but he wants to cross to other people, to the stars, to the world:

*To talk with someone,
ask a question first,
then—listen.*

Daydreaming is not useful for crossing, but eyes are. “Today, just as yesterday, the job of the eyes, the eyes in the head and in the mind, is to see.” The landscape around Soria he studies with fierce attention. How to study the outer world without losing inward richness—that is the issue Rilke and Ponge lived. If we look only at our problems, Machado said, the inner world dissolves; if we look only at the world, it begins to dissolve. If we want to create art, we have to stitch together the inner world and the outer world. How to do that? Machado concludes, well, we could always use our eyes.

One of his earliest memories, which he included in Juan de Mairena’s notebooks, is this: “I’d like to tell you the most important thing that ever happened to me. One day when I was still quite young, my mother and I were out walking. I had a piece of sugar cane in my hand, I remember—it was in Seville, in some vanished Christmas season. Just ahead of us

were another mother and child—he had a stick of sugar cane too. I was sure mine was bigger—I knew it was! Even so, I asked my mother—because children always ask questions they already know the answer to: ‘Mine’s bigger, isn’t it?’ And she said, ‘No, my boy, it’s not. What have you done with your eyes?’ I’ve been asking myself that question ever since.”

The Ch’an teachers tell a story about a man of the world who one day confronts a master, and asks him to sum up what he has learned in his life as a Buddhist monk. The master hands him a piece of paper with one word written on it: “Attention!” The worldly man now insists that he is a serious student, and implies that the master is holding back. He takes the paper back and writes “Attention. Attention.” The worldly man now appeals to the master’s humanity, points out that he too has a soul, and they will both die soon; it is the master’s duty to tell him what he needs to know. The master says: “You’re right.” Taking the paper he writes three words: “Attention! Attention! Attention!” Much of Machado’s life he spent in this effort of attention.

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Machado in his work makes clear that we in the West have our own tradition of attention. Pythagoras, for example, listened to vibrations. He usually began a lecture with the monochord, which he plucked so that his listeners could hear the note clearly; then, breaking the string at its nodes, he let them hear the overtones. He then pointed out that the relationships between the vibrations they had just heard corresponded to the relationships between the speeds of the planets. Paying attention, in the tough sense of the phrase, means paying attention to nonhuman vibrations, the life of cat-gut and planets. Pythagoras said, “When you get up in the morning, smooth out the shape of your body from the bed.”

When Machado pays attention, he pays attention to time, which surely existed before human beings; to landscape, whose rhythm Machado said is slower than human rhythm; to the past of each city he lived in, for each city’s life extends beyond our individual life; to the way colors unfold (Goethe studied

color also); to synchronicity, that is occasional identity of human and natural events; and to the curious world of dreams. "Pythagoras' lyre goes on resonating in dreams," he said.

Yet he did not want to lose "we". He knew that a secret "you" was present in the feelings evoked by a landscape. In poetry every feeling, he said, "needs for its creation the distress of other frightened hearts among a nature not understood. . . . In short, my feeling is not only mine, but *ours*."

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Antonio Machado was born on July 26, 1875, in Seville. Until he was eight, he lived in the enormous Palacio de las Dueñas, where his father, a teacher and early collector of folk poetry and folk music in Spain, lived as a kind of caretaker for the Duke of Alba. It had long passageways. When Antonio was eight, the family moved to Madrid; there Antonio and his brothers attended the Free Institution of Learning, whose founder, Francisco Giner de los Ríos, had a profound effect on two or three generations of Spanish intellectuals and writers. Antonio tended to be torpid and slow; he took ten extra years to get his B.A. He published his first book when he was twenty-eight. Eventually he chose a career as secondary-school teacher of French, passed the examination, and when he was thirty-two got his first job at Soria, a poor and exhausted town in the grazed-out mountainous area of Castile. He stayed there five years. During the second year he married the daughter of the family in whose pension he lived, Leonor, then fifteen. He watched her sicken of tuberculosis and die after two more years, in the fall of 1911. "She is always with me," he said; he addressed her often in later poems, and never remarried. He abandoned the idea of suicide, with arguments rather like Frost's: He wrote to Jiménez that he did not want to annihilate whatever in him was helpful and constructive. He resigned his position at Soria, and transferred to Baeza, in the south, nearer his first home, and stayed there seven years. During 1912, his last year in Soria, his second book, *The Countryside of Castile*, came out; and he continued to add

poems to it during his years in Baeza. In 1919, he transferred again, this time to Segovia, which is only an hour from Madrid. He was able now on weekends to escape from provincial life, which he complained was boring and deadening; and he began writing plays and taking part in the intellectual life of Madrid. He lived in Segovia from 1919 to 1932, thirteen years, during which he fell in love with a married woman he called "Guio-mar," invented two poet-philosophers named Abel Martín and Juan de Mairena, and published his third book, *Nuevas canciones* (*New Poems*). He became more and more active in public life, writing in the papers on political and moral issues during the exciting period that led in 1931 to the proclamation of the Second Spanish Republic. He lived in Madrid after 1932 with his brother José and wrote, disguised playfully as Juan de Mairena, many articles in the newspapers defending the Republic and its plans. After the civil war began in 1936, he continued to write prose, but little poetry, and finally, January 28, 1939, moving ahead of Franco's army, crossed the Pyrenees as a passenger in an old car, holding his mother on his lap. He died at Collioure, just over the border, on February 22, and as the gravestones make clear, his mother survived him by only a few days. His attitude toward his own life resembled James Wright's toward his: that it was a bookish life, and the events were not too important.

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What about liveliness? Everything is to be lively. When he was living at Segovia, he began to feed his made-up philosopher Juan de Mairena bits of prose that he had written earlier. Here is a little scene:

"Mr. Pérez, please go to the board and write:

The daily occurrences unfolding on the avenue."

The student did as he was told.

"Now go ahead and put that into poetic language."

The student, after some thought, wrote:

What is going on in the streets.

"Not bad!"

So Machado, though he wanted poetry to have nobility and beauty, refused to achieve that through poetic or archaic language, which he knew involved a misuse of time.

“Mr. Martínez, go to the board and write:

Those olden swords of the glorious times. . . ”

The student obeyed.

“To which time do you think the poet was alluding here?”

“To the time when the swords were not old.”

“Every day, gentlemen, literature is more ‘written’ and less spoken. The result is that every day we write worse, in a chilly prose, without grace, however correct it may be: our eloquence is merely the written word fried again, in which the spoken word has already been encased. Inside every orator of our time there is always a clumsy journalist. The important thing is to speak well: with liveliness, thought, and grace. The rest will be given us as a gift.”

He distrusts ancient eloquence:

“The truth is the truth,”—perhaps Agamemnon said it or his swineherd.

Agamemnon: “Absolutely clear.”

Swineherd: “I’m not sure about that. . . .”