

THERE IS NO ROAD



ANTONIO MACHADO

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Proverbs of Antonio Machado

Translated by Mary Berg & Dennis Maloney

Introduction by Thomas Moore



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A World of Voices



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INTRODUCTION

by Thomas Moore

Wallace Stevens described a poem as "the cry of its occasion," and I might compare it to the reverberation of a bell. When you ring a good bell, you want to hear the overtones and not the thud or whack of the initial strike. A poem is meant to resonate, to initiate thought and feeling rather than bring them to a stop.

I enjoy Antonio Machado's poetry because his poems are so bodily, so natural, and so languidly simple, and also because they never fail to surprise you into insight. Here is a professional philosopher who knows that dry, abstract conceptualization doesn't take you nearly as far into your subject as does a perceptive glance at the obvious world around you. He looks at a country or village scene and sees a natural truth that might otherwise lay hidden. He reveals the import of the ordinary, even as he remains within his sensuous re-presentation of it.

Machado's poems discover the "natural symbolism" in nature and especially in ordinary human situations. He doesn't manufacture meaning but points to the paradox and lyricism inherent in the situations themselves. He is like a musician banging his fingers on the wood keys of a piano and making meaningful sound out of his violence. Something in the intellectual mechanism of interpretation and analysis is missing in Machado's way of making poetry, and this effective short-circuiting is not the way of all poets. In fact, Machado is a master of immediacy. He never lets you get any distance on the scene of the poem, and still he grants you the vision of timeless implications.

Reading him, I sometimes wonder if I am reading something like Stevens' adages or William Blake's proverbs. His indulgence in paradox and circularity reminds me of Jesus, another poet of the magical naturalism school, and, of course, Emily Dickinson who also made theology out of a garden patch and a local ring of hills.

I meant to say that I enjoy Machado, which isn't something I could honestly say about many poets I read and appreciate. Or, maybe it's that the enjoyment in Machado is sensual, whereas it might be more intellectual in another poet. He is more like good food than a great idea. At the same time, you could design your life around his poems. You wouldn't need any more advice or more insight.

I first came across Machado in translations by an informal mentor of mine whom I met when I was nineteen. Thomas McGreevy was a paterfamilias and marriage counselor for James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, and W. B. Yeats, and was a bosom companion of Samuel Beckett and their partners and families. He told me countless stories of his adventures with these word jugglers and taught me how to look at Velasquez. I was living in Ireland then and would meet him in Dublin at the National Gallery to receive my real education

in a smoky room in the innards of the museum. Only late did I learn that he was deeply schooled in Machado.

Here are a few lines in McGreevy's translation from "Childish Dream." They have been with me for many years, offering their simple guidance:

All the rose trees

give their perfumes

all the loves

unfold love.

To have the opportunity to introduce these poems in the beautifully musical and direct translations by Dennis Maloney and Mary Berg means a great deal to me personally. It allows me to return to my Dublin youth and to an aesthetic that is as close to my ideal as I can imagine.

People sometimes complain that my writing is too simple, too light. Just recently a professor in an audience stood up and shouted that I was anti-intellectual. I was dumbfounded. I sometimes explain, not entirely without a twinkle in my eye, that after all my father was a plumber. That is true, and doubtless the true source of my simplicity. But I like to think that Machado's spirit has something to do with it. He could offer us a way out of the dry sophistication that accompanies modernism and a way beyond the sentimentality that creeps in as a reaction. His diction is perfect and his perceptions wonderfully circular and parabolic. He is what I expect a poet to be: an infinite mind disguised in an infinite body.

Preface

1

Antonio Machado is regarded as one of the greatest Spanish poets of the twentieth century. Born in Seville in 1875, he is often considered, along with Juan Ramon Jimenez and Miguel de Unamuno, part of the generation of 1898, which ushered in a new Spanish poetics as the country entered the twentieth century. At the age of eight his family moved to Madrid where he later studied at the Institucion Libre de Ensenanza, a liberal institute that supported an integrated approach to the development of the student's total nature. The founder, Francisco Giner de los Rios, had a profound effect on several generations of Spanish writers and intellectuals. In 1903 he published his first volume of poems, *Soledades*. Machado made his living as a high school teacher of French and in 1907 took his first post in the isolated town of Soria in Castile. He stayed there for five years, married and watched his young wife sicken and die of tuberculosis. His last year there saw the appearance of his second book, *Campos de Castilla*. Soria and the area around Castile became Machado's spiritual center. Even after he moved to Baeza and Segovia he continued to write of Soria.

He stayed in Baeza for seven years before transferring to Segovia in 1919. Segovia was only an hour from Madrid which allowed him to escape the boredom of the country for the intellectual life of the capital. He lived in Segovia from 1919 to 1932 during which time he published his third book, *Nuevas canciones*, and began to become more active in public life writing essays on political and moral issues.

In 1932 he moved to Madrid and assumed a teaching post there. This was the exciting time just after the fall of the monarchy and the declaration of the Second Spanish Republic and much intellectual and political freedom. Machado wrote many articles in newspapers defending the Republic and its plans .

With the advent of the Civil War in 1936 Machado continued to support the cause of the Republic writing prose but very little poetry. As the war progressed with things going bad for the Republic Machado moved first to Rocafort, near Valencia, and then to Barcelona. In early 1939, as Franco's army approached he joined the exodus of refugees crossing over the border into France. He died there a month later in the town of Collioure on February 27, 1939.

2

As the title of his first book, *Soledades*, suggests Machado was a poet of solitude. His generation of 1898 had experienced the loss of the War of 1898 and with it the last vestiges of Spain's once huge empire disappear. This new prospect of diminished expectations turned both the nation and its poets inward to discover and celebrate the traditional villages, bare landscapes and common people of the Spanish countryside. Machado understood well this need to return inward and reestablish Spain's connection with itself and its people after the long period of expansion and conquest.

In the spare and luminous language of Machado, we find extraordinary sensitivity to place and landscapes, as well as a genuine feeling for local folklore and song as a living tradition from which

to learn. His poetry is not the poetry of closed rooms but that of the open air. Many of his poems were written as the result of long walks through towns and hillsides. He often entered the inner world by first penetrating the outer world of landscapes and objects. Machado said " It is in the solitude of the countryside that a man ceases to live with mirrors." Machado perfected the art of seeing. His gift was the ability to create, from the material of the other world transformed through his heart, a poem. Many of Machado's poems are a voice talking outloud to itself and to us in an ongoing inner dialog. Machado speaks of this and gives a profile of himself in his poem "Portrait".

Portrait

My childhood is memories of a patio in Seville,
and a sunny orchard where lemons ripen;
my youth, twenty years on the soil of Castile;
my story, a few events just as well forgotten.

I was never a great seducer or Romeo
—that is apparent by my shabby dress—
but I was struck by the arrow Cupid aimed at me
and loved whenever I was welcomed.

Despite the rebel blood in my veins,
my poems bubble up from a calm spring;
and more than a man who lives by rules
I am, in the best sense of the word, good.

I adore beauty and following modern aesthetics,
I've cut old roses from Ronsard's garden;
but I hate being fashionable
and am no bird strutting the latest style.

I shun the shallow tenor's ballads,
and the chorus of crickets singing at the moon;
I stop to separate the voices from the echoes,
and I listen among the voices to only one.

Am I classical or romantic? I don't know?
I want to leave my poetry as the captain leaves his sword;
remembered for the virile hand that gripped it,

not for the hallmark of its maker.

I converse with the man who is always beside me,
—he who talks to himself hopes to talk to God someday—
my soliloquy is a discussion with this friend,
who taught me the secret of loving others.

In the end I owe you nothing; you owe me all I've written.
I work, paying with what I've earned
for the clothes on my back, the house I live in,
the bread that sustains me and the bed where I lie.

And when the day arrives for the final voyage
and the ship that never returns is set to sail,
you'll find me aboard, traveling light, with few possessions,
almost naked, like the children of the sea.

3

The poems in this volume are drawn from two sequences of Proverbs and Folksongs that appeared in Machado's books *Campos de Castilla* and *Nuevas canciones*. They are short verses reminiscent in form and manner of traditional Spanish sung and spoken lyrics. Machado used these brief forms of traditional verse as vehicles for a wide range of reflections and insights. His spiritual fathers in these poems include Pythagoras and Heraclitus. These aphorisms possess a lyrical intensity and explore the many sided self acknowledging an otherness within as well as without. Some bear a similarity to zen koans and others reveal the roots of Machado's social convictions to create a poetry of broad social resonance.

Mary Berg and Dennis Maloney

I

never chased after fame,
nor longed to leave my song
behind in the memory of men.
I love the subtle worlds
almost weightless, delicate,
like soap bubbles.
I like to see them paint themselves
in the colors of sunlight and scarlet,
float into the blue sky, then
suddenly quiver and break.

II

These chance furrows
why call them roads?
Everyone, on a journey, walks
like Jesus on the sea.

XXVIII

Every man
wages two battles:
in dreams, he struggles with God
and awake, with the sea.

XXIX

Traveler, your footprints
are the only road, nothing else.
Traveler, there is no road;
you make your own path as you walk.
As you walk, you make your own road,
and when you look back
you see the path
you will never travel again.
Traveler, there is no road
only a ship's wake on the sea.

XXXV

Consciousness takes two forms.
One is light, the other patience.
One involves shining some light
into the depths of the sea;
the other on waiting it out,
with a pole or net, waiting for
the fish, like a fisherman.
Tell me, which is better?
The consciousness of the visionary
who watches live fish
in the watery depths, fugitives
that will never be caught,
or this cursed job
of tossing up on the sand,
dead, the fish of the sea?

XLI

It is good to know that glasses
are to drink from;
the bad thing is that we don't know
what thirst is for.

XLIV

All things pass and all things remain,
but our task is to pass through,
to pass through making roads,
roads out over the sea.

XLV

To die... To fall like a drop
of sea into the immense sea?
Or to be what I've never been;
one, without shadow or dream,
a man walking alone,
with no road and no mirror?

XLVII

Man has four things
that are no good at sea;
anchor, rudder, oars,
and the fear of going down.