

# IN OUR GRIEF WE CAN FIND CONSOLATION IN LOVE

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Over the course of time we all find texts that somehow keep calling us back to read and re-read again and again. These are texts that evolve as we evolve as human beings and with each successive reading they bring us new discoveries – about the texts themselves, of course, but also about ourselves and the world we inhabit.

For me, among the most significant texts are a series of brief poems by the Spanish poet, Antonio Machado (1876-1939) inspired by the illness and eventual death of his young bride, Leonor. Composed within the year of her illness and death in 1912, the poems follow the way in which Machado dealt with the tragedy, grief, pain and sadness of Leonor's death – first with lingering hope as she lay ill, then with anger at her death, later with denial of her absence, resignation and finally reconciliation. This is perhaps a normal human cycle and while I don't think Machado expresses a unique view on these issues, I recite these poems from memory or re-read them slowly for the dignity of their attitudes, the simplicity of their expression and the beauty of the language expressed. Therein lies the originality of these texts. Most important, however, is what these verses teach me about how we may lead our own lives, not just in difficult times but at all times. Even from the depths of his own anguish, Machado reminds us that in despair there can also be hope, in pain there can be compassion, and in our grief we can find consolation in love.

I have chosen five poems from within this cycle to represent the evolution of Machado's experience. The first is Poem CXV, *A un olmo seco*, in which Machado, always a keen observer of nature, confronts the near inevitability of Leonor's death while, in a very human way, desperately holding on to a small sliver of hope:

## TO A DRY ELM TREE

On the old elm tree, split by lightning  
and dead in its center,  
with the April rain and the sun of May  
some green leaves have appeared.



The ancient elm on a hillside  
 lapped by the Duero! A yellowish moss  
 has spread over the faded bark  
 of the dusty and worm-eaten trunk.  
 Unlike the singing poplars that guard  
 the roadside and riverbanks, it will never  
 be inhabited by brown nightingales.  
 An army of ants is climbing up it  
 in a long line, and in its heart  
 are spiders spinning their gray webs.  
 Before you are toppled, elm of the Duero,  
 by the woodcutter's axe and a carpenter  
 converts you into the yoke of a bell,  
 a wagon tongue and a yoke for a cart;  
 before you glow red tomorrow,  
 in the hearth of some miserable shack  
 by the side of the road;  
 before a storm splits your trunk and  
 the mountain wind knocks you down;  
 before the river carries you to the sea  
 through valleys and gorges,  
 elm tree, I want to write in my notebook  
 the charm of your new green branch.  
 My heart is also  
 waiting, for light and for life,  
 for another miracle of spring.

Soria 1912

Following her death, Machado lashes out at a God, whose "will is done" as we often pray, but who leaves the poet in the depths of loneliness and despair, adrift in a sea of nothingness:

CXIX

Lord, you have torn from me what I loved most.  
 Hear once again, oh God, my heart cry out.  
 Your will was done, Lord, contrary to mine.  
 Lord, we are now alone, my heart and the sea.

The dream world, especially the space of waking dreams, is characteristic in Machado's verses and in this cycle of poems, he manages to momentarily soften his grief by invoking the memory of his lost love within a simple, natural setting... and it provides him with a modicum of hope within his own grief.

## CXXII

I dreamt that you were leading me  
 down a white path,  
 in the middle of green fields,  
 toward the blue mountains,  
 toward the blue foothills,  
 on a tranquil morning.  
 I felt your hand in mine,  
 your friendly hand,  
 your young voice in my ear,  
 like a new bell,  
 like the virginal bell  
 of a spring dawn.  
 Your voice and your hand,  
 in dreams, seemed so real!...  
 Live, hope: who knows  
 what the earth swallows up!

Yet Machado cannot help but recall his encounter with Death at Leonor's bedside and in a beautifully tender poem he expresses his sense of resignation and acceptance:

## CXXIII

One summer night  
 —the balcony and the door  
 of my house were open—  
 death entered my home.  
 It went over to her bed  
 —it didn't even look at me—  
 with very sharp fingers  
 it broke something very fragile.  
 Without looking at me,  
 death passed before me  
 again. What have you done?  
 Death didn't answer.  
 My little girl lay there quiet,  
 my heart grieved.  
 Alas, what death had broken was  
 a thread between the two of us.

Finally, in perhaps one of the finest, most delicate and subtle poems of Spanish literature, Machado once again recalls the patterns of nature while addressing his friend in poem CXXVI, A Jose Maria Palacio. With these verses, Machado closes the cycle which began with his tribute to the dying elm. In contrast to the decay and sickness of the old tree, in this poem he evokes a kind of Eden, a paradise of nature in springtime within the usually harsh landscape of the Castilian plain where he and Leonor shared their brief time toget-

her. Here the poet leaves his love to rest in peace as he himself finds a certain peace of spirit and reconciliation.

CXXVI  
TO JOSÉ MARÍA PALACIO

Palacio, old friend,  
does spring already  
adorn the branches of poplar trees  
along the rivers and roads? On the plateau  
of the Duero spring comes late,  
but it's so lovely and gentle when it arrives!...  
Do the old elm trees have  
some new leaves?  
The acacias must still be bare  
and the mountains covered with snow.  
Oh, the blue and pink peak of Moncayo,  
there in the sky of Aragon, so beautiful!  
Have blackberries blossomed  
among the gray rocks,  
and white daisies  
in the lush grass?  
On those bell towers  
the storks must now be arriving.  
There must be green wheat stalks,  
gray mules in the plowed fields,  
and farmers who do their late planting  
after the rains of April. Bees must now  
be drinking from thyme and rosemary.  
Have plum trees blossomed? Are there still violets?  
There will be no lack of cautious hunters  
with partridge decoys under  
their long capes. Palacio old friend,  
do the riverbanks now have nightingales?  
On a blue afternoon,  
with the first lilies and roses  
from the gardens, climb up to Espino,  
to high Espino, where her country is...

Baeza, April 29, 1913

All five poems are from collection Antonio Machado: Fields of Castile - Campos de Castilla: 1907 - 1917 translated by Armand F. Baker. © Copyright 2006 - 2014