The Vision of an Imprisoned and Moribund Society in the «Soledades, Galerías y otros Poemas» of Antonio Machado

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The purpose of this study is to investigate the relation between Machado's early poetry and the Spain of the 1880's and 1890's, the Spain of his early childhood and young manhood. Nearly all critics of Machado agree on dating the beginnings of his first poetic expression of «preocupaciones noventayochistas» with Campos de Castilla in 1912. Soledades, Galerías y Otros Poemas (1899-1907) is regarded by most as an introspective work of purely personal poetry, essentially «intimista», «modernista», «simbolista», even «existencialista». But is it possible that the Restoration Society of the Spain of these years did not leave any imprint at all upon the images of Machado's first poetic period? Might we not expect the teachings and sensibility of Francisco Giner and the «institucionistas» to have had some effect upon the artistic consciousness of their disciple? 1. Let us consider now, if only briefly and schematically, certain aspects of the real economic and social conditions of Restoration Spain and then observe, in some detail, how this reality is filtered through the artistic consciousness of a great poet.

In the nineteenth century, particularly from the middle of the century on, the strength of the Spanish economy was based on the production of both agricultural goods (wine, olives, wheat) and mineral resources (copper, mercury, iron). By the 1850's and 1860's, Spain became principally an exporter of primary products and a field for foreign investment (railroads, mines, banking). From this set of conditions, there arose a dominant oligarchy (elements of the old aristocracy in alliance with sectors of an ascendant bourgeoisie) whose wealth was based upon the export of raw materials and whose interests were tied up with and dependent upon foreign capital 2. There have been few periods in modern Spanish history when it has been more evident that the country was virtually the private property of a privileged few. The German prince, Clodoveo Hohenlohe, who attended the funeral of

Alfonso XII, was moved to comment on the Spanish situation in the following way:

Dijérase que todo se reduce aquí a satisfacer a los cien mil españoles de las clases distinguidas, proporcionándoles destinos y haciéndoles ganar dinero. El pueblo parece indiferente. Esto prueba que el gobierno actual tiene las elecciones en sus manos y aún se cuida de que sean elegidos algunos miembros de la oposición. Todo esto constituye un sistema de explotación de lo más abyecto, una caricatura de constitucionalismo, frases y latrocínio.

Tuñón de Lara who cites the preceding text goes on to comment:

Desde 1885 hasta 1897, Cánovas y Sagasta se dedicaron a cultivar ese sistema, por turno riguroso, mientras el enorme potencial material y espiritual de España pugnaba por hacer saltar esa corteza, o mejor dicho, esa capa aislante de vacío, que, al atenazarse a las energías, permitía la vida muelle de los cien mil españoles (entre los dieciocho millones) de que hablara el intuitivo príncipe alemán 3.

This picture of Spanish economic and social life applies principally to the vast regions of central and southern Spain (Castile, Andalusia). It should be noted in passing, nonetheless, that during the Regency in the 1860's and 1870's, the dynamic periphery in the north and northeast (Cataluña, the Basque countries) exhibited remarkable growth and development, though only in Cataluña did there arise «an autonomous middle-class civilization, vital and open to influences from abroad» 4. What is essential for our purposes, in order to appreciate the artistic sensibility of S. G. O., is to realize that fully three quarters of Spain remained primarily an agrarian country. Vicens Vives summarizes the situation: «La industrialización no modificó en nada la economía agraria de España, que continuó basada en la gran propiedad, la rutina y unas técnicas anticuadas» 5. Again, on the same subject, Tuñón de Lara observes: «La aparición de un verdadero capitalismo en esos años no debe velarnos la permanencia de la estructura económica arcaica de nuestro país, que seguía esencialmente agraria» 6. Tuñón concludes his treatment of this subject in the following terms:

En resumen, España seguía siendo el país agrario, de agricultura no capitalista, sino atrasada, el país de escaso mercado interior; aún jugaba en el mercado exterior con sus materias primas, pero la salida de éstas se realizaba en detrimento de sus propias posibilidades de industrialización. Su industria ligera luchaba con los precios de las materias primas y, más aún, con los precios de la maquinaria a importar, lo que repercutía en un costo elevado de producción, pese a los salarios nada elevados. Mientras el mun-
do entero se lanzaba a la aventura exaltante del siglo xx, España era aún prisionera de los moldes de vida de otros tiempos.

It is precisely this sense of a dependent, archaic, agrarian economy that leads Raymond Carr in his history to observe that «Spain remained economically and socially invertebrate, a colonial economy exploited by foreign capital». The following expressive descriptions can also be found throughout Carr’s work: «free trade condemned Spain to the slavery of an archaic agrarian economy» (p. 279); «there was no hope of an agrarian reform which might release productivity imprisoned by the latifundia system» (p. 400); «thus by 1930, when a Roman would still have felt at home on an Andalusian estate» (p. 1).

With this awareness and sensitivity now, let us turn to Machado’s early poetry and observe how certain aspects of the economic and social reality of Restoration Spain are reflected in the language of poetic imagery. The «plazas en sombra», the deserted street scenes, the ruins of buildings and churches projected on the screen of the poetic imagination, capture the static, stagnant conditions of a society imprisoned by an archaic system. The sense of containment, of imprisonment, of unrealized potential, is everywhere in evidence:

¡Alegría infantil en los rincones de las ciudades muertas!...

Ese aroma que evoca los fantasmas de las fragancias virgenes y muertas.

Primavera viene — su veste blanca flota en el aire de la plaza muerta—;

En la marmórea taza reposa el agua muerta.

El agua de la fuente resbala, corre y suena lamiendo, casi muda, la verdinosa piedra.

The energy, youth and regenerative powers of Spain are trapped by the lethal heritage of a decadent society. Children are imprisoned in school, work in the countryside is chained to the eternal wheel of the «noria», people of the provincial towns live a slow death on balconies and behind windows — everywhere vital forces are denied by the powerful inheritance of the past.

The subtle and acute sense of things irretrievably lost, the emotion of the dying sunset, the disappearance of autumn’s golden foliage all become doubly charged. This is no world that, in the words of Tünón, «se lanzaba a la aventura exaltante del siglo xx». Rural Spain of the center and the south is no dynamic or progressive European society, preparing itself for entrance into the twentieth century. This is a society «prisionera de los moldes de vida de otros tiempos». This is a society whose ruined buildings, dusty roads, «norias», and «torreones» bear the stamp of another age, an archaic society whose future is condemned to be the eternal repetition of what has always been. Is this not an important sense of the monotony and bitterness associated with the water («eterna cantora») of the fountain in Poem VI or with the «eterna rueda» of the «noria» in Poem XLVI? This is, at least, part of what is wrong with the traveler in search of his lost land of infancy and paradise.

He can not separate his personal quest from the condition of the «fallen» world around him. What chance does he have of realizing his potential for love and growth in a world so fraught with sterility and death? How can the pilgrim in search of springtime and young love ever forget that the road he travels has been cursed and condemned by «la vieja España?» The «virgen esquiva y compañera» of Poem XXIX, the youthful energy and potential of life in a new and better Spain (the dream of Francisco Giner and the «institucionistas») coexists with and is contaminated by the specter of death of an archaic Spain. Surely this is the reason for both her elusiveness and the terrible bitterness of her love:

Detén el paso, belleza esquiva, detén el paso.

Besar quisiera la amarga, amarga flor de tus labios.

Perhaps nowhere is the poetic sense of unrealized potential in an archaic society more profoundly treated than in the theme of youth and young love. We recall that for Giner and the men of the Institución the enormous energy, potential and future of a country is deposited in its youth. But the powerful truth of Machado’s artistic vision belies the idealism and the optimism of his teachers. The youth of S. G. O. is trapped in schools, or in old streets of dead cities, defeated and prematurely gray in the case of the younger brother of Poem I, or wasted or unlived in the case of the poetic personality itself. Even the images of young women, drawn from the myths of classical antiquity, have contemporary significance for Restoration Spain, as they consistently convey the sense of young love and womanhood, violated, tragically affected, ruined or spoiled in some way: Persephone, stolen away by the Lord of the Underworld, carries the kiss of death on her permanently, and the beautiful and dangerous Diana, virgín huntress who hated both men and marriage. Even the vision of the «linda donnellita» of Poem XIX, whose innocence and life-affirming activity seem to dominate the scene at the end of the poem in this way:
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Tú miras al aire
de la tarde bella,
mientras de agua clara
el cántaro llenas.

Even she can not escape the elements of stagnation and disintegration; that playfully, but significantly, make up her early autumn environment:

¡Verdes jardíñillos,
claras plazaletas,
fuente verdínosa
donde el agua sueña,
donde el agua muda
resbala en la piedra! ...
Las hojas de un verde
mustio, casi negras
de la acacia, el viento
de septiembre besa,
y se lleva algunas
amarillas, secas,
jugando, entre el polvo
blanco de la tierra.
Linda doncellita
.........................

This situational irony in which the environment seems to deny the conditions of life it supports or in which elements of life and vitality are constantly juxtaposed to and contained by elements of death and sterility is characteristic of the poetic vision of Machado in S. G. O. Let us study several poems in some detail now and observe how a special configuration of imagery accounts for the expressive organization of the poem and responds ultimately to a vision of youth, love and vitality, trapped in an archaic and decadent society. We note the clear juxtaposition of opposing forces in the following poem of "Del Camino":

El sol es un globo de fuego,
la luna es disco morado.
Una blanca paloma se posa
en el alto ciprés centenario.
Los cuadros de mimtos parecen
de marchito velludo empolvado.
¡El jardín y la tarde tranquila! ...
Sueña el agua en la fuente de mármol.  (XXIV)

We note how the positive and the negative, the life-affirming and life-denying, vitality and mortality constitute the two poles of meaning conveyed by the following pairs of contrasted elements: sun — moon; dove — cypress tree; myrtle-dust; garden — afternoon; water — marble. We further note that sun, dove, myrtle, garden and water, in addition to many obvious positive connotations, are associated with both sacred and profane love in classical and Christian traditions. Though the traveler of the quest in "Del Camino" is not here present or mentioned by name, the emotional climate of an amorous quest is intensely felt. Both the dove and the myrtle are emblems of love, sacred to Venus. And the recurring image of the garden throughout S. G. O. requires us to recognize it as a symbol of paradise. We should note, however, that though this image may evoke the perfect land of innocence and infancy, it is not the garden of paradise which possesses eternity. This garden is submerged in temporality, subject like all mortal existence to the laws of decay and death. Finally, the murmuring water contained in the marble fountain is the perfect summary of the significance of all that has gone before. The fountain of the waters of life —a symbol that contains the highest and most sacred significance, particularly within the Christian tradition— is here and everywhere throughout S. G. O., contained by stone or by marble. Durable and ornamental stone that it is, marble suggests an image of the fountain as a statue, a constant reminder of an older age that continues to exist, and to stagnate, in the present. Fountain water contained by stone, a leit-motif throughout the early poetry, captures subtly a sense of "la amargura de la limitación", as the poet's younger brother so well describes it.

One more pattern in the poem deserves our attention. We note that the elements under elaboration occupy a hierarchy of existence that begin in the sky and end at ground level. As we surrender to the vision of the poem, our attention follows a downward course—from the sun and moon, to a bird at rest in a tall cypress tree, to myrtle bushes, to water almost buried in a marble fountain. The description itself parallels the decline of the burning sun into the west and is subtly expressive of the "fallen" world of an archaic society. Though the vision of the poem is a very static one (there are no verbs of action at all), it is nonetheless highly charged with a sense of age and decay.

Poem XXXII offers an expressive variation of this profound and characteristic vision of the world in S. G. O. Even more so than the preceding poem, the quietude and the immobility of the following scene capture the funereal atmosphere of a moribund rural and provincial society:

Las ascas de un crepúsculo morado
detrás del negro ciprésal humeante...
En la glorieta en sombra está la fuente
con su alado y desnudo Amor de piedra,
que sueña mudo. El la marmórea taza
reposa el agua muerta.
The expressive organization of this poem follows patterns similar to the ones just studied. There are only three sentences here. In each sentence, there is one life-affirming element (sun, love, and water), and in each case, the vitality of the element is denied, and denied progressively with greater vigor: the sun, like the embers of a dying fire, has not yet been totally extinguished; Love (a Cupid figure) is locked in stone, its free and uninhibited or spiritual nature («alado y desnudo») is severely qualified by stone, dream and muteness; the life of the water is totally denied, as it rests in an attitude of death. Thus, there is more than a sustained contrast of opposing forces here; darkness, lifelessness and death clearly prevail over the sun, love, and water.

The funereal sense of the cypress tree in this poem is more fully developed than in the previous Poem XXIV. Following the image of the glowing embers of a dying sun, the cypress trees here remind us that they are the traditional tree of cemeteries in many parts of Spain. Thus, there is an unmistakable death-like atmosphere as the poem opens; also a sense of imminence, of something about to die, as the light and the fire burn out («humean»). How well this sense of the imminence of death is fulfilled by the ending of the poem. The imaginative vision of the poem tells us that something does indeed die; the water is dead. The associations with graveyard, provoked by the «negro ciprés», are further reinforced by the connotations of the language in the last sentence. «Marmórea taza», the marble basin of the fountain, cold, heavy, and ornamental, suggests a gravestone or a tombstone in this context. «Reposar» is precisely the appropriate word that might be used as part of the inscriptions on a tombstone. Thus, the personified figure of water here is not only dead, it is buried, and it fulfills the sense of cemetery conveyed earlier by the expressive imagery of the opening lines.

As we have already tried to indicate in an earlier article (see footnote 11), the poetic personality of S. G. O. did not and could not believe in a transcendent God, but it does indeed make poetically effective use of the emotionally charged imagery of Christian symbolism. In the elaboration of a personal myth of redemption, the fountain lies at the center of the traveler's garden of paradise. Here the death of the waters of the fountain conveys a powerfully negative view of the possibility for rebirth and youth and innocence. The death of this possibility in the context of the quest for an inner paradise means the death of the possibility of «glory». Of course, there will be no luminous vision of God in the celestial garden of the heavens; and there will be no inner vision of light, truth and self-knowledge for one who seeks an immanent source of divinity. The only glory is the «gloria en sombra», at the center of a «fallen» garden, presided over not by the love of God, but by a man-made, stonewrought image of Love. A dramatic contrast, indeed, between the longing for a perfect world and the reality of an archaic society! We may observe once again how the elements elaborated in this poem occupy a hierarchy of position that obliges the reader's attention to follow a descending order—sunset, stone statuary of the fountain, water buried in the marble basin. Again the presentation of poetic imagery subtly parallels the decline of the sun, the decline of life, the decline of a moribund and provincial society. Though this is only one powerfully negative vision (and powerfully negative state of mind) in the traveler's quest, it is a recurring one throughout S. G. O. and it captures as well as any poem the sense of light, love, and life, trapped and suffocated by the oppressive atmosphere of an archaic society.

The preceding two poems are taken from «Del Camino», where the principal patterns of the quest are most fully developed. Despite the fact that the strictly personal nature of an inner drama is insistently elaborated in this section, we see even here, projected on the screen of the poetic imagination, images that are expressive of the static, stagnant conditions of an «imprisoned» society. In other sections of S. G. O., especially in the first division of nineteen poems, but also in «Humorismos, Fantasías, Apuntes», as well as in «Galerías» an «Variación», the treatment of the quest is extended to include a social significance for other groups in Spanish society. Let us study carefully now, in three different and highly significant poems, the characteristic vision of S. G. O., particularly as it focuses upon the world of children.

The very last poem of the work, Poem XCVI, is both a perfect summation of Machado's sense of life in Spanish society during the Restoration, as well as a magnificent example of the poet's artistic talent at the height of its expressive powers:

SOL DE INVIERNO

Es mediodía. Un parque.
Invierno. Blancas sendas;
simétricos montículos
y ramas esqueléticas.

Bajo el invernadero,
naranjos en maceta,
y en su tonel, pintado
de verde, la palmera.

Un viejecillo dice,
para su capa vieja:
«¡El sol, esta hermosura
de sol!...» Los niños juegan
El agua de la fuente
rebela, corre y sueña
lamiendo, casi muda,
la verdinosa piedra.
Again the familiar opposition of life-affirming elements and life-denying elements determine the expressive organization of the poem and convey its essential vision. We can observe in the title and in each stanza the following series of contrasts and tensions: the sun at noon, at the peak of its vitality, the season in winter in a state of dormancy; a park, symbol of paradise, the longed-for state of perfection, here converted into the specter of a cemetery, under the spell of winter; the Edenic and Christian imagery of orange and palm trees converted into something false and artificial (potted and painted), under the conditions of a greenhouse; the young children in the ascendency of life, an old man in his declining years; the vitality and playfulness of the fountain water, contained by the moss-covered stone, expressive of age, permanence and stagnation.

But the complexity of this poem is greater than the two previously analyzed. Not only does the expressiveness here arise from the contrast of elements within each stanza, but also from contrasts between different stanzas. If we compare the second with the first stanza, a kind of situational irony emerges. We note that there is something very incongruous about the survival of these tropical plants in the middle of winter—tropical plants in a winter house («invernadero»)! The utter artificiality of the attempt to extend the life of this lost paradise is further indicated by «maceta» and «tonel», and by the subtle placement of the phrase «pintado de verde». «Painted with green» suggests the effort to create a springtime or summer feeling, appropriate to the character of this indoor oasis. But let us observe carefully the real effect of the following two poetic lines:

y en su tonel, pintado
de verde, la palmera.

«Pintado de verde» distributed over two lines, midway between «tonel» and «palmera», has the poetic effect of contaminating «la palmera» with its meaning. The logic of grammar («pintado» does indeed modify «tonel») yields ever so subtly to the logic of the poetic line («de verde, la palmera»). It is as if the date palm were painted green! In an almost imperceptible way, the color green, so often expressive of life and vitality, here acquires a negative sense. A coating of green paint, associated as much with «palmera» as «tonel», is antithetical to natural life forces and conveys a sense of pure artificiality and sterility.

Abundant parallels and contrasts can be observed between the third and fourth stanzas. The water is like the children, while the moss-covered stone is like the old man. The activity of the water («resbala, corre, sueña») captures the play and the illusion of the children, while the stone’s cover of «verdín» suggests an analogy with the «cara vieja» of the old man. Both the stone and the old man suffer the effects of age. But the old man is sensitive, the stone is not. The old man responds to nature’s beauty and touch («esta hermosura de sol»), the stone is insensitive to the water’s gentle touch («lamiendo»). The irony of life is that the old man with his gifts of acquired sensitivity and appreciation will soon die. The stone is permanent and has nothing to show for its life except the moss of stagnant waters. The larger poetic statement of stanzas three and four would seem to be that just as the vitality and playfulness of the water is contained by the moss-covered stone, so the life and energy of childhood are contained by old age and decrepitude. In fact, a key organizing principle of the entire poem might be expressed both literally and figuratively by the idea of containment: the sun at midday is contained by the season of winter; the tropical plants are explicitly contained and imprisoned within the green house; the old man is contained in his cape; the children are contained by old age, and the water is contained by the stone fountain. Winter, greenhouse, old cloak, old age, and stone fountain all represent the limiting and confining conditions of life—a poetic vision doubly charged with significance in the context of a Spanish society, imprisoned by an archaic system.

But the vision of this poem is not the static one of the two poems previously analyzed. There is a progression from perfect stillness to movement and back to stillness again. The first stanza depicts a scene that is utterly static, frozen, inert, expressive of winter as the season of death. The park appears appropriately as a cemetery, with symmetrical mounds like graves, and skeletal branches that suggest the bones of the dead. This sense of the world, rigid and frozen, is further enhanced by the bilateral symmetry of the corresponding lines. Then we pass in the second stanza to a description of artificial life in a «winter house». The positioning of the color green, as we have already noted, serves to reinforce the artificial effect. In fact, the entire scene strikes us as incongruous as though «painted» in artificially. There are no verbs or indications of movement at all. There is simply the arrangement of fruit trees and color, as though the painterly effect of a still life is sought. But the rigidity of syntax of the first stanza gives way at least to a greater flexibility and a smoother flow of language, as if to prepare us for the real life to come.

Then, finally, in the third stanza, there is an injection of human emotion as the old man exclaims how beautiful the sun is. It is at this point that the poetic world comes to life. The children play and the fountain water slips and runs. It is as if the sun has finally warmed up the juices of life—the feelings of old age and the energy of youth. Again the logic of the poetic line makes itself felt:

de sol!»... Los niños juegan.

Unconscious though they may be, the children are really closer than the old man to the life and the energy of the sun. In this context, how expressive is the imagery and the syntax of the final stanza. The fountain water represents a little allegory of human life. It captures
the youthful energy, vitality and illusions of childhood («resbala, corre y sueña») as well as something of the sensitivity and enfeeblement of old age («lamiendo, casi muda»), before it comes to rest against the stone of death. A full cycle has been completed, and with this image, «la verdina piedra», we have returned to the graveyard feeling of the first stanza. The last image of the poem, «the water licking against the moss-covered rock», captures perfectly the sense of futility and sterility that characterizes the final poems of S. G. O. Again, and for the final time, the water of the fountain expresses «la amargura de la limitación», in an archaic and stagnant society.

«Sol de invierno», studied in isolation from the larger world of S. G. O. and studied in isolation from its historical and social context, generally does not merit from the critic more than a passing comment on the theme of youth and old age. But we may now advance the deeper meaning of the poem that the life of young children in a water trapped in an old stone fountain. Surely, then, a much higher degree of social awareness is present here and throughout S. G. O. than is generally suspected. Let us consider two more poems where the vision of the children’s world and its social significance is even more fully developed. At the very beginning of S. G. O., in one of the introductory poems, we may take note of the poet’s special sensitivity to the situation of school children in «la vieja España»:

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

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

¡Alegria infantil en los rinones
de las ciudades muertas!

¡Y algo nuestro de ayer, que todavía
vemos vagar por estas calles viejas!

To begin with, one can not help but respond to the attractive sentiment contained in the poetic commentary of the final two lines. They convey the poignant feeling of the man of today, as he recognizes among these «pequeños colegiales» his former self of yesterday. There is something unsuppressible about youthful joy and good spirits, especially the joy of bursting out of school and being free. It is so strong here, it is contagious, and it seems to resuscitate in the observer a youthful spirit of the past, a special feeling projected in the atmosphere, carefree, wandering still, along these old streets. But if we pay close attention to the entire poem and concentrate once again on its expressive organization, we will find, I think, that there is more emotion and significance here than that of pure nostalgia and relived moments of the past. Let us consider first, then, the characteristic vision of S. G. O., perhaps more evident here than anywhere in the entire volume. The situational irony, the balance of opposing forces (of stone containing life, of the old and the new, the dead and the living), which here becomes progressively sharper, needs no special commentary:

la plaza — los naranjos encendidos
la escuela — pequeños colegiales
la plaza en sombra — sus voces nuevas
las ciudades muertas — alegria infantil
estas calles viejas — algo nuestro de ayer

What does need special commentary, perhaps, is the significance of this school in Machado’s poetic world. We need only to recall «la aburrida escuela» of «Las moscas» (Poem XLVIII) or to remember the «monotonía» of «Recuerdo infantil» (Poem V) to feel sure that the school for Machado is a place of boredom and sterility. It stirs rather than promotes the life of the mind, as we will soon directly see. This negative sense of the school is surely felt or implied here. The children give a tremendous shout of joy and liberation as they break out of the confinement of what for them has been a prison all day long. But the complex vision of this poem contains a bitter irony, an irony that has to do not with the relived moments of the past, but with the future that lies ahead for these children. What chance will they have to grow and to prosper and flourish in the midst of these dead cities? These «pequeños colegiales», of course, are unconscious. They play when they are free and they express their animal vitality. But in the larger awareness of the poem and of the poetic world of S. G. O., we see the bitter irony in this liberation from school. The children escape from one kind of prison, only to enter another kind of prison. Like the spring water of Poem XCVI, that slides and runs out into the basin only to end by leaping futilely against the old stone of the old fountain, so the youthful happiness of new voices here reverberates through and is contained by the old streets and dead plazas of dead cities. We can now better understand the nostalgia expressed at the end of the poem. It is the kind of world and the kind of a society in which an adult has nothing to look forward to, only to look back upon.

We may note finally the attractiveness of these «naranjos encendidos» — alive with color, round, smiling, inviting. Edenic images, beautiful reminders of that lost perfect world, so strongly desired by the traveler on his quest. The special significance of the oranges here is that they are present when the children are absent, and then absent when the children are present — creating the effect of a tantalizing mirage. They clearly dominate the plaza in which they are contained; they are alive, lit up. They seem to beckon invitingly, and the children are trapped in school. When the children finally escape their confinement, the oranges disappear mysteriously, fade unnoticed into the darkness and the shadows...
of the plaza. These school children, like the traveler of so many poems, are separated from their garden of paradise. They, too, must live out their lives in the «fallen» world of a stagnant society, in «la aborrecida escuela» or in «los rincones de las ciudades muertas».

We recall that the traveler’s search for paradise, for a world of perfection, results only in the bitterness and frustration of failure. He encounters everywhere, in the galleries of his mind, the shadow and dust and age of a «fallen» world. We must understand further that these conditions, too, apply to everyone in S. G. O., including and especially children. For the profound vision of this poetic masterpiece reflects the real conditions of an archaic Spain as it reveals the encirclement of all that is young and vital in the deadly atmosphere of the past.

Let us consider finally the powerful poetic vision of Poem V, where the reason for the children’s joy of Poem III becomes abundantly clear. «Recuerdo infantil» is more than the grim portrayal of the deadening influence of the classroom. It surely recreates some of the poet’s own unfortunate experience in Spanish schools in the late 1880’s. More importantly, it captures an outmoded and prevailing method of education in the Spanish school system of the time, and it relates, in a devastating way, the significance of what goes on in the classroom to the larger world of Spanish history and society:

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 Caim fugitivo, y muerto Abel, junto a una mancha carmín.

Con timbre sonoro y hueco truena 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.

This is certainly not the classroom of the venerable Francisco Giner, who always dressed neatly and who scorned textbooks. Certainly not the Francisco Giner, who delighted in Socratic discussion, and in songs and games with a small group of pupils in the garden of the Institución. This is the traditional system of «la vieja España», traditional learning by textbooks, by choral recitation, by rote, from poorly paid professors without interest in the moral and intellectual personalities of their pupils. Both teachers and students are mechanically performing the most dreadful of lessons. How well the various expressive features of the poem convey the most stifling monotony — the regular, consonant rhythm, the internal rhyme («tardes parda»), «estudian... lluvia»), and the enormous size of the numbers under multiplication, suggesting the infinite tedium of the afternoon’s exercise.

Though the familiar vision of containment and imprisonment is here very much in evidence, this poem possesses a very different kind of structure than that which has been analyzed thus far. The special expressive organization of this poem arises, in part, from the various comparisons between what goes on inside the classroom and what goes on in the world outside. Dámaso Alonso has called our attention to an important stylistic detail, which will provide a useful point of departure for our discussion now.

He points out that, in the Puyeo edition (1907), the first and last stanzas are perfectly identical. But in the Poesías Completas, a slight modification is introduced. The ending of the first stanza continues unchanged:

... Monotonía de lluvia tras los cristales.

But the ending of the last stanza now reads:

... Monotonía de la lluvia en los cristales.

With the benefit of this critic’s sensitivity, we begin to realize that the sound of rain has become more concrete and particularized — «lluvia» becomes «la lluvia». The visual scene has given way ever so subtly to an auditory impression — «tras» is replaced by «en». The sound of rain has invaded the classroom and is associated directly with the children’s voices: «hay ahora como una participación directa en el ambiente, de la lluvia, no ya fuera, como fondo del cuadro, sino monótona sobre los cristales, cayendo y resbalando sobre los cristales, asociada directamente a la monotonía encerrada... (monotonía aritmética cantiada; monotonía lluvia sobre cristal)».

This observation permits us to see further appropriateness to the numbers under elaboration («mil veces mil, un millón»). They apply perfectly to the infinitude of raindrops. It is, in fact, as if the children were counting the raindrops.

The relationship between the chant of arithmetic and the sound of rain (between what transpires on either side of the «cristales») awakens our sensitivity to other metaphorical language of the poem. We note that the voice of the old schoolteacher is expressed in this way:
Michael Predmore

Con timbre sonoro y hueco
trueno el maestro, un anciano

The old man is described in relation to his school children in stormy atmospheric terms: just as thunder calls forth the rain, so does his commanding voice call forth the chanted arithmetic from the children. The old man thunders and the children «rain», a metaphorical relationship even more skillfully drawn through the expressive qualities of sound. We note the sharp contrast between the deep, thunderous voice of the old man conveyed by the «o's» and «u's», «tru» and «tro», and the high-pitched voices of the children conveyed by the multiple repetition of the accented «i» in the words, «infantil», «mil», and «millón».

What requires special commentary here, because its richness of meaning is developed throughout a whole series of poems, is the poetic significance of the word «cristal». If we review the many contexts in which «cristal» appears (particulary, Poems VI, XXXIV, XXXVII, XI, IX, LXII), we discover that it most often possesses qualities of the mirror and is valued for its reflective capacity: water as «cristal», as a potential mirror; window as «cristal», as an ambiguous mirror; and dreams have «cristales» in the sense of looking glasses of the mind, mirrors of the mind. This sense of «cristal» as mirror, particularly as mirror of the mind, is operating here, I believe. Let us examine one more bit of internal evidence that supports this interpretation. On two previous occasions we have seen how the logic of the poetic line suggests and enriches poetic meanings under elaboration. In «Recuerdo infantil», this technique is employed several times with great effect. The two most prominent examples are to be found in the third line, of the first and last stanzas:

... Monotonía

The children do indeed «study monotony» as they chant their arithmetic interminably. «Cristal», thus, acquires two meanings as panes of glass of windows, and as the mirrors of the minds of the children. (Is it just a coincidence that «los cristales» echoes so perfectly «los colegiales»?)

And now, the stylistic variant observed earlier by Dámaso Alonso acquires even greater significance:

... Monotonía
de la lluvia en los cristales.

The vision of the poem, as we have already seen, establishes the association of the numbers with the raindrops. The children seem to be counting raindrops or «rainings» numbers. Now the introduction of the definite article («la lluvia» instead of «lluvia») and the replacement of «tras» with «en» articulate the new poetic meanings developed in this poem. We must now read the language of the last stanza figuratively, as well, in this way: The school children study the monotony of the rain of numbers on the mirrors of their minds. What is reflected on the mirrors of their minds is the image of monotony, the image of raindrops that run over the mind like rain over a window pane. In fact, a kind of brainwash is going on here. Just as the rain beats a pattern of monotony on the window pane, so the chanted arithmetic «rainings» relentlessly on the minds of the children. Traditional learning is uselessly pounded into them until they are deadened to the important things of life. In fact, this is the significance suggested by the poetic logic of the second line in the poem:

de invierno. Los colegiales

Children, in spirit, are always creatures of springtime, of summer, of the sun («de sol!... Los niños juegan», Poem XCVI), but here they are suffocated under the season of winter. They have grown old before they have grown up, old before their time, «colegiales de invierno».

The final and most important problem of the poem must now be addressed. What is the significance of the poster of Cain and Abel? It has never been questioned by any study of Machado's poetry, yet it is the first and only appearance in S. C. O. of a theme that will later acquire great importance in Campos de Castilla. It deserves our full attention. The «cartel» provides the only image, the only representation of life and death, of something really important, in the entire classroom. Yet it seems so thoroughly forgotten, as the schoolmaster thunders and the children «rain» on and on. But the sensitive reader is not allowed to forget the significance of Cain and Abel. The logic of the poetic line here asserts itself with special force:

Es la clase. En un cartel

The effect of the grammatical period is lost in the sinalepha («clase. En») necessitated by a proper reading of the line. We are made to understand that the real lesson is not contained there in the schoolmaster's book, but there in the poster before everyone's eyes. The real lesson is not the dull, stultifying exercise of arithmetic, but the dramatic representation of a great truth, prominently displayed and so thoroughly ignored. The poster is a powerful reminder that children must be taught to be moral and ethical beings rather than mimicking parrots — «thou shalt not kill thy brother» is a far more important lesson than the chanting of these meaningless numbers. But these numbers are only meaningless for the «anciano» and the «colegiales», for those who are forced to perform them mechanically and abstractly. The special organization and the superior awareness of this poem compel us to see that the numbers of stanza 4 apply perfectly to the fratricide of stanza 216. The numbers represent the number of times that brother has
killed brother throughout human history since that first tragic Biblical event. We may now return to and complete the earlier observation of Dámaso Alonso. Just as the rain from the outside invades the classroom, so the lesson of the classroom «invades» the outside world. One million raindrops and one million fratricides—killing, like bad weather, seems to be a monotonous and endless condition of life.

We would be wrong to conclude, however, that «Recuerdo infantil» is making a general statement on a universal human condition. Within the larger vision of S. G. O., we must understand that this poem is treating, with a high degree of social awareness and bitterness, the familiar theme of the un-lived and wasted youth of Spanish society. The powerful commentary suggested here is that those who are trapped in the traditional modes of learning of a traditional society are condemned to repeat the pattern of their species. These «colgiales» are the descendents of the children of Eve, destined themselves to participate in this cycle of fratricide. What kind of world awaits these children in later life? Will they be condemned to live out their lives «en los rincones de las ciudades muertas», or will they be sent off to war and fratricide? In the context of nineteenth century Spanish history, the theme of Cain and Abel is a powerful and appropriate vehicle of social significance. Wars of national liberation, colonial wars, Carlist civil wars, industrial wars, peasant wars, and colonial wars again—fratricidal conflict of all dimensions, and especially the increasing social violence during the 1890's, to which the «noria» and the «cadalso» are most certainly related. We can be sure that this kind of Spanish history constitutes the world that filtered through the artistic consciousness of the author, not only of La Caricatura, and not only of Campos de Castilla, but also of «Recuerdo infantil» and the work to which it belongs, Soledades, Galerias y Otros Poemas.

NOTES

1 For a brief but excellent introduction to the early formative years of Antonio Machado, see the recent book of Matyás Horváthy, Las dos Soledades de Antonio Machado. (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1975.)

2 Raymond Carr on several occasions refers to the Spanish economy as a colonial economy. We note, for example, that when Narváez is dismissed by the Queen in January 1846, Carr observes: «with his fall began a lamentable period of cabinet shuffles rendered more confused by the competing influences of the French and British ministers—both of whom backed different ministries and acted at times as if Spanish politicians had ceased to count as governors of an independent nation», Spain (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 241.


4 Carr, p. 435.


7 La España del Siglo XIX, vol. 2, p. 144

8 Spain, p. 398.

9 One good example of «productivity imprisoned by the latifundia system» is provided by Vicens Vives. In 1902, the government gave evidence of wanting to address itself to the agrarian question by creating the «Instituto de Reformas Sociales», with the following results: Además, aplicando las ideas de Costa sobre la valoración de los terrenos agrícolas mediante la irrigación, estableció el primer plan nacional de trabajos hidráulicos (plan Gasset, 1902), que se adoptaría de nuevo y mejoraría en 1916. Pero las realizaciones no se multiplicaron: de 296 proyectos sólo se llevaron a cabo una treintena. La causa fundamental de ello fue la falta de capitales. Los bancos españoles y el capitalismo extranjero se desinteresaron por completo de este problema primordial. Menos del 1 por 100 de los capitales de las sociedades anónimas se consagró a la agricultura (Coyuntura Económica, pp. 202-03).

10 Antonio Machado, Obras: Poesía y Prosa, ed. by Aurora de Albornoz and Guillermo de Torre (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1964). All quotations of Machado will be taken from this edition.


14 Just as the glory of the poem XXXI is a «gloria en sombra», so the paradise here is a greenhouse or a park transformed into a cemetery. This conversion of the positive images of the quest into their opposites responds very much to the ironic vision of the solipsist.

15 Machado left Giner's Institución in 1889 and continued his studies for a short while in the Institutes of «San Isidro» and «Cardenal Cisneros». These latter schools may very well be the source of this «recuerdo infantil».


17 Poetas Españoles Contemporáneos, p. 144.

18 The affinity of stanzas 2 and 4 is further reinforced by the repetitive effect of the accent of «i» in key words, as well as by the stressed accent on the final syllable of the last word of each line, a pattern which departs from the metrical scheme of stanzas 1, 3 and 5.

19 Pablo Neruda gives explicit expression to his same idea in La España Encendida (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1970): «Cain y Abel cayeron muchas veces (asesinados un millón de veces)», p. 31.


21 This collection of Machado articles, edited by Enrique Paradís and published during 1892 and 1893, is contained in the edition of Aurora de Albornoz, La prehistoria de Antonio Machado (México: Ed. La Torre, 1961). What is of special interest to us here is the series of nine sketches of political satire written in collaboration by the youthful Machado brothers under the pseudonym «Tablante de Ricamonte». All of these sketches reveal an acute sensitivity to the social disorders, turmoil and injustices of those years, a sensitivity acquired at a very early age, and prior to the composition of S. G. O.