

An Unspeakable Betrayal

For a whole year I had been laboring on *my* work, *my* great work. I was spending five, six, ten hours of every day on this crowning achievement, and already the world's finest literary magazines were fighting to get it. The furniture, the parquet floor, the books in my room were all delighted to see me toiling at this work of genius. As soon as I sat down, the table, the bookcase, and the bed crowded around me, chirping contentedly. The bookcase in particular, which would draw closer, on tip-toes, and arch its ribs of books expectantly. A spider at work on a large house under construction in a corner always slid down a scaffold pulley and nodded in assent with its legs.

My only enemy, goading and quarrelsome, was the wind. Almost every night, before entering my room, I left him whistling cheerfully, entwined by the power lines in the street or cavorting with the papers that grazed on the stone pavement. But scarcely had I finished undressing, as the obliging easy chair shook the dust from itself, opening its cordial arms to receive me, when he began to throw violent punches at the window's spine, looking for an opportunity to sneak in or trying to open it by force; but my window crossed its two sinewy, solitary fingers tightly and scoffed at the wind. The wind, to avenge himself, badgered the walls with savage impetuosity, whistling loudly and hurling handfuls of dust and pebbles against the glass. But I, despite everything, retained my composure and kept working.

Finally, one night he promised that if I would let him in to admire my

work, he would never bother me again; on the contrary, he would bring me all kinds of perfumes and music and coo softly to *my* great work.

Tempted by the offer, and furthermore, I must confess, by a slight tinge of legitimate pride in having so important a figure take an interest in my work, I was inclined to consent. The wind, howling with delight, uprooted two trees, spun a few houses forty-five degrees, and swung all the bells of the city in triumphal peals. Not content with this, he showed off as a magician. He turned three priests sneaking down the street into as many inverted umbrellas; he made Himalayas of streets and houses enveloped in his clouds; and, at his conjuring, cafe tables sprouted rags, documents, straws, and other objects from the Great Costume Jewelry Store of the Garbage Dump.

At last, considering how eager he was to please me, I decided to let him in and opened the window.

The grotesque wind rushed headlong over the sills and sniffed restlessly at everything. Where he caused real terror was in the basket of papers; they were resting peacefully there, but upon perceiving the presence of the monster, they caprioled madly one on top of the other, swirling about and fleeing in all directions before taking shelter in the tub and beneath the wardrobe, for the wind is paper's cat.

Frankly, I was angered at his impropriety and the lack of interest he had shown in perusing *my* work, for which I admonished him severely. Then, feigning close attention, he reviewed the thousands of pages, shuffling them as loudly as a conjurer does a deck of cards; suddenly, with a single slap, he threw them into space through the dumbfounded window, which had opened its big mouth in amazement, and set out after them.

I was crushed, dazed, torn apart forever, like a book from its cover. He had carried off *my* work, *my* definitive work, which was flying, transformed into seagulls, across the horizon.

I swore to avenge myself without delay. I soon found a way to do it. When I saw him asleep on the roof, where the chimneys were also yawn-

ing, lulled by his snoring, I installed a different window that barely fit and would occasionally come off its hinge. And he fell into the trap.

As usual, upon waking he threw himself against the window, but this time he found himself captured, vanquished, defeated by the cracks.

For years now he has been wailing mournfully and pleading for his freedom. Unyielding, I will keep him there, handcuffed to the interstices of the window, which is always closed and always sure of itself. *I'm not one to play games with.*

From the Spanish. Published in Ultra (Madrid), February 1, 1922.

Orchestration

for Adolfo Salazar

Violins

Pretentious young ladies of the orchestra, insufferable and pedantic. Jagged mountains of sound.

Violas

Violas that have just entered menopause. These spinsters still retain their half-tone voices.

Violoncello

Murmurs of sea and woods. Serenity. Deep eyes. They have the conviction and the grandeur of Jesus' sermons in the desert.

Contrabass

Diplodocus of instruments. Oh, the day they decide to let loose their great bellowing, driving away the terrified spectators! For now, we see them oscillate and growl with contentment as the contrabassists tickle their stomachs.

Piccolo

Anthill of sound.

Flute

The flute is the most nostalgic instrument. That she who in the hands of Pan was the thrilling voice of meadow and forest should now find herself in the hands of a fat, bald fellow . . . ! But even so, she remains the Princess of instruments.

Clarinet

A hypertrophied flute. Now and then, poor thing, he sounds all right.

Oboe

Bleating become wood. Its waves, profound lyrical mysteries. The oboe was Verlaine's twin brother.

Tenor Oboe

The mature, experienced oboe. Well traveled. Its exquisite temperament has become more serious, more inspired. If the oboe is fifteen years old, the tenor oboe is thirty.

Bassoon

Bassoonists are the fakirs of the orchestra. Now and then, they watch the terrible reptile they hold in their hands, as it shows them its forked tongue. Once they've hypnotized it, they lay it in their arms and become ecstatic.

Contrabassoon

The bassoon of the Tertiary Period.

Xylophone

A child's game. Water of wood. Princesses knitting in the garden, moonbeams.

Trumpet with Mute

Clown of the orchestra. Contortion, pirouette. Grimaces.

French Horns

Climbing toward a summit. Sunrise. Annunciation. Oh, the day they unfurl like a streamer!

Trombones

A slightly German temperament. Prophetic voice. Succentors in an ancient cathedral with ivy and a rusty weather vane.

Tuba

Legendary dragon. The other instruments tremble with fear at its booming, subterranean voice and wonder when the prince in burnished armor will come to deliver them.

Cymbals

Light shattered into fragments.

Triangle

A silver streetcar through the orchestra.

Drum

Little toy thunder. "Somewhat" menacing.

Bass Drum

Obfuscation. Coarseness. Boom. Boom. Boom.

Timpani

Skins filled with olives.

From the Spanish. Published in Horizonte (Madrid), no. 2, November 30, 1922.

Suburbs: Motifs

Suburbs, outskirts, the last houses of the city. It is to this absurd conglomeration of earthen walls, heaps of dirt, hovels, withered scraps of countryside, etc., that the following motifs refer.

These aren't the great suburbs of a London: tough, sordid, but full of working-class activity. Rather, they are those of the small provincial capital, inhabited by poor and indolent people, rag-and-bone folks at most.

These suburbs have the anodyne, expressive complexity of an attic. They're like a room into which the city tosses all its worn-out things. Everything moth-eaten or useless can be found there.

In this absurd aesthetic so characteristic of the suburb, everything is forsaken, symbolized by the objects that appear before us: the empty tin can, the hungry dog, the eviscerated mouse, or the twisted, dust-covered gaslight.

Its entire psychological and material perspective—hostile and sad—is relegated to the depths of our spirits. The soul of the suburb strangles any glimmer of life or movement the place might have. In the aquarelle that we immediately paint with the palette of our feelings, we can use only one color: gray.

All the noises and gratings that roar in the great mouth of the city become obsessive there, set into the monotony that smears the suburban atmosphere. Joy hangs in tatters from the eaves, barely stirred by the breeze of small voices, those of the children who sift through the heaps, to whom no one ever tells stories.

Here and there, our eyes—which survey the suburbs with the selfish “God forgive, brother” of fallen things—are offended by a “Tavern” sign, spelled out in decrepit letters, sick to the marrow, for here the word has even lost the strong and vibrant quality that, like wine, it boasts of elsewhere. From the balconies, set out like rags to dry, hang the innumerable crimes pointed out again and again in the streets by the blind man with his cane and placard.

We see from time to time, taking shelter behind the walls of some would-be corral, the heaps of dirt adulterated with the hundred indistinct, useless objects—because a hundred hands have already removed what was useful in them—that bury our imagination as if in a ditch. Those corrals suffer from nostalgia for the sound of bleating, and on the backs of their ocher walls there are dirty, forgotten jewels of verbena.

In the subjective view of the suburb at dusk, everything becomes more heartrendingly inert. Our souls are whipped gloomily by a rag hung from an electric cable or the echoless shouts that ply the air like bats. In the distance, the dim gaslight winks its failing eye, and the frayed shadows take refuge in the doorjambs, spreading out their silent hands as if begging for something.

The interminable yawn of the suburb and its reddened, faded eyes are always the terrible curse of the city. Even when the day dances happily across the nearby rooftops, it is immediately caught in the snare of the suburb’s perennial sadness, which paints a black stroke across the boisterous joy of the metropolis. These lethargic districts belong to the camp of the hopeless, the fatal. Their emotion of dead trees. The inhabitants have been victims of the rabid bite of the suburb’s soul. The only cure for this suburbophobia is a preventive injection of a few sacks of gold.

Among the cortège of words, there is Suburb, dressed in rags, stained with grease, and on its face the stigma of the tramp who sleeps in the doorways of houses.

From the Spanish. Published in Horizonte, no. 4 (Madrid), January 1923.

Unnoticed Tragedies as Themes for a Totally New Theater

Of all literary genres, the theater is certainly the least exploited. From primitive times to the present, it has fundamentally undergone little or no variation.

Ibsen first, then Wedekind were those chosen to mark out a new orientation in this art, still in its long-lived infancy. And Maeterlinck and Apollinaire? Did they do anything other than revise the old structural composition, tackling eternal yet outdated themes in a new way?

The aesthetic problem before us is to construct, to introduce “new” and “original” themes that have not been treated by any universal dramaturgy. Even if the *Chauve-Souris* revue succeeded in masterfully molding the range of emotions that the theater tends to awaken, nevertheless, its means of expression were, if not old, then at least lacking interests of continuity. How do we fuse this interest with the novelty of the subject?

Surely the inanimate can provide us with abundant themes. It's true that some lifeless object is often made to speak, but usually as if it were a human being or with lyricisms that surpass the greatest of poets. The lyrical and philosophical expression is there, but not the psychological expression innate to them—this tremendous and complex psychology still so little explored.

Ultimately, the drama, comedy, or what have you about the customs and passions of these strange characters, should it fail to impress a human audience, could instead bring tears, laughter, or thrills to the other audience of chairs, kitchen utensils, etc., etc.

But what is certain is that passions do exist in the world of the abiotic.

A few years ago I bought a small chamois cloth, because it seemed nice to me in the shop window where it resided. I used to hang it on a nail by my window, and there it went on existing tranquilly. When I entered my room, it gleefully moved its little angular arms and didn't stop signaling me until I took it in my hands. It clung to them tenderly, communicating its sweet warmth with affection that can only be compared to that of a mother caressing her child. Its rag tongue would tell me things that were inexplicable to me, only a human being, after all. If before I began to clean my glasses I didn't stroke its smooth, diminutive head of hair, it would wrap itself around my fingers and not let go until it received the desired caress. In the end both he and I became truly fond of each other. To see him smile through his creases on sunny days, or cry, wrinkled and battered, when it rained!

Then one day I noticed that he wasn't in his place. I remembered his clever trick in the past of hiding behind the furniture. When I couldn't find him, I knew that something terrible had happened.

I spent three or four months in a sadness that could only be explained by the disappearance of my little friend. But one day as I was heading toward the outskirts of town, I was stupefied by the sight of a dreadful tableau. A strong wind made the road posts bellow in pain, and armies of clouds in purple uniforms traversed the sky sowing extermination. In the midst of this scene, dangling from a telegraph wire, lay my unforgettable rag, dead. He was enveloped in an otherworldly sorrow, his heart-breaking tatters moving in the wind, pecked dispassionately by rain and wind. Even now it moves me just to think about it.

This sad event illustrates the reciprocal tenderness that the inanimate sometimes offers us.

And this deep affection that we have for our pipe, teapot, cane, or necktie—isn't that perhaps the fitting response to their favors?

I know of a pipe that was picked up from a friend's table by a hard-hearted man, who abducted it without compassion. Well then, when the vile abductor went to light it, it singed his nose. That infuriated pipe spewed burning ash from its only eye.

Another time, one of those plump earthen jugs, with a sharp beak, choked up and refused to give me its cooling streams if every day I didn't scatter a few crumbs on the floor, which it gobbled up, making little hops and leaning over with comical clumsiness.

For a theater of the macabre, à la *Edgar Poe*, the dramatist of the new generation can find inspiration in the attics of houses, and leave behind those shop-worn cemeteries. In attics, "top-floor municipal cemeteries," one can find old chests of drawers, their stomachs distended by the final illness, limping on their feet during midnight sabbats. Birdcages lacking all sense of proportion. Grotesque luggage trunks, still gripped with the terror inspired by death. This entire funerary procession standing honor guard over the one who was once a brazier, still encased in the iron armor in which it was interred. Finally, there is the macabre smell of dead crockery so common in attics.

I happened to be reading the paper when suddenly I heard a sharp groan from the clothes rack. My brilliant pajamas, only recently purchased, had just committed suicide by leaping to the floor. My shock was complete when I realized that what I had been reading about was an enormous fire at the Great House of Fabrics, the store where I had purchased them. The flames, bent on plunder, had totally destroyed it. Had the pajamas perhaps read about the death of their brethren, or sensed it? I don't know; the fact is, the affective is a quality of the inanimate.

From the Spanish. Published in Alfar (La Coruña), no. 26, February 1923.

Why I Don't Wear a Watch

I was writing a letter of no importance, so what I am about to relate was not a suggestion produced by an altered state of consciousness, nor could it have been a dream, since a few moments earlier I had been hunting down an impertinent fly that kept bothering me by speaking into my ear—like those old deaf people who whisper, low and laboriously, insufferable things—and on the day after my adventure I found its corpse in a coffin formed by the lid of the inkwell.

So there I was, writing. Suddenly I heard nearby a ticktock louder than the others, as if its whole point were to get my attention; to my profound amazement, I found myself face to face with a being stranger than any the imagination could devise.

It had two legs, one a pencil and the other a pen; its body took the shape of a rusty steel rod, and its head was nothing more than a gilded brass disk, with an uneven mustache in the form of two arrows and two minuscule crowns for eyes, like the kind used to wind wristwatches. Everything about him demonstrated a truly intolerable air of affectation and vanity.

Astonished, but no less offended, I questioned him: “Would you mind telling me why you have entered my room without having had the decency to knock?”

The extravagant little fellow, unfazed by my gruffness, replied very casually: “You’ve been going around with me since the day you were born, Mr. Muckamuck, and until now you’ve never deigned to ask me such questions.”

Irritated by his contemptuous tone, I said, “Mind your tongue, and don’t call me Mr. Muckamuck, because I have other, more honorific titles”—and to prove it I was about to take from my desk the documents conferring them.

“Calm down, young man,” he told me. “I am older than you could possibly dream, and my age gives me the right to use this authoritarian tone.”

“Well, then, who are you?”

“I am Time.”

An Oh! of stupefaction drew a perfect circle on my mouth. But he hastened to continue: “Don’t be frightened; after all, I only materialized in this form out of pure sympathy for you. More important, I wish to make revelations that perhaps might interest you.”

At that, he settled comfortably onto a cushion. In further astonishment, I saw the alarm clock and the clock on the wall leave their places and, wagging their tails, come over to lick his feet. There could no longer be any doubt that this was indeed Time himself to whom I was talking. Now I will transcribe his story in its entirety.

Here is what he said: “My friend, tonight I have undertaken a bold gesture. I myself have annulled several hours of Eternity.

“No one but you will know that nothing will age while I am here, and all that exists will have disappeared. But I am going to speak to you about my life. My whole life story can be divided into two periods: before the invention of clocks, and from then until now. My first era glided along in joyful frolicking with my brother Space everywhere we ruled in the Universe. We had a great time, upon my soul!, and only one tiny cloud ruffled our existence. It was something of a gastronomic nature. Can you believe there wasn’t a single kitchen, not one restaurant, not even a pasture? A complete lack of food is what drove me to devour my children as soon as they were born. Later I saw myself portrayed as a monstrous and ferocious old man, turned theophagous through egotism and evil instincts. But I solemnly swear”—as he said this, his pendulum swung gracefully across his stomach—“that these so-called crimes were com-

mitted only to satisfy my appetite. On the other hand, eating one's children belongs to a code of ethics that was very fashionable some five or six thousand years ago."

He said "five or six thousand years" the way you or I would say "three or four days."

"But my friend, ever since the first clock appeared"—and his rather erect and martial mustache now marked 7 and 25—"there hasn't been a moment's rest for me. I must multiply myself, raise myself to the n^{th} power to be able to run every clock in existence. You might have noticed that I can't always keep up with so much work, and when that happens my enemies are in the habit of falling silent. The agitation has been excessive for at least a few centuries, despite which you will sometimes hear and even read, 'Time passed tranquilly . . .' 'Time quietly promised . . .' But believe me, those are nothing more than lies and foolishness, to which you should pay no attention."

At this point, a slight throat irritation struck him, and he coughed 8:00. Scarcely able to ticktock, amidst the jubilant barking of my two clocks, which were also chiming 8:00, he went on: "I see here you have a portrait of that half-wit Einstein. Experience has armored me against insults, but the offense of relativity has grieved me above all others. As if the falsehoods raised against me weren't enough, it turns out I'm now the subject of everyone's gossip, thanks to this depraved person."

Suddenly his body began to lengthen inordinately. I swung around anxiously in my chair upon seeing a new prodigy in that phantasmagorical night. Time had stretched out too far.

"Don't worry," he told me, already completely calm, "in a moment I'll finish and be gone. But I'm not leaving without first helping you in whatever way possible. Of course, when old age comes to grab you in his trembling claws, I'll be there to stop him and keep you eternally young."

"Thanks, but no thanks," I replied quickly, "I want my time to come like everyone else's."

"You're a sensible man," he answered. "Since you refuse this, I will count you among my beloved children, and favor you as I do them."

“Then I’d like to know who my brothers will be.”

“For God’s sake! Well, your brothers will be watch thieves and swindlers, because they do much to lighten my load by making off with those little instruments that are the most annoying to me, since they are so numerous. Lazy people are also my children, for they use me in moderation. My children are—”

“Don’t go on,” I said abruptly. “You want to throw me in with swindlers, with idlers? No way will I accept your favors.”

“You’re an inexperienced young man, far too ingenuous. Open your eyes to the fact that they are the ones who have lived best, along with the many others I was about to cite. If you were an artist, you would love, for example, just a few hours of tedium, my favorite son.”

“I’m beginning to see that your most beloved children are the traits most discredited among men. You’re proving to be a vagrant, unscrupulous, selfish being.”

Time was threatening to storm. His minute and hour hands were growing angry. He struck 8:30 in such a menacing way that I began to feel genuine fear.

“Enough, young man. Since you disdain my favors, you will suffer my disfavor. In the meantime, within two days you will be left without clocks.” Having said this, he suddenly disappeared.

And his curse was fulfilled, for not two days after my adventure, I found myself without a dime and had to pawn my two dear clocks.

What’s more, I fell prey to a constant obsession. Every clock I ran into glared at me threateningly; their hands bristled with wrath. Others, when I wanted to know what time it was, would spin disconcertingly, as if to mock me.

So I bought myself an hourglass and placed it on the table. But then the vengefulness of Time was bloodier still. I don’t know what he did with it, but the fact is, its slender waist, a waist as thin as a needle, widened little by little until it allowed the sand to pass in thick streams.

Then I came to detest that poor, plump hourglass, which after all was not to blame for its disgrace, and one day I threw it out the window,

like those intolerant masters of the house who cast out a maid who slips up.

Since then, I have resigned myself to getting by without a watch, which has made me lose some very good friends when I fail to show up at our meetings.

From the Spanish. Published in Alfar (La Coruña), no. 29, May 1923.

Theorem

If from a point outside of a straight line we draw a parallel line, we will obtain a sunny autumn afternoon.

In fact:

The sky, all blue eyes, reflects the fishless dream of ponds, and these in turn tepidly bathe the laziness of the afternoon.

The blind trees pass by in a slow procession, and in their highest branches a straggling leaf chirps gold.

The streets want to leave en masse for a stroll in the country, but so slowly that the travelers soon leave them behind, trembling in the sun.

Yellowish fields climb hills and bluffs and stretch out there, legs spread, waiting for the night. Only a few poplars, always restless, telegraph a Morse code of leaves.

Measured breathing of the afternoon, and all things beating to its rhythm.

Me, I carry in the palm of my hand my cane without leaves.

A breast sleeps purring in the sun.

All the windows have eyelashes like women.

The church tower, like a forefinger, points to the last tiny white cloud.

Silence after a hum, then Christ passes by selling voices.

The swallows kiss the beak of seven o'clock.

A volley of weathercocks in the air.

The ears of that mule—he himself can't be seen—reabsorb the evening.

The light goes out in my lapels.
It is the hour when the solitary birthing of street lamps begins.
Someone turns the switch to the stars.
Which is what we have not proposed to prove.

From the Spanish. Written in 1925.