

Translator's introduction

Two observations by Antonio Machado help us understand the appeal of Antonio Barbagallo's modest, heartfelt collection of poems, *Life and Death Matters (De vida o muerte)*. In a brief foreword written in 1917 to his first collection of poetry *Soledades* (1903), Machado reflected:

I thought that the essence of poetry is not so much the phonetic quality or color of the word or the metrical line or the complex of sensations as much as it is a deep stirring of the spirit. This stirring is what the soul offers – if it offers something; or what it says, if it says something – with its own voice in a lively response to the engagement with the world. [my translation]

Also in 1917, he composed a few lines by way of introduction to his collection *Campos de Castilla* (1912). Here he wrote:

[Some of my poems] respond to the simple love of Nature that in me is infinitely stronger than the love of Art. Finally, several poems reflect the many hours of my life spent – some might say wasted – meditating on the enigmas of being human and of the world about us. [my translation]

Machado's words help us appreciate the work of contemporary poets like Antonio Barbagallo who speak about matters of life and death and who insist that life and death matters. Barbagallo's poems in this collection convey a simple, honest, passionate engagement of the many dimensions – and particulars – of human existence. The poems capture a rich variety of moods, impressions, and observations. Many different kinds of love and grief find expression, as well as an ardent, but also sweet and playful, eroticism. His images – many drawn from his native Sicily, from Spain, and from the Northeastern United States – are striking, and the rhythms of the poems are robust and compelling.

There is in Barbagallo's poetry a simple love of nature and of the pastoral as in the poem that hails the "white-washed villages of Andalucía" (9), the poem that grants us a vista of the Vermont countryside (10), and the poem that invites us to return with the poet to his native Sicilian landscape (29). Yet, the poet is also mindful of nature's honest sternness as in the lines describing the farmer's relation to the land:

*The land, sister, calls you
and awaits you without gift
and without guile. (2)*

The joy and agony – the enigma – of human relationships is a recurring theme in the collection. Barbagallo rejoices in his children and celebrates that most elemental of human bonds, the one between parents and children (11, 21, 25). Nonetheless, in other poems, we are witness to his puzzlement and anguish over broken and estranged filial relationships:

*There is a name for each of you,
but how will you call to a father
who has lost you? (15)*

And to his son, he says:

*I would give you a drum
so you can startle me awake –
and I may see you. (8)*

The poet confesses his abiding love for his "sweet lady and dark-eyed companion" in a number of tender love poems. Yet, this marvelous and sustaining love between a man and a woman is always in some tension with the "madnesses" of desire. He often shares with us his unabashed delight in the beauty of the female body and in the passionate throes of lovers together:

*Your being comes to me in gusts of breath,
in the flames of lips,
in the heat of breasts,
in the taste of a woman; (16)*

He captures the enchantment and allure of "night-time love":

*In the night there is the mystery
of perfumes and of moons,
there are murmurs of hidden waters,
moans, and fasting lovers. (28)*

For the poet, love in all of its manifestations and dimensions gives meaning to our lives and propels us forward. He affirms the essential joy of being alive – even as he is also painfully aware of the shadows of existence: sorrow (4), emptiness (6), despair (5), boredom and brokenness (17), regret (24), and the longest shadow of all, death:

The dead terrify me. (20)

Indeed, the terror of death must be taken up into life resolutely and courageously, not covered over or falsified:

*Ah, those malignant crosses
I refuse to bear. (20)*

Barbagallo is not afraid to wrestle with the many contradictions of life. He understands that it is this very cleft in our existence that gives birth in us to thought, to art, to wisdom. But we need to be open and ready to learn:

*Here I am, listening to the wise ones
of countless worlds, (32)*

Poetry in its essence is a stirring of the spirit, Machado told us, a stirring spoken by the soul in its own voice as a response to our being in the world. Antonio Barbagallo, in this collection of poetry, has given his own "lively response" to our engagement with each other and with the world. My hope is that in translating these poems, I have conveyed enough of Barbagallo's passionate voice so that the reader's spirit may be stirred.

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