

ARTS CORNER

The Land of Our Fathers

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Consider—if you have a minute—the painting in the photograph (Figure 1), still soaking in the remaining light, of burnished tint, of splendid nature. Everything is enveloped in a display of golds, the land appears to sleep, the wheat field calmed by the last dregs of sunlight.

The weary afternoon—of this September day—is fading, the autumn has already begun, and the land and sky shrug off the day-long, sultry haze.

Half way down the path, face on, and heading towards us, is the delicate figure of a countryman, doubtless fully accustomed to the weariness of working from dawn to dusk. This crude figure of bland simplicity, wears a straw hat, and leans with his right hand on a walking stick in a candid restful attitude (his entire figure suffused by an explosion of golds).

This is without doubt an old man, one of the many who have lived all their life in the country, working the land day after day, an old man from nearby on his way home.

This old countryman scents the fine aroma of the cloistered afternoon, a breath from the landscape that gives him enormous pleasure. Tender feelings rise up from his memories as he picks up his train of thought and thinks the landscape is no longer what it once was; that this peace, this jubilant situation, this evocative awareness, are revelatory states that will dissolve in the inevitable flow of time, like the last mists of the early morning, or the cooling sun sinking through the blood-stained veil of cloud.

In the endless calm, an aura of monastic silence holds through the remnants of the afternoon, with the fragrance of burning, ripe seeds, with the brief drone of the wayward bumblebee, and the country becomes quieter, deeper, more alone.

The first tones of dusk are being painted in the sky, between bursts of oranges and yellows—like a sea of lava—assuming the vaporous splendor of a sun that appears to recline across the broad bed of the horizon, as though possessed of profound sleepiness.

In this oil painting—produced with genuine affection—I have tried to emphasize the great damage being suffered by nature, our living environment, the land where we were born, and the excessive climate change we are so well aware of, that will no doubt be one of the greatest challenges facing us in the early 21st century.

My devotion to painting is quite separate from my dermatology practice, and leads on from my fondness of representing the small details of things, their interior nature, their matt relief on canvas—in sum, I am dragged along by evocation of the commonplace, of the perishing (as the great Azorín expressed so well throughout his work). Hence, I seek in the landscape and its peoples, the atmosphere and color of a still unblemished earth, with splendor, whose roots bore the fruit that provided our parents with food—“the land of our fathers”—the sort of environment we are unlikely to see, hear, or breathe again, but that, thanks to the magic wrought by art (Figure 2), we can celebrate nonetheless, be it through music, painting, or literature.

Autumn Sun

*Nothing is left for you now
except this small piece of sun which
comes each afternoon, and
rests parsimoniously on
the mourning brows of the elders
who guard the memory of a time now
non-existent, abandoned to sadness...*

*The enforced leisure of your years
far now from the triumphal days, of fruitful labor
and clamorous laughter,
(when love rose up, unconquered)*

*You have become more cautious and regretful,
distanced from dreams poured into silence,
taking with them long-gone promises and desires...*

*So enjoy this autumn sun
like these tired bodies,
suffused by the limpid splendor of
the afternoon, and some sublime pain...*

*Let this wise and omnipotent time take you,
palpitating into the depths of yourself,
like life itself...*

Melancholy and Amber

Like trees

*After all there are men I never was
and nonetheless wanted to be
if not for a whole life, at least for a time
for the blink of an eye*

MARIO BENEDETTI

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Figure 1. The Land of Our Fathers.

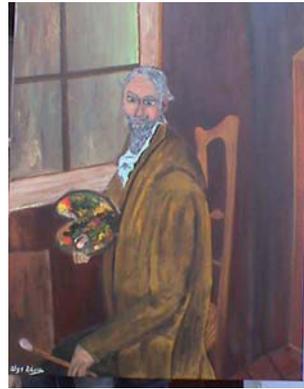


Figure 2. In Praise of Painting.

It could be said that new times are stalking us. They watch our every movement, spy on our progress, scrutinize our feelings, and probe our weaknesses, in order to dominate us, to push us toward materialism and technology, like the most mercilessly agnostic, militant big brother. Today we know, with a certain degree of disappointment, that love has been reduced to pure neurobiology, defined by an activity in the ventral tegmental area of the brain and the caudate nucleus, both related to the reward system. Dopamine, adrenaline, serotonin and oxytocin guide our choices. Destiny is no longer written in the stars, but in our genome, and the sequence of nucleotides that encode apolipoprotein E will either include us or exclude us from the list of Alzheimer candidates far sooner than we can forget. Instant communication with friends in the Antipodes is already routine, and we can be treated for illness via telemedicine from thousands of kilometers away.

Society is changing, growing, and gulps us down like a voracious monster in an insatiable, Pantagruelian feast.

Have we gained effectiveness, information, liberty, efficiency, speed, property, power, long life?

Yes, we certainly have. Yes.

But at the same time, have we eliminated taking time, memories, charity, sweetness, moments of rest conversation?

Yes, we certainly have. Yes.

The face and the flip side always go together, and humanity advances between black and white. We have gained and we have lost. We are a broad range from jet to alabaster.

But when I look at the painting by José Luis Alós Ribera, our artist-dermatologist, contributor to this Arts Corner today, my eyes fill with amber and melancholy. The golden color welcomes me, with this feeling of a party coming to an end, with this mystery of what was and perhaps will be no longer, with this strange strength in weakness that drags

us relentlessly along, with the pity of decadence, with the fear of oblivion. I feel I have lost something I once had. And I feel it serenely, with the nostalgia of what was, with the tenderness of that I loved, with the delicacy of the fragile, with the caress of the small. Without bitterness.

I submerge myself in the sweet colors of the canvas, and I would like to be there, invisible and silent, impregnated with these yellows, oranges and browns that inexplicably, from their melancholy, shout at me that I still have time, that we are still men and women capable of holding within our fingers the force of life, the sun and the earth. That we can still confer eternity on things destined to die.

His painting moves us to lyricism, to intimacy, to poetry. The painter himself becomes the recipient of his own message, and responds with these deeply felt, serene and shy verses, that sing in murmurs like the shady water of springs hidden amidst the undergrowth. The image of the late summer evening—for that is how I see it—has evoked other images in me, greener, younger, more passionate.

*I am so close,
so close,
that the clover on the ground rubs my neck,
threads into my hair,
sticks provocatively to my damp lips.
An ear of corn
curls in the warm fold under your arm.
your body extends like a wave,
spreads like a plague
breaking
the green army of miniscule lances.
I am so close,
so close,
that I can fill the hollow of your hand
with slow kisses
by barely moving.
I am so far,
that the trees are lost
and I have to move my eyes
make my pupils dilate to see them
I am so far,
so far,
that I don't know your name.*

I came to these reflections, these feelings, these emotions through the painting, the writing, the poetry of José Luis Alós Ribera: guardian of lost time, soldier of peace, master of hope and nostalgia.

To this amber-tinted melancholy.

It is worth the trouble, don't you think?

A. GUERRA