

Valentí Almirall

«A Manuscript of a Wise Man or a Fool»

Introduction and Translation
by Todd Mack

Valentí Almirall i Llozer (1841-1904) was a late nineteenth-century Catalan lawyer, politician, and journalist. After studying at the Escola de Belles Arts of Barcelona, Almirall graduated from the Universitat de Barcelona with a law degree in 1863. An ardent Federalist, he participated in the 1868 Federal Revolt of Barcelona. Later, Almirall was fundamental in founding the Partit Republicà Federal and was director of the journal *El Federalista*. He was also involved in the *Revista Republicano-Federal*, and he founded the journal *El Estado Catalán* (1869-70, 1873). In 1878 Almirall published two political novels: *El alma al diablo* and *Una autoridad modelo*, and on May 4, 1879 in conjunction with the *Jocs Florals* he initiated the publication of the first newspaper written solely in Catalan: *El Diari Català*. The story you are about to read was published in issue 490 of that political and literary journal on December 16, 1880.

“A Manuscript of a Sage or a Fool” represents one of the first forays into the genre of science fiction in all of Catalan literature. In this short story Almirall describes a cosmic vision – a kind of sci-fi reimagining of the theological visions of writers such as Dante. Thus, while a work like the *Divine Comedy* reveals spiritual knowledge of a *different* world,

cosmic vision literature reveals scientific (or quasi-scientific) knowledge about *this* one.

Almirall did not sign the story with his own name, but with that of Thales of Miletus, a pre-Socratic thinker that Aristotle considered to be the first natural philosopher in the Greek tradition. Thales was famous for his emphasis on scientific rather than mythological explanations of nature, and his far-reaching intellectual pursuits led him to important discoveries and theories related to mathematics and astronomy. As a natural philosopher, Thales was instrumental in a movement away from mythological and towards scientific explanations for natural phenomena, and he was specifically interested in the ephemerality of matter.

In “A Manuscript” Almirall writes in the voice of an unknown narrator (not Thales), who, while wandering through the *encants* market in Barcelona, comes across a mysterious manuscript written in an unknown language. After much “hard work and patience” this narrator is finally able to translate a few passages of the text, whose narrator describes an experience *he* had while wandering on a Mediterranean beach, wondering what might have caused the Greeks and Romans to achieve their incredible heights of genius. Without warning, this second narrator then progressively and inexplicably is deprived of the use of his senses to the point where his completely disembodied conscious loses even the memory of ever having felt bodily sensations. In this



A Manuscript of a Wise Man or a Fool

purely Cartesian state, the unknown narrator then finds “supreme happiness” as he experiences the universe without temporal or spatial limits (what he calls “the great everything in its immense and infinite evolution”) and comes to see the great patterns of the universe. The vision ultimately leads the narrator of the manuscript to concede that the pride of man is absurd, and that the entire human race will eventually dissolve into nothing – an idea with which Thales would have likely agreed.

But what of Almirall himself? When he wrote “A Manuscript,” he was still furiously pursuing his political and cultural goals for Catalonia. In October of 1880 he had organized the First Catalanist Congress, and just two months later he published this very story in a newspaper that he himself founded with the express purpose of igniting a Catalan rebirth (*Renaixença*) through discussion of literature and politics. Indeed, Almirall seems like anything but a man convinced of the foolishness of human endeavors to build something lasting. Given that context, this short story about an enigmatic manuscript takes on its own mystery. Why did Almirall write it in the first place? Could he have been giving tentative voice to his own misgivings about the future of the endeavor in which he was engaged? Rather than a manifesto, could this story have been a barely conscious tapping of the philosophical brakes as Almirall contemplated just how puny even the greatest of human civilizations appear when viewed with an omniscient eye? It seems as if Almirall himself, in the very creation of this story, is wondering whether or not he himself is a wise man or a fool.

This short story represents unique challenges for translation because it is written in purposefully opaque prose. The main body of the text is itself meant to represent a rough and unsure translation, and I have done my best to retain that style in the English. Thus, while I have made a few small changes in syntax and lexicon for the sake of English readers, I have tried not to domesticate Almirall’s original Catalan and have intentionally left things unclear in places in which I believe he meant them to be so. In doing so, I can only wonder if I have been a wise man, or a fool. ●



Traducción de Todd Mack

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One of my vices is that of going to the Barcelona flea market every day that it is open, in search of those bargains that can only be found in the flea market. I have found many of them there, but few as *original* as one I will have the pleasure of communicating today to the readers of the *Diari Català*. Among some old books that had belonged to a German who had just died, I found a manuscript with writing so strange that at first I believed it to be the work of a sage. I tried to decipher it and translate it, and with hard work and patience I have been able to bring to light the following passages.

DIGRESSIONS

It was summer, and I was traversing the most beautiful coasts of the Mediterranean Sea looking with eagerness for the reasons that have made them the privileged site of civilization in known history. The rays of the sun, which in past epochs gave to Greece and to Rome the warmth of inspiration, fermenting the geniuses that the pride of men calls immortals and which in times closer to ours have worked the miracle of making fecund and productive the very idea of Christianity, the most sterile and destructive of which the human race has conceived, fell perpendicularly upon my brain without my noticing, because of how absorbed in and drunk I was with my dreamy meditations. My gaze, short like that of any ordinary man since it can only take in a few kilometers in the immensity of the universe, hoped to extend beyond the horizons and discover the places that I glimpsed in my dreams: while my imagination, slave of time and of space, evoked the people that had moved in the same places in which I remained unmoved. Suddenly I felt struck by a very strange attack, which I have since tried to classify with the help of everything that has been written about pathology. The hours, the minutes, or the months – I could not even track clearly the time – that I stayed there standing on the sand, my human

nature completely lost, form today for me a confusing and indefinable record, but one so sweet, so soft, so vigorous, that as I try unfruitfully to penetrate its mystery I feel at once large and small, proud and humble, weak and strong.

A hundred times I have tried to take charge of it; a hundred times I have tried to communicate more impressions and a hundred times I have had to abandon the task. How can one explain the inexplicable? How to communicate through human language the impressions received when I had lost my human nature?

But I am a man, and I feel the characteristic pride of the order to which I belong. I am going to try it again for the hundred and first time.

At the moment I fell to the sand, a thick and dense fog came over my eyes, at the same time in which I noticed that my ears had been hermetically sealed. The two senses that a man most appreciates, since they are the ones that put him in most direct relation with space and time, disappeared completely, so completely, that I did not *see black* nor did I hear *silence*, as if I were seeing or hearing a memory as happens when we artificially deny ourselves the use of sight and ear, but that I could see and hear *nothing*. Not a memory was left to me that I had seen nor heard, and my brain was not conscious that it had ever been in relation with the exterior world through the ocular orbs, nor through the auditory conduits such that – to use a vulgar expression – I saw and heard through my eyes or my ears, the same thing that today I see and hear through my elbows or my back.

And what a strange thing! Upon finding myself in the miserable state of he who has been mute and blind since birth, the first sensation was the intimate satisfaction that a man feels when he acquires an idea that for him is completely new. That briefest of instances



A Manuscript of a Wise Man or a Fool

that made necessary the notion of seeing and hearing in order to erase them from my memory, was sufficient to open more potentialities and persuade me that those senses are only secondary. The king of human senses is that of touch, to which we perhaps do not pay attention because of the continuation and importance of the services it renders to us. Sight puts us in direct relation with space and hearing with time, but if we only had those two senses our notions of time and space would be very incomplete and imperfect.

But this intimate fruition lasted very little, since just as a veil had been placed over my eyes and a stopper in my ears, my sense of touch became useless and I was absolutely senseless; so absolutely that when I *awoke* from my illness I found my face covered in bruises and cuts. The lack of a sense of touch had made me try to lift myself from the ground by pressing my face against the sand, and had made it so I *did not feel* the obstacle that the immovable ground presented to me.

Along with my sense of touch I also lost my senses of smell and of taste, such that I became absolutely separated from the human world. The impressions that I had previously received were erased from my mind, and of time and of space I did not even conserve consciousness.

At this point begins the inexplicable. In the sad situation in which I found myself, like the man who has been born without any of the senses, I suddenly experienced a very strange *sensation* – I say sensation so we may understand each other. A new sensation had appeared to me that put me in relation with the universe, completely separated from the ideas of time and space. I could *see* and *hear* and *touch* everything – *in one mathematical point and instant*. Nothing had distance nor dates, and everything appeared to my brain to be *modified* in a way that was infinitely

more *clear* and more *precise* than when I had the use of the lost senses. Space and time had been, are, and will be the cause of the limitation of the faculties of human beings. The senses enslave these phantasmagorical conditions to everything they believe extends their knowledge.

How many unknown impressions did I feel in those *moments* of supreme happiness! The Universe without limits and without instants had no mysteries for me! The greatest elucubrations of the genius of men showed to my being all of their imperfections and their misery! *I heard* the human species, and it made me laugh. *I saw it from the beginning* – I must use human language, since I am once again a slave to time – *I saw it from the beginning* as stupid and without any knowledge of what surrounded it. *I could see it* later, in the pride of ignorance, come to suppose that it was the queen of the Universe and that all life was subordinate to its life. *I could see it* later, having arrived at its virile age, direct its impotent gaze to time and space, discovering in them only what was sufficient to fade its baseless and unfounded pride, but causing to be born in its spirit a new pride, just as unfounded and stupid as that which had barely faded. I could *see* that because it was fooled by the insignificant increase it had given to its senses through means that were relatively ingenious compared to its forces, came to believe that it was on the way to dominate nature and proclaimed indefinite progress. I saw it debating *always* in impotence, and trying, through its limited and enslaved senses, to arrive at the immensity and the infinite, words to them absurd, since they express ideas that they neither know nor can know. I *saw* it, then, miserable, emaciated, insignificant, such that, from the time I recovered human nature I have not been able to regain clear consciousness of it.



A Manuscript of a Wise Man or a Fool

I saw then the great everything in its immense and infinite evolution; I saw the absolute simplicity of material and of the immutable laws that govern it. To my view worlds were formed, they grew, they developed, they were in their apogee, they diminished, they decomposed, and they disappeared again in the immense everything of nature. To my view all material combined in an infinite variety of forms, giving place to manifestations of life that were likewise infinitely various. Everything was alive, everything moved; a man the same as a rock, the world in formation the same as the one in decomposition, since everything fulfilled fatally the law that imposed itself on all beings *large and small, old and young*.

Because my intelligence is served today by human senses, it is impossible to continue describing what in those moments it saw. I can only remember that the pride of man showed itself to me then to be a ridiculous and absurd thing. We are slaves to the general and absolute rule that the great everything moves and we must follow its inflexible prescriptions. The life of the most insignificant being is the synthesis of life in general and the small planet we inhabit follows the same evolutions that those infusoria, smaller than microscopic, that are born in a fraction of a second, fulfill their mission and die with vertiginous haste. The progress of the human species is, then, subject to the life of the planet it inhabits, just as the planet is to the system of which it forms a part, just as the system is to all other systems, which are the imperceptible link between the parts and the whole of nature. The law of selection and transformation will modify and improve our race as long as the earth has not arrived at the point that separates growth from decadence. As soon as it arrives at that point, life will take on new forms and man if he still conserves the pride of his race will

have to contemplate how, gradually and by almost imperceptible degrees, it loses what it had gained, until it returns to the point of its origin through *negative selection*, and the beings that are born after will be the only testimonies of the decomposition of the planet – that we believe we have adorned and perfected with the effort of our intelligence – as the infinitely small amount of material of which it is composed, passes to form part of new worlds and new forms, which will also follow immutably the fatal laws of nature...

To this point and no further, it has been possible for me to translate the manuscript that has stumped me for months and months. Its author still follows his elucubrations, but he has done it through signs that he has not been able to decipher even with the help of some of those friends of the kind who can read even the unknown characters of languages of which no knowledge remains, no matter how much some of these consultants, even though they do not understand them, assure me that they contain important and transcendent ideas. We do not have, then, more recourse than to leave its translation to some fortunate person who once again suffers the same mysterious illness of which the author of the manuscript was a victim, whom we repeat, we do not know whether to qualify as a sage or a fool.