

Félix Martí Ibáñez – Iberian Daedalus: the man behind the essays

Herman A Bogdan Adjunct Professor, St Johns University, Queens College of the City University of New York, Flushing, New York, USA

Keywords: Félix Martí Ibáñez; medical literature

The study of the civilizations of the past is always a revelation to modern man. One of these revelations is the great influence exerted by men with medical training on the political, social and cultural achievements of their period. Go back 4000 years into the mists of antiquity and you will find Imhotep, an Egyptian of clean-shaven skull and pensive eyes, who served as physician to his Pharaoh and who was the architect of the oldest stone structure still in existence, the step-pyramid of Sakkara. Imhotep, the first of many great physicians, was the one who codified the medical lore of ancient Egypt. This later found its way into the rational thinking of the Greek physician, Aesculapius, and was eventually to mold the thinking of modern-day man.

That physicians have influenced the arts and science of their time is generally known, but it is not generally recognized to what degree they have produced a host of great writers. In fact, the medical profession has produced more writers than any other with the possible exception of the clergy. The following are just a few who received training in medicine and made worthy contributions in literature: Keats, Goldsmith, Smollet, Conan Doyle, A J Cronin, Somerset Maugham, Anton Chekhov, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Silas Weir Mitchel, and William Carlos Williams. One wonders to what degree their knowledge of medicine facilitated their description of normal and pathological behaviour in literature. Certainly it must have been considerable.

In our time, a physician who made a significant contribution to literature is Félix Martí-Ibáñez. By the age of 25 years he had already achieved distinction in medicine in his native Spain. Later, as an expatriate from the fascism of Francisco Franco, and as roving 'civitas mundi', he produced a number of literary works that fused artistic, literary, and historical concepts with medical ideas and practices. He was the founder of *MD*, the medical news magazine, and its editor-in-chief and publisher for almost two decades, Professor of the History of Medicine at the New York Medical College, and Flower and Fifth Avenue Hospitals, protégé and friend of Doctor Gregorio Marañón, pupil and disciple of Jose Ortega y Gasset, and inheritor of the medico-literary mantle of Dr Henry Sigerist. Martí-Ibáñez merits our study as one who early determined that his life would be devoted to conciliating art with medicine, fusing the humanities with technology and joining the physician's realistic view of the world to the romanticism of the poet - all this in language that is lyric and majestic.

The output of such a mind deserves literary interest in an age that is often pedestrian in its specialization. While his works included novels in English and Spanish, novellas, short stories, works on the history of medicine and many other medical topics, it is in the essay form that the author suspects Martí-Ibáñez found the greatest freedom. In the introduction to his book, *Centaur: Essays on the History of Medical Ideas*, he notes that the attributes of an essay are that:

The essay is light, it is unfinished, a fragment of a sculpture, a stanza of a poem, a preliminary sketch of a picture . . . Instead of exhausting a theme, the essay simply draws a curtain over it and spotlights it . . . The essay presents a theme in short, vivid flashes that incite the desire to know more about it, to seek out more erudite treatises on the subject . . .

The value of an essay lies in the fact that, in classical terms, the essay was considered to be a brief, literary composition that presents a subject from personal feelings or from the personal point of view of its author. Its flexibility contributes to its elusiveness and to its 'short, vivid flashes'. The study of the classical essays of the past shows them to vary in style, content, and length. Essay topics can be as diverse as the history of roast pig (by Charles Lamb), the value of friendship (by Ralph Waldo Emerson), and a piece of chalk (by G K Chesterton). They are written in a manner that gives vent to personal feelings, a manner that is casual not comprehensive, yet instructive and entertaining. The lack of comprehensiveness,

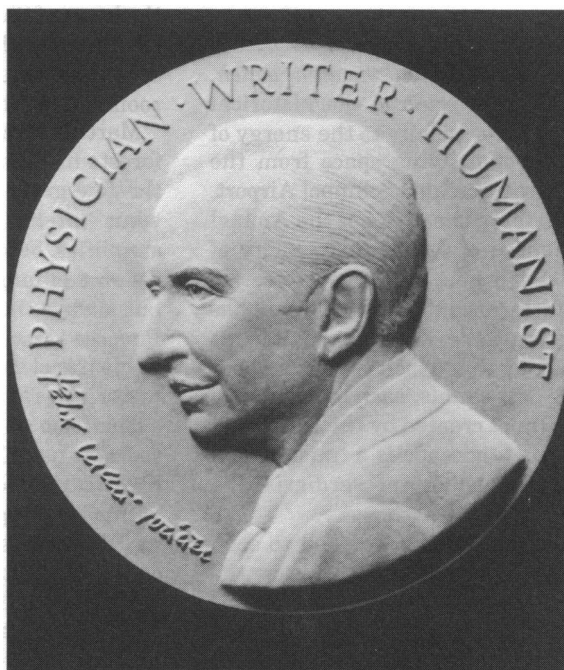


Figure 1. The Félix Martí-Ibáñez Medallion (designed by Ted Bergman)

in the hands of the great classical essayists, enables them to relate their inner feelings to external events in a way that is readable and often intimate.

Into this pattern of the classical essayists we can place Martí-Ibáñez. The essay in his hands becomes 'most engaging'. J Donald Adams, literary critic of *The New York Times*, wrote that Martí-Ibáñez had established himself as

... one of the most engaging of contemporary essayists. His range of interest is wide and his travel essays in particular have that quality essential to excellence - the power to evoke the spirit of place peculiar to whatever country or place he writes about.

Generally speaking, his essays retain the flexibility of the eighteenth and nineteenth century classical writers, and demonstrate his greatest literary endowment, a wide-ranging interest. This quality was to find further expression in his tales of the imagination, in the short stories, and in the histories. In them he impresses us as a true Renaissance Man who could see art, history, science, and other areas of learning as a gestalt.

During the 15 years that Martí-Ibáñez ran *MD* he wrote a total of 240 essays for the magazine, some of which were published after his untimely death in 1972. If we recall that Montaigne, generally considered to be the father of the essay, is known to have written 107 essays, then Martí-Ibáñez's output was truly prodigious. Add to that his reviews of books, plays, and films in the monthly 'Entertainment Section' of *MD*, his many novels, his trips to all parts of the world, and the man's creative output is incredible. In his essays it is possible to delineate four major areas that he dealt with - the arts, adventure, science and travel.

Ranging over the entire world, the travel essays show him as a man who had insatiable curiosity to go everywhere and see everything. He loves to begin the travel essays with this introduction:

The Innocent Traveller - a Spanish born physician, a wanderer who loves to roam the world observing it all with eyes filled with love and wonder . . .

Illustrative of the style of his travel essays is the essay entitled *The day watch and the night watch*. He begins this with a description of the historical background of Holland, pays tribute to the energy of a people who have wrested living space from the sea, praises them for having created Schinpol Airport, and concludes by describing the affect of the Amstel River on the development of Amsterdam, a city of merchants, sailors, fishermen, and exporters. He applauds the spirit of tolerance that for 300 years has characterized the Dutch people. At the same time his sensitive antennae pick up that which is unique about the city - its azure sky, its canals, each of which is a 'pale blue mirror', the mist created by the Dutch sky which, as it falls on the landscape is a 'mist of dull gold copper, of wax and honey, of verdigris and mahogany'.

Amsterdam is the city of Rembrandt and so each scene becomes a 'cloth dipped in turpentine as the golden transparent veil overcasts the city'. The unique form of architecture, the unusual polders and lowlands, the flora and fauna, the bicycles used by people of all ages, the shops on the Kalverstraat - all this is seen, admired, commented on by our Innocent Traveller. Yet, they are related to the central image that the

essayist focuses on almost in the same sense that the darkened background of a Rembrandt painting serves to bring into sharper focus the luminosity of the subject.

In *The night watch* essay he devotes more than one-third the length of the essay to the history of the painting, to the characters depicted in it, to its creation, and to its preservation over the centuries. The affect on the beholder becomes an apotheosis to Rembrandt . . .

to gaze at *The night watch* is to realize with a shudder of excitement that the finger of God once touched this artist's brow.

For him, Amsterdam is many things - but above all, it is the City of Rembrandt.

If Amsterdam's sky was a mist of gold and copper, the sky of Paris, in the essay entitled 'The Silver Venus', is 'of tarnished silver veiled in wisps of smoke and mist interspersed with patches of heavenly blue'. The quicksilver River Seine gives life to a people who, unlike the Spaniards, always have cherished the cult of life. In Paris, life flourishes in the cafes where renowned men and women create literature. It flourishes in the flower stalls, in every *fille de joie*, in every cathedral. If the Amstel represented for Martí-Ibáñez the pulsating life and trade of Amsterdam, the boulevards of Paris represent life passing and life contemplated. The French cuisine transports him into ecstasy, and one imagines him smacking his lips over *escargots à la Bourguignonne*, or champignons and snails, or *pâté de foie gras*. He lauds the three great passions of France - poetry, sex, and food - and having done so laudably, concludes with an evening in one of the existentialist cafes. Naturally!

Paris is feminine, given over to silks, perfumes, and love. London is masculine, famous for its tweeds, pipes, leather goods, and characterized by a climate that has 'the asperity and ruggedness of the male . . . swathed in the manly mackintosh of its fogs'. In the *Innocent traveller* we visit the Tower of London, Westminster Abbey, Piccadilly Circus, the pubs, and 221-B Baker Street. For the Innocent Traveller to visit the home of Sherlock Holmes is sheer delight, and we realize how thrilled he is, as the fog 'filters like ectoplasm' through the windows, to be standing in the room where Sherlock Holmes had lived and worked.

Martí-Ibáñez is a master of generalization, who sees forests more often than trees. He loves to highlight the few great achievements of a people and omits what might be minutiae. Sometimes he oversimplifies, becomes didactic and falls in love with the cadence of language or with the picturesque phrase, but always the effect is the one he wants to achieve. Purpose always rules his prose. We find this not only in his travel essays but in the essays that are literary, historical, reflective, or based on a medical topic.

The form of his essays, if we seek to characterize them, is usually the broad introduction, followed by the 'tight' middle, after which comes the generalized-with-cosmic-application final section, and the summing up. His essays are characteristically wide-ranging, contain a great diversity of topic, a magnificent felicity of language, a universal philosophic approach, a concluding generalization, and finally they contain the humanistic tie-in with problems of the modern world.

Before we leave this all too brief discussion of the essays, we should mention three short essays which caught the attention and admiration of a multitude

of physicians since their publication in 1960, 1961, and 1965. These are: *To be a doctor*, *The young Princes*, and *The race and the runner*. Thousands of reprints of these popular essays were sent by *MD* magazine in response to physicians' requests in the United States and the rest of the world. Later, in 1968, these essays were published in book form. Probably physicians, having read these essays, admired their wisdom and wished that their sons and daughters would similarly be affected. Good reason to admire him. Here, in the essay, 'To be a doctor', he addresses a group of young doctors:

Only through the history of medicine can one appreciate that to be a doctor, in the true sense of the word, is to be not only a wise man but, above all, a good man . . . to be a whole man who fulfills his task as a scientist with professional quality and integrity; as a human being, with a kind heart and high ideals; and as member of society, with honesty and efficiency. . . . History is made by men, and the greatest among the makers of history is the physician because of the effects of his ministry on all other human beings.

The man behind the essays

What a man becomes is often determined by where he is in time and place. Take a Spaniard, give him a father who is an educator, classicist, and humanist and a mother who is an accomplished pianist. Surround him with a loving sister, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Place his childhood in the city of Cartagena where he meanders along shores washed by the limpid waters of North Africa and baked by the heat of a Mediterranean sun. Endow him with a classical education and specialized training in medicine. Then uproot him midway in the course of his life and transplant him to a new continent and to a new idiom. Behold how the keen mind and the sharp eye continue to range over the entire spectrum of man's achievements and nature's beauty.

Cartagena is a city of antiquity whose beautiful bay and prolific mines attracted the Carthaginians as early as 225 BC. Here, on 25 December 1911, Martí-Ibáñez was born into a family of culture. His mother, Josefina, taught music. His father, Professor Félix Martí Alpera was a scholar who wrote many texts in the field of pedagogy. His sister has a PhD in pharmacology. Numerous relatives overwhelmed him with love and insured a secure childhood filled with warm memories.

Already in the young child there was a sensitivity to the magnificence of nature, a sensitivity that was to be expressed in everything he would write in his mature years. From Cartagena the family moved to Barcelona, as ancient as Cartagena but modern, industrialized, and hectic with commerce and trade. During hot summers they escaped to Valencia. His description of this still-beautiful city is enchanting.

Many summer nights I spent sitting on the balcony of our house in Valencia watching the emerald, ruby, and topaz will-o'-wisps of the small fishing boats whose reflections made an impressionistic picture with the night as canvas, a real water ballet of shimmering lights, as though they might be souls of the fisherman whom the sea on stormy days had deposited in its liquid crystal coffin.

In Barcelona and Madrid he studied medicine and came under the influence of a number of great teachers, one of whom, Dr Gregorio Marañón, he was to write about later as having inspired in him respect for the dignity and personality of the patient. It was Marañón who made him aware that the

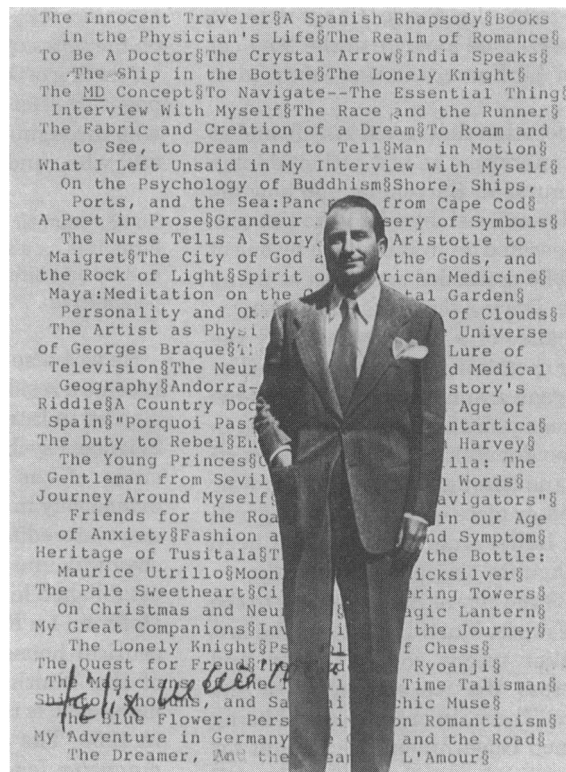


Figure 2. Félix Martí Ibáñez: The man and his works (Collage by Verna Sabelle)

moment the patient begins to answer the physician's questions, there comes into being not only a most valuable diagnostic tool but also a delicate physician-patient relationship which can be one of the physician's principal clinical devices.

In his student years, Martí-Ibáñez read widely, not only in the required texts but in Spanish and in world literature. When he was graduated from Barcelona with a degree in medicine at the age of 19, he was already beginning to contribute to medical and literary magazines. It is during this period that he wrote his first novels, *Yo Rebelde* and *Aventura*. A year later, the University of Madrid awarded him his doctoral degree from the Medical School. His doctoral thesis 'Ensayo sobre historia de la Psicología y Fisiología místicas de la India' is an early indication of the kind of intellectual interests that were to mark the rest of his life.

He hung his medical diploma in his consulting room and began to wait for patients. While waiting he managed to edit several medical and literary journals and to give lectures throughout the cities of Spain on art, literature, and psychology. In 1937, now 26 years old, he was appointed General Director of Public Health and Social Service of the province of Catalonia. Two years later, with the country torn by the Civil War, he was made Under-Secretary of Public Health and Social Service for the whole of Loyalist Spain. Again, after 2 years in this post, he was named Director of Wartime Health Education in Catalonia, where he worked through the radio and the press to bring to the people inspiring messages that would fire their patriotism.

In 1938 a series of World Peace Congresses were held in New York City, Mexico City, and Geneva. Martí-Ibáñez represented Spain at these meetings and used the opportunity to lecture widely throughout the United States, Mexico, and France. He formed friendships in France at this time which, a year later, were to save his life while he was attempting to escape from

Franco. Returning from the Peace Congresses to Barcelona, he saw service as a major in the Medical Corps of the Spanish Air Force, and was wounded in action.

He describes the operation that saved his life and at the same time he recounts how he had gathered some flowers for a young nurse in Barcelona, and how his wounds soaked the flowers with blood and he lost consciousness. He was operated on in Barcelona by one of his former teachers who proceeded to extract as many fragments as possible. During the operation, however, the lights failed because of a bombardment by the Franco troops and the operation had to be completed by candlelight. The surgeon assumed that all fragments had been removed. Some years later, while lecturing in Tampa, Florida for the Republican government, Martí Ibáñez passed his hand through his long black hair and encountered a spikey piece of metal. A strong pull and it was out. The bullet fragment that had been overlooked had worked its way out of his scalp.

On 26 January 1939 the city of Barcelona fell to the armies of Francisco Franco. Martí-Ibáñez and the last contingent of Loyalist troops sought safety and trudged wearily across the ice and snow of the Pyrenees into France. There, in order to avoid being interred by the French Government, he hid out for several days in the frontier home of some friends until relatives came to rescue him. From there it was to Paris and then it was passage to America.

His thoughts on the Civil War are interesting since he saw then, as many were to see later, that the victory of Franco over the Loyalist forces would prepare the way for Hitler and for the Second World War.

All told, the Spanish Civil War was the greatest crusade for democracy in our century and the one that might have prevented World War II. Had it happened more recently the conflict might have ended in a worldwide atomic war. Fortunately that did not happen, since the winning of any nation is too costly at such a price. A nuclear factory may be able to produce many atomic bombs in a single day, but all the atomic-powered factories put together could never create a page of Cervantes, an El Greco canvas, a Shakespearean sonnet, or a statue by Michelangelo. A nuclear conflict would only lead mankind back to the jungle and the simian state, as Aldous Huxley already prophesied.

Martí-Ibáñez became a resident of the United States in 1939. He participated in various International Congresses held in Amsterdam, Paris, Stockholm, Nice, and Zurich and lectured extensively throughout the Western Hemisphere, Europe, Japan, and the Philippines. In 1950 he established MD Publications. In 1957 he created and launched the medical newsmagazine *MD* of which he was editor and publisher until his death.

Medicohistorical papers by Martí-Ibáñez have been published in journals throughout the world. He is the author of the section on the 'History of medicine' in the *Encyclopedia Americana*. His short stories have appeared in such magazines as *Town and Country*, *Esquire*, *Gentry*, *Art and Architecture*. His books on the history of medicine consist of: *Centaur: Essays on the history of medical ideas*; *Men, moulds and history*; *A prelude to medical history*; *Ariel: Essays on the Arts and the history and philosophy of medicine*.

Among his literary works are a series of fantasy stories found in: *All the wonders we seek*; *Waltz*; and

short stories; *A sword from Toledo: a historical novel on the times of Vesalius*; and *Journey around myself*.

A listing of the complete writings would entail several pages. Suffice it to say that he was a prolific writer who throughout his life was absorbed by the quixotic and who candidly admitted to being a romantic:

To be romantic means that a man lets his heart go to his head. It is . . . a sort of magic lens that transfigures the world and its inhabitants so that they can be viewed in a different perspective . . .

He was also a man of action. In 1939, when he had become a resident of the United States, he again participated in International Congresses on the History of Science, Psychiatry, and Psychology held in different cities of the world and he continued to lecture extensively in Europe and Asia. He became editor and associate editor of assorted medical, psychological, chemical, and psychopathological journals. In 1941 he established himself with the research department of Hoffman-La Roche and Co., a Swiss-backed pharmaceutical house. Later, he became Medical Director of the Winthrop and Squibb Companies. Already mentioned is that he had established MD Publications in 1950. The corporation was to publish *MD News-magazine* for the next several decades and was to list on its editorial board many prestigious European and American physicians.

In 1956 the New York Medical College, Flower and Fifth Avenue Hospitals, appointed him Professor and Chairman of the Department of the History of Medicine. He held this post until 1958 when he resigned in order to concentrate more fully on writing and publishing. In the spring of 1960 he was guest of honour at the annual meeting of the Japanese Society for Tuberculosis and delivered a lecture on 'The great historical challenges in medicine' at Fukuoka, Japan, receiving a plaque in recognition from the Society.

In his later years Martí-Ibáñez began to suffer from visual problems. These curtailed his literary activities. It mattered not. The great works had already been written. When he died he left, in finished form, a long novel, and 60 essays for *MD*.

He died on 24 May 1972, at the age of 61 years. Dr William C Gibson, the former international editor of *MD* and a distinguished medical historian and neurophysiologist who had become acquainted with Martí Ibáñez while teaching at Yale in the 1960s, took over as editor of *MD*. Since then *MD* has had a number of editors. Currently, Gerald Weissmann, MD, is Editor-in-Chief.

In conclusion, Martí-Ibáñez saw clearly that modern society had turned the physician into a specialist whose education and training had left little time for building castles in the sand. He conceived of the physician as an intellectual who is also a man of action, and a man of feelings and yearnings. Like Imhotep, he wanted the doctor to participate in the sociological scene, with full cognition of the vast history of mankind and with empathy for his fellow human beings. His conception of what it meant to be a doctor was not meant as a boast but as a pursuit for all doctors when he wrote - 'to be a doctor is to be an intermediary between man and God'.

(Accepted 22 April 1992)