

Unamuno's Unsolved Problem

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The search for moral truth is said to characterize the "generation of '98,"¹ the leaders in Spain of a patriotic and intellectual renaissance brought about by the shock of the Spanish-American War and the final loss to Spain of her vast empire. Don Miguel de Unamuno and Jugo, born in Bilbao in the Basque provinces of Spain in 1864, one of the "generation," is called by George Tyler Northup "this fighting Christian . . . the noblest Spaniard of the present moment."²

In the words of Don Miguel himself: "All who invoke the name of Christ with love and respect I consider Christians, and the orthodox are odious to me, be they Catholic or Protestant—one is as intransigent as the other—who deny Christianity to those who do not interpret the Gospel as they do." And "I do have . . . a strong leaning toward Christianity without embracing the special dogma of any Christian creed."³

Don Miguel cannot properly be called a philosopher, for he developed no system of philosophy; although he has written a number of novels he is not a novelist; he wrote poetry and drama, but he is neither poet nor dramatist. He was a man of culture, widely read in French, English, Italian, German and Latin, and won for himself by competitive examination the chair of Greek language and literature at the University of Salamanca in 1891. He was a personality, an individual, a man of "flesh and bone" with a problem of human destiny which is, according to him, the only one that philosophy is called on to solve.⁴ For him it springs from his vital instinct for immortality versus his skeptical European culture gleaned from such writers as Prudentius, Kierkegaard, Pascal, Ibsen, Spinoza, and Bergson. It is a battle between intuition and logical thought. Moved by the fear of nothingness, of the destruc-

¹ Ferrater Mora, José, *Unamuno; Bosquejo de una Filosofía* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, S.A., 1944), p. 16.

² Northup, George Tyler, *An Introduction to Spanish Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1925), p. 439.

³ Unamuno, Miguel de, *Perplexities and Paradoxes* (New York: Philosophical Society, 1945. Translated by Stuart Gross), p. 4.

⁴ Unamuno, Miguel de, *La vida de Don Quijote y Sancho* (Madrid: Fernando Fe, 1905), p. 425.

tion of the personality, he turns to hope. The reasons in favor of mortality are not sufficient to destroy this hope. "Those arguments," he says, "do not make any impression upon me, because they are arguments, and nothing but arguments, and the heart does not nourish itself on such. I don't want to die; no, I don't want to, nor do I desire to want to [a very representative statement from Unamuno]; I want to live forever, and forever, and forever, to be myself, this poor self which I am and which I feel myself to be now and here, and therefore the problem of the duration of the soul, of my own soul, tortures me."⁵

Reason is the enemy of life. The thirst for life, for immortality, is in collision with reason. The conflict in his own mind arose between this thirst, this demand for immortality, and the influence of James and Bergson, and even more of Kierkegaard. Unamuno takes up the unsolved problem of the incompatibility of existence and movement, as identified with reason and faith, left by Kierkegaard,⁶ that Nordic Socrates, worried and ironical, who haunted the foggy streets and squares of Copenhagen from 1813 to 1855, and who set the defiance of individual, personal existence over against rational and abstract thought. But Unamuno was not capable of a solution either. Reason cannot satisfy the man of "*carne y hueso*" as to whether or not he is to die completely and forever—that is, to lose his individuality. But reason and faith are two enemies which cannot exist without each other. The irrational asks to be rationalized, and reason can operate only on a basis of irrationality.⁷

The New Testament, especially St. Paul's writings, was his favorite reading matter, "but the word preached did not profit [him], not being mixed with faith . . . for we who have believed do enter into rest."⁸ "Rest yes," says Unamuno, "when we can do no more . . . There are, nevertheless, two kinds of rest: a temporal one in order to return to the struggle after having regained strength, and this rest is like sleep, a preparation for living: and the other, definitive and lasting, which is like death, the end of life."⁹ "Don't preach peace to me because I fear it. Peace is submission and falsehood.

⁵ Marias, Julián, *Miguel de Unamuno* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, S.A., 1943), p. 204.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁸ The book of Hebrews, 4:2-3.

⁹ Unamuno, *Perplexities*, p. 24.

... I seek religion and faith in war."¹⁰ "The believer who refuses to examine the fundamentals of his belief is a man living in insincerity and in falsehood."¹¹ "I don't care if you agree with me or not . . . I want us all to struggle, for out of the struggle rises love . . . War has been and is the mother of compassion, which we call love; peace is the mother of envy."¹² How like Emerson in his essay entitled "Self Reliance!" For instance: "Whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness."

But let reason and faith be at war! "Most of my endeavor has been to unsettle my neighbors, to rouse their hearts, to afflict them when I can . . . Let them seek as I seek, struggle as I struggle, and between us all we shall extract one particle of the secret from God, and this struggle will at least increase our spiritual stature."¹³ He will send them elsewhere who seek solutions from him, for he has none to sell—only uncompleted thoughts, not bread but yeast and ferment, for to awaken the sleeping is a work of supreme mercy. Restful solutions are for lazy spirits.

Although Unamuno was passionately fond of Christ, since He died to give us life, he had little faith in God. "No one has been able to convince me rationally of the existence of God, but neither of his non-existence . . . and if I do believe in God, or at least believe that I believe in him, it is principally because He reveals Himself to me through my heart, in the Gospel, through Christ, and through history. It is a matter of the heart."¹⁴

In 1913 Unamuno published his *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida—Of the Tragic Sense of Life*. The gist of this tragic concern is:

Where do I come from and whence comes the world in which I live and from which I live? Where am I going and where is all that surrounds me going? What is the meaning of this? Such are the queries of man . . . and if we look carefully we shall see that underneath these questions there is not so much the desire to know the why as to know the how: not of the cause but of the outcome . . . , but in reality these causes are, for us, ends. And the Supreme Cause, God, what is He but the Supreme End? . . . We want to

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

know where we come from so as to ascertain the better where we are going . . . And this is the basis of the tragic sense of life.¹⁵

But why does he want to know whence he came and where he is going? Because he does not want to die completely, and he wants to know definitively whether he has to die or not. Man needs to know in order to live, and reason is not sufficient for this *cuestión única*, that of life everlasting. "Faith in life everlasting is the supporting conviction of Christian existence."¹⁶

Del sentimiento trágico de la vida is called by Brennan "without doubt the greatest book of its kind to have been written in Spanish."¹⁷ In this book Don Miguel poses the theory that the anxiety not to die, the hunger for personal immortality, the endeavor to persist indefinitely in our own being, which is our very essence, is the effective basis of all knowledge and the intimate point of departure of all human philosophy.

Don Miguel de Unamuno with his Christian ideals pitted against his practical logic (or logical practice) represents Spain's Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, faith and reason, which could not exist without each other until Sancho, the materialist, had become Quixotized and Don Quixote, the idealist, had become Sancho-panzaized. Because he was so deeply moved by the affairs of his nation that he opened his mouth violently against abuse, he was banished to the Canary Islands for some months (February to July, 1924) and spent more than five years in voluntary exile in France, but he died in Salamanca, his Salamanca, where he had taught for forty-five years, on the last day of December, 1936.

¹⁵ Unamuno, Miguel de, *Del Sentimiento Trágico de la Vida* (Buenos Aires: Espasa-Calpe Argentina, S.A., 8th ed., 1947), pp. 33-34.

¹⁶ Marias, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

¹⁷ Brennan, Gerald, *The Literature of the Spanish People from Roman Times to the Present Day* (The Cambridge Press, 1951), p. 423.