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approx. 5000 words
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The Necessary Warfare:
A Reading of Unamuno's
Tragic Sense of Life

By

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"I cannot; no cannot stand the purity of it all: pure concept, pure cognition, pure will, pure reason, all that purity leaves me breathless.... And I want to descend to the lowest depths, where the air is heavy and I can clutch the earth covered with the flowers of passion... and reasoning doesn't help. No, no, no! I will not resign myself to reason!"

--Miguel de Unamuno y Jugo

A note to the reader:

I wrote this article in graduate school in 1991 or 1992. While it has the potential to be an academic piece, I prefer its studious informality. In other words, it is an essay rather than an article. It is personal. It makes one think about devotion to any particular set of ideas, or to any one view of the world. As you will learn at the end, that is what Unamuno wanted from his life's work.

The Man and His Works

There is something odd about undertaking an academic piece on Miguel de Unamuno y Jugo de Larraza. Indeed, no translator, commentator, or biographer seems capable of approaching this task without some hesitancy. This seems inspired by the tacit understanding—most immediately available to those who have read his works in Spanish—that one cannot deal with his works without dealing with him personally. And yet biographical references, psychological explanations, and even his own explanations seem to help very little in understanding his *works*. Here I must pause.

There are three words for “work” in Spanish: *trabajo*, *obra*, and *labor*. They spill into each other, defying clean translations—a fact that Unamuno, as a linguist, knew well and exploited on every occasion. The first, *trabajo*, is closest to our common word for “work”, meaning a physical task or job. It contains, however, a kernel of meaning that defies translation: *bajo*, *abajo*—underneath, beneath, below. *Trabajo* is that under which we labor. In a sense, *trabajo* is an external imposition, an inevitable weight that will not let us escape the necessity of work itself. *Trabajo* is at once compelling and regretful. Unamuno would say that it could be understood best in terms of the task that Christ undertook in carrying the cross up the hill. The word is related to the Portuguese word *travvalho*, and in turn to our word “travail”.

The second word, *obra*, is even heavier. Like *trabajo* it has a verbal counterpart, *obrar*, that we translate “to work”. It is often used to signify a work of art—*una obra de arte*. But that is a classroom translation. When Spaniards speak of their *obra*, they do not speak of a personal creation, such as a single painting, but of the life to which they are dedicated in the process of which some coincidentally

individual works are produced. Miguel de Unamuno produced many *obras* (his *Obras Completas* numbers in excess of 50 volumes), but he had only one *obra*, only one task compelling him of which his writings are but one manifestation. Even here we cannot rest with the artistic definition that robs the task of its Spanishness. We must remember the word *obrero*: a worker, a day laborer, one who struggles carrying heavy loads, building, constructing, and who is destined to do so until he dies. *Obreros* do not retire and you cannot retire from your *obra*. It is more than your life: it *is* life.

The last of these three words was the most important to Unamuno: *labor*. Its translation is obvious, its meaning not nearly so. It is as closely associated in meaning with *obra* as are the letters that compose it (consider the noun with its article, *la obra* and a form of the verb, *labora*). Spanish dictionaries define the verb in terms of *ahínco*: "all of one's capacity, effort, and force." But it is also defined in terms of a goal, for a *labor* is not comprised solely of effort, but also of the goal, of the fruit that it yields. Here we cannot escape a meaning that never escaped Unamuno: the maternal. In English, *labor* is the act of giving birth—*dar a luz* in Spanish, literally, to give light, to bring to light. Or, we can play with the language in a very Unamunian way: *dará luz*, she will give light: the future imperative. His works, *sus obras*, complete with personal possessive pronoun, were the imperatives of his life. They sprang from within with immense labor, inseparable from the man and inseparable from the pain in bringing them to light.

The Man of Flesh and Blood

Unamuno begins his *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* by reworking Terence's assertion, "I am a man; nothing human do I deem foreign" into, "I am a man, no other man do I deem a stranger." One cannot go more quickly to the core of Unamuno's thought than to understand his insistence that *nihil humani*, properly understood, ought to read: *nullum hominem*, for there is no "mankind", there are only men. Abstractions repulsed Unamuno. His *La agonía del cristianismo* begins with an assertion of such concreteness: "This book was written in Paris, while I was in exile." He knew the debt he owed historical circumstances that gave rise to his works and emphasized them at every opportunity. He began his personal diary under the weight of the presence of his newly-born mentally retarded child lying in a crib beside him. "And this specific man, this flesh-and-blood man is both the subject and supreme object of all philosophy, whether certain self-styled philosophers like it or not." He might well have said, "This child, this specific child..."

He was no less insistent upon the historical concreteness of other thinkers than upon his own. He refuses to say "Kant", but prefers "the man Kant". Likewise "the man Fichte", "the man Spinoza" (who had a "God-ache" in the way that other men have headaches and stomach-aches), "the man William James", "the man Hegel", and "the man William Butler". Each one had a historical concreteness that he could not escape, no matter how profound his system of philosophy.

These systems, Unamuno asserts, attempted to hide what their creators were trying to escape: the question of their personal mortality. Each philosopher—each man—stood as the middle term in the dialectical interplay between mortality and immortality. Systems cannot "resolve" immortality because consciousness

itself—a “sickness” unique to, and universal among mankind—brings about the tension, the feeling that “whole peoples” and every individual feels: the tragic sense of life. Indeed consciousness—the tragic sense of life itself—is the middle term that makes each and every man of flesh and blood what he is:

“For the present let us agree on this intense suspicion that the longing not to die, the hunger for personal immortality, the striving to persevere indefinitely in our own being, all of which is, according to the tragic Jew, our very essence, constitutes the affective basis of all knowledge and the personal inner point of departure for any and all human philosophy wrought by man for his fellows. And then we shall see how the solution to this inner affective problem, a solution which may amount to a despairing renunciation of any attempt at a solution, is something that colors all the rest of philosophy. *Underlying even the so-called problem of knowledge there is nothing more than this human feeling*, just as underlying the inquiry into the why, into the cause, there is simply the search for the wherefore, for the end purpose. All the rest is either self-deception or a wish to deceive others by way of deceiving one’s self. *And this personal and affective point of departure for all philosophy and all religion is the tragic sense of life.*”

For Unamuno the dialectical tension surrounding epistemology, ontology, or any other category of philosophical thinking arises out of the essence of what it means to be human: struggle, *la lucha*. He makes much of this point in *The Agony of Christianity*, in which he begins with a discussion of the greek root of the word *αγονια*: “Agonía, *αγονια*, quiere decir ‘lucha’” [Agony means struggle]. He invites us to play with the words *agonista* (one who agonizes, one who struggles), *protagonista* (protagonist, *proto-agonista*, the prototype of one who agonizes,

struggles) and *antagotista* (antagonist, *anti-agonist*, one who struggles against the strife). He wants to wipe away the separation that we have come to make between agony and struggle and make us understand that agony is not a category of suffering that besets the infirm, but that the very condition of consciousness is a sickness that will not allow us to cease striving for immortality while bound to mortality. To be human is to exist as the middle term in the dialectical study between temporal and eternal, that is, between the necessary and the possible.

The Problem of Reason

Unamuno taught that all attempts to discover a rational solution to the problem of consciousness (and rid man of the tragic sense of life) were destined to fail because that sense arose out of consciousness itself, and not out of a philosophical—that is, out of a rational, linguistic, symbolic—endeavor. The issue is key for understanding Unamuno. To approach the problem of the immortality of the soul from an understanding that such a characteristic of soul can be proven is to begin with completely mistaken assumptions about the origins of our understanding of the soul. The real issue, for Unamuno, was not whether or not the soul was immortal, but that it was finite and it desired infinitude. He wanted to make it understood that there was no erasing this essential longing from the human heart. One gets the feeling that if God himself grabbed Unamuno by the collar and shook him and said, "You are immortal and don't forget it," he would insist that his personal longing for immortality persisted.

When attempting to understand Unamuno's extreme subjectivism or anti-rationalism, this point is often missed: that the rationalist approach ignores the

essential questions about immortality by mistaking from whence these questions arose. Instead, Unamuno's commentators often assume that Unamuno's anti-rationalism is not traditionally founded, or that it begins with an assumption about the validity or preferability of a subjectivist stance in resolving all questions. This is not the case. For example, Unamuno speaks of Kant's attempt to "establish the rationality of the longing for immortality" as the "origin of his Critique of Pure Reason." The mistake, according to Unamuno, was to have attempted to establish the rationality of this longing when it springs from extra-rational sources. He also cites Hume's objections to rational attempts to prove the immortality of the soul, but does not hold that skepticism is enough to refute such attempts. He summarizes common rational arguments in favor of the soul's immortality and demonstrates the flaws in their syllogistic structure, but returns again and again to the assertion that it is not reason itself that is responsible for the failed proofs, but the failure to recognize the source of the question as extra-rational.

Unamuno argues that rationalist attempts to prove the immortality of the soul all begin with assertions about the simple "substantiality of the soul" and make it "independent of extension," that is, a self-reflective power. Not only can "no one say what constitutes a substantial unity," or even a "substance," but attempting to do so necessitates a division of consciousness that can only be sustained by references to noumenal categories—themselves inventions of the division which was predicated upon that which they were predicated upon. The fault, it seems, does not lie with the nature of reason, but with its improper application: Unamuno condemns the entire affair as "irrational."

Conclusions about Unamuno's anti-rationalism are not always misunderstandings of his enterprise. In fact, he made a considerable number of statements which, when taken out of context, seem disparaging of reason in an of itself. One such statement is: "Whatever the view taken, it always appears that reason confronts our longing for personal immortality and contradicts us. And the truth is that reason is the enemy of life." The last sentence could be Unamuno's signature. But that signature has a context. That context is, as ever, the topic of immortality. He states categorically that reason is man's attempt to cover over the painful longing for immortality which is a "vital" part of existence. It is not so much wrong to apply reason to the enterprise of understanding the essential longing: Unamuno blames no one for wanting to understand that pain. It is, however, inhuman—if not destructive—to attempt to cover that part of existence that keeps us most alive and provides us with the greatest reason to live. One can hear echoes of Nietzsche: "Are we not, with this tremendous objective of obliterating all the sharp edges of life, well on the way to turning mankind into sand?" Reason, left to its own devices, harms no one. Applied to the enterprise of human existence it bleeds off that which is most vital and most human. It leads inevitably to emptiness and despair.

The Fruits of Despair

"Any peace", says Unamuno, "between [life and reason] is impossible and we must live from their warfare. And we must make this warfare, make war itself, the condition of our spiritual life." Unamuno does not seek to overcome reason, nor to establish feeling as the grounds for life, but to live from their conflict. How, he asks,

can we do otherwise? But the necessary conflict and the attendant despair of resolving that conflict can do more than merely lend an invigorating tension to existence: "This despair can be the bases of a vigorous life, of an effective activity, of a system of ethics, of aesthetics, of a religion, and even of a logic." He wants to show us that "this uncertainty, the suffering, and the fruitless struggle to escape uncertainty, can be and are a basis for action and a foundation for morals." In fact, he asserts that this tension not only can inspire a valid system of morals, aesthetics, etc., but that we have no choice but to allow it to do so, for faced with the choice between renouncing reason or life, we cannot do either, but must "live and act between these two facing millstones which grind our souls."

God and the Mystery of Suffering

For Unamuno, the mystery of suffering, compassion, and love that emerges from despair comes from consciousness: from what it means to be human. Here again the Spanish language plays an important role in developing a sense of the relationship among these topics. Consciousness, Unamuno points out, derives from the Latin word "conscientia," that is, "with knowledge." It is, in turn, "*conocimiento participado*." First *participar* is a transitive verb in Spanish, whereas it is an intransitive verb in English. In English, "participate" conveys the sense that one voluntarily engages in some activity. But in Spanish, the verb is closely related to *partir* and *repartir*: to distribute, to divide up, to disperse among many people. *Participar*, in Spanish, is first and foremost to communicate something to someone. *Conocimiento participado*, then, is knowledge that is communicated to all.

Conscientia is *con-sentir*: to feel with. This is consciousness, which is contrasted with *compadecer* (to suffer). In other words, consciousness is to feel with the rest of humanity; to feel with the rest of humanity is to suffer with them. Even the simple phrase "I'm sorry" in Spanish is "*lo siento*": I feel it also; I suffer as well. To feel sorrow in Spanish is to understand to the degree that one feels what another feels; one suffers what the sufferer does. In this way we are all *protagonistas*: prototypes of sufferers, participants in the suffering. Thus *compadecer* is not merely compassion; it is to suffer with the sufferer. To have consciousness, to be human, is to suffer what others suffer.

What others suffer most can only be that sense—that *sentimiento*, that emotion (for he did not say "*sensación*")—that we are all "wretched shadows who file by, going from nothingness to nothingness, mere sparks of consciousness shining for a moment in the infinite and eternal darkness." But out of this grows something truly redeeming: "If you look at the universe as closely and as inwardly as you can, that is, within yourself, if you sense, and not merely contemplate, everything in your consciousness, where all things have left their painful imprint, then you will plumb the depths of the tedium, not only the tedium of life, but of something more: the tedium of existence: the bottomless well of the vanity of the vanities. And thus you will come to feel compassion for all things: you will feel universal love."

Thus feeling and understanding the nothingness of existence, made possible through a reflection upon our own finitude and our commensurate desire for infinitude, brings us to an understanding that we are participants in the human condition. We must conclude that all things suffer as we do. Suffering all together,

we personalize the Universe, recognizing its own consciousness with its own suffering. "And this Consciousness of the Universe... is what we call God."

This God is participant in the bilateral act of suffering and compassion: *padecer* and *compadecer*. It is this God as infinite consciousness of suffering that makes "supreme happiness" possible for Unamuno. For our suffering, finite soul seeks out the "bosom of eternal and infinite wretchedness [*miseria*: misery]" and there takes refuge. It is only this Eternal that brings relief. Why? Because it is something with which to contrast the finite—to let the finite be aware of its own existence. Without this understanding, Unamuno's statement that there would be nothing "more painful [than] to be oneself for all time" makes little sense in light of his longing for immortality. Here we understand that it is not so much the longing for *immortality* that he wants to emphasize as the *longing* for immortality. This is the "warfare" that was the "condition for our spiritual life." And it is in this sense that we are to remain forever at war with God—who makes possible this condition and the warfare upon which we thrive.

If God makes this condition possible, it equally makes God possible. God did not create our longing; our longing created God: "To believe in God is, in the first place, as we shall see, to wish for God to exist and to be unable to live without Him." For Unamuno, either in his role as believer or as agnostic, this is not a problem: "Certain facile and superficial men, slaves to reason, to that reason that externalizes us, think that they have said something meaningful when they say that far from God's having made man in his own image and likeness it is man who has made gods or his God in his own image and likeness. So superficial are these men

that they do not pause to consider that if the latter proposition is true, which it is, it is true because the first proposition is no less true."

As in the question regarding the immortality of the soul, the issue is not *if* God exists, but *if God* exists. Formulated thus, it cannot be doubted: "And this God, the living God, your God, our God, is in me, is in you, lives in us, and we live and move and have our being in Him." How does He exist in us? "By virtue of the hunger, the longing we have for Him." God owes his existence to the suffering we all feel, which we call consciousness: the *tragic* sense of life, the "vital anguish". Thus the suffering which is the essence of our consciousness is also the essence of our belief. From this belief, which is to say, from this longing, we derive "our sense of beauty, finality, goodness," that is, of ethics, aesthetics, and the meaning of existence.

Doubt in Practice

This system, says Unamuno, will be criticized as "unsustainable" on the grounds that "unity and clarity are essential conditions for life and thought." Unamuno rightly suspects that his critics will complain from the outset that any system that offers a cause for ethical action must be free of internal contradictions that might paralyze its adherents at key moments of decision. To answer this, he turns the tables on such criticisms by pointing out that any such system is an "*a posteriori* justification of our conduct." In other words, such systems gain their logical cohesion by virtue of lending a foundation to a set of practices, rather than offering a means to guide moral activity. By being essentially descriptive, they contain contradictions. Their value lies solely in their ability to conform themselves

to the already existent facts of moral conduct. What is needed instead is a motivation for that conduct, not merely a justification for it.

He returns, therefore, to his formula of conflict: "It is the conflict itself, this selfsame passionate uncertainty, doubt, the perceptual wrestling with the mystery of our final destiny, the consequent mental despair, and the lack of any solid or stable dogmatic foundation, that may serve as basis for an ethic." The opposite position, which holds that action flows from belief, runs the terrible risk of fanaticism—and has the disadvantage of ultimately being grounded in fear. But the man who acts without dogmatic motivation does so precisely in order to "create [his] own world": his belief grows from his action. This is to say that his own doubt—his "passionate uncertainty"—gives him reason for action that no dogmatic system can offer: reason to continue laboring. One who acts thus in doubt creates his own faith, acts passionately from the conviction that the action itself is worthwhile and never pauses to wonder if the doctrine that motivates his action is true or false because neither doubt nor doctrine have anything to do with his action.

In this description of the man who acts (*obrar*) without the motivation of a doctrinal system justifying his activity, Unamuno wants his readers to think of the leading character in his novel, San Manuel Bueno, mártir. San Manuel is a village priest in the pueblo of Valverde de Lucerna, an isolated, backwards agricultural town. He is the lone priest in the town and occupies the post with total, passionate awareness of the fact that he has no faith. His self-proclaimed *obra* is to guide the people toward a faith that will serve as constant consolation for their difficult lives. Throughout the book there are references to Thomas Aquinas and the discussion of

the active and contemplative lives, with San Manuel repeatedly defending the value of the former. His cry is an unceasing "*obrar, obrar, y obrar.*" The contemplative life holds no attraction for him, rather an immeasurable horror because he has confronted the reality of such contemplation: tormenting doubt. The message is clear: one can never engender faith through thought, no matter how rational or irrational that thought may be. Instead, the lone hope for faith is constant activity that will give birth to faith: "it is not faith which creates the martyr but rather the martyr who creates faith."

Nonetheless, there is no sense that one works (*obrar*) for the sake of, or with the hope of, engendering faith. Nor does one work out of a sense of duty, or even to gain happiness. The desire to virtuous activity is rather a response to the imperative of refusing to "resign ourselves to the idea of having to disappear some day." The refusal has its roots in the essential component of human consciousness that Unamuno has been developing the entire book: the simultaneous sense that we all carry of being finite and desiring infinitude. This frank, painful, passionate recognition of inescapable pain opens the way for redeeming activity:

"The cure for suffering, which is the collision of consciousness with [the possibility of] unconsciousness, is not to submerge yourself in unconsciousness, but rather to raise yourself to [greater] consciousness and suffer more. Suffering is cured with more suffering, with higher suffering. You must not take opium, but throw vinegar and salt on the soul's wound, because when you fall asleep and you no longer feel pain, you are no more."

Thus mortality awaits those who feel pain, those who strive for rest, those who feel no passion. One must fight to keep that sense of pain acute, for it is a

matter of life and death. But it is not enough to keep it alive in oneself: one must seek to invade other people's souls and instill them with the same invigorating, painful sense of the conflict that lies dormant in their souls. "True religious morality," writes Unamuno, "is, at bottom, aggressive, invasive."

"True charity is [invasive, and] consists in forcing my spirit upon other spirits, in offering them my suffering as nutriment and consolation for their own sufferings, in arousing their unrest, in whetting their hunger for God [with] my hunger for God. It is not charity to rock and lull our fellow men to sleep in the inertia and heaviness of matter, but rather to arouse them to... anguish and torment of spirit."

Unamuno's morality grows out of his understanding of what is the most essential aspect of the human condition. Its outward expression is an attempt to bring our fellow humans to a sense of their own humanity and awaken them to the anguish that will make them feel most alive. The anguish and awareness alone, however, are not enough. Unamuno knows that one needs a mode of conduct for the practical expression of anguish. This he expresses in a simple formula, repeated dozens of times in different ways: "Let us make the nothingness which awaits us an injustice." To do this, we must "fight against destiny, even without hope of victory; we must fight *quijotesamente*."

Don Quijote

In Don Quijote, Unamuno finds the ultimate expression of a Spanish morality that strives against all odds to express the longing for the impossible within its soul. He becomes a prototype of suffering, the ultimate *proto-agonista* in the painful

comedy of existence: "The philosophy in the soul of my people seems to me the expression of an inner tragedy analogous to the tragedy in the soul of Don Quijote, the expression of a conflict between what the world appears scientifically to be and what we want the world to be in accord with the faith of our religion."

Quijote is the ultimate expression of the human: the person who cannot reconcile his finitude with his desire for infinitude. All his activity was a response to a call that he felt deep within himself to pursue immortality, even if only in name. Each episode of his life was a fight against appearance and a struggle to arrive behind the appearance of reality. Just as Quijote fought the appearance of the windmill, so we fight the appearance of our mortality. It does not matter that our mortality might be as real and as inescapable as the windmill that tossed Quijote into the air and landed him firmly on his backside; it is the attack itself that redeems. Quijote felt most alive in battle, in conflict with reality: so we are most alive combating the appearance of death with passionate devotion to the conflict that makes us feel alive.

Unamuno's last chapter in The Tragic Sense of Life deals with Quijote because he is the most concrete example of that tragic sense. Everything that he has tried to say in the book is said best in the person of Don Quijote. His life is the embodiment of warfare: an eternal conflict between the phantasms of actuality and the reality that he desires.

This is what Unamuno means by morality. It is not a set of universal actions that can be catalogued and imitated, nor is it a list that philosophers can generate, but a catalogue of actions that each individual must create for himself. This is also why Unamuno comments so extensively upon philosophy in his comments on

Quijote: because he wants to show that the direction of one's life cannot be concluded from logical discourse (i.e., from philosophy), but must grow out of the passion of existence, which existence is defined by the conflict inherent in it.

Unfortunately, not all men are aware of the conflict because they rest comfortably in their existence. They have a belief in immortality or a resigned acceptance of their finitude. This "malady" is the occasion for the book: "But the truth is that my work—my mission, I was about to say—is to shatter the faith of men, left, right, and center, their faith in affirmation, their faith in negation, their faith in abstention... My purpose is to war on all those who submit, whether to Catholicism, or to rationalism, or to agnosticism. My aim is to make all men live a life of restless longing."

It may well have been a quijotic battle—which is to say that there may have been no hope for victory. But it was a battle that Unamuno considered so essential to his own existence that he could not keep from trying to instill it in *todo el mundo*.