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Miguel de Unamuno

or an agonizing path of spiritual Utopia

Translated from Dr. William Bellis



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There are not only “witnesses to the century“ who advanced age for the gift of their wisdom – there are also those in whom the wisdom of the century seems to be present, the initiates.

And there is scarcely a better witness, one who joins together so much philosophy and literary scholarship, poetry and theology, contemporaneity and tradition in Spanish culture, scarcely anyone who could have suffered so personally in himself and survived the massive tension between dogmatic interpretation of the world and poetic experience of it, between the strictness of the exegetes and the hatred of the anti-religious new radicals as did Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936), literary scholar and classical philologist, poet, novelist and writer of stories, humanistic politician (who worked for an association of European Cultures unfettered by borders) and thinker. In a word, a real philosopher.

It would be possible, as Goethe might have put it, to say that only with Unamuno did the Spaniards become a modern civilized people. The great seminal thinker and representative of Spanish culture in the twentieth century is one of the very first of those who attempted and dared to understand the problem of a Christian belief in the unsettled world of the modern age radically, from the perspective of a living form of philosophic thought. Unamuno’s profession of the unity of genuine Catholic belief and the latest philosophical truth gains more in persuasive power when one knows that this man had to push through his idea of a Spanish culture against Spain’s despotic rulers of the twenties and thirties, and that he had to pay for his humanism with long years of exile.

In the Iberian-Spanish sphere, Miguel de Unamuno is among the authors most widely read, but in neighbouring countries he no longer is. Who, after all, is still

interested nowadays in the issues of a particular Spanish philosophy at the outset of the twentieth century. Moreover, it has always been the case that the truly metaphysical weight of the Faith has been borne on the shoulders of the last witnesses of the Faith. At the beginning of our age, man was transferred “...from the center of a divinely established natural order into the unthinkable emptiness of a lifeless universe, the sheer immensity of which had to produce terror...“. And it is to Unamuno’s credit that he – as one of those at the very beginning – helped to lay the foundations for the modern understanding of Faith and Science.

With Unamuno a really new beginning is made. From the first, the never lost “Spanish heritage“ is seized hold of, the holy and heroic elements of Iberian culture which still lay hidden.¹

¹ Here, I happily call to mind a rare work – Carl Benedek’s “Das Iberische Erbe Spaniens” (Casimir Katz Verlag, 1980) – a book of cultural-philosophical reflections by an unusual Hungarian-European observer who spent his spanish years, the best of his life, under an authoritarian – indeed, a police-regime in the heart of Spain, in beautiful Cordoba, supported by the love of his lovely, wonderful wife, Alice. I happily acknowledge that it was precisely his book which moved me once more to a confrontation with Unamuno of prime importance to me. A confrontation with my beloved and admired author whom I had read years before, without ever having expressed my respect for – and distance from – his philosophical concepts.

The overflowing, marvellous, richly contradictory personality of Miguel de Unamuno² gleams like a shining star on the pinnacle of Spanish literature of the first third of the twentieth century: without any connection to the cold world of enigmatic mechanisms which form the basis of the actual history of the age.

Indeed, that here one possibility as well as another is given, and that Unamuno actually expresses just his own self without, at the same time, reflecting so-

² **Chronology:**

Born on 29 September 1864 (on the same day as his writer Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra 1547-1616). Native language: Basque. Birthplace: Bilbao.

1870 – death of his father. **1873** – Siege of Bilbao (bomb explosion near his paternal home – with lifelong consequences).

1880 – completion of middle school in Bilbao and move to Madrid. Student of philosophy and philology. Profound crisis of faith with which he had to contend all his life.

1884 – Completion of studies with a dissertation on the Spanish language. – no work, therefore back to Bilbao. Language lessons, newspaper articles. Unsuccessful job applications.

1891 – Marriage to Concha Lizárraga – eight children. In the same year, became Professor of Greek language and Literature at the University of Salamanca (later, of Latin and Spanish too).

1901 – Rector of the University of Salamanca.

1914 – As critic of King Alfonso XIII, removed and confined to the isolated island of Fuerteventura, from which he escaped in his sailboat to France. He lived at first in Paris, then in Hendaye near his Basque homeland.

1930 – Return to Salamanca after the collapse of the dictatorship.

1931 – As president by seniority, he opened the parliament. Rector of the University of Salamanca for life. Honorary citizen of the nation. Retired in 1934 – his bust was placed in the stairwell of the university. In consequence, he never entered the building again.

1936 - In July, he hailed El Caudillo, Franco, as savior of Spain. Soon, however, he saw through Franco's politics and became his opponent. As a result, he was put under house arrest beginning in October, 1936. On New Year's Eve the same year, Don Miguel passed away peacefully, after seventy-two years of earthly existence.

called “reality“ make his philosophy the pivot and central point of the real intellectual history of Spain.

A humanist: in exactly that sense that his time did not want to understand: a transcendental humanist. His maxim was to express things in the simple words of every believing person.

Never can one stop hoping that the person himself can change himself, because he is able to find his true self, and only then to show his most real being. A qualitative change is possible. For it, the person must overcome himself, must go beyond his suffering.

In comparison with an academic philosophy which remained ever on the periphery of things in Spain, Unamuno belongs among the spontaneous philosophic personalities on whom the depth and dynamism of each culture depends. Moreover, he feels himself essentially related more to the Greek tradition in Spain³ than to the west European tradition, which appeared only late there.⁴

³ The Iberian philosophic tradition refers to the mythical inheritance from Seneca, a thinker who was, in fact, probably born in Spain - Hispania did not yet think Spanish. Unamuno, himself originally a classical philologist, continues the tradition of the great twelfth-century translator, Dominicus Gundisallinus, the magical appearance of a Raymond Lullus (1235-1315) who otherwise belongs to the tradition stemming from the University of Toulouse. The Latin philosophy of religion of Spain: Isidor of Sevilla (1560-1636) stands at the beginning of a line which reaches its high point in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in the figures of Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) and Francescco Suarez (1548-1617), without using the Greek-Aristotelian inheritance of Spain in the process. Unamuno, however, feels himself more committed to the tradition of the first translations of Aristotle, especially those done by Gundisalvus, a Segovian, who turned Aristotle's “Physics“and “Metaphysics“ into Latin. Moreover, the Italian, Gerardus von Cremona, a Lombard, and the Englishman, Michael Scottus, who had studied in Oxford and Paris, worked on the “Metaphysics.“

⁴ Unamuno is less related to that Neoplatonic-cabalistic line which remains linked to the names of Jehuda Halevi, Josef ibn Zaddik, Abrarham ben David, Salomon ben Jehuda ben Gebirol and others. In addition, only in the middle of the sixteenth century did the Frenchman Henricus Stephanus bring out the first critical edition of the Greek text of Plato, and only at just about the same time was the

Spain and the history of Iberian culture, Spain – “La Madre Grande“, the “Great Mother“ – becomes a fascinating motif of Unamuna’s work⁵. He, himself,

first critical edition of Aristotle’s works brought out by Isaac Casaubon: it was, though, only an attempt of poor technical quality. Much later still, the basic works of European philosophy were translated into Spanish. Only in 1878, in the translation by Manuel de la Revilla, did the first Spanish edition of the philosophical works of Descartes appear. And only in 1883 did José del Perojo publish Kant’s “Kritik der reinen Vernunft”. Instead of an authentic German classical philosophy, there was introduced into Spain through Julián Sanz del Río, in the middle of the nineteenth century, the philosophy of Karl Kraus – “el krausismo“- as one of the first contacts of Spanish culture with German philosophy. The ground for the acceptance of a “European“ philosophy was, thus, more poorly than properly prepared as the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth.

Cf. San Bonilla,A.:”Historia de la Filosofía española“, Madrid 1908.

Pastor, J.F.: “Weltanschauung und geistiges Leben in Spanien“, 1931.

Mariás,J.: « Philosophes espagnoles de notre temps », Paris 1954.

⁵ Works:

“En torno al casticismo“, 1895

“Adentro!“, 1900

“La vida de Don Quijote y Sancho“, 1905

“Andanzas y visiones española“, 1913

“Del sentimiento trágico de la vida“, 1912

“La agonía del cristianismo“, 1925

Poetry:

“Poesías“, 1907

“ El Cristo de Velásquez“, 1920

“Rimas de dentro“, 1923

“Teresa“, 1923

“ Romancero del destierro“, 1928

Prose:

“Paz en la guerra“, 1897

“San Manuel Bueno, mártir“, 1932

Others:

becomes the foremost beloved interpreter of Spanish patriotism, and his polyglotism (he knew a dozen languages) serves him for the ideology of a Spanish charisma for history.

His fame in the “postmodern epoch“(Schirmacher) remained, however, genuinely ambivalent.

The bewildering spectrum of interpretation⁶ shows that Unamuno has become a fashionable philosopher, a quarry of thoughts from which each hauls away the material he can use. Unamuno’s formulation of the “tragic sense of life“ became a mere slogan as had once become Nietzsche’s talk about a “Will to Power“ and his saying, “God is dead.“ But this fate he shares with all great philosophers.

To speak again with Friedrich Nietzsche “The overcoming of the purely individual results from the coordination of perspectives which makes possible a supraindividual experience.”⁷

“Amor y pedagogía“, 1902

“El espejo de la muerte“, 1913

“Niebla“, 1914

“Abel Sánchez“, 1917

“Tres novelas ejemplares y un prólogo“

(“Dos madres“; “El marqués de Lumbria“; “Nada menos que todo un hombre“), 1920

“La tía Tula“, 1921

⁶ For a survey of the viewpoints on Unamuno:

Cancela,Gilberto: “El sentimiento religioso de Unamuno“, New York 1972, 27 f

Martínez,Crusado-Rosa,Fernanda: “Die Vernunft-Herz-Problematik bei Unamuno: ein Versuch der Rekonstruktion aus wissenschafts-theoretischer Sicht“, Bern 1982

Regalado Garcia,Antonio: “El siervo y el señor. La dialéctica agónica de Miguel de Unamuno“, Madrid 1968

⁷ Nietzsche, Friedrich: “Menschliches, Allzumenschliches“, 185.

The inner struggle over the purely personal precedes all else with Unamuno: not for something looser, but, on the contrary, for the deepest strict truth of the ultimate perspective. To him, any criterion which did not adhere to the truth of this perspective would be false. In this too, he remains still bound to the pious, soft voice of his heart. Not so much the “scientific knowledge“ but much more the knowing person himself – the scholar too – is, for him, the indispensable subject of this thoroughly dialectic truth which becomes the *raison d’être* of any philosophy whatsoever.

And it is at the same time the absolutely selfless Agon, the hope in the impersonal principle which has nothing – absolutely nothing – to do with some fear-hope mixture regarding earthly happiness. May this be understood by whoever reads it: “If we hope in Christ only in this life then we are the most miserable of men.“ (1 Cor. 15: 12-22)