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Miguel de Unamuno: Death & Politics in the Work of a Twentieth-Century Philosopher*

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The role of death in relation to politics has been largely neglected by political philosophers. Yet it has an important place in political theory as Mary Lyndon Shanley demonstrates in her analysis of the thought of the Spanish writer, poet, and philosopher, Miguel de Unamuno, whose apparent political inconsistency has been perplexing to students of his work. It is Shanley's position that Unamuno's political activity cannot be explained in terms of political ideology but finds its rationale in his overpowering fear of death. His position differs, however, from that of other thinkers who have written on death and politics. Unlike them he is not guided by the usefulness of religious belief to politics but questions whether politics can be of value to beings conscious of their mortality.

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The life of Miguel de Unamuno, the great Spanish writer, poet, and philosopher of the early twentieth century, raises intriguing questions for anyone who thinks about the nature of politics and the usefulness of various forms of political activity. Unamuno, during the latter part of his life, became seriously involved in Spain's political life. He first opposed the monarchy of Alfonso XIII and supported the Republicans. He later severely criticized the Republic and supported the Nationalists on the

* The author wishes to thank Professor Judith N. Shklar of Harvard University for criticisms and suggestions of an early draft of this article.

outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Not long thereafter, however, he denounced the Fascist forces in Spain and died while under house arrest for that denunciation.

Unamuno's shifts in political position make little sense when viewed from an ideological perspective and have led many to charge him with inconsistency and disloyalty to the liberal cause in Spain.¹ Political ideology, however, is the wrong place to look for an explanation of Unamuno's behavior. His philosophy, his epistemology, and particularly his perception of the importance of the fear of death for human beings were the major determinants of his action.

The fear of death is a subject rarely discussed by political philosophers. Most discussions of death and politics concern the question of whether religious belief is useful to the state. For example, Aristotle in the *Ethics*, Machiavelli in the *Discourses*, Rousseau in the *Social Contract*, and Marx in *Capital* all evaluate the role that the belief in immortality plays in creating social cohesion and political stability. Political theorists who confront the question of death traditionally ask what function religious belief serves in collective human life. The issue Unamuno raises, however, is somewhat different: he questions whether politics and history can have any meaning for men who know that they, as individuals, must die. The issue is not whether religious belief is useful to politics, but whether politics itself is of any value to beings conscious of their own mortality. Plato considers this question in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, as does Augustine in the *City of God*, but the issue is only one of many considerations about politics in those works; it is the central concern of Unamuno's philosophy. Like Heidegger and Sartre, Unamuno sees cultivation of the awareness of death as the primary task of the philosopher and the only hope of understanding what it means to live.

Unamuno's literary works explore the philosophical issues which the fear of death raises, and his erratic political behavior can best be understood as a series of responses to two different evaluations of political activity in the face of the fact of death. One is that politics is the stuff of history, and that remembrance in history is a form of immortality. The other is that politics and history alike are transient and insubstantial and

1. For evaluations of Unamuno's relationship to the Second Republic see Jean Becarud, *Miguel de Unamuno y la segunda República*, trans. Florentino Trapero (Madrid: Taurus, 1965); Elías Díaz, *Revisión de Unamuno* (Madrid: Ed. Tecnos, 1968); Antonio Regalado García, *El Siervo y el Señor. La dialéctica agónica de Miguel de Unamuno* (Madrid: Ed. Gredos, 1968). The best biography of Unamuno is Emilio Salcedo, *Vida de Don Miguel*, 2nd ed. (Salamanca: Anaya, 1970). Margaret Rudd, *The Lone Heretic* (Austin: University of Texas, 1962) provides a biography in English, but it is less thorough than that of Salcedo.

can provide human beings no escape from their own mortality. These competing evaluations of the nature of politics itself are inextricably tied to Unamuno's philosophical thought about temporality, mortality, and death.

An examination of Unamuno's struggle to ascertain the meaning of political activity in the face of death sheds light on periods of his life which so far have puzzled his biographers. Moreover, tracing the relationship between Unamuno's perceptions and evaluations of politics and the vicissitudes of his political career reveals a great deal about the relationship between philosophy and political activity. Unamuno's view of politics made it difficult, indeed virtually impossible, for him to act effectively during the tumultuous years of the Second Republic. Unlike Aristotle, for whom man was essentially a "political animal," Unamuno regarded man as primarily a private creature and politics as irrelevant to his most important concerns.

I believe that Unamuno tended to dismiss political questions as unrelated to the greatest questions of human life because he misunderstood the nature of politics and political concerns. He asked politics to save him from death and dismissed it for failing to do so. A study of Unamuno's struggle to understand the relationship between the problem of human mortality and the meaning of politics is important not only for the illumination of his biography, but also for the insight it gives to political practitioner and theorist alike who attempt to assign politics its proper role in human life.

I. The Desire for Immortality

Unamuno was hounded by a dread, amounting to terror, of death, and all his intellectual efforts were devoted to comprehending this dread. His greatest philosophic works, *The Tragic Sense of Life* and *The Agony of Christianity*, are records of his own impassioned search for some assurance that his own consciousness would not end with his death, that somehow death is not the absolute end of individual existence. It would be difficult to find even one of Unamuno's almost innumerable essays which does not deal with death and the interrelated problems of temporality and history.²

Unamuno sees a deep and ineradicable tension between the human hope in "life everlasting" and the inability of reason to know what lies

2. There are numerous editions of Unamuno's works, but the most complete and definitive collection to date is Miguel de Unamuno, *Obras completas*, ed. Manuel García Blanco, 9 vols. (Madrid: Escelicer, 1966–1971). (Hereafter *O.c.*)

beyond death. Men know that they must die, and yet they know nothing of death itself.³ It is an essential assumption of Unamuno's philosophy that all self-conscious beings desire to live forever. The inability of reason to satisfy the most ardent longing of the will leads to human despair and the "tragic sense of life."⁴ Despair, however, is not the same thing as resignation. Despair for Unamuno arises precisely because man cannot know his destiny and cannot settle into either assurance or resignation concerning life beyond death, but must constantly be buffeted back and forth between the longing of his will and the impotence of his reason. Despair thus implies not resignation but struggle, or as Unamuno calls it—using the Greek etymology—"agony." Life is "agonic," a continual struggle to gain knowledge concerning death and to assure oneself that death is not final.

The possibility of life beyond death is two-fold. First, an individual might live on in the flesh, the promise of the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body. Second, an individual might live on in the spirit, in name, in the memories of others. Both of these possibilities are important for Unamuno; neither *by itself* satisfies his longing for immortality. The interplay between these possible resolutions to the problem of death gave shape to Unamuno's literary and philosophical works and to his public life as well. Paradoxically, Unamuno's examination of Chris-

3. Socrates expressed no horror in the reflection that if death is "a sleep like the sleep of him who is undisturbed even by dreams, death will be an unspeakable gain. . . . But if death is a journey to another place, and there, as men say, all the dead abide, what good . . . can be greater than this?" Plato, "Apology" in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett, 4th ed. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1953), 1. 356. 40d–e. Perhaps Socrates' calm was increased by the fact that he wished to comfort his mourners. In any case, Unamuno did not believe it was possible for a man to be thus indifferent to his fate.

4. The major works which presented these ideas are available in English translations. Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and in Peoples*, trans. J. E. Crawford Flitch (1921; reprint ed., New York: Dover Publications, 1954). Miguel de Unamuno, *The Agony of Christianity*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt (New York: Ungar, 1960). The ideas presented in *The Agony of Christianity* are similar to those of *The Tragic Sense of Life*. Authentic Christians must live in agony (in struggle) because their reason cannot tell them what their faith longs to believe, that is, that the Resurrection of Christ is the promise of eternal life. Unamuno's scepticism is crucial to both his religious and his philosophic thought.

Good interpretations of Unamuno's work available in English are Arturo Barea, *Unamuno* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952); Allen Lacy, *Miguel de Unamuno: the Rhetoric of Existence* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1967); Julián Marías, *Miguel de Unamuno* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1966); José Ferrater Mora, *Unamuno: A Philosophy of Tragedy* (Berkeley: University of California, 1962).

tian doctrine led him to seek the immortality of history, while his reflections on fame and reputation in the “theater” of history gave rise to his most ardent yearnings to live forever in the flesh. First one hope then the other held sway; neither was ever wholly abandoned.

The Agony of Christianity and the Desire for Historical Remembrance

No one escapes the struggle against death, not even the Christian believer. In *The Agony of Christianity* Unamuno concludes that even the believer lives in the throes of agony. This is not simply because Unamuno himself did not have faith. The book is not “*My Agony of Christianity*” but “*The Agony of Christianity*”; in Unamuno’s eyes, the tension which underlies all existence is neither abolished nor alleviated by religious faith. The basis of Christian faith is the resurrection of Christ. Faith in the resurrection, says Unamuno, allows an individual to believe in the resurrection of his own body, but such physiological immortality is not enough. Man also desires the immortality of the soul, of his own soul, socially, in history. Unamuno writes,

The resurrection of the flesh, the Judaic, Pharisaic, psychical—almost carnal—hope came into conflict with the immortality of the soul, with the Hellenic, Platonic, pneumatic or spiritual hope. And this is the tragedy, the agony of St. Paul. And that of Christianity. Because the resurrection of the flesh is something physiological, something completely individual. A solitary, a monk, a hermit can rise in his flesh and live, if this is to live, alone with God.

The immortality of the soul is something spiritual, something social. He who makes himself a soul, he who leaves a work, lives in it and through it in his fellow-men, in humanity, insofar as humanity lives. This is to live in history.⁵

Such an insatiable longing for life led one of his critics to remark that Unamuno suffered from “ontological greed.”⁶ Unamuno insists on living not only this life but a life beyond death and on living that life not merely in the flesh but also in human memory. For Unamuno, the Chris-

5. “La agonía del cristianismo,” *O.c.*, 7:317. Note the unorthodoxy of Unamuno’s language. The Christian promise of resurrection is of the resurrection of both “body” and “soul.” Unamuno is trying to express the idea that to be remembered by God in eternity is not enough; human beings wish temporal remembrance in human history as well. Even had Unamuno been able to give assent to the tenets of Christian belief, that faith alone would not have satisfied his hunger for immortality.

6. François Meyer, *La ontología de Miguel de Unamuno*, trans. Casareo Goicoichea (Madrid: Ed. Gredos, 1962), p. 26.

tian belief in the resurrection does not render history unimportant. Rather, he insists that *not even* Christian belief can make historical remembrance unimportant to the individual.

The resurrection of the flesh must rest in the hands of God. The possibility of living on in history rests in human hands. Unamuno therefore sought desperately some means of conquering death by creating for himself a "place" in history. Fame, which would cause him to be remembered by others, was a way of placing himself above the endless waves of most human events which pass by and are forgotten. The quest for renown, at first just an object of philosophical speculation, became an obsession for him.

Other aspects of Unamuno's philosophic vision also fed his conviction that fame might provide a man with one way to transcend his own mortality. He developed the conviction that what is real is what men *believe* to be real. What is real is not the material world, but states of perception. This view developed mainly from Unamuno's study of literature and his own literary efforts.

Unamuno never tires of insisting, for example, on the reality of literary characters: if someone pictures Don Quixote while reading Cervantes' book, follows his exploits mentally, and is influenced by his story, is he not then "real" for that person? Indeed, Unamuno contends that Don Quixote was perhaps more real than his creator Cervantes, for people who know more of Don Quixote, think more of him, and care more about him, than they do of Cervantes.⁷

This view of reality, developed first with regard to literary characters, also shapes Unamuno's view of the nature of historical reality. As what is real is what men believe to be real, so history records not what happens but what men *believe* to have happened. Unamuno insists that historical personages are real and immortal, insofar as their exploits are recorded and read by posterity. If a man must die, then at least his name can live on in history and in the memories of others. Conversely, Unamuno's position throws into question the "reality" of those things which happen but are never noted by the historian, which pass away into oblivion. To Unamuno, the real becomes that which is written, and history becomes above all a place wherein men can be immortal.⁸ Public activity was an

7. See, for example, Miguel de Unamuno, *Our Lord Don Quixote: "The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho" and Other Essays*, trans. Anthony Kerrigan (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1967).

8. R. G. Collingwood, who also believed that history was the present re-enactment of past events and thoughts in the mind of the historian, compared writing history to writing a novel, the difference being that the novelist may freely construct, the historian must reconstruct. Collingwood asserted that "it is . . . the his-

important way to win remembrance, and Unamuno began to regard public affairs as a forum for the battle for prominence.

Unamuno's epistemological and ontological views, therefore, gave rise not only to his numerous novels which explored the idea that literary creatures are as real as their authors,⁹ but also to his understanding of and his participation in political life. In his later years (certainly after 1920), Unamuno began to perceive public activity as essentially theatrical. Public life was theater, politics was concerned with the creation of the play which constituted public life, the historian was he who sat and recorded the play for future generations. To attract the attention of the historian, then, was one way to achieve that immortality which Unamuno so desperately desired.

Life as Theater and the Desire for Resurrection

Unamuno chose the venerable image of life as a theater to convey the thought that public activity is essentially theatrical and aimed at creating a story which will be read by future generations.¹⁰ The image and the notion of historical remembrance, however, were not themselves without problems for Unamuno. Creating a political personage and winning renown may assure remembrance in history, but there is always the fear that history itself may end and that in any case man wants also the assurance of his personal survival in the flesh. Winning historical remembrance was therefore a complicated obsession for Unamuno—an activity on which he expended enormous effort and which he nonetheless distrusted and ultimately rejected.

torian's picture of the past, the product of his own a priori imagination, that has to justify the sources used in the construction. . . . Freed from its dependence on fixed points supplied from without, the historian's picture of the past is thus in every detail an imaginary picture. . . . As works of imagination, the historian's work and the novelist's do not differ." R. G. Collingwood, "The Historical Imagination" in Hans Meyerhoff, *The Philosophy of History in Our Time* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), pp. 80–81.

9. See especially Miguel de Unamuno, *Mist*, trans. Warner Fite (New York: Knopf, 1928). Also compare with the similar insight of Unamuno's contemporary, Luigi Pirandello, "Six Characters in Search of an Author," *Three Plays* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1922).

10. The image of the theater has also been applied popularly to certain aspects of political life. People speak of the "stage" of history, of people playing important "roles" in historic events, of statesmen "acting their parts" well or poorly, and of their rivals "waiting in the wings" to take their places at the first faltering.

For a modern view of history as theater, of politics as image-making and the manipulation of symbols, see Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1969).

Unamuno's use of the metaphor "life is a theater" is inseparable from his thoughts on the necessity for historical remembrance. His interpretation of the image is, of course, not the only one allowed by the metaphor. It will help to clarify Unamuno's thought to compare his use of "life as a theater" with that of the great sixteenth-century playwright, Calderón de la Barca. The comparison will also distinguish Unamuno's agonistic sense of Christianity from the traditional Christian doctrine which infused Calderón's work. Calderón deeply influenced Unamuno (as he inevitably does all Spanish writers), and he used the metaphor "life is a theater" as the theme of his famous play, *El gran teatro del mundo*.¹¹ In that play, Calderón presents an allegory at the heart of which is the question of whether the world as we know it is "real" and "final" or whether it is simply a "play" and therefore unimportant.

El gran teatro del mundo dramatizes the notion that human life is a play and that each person's life upon the stage is a test to determine whether or not he can distinguish his essential or true self from his role or his historic self. Those who pass the test are those who realize that they are given their costumes and accouterments in order to fill a social role, but that this role is not an end in itself. No one can choose his role or costumes, but he can act within them well or badly. Acting well consists in recognizing them for what they are—roles and costumes, each of which represents a function necessary to the well-being of the social whole. Acting badly is to regard the role and its accouterments as ends in themselves, to regard political divisions, social distinctions, and economic inequalities as something more than passing attributes over which men exercise only temporary stewardship. The theme of *El gran teatro del mundo* is *not* to show that the world is a theater—that after all was a well-known metaphor—but rather to show that a particular kind of attitude is necessary in order to play one's part correctly.

For Calderón, the metaphor "life is a theater" conveys an essentially reassuring world view. If the world is a stage, men the players, their lives the play, then the fact that they do not comprehend the drama is of no significance. What is important is that they recognize that they are players bound in certain ways by their roles, but answerable to God for their characterizations and for the recognition that behind the masks all players are men like themselves. For Calderón, the world was theater, and life just a play.

The passage of four centuries, however, brought a radical transformation in the predominant meaning of the image. When Unamuno (and

11. Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *El gran teatro del mundo* (Salamanca: Anaya, 1958).

contemporaries such as Pirandello) pictured life as theater, he pictured men as set upon the stage of life with no author for their life's drama other than themselves. The world is "theater" because men are actors, nothing more than *personae* playing their roles. They gesture and talk and seem to communicate but in reality can never penetrate beneath either their own or others' masks. All is representation—trying to find one's "self" as opposed to his *persona* is impossible. Unamuno, like Calderón, sees that life is a play, but for him the play is everything. One can have no sure knowledge of God. The actors, therefore, play their parts in the fear that not God, but Nothingness, sits on the other side of the footlights, and men play their drama, uncomprehendingly, to an audience which does not exist. Their lives are a play and nothing more; the self is elusive, and man cannot find it; it is forever inaccessible.

Here Calderón and Unamuno part ways, for one paints a vision of human life as "just" a theater, while the other presents a picture of human life as "only" theater. The change from "just" to "only" implies an entire change in world view. If life is *just* a theater, then men are in Calderón's world where God's in his heaven, and while all may not *seem* right with the world, they can rest assured that it is or will be so. If life is just a play, then men are not eternally poor or rich, broken or whole, virtuous or vile, but are cloaked in those robes only as long as the play lasts.

But if life is *only* a play and nothing more, as Unamuno sometimes contended, then men must truly live in anguish, for life then is apparitional, limited, incomprehensible as a whole, and final. Life is only a play, what is acted is done, what is done is acted, and there is no way to discard the script which is absurd. If life is only a play, men's costumes sit upon them for eternity, for they are their roles and nothing more. If life is only a play, it means that there is no reality which precedes or surpasses it, there is no author save oneself.¹²

12. It is at this level of greatest abstraction that one sees how appropriate it was that Unamuno's great philosophic work was entitled *The "Tragic" Sense of Life*, borrowing the main image from the world of theater. Unamuno's thinking is permeated by the notion of life as theater—and for Unamuno the play is tragic.

In comedy, the members of the audience are kept aware of the fact that they are watching a play. No matter how awful things temporarily appear, all will come right, for this is not *real* in the sense that it is not *final*. Men will be rescued in spite of themselves, and it is only necessary to wait for the denouement and enjoy the spectacle in the meantime.

In tragedy, on the other hand, the assumption is always that "this is all there is." The protagonist cannot go back, retrace his steps, see where all went wrong. Life may be unreal in the sense that it may yet be a dream—"We are such stuff as dreams are made of"—but the dream is all there is, and it is real insofar as it

This was the image which haunted Unamuno when he contemplated the possibility that there might be no life of the body beyond death. One might create for oneself a prominent role in the human drama, but without the assurance of perpetuation of one's own existence, fame and historical remembrance was no more able fully to satisfy Unamuno's ontological greed than was the Church's promise of bodily resurrection. This unresolvable intellectual (and spiritual) problem motivated Unamuno's political activities as well as his philosophic writings.

II. Unamuno's Political Activity

The impact of Unamuno's agonistic sense of life on *both* his literary production and his political activity was profound. It has frequently been recognized that his literary and philosophic achievements reflect that sense; what has so far been overlooked is that it largely determined his political activity and goes far to explain the erratic nature of his political outbursts. The realization that Unamuno acted as he did in part because of his philosophic views raises questions about the adequacy of those views for a full understanding of politics.

Chronology

Unamuno's early political writings were motivated by concerns common to those of his generation. Because it was virtually impossible to imagine any Spanish Bourbon constrained by a constitutional government and because of the deep impact of the second Carlist War on his childhood, Unamuno was a firm antimonarchist. He criticized the relationship between the central government and the ethnic minorities,¹³ he protested Spain's war with the United States,¹⁴ he debated the wisdom of the "Europeanization" and modernization of Spain.¹⁵ In large part due to this political outspokenness, Unamuno was deposed as rector of the University of Salamanca in 1914.¹⁶ He now had a personal grievance against Alfonso XIII to feed his antimonarchical sentiments. Gradually, he began to gain a reputation as a member of the political opposition.

is final. The cyclical nature of things implied by the almost inevitable marriage which closes a comedy is replaced in tragedy by a strictly linear perspective, frequently accentuated by the protagonist's death. What is done, is done.

13. Miguel de Unamuno, "En torno al casticismo," *O.c.*, vol. 1.

14. Miguel de Unamuno, "El porvenir de España," *O.c.*, vol. 3.

15. See notes 13 and 14, *supra*.

16. For the most complete discussion of this episode, see Salcedo, *Vida de Don Miguel*, pp. 192–198.

From 1914 on, it became clear that Unamuno was capable of using specific issues—his deposition as rector, Spain's neutrality in World War I, the suppression of the workers' strikes of 1917—as vehicles for protest of a broader nature against the monarchy itself. His protest was so vehement that it led the military dictator, Primo de Rivera (who came to power in 1923 in an effort to protect the throne after the disastrous defeat of Spanish troops in Morocco), to send Unamuno into exile.

Six months after Primo's ill-considered action, he lifted the order of confinement. Unamuno, now free to return to Spain, refused to do so until the dictatorship fell. Instead he went to France and from Paris and then Hendaye engaged in a fierce battle of international propaganda, railing at the monarchy and Primo in the international press and in pamphlets smuggled across the border to Spain by sympathizers.

In 1930, with the fall of Primo, Unamuno returned to Spain, a hero of the Republican forces which were gathering strength for the bloodless overthrow of the monarchy itself. For the next year, Unamuno frequently wrote and spoke in favor of an end to the monarchy and the coming of a republic. He was sufficiently identified with the Republican cause to be chosen to proclaim the Republic from the balcony of Salamanca's *ayuntamiento* on April 14, 1931, and he was elected to the Constitutional Convention and the first Cortes as a Republican-Socialist candidate. But even as he sat in the Cortes, his disillusionment with the new regime grew, and he refused to run again in the elections of 1933. By 1932–1933 he began publishing bitter articles denouncing the excesses of Republican fervor and the follies of ideological politics.

People began to say that Unamuno was erratic, becoming senile, betraying his cause and the country with it, unwilling to tolerate the hardships and occasional abuses inevitable with a social revolution as profound as that of the Second Republic. When the Civil War broke out on July 18, 1936, the critics' worst fears seemed confirmed. Unamuno was torn between his abhorrence of the militarism represented by the generals and his disgust with the chaos of the Republican regime, but in September he signed a declaration of support for the Nationalist forces. Only two weeks later, however, appalled at hearing the fascist slogan "long live death" at an assembly at the University of Salamanca, he rose to denounce both the slogan and the Nationalist General Millán Astray who had shouted it. This was Unamuno's last public act. He was put under house arrest by the Nationalists and died at the age of seventy-two on December 31, 1936.

The rapid vicissitudes of Unamuno's political statements and alignments from 1931 to 1936 have led both Nationalist and Republican

sympathizers to claim Unamuno as their own.¹⁷ The truth, however, is more complex than partisan interpretations will allow.

Political Principles

Despite the vagaries of his political allegiances, Unamuno did hold firmly to several political tenets throughout his life. It is typical of his personality that he should have defined himself as an *antimonarchist* rather than as an advocate of, say, representational democracy. He was always more comfortable as gadfly and iconoclast than as partisan advocate.¹⁸ His antimonarchism and his abhorrence of Primo de Rivera's dictatorial regime revealed his deep distaste for arbitrary or absolute government. This aversion also helps explain some of Unamuno's growing distrust of the Republican government after 1932. As the Republic became more and more pressed both politically and economically, the government increasingly resorted to fiat and armed repression. (The worst instance of this was, of course, the suppression of the strike of Asturian miners in October 1934, in which more than a thousand workers lost their lives.¹⁹) The irony of Unamuno's constant criticism of the Republican regime, however, was that the alternative to the Republic was a rightist military government, a spectre which was yet more repugnant to him.

Unamuno was also an economic egalitarian. During his youth, he wrote for several years for socialist periodicals. When he was rector of the University of Salamanca (1901–1914), he became involved in a program for land redistribution in the province. His socialist convictions, however, were based less on a sophisticated economic analysis than on two other factors. One was a deep empathy for the Basque, and later the Castilian,

17. See, for example, Eduardo Comín Colomer, *Unamuno, libelista: sus campañas contra Alfonso XIII y la Dictadura* (Madrid: Colección Siglo Ilustrado, 1968); Indalecio Prieto, "La repatriación de Unamuno," *Acción* (Montevideo), 7 January 1956.

18. Indeed, he feared partisan advocacy. "Partisan," he explained, is etymologically related to "partial"—a "partisan" always is consigned to giving voice to partial views, partial truths. See "La enfermedad de Flaubert," *La ciudad de Henoc: comentario, 1933* (Mexico: Ed. Seneca, 1941), p. 27; and "Los amigos," *O.c.*, 7: 1069.

19. The precise number is impossible to ascertain. As Herbert Matthew writes in *Half of Spain Died* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), p. 58: "An accurate picture of the Asturias uprising will never be obtained because of the passions aroused, the censorship that lasted for months, and the partisanship that colored every account. . . . Gerald Brenan says that 3,000 [miners] were killed, Stanley G. Payne says 900—and both are careful scholars. . . . Post-war Nationalist accounts are hopelessly biased." From 30,000 to 40,000 persons were arrested and tried for rebellion.

peasant. The other was an essential egalitarianism rooted in his view of the fate of mortality shared by all human beings.

A final important constant was a deep reverence for the free exchange of ideas and an inability to tolerate censorship for whatever ends. The free dissemination of ideas was an absolute value for Unamuno and constituted for him the essence of political liberalism.²⁰ This caused great friction with the monarchy and with Primo; spurred the great quantity of clandestine pamphlets smuggled to Spain from his exile in Hendaye; severed him from the Republic when it, in turn, began repression of anarchist and monarchist presses; and motivated in part his rage at Millán Astray, who not only glorified war and death, but did so in the university precincts, "the temple of the intellect" of which Unamuno regarded himself "the high Priest."²¹

Unamuno's deeply held political principles explain in part the changing nature of his political allegiances. But they do not do so entirely, nor totally convincingly. Hardest to explain in his public life was his turning upon the Republican government with increasing acerbity after 1932. An attempt to account for this by reference only to his disillusionment with the Republic's suppression of the far left and the far right or with Republican propaganda meant to mask its own shortcomings is overly simplistic and fails. Such an attempt must suppose Unamuno to be hopelessly naive politically or to be losing his intellectual powers.²² Despite all its failings, the Republic was the bulwark against the militarism which was mounting on the right. Both totalitarian government and intellectual repression were far more likely to be Spain's fate if the Republic fell than if she survived.²³ One must look elsewhere for an explanation which will bring coherence to Unamuno's utterances and actions.

20. See "Hay que levantar la censura" and "Un pronunciamiento del cine" written in 1924 and quoted in Salcedo, *Vida de Don Miguel*, p. 257; "A nuestros lectores," *Hojas libres* (Hendaye), 1 April 1927; "A mis hermanos de España, presos en ella," *Hojas libres* (Hendaye), 1 January 1928.

21. Luis Portillo has attempted to reconstruct Unamuno's final public declamation; it is quoted in English in Rudd, *Lone Heretic*, pp. 298–301.

22. There is no evidence to support either of these suppositions. Unamuno was perfectly capable of astute political analysis—during this period he simply was not interested in the political but in the ontological dimension of his actions. His writing did not slacken—his brilliant novel, *San Manuel Bueno, mártir*, was published in 1933.

23. This is not simply a matter of hindsight. The efficacy of the army, called in by the government at the urging of José María Gil Robles and Alejandro Lerroux, in suppressing the revolts of 1934 led many to fear for the future of the Republic should the center coalition fold. See J. Alvarez del Vayo, *Freedom's Battle*, trans. Eileen E. Brooke (New York: Knopf, 1940); and Frank Jellinek,

The Politics of Theater

Exile began a new period of political activity for Unamuno. Prior to his confinement on Fuerteventura, his political involvement had not been too different from that of other Spanish intellectuals, a combination of political liberalism and antimonarchism, intensified by his personal dislike of Alfonso XIII. But the self-imposed continuation of his exile, the vituperative tone of his political writings against Primo, and the level of physical discomfort and psychological suffering he was willing to endure²⁴ stemmed from deeper concerns than those which had motivated his occasional excursions into politics from his professorship in Salamanca. In exile Unamuno conducted no traditional political battle, but a struggle to achieve a place in history and to assure himself the immortality of historical remembrance.

The activities of Unamuno's self-imposed exile were in large part a verbal duel with Primo de Rivera. Unamuno had learned well his own lesson that what matters in history is what others *believe* has happened, and he therefore set out to pit his own representation of the state of affairs in Spain against that of Primo. Motivated by his perception of history as theater, he decided to adopt the role of exile and play it to the hilt. His refusal to return to Spain was a part of the creation of that role. Once he *could* legally return to Spain, he *would* not, because by staying in France he made the regime appear to be one which exiled all dissidents and stifled freedom of speech at home.

Unamuno was not, however, simply waging a political battle by means of the manipulation of symbols. His self-imposed exile was also an effort to create a legend, to ensconce himself in the annals of Spanish history. History, the written word, shapes people's mental images of persons and events gone by, much as literature produces mental images of fictional persons and events. Thus if historians recorded Unamuno's activities of protest as those of a persecuted exile, it is as such that he would live throughout recorded time. He was creating his legend as a way of assuring himself the immortality of historical remembrance. Indeed, during these years the "hunger for immortality" almost exclusively referred to the immortality conferred by history. It seems as if once

The Civil War in Spain (1938; reprint ed., New York: Howard Fertig, 1969), for two analyses written shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War. The histories of Gerald Brennan, Raymond Carr, Gabriel Jackson, and Hugh Thomas should also be consulted.

24. On the conditions of Unamuno's exile see Salcedo, *Vida de Don Miguel*, pp. 263–315; and Unamuno's novel, *Cómo se hace una novela* (Buenos Aires: Ed. Alba, 1928).

Unamuno confronted the “tragic” implications of his philosophical assumptions—the impossibility of knowledge of anything beyond death—he turned with increasing intensity to the realm of politics and history to give him at least the immortality of fame and remembrance.²⁵

History is the creation of legend: to act politically is to take part in the creation of the public legend, to write history is to put the legend into words, to seal it “for ever.” Unamuno himself wrote the history of his exile in his work, *Cómo se hace una novela*, or “How a novel is made.” “Novel” here meant both “book” and “life,” and in writing *Cómo se hace una novela* Unamuno wrote the history in which he hoped he might live into the future. Despite this literary tour de force, there was still a tragic overtone to Unamuno’s proud defiance of time through the creation of his legend:

... people here [in France] ask me if I can return to my Spain, if there is any law or disposition of public power which blocks my return and it is difficult for me to explain to them ... why I cannot and must not return while the Directory endures. ... Some, when I explain to them my situation, smile to themselves and say: “ah yes, a question of dignity!” And I see that underneath their smiles they say: “He guards his role. ...”

Are they not somewhat right? ... Am I not inspired to make my legend, that which buries me, in addition to that which the others, friends and enemies, make for me? If I do not make my legend, I die totally; and if I do make it, too.²⁶

This is the realization which haunted Unamuno’s thinking about history: elsewhere in *Cómo se hace una novela* he wrote “this legend, this history, devours me, and when it finishes, I will finish with it.”²⁷ In spite of the elaborate metaphysical speculation regarding the reality of the word and the creation of fictional worlds in which he can live and perpetuate himself, Unamuno did not solve the problem of immortality posed by *The Tragic Sense of Life* and *The Agony of Christianity*. Because he could not be assured of his immortality, yet simultaneously could not cease longing for that assurance, his experience of life was tragic. And so Unamuno called the creation of his legend “the *tragic* care

25. There is an irony in this, of course, since Unamuno had already created a place for himself in history by his literary efforts, and it is for these works that he is primarily remembered. Nonetheless, once his antimonarchism involved him in politics, he wished to battle Primo—and make a name for himself—in the political arena.

26. Miguel de Unamuno, “Cómo se hace una novela,” *O.c.*, 8:744–45.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 471.

of my exile.” (italics added).²⁸ History was finally without redemptive power; it was the creation of a legend to give him the immortality of the word, when he longed for the immortality of the flesh as well.

In exile, separated from everything else which mattered to him, Unamuno clung to the notion of creating a legend, of battling Primo in the history books, and of winning the “immortality of the word.” It was not difficult to paint the evils of the dictatorship and the monarchy in bold strokes, and his exile gave Unamuno the opportunity to do so masterfully. Moreover, only the notion that he was creating a legend for Spain, and for himself, could make the separation from his homeland and his family endurable. The politics of theater therefore preoccupied him during the 1920’s, and he created a role which was to win him tumultuous acclaim when he returned to Spain to help usher in the Republic.

Life as Theater

Once back in Spain, a gradual change took place in both Unamuno’s actions and philosophical preoccupations. Within a year, he declared himself to be a nonpartisan, not a member of any of the republican coalition parties; in 1932, he refused to run for re-election to the Cortes; he went less frequently to Madrid; he began to speak of the Republic in critical tones. This change in political attitude was accompanied by a change in the concerns of his literary and philosophic writings. In the 1930’s Unamuno returned to the problem of *The Tragic Sense of Life*, the problem of the irresolvable tension between the desire for the assurance of eternal life in the flesh and the inability of reason to provide that assurance. He again sought the eternal and rejected as ephemeral all things temporal.²⁹

These changes in Unamuno’s behavior and concerns are perhaps not as surprising as it might at first appear. The major political task which Unamuno had set himself was now accomplished—Primo and the Bourbon monarchy were deposed. Unamuno was home, and he no longer needed to cultivate the *persona* of an exile; now it was his concern to work out the details of the new regime of Republican Spain. In a deeper sense, to, he was home—back again with his family he regained that psychological strength to contemplate with a steady gaze the possible ontological emptiness of history. The death of his wife in the spring of 1934 made him feel all the more acutely the question of meaning in hu-

28. Ibid.

29. This new emphasis is reflected in Unamuno’s novel, *San Manuel Bueno, mártir*, which concerns the lives of the people of the tiny village Valverde de Lucerna, which has hardly changed for centuries, and whose lake is “the lake of the eternal.” See the discussion in Ferrater Mora, *Unamuno*, p. 104.

man existence. There was no sudden break in Unamuno's thought, of course, for the desire for the immortality of the flesh and of the word had both been present even in his earliest works. There was, rather, a shift in emphasis or prominence upon his return to Spain.

Unamuno emphasized again that it is vain to think that any lasting human contentment can be achieved when people are destined to die without knowing what lies beyond death or what their death means. From this perspective, the problems of political factions and parties made virtually no difference to him. His declared nonpartisanship was not new for him—he had withdrawn from the Socialist Party in 1897 declaring himself to be of no party. But his insistence on nonpartisanship was intensely embarrassing and annoying to the Republicans as they tried to hold together their coalition government. In October 1931, at the opening of the academic year at the University of Salamanca, just six months after one of the most stunning “bloodless revolutions” of modern history, Unamuno brushed aside the importance of the “little accidental and temporal contingent differences of various forms of Government.”³⁰ A month earlier, in the Cortes, Unamuno had proudly declared, “I . . . regard myself as free [from] . . . so-called party discipline. . . .”³¹ In 1935, his disillusionment with the efforts of the Republican government was unmistakable:

[We] put no trust in parties, nor in unions, nor in the proportionality of the vote, nor in hierarchies, nor in dogmas. We adhere to our private, intimate inspiration. . . . We are solitaires, if you will.³²

And again:

The reader will forgive me for this unburdening of my soul, but this circle of partisan incomprehension is so painful! . . . And within . . . nothing of nothing [*nada de nada!*]³³

It is no wonder that those accused of pursuing “nothing of nothing” felt abandoned, even somewhat betrayed by their former ally.

Unamuno's view of life as theater was also important during the Republican period, although in quite a different way from what it was during his exile. To play the game of politics reflectively, and respon-

30. “Discurso en el Paraninfo de la Universidad de Salamanca el día 1 de octubre de 1931,” *O.c.*, 9:397.

31. “Discurso en las Cortes de la República el día 25 de septiembre de 1931,” *O.c.*, 9:391–92.

32. “Los amigos,” *O.c.*, 7:1069.

33. “Programa para un cursillo de filosofía social barata, V,” *Ahora* (Madrid), 17 December 1935.

sibly, there must be the perspective that the game matters and is not arbitrary. This was the lesson of Calderón's plays. Calderón thought that while political life is not ultimate, neither is it arbitrary, nor is what happens in history a matter of indifference to man or to God. Men wear the masks of social station and political role, and it is of supreme importance to both themselves and their fellows how they live within those roles.

For Unamuno, however, the image of life as theater signified, on the one hand, the hopeful view that as life is theater, so history is a stage on which men and women gain renown and immortalize themselves. On the other hand, the theatricality of life meant that human lives are only roles and that, unlike the end of Calderón's drama, when the final curtain falls upon the historical drama no one will cast aside his mask. If man's only destiny is to die, then variations in regimes, constitutional structures, ideological distinctions, and economic and social arrangements matter little; all are equally insignificant—petty triumph or disappointment—in the face of mortality.

Viewed from this perspective, Unamuno's "abandonment" of the Republic is easier to understand. When he criticized the agrarian reform efforts of the Azaña government, for example, he did not consider the effect of his critical stance on the fate of a beleaguered regime struggling for survival but sought only to debunk the notion that economic reform would bring true human happiness in its wake. When he blasted Azaña himself for compromising with the ideologies of the far left, he did not stop to weigh the other possibilities facing the coalition government but instead railed against the idea of finding earthly happiness in the communism of future generations. When he criticized members of the Cortes for thinking about the wrong problems, he did not mean that their *political* priorities needed reordering but rather that they should reflect upon the transitory nature and insignificance of *all* political problems given the greater human problem of death.

Distinguishing philosophical and political pronouncements, however, was hard to do in a time of political crisis (and has remained so since). Unamuno's nonpartisanship had been a tenable stance when he was in exile, where he could oppose the monarchy as a solitary individual. But in opposing the monarchy he had, in effect, allied himself with the Republican forces. Unamuno's reassertion of nonpartisanship under the Republic was interpreted as a rejection of the Second Republic by her one-time friend. His signing of the statement of support for the Nationalist government and his subsequent denunciation of Millán Astray further complicated any attempt to understand his politics. Only by seeing the persistent nature of Unamuno's concerns with death and with

the creation of a legend in and through history can his political activity be understood.

III. Conclusion

The controversy which surrounded, and still surrounds, Unamuno's activity arose because his life during its final years combined features of the perspectives of an *homme engagé* and those of a nonpartisan man of the mind. I have attempted to show that Unamuno's actions during the last twelve years of his life are best understood if they are viewed as motivated not only by political considerations, in which case his rejection of the Republic seems inexplicable, but predominantly by his deepest philosophical concerns.

Unamuno's use of metaphysical criteria to judge both the daily vicissitudes of party struggles and the scope and nature of political concerns themselves had certain undeniable strengths. He uncompromisingly pointed out the sham of the promises of "eternity" proffered by contemporary politics. Those political ideologies which offer a "final solution" to politics encounter a scathing critique in Unamuno's philosophy. This is as true of the promises of utopian socialism and communism on the left, as it is of fascism on the right.

Unamuno also criticized the contemporary reliance on modernization and technological progress for the eradication of human misery. Such means overcome much human suffering, but Unamuno never stopped insisting that misery is spiritual as well as physical. He was acutely aware of the dehumanizing and deadening aspects of technological culture. bureaucratization, specialization, and atomization in contemporary society. Technological advancement, political progress, and national grandeur—ways in which modern nations have sought to perpetuate the nation in history—were in Unamuno's eyes only fabrications of eternal life, *ersatz* solutions to the deepest problem of human existence.³⁴ In battling the modern tendency to seek the justification of politics in such artificialities, he contributed to the proper understanding and evaluation of political life.

Unamuno nonetheless encountered difficulties when he attempted to move from an intellectual comprehension of the limits of politics to meaningful activity which took account of his perceptions. His difficulties

34. This point is made by Arthur A. Cohen in his review of "*Our Lord Don Quixote, The Tragic Sense of Life, and The Agony of Christianity*," in the *New York Times Book Review*, 16 December 1973. The phrase "fabrications of eternal life" is his.

call to mind the exchange between Thomas More and the traveler Raphael in More's *Utopia*. Raphael, a man of principle, contends that he could never be a royal counselor, for he would always speak what he believed, and would certainly be killed for it. More, equally a man of principle, retorts that on the contrary kings need principled counselors, but to blurt out whatever one thinks in every situation is an inappropriate way to act. It would be, he says, as if one stepped on the stage in the middle of a comedy by Plautus spouting lines from the tragedy *Octavia*: "There is a more civilized form of philosophy [than the academic variety]," says More, "which knows the dramatic context, so to speak, tries to fit in with it, and plays an appropriate part in the current performance."³⁵

Unamuno became so possessed by his wrestling with the problem of death that he ignored the exigencies of the current performance. The history of the Republic was a political drama governed by the political rules of accommodation, compromise, and adjustment, involving a struggle for power in a deeply fractured polity. After his return to Spain, Unamuno seemingly failed to consider the kind of public personage he had become, and he ignored the constraints which should have accompanied that *persona*.

In giving constant expression to what he saw as the ultimate questions of human life, Unamuno was very far from that "vocation" of politics which Max Weber so brilliantly analyzed.³⁶ According to Weber, the political actor must abandon an ethics of pure intention for an ethics based on a calculation and acceptance of full responsibility for all of his actions.

[A] man who believes in an ethic of responsibility takes account of precisely the average deficiencies of people; . . . he does not have the right to presuppose their goodness and perfection. He does not feel in a position to burden others with the results of his actions . . . he will say: these results are ascribed to my actions. The believer in an ethic of ultimate ends [on the other hand] feels "responsible" only for seeing to it that the flame of pure intentions is not quenched. . . . [His deeds] are acts that can and shall have only exemplary value.³⁷

35. Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Paul Turner (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), 1:63.

36. Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (New York: Oxford University, 1946), pp. 77–128.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

When Unamuno behaved as if the conventions and concerns of the political world no longer applied to his actions, he violated Weber's precepts and was, like More's tragedian, caught in the wrong play. Once an individual has stepped on the stage of history and has presumed to take some responsibility for man's collective drama, as Unamuno did in the 1920's, he cannot so easily revert to the wings without being at best enigmatic and at worst irresponsible.

Politics deals with the common goals to be pursued by a collective entity, not with individual aspirations alone. It involves the contingent and the variable, not the inevitable and the permanent. The constraints of nature (including natural disasters as well as climate and terrain), the bounds of human reason, and the failings of human character all make politics uncertain and unpredictable. Its goal must be amelioration and not perfection. For all these reasons political activity frequently requires a choice among less-than-ideal alternatives. Anyone who would engage in politics must be willing to deal with the multitudinous contingencies of human life, to make value judgments about temporal goods and evils, and to weigh desirability against possibility in planning any program or course of action. The political actor must both know the ideal which he seeks to realize and be able and willing to take steps which will *approach*, even if they cannot reach, that ideal. In Thomas More's terms, the political actor must have high principles, but also know the play he is in, accept its limits, and gauge his gestures and lines accordingly.

In distinction to More's view of politics as a play which shapes the actors just as surely as they may shape the play and to Weber's notion that the responsible politician must take account of the political realities which will affect his cause, Unamuno's view of politics was essentially self-centered. Many people have pointed out the political consequences of his umbrage at being replaced as rector of the University of Salamanca. But his egoism went much deeper. Unamuno approached politics not on its own terms, as the arena in which a society works out the compromises of interests and the choices of values by which it governs itself, but rather as the stage on which to work out his own most intimate intellectual and religious problem. He refused to deal with political issues as such, transforming them instead into tools in his struggle for immortality. In attempting to give constant expression to his concern with immortality through his political involvement, Unamuno did violence to those political ends for which he did care.

To regard politics and political activity as meaningful at all, one must posit some meaning for the human drama itself; some importance in the collective destiny of a people; some significance in the variation of regimes, customs, and laws by which peoples are governed. Such calcula-

tions often appeared unimportant to Unamuno in the light of the overwhelming problems of temporality, death, and immortality. They are, nonetheless, essential for politicians and theorists alike. The inevitability of death does not obviate the fact that life can be made better or worse, happier or more painful, more civilized or barbaric depending on just such "little accidental and temporal contingent differences of various forms of government" which Unamuno was wont to dismiss towards the end of his life.

The fact of mortality, indeed, may lend special importance to the political decisions which affect the quality of a people's collective life. It is this aspect of political life, something other than the belief in the perfectibility of life on earth yet valuing whatever good can be achieved through politics, which Unamuno's preoccupations with death could not sufficiently distinguish and discuss. Unamuno's "agonic" view of human life swept so broadly that it frequently overlooked those relative judgments which are essential to the normative evaluation of political life and activity. It is this perspective, that even these mediate and contingent goods are important, which is necessary to evaluate properly, as well as to act in, the political world.