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Unamuno's Last Lecture
by Luis Portillo

THE CEREMONIAL HALL in the University of Salamanca is a spacious chamber, used only on formal occasions, solemn, austere, the walls hung with tapestries. Through the huge windows enters a shimmering flood of iridescent light which deepens the amber glow of the century-old plinth stones.

This was the setting.

The play was enacted on 12 October 1936, when Spanish Fascism was in its first triumphant stage. The morning was half spent. The patriotic festival of the Hispanic Race was being celebrated.

There they were on the presidential dais: the purple calotte, the amethyst ring and the flashing pectoral cross of the Most Illustrious Doctor Plá y Deniel, Bishop of the Diocese; the lackluster robes of the Magistrates; the profuse glitter of military gold braid side by side with the crosses and medals exhibited on presumptuously bulging chests; the morning coat, set off by black satin lapels, of His Excellency the Civil Governor of the Province; and all these surrounded—was it to honor or to overwhelm?—the man whose pride in his incorruptible Spanish conscience was steadfast and straight: Miguel de Unamuno y Jugo, the Rector.

From the front wall, the allegorical picture of the Republic had gone, and there shone from under a canopy the Caudillo's effigy in plump insolence. To the left and right, on crimson-covered divans, the silk of

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the doctors' gowns and their mortarboards with gay tassels in red, yellow, light blue and dark blue, symbolizing Law, Medicine, Letters, and Science.

A few ladies were scattered among the learned men; in a prominent place, Doña Carmen Polo de Franco, the distinguished spouse of the Man of Providence.

From a packed audience which faced the dais of the elect, with its protective balustrade of dark polished wood, there rose the confused murmur of expectancy. At the far end of the long hall glinted the rounded brasses of a military band, ready to play the obligatory hymns.

The ceremony began. Don Miguel opened it with the ritual formula, spoken in that unforgettable voice of his, thin and clear. Then Don Francisco Maldonado stepped on to the platform, short, fat, Professor of Literature and Salamancan landowner. With affected, baroque diction and vast erudition, he delivered a colorless and circumstantial address. At the end, he expressed his hope for a better future, with kindly and sincere emotion. He descended the steps among cheers and applause, bowed to the dais, and returned to his seat. He was followed on the speaker's platform by Don José María Ramos Loscertales, of Saragossa, tall and lean, with fluid gestures, flashing eyes, sober and precise of speech, his sensitive face in perpetual motion, expressing a subtle and enigmatic irony. He spoke of the mortal struggle raging at the time—yet another circumstantial speech. Its thesis: the energies of Spain at white heat in a crucible of passion—and like gold from the crucible, Spain would emerge in the end, purified and without stain, in her true colors . . . which rejected the taints artificially imposed on her. Clamorous ovation.

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And then rose General Millán Astray. With ostentatious humility, he preferred to speak from his own place. His appearance was impressive. The General is thin, of an emaciation which pretends to slimness. He has lost one eye and one arm. His face and his body bear the indelible tattoo of horrible scars. These savage mutilations and gashes evoke a sinister personality; his angry and rancorous bearing kills any compassion his mutilations might have inspired.

He had been the organizer of the *Tercio*, the Spanish Foreign Legion for operations in Africa; he had been the creator of an iron, inexorable discipline to which the reckless fugitives from other social disciplines submitted of their own free will. He had gained those wounds which to many seemed glorious, to some over-exploited, and to all horribly impressive, in those fantastic Moroccan campaigns which had been Spain's bitter nightmare under the regretted aegis of King Alphonso XIII, called "The African" in his day. Yet the unquestionable nimbus which surrounded the figure of the General was due to the gruesome originality, to the mysterious paradox of his battlecry: "*Viva la Muerte!*" — "Long live Death!"

Barely had Millán Astray risen to his feet when his strident voice rang out, as though bursting from that heroic chest bedizened with a galaxy of crosses, the testimonials and rewards of gallantry.

First of all he said that more than one-half of all Spaniards were criminals, guilty of armed rebellion and high treason. To remove any ambiguity, he went on to explain that by these rebels and traitors he meant the citizens who were loyal to the Government.

In a sudden flash of intuition, a member of the audience was inspired so as to grasp the faultless logic

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of a slogan which common minds had thought the product of an epileptic brain. With fervor, he shouted:

"Viva, viva la Muerte!" — "Long live Death!"

Impervious, the General continued his fiery speech!

"Catalonia and the Basque country—the Basque country and Catalonia—are two cancers in the body of the nation. Fascism, which is Spain's health-bringer, will know how to exterminate them both, cutting into the live, healthy flesh like a resolute surgeon free from false sentimentality. And since the healthy flesh is the soil, the diseased flesh the people who dwell on it, Fascism and the Army will eradicate the people and restore the soil to the sacred national realm. . . ."

He made a pause and cast a despotic glance over the audience. And he saw that he held them in thrall, hypnotized to a man. Never had any of his harangues so subjugated the will of his listeners. Obviously, he was in his element. . . . He had conquered the University! And, carried away himself, he continued, blind to the subtle and withering smile of disdain on the lips of the Rector.

"Every Socialist, every Republican, every one of them without exception—and needless to say every Communist—is a rebel against the National Government, which will very soon be recognized by the totalitarian States who are aiding us, in spite of France—democratic France—and perfidious England.

"And then, or even sooner, when Franco wants it, and with the help of the gallant Moors who, though they wrecked my body only yesterday, today deserve the gratitude of my soul, for they are fighting for Spain against the Spaniards . . . I mean, the bad Spaniards . . . because they are giving their lives in defence of Spain's sacred religion, as is proved by their attending

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field mass, escorting the Caudillo, and pinning holy medallions and Sacred Hearts to their burnouses. . . ."

The General lost himself in the maze of his own vehement outburst. He hesitated, irritated and defiant at the same time. In these straits, an enthusiastic Fascist came to his rescue and shouted:

"Arriba España!"

The crowd bowed their heads in resignation. The man went on, undaunted:

"Spain!"

Mechanically, the crowd responded: "One!"

"Spain!" he reported.

"Great!" chorused the obedient public.

"Spain!" the Blue Shirt insisted, implacably.

"Free!" they all replied, cowed.

There was an obvious lack of warmth and listlessness in these artificially produced responses. Several Blue Shirts rose to their feet as though pushed by invisible springs, and raised their right arms stiffly in the Roman salute. And they hailed the sepia-colored photograph on the front wall:

"Franco!"

The public rose reluctantly and chanted parrot-like:

"Franco! Franco! Franco!"

But Franco's image did not stir. Neither did the Rector.

Don Miguel did not rise to his feet. And the public fell silent and sat down again.

All eyes were fastened in tense anxiety on the noble head, on the pale, serene brow framed by snow-white hair. The uncertain expression of his eyes was hidden by the glitter of his spectacles.

Between the fine curve of his nose and the silver of his Quixote-like beard, his mouth was twisted in a bitter grimace of undisguised contempt. People began

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to grow uneasy. A few suddenly felt a recrudescence of their old rancorous abhorrence. Some admired the serene fearlessness of the Master and feared for his safety. The majority were gripped by the voluptuous thrill of imminent tragedy.

At last, Don Miguel rose slowly. The silence was an enormous void. Into this void, Don Miguel began to pour the stream of his speech, as though savoring each measured word. This is the essence of what he said:

"All of you are hanging on my words. You all know me, and are aware that I am unable to remain silent. I have not learnt to do so in seventy-three years of my life. And now I do not wish to learn it any more. At times, to be silent is to lie. For silence can be interpreted as acquiescence. I could not survive a divorce between my conscience and my word, always well-mated partners.

"I will be brief. Truth is most true when naked, free of embellishment and verbiage.

"I want to comment on the speech—to give it that name—of General Millán Astray, who is here among us."

The General stiffened provocatively.

"Let us waive the personal affront implied by the sudden outburst of vituperation against Basques and Catalans in general. I was born in Bilbao, in the midst of the bombardments of the Second Carlist War. Later, I wedded myself to this city of Salamanca, which I love deeply, yet never forgetting my native town. The Bishop, whether he likes it or not, is a Catalan from Barcelona."

He made a pause. Faces had grown pale. The short silence was tense and dramatic. Expectation neared its peak.

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"Just now, I heard a necrophilous and senseless cry: 'Long live Death!' To me it sounds the equivalent of '*Muera la Vida!*' — 'To Death with Life!' And I, who have spent my life shaping paradoxes which aroused the uncomprehending anger of the others, I must tell you, as an expert authority, that this outlandish paradox is repellent to me. Since it was proclaimed in homage to the last speaker, I can only explain it to myself by supposing that it was addressed to him, though in an excessively strange and tortuous form, as a testimonial to his being himself a symbol of death.

"And now, another matter. General Millán Astray is a cripple. Let it be said without any slighting undertone. He is a war invalid. So was Cervantes. But extremes do not make the rule: they escape it. Unfortunately, there are all too many cripples in Spain now. And soon, there will be even more of them if God does not come to our aid. It pains me to think that General Millán Astray should dictate the pattern of mass-psychology.

"That would be appalling. A cripple who lacks the spiritual greatness of Cervantes—a man, not a superman, virile and complete, in spite of his mutilations—a cripple, I said, who lacks that loftiness of mind, is wont to seek ominous relief in seeing mutilation around him."

His words rang out crystal clear. The heavy silence gave them resonance.

"General Millán Astray is not one of the select minds, even though he is unpopular, or rather, for that very reason. Because he is unpopular. General Millán Astray would like to create Spain anew—a negative creation—in his own image and likeness. And for that reason he wishes to see Spain crippled, as he unwittingly made clear."

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At this point General Millán Astray could stand it no longer and shouted wildly:

"Muera la Inteligencia!" — "To death with Intelligence!"

"No, long live intelligence! To death with bad intellectuals!" corrected Don José María Pemán, a journalist from Cádiz. A few voices seconded him, many hands were clenched to check an imprudent impulse to applaud the aged Rector. The Blue Shirts felt tempted to become violent, true to totalitarian procedure. But a most unusual realization of their numerical inferiority strangled this impulse at birth. Arguments flared up round the names of academicians who had disappeared or been shot. Irritated "sh's" came from various sides. Some gowned figures had gathered round Don Miguel, some Blue Shirts round their vilified hero.

At last the clamor died down like the sound of surf on the beach, and the groups dispersed. Don Miguel again became visible to the assembly, very erect, his arms folded and his gaze fixed straight ahead, like the statue of a stoic. Once more his word dominated the hall.

"This is the temple of intellect. And I am its high priest. It is you who are profaning its sacred precincts.

"I have always, whatever the proverb may say, been a prophet in my own land. You will win, but you will not convince. You will win, because you possess more than enough brute force, but you will not convince, because to convince means to persuade. And in order to persuade, you would need what you lack—reason and right in the struggle. I consider it futile to exhort you to think of Spain. I have finished."

The controversies flamed up again, interrupted by sudden waves of unanimous silence.

Then Don Esteban Madrugá, Professor of Common

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Law, a straightforward and truly good man, took Don Miguel by the arm, offered his other arm to Doña Carmen Polo de Franco, and led them out of the room. Unamuno walked with perfect dignity, pale and calm. Franco's wife was so stunned that she walked like an automaton.

The Junta in Burgos was consulted. Franco's orders came: they were inexorable. If the offence was considered grave enough, the Rector of Salamanca was to be executed without delay. The offence was indeed considered to be so, but somebody who was better advised realized that such an act would fatally injure the prestige of the nascent "Movement of Salvation." It was therefore never carried out.

Don Miguel retired to his home. His house was kept surrounded by the police.

And shortly afterwards, thus guarded, Miguel de Unamuno died suddenly on the last day of 1936, a victim of a stroke of the brain, achieving lasting peace.

