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Unamuno's Aesthetics of Disbelief

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One of the many paradoxes regarding the public figure of Miguel de Unamuno during the last thirty years of his life concerns the question of why a university professor would choose to make his most private psychological problems a public spectacle. His way of life was not the material for scandal. He was a private family man of austere if somewhat idiosyncratic habits: he wore only black suits, no ties; he had no known indulgences such as tobacco or even table wine; he lived a chaste monogamous life, and cared deeply for his wife and children. His idea of an extended holiday was a hike in the mountains. He was not adverse to travel but disdained the cities in favor of the countryside. Yet this quiet family man, scholar, and professor of Greek and Latin made his most painful self-doubts and problems the subject matter of hundreds of newspaper articles in Spain and Spanish America. This contradiction extended over his occasional writing from 1897 to his death in 1936 and also found some exposure in his published poetry, especially in his posthumous *Cancionero* (public diary). Another issue related to but distinct from the public disclosure of psychological depression was Unamuno's public display of religious disbelief.

Those of us who live in a lay society tend to forget how politically-charged questions about belief in God and purported adherence to orthodox religious practice can be. Even in some nations where there is a constitutional separation of church and state, there can be continuous agitation. In the United States, for example, there is the perennial debate about the absence of prayer in the public schools. In Canada a member of Parliament was censured by his socialist party because he introduced a bill on behalf of his constituents requesting the deletion of references to God in the preamble to the constitution. Of course, there are many parts of the world where even the prime minister can be killed for perceived opposition to religious fundamentalism.

Unamuno lived his entire life in a Spanish nation sharply divided on the role the Roman Catholic church was to play in the politics and social practices of the nation. On the one side the various parties of the left only differed from each other on how extreme

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they were in the elimination of the church from all public life, and on the other side the religious zealots and fundamentalists wanted some form of oligarchic rule where the church played a principal power role. The struggle intensified when both sides began to use the profession of belief or disbelief as a means to test for acceptance of individuals within the social group. In 1897 Unamuno saw the enormous danger in the ideological intransigence of the Spanish people:

In Spain there are two issues which according to public opinion engulf all other issues including the social issue. They are religion and regionalism or local distinctiveness. The struggle of free-thinkers, rationalists and liberals against Catholicism and the struggle within the Church itself (between the clergy and the people) take up all of the intellectual energy and this is especially so in the provinces. Every political party has a fixed position with regard to the religious issue.¹

And, in 1900, after the war of 1898, amidst the calls for Spain's regeneration, he returns to the base problem of dogmatism and a profound inability to engage in dialogue which he sees as the dictatorship of ideology:

And here in Spain? Here we have suffered acute dogmatism for a very long time; an immanent inquisition has always ruled here; this has been an intimate and social inquisition of which the other one—the historical and national one—was but a passing phenomenon; ideology has produced ideophobia here, for it is always the case that absolutism begets anarchy.²

The defeat of the Spanish Republic at the end of the civil war in 1939 ushered in thirty-seven years of Roman Catholic collaboration with the military dictatorship of Francisco Franco. The civil war (1936–39) was fought as much on ideological grounds as economic ones, but the religious divide of belief and disbelief was the explicit cause for sinking the country into a civil war that left a million dead, all of its cities in ruin, its economy devastated, and, after 1945, left it isolated within Europe and in the world. Unamuno wrote about this impending catastrophe and put his own disbelief in evidence thirty years before the hostilities began in 1936:

Perhaps Spain finds itself today in the most critical and decisive moment in its social history; perhaps we are on the verge of reaping the bitter lesson of the disaster [the war of 1898 with the United States], perhaps it will be decided if we are to join other civilized nations or we are to return to the old rocky wheel tracks. Spanish politics have never been so confused and entangled as they appear to us at this time, public sentiments have rarely been so agitated and this is because the question of questions has finally been posed, the question that engenders war, the vital question for Spain, the religious question.

In substance the two civil wars [Carlist wars of the nineteenth century] that bloodied our land in the last century were fought over freedom of religious conscience in Spain. . . . I hope we will arrive at the separation of Church and State. And all of this will be but the prologue of an awakening of the Spanish religious conscience, in a stupor induced by the Canticles of the Roman Church.³

Unamuno would not live to see the religious freedom he advocated, and his fellow countrymen would not see it for seventy years after this essay was written. The public situation of Unamuno was not accidental; he pursued it with extraordinary passion. Throughout these years he was either at the center of the storm or he was the storm himself.

The profession of belief and disbelief by Unamuno was always taken from his private life and thrust by him into the public eye with a highly disconcerting effect on his contemporaries. He made belief and disbelief into one and the same idea: a dialectic manifestation of human consciousness. In "Mi religión" (My Religion) of 1903 he had already gone the next step which was to identify existence with struggle:

My purpose has been, is and will be to induce those who read my work to think and meditate on fundamental issues and it has never been to give them fabricated thought. I have always aimed to provoke and, in the end, to suggest more than to instruct. . . . I claim my freedom, my holy freedom, and even the freedom to contradict myself if need be. I do not know if anything of what I have done or will do in the future will remain for years or centuries after my death, but I do know that waves break continuously in an ocean without a shoreline, although with time they weaken. To provoke the spirit is to do something that lasts, my work will persist in it.⁴

Unamuno's combativeness in public life is legendary, but among the wide variety of subjects he treated none was more intense than the image of God. This was in part due to the fact that he made no secret that the source was his own internal struggle with disbelief in all its negativity; in "Sueño" (Dream), a short story from 1897, the character reflects Unamuno's own psychological crisis and eventual breakdown :

At other times he tossed and turned, full of a burning nervousness, thinking in nothingness which terrorized him more than hell. Nothingness! to fall, fall through an immense emptiness . . . no, not even falling.⁵

There is no question as to the source of his character's suffering. A more explicit fictionalization of his personal situation came in another short story, "Una visita al viejo poeta" (A Visit to the Old Poet), published in September 1899:

I have renounced my abstract and fictive self that plunged me into the solitude of my own emptiness. I looked for God through him, but since that self was an abstract idea, a cold and diffuse self of rejection, I never found more God than his infinite projection, with his cold and diffuse mist, a logical God, mute, blind and deaf.⁶

But belief or disbelief in God was not only a private matter in Spain of the early twentieth century; it was also a political issue that carried grave consequences for the community and the individual. Throughout the nineteenth century the Roman Catholic Church in Spain had been losing ground, so much so that the agitation for a republic that followed the Spanish-American War of 1898 set off alarm bells

with regard to the growing threat to the remaining political and social privileges it still held. The higher clergy launched into an all-out war against anyone who challenged the status of the church, using the familiar charge that an enemy of the church was an enemy of God. The attack on Unamuno was at its height when the bishop of the Canary Islands delivered a violent diatribe against the Anti-Christ from Salamanca. This campaign by the clergy was met by an equally violent reaction from the leftist political parties whose radicalization culminated in anti-clerical demonstrations against churches and convents. Unamuno was just as opposed to the church's political power as he was to the church-burnings. In 1906 he wrote this assessment:

Everyone believes and repeats the opinion that Spain is not only a preponderantly Catholic country but a fanatical one, and yet nothing could be further from the truth. . . . The majority of educated persons in Spain are not Catholic.⁷

Unamuno recognizes that what is at stake is not religious belief or disbelief but rather political power. The church is not fighting for the souls of the Spanish people but to retain power which they correctly assess as threatened. Unamuno continues:

Until now the struggle has been strictly religious and not a political-ecclesiastical one, but it will come and I hope we will arrive at a separation of Church and State.⁸

In one of the most significant and least known articles on the dialectic of belief and disbelief, "Ciencia religiosa" (Religious Science), published in June 1910 in *La nación*, Unamuno comments extensively on an article published in Barcelona by the Catalan astronomer José Comas Solá. Unamuno cites Comas Solá: "If a world inhabited by conscious beings did not exist, it would not make any difference to do away with the universe and replace it with emptiness or nothingness." Unamuno responds with his usual conviction: "for we believe in God in order to believe, or because we want to believe in the persistence of consciousness. . . . To believe in God is above all to want for God to exist and to want this is to desire the eternal persistence of consciousness."⁹

If we turn to the private arena of struggle in the dialectic of belief and disbelief, we also find a constant literary exploration of liminal thinking. In the previously cited short stories the dialectic is expressed through the characters, but in his poetry—as, for example, in *Rosario de sonetos líricos* (Rosary of Lyrical Sonnets)—it is the lyric voice of the author and his lyric persona: "How great you are, my God! You are so great / that you are but Idea." Or even more explicitly: "God is the unattainable desire we have of being god."¹⁰ Or in the following lines that will reverberate as the ethical conclusion to *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida en los hombres y en los pueblos* (*The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and in Peoples*): "And if it is nothingness that awaits us, let us so act that it shall be an unjust fate."¹¹

Unamuno's gradual development of what I have called the aesthetics of disbelief draws from a broad range of sources; English, French, and even Danish,

but primarily German. The major German theologians and philosophers of the nineteenth century were all read and assimilated by Unamuno. One of the most lasting sources is Georg Wilhelm Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* and, especially, the introduction.¹² It is from Hegel that the idea of identity emerges out of the dialectical movement of opposites. Hegel's God is negativity or the abyss that is the necessary polarity to being. In Hegel's language God negates himself so that the world can be. In Unamuno's view, the idea of God is the projection of the human being's desire to continue. He is pure desire to be. The individual and collective expression of his desire to continue in being is God. The problem arises when one person's idea of God is threatened by another's idea of God or no-god. The core idea of God as the sum of human aspirations is that my God is our God, which makes us human. An early indication of this direction is in the *Diario íntimo* (Intimate Diary) of 1897: "Beneath and within your consciousness of yourself, there is consciousness of God, of God in you."¹³ The most explicit expression of a man-made God is given in "Plenitud de plenitudes y todo plenitud" (Plenitude of Plenitude and All Plenitude):

The power to create God to our likeness and image, of personalizing the universe, does not signify anything but to internalize God as the substance of what we desire.¹⁴

The concept of the open dialectic in Unamuno has metaphysical, anthropological, and aesthetic expression, and I have written about these distinct modes of engagement elsewhere.¹⁵ What concerns me here is to give a historical context to the aesthetics of disbelief. At the core of this aesthetics lies the passage from simple contradiction to the semantic impertinence of the creative metaphor. In a contradictory statement, proposition A is countered by proposition B in such a way that there is no room for compromise. One negates the other. But what is overlooked in this simple example is the action of negation, for what has been active in this encounter is the expression of negation.

Unamuno fully understands the origin of his dialectic and his transformation of Hegel's logic to an open dialectic: "Dialectic is the process of antinomies and antithesis. Dialectic is the least dogmatic [mode of inquiry] and irrespective of how passionate [the argument], in the end it is skeptical."¹⁶ If instead of propositions we have images, then the opposition of one image by another creates blockage or what we might call semantic impertinence. The language does not make semantic sense. When this happens, instead of eliminating one image or the other which would be the logical solution, we have before us the tension of opposition and this tension is the basis for the creative metaphor. Thus we have an image from Islam: "God is great," immediately countered by "God is but an idea," which we attempt to reconcile with the notion of "a great idea." But no sooner have we done this than the true opposition emerges: God is larger than reality.

¡Qué grande eres, mi Dios! Eres tan grande
que no eres sino Idea; es muy angosta
la realidad por mucho que se expande.¹⁷

[How great you are, my God. You are so great
that you are but an Idea; reality
is too narrow no matter how much it expands.]

The second verse has the deflationary effect of an apparent reduction of God to no more than an idea, which is a clear semantic opposition to largeness or greatness. Yet, there is a way out, for an idea like that of truth can indeed be an idea and still be great. The full semantic impertinence comes in the enjambment between verse two and three. God is great because reality is too narrow no matter how it expands. Therefore the following poem of disbelief emerges. God is but an idea, an idea that is too great for reality no matter how our knowledge of it expands. The metaphor is that God in physical terms of size and space exceeds all comprehension because God is not real; as an idea there is no limit to what countless generations of millions of persons over centuries can imagine. The aesthetics of disbelief is a tensional creativity full of indeterminacy and conceptual richness.

The dialectic of belief and disbelief is, in Unamuno's thinking, the personal evocation of what is fundamentally a phenomenological metaphysics. When faced with a fundamentalist believer in a religious doctrine on the one side, and an equally adamant non-believer who refuses all inquiry that is not rational, what position is left open? Unamuno held that the in-between area separating the polar opposites was the dynamic center of the thinking person. In the midst of this tug of war is the creative doubt of the dialectic.

The metaphysical basis for this thinking is a phenomenological idea of being as struggle, an idea later developed by Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Consider, for example, Merleau-Ponty's statement in *Sense and Non-sense*:

Everything changes when a phenomenological or existential philosophy assigns itself the task, not of explaining the world or of discovering its conditions of possibility, but rather of formulating an experience of the world, a contact with the world which precedes all thought about the world. After this, whatever is metaphysical in man cannot be credited to something outside his empirical being—to God, to consciousness. Man is metaphysical in his very being, in his loves, in his hates, in his individual and collective history.¹⁸

It is especially Merleau-Ponty who comes closest to Unamuno in "Humanism and Terror": "The true nature of tragedy appears once the same man has understood both that he cannot disavow the objective pattern of his actions, that he is what he is for others in the context of history, and yet that the motive of his actions constitutes a man's worth as he himself experiences it."¹⁹ These lines are so close that with a few stylistic changes they could be taken as Unamuno's work. It is not my aim to discuss influence, but rather to emphasize that Unamuno's thinking was very clearly in tune with a post-Hegelian approach to metaphysics. The dialectic engagement of the other that Unamuno had already begun to sketch out at the turn of the century can be found in this passage: "The world and I mutually make each other. And from this game of mutual action and reaction there comes forth in me

my consciousness of myself.”²⁰ Or, to put it in Martin Heidegger’s words, being in the world precedes the *cogito*, which Unamuno repeats: “What is *mine* precedes myself, the self makes himself possessor, and then sees himself as producer, and ends up by seeing himself as his true self when he is able to directly adjust his production of the world to his consumption of it.”²¹ Unamuno completely rejects the abstraction of Hegelian idealism; reality is to be “ahí,” there, in the literal actual daily world of work and pleasure, the “intrahistoria.” Heidegger’s apt term for this embeddedness of human existence is being-in-the-world that would have won Unamuno’s approval, for there is no doubt that Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*) emphatically stresses that existential identity and the world of work and play are one.²²

A few pages later Unamuno expands on this concept. The world and society are *for me* in the existential sense that the whole is in the singular self and the self is in the whole: “The world and society are *for me*, but I am society and the world, and my others are within me and they all live within me.”²³ It is significant to compare Unamuno’s idea of the universe being “for myself” and the contrary view by Jean Paul Sartre that the universe is “for itself” and the myself is engaged in trying to overcome his initial alienation. To the extent that the myself lives in a universe that he has appropriated, in Unamuno’s thinking, all existence is threatened by the myself’s death. In Sartre the struggle against alienation is ongoing and culminates in death.

The fundamental point here is that the question of self and other is taken out of the Cartesian bifurcation and is transformed into action. Both the self and the other exist only in society and each is part of the interaction of human existence. There is no self without the other and there is no other except through the self. Unamuno writes, “To love the other one is to want him to be like myself, that he be another self, that is, it is for me to want to be him, it is wanting to erase the dividing line between him and myself.”²⁴ This concept of alterity is deeply related to Unamuno’s dialectic of belief and disbelief since it is the collective belief or wanting to believe that makes disbelief creative rather than destructive. The following verses say it clearly: “The epic of God where man is not born, but rather makes himself and from man himself God is made.”²⁵

There was also a political appropriation of the dialectic. Unamuno did not limit fundamentalism to religious sects, but on the contrary recognized its most vigorous reincarnation in political parties. With an incredible sense of history Unamuno wrote the following lines: “If they are able to implant Communism in Russia, Russian history will henceforth insist on the struggle of the government against the efforts of the people to return to the old regime. And if this struggle does not ensue there will be no history and it will not be worth living there and they will return to animality.”²⁶

Unamuno’s strong statement here, “If this struggle does not ensue there will be no history,” is not only referring to the specific conditions of Soviet Russia but to the human condition in general, since history is the record of the struggle that comes to the surface, and interhistory is the struggle that is the everyday reality of life. It is instructive to compare this view with Heidegger’s words in *Sein und Zeit*:

When we are with one another in public, our everyday concern does not encounter just equipment and work; it likewise encounters what is given along with these: affairs, undertakings, incidents, mishaps. The world belongs to everyday trade and traffic as the soil from which they grow and the arena where they are displayed. . . . Do not equipment and work and every thing which Dasein dwells alongside, belong to history too? If not, is the historizing of history just the isolated running-off of streams of experience in individual subjects?

Indeed history is neither the connectedness of motions in the alterations of objects, nor a free-floating sequence of experiences which subjects have had. . . . What is historical is the entity that exists as Being-in-the-world. *The historizing of history is the historizing of Being-in-the world* [emphasis mine].²⁷

The political appropriation of the dialectic creates a society without movement, but deep within this static state there is submerged pressure to restore the struggle. The state will, of course, move increasingly to suppress this opposition, but it will nevertheless grow in weight until the walls created by the state to hold back dissent break down and the entire state structure is swept away in the flood waters of a renewed dialectic.

The aesthetics of disbelief is perhaps Unamuno's most original and most lasting contribution to Spanish thought. Pedro Cerezo Galán has understood the significance of Unamuno's achievement for Spain's intellectual development:

Unamuno has known how to explore this long gallery of tragic, comic, and tragicomic masks which taken together define the always imminent structural possibilities of the human condition. And he has explored it intimately, that is, through his literature as innumerable miscarriages, turns or fragments of his own life, for each man carries within him the sum of what it is to be human. That is why his thought is etymologically exemplary, an exemplum of life and reality. And because there is no example without experience, his life and writing was an experiment of the human condition, at the edge of one of the most substantial crisis of modern culture, whose effects are still with us today. This was an example and experiment which had of necessity to be realized in the literary word, the word of myth in the culture of the enlightenment, the only word which is capable of being at the same time a testimony of life and the sum of spiritual health.²⁸

I would add that within the dialectic of the self/other there lies the conscious action of the self playing his part in life for his others. If we all are but bit players in the drama of life, to paraphrase William Shakespeare, fictional characters are major players since their roles will be our roles as readers.

Unamuno pushes his ideas further than anyone else would have dared: "There are many of us who not convinced by Hegel, continue to believe that the real, the true real is irrational; that reason builds on irrationality."²⁹ But how does this rejection of rational abstraction lead to an aesthetics? Unamuno stated unequivocally that the poetic text elicits much more than it contains and this is so for various reasons, primarily because it is written and therefore can be read,

liberated from its original context, and, secondly, because it deals in metaphor and other impertinent statements whose indeterminate nature brings about the creative response of the reader. Although he often wrote that his poems, especially the occasional poetry, were crystallizations of time, he was just as clear that from the point of view of the reader they were ciphers of transcendence.

With Unamuno, aesthetics merges with ethics effortlessly as we can see from the following statement, one of the most remarkable expressions of respect for others, written in a country where arbitrary rule was still part of living experience: "Everyone who knows that true human freedom is that in which each man can develop his own nature, in his own special way of being, with his own unique idea of the world, everyone who understands and feels the profound maxim of Zao-Tse will know peace: the greatest gift you can give another is to help him follow his nature."³⁰

In conclusion, from 1896 to the time of his death forty years later, Unamuno made his metaphysics into an aesthetics with the conviction that all of us individualize the material reality that surrounds us, the only difference being that with some this individualization remains within the person, while with others it is given form so that readers will share in the individualization:

All that is external in civilization is the matrix; it contains elements of culture not yet individualized, not yet made into ourselves, all that is yet to organize, the reserve nourishment for our spirit is there. But the matrix also contains residual debris, and excrement. . . .

We must help secretion and accelerate the process of decomposition; we must liberate culture from civilization which drowns it.³¹

The task of the writer is to create the world so that others may be assisted in their own process of making the world. Unamuno, in my view, made his private crisis a public text because he was trying to absorb the public figure into the private. It is a matter of debate whether he was able to do so.

NOTES

1. Miguel de Unamuno, *Obras completas*, 9 vols. (Madrid: Escelicer, 1966–71), 9: 737. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
2. Unamuno, *Obras completas*, 2: 960.
3. Miguel de Unamuno, *De patriotismo espiritual: Artículos en "La Nación" de Buenos Aires (1901–1914)*, ed. Victor Ouimette (Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad, 1997), 77.
3. Unamuno, *De patriotismo*, 77–78.
4. Unamuno, *Obras completas*, 3: 263.
5. Unamuno, *Obras completas*, 2: 782.
6. Unamuno, *Obras completas*, 2: 520.
7. Unamuno, *De patriotismo*, 77–78.
8. *Ibid.*, 80.
9. *Ibid.*, 209.
10. Unamuno, *Obras completas*, 6: 359..
11. Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and in Peoples*, trans. J. E. Crawford Fritch (London: MacMillan and Co., Limited, 1926), 263.

12. G. W. Hegel, *Fenomenología del espíritu*, trans. W. Roces (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1966).
13. Unamuno, *Obras completas*, 8: 876.
14. Unamuno, *Obras completas*, 7: 223.
15. Mario J. Valdés, *Death in the Literature of Unamuno* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964).
16. Unamuno, *Obras completas*, 8: 747.
17. Unamuno, *Obras completas*, 6: 359.
18. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Nonsense*, trans. H. L. Dreyfus and Patricia A. Dreyfus (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964).
19. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, trans. J. O'Neill (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 62.
20. Unamuno, *Obras completas*, 1: 992.
21. Ibid.
22. George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 83.
23. Unamuno, *Obras completas*, 1: 996.
24. Unamuno, *Obras completas*, 7: 273
25. Unamuno, *Obras completas*, 6: 916.
26. Unamuno, *Obras completas*, 5: 1165.
27. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 439–40.
28. Pedro Cerezo Galán, *Las máscaras de lo trágico. Filosofía y tragedia en Miguel de Unamuno* (Madrid: Trotta, 1996), 25–26.
29. Unamuno, *Obras completas*, 7: 111.
30. Unamuno, *Obras completas*, 9: 659.
31. Unamuno, *Obras completas*, 1: 996.