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Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo  
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Garnett Engels Byron Schiller  
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka  
Cotton Dostoyevsky Hall  
Baum Henry Kipling Doyle Willis  
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac  
Stockton Vatsyayana Crane  
Burroughs Verne  
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch  
Homer Tolstoy Whitman  
Darwin Thoreau Twain  
Potter Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato Scott  
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# **Tragic Sense Of Life**

Miguel de Unamuno

# Imprint

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## INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

### DON MIGUEL DE UNAMUNO

I sat, several years ago, at the Welsh National Eisteddfod, under the vast tent in which the Bard of Wales was being crowned. After the small golden crown had been placed in unsteady equilibrium on the head of a clever-looking pressman, several Welsh bards came on the platform and recited little epigrams. A Welsh bard is, if young, a pressman, and if of maturer years, a divine. In this case, as England was at war, they were all of the maturer kind, and, while I listened to the music of their ditties—the sense thereof being, alas! beyond my reach—I was struck by the fact that all of them, though different, closely resembled Don Miguel de Unamuno. It is not my purpose to enter into the wasp-nest of racial disquisitions. If there is a race in the world over which more sense and more nonsense can be freely said for lack of definite information than the Welsh, it is surely this ancient Basque people, whose greatest contemporary figure is perhaps Don Miguel de Unamuno. I am merely setting down that intuitional fact for what it may be worth, though I do not hide my opinion that such promptings of the inner, untutored man are worth more than cavefuls of bones and tombfuls of undecipherable papers.

This reminiscence, moreover, which springs up into the light of my memory every time I think of Don Miguel de Unamuno, has to my mind a further value in that in it the image of Don Miguel does not appear as evoked by one man, but by many, though many of one species, many who in depth are but one man, one type, the Welsh divine. Now, this unity underlying a multiplicity, these many faces, moods, and movements, traceable to one only type, I find deeply connected in my mind with Unamuno's person and with what he signifies in Spanish life and letters. And when I further delve into my impression, I first realize an undoubtedly physical relation between the many-one Welsh divines and the many-one Unamuno. A tall, broad-shouldered, bony man, with high cheeks, a beak-like nose, pointed grey beard, and a complexion the colour of

the red hematites on which Bilbao, his native town, is built, and which Bilbao ruthlessly plucks from its very body to exchange for gold in the markets of England—and in the deep sockets under the high aggressive forehead prolonged by short iron-grey hair, two eyes like gimlets eagerly watching the world through spectacles which seem to be purposely pointed at the object like microscopes; a fighting expression, but of noble fighting, above the prizes of the passing world, the contempt for which is shown in a peculiar attire whose blackness invades even that little triangle of white which worldly men leave on their breast for the necktie of frivolity and the decorations of vanity, and, blinding it, leaves but the thinnest rim of white collar to emphasize, rather than relieve, the priestly effect of the whole. Such is Don Miguel de Unamuno.

Such is, rather, his photograph. For Unamuno himself is ever changing. A talker, as all good Spaniards are nowadays, but a talker in earnest and with his heart in it, he is varied, like the subjects of his conversation, and, still more, like the passions which they awake in him. And here I find an unsought reason in intellectual support of that intuitional observation which I noted down in starting—that Unamuno resembles the Welsh in that he is not ashamed of showing his passions—a thing which he has often to do, for he is very much alive and feels therefore plenty of them. But a word of caution may here be necessary, since that term, "passion," having been diminished—that is, made meaner—by the world, an erroneous impression might be conveyed by what precedes, of the life and ways of Unamuno. So that it may not be superfluous to say that Don Miguel de Unamuno is a Professor of Greek in the University of Salamanca, an ex-Rector of it who left behind the reputation of being a strong ruler; a father of a numerous family, and a man who has sung the quiet and deep joys of married life with a restraint, a vigour, and a nobility which it would be difficult to match in any literature. *Yet* a passionate man—or, as he would perhaps prefer to say, *therefore* a passionate man. But in a major, not in a minor key; of strong, not of weak passions.

The difference between the two lies perhaps in that the man with strong passions lives them, while the man with weak passions is lived by them, so that while weak passions paralyze the will, strong

passions urge man to action. It is such an urge towards life, such a vitality ever awake, which inspires Unamuno's multifarious activities in the realm of the mind. The duties of his chair of Greek are the first claim upon his time. But then, his reading is prodigious, as any reader of this book will realize for himself. Not only is he familiar with the stock-in-trade of every intellectual worker—the Biblical, Greek, Roman, and Italian cultures—but there is hardly anything worth reading in Europe and America which he has not read, and, but for the Slav languages, in the original. Though never out of Spain, and seldom out of Salamanca, he has succeeded in establishing direct connections with most of the intellectual leaders of the world, and in gathering an astonishingly accurate knowledge of the spirit and literature of foreign peoples. It was in his library at Salamanca that he once explained to an Englishman the meaning of a particular Scotticism in Robert Burns; and it was there that he congratulated another Englishman on his having read *Rural Rides*, "the hall-mark," he said, "of the man of letters who is no mere man of letters, but also a man." From that corner of Castile, he has poured out his spirit in essays, poetry, criticism, novels, philosophy, lectures, and public meetings, and that daily toil of press article writing which is the duty rather than the privilege of most present-day writers in Spain. Such are the many faces, moods, and movements in which Unamuno appears before Spain and the world. And yet, despite this multiplicity and this dispersion, the dominant impression which his personality leaves behind is that of a vigorous unity, an unswerving concentration both of mind and purpose. Bagaria, the national caricaturist, a genius of rhythm and character which the war revealed, but who was too good not to be overshadowed by the facile art of Raemaekers (imagine Goya overshadowed by Reynolds!), once represented Unamuno as an owl. A marvellous thrust at the heart of Unamuno's character. For all this vitality and ever-moving activity of mind is shot through by the absolute immobility of two owlish eyes piercing the darkness of spiritual night. And this intense gaze into the mystery is the steel axis round which his spirit revolves and revolves in desperation; the unity under his multiplicity; the one fire under his passions and the inspiration of his whole work and life.

It was Unamuno himself who once said that the Basque is the alkaloid of the Spaniard. The saying is true, so far as it goes. But it would be more accurate to say "one of the two alkaloids." It is probable that if the Spanish character were analyzed—always provided that the Mediterranean aspect of it be left aside as a thing apart—two main principles would be recognized in it—*i.e.*, the Basque, richer in concentration, substance, strength; and the Andalusian, more given to observation, grace, form. The two types are to this day socially opposed. The Andalusian is a people which has lived down many civilizations, and in which even illiterate peasants possess a kind of innate education. The Basques are a primitive people of mountaineers and fishermen, in which even scholars have a peasant-like roughness not unlike the roughness of Scotch tweeds—or character. It is the even balancing of these two elements—the force of the Northerner with the grace of the Southerner—which gives the Castilian his admirable poise and explains the graceful virility of men such as Fray Luis de León and the feminine strength of women such as Queen Isabel and Santa Teresa. We are therefore led to expect in so forcible a representative of the Basque race as Unamuno the more substantial and earnest features of the Spanish spirit.

Our expectation is not disappointed. And to begin with it appears in that very concentration of his mind and soul on the mystery of man's destiny on earth. Unamuno is in earnest, in dead earnest, as to this matter. This earnestness is a distinct Spanish, nay, Basque feature in him. There is something of the stern attitude of Loyola about his "tragic sense of life," and on this subject—under one form or another, his only subject—he admits no joke, no flippancy, no subterfuge. A true heir of those great Spanish saints and mystics whose lifework was devoted to the exploration of the kingdoms of faith, he is more human than they in that he has lost hold of the firm ground where they had stuck their anchor. Yet, though loose in the modern world, he refuses to be drawn away from the main business of the Christian, the saving of his soul, which, in his interpretation, means the conquest of his immortality, his own immortality.

An individualist. Certainly. And he proudly claims the title. Nothing more refreshing in these days of hoggish communistic cant

than this great voice asserting the divine, the eternal rights of the individual. But it is not with political rights that he is concerned. Political individualism, when not a mere blind for the unlimited freedom of civil privateering, is but the outcome of that abstract idea of man which he so energetically condemns as pedantic—that is, inhuman. His opposition of the individual to society is not that of a puerile anarchist to a no less puerile socialist. There is nothing childish about Unamuno. His assertion that society is for the individual, not the individual for society, is made on a transcendental plane. It is not the argument of liberty against authority—which can be easily answered on the rationalistic plane by showing that authority is in its turn the liberty of the social or collective being, a higher, more complex, and longer-living "individual" than the individual pure and simple. It is rather the unanswerable argument of eternity against duration. Now that argument must rest on a religious basis. And it is on a religious basis that Unamuno founds his individualism. Hence the true Spanish flavour of his social theory, which will not allow itself to be set down and analyzed into principles of ethics and politics, with their inevitable tendency to degenerate into mere economics, but remains free and fluid and absolute, like the spirit.

Such an individualism has therefore none of the features of that childish half-thinking which inspires most anarchists. It is, on the contrary, based on high thinking, the highest of all, that which refuses to dwell on anything less than man's origin and destination. We are here confronted with that humanistic tendency of the Spanish mind which can be observed as the dominant feature of her arts and literature. All races are of course predominantly concerned with man. But they all manifest their concern with a difference. Man is in Spain a concrete being, the man of flesh and bones, and the whole man. He is neither subtilized into an idea by pure thinking nor civilized into a gentleman by social laws and prejudices. Spanish art and letters deal with concrete, tangible persons. Now, there is no more concrete, no more tangible person for every one of us than ourself. Unamuno is therefore right in the line of Spanish tradition in dealing predominantly—one might almost say always—with his own person. The feeling of the awareness of one's own personal-

ity has seldom been more forcibly expressed than by Unamuno. This is primarily due to the fact that he is himself obsessed by it. But in his expression of it Unamuno derives also some strength from his own sense of matter and the material—again a typically Spanish element of his character. Thus his human beings are as much body as soul, or rather body and soul all in one, a union which he admirably renders by bold mixtures of physical and spiritual metaphors, as in *gozarse uno la carne del alma* (to enjoy the flesh of one's own soul).

In fact, Unamuno, as a true Spaniard which he is, refuses to surrender life to ideas, and that is why he runs shy of abstractions, in which he sees but shrouds wherewith we cover dead thoughts. He is solely concerned with his own life, nothing but his life, and the whole of his life. An egotistical position? Perhaps. Unamuno, however, can and does answer the charge. We can only know and feel humanity in the one human being which we have at hand. It is by penetrating deep into ourselves that we find our brothers in us—branches of the same trunk which can only touch each other by seeking their common origin. This searching within, Unamuno has undertaken with a sincerity, a fearlessness which cannot be excelled. Nowhere will the reader find the inner contradictions of a modern human being, who is at the same time healthy and capable of thought set down with a greater respect for truth. Here the uncompromising tendency of the Spanish race, whose eyes never turn away from nature, however unwelcome the sight, is strengthened by that passion for life which burns in Unamuno. The suppression of the slightest thought or feeling for the sake of intellectual order would appear to him as a despicable worldly trick. Thus it is precisely because he does sincerely feel a passionate love of his own life that he thinks out with such scrupulous accuracy every argument which he finds in his mind—his own mind, a part of his life—against the possibility of life after death; but it is also because he feels that, despite such conclusive arguments, his will to live perseveres, that he refuses to his intellect the power to kill his faith. A knight-errant of the spirit, as he himself calls the Spanish mystics, he starts for his adventures after having, like Hernán Cortés, burnt his ships. But, is it necessary to enhance his figure by literary com-

parison? He is what he wants to be, a man—in the striking expression which he chose as a title for one of his short stories, *nothing less than a whole man*. Not a mere thinking machine, set to prove a theory, nor an actor on the world stage, singing a well-built poem, well built at the price of many a compromise; but a whole man, with all his affirmations and all his negations, all the pitiless thoughts of a penetrating mind that denies, and all the desperate self-assertions of a soul that yearns for eternal life.

This strife between enemy truths, the truth thought and the truth felt, or, as he himself puts it, between veracity and sincerity, is Unamuno's *raison d'être*. And it is because the "*Tragic Sense of Life*" is the most direct expression of it that this book is his masterpiece. The conflict is here seen as reflected in the person of the author. The book opens by a definition of the Spanish man, the "man of flesh and bones," illustrated by the consideration of the real living men who stood behind the bookish figures of great philosophers and consciously or unconsciously shaped and misshaped their doctrines in order to satisfy their own vital yearnings. This is followed by the statement of the will to live or hunger for immortality, in the course of which the usual subterfuges with which this all-important issue is evaded in philosophy, theology, or mystic literature, are exposed and the real, concrete, "flesh and bones" character of the immortality which men desire is reaffirmed. The Catholic position is then explained as the *vital* attitude in the matter, summed up in Tertullian's *Credo quia absurdum*, and this is opposed to the critical attitude which denies the possibility of individual survival in the sense previously defined. Thus Unamuno leads us to his inner deadlock: his reason can rise no higher than scepticism, and, unable to become vital, dies sterile; his faith, exacting anti-rational affirmations and unable therefore to be apprehended by the logical mind, remains incommunicable. From the bottom of this abyss Unamuno builds up his theory of life. But is it a theory? Unamuno does not claim for it such an intellectual dignity. He knows too well that in the constructive part of his book his vital self takes the leading part and repeatedly warns his reader of the fact, lest critical objections might be raised against this or that assumption or self-contradiction. It is on the survival of his will to live, after all the onslaughts of his critical

intellect, that he finds the basis for his belief—or rather for his effort to believe. Self-compassion leads to self-love, and this self-love, founded as it is on a universal conflict, widens into love of all that lives and therefore wants to survive. So, by an act of love, springing from our own hunger for immortality, we are led to give a conscience to the Universe—that is, to create God.

Such is the process by which Unamuno, from the transcendental pessimism of his inner contradiction, extracts an everyday optimism founded on love. His symbol of this attitude is the figure of Don Quixote, of whom he truly says that his creed "can hardly be called idealism, since he did not fight for ideas: it was spiritualism, for he fought for the spirit." Thus he opposes a synthetical to an analytical attitude; a religious to an ethico-scientific ideal; Spain, his Spain—*i.e.*, the spiritual manifestation of the Spanish race—to Europe, his Europe—*i.e.*, the intellectual manifestation of the white race, which he sees in Franco-Germany; and heroic love, even when comically unpractical, to culture, which, in this book, written in 1912, is already prophetically spelt *Kultura*.

This courageous work is written in a style which is the man—for Buffon's saying, seldom true, applies here to the letter. It is written as Carlyle wrote, not merely with the brain, but with the whole soul and the whole body of the man, and in such a vivid manner that one can without much effort imagine the eager gesticulation which now and then underlines, interprets, despises, argues, denies, and above all asserts. In his absolute subservience to the matter in hand this manner of writing has its great precedent in Santa Teresa. The differences, and they are considerable, are not of art, absent in either case, but of nature. They are such deep and obvious differences as obtain between the devout, ignorant, graceful nun of sixteenth-century Avila and the free-thinking, learned, wilful professor of twentieth-century Salamanca. In the one case, as in the other, the language is the most direct and simple required. It is also the least literary and the most popular. Unamuno, who lives in close touch with the people, has enriched the Spanish literary language by returning to it many a popular term. His vocabulary abounds in racy words of the soil, and his writings gain from them an almost peasant-like pith and directness which suits his own Basque primitive

nature. His expression occurs simultaneously with the thoughts and feelings to be expressed, the flow of which, but loosely controlled by the critical mind, often breaks through the meshes of established diction and gives birth to new forms created under the pressure of the moment. This feature Unamuno has also in common with Santa Teresa, but what in the Saint was a self-ignorant charm becomes in Unamuno a deliberate manner inspired, partly by an acute sense of the symbolical and psychological value of word-connections, partly by that genuine need for expansion of the language which all true original thinkers or "feelers" must experience, but partly also by an acquired habit of juggling with words which is but natural in a philologist endowed with a vigorous imagination. Unamuno revels in words. He positively enjoys stretching them beyond their usual meaning, twisting them, composing, opposing, and transposing them in all sorts of possible ways. This game—not wholly unrewarded now and then by striking intellectual finds—seems to be the only relaxation which he allows his usually austere mind. It certainly is the only light feature of a style the merit of which lies in its being the close-fitting expression of a great mind earnestly concentrated on a great idea.

The earnestness, the intensity, and the oneness of his predominant passion are the main cause of the strength of Unamuno's philosophic work. They remain his main asset, yet become also the principal cause of his weakness, as a creative artist. Great art can only flourish in the temperate zone of the passions, on the return journey from the torrid. Unamuno, as a creator, has none of the failings of those artists who have never felt deeply. But he does show the limitations of those artists who cannot cool down. And the most striking of them is that at bottom he is seldom able to put himself in a purely esthetical mood. In this, as in many other features, Unamuno curiously resembles Wordsworth—whom, by the way, he is one of the few Spaniards to read and appreciate. [1] Like him, Unamuno is an essentially purposeful and utilitarian mind. Of the two qualities which the work of art requires for its inception—earnestness and detachment—both Unamuno and Wordsworth possess the first; both are deficient in the second. Their interest in their respective leading thought—survival in the first, virtue in the second—is too

direct, too pressing, to allow them the "distance" necessary for artistic work. Both are urged to work by a lofty utilitarianism—the search for God through the individual soul in Unamuno, the search for God through the social soul in Wordsworth—so that their thoughts and sensations are polarized and their spirit loses that impartial transparence for nature's lights without which no great art is possible. Once suggested, this parallel is too rich in sidelights to be lightly dropped. This single-mindedness which distinguishes them explains that both should have consciously or unconsciously chosen a life of semi-seclusion, for Unamuno lives in Salamanca very much as Wordsworth lived in the Lake District—

in a still retreat

Sheltered, but not to social duties lost,

hence in both a certain proclivity towards ploughing a solitary furrow and becoming self-centred. There are no doubt important differences. The Englishman's sense of nature is both keener and more concrete; while the Spaniard's knowledge of human nature is not barred by the subtle inhibitions and innate limitations which tend to blind its more unpleasant aspects to the eye of the Englishman. There is more courage and passion in the Spaniard; more harmony and goodwill in the Englishman; the one is more like fire, the other like light. For Wordsworth, a poem is above all an essay, a means for conveying a lesson in forcible and easily remembered terms to those who are in need of improvement. For Unamuno, a poem or a novel (and he holds that a novel is but a poem) is the outpouring of a man's passion, the overflow of the heart which cannot help itself and lets go. And it may be that the essential difference between the two is to be found in this difference between their respective purposes: Unamuno's purpose is more intimately personal and individual; Wordsworth's is more social and objective. Thus both miss the temperate zone, where emotion takes shape into the moulds of art; but while Wordsworth is driven by his ideal of social service this side of it, into the cold light of both moral and intellectual self-control, Unamuno remains beyond, where the mol-