



Tragic Sense of Life

Miguel de Unamuno , J.E. Crawford Fritch (Translator)

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To the mentality that assumes, more or less consciously, that we must of necessity find a solution to every problem, belongs the argument based on the disastrous consequences of a thing. Take any book of apologetics-that is to say, of theological advocacy-and you will see how many times you will meet with this phrase-"the disastrous consequences of this doctrine." Now the disastrous consequences of a doctrine prove at most that the doctrine is disastrous, but not that it is false, for there is no proof that the true is necessarily that which suits us best. -from "The Rationalist Dissolution" This is the masterpiece of Miguel de Unamuno, a member of the group of Spanish intellectuals and philosophers known as the "Generation of '98," and a writer whose work dramatically influenced a wide range of 20th-century literature. His down-to-earth demeanor and no-nonsense outlook makes this 1921 book a favorite of intellectuals to this day, a practical, sensible discussion of the war between faith and reason that consumed the twentieth century and continues to rage in the twenty-first century. de Unamuno's philosophy is not the stuff of a rarefied realm but an integral part of fleshly, sensual life, metaphysics that speaks to daily living and the real world. Spanish philosopher MIGUEL DE UNAMUNO (1864-1936) was a prolific writer of essays, novels, poetry, and the stage plays. His books include Peace in War (1895), The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho (1905), and Abel Sanchez (1917)."

Tragic Sense of Life Details

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English in 1921, shortly after it, by J.E. Crawford Fritch with revisions by the author. In the Preface to the translation, Unamuno wrote "I wrote this book not for Spaniards only, but for all civilized and Christian men -- Christian in particular, whether consciously so or not -- of whatever country they may be." The apparent limitation of the intended audience of the book to "Christians" would exclude other people of faith and secularists and may be a limitation of the work. As a non-Christian who explores religious -- philosophical themes, I learned from this unusual book.

The "tragic sense of life" for Unamuno derives from transience and from the inevitability of death. It is presented as a personal tragedy. Unamuno says that without a sense of eternal life the purposes of individuals become futile and meaningless. Unamuno's sense of eternal life derives from his Catholicism. He finds that the dread of death and its finality is basic to the human condition. The tragic sense of life derives from the need to be immortal for life to have meaning and from life's finitude. Reason teaches the finitude of life which ends with the death of the body. Faith seeks immortality. Hence, Unamuno derives the conflict between faith and reason which he explores and expands upon throughout the book. He does not try to resolve the conflict. Rather, Unamuno tries to use the conflict as a way to deepen understanding and appreciation of life.

The book is written throughout in a highly personal tone with Unamuno describing his own thoughts and experiences. He argues that philosophical thinking is poetic and religious in character and involves the whole person, before the abstractions of rationalistic thinking. The first six chapters of the book develop the dilemma as Unamuno considers the "hunger for immortality", Catholic teachings about immortality, rationalist objections to immortality, and the depths of doubt that result. The final six chapters offer what Unamuno says are imaginative rather than argumentative responses to the dilemma. He considers matters such as the search for love, the search for God, faith, the nature of religion, and living passionately and with purpose in every day life. Unamuno's final chapter includes a meditation on Don Quixote, whom the author sees as emblematic of the religious search for ideals and the willingness to endure loneliness and ridicule in the quest. Don Quixote comes to symbolize the author's own quest, the Spanish character, and the religious life.

Soren Kierkegaard and William James are strong influences on this book. In particular, Unamuno offers an emphatic, extreme reading of William James' famous essay "The Will to Believe". Unamuno suggests that individuals need to persist with their hearts in the quest to find God and immortality, even suggesting that such a quest creates the God which is sought. The book is written in a spirit of tension as Unamuno does not wish to fall into the pit of irrationalism.

The writing in this book is passionate. Its strength lies in its sincerity while its weakness lies in its constant state of overdrive. In his last chapter, Unamuno says that he wrote the book as a sort of an improvisatory free-flow, and it shows. The book is repetitive, leaps from one thing to another with frequent changes in perspective and views. The complexity of the subject and of the thought are captured in the writing. The virtues of cool thinking, reflection, and sustained analysis should not so readily be given up.

I first read "The Tragic Sense of Life" many years ago and came back to it after reading a book by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (1903 -- 1993), an Orthodox Jewish thinker, "The Lonely Man of Faith" (1965) The Lonely Man of Faith The language, styles, and religious commitments differ sharply, but both authors explore the same basic dilemma. Soloveitchik distinguishes between two "Adams" in the Biblical creation account: the Adam of power and domination, and the Adam of loneliness in search of redemption. Lonely Adam must come to terms with the dominant Adam and pray and live with an inherent solitude in a mechanized world. Unamuno's Quixote seems to me a more dramatic figure -- a knight -- than Soloveitchik's quiet scholar but both are essentially loners. Both books are deeply individual, almost confessional.

Kierkegaard is a crucial presence in both books. William James, another great writer about philosophy and religion distinguished between "tough minded" and "tender minded" religion. Both Soloveitchik and Unamuno are well on the latter side of the continuum.

The expression of angst in the works of these two differently thoughtful writers, Unamuno and Soloveitchik, resonates with many modern readers with religious interests. Rationalism, science, and thinking an issue through tend to be disvalued in both books in favor of faith. Still, there is much that may be learned from reading these books, even by readers with an unapologetically secular orientation.

Robin Friedman

Ellie says

It was hard for me to decide on a rating for *Tragic Sense of Life* by Miguel de Unamuno. For the many times I struggled to understand, was bored or intensely frustrated, I wanted to give it two stars. But then, for the many times I felt like the text was singing, that I was intensely moved by Unamuno's *cris de coeur* about faith, despair, and hope, I wanted to give it five stars. But settling on three seemed to betray both aspects of my reading experience so I went with the moments, pages, when I was deeply moved and excited, I decided on four stars.

Some experiences are hard to reduce to a number.

Unamuno is writing of the/his struggle with the knowledge of our inevitable death and how that drives some people to reason and others to faith. He comes down on the side of those for whom the "foolishness of the cross" is the necessary refuge.

Some notes and quotes:

"Our life is a hope that is continually converting itself into a memory and memory in turn begets hope."

The tragedy of life is death. Death of our individual consciousness. We are caught between not being able to imagine ceasing to be and not being able to imagine continuing-or at least not without doubt."

A faith that is alive is also on the edge of despair (similar to what Thomas Merton said). We can't help but doubt but we are still pushed to believe.

We need hope to be happy so if all our desires are fulfilled in heaven, then happiness would be impossible.

We need to believe in order to live even if it seems to us impossible to believe.

According to Kierkegaard, faith is the "crucifixion of reason."

The "foolishness of the cross."

It is this contradiction that Unamuno says gives his life meaning and purpose. Or it is the conflict.

Ethics built on struggle with uncertainty.

Problem of vocation or occupation ?! Must give oneself wholly to one's work.

“virtue like religion is the fruit of passion”

I liked this book best when I read it more as a poem than as philosophy. And it was in that way that I found the text most meaningful and beautiful.

Roy Lotz says

(See below for English translation)

Pues abrigo cada vez más la convicción de que nuestra filosofía española, está líquida y difusa en nuestra literatura, en nuestra vida, en nuestra acción, en nuestra mística, sobre todo, y no en sistemas filosóficos. Es concreta.

Cuando intento aprender un idioma, leo siempre a los filósofos que han escrito en esa lengua, por dos razones. Primero, porque me gusta la filosofía ; y segundo, porque el vocabulario de la filosofía—especialmente en las lenguas romances—es bastante similar, con muchas palabras con una raíz común latín y griego. Y el filósofo más conocido de España, menciono aparte de Ortega y Gasset, es Unamuno.

Sin embargo, te aviso de que este libro no es filosofía *sensu strictu*. Si lo tienes en cuenta desde el principio, te ahorrarás mucha frustración. Unamuno no desarrolla argumentos lógicos, ni crea un sistema consistente. Este libro es, más bien, una colección de ensayos, una obra de literatura, un grito de dolor y de alegría, un tratado místico, y finalmente un poema en prosa. Unamuno no está intentando resolver ninguno de los problemas tradicionales de la filosofía; este libro es una expresión de la crisis de su vida.

En su opinión, el problema central de la vida es la muerte. El hecho de que cada hombre va a morir, y ninguno quiera: “*No quiero morir, no, no quiero ni quiero quererlo ; quiero vivir siempre, siempre, y vivir yo este pobre yo que me soy e me siento ser ahora y aquí, y por esto me tortura el problema de la duración de mi alma, de la mía propia.*”

Por esta razón tenemos el anhelo de inmortalidad. Este anhelo es simplemente una expresión de la vida, es decir, el anhelo de inmortalidad es la vida misma. En contra de la vida está la razón, que no puede creer en Dios ni en la inmortalidad. Entonces, se nos abren tres opciones: o nos sometemos a la razón, o nos sometemos a la fe, o vivimos con una pelea entre ellas.

Unamuno elige esto último. La vida deseable, en su opinión, es una vida de dolor, angustia, lucha, éxtasis, y exasperación. El individuo vale más que el universo, el individuo de carne y hueso que lo existe, y por eso no debemos someternos a algo abstracto, impersonal, ideal. Unamuno no desea el cielo tradicional, donde no hay tiempo, y los beatos no tienen cuerpo ni identidad, sino que todo el mundo está absorbido en la visión beatífica. Él quiere una continuación infinita de esta vida, nuestra vida de carne y hueso, con toda nuestra esperanza e ilusión, pero sin el miedo terrible a la muerte.

Unamuno se considera a su mismo católico, pero su libro está lleno de herejías. Tras la publicación de este

libro, la Iglesia Católica lo añadió a la *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*. Unamuno está, por ejemplo, en contra del escolasticismo de Santo Tomás de Aquino. El Dios de los escolásticos no es Dios, solo su idea, esto es, una abstracción estéril y vana. Tienes que creer en Dios con tu corazón, no con tu cabeza ; tienes que creer antes de saber, no saber antes de creer. Se puede ver que Unamuno está influido por Pascal y su apuesta, y también el existencialismo de Kierkegaard, a quien Unamuno llama “hermano.”

Aunque no soy cristiano y no creo en dios ni en la vida después de la muerte, admiro a Unamuno por su originalidad y su fe. Filosofía no es, según él, una cosa intelectual ni abstracta, sino una expresión de la vida inquieta y anhelada. En sus palabras: “*El mundo intelectual se divide en dos clases: diletantes de un lado y pedantes de otro.*” Seguro que Unamuno fue un diletante, pero también fue artista y, lo más importante, un hombre sincero y ferviente.

Fue también un escritor, un escritor magnífico. Su prosa es viva y eléctrica. Escribe como un místico en trance o un profeta gritando en el desierto. Por eso, si todo demás no bastase, debes leer sus libros:

¿Cuál es, pues, la nueva misión de Don Quijote hoy en este mundo? Clamar, clamar en el desierto. Pero el desierto oye, aunque no oigan los hombres, y un día se convertirá en selva sonora, y esa voz solitaria que va posando en el desierto como semilla, dará un cedro gigantesco que con sus cien mil lenguas cantará un hosanna eterno al Señor de la vida y de la muerte.

English

(view spoiler)

Whenever I try to learn a language, I always read its philosophers, for two reasons. First, because I like philosophy; and second, because the vocabulary of philosophy—especially in the Romance languages—is quite similar, with many words sharing a common Latin or Greek root. And the most well known Spanish philosopher, apart from Ortega y Gasset, is Unamuno.

However, I must warn you that this book is not philosophy *sensu strictu*. If you keep this in mind from the beginning, it will save you a lot of frustration. Unamuno doesn't develop logical arguments, nor does he create a coherent system. This book is, rather, a collection of essays, a work of literature, a cry of joy and pain, a mystical treatise, and, in the end, a poem in prose. Unamuno wasn't trying to resolve any of the traditional problems of philosophy; this book is an expression of the crisis of his life.

In his opinion, the central problem of life is death: “*I don't want to die, no, I don't, nor do I want to want to die; I want to live forever, forever, and live as the poor self that I am and that I feel myself here and now, and because of that I am tortured by the problem of the duration of my soul, of my own soul.*”

For this reason we have the desire for immortality. This desire is simply an expression of life, that is to say, the desire is life itself. Against life is reason, which cannot believe in God or immortality. Thus we are left with three options: submit to reason, submit to faith, or live with a constant battle between the two.

Unamuno chose the last one. The desirable life, in his opinion, is a life of pain, anguish, struggle, ecstasy, and exasperation. The individual is worth more than the universe, the individual of flesh and blood is all that exists, and for that reason we should not submit to anything impersonal, abstract, ideal. Unamuno did not

desire heaven as traditionally conceived, wherein there is no time, and the beatified have neither body nor identity, and everyone is absorbed in the beatific vision. He wanted an infinite continuation of this life, our life of flesh and blood, with all our hopes and dreams, but without the terrible fear of death.

Unamuno considered himself a Catholic, but his book is full of heresies. After the publication of this book, the Catholic Church added it to the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*. Unamuno was, for example, against the scholasticism of Saint Thomas Aquinas. The God of the scholastics is not God, only the idea of God, that is, a sterile and vain abstraction. You have to believe in God with your heart, not your head; you have to believe to know, not know to believe. You can see that Unamuno was influenced by Pascal's Wager, as well as the existentialism of Kierkegaard, whom Unamuno calls "brother."

Even though I am not a Christian and believe neither in God nor the afterlife, I admire Unamuno for his originality and his faith. Philosophy was not, for him, an abstract and intellectual thing, but rather the expression of a restless and yearning life. In his words: *"The intellectual world is divided into two classes: dilettantes on the one side, and pedants on the other."* Unamuno was certainly a dilettante, but he was also an artist, and, most importantly, a fervent and sincere man.

He was also a writer, a magnificent writer. His prose is vivid and electric. He wrote like a mystic in a trance, like a prophet screaming in the desert. For that, if nothing else suffices, you should read his books:

What is the new mission of Don Quixote today in this world? To cry out, to cry out in the desert. But the desert hears, even though men do not, and one day it will become a jungle of sound, and this solitary voice will be planted in the desert as a seed, from which a gigantic cedar will grow with one hundred thousand languages singing an eternal hosanna to the Lord of life and death.

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Laurel says

actually a book of philosophy with some true humanity, whether or not you agree with all of his points. the eternal conflict between head and heart... an applicable topic for all of us layman philosophers. in that sense: highly practical for daily life, but certainly not practical in the sense of mundane. very accessible, as well. you can read this even if you don't have to for a class (unlike whitehead, for example)! i kinda think it's necessary reading.

The "Birth of Tragedy" and the "Tragic Sense of Life" are also similar in that both works conclude with a lengthy section in which the author argues the case for case of a national artistic figure. Nietzsche argues that the operas of Wagner mark the return of the Greek tragic genre in the purest form. Unamuno contends that Cervante's "Don Quixote" is the ultimate hero of man caught in a fundamentally tragic (or absurd) situation in that Don Quixote simply laughs at the absurdity of his dreams and serenely charges his windmills.

Unamuno's book is full of bonbons. For someone familiar with Cervantes and Nietzsche, it will be a joy to read.

Jimmy says

Unamuno's defense of blind faith is, well, indefensible. He is a follower of the Tertullian creed: *Credo quia Absurdum*, or I believe because it is absurd. Because of our hunger for immortality, we create a god who gives a conscience to the universe and allows us to feel we have meaning. I prefer the courage of facing up to the truth of our mortality.

Unamuno prefers man as a feeling animal rather than a reasoning animal. I prefer the latter. Unamuno prefers to discuss "by metaphor." He ignores or seems unaware of the option that it is death that gives life meaning, the great existential paradox.

"We cannot conceive ourselves as not existing," he says. But I can. And you, gentle reader, can too.

He keeps repeating the question, "Wherefore?" But there is no Why?, there is only what Is. But Unamuno wails about how much he does not want to die, and he does not want to want to die. He claims that Nietzsche because he could not be Christ, bewailed against Christ. Unamuno defends the Church for opposing Galileo for "shattering the anthropomorphic belief that the universe was created for man." And he defends the Church for opposing Darwin for shattering our belief in our exceptionalism. And he defends Pius IX for claiming he was irreconcilable with modern civilization when he became the first infallible pope. Then he quotes Tertullian again with his, "He was buried and he rose again; it is certain because it is impossible."

He believes Spinoza was right to be called an atheist. Pantheism is rightly called atheism disguised. "A terrible thing is intelligence." Spinoza that we spring from nothingness and return to it.

Unamuno refers to the great biblical story where Jesus says to a man, "If you can believe, all things are possible to him that believes." But the man responds, "Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief!" A truly great quote. But the only solution to that man's unbelief is "faith." And religious faith always implies belief in the unbelievable and the impossible. And if God does not exist, neither do we exist. But Unamuno sees hope rising out of the abyss of despair.

The most tragic thing in life is love. It is the "child of illusion and the parent of disillusion." It is "the sole medicine against death, and it is death's brother." When you come to pity all things, you will arrive at universal love.

He quotes Dante: "There is no greater sorrow than the recollection of happy bygone days." And Herodotus, "The bitterest sorrow that man can know is to aspire to do much and to achieve nothing."

