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The Generation of '98 with Emphasis on Miguel de Unamuno

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Spanish literature

THE GENERATION OF 198
WITH EMPHASIS ON MIGUEL DE UNAMUNO

by

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FOR MR. RIUSECH

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The generation of '98 is a name given to certain individuals united in their literary efforts to better Spain politically, socially and culturally. The date of the group is significant since it symbolizes the transformation of Spanish life as a result of Spain's war with the United States. This group of young non-conformists consisted mainly of Valle Inclan, Azorin, Benavente, Maeztu, Baroja and Unamuno. All were characterized by their protest against Spain's immediate past, demanding new precedents to be set for future action and tradition.¹

Each in his own way was searching for the true identity of Spain, and went about it by delving into classical literature, the history of Spain and the culture of the past.² Those who valued the historical aspect of Spain brought into light the beauty of the old towns and countryside. The group as a whole revived an appreciation of El Greco, Gongora and Larra. They sought inspiration in Castile, to them the soul of Spain, and in the spiritual qualities of the Cid and Don Quixote. New concepts of European culture including the works of Schopenhauer, Carlyle and Nietzsche, gave new light to historical perspective. A nationalism, individualism and self-searching characterized the mood of the new generation.³

Each writer's goal was the same - to solve the problems of modern man's survival, progress, and future⁴ - their means to this end, however, differed so widely that they were drawn apart.⁵ In fact, many of their ideas were so divergent that Baroja,

supposedly one of the outstanding figures of this generation, refuted its very existence. He said it lacked common age groups, goals and spiritual solidarity. However, the accomplishments of the group are tangible proof of its being. "Only in the generation of 1898 were esthetic values defined, works of art analyzed and the creative process explained."⁶

No one contributed more to these achievements than Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936), described as "the greatest figure of contemporary intellectual Spain..., the most important Spaniard since Goya..., the leading figure of the generation of '98..., and the best symbol of his country and his time."⁷

Unamuno studied at Bilbao and received his Ph.D. in 1883 from the University of Madrid. Beginning in 1884 he taught for seven years at Bilbao, the city of his birth, writing for a socialist newspaper. He received an appointment to the Chair of the Greek Language and Literature in 1891 until 1901 when he became Rector at the University of Salamanca. Unamuno supported the Allies during WWI and was exiled in 1924 to the island of Fuerteventura as a result of his criticism of Primo de Rivera's dictatorial regime. Rescued by the French, he lived six years in Paris and Hendaye, a town near the Spanish border. Generally apolitical, he criticized all the regimes under which he lived including monarchy, dictatorship and even the republic⁸ whose establishment he had formerly advocated.⁹ In 1930 he returned to Spain and died in Salamanca after six years.

Unamuno differed from his contemporaries in several ways.

He surpassed them in his knowledge of culture, both ancient and modern, philosophy and literature. He was the only one who maintained a battle against the Spanish political regimes. In contrast to the bohemian life of most of the other writers of his time, he led a family life with a wife and several children. Rather than to live in Madrid as did the others, he chose to live a settled life near Salamanca.¹⁰

A knowledge of the life of Unamuno is vital to the understanding of his work since all his literature is basically autobiographical and/or self-analytical.¹¹ Unamuno's ideas cannot be defined in any exact order because they were produced by an ever-changing, living being. He emphasized reason as well as metaphysical irrationality, and his originality was characterized by paradox.¹² Although his conclusions often contradicted, he was incessantly involved in a search for the eternal and universal qualities of the spirit.

Unamuno's ideas constantly clashed in regard to the new and the old, centering mainly on reason versus religion. Knowledge of God is a constant struggle and he despised those who were smug in their idea of a God whose character they knew precisely. Unamuno did not accept traditional Christianity, but he thought that it should be accepted by those who could believe in it. Religion was a vital part of his life, and the conflict of his reason and his desire to believe created in him a "tragic sense" that permeated all his work.¹³

Often sharp and sarcastic, Unamuno condemned intolerance

wherever it occurred. He wrote with no regard to public opinion, but according to whatever he felt and believed at the moment.¹⁴

The closest answer to the question he asked of what is Spain and who is man, lay, he felt, in "intrahistory," that is, the life of the Spanish masses in regard to their village life, their humble chores, their goals and their problems. He believed that daily life, overlooked in favor of spectacular national and international events, in light of personal value, much overshadowed the other. He tried to analyze the faults of Spain and to search for remedies of permanent value in harmony with the true national character.¹⁵

Spain, religion (the Bible being one of his major sources¹⁶) and man are themes that recur in all his literature¹⁷- essays, poetry, novels, criticisms, plays, short stories and newspaper articles. A man of many talents, his most important works were done in essays, novels and poetry.

The purpose of Unamuno's essays was to interpret Spanish history and culture. En torno al casticismo, five essays considered as one work, he concerned himself with communicating the idea that the value of other cultures can be recognized without sacrificing one's own. He felt that Spanish culture could be highlighted by the assimilation of European traditions and ideas. (Later he rejected the mechanical progress of Europe and focused on her spiritual and religious aspects.)¹⁸

Unamuno believed in the Spaniard, but he felt that there were certain attitudes that should be corrected. His countrymen

were often aggressive because of extremes in accepted action and spirit to which they were accustomed. He felt that the Spaniard was torn between romantic love and a senseless family duty, resulting in intense frustration. The Spaniard felt that he could not change or withdraw an opinion because his honor might suffer. Unamuno never held this conviction. He never hesitated to contradict or correct himself, but he felt these characteristics in the men around him.¹⁹

In 1905 Unamuno wrote Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho, recreating Quixote as the spiritual soul of Spain, the constant hunter for the unattainable. He identified completely with Quixote, both in this respect and in Quixote's battle against materialism which he felt to be the embodiment of the denial of immortality.²⁰ He encouraged good works, action and the need for immortality. He believed that faith results from fear of the unknown and must be conquered. He suggested that Sancho is possibly a more admirable character than his master because he has more doubts and less faith.²¹

Del sentimiento tragico de la vida, a study in the basis for faith and disbelief, is the pathos of a man who wants to know what he is, where he came from and where he is going. The question is why does he want to know these answers. It is because he does not want to die entirely, for then life would have no meaning.²² Unamuno gave him three possibilities to believe:

- (1) He will die completely. This can only cause desperate despair.
- (2) He will not die entirely, thus, he can be resigned to this life

and to his ultimate fate. (3) He does not know either way; this leads to struggle. Unamuno longed for faith in immortality, for he ~~did~~ not wish to die completely either. But he felt that reason and knowlege have destroyed faith. Thus, there is no hope of immortality. His only faith was in the world and the men in it. His encouragement of good works was justified by his encouragements to live life and to die showing that death is unjust.²³

Unamuno wrote of human passion and pathos. The attack of the Carlists on the city of his birth left a lasting impression on him and was the inspiration of his first novel, Paz en la Guerra.²⁴ The importance in all his novels lay not in the plot, but that each character symbolized some aspect of man.²⁵

The same themes permeate his poetry and his prose. He considered the two as simply different literary forms to express the same things. Poetry to him afforded a way to strip the soul, not to expound on sentiment.²⁶ The poetry of Unamuno was often as irregular and free as his prose was rhythmic and poetic.²⁷ Though his poetry lacks musicality and refinement, depth of thought and emotional force compensate for lack of beauty in his verse.²⁸

At times the metaphysical in him was sublime. He then wrote profound religious poetry such as "El Cristo de Velazquez."²⁹ His poems of beauty praise God but come to an end with doubt and scepticism like all his works as well as the life of Unamuno.³⁰

Footnotes

¹Richard E. Chandler and Kessel Schwartz, A New History of Spanish Literature, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1961, p. 557.

²Arturo Torres-Rioseco, New World Literature, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1949, p. 272.

³Chandler and Schwartz, p. 557.

⁴Ibid., p. 558.

⁵Diego Marin and Angel del Rio, Breve Historia de la Literatura Espanola, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967 p. 271.

⁶Torres-Rioseco, p. 139.

⁷Chandler and Schwartz, p. 565.

⁸Ibid., p. 560.

⁹Marin and del Rio, p. 279.

¹⁰Angel del Rio, Historia de la Literatura Espanola, New York, Dryden Press, 1948, p. 180-181.

¹¹Ibid., p. 101.

¹²Chandler and Schwartz, p. 562.

¹³John Devlin, Spanish Anticlericalism, New York, Las Americas Publishing Company, 1966, pp. 113-115.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 121.

¹⁵Marin and del Rio, p. 281.

¹⁶del Rio, p. 282.

¹⁷Chandler and Schwartz, p. 561.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 562.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 563.

²⁰Devlin, pp. 115, 118.

²¹Chandler and Schwartz, p. 563.

²²Ibid., 563.

²³Ibid., p. 564.

²⁴Ibid., p. 560.

²⁵Marin and del Rio, p. 284.

²⁶Ibid., p. 283.

²⁷del Rio, p. 183-184.

²⁸Marin and del Rio, p. 283.

²⁹Ibid., p. 283.

³⁰Devlin, p. 119.

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