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# Discovering the Tragic Sense of Life: an Examination of Philosophical Influence on Art and Self

Jamie Zito

*“The truth is that my work is to shatter the faith of men here, there, and everywhere, faith in affirmation, faith in negation, and faith in abstention from faith, and this for the sake of faith in faith itself; it is to war against all those who submit, whether it be to Catholicism, or to rationalism, or to agnosticism; it is to make all men live the life of inquietude and passionate desire.”- Miguel de Unamuno*

The intention of this project is abnormal as far as research is concerned because it is the product of a philosophical self-examination, using the lens of Miguel de Unamuno’s writings. His works focus on a thorough investigation of the meaning of life and by what pillars we define our existence and the existence of God. He does not seek to answer, but instead to struggle with the question, “why do we exist and to what end?” Unamuno’s central philosophical stance is that suffering is essential to an intentional existence because it is through physical suffering that we are aware of our own body and mental suffering that we are aware of our soul. His writings are dense and oftentimes full of contradiction, but Unamuno is not seeking to create definitions or standards. His intention in writing is the same as his intention in life: to awaken the depths of the soul to the agonistic reality of uncertainty, opening himself and others to the fallout of this realization.

The frame of this project and my purpose of research is to stir up this questioning in myself in order to better understand what influence philosophy and religious questioning has on my art. I will also attempt to break down Unamuno as a writer and a thinker, in order to use his seminal commentary on *Don Quixote* as the basis for a series of painting that will explore the religious nature of Don Quixote’s life, as described by Unamuno.

Unamuno begins *The Tragic Sense of Life* with the intention of giving the reader a chance to center himself on what man is as a philosopher and as a being; it introduces to the reader the struggle to explain what existence is, a theme that can be seen throughout the entirety of Unamuno’s canon. Unamuno seeks to start his audience off with the appropriate lens in which they might realize a pivotal departure point consistent in all of his work: that each man is an end in himself, as opposed to the means to an end and the realization that people do not fulfill objective means, even though they seem to play that role in our own life narrative.

Each man is caught up in his own struggles toward his own personal “wherefore of his existence” and we must remember that although we can only ever take the world in through our unique and biased eyes, there is something profound about realizing that each and every person around us is doing exactly the same. No matter how well we know someone or how engrained they are in our individual life, everyone outside of us is merely playing a supporting role to us and we are in the same position when the situation is reversed. When we take a hard look at how life plays out on a day-to-day basis, it is evident that people view each other as a means to an end; that those around us serve some purpose in our life and thus we stay with them or leave them. Unamuno urges us to reconsider this reality because only when we truly understand that each man is an end in himself can we begin to grasp at the meaning of our own existence.

To depart on the quest for personal understanding and to begin grappling with the deepest questions we face within ourselves about the reality of our existence, it is crucial to bear in mind the shared nature of this endeavor and the collective struggle humanity faces as a vast group of individuals struggling to reconcile the same paradoxes and reach the same, yet intrinsically unique, end. The example that Unamuno gives is that “the telephone may be useful to us in enabling us to communicate at a distance with the woman we love. But she, where is she useful to us? A man takes an electric tram to go to hear an opera, and ask himself, ‘Which, in this case, is the more useful, the tram or the opera?’”<sup>1</sup> This is an amazing explanation because it perfectly represents how we have wants and desires and make conscious decisions to move closer toward things that evoke emotion or any internal response, like love or people or the arts. We do gain from these experiences or people, but they do not fulfill an objective end and therefore are not of objective use. Perhaps this woman evokes the sentiment of love, but she herself is not the answer to our questions about love. The only place to discover these answers in the lonely and deeply personal depths of our own self. It is essential to understand Unamuno’s words that each man in himself is an ends and not a means because it is this realization that allows the reader to fully grasp the magnitude of Unamuno’s various musing about individual vs. universal and to see that all men are connected in that if each is an end, each deals with the same questions and ponderings, wants and desires. Each is living a distinct and unique life and will develop an equivalent yet highly varied personality, which Unamuno describes as the altered projection of our individuality into society.<sup>2</sup>

1 Miguel De Unamuno. *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and in Peoples*. Trans. J. E. Crawford Fitch (London: Macmillan and Co., 1921). 2.

2 Miguel De Unamuno. *Essays and Soliloquies*. Trans. by J. E. Crawford Fitch (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Press, 1925), 42.

This moves us toward explanations about our own existence and why we question and search: logically we know that these non-objective emotions or experiences that we seek through our encounters with the world and with other people do not fulfill or satisfy our basic needs to live, those necessities that lie within reason and logic. At the same time, we cannot deny that there is some part of us that craves more than these rational needs, defying logical explanation and our society's underlying assumption of an objective reality. In our present day and age, there is plenty of material in circulation, pertaining to the brain chemistry of love leading to happiness or social interactions being necessary to our physical health, yet based on my research, Unamuno might decry this as scientists trying to limit our projections of existence to a definitive box, and I cannot help but agree with him. Unamuno was writing in an age when Spain was being criticized by the rest of Europe for producing thinkers of "lesser intelligence" for they were weary to sell their souls to the theory that rationalism was the pinnacle of intelligence, and it would appear that we live in an age not dissimilar from Unamuno's, where everything must be explained and there is no room for marveling at the complexity of human experience. We are taught from the age we start at school to break everything thing we can sense into its rational components in order to understand it, and yet why is this our basis for understanding? Why is our natural sense for things a lesser form of understanding? Why must our feelings about things be decried as bias and yet we pretend as if our rational intellect can somehow escape these same preconceptions? As Unamuno says "Man is said to be a reasoning animal. I do not know why he has not been defined as an affective or feeling animal...More often I have seen a cat reason than laugh or weep. Perhaps it weeps or laughs inwardly, but then perhaps, also inwardly, the crab resolves equations of the second degree."<sup>3</sup> Thus, to Unamuno, man is distinguishable by his ability to feel and to emote in a very discernible way, and the man of flesh and bone is the physical manifestation of a thing that cannot only reason but feels passionately about said reason.

A quote from another story fits here to give a better understanding of why Unamuno sees the laws that come from reason as just another form of detestable dogma, something that will be discussed at length later in this paper: "It is clear enough. Common, vulgar spirits are never distinguished, and, unable to bear the fact that others are, they attempt to impose upon others more fortunate the uniform of dogma- which is a kind of dull fatigue uniform- so that the uncom-

<sup>3</sup> *The Tragic Sense of Life*, 3.

mon may appear undistinguished."<sup>4</sup> In other words, those who are common and unoriginal use reason and the dogmas about reality that it breeds to vanquish the creativity of those who can still marvel at the mystery of the universe without need of explaining it. Man is abnormal, unique and this is what makes our lives seem like they have some sort of meaning; that we are each different from all others and in the same breath, know that we are somehow the same. This is how we feel purpose and passion, the essentials of immortality for Unamuno. Science, with law and definition, its own special forms of dogma, seeks to make oddities into normalcy and to make the uniqueness of the human life just another piece of an elaborate, yet predictable, logarithm. Unamuno is instantly hesitant of anything that attempts to strip man of his flesh and bone in order to prove that at the end of the day we all look the same. For Unamuno, it is exactly our differences and our passions, our personal yet collective search for the wherefore of life, that allow us to ponder our own existence and in turn, have access to the richness of faith and the power of our metaphors for God. If we do not first realize that we are all on the same journey, each an end in ourselves, there is no hope for the individual, because just as individual humans have sense that the cells that comprise him lack, so does society have senses that individuals lack.<sup>5</sup>

Unamuno focuses on what it means to be a man and uses various other philosophers either in support or to challenge argument his own conclusions. Unamuno is interesting as a philosopher because he loves to be challenged. It would seem that he could have daily paradigm shifts and be at ease with this fact because he had realized that this is simply the nature of life and philosophy has no reason to differ. We can be assured of one thing at one moment and then experience something in the next that calls everything we knew into question. Unamuno firmly believes that man is concrete and unitary, there is no denying the physical being, but from Spinoza he pulls an interesting branch of his explanation:

...that is, the endeavor wherewith everything endeavors to persist in its own being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing itself...every man who is a man, is nothing but the endeavor, the effort, which he makes to continue to be a man, not to die....The endeavor whereby each individual thing endeavors to persist involves no finite time but indefinite time. That is to say that you, I, and Spinoza wish never to die and that this longing of our never to die is our actual essence.<sup>6</sup>

4 Miguel De Unamuno. *Abel Sanchez and Other Short Stories*. Trans. Anthony Kerrigan (South Bend, Indiana: Regnery-Gateway, Inc., 1956), 56.

5 Miguel De Unamuno. *Treatise on Love of God*. Trans. Nelson R. Orringer (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 23.

6 *Tragic Sense of Life*, 7.

This quote is particularly complex because one must be aware of Unamuno's feelings toward Spinoza. Throughout *The Tragic Sense of Life*, Unamuno refers to Spinoza as "the tragic, Portuguese, Jew" with a certain air of pity, as Spinoza is a famous rationalist. In the same sentence, Unamuno is both agreeing and disagreeing with Spinoza, something that could not be understood without a thorough understanding of Unamuno's fluid shifts in perspective and easy acceptance of his own paradoxical thought. Unamuno agrees that our longing to persist is essential, as he believes longing and desire for immortality is what pushes us to seek God, and yet also decries that longing for life too strongly is what most often leads a man to take his own life for he cannot bear to persist with the knowledge that this life will slip away.<sup>7</sup> We know that Unamuno disagrees with Spinoza's rationalist argument because it concludes with the sentiment that our longing is our core essence, which Unamuno has already decried through his passionate exploration of the man of flesh and bone, who does not long to exist as he is consumed with the passionate and emotional experience of existing, therefore our essence must exist outside of this longing, for it is the essence that prompts the longing and not vice versa. Through his argument with Spinoza, it can be summarized that a crux of Unamuno's perception of man is that he craves immortality because his longing to persist goes beyond the life we know presently, denying that this longing could be our human essence. Further, not only does man crave immortality, but acknowledges that it is the craving of an illogical, unattainable idea. If we were in fact creatures of reason, how could it be rationalized that we crave what is beyond reason, for when we are craving something, are we are validating it as a reality? Instead Unamuno rebuts Spinoza's argument and posits that personality is essence and life is an exercise in cultivating personality, while still balancing it with our individuality.<sup>8</sup>

Unamuno also states that memory is the basis of individual personality, just as tradition is the basis of the collective personality of a people, with personality being the highest designation to which we aspire, our ever evolving, yet always consistent essence. Whether the self via personality changes in different ways today as compared to twenty years ago, there is no doubt that who one is today is a product of who he or she has been, the examination of which hints at the continuity of man; we arrive at who we are at any given time by building off of the continuous state of consciousness we have been experiencing and the memory we live in and by.<sup>9</sup> In Tillichian terms, our personality is our human essence mani-

7 Ibid, 45.

8 Ibid, 8.

9 Ibid, 9.

fest in a process of continual becoming. Along with this, Unamuno takes extreme pride in the unique personality and believes that we begin to process the verb “to be” as an individual. What is meant here is that to wish to be anyone or anything else than what one is at that exact moment is to cease to be who one is (too long to be another is to deny one’s own personality) and taking into consideration the language Unamuno has provided us, this would be to deny one’s essence.<sup>10</sup>

Unamuno also makes a point to note the difference between a human soul and a human life, and it would seem that he values the soul as the continuity within man. There is a temporal continuity in personality but there is an indefinite continuity when considering the soul. He states “...the less a man believes in the soul, that is to say in his conscious immortality, personal and concrete, the more he will exaggerate the worth of this poor transitory life...”<sup>11</sup> He also states that the world is for consciousness, and that consciousness and finality are one in the same; an apparent contradiction in the frame of the immortal soul. Unamuno defends this with the fitting argument that life in itself is a contradiction as it is an endless struggle with no chance for victory.<sup>12</sup>

Upon first reading, much of what Unamuno says seems dismal and pessimistic, but here is where it becomes apparent that to read an Unamuno essay is to know Unamuno in the instant but to not understand what he is saying about life for some years later. He writes, “I have hope only for those who do not know, but who are not resigned to being ignorant, for those who restlessly struggle to learn the truth and who are more concerned with the struggle than with the victory.”<sup>13</sup> This quote directly pertains to those who challenge dogmas and do not accept what others have declared truth, but it is fitting in this context because it shows us that Unamuno has more hope for understanding and meaning in the lives of those who struggle continually and are not concerned with ever winning, for victory would mean the end. Just as life is a contradiction, so is knowledge, for what we feel often challenges what we claim to “know.” This leads into Unamuno’s discussion of values of the heart vs. values of the mind and how label mongers and pendants might only think with their brain instead of every part of their body, for understanding with the brain defines things, but understanding them with the heart gives them volume. Those who only think with their brain seek to find the definitions and the reasons of objects as opposed to considering the ever changing variables of the world and the self. Their definitions may be more objectively

10 Ibid, 10.

11 Ibid, 12.

12 Ibid, 15.

13 Miguel De Unamuno. *Perplexities and Paradoxes*. Trans. Stuart Gross (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1945), 5.

efficient; they may be able to recite fact and understand the world as objective evidence, but they will lose the ability to revitalize themselves and their thought. They will lose touch with their body as a united force for understanding reality and be limited in every way.

Unamuno chooses to explain this via a wonderfully rich metaphor of a professional boxer.<sup>14</sup> Unamuno often says that knowledge is not an end in itself and we only seek knowledge as a means for some greater end, so it seems fitting that I include some of myself, particularly here for this section speaks to my own musings about the world and those around me. It is reassuring that 100 years ago a man in Spain was writing things that would make me feel better about the unique individual and yet confirm that countless others before me have wondered at the same question which I find myself posing. I often wonder why so many people around me choose to only see the world as objective; to be a scientist and collect evidence and if the evidence proves something that it is true without question. All they have left is their brain because that is the designed “wherefore” of institutionalized learning. I cannot help but question if they feel any sense of grief or sorrow that with each discovery (however essential this discovery is) it is in part their task to extract the marrow of the wonder and mystery from the bones of the universe. Existentialism is inspiring to me because as depressing as it may appear, there is something boundlessly comforting that to think with more than the brain or complete any action with the entirety of the self may be our designation as opposed to our resignation. For me, it is impossible to look into the world and accept that it is limited to what can be presented as objective evidence. It is even more impossible to look into oneself and believe this.

This is where imagination must enter the dialogue. It is the one skill we are born with that dwindles as we develop. It is present, a part of existence that is beyond the confines of reason, and is almost universally abolished from our adult selves. It would seem that our age of reason has deemed imagination unnecessary to persist in the world in which we live and thus it has become erroneous, present in the child’s mind, but dismissed by the adult. Show me a deeply refined, understood personality and a highly developed imagination, and I will show you a true man of flesh and bone.

In order to discuss man who thinks, Unamuno must also discuss knowledge. To him, all knowledge has an ultimate object because it is either for an immediate practical end or simply to continue the process of cultivating knowledge as there will never be an “end” of knowledge.<sup>15</sup> Even philosophy falls into this category

<sup>14</sup> *Tragic Sense of Life*, 14-15.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

(the category being knowledge that has an object as opposed to thought “for the sake of thought” or knowledge “for the sake of knowledge”) because it refers to our destiny or our attitude as we face life and the universe. Thus, even philosophy perpetuates the tragic contradiction because the philosopher must engage his ponderings and decide whether they address issues of the mind or of the heart and will, satisfying the immediate practical end of philosophizing, but never resolving man’s internal struggle either on a personal or universal level. No philosophy can solve this contradiction or evade it, so all that can be done is for the man in charge of the philosophy to face the contradiction squarely. All men face the question of why in regard to origin and “wherefore” in regard to destiny; these questions are not purely rational and thus must be felt.<sup>16</sup> To feel is essential to man and drives us to ask the unanswerable questions of ourselves for “we all lack something; only some of us feel the lack and others do not. Or they pretend not to feel the lack, and then they are hypocrites.”<sup>17</sup> Unamuno describes the story of Solon who was asked by a pedant why he was weeping over his dead son if weeping availed nothing. Solon replied, “Precisely for that reason—because it does not avail.” Weeping over sorrow does not do anything; it is manifest that weeping alleviates distress, but Solon does not weep to alleviate distress; he weeps because it does not avail; it does not solve anything but it must be done. Unamuno makes the beautiful comment that he is convinced:

...that we should solve many things if we all went out into the streets and uncovered our griefs, which perhaps would prove to be but one sole common grief, and joined together in beweeeping them and crying aloud to the heavens and calling upon God. And this, even though God should hear us not; but He would hear us. The chief sanctity of a temple is that it is a place to which men go to weep in common.<sup>18</sup>

This is where Unamuno introduces the term “the tragic sense of life” which he does not fully explain but in a sense dances around. The tragic sense of life is something uncovered throughout the process of reading all of Unamuno’s works and it is something that cannot be defined, not even by Unamuno himself, for it is exactly as he states it: a sense. It is a feeling and a sentiment, a weight in the pit of our dreaming selves that is dragged behind us at all times, no matter how rational and unfeeling we attempt to be about our own existence. This tragic sense is something that lies within each of us and takes various shapes; Unamuno is trying

16 *Ibid.*, 16.

17 *Ibid.*, 17.

18 *Ibid.*, 17.

to stir these often unthought-of or neglected thoughts in us through his writing so that we might discover our own tragic sense and spend our lives grappling with it in an attempt to truly know ourselves at the core of our existence. I do not think it is supposed to be negative or sad in the usual way that we read tragic, it is more of a frame of mind that is closer to full consciousness and in this state, man can recognize the tragic paradoxes of life, consciousness, and his own existence. It is a conception of life.

In the quote above Unamuno is trying to say that knowledge and action will not solve our most fundamental problems with life or be able to ever relieve our deepest grief, our knowledge of our finite existence that we cannot understand. If everyone recognized this tragic paradox of knowledge without understanding, or at least acknowledged their deepest griefs of incomprehensible finitude, it would result in weeping, the ultimate action without reason and this will awaken them to the tragic sense of life. When Unamuno claims that we must learn to weep he is saying that we must regain our ability to act beyond reason, to engage love, to weep for sorrow, to cultivate our imagination for these will lead us to God. Even though God should hear us not, Unamuno says, but He would hear us because this in itself is a paradox. What Unamuno means is that God is acknowledged as not real and our rational mind know that weeping is indeed futile for no one can actually hear our silent pleas, but in fact there is something hearing our pleas. We plea and weep because there is something within us, some essence of our self that has acknowledged (perhaps without our brains' consent or awareness) that there is a "wherefore" of our cries and that is God.

As stated in the introduction, this project is an exploration of how philosophy and religion inform art and this idea of internal acknowledgement of something beyond seems so vitally important, this idea that our highest self has acknowledged that there is a focal point past the clarity of reason and we can know this by the feelings we have and the actions that accompany them. There is something about the artist that accepts that there is a muddiness to human existence; that things must be reached for before they can be seen and there are unanswerable and incalculable parts of the self. One does not wake up one morning and decide to make art. There is inspiration and vision and a recognition beyond reason. Reason dictates that art is not an objective necessity, but the artist knows otherwise. There is a "wherefore" in his decision to make art even if those outside what the individual cannot understand at the moment. In addition, in order to make art, one must be aware, consciously or otherwise, of the tragic sense of life. It is here that my own art work enters because I want to use Unamuno's philosophy and a deep-

er understanding of existentialism to inform my work. I cannot merely research Unamuno without his philosophy affecting me or stirring my own thoughts and if I want his existentialist lens to influence my creative process, I too must open myself to the tragic sense of life and all of the questioning this entails.

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