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The Ludic Element in Unamuno's Thought

Gonzalo Plasencia

Authors such as Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus popularized the philosophical movement called existentialism in the 1940's, which declared that man had no nature and that, as a result, he was totally free to choose and direct his own course of life. According to this philosophical perspective, the absurdity of existence and the inadequacy of human reason cause despair, anguish and nausea in man. Existentialism, which was fathered by the nineteenth century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, has been associated, in one form or another, with many writers and philosophers, e.g., José Ortega y Gasset (*El tema de nuestro tiempo*, 1923), Franz Kafka (*Der Prozess*, 1925), and Martin Heidegger (*Sein und Zeit*, 1927). But prior to these individuals, Miguel de Unamuno had demonstrated an affinity for kierkegaardian thought and a propensity for existentialism in such works as "La Fe" (1900), "Mi religión" (1907) and *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* (1913).

Unamuno's attraction to the Danish philosopher is due, in part, to Kierkegaard's aversion to rationalization of the existence of God and his opposition to systematic philosophies. Specifically, Kierkegaard wanted to free the Church from the clergy and all the middlemen who exteriorized religion. He also expounded on the limitations of reason and the dangers of adhering only to this faculty. Although the similarities between these two thinkers are remarkable, there is one thorn in their "spiritual brotherhood", i.e., Kierkegaard chose to believe in the existence of God and Unamuno was unable to accept or deny His existence: the Danish philosopher selected the nonrational act of faith to attain God while the Spanish thinker did not go beyond struggling between reason and emotion. Nevertheless, the Basque writer's existential perspective of life is closely akin to that of Soren Kierkegaard.

In spite of all the volumes that have been written about Miguel de Unamuno, his literature and thought can be basically reduced to an intense aversion to conformity, conventionalism and rationalism, and a persistent call for freedom, spontaneity and struggle. Life, as portrayed by don Miguel, is a constant battle of opposites without resolution. Doctrines, dogmas, utopias and institutions provide one-sided perspectives that suppress the concept of life as a *lucha* and instill inertia in man. Human existence for our author is a contest, a battle and a struggle.

This existential and agonistic concept of life has such a strong resemblance to his definition of the ludic element, that it is no exaggeration to affirm that life for the Basque writer is a form of play. At first glance, it may seem incongruous to think that a prestigious and austere individual, an author who concerned himself with such profound and grave topics as existence, immortality and God, would even consider the ludic element, yet alone have it at the foundation

of his thought. But a careful review of Miguel de Unamuno's bibliography will reveal a good number of writings that treat specifically, at least in part, the ludic factor and demonstrate that this phenomenon is disseminated throughout his writings. Titles such as "El juego de las ideas" ("The game of ideas") (1908), "Sobre el ajedrez" ("On chess") (1912), "El juego y la guerra" ("Games and war") (1917), "Juego limpio" ("Clean fighting") (1917), and "Boy-scouts y foot-ballistas" (1923), together with *Recuerdos de niñez y de mocedad* (*Remembrances of Childhood and Youth*) (1908), where he recalls with extraordinary fondness his youth and the joys of play, manifest an interest, an enthusiasm and a love for the ludic factor. In "Arabesco pedagógico sobre el juego" ("A pedagogical arabesque on play") (1914), he leaves no doubt as to his esteem and admiration of play; "Pocos, muy pocos, si alguno, más enamorados del juego y más propensos que yo a él."¹

His propensity toward the ludic factor is reflected in his vision of the world. Unamuno always sought the natural opposite, be it in religion, politics or economics, of every postulate (reason—emotion, word—letter, soul—flesh, Gospel—Bible, communism—fascism). He insisted on a theory of opposites, and while speaking in his novel *Niebla* to Augusto Pérez, for example, don Miguel states his necessity for discussion, contradiction and opposition. This need is of such magnitude that he invents someone within himself if there is no one to question or contradict him. Play conjugates with this theory of opposition because it is an activity that calls for opposites, contraries and adversaries: either there are two or more conflicting participants or the participants must contend with contrary elements. Any game that lacks this quality of adversity and opposition is not truly a ludic function. In *La novela de Don Sandalio, jugador de ajedrez* (1930), he affirms the necessity of adversaries in play and the need for opposition in life in order that men may communicate and embrace each other. Opposition leads to struggle and this, in the opinion of Unamuno, is the surest way of eliminating solitude and bringing people together. By definition, conflict implies a relationship between two or more antagonists and this view, postulated by many, in particular Georg Simmel, the German philosopher and sociologist, is at the heart of Unamuno's thought. As long as there is conflict and play, there is no apathy.

Confrontation, struggle and conflict constitute life for don Miguel. Consequently, true human existence is a continuous struggle that causes tension and agony. In "Mi religión" (1907), possibly his most succinctly written essay, Unamuno rejects the eternal *ignorabimus* and declares his religion to be the search for truth in life and life in truth, knowing that he is not to obtain them while he lives; nevertheless, his religion is to struggle incessantly and tirelessly with mystery and God. This religious outlook, which is similar, in part, to Pascal's polemical faith, is very personal and does not anticipate answers. Unamuno struggles with existence, immortality and God for the sake of the struggle itself.

Man plays for the sake of playing because the ludic element, as set forth by Unamuno, is a disinterested activity that is satisfying in itself and ends there. Play has no other object than to run its course and provide satisfaction. Just

prior to his exile in 1923, in his article, "Boy-scouts y foot-ballistas", he declares that the Spanish Government has subverted the concept of play for its own sake by transforming the boy-scouts into an instrument for the attainment of patriotism. While expressing displeasure with the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, he points out that play functions for its own sake and that it cannot be utilized for any other purpose: one does not even enter into this activity in order to be victorious. His concept of life hinges on this criterion, because man struggles and agonizes with irresolvable issues for the sake of struggling and agonizing.

In order to engage fully in play and in life, to truly be alive, man must be free. He cannot be inhibited or controlled by any external forces. Unamuno always gave the highest priority to freedom of choice and in his view there is nothing freer than play: "La libertad sólo es verdadera libertad en el juego. . . No hay más que una manera de ser de veras libre, y es jugar."² All true ludic activity is devoid of external interference so that the free and spontaneous interactions between its components and participants may take place. The boy-scouts, known as *exploradores*, do not explore anything because the authorities supervise and direct the activities of these youngsters. Don Miguel always deplored and denounced the utilization of games in education because the external organization and control, besides stifling the learning process, destroys the freedom and spontaneity of the ludic factor.

Due to this ludic criterion, Unamuno's aversion to dogmas, doctrines, utopias and professionalism is understandable. These forms of ideocracy prevent men from thinking boldly, independently and comprehensively. Professionalism, for example, in politics, government, religion or education leads to monopolization and exclusion. Professionals feel that they should control the knowledge and the theory of their specialization and exclude anyone whom they deem less qualified. Consequently, professionalism leads to conservatism, loss of true function and perspective and self-indulgence.

In particular, Unamuno criticized the Church because of its insistence on being the official interpreter of the Scriptures and, therefore, not permitting Christians to doubt, struggle or agonize with the teachings of Christ. Disciples of the Church, he felt, should not be prevented from playing with the conflict of the resurrection of the flesh and the immortality of the soul.

His objections to the Monarchy and to the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, and his disillusionment with the Republic and the fascist movement are founded on his motto of struggle and agony and his aversion to professionalism. These political movements, dominated respectively by the monarchists, the military, the socialists and the military again, encouraged the citizens of Spain to accept their principles blindly and stoically. These professionals, by insisting that their form of government is the only mode of governing, have eliminated opposition, choice, freedom and, consequently, true patriotism. Men should have the freedom to examine ideas as a soccer player examines a ball in order to determine which one will hold up, which one will not and which one will accelerate the game.

One cannot overlook the strong similarities between Unamuno's concept of life and his definition of play. In "De la religión de un luchador" ("On the re-

ligion of a fighter"), he asserts that his religion is to seek battle and war without any expectation of remuneration. If there is any compensation, it will probably come from the struggle itself. In "Juego limpio", he summarizes the ludic element by stating that play is a function in and of itself. Specifically, while speaking of his personal life and religion, he says, ". . .yo lucho por la lucha misma."³ And, in alluding to play, he declares, ". . .debe ser un fin en sí y no un medio para otra cosa. Se juega para jugar."⁴ Both phenomena require opposites, contraries and adversaries that interact spontaneously and freely, i.e., people must have the liberty to struggle with mystery, paradox and contradiction and players must have the freedom to play as they wish.

Not only does he envision life, religion and play in a similar light, but he utilizes similar phraseology to describe both phenomena. Concerning his spiritual search for war, he says, "Si vencemos, ¿cuál será el premio de la victoria? Déjalo; busca la lucha, y el premio, si lo hay, se te dará por añadidura."⁵ And, in referring to play, he states, "Y todo lo demás que del juego se saca es algo que se le da al jugador por añadidura."⁶

Play and struggle are synonymous for don Miguel and if there is any doubt, we can always refer to his assertion, ". . .se juega, en fin, para vivir." (" . . .one plays, finally, in order to live.")⁷ Unamuno equates play with life, just as he equates meaningful existence with struggle and agony. As long as one battles or plays there is life; if man ceases to battle or play, he ceases to live. Non-playing individuals, such as those who adhere to dogmatism and conventionalism, lead lives that resemble death. The Basque writer's existential concept of life conjugates perfectly with his definition of play and, moreover, play is the underlying principle of his thought. If human life is to experience agony and tension, it must struggle and play.

Being of this opinion, Unamuno did everything in his power to stimulate turbulence and unrest within the cockles of men's hearts. He felt that a play on words would lead to a playing of ideas. Therefore, in an effort to reveal his inner turmoil and to foment a comparable occurrence in others, he saturated his literature with juxtapositions, rearrangements and dislocations of words. Although we will limit ourselves to just a few examples, there are innumerable occasions when he employs this play technique. Making use of this technique in his Prologue to the *Tres novelas ejemplares*, don Miguel states that there are two positive and two negative positions concerning existence: first, wanting to be and wanting not to be; second, not wanting to be and not wanting not to be. In *Niebla*, Augusto Pérez, fictitious character, asks Miguel de Unamuno, his creator (in itself a form of play), in what fashion does a dreamer exist; as the dreamer who dreams of himself or as something dreamed by himself? And in "El juego del hombre", he again employs this technique and says, "El hombre y el juego! El juego del hombre y el hombre del juego! Porque suele ocurrir que en el juego del hombre se convierte éste en el hombre del juego."⁸

Unamuno even utilized his knowledge of philology to enhance this technique. The etymological origin of the word *agonía*, for example, is the Greek *agon*, meaning contest, and therefore this word was easily identifiable with the Greek concept of play. Miguel de Unamuno, professor of Greek, undoubtedly was aware of this correlation and played with the etymological meaning of the word

agonía and employed it extensively throughout his literature in order to describe his ludic concept of life and religion. Specifically, he describes Christianity polemically and in terms of a struggle in *La agonía del cristianismo*, insisting that Christians agonize (struggle), like Christ. Also, the literary characters that comprise his *nivolos* (playing with the word *novelas*) he calls *agonistas* (agonists), because they are entities that are constantly agonizing, struggling and playing within themselves. The Basque writer's constant manipulation of words, meanings, ideas and emotions is one of the most conspicuous characteristics of his literary style and one that is found throughout his poetry, plays, essays and novels.

This literary technique in addition to his utilization of paradoxes, contradictions and questions was a conscious effort by Unamuno to agitate and to initiate a struggle within the souls of his readers; for example, at the conclusion of *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida (On the Tragic Sentiment of Life)*, the reader may no longer have complete confidence in reason and he may feel that Saint Thomas' five proofs for the existence of God are insufficient. Therefore, he now begins to doubt, to play with the different possibilities and to agonize between his reason that affirms the impossibility of having complete certainty concerning His existence, and emotion that instills a desire and wanting that there be a Supreme Being. Some writers postulate ideas and present, at least in their judgement, definitive solutions. Unamuno discredits definitive solutions and presents paradoxes, contradictions and problems that cause the reader to doubt, to think, to agonize—to play.

Although Unamuno's bibliography does not include an overwhelming number of articles or essays that treat the ludic element, there is no denying his concern for and preoccupation with this phenomenon. His writings, as we have seen, manifest a propensity toward and a comprehension of what constitutes true ludic activity. Moreover, there is an intrinsic relationship between his definition of play (the spontaneous interaction of adversaries in a disinterested activity which brings about tension), and his concept of life and religion: the free struggling of opposites in an activity that "agonizes" for its own sake. Miguel de Unamuno, being a *jugueterón* himself, felt that men should be, in the highest sense of the word, "*jueguetones*" in life and religion.

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NOTES

1. Miguel de Unamuno, "Arabesco pedagógico sobre el juego," *Obras Completas*, VIII (Madrid, Escelicer, 1966), p. 309. ("Few, very few, if any, have a greater love and a greater propensity towards play than I.")
2. "Berganza y Zapirón," *Obras Completas*, III, p. 346. ("Freedom is only really freedom in play. . . There is only one form of truly being free, and that is to play.")
3. "De la correspondencia de un luchador," *Obras Completas*, III, p. 269. ("... I struggle for the struggle itself.")
4. "Juego limpio," *Obras Completas*, VII, p. 613. ("... it ought to be an end in itself and not a means for anything else. One plays in order to play.")

5. "De la correspondencia de un luchador," *Obras Completas*, III, p. 269. ("If we win, what will be the prize for the victory? Forget it; seek the struggle, and the prize, if there is one, will be given to you as a bonus.")
6. "Juego limpio," *Obras Completas*, VII, p. 613. ("And everything else that may come from play is something that is given to the player as a bonus.")
7. *Ibid.*
8. "El juego del hombre," *Obras Completas*, VII, p. 1506. (Man and play! The play of man and the man of play! Because the play of man is inclined to become converted into the man of play.")