

# Unamuno and feeling for animals

This past December 31 (2011) marked the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936), a distinguished member of the so-called *Generación del 98* (Generation of 98) and an intellectual committed to the issues of his time, something which cost him his position as Chancellor of the University of Salamanca, where he held the chair in Greek. Occurring towards the end of his life, his removal from the chancellorship was an event that provoked a wave of interest, support and followers. The man personified the critical spirit against the excesses of the exercise of power and represented the axis of liberal thought against the reigning purism of those who intended to define Spain through its customs, entrenched habits, traditions and spectacles without justifying or considering the worth of maintaining these; he stood against those who never bothered to consider if the essence of *lo español* (being Spanish) was connected to these topics.

I do not intend to discuss the entirety of the figure of Unamuno, as this is amply known and well documented. Instead, I will highlight a lesser known part of his personality and of the *Unamunian oeuvre*, employing a paraphrased version of his work “El sentimiento trágico de la vida” (“The Tragic Feeling of Life”) as the title for this article. I refer to his position regarding *la tauromaquia* (bullfighting), which he made public in a very clear and precise manner, as well as his relationship with dogs.

Unamuno was never shy to express his opinion against bullfighting; it is common to cite his celebrated phrase of repulsion: “I have always been bored and disgusted by bullfights”. Over the years he published articles in newspapers expressing his rejection of a spectacle that, in his opinion, “distracted” the public from the real problems of Spain. He also detailed the negative impact of the breeding of bulls on the Spanish economy of the time.<sup>1</sup> It cannot be said that for Unamuno, as well as for his literary contemporaries, the fate of animals and the cruelty against them were a preeminent interest.<sup>2</sup> The expressions used by these writers (Unamuno, Baroja, Machado, Azorín) with reference to the cruelty of bullfighting spectacles cannot be taken out of context. What they expressed was the rejection of the barbarism of the spectacle and the spiritual dullness which they felt the bullfights produced amongst the spectators.<sup>3</sup> In their criticisms of bullfighting, the intellectuals of the Generation of 98 were not moved by the empathy for the bull’s suffering during the fight so much as the rejection of the degrading spectacle offered by a part of society immersed in *el pintoresquismo* [picturesqueness]. The spectacle ran against the currents of regenerating thought promoted by Joaquín Costa and other intellectuals, though these intellectual movements were themselves bitterly divided between tradition and modernity.

The compassion for animals and the rejection of the violence of bullfighting, as well as the expression of animal mistreatment, is a perspective which would take time in its formulation. However, due to a legislative reform in 1928, under the auspices of the Dictatorship of Primo de Rivera,<sup>4</sup> protection for

1 UNAMUNO, M. de, “Sobre la muerte de Joselito” (“On the death of Joselito.”) (1920), en *Obras Completas XI* (Complete Works XI) (Madrid 1958) 929: “The persistence of bull fights depends on the continued existence of the breeding of bulls, and both of these are economically backward. (...) The bulls destined for fights are fed instead of the people and kill their matadors. These bulls help cause the depopulation of Spain.”

2 CAMBRIA, R., *Los toros: tema polémico en el ensayo español del S.XX* (Bulls: A Polemical Theme in Spanish Essays of the 20th Century) (Madrid 1974). Ed. Gredos, 30, 51- 77, 133, 152 and 281.

3 VALDIVIELSO, M.; *Pan y Toros, Las corridas de toros como símbolo de la decadencia española en la literatura y la pintura de la Generación del 98, (Bread and Bulls, Bullfights as a Symbol of Decadence in the Literature and Painting of the Generation of 98) in Arte e identidades culturales (Art and Cultural Identities). Actas del XII Congreso Nacional del Comité Español de Historia del Arte (Acts of the XII National Congress of the Spanish Committee of the History of Art), (Universidad de Oviedo 1998) 343 ss.*

4 Real Orden de 12 de Julio de 1930. (Royal Order of July 12, 1930)

horses during bullfights was introduced through the use of breastplates which prevented them from being disemboweled in the bull ring, as Baroja vividly described in 1904 though the protagonist in one of his novels.<sup>5</sup>

In Catalonia a prohibition on bullfighting has just come into force this year (January 1, 2012), as had been planned.<sup>6</sup> It is clear that this question will continue to be polemical, which is nothing new.<sup>7</sup> However, as we have affirmed in another occasion, it is difficult to silence the critical conscience of a society which is ever-more sensitive to the mistreatment of animals and less willing to accept spectacles which involve violence against animals.

In what we could call the private sphere, Unamuno was one of the few Spanish authors who wrote an epitaph or a eulogy for the death of a dog. Examples of the feeling of pain for the death of a life companion, as a dog or a cat usually is, have been cultivated elsewhere across many centuries, in Roman inscriptions as well as in literature, specifically in the Anglo-Saxon tradition.<sup>8</sup>

Unamuno's "Elegía a la muerte de un perro" ("Elegy for the death of a dog") is an emotional text expressing pain and the void left by the death of a dog. Closing "Niebla" ("Fog"), another novel by Unamuno, it is interesting that it is the dog, Orfeo, who is entrusted with making "La oración fúnebre a modo de epílogo", ("The funeral oration as an epilogue"). Orfeo employs the same expression that the writer uses in the "Elegía" to show the solitude produced by the death of Augusto Pérez, his "God", his owner.<sup>9</sup> Unamuno also wrote a poem dedicated to Remo, the German shepherd belonging to José Ortega y Gasset (Cancionero, no. 260). In his memoirs, Ortega y Gasset related that Unamuno had been impressed by the look of the animal when the dog greeted the author with two of his paws on Unamuno's chest, placing his eyes level with those of the writer ("what mystery lies in those pupils", he later asked). The influence of the character of Orfeo is noted in the poem that Rafael Alberti dedicated "To Niebla, my dog", the dog who had belonged to Pablo Neruda, who had entrusted the dog to Alberti when Neruda left Spain.

It is interesting to note that Spanish literature lacks expressions showing love for animals, documents written from the first person point of view of animals, and memoirs of those who have lived with animals. A type of ancient shame continues to exist for showing love to those who are considered, at least legally speaking, as mere things. It may be a good sign that texts are being published (or reedited) with expressions of feelings for animals.

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5 BAROJA, P., *La Busca* (The Search) (Madrid 1972) 286: "The bull attacked and lifted the horse into the air. The rider fell to the ground and they rescued him straight away; the horse tried to get up, with all of its bloody intestines outside its body, it stepped on its entrails with its hooves and, with its legs shaking, fell convulsing on the ground (...) the mules [which carry out the dead bulls from the ring] came out and dragged the horse out of the ring, with its intestines still on the ground, and a *monosabio* [matador's assistant] removed the entrails with a rake."

6 Ley 28/2010, de 3 de Agosto (Law 28/2010, of August 3) (<http://www.derechoanimal.info/bbdd/Documentos/792.pdf>). See for reference. GIMÉNEZ-CANDELA, T. and FAVRE, D., *On Outlawing Bullfighting in Catalonia, Spain* (Oxford 2012), in press.

7 GIMÉNEZ-CANDELA, T., *Toros y toreros* (Bulls and Bullfighters) (<http://www.derechoanimal.info/esp/page/1440/toros-y-toreros>)

8 LORD BYRON, *Epitaph to a dog* (1808), in honor of his dog Boatswain, who died having contracted rabies: "Near his Spot/ are deposited the remains of one / who possessed Beauty without Vanity / Strength without Insolence / Courage without Ferocity, and all the virtues of Man without his vices/..."; KIPLING, R., *The Power of the dog*: "...Buy a pup and your money will buy/ Love unflinching that cannot lie / Perfect passion and worship fed/ By a kick in the ribs or a pat on the head. / Nevertheless it is hardly fair / To risk your heart to a dog to tear..."; TWAIN, M., *Letter to W D Howells*, 4/2/189: "The dog is a gentleman; I hope to go to his heaven, not man's."

9 UNAMUNO, M.de, *Elegía a la muerte de un perro* (Elegy for the death of a dog): "Si supieras mi perro / qué triste está tu dios, porque te has muerto? / ¡También tu dios se morirá algún día! / Moriste con tus ojos / tal vez buscando en éstos el misterio / que te envolvía.../" ("If only you knew, my dog / how sad your god was, because of your passing / Some day your god will also die / You died with your eyes / perhaps searching within them the mystery / which surrounded you.")