

ALFONSO GARCÍA NUÑO, *El problema del sobrenatural en Miguel de Unamuno*. Prólogo de Ciríaco Morón. Madrid: Ediciones Encuentro. 2011. 1,007 pp.

This is a relentless, leave-no-stone-unturned exposition of Unamuno's views on the transphysical world. Why should the transphysical (a word which I prefer to supernatural) be a problem? According to García Nuño it is because man is made in God's image and yet finds that this is not enough to enable him to enjoy God's presence ('partícipe de la condición divina' [103]). As humans we are minded to rise above our material constraints and establish bridges to a world beyond the physical. One can accept this. But does the supernatural exist or is it rather the case that we humans have an incomplete and inadequate view of the natural world and banish to a supernatural realm what we do not understand about the natural one? After all, Unamuno, for all his spiritual longings and teleological lucubrations kept coming back to the body and its brain, suggesting that for him the human mind (or soul or psyche, to use the Greek term) was something inseparable from our physical nature. Indeed despite his denials—or because of them—many of Unamuno's statements point decidedly towards

pantheism and even pan-psychism (the notion that mind inheres in every atom or every cell in the universe). There is nothing cranky about this; it is a perfectly respectable philosophical position meant to overcome the longstanding and irresolvable mind-body problem.

García Nuño, however, sees the question of Unamuno's hankering for transphysical perdurance and his concomitant difficulty in believing in such perdurance in theological terms. Not because Unamuno was a theologian but because he issued a challenge to orthodox theology: 'Sus preguntas fueron oportunas, sugerentes e iluminadoras, aunque sus respuestas no sean en muchos aspectos satisfactorias' (87). My problem with García Nuño's approach is not what he says about Unamuno—his dogged pursuit of everything Unamuno said on the matter is unimpeachable—but rather his premises: he is after all a Roman Catholic priest trained in Rome, and his theological training has predisposed him to a particular point of view. He also makes an assumption which some *unamunistas* will want to query, namely that from the 1897 crisis onwards 'la fe va a ser el eje en torno al cual va a girar su vida y su pensamiento' (289). Not that he is in any way hostile to Unamuno. On the contrary, he emphasizes Unamuno's orthodoxy wherever he can and does his repeated best to rescue him from pantheism. Indeed I think he is excessively tolerant towards Unamuno's backpedalling and often contradictory views, and he consistently underplays the influence of liberal Protestant theologians in his entirely understandable effort to claim Unamuno back for orthodox, or at least quasi-orthodox, Catholicism. But at least this is infinitely better than subjecting him to the barbaric and unchristian campaign of denigration to which the Spanish episcopate and the Jesuits subjected him for two whole decades after his death. Of course, there is a limit to how far one can go in depurating Unamuno, and on the very few occasions when García Nuño opts to correct him he does so from an orthodox Catholic position, for example over the question of transubstantiation, or the existence of hell, or God's motive in creating mankind. García Nuño does an excellent job of rescuing Unamuno from the Church's wrath, but where there is doctrinal clear water there is no doubt where he stands.

The book's thoroughness means that it is a very good guide to just about everything Unamuno said on God, religion, immortality, man's place in nature and related subjects. It is not such a good guide on the correctness or incorrectness of Unamuno's statements because García Nuño evidently wants to bring Unamuno back to the fold, not call his views into question. Sometimes he puts things in a way which I find odd. '¿Por qué el existencialismo de nuestro autor no es ateo?' (293). Is this not a funny question? Has anyone asked the same question of Gabriel Marcel? Or has anyone asked: why is Sartre's existentialism atheist? Surely it is the person who is the one or the other. García Nuño is well aware that Unamuno often made statements that he did nothing to explain, but on the quirkiness of many of those statements García Nuño keeps a respectful silence. In particular Unamuno's philological eccentricities—trying to pass off as philosophy what is mere wordplaying *à la* Derrida—go uncriticized. Unamuno made a great play of the importance of *estar* as a corrective to Descartes' famous axiom. Before *ser* comes *estar*, and *estar* is as important to existence as *pensar*, he argued. Well, in Spain perhaps. Not in France or Britain. 'Estoy, luego soy' is possible in Spanish, but not in English or French. This may be philology, but it is certainly not philosophy. 'I stand, therefore I am', makes no kind of worthwhile philosophical statement. Very Unamunian certainly, but hardly worth scholarly exegesis. For as Descartes might have asked, what is the difference between 'I am' and 'I am here'? According to García Nuño Unamuno applies *estar* to God in order to establish a more powerful theology. This of course 'excommunicates' those cultures which do not use *estar*. What a strange kind of Christianity!

Unamuno's idiosyncratic view of history goes similarly unchallenged. The idea that the real historical revolutionaries are only those who experienced religious doubts and consequent struggles with their faiths rather than those who had firm beliefs one way or the other (Petrarch, Erasmus, Voltaire) is simply grotesque, but García Nuño passes no comment. Similarly Unamuno's philological reductionism is accepted unquestioningly and he is allowed to get away with the sloppy thinking contained in statements such as 'son estas [las palabras]

las que hacen el pensamiento' (775), or 'la historia es esencialmente palabra' (814), or 'la imaginación y el soñar son posibles gracias al lenguaje' (853), or the even more ludicrous proposition that 'se quiere con palabras' (776). Are we to accept that deaf and dumb people or nine-month-old babies cannot think, that economic relations play no significant part in history, that music, painting, architecture, mathematics even are language-driven, or that people who suffer from aphasia after a stroke are incapable of loving? The problem with Unamuno is that he cannot extricate himself from his world of words. In Chapter XX of his book, which I strongly recommend, García Nuño does a very good job of explaining Unamuno's idiosyncratic musings on life as a novel but unwittingly shows up his inadequacies. Unamuno saw life as a book which we write as we go along and words as a creative tool. The book of life turns too easily into a book of words. Paradoxes cascade, oxymorons proliferate, antiphrases breed on every page. The problem becomes that of the supervoluble rather than of the supernatural. Unamuno's creative view of language (*poiesis*) ends by tarnishing the seriousness of his message. This becomes evident in García Nuño's book precisely because he summarizes virtually every statement that Unamuno made, and it shows up the latter's prolixity rather painfully. Unamuno set out to provoke and needs to be read critically.

As well as the faithful but uncritical reproduction of Unamuno's often eccentric pronouncements, we find in García Nuño's book more purely religious statements that seem to me highly questionable, as for example his approving comment that 'lo propio de la religión no es la moral, sino el anhelar la otra vida, creer en la eternidad de la conciencia' (726). This may be a typically Catholic viewpoint, but not all Christians—certainly not the one who writes this—would agree that 'lo central [es] el anhelo de eternidad' (726). Ara Norenzayan in his recent work *Big Gods* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 2013) has given us a more cogently argued explanation of the emergence of religion. Leading a moral (or Christian) life makes sense irrespective of our prospects for eternal salvation. And even if we accept our hankering for perdurance, why should we not express this desire through a moral imperative, as in Kant?

All the same I should be wrong to insist too much on my own objections to García Nuño's approach because there will be many liberal Catholics who are quite rightly of the opinion that Unamuno's religious viewpoint is perfectly compatible with modern Catholicism, if not with that of his own day. But there are some dubious statements all the same. 'La respuesta al enigma del sentido, el hombre sólo la encontrará resuelta, sin sombra ninguna de duda, tras morir' (897). García Nuño, the Catholic priest, is taking too much for granted. I would not want to prejudge the issue, but is there not at least a chance that upon death we will find out precisely nothing? For an ironic version of this possibility, which shows Unamuno's capacity to laugh at himself and poke fun at his own obsession with personal survival, read his short story 'Don Martín, o de la gloria'.

One interesting and useful feature of García Nuño's book is the structure he has given it. He divides Unamuno's production into five chronological stages: 1884–1896; 1897; 1898–1913; 1914–1926; and 1927–1936. He then looks at each stage under the same headings: (i) 'Realidad y realidades'; (ii) 'El hombre y su mundo'; (iii) 'El conocimiento del hombre'; (iv) 'Personalidad y vida'; and (v) 'El deseo de Dios'. While this inevitably makes for a certain amount of repetition, it does offer the advantage of enabling one to trace Unamuno's ideological evolution. It confirms the work of Ciríaco Morón, as well as my own suspicion that while there are certain recurring ideas in Unamuno's work from very early on, his most profound explorations of the human situation are those which come after *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida*, that is to say when Unamuno was in his fifties and sixties, or from *Niebla* (1914) onwards. And this is so whether one takes a narrowly theological view or a broader humanist one. His anguished and contradictory stance over belief, still detectable in *Del sentimiento trágico*, is replaced by a more sober consideration of man's finality in the context of the divine and the human, of God and his fellow-men. And it was precisely the tragedy of his fellow-Spaniards, of a Spain that appeared to have turned its back on divine values, that cast a deep shadow over Unamuno's later years. His final words, '¡Dios no puede volverle la

espalda a España! ¡España se salvará porque tiene que salvarse!’ (as reported by Salcedo in his biography of Unamuno and reproduced by many including García Nuño), were a desperate appeal to a divinity forgotten by a country immersed in a frenzy of blood-letting which Unamuno consistently denounced in his final days despite his confinement and perilous situation.

It should also be said that, apart from its theological theme, García Nuño’s book contains many perceptive pages on other Unamunian topics, notably on the formation of personality, on the connection between the physical and mental worlds, on matter and spirit, on the difference between nature and history. Those who take Unamuno’s thought to be religious in essence and intention will want to read this massive book with care and attention. Those who (like myself) believe Unamuno was no Thomas Aquinas or even Hans Küng and made no significant contribution to the *academic* discipline of theology ought at least to read the final fifty pages of conclusions which summarize the preceding 900 pages. The labour that has gone into this book is truly impressive.

C. A. LONGHURST

*London.*