

# THE PHILOSOPHY OF AGONY

## An Accidental Meeting between Unamuno and Ulyanov in the Mausoleum

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Out of the fear of worms and bacteria the human intellect has mobilized the most divergent genres to exonerate the imperviousness of death. Horatio, in his ode to the muse of tragedy, bragged about that "the force of poetic greatness" is independent of the motion between appearance and disappearance, and that the poet's sculpture proves to be more lasting than bronze.<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare, being completely aware of his poetic power, rendered – against any tangible things – his "powerful" speech to the prevailing present by placing it beyond time.<sup>2</sup> Both would place the individual entities into the shadows of poetry that is timeless in its meaning and exists in the message it conveys, and though these entities will exist and repeat themselves in the far future, they will not prove to be permanent.

While Apollo speaks about two kinds of existence in the "Iliad" clearly separating and outlining a border between the order of the immortal Gods and the earthly humans, now, in this modern age, more and more individuals would like to get a slice of this immortality by negating the same border. This tendency is well illustrated by the multiplication of self-portraits. Unamuno's Austrian contemporary, Egon Schiele, has produced the greatest number of self-portraits in the history of the art of painting; he surprised himself by creating more than a hundred of them.

Agony, seemingly, is an ambivalent notion: it is a fight for life and against life. "Agony – says Unamuno – means fight. Only those can agonize who live through fighting, fighting against life. And against death, too. This is what St. Theresa of Avila's prayer says: 'I die because I do not die.'"<sup>3</sup> Agony is nothing but an incessant fight for an after-life survival, a fight penetrating life's every moment without compromise. The philosophy of agony emphasizes the complete turn-around from the deep resignation and from the hopeless submission. Agony is nothing but a true munchausenian adventure: pulling ourselves by the hair out of the morass of mortality.

Unamuno ignores the moment when everything seems to be slipping out from man's hollow of hand. By not recognizing death is the way to take up the fight against death – this is what the Spanish sage proclaims, who, paradoxically, has inherited neither a legendary nor he has enjoyed serious popularity by posterity. This is a heroic attitude against mortality, since the ephemeral, the mortal demands immortality. And even if he has to die he should – as an audacious adversary – wage his war against it in this hopeless combat. The examples of the agonizing God (Christ) and the agonizing man (Don Quixote) encourage us. "Our crucifixes, our Spanish Christs are terribly tragical ones. This is the cult of the agonizing, and not that of the dead Christ."<sup>4</sup>

Unamuno's philosophy, just like N. Fjodorov's, serves immortality. Unamuno, the mortal who wishes to compete with the immortals, wants to back out from life with such a conscious that he stays instead. His program is provocative: negate the void, exist against mortality; transgress time by reminiscing and by defining, be evoked from time to time, be placed among the living individuals. Man has to be shaken up from his self-complacent tranquillity and internal self-neglect: he has to create the world of survival against the world of destruction and join the philosophers departing into immortality. The soul, which is fully aware of its fallibility though being destined to perish, still lays claim to immortality; and he trusts the after-life, and he trusts in saving and keeping alive his own memory. "The visible universe, which is the by-product of self-supporting instinct, is somehow too narrow for me..." – writes Unamuno in his "The Tragical Awareness of Life" – "it is like a cage designed in a small scale: my longing soul incessantly crashes into its bars and I gasp for breath. More is needed, more; and then we need even more: I want to be me, an incessant me, moreover, I want to be the rest of them, I want to penetrate into the totality of the visible and invisible things, I want to expand into the boundless space, I want to lengthen my self into the infinite times. If I am not everything, and if I am not everything for eternity, it means as if I did not exist, thus my totality should be me forever. And if I am me in my totality, then I am all the others, too. Either all or nothing!...I have heard once a story: a poor harvester on his death-bed, when the priest visited him in the hospital to administer the extreme unction and wanted to smear the harvester's hands with the sacred water, did not want to slacken his fist at all in which he squeezed some dirty coins: he did not realize that, soon, neither his hand, nor his own self would remain his own. We all close and stretch in the same manner not only our hands, but our hearts as well, because we wish to grab and hold the world in it."<sup>5</sup>

Modern man can best identify himself with his own body. Unamuno's speech is a speech from the flesh-and-blood man towards the flesh-and-blood man. Unamuno has not paid particular attention to generational community or age-group existence; he scrutinizes the continual existence of the national and family community, observes their successions; meanwhile, he is preoccupied with the fate of the individual: he is

concerned with the immortality that can be filtered through man's organic nature, cultural determination and belief.

Unamuno's way of thinking represents not only the mentality of doubt, as much as it also reflects the philosophy of "the wanting to believe," and, in his "Hellenistic" worship, vainglory is more important than piety. The sage manifests himself vacillating between self-observation and narcissism and what he mostly strives for is to be read in order to exist. The man striving for achieving "personal immortality" and permanent eternity does not only intend to procrastinate the inescapable end, but he wants to settle with the decay itself. Unamuno's objective is unambiguous: losing the man should not mean losing the philosopher. In order to make sure that the philosopher should survive he can accomplish that by staying with us through his works, so that the ungrateful posterity would not forget him after his death, or that his life should not be covered by the dust of oblivion; consequently, it is writing itself, the potential immortality provided for him by the composition itself that supplies the energy for his inner motivation.

He intends to leave his writings for his after-life presence. For him the real pleasure is to see – perhaps – the flashing images of his own self on the white pages, thus, maybe, even in our deaths, we do not have to depart from this world. Throughout his whole life he is motivated by the pressure of writing rather than by the avalanche of his thoughts. Unamuno finds solace in writing, he transforms writing into an existential mode; his works do not annoy the average citizen, they do not reflect brutal gaping in amazement; they do not talk back, and they are not even angry. Unamuno works like an alchemist completely obsessed with his own alchemy: he produces a multitude of stories, reflections, travelogues, mystical meditations, mysterious theories and literary essays. While he does everything he can to leave his intellectual armory behind him, his oeuvre is an excellent example to illustrate how a philosopher can break into pieces under the weight of his own writings.

For the modern man it becomes especially important to express his desire to leave behind his signal, his marks. He obstinately insists on trying to reverse the irreversible. At the same time, he wants not only to carve out, but to gild his own 'intellectual' portrait as well. He does not aim high towards the unattainable using an alpine equipment, but by using what can be uttered, by the 'force and efficacy of the word;' he believes in the conjuring power of words. He believes the word is his own portrait, and through this word expressing his inner core, he gets preserved. In his philosophy, in reality, existence is replaced by the power of word and by the excessively elaborate form.

The man, who is hesitant to die and longs for the impossible being afraid of the ultimate silence and the markless death, is instigated to create something that points towards well beyond his own self. He does not want to belong to the departing ones, who depart into eternity; he hopes to be noticed, he hopes in his good fortune, and his work is not finished by simply putting down his pen and by casting a stealthy

glance over his shoulder at posterity. Unamuno, the man who searches for permanence clinging to life at all costs and who wants to survive even his own death, gets embedded into the fragile human achievements. The mortal man dreams about his immortal masterpiece, since he would like to become immortal through his mental and intellectual efforts. If he cannot rescue his physical form, he, at least, does everything in his power to prepare his own intellectual embalmment so that he could head towards intellectual agelessness and untouchability to eschew the silence of the weighty and offensive oblivion.

One of the prominent figures of the Russian "98-generation," Vladimir I. Lenin, knew that portraits, self-portraits would preserve only the individual lines, the one-time looks; time would steal everything else, and posterity could resuscitate only the white skeleton.

Vladimir Ilyich, the professional revolutionary, had chosen the other path of immortality, he invited the bearded time to shake hands in a different way: he did not want to ingratiate himself with the other figures who were already on the pedestal; he did not want to initiate himself into their ranks but the "ideology" he represented; he would have liked to transform the ideology into some sort of classic for the posterity. He does not seek immortality for the body, but by concentrating on an ideology he searches for the possibility of eternity; he wants to attain timelessness for the ideology. This famous, controversial and satanic protagonist of the XXth. century is obsessed with one ideology, and he is not only interested in the ideology itself, but he is also engaged in the incessant manifestation of it, as well. Lenin employs a Janus-faced attitude towards the Russian culture that is shaped among the decorative stage elements of being tuned in on the final matters and redemption; and that which is being formed on the horizon of awaiting the end, of escathology, of Apocalypse and of the second coming. The creator of the Russian Revolution does not intend to extend immortality towards the underworld, but towards a 'secular' direction, and thus, a this-worldly variety of Russian messianistic effort is offered here. In any case, both his whole life and his unburied corps themselves represent nothing but the attained surreality. That is how he appears – seven years after his death – in the painting of the Catalanian master, Salvador Dali (*Six Apparitions of Lenin on a Piano*, 1931): Lenin's image, engraved and multiplied in the golden background, emerges out of the white keyboard of a black piano.

The same way as the first mausoleion, which was erected by the wife of King Mausolos of Cara as a sepulcher for the deceased husband, the Red Square Mausoleum of Lenin represents the immortality that had been approved by others. The bowels of the Mausoleum, which, at first, had been built of wood in 1929 and then, later, of red stone, granite and marble symbolizing the system, hides the leader of the Bolshevik revolution; but it is also destined to represent the depth of this ideology. The embalmed corpse exhibited in public, the fairy tale-like scenery provide the kind of image as if Lenin had just retired to rest and to continue to dream on.

However, by exhibiting the mummy in public, by this enforced permanent physical manifestation of the corpse, the seeds of numerous mysteries and debates surrounding it had been sowed. The mausoleum does not provide an island of tranquillity, it is not a resting place; quite the contrary, it has become the tool of the life supporting equipment.

The soviet mausoleum provided an opportunity to emphasize the system's aloofness from the Christian traditions, but, in reality, what they did, using the ennobled corpse that was ritually presented, was to prepare a fertile soil for the Stalinist bolshevism. Stalin applied different colors – senseless temerity, self-complacency, justice submerged and permeated in brutality – in repainting his Eastern, despotic empire, thus establishing a flourishing industry of corpse cosmetics. (The mummy was, obviously, identified with the East, since both the lands of the pharaohs and the Chinese and Japanese cultures had in their possession the recipe of perfect mummification.) Stalin, who was already worried about his own immortality, had presumed that if he covered the Teacher with soil, the myth of the grand ideology would also accompany Lenin down into the grave.

That is why Stalin had tried to exploit, just like the desert nomads, the wealth provided by the mummy: he had sealed Lenin's intellectuality behind the thick walls of the Mausoleum, so that – while he referred to Lenin hiding behind Lenin's back – he could realize his goals. The mausoleum, the sanctuary of immortality and the mask of vivification that had been dedicated as the heart of the empire, served only to conceal Stalin's narcissism. The system was transformed into fanaticism, and in every bit of, it became 'rigor mortis.' Also, the well-known 'imperial sculpture' of the Roman Empire reappears, where the head was pinned to the body, and when the 'imperator' was replaced, the easily changeable sculpture heads made the quick switch possible. Observing the mummy, one cannot assert the same about this society what has always been proclaimed by its commissars, namely, that the corpse displays the moment when it is about to move and that it is full of vitality and that it expresses the enjoyment of life.

The depersonalized corpse lying in the mausoleum has buried under itself the one-time idea of collectivism proclaimed so majestically by this body, and this provocative construction of collective ideologies has become the self-justifying fetish of bolshevism. The tranquillity of the mausoleum and its occupant's rest had been broken by the rumbling sound of the tanks and the marching crowd's uproar parading under arms through the Red Square, celebrating according to the communist rituals. The parapet of the mausoleum was rebuilt into a balcony for the Bolshevik ideology, whence the creme of the party-state watched the saluting crowd marching at the word of command. Besides the cult-like display that, in itself, represented the paradox of this the openly proclaimed atheistic system, Lenin was also given an official legendarium and the corpse was sacredly coated; the well-conserved body was guarded by military honor and both party leaders and tour-guides talked about it. The

mausoleum was thus firmly established to become the place of pilgrimage, whereas the corpse of the leader became the bizarre object of endless scientific experiments.

The corpse has been conserved permanently, but the communistic ideology has vanished: the corpse of Lenin has survived the disintegration of its own achievement: the Soviet Union.

Though the leader of the Bolshevik revolution was given state guard of honor: and they guarded the mummy's secret up until 1993; but, in the meantime, it turned out to be that the ideology preceded its leader in getting buried first; and, similarly to Nietzsche's prophecy about God's mortality, we can also assert about Lenin's ideas that their empty sockets and their long shadows will still be displayed for a long time. The mummified body, that at one time shook the world and undertook the work of destruction and creation, has become the object of art gallery tours; the late cultic object has become the favorite product of the kitsch manufacturers: we often meet Lenin (sometimes displayed as McLenin) on T-shirts, spectacle-cases, bags, wallets, purses, key-rings and pins.

"The Lenin Mausoleum – says Boris Groys – , from the very beginnings, is the unique mixture of the Egyptian pyramid and the British Museum. Lenin's mummy is guarded and paid tribute in a pyramid called mausoleum, at the same time Lenin's corpse is displayed in a museum called mausoleum. What is more, it is absolutely certain that what we have here is one of the most successful exhibitions in the history of the modern museum. ...The resting place of the Lenin-mummy, obviously, can no longer be the scene of personal resurrection: the continuous supervision and the incessant march of the curious crowds guarantee that the corpse can remain only a corpse, and thus, no miracle could take place."<sup>6</sup>

But the question remains the same: Can the corpse ever be buried unpunished, can the peace of the embalmed body be disturbed? Don't we have to be confronted with the disease called pharaoh's curse, when it is opened?

Unamuno, despite of our fallibility and fragmentedness, intends to mummify his own intellect, his philosophical existence; Lenin has gone through the other path of self-mummification: he does not desire to get into the mausoleum, but he wants his own self to be transplanted into the revolution's ideas, and that is how he intends to enter onto the path of immortality. Lenin and Unamuno, as XX<sup>th</sup>. century theoreticians who always race against time, have established their alliance against futility, the violent denial of hopelessness and to repulse mortality. They have not longed for the immortality of the Venetian doges, or for the glimmering mummified portraits; the philosopher and the political reformer wanted to 'create' all that would point beyond the ephemeral life. They wished to provide as proof their hands and intellects; and they themselves – with their own hands – had initiated the mummification process. But what has really been mummified?

## Bibliography

<sup>1</sup> "I leave behind more lasting memories than ore, which are higher than the peaks of kingly pyramids; Neither starving rain showers nor foolishly infuriated storms can erase them; they resist the long procession of infinite years and the racing time. Die I cannot, yet. What's already best in me No grave can hide: I'll outlive the time." (Translated by Istvan Hollo) Horation: To Melpomene. Odes III., 30.

<sup>2</sup> "Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of princes, shall outlive this pow'rful rhyme." Shakespeare: LV. Sonnet

<sup>3</sup> Miguel de Unamuno: *The Agony of Christianity*, Budapest, Kossuth Publishing House, 1997, p.9.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.14.

<sup>5</sup> Miguel de Unamuno: *The Tragic Sense of Life*, Budapest, Europa Publishing House, 1989, pp. 39-40; p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> Boris Groys: *The Natural Geography of Utopia*, Budapest, Kijarat Publishing House, 1997, pp.6-7.