

# Is Nothing Sacred? Spain Performs the Death of God

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*We are not talking about the absence of the experience of  
God, but about the experience of the absence of God.*  
W. Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*

*¡Teresa, alma de fuego,  
Juan de la Cruz, espíritu de llama,  
por aquí hay mucho frío, padres, nuestros  
corazoncillos de Jesús se apagan!*

Antonio Machado, *Campos de Castilla*, CXXXVI, XX

The art of the last two centuries appears to have become significant at the expense of religion. The progressive secularization of the modern world has had an indisputable influence on social institutions, and has generated significant shifts in the values and beliefs that underlie modern life, in many cases leading to outbursts such as Baroja's declaration that "tenemos que inmortalizarnos" (27). Nietzsche's famed assertion of the death of God signaled a change in the ways in which we think about the world, a shift in where we seek answers, and where we claim to find them. Herein lies an intriguing paradox: that despite the marginalized role and importance of religion in social institutions, collective and individual practices and so forth, the specter of religion continues to bear in important ways on the cultural identity of modern Westerners.

This article will argue that much of circa-1900 Spanish literature gestures in a common direction, animated largely by the suspicion that God's presence can no longer be recognized or seen as significant. And yet, as many of the works of Miguel de Unamuno (*San Manuel Bueno, mártir* and *Niebla*), Antonio Machado (*Campos de Castilla*), Benito Pérez Galdós (*Miau*), and Juan Ramón Jiménez (*Diario de un poeta*

*reciençasado*) suggest, perhaps the (re)birth of God can be achieved by other means. Although other authors and works of the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century fit this characterization, it is my contention that in the above works, a heightened awareness of and engagement with the sacred—and its presumed retreat—figure as a striking and recurrent tension. That is, they can be seen to question aesthetically—through both prose and poetry—what many would view as a common, basic assumption: since religion was essentially constituted by the experience of the sacred, it would seem that a secular world would therefore be a world in which no experience of the divine would be possible. Yet, if as Bataille argues, “[t]he intention to gain eternal life is connected with sanctity” (390), then perhaps metaphorically, God slumbers on in much modern art.

The key value that is lost with the collapse of the transcendent guarantee is the sense of a unified purposefulness, a totalizing worldview governing both universe and self. The value systems multiply—politics, science, religion, aesthetics—all marshaling their own separate goals and criteria. Otherness becomes an especially important term during this period: the discontented tone of many works of late nineteenth-century Spain evolves, in large part, from the broader trend toward fragmentariness characteristic of (European) modernism, from the second half of the nineteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth. At stake in the experience of otherness is the modern strategy of self-coherence, and the suspicion that such a “project of the self” is ultimately impossible. The unitary other that was a product of religion is lost when this structure of opposites breaks down, a discontinuity in the world that is memorably embodied by Baroja’s priest in *El cura de Monleón*, who abandons the ministry when his faith wanes. The creation of a secular other, or a new “sacred,” is of course a variation on the theme of otherness.<sup>1</sup> So while the religious-secular opposition is a useful means of discussing these authors, we are actually addressing otherness as the perceived object of power, knowledge and desire. It is an illusion constructed out of differences, an eternally morphing alibi that serves to confer a sense of stability and wholeness.

In Spain, the general mood of this period’s literature is in many ways consistent with that of the rest of Europe and the West—turn-of-the-century literature must be understood in relation to a deepening of uncertainty and alienation in the contemporary period. By reference

to the philosophical assumptions characteristic of the age, and to the writer's way of understanding the function of art, one sees that the disintegration of optimism—tentative though it may have been previously—is attributable to the failed promises of scientific rationalism, as much as to the spiritual crisis mentioned in the first paragraph. But religious doubt bears in unique ways on Spanish writers:

In spite of religious yearnings like Unamuno's, *all the best literature of this age is the work of agnostics or atheists*. In the [1880s and 1890s] agnosticism did not have to be pessimistic. Thinking men who could not accept the spiritual comfort offered by the Church had often been able to find alternative grounds for a kind of hope in the rational conquest of knowledge, and in the widely applied and applauded concept of evolutionary progress. But in the twentieth century the findings of reason only added an extra dimension to despair, and the idea of progress became a bitter mockery. (Brown 6, my emphasis)

If Brown's remarks are correct, then the twin themes of religion and literature gain in importance in the Spain of this period. While it is crucial to understand the religious stance of the period's writers, their feelings on religion might be viewed strictly as a starting point. Building on Brown's comments, it is impossible to overlook the ironic fact that the issue of religion is addressed constantly, urgently and tirelessly in that "work of agnostics or atheists." However, in an age when religious hope exceeded religious expectation, the relevant question, simply put, is how do they address the problem of religion? What is to count as "sacred" in irretrievably agnostic or atheistic Spanish authors active in the years surrounding the turn of the century?

It would seem profitable, therefore, to seek out a distinctive aesthetic impulse in these authors that might symbolically compensate for the lack of "authentic" religious experience. Terms like "crisis," "anguish" and "pessimism" are commonly (and justifiably) applied to Unamuno and Machado, but they do not go far enough. By the last decade of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century, innovative aesthetic practices were emerging in response to what Donald Shaw describes as "an increasingly desperate search for *ideas madres*, for a satisfying pattern of ideas, ideals, and beliefs

with which to solve the threefold pattern of truth, duty, and finality” (159). Referring to early twentieth-century fiction, Roberta Johnson describes its tendency towards “innovative ways of conveying a more subjective reality” (128). The combined emphasis on the individual (who must find his or her own way) and on art (which serves as a retaining wall for identity) arguably allows the individual—the artist—more creativity and range than other spheres. It can be fairly stated that the self, by turn-of-the-century Spain, becomes increasingly self-interested and self-reflexive. At stake is an intriguing question: how does the presumable loss of the divine bear on the literary activity of the period? With regard to the authors under discussion, what is to count as “sacred”? Departing from the role it played in its formerly religious incarnation, what has it become in the agnostic-atheistic minds of Pérez Galdós, Unamuno, Machado, Jiménez and other turn-of-the-century Spanish authors?

In modern literature, there appear to be numerous vehicles that smuggle notions of the sacred back into modernity.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, for the reasons described above, it seems at least arguable that many literary trends—including the flood of “isms” that begin most visibly with romanticism—are simply “post-sacred” manifestations that travel under another name. These observations position us to raise an intriguing question: has there been, rather than a total retreat, a new paradigm in which an experience of the religious is, in some sense, still possible? No doubt the sacred in modernity is—according to many—withered on the vine; but do fragments of it remain alive, although heaving and fitful, yet still retrievable, in flashes such as Pérez Galdós’s Count of Albrit and the “verdades incontrovertibles” he experiences while in a state of “sopor” during mass; Unamuno’s Manuel Bueno; or Machado’s eternally flowing waters? To summarize, the central tension is the following: there appears to be a close connection between aesthetics on the one hand, and the need for some sort of release and relief for those who are no longer persuaded by the possibility of a transcendent entity. Art becomes the quest *par excellence* for new forms of an experience of the sacred.<sup>3</sup>

In modern Hispanic literature, Unamuno is the writer who perhaps most explicitly addresses God’s absence. This notion is memorably illustrated in *San Manuel Bueno, mártir* (SMB), when Saint Manuel says, “La verdad, Lázaro, es acaso algo terrible, algo intolerable, algo mortal” (605). The “truth” (“la verdad”) is that death is

likely the end of existence, and Manuel's response to this assumption is to find identity completion by other means—through a sustained “perderme en la vida del pueblo,” a “sumergir[me] en el alma de la montaña” (607). If the reader, like Manuel, accepts the “terrible” truth, then, also like the embattled priest, he or she must seek alternate ways to experience transcendence *symbolically* rather than conventionally, spiritually. In nearly all of Unamuno's works there is recourse to the act of creation as a means of reaching beyond the self, and thereby managing a continuation of the ritual process whereby one's own death will not mean utter annihilation. Through Augusto Pérez, in *Niebla*, Unamuno shows that there is a sense in which he himself, as author, achieves transcendence; he can be said to perform the role of God, playing the “fictive” creator of Augusto. It is particularly ironic that immortality could be achieved through the likes of this protagonist: Augusto is seemingly without any perceptible identity; he lacks both future goals and past achievements. The irony emerges when we recall that Unamuno is a firm believer in Cervantes's maxim that every man is the product of his life's deeds (*hijo de sus obras*), and, like his literary ancestor, was a practitioner of both invention and self-invention. When Augusto is of marrying age, he resolves to find a wife. But his aspirations fall short when his love is unrequited, at which point he decides to end his life. His famed encounter with his creator, Unamuno, leads the latter to inform Augusto that he cannot commit suicide because he is a fictional creation. Augusto argues that he is more real than Unamuno precisely because of his fictional quality, an observation that angers Unamuno and leads him to promise to kill Augusto himself. He evidently carries out his promise, though it is by no means clear that any true “death” has taken place. Most importantly, it is his fictional status that seems to have saved Augusto, and seemingly assures his claims of immortality.

In this way *Niebla* can be taken as a restaging and reconfiguration of the sacred, an observation that is perfectly consistent with Susan Sontag's remarks on religion and art: “[W]ithin the last century art conceived as an autonomous activity has come to be invested with an unprecedented stature—the nearest thing to a sacramental human activity acknowledged by secular society” (212). Intrigued with the notions of creation and destruction, presence and absence, life and death, Unamuno is keenly attuned to art's unique potential for providing a means of embodying and giving release to such preoccupations.

As we have seen, Unamuno, as well or better than anyone else, was aware of the human being's need to engender and perpetuate, whether through religion, art, science, sexual reproduction, the erecting of tombstones and crypts, and so forth.<sup>4</sup> The human being perpetuates and multiplies itself as a guarantee of the only possible form of personal immortality. One critic accurately points out that the Spanish finisecular zeal of the creation and care of the self "es ahora la suprema tarea," and that "[e]l culto del yo es el culto de héroe" (Cerezo Galán 64–5). Clearly, exceptions exist. In Pardo Bazán, for example, this sort of emphasis on the self is absent, a fact that is perhaps largely attributable to her religious tranquility, a stance which in many cases seems to permeate her works, lending them a serene confidence that in other (and in most cases later) writers flags or disappears altogether. Conversely, Unamuno and Pérez Galdós, Machado and Jiménez find themselves bereft of the traditional sources of support and comfort that Pardo Bazán frequently finds, particularly in religious institutions. And so we see in Unamuno an impulse that is constantly reworked: the attempt to cover up mortality, to symbolically remedy the descent into existentialist despair that accompanies the contemplation of one's death.

Participating in the same larger dialogue, Antonio Machado, like Unamuno, points up a crucial irony that inheres in the relationship between religion and modern existence: that even avowed atheists cannot resist undertaking the pursuit of a new "sacred."<sup>5</sup> The Machado of *Campos de Castilla* (CC) lacks the robust optimism conferred by religion (with its claims of unity, stability and teleology) and Enlightenment thought (with its pretensions of a progressive control over nature). In most cases Machado's musings express a sort of dual sentiment: since we are unable to participate in God (at least not in any conventional sense), then it is our own creative impulses that move center stage. Typical of the period's literature, Machado's literary activity inevitably reveals both an adopting and adapting of the sacred. When Machado speaks of "el Dios que todos hacemos" (CC, "Profesión de fe" 2),<sup>6</sup> it is the human being who now assumes the role of power. In a gesture reminiscent of *Niebla* (a work that resonated deeply with Machado), the speaker of Machado's feted "Profesión de fe," alluded to above, declares that:

[...]

Yo he de hacerte, mi Dios, cual tú me hiciste,  
 y para darte el alma que me diste  
 en mí te he de crear. Que el puro río  
 de caridad que fluye eternamente,  
 fluya en mi corazón. ¡Seca, Dios mío,  
 de una fe sin amor la turbia fuente! (9–14)

These verses address the speaker's perception of God, and suggest a stance toward the divine that presumably at one point held God to be inscrutable ("la turbia fuente"). The once ambiguous feelings, however, have now been replaced by a complete absence ("seca") of both faith and therefore love. The entire poem, as well as the fragment quoted above, strongly supports this interpretation. However, if this reading is correct, a number of other questions follow in its wake. If God is taken to be absent, then why does he figure not only as the object, but as the apostrophe of the poem? The first verse quoted contains a possible answer: if God created the speaker—that is, if the speaker once "believed" in God the Creator, then now, given the disappearance of faith, the speaker becomes the creator, the giver, the agent. In effect, the poetic voice explicitly states that from the soul God gave him, he intends to create God—in a reversal-into-the-opposite, the created now becomes the creator. The "sacred" in this poem must evidently be understood *symbolically*: the work of art amounts to a (symbolic) representation of our beliefs. Contrary to the meaning some critics have drawn from the poem (namely, that it is a testament to the speaker's [and/or Machado's] religious outlook), Machado's descriptive declaration of his faith would seem to be a confession of his *lack* of faith. That is, according to one reading, the entire poem can be seen as a considered articulation of what he does believe (his own creative powers, all described in the present tense) as well as what he disavows (divine existence or agency, formulated in the past tense).

Perhaps the sacred is the self transformed and constructed symbolically, a means of coming to know ourselves and affixing ourselves *to* ourselves. Most paradoxical and fascinating in Machado is that he, just like Unamuno, cannot seem to be able to do without God, and therefore goes about "creating" him in various ways (the allusions to concepts like creation, construction and so forth is a constant in his

works).<sup>7</sup> It is impossible to provide a satisfactory account of the ways in which the conventional self-image of rationality and control is, throughout Machado's works, both parodied and subverted. However, poem "CXXXVI, XVI" of CC expresses what many other poems and writings more covertly gesture towards: "Ya estamos en el secreto: / todo es nada" (4).

The most distinguishing features of Machado's vision underlie this sort of poetry, with its broad religious resonances. But the tenor of poems such as those above is certainly more than a simple lamentation. Poetry provides him with a means of negotiating issues—both literary and metaphysical—that are inseparably linked in his mind (this becomes especially evident in the musings of his apocryphal philosophers, Juan de Mairena and Abel Martín). For Machado, as for Unamuno, the transcendent is meant to be approached rather than attained: any intellectually honest view must emphasize the constructive and temporal dimension inherent in life and art. The *Parábolas* (which form part of CC and to which the majority of the above poems belong) evidence the increasing impact of Unamuno on Machado, and are perhaps the most revealing of fundamental questions of faith, knowledge and art. Thus, as we saw in "Profesión de fe," there is a sense in which God is the creation of man as much as the opposite is true. In verses such as these, there is a sense in which we might view Machado as responding to the necessity of reconstituting the sacred in a modernity that is insistently secular. Art's role, it seems, is compensatory, offsetting the lack of "authentic" religious experience. Taking a broader view, it becomes easy to see the issue of the sacred as including but not being exhausted by religious questions. With Unamuno and Machado, their writings should be seen not just as tools through which to reproduce the tensions that arise from religion's "failure" in modern times. There is something of this in Sontag's remarks that "[t]he need of human beings to transcend 'the personal' is no less profound than the need to be a person" (231). Art allows the artist to problematize religion and all its promises, permitting the individual to both feature and extend itself beyond the "biological" boundaries that circumscribe it.

Yet Machado anticipates Sontag's comments when he makes the rather grim realization that a project of the self is possible only in the sense that such a strategy is constantly unfolding, and ends not with a sort of telos or pre-established goal, but with the death of the indi-

vidual that interrupts that unfolding. The leitmotif of water and its various manifestations (“Suenan el agua en la fuente de mármol” [*Del Camino*, “XXIV” 8]), exemplify this self-in-progress notion, while also representing his personal need for expressive, concrete images of identity, a need that is connected simultaneously with a rejection of transcendence. In other words, Machado here finds himself in an intellectual-aesthetic double-bind: he expresses the modern subject’s desire to represent and foreground one’s identity, to grasp and shape “real” dimensions of experience, *despite* his suspicion that such a project is ultimately utopic or, at best, reductive.

If it is true that the literature of this period attempts to compensate for the perceived lack of “authentic” religious experience, then it may be useful to invoke the example of Juan Ramón Jiménez. According to Cardwell, for Jiménez artistic creation provides “a means to sustain some form of faith in the face of Romantic lost ideals and illusions” (507). One of the fundamental differences between Machado and Jiménez is that the former is at pains to capture the fluidity of experience and relationship rather than the illusory fixity of identity. Jiménez, particularly in *Diario de un poeta recién casado* (*Diario*), rebels against this notion; many of his poems express his desire to triumph over and against identity diffusion or decomposition. In *Diario*—Jiménez’s best collection, in his own estimation—assimilation or unity is most often won. This sort of vague belief in the power of poetry would lead Luis Cernuda (Spanish poet, critic and member of the so-called Generation of 1927) to accuse Jiménez of a “subjetivismo egotista.” Before responding to this indictment, we might first note that poetry for Jiménez implies a sort of personal salvation, prompting exuberant outbursts such as the following: “¡Oh!, ¡qué dulce, qué dulce / verdad sin realidad aún, qué dulce!” (*Diario* “I” 15–16). This is not to say that Jiménez takes an unproblematic view of life—as Sánchez-Barbudo notes in reference to this poem:

[L]a maravilla a veces [. . .] es poder constatar que lo lejano, sin dejar de ser tal, está ya próximo; que lo fantástico, sin dejar de ser tal, es ya casi realidad. Por eso el poema empieza y acaba destacando, entre admiraciones, con sorpresa y alegría, lo contradictorio que resulta tanto el objeto deseado como su propio sentimiento. (66)

These remarks point to an inherent irony: subject and object (desire and its fulfillment) correspond only on a symbolic (aesthetic) level. That is to say, Jiménez appears every bit as besieged by religious doubt and existential fear as Unamuno and Machado (see *Eternidades* “CXXII”); also similar is his aim: to pursue an aesthetics that provides him with a cohesive identity. In this way he is, aesthetically, no more “egotistical”—as Luis Cernuda charges—than any of the other deeply disquieted Spanish writers of his time.

The irony of the “maravillas” signaled by Sánchez-Barbudo puts us on the path of another interesting issue: the poet’s obvious delight in the unexplainable and the contradictory, a pleasure reminiscent of Baroja’s musings about Poe’s compositional method of “The Raven.” The strategy at play seems to be a kind of mystification (in the face of scientific demystification?), a construction of some sort of hazy otherness that seduces by its very distance and indeterminacy. These instances of spontaneous, almost carnival-like effervescence reinforce the duality of human nature, and underscore the experience of being both self and other.

Quite unlike many of the verses of *Diario*, Machado’s emphasis is on poetry’s failure to attain pure reflexive self-sufficiency—it bears the signs of a (vain) struggle to escape the world in which it is necessarily inscribed (CC “CXIX”). It is in this sense that it becomes sacred, unknowable to itself except through its own otherness: art removes us from ourselves, allowing us to overcome alienation and powerlessness. Yet, at the same time, it is never more than a symbolic, representational gesture—a fact of which Machado is always fully cognizant. Images such as time and water symbolically register these paradoxes inherent in Machado’s vision. In poem “CXLI,” the waters heard flowing within point to the poet’s existential dilemma, always in a state of flux, while they also point to the epistemological interdependency to which he finds himself constrained, recalling notions of permanence and fixity: “Como otra vez, mi atención / está del agua cautiva; / pero del agua en la viva / roca de mi corazón” (CC “CLXI, XI” 1–4). For all his sympathy and admiration for the mystic poets, Machado can endorse neither the Platonic vision nor mysticism due to their espousal of a harmonious and intelligible reality. Both outlooks, like religion itself, afford an individual and social plenitude whose effects are powerfully seductive. And yet Machado was too enamored of logic to allow similar “utopic” notions to console him.

For all their differences, both Machado and Jiménez figure among the twentieth century's most emblematic representatives of the modern process of secularization as well as modernity's response to it. Cardwell makes the point that, in a 1905 review of Unamuno's *La vida de Don Quijote y Sancho*, "Machado expressed the view that the cries of anguish and the inward search for a spiritual goal were just as important in the search for a national regeneration as active campaigns" (508). Secularization, at least with regard to much Spanish literature, did not mean simply a demystification of the sacred in the name of more "material" values. It made necessary a remapping of the world, a sacralization of the world through aesthetics.

We mentioned earlier, in the context of Unamuno, that artistic creation seems in many ways a symbolic means to personal salvation. Indeed, it is not difficult to see a protagonist (Augusto) or an image (a river) as the articulation of otherness that aids in rounding out the writer's identity. It would seem that religious doubt induces this activity: most paradoxical and fascinating in Machado is that he, just like Unamuno, cannot seem to be able to do without God, and therefore goes about "creating" him in various ways.

So far we have seen examples of how certain writers, confronting the apparent absence of God, have gone about continuing an experience of the sacred. Arguing that "there are no immortal gospels," Durkheim held humanity to be capable of "conceiving new ones" (323). The question posed at the outset of this article bears repeating: what is to count as sacred? When Proust speaks of his taste of cake (the "petite madeleine"); when Woolf refers to "this day, this moment," when Alejo Carpentier chronicles "las maravillas" of Latin America, it seems at least arguable that they, along with Unamuno and Machado, are managing a secular recasting of a sacred paradigm, a symbolic bid for personal or collective "salvation"—after all, the sacred responds to our urgent desire for authority, for order and organization. Through these events and experiences, the above authors are intent on making the object of desire—a past event, a future goal, knowledge of oneself, etc.—more "real," more genuine than other resources make possible.

In the context of literature, one major difference between "canonical" modernist texts and the Spanish works discussed here should again be stressed: nearly every major Spanish writer of the time explicitly addresses the status of God. This observation makes a study of the

sacred, as we have defined it, both more intriguing and more complex. In Pérez Galdós's *Miau*, Ramón declares to his sister-in-law, "Es que yo no me alegro de ser incrédulo, fíjate bien; yo lo deploro, y me harías un favor si me convencieras de que estoy equivocado" (262). The importance of the father's attitude is augmented by Ramón's comments, a few pages later, concerning similar issues. In short, Ramón describes two theories of knowledge:

Lo previsto no ocurre jamás [. . .]. [L]os españoles viven al día, sorprendidos de los sucesos y sin ningún dominio sobre ellos. Conforme a esta teoría del fracaso de toda provisión, ¿qué debe hacerse para que suceda una cosa? Prever la contraria, compenetrarse bien de la idea opuesta a su realización. ¿Y para que una cosa no pase? Figurarse que pasará, llegar a convencerse, en virtud de una sostenida obstinación espiritual, de la evidencia de aquél supuesto. (284)

The logic of the illogical, he argues, is the paradoxical law governing life. However, when Ramón is finally offered a long awaited job, he debates the validity of his personal "illogical" theory, comparing it to the doctrine of Christianity, which states: "Pedid y se os dará" (284). He then describes his own theory as "diabolical," and the Christian one as consoling. He reasons that it is perhaps best to leave his fate up to God, "renunciando a la previsión de los acontecimientos," which, he claims, amounts to little more than the "resabio pecador del orgullo del hombre" (284–5). Ramón seems engaged in an ironic yearning for fixity of any sort, and vacillates between the divine and the absurd as potential sources.

It would be misleading to view this search for divine fixity as absent in earlier nineteenth-century fiction writers, including Pérez Galdós himself. Such anxieties—and responses to them—had arguably been underway for centuries;<sup>8</sup> not simply important for their own times, turn-of-the-century Spanish writers inherited and passed on problems, not always inspiring or aspiring. However, one does wonder to what extent Pérez Galdós's disappointment in the failed rise in the middle classes—a point made clear in his 1897 speech on reception to the *Real Academia Española*, in which he also states his consequent intention to change his "principios literarios"—inform his

literary project.<sup>9</sup> It seems clear that Pérez Galdós's confidence in the possibility of a coherent strategy was faltering, producing in him a sensation not unlike the one Ramón experiences above: the disappearance of unified purposefulness governing both universe and self, and the logical consequence that this loss must be offset. Ramón resorts to his grandson's "visions" that seem to be a direct channel to God, suggesting that the cultural construction of the sacred experience, and its relation to religion, have undergone significant shifts.

Many of the major Spanish writers of this period therefore occupy an interstitial position regarding orthodox faith: God is regularly addressed but frequently seen as not sufficiently guaranteeing the self. Tradition is stretched and morphs in the writer's attempt to forge myths appropriate to his or her times, all as a means of understanding and dignifying the contemporary world. Like the younger generation of Spanish writers, Pérez Galdós is operating both inside and outside of the traditional conception of the sacred, namely, the God of Christianity; in many cases (e.g. Pérez Galdós's *Miau*, Unamuno's *SMB*, and Machado's "Profesión de fe"), the writer ultimately introduces a highly individualized religion (this is perhaps what Machado means when, through Juan de Mairena, he states that "los dioses cambian por sí mismos, sin que nosotros podamos evitarlo, y se introducen solos [. . .]") (*Juan de Mairena* 230). Particularly in the case of Machado, Unamuno and Pérez Galdós, a thorough knowledge of Christianity prevailed among contemporary Spanish writers, a fact that clearly informs their work. Furthermore, this points up the perils of seeking traces of the sacred within their texts, drawing as they do upon inherited forms and yet refashioning them, secularizing them. But in many ways the "quest for the sacred" they stage forms part of the broader, modern strategy of self-coherence, an ideal that, though impossible without a transcendent other can, in their case, be approached by means of art.

In a sense, then, the new sacred is in many ways a dialectical interchange between traditional sources and present demands, between the past and the ever modernizing present. From this perspective *SMB* stands as both paradigm and rupture since it appropriates as well as recasts the Christian myth. In fact, this very same "sacralizing" impulse is at play in nearly all of Unamuno's fictional works. Of course, art's claim of endurance—its reification of sentiments—is not of recent coinage. Examples abound in Shakespeare ("Not marble

nor the gilded monuments of princes / shall outlive this powerful rime" ["LV" 1-2]) and Cervantes's Dulcinea (herself a seemingly transcendent value in the eyes of Don Quijote); in modern writers, a similar gesture appears, such as when, in "Borges y yo," Borges writes: "[E]stoy destinado a perderme, definitivamente, y sólo algún instante de mí podrá sobrevivir en el otro [Borges]" (351). In Unamuno, as well, we see the desire to reinstate fiction as a means of embodying values in a world without essential forms. This is at the heart of Unamuno's reading of *Don Quijote*, whose status he wishes to privilege (just as Don Quijote elevates Dulcinea) and incorporate within the experience of modernity.

Most provocatively, the plain but curious fact again surfaces: irrespective of the author's stance on religious belief, the "sacred" can be enlisted to examine ostensibly non-religious matters such as community, authority and identity. In connection with this, a point made earlier bears repeating: if *SMB* refashions the story of Christianity, then this is so in the sense that Unamuno continues it under another, secular name. *SMB* is *not* the story of humankind's salvation, but rather about the power of belief and its ability to shore up identity by insisting on the existence of some positive "truth"—regardless of how we might choose to define the term.

Unamuno's pervasive skepticism, coupled with his unabated desire to believe in a divine being and achieve immortality, has led many critics to examine his works almost exclusively in the light of his religious preoccupations. However, it is important to recognize the recurrent theme of otherness Unamuno addresses as a means of staving off the destructive effects of loneliness and doubt. An "enfermedad de conciencia," as he called it, the knowledge that one's death is the end of everything forces an intensification of experience and expresses the sadistic creativity and theatricality of selfhood. The secular dimension can be seen in his zeal to perform the role of creator as a strategy meant to mirror himself and draw power from his own lamentable condition.

In *SMB*, Angela functions as chronicler and narrator as well as symbolic daughter and mother to Manuel. As her retrospective narration concludes, she poses a question to which she provides no answer: "¿Y yo, creo? [. . .] ¿Es que sé algo?, ¿es que creo algo?" (624). A few lines later she enlarges the question: "¿Y éstos, los otros, los que me rodean, creen? ¿Qué es eso de creer? Por lo menos, viven" (626).

Her ambivalence is also sustained by a statement that comes in an earlier paragraph:

Así le ganó [a mi hermano Lázaro], en efecto, para su piadoso fraude; así le ganó con la verdad de muerte a la razón de vida. Y así me ganó a mí, que nunca dejé trasparentar a los otros su divino, su santísimo juego. Y es que creía y creo que Dios Nuestro Señor, por no sé qué sagrados y no escudriñaderos designios, les hizo creer [a Manuel y Lázaro], les hizo creerse incrédulos. Y que acaso en el acabamiento de su tránsito se les cayó la venda. (625)

Angela recognizes Manuel's religious work to be a "piadoso fraude" to which she, too, has been won over. But she also explains Manuel's and Lázaro's lack of faith in theological terms, reasoning that their non-belief, imposed (as she states) by God, made them ideally suited to guide the town. Unamuno's intervention—as the person now in possession of Angela's chronicle—contributes to the discussion, thereby enlarging the meaning of "belief." If the reader is aware of Unamuno's stance on religion,<sup>10</sup> it comes as no surprise that, as external narrator in *SMB*, he avoids mentioning the agnosticism that characterizes Manuel. Instead, he affirms the "truth" of San Manuel:

De la realidad de este San Manuel Bueno, mártir, tal como me le ha revelado su discípula e hija espiritual Angela Carballino, de esta realidad no se me ocurre dudar. Creo en ella más que creía el mismo santo; creo en ella más que creo en mi propia realidad. (627)

Unamuno, Angela and Augusto Pérez all attest to Durkheim's firm belief that "there are no false religions" (4): they stand as invitations to think about the various forms of belief (in its broadest sense), and how they shape self-consciousness. All three live uneasily due to the ambiguity of existence, and all three question radically the taken-for-granted assumptions about the coherence of identity. Here, perhaps, we can establish a key point of articulation with certain modernist works that point to a "second life," life lived and perpetuated in its "other" aspects, despite their status as literary texts.<sup>11</sup> That is, Unamuno's short story nostalgically yearns for a great truth, a Lyotardian "grand

narrative”<sup>12</sup> (any totalizing or unified discourse—Marxism, capitalism, Christianity—which attempts an all-encompassing account of history, to the exclusion of “little” narratives. According to the French philosopher, such explanatory theories ought to be met with suspicion or “incredulity”). Angela describes Manuel’s life work as both “piadoso” and “fraudento.” A conventional reading of her remarks points to the agnostic’s dilemma. Interpreted more broadly, however, every primary character—including Unamuno—has, for varying reasons, redirected his or her attention from God to the mythical Manuel (the notable exception, of course, is Manuel himself). The definition of faith is thereby enlarged, allowing even liberal secularists such as Lázaro to be classified as faithful believers. Each has been seduced by the temptations of myth, yielding to the urge to kneel before something more powerful than oneself.

Along with Spain’s political, economic and social institutions, the country’s cultural activity was itself being transformed by a secularizing orientation that, in the arts, dates most visibly from the Romantic era. The metaphors have their own historicity: the search for God; the “Logos”; a stable grounding; the “search for the sacred.” I have tried to demonstrate that much of circa-1900 fiction can be seen as an intensified version of this reconfiguration of some sort of lost guarantor. Simply put, although religion and other value systems serve as constructive and stabilizing enterprises, the artistic process—aesthetics—perhaps most successfully satisfies the basic human need to constantly reestablish a means of security and self-knowledge. Particularly in the age of technology and science, it is art—and the very materiality of the medium—that therefore becomes intrinsically valuable because something is realized through the process of creation that cannot be achieved by any other means (divine, mechanical, etc.). Similarly, Pérez Galdós, Unamuno, Machado and Jiménez exemplify their period by embracing reality and accepting the tragedy of human life, while at the same time attempting to transcend that reality. Crucially, they do this at a time when ultimate truths—traditionally anchored in the transcendent—stage a steady retreat. Whether manifesting an individual or collective will, art works to remove us from ourselves, just as the fictional Augusto allows Unamuno to move beyond himself—an aesthetics drawn from a theological idiom, so to speak.

The conclusions of many of the above authors are, it seems clear, in tension with their desires. Since early nineteenth-century

Romanticism, many have argued along with Coleridge that “[n]o man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher” (179). Art stands as evidence that, as human beings, we are dependent on symbolism, on representation; art is also symptomatic of the fact that humanity always seeks to overcome alienation. The above authors were well aware that to be able to make important decisions humankind must have a purpose, a vision of an ultimate goal. The age of faith had a purpose—that of serving God, appealing to him as a source for questions of truth. The comfort of truth claims completes individual and collective human identity, a fact that is attested to by the history of Western civilization and its subsequent search for a non-transcendent ground for authority—a search dependent on the hope that history might still have a telos. In this article I have pursued the (to my mind) indisputable relationship between the privileged status of art and the search for transcendence in a secular and materialist age. In this sense, artistic creation (and aesthetics as a category generally) might be viewed largely as an outlet for grief and anxiety that is, at its roots, metaphysical. Particularly by the late nineteenth century, a period characterized by the twin “failures” of religion and science, the role of literature seemingly becomes even more compensatory, symbolically enacting the absence of some absolute, the lack of fixity amidst an increasingly inscrutable world. I have also suggested that many works of the period frequently gravitate toward religious themes, while at the same time abusing their conventions and original significance. In any event, it is clear that many of the works of this period are inspired by more than mere “escapism,” in which the author strives to turn an intolerable, boorish or incoherent reality into something more meaningful or more pleasant. Above all, the literature of the decades surrounding the year 1900 bears the marks of both an intense questing and a wearisome struggle. The privileged role of aesthetics in a world in which God has presumably retreated suggests that the artist is ideally suited to seek viable substitutes. Or, as Unamuno’s unbelieving priest asserts: “¿Religión verdadera? Todas las religiones son verdaderas, en cuanto hacen vivir espiritualmente a los pueblos que las profesan” (*SMB* 245). Unamuno and many of his contemporaries display an astute awareness of this dilemma, both staging their own “quest for the sacred” while also inviting the reader to reopen the possibilities created by a world in which God’s absence is, in a sense, still overwhelmingly present.

## Notes

1. Other forms and contexts, for example, raise the issue of reason and its relation to the irrational and madness; gender; the politics of the nature-culture boundary, and so on.

2. The concept of the sublime, particularly Lyotard's rehabilitation of the term, comes to mind.

3. Offering a different perspective on this same issue, David Jasper follows the theologian Thomas Altizer, and persuasively argues for "the apocalypse of the death of God" (98). That is, the death of God is in modern times parlayed into a tireless recreation of and conversation with God (91).

4. Unamuno explicitly addresses this urge in *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* (155).

5. Only the twin failures of reason and religion could prompt in Machado the following exasperating verses:

El hombre es por natura una bestia paradójica,  
un animal absurdo que necesita lógica.  
Creó de nada un mundo y, su obra terminada,  
"Ya estoy en el secreto—se dijo—, todo es nada."  
(CC "CXXXVI, XVI" 1-4).

6. These verses present a more complex and fractured view of a world, one with no fixed moorings, and remind us that, despite the unmatched authority that both religion and science have possessed, such messianic thinking is ultimately illusory.

7. For Machado, poetry cannot (and ought not) emancipate itself from effects of time; the poet's task is to convey the *experience* of time, and for this reason the poet is uniquely positioned to reproduce the sensation of reality. Thus we find Machado implicitly shunning the notion of poetry as "immobilizing" ("Ni mármol duro eterno / ni música ni pintura / sino palabra en el tiempo" [CC "CLXIV" 1-3].)

8. Many scholars have argued that the story of modern art begins in the eighteenth century, as both an extension of and a reaction against the Enlightenment disenchantment of the world. Most significantly, the (Romantic) sublime and Gothic fiction, with all the latter's supernatural entailments, reflected the necessity of filling a void created by God's absence. Roberts offers a succinct summary: "Modern art is the continuation of the sacred by other means" (173).

9. In an apocalyptic tone, he states: "Podría decirse que la sociedad llega a un punto de su camino en que se ve rodeada de ingentes rocas que

le cierran el paso [. . .]. Contábamos, sin duda, los incansables viajeros con que una voz sobrenatural nos dijera desde lo alto: *por aquí se va, y nada más que por aquí*. Pero la voz sobrenatural no hiera aún nuestros oídos, y los más sabios de entre nosotros se enredan en interminables controversias sobre cuál pueda o deba ser la hendidura o pasadizo por el cual podremos salir de este hoyo pantanoso en que nos revolvemos y asfixiamos” (“Sociedad presente” 475).

10. SMB was published in 1931, nearly thirty years after *El sentimiento trágico de la vida*, which sets forth the theme of religious crisis that would run through most of his subsequent works.

11. This observation is further corroborated by Unamuno’s refusal to divulge how he happened upon the “document.” The Bahkrinian-like cacophony of voices and perspectives is a pointed inheritance from the lost manuscript the author of *Don Quijote* claims to find in a Toledo market.

12. One may take this a bit further and make a bid for the text’s post-modernist qualities: in many ways it liberates itself from the requirement of great truths and avowedly engages in the play of forms (particularly when Unamuno himself appears and proclaims his belief in “la realidad de este San Manuel Bueno” (627)). In other words, perhaps this is Unamuno’s way of foregrounding and intensifying the work’s complexities—where meaning and “truth” are contested and fragmented—or, conversely, of simply sidestepping them. After all, precisely what is the “realidad” of “este San Manuel Bueno”?

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