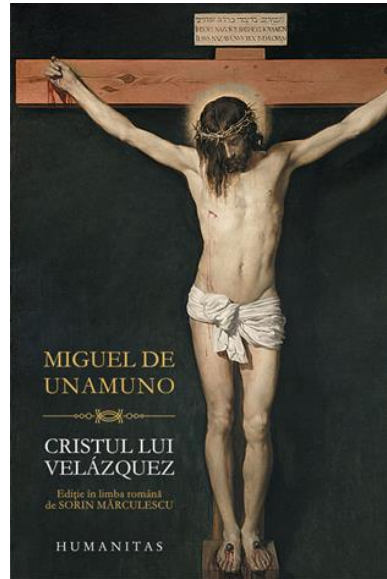


***The Poem of a Distinguished Spanish Writer and Professor on an Acclaimed Spanish Painting***

**Ana-Magdalena Petraru**

Miguel de Unamuno, *Cristul lui Velázquez/ El Cristo de Velázquez (The Christ of Velázquez)*, translated by Sorin Mărculescu, Humanitas Publishing House, 2015, 320 pages



The poet, translator and essayist Sorin Mărculescu prefaced and annotated the first complete faithful translation into Romanian of Unamuno's 1920 masterpiece in verse on Velasquez's 1632 masterpiece on canvas. The learned edition accompanied by a minute chronological table and its extended preface, consisting of almost ninety pages, is a thorough study of the poem, a book in itself, to celebrate approximately 150 years from the Spanish author's birth. Considerations on the translation are of interest to any Translation Studies scholar, Mărculescu complaining about the poor quality of various 'sub-poems' previously rendered into Romanian in an anthology. Unamuno's Spanish is considered a difficult one and that of the poem written in ten years makes no exception. Apart from the problems that the translation of poetry raises, be they 'prosodic, semantic or syntactic', the Spanish writer's text, a strong opponent of 'poetic artifice', "is enriched by many rhetorical and stylistic devices: a lexis of regionalisms from Salamanca, a syntax arguing for the distortions of the hyperbaton and gains in expression, a prosody in which the hendecasyllabic is freely developed, in enjambments and unexpected phonetic associations (rhymes and interior assonances), a construction which could be labelled as 'hypertextual' considering the hundreds of marginal references to biblical texts that are an integrating part to the poem (despite Unamuno's claim that they were added for ignorant people), hence the multidimensional space of reference that we need to

observe...”.<sup>1</sup> Among the translation technicalities, the Romanian translator also preserved the small and capital letters preferred by Unamuno when addressing the Divinity and the Divine Person.<sup>2</sup>

*The Christ of Velázquez* is one of the most important poems in Spanish literature and its author, a unique poetical figure, was accused of Unamunocentrism (the author himself spoke of *yoismo* as his landmark) which defined all his works, not just the lyrical ones. Rooted in religion and philosophy, despite a temporary socialist background, Unamuno rose against reason and rationalism, hence his adherence to doubtfulness and an aversion for the sentimentalism that generally characterised Spanish poetry. Fascinated by the figure of Jesus Christ, the inaccessible face of Divinity, the writer needs the figure of the Saviour on the cross, in flesh for adoration. Drawing on German philosophy (Kant, Hegel) and other prominent figures (Pascal, Kirkegaard), on the one hand and mainstream Christian theology (St. Augustine) and protestant contemporaries, on the other hand, to name but a few of his influences, Unamuno became an existentialist with the main concern of man in relation to transcendence. This may explain the choice of Velázquez’s Christ depicted alone, unaccompanied by the other figures as in mainstream representations dictated by traditional canons, thus inviting the viewer/ audience/ readers to contribute externally outside the painting.<sup>3</sup> The poem shows “a fierce fight against doubt, in a monophonic discourse addressing a unique recipient, both immobile and mute in an unmentioned duration: a painted canvas whose ascendance is neither documented by the painter, nor by the poet who declaims his successive interventions, less so by the translator meant (and resigned) to the unceasing breaking of overlapping veils. Unamuno does not address (...) an instance of Christ ready to answer with mercy (...) and the distance between the praying soul and the invoked figure was/ is/ will be practically inexistent.”<sup>4</sup>

A Basque raised by his mother and grandmother in a traditional Catholic environment, Unamuno distinguished himself as a family guy that was about to become a priest who lost faith during his studies at Madrid and switched to agnosticism due to the socialist ideals in the pipeline at the time. His health problems, a sick child and the quasi-evangelical wife bring him back to the path of religious meditation until his death in 1936. Essayist, playwright, diarist, columnist, the Spanish writer’s debut as poet was a late one, he was never engaged politically, religiously or literarily. He was concerned with man’s life on earth and the fact that he was put there by God to finally die, i.e., destined to suffer without the certainty of regaining the body *post*

<sup>1</sup> Sorin Mărculescu, *Notă liminară (Introductory Note)*, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Sorin Mărculescu, *idem*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> Sorin Mărculescu, *De la ecfrază la extază (adnotări și divagări)/ From Ekphrasis to Ekstasis (Adnotations and Divagations)*, pp. 9-16, *passim*.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, pp. 38-39.

*mortem*. The uncertainty of afterlife, the craving for immortality rooted in Kantian anthropology best define his agnostic side and along with his mystical traits, a religion of uncertainty. With the many bleeding figures of Christ depicted by Velázquez, it is argued that Unamuno actually lives in a spiritual Catholic environment, despite his intellectual adhesions. The hope in the love of God is a hypostasis of the love for Spain in the author.<sup>5</sup> As translator, Sorin Mărculescu admits he preferred to choose his authors, as often as possible, “to render into Romanian great deceased writers of ‘dead languages’, of vernacular ‘stases’ of the supra-idiom which becomes its creating mirror; in other words, in the spirit of Unamuno, the spoken language is understood as gradual death, as ‘in-dying’, the only living way to the inaccessible eternity of the word. And through translation, such stases are reborn (...). This subtle archaeological revival of lexemes, as well as the inclination towards religious or dialectal forms in Unamuno (...) could be interpreted as expression of the same ‘willing to hope’ (...).<sup>6</sup> As he advanced in the Romanian rendering of the Spanish book-poem, he started asking himself who was actually translating it, as literary historians and theologians were wondering who was the person the poem talked about (the character’s voice or the author’s). “It was an Orthodox Christian poet, maybe not less dilemmatic and in agony than the catholic Unamuno with a deep respect for Catholicism (...) a humble admirer of a Spain that tried to include it in his own personal mythology, a soul split between two seemingly intense pulsations: the love towards his own country and Eastern Romanian traditions, of a remarkable unity (...) and profoundly attached and concerned by Western Latin pole represented by Spain (...).”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the answer was found by the translator, the who being someone close to his own end, with no obligations and dogmatic constraints or other that felt the need for a climate of finding humility in life. The why came after the first version when stylistic doubt and philological exigence occurred. It was a desire of silent greatness more than poetic affinity, a feeling of ontological completeness.<sup>8</sup>

Marking what could be called an accident in his artistic development, the Christ of Velázquez cannot be circumscribed to Spanish religious paintings (in the tradition of Francisco de Zurbarán). In the context of *Las Meninas*, labelled as ‘a theology of painting’, the Spanish artist proves his detached realism, his grotesque, the suggested royalty prefiguring an absent, yet implicit inner and outer audience; similarly, his Christ implies the lance of Longinus he was pierced with in the poet’s interrogating ‘dynamism’ whose (role) model remains unknown to us. A living proof of poetry as blind painting, overcoming the impossibility of comparing static and dynamic arts,

---

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*, pp. 12-34, *passim*.

<sup>6</sup> *Idem*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>7</sup> *Idem*, pp. 82-83.

<sup>8</sup> *Idem*, pp. 84-85, *passim*.

Unamuno's book-poem takes the linguistic and dynamic sign in poetry to new horizons (of expectation) to a static and iconic sign in visual arts, in general and painting, in particular aiming at a deliberate disconnectedness of the work of art and literature that permanently alludes to itself.<sup>9</sup> A part of *Iliad* in itself in the acception in which Achilles's tendon is accounted for, the book poem praising the 17<sup>th</sup> century painting exhibited at Prado, Madrid could also play the role of a large counterpoint in Spanish literature of John Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.<sup>10</sup>

Unamuno's desire to make a Christian, biblical and Spanish thing, as he confesses in a letter to the Portuguese poet Teixeira de Pascoaes, in 1913,<sup>11</sup> leads to this book-poem of 2540 white iambic pentameters divided into four parts (I – 1065 verses; II – 448 verses; III – 774 verses; IV – 283 verses), in their turn consisting of 'sub-poems' numbered in Roman style, all entitled except the first four ones in part I. Numerological, alchemic, astrological aspects and other are not excluded from the exegesis, yet it remains safe to argue that most titles and epigraphs are of concrete nature drawing on parts of Velázquez's oil on canvas or of an abstract/ moral nature, inviting to reflection.<sup>12</sup> Mărculescu argues that "Part one assumes the role of universal-prophetic introduction, of founding 'will' of this modern gospel for the Spanish people, as Unamuno saw his poem. Part two is a transition section in which the great opposites are brought into play, namely life/ death, death/ rebirth, father/ son, body/ soul, sacrifice/ salvation, Old Adam/ New Adam, etc. Part three comprises quasi-anatomical meditations (...) on the various parts of Christ's body as can be seen in Velázquez's painting, similarly to the stages of meditation in Ignatius de Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* (...), the number of sub-poems in this part equalling that of the New Testament books, i.d., 37. Part four has eight numbered sub-poems and an unnumbered one which is the longest."<sup>13</sup>

The complex book-poem of almost 200 pages in the Romanian translation, footnotes included, takes the initiated reader on a journey to unveil biblical mysteries in treats designed as 'sub-poems', literary jewels inspired by Velázquez's oil on canvas. The Spanish painter's 'magic brush' is the key to our vision and understanding<sup>14</sup>, we become anew by admiring it, Christ's death, and then rebirth.<sup>15</sup> Seen only as Judge, Diego, the artist,

---

<sup>9</sup> *Idem*, pp. 40-47, *passim*.

<sup>10</sup> *Idem*, p. 48, *passim*.

<sup>11</sup> *Apud*. Mărculescu, *idem*, p. 58.

<sup>12</sup> *Idem*, p. 60-61, *passim*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *Cristul lui Velázquez/ The Christ of Velázquez*, Part One, I, p. 117.

<sup>15</sup> *Idem*, p. 118.

depicted Him to resemble Apolo, a deification in art.<sup>16</sup> The moon is the symbol of Christ and the first sub-poem with a title (V, pp. 128-129), followed by *Ecce Homo* as Christ's white body is gospel to men.<sup>17</sup> In VII, *God-Darkness*, the pitch black of the background contrasts with the white body<sup>18</sup> and we are invited to use His chest as a pillow.<sup>19</sup> Christ gave His blood for ours which is 'poisoned'<sup>20</sup>. Did he die or just faint for three days?<sup>21</sup> He is a friend, now in death's peace who came to earth to bring the war, the fighting creation.<sup>22</sup> As white as the sky at dawn<sup>23</sup>, as white as a five-petal rose is His body<sup>24</sup>, shining as a river in the sun<sup>25</sup>, a white cloud that guided the people of God<sup>26</sup>, a white lamb of God that forgives the sins of the world and stops Cain's blood from the wound.<sup>27</sup> The wine is sad in the desert where there's no water and so is the wine-blood and His soul,<sup>28</sup> whereas white linen is His fragile body,<sup>29</sup> a white eagle that enlightens us.<sup>30</sup> Was it a black cloud given by His hair,<sup>31</sup> a lion of deserts, a white bull that fell under the burden of the cross<sup>32</sup>, a Sphynx, a Cherub of our flaws<sup>33</sup>? A white gate that opens to whoever knocks<sup>34</sup>, a lily from the valley of pain full of Adam's sweat and tears?<sup>35</sup> It is like a sword that Christ's body feasts the eye<sup>36</sup>, a white dove from the sky, a sign of promise<sup>37</sup>, Mary's white milk and a mother's that gives peace to humankind.<sup>38</sup> Our love for Christ's body burns us.<sup>39</sup> Jacob's ladder is His cross<sup>40</sup> and He is a white snake that heals those that look at

---

<sup>16</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, II, p. 119-120.

<sup>17</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, VI *Ecce Homo*, p. 130.

<sup>18</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, VIII *Blood*, p. 138.

<sup>21</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, X *Life is a Dream* p. 141.

<sup>22</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XI *Peace in War*, p. 143.

<sup>23</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XII *Dawn*, p. 146.

<sup>24</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XIII *Rose*, p. 147.

<sup>25</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XIV *River-Spring*, p. 150.

<sup>26</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XV *Cloud-Music*, p. 152.

<sup>27</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XVI, p. 155.

<sup>28</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XVIII *Wine*, p. 159.

<sup>29</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XIX *Linen*, p. 161.

<sup>30</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XX *Eagle*, p. 163.

<sup>31</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XXI *Black Cloud*, p. 165.

<sup>32</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XXIII *The Bull*, p. 167.

<sup>33</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XXIII *Cherub-Book*, p. 169.

<sup>34</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XXV *Gate*, p. 171.

<sup>35</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XXVI *Lily*, p. 173.

<sup>36</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XXVI *Spade*, p. 175.

<sup>37</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XXIX *Dove*, p. 179.

<sup>38</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XXX *Milk*, p. 180.

<sup>39</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XXXII *Eucharist*, p. 183.

<sup>40</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XXXV *Ladder*, p. 189.

Him<sup>41</sup>; His nails are keys that open the lock of death through life<sup>42</sup> and like a buck running through the woods, He rose to the Calvary to die from so much bleeding<sup>43</sup>, silence, nakedness, calm and night are Jesus's garments.<sup>44</sup> The second part finds Christ abandoned by His Father and in solitude on the empty mountain<sup>45</sup>, where the sea is a trembling mirror of the eyes of God and a prime cradle of life<sup>46</sup>; He came to spread fire on earth<sup>47</sup> and the soul and body are inseparable.<sup>48</sup> The sky is black forecasting a tempest<sup>49</sup> and His Parent holds the cross for Him, weighing the stars like a scale<sup>50</sup>. The crowds wanted to proclaim Him king after the miracle of the bread and fish but He escaped to the mountains for His kingdom was not in this world.<sup>51</sup> Part II concludes with the calvary of love that breaks the clouds on Sinai like the son so that our hope may spring.<sup>52</sup> Part III opens with Pilate's statement, "What I have written, I have written" and puts the inscription above His forehead<sup>53</sup> where the crown on his head stands for our sins, as many as the thorns.<sup>54</sup> The head rests on the chest as a lily withered by the sun<sup>55</sup>, the long black hair falls<sup>56</sup>, the burnt forehead<sup>57</sup>, the face was kissed by His mother goodbye<sup>58</sup>, His eyes became shadow in the long wait for the Father<sup>59</sup> and the ears are covered by the long hair, a Father's charm<sup>60</sup> and the nose shines like a knife<sup>61</sup>. The cheeks turned pale from the salt of the tears<sup>62</sup>, the chest holds the infinite in agony<sup>63</sup>, His bones are as a rock, a bone of the earth's bones<sup>64</sup>, His

---

<sup>41</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XXXVI *Snake*, p. 190.

<sup>42</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XXXVII *Nails*. *Art*, p. 192.

<sup>43</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XXXVIII *Buck*, p. 194.

<sup>44</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XXXIX *Silence*, p. 197.

<sup>45</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, Part II, *Solitude*, p. 201.

<sup>46</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, III *The Sea*, p. 205.

<sup>47</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, IV *Fire*, p. 208.

<sup>48</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, VI *Soul and Body*, p. 212.

<sup>49</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, X *Tempest*, p. 223.

<sup>50</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XII *Scale*, p. 229.

<sup>51</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XIII *King*, p. 230.

<sup>52</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XIV *From Sinai to Calvary*, p. 234.

<sup>53</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, Part III, *The Inscription*, p. 237.

<sup>54</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, II *Crown*, p. 239.

<sup>55</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, III *Head*, p. 242.

<sup>56</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, IV *The Long Hair*, p. 244.

<sup>57</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, V *Forehead*, p. 249.

<sup>58</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, VI *Face*, p. 250.

<sup>59</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, VII *Eyes*, p. 252.

<sup>60</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, VIII *Ears*, p. 255.

<sup>61</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, IX *Nose*, p. 256.

<sup>62</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, X *Cheeks*, p. 258.

<sup>63</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XIII *Chest*, p. 264.

<sup>64</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XIV *Bones*, p. 267.

shoulders hold the flock of sheep resting on the hills<sup>65</sup>, the hands opened blind eyes, cured deaf ears<sup>66</sup> and the wound caused by Longinus's lance gave him faith<sup>67</sup>. Part IV starts with death to whom Christ belongs to as first born of the tree of endless life<sup>68</sup>; not death, but salvation is the passage from this life to the immortal one for Him<sup>69</sup>. He is truth as His death ends in resurrection and gives us life.<sup>70</sup> The poet finally asks for God's urge as a hurricane to love Him<sup>71</sup> and in the end, the supplicant demands the silent Christ to hear our groans from the valley of tears, to give us His flesh and blood as Eucharist for our redemption and guidance on the path to the light.<sup>72</sup> A final prayer that all the faithful should make, a must read for all those interested in literary approaches to art, interdisciplinarity and biblical reception in literature.

---

<sup>65</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XIX *Shoulders*, p. 273.

<sup>66</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XX *Hands*, p. 274.

<sup>67</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, XXII *The Wound in the Flesh*, pp. 278-279.

<sup>68</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, Part IV, I *Death*, p. 293.

<sup>69</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, II *Health*, p. 294.

<sup>70</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, III *Truth*, p. 300.

<sup>71</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, VII *Struggle to Love*, p. 303.

<sup>72</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, *Final Prayer*, pp. 310-315.