



HOW PAPERFOLDING HELPED A PHILOSOPHER UNDERSTAND HUMAN NATURE

*The **Pajarita**: Not a Mere Children's Game*

The pajarita, the windmill, the boat... Over and over again, we have read that origami is generally considered to be a just a children's game. We seek to rebel against such an injustice by creating increasingly complex origami sculptures that can pierce the armor of the most coveted museums in the world. Some have managed to do so, indeed. However, besides this battle, which will continue in almost all places inhabited by paper folders, there is an application that has not received enough attention. I am referring to the use of the pajarita as a practical device for challenging ideas and promoting philosophical debate.

By *Laura Rozenberg**

It seems impossible, right? Surely, something as naïve as the pajarita cannot be used as a mirror that reflects our misery. Nevertheless, that is exactly what some thinkers and writers have done. Many of us who have been a part of the paperfolding world for some time now are acquainted with the famous *Apuntes para un tratado de Cocotología*, which is found at the end of the book *Amor y pedagogía* by Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936). Published in 1902, the appendix is presented as a humorous text that describes the natural history of the paper bird. I remember having read it several times, always wondering about the meaning of those pages that seemed as if they had been taken from a scientific paper of the time. The essay describes, with great attention to detail, the anatomy of the pajarita and its evolutionary relationships, with many graphs and pseudo-technical terms. Was this a work of

humor? A satire? A critique of Darwinism? And why would Unamuno take lightly a topic as serious as science? Did he oppose Darwin's theory and was thus mocking it?

Of course, to understand Unamuno's intentions for writing this text, it was necessary to analyze the context. Only then would it be possible to clarify its meaning.

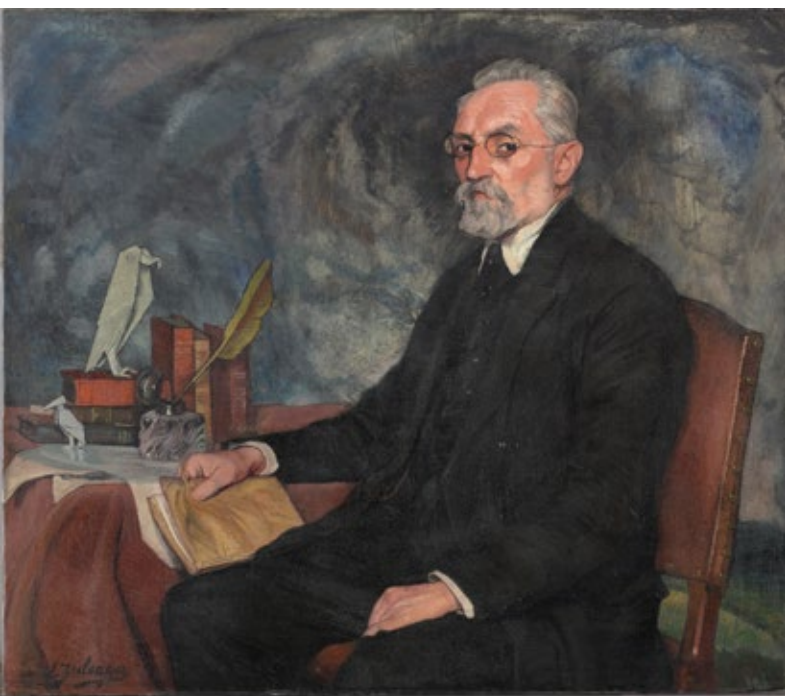
As a matter of fact, Unamuno was not attacking Darwin's theory¹; rather, he was criticizing the so-called scientism, an improper usage of science or scientific claims. He had been a staunch defender of the new scientific ideas of the time but, at the same time, was concerned by the growth of fanatical reductionism. He also began to think about issues that, in his understanding, could not be explained using the scientific method. In his writings after 1897, he began to differentiate scientific issues from spiritual matters, which are "discovered



Foldings created by Miguel de Unamuno and folded by Ligia Montoya circa 1965.

with the eyes and ears of the heart.”² Conscience, intuition, feelings, art, and happiness could not be explained with scientific formulas. According to Unamuno, not all problems could be reduced to biological matters, and the soul could not be analyzed inside test tubes (although Unamuno remained a deep admirer of his fellow countryman Ramón y Cajal). He, who had been a great enthusiast of science and progress and had admired the positivism of Spencer and the rationalism of Hegel, suddenly became a mystic upon reaching the age of Christ.

From that point on, he started “denouncing the risks of a scientific attitude that excludes or denies any other type of knowledge.” He considered that scientism, in its extreme form, was as destructive as any religious fanaticism that science strived to abolish. After his spiritual crisis, he sought “relief and calm by adopting the habits and the faith of his childhood, resurrecting the soul of his inner child,” writes Alicia Villar Ezcurra³, a distinguished Unamuno scholar.



“Miguel de Unamuno”, oil on canvas by Ignacio Zuloaga, painted in 1925. His pride for literature and paperfolding are symbolized in the objects on the table. (Photo: Courtesy of the Hispanic Society of New York).

Thus, it is not strange that, in 1902, after overcoming his crisis and getting back on track, he wrote *Apuntes para un tratado de Cocotología*, adding it to *Amor y Pedagogía*, a critical study on the effects of incorrectly applied pedagogy. That is why he considers that the pajarita is not a mere children’s game. Not many people understood the message and the document was looked on as a simple and inoffensive parody. But those who were able to read between the lines saw the pajarita, with a beak that was as sharp as a sword, as the alter ego of the spiritual Unamuno, the one who came to rebel against the individuals he considered “priests of the holy Science.”⁴ Many probably felt disappointed by the new direction of his work, while others embraced the ideas of a wise man who was turning more spiritual and more of a dreamer. An Unamuno who played with children folding paper; wondered about the meaning of life and the truth about intuition; and, above all, an Unamuno who felt identified with the words of Hamlet: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” 🛩

Suggested readings

Apuntes para un tratado de Cocotología, by Miguel de Unamuno. Appendix of the book *Amor y pedagogía*. First published in Barcelona, in 1902, numerous editions followed since then to today.

La Crítica de Unamuno al cientificismo, by Alicia Villar Ezcurra. Pensamiento magazine, vol. 69. Year 2013.

What a Little Bird Tells Us: Unamuno, Origami and the Modern World, by Patrick Maynard (origamiusa.org/thefold/article/what-little-bird-tells-us-unamuno-origami-and-modern-world)

References

¹In fact, Unamuno was a committed defender of the theory of evolution. As regards Darwin, Unamuno stated that he was “one of the greatest individuals in the entire human race.” From *La Crítica de Unamuno al cientificismo*. Alicia Villar Ezcurra. Pensamiento magazine, vol. 69 (2013), núm. 261, pp. 1035-1048

²*Caras y Caretas* magazine, Buenos Aires. May 19, 1923.

³Villar Ezcurra, A. Op. cit.

⁴Villar Ezcurra, A. Op. cit.

*First published in “Pajarita”, the magazine of AEP (Asociación Española de Papiroflexia). Translated from Spanish by Guido López Dato