CHAPTER TWO

An Incomplete Work of Imperial Mourning: Miguel de Unamuno’s *En torno al casticismo*

Addressing the Post-Imperial Condition

When a young, socialist Miguel de Unamuno (1864–1936) published a series of five essays in *La España Moderna* between February and June 1895, little did he imagine the lasting impact they would have on twentieth-century Spanish literature. Compiled seven years later as *En torno al casticismo* (1902), these essays quickly became some of the most commented upon texts of the Spanish literary canon as well as the object of a bitter ideological debate within Hispanism. Critics of different ideological allegiances have used *En torno al casticismo* to highlight those aspects of the text that supported their particular concept of national community while brushing aside those aspects that contradicted it. Both the right and the left have used *En torno al casticismo* to support their own visions of the political community: on the right, Ernesto Giménez Caballero argued for the relevance of *En torno al casticismo* to Fascist ideals in the late 1920s, and in the late 1940s Pedro Laín Entralgo saw it as an exemplification of the Falangist ideals of the times; on the left, José Carlos Mainier, Pedro Cerezo Galán, and Carlos Serrano have recently presented *En torno al casticismo* as advocating a liberal nationalism, while Eduardo Subirats has decried the essays’ authoritarian, undemocratic aspects, and Joan Ramon Resina and Jo Labanyi have deplored its centralizing aspects – these last three critics advocating a more plural, decentralized, democratic vision of the political community.1

Although there have been numerous interpretations of *En torno al casticismo*’s political thrust and ideological underpinnings, next to nothing has been written on the way in which the text addresses Spain’s transition from an imperial nation to a post-imperial one.2 In fact, as various scholars have remarked, the Spanish Empire *qua* empire left only a few marks on fin-de-siècle Spanish literature (Blanco “El fin”; G. Gullón 109; Serrano, “Conciencia” 335), but Spain’s imperial past certainly informed the general argument of *En torno al casticismo*, leaving a number of subtle, diffused traces.
Focusing on those passages of the essay that evoke the early modern Spanish Empire, my reading of *En torno al casticismo* will highlight the relationship between emotions attached to empire and the essay’s national imagination.

Even though the original publication dates of the essays that were later compiled as *En torno al casticismo* (February-June 1895) coincided with the outbreak of the second Cuban War of Independence (February 1895) – and thus the beginning of the end of Spain’s last colonies – the text’s allusions to empire focus almost exclusively on the political and religious dimensions of the early modern Spanish Empire of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (what was known by contemporaries as the *Monarquía hispánica*). Unamuno’s clearly historical focus sought to represent the norms and values associated with past Spanish imperialism as belonging to a foreclosed historical epoch and a morally bankrupt ideological system that despite its manifest anachronism was still at play in Spanish national consciousness. This generally critical attitude toward the political aspects of imperialism is congruent with Unamuno’s opposition to the Cuban War (Serrano, “Conciencia” 350 and “Unamuno”), which he saw as “un producto de nuestra rapacidad y torpeza económica, hija de disparatados proteccionismos y monopolismos” [a product of our rapacity and economic clumsiness, the daughter of ludicrous protectionisms and monopolisms] (qtd. in Rabaté and Rabaté 172). At first glance, then, the references to the early modern Spanish Empire in *En torno al casticismo* seem to critique the historical basis of Spain’s contemporary imperialism in Cuba and to dismantle what Unamuno called “el estúpido jingoísmo de esta atrocidad de la guerra de Cuba” [the stupid jingoism of this atrocious Cuban War] (qtd. in Rabaté and Rabaté 160).

However, as we shall see in what follows, Unamuno’s lack of reflection on the cultural aspects of imperialism in *En torno al casticismo* burden the text’s attempt to break ties with Spain’s imperial values.

Bearing these considerations in mind, this chapter explores the emotional climate surrounding the Habsburg Empire in *En torno al casticismo*, arguing that it affords the possibility for new readings of the text as performing an incomplete work of mourning. *En torno al casticismo* is an essay that can be read as a response to what Unamuno perceived as the death of imperial values embedded in the national-religious formation known as *casticismo*. Despite being published before the Disaster of 1898, *En torno al casticismo* foreshadowed the painful, complex, and ambiguous adjustments that Spanish culture would later have to make as it strove to accept the loss of its last imperial remains – a process that, as we shall see, was far from successful.

Although the five essays of *En torno al casticismo* are not, as Unamuno claimed, the first to explore “la psicología de nuestro pueblo” [the psychology of our people] (273), they certainly stand out as one of the first and
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finest examples of the genre. Like other fin-de-siècle Spanish intellectuals before and after him, Unamuno approached the “problem of Spain” as an eminently psychological problem, as a conflict that played out within Spaniards. This psychological dimension already appears in the opening paragraphs of the essay when Unamuno frames his reflections on casticismo – the traditional, conservative, chauvinistic set of customs, values, and dispositions characteristic of Spanish culture – as an investigation into “[los] problemas que suscita el estado mental de nuestra patria” [[the] problems stirred by the mental state of our fatherland] (128). At the end of the first essay he again states that his study is “un examen de conciencia” [an examination of the conscience] of the Spanish people (154), thus reinforcing the analogy between the individual and the collective, between individual Spaniards and the Spanish people. Immediately thereafter, he cautions that if such psychological probing is to be successful, it must be carried out fully acknowledging the problematic or even pathological nature of the dispositions that make up the national psyche:

Volviendo a sí, haciendo examen de conciencia, estudiándose y buscando en su historia la raíz de los males que sufren, [los pueblos] se purifican de sí mismos, se anegan en la humanidad eterna.

[It is by turning to themselves, by searching their souls, studying themselves and searching in their history for the root of their illnesses that peoples purify and submerge themselves in the waters of eternal humanity]. (154)

While the cure for the malady draws heavily on religious and penitential imagery and seems to consist in reaching a state where a people’s particular attachments are combined with universal values (this is, at least in part, what is meant by the rather obscure metaphor of a people submerging themselves in the waters of eternal humanity), its etiology seems far from clear. What exactly is the root of Spain’s illnesses? Is it even possible, at the end of the nineteenth century, to identify an essence, a foundation, a basic structure that explains, to use Unamuno’s terms, “el marasmo actual de España” [Spain’s present stagnation] (247)? En torno al casticismo provides an exceedingly simple answer to these questions: the key to Spain’s paralysis lies in “nuestro núcleo castizo” [our castizo or pure core] (247), which for Unamuno is the product of the physical conditions found in Castile (its central geographical location in the Iberian Peninsula, its climate, and its landscape).

Bearing the clear epistemological imprint of a mixture of naturalism and idealism derived from the evolutionary determinism of Hippolyte Taine
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(1828–1893) (Ramsden, 1898 Movement 51–95), En torno al casticismo develops a threefold argument by means of dense, digressive, exuberant, and highly suggestive prose. First, it identifies the main components of this castizo core, which include psychological traits (such as dogmatism, intransigence, and individualism), political characteristics (such as the spirit of conquest and expansionism, unitarism, and blind submission to authority), cultural features (such as isolation from the main currents of European thought) and economic elements (such as an aversion to work and endemic poverty). It then analyzes the ways in which castizo values have manifested themselves in major works of the Spanish literary canon (such as Pedro Calderón de la Barca’s plays or San Juan de la Cruz’s poetry). And finally, it calls for a breaking of ties with this traditional system of casticista norms and values by suspending and transforming them into a system of beliefs that combines particular identifications (which incorporate the Volksgeist of the Spanish people) and universal values (which represent an underlying common humanity that is open to European culture). The belief system resulting from this Hegelian Aufhebung (Cerezo Galán, Las máscaras 176) designed to overcome the values of casticismo is embodied in what Unamuno alternatively calls “inrahistory” (intrahistoria) or “eternal tradition” (tradición eterna), two concepts that are in direct opposition to the merely historical, superficial existence of casticismo and its chauvinistic traditions.

Empire and casticismo

The Spanish Empire, in its early modern configuration, is evoked several times in the text when discussing casticismo. Empire figures as either a material effect of the political and religious values of casticismo or as a decisive narrative component, a crucial element of the historical myths and legends it engendered. In Unamuno’s account, Castile’s ideals of conquest and evangelization, “la idea del unitarismo conquistador, de la catolización del mundo” [the idea of a conquering unitarism, of the world’s Catholicization] (En torno 166), made the Castilian people “uno de los pueblos más universales, el que se echó a salvar almas por esos mundos de Dios, y a saquear América para los flamencos” [one of the most universal of peoples, one that went about saving souls all over the world and plundering the Americas for the Dutch] (En torno 165). The use of the term “plunder” to depict the colonization of the Americas, which in late nineteenth-century Spain almost invariably figured as a work of compassion and civilization (recall Castelar’s or Cánovas’s intervention in the 1892 commemorations), suggests that Unamuno, a writer of sui generis socialist ideas, viewed the imperial adventure with considerable animosity. The term was also a
way of having his readers emotionally distance themselves from the glory associated with the conquest and colonization of the Americas, which, as we have seen, was widely celebrated during the 1892 commemorations.

Unamuno gives the reader another indication that the imperial past’s privileged place in the national imagination needed to come to an end when he considers the conquistadors as the paradigmatic subjects of a traditional, outdated ideology such as casticismo:

Si se buscase la filiación de nuestros conquistadores en América estoy seguro que se hallaría que los más de ellos eran, como Hernán Cortés y Pizarro, de tierras de dehesas y montaneras, y no de las pingües y mollares huertas.

[If one were to trace the genealogy of our conquistadors in America, I am sure that one would find that the majority of them, like Hernán Cortés and Pizarro, came from lands of pastures and meadows, not from lands of lush, fertile orchards]. (En torno 276)

For Unamuno, the conquistadors hail from the Castilian plateaus where casticismo originated and, because of this, he sees them as wandering shepherds who resorted to the imperial adventure to flee the poverty to which their land condemned them.

The problem is that, once the conquistadors arrived in America, they showed no work ethic whatsoever – and this was one of the worst accusations one could face in fin-de-siècle Spain, when disciplined work was emerging as the cornerstone of the reformed national subject. Seeing the conquistadors as an embodiment of “nuestro castizo horror al trabajo, [y] nuestra holgazanería” [our castizo aversion to work {and} our laziness] (En torno 196), Unamuno writes:

En ninguna parte arraigó mejor ni por más tiempo lo de creer que el oro es la riqueza, que aquí, […] Los pobres indios preguntaban a los aventureros de El Dorado por qué no sembraban y cogían, y en vano propusieron los prudentes se enviaran a las Indias labradores. Francisco Pizarro, en el momento de ir a pasar su Rubicón, traza con la espada una gran raya en tierra y dice: “Por aquí se va al Perú; por acá se va a Panamá a ser pobres; escoja el que sea buen castellano lo que más bien le estuviere.”

[Nowhere else did the identification of gold with wealth take deeper, more permanent roots than here […] The poor Indians asked the adventurers of El Dorado why they did not sow and reap, and it was in
vain that prudent officials suggested that farmers be sent to the Indies. Francisco Pizarro, when crossing his Rubicon, draws a sharp line in the dirt with his sword and says: “This way you go to Peru; that way you go to Panama to be poor; he who is a good Castilian chooses whatever suits him best]. (En torno 197; emphasis in orig.)

Importantly, the heroic figure of the conquistadors is doubly negated here. Their military feats are not recognized because for Unamuno militarism is not a value, but rather another undesirable character trait associated with casticismo (see En torno 199, 248; Cerezo Galán, El mal del siglo 111); at the same time, their personalities are reduced to an incarnation of indolence and greed, a characterization that situates Unamuno’s rendering well within the parameters established by the Black Legend of Spanish colonial brutality denounced by Rafael Altamira in Psicología del pueblo español (1902) and later, most famously, by Julián Juderías in La leyenda negra (1914).

By stripping the conquistadors of their heroism, by removing them, as it were, from the national pedestal, Unamuno is free to redefine heroism in terms of what had become one of the privileged categories of turn-of-the-century political discourse: the people. Indeed, for Unamuno true heroism does not reside in dazzling military conquests, or in the no less spectacular accumulation of riches, but rather in the humble, daily work carried out by a mass of anonymous Spaniards who display “el heroísmo sostenido y oscuro, difuso y lento, del verdadero trabajo” [the heroism of true work, a heroism that is both sustained and unsung, diffuse and slow] (En torno 199). The stark contrast between Unamuno and Cánovas del Castillo, who saw the nation’s glory in the accumulation of power, territories, and international prestige (Blas 32), could not be more evident. While Cánovas’s narrative of the Spanish nation was structured by a number of great political and military figures instrumental in the making of the early-modern empire – Charles V, Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, Philip II – (Discurso 134–39), Unamuno’s revolves around the people, a new historical subject that, as we shall see, makes numerous (if often equivocal) appearances in En torno al casticismo (see especially 144–48 and 264–82).

Another facet of Unamuno’s indictment of casticismo’s imperial values can be seen in his highly critical understanding of the role that religion played in Spanish imperial expansion. Unamuno’s claim is that, in Spain, Catholicism was an instrument of social cohesion and ideological uniformity: “[la religión era una] institución para sustento de la máquina social y mantenimiento del orden y del silencio y de la obediencia a la ley” [religion was an institution devoted to the support of the social machine and to the preservation of order, silence, and obedience to the law] (En torno 213). But when Catholicism was
transplanted to the colonies, it acquired a more sinister ideological function, that of masking colonial exploitation:

La religión cubría y solemnizaba. Para que les enseñaran “las cosas de nuestra santa fe católica” encomendaban indios a los aventureros de América. ¡Extraña justificación de esclavitud!

[Religion concealed and solemnized. So that Indians could be taught “the things of our holy Catholic faith,” they were entrusted to the adventurers of America. What a strange justification for slavery!] (En torno 215; emphasis in orig.)

It is worth recalling here that for Catholic, traditional sectors of Spanish society, who were the stalwarts of castizo ideology, the discovery, conquest and colonization of the Americas was essentially a religious – and thus an inherently justified – endeavor. Francisco Javier Simonet (1829–1897), for instance, wrote in the traditionalist newspaper El Siglo Futuro that the glory of the discovery and colonization of the Americas belonged above all to the Catholic Church, which inspired and prepared it:

señalando a nuestros católicos monarcas el fin cristiano y civilizador que debían cumplir con preferencia en la conquista y ocupación del Nuevo Mundo, e interesándose eficazmente por la felicidad temporal y eterna de sus moradores.

[showing our Catholic monarchs the Christian and civilizing ends that were to be their priorities in the conquest and settlement of the New World, and [by] taking an active interest in the temporal and eternal happiness of its inhabitants] (1).

Given the framework of military heroism (Cánovas del Castillo) and religious exaltation (Simonet) in which Spanish imperial legacies were conventionally interpreted during the Restoration, Unamuno’s view of the conquest and colonization of the Americas as an undesirable effect of casticismo was nothing if not critical. Unamuno’s reflections are not only a meditation on Spain’s national traditions, but also an attempt to undermine the legitimizing structures of the Restoration system. These legitimizing structures were sustained, among other things, by transmitting a stereotyped sense of history to Spanish schoolchildren through textbooks that included what one contemporary historian has described as “una mera sucesión de reinados y de acontecimientos militares generalmente magnificados, cuando no fabulados” [a mere succession of reigns and military events that were generally magnified, if not outright fabricated] (Jover Zamora, “Aspectos”
Within this mythified view of Spanish history, the discovery of the Americas was transformed into the affirmation of Spanish colonialism (recall our observations about the 1892 commemorations of Columbus’s first voyage) and the conquest of the Americas was reduced to a single, supposedly glorious battle, the Battle of Otumba where Cortés and his Tlaxcalan allies decisively defeated the Mexicas who had driven them out of Tenochtitlan during the infamous “Noche Triste” of June 30, 1520.

To have a better sense of the distance that separates the myth of Otumba from the historical event, we can turn to Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España, an account where this battle bears all of the traces of uncertainty, complexity, and confusion that historical events have for those who lived them. For Díaz del Castillo, the fight that took place on the plains of Otumba was not a clear-cut event, but rather a series of chaotic occurrences that resulted in an unexpected victory thanks to two developments which, of course, were completely removed from the heroic, nationalist meanings conjured up by the toponym “Otumba.” First, Díaz del Castillo notes, the battle could not have been won without the contribution of the Tlaxcalan, “[que] estaban hechos unos leones, y con sus espadas y montantes y otras armas que allí apañaron hacíanlo muy bien y esforzadamente” [who fought like lions, battling with great skill and courage with their swords, long swords, and other makeshift weapons] (322). Second, the victory hinged on the moment in which a young cavalier, Joan de Salamanca, finished off the Aztec commander and tore away his banner, throwing the Indian army into disarray and consternation (322). Therefore it seems clear that the battle was neither an exclusively “Spanish” affair (whatever “Spain” might have meant during Díaz del Castillo’s lifetime) nor an occasion to parade Spanish military superiority (since the victory came about almost by chance).

Trying to expose the fallacy of these historical myths, Unamuno cast an ironic light on those who had transformed the Spanish Empire into a cultural myth of the Restoration. Thus, when he summoned his readers to recall “la vivaz expansión del espíritu castellano, que produjo tantos misioneros de la palabra y de la espada, cuando el sol no se ponía en sus dominios” [the lively expansion of the Castilian spirit, which produced so many missionaries of the word and the sword, when the sun never set in its dominions] (En torno 167), he was also warning them against those who pronounce conminaciones en esa lengua de largos y ampulosos ritmos oratorios que parece se hizo de encargo para celebrar las venerandas tradiciones de nuestros mayores, la alianza del altar y del trono y las glorias de
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Numancia, de las Navas, de Granada, de Lepanto, de Otumba y de Bailén.

[admonitions in that rhetorical style made of long and pompous oratorical cadences, a style that seems crafted to celebrate the revered traditions of our elders, the alliance between the altar and the throne, and the glories of Numancia, las Navas, Granada, Lepanto, Otumba, and Bailén]. (En torno 132)

A few years later, in 1901, the regenerationist intellectual Joaquin Costa also called for Spaniards to put their fixation with past military glories behind them, uncannily echoing Unamuno’s pronouncement almost word for word:

Deshinchemos esos grandes nombres: Sagunto, Numancia, Otumba, Lepanto, con que se envenena a nuestra juventud en las escuelas, y pasémosles una esponja.

[Let us deflate those big names: Sagunto, Numancia, Otumba, Lepanto, with which our youth is poisoned in school, and let us agree not to talk about them anymore]. (284)

In their pronouncements, both Unamuno and Costa are trying to undo the rhetorical transformation of the Battle of Otumba into a symbol that connotes the Spanish Empire’s military greatness. This rhetorical effect, which gathers its strength from Otumba’s position in a series of undisputed symbols of “Spanish” valor – the sieges of Numancia (133 BC) and Sagunto (219 BC) and the Battles of Lepanto (1571) and Bailén (1808) – is questioned by both Unamuno and Costa. What they are denouncing is what Roland Barthes called the naturalization of history through myth:

Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. (143)

Turned into the mythological signifier denounced by Unamuno in En torno al casticismo, “Otumba” simply stated the fact of Spanish imperialism without the need for explanation; it was an indication that the military greatness of the Spanish Empire came, as it were, from eternity. Placed within a larger perspective, Unamuno’s indictment of the conquest as cultural myth can be seen as part of the wider attack that young intellectuals were waging on the Restoration’s presentation of power as spectacle, as a collection of empty words and images (Subirats, “España” 328).
The problem with Unamuno’s arguments, as with those of other fin-de-siècle Spanish intellectuals, such as Azorín, Ángel Ganivet, and Ramón Menéndez Pidal, is that in attempting to dispel the cultural myths of the Restoration, they engaged in a good deal of national myth-making themselves. As Javier Varela has remarked, this tendency toward the elaboration of myths is common in times of crisis, “cuando, sobre todo por los intelectuales, se percibe una amenaza a los valores que definen la identidad colectiva” [above all when intellectuals perceive a threat to the values that define collective identity] (21). Unamuno himself remarked a few years later:

¡Desgraciado del pueblo que, descansando en sus antiguas tradiciones y leyendas, cesa en la labor vivificante de labrarse leyendas y tradiciones nuevas!

[Unhappy is the people who, resting on its ancient traditions and legends, fails to engage in the vivifying task of carving out new legends and traditions for itself!]. (Obras 3: 875)

Ironically, the Restoration legends that Unamuno opposes and the ones that he fabricates have something in common: their centralism, their metonymical consideration of Castile as the whole of Spain and therefore as the region better suited to impose its language and culture – an idea that echoes the tenets of a type of domestic neo-imperialism. Even in En torno al casticismo, a book that still holds some hope for regionalism (163), centralism is foreshadowed in Unamuno’s naturalization of the historical violence by which Castilian culture imposed itself throughout Spain.6 Far from acknowledging it, he explains it away as a product of geographical circumstances, of Castile’s central position in the Iberian Peninsula: “Castilla ocupaba el centro, y el espíritu castellano era el más centralizador, a la par que el más expansivo” [Castile occupied the center, and the Castilian spirit was the most centralizing and expansive of all] (164). And this is all he has to say about centuries of conflict between Castile and the other peninsular communities.7

But returning to the treatment of the Spanish Empire in En torno al casticismo, it is important to note that there is another way in which Unamuno critiques the imperial values associated with traditional, castizo Spanish identity: he portrays the empire, both in its incarnation as a real historical entity and a cultural myth, as a moribund ideal. In 1895, Unamuno seems to view the ideology of casticismo as the spiritual component of a dead social formation that nonetheless still inhabits the present: “En esta crisis persisten y se revelan en la vieja casta los caracteres castizos, bien que en descomposición no pocos” [In this crisis, the castizo character traits persist
and manifest themselves in the old caste, although many of them are in a state of decomposition] (En torno 247). As with other components of the ideology of casticismo, Unamuno seeks to break ties with imperialism by characterizing it as a relic of an exhausted past, as the ruin of a foreclosed historical epoch. However, the problem in En torno al casticismo, as in Spanish society, is that imperialism is approaching death but is not quite dead yet. This is why Unamuno makes Don Quixote a symbol of imperial adventurism and repeatedly calls for his death:

Hay que matar a Don Quijote para que resucite Alonso Quijano el Bueno, el discreto, el que hablaba a los Cabreros del siglo de la paz.

We have to kill Don Quixote, to resurrect Alonso Quixano the Good, the prudent one, who spoke about the century of peace to the goatherds]. (En torno 244)

A few pages later, he insists on making Quixotism a stand-in for casticismo’s imperial and militaristic meanings, by declaring that

hoy es la vida de nuestro pueblo vida de guerrero en cuartel o la de Don Quijote retirado con el ama y la sobrina.

today the lives of our people are like the lives of warriors confined to their barracks, or like Don Quixote’s when he abandoned his adventures and returned home to his housekeeper and niece]. (En torno 248)

In “¡Muera Don Quijote!” [Death to Don Quixote!], an article published in Vida Nueva on June 25, 1898, after the United States had entered the War of 1898, Unamuno repeats his call for the death of Cervantes’s hero as a way to forget the insidious historical ideals of universal Catholicism and of imperialism that were part and parcel of casticismo:

Hay que olvidar la vida de aventuras, aquel ir a imponer a los demás lo que creíamos les convenía y aquel buscar fuera un engañoso imperio.

We have to forget the life of adventure, that drive to impose upon others what we thought best for them, that exterior search for a deceptive empire]. (Obras 7: 1195)

And he refers again to Spain as a specter, as “[un] fantasma histórico simbolizado en una tela de colores” [an historical ghost symbolized by a colored canvas] (Obras 7: 1195).

Thus, when Unamuno called for Don Quixote’s death in the late 1890s, he was, in effect, attempting to make his fellow citizens forget the values
associated with imperialism, to cure their melancholic attachment to them. The wish to kill, then, names above all the psychic process of mourning, a severance, an interruption of recollection that represents a necessary step toward regaining a normal, healthy attitude to life. Unamuno identifies the end of this process of mourning and the attainment of a healthy attitude to life with the creation of a new sense of personhood. The death of the Spanish nation (a merely historical entity constituted by pernicious dispositions and the myths of *casticismo*) would give way to the birth of an authentic people whose existence seems more utopian than real (an eternal entity constituted by peaceful, Christian values that is open to European ideas):

La nación española – la nación, no el pueblo – molida y quebrantada, ha de curar, si cura, como curó su héroe, para morir. Sí, para morir como nación y vivir como pueblo.

[If the crushed, broken Spanish nation is to be cured – the nation, not the people – it has to be cured, just as its hero was, in order to die. Yes, to die as a nation and to live as a people]. (Obras 7: 1195)

In contrast to Unamuno’s later work, where death figures as nothingness and as a perpetual source of existential angst, death here is encoded in two distinct, if related, discourses: in the idiom of psychology (death as a condition of possibility of forgetfulness) as well as in that of politics (death as a condition of possibility of the rebirth of a people). While in the discourse of psychology the trope of death triggers the psychic process of severance, and thereby signals the exhaustion of *casticismo* – and, consequently, of imperialism – in the discourse of politics it makes the existence of a new political community possible. These two discourses converge when we realize that the forgetting of empire, understood as both a historical reality and a cultural myth, is a necessary condition for the emergence of new senses of personhood.

**Mourning Imperial Values**

To argue that the formation of a new political identity out of the *castizo* entrenched sense of political community requires the definitive death of *castizo* ideology is to realize that *En torno al casticismo* comes to terms with a loss, the loss of *casticismo* and its imperial values, a set of ideals that had had great significance for the Spanish ego for, as Unamuno points out, “Castilla ha hecho la nación española” [Castile made the Spanish nation] (*En torno* 162). Three years before the loss of the last colonies – remember that the essays in *En torno al casticismo* were published in *La España Moderna* between
February and June, 1895 just as the second Cuban War of Independence was beginning – Unamuno was already beginning to undertake what Freud calls “the work of mourning.”

In his famous paper “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), Freud understands mourning as a process involving a slow, gradual, and painful work of severance that begins when the subject accepts the non-existence of the lost object and ends when he or she breaks all emotional ties to it. This process results in the freeing of the libido and its investment into a new object. Just as the relinquishing of emotional ties is “carried out bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy, and […] the existence of the lost object is [thus] psychically prolonged” (Freud 245), Unamuno’s separation from the values of casticismo is a slow and grueling process. This can be seen in his discussions of the Castilian landscape, his analysis of Spanish literature, and his critical evaluation of castizo dispositions. Consider, for instance, his detailed, lyrical evocations of the physical and climatic factors that have shaped the lives of Castilians and that of the conquistadors, whose uniform, tenacious character is explained by the Castilian landscape itself:

es [...] un paisaje monoteístico este campo infinito en que, sin perderse, se achica el hombre, y en que siente en medio de la sequía de los campos sequedades del alma. (En torno 174)

Or consider his exhaustive recollection of the castizo values inherent in Spanish thought and literature. Most notably, he addresses the canonical plays of Calderón, which, he says, exemplify “este espíritu disociativo, dualista, polarizador” [this dissociative, dualist, polarizing spirit] (En torno 191), a spirit incapable of perceiving nuances and expressing genuine human conflict. He then opposes the spirit of Calderon’s plays to that of Shakespeare’s, a spirit which succeeded in “sumirse en el fondo eterno y universal de la humanidad” [delving into humanity’s eternal and universal depths] (En torno 190). Or, finally, consider his painfully meticulous recalling of the castizo dispositions still in existence in contemporary Spanish society, which ranged from dogmatism and inner anarchism to the lack of a strong work ethic or the presence of a militant, legalist form of conduct, to cite just a few (En torno 248–66). At the end of this protracted process of mourning, of carefully detaching the libido from each component of casticismo, the Spanish ego is able to transfer its libido onto an alternate object: the people and its intrahistoria.
Once the work of mourning is accomplished, a new story about the past can be told in which the silent life of the people replaces casticismo and its loud, forceful imperial values as protagonists. By means of a densely woven web of metaphors Unamuno approximates, without unequivocally articulating, the political community’s greatest asset, its intrahistoria, the foundation upon which a new sense of peoplehood is to emerge. In a famous passage at the beginning of the essay, the intrahistoria of the people is compared with

la vida silenciosa de los millones de hombres sin historia que a todas horas del día y en todos los países del globo se levantan a una orden del sol y van a sus campos a proseguir la oscura y silenciosa labor cotidiana y eterna, esa labor que como la de las madréporas suboceánicas echa las bases sobre que se alzan los islotes de la historia.

[the silent life of millions of men without a history who, at all times and in all parts of the world, get up with the sun and go about their obscure, silent, eternal daily work in the fields, the work upon which, much like the suboceanic reefs, the islets of history are erected]. (En torno 145)

In the depths of intrahistoria, in this agrarian, national-popular consolatory fantasy, there seems to be little room for either celebratory accounts of the colonial past or the individual heroism of the conquistadors for both seem to be relegated to the realm of the merely historical, to the superficial strata where historical accidents occur. By invoking the notion of intrahistoria, it is as if Unamuno attempted to replace the oligarchic, militarist, Catholic, national myth of the Restoration with a pseudo-liberal, pacifist, vaguely Christian national mystique.

To use Rogers Smith’s terminology in Stories of Peoplehood, the story or myth of peoplehood that Unamuno begins to tell is an ethically constitutive story (64–65), a fable of identity that downplays political and economic themes so as to underscore the worth of a particular group of society – in this case, the anonymous masses excluded from the oligarchic power structure of the Restoration. As an economically and politically marginal collective subject, these masses cannot appeal to the possession of riches or political power to articulate their sense of worth, but they can surely take pride in being the bearers of a brilliant, if largely unknown, culture and in possessing a valuable, if largely unarticulated, political will. Drawing on the apparently incompatible traditions of German Romanticism and French Enlightenment symbolized by the contributions of Johann Gottfried Herder and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Serrano, “Entre Herder y Rousseau”), Unamuno conceives intrahistoric bonds as the expression of both a pre-existing,
permanent organic culture and of an ongoing, evolving subjective will. On the one hand, *intrahistoria* is identified with *Volksgeist*:

una hondura del alma común en que viven y obran todos los sentimientos y aspiraciones que no concuerdan en forma definida, [...] una verdadera subconciencia popular.

[a depth of the common soul where feelings and aspirations act and exist even when they are not fully in agreement, [...] a true popular subconscious]. (*En torno* 264)

On the other hand, it is described as a social contract, as when Unamuno writes that “la doctrina del pacto [...] es la que, después de todo, presenta la razón intra-histórica de la patria; su verdadera fuerza creadora, en acción siempre” [the doctrine of the pact [...] is the one which, after all, offers us the fatherland’s intra-historic reason, its always ongoing, truly creative force] (*En torno* 159). Thus, membership of the intrahistoric Spanish political community has a paradoxical quality in that it is simultaneously a matter of unreasoned attachment (a primordial condition) and a matter of principled choice (a reasoned, political commitment). While the principled choice requires the manifestation of a conscious will, the primordial condition involves a series of unconscious, permanent, objective features, among which language stands out:

La lengua es el receptáculo de la experiencia de un pueblo y el sedimento de su pensar; en los hondos repliegues de sus metáforas (y lo son la mayoría de los vocablos) ha ido dejando sus huellas el espíritu colectivo del pueblo [...].

[Language is the vessel of the experience of a people and the sediment of its thought; in the deep folds of its metaphors (and most words are indeed metaphors) the collective spirit of the people has left its marks [...]]. (*En torno* 161)

By the end of *En torno al casticismo*, however, this seeming contradiction seems to resolve itself in a rather abrupt manner. Instead of suggesting that the contradictions of *intrahistoria* might evoke a truth that is not immediately apparent, Unamuno chooses to privilege the (permanent, primordial) cultural component of *intrahistoria* over its (ongoing, principled) political counterpart. It should come as no surprise, then, that while Unamuno praises the people’s cultural manifestations, customs and folklore (*En torno* 263), he also makes two highly significant political statements: one, he dismisses the democratic, progressive Glorious Revolution of 1868 as an “inauthentic,”
castizo phenomenon – a commonplace stance among young, fin-de-siècle intellectuals who saw nineteenth-century liberalism as a bankrupt ideology; and two, he vindicates the popular brand of a reactionary political ideology such as Carlism, which he valorizes as “un irrupir de lo subconciente en la conciencia, de lo intra-histórico en la historia” [an irruption of the subconscious into consciousness, of the intrahistoric into history] (En torno al castizo 267). At this point we understand that the primary (and most consistent) component of Unamuno’s story of peoplehood is language, not political will. Indeed, when he abandoned the concept of intrahistoria around 1900 (Serrano, “Entre Herder y Rousseau” 188), language continued to figure as a crucial element in his later work. And it is precisely through this centrality of language, which Unamuno understands as a closed, univocal, stable universe, that the stage is set for the imperial specters that had been expunged from En torno al casticismo to return, albeit in a highly sublimated manner. In 1895, Unamuno succeeded in breaking emotional ties with the political, military, and religious dimensions of the early modern Spanish Empire, but in failing to address its cultural aspects, he did not successfully mourn this important aspect of the Spanish Empire. This would have momentous consequences for Unamuno’s later attitude toward the cultural production of the non-Castilian peoples that were part of the “first” Spanish empire, specifically those of the Latin American republics and Catalonia (although the same argument could be made about his native Basque culture).

By 1900, when Spanish American modernismo was attaining the apex of its prestige and its “conquest of the metropolitan [Spanish] literary field” was well under way (Mejías-López 85–124), Unamuno’s silence regarding Spain’s imperial cultural narratives in En torno al casticismo would come back to haunt him. As Alejandro Mejías-López has pointed out, “For many writers in Spain, like Unamuno, modernismo took the form of imperial nostalgia, caused to a considerable extent by their unwillingness to recognize the ‘inverted conquest’ that had shaped their writing in the first place” (179). Indeed, for the Unamuno who writes essays on Spanish American literature and who, in his later work, revisits the imperial past in his notion of a transatlantic Hispanic community, the peoples of Spain and Latin America are in fact the same people. Political, economic, and cultural differences are erased insofar as they figure as superficial manifestations of a deeper, organic community rooted in a common language that, despite its pan-national character, still bears the name “Spanish”:

El lenguaje, instrumento de la acción espiritual, es la sangre del espíritu, y son de nuestra raza espiritual humana los que piensan y por tanto sienten y obran en español.
Language, an instrument of spiritual action, is the blood of the spirit, and those who think and therefore feel and act in Spanish belong to our spiritual human race. (Obras 4: 646)

That is what allows Unamuno to claim, contradicting his earlier indictments of the conquistadors and imperial myths, that José Martí and José Rizal are as Spanish as Hernán Cortés and Vasco Núñez de Balboa (Obras 4: 646). No matter that Martí and Rizal were the victims of a system of imperial domination that was made possible by Cortés and Balboa, among others: in the protoplasmatic depths of the spiritual race differences of all kinds simply dissolve, much as in those of intrahistoria.

One consequence of such dissolution of difference is that the conquest and colonization of the Americas is cast as a purely cultural, glorious and, one might add, heavily masculinely-coded endeavor: “¿No es nada cultural crear veinte naciones sin reservarse nada y engendrar, como engendró el conquistador, en pobres indias siervas hombres libres?” [Is it not a cultural achievement to selflessly create twenty nations and to engender free men out of poor Indian slaves, as the conquistadors did?] (Del sentimiento 311). In 1895, Unamuno might have condemned “the idea of a conquering unitarism, of the world’s Catholicization” (En torno 166), but in his later Hispanist work this idea of unitarism returns, trading its Catholic and militaristic appearance for a linguistic form.12

Similar to his ambivalence regarding unitarism, Unamuno’s relationship with Catalan culture was marked by contradictory emotions.13 He admired the modernity of Catalan culture while fearing (even loathing) its political ambitions. He corresponded extensively with Catalan modernist writers – the most famous of whom was his friend Joan Maragall – while at the same time condemning the political aspirations of the Catalan people.14

The vague regionalism of En torno al casticismo, in which he affirmed that “el regionalismo y el cosmopolitismo son dos aspectos de una misma idea y los sostenes del verdadero patriotismo” [regionalism and cosmopolitanism are two sides of the same coin and the pillars of true patriotism] (En torno 163), was soon to be replaced by the consideration of Catalanism as a problem, as a movement that caused distress by putting forward “un modo de sentir la vida privada y pública muy distinta de como la siente el hijo de las mesetas centrales” [a way of experiencing private and public life which is very different from the one experienced by a son of the central plateaus] (Obras 7: 452).

Unamuno’s changing attitude toward the value of regionalism is a function of his linguistic essentialism and cultural nationalism, which centered, as we have seen, around the notion of Castilian as an instrument
of spiritual action. This is most clearly seen in his frankly chauvinistic positions on the Catalan language. While in 1896, he may have encouraged the use of written Catalan in Catalonia (see “Sobre el uso de la lengua catalana” in Obras 4: 503–06), by 1908 he was decrying the possibility that the Catalan language might acquire any type of official recognition: “la única lengua nacional de España es la lengua española; la única lengua, lengua íntegramente española y además, lengua internacional, lengua mundial” [the only national language in Spain is the Spanish language; the only language, an entirely Spanish language and, what is more, an international language, a world language] (Obras 4: 375). What to make, then, of Unamuno’s opinions about Latin American and Catalan cultures? How is one to describe his engagements with these cultures if not through the use of terms like imperialism or neo-imperialism? Ultimately, as Joan Ramon Resina observes, Unamuno seems to have linked “the end of political empire to the founding of a language empire and the achievement of linguistic supremacy over historical and geographical contingencies” (“For Their Own” 121).

The narrative of mourning offered by En torno al casticismo succeeded in exorcising the most traumatic specters of the Spanish imperial past, those that related to the religious justification of political domination and economic exploitation. But in the affirmative, essentialist, cultural story of peoplehood that it proposed, the possibility for these specters to return in an idealized manner, haunting future developments of Unamuno’s thought, was already inscribed. Ultimately, what En torno al casticismo suggests is that, despite Unamuno’s efforts, the ghost of empire continued to live on, “for ghosts are the return of the repressed of history – that is, the mark of an all-too-real historical trauma which has been erased from conscious memory but which makes its presence felt through its ghostly traces” (Labanyi, “Introduction” 6). This pattern of incomplete severance with the meanings conjured up by the Spanish Empire, as we shall see in more detail in Ángel Ganivet, testifies as much to the ambivalence felt by early twentieth-century intellectuals vis-à-vis the imperial legacies as to their need to regain a cultural prestige that had been steadily fading away since the seventeenth century and that was being increasingly questioned by the growing prestige of Spanish-American modernismo and by the rise of sub-state nationalisms, of which Catalonia was the paradigmatic example.

Notes
1 These readings of En torno al casticismo can be found respectively in Giménez Caballero’s “Carta a un compañero”; Laín Entralgo’s classic yet partisan book La generación del 98, where Falangist ideology is more clearly visible in the author’s
choice to brush aside the contradictory, heterodox judgments of the ’98ers and
and to focus instead on their “ensueños de españoles” [patriotic dreams] (494), which
in the last pages of the book show their true ideological colors (see 455–502);
Mainor, Historia, literatura, sociedad (200); Cerezo Galán, El mal del siglo (101–26);
Their Own Good”; and Labanyi, “Nation, Narration, Naturalization.”

2 In this respect, it is curious to note that the critical literature that reads Unamuno
as simply one of the intellectuals that advocates a cultural, neo-imperialist will
to power in the former American colonies does not perform a detailed, in-depth
analysis of En torno al casticismo. See, for instance, Fiddian, Santos-Rivero, and
Venegas. One of the few critical articles that focuses on Unamuno’s opposition
to the colonial wars is Blanco’s “El fin del imperio español.”

3 In the prologue to the 1902 edition, Unamuno claims that his essays were the first
in a long line of texts devoted to the exploration of Spain’s national character,
such as Ángel Ganivet’s Idearium español (1897), Macías Picavea’s El problema
nacional (1899), Martínez Ruiz’s El alma castellana (1900), Ramiro de Maeztu’s
Hacia otra España (1899), and Rafael Altamira’s Psicología del pueblo español (1902).
However, it is worth recalling that Lucas Mallada’s Los males de la patria (1890),
which can be properly considered the foundational text of the essayistic tradition
of national self-reflection, was published five years before Unamuno’s earliest
essay (Juaristi 17).

4 Unamuno joined the socialist party (PSOE) in 1894, and published extensively
in La Lucha de Clases. For details of the ideology of early Unamuno, see Blanco
Aguinaga 57–116 and Rabaté.

5 Of course, as several critics have noted and as I will discuss shortly, Unamuno
engages in a good deal of (national) myth-making himself in En torno al casticismo.
For a recent critique of this aspect of Unamuno’s text, see Labanyi, “Nation,
Narration, Naturalization.”

6 In his later works he would abandon the occasional anti-Castilian overtones of
En torno al casticismo for an aggressive Castilian mystique. The following passage
from “La crisis actual del patriotismo español” (1905) provides a good example
of Unamuno’s changing positions on this matter: “Sean cuales fueren las
deficiencias que para la vida de la cultura moderna tenga el pueblo castellano, es
preciso confesar que a su generosidad, a su sentido impositivo, a su empeño por
imponer a otros sus creencias, debió su predominancia” [Whatever the Castilian
people’s deficiencies for the life of modern culture, it is necessary to confess that
they owed their superiority to their generosity, to their sense of imposition, and
to their determination to impose their beliefs upon others] (Obras 1: 1293).

7 Small wonder, then, that Jo Labanyi recently argued that “by privileging the
landscape of Castile as an image of the national soul, the 1898 writers are
forging [...] a new brand of nationalist sentiment which proposes a supposed
geographic uniformity as a way of naturalizing a belief in the need for cultural
uniformity” (“Nation, Narration, Naturalization” 133). For a general discussion
of the myths of the 1898 Generation, see Abellán’s Sociología del 98 (38–46); for a
specific discussion of the mythification of Castile in the 1898 authors, see Varela
145–76.

8 Unamuno would later recant his calls to kill Don Quixote in Vida de Don Quijote
y Sancho, chapter LXIV, part II, where he begs for Don Quixote’s pardon (476),
here a completely autonomous character that only bears some resemblance to Cervantes’s. For an understanding (and a critique) of Quixotism as a heroic, nationalist idealism in the early twentieth-century essay, see Britt Arredondo.

9 See, among many other works, Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho and Del sentimiento trágico de la vida.

10 Although Freud revised his early account of mourning in later writings such as The Ego and the Id (1923), the process described in “Mourning and Melancholia” can help us better understand Unamuno’s efforts to relinquish emotional ties to casticismo: “Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object […] Nevertheless its orders cannot be obeyed at once […] Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it […] The fact is, however, that when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” (245). For an important revision of Freud’s early mourning theory that reformulates his distinction between mourning and melancholia, see Abraham and Torok.

11 Carlos Serrano resolves this contradiction between Herder’s theory of Volksgeist and Rousseau’s theory of social contract by claiming that Unamuno did not perceive these theories as contradictory, but rather as complementary and compatible with his socialist ideology (Serrano, “Entre Herder y Rousseau” 195).

12 In fact, this linguistic neo-imperialism can be traced back to Unamuno’s 1894 claim that Martin Fierro, the great epic of Argentinean literature, was a poem “español hasta los tuétanos” [Spanish to the marrow] (Obras 4: 719). For his part, José Luis Venegas convincingly demonstrates that the model for the assimilation of difference and the presentation of a Hispanic cultural community as given can be found in Unamuno’s cultivation of the epistolary genre. Other relevant sources for analyzing and contextualizing Unamuno’s neo-imperialist view of Latin American literature and history include Fiddian 88–93; Loureiro, “Spanish Nationalism”; and Santos-Rivero. For a contrasting, more positive view of Unamuno’s engagement with Spanish American culture that nonetheless smooths over his neo-imperial propensities, see Maíz.

13 It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the complex and changing relationship between Unamuno and Catalan culture in detail. For a recent engaging account, see Bastons i Vivanco’s dissertation “Unamuno i la cultura catalana.”

14 For a brief study and selection of Unamuno’s correspondence with Catalan modernist writers, see Bastons i Vivanco’s “Unamuno y los modernistas catalanes.” Unamuno and Maragall exchanged forty letters between 1900 and 1911, all of them published in Epistolario y escritos complementarios: Unamuno-Maragall. Their respective visions of Spain are aptly exposed in an article by Lladonosa Vall-Llebrera.