

# The neurological disease of “Raimundín” in the life of Miguel de Unamuno

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## ABSTRACT

Miguel de Unamuno was a philosopher, professor, writer in various capacities (favouring poetry), rector of the University of Salamanca, and a committed politician; he was one of the most important and influential thinkers in Spain's history, and lived a life tormented by doubt in his faith in God and in the immortality of man. One contributing factor to this unease was the tragic neurological disease of his son Raimundo, who presented severe sequelae associated with chronic hydrocephalus secondary to a case of probable meningitis. The available information on the boy's illness comes from Unamuno himself: his diary, letters to friends, drawings he made of his son, and poems dedicated to him. His daily life with his disabled child, his impotence to improve the situation, and the absurdity of the disease, understood as God punishing or forsaking him for his own lack of faith, provoked one of Unamuno's most intense personal crises.

## KEYWORDS

Hydrocephalus, Unamuno, meningitis, religious conflicts, intellectual disability

## Introduction

Miguel de Unamuno y Yugo, one of the most important writers and philosophers in Spain's history, was a complex, obsessive man, full of contradictions. Crises of faith in God and anxiety about the afterlife were highly significant, and occasionally took a central place in his thought and work. A review of personal accounts from Unamuno himself and from those close to him shows that his doubt and angst were partly influenced by the neurological disease and death of his son Raimundo (“Raimundín”), which are addressed in letters, poems, and drawings; this evidence is evaluated in the present article.

## Material and methods

The summary of Unamuno's life is based on biographies of the author.<sup>1-7</sup> The analysis of Raimundín's neurological

status and capacities is based on descriptions given by some biographers, but mainly on observations made by Unamuno himself in letters to friends and various poems dedicated to his son: “Lullaby for a sick child,” “Memories,” and “The death of a son” (in the sources consulted, the latter title was used for two different poems written at different times). The images of Raimundín were drawn by Unamuno himself. The originals are held at the Unamuno House Museum; Francisco Javier del Mazo Ruiz kindly provided copies for the purposes of this article.

## Brief biography of Miguel de Unamuno

Unamuno was born in Bilbao on 29 September 1864 and died in Salamanca on 31 December 1936. His family was left in a precarious situation following his father's death in 1870, and the assistance (and therefore the influence)

of his grandmother left a significant mark on Unamuno's life and personality.

As a child, he bore witness to the siege of Bilbao during the Third Carlist War, between December 1873 and May 1874; General Martínez de la Concha broke the siege and liberated the city from the Carlist uprising. The tragic events of those months strongly influenced the young Unamuno, even inspiring his first novel *Peace in war* (1897).

He attended secondary school in Bilbao and studied philosophy at university in Madrid, later returning to Bilbao to prepare for competitive civil service examinations. Despite unsuccessful initial attempts, he won the chair of Greek at the University of Salamanca in 1891. In January of that year he had married Concha Lizarraga, his girlfriend since adolescence.

After the first two sons, Fernando and Pablo, Raimundo was born in 1896; he was followed by Salomé, Felisa, José María, Rafael, and Ramón. In March 1897 (partly influenced by Raimundo's illness, as we will see later), Unamuno experienced one of his first crises of religious and political faith, and abandoned the socialist movement. Raimundo died in 1902 at the age of six.

In 1900, Unamuno was appointed rector of the university, a position he held until he was deposed in 1914. In 1920, he returned to politics, and was elected to parliament in 1922. He also returned to academia, first as the dean of the Faculty of Arts, then vice-rector, and finally as acting rector. The coup d'état by General Primo de Rivera took place in 1923. Unamuno had previously openly criticised the monarchy, describing in excoriating terms the King, Alfonso XIII; he was also opposed to the coup. Unamuno was removed from his posts and banished to Fuerteventura. When his sentence was later commuted, instead of returning to mainland Spain he opted for exile first in Paris and then in Hendaye (where he remained for 5 years, until 1930), in protest at the political situation.

After the fall of the regime, Unamuno returned triumphantly to Spain and resumed his political activity; in 1931, under the Second Spanish Republic, he was elected to the municipal and to the national government, also becoming honorary mayor of Salamanca, and was once more appointed rector of the university.

He retired in 1934, but was named rector emeritus. His wife died the same year.

In 1935, Unamuno distanced himself from the Republic, with which he had initially sympathised, for its revolutionary excess: arbitrary killings in which he lost friends and colleagues, and bloody religious persecution, which he saw as a threat to Western Christian civilisation. As a result, in 1936 his position began to move away from the Republic and toward Franco's military uprising. However, he could not support the brutality of the rebellion; close friends were killed by the firing squad. In fact, he personally visited Franco to ask clemency for some of them. An unusual turn of events led to his deposition from the role of emeritus rector in August by decree of President Azaña, followed in September by a decree reinstating him by the government of Burgos; he was again stripped of the title following a notorious incident at the university.

On 12 October 1936, during an academic ceremony held at the university auditorium to celebrate Día de la Raza ("The day of race"), he clashed with General Millán Astray, criticising his speech; several versions of the exchange are reported. In any case, he was deposed from his position as emeritus rector on the initiative of his own staff; the decision was ratified in a decree signed by Franco himself. After this hostile encounter with the emerging political power, he did not leave his home, possibly due to having been placed under house arrest. In the following two months, Unamuno suffered intense solitude: longing for his wife, to whom he dedicated at least one poem; bitterness at seeing Spain torn apart by hate, with personally painful examples including the execution of his former student Professor Vila, rector of the University of Granada; and intense concern over pressing economic hardship and the fates of his children who had remained in Madrid. He died suddenly on 31 December while in conversation with Bartolomé Aragón, a young lecturer and a former student of Unamuno's. Medical records attribute his death to "medullary haemorrhage due to arteriosclerosis and arterial hypertension," although there is no evidence that an autopsy was performed. With hindsight, it seems more likely he died due to cardiac arrest.

The same fascists who had jeered and intimidated Unamuno by chanting "Long live death! Down with intelligence!" during his confrontation with Astray seized his coffin and carried it to the cemetery under a Falangist flag, bidding him farewell with fascist cries of "*presente*" and "*arriba España*." This is another of the countless paradoxes of Unamuno's story, such as

the contrast between the Catholic church’s official view of him as a dangerous atheist and anti-Christian,<sup>8</sup> “the greatest heretic and the greatest teacher of heresies,”<sup>9</sup> which led him to be censored as a forbidden author,<sup>10</sup> and his epitaph (written by Unamuno himself):

Place me, eternal Father, in your breast,  
mysterious home;  
There I shall sleep, as I come fatigued  
from the hard struggle.

#### Raimundo’s disease

Unamuno’s biographers give scant details of the disease afflicting his son Raimundo, born on 7 January 1896. He is understood to have developed meningitis during the first weeks of life; some authors venture to classify it as tuberculous meningitis. The author of the present article has identified no detailed information either supporting or refuting this diagnosis. However, it is not entirely convincing given that mortality rates for tuberculous meningitis at the time were virtually 100%. Aetiology may be explained by some other childhood disease with lower mortality and frequent sequelae, for instance *Haemophilus influenzae*. Given the early onset of hydrocephalus, in the first or second month of life, we are also (in the absence of data from cerebrospinal fluid analysis) unable to rule out that it was secondary to a haemorrhage in the neonatal period.

In the first months of 1896, Unamuno suffered greatly as a result of Raimundo’s illness; this is made clear in his diary and a letter to his friend Múgica, which give some details of the boy’s condition. At the beginning of the diary, he writes several notes, collected by Sabaté.<sup>6</sup>

The 23rd: Between life and death...We forcefully need the doctor. He managed to continue living... Strabismus; will he be blind? Experiences. Indigestion. Baths. Later, remorse. His head is growing...the doctor is coming. Fear. Iron iodide... Perspectives. Death before idiocy. Bad night.

In a letter to Múgica, he writes with almost clinical precision:

So far, his head has grown little and it seems the disease may have stopped, although the fontanelle and the sutures of the frontal and parietal bones are not closing, and he is very dazed and shows no sign of attention. You know how unlikely it is that he should be cured; the worst outcome is not death, but that death should be drawn out over years, years of stupidity and idiocy for the poor boy.

**Table 1.** Descriptive summary in neurological terms of Raimundo’s disease, based on Unamuno’s testimony, writings, and drawings.

— ACUTE PHASE: severity, risk of death
— CHRONIC PHASE/SEQUELAE:
Hydrocephalus (macrocephaly, open fontanelle, sutural diastasis)
Parinaud syndrome (upgaze palsy)
Strabismus
Intellectual disability and muteness (language not acquired)
Eye contact, social smile
Spastic paresis of the right hand
Slow stereotyped movements of the left hand
Spasticity of the legs in adduction (with some voluntary movement)

However, through his mother he was aware of one patient (Dr Gorostiza) who was cured without sequelae; in April, he continued to cling to this hope, albeit with little conviction: “[...] he always lowers his gaze. And he’s so delayed! He’s three months old and he doesn’t laugh, he won’t look at you, he doesn’t understand.”

By June, these hopes had faded, with the child showing considerable sequelae secondary to chronic hydrocephalus. Again, through his drawings, letters, and poems it is Unamuno himself who offers insight into the boy’s neurological and functional status, which could not have changed greatly over the following years (Table 1).

Firstly, he suffered severe intellectual disability. As Unamuno describes in his poem entitled “The death of a son,” Raimundo never acquired language, remaining mute:

And his half-open mouth, always filled  
with a silent cry of protest  
replying to the silence of the sky  
with the muteness of an aborted prophet.

However, the child may eventually have been able to perceive his surroundings, as Unamuno notes that he showed signs of happiness or laughter: “all Raimundín does is laugh”.

Unamuno was a great draftsman, excelling in the skill as a boy. He drew all manner of subject matter, but particularly enjoyed making small caricatures of his classmates and teachers at high school. The archive of the Unamuno House Museum in Salamanca holds at least three drawings of Unamuno’s sick son. As Unamuno’s



**Figure 1.** Drawing of Raimundo by his father. Macrocephaly is not pronounced, and no abnormal posture is observed in the limbs of the sleeping child.



**Figure 2.** In this drawing, which is probably later than that shown in Figure 1, macrocephaly is evident. The child may also present mild strabismus with phoria in the adduction of the left eye. The posture of the left hand and arm appear normal. However, in the separate drawing of the right hand, the thumb is trapped by the other flexed fingers, indicating severe spasticity. Unamuno wrote that the child could move only one hand; this would be the left hand, according to this drawing.

daughter Felisa told her grandson Miguel,<sup>2</sup> and as Unamuno wrote in a letter to Salomé, he always carried the drawings in his wallet; this may explain the worn, creased edges.

In my wallet I always carry a portrait I drew of your little brother, Raimundo, and that mystery of seven years of unconscious anguish has given me much to meditate on.

The three images seem not to have been drawn at the same time. The first two show a baby, whereas the third portrays a boy of at least two-three years of age.

In Figure 1, the child is shown sleeping with both arms slightly bent; the position of the hands is not clearly shown. Figure 2 shows clear macrocephaly; we can also observe mild strabismus with phoria in adduction of the left eye. The left arm is resting with the hand open in a normal position. Beside the portrait is a drawing of the right hand, which is shown in a fist, with the thumb probably trapped by the other flexed fingers. This image of the hand is suggestive of spasticity and perhaps dystonia. In the poem mentioned above, Unamuno states

that the child only moved one hand (the left, according to the drawing in Figure 2), although his description does not allow us to deduce what capacity for movement was conserved:

With the one little arm he moved  
(the other stayed inert) he would slowly rock,  
back and forth, perhaps painting on  
canvas his unconscious dreams.

We may say that the movements of the left arm were slow and more or less stereotyped; they may have been rhythmic, to rock himself, or semi-voluntary, as though painting his dreams on a canvas.

With regard to Raimundo's legs, Unamuno describes them as being crossed in modest concealment, suggesting severe spasticity of the adductor muscles of the thigh, often observed in patients with chronic hydrocephalus. However, the child must have maintained some voluntary motility, taking into account another poem of Unamuno's, "Raimundín's disease," in which he describes

how the boy could crawl up his father’s legs, climbing his torso to give him a kiss:

... seeking a kiss,  
 that coveted prize, up my legs  
 you climb with sweet longing...  
 ...In the dark oblivion of your spirit,  
 not even knowing it yourself,  
 its foliage purifying the air  
 that fills your chest with your soul.  
 It will live a hidden life,  
 that of forgotten reverie,  
 the paternal body you climbed  
 with childlike resolve  
 to pick the coveted fruit,  
 to reap a loving kiss from my mouth.

In Figure 3, Unamuno faithfully portrays his son’s macrocephaly and the ocular signs of chronic hydrocephalus, attributed to pressure of the lateral and third ventricles on the mesencephalic tegmentum: the retraction of the upper eyelid with an expression of fright or surprise and the “setting sun” phenomenon, in which the eyes tend to display a downward deviation due to supranuclear vertical gaze palsy, leaving the sclera visible above the iris. Unamuno noted this: “he always looks down.” Any neurologist in the world could show this wonderful picture Unamuno drew of his son in a class on hydrocephalus.

In the writer’s day, there was no effective surgical treatment for hydrocephalus that may have changed the fatal course of Raimundín’s progression. Although Karl Wernicke performed the first puncture and external drainage to treat hydrocephalus as early as 1881,<sup>11</sup> the emergence of systems for permanent shunting to the right atrium,<sup>12-14</sup> and later to the peritoneum,<sup>11</sup> took several decades.

Poor Raimundín died peacefully in his sleep, according to the verses of “The death of a son”:

And a daybreak was extinguished,  
 reaching the nebulous  
 far end of that sky that we will  
 never see on a distant planet.

Unamuno anticipated the end, and the link between sleep and death, in another poem, “Lullaby for a sick child”:

Sleep, flower of my life,  
 sleep softly.  
 For sleep is your only refuge



**Figure 3.** In this drawing the boy is older and shows clear macrocephaly. The portrayal is more dramatic, with Raimundo appearing shocked or surprised due to the signs of chronic hydrocephalus; the retraction of the upper eyelid and the downward deviation of the eyes reveal the sclera above the iris in the “setting sun” sign.

from your pain.

...

Sweet Death  
 who loves you so  
 soon will eagerly come  
 to take you.

You will sleep in her arms,  
 eternal sleep,  
 and for you, my son,  
 winter will be no more.

In this poem Unamuno clearly alludes to death as a release for his son from the dreaded “idiocy” and his protracted anguish; however, he also tried at times to console himself with the thought that “neither the madman nor the idiot suffers, as they do not know their disease, and they are able to live in contentment. All Raimundín does is laugh.”

The disease and death of Raimundín in Unamuno’s life

Raimundo’s disease was a significant influence in Unamuno’s life, at least in one phase. He himself wrote of his great excitement, even as a young man, at the idea of starting a family, and his joy at the birth of each of

his children. Raimundo's birth was particularly special as having three children brought the family into the long cherished idea of the "large family." As a student in Madrid, he wrote in one of his textbooks:

Oh! When I have children of flesh and blood, full of life, love, and sweetness. It is one of my dreams... and I save my tenderness for the day I have a son. A son! Perhaps I shall have too many and I shan't be able to provide for them. Poor children! How I love you!

Unamuno's grandson Miguel also recalls his love of children, both his own and those around him; he would play with them and make them gifts of his famous paper hats and birds. He even hints at other valuable accounts: "Menéndez Pidal and Pérez de Ayala recall how magnificently Don Miguel got along with children; I knew him when I was a child and he an old man, and my memory is the same."<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, Raimundín's disease was like a bomb hitting the home of Unamuno and his wife Concha; the latter would often cry as she held the child. His fear that his son would be left a disabled "idiot" came true. The term, originating in Esquirol's ideas, was widely used at the time in reference to patients with severe intellectual impairment and no chance of recovery; Bourneville admirably fought against its use in his efforts to support these unfortunate individuals.<sup>15</sup>

The sick child was a constant, oppressive presence. Unamuno was tormented by the idea that Raimundín's sickness was the fulfilment of a premonition. Before they were married, he wrote to Concha describing one of his dreams:

One night I had one of those sad, mournful dreams that I cannot escape, even though I am happy by day. I dreamed that I was married, that I had a son, and that he died. Over his body, which looked like wax, I told my wife: 'look at our love; soon it shall rot; everything ends that way...'

Unamuno installed a cradle for Raimundo in his study in order always to be beside him. He also encouraged his other children to play with Raimundo to distract him.

Despite his efforts to feel fondness for his son and to intellectualise his pain, Unamuno was unable to do this without reproaching and blaming himself for Raimundín's tragedy. On the one hand, he thought that he may himself be responsible, having transmitted some genetic defect derived from his father's consanguineous marriage to a first niece. On the other hand, and due

to Unamuno's personality and thought, he believed his son's disease to be divine punishment for his loss of faith. In his youth, Unamuno was a fervent Catholic, attending mass daily. His philosophical study, both in secondary school and later in university, led him to question the existence of God and the immortality of man, which he was not able to rationalise. His existentialism and crisis of faith, both in God and in reason, were strongly influenced by Kierkegaard. This loss of faith resulted in an inability to believe in what he most desired: not to die. Unamuno said that his doubt was born not of philosophy but of passion, as the conflict was between sentiment and reason; this became a deep feeling of anguish, a tragedy which he described as "perpetual struggle, without victory or the hope of victory; life is contradiction."<sup>16</sup> This intellectual search for God, in which he wanted to believe simply and sentimentally, as in his childhood, was with him throughout his life; he was distressed by God's silence and the lack of rational evidence of his existence.

His son's disease represents a brutal confrontation with the idea of God, provoking one of the greatest crises of anxiety of his life. The latter months of 1896 and the beginning of 1897, following Raimundo's birth, were marked by increasing anxiety due to the religious doubts that tormented him, culminating on the night of 21 March 1897. He was unable to sleep, felt that death was imminent, and presented palpitations, chest pain, and inconsolable sobbing; this episode represents an acute anxiety attack with a possible depressive background. He was exhausted and blamed himself for his son's suffering. Concha tried to console him with maternal words and gestures, but was unsuccessful; Unamuno left the house and took refuge at a Dominican convent. There are differing accounts of how long he remained there. It has been said, although with limited evidence, that he stayed as long as three days, and spent two on his knees praying, face to the wall, mortifying himself and searching for his childhood faith, which God was now punishing him for abandoning. What we know for certain is that on the 22nd of that month he gave vent to his feelings in a letter to his friend and former spiritual director Juan José de Lecanda, and started writing his *Diario íntimo* the next day.<sup>17</sup>

On 26 March, he wrote a short letter to Rafael Altamira, confessing that:

I find myself resting so absolutely that I do not even feel like writing letters. I have experienced a

profound spiritual crisis, which has not yet passed. Thanks be to God, my spirit is becoming peaceful once more.

Father Lecanda insisted Unamuno travel with him to Alcalá de Henares to spend several days performing private “spiritual exercises.” Unamuno’s diary includes countless reflections on all the mysteries that fascinated him: free will, hell, death, and above all the existence of God.

He writes:

I killed my faith by trying to rationalise it. It is only right that now I should vivify my rational acquisitions with faith and give my time to this task. All of which is enough to drive me mad.<sup>17</sup>

Among so many notes and reflections, frequently in Latin and Greek, Unamuno also prays to God:

I desire consolation in life and the power to think serenely on death. Give me faith, my God, for if I manage to have faith in another life, then the afterlife exists.

Having surpassed this profound crisis of March 1897, Unamuno and his wife appear to have entered a phase of greater stability and acceptance of the tragedy that had befallen Raimundín. The birth of subsequent children, particularly the daughters they yearned for, Salomé and Felisa, would have brought significant comfort. The next direct accounts of Raimundín’s disease are from the time of his death in 1902, when Unamuno dedicated the poem “The death of a son” to him. In these verses, Unamuno once more evokes how the presence of a sick son brought about the recurring, obsessive idea of asking God about our fate:

...I still remember how I would pass  
from his cradle to the sad headboard,  
asking the Lord with my eyes,  
tragic from sleep, about our destiny.

However, God remained silent:

...But it remained with me; of my children  
it is he, perhaps, who has given me most ideas:  
in his silence I hear the silence  
of God in answer to our questions.

Unamuno scholars have given little import to the significance of Raimundín’s disease in Unamuno’s spiritual crises, as he himself describes.<sup>18</sup> Much attention has been paid to the fact that Unamuno, the great writer, scholar, and philosopher, constantly lived through ideological, personal, and political contradictions;

probably the greatest of these was his inability to profess the robust faith that he so longed for in a God he ceaselessly sought to find. This is reflected in the final verses of the last poem that was found on his desk upon his death:

To dream of death, is this not to kill the dream?  
To live the dream, is this not to kill life?  
Why put in such effort  
to learn that which in the end is forgotten,  
scrutinising the implacable brow—  
desert sky—of the eternal master?<sup>17</sup>

### Conflicts of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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