

## Harry's Rant of the Month

### "To My Readers"

I ranted some while ago on "The Second Language," when my granddaughter Erin went to Guadalajara and stayed long enough to become bi-lingual. Some Know-Nothings pretend that a second language is a hindrance, but Erin and I know better. I learned it fifty years ago, when I spent a year in Madrid.

Now here comes a would-be presidential candidate, name of Gingrich, declaring that Spanish should not be taught in schools because "it is the language of the ghetto." Seems he never heard of Lope de Vega, or Miguel de Cervantes, or Jorje Luis Borges, or Octavio Paz, or Ortega y Gasset, or Miguel de Unamuno.

We wondered what was the Spanish word for "ghetto." We thought of *barrio*, but looked in the Spanish-English lexicon for a translation. Yes, *barrio*, with a qualifying description of poverty and discrimination. Then we looked in the Spanish-Spanish dictionary. There it was, with some history, harking back to the origin of the word in medieval Venice -- and then it plunked down a new word for me, which I find quite shocking -- *judería*. A *carnecería* is where they have meat. A *librería* is where they have books. A *judería* is where they have Jews.

So Gingrich is not only stupid, about the value of a second language; he is in error! Hebrew, or Yiddish, is the language of the ghetto.

It troubled me all day, and late in the evening I was reminiscing about fifty years ago and the process of learning Spanish. I reached back and picked up TOMO DOS [volume two] of ENSAYOS [essays], by Miguel de Unamuno, one of my heroes and mentors from way back then. I opened the tiny 1200-page book -- thin onion-skin pages, like a Bible -- opened it at random, the way some superstitious people do with the Bible. It opened to "A Mis Lectores" [to my readers] -- and I was blown away reading those eight pages. I'm not sure I had ever read that essay before, but I needed to read it now. Unamuno writes the way I want to and try to write. He is very self-conscious about it. I took the time last week to translate all eight pages, and I herewith share some of it with you. [The most difficult word to translate is *simpático* -- "pleasant, nice, likeable, congenial." I don't like the word "nice" in English, as it is most commonly used. So here I use mostly "likable." "Nice" would be meant satirically, if I used it.]

### *To My Readers*

*Yes, I know very well that I am not likable to all those who read me; perhaps I'm not to others, also. What are we to do? As long as they read me... Because, yes, indeed, I prefer to be not likable to them and they go on reading me, to being likable and they quit reading me. Likability often costs both authority and respect. I confess to you that I don't consider it a desirable thing to become a likable writer. It is perhaps the beginning of discredit, of deep discredit, no matter how gilded or covered up it appears.*

*Yes, I know that I am not likable, that perhaps I have come to be unpleasant to many who read me, yet in spite of that unpleasantness, or rather because of it, they continue to read me.*

*Not long ago a friend and fellow-Basque wrote to me, telling me that even though he often doesn't share my opinions, he reads me because I stir up ideas that require response. And I consider myself quite satisfied with that, to provoke ideas in those who read me, even though these ideas are contrary to those that I expound and defend. But there are many, very many, readers who do not like it that I oblige them to think and who only look for someone who will tell them what they already know, what they have thought already. In order to become a likable writer one only has to flatter and corroborate the preconceptions of the readers, to nail down in them the common notions that they carry stuck in their minds. That's how to make yourself likable and it's also how they tire of you soon, and say, "Oh, yes, a likable writer, very comprehensive," and they quit reading you.*

*Most persons -- I have said it many times, and since I am a boring writer -- another quality that makes me not likable -- I have to repeat it even many more times -- Most persons read in order not to inform themselves. Just as it sounds -- in order not to be informed. The honorable Joe Blow takes the newspaper or the magazine at breakfast, and reads, like someone hears a waltz playing, in order to kill time. It bothers him if the words excite him; it bothers him if they contradict him; but it bothers him even more if they tell him something he has never thought of.*

*There is a spiritual pain analogous to physical pain; there is a spiritual pain when something tears at the fabric of the soul. Because just as the body has its fabrics of cells and fibers, likewise the soul has its fabrics of impressions, memories, sensations, ideas. The rupture of an association of spiritual cells is like the rupture of an association of bodily cells, and it can produce anything from a slight botheration to an extremely sharp pain.*

*Many times it has been said, and it's a thing observed by everybody, that the pain caused by the death of a beloved person, with whom we have lived, increases gradually in the first days and then begins to diminish. This pain follows a course which we could mark by a curve of rapid rise and slow descent. The first effect is one of stupor, and at times, if our beloved suffered much in order to die, we feel even relief seeing that person at rest at last. The greatest pain comes upon finding empty the place formerly occupied, at table, or perhaps in bed, or at our side.*

*The greatest pain is when we sense the lack, when we sense the emptiness left in our existence, when we sense the rupture of our associations of ideas and feelings. The image of that beloved person was intimately woven into the spiritual fabric of our life, and death could not rip it out of us without destroying that fabric.*

*We all know that if one spends many years far from his parents, without seeing them or living with them, the pain which the notice of death causes is not, by a long shot, a*

*lacerating pain. The truth is news of death is not the experience of death. The son, an excellent son otherwise, accustomed himself to another life, created another spiritual fabric. The proverb says it well: "Eyes don't see; heart doesn't feel."*

*These very reflections will seem to many, I suspect, unlikable, hard, tasteless, unfeeling. But I believe they are based on truth...*

*Every rupture of associations of ideas and feelings causes us upset, all the way from the pain of the death of a parent, or a husband or wife, of a brother, of a son, to the botheration, the irritation cause by him who breaks up a thing we've become used to. I am one of those writers who propose to break those associations -- and for that reason they call us paradoxical -- we cause trouble and make ourselves unlikable. It is our destiny.*

*And they say we cause trouble, not so much by what we say as by the way we say it. Yes, it is because, instead of cutting those associations cleanly, with scalpel, chloroforming the patient in advance, or hypnotizing him, we do it with hard jerks and when he is wide awake. It's a question of method and it's a question of temperament. Chloroform, as much in the clinic as in literature, has its drawbacks, and there are occasions when the patient needs to feel the pain...*

*And then there's another thing that makes me unlikable, I know it. It is my lack of impersonality, my inability to make this what they call an objective task, the business of putting my self, more or less, into all my writings, this that they call my egotism. And, what shall we do? I admire those who know how to remove themselves from themselves -- I admire them, but I don't imitate them and I don't want to imitate them...*

*Yes, yes, it is very fine that business of making a discrete use of bits of knowledge, as it is very fine to make discrete use of wealth. But the fact is the neither knowledge nor wealth constitutes our very selves, but is rather something stuck on, which comes and goes, something which can be taken or left. But I cannot make a discrete use of my very self. If they take from me a peseta or a duro I can adjust, but it will be hard for me to adjust if they take away an arm, or worse, a piece of my soul. I can give a peseta or a duro discretely, but an arm, or a piece of my soul -- I can't rip them off and give them away, except passionately, that is, indiscretely. And I don't give ideas, I don't give information -- I give pieces of my soul...*

*– Miguel de Unamuno*

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