



Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho

Miguel de Unamuno

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Con una extraña mezcla de admiración y animadversión hacia Cervantes, Unamuno, tomando el *Quijote* en ocasiones como simple pretexto y sirviéndose en otras de él como estímulo y fuente de inspiración, logró crear un inspirado ensayo de gran valor literario y filosófico.

Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho Details

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Roy Lotz says

'For me alone was Don Quixote born, and myself for his sake; he knew how to act and I to write,' Cervantes has written with his pen. And I say that for Cervantes to recount their lives, and for me to explain and elucidate them, were born Don Quijote and Sancho. Cervantes was born to narrate, and to write commentary was I made.

Miguel de Unamuno defies classification. At once a philosopher, a literary critic, a novelist, a poet, and an essayist—and yet none of them completely—he resembled Nietzsche in his mercurial identity. In this way, too, did he resemble Nietzsche: though he had many themes and central ideas, he had no system. He wrote in short feverish bursts, each one as fiery and explosive as a sermon, going off into the branches (as the Spanish say) and returning again and again to his ostensible subject—only to depart once more. He was a wandering knight errant of a writer.

Unamuno was a member of the so-called Generation of '98. The date—1898—alludes to the Spanish-American war, a conflict in which Spain suffered a humiliating defeat and lost nearly all of her colonies. After this, it became impossible to see Spain as a world power; her decline and decadence were incontrovertible. This generation of intellectuals and artists was, therefore, concerned with rejuvenating Spanish culture. In Unamuno's case, this took the form of finding Spain's 'essence': which he did in the person of Don Quixote. He sees in the knight errant everything profound and important in Spanish culture, as a kind of Messiah of Spanish Catholicism, often comparing Quixote to Iñigo de Loyola and Teresa de Ávila.

This book has, therefore, a quasi-nationalistic aim, which may weary the non-Spanish reader. But it survives as one of the greatest works of criticism written on Spain's greatest book.

The title of *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho* is usually rendered in English as *Our Lord Don Quijote*; and this title, though not literal, does ample justice to Unamuno's project. In this work Unamuno undertakes to write a full, chapter-by-chapter commentary on Cervantes' novel; but his commentary is no conventional literary criticism. Unamuno declares his belief that Don Quixote and his squire were real, and that Cervantes did a grave injustice to their lives by writing it as a farce. In reality, the Don was a hero of the highest order, a saint and a savior, and Unamuno aims to reveal the holiness of the Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance for his readers.

Unamuno is, thus, the most quixotic of interpreters. He claims to see naught but pure nobility and heroism in the great knight from La Mancha. And yet the grandiose and ludicrous claims of Unamuno, and the farcical nature of Don Quixote himself, put the reader on guard: this commentary, like the great novel itself, is laden with delicate irony—an irony that does not undermine Unamuno's literal meaning, but complements and complicates it.

You might call this Cervantine irony, and it is difficult to adequately describe, since it relies on a contradiction. It is the contradiction of Don Quixote himself: perhaps the most heroic character in all of literature, braver than Achilles and nobler than Odysseus, and yet laughably ridiculous—at times even pitiable and pathetic. We are thus faced with a dilemma: applaud the knight, or ridicule him? Neither seems satisfactory. At times Quixote is undeniably funny, a poor fool who tilts at windmills; but by the end of the novel—an ending more tragic than the darkest of Shakespeare's tragedies—when he renounces his life as a

knight and condemns all his adventures as insanity, we cannot help but feel profoundly sad, and we plead along with Sancho that he continue to live in his fantasy world, if not for his sake than for ours.

This is the paradox of idealism. To change the world you must be able to re-imagine it: to see it for what it might be rather than for what it is. Further, you must act “as if”—to pretend, as it were, that you were living in a better world. How can you hope to transform a dishonest world if you are not honest yourself, if you do not insist on taking others at their word? Quixoticism is thus the recipe for improving the world. Dorothea, from *Middlemarch*, is a quietly quixotic figure, only seeing pure intentions in those around her. But paradoxically, by presupposing only the best, and seeing goodness where it is not, she creates the goodness that she imagines. Confronted with a person who sees only the most generous motives, those she meets actually become kind and generous in her presence.

We then must ask: Is Dorothea a fool? And if so, does it matter? And what does it even mean to be a fool? For as Lionel Trilling pointed out, Cervantes posed one of the central questions of literature: What is the relationship between fiction and reality?

Human reality is peculiar: We acknowledge an entire class of facts that are only facts because of social agreement. The value of a dollar, for example, or the rules of football are real enough—we see their effects every day—and yet, if everyone were to change their opinion at once, these “facts” would evaporate. These “social facts” dominate our lives: that Donald Trump is president and that the United States is a country are two more examples. You might say that these are facts only because everyone acts “as if” they are: and our actions constitute their being true.

The reality that Don Quixote inhabits is not, in this sense, less real than this “normal” social reality. He simply acts “as if” he were residing in another social world, one purer and nobler. And in doing so, he engenders his own reality—a reality inspired by his pure and noble heart. What is a queen, after all, but a woman who we agree to treat as special? And if Don Quixote treats his Dulcinea the same way, what prevents her from being a queen? What is a helmet but a piece of metal we choose to put on our heads? And if Don Quixote treats his barber’s bowl as a helmet, isn’t it one? We see this happen again and again: the great knight transforms those around him, making them lords and ladies, monsters and villains, only by seeing them differently.

In this way, Don Quixote opens a gulf for us: by acknowledging the conventional nature of much of our reality, and the power of the imagination to change it, we are left groping. What does it mean for something to be real? What does it mean to be mistaken, or to be a fool? To improve the world, must we see it falsely? Is this false seeing even “false,” or is it profoundly true? In short, what is the relationship between fiction and fact?

To me, this is the central question of Cervantes’ novel. But it remains a dead issue if we choose to see Quixote merely as a fool, as he is so commonly understood. Indeed I think we laugh at the knight partly out of self-defense, to avoid these troublesome issues. Unamuno’s worshipful commentary pushes against this tendency, and allows us to see the knight in all his heroism.

blakeR says

(Español primero. . . English below)

Esto fue un libro sumamente difícil de entender, no solo porque lo leí en mi segundo idioma, pero también por los conceptos super-abstractos que Unamuno persigue sin descanso. Es el último de los libros

unamuneanos que quería leer, y puedo decir por cierto que admiro al hombre y pensador mucho más que disfruto de sus obras.

Llegué a Unamuno a través de Erich Fromm, quién contó en su librito *On Disobedience* del famoso episodio entre Unamuno y el general José Millán-Astray en la Universidad de Salamanca el 12 de Octubre, 1936. Para ellos que no sepan, el general lidió un grito falangista en el auditorio, y Unamuno respondió así:

«Estáis esperando mis palabras. Me conocéis bien, y sabéis que soy incapaz de permanecer en silencio. A veces, quedarse callado equivale a mentir, porque el silencio puede ser interpretado como aquiescencia. Quiero hacer algunos comentarios al discurso -por llamarlo de algún modo- del profesor Maldonado, que se encuentra entre nosotros. Se ha hablado aquí de guerra internacional en defensa de la civilización cristiana; yo mismo lo hice otras veces. Pero no, la nuestra es sólo una guerra incivil. Vencer no es convencer, y hay que convencer, sobre todo, y no puede convencer el odio que no deja lugar para la compasión. Dejaré de lado la ofensa personal que supone su repentina explosión contra vascos y catalanes llamándolos anti-España; pues bien, con la misma razón pueden ellos decir lo mismo. El señor obispo lo quiera o no lo quiera, es catalán, nacido en Barcelona, y aquí está para enseñar la doctrina cristiana que no queréis conocer. Yo mismo, como sabéis, nací en Bilbao y llevo toda mi vida enseñando la lengua española, que no sabéis...»

En este punto, el general José Millán-Astray (el cual sentía una profunda enemistad por Unamuno), empezó a gritar: «¿Puedo hablar? ¿Puedo hablar?». Su escolta presentó armas y alguien del público gritó: «¡Viva la muerte!» (lema de la Legión). Millán habló: «¡Cataluña y el País Vasco, el País Vasco y Cataluña, son dos cánceres en el cuerpo de la nación! El fascismo, remedio de España, viene a exterminarlos, cortando en la carne viva y sana como un frío bisturí!». Se excitó de tal modo hasta el punto que no pudo seguir hablando. Pensando, se cuadró mientras se oían gritos de «¡Viva España!».

Se produjo un silencio mortal y unas miradas angustiadas se volvieron hacia Unamuno, que dijo: «Acabo de oír el necrófilo e insensato grito "¡Viva la muerte!". Esto me suena lo mismo que "¡Muera la vida!". Y yo, que he pasado mi vida componiendo paradojas que excitaban la ira de algunos que no las comprendían he de deciros, como experto en la materia, que esta ridícula paradoja me parece repelente. Como ha sido proclamada en homenaje al último orador, entiendo que va dirigida a él, si bien de una forma excesiva y tortuosa, como testimonio de que él mismo es un símbolo de la muerte. El general Millán-Astray es un inválido. No es preciso que digamos esto con un tono más bajo. Es un inválido de guerra. También lo fue Cervantes. Pero los extremos no sirven como norma. Desgraciadamente en España hay actualmente demasiados mutilados. Y, si Dios no nos ayuda, pronto habrá muchísimos más. Me atormenta el pensar que el general Millán-Astray pudiera dictar las normas de la psicología de las masas. Un mutilado que carezca de la grandeza espiritual de Cervantes, que era un hombre, no un superhombre, viril y completo a pesar de sus mutilaciones, un inválido, como he dicho, que no tenga esta superioridad de espíritu es de esperar que encuentre un terrible alivio viendo cómo se multiplican los mutilados a su alrededor. El general Millán-Astray desea crear una España nueva, creación negativa sin duda, según su propia imagen. Y por eso quisiera una España mutilada (...).»

En ese momento Millán-Astray exclama irritado «¡Muera la intelectualidad traidora! ¡Viva la muerte!»

Unamuno, sin amedrentarse, continúa: «¡Este es el templo de la inteligencia, y yo soy su sumo sacerdote! Vosotros estáis profanando su sagrado recinto. Yo siempre he sido, diga lo que diga el proverbio, un profeta en mi propio país. Venceréis, porque tenéis sobrada fuerza bruta. Pero

no convenceréis, porque para convencer hay que persuadir. Y para persuadir necesitaréis algo que os falta: razón y derecho en la lucha. Me parece inútil el pedir os que penséis en España. He dicho».

A continuación, con el público asistente encolerizado contra Unamuno y lanzándole todo tipo de insultos, algunos oficiales echaron mano de las pistolas... pero se libró gracias a la intervención de Carmen Polo de Franco, quien agarrándose a su brazo lo acompañó hasta su domicilio. Ese mismo día, la corporación municipal se reunió de forma secreta y expulsó a Unamuno.

Me choqué tan fuerte ese último comentario, y me pareció tan heroico decirlo en ese ambiente, tanto que salí de uno para averiguar todo sobre Unamuno, y para leer sus escritos mas emblemáticos. Y mientras no me han interesado tanto sus libros (por ser bastante ocultos y abstractos), es obvio el genio que los inspiró a todos.

Esto, *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho*, fue lo más difícil por lejos. Fue más bien una elogia, alardeando los bondades del Caballero de la Mancha, y se puso tedioso después de un rato. Primero estaba un poco escéptico sobre esta idea, no solo presente en Unamuno pero también en todos los críticos de Cervantes, que de algún modo logró Cervantes meter esta inspiración divina en su obra maestra. Unamuno lo lleva aún más allá, diciendo que Cervantes ni estaba conciente de la divinidad que estaba creando con sus leyendas de protagonistas, que Cervantes de hecho no los trataba lo suficiente bueno, que los negaba e insultaba. Es una perspectiva bastante ridícula en la superficie, pero si puedes permitir a Unamuno su locurita, utiliza la idea con efecto interesante.

Lo que más me impresionó del libro fue la idea que Unamuno escriba con una actitud igual al héroe con quién está obsesionado. Como el Quijote lee sus libros de caballeros convencido que sean historias verdaderas, también Unamuno lee *Don Quijote* presumiendo que Quijote y Sancho son personas auténticamente vivas. Es un espejo fascinante, porque a través de Unamuno se ve una versión real del proceso ridículo de enloquecimiento que sufrió Don Quijote en la novela.

A parte de esto, me dió el libro algunos buenos conceptos alrededor de Don Quijote. El amor que tiene Unamuno para los dos es sin duda contagioso, y si yo no hubiese leído este libro como compañero de la novela, es muy probable que se habría entendido como nada mas que una triste broma. Pero gracias a Unamuno y su amor (y fe), yo veo la nobleza de Don Quijote y Sancho, y la ofensiva injusticia de sus burladores.

Todavía me parece extremo analizar al libro hasta este punto (digo lo mismo sobre otras criticas tan serias), y no puedo recomendarlo a ninguna persona que no esté estudiando con un(a) profesor(a), pero hay que admitir que me iluminó mucho alrededor de una de las más famosas novelas en la historia del mundo.

This was an extremely difficult book to understand, not only because I read it in my second language, but also because of its incredibly abstract concepts and language. It's the last of Unamuno's books that I wanted to read, and I can say without doubt that I admire Unamuno the man and thinker much more than I actually enjoy his works.

I got to Unamuno through an otherwise forgettable little book by Erich Fromm called *On Disobedience*. In it, Fromm recounts a famous confrontation between Unamuno and General José Millán-Astray at the University

of Salamanca on October 12, 1936. The General led a Falangist cheer to which Unamuno responded in front of the whole auditorium:

"You are waiting for my words. You know me well, and know I cannot remain silent for long. Sometimes, to remain silent is to lie, since silence can be interpreted as assent. I want to comment on the so-called speech of Professor Maldonado, who is with us here. I will ignore the personal offence to the Basques and Catalonians. I myself, as you know, was born in Bilbao. The Bishop," Unamuno gestured to the Archbishop of Salamanca, "whether you like it or not, is Catalan, born in Barcelona. But now I have heard this insensible and necrophilous oath, "¡Viva la Muerte!", and I, having spent my life writing paradoxes that have provoked the ire of those who do not understand what I have written, and being an expert in this matter, find this ridiculous paradox repellent. General Millán-Astray is a cripple. There is no need for us to say this with whispered tones. He is war cripple. So was Cervantes. But unfortunately, Spain today has too many cripples. And, if God does not help us, soon it will have very many more. It torments me to think that General Millán-Astray could dictate the norms of the psychology of the masses. A cripple, who lacks the spiritual greatness of Cervantes, hopes to find relief by adding to the number of cripples around him."

Millán-Astray responded: "¡Muera la inteligencia! ¡Viva la Muerte!" ("Death to intelligence! Long live death!"), provoking applause from the Falangists.

Unamuno continued: "This is the temple of intelligence, and I am its high priest. You are profaning its sacred domain. You will win, because you have enough brute force. But you will not convince. In order to convince it is necessary to persuade, and to persuade you will need something that you lack: reason and right in the struggle. I see it is useless to ask you to think of Spain. I have spoken."

The whole exchange, but especially his last words, impressed me so much with their heroism that I had to go and learn everything I could about the man who uttered them, and read his best-known books. And while his books haven't interested me greatly (being as erudite and abstract as they are), the genius behind them is unmistakable.

The Life of Don Quixote & Sancho was the most difficult by far. It was more of an elegy, singing the praises of the Knight of La Mancha, and it got old. I began skeptical of this idea, not only by Unamuno but by many other critics of Cervantes, that Cervantes somehow tapped into a divine fountain of insight in order to produce this work. Unamuno takes it even further, proposing that Cervantes wasn't even conscious of the divine natures of his creations, that he actually didn't treat them with enough respect or devotion, that he insulted and neglected them in his ignorance. The idea is pretty ridiculous on its face, but if you grant Unamuno his little eccentricity, he produces some interesting results.

What most impressed me about the book was seeing how Unamuno writes with the same exact attitude as the hero about whom he's writing. Just as Quixote reads books of chivalry convinced that they are true stories, so does Unamuno read *Don Quixote* with the premise that Quixote and Sancho are real people. It's a fascinating mirror because through Unamuno you see the real-life version of the ridiculous process of going crazy that Quixote suffers in the book.

Apart from this, Unamuno's book gave me some good understandings about the novel as I read it. The love that Unamuno shows for the two protagonists is contagious, and if I hadn't read this book alongside the novel (see my review), it's very probable that I would have experienced the world classic as nothing more than a sad, tiresome joke. Thanks to Unamuno, and to his faith and love, I can see the nobility in Quixote and Sancho, and the offensive injustice of his mockers.

It still seems extreme to analyze *Don Quixote* to the degree that Unamuno and many other critics have done. Unamuno's 300-plus page "essay" certainly qualifies as obsession (whether unhealthy or not I can't say). Nor can I recommend it to anyone who's not actively studying with the aid of a professor. But I have to admit that despite my struggles and my unabashed relief at finally finishing it, it has illuminated much for me about perhaps the most famous novel of all time.

Not Bad Reviews

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