

“Del crepúsculo del día”: Life and Literature in the *Persiles*

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Aquel día y aquella noche caminaron sin sucederles cosa digna de contarse, si no fue que en ella acabó Sancho su tarea [de recibir los azotes], de que quedó don Quijote contento sobremodo, y esperaba el día, por ver si en el camino topaba ya desencantada a Dulcinea su señora; y siguiendo su camino, no topaba mujer ninguna que no iba a reconocer si era Dulcinea del Toboso, teniendo por infalible no poder mentir las promesas de Merlín.

Con estos pensamientos y deseos subieron una cuesta arriba, desde la cual descubrieron su aldea, la cual, vista de Sancho, se hincó de rodillas, . . . (Don Quijote, II, lxxii)

Precisely when Sancho has finished receiving the lashes that were to disenchant Dulcinea and when Don Quijote most anxiously expects to see his beloved, their village comes into view. Don Quijote attempts to realize a self that, previous to his sallies, he has formulated from the novels of chivalry. However, his outward and wayward journey towards this realization represented by Dulcinea turns inward and homeward as he comes to realize himself as the creator of his own illusions. As Avalor-Arce states, Quijote attempts to “vivir la vida como una obra de arte . . . [pero] si esto ocurre con criaturas que habfan nacido del arte y para el arte, un mero mortal, como don Quijote, sólo puede esperar la derrota y el ridículo como resultados de sus tentativas” (385). Cervantes seems to suggest that the relationship between life and art, between experience and its representation, can lead to a disillusionment of dangerous proportions if not properly understood. But before we are tempted to exaggerate the apparent modernity of the *Quijote* in its portrayal of the chasm between literature and life, between words and things, we must consider the seemingly contradictory stance of Cervantes in his final work, *Los Trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*.

Because it seems to oppose what has been called the mature Cervantine irony of the *Quijote*, many critics have disregarded this work as the product of senility or a work written mainly for "señoritas." This work appears to establish an entirely different relationship between literature and life, a relationship in which irony, that results from slippage between these two realms, is almost entirely absent. Rather than occupying itself with the ways in which individuals continually miss the mark in their attempts to name and represent experience, the *Persiles* shows how literary patterns and constructs, although at times arbitrary and misapplied to life, originate from the very fabric of life. Indeed, as the polyphony of tales increases in this narrative, as each character attempts to name his own experience with autobiographical fictions, the Christian cycle of birth, death, and rebirth emerges as the essential plot of life itself. Art imitates life, which in turn imitates Providence. Art, then, is only a reflection of the way in which God has shaped life.

Although this essay is not an attempt to reconcile fully this absolutist, transcendental view with Cervantes' celebration of perspectivism in the *Quijote*, the examination of the *Persiles* which follows intends to help refocus future consideration of the *Quijote* on the question of the bad faith of the protagonist's adventures and not on the nature of his universe. By 'bad faith,' I am referring to Don Quijote's insistence on creating illusions, *ex nihilo* or even *ex litteris*, which I believe more directly explains the perspectivism that occurs, for example, in the "baciuelmo" scene than does a view of the *Quijote*'s universe as a relative one. Indeed, the *Persiles* seems to argue that life itself is source enough of adventure and of literary imaginings, and that we threaten to squelch life's drama with our own interested desires. In light of the *Persiles*, the bad faith of Alonso Quijano is that he doesn't trust life to bring adventure, love, or authentic identity to him. Thus, his only possible authentic existence is one in which Dulcinea is an impossibility. Periandro and Auristela, on the other hand, achieve the most ideal union of imagination and reality because they choose to let life name and reveal them; they allow the furnace of experience to refine and purify their desires before they are named or expressed.

In the world of the *Persiles*, life's moments contain seeds of good and bad fortune, and the distinction is of such subtlety that wisdom lies in being hesitant to embrace either security or despair until the diversity of further experience affords the proper perspective. Like

a fugue that threatens to collapse into discord and chaos before it resolves into a harmonious theme, the various characters in the land of the barbarians tell their stories together: "algunos contaron sus miserias, y otros las dejaron en silencio, por no hallar palabras para decirlas. . . los sucesos que contaron fueron tan diferentes, tan estraños y tan desdichados, que unos les sacaban las lágrimas a los ojos y otros la risa del pecho" (*Persiles* 84-85). Cervantes later remarks (II, v) that weeping and laughing are the essential expressions of our humanity since both tragedy and comedy are the very fabric of life. But if we slip into the extremes of either emotion too easily, we may prove to be too vulnerable to appearances. By embracing the false promises of appearances, our life becomes a tragedy. For Cervantes, despair is a sign of impatience with life's trials. As Auristela remarks: "—No sería esperanza aquella . . . a que pudiesen contrastar y derribar infortunios, pues así como la luz resplandece más en las tinieblas, así la esperanza ha de estar más firme en los trabajos. Que el desesperarse en ellos es acción de pechos cobardes, . . ." (97).

The many stories related in the *Persiles* focus on the problems of desire and how it upsets the patience needed to see experience through to its end. Whenever characters prematurely impose a particular meaning onto their experience and onto those whom they love, they fall from grace and their story becomes a tragic tale. To the extent that characters are hesitant to be so imposing and pause to narrate their trials to others, they find space for repentance of past errors and improvement in their judgment. Auristela notes that "Nuestras almas, . . . siempre están en continuo movimiento y no pueden parar sino en Dios, como en su centro. En esta vida los deseos son infinitos, y unos se encadenan de otros, y se eslabonan, y van formando una cadena que tal vez llega al cielo, y tal se sume en el infierno" (458-459). The desires to tell and to be told stories help link individual experience together much as a fugue brings into focus overarching structure and order as seemingly detached and fragmented themes begin to resonate. Ruth El Saffar's comments on the secondary characters of the *Quijote* apply equally to the *Persiles*:

. . . the escape from their madness and violence comes through a progressive disengagement from their story/history. By telling it, they open themselves to a fuller understanding of their role in a situation much larger than they had understood

it to be; and by hearing it told about others, they come to appreciate how catastrophic their abandonment of their own responsibility to themselves can be. Fiction, in this sense, can play a healing role in the lives of characters caught up in it. (80)

The storytelling moment marks a turning point between past struggle and a future beyond those "trabajos." When the storyteller gains the necessary distance and freedom, he can rearrange the elements of the past in order to expose to himself and to his audience a less threatening meaning of that experience. The power of selection in the act of narration is the essence of a narrator's freedom since "no todas las cosas que suceden son buenas para contadas, y podrían pasar sin serlo y sin quedar menoscabada la historia . . ." (343). Individuals rescue themselves from the spiritual death of past error through a careful selection and deletion of the appropriate elements of that past in order to change its meaning to redemption. In other words, the literary constructs employed to reinscribe individual lives into the Christian romance only signify the freedom of humankind, so valued by Cervantes, to choose spiritual life or death.

Rutilio's account of his past exemplifies the redeeming effects of telling one's story. With the help of a man from Norway, he comes to interpret his experiences in a way that frees him of his past errors. Rutilio's flaw is that he trusts in his rescuer's promises out of desperation even though he knows that she is a sorceress. His sin is directly related to his primary flaw of loving his student, a young woman, without prudence or discretion.¹ Significantly, Rutilio includes the Norwegian's perspective in his narrative, a view he gained by having told his story to him before:

—Yo soy— respondí— un miserable, que por huir de la muerte he venido a caer en sus manos— . . .

Mostró condolerse el que me hablaba, y djome:

—Puedes, buen hombre, dar infinitas gracias al cielo por haberte librado del poder destas malélicas hechiceras, de las cuales hay mucha abundancia en estas septentrionales partes. Cuéntase dellas que se convierten en lobos, . . . Como esto pueda ser yo lo ignoro, y como cristiano que soy católico no lo creo. Pero la esperiencia me muestra lo contrario. Lo que puedo alcanzar es, que todas estas transformaciones son

ilusiones del demonio, y *permisión de Dios* y castigo de los abominables pecados deste maldito género de gente. (92, italics mine)

These illusions, then, have three separate meanings simultaneously. On one level, Rutilio breaks down the illusion that the woman is a savior; by embracing her, he sees her true identity as a demon, although he says that initially "Túvela, no por hechicera, sino por ángel que enviaba el cielo para mi remedio" (90). On another level, because she appears as a she-wolf, the witch is punished by Rutilio's hand for her sorcery. And finally, it seems that God allows such evil illusions to exist because they act as punishment for sin and therefore ultimately signify his existence. Encounters with such illusions also help characters such as Rutilio to realize in time that they have been running into, rather than away from, death. Thus, to have seen her as anything but a she-wolf appears to have been the true illusion, an illusion that is self-willed much like Quijote's imaginings.

Because life fluctuates between comedy and tragedy, and because not all events make for good storytelling as mentioned above, narrating one's life means participating self-consciously in a fictionalization of the past. Cervantes suggests that this self-consciousness is similar to that of an artist, such as the one who attempts to narrate this story and must choose how to render each event:

Parece que el volcar de la nave volcó, o por mejor decir, turbó el juicio del autor desta historia, porque a este segundo capítulo le dio cuatro o cinco principios, casi como dudando qué fin en él tomaría. En fin, se resolvió, diciendo que las dichas y las desdichas suelen andar tan juntas que tal vez no hay medio que las divida; andan el pesar y el placer tan apareados que es simple el triste que se desespera y el alegre que se confía. (162)

The ship is subsequently buried ("sepultóse la nave") like a coffin and its inhabitants emerge as if from a womb ("segunda vez nacieron del vientre desta galera"). An old gentleman who had seen a similar incident in which survivors were brought forth from a hole made in its top provides the perspective needed to give the incident its metaphorical meaning. Thus, we see the event as a repetition of a

pattern of death and rebirth, a pattern central to the Christian universe. The congruence between the man's testimony and the events confirms the truth of his distinction between miracles and mysteries, the former occurring outside the laws of nature whereas the latter only have the appearance of doing so, since they occur rarely. Despite appearances of unbelievability, we come to see life experience in the *Persiles* essentially as a mystery only because the various narrations resonate so frequently with each other, a resonance which makes the events more credible, albeit uncommon. Periandro's response to Rutilio's apologies about the unnatural character of his story reflect, this increased capacity to believe: "—En las [gracias] que a nosotros nos han sucedido, nos hemos ensayado y dispuesto a creer cuantas nos contaren, puesto que tengan más de lo imposible que de lo verdadero" (88). And this increased openness allows us to see the pattern of Christian redemption at the heart of experience.

The chief obstacle to the credibility of these life events seems to be the literary constructs employed to relate them. The highly crafted literary voice of the shipwreck account, for example, is unmistakable. Although this and other narrations include literary allusions such as scripture, classic epic (particularly the *Aeneid*), comedy, farce, religious and courtly drama, lyric poetry, medieval and classical romance,² and thereby appear to be less "historia" than "fábula," they prove to be every bit as truthful as history. They do so because similar literary constructs are employed in the narrations by individual characters and in the book's overall narration which suggests that life itself is the source of those constructs. If this is the case, one should not complain about verisimilitude when listening to these tales. Cervantes argues:

... puesto que es excelencia de la historia, que cualquiera cosa que en ella se escribía puede pasar al sabor de la verdad que trae consigo; lo que no tiene la fábula, a quien conviene guisar sus acciones con tanta puntualidad y gusto, y con tanta verisimilitud, que a despecho y pesar de la mentira, que hace disonancia en el entendimiento, forme una verdadera armonía.
(343)

Cervantes later claims that "la historia, la poesía y la pintura simbolizan entre sí y se parecen tanto, que cuando escribes historia, pintas, y cuando pintas, compones" (371). Thus, on a fundamental level there is no difference between fiction and history. The only difference lies in the fact that fiction starts out at a disadvantage since its reputation is not for telling literal truths. Thus, whenever an audience is predisposed against transcendental truths because they appear more fabulous than true, the artifices of fiction must be employed that the story can also "pasar al sabor de la verdad." According to this logic, the more fictional a story, potentially the greater the truth it can convey. Conversely, stories told under the guise of history might be more likely to deceive us because we consider it *a priori* a vehicle of truth. Paradoxically, then, the most genuine lives, as represented by Persiles and Sigismunda, will ultimately become the most fictitious tales as is evident from Periandro's account of his own adventures.³ Fiction, then, is the most effective vehicle for telling the truth about life, especially if that truth is transcendental.

If fiction speaks the greatest truth, the most honest people are those who can successfully live a lie, or as Avalle-Arce puts it, "vivir la vida como una obra de arte" in order to make "lies" true. Don Quijote emerges from the Cave of Montesinos having learned that "todos los contentos desta vida pasan como sombra y sueño, o se marchitan como la flor del campo" (II, xxii). Avalle-Arce remarks that he emerges with the "verdadera lección de heroísmo profundamente humano: saber que la vida es sombra y sueños, pero vivirla como si no lo fuese" (384). Nevertheless, Don Quijote is unable to live life duplicitously because he gains an audience interested in making literal his dreams of Dulcinea and Sancho's dreams of an island government. The secondary characters have taken his mission even more literally than he did since they do not trust that he can maintain his illusions as long as life continues to contradict him. That contradiction, however, had been his mainstay since it was evidence that enchantment was at work, evidence that only affirmed his role as knight errant. Perhaps what explains the public response to Alonso Quijano in the novel is that he ostentatiously renames himself and cloaks himself in a new identity which he seeks to verify despite empirical evidence. Seeing the gap between the names he gives things and what they know to be true, other characters such as the Duke and the Duchess feel compelled to fill that gap.

Quijote attempts to transmit the reality of his soul to the outside world but moves back towards his real self through disenchantment and disillusionment because the world begins to imitate his soul in bad faith, ultimately signaling his aloneness in that world. But this aloneness is not an existential, one since upon renouncing his dreams, he falls back on newly gained understanding about life's truths. A Valle-Arce notes that at the end of Quijote's life, "una autodecepción consciente y más que heroica le lleva a decirse que 'la vida es algo más que sueños y sombras.' Y así se prepara para una muerte ejemplar y cristiana" (387). Quijote acts simply as a Persiles in reverse. Periandro's inner soul is under constant threat of being consumed or permanently transformed by a corrupt and chaotic world but ultimately moves toward an unveiling of the illusions of this world and the true identity of that soul. Periandro succeeds because, although he also renames himself, he does so to protect his true identity which he allows experience to draw out. His adventures are characterized by his refusal to name himself and his ability to live life duplicitously, knowing that he is deceiving everyone, particularly Sinforosa and Arnaldo. The revelation of his real name is simultaneously the realization of a union with perfect beauty and with God. The beauty of this world becomes synonymous with the beauty and goodness of God, and the desires for mortal beauty are united with desires for God. His narrative represents the attempt to inscribe his literal heroism literarily whereas Quijote attempted to inscribe himself literally into a literary model of heroism.

As a contrast to Periandro and Auristela, several secondary characters in the *Persiles* name themselves prematurely by giving in to an impatient desire for an early end to their trials. In a scenario similar to Rutilio's, a sorceress, Cenotia, loves Antonio and promises him the realization and the possession of all human fantasies, not unlike the destiny Periandro ultimately achieves: "Si te parezco fea, yo haré de modo que me juzgues por hermosa; . . . haré que brote del abismo lo más precioso que en él se encierra, haréte invencible en todo, blando en la paz, temido en la guerra; en fin, enmendaré tu suerte de manera que seas siempre envidiado y no envidioso" (202).

It is the nature of greed and impatient desire, which are the threatening antitheses to Auristela's and Periandro's positions, to aspire to possess hidden treasures simply with the wave of a hand, or with the exercise of physical, monetary, or political power. As Cenotia

rushes to possess Antonio, he shoots an arrow in defense and mistakenly hits Clodio: "le pasó la boca y la lengua, y le dejó la vida en perpetuo silencio. Castigo merecido a sus muchas culpas" (203). That Clodio is killed in the place of the witch suggests that he is the true nemesis. Clodio is described as having a capacity for language that adds salt to the taste of life; his words are critical, cutting, often truthful but ill-intended. Even though he speaks the truth to Arnaldo about Periandro and Auristela being lovers, his truths are as unwanted and dangerous as the sorceress' promises, since they are also inspired by lustful passions. On several occasions, Clodio discusses the almost physical quality of his passions and his words: "por momentos me fatigan ciertos ímpetus maliciosos que me hacen bailar la lengua en la boca, y malograrse entre los dientes más de cuatro verdades que andan por salir a la plaza del mundo" (135-136). Later he confesses: "me salen a la lengua y a la boca ciertos pensamientos, que rabian porque los ponga en voz y los arroje en las plazas antes que se me pudran en el pecho o reviente con ellos" (181). The truths that he wishes to tell prove to be self-interested and thus corruptive since he falls in love himself with Auristela's beauty, the punishment for which Antonio unwittingly gives him. His sins are not unlike Rosamunda's lust, for as she rebuts, "así los ancianos murmuradores hablan más cuanto más viejos, porque han visto más, y todos los gustos de los otros sentidos los han cifrado y recogido a la lengua" (136).

Clodio tells truth only to hide his own lies whereas Periandro tells lies, such as his dream about Auristela, to protect the truth. Although admired for his storytelling abilities, his intention is clearly not self-aggrandizement but the protection of Auristela from Arnaldo. Hence, he speaks of her in his dream-island surrounded by Modesty and Self-Control to warn with these fictions Arnaldo and anyone else tempted to possess Auristela. When accused of having related only a dream, he freely admits, "Sí . . . porque todos mis bienes son soñados" (244). Significantly, Periandro shows an awareness that his "bienes," like "lo más precioso" that Cenotia promises to Antonio, must be thought of as products of the imagination if there is to be any possibility of their realization. As Quijote finally realizes, he trusts that there is more to life than dreams. As Mauricio remarks, "esas son las fuerzas de la imaginación, en quien suelen representarse las cosas con tanta vehemencia, que se aprenden de la memoria, de manera que quedan en ella, siendo mentiras, como si fueran verdades" (244). But rather than

signifying a modern dilemma, the power of the imagination to make dreams seem real is only a metaphor for the way in which faith in God allows dreams to become reality, if not in this life then certainly in the next.

Thus, for Cervantes what is most reprehensible is not to create fictions in order to tell one's own story, since they can often be more effective in communicating transcendental truth, but to take life's metaphors literally. If earthly experience and its vicissitudes of fortune are metaphors for the hand of Providence, then the failure to see past the surface of life leads to spiritual death. The paradox becomes that to the extent that we place our faith in a reality that we believe lies behind mortal experience, we will better enjoy the experiences of this life. Contrarily, the more literally we see earthly experience, the more we will want to seize it as our own and will discover that we have only grasped phantasms. Those who take Auristela's physical beauty literally fail to appreciate her beauty as a metaphor for the inspiring love of God. As El Saffar argues, the trials of Persiles and Sigismunda are meant to purify their desires for one another. The ultimate test for Sigismunda is to learn not to be jealous, and for Persiles it is to love her even in a state of physical depravity. According to El Saffar, this happens partly as a result of a continual 'othering' of their desires: they observe the extremes of possessive and impatient desire played out to their conclusions and come to understand the mistakes made in taking beauty too literally.

At the same time that Auristela and Periandro begin to unravel their true identities in Rome, a portrait of Auristela inspires a duel between the Duke of Nemurs and Prince Arnaldo, and street brawls erupt over renegade portraits of portraits that have been circulated throughout the city. The representation of Auristela's beauty is revealed to be the true object of their desires since they failed to understand or to allow that her beauty could be a representation of her goodness and of God's inspiration, since "los corazones enamorados creen con mucha facilidad aun las sombras de las promesas de su gusto" (197). "They have their reward," as Christ said regarding the hypocrites who pray in public. And since Periandro was able to deny his own identity and withstand the loss of her beauty and still see the reality behind the metaphor, he has his reward as well. A Valle-Arce's comments about Anselmo in "La novela del Curioso impertinente" also describe those compelled to fight over Auristela's portrait:

El rehusar aceptar la problemática de la vida y, al contrario de esto, el refugiarse en la abstracción, forman la base del mortal error de Anselmo. Parece como si él mismo lo hubiera entendido así, pues en su último escrito, que la muerte no le dejó terminar, dice: "No estaba ella obligada a hacer milagros" (I, xxxv). El milagro sería esperar que un individuo actúe en forma extrahumana, como abstracción abúlica e insensible al margen de la vida. (48)

Auristela and Periandro unite as Persiles and Sigismunda precisely because they never showed mistrust in the possibility of an ideal union. That mistrust is apparent in others' desires to take premature possession of those they love out of fear and greed.

Perhaps it is less palatable today than it might have been in Cervantes' time to read about such ideal physical and spiritual specimens whose lives seem entirely structured according to fate, but we must not mistake their metaphorical meanings or else we will commit the same error as those secondary characters Cervantes criticizes. Besides, there is evidence to suggest that Cervantes did not see such a union between one's ideals and reality as an immediate possibility in this life but merely as a goal toward which we move in life. This is suggested by the poet's attempt to write the story of the traveling band in Book III; this is the poet whom Avallé-Arce has called the most characteristically Cervantine character in the novel. After the poet dresses Auristela in various costumes in his imagination to express different emotions, Cervantes portrays his thoughts:

¡Válame Dios, y con cuánta facilidad discurre el ingenio de un poeta y se arroja a romper por mil imposibles! ¡Sobre cuán flacos cimientos levanta grandes quimeras! Todo se lo halla hecho, todo fácil, todo llano, Allí se vio él en el mayor [trabajo] que en su vida se había visto, por venirle a la imaginación un grandísimo deseo de componer de todos ellos una comedia; pero no acertaba en qué nombre la pondría, si la llamaría comedia, o tragedia, o tragicomedia, porque si sabía el principio, ignoraba el medio y el fin, pues aun todavía iban corriendo las vidas de Periandro y de Auristela, cuyos fines habían de poner nombre a lo que dellos se representase. (284-285)

Thus, the poet also has his own "trabajos" not unlike those of his living subjects since he too must not be hasty or impatient to force a false ending to life. In a very real sense then, the richest lives, like the richest works of art, are patient with life's delicate balance between comedy and tragedy. Like Rutilio's experience in Norway, Cervantes represents life as perpetually in the "crepúsculo del día," at times threatening to appear as the advent of night and yet promising, even as it threatens, the hope of dawn. The poet's dilemma, I believe, helps us to see with what trepidation Cervantes dared to write the *Persiles*. We are of course not expected to take the marriage of Persiles and Sigismunda as literal but as a representation of the end of life's trials when conjectured by extrapolation, and perhaps Cervantes, so near his own death, felt the courage to make that conjecture, to "poner nombre" to life as he approached its conclusion.

Notes

¹ Ruth El Saffar accurately describes the resonance that this story and Manuel Sosa de Cotinho's have with Periandro's own relationship with Auristela. While the protagonists' story remains clouded, all around Periandro the vicissitudes of love are played out to their extremes only to help his own desire for Auristela to refine itself (136). Rutilio took the girl to Rome so they could fully enjoy each other "[nos gozásemos]," which of course contrasts and also potentially threatens our perception of Periandro's intentions in taking Auristela to Rome.

² See Forcione's analysis of literary illusions in the *Persiles* in his *Cervantes' Christian Romance*, particularly his chapter "Literature in the Quijote and the *Persiles*."

³ Forcione effectively demonstrates the tremendous literary imagination brought to bear in Periandro's relation of his own adventures in *Cervantes, Aristotle, and the Persiles*.

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