

Another Reading of  
*Don Quijote* Beyond  
 the Realist-Idealist  
 Dichotomy: Maria  
 Zambrano's "Poetic  
 Reason" and the Role  
 of Liberty

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That the moral of Don Quixote should be doubtful and that each man should be tempted to see in it the expression of his own convictions, is after all the greatest possible encomium of the book. For we may infer that the truth has been rendered in it, and that men may return to it always, as to Nature herself, to renew their theories or to forget them, and to refresh their fancy with the spectacle of a living world.

—George Santayana (1956, p. 119)

It is trite and old-fashioned to speak about truth and its potential existence in literature. George Santayana, however, puts his finger on an understanding of truth that is, much to our chagrin as “moderns” who have no time for such nonsense, quite evocative. Notice that he identifies “the truth” in *Don Quijote de la Mancha* precisely because the novel does not have a clear moral teaching and because each man, upon reading it, is “tempted to see in it the expression of his own convictions.” This ambiguous quality is what renders *Don Quijote* “true” in the sense that it encapsulates something undeniable about human beings and our existence on this Earth that allows us to “return” to the novel and always discover something new, refreshing—it is what renders the novel, as we say, timeless.

Santayana (1956, p. 118) goes further, writing the following:

There is nothing in the book that suggests a premeditated satire upon faith and enthusiasm in general. The author's evident purpose is to amuse, not to upbraid or to discourage. There is no bitterness in his pathos or despair in his disenchantment; partly because he retains a healthy fondness for his naughty world, and partly because his heart is profoundly and entirely Christian. [Cervantes] would have rejected with indignation an interpretation of his work that would see in it an attack on religion or even on chivalry.

The claim is quite challenging, for it implies that Cervantes intentionally avoided inserting any of his own views into this long and complex story. Santayana is not alone on this point, however. The British Hispanist E. C. Riley (1986, p. 134) similarly tells us that it is misguided to read *Don Quijote* as a “moral or philosophical” tract. This paper af-

firms both authors' claims. That said, it is understandable that readers would like to derive moral or philosophical meaning from such a captivating story.

After all, even if Cervantes avoided any form of explicit moralizing through his writing, it should still be possible for us to assume that the author had *something* in mind when he set out to write this work. To wit, our reading of *Don Quijote* cannot be alone without some guiding idea of what the author was *doing* by writing this novel. If this is the case, then we seem to find ourselves at a crossroads: either we engage in deep biographic and historical study of the author to gain some relative understanding of what he might have been doing through his novel, or we read it without any background knowledge of the personal and historical context in which it was written and take it at face value. The problem with the former is that it defeats the entire purpose of creativity and art. The problem with the latter is that it gives us free rein to interpret however it pleases us. There is, of course, a middle way.

The intention for this essay is threefold: the first is to engage in a discussion about the trouble of reading works of great literature like *Don Quijote* with the end of deriving some sense of political-philosophical affirmation from them; the second is to elaborate on the previous claim by introducing some examples of philosophical readings of *Don Quijote* by José Ortega y Gasset and Miguel de Unamuno, both of which embody the realism-idealism dichotomy that is often imposed on the novel; the third is to explore the theme of liberty in *Don Quijote*, aptly raised by Eric-Clifford Graf in his *Anatomy of Liberty in Don Quijote de la Mancha*, using the writings of María Zambrano to propose an alternative reading of the novel and the role of liberty within it. Zambrano's conception of liberty will suggest some additional caveats that might, respectfully, problematize some of the claims in Graf's reading of the famous Spanish novel. It should be clear from the outset, however, that this essay is not, in its primary intention, a criticism of Graf's scholarship or of his argument. His book is excellent and rigorous, though, as with any book, it leaves much room for debate. Instead, this essay sets out to expand some of the questions about Cervantes and about the concept of liberty in *Don Quijote* that run parallel to Graf's book. Above all, it is a defense of the novel as a work of literature, not a literary work of political-philosophical thought.

## I. THE ALLURE OF THE AUTHOR, THE AMBIGUITY OF THE KNIGHT

We should be wary of ascribing any objective moral message to a work of literature as complex and profound as *Don Quijote de la Mancha*. Yet, humans are contemplative creatures, and writers are exemplary figures of our creative faculties that seek, regardless of how hard we try to avoid it, to understand the world through some form of poetic philosophizing. The characters that spring forth from the author's mind portray distinct world outlooks through their thoughts, speeches, and actions, and putting these characters in *relation* with others within the world of a story is a feat that only the most imaginative writers can accomplish. How then, could we avoid the temptation to pierce the mind of Miguel de Cervantes, whose passionate chivalric knight will forever live in our collective literary imagination?

The mind of a literary genius beckons our attention. Surely, *Don Quijote* is a testament to Cervantes's own complexity that is itself worthy of study. It is telling enough, however, that it is not Cervantes who lives on in our minds, but his fictional character Don Quijote. Even then, this fictional character leads different lives. For some readers, Don Quijote endures as an example of a failure, a shortcoming of man. The would-be knight errant's story is an admonition for he that dares to dream too much without a grounded realization—a "realistic" understanding—of what simply can and cannot be achieved in a particular time and place. For others, Don Quijote represents our highest ideals, which, even if inadequate for this imperfect world of ours, transcend the limits of our worldly complacency with "reason." These two readings are not, moreover, mere characterizations or straw men interpretations of the novel; most readers tend to fall into one of these two camps. For example, two of Spain's most influential political and philosophical thinkers from the twentieth century, José Ortega y Gasset and Miguel de Unamuno, read *Don Quijote* in these differing ways. Ortega propounded the former, sobering interpretation, while Unamuno advanced the latter, inspirational alternative.

In his work *Our Lord Don Quijote*, Unamuno (1967, p. 4) famously claimed:

I consider myself more Quixotist than Cervantist, and that I attempt to free Don Quijote from Cervantes himself, permitting myself on occasion to go so far as to disagree with the manner in which Cervantes understood and dealt with his two heroes, especially with Sancho. Sancho imposed himself upon Cervantes, despite his creator. The fact is, I believe that characters of fiction possess a life of their own within the mind of the author who creates them, as well as a certain autonomy, and that they obey an intimate logic of which the author himself is not altogether conscious.

At the heart of this statement is a question of literary theory: can we isolate a character from the agent of its inception? In other words, is it possible to call oneself “Quixotist” and *not* “Cervantist” when Quijote would not exist without Cervantes, and when the wider context of Cervantes’s story is, arguably, set up to defeat Don Quijote’s idealism? Does Unamuno not run into the danger of abstracting too much from Cervantes’s creative paradigm? Unamuno (1967, *Ibid.*) would shake his head, for indeed he does believe “that we can understand Don Quijote and Sancho better than Cervantes, who created them (or, more correctly, extracted them from the spiritual innards of his country).”

Notice what Unamuno is telling us: Cervantes did not *create* his characters, he extracted them. That is to say, they are not his alone—they belong to everyone. To *extract*, moreover, implies prior existence: Unamuno believes Cervantes baptized two concepts which were before unnamed, meaning that his ownership over them is only partial. There is a wider context of ownership over these concepts that spans a national culture. Don Quijote and Sancho Panza belong especially to those who understand “the spiritual innards” of Spain, since the nation provides the context in which Cervantes wrote. It is a literary usufruct that is visible in the nineteenth-century Spanish readers of *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, namely those belonging to the Generation of ’98, who used the novel as a trope to analyze Spain’s cultural and political condition when they were turning the corner into a new century (more on this point below).

What is important to notice in these initial remarks about the legacy of *Don Quijote* is the influence of the novel and, more importantly, of its protagonist over the authority of the author. Cervantes is hardly at the center of the novel, nor does he want to be. He recognizes (Cervantes 2011, 1, Prologue, p. 3) the possibility of a similitude between himself the writer, with a “sterile and ill-cultivated talent,” and his “dry, shriveled-up, unpredictable child,” *Don Quijote*; but he also tells us that “tranquility, a pleasant place, the amenity of the countryside, the serenity of the heavens, the murmuring of the fountains, the stillness of the soul, make even the most sterile muses appear fertile and allow them to bear fruit that fills the world with wonder and content.”<sup>1</sup> Cervantes declares that he has managed, through the right conditions, to create something that is more than his own, that transcends his individual condition. He goes one step further: not only does he recognize he has created a character who will take on a life of his own, but he explicitly distances himself from the natural affection that a “father” would have towards his “ugly and clumsy child” by telling us, readers, to look upon Don Quijote not with the sympathy of a father, relative, or friend—to see “his defects as cleverness and charm”—but, rather, to look upon him as if we were encountering him for the first time, without any preconceptions about what Cervantes might want.

A point of clarification is needed: this is not a defense of a Foucauldian “death of the author,” but nor should we infer that all the characters in the novel, and the story itself, are orchestrated to serve the author’s moral or political intentions. We can briefly turn our attention back to the argument of the book that inspired this conversation on *Don Quijote* to demonstrate this point. Graf welcomes authorial intent into his research inquiry: underlying his book is an assertion about authorial intent that argues that we can surmise the moral teachings of *Don Quijote* from what we know about Miguel de Cervantes as a historical figure. For example, Graf (2021, p. 5) writes:

That Cervantes appreciated precursors like Plato, Giovanni Boccaccio, Niccolo Machiavelli, and Juan de Mariana suggests *Don Quijote* has something to do with symbolic caves, merchant class humor, advice to princes, and monetary policy. That Cervantes was later appreciated by María de Zayas, Thomas Hobbes, Thomas Jefferson, and Mark Twain suggests *Don Quijote* has something to do with feminism, materialism, constitutionalism, and criticism of the institution of slavery.

The first claim is plausible, the second problematic given Graf's previous emphasis on authorial intent. The interpretation of a work by another reader does not imply that the novel itself is *about* a particular theme, only that its message resonates with the reader's experience. Cervantes's influence on thinkers like Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Hume, Voltaire, Burke, and Mill, which Graf rightly points out, only implies that these thinkers—who happen to be predecessors or key thinkers of the “classical” liberal movement—found something of value in *Don Quijote*, as tends to happen with great literature, not that the respective philosophical traditions which these diverse thinkers represent were the same philosophical commitments for Cervantes, even less so that *Don Quijote* is about these things. The classical liberal push of *Don Quijote* goes a tad too far, especially in wanting to claim Cervantes as a “precursor” to major liberal thinkers like Locke, Smith, Mill, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Jefferson, Madison, and Twain.

This way of thinking—that the appreciation of a literary work, even its influence on a thinker, is tantamount to the work itself objectively possessing the meaning that a reader derives from it, or of the author sharing that belief with the reader who was keen enough to pick up on it—is a slippery slope for literature. It is even more difficult to accept if we are to conceive of literary writing as a creative enterprise, of the literary writer as a creator—that is, as an artist—and of art as something wholly distinct from politics in its creative *process*. The artist is not an expository thinker who is simply out to prove a point, for the act of writing is cathartic and therefore expressive of the writer's own questions and struggles to which he has not yet found an answer. If we accept this idea of writers, then their literary works become independent entities from the author's own thought once they are created. In this sense, Cervantes's enterprise in writing *Don Quijote* is not the same as that of Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Hume, Voltaire, Burke, and Mill, despite Graf's argument otherwise. This is not to say that Cervantes himself might not have shared the same views as these political thinkers, but that *Don Quijote*, the novel, is not about Cervantes; it is not even about Don Quijote the character as an isolated figure. As with all great literature, it is about us, the readers, and our relationship with the knight.

Now, the author is still indispensable in this relationship between the reader and the story (or between the reader and the treatise if we are engaging with a political thinker like Locke, for example), because of the sheer fact that the idea is generated within the mind of the author, be he a creative writer or a political writer, and it is *the author's* idea that resonates with a striking number of people dispersed across space and time. What contextualist historical study of an author helps us to appreciate is the author's genius; it allows us to understand, since we are so curious to know, *why*, perhaps, the author wrote. In so doing, we discover another layer of our intimately spiritual relationship as human beings of a common world, which we perceive through our universal connection with an author's work, that recognizes our shared conditions within the human experience: the things we feel or yearn for, such as love, sorrow, disillusion, hope, doubt, etc. For this reason, Graf is entirely correct to identify a central theme, if not *the* central theme, in *Don Quijote* that touches on that vital component of the human experience: liberty.

A question follows: *what kind of liberty?*

## II. TWO CONCEPTS OF LIBERTY IN *DON QUIJOTE*: THE REALIST AND IDEALIST

Even if the author's mind creates the world that becomes a story, and its characters evoke a part of the author's thoughts, this is no reason to assume that the characters and the author are one and the same. Furthermore, the themes that emerge in a story might not have been at the forefront of the author's mind when he set out to write. If we are to say that liberty is the central theme in *Don Quijote*, it is because

liberty is a broad term that encompasses myriad connotations. We can take a closer look at Ortega's and Unamuno's diverging readings of the novel. To be sure, their conceptions of liberty are shaped by the novel without any concern about Cervantes's own philosophical commitments. Still, they fall into the realist-idealist dichotomy that eventually tangles itself with misleading moral-philosophical, and consequently political, implications.

For example, Graf (2021, p. 1) sees an "overarching theory of liberty" encapsulated in *Don Quijote*—and by extension Cervantes's own thought—emblematic of the early modern period that reaches out of the literary imagination. Through his "game of perspectives," Cervantes is allegedly able to offer us a "realist bourgeois solution to the confusing labyrinth of tyranny, bondage and corruption" (Graf 2021, pp. 2–3). The novel's "realist and functional bourgeois options" are pitted against the "fading idealist fantasies of feudalism," where bourgeois realism stresses "common sense" and is "deeply related to the assertion of positive themes like freedom, harmony, and progress" (Graf 2021, p. 3). Graf is precise and categorical about the specific types of liberty that most interested Cervantes while writing *Don Quijote*. He arranges his book in five sections, which he describes as "Western civilization's most important societal virtues early in the twenty-first century," and which include religious tolerance, respect for women, abolition of slavery, resistance to tyranny, and economic freedom (Graf 2021, p. 5).<sup>2</sup> There is a tinge of anachronism here, but, more importantly, to call these five components the "anatomy of liberty" ignores the fact that these are secondary qualities about what, precisely, liberty is.

In the case of Ortega, Unamuno, and Zambrano (as will be explained in the next section), *Don Quijote* is read as the muse through which they understand their nation's significance within a wider reality that demonstrated a changing—that is, modernizing—world. For example, Ortega and Unamuno are considered influential figures in the Generation of '98 movement.<sup>3</sup> Their thoughts are primarily responding to the problems facing Spanish society at the time: to the chagrin of the nation's political leaders, the Spanish monarchy's restoration in 1874 did not result in continued Spanish cultural preeminence in the world, and the former empire's colonies dwindled over time until the Treaty of Paris of 1898 finally ended Spain's colonial rule. Without its colonies, the national wealth of Spain stagnated. The question of how a nation could be "great" without international prowess, demonstrated by the number of colonies it held, and the shift in the conception of "power" as something more than military strength and material wealth from the exploitation of colonies, was highly relevant at the time. Ortega and Unamuno were writing about philosophy when the social reality of their day was one of widespread public ignorance (i.e., the lack of public education) and poverty. Despite these practical concerns, their understanding of liberty, though tied to extant questions about national identity, were better elucidated by literature.

The historical Spanish treatment of the concept of liberty is different from the English conception we have been handed down in the classical liberal tradition. For this reason, it is problematic to argue that Cervantes, and—worse yet—*Don Quijote*, are emblematic of the bourgeois virtues that have come from this tradition as it pertains to political-economic principles. Not only does it assume that all European thought must converge at some point or another on principles that are distinctly rooted in a classical liberal tradition, but, more seriously, it implies there is only one understanding of liberty which, again, is quite English in character. The Spanish conception of liberty, though certainly not homogenous, is less derived from political principles than it is from literary and philosophical ideals. In other words, even the most "realist" of Spanish philosophers are Romantics to an extent. It goes without saying that these previous statements are not intended as national characterizations of a concept that transcends nationality and certainly is not bound by it. Rather, they borrow from Ortega's "circumstantial" philosophical system to raise the importance of cultural context and individual "circumstance" to understand how something as broad as liberty is diversely engaged with as an idea by people of different cultural-national backgrounds.

Consider how Ortega (1963, p. 24) uses *Don Quijote*. Ortega's pithy description of his philosophy in his *Meditations on Don Quijote* (1914) is more complicated than it initially seems and is derived in large part from his reading of *Don Quijote*: "Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia" (I am myself and my circumstances). It might seem a relativistic claim, yet it could not be more starkly opposed to relativism because it is also a



call for metaphysical inquiry aimed at using the inevitable human fact of circumstance to derive broader universal meaning. In his *Meditations*, Ortega does not attempt to explain the novel, much less Cervantes's thought. Instead, Ortega's book is a work of philosophy built on an interpretation of the novel, wherein the structure of life is revealed to Ortega under the species of heroism and tragedy. As Spanish philosopher Julián Marías (1963, p. 25) notes about Ortega's thought in the *Meditations* as it relates to *Don Quijote*:

Ortega takes care to warn us that we are all heroes in some measure, that heroism is not ascribed to certain specific contents of life, that it lies dormant everywhere as a possibility, that the will is the tragic theme. In other words, that heroism and tragedy belong essentially to man, as forms of being in which life rids itself of its merely biological condition and exhibits its true nature ... Don Quijote, who is real, who belongs entirely to reality, inserts in this reality his indomitable will, which is a will for adventure ... In Don Quijote human life is shown free from the elements which normally conceal it; that is the *methodical* justification of the *Meditations*, interpreted as a first approximation to a *metaphysical theory of human life*.

These sentiments sound more appropriate as a description of Unamuno's *Tragic Sense of Life* (1912), in which Unamuno uses Don Quijote's character as a symbol to reject rational explanation and raise spiritual (and religious) mystery as the guiding framework to understand human life and human suffering, the perpetual result of our fundamental imperfection. As Unamuno (1921, p. 33) writes, "[r]eason ... is a social product" and the idea of the individual "an abstraction." We live between two instincts, he adds, the instinct of "personal preservation" but also the instinct of "perpetuation," in which the former is individualist and the latter social: "the instinctive preservation, hunger, is the foundation of the human individual; the instinct of perpetuation, love, in its most rudimentary and physiological form, is the foundation of human society" (Unamuno 1921, p. 34). Yet Unamuno's emphasis on love as another equally vital facet of man's "instinct" is connected to Ortega's own philosophy, for both demonstrate an interest in metaphysical inquiry, albeit in different forms. Ortega (1963, pp. 22-23) believes that philosophy is "the general science of love" and that we see in love "an extension of the individuality which absorbs other things into it, which unites them to us." Even if individuality is a fact of life, Ortega argues that the objects of our love demonstrate the need for the broadening and eventual uniting of the individual and the concept of our love, that is, the object of our perception. Marías (1963, p. 25) again explains:

The circumstantial and vital—biographical—character of reality makes evident that concrete knowledge is interpretation, discovery of a *logos* or meaning of things, based on a vital perspective; and this leads on to a new theory of the *concept* ... This notion of the concept as bound to perception, of an active vision, brings Ortega to the now famous interpretation of truth as discovery, unveiling, evidence, *aletheia*, and to something which is much more profound ... the possibility... of a *vital reason*.

For Ortega, philosophy brings forth *aletheia*. Unamuno was more skeptical about this end-result in philosophical inquiry. Instead, Unamuno looked to religious faith as the preferable alternative.<sup>4</sup> For Unamuno, *Don Quijote* is a triumph of the "Spanish" worldview as he understood it. What makes Don Quijote great is his pursuit of immortality, and his quest to achieve his end requires resolute belief in his ability to achieve it. Unamuno saw this quality as admirable and one which a nation should pursue. However, if Unamuno "canonized" Quijote's idealism (Riley 1986, p. 134), there is a problem of either possibly misreading the novel or manipulating it. Ortega parts with Unamuno here and refutes Unamuno's argument in his *Meditations*. In Ortega's reading of the novel, Don Quijote is not a solitary knight: his idealistic ambitions have effects outside himself, introducing the importance of the social element, and Don Quijote is forced to confront the exterior (real) world outside his mind through his disillusion and, more specifically, his conversations with his trusted squire, Sancho Panza. Sancho Panza embodies the rational supplement to Don Quijote's ideal-

ism since the “pattern” of the novel often entails Don Quijote misinterpreting a “stimulus” through his idealistic mindset, and Sancho warning Don Quijote through his realistic outlook (Watt 1996, p. 53).

This disagreement matters since it demonstrates two different interpretations of the story that resulted in different visions for what Spain should do to reclaim itself within its own history and within Europe. One asserts idealism, and the other checks it with realism. Still, both thinkers are starting from a philosophical-literary analysis insofar as they place their trust, spiritual or intellectual, in the philosophical underpinnings of *Don Quijote*'s events and the wider significance of the novel to their immediate political implications for Spain at the time. Here, we have two working conceptions of liberty. Ortega's is one where reason elucidates liberty and restrains it from the wishful thinking that results in its idealistic tendencies. Unamuno's is one that embraces the idealism of liberty: his is an affirmation of the positive form of liberty that propels man to act in the world and seek self-fulfillment. Of course, these two conceptions of liberty are not incompatible, nor are they unique to the thought of Ortega and Unamuno. We have heard iterations of these versions of liberty elsewhere, across historical time and geographical space. Yet these two concepts of liberty in Ortega and Unamuno were inspired by reading *Don Quijote*. There is a third version.

### III. MARÍA ZAMBRANO'S CONCEPT OF LIBERTY IN HER “POETIC REASON”

María Zambrano takes a middle approach between Ortega and Unamuno. Though a younger contemporary of both thinkers, her name will be more obscure to readers, even those familiar with Spanish philosophy. She was the first female recipient of the Cervantes Prize, which she won in 1988. Her praise of reason and rationalism as a pillar of Western civilization echoes Ortega. However, Zambrano recognizes that human beings are imaginative, emotional, and spiritual people. It is a part of human nature to seek out and generate what can be best described in English as “wonder” or “enchantment.” The strength of medieval literature is that it often exalted this sense of wonder and enchantment through its chivalric stories. In this sense, the world offered by fantasy is hardly idealistic. Rather, it taps into a poetic dimension that exists in every person. Emotions are real, she admits. It is not only impossible, but dangerous, to repress this tendency, for it will spring forth in other forms of idealism outside of literature and art. Zambrano's concept of “razón poética” (poetic reason) displays the combination of poetic imagination with reason, and together they form the faculty that unifies the world into an intelligible whole.

This focus on “poetic” reason shifts the methodological process of reason from philosophy to literature, from introspective to creative. For Zambrano, the worldview of the Spanish people is “embedded in literature,” to borrow the apt wording of another scholar (Johnson 1996, p. 215). Poetic reason adds to our faculty of philosophical reason the importance of emotions as they relate to wonder and enchantment and identifies the source for exploring and understanding those emotions—literature. Wonder is the first step that initiates our desire to know about the world, while reason builds from wonder and starts to analyze it from our various sources of understanding. We can see why Zambrano was a close reader of *Don Quijote*, for the novel also gets at the heart of this reality about the human condition: the relationship between reason and wonder. This relationship can be antagonistic at times, but the two concepts are not always in tension. While the interpretations of thinkers like Ortega and Unamuno are inclined to see Don Quijote and Sancho Panza as embodiments of two different forms of people, thereby hinting that we are supposed to side with one or the other, there is room for the possibility that the two characters are embodiments of two parts of every individual. The broader plot of the novel, moreover, is also read as either a defense of idealism or a demonstration of its dangerous consequences; Zambrano reads the novel differently.

In her essay “La Reforma del Entendimiento Español” (The Reform of Spanish Understanding), Zambrano (1986, p. 95) remarks on *Don Quijote*'s commentary on liberty as it pertains to the Spanish condition of the early twentieth century. She begins by explaining that Cervantes, through his novel, presents readers with “the failure of the Spaniard, who implacably manifests to us that wonder of coherent will; clear, perfect, that has been left unemployed and does nothing but crash against the wall of the new age.” Pure will, she adds, is detached from a real object and thus invents itself. Zambrano is echoing Kant, but

she argues that there is nothing original in Kant that we could not already perceive in our *hidalgo* from La Mancha.

It is important to notice what Zambrano is saying by this statement: she is arguing that Kant articulated something in the eighteenth century that Cervantes depicted in the seventeenth century through *Don Quijote*. Her purpose is not to argue that Cervantes “beat” Kant to the point. As the Book of Ecclesiastes reminds us, after all, there is nothing new under the sun, hence Santayana’s statement in our epigraph, wherein he argues that the mark of truth is indicated by our ability to return to a work of art that renews and refreshes our understanding of the world. Invention, much like truth, is cyclical: we come back to it from time to time. Instead, what Zambrano means by this statement is that Cervantes thinks as a Spaniard, and, by extension, speaks to the Spanish people through literature, that which best resonates with the Spanish cultural-epistemic framework. She writes, for example, that Cervantes *could* have presented his thoughts through a philosophic system like Kant’s, but this type of presentation would not have resonated with Spanish society. She adds, more importantly, that Cervantes had much more to say in his novel than to present an exposition of the pure will.

“The end of [Cervantes’s] work was another: failure;” that is, the “resigned” and “realistic” but also “hopeful” acceptance of failure (Zambrano 1986, p. 95). Zambrano (1986, p. 95) adds an essential sentence after this statement that begins to open our discussion to the “political” implications, though very limited in scope, of Zambrano’s concept of liberty in her reading of *Don Quijote*: “Neither philosophy nor the state are based on a conception of human failure such as the one presented in this novel. That is why [*Don Quijote*] needed to be for the Spaniards what philosophy was for Europe.” Per Zambrano’s reading of *Don Quijote*, the search for liberty necessitates the existence of failure. In her acceptance speech for the Cervantes Prize, Zambrano describes her conception of liberty through an anecdote of her years spent teaching in Mexico while exiled during the Spanish Civil War. She focused her lessons on the birth of the “idea of liberty” in Ancient Greece.<sup>5</sup> Teaching the idea of liberty, Zambrano reminisces, “was a natural way of remembering Spain and its already melancholic, resigned, and hopeful failure” because it had “gone beyond its time,” presumably in attempting to establish and maintain a Republican government when there still remained a substantive constituency of conservative, pro-monarchical “nationalists” in Spain. Everything that gets ahead of itself, she noted, is condemned to failure by history’s “inexorable rhythm.” Zambrano, however, sided with the Republicans against the Nationalists, hence her decision to go into exile when the Republicans were defeated in 1939.

Zambrano’s treatment of liberty is necessarily combined with failure. As she writes (1986, pp. 96-97), “in failure appears the greatest measure of man.” What’s more, failure provides the “guarantee of a more complete rebirth.” In Zambrano’s reading of *Don Quijote*, it is telling that Cervantes makes Don Quijote set out on his journey at dawn, since dawn represents a complex interplay between “the certainty of time and light” and the “uncertainty of what time and light will bring.” After all, she writes, the dawn we see in nature is an analogy for man’s own nature, wherein he seeks out to find and actualize “his indecisive, half-illusory freedom.” Don Quijote represents, in an “exemplary” manner, “the dream of liberty,” the achievement of which is both certain and uncertain. Such a view of liberty provides a picture that combines both idealism and realism, though not in the way we might initially conceive. There is a tension between these two ways of understanding the world, sure enough, but this tension posits a dualistic conception of liberty as consisting of failure and hope. The following statement must also be stated in her own words:

The very clear mystery of the coexistence between Don Quijote and Sancho is something that has not yet been revealed in all its significance, because it is a prophecy without petulance, of a type of human relationship that has not yet been realized. The novel supposes a much greater human wealth than philosophy, because it supposes that something is there, that something persists in failure; the novelist does not build or add anything to his characters; he does not reform life, while the philosopher reforms it, creating over a spontaneous life a life according to thought; a created, systematized life. The novel accepts man as he is in his failure, while philosophy advances alone...



The fact that there are “idealists” for whom Don Quijote resonates and “realists” who see in Sancho Panza the necessary balance to idealism (such as Ortega’s reading of the novel) does not home in on the importance of their relationship beyond serving as intellectual complements. After all, these characters do not intellectualize their interaction to broader philosophical principles. Both Ortega and Unamuno derive their interpretations of *Don Quijote* based on a philosophical analysis of the novel and its characters, resulting, as philosophy tends to do, in contrasting readings that try to make sense of the course of events in the novel as hinting at some form of moral teaching. Zambrano rejects this method, since it removes the sheer simplicity of Cervantes trying to depict the world as it is: dually ideal and real, hopeful and disappointing.

From this statement we can glean some final thoughts on Zambrano’s conception of liberty. In her work, *Filosofía y Poesía*, (*Philosophy and Poetry*), Zambrano critiques philosophy’s tendency towards unity. Philosophy and poetry are different, she writes, because of the type of unity that they aim to achieve. She asks (1993, p. 19): “Does the poet not care about unity? Is he carelessly (“vagabundamente”) attached—immorally so—to apparent multiplicity, out of unwillingness (“desgana”) and laziness, for lack of ascetic impetus to follow the goal of that lover of philosophy: unity?” Not so, she answers. What poets (i.e., artists) see as unity and depict in their works is the “unity of creation” that accepts heterogeneity as a fact of life, and then they depict it. This unity uses “the dispersed and fleeting” elements of our varied experiences to create “something whole, eternal” (Zambrano 1993, p. 21). The artist creates unity through art with words, image, or music, but he does not “exert violence whatsoever over heterogenous appearances,” yet still achieves unity (Zambrano 1993, p. 22).

There is a catch. For the poet, the unity achieved in his art is “always incomplete;” the poet knows this, and “therein lies his humility:” he is content with his “fragile unity” (Zambrano 1993, p. 22). This understanding of unity mirrors Zambrano’s conception of liberty as something rooted in failure because of the diversity of thought and aspiration, which produces something timeless through its reminder of our collective, contradictory march towards liberty as being met with repeated failure. As she notes in the above excerpt, Cervantes’ novel “supposes” something greater than philosophy: “that something persists in failure,” which is eventual wisdom from recognizing the inescapability about the unknown elements of our pursuit of liberty. Of course, like Don Quijote, men are disposed to get ahead of themselves, which results in failure. Riley’s and Santayana’s readings of the conclusion of *Don Quijote* emphasize the knight’s balance of mind by the end of his journey as a result of his ability to reflect on his mistakes.

Zambrano’s meditation is a parallel for the failure of the Spanish Republicans. Many saw reason as the most important element of political life—as a number of readers of *Don Quijote* would like to believe—but were met with failure. As Zambrano (1986, p. 99) writes, “reason, in its march, does not walk alone, but in connection with other human realities.” She adds, in reference to the Spanish Civil War, “Our [the Republican’s] failure to carry out a reform, the reform of thought and of the State that we needed, made our clearest understanding retreat to the novel and our best model of man, to remain a fictional entity” (Zambrano 1986, p. 99). Zambrano is lamenting that Republicans did not realize that with a “modern” political-philosophical outlook there needed to be a widespread sharing of this mentality. It did not exist, and so it rendered their project as fictional as *Don Quijote*.

#### IV. THE LIBERTY OF FRAGILE UNITY IN *DON QUIJOTE*

By way of conclusion, we must tie this all back to Cervantes. Cervantes’s use of the chivalric trope in *Don Quijote* is a representation of “the most essential values in both the classical and the Christian heritage of Western civilization” (Watt 1996, p. 53). Even if these values were changing at the outset of the seventeenth century, however, we must not assume that Cervantes was seeking to subvert them. Cervantes’s novel and creative use of this common literary genre can also be a form of praise—a tipping of the hat, so to speak—for a literary convention that was on its way out. This connection between imitation and creativity is not surprising. As Allan Bloom (2010, p. 3) notes in his study of *Don Quijote*, it was common in the Renaissance to “invent” through imitation:

In the Renaissance invention was many times perceived as synonymous with imitation. The link between *inventio* and *ingenio* is put forth by the sixteenth-century prose writer Juan de Valdés: “‘invention’ and ‘disposition’ (disposición, ordenación) are the two principal parts of rhetoric; the former corresponds to the ingenio, the latter to the juicio.” Robert Edwards explains, “The purpose of invention, as the etymology (*invenire*) suggests, is discovery, and one rhetorical issue that bears directly on poetry is whether such discovery entails original creation or the employment of existing commonplaces.

Bloom agrees that by juxtaposing imitation and invention, Cervantes is playing a game of meaning that likely results in his rejection of imitation, preferring invention. His protagonist, however, embodies the older outlook—imitation—and, by creating a character who displays all the qualities of this old outlook, Cervantes is, quite literally, placing (or rather, displacing) a convention outside of its time. In this reading, Don Quijote is read as a representative of the “old” world, and Sancho Panza of the “new” and modern world (Da Silva 2004, p. 353).

This reading, though also compelling, takes away the agency that Cervantes wants us to give to his errant knight, who belongs to us all. Furthermore, it attributes to Cervantes a level of perspicacity that we constantly attribute to thinkers in the past as a way to explain to ourselves why we are where we are today. Take, for example, Thucydides, whose *History of the Peloponnesian War* supposedly marks a break from the Homeric tradition of narrating history in verse and whose accounts and reasons for the events of history also imply a methodological disagreement with historians like Herodotus, for whom the gods could still play a role in the development of human events. Fast forwarding a couple of centuries, we say that Machiavelli was the first “modern” political philosopher, who infamously divorced politics from ethics; some scholars even argue that Shakespeare was himself interested in marking the influence that Machiavellianism had on political society such that his *Henry IV* trilogy is meant to display this shift in the historical development of English politics during the Wars of the Roses (Manheim 1973; Grady 2000). So too, we say, does Cervantes break with the medieval worldview in *Don Quijote*, granting it its final swansong before ringing in a new age—the Renaissance. Cervantes may plausibly have been this keen, but a fair level of skepticism and intellectual humility from our modern standpoint would ask whether we are not simply telling ourselves a story we would like to believe about ourselves by reading this ideal into our inquiry of the past.

Don Quijote serving as an embodiment of an old way of life does not imply that the novel itself is solely about demonstrating how idealistic or antiquated he is. More central is the issue of actualizing one’s ideals in a constantly disappointing world. As this essay has tried to demonstrate, the reading of *Don Quijote* that Zambrano espouses is one of hope about the nature of liberty as an ideal that propels history forward, but also one of wholehearted admittance, from her personal experience, that liberty is bound to be met with failure. Moreover, liberty cannot be leveled by reason alone, because it ignores that poetic tendency in all of us that seeks some form of higher actualization. We can seek to achieve this actualization through philosophical unity, but it will leave us with a false picture of the world; or, we can seek to gradually achieve liberty—however we may define it—by reading the works of literature that showcase to us the reality of the world, which is the reality that Cervantes encapsulated in his novel. This is the “fragile unity” that Cervantes achieves in an unstable world—his and ours alike—that renders *Don Quijote* a source of “truth” as Santayana expressed it. It is the reason why “world” literature—where *Don Quijote de la Mancha* incontrovertibly holds a high place—can have its home in the literary imagination of its culture or nation (often both), as well as in the broader imagination of our creative humanity.

## NOTES

- 1 References to *Don Quijote* are by part, chapter, and page number.
- 2 The moments in the novel where Catholicism is derided supposedly demonstrates Cervantes' disdain "for religious formality and metaphysical belief" (Graf, 2021, p. 13). This statement is dubious (cf. Riley and Santayana). Graff associates religious tolerance with quasi-Protestant, Erasmian (i.e., reformist) conceptions on the topic. While I do not wish to comment in this essay on the religious elements in *Don Quijote*, there are certainly scholars who see a positive connection between Cervantes' emphasis on individual liberty and also read the novel through a spiritual lens inextricably connected to Catholic theology (cf. Sullivan 1996). While Graf makes Cervantes out to be more Erasmian in his theological influence than Jesuit, this question is certainly open to debate: there are also works that read *Don Quijote's* character as type of saintly figure whose actions represent elements of Catholic theology rooted in his Jesuit educational upbringing (see McGrath 2020).
- 3 Some scholars consider de Unamuno as a "precursor" to the Generation of '98, not a member. I have no strong stance on this particular debate, but consider his thought influential for the movement, nonetheless.
- 4 Graf also mentions the Generation of 1898, but he argues that Unamuno saw in *Don Quijote* a possible "grounding, rationalizing effect on what was still a mystical and metaphysical culture at the turn of the twentieth century" (Graf 2021, p. 8). This statement is not quite correct.
- 5 Quotes from Zambrano's Cervantes Prize speech are translated by the author of this article. The original Spanish text can be found here: <https://cope-cdnmed.agilecontent.com/resources/pdf/1/0/1542312863201.pdf>

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