

“God is dreaming you”: Narrative as *Imitatio Dei* in Miguel de Unamuno

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The starting point of my essay is a paradoxical claim that the Spanish philosopher, poet and novelist Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936) makes—in his essay “Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho” (1905)—that Don Quixote, Cervantes’ character, is more real and authentic than Miguel de Cervantes himself. Then, after discussing this claim and analyzing the implications of an ingenious literary device that Unamuno employed in his fiction “Niebla” (1914), I will sketch some of the possible philosophical consequences that Unamuno’s literary concepts might have on understanding the ultimate identity of the self, and of the nature of human condition in general. The paper is in three parts: 1) the first part is dedicated to discussing the above mentioned paradoxical claim in “Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho”; 2) the second part deals mainly with Chapter XXXI of Unamuno’s “Niebla”; and 3) in the final part I will deal with Unamuno’s insight that the relationship between the self and God is, properly speaking, of the same nature as the relationship between a literary author and the fictional beings he creates. In addition, I will be trying to place Unamuno’s insight within a broader context of history of ideas, and to point to some of its far-reaching philosophical implications.

1.

“In strict truth, it cannot be said that Don Quixote is the child of Cervantes.” (Unamuno 1967: III, 455) This is one of the central ideas occurring, in various forms and under different guises, throughout Miguel de Unamuno’s *Life of Don Quixote and Sancho*. In Unamuno’s view, such a character as Don Quixote is too complex, profound, and authentic a creature to be simply the product of one’s imagination. The less so of Cervantes’ imagination. More often than not Unamuno is very critical about Cervantes’ approach to his own characters. Unamuno admonishes Cervantes for having been too-often driven, in his dealing with his characters, by bias, prejudice and envy, and for having misunderstood the real significance of the characters of the book he wrote: “I consider myself more Quixotist than Cervantist, and . . . I attempt to free Don Quixote 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.” (*Ibid.*, 4)

At it were, Cervantes as a person falls short of the high expectations caused in us by Cervantes as an author, or at least by the human complexity and authenticity of his narrative's characters. On occasion, Unamuno even goes so far as to use such a strong language as that revealed by his comments on Cervantes' account of the "affair of the lions": "Ah, damnable Cide Hamete Benengeli, or whoever it was that wrote up this feat, how vilely and pettily you understood it!" (*Ibid.*, 187) In general, throughout his book Unamuno begs us repeatedly that we should not mistake him for one of those literary scholars or historians of literature who, in their narrow-mindedness, consider Cervantes' main characters simply in terms of "creatures of fiction." He constantly reassures us of his commitment to undertaking a completely different approach to *Don Quixote*: "I do not want to be confused with the pernicious and pestilential sect of vain men, inflated with hollow historical scholarship, who dare to maintain that there never were such men as Don Quixote and Sancho in the world." (*Ibid.*, 189)

Deeply marked by the "injustice" having been done to Cervantes' characters over the centuries by generations of literary scholars and historians, Unamuno decides to embark on the difficult task of revealing the *real—ultimate* and *absolute*—meaning of the writing *Don Quixote*. A difficult task indeed—if we bear in mind that, for Unamuno, even Cervantes himself grossly misunderstood his characters. Significantly, the complete first edition title of Unamuno's book is: *The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho According to Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, Explained and Commented upon by Miguel de Unamuno* (*Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho, según Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, explicada y comentada por Miguel de Unamuno*). Upon analyzing in great detail Don Quixote's way of living, his temper and character, his deeds, thoughts, current behaviour, his opinions and arguments, his "intellectual background" and his entire *Weltanschauung*, Unamuno concludes that there are good reasons to believe that Don Quixote was "a reasonable madman and no creature of fiction, as the worldly believe. He was one of those men who have eaten, drunk, slept, and died." (*Ibid.*, 56) Which amounts to saying that, for Unamuno, Don Quixote has acquired such a degree of solid reality and unmistakable "concreteness" that he may well be considered *un hombre de carne y hueso* ("a man of flesh and blood"), the supreme standard by which Miguel de Unamuno assessed human authenticity.

Interestingly, in establishing whether or not somebody exists authentically, as a "man of flesh and blood," Unamuno makes use of a pragmatist criterion: *operari sequitur esse* ("action follows being"), a principle accord-

ing to which something, or somebody, can be said to exist inasmuch as it produces visible and enduring effects on the surrounding world and/or on the minds of his neighbours, whether in the present or in the future: “only what acts exists and that existing is acting; if Don Quixote acts in those who know him, and produces life works, then Don Quixote is much more historic and real than all those men, shadows with names, who wonder through . . . chronicles . . .” (*Ibid.*, 131) As such, people who apparently lived some time ago, even those whose names we can still find mentioned in historical documents and archives, did not *really* exist if they fail to affect, in some serious way, our lives, destinies and ways of thinking. They are merely “shadows with names,” with no reality or meaning whatsoever as they have not added anything to our lives and do not mean anything *for us*. Oblivion is our way of punishing them. On the other hand, there are those past figures who are still vigorously shaping and nourishing our lives, those who—in some way or other—are still influencing our ideas and theories, our ideals and ways of living. In this process they are, according to Unamuno, conferred upon *true existence*. And remembrance is our way of rewarding them. Finally, after having drawn this principle to its ultimate conclusion, Unamuno has to recognize openly that: “In eternity, legend and fictions are truer than history.” (*Ibid.*, 132)

As a result, convinced that Don Quixote, through all his doings and sayings, reveals a human complexity that Miguel de Cervantes could not have been able to grasp—the less so to invent—Unamuno proceeds to show how we have to separate the *author* from his *character*. Technically, as it is well-known, Cervantes used in his novel the old rhetorical trick of attributing the writing of the book to someone else, namely to one Cide Hamete Benengeli, who supposedly first-hand reported Don Quijote’s feasts, Cervantes being only the person who happened to “discover” or “come across” the old manuscript. All what Cervantes subsequently did was “editorial work,” as it were. And it is precisely on this insincere “confession” which Cervantes made about the writing of *Don Quixote* that Unamuno relies his devastating attacks on Cervantes. He does so in a highly ironical way, and—as we will see—with unexpected results:

There is no doubt that in *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha* Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra displays a genius far above what we might have expected of him in view of his other works . . . So that we may well believe that the Arab historian Cide Hamete Benengeli

is not purely a literary device, but rather encompasses a profound truth, which is that the history was dictated to Cervantes by another man . . . the account was a real and true one, and . . . Don Quixote himself, disguised as Cide Hamete Benengeli, dictated the narrative to Cervantes. (*Ibid.*, 322)

As such, not only does Cervantes' role in the genesis of the novel get drastically minimized, but—what is more important—the very substance and structure of *Don Quixote* excludes him: properly speaking, there is no place for him in the production and structure of the book as one of its characters simply dictated the story to its fictitious, imagined author. As it happens, some “transfer of reality” between the author and his character takes place, with the paradoxical result that eventually the imagined character comes to appear as being more real and more authentic than the author who imagined him:

though we oftentimes consider a writer to be a real, true, and historic person because we see him in flesh, and regard the characters he invents in his fictions as purely imaginary, the truth is exactly the reverse. The characters are real, it is they who are the authentic beings, and they make use of the person who seems to be of flesh and blood in order to assume form and being in the eyes of men. (*Ibid.*, 323)

As a consequence, it could be said (and Unamuno does it repeatedly) that, in the end, it is Don Quixote who, properly speaking, invented Cervantes. He is the creator of Cervantes just as Hamlet is, to quote another of Unamuno's characters in *Niebla*, “one of the protagonists who invented Shakespeare” (*uno de los que inventaron a Shakespeare*) (Unamuno 1976: VI, 215).

Now, if one is to look at this process of de-realizing reality from a different, more commonsensical angle, it becomes obvious that all this demonstration should be considered, as it were, with a grain of salt—more precisely, as a brilliant demonstration *per reductionem ad absurdum*. The fundamental supposition on which such a contention is based is, I suppose, the notion that, basically, the narrative—along with its principles, rules, standards, accomplishments, etc.—may well be seen as a means through which *humanity* could be somehow defined or, in any case, better understood. As in a mirror, within a narrative we can find encapsulated *the very conditions of possibility of humanity*, our own definition at its most synthetic, comprehensive, and

authentic. Which is to say: there is a subtle dialectic between *imagining* a self (that is, conceiving of it in purely theoretical or speculative terms) and *translating* it into precise existential situations. To put it another way, the *situational logic* revealed by a well-constructed and carefully woven literary plot has possibly something important to say about our ultimate concepts of *reality* of the self, betraying our projections of what the self is like. A well-constructed literary character cannot act arbitrarily (precisely because he is well-constructed): on the contrary, he will have to act coherently, and—because of that—all his moves, all his doings within the narrative—in some unmistakable way—will be indicative of *the ultimate limits of the concept of humanity*. In order to be convincing, the literary characters must be already *exemplary*; they cannot afford the luxury of being “simply” humans, they must be humans at their very best. And given precisely the rules of this type of determinacy, it can be said that sometimes “fictional characters supersede the reality of their creators” (Jurkevich 1991: 33).

In a sense, then, since the author has to strictly follow the rules of the narrative construction in creating his characters—otherwise he will not produce plausible creatures—he can be said to be *subordinate* to or dependent on them. Caught up as he is in the specific world of his characters, a world dominated by specific rules and principles, the author has no choice but to be their faithful “chronicler.” Ironically, this humble situation in which the author finds himself is an immediate, if paradoxical, consequence of his greatness as an author. The more obedient he is in following the inner logic of the worlds (people) he creates, the better he is as an author of fiction. As a matter of fact, this is exactly what Unamuno has to admit: “after their initial conception, characters have a way of imposing themselves on their author; they become autonomous in the sense that their author cannot really control them.” (Basdekis 1974: 54)¹ As a consequence, we may well come to say that certain characters are more real than such or such people, possibly more real and more spectacular than their own author: this happens precisely because the literary character acts more coherently—in terms of plausibility, reasonableness, situational logic, etc.—than a “real” human being would do in a similar situation.² Needless to say, according to such a view, the narrative comes to be much more than (if not something different from) merely a “piece of literature.” Far from being simply some one-sided mirror of the “real life,” a narrative comes now to play the role of a *criterion* for the authenticity and meaningfulness of life. In a way, literature ceases to simply “reflect” life, but it *validates*, or even *creates*, life.

2.

As one commentator once said, “*Mist* [*Niebla*] is the logical extension, the translation into fiction of all the theoretical pronouncements in *The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho*.” (Basdekis 1974: 52). In this fiction writing we can find, as it were, at work, embodied in concrete literary situations and plots, some of the theoretical insights Unamuno developed in the essay *The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho*.

Niebla is much more complex a story than I can sketch here, but—for the purposes of the present essay—let me just extract and discuss at some length one insulated chapter, namely Chapter XXXI. In this chapter it happens that a character of the book, one Augusto Pérez, before proceeding to commit suicide, decides to do the most unexpected thing that ever crossed a literary character’s mind in the entire history of modern narrative: namely, to get out of the novel and pay a farewell visit to his very creator, to Miguel de Unamuno himself. This is, as Carlos Blancos Aguinaga puts it, an “extraordinary—and justly famous—chapter” where, “the conventions of Fiction, and therefore of existence, are broken,” a chapter of a “shocking originality” (Blancos Aguinaga 1964: 194), which will have a decisive influence upon the future of the narrative in the twentieth century. The unusual encounter takes place in Unamuno’s office, at the *Universidad de Salamanca*, where then he served as professor of classics, president of the university, and Spanish national prophet (something like what Count Tolstoy had come to be in Russia a few decades earlier):

At that time, Augusto had read an essay of mine, in which I had made a passing reference to suicide and this . . . made such an impression on him, that he did not want to leave this world without making my acquaintance and conversing with me for a while. And so he came to Salamanca, where I have been living for over twenty years, to call on me. (Unamuno 1976: VI, 216-17)

And there, in Unamuno’s university office, we become witnesses to this remarkable literary *tour de force*: namely, a lively and sophisticated conversation between a literary character and the very author of the book within which he plays the role of a character. They talked about writing novels and imagining creatures, about the ultimate nature of the imagined creatures and what precise type of existence they could enjoy. They talked about letting

these creatures die or keeping them alive. It is in this way that, among other things, Augusto Pérez learns from Miguel de Unamuno the unbearable truth that his ultimate ontological make-up is of such a nature that he cannot even . . . commit suicide: “the truth . . . is this: you cannot kill yourself because you are not alive, and because you are not alive, neither are you dead, because you do not exist . . . You are not . . . anything more than a figment of my imagination and of my readers’ imagination . . .” (*Ibid.*, 218-19)

Subsequently, in an attempt at comforting him, Unamuno tries to teach his character some of the things we already discussed above, namely that “[a] novelist or playwright just can’t do anything he fancies with a character he creates. Nor can a creature out of a novel do anything a reader might expect of him, in accordance with the basic precepts of art . . .” (*Ibid.*, 221) As far as Augusto’s future is concerned, there is nothing that his creator could do for him as the strict rules of the narrative construction have their part to play in this affair: “It’s already written. It’s in the books. Your fate is sealed and you cannot live any longer. Anyway, I don’t know what else is there for you to do. For instance, God, when He no longer knows what to do with us, kills us.” (*Ibid.*, 226) Born miraculously out of one’s imagination, the character is inevitably marked by the precariousness, ambiguity and non-substantiality characterizing the things imaginary: “the fictional being . . . inasmuch as he is a dream or narrative, is real. He is a temporal life or existence of the same mode of being as the human one, but, inasmuch as he is the result of a *fingeré*, an author’s dream, he has no substance . . . and falls into the void, into nothingness.” (Marías 1966: 93)

Then, another significant thing—one skillfully alluded to in the previous Unamunian passage quoted—occurs in their conversations: namely, the notion that, in a way very similar to that in which a character has its fate “sealed,” the author himself depends, in his turn, on someone else: on his divine Author, or—more precisely—on God’s “dreaming” him. The author is not a self-sufficient master, independent and free to do anything he wants, but he is “written” by someone else. Properly speaking, he is nothing but a character in another story. Augusto Pérez:

You want me to die as a fictional being? I am to die as a creature of fiction? Very well, my lord creator, Don Miguel de Unamuno, you will die too! . . . You’ll return to the nothingness from which you came. God will cease to dream you! You will die . . . , even though you don’t want to. You will die, and so will all those who read my story, every

one . . . They are all fictional beings, too, creatures of fiction like myself . . . you, my creator, my dear Don Miguel, you are nothing more than another 'nivolistic' creature. (Unamuno 1976: VI, 226)

Carlos Blancos Aguinaga, commenting on this chapter, comes to say that “the most important thing about this chapter, the most obvious and surely the least observed, is not that Augusto tries to escape the world of Fiction, but that, in it, a new character finally leaves his mist and enters the novel: a character by the name of Miguel de Unamuno.” (Blancos Aguinaga 1964: 197)³ This is indeed an important thing about this chapter—one of the most ingenious and innovative literary devices employed in the entire modern narrative. (Let us just remember that Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* would appear, in print and on stage, some seven years after *Mist*, in 1921, just as Borges’ writings would appear only much later. And so would all of Mikhail Bakhtin’s writings about the autonomy of the literary hero.)

Nevertheless, there is in this passage something more important and consequential than the fact that Unamuno enters the novel as just another creature of fiction. From a philosophical point of view, I would say that the most significant thing about this chapter is not that, in it, Miguel de Unamuno comes to be a mere literary character, but that *life itself becomes a narrative*, a story with an Author who “tells” it, a narrative with a specific plot and specific characters.⁴ I will dedicate the last part of my essay to discussing some of the far-reaching implications of this particular insight of Miguel de Unamuno.

3.

The notion that we human beings may well be only players in some play or game, lacking in any real autonomy and self-sufficiency, totally dependent on some *magister ludi*, on the one who is in charge with organizing, starting and ending the game, is certainly one of the oldest topics in the European world. For example, in his *Laws* (803 c-d) Plato says at some point that

while God is the real goal of all beneficent serious endeavor, man . . . has been constructed as a toy for God, and this is, in fact, the finest thing about him. All of us, then, men and women alike, must fall in with our role and spend life in making our *play* as perfect as possible

. . . We should pass our lives in the playing of games . . . with the result of ability to gain heaven's grace . . . (Plato 1961: 1375)

Later on, the topic took on various forms, and has been known under various names, all of them clustered around the same central intuition: that this life as we live it is *not* as real and substantial as it seems to be, but only an existence of a second-order. Either in the shape of *theatrum mundi* ("The theatre as a 'theatre of the world,' a representation of the cosmos in which man plays his parts . . ." [Yates 1969: 165]) or in the form of world as play/fable (*mundus est fabula*), or in that of life as a dream (*la vida est sueño*), the topic has troubled numerous artists, writers, philosophers, scholars, etc. since the remote Greco-Roman antiquity and has shaped in its own way the physiognomy of the Western mind. For some reasons, it enjoyed a massive revival during the Renaissance ("the theatre of the world as an emblem of the life of man was a topos widespread in the Renaissance, whether in the form of memory theatres, or of emblems, or of rhetorical discourses." [*Ibid.*, 165]), to become "a commonplace in Baroque thought" (Nancy 1978: 636). It is indeed a common place in the world of Shakespeare ("All the world's a stage / And all the men and women merely players"), but it was probably the Spanish theatre during *Siglo d'Oro* that made most of it.

On the other hand, as far as history of philosophy in a narrower sense is concerned, the topic has had its occurrences. I will limit myself here, very briefly, only to two examples. First, it would be fair enough to say that George Berkeley's God, who is "perceiving" all things in the world rendering them existent and intelligible, is in a way a supreme Narrator or a Dreamer of the world. The world exists only insofar as God is aware of it. Moreover, Berkeley explicitly says that the world is a "divine discourse," a system of signs and symbols, by whose careful grasping we could learn something about their Author.⁵ Pushing this notion to its ultimate conclusion, there is a certain sense in which Berkeley's world might be seen as a dream-like appearance, as the fragile epiphany of our own thinking. William Butler Yeats insightfully realized that Berkeley's world is ultimately dependent on our "dreaming" it:

God-appointed Berkeley that proved all things
a dream,
That this pragmatism, preposterous pig of a world,
its farrow that so solid seem
Must vanish on the instant if the mind but changes its theme
(Yeats 1965: 268)

Secondly, one might well see Schopenhauer's philosophy as belonging to the same tradition of thought in which a divine *magister ludi* is incessantly doing and undoing this world of ours. As he bitterly sees it, *Wille* is someone or something that all the time *makes use of us*, cruelly and ironically "playing" with us, without leaving us any real freedom or autonomy. In the second volume of his *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* Schopenhauer openly talks about this world as something "akin to a dream," to say nothing here about his enthusiastic borrowings from Indian philosophy, especially the notion of *Maya*.

Therefore, Unamuno's insight that we exist only inasmuch as God is dreaming us or telling "our story," and that our ultimate ontological make-up is determined by the nature of the roles we play within the divine narrative (or play, or game) are not necessarily original in itself. Moreover, considering some of the facts about his personality, affinities, sensibility, education, and keeping in mind the complex and rich cultural and historic background against which Unamuno's thought emerged, Carlos Blancos Aguinaga comes even to conclude that Unamuno *had*, in a way, to arrive at openly employing such a topic:

As a man preoccupied with the apparent lack of substantiality of his own existence, obsessed with the impossibility of true communication . . . , and worried about the growth of his own image as a thing other than himself, it was only natural that Unamuno, a Spaniard steeped in his own tradition, should turn to the works of Calderón to borrow the two central metaphors of *Niebla* (*Vida-Sueño; teatro del mundo*) and that he should take delight in the whole Baroque of *Engaño: Life as Fiction*. (Blancos Aguinaga 1964: 203-4)

What is nevertheless original in his case is precisely his *pathetism* and dramatic accents. Life as a dream of God (with all the ambiguity, precariousness and complete lack of substantiality that the word "dream" implies) is to Unamuno not merely a literary topic, or some rhetorical trick to be neutrally employed in fiction writings, but one of the most tragic things about human nature. For "God will cease to dream you!" means automatically: "You will die." If God will wake up, change the theme of his dreams, or for some other reason not dream us any longer, that would necessarily bring about our return into nothingness. This was for Unamuno not just a matter of literary practice, but a central source of anguish and despair

throughout his life, and should be considered in the closest connection with his major philosophizing in *El Sentimiento Tragico de la Vida* (1911) and other philosophical pieces. That he did not consider this topic in simply rhetorical terms is proved, for example, by what he is confessing to a friend in a private letter (to Walter Starkie, dated October 1921): “I say that we are a dream of God. God is dreaming us and woe to that day when He awakes. God is dreaming. It is better not to think of that, but continue to dream that God is dreaming.” (Unamuno 1967: III, xxxiv)

From our understanding of what a creature of fiction is we derive the acute awareness of what *it is the case* as far as the ultimate nature of our selves is concerned: that is, we grasp the fact that we are ontologically precarious and uncertain, lacking in density and any deeper ground. What lies behind Unamuno’s insight is the unsayable fact that we humans are, at our best, simply *fictions*. It is true, “fictions of a superior order,” born out of the mind of a very noble Author, but fictions nonetheless. Which is to say: we are “beings” in only an ironical way, creatures ontologically rootless and dependent. We need someone else to dream us, or to tell our story, to confer existence upon us by simply bearing us in his mind. Within such a context, the work of fiction comes to be seen as a most convenient and elegant pattern on which we are molded. By carefully studying the work of fiction, the way in which it is being produced, developed and structured, we can get a better understanding of our own “human condition”:

if we move [from the realm of fiction] into the sphere of the reality of the real man we find an analogous situation: seen from God’s point of view, man also lacks substantiality and depends on his Creator . . . Human reality also appears as a dream of divinity, as fiction of a superior order capable of producing fictions of a secondary order, which are those called fictional beings. (Marías 1966: 93)

There is, nevertheless, something that might “save” us, so to speak, something that might compensate for our ontological precariousness. Even if Unamuno does not talk explicitly about this particular form of “salvation,” I take it as being one of the logical consequences of his notion in *Niebla* that God is “dreaming” us, that we are but “characters” in God’s cosmic story. My interpretation goes as follows.

Caught as we are between a God who creates us only by way of dreaming and the dense *nothingness* (*nada*) from which we try to keep safely away,

it seems the only reasonable way to make sense of our lives is to tell stories and imagine others' lives (our un-lived lives?), produce/dream narratives and make them known to our neighbors, create in our turn fictional beings and fictional worlds. It is true: from God's exclusive point of view, we are made of the same stuff that the dreams are made of. Nevertheless, precisely by our ability to dream/tell stories, that is, to mirror and multiply God's world, we are not completely lost. As Unamuno puts it, "to narrate life is the most profound way of living it." In this way literature ceases to be simply a "cultural practice" like any other, but somehow comes to acquire the privileged status of a soteriological technique. For, in doing so, in creating fictional worlds, we do practice a form of *imitatio Dei*, imitation of God. Made as we are "in His image and after His likeness," we are fated, in our doings, to "imitate" God and his way of dealing with the world.

There is in us a primordial need to tell stories, to imagine and weave narratives, and—according to this line of thought—we should take this need as, so to speak, the "trade mark" that God imprinted on us. God's "dreaming" of the world, when translated into human terms, takes the shape of our "narratives," stories, dramas, and so on. What was previously seen as our fundamental weakness could be turned into our most significant strength. Considered from this particular angle, the human history—as one accompanied everywhere by myths, stories, and grand narratives—appears as an uninterrupted attempt at imitating the divine process through which the world is being brought into being. By bringing fictional worlds into existence we follow, so to speak, in God's footsteps. More than that, this should be regarded as the most significant *metaphysical solace* we have access to: namely, that—by our being narrators of life—we are in a way gods *en miniature*, living mirrors of God.

It is true, we ourselves are "fictional beings," but—by our ability to practice the divine art of narrative—we are eventually "saved" and gain a certain ontological dignity and grounding. For the stories we tell, the narratives we weave and the fictional worlds we create are living proof that, ultimately, we are closer to God than to nothingness and what we do can be *meaningful*. Through the very act of telling a story we are transcending ourselves in the sense that, by telling that story, we *point to* the supreme Author, to the divine Narrator. This makes a myth, as a theological story, not merely a story *about* God, but—indirectly, in virtue of the fact that myths *are possible*—an oblique proof that God exists. A consequence of the above analogy between God's dreaming us and our telling of stories and weaving

of narratives is that the sheer existence of the myth might well be seen as a “trace” that God left in the world.

I would like to conclude this essay by reminding the reader of a certain “fiction” by Borges, probably the most influential of Unamuno’s disciples. This very short text (which in the Spanish original bears an English title: *Everything and Nothing*) is about William Shakespeare’s life and death, about what he did and what he didn’t in his lifetime, and—more importantly—about the ultimate meaning of an author’s life. Right at the end of this (very Borgesian indeed) biography of Shakespeare, we come across the following note:

History adds that before or after he died, he discovered himself standing before God, and said to Him: *I who have been so many men in vain, wish to be one, to be myself.* God’s voice answered him out of a whirlwind: *I, too, am not I; I dreamed the world as you, Shakespeare, dreamed your own work, and among the forms of my dreams are you, who like me are many, yet no one.* (Borges 1998: 320)

In fact, the English version does not convey the whole rhetorical force of God’s speech as it is present in the Spanish original. For in the latter God does not say simply “Shakespeare,” but “my Shakespeare” (*mi Shakespeare*), ironically emphasizing the dreamlike character of Shakespeare’s own existence: *yo soñé el mundo como tú soñaste tu obra, mi Shakespeare, y entre las formas de mi sueño estás tú, que como yo eres muchos y nadie.* (Borges 1960: 45) When it comes to ultimate meanings, we are closer to God than we are ordinarily inclined to believe. Both God and Shakespeare are dreamers: the former’s dream takes the shape of the world, with ourselves in it, and the latter’s dream takes the shape of the various tales, myths, and narratives that, taken together, make our lives in God’s world a little more bearable.

Notes

¹ Commenting on Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* he confesses at a given moment: “To my shame, I must admit that I have on occasion invented fictional beings, characters in novels, for the purpose of putting in their mouths words I did not dare put in my own, and to make them say as if in jest something I took very seriously.” (Unamuno 1967: III, 14)

² Of course, this is because, ultimately, it is the reader who “constructs” the literary character of the book she is reading: “in ultimate terms the intrinsic essence of a fictional creature must be shaped by the reader, who in turn discovers something in himself . . . the author’s role has been minimized, as the true author of fictional personalities becomes

the reader.” (Basdekis 1974: 55) But, within the limited space of this paper, I have had to leave aside all these problems of reception, of reader’s contribution to the construction of the plot, etc.

³ Carlos Aguinaga even designs a fascinatingly ingenious scenario to make his thesis more convincing: “we can well imagine a day in which a human being will find in some obscure library a strange and ancient work by the title if *Niebla*, author unknown: what then will be the difference between Miguel de Unamuno and Augusto Pérez?” (Blancos Aguinaga 1964: 198)

⁴ As a matter of fact, Blancos Aguinaga alludes to this fact: “ultimately this is the exemplarity, the lesson of *Niebla*. A beautiful example of how the novelistic tradition at work in the modern situation may force the imagination to approach the point of no return, there to reveal the meaning of the game of Fiction, the precariousness of Existence.” (Blancos Aguinaga 1964: 205)

⁵ More about this issue in my essay “George Berkeley’s ‘Universal Language of Nature’.” (Bradatan, 2005).

References

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