

## Clowning and Tragic Clowning: Miguel de Unamuno as a Funny Writer

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**Abstract:** The present study considers the role and function that humour has in Unamuno's intellectual and literary universe. It traces Unamuno's attitude to humour to his reading of the Spanish character in *En torno al casticismo* (1895) and to his dialogue with the figure of Don Quixote, as found in *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho* (1905) and *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* (1912). Finally, it looks at the theory of humour offered in the novel *Niebla* and also at the role that humour played in Unamuno's later political writings, especially those of exile (1924-1930).

**Keywords:** Unamuno, humour, nimbus.

Towards the end of Chapter 1 of *Niebla* (1914), Augusto Pérez sits on a park bench, takes out a pen and notebook, and gets ready to jot down the important details of his first encounter with Eugenia Domingo del Arco. He has just followed this young woman along the street to her house, where he asked the concierge for her name and then wondered aloud why her first surname was not Dominga, given that the gender of surnames should obviously agree with that of their owners. As he had been characteristically lost in thought while he followed her, the only physical detail he can remember is Eugenia's eyes, but he also remains firmly in possession of that troublesome name:

"¡Veamos! Eugenia Domingo, sí, Domingo, del Arco. ¿Domingo? No me acostumbro a eso de que se llame Domingo... No; he de hacerle cambiar el apellido y que se llame Dominga. Pero, y nuestros hijos varones, ¿habrán de llevar por segundo apellido el de Dominga? Y como han de suprimir el mío, este impertinente Pérez, dejándolo en una P., ¿se ha de llamar nuestro primogénito Augusto P. Dominga? Pero... ¿dónde me llevas, loca fantasía?" (Unamuno, *Niebla* 112-113)

Names and naming become an important part of Augusto's introspective and largely word-bound experiences in the novel, but the climax of the first chapter appears more interested in setting up a deliciously silly schoolboy *pedo/minga*

joke that seemingly springs from Augusto's "loca fantasia" or, more likely, his unconscious.

A decade after the publication of *Niebla*, when he was in bad odour with the Dictatorship of General Primo de Rivera and in voluntary exile in France, Unamuno's farts were also very much on the mind of the Bishop of Orense, Florencio Cerviño y González, who decided that it was high time to kick a man when he was down. What concerned the Bishop, as the *Heraldo de Madrid* reported on its front page on 7 December 1925, was not just that one of Unamuno's books was being used for teaching purposes but also, as the headline made clear, that that book was both "ramplón" and "soez":

El día 31 de octubre último el señor gobernador civil de Orense le ha dicho al señor rector de la Universidad de Santiago:

"El reverendísimo e ilustrísimo señor obispo de esta diócesis se ha dirigido a mi autoridad, en escrito de fecha 27 del mes en curso, participándome que el nuevo catedrático de Gramática castellana de esta Escuela Normal de maestros ha puesto de texto, para prácticas de lectura, el libro de D. Miguel de Unamuno *Recuerdos de niñez y mocedad*, obra del más ramplón estilo, que escarnece desde el principio hasta el fin los dogmas y prácticas de la religión católica; contiene herejías tales como ésta que pone en la página 73: 'Del coco surgieron el demonio y Dios', y tiene páginas de lenguaje tan soez e impropio del fin a que se pretende destinar como el de este párrafo que copio de la página 61: 'El pedo – hay que nombrarlo sin más rodeos – es uno de los principales factores cómicos de la niñez. Recuerdo a este propósito las mil gracias que a cuenta del pedo se les ocurría en él a Félix y a Juan. Cuando alguno de ellos lo soltaba, y procuraban hacerlo, hacía con la mano ademán de recogerlo del trasero...'. Y que el mencionado libro, que nada tiene de modelo literario o educador, parece haber sido puesto de texto únicamente – porque para otro fin no sirve – para dar a conocer a Unamuno, hacer concebir bajo concepto de la Iglesia Católica y sus prácticas... [sic], y vender una obra que de otra manera no tenía salida en el libre comercio.

Lo que tengo el sentimiento de trasladar a V.I. con el ruego de que, si así lo estimase procedente, se sirva adoptar la resolución que el caso reclama, al objeto de que se proceda a la instrucción del oportuno expediente para depurar el hecho denunciado y la imposición de la sanción que fuere de justicia, conforme a lo establecido en la real orden de 13 del mes de octubre actual, la cual ha sido inserta en la *Gaceta de Madrid* correspondiente al siguiente día; permitiéndome significar a V.I. al propio tiempo que con esta fecha pongo el hecho denunciado en conocimiento del ilustrísimo señor subsecretario del ministerio de la Gobernación." (*El Heraldo de Madrid*, 7.12.1925)

It is debatable whether the poor Bishop was more exercised by the flatulence or the heresy, but what his denunciation makes clear is just how differently Unamuno was perceived during his lifetime from how he is seen today. Most works on the thinker, novelist, dramatist and poet treat him, quite correctly, as a serious and sometimes sombre writer but also often, and less correctly, as a puritanical and a po-faced one. The reality is that, while Unamuno was a high-minded intellectual with a mission to educate his readers and refashion the nation to which they and he belonged, he was also unconventional, subversive, iconoclastic, playful and often downright funny, even if his humour can often be seen to be an integral part of that mission. The man who, when told by his publishers that the manuscript of his second novel *Amor y pedagogía* (1902) was too short, simply added a learned series of notes for a treatise on origami (Unamuno, *Amor* 383-411; see Nozick 146) or who starts his most famous philosophical work *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* (1912) by claiming that what may distinguish humans from animals is our capacity to feel rather than to reason and then adding that, as far as we know, crabs are able to solve quadratic equations inside their heads (Unamuno, *Del sentimiento* 98), is obviously someone capable of turning normal expectations or assumptions on theirs.

This article will look at the place that humour occupies in Unamuno's intellectual and literary universe and will show that he developed a whole and complex theory of humour – one that encompasses anthropology, ethnography, sociology, pedagogy and politics, as well as ideas on spiritual and social regeneration. It will focus mainly on three key texts, namely the essays contained in *En torno al casticismo* (1895) and *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho* (1905) and then the novel *Niebla* (1914), although it will also make reference towards the end to the poems and clandestine political articles that Unamuno wrote during his long exile in Fuerteventura, Paris and Hendaye (1924-1930). Although the article will claim that humour was ultimately a serious business for Unamuno, it will endeavour not to overlook the fact that he could be, after all, a very funny writer.

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Unamuno's understanding of the role and function of humour both in life and in literature is rooted in his complex reading of the Spanish character found in his first major work, *En torno al casticismo*. As is well known, this work represents Unamuno's earliest response to the perceived decadence of Spain and offers a psychological and cultural diagnosis of, and potential cure for, that decadence.<sup>1</sup> Presenting Castile as a synecdoche for Spain, Unamuno carries out a detailed analysis of the Castilian character, which, following the ideas of Hippolyte Taine and others, he claims has been formed by both historical and environmental factors, including landscape and climate. His main point is that the dramatic contrast between earth and sky and the extremes of temperature

on the Castilian plateau have helped to create a way of seeing and responding to the world that is also marked by extremes (Unamuno, *En torno* 172-183). The Castilian mind, claims Unamuno, tends to separate things out into sensual, intellectual and moral opposites: light/dark, good/bad, right/wrong, and therefore embraces a Manichaeian worldview that can easily give rise to intolerance and even violence.

As he develops these thoughts in Chapter 2 of the work, Unamuno introduces a concept, that of *nimbo* (nimbus), that will provide an important link to the ideas on humour that he will develop twenty years later in the Prologue to *Niebla*. Starting with the notion that the most basic act of perception or discernment involves the perception of difference, since knowing something signifies distinguishing it from all other things, he goes on to add, however, that difference can only be recognised against a background of similarity, since

[e]n la sucesión de impresiones discretas hay un fondo de continuidad, un *nimbo* que envuelve a lo precedente con lo subsiguiente; la vida de la mente es como un mar eterno sobre que ruedan y se suceden las olas, un eterno crepúsculo que envuelve días y noches, en que se funden las puestas y las auroras de las ideas. Hay un verdadero tejido conjuntivo intelectual, un fondo intra-conciente en fin (179).

Revisiting the metaphor of the sea, which he had already used in Chapter 1 in order to define his notion of *intrahistoria*, Unamuno goes on to characterise ideas as islands that jut out above the waves but are in fact connected under the surface by the sea bed. Or like stars that are enveloped in and connected by a vast ethereal atmosphere. Within the human mind, therefore, “[c]ada impresión, cada idea, lleva su nimbo, su atmósfera etérea; la impresión de todo lo que le rodeaba” (180), and, although we need to abstract ideas from their nimbus in order to be able to think rationally, it is the nimbus itself that gives our thoughts and ideas their flesh, life, richness and depth (181).<sup>2</sup>

Now the problem with the Castilian and, by extension, Spanish way of thinking, according to Unamuno, is that it focuses on hard ideas and concepts at the expense of the nimbus that surrounds them and gives them meaning. Like the landscape that surrounds it, the Castilian and Spanish spirit is, he says, “cortante y seco, pobre en nimbos de ideas” and has given birth to “un realismo vulgar y tosco y un idealismo seco y formulario, que caminan juntos, asociados como Don Quijote y Sancho, pero que nunca se funden en uno”. This spirit is, crucially for our purpose, “socarrón o trágico, a las veces, a la vez, pero sin identificar la ironía y la austera tragedia humanas” (182), a point that he goes on to exemplify in Chapter 3 through reference to the work of Calderón. In what is itself a rather unjust and even Manichaeian reading of the plays of Calderón and Shakespeare, Unamuno claims that, while the latter is able to create characters of great psychological depth and complexity, the former tends to turn

his into mere representatives or embodiments of certain ideas, vices or virtues (185-193). Calderón's theatre, according to this reading, is full of symbols rather than human protagonists; it separates out and creates contrasts between the characters and the ideas they represent rather than focusing on the nimbus that links them together; and it also "mezcla lo trágico y lo cómico", sí, los mezcla, no los combina químicamente", as Unamuno says in response to Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo. This is a theatre that is dissociative and didactic in nature and that gives expression to what Unamuno calls a dualistic and polarizing mindset that lies at the heart of his critical vision of Castile and Spain (187-188). Because the mental disassociation that he finds expressed in Calderón's plays is also the mindset of the Inquisition and the Counter-Reformation and that too of an intolerant society that has come to believe in honour and in religious dogma, and in wars and crusades as acceptable means by which to defend that sense of honour and impose that dogma (193-215). And, as Chapter 5 sets out to show, that dissociative and inquisitorial spirit still reigns in the Spain of the late nineteenth century, which is dominated by castes and cliques of all kinds: political, intellectual, philosophical, scientific, literary, religious, social... (247-261). Only a dual programme involving both the Europeanisation and modernisation of the country, on the one hand, and the ethnographic study and championing of the underlying values and potential of the Spanish people, on the other, could serve to bring about the true regeneration of the nation (262-269).

As Unamuno carries out this devastating cultural and psychological critique of the Castilian character that has, in his eyes, helped to forge the outlook and attitudes of modern Spain, he also makes clear that not all Castilian culture is dissociative and inquisitorial in nature. In Chapter 4, he focuses his attention on those Castilian authors who were able to give expression to a deeper and more complex view of humanity, one that combines rather than separates and is thus able to reveal to us the rich nimbus that characterises human existence and experience. He finds this worldview best expressed in the works of the mystics, men and women like St John of the Cross and St Teresa who managed, he believes, to fuse the ideal and the real, the world of the spirit and that of the senses, the inner life and the outer, and to give expression to a profound humanism that can also be found in the work of Fray Luis de León (217-246). Given Unamuno's later devotion to Don Quixote – and to the capacity that humour possesses to uncover the nimbus that surrounds our ideas and beliefs –, one might have expected Unamuno to have gone on to mention Cervantes's novel as another example of a work that is capable of expressing the myriad complexities of life, but the many references to the novel found in this Chapter and indeed throughout the whole of *En torno al casticismo* tend rather to emphasise the dissociation between the characters of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza (187, 251), as when he claims that it was St John of the Cross who managed, *avant la lettre*, to fuse "el espíritu quijotesco y el sancho-pancino en un idealismo tan realista" (225). As the very final section of Chapter 4 makes

clear, Unamuno's cultural and psychological reading of Spain's current predicament led him strongly to believe in the 1890s that Don Quixote needed to die so that Alonso Quixano, the sane man and good humanist, could come back to life (243-246).

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This anti-Quixotism, visible above all in the article "¡Muera Don Quijote!" of November 1898 (Unamuno, *Obras completas* VII: 1194-1196), where he associated Don Quixote with the imperialist spirit that lay behind the current colonial wars, would not last much beyond the turn of the century. By 1905, with his *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho*, Unamuno would in fact come to see Cervantes's novel as the Spanish bible and Don Quixote himself as a Christ-like figure, the Messiah of a specifically Spanish religion. Unamuno's commentary was one of many that appeared in or around 1905, the year that marked the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the first part of the *Quijote*, and many of these commentaries were such highly serious academic or nationalist works that, as Rutherford recently reminded us, Antonio Machado would complain in 1914 that "nosotros no hemos hecho sino reaccionar contra lo cómico quijotesco, hasta casi borrarlo, encerrando la figura del héroe en un perfil tan serio, que a todo puede incitarnos menos a risa" (Machado qtd. in Rutherford 176). Something similar could be said about the many critical commentaries on Unamuno's *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho*, most of which provide excellent overviews of Unamuno's emerging Spanish philosophy but overlook the Cervantine humour and irony that permeates the work from beginning to end.<sup>3</sup> To borrow the title of Peter Russell's famous 1969 article on the *Quijote*, it might be time to read *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho*, at least in part, as a funny book.

There is no doubting the serious intent behind Unamuno's commentary on Cervantes's novel. At its heart lies an attempt to sublimate the search for fame that had driven and motivated Don Quixote into a new ontological and ethical system that Unamuno claimed was essentially Spanish in nature. He developed this system as a response to the existential crisis that he himself had suffered in 1897, during the course of which he had strongly criticised his own tendency to write and act for the gallery and as a result to sacrifice what he called his authentic, inner self to his acting, public self (see Unamuno, *Diario íntimo* 192-193; 219-220, etc.). Partly through a renewed dialogue with the figure of Don Quixote, Unamuno had come over the following years not only to reconcile himself with the drive for fame but to see it, as he makes clear in essays such as "¡Plenitud de plenitudes y todo plenitud!", of August 1904, as an immensely positive impulse, one that leads men and women to strive for spiritual fullness and to encourage those around them to do the same (Unamuno, *Obras completas* I: 1171-1182). This is the story that he wishes to tell in *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho*, where he presents Don Quixote as a true "hijo de sus obras",

that is, as someone who creates himself and achieves immortality through his actions (Unamuno, *Obras completas* III: 78). For Unamuno, the idea of being the "hijo de sus obras" is a profoundly Christian one, since it allows each individual to conceive of his or her own soul as an "obra" that can be consciously and actively made and also to participate in a collective spiritual life that is fundamentally dynamic in nature (122-123). This is why he presents Don Quixote in this work as Christ's disciple (197), as the "Caballero de la Fe" (204) and even as "mi San Quijote" (182). And, although he presents Sancho Panza as the representative of the down-to-earth and pragmatic Spanish people, he goes out of his way to show how Don Quixote's idealism rubs off on Sancho, just as Sancho's realism rubs off on Don Quixote (157). Indeed, the mutual influence between Knight and Squire, which Unamuno had failed to pick up on in *En torno al casticismo*, is precisely what leads him now to believe that the novel does indeed contain the sort of nimbus, ambiguity and human complexity that he had previously found only in the works of St John of the Cross, St Teresa and Fray Luis de León. As he says at the end of *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho*, it is his express hope that the Spanish people, in the guise of Sancho Panza, will be able to carry on the work of Don Quixote and continue to propagate the Quixotic ideal, that is, the Quixotic Christianity that Unamuno has defined over the course of the work (247).

Serious stuff indeed. And yet it is serious stuff that is shot through with the very irony and ambiguity that Unamuno found in the work he is commenting on. As mentioned previously, Unamuno published *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho* alongside a whole slew of other works on the novel, many of which were drily academic or pedantically authoritative in nature or tone. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising to find that Unamuno sets out to criticise or even to parody such works, something that he achieves above all through his own presence in the text as exegete and commentator. Far from acting as humble interpreter, Unamuno quite deliberately proclaims his absolute authority over Cervantes's novel, telling us at the end of the work that "Cervantes nació para explicarla [la vida de Don Quijote], y para comentarla nací yo" (254) and going out of his way on numerous occasions to challenge or correct other people's readings or interpretations. He takes particular pleasure in lashing out at the so-called *cervantistas*, those who get lost in their "tiquismiquis y minucias" (112 and 222), but he has no qualms either about questioning the authority of Cide Hamete Benengeli, especially his version of the adventure with the lions in Chapter 17 of Part 2 (167), or even that of Cervantes himself, who, we are told, was unable in Chapter 22 of Part 1 to understand Don Quixote's thoughts on human and divine punishment. "No por haber sido [Cervantes] su evangelista", explains Unamuno, "hemos de suponer fuera quien más adentró en su espíritu. Baste que hoy nos haya conservado el relato de su vida y hazañas" (115).

Now it could be objected that Unamuno is being deliberately high-handed at moments like these simply because he is interested in imposing his own

reading of the novel and using it to found his new Quixotic religion. There is no doubt that he feels that he can speak directly to Don Quixote himself, playing the combined role of confidante and confessor (100-102), and also that he is intent on establishing his own version of the character, whom he frequently refers to as "mi señor Don Quijote" or "Don Quijote mío" (80; 100). And yet there is something both playful and playfully serious about the absolute authority that he arrogates to himself as interpreter of Don Quixote's character and actions. As he reveals in the Prologue to the third edition of *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho*, written in May 1928, he continued to affirm that authority outside the confines of the work itself through his correspondence with his translator into English, the North American academic Homer P. Earle. Earle pointed out that Unamuno had incorrectly attributed certain words to Sancho Panza that had in fact been spoken by Sansón Carrasco and suggested that, in his translation, he could either correct the mistake or include a footnote that would ward off the criticisms of the so-called experts. Unamuno tells us that his first impulse was to inform Earle that his work was akin to the commentaries on the Gospels written by the mystics and that he preferred to leave to the literary critics and historical researchers the worthy job of finding out what the novel signified in the context in which it was actually written (62-63), but he decided in the end to provide the following explanation instead:

En el prólogo del *Quijote* – que, como casi todos los prólogos (incluso éste) no son apenas sino mera literatura –, Cervantes nos revela que encontró el relato de la hazañosa vida del Caballero de la Triste Figura en unos papeles arábigos de un Cide Hamete Benengeli, profunda revelación con la que el bueno – ¡y tan bueno! – de Cervantes nos revela lo que podríamos llamar la objetividad, la existencia – *ex-istere* quiere decir estar fuera – de Don Quijote y Sancho y su coro entero fuera de la ficción del novelista y sobre ella. Por mi parte, creo que el tal Cide Hamete Benengeli no era árabe, sino judío y judío marroquí, y que tampoco fingió la historia. En todo caso, ese texto arábigo del Cide Hamete Benengeli le tengo yo y aunque he olvidado todo el poquísimo árabe que me enseñó el señor Codera en la Universidad de Madrid – ¡y me dio el premio en la asignatura! –, lo leo de corrido y en él he visto que en el pasaje a que aludía el profesor Earle fue Cervantes el que leyó mal y que mi interpretación, y no la suya, es la fiel. Con lo cual me creo defendido de todo posible reparo de una crítica profesional o profesoral (63).

Unamuno never in fact sent this explanation to Homer P. Earle – we have a copy of the letter that he wrote, and it shows that Unamuno actually acted on his first, rather than his second, impulse (see Unamuno, *Epistolario Americano* 502-504) –, but it reveals both his playful spirit and also a deeper point: that Unamuno's affirmation of his own authority is accompanied at all times by a subtle, humorous and ironic self-undermining of that authority. Throughout *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho*, Unamuno adopts the guise not only of a hagiographer



but also of the evangelist of a new national religion – but a national religion which, he stresses time and again, is of his own making. This man, who had spent his earliest years as a writer surrounded by the myth-makers of Basque *fueros*, knew full well that national myths were just that: myths created by imaginative and literary-minded interpreters of the national character. Doing full justice to his Cervantine inspiration, therefore, he bequeaths us in *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho* a founding national text that announces on every page its invented, fictional status (on this point, see Roberts 96-110). It may proclaim a new worldview, but it leaves the reader contemplating, and mulling over the significance of, the multiple layers and therefore subtle ambiguities of what is actually being proclaimed.

Unamuno will also, of course, expound his Quixotic worldview at the climax of his most important philosophical work, *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* (1912), where, once again, he will do nothing to hide the fact that he has drawn this worldview up from the depths of his own mind and imagination: “Lo que llamo el sentimiento trágico de la vida en los hombres y en los pueblos es por lo menos nuestro sentimiento trágico de la vida, el de los españoles y el pueblo español, tal y como se refleja en mi conciencia, que es una conciencia española, hecha en España” (Unamuno, *Del sentimiento* 469; see also 502-503). It is “Nuestro Señor Don Quijote, el Cristo español” (470) who has helped him over the course of the work to give an even fuller account of how a whole new ethical system can be built out of the impulse to fame, a system that he refers to as the “moral de la imposición mutua” and defines as the drive to “sellar a los demás con nuestro sello, por perpetuarnos en ellos y en sus hijos, dominándolos, por dejar en todo imperecedera nuestra cifra” (448). But there is another important dimension to Unamuno’s Quixotic outlook in *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida*, one that looks back to *En torno al casticismo* and prepares the ground for the ideas on humour that will be presented in the Prologue to *Niebla*. When, over the first half of the work, he looks at our responses to death and at the important but insufficient roles that both reason and faith play in the search for answers to death, Unamuno makes clear that neither the answer normally supplied by reason – that there is no such thing as an afterlife – nor that supplied by the Christian faith – that we will live on after our deaths but in a transformed and pre-ordained form – satisfies his own longing to live on in the form in which he finds himself in this life (171-240). We cannot live without reason or faith but neither can we live, says Unamuno, with the certainties that each of these faculties offers us (241-269). It is therefore out of the conflict between the two that we can gain both spiritual energy and consolation – the consolation of never being fully sure of what our ultimate fate will be, the consolation of what Unamuno calls in Chapter 6 of the work “la santa, la dulce, la salvadora incertidumbre” (255).

Unamuno adds here that Don Quixote is an example of someone whose faith was based on uncertainty and Sancho Panza of a rationalist who doubts his

reason (257-258), so it should come as no surprise that Unamuno should present Don Quixote in the Conclusion as the figure that best exemplifies this holy uncertainty that comes, not from a rejection of faith or reason, but from the subtle conflict between the two: "Aparéceseme la filosofía en el alma de mi pueblo como la expresión de una tragedia íntima análoga a la tragedia del alma de Don Quijote, como la expresión de una lucha entre lo que el mundo es según la razón de la ciencia nos lo muestra , y lo que queremos que sea, según la fe de nuestra religión nos lo dice" (503). And, as the title of this Conclusion, "Don Quijote en la tragicomedia europea contemporánea", implies, Europe desperately needs Don Quixote's holy uncertainty, as it is in the grip of a "tragicomedy", that is, the tragedy of a new Inquisition based on reason, science and progress that feels obliged to laugh at all those who resist its new shibboleths and dogmas (473 and 478-479). Don Quixote is a holy and tragicomic figure for Unamuno because, like Christ, he was not afraid to stand up for his beliefs and to court ridicule in the process (483-484, 496-498 and 505-509). And nor is Unamuno, who clearly defines his own role as an intellectual in terms both of a struggle against the resignation that results from a blind belief in either reason or faith and of a defence, it could be said, of the nimbus that surrounds and perhaps even connects these human faculties:

Pero es que mi obra – iba a decir mi misión – es quebrantar la fe de unos y de otros y de los terceros, la fe en la afirmación, la fe en la negación y la fe en la abstención, y esto por fe en la fe misma; es combatir a todos los que se resignan, sea al catolicismo, sea al racionalismo, sea al agnosticismo; es hacer que vivan todos inquietos y anhelantes (505).

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And so we reach *Niebla*, and above all its Prologue, which offers Unamuno's most detailed exposition of his theory of humour, one that pulls together the different strands of *En torno al casticismo*, *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho* and *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida*. The focus here is firmly back on Spain rather than on the whole of Europe, and Unamuno is not so much interested in the underlying beliefs of the Spanish people as in their mental processes and general attitude towards life. But, precisely for these reasons, the Prologue to *Niebla* allows Unamuno to explore the very role and function of humour and also its aesthetic implications. Or, rather, it allows him to allow Víctor Goti to explore these things for him, since, in a typically Cervantine twist, he has asked one of his characters to prologue his novel for him.

At the heart of the Prologue lies a critique of the Spanish people and, in particular, of the Spanish reading public, which is described as being uneducated and suffering from what is variously called "ingenuidad", "candidez ingenua" and "simplicidad palomina" (Unamuno, *Niebla* 98). Víctor Goti gives some examples

of the critical responses that Unamuno has received from his readers over the years as a way of calling attention to their supposed naivety, although he also adds that Unamuno has included certain jokes and pranks in his work – such as the underlining of random words in one of his articles in order to parody the overuse of emphasis in contemporary journalism – that have not been detected by them (98-100). But the main point that Goti wants to make on Unamuno's behalf is that many Spaniards do not know how to react to what they read, especially when it contains irony and humour. It is not that there is no sense of humour in Spain but rather that much of it, says Goti, depends on wordplay or simple satire: even the satire of Quevedo, he adds, caters for such unsubtle tastes, as it immediately makes explicit what its intention and its message actually are (99-100). Then Goti makes a point that clearly has its roots in what Unamuno had said in *En torno al casticismo* about the dissociative tendency within the Castilian and Spanish character: the Spanish reading public, which Goti now makes coterminous with the Spanish people, does not like being caught out or having its leg pulled. When it listens to or reads something, it wants to know immediately if that thing is serious or humorous and how, therefore, it needs to react: what it cannot brook is the idea that something can be said or written in a way that is both serious and joking at the same time (101).

“[H]ay que acabar con esta ingenuidad” (100) is what Goti claims Unamuno has said to him, a statement that points both to the educative function that humour has for Unamuno and also to the sort of humour that he wishes to deploy in his own work. Back in *En torno al casticismo*, as we saw earlier, Unamuno had complained that the Castilian and Spanish spirit was “socarrón o trágico, a las veces, a la vez, pero sin identificar la ironía y la austera tragedia humanas” (Unamuno, *En torno* 182) and that Calderón's work, the perfect expression of that dissociative spirit, “mezcla lo trágico y lo cómico, sí, los mezcla, no los combina químicamente” (188). In reaction to this separating out of tones, Goti now explains, Unamuno wishes to follow the example of Cervantes, Spain's only complete humourist, and bring about a true fusion of “burlas” and “veras”, of the tragic and the comic:

Don Miguel tiene la preocupación del bufo trágico, y me ha dicho más de una vez que no quisiera morir sin haber escrito una bufonada trágica o una tragedia bufa, pero no en que lo bufo o grotesco y lo trágico estén mezclados o yuxtapuestos, sino fundidos y confundidos en uno (Unamuno, *Niebla* 100-101).

Unamuno as tragic clown. But not in the sense of the clown who goes about his job entertaining his audience while surrounded by tragedy, as happens to the poor *titiritero* in *San Manuel Bueno, mártir* (1930; Unamuno, *San Manuel* 13-14), but in that of the writer who achieves a complete fusion of the comic and the tragic modes of writing. Víctor Goti responds to this idea by saying that

it expresses a purely Romantic attitude, that is, one imagines, one that is reminiscent of Victor Hugo's famous *Préface de Cromwell* (1827), where the French Romantic had celebrated the work of Shakespeare, "qui fond sous un même souffle le grotesque et le sublime, le terrible et le bouffon, la tragédie et la comédie" (Hugo 422; on this point, see Vilanova, "La teoría nivolesca" 197-200). Unamuno does not seem unduly upset by this parallel, perhaps because of the link with Shakespeare that it implies, but, according to Goti, he goes on to reject the distinction between Classicism and Romanticism – again, perhaps, in response to similar distinctions made in Hugo's *Préface* – and to reiterate his main point, that is, that his own aim is not to distinguish, define or separate out but rather to "indefinir, confundir" (Unamuno, *Niebla* 101).

Here, in this "adusto y áspero humorismo confusionista" (102), we have the secret of Unamuno's humorous art. Its function, as Goti goes on to explain, is to disturb his audience's reading and therefore thinking patterns, to make them unsure as to whether they should laugh or cry, and to make them think, question and wonder. There is no irony without bile, Goti explains, and, if Unamuno makes his readers laugh, it is not in order to aid their digestion but to make them vomit out their accepted and unquestioned assumptions and ideas (102).<sup>4</sup> The important thing is to confuse them, that is, to challenge their dissociative and therefore potentially inquisitorial attitudes by making them forever unsure of what they are reading and of how they should react to it, and the best way to achieve such *confusion* is through the *fusion* of categories, genres and tones: truth and laughter, the comic and the tragic, the serious, the grotesque and the ironic.

Several critics have drawn attention to Unamuno's "humorismo confusionista", especially Bénédicte Vauthier, with her excellent insights into Unamuno's ironic mode of writing.<sup>5</sup> Víctor Goti himself goes on to provide a parodic echo of Unamuno's idea of fusing styles by mentioning the mildly grotesque positivist sage from Unamuno's novel *Amor y pedagogía*, Don Fulgencio Entrambosmares del Aquilón (105-106), who has developed a crazy combinatory science that is directly reminiscent of Polonius' description of the actors' craft in Act II, Scene 2 of *Hamlet* (Shakespeare 883), an indirect allusion that serves to suggest that Unamuno's confusionist humour in *Niebla* may well be partly Shakespearean in inspiration.<sup>6</sup> But the main inspiration, without doubt, is the *Quijote*. The novel itself will use Cervantine tricks, such as Víctor Goti's penning of the Prologue and Unamuno's own appearance in the novel as a character, in order once again to place the issue of authorship – and authority – in question. And it will, in Augusto Pérez, create a very twentieth-century Quixotic, as well as Hamletian, figure, who issues forth into the world in search of adventures and who finds obstacles, pitfalls and mockery at every turn. Augusto is a doubter who gets lost in his thoughts, a clownish figure who is able to make us laugh and feel moved at one and the same time, and a timid and almost paralysed individual who is ultimately able to stand up to his creator and

inform him that he does not wish to die, only then to eat himself to death (Unamuno, *Niebla* 277-296). The novel does not deliver a clear message beyond that of encouraging us to leave behind our cherished ideas and to open up to the complexities, the ambiguities, the rich nimbus of life.

And the idea of nimbus takes us, finally, to the title of the novel. It is easy to follow Augusto Pérez's journey as a journey out of the mist of his mental and existential confusion into the light of self-knowledge and self-assertion. But, in reality, Augusto never reaches the light: he simply moves out of and back into the mist in a constant oscillation between clarity and confusion. Might it be possible, then, to see a direct correlation, a metaphorical link, between the notions of *nimbo* and *niebla*? Might it not be that the mist that the novel offers us represents, at least in part, both the "ethereal atmosphere" that *En torno al casticismo* told us envelops and gives meaning to our ideas and "la santa, la dulce, la salvadora incertidumbre" that *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* presented as the only true path towards spiritual fulfilment (Unamuno, *Del sentimiento* 255) – and which, of course, Unamuno very much associated with the figure of Don Quixote? As far as our reading of the novel is concerned, there is no doubt that the fusion of *burlas y veras*, of reality and fiction, of tragedy and comedy certainly leads us to question whether Augusto Pérez actually committed suicide, as Víctor Goti claims (Unamuno, *Niebla* 106), or was killed off by his creator, as Unamuno the character angrily retorts (107-108). With one fell swoop, the Prologue and Post-Prologue to *Niebla* have submerged the reader in the holiest of uncertainties, those concerning free will, determinism and human destiny.

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"La santa incertidumbre". As a coda to this article, it is important to point out that the last two decades of Unamuno's life were marked and even dogged by the very unholy and sometimes sanctimonious certainties associated with political activism. From 1914 onwards, Unamuno's growing anger at the increasing corruption and authoritarianism affecting Spanish politics caused him to adopt a fiercely critical attitude that ultimately led to his banishment and then voluntary exile under the Dictatorship of General Primo de Rivera. During this time, when he thought that Spain was being led by fools who simply followed military discipline and were incapable of thinking for themselves, he would turn to humour as a weapon. To explain his position, he told the story in *Cómo se hace una novela* of an army captain who could not stand a new recruit because of the latter's cleverness and seemingly ironic attitude. After having delivered one of his characteristically chichéd patriotic harangues, the captain, "ya no dueño de sí, se dirigió al soldado diciéndole: '¿Qué?, ¿se sonríe usted?'; y el mozo: 'No, mi capitán, no me sonrío'; y entonces el otro: '¡Sí, por dentro!'" (Unamuno, *Cómo se hace* 190). As this story shows, Unamuno believed that the supporters of the Dictatorship, rather like the readers he had already got Víctor

Goti to berate in the Prologue to *Niebla*, were guided by the principle that “¡De mí no se ríe nadie!” (179) and that what they most feared was irony. And irony is what Unamuno would give them in spades during his exile – not the confusionist irony that he had advocated in *Niebla* but rather something more akin to the satirical voice of Quevedo, “en la que”, as Goti had critically noted in his Prologue, “se ve el sermón en seguida” (Unamuno, *Niebla* 100). The result was a series of poems and articles full of anger and invective and often of scatological references that are much more disturbing than those we encountered at the start of this article. So, for example, Poem 1 of *De Fuerteventura a París* (1925) represents General Primo de Rivera as an ageing and idiotic Don Juan who decides one afternoon, after his siesta, to dress up as Don Quixote. He gets on his Rocinante,

Mas al sentir la no ligera carga  
el pobre bruto, enjuto de sudores,  
tropezó luego, se tendió a la larga,

renunció a la victoria y sus honores  
y tuvo allí Don Juan, mozo de adarga,  
que aligerarse haciendo aguas mayores. (Unamuno, *De Fuerteventura* 12)

And, as an example of his bitterly ironic prose, in this case from an article entitled “De nuevo lo de las responsabilidades”, which appeared in the clandestine broadsheet *Hojas Libres* (Hendaye) on 1 May 1928, we have the following passage about Primo de Rivera, perhaps the most mordant and violent of Unamuno’s career:

¿Pueden tolerar [sus compañeros de armas] que aparezca como elevado por ellos al poder ese degenerado que esparce en su torno vaho de retrete de casa de lenocinio? ... Si fuera un particular, ¿se le podrían pasar esas... genialidades? Y hasta nos reiríamos un momento con ellas – no mucho, porque cansan pronto, ya que maldita la gracia que tienen –; pero no es un particular, sino que es un general, y para baldón de España presidente – siquiera nominal – de un Consejo de Ministros de la Corona, y la risa se convierte en congojoso bochorno. Y si el fofo corpachón le pide mearse en algo, que se mee en la Corona o en la cabeza del Rey, así como cierto ministro de Instrucción Pública dicen que se meó en el tintero de su despacho del Ministerio al tener que dejarlo. Que se mee en la Corona endulzándola así, y bien meada estará; pero ¿en España? Ni nos hace falta saber con qué mea. ¡Que se lo guarde! (Unamuno, *Political Speeches* 78-79).

Throughout *Hojas Libres* and *Cómo se hace una novela*, Unamuno justifies such righteous anger by saying that he feels the same “santo desdén” as that of the great “proscritos y desdeñosos” of the past: Dante, Mazzini, Hugo – even

Moses and St Paul (Unamuno, *Cómo se hace* 192). But he also knew that the political situation was making it ever more difficult for him to put his “humorismo confusionista” into practice or to call attention to the nimbus that surrounds ideas and beliefs and helps to undermine their capacity to divide and polarise. From this perspective, it is doubly tragic to find the man who had done so much to break down the Manichaeism of Spanish intellectual and political life lost at the end of his own life in the no man’s land between what he called “los hunos” and “los hotros” (Unamuno, *El resentimiento* 43). The Civil War would end up defeating Unamuno’s tragicomic project and reducing his voice to silence.

## NOTES

1. For more detailed analyses of *En torno al casticismo*, see Ramsden; Shaw; Fox 112-23; Berchem and Laitenberger; Juaristi; Rabaté, *Crise intellectuelle*; Rabaté, *Guerra de ideas* 87-121; Hoyle; Ardila 33-65.

2. For an overview of Unamuno’s concept of *nimbo*, see Álvarez Castro, *La palabra y el ser*, 133-136.

3. For an analysis of Unamuno’s Quixotism, see Ferrater Mora 81-99; Close; Cerezo Galán 311-371; Storm 212-218 and 289-309; Britt Arredondo 75-89 and 131-143.

4. Unamuno will return to this idea in his major exile work *Cómo se hace una novela* (1927): see Unamuno, *Cómo se hace* 169-180.

5. See Vauthier, *Niebla de Miguel de Unamuno* and *Arte de escribir*. Other critics who have touched upon this idea include Batchelor, *Unamuno Novelist* 150-189; Olson, *Niebla*; Vilanova, “La teoría nivolesca”; Øveraas, *Nivola contra novela*; Longhurst, *Unamuno’s Theory of the Novel*.

6. On the many Shakespearean echoes in *Niebla*, see Roberts, “Oyéndose casualmente”.

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