

# The Lessons of *San Manuel Bueno, mártir*



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A writer of fiction puts something of himself not only into one but into all the characters of a given book, however different, however opposed they may be. And if he puts something of himself into a principal character, he puts just as much that is the opposite of himself: thus he is in the character, but the character is not he.

—Henry de Montherlant,  
Preface, *Chaos and Night*

Miguel de Unamuno—philosopher, novelist, essayist, poet, dramatist, as well as teacher, university president, and national politician—was long regarded as the greatest and most original literary figure of the twentieth century in Spain. But in the last few decades, as the canon wars rage, his stock as a Dead White Male has declined seriously, to the point where many (especially some feminists, Marxists, and post-modernists) refuse to read, write, teach, or even talk about him.<sup>1</sup> My

<sup>1</sup> One strong indication of Unamuno's fall from critical grace in recent years can be seen in the decline of scholarship devoted to him and his work. The annual MLA Bibliography, because of its comprehensiveness and recognized authority, is arguably the single best indicator of a writer's stance in the critical canon. Here it is clear that Unamuno has lost ground in the final quarter of the twentieth century. In the decade 1966–75 there were 415 entries for Unamuno in the MLA Bibliography, which placed him at the top of all twentieth-century Spanish writers (Lorca was second with 299 entries). Twenty-five years later, in the final decade of the century, 1991–2000, Unamuno had 182 entries and had fallen to fifth in the relative “standings” of twentieth-century writers (behind Lorca, Machado, Valle-Inclán, and Miguel Hernández).

goal in this essay is not to try to rehabilitate the fading reputation of Unamuno, but to take one of his works of fiction—*San Manuel Bueno, mártir* [*Saint Manuel Bueno, Martyr*] (*SMB* hereafter), the tale of an unbelieving priest—and derive some lessons from it.

## I

*SMB* is the story of Don Manuel Bueno, who is born and raised in the small village of Valverde de Lucerna and, after his seminary education, returns to the village as priest and spends the remainder of his life there. Always a kind, gentle, and loving man, Don Manuel works tirelessly on behalf of his poor, rural, uneducated parishioners, always with them in their fields as they work and in their homes when they are ill or facing death. He gives selflessly and energetically of himself, doing everything possible to make the lives of his flock more comfortable and bearable. His majestic bearing and gentle ways, his resonant and inspiring voice, and his example of Christian sacrifice, make him appear saintly in the eyes of everyone who knows him. When, during the Easter services, he speaks the words of Christ on the cross—“¡Dios mío, Dios mío!, ¿por qué me has abandonado?” [My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?]<sup>2</sup>—it is as if those words emanate directly from the Lord himself. At the time of his death he asks to be brought to the church and, on a bed placed before the altar, surrounded by his closest friends, and in the presence of the entire local populace, leads the people one last time in the *Credo*, dying during the prayer. Some while after his death the bishop of the diocese begins to gather information and testimony about Don Manuel, with the hope of initiating a process of beatification that will lead to the eventual canonization of the local saint.

But, it turns out, the story is not quite as simple as it first appears. Don Manuel had a secret that in his lifetime only two persons ever learn: he is an atheist; he does not believe in the afterlife or the resurrection of the immortal soul. He has lived a lie all his adult life, sacrificing, like a martyr, his own true belief for the sake of his

<sup>2</sup>Unamuno, *San Manuel Bueno, mártir*, ed. Mario Valdés, 101–02. Subsequent references in the text are to this edition. Translations from Unamuno’s works are from his *Selected Works* volumes listed in the Works Cited and identified by page number; or, for works not included in these published works, the translations are my own, in which case they are not identified by a page number. All other translations from Spanish are my own.

innocent and ignorant parishioners. The person who first learns Don Manuel's secret is one Lázaro Carballino, a local who has spent years in some part of Spanish America, where he has accumulated a substantial fortune (in Spanish Golden Age terminology, he is a classic *indiano*) and then returns to his native village. Lázaro returns from the New World an atheist and social activist. He is disdainful of the local bumpkins and wants to move his mother and sister to a large, progressive city. But, like everyone else, as he gets to know the local priest he is impressed by what seems to be his genuine decency and intelligence. The two of them begin to spend time together, taking long walks down by the ruins of an old monastery on the shore of the local lake. Eventually, a miracle occurs: Lázaro announces that he will convert to Christianity and take communion. The entire village perceives this as a wonderful triumph of God over unbelief and celebrates the conversion. There is a small accident when Don Manuel administers the communion ceremony: the priest nervously drops the communion host, but Lázaro picks it up and places it in his own mouth.<sup>3</sup> When Lázaro and his sister Ángela return home and Ángela makes the comment that the entire village is so happy to see the conversion, Lázaro states that that was exactly why it was done: to make everyone happy. The conversion was not authentic, but a show for the good of the people. In the ensuing years, Lázaro becomes Don Manuel's right hand in his work on behalf of the people of the village. Even though the two men themselves do not believe, they do everything possible to reinforce the simple belief of the people and to make their lives more comfortable.

Also implicated in the secret and in the work on behalf of the villagers is Lázaro's sister Ángela, who is, in many ways, the most important and interesting character in the entire story.<sup>4</sup> In fact, she is responsible for it. *SMB* is presented as a first-person narrative written by Ángela, after the deaths of Don Manuel and Lázaro, when she is about fifty years old.<sup>5</sup> As well as a partial biography of Don Manuel, it is also the

<sup>3</sup>This is an invalidation of the ceremony of Holy Communion (Andrachuk); significantly, at this moment, a cock crows—as it did in the New Testament when Peter denied Christ.

<sup>4</sup>Reed Anderson has also proposed that Ángela be considered “as the novel's ‘main character’” (68).

<sup>5</sup>Appended to Ángela's narrative is a brief editorial statement by Unamuno, commenting on how he came to have possession of the manuscript and on the themes of the story and the characters. Many scholars would insist that the voice of the epilogue is that of a fictional character, rather than the actual author Unamuno, but I believe that this conventional distinction is unnecessary (see Mancing).

story of how she comes to learn of the priest's secret,<sup>6</sup> what happens after that, and how it affects her. Her story is, as much as anything, Ángela's own heartfelt confession. She states that she is not really sure why she is writing or what she intends to do with her document, but she does not trust the bishop who has requested a statement from her as part of his beatification campaign. She ends her confession questioning her own memory, and her own faith, and wondering if perhaps both her brother and Don Manuel died believing they did not believe but in fact believing very deeply.

## II

Unamuno was obsessed throughout his life with the sort of questions that plague his character Don Manuel: the nature of the human soul, the possibility of an afterlife, the existence of God. His philosophical treatise *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida en los hombres y en los pueblos* [*The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations*] (1913), is a protoexistentialist meditation on precisely these matters. As Unamuno states in the opening paragraph of the meditation, his concern is “ni lo humano ni la humanidad, ni el adjetivo simple, ni el adjetivo sustantivo, sino el sustantivo concreto: el hombre. El hombre de carne y hueso, el que nace, sufre y muere—sobre todo muere [ . . . ]” (20) [neither ‘the human’ nor ‘humanity,’ neither the simple adjective nor the substantivized adjective, but the concrete substantive: man, the man of flesh and blood, the man who is born, suffers, and dies—above all, who dies, (3)]. These are concerns that appear throughout everything Unamuno ever wrote, and I won't attempt to document his obsession with such matters, but later I will cite his very famous short essay entitled “Mi religión” [My Religion] first published in a newspaper in 1907, and other statements of his.

That Don Manuel shares many of the same concerns about the fate of a soul after death, that his preoccupations seem to reflect those of the author, and that this tale of an unbelieving priest seems to be

<sup>6</sup>The scene in which Ángela learns from her brother of the priest's profound unbelief is by all standards the climax of the novel; see, for example, Blanco Aguinaga (“Relectura” 109). Lázaro explains how Don Manuel refuses to answer the question about his own belief by saying, “Y así es como le arranqué su secreto” (122) [And it was in this way that I came to understand his secret (157)] To which a horrified Ángela's response is, she writes, “—¡Lázaro!—gemí” [“Lázaro” I moaned]. It is no accident that these lines are located at the exact center of the story: by my count, 6142 words (49.9% of the total) precede it and 6163 words (50.1%) follow it.

Unamuno's last major reflection on the subject, are unanimously recognized. But herein lies the problem of much of the criticism that has grown up around the novel. Because the fictional Don Manuel Bueno and the historical Don Miguel de Unamuno share many of the same philosophical concerns, many—probably the majority of—readers have equated the two, assuming and affirming that Don Manuel is Unamuno's alter ego, the spokesperson for his most profound beliefs.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, much that has been written about this novel conflates Unamuno and Don Manuel, author and character, and what is believed to be true about one is assumed necessarily to be true about the other. The priest's fervent activity on behalf of his parishioners is very often seen as representing Unamuno's own attempt to make the tired perceptions of traditional Christianity meaningful in a modern world.

There have been dozens, perhaps hundreds, of essays, articles, book chapters, and books written about *SMB*. Rather than review in detail that critical tradition, I will make some general observations about some of the main currents that run through this criticism. Once the Don Manuel = Unamuno assumption is made, most readings take one of two forms. In the first, Don Manuel is a true martyr, working tirelessly for the spiritual benefit of his beloved parishioners and personifying the positive values of the very Christian faith in which he personally could not believe. This position thus becomes a reflection of the author's own Christian beliefs. In the second, Don Manuel reflects his author's cynical endorsement of blind faith, *la fe del carbonero* [the faith of the charcoal burner] (a proverbial phrase that Unamuno used on several occasions), for the masses, while atheism is allowed to the thinking person. Both versions, but especially the second, often posit a crisis of faith for Unamuno in 1930 that makes possible an endorsement of Don Manuel's belief, deeds, and life, radically at odds with all he stood for during the majority of his life. The most influential study in which the latter position is forcefully argued is that of A. Sánchez Barbudo (originally published in 1959). Sánchez Barbudo describes a religious crisis in Unamuno's life in the year 1930 and then affirms that *SMB* is the author's "testamento religioso" (239) [religious testament],

<sup>7</sup>For example, Antonio Regalado García: "El extraordinario valor de *San Manuel Bueno* está en ser más que una novela, una autobiografía del espíritu de su creador, que incluye en ella su posición final ante los trascendentales problemas que le inquietaron y le justificaron su vida" (204–05) [The extraordinary value of *San Manuel Bueno* resides in the fact that it is, more than a novel, its creator's spiritual autobiography, that within it is included his final position with regard to the transcendental problems that troubled him and justified his life].

adding that “él se identificaba con el párroco y parece absolverse al absolver al cura” (245) [he identified with the parish priest and seems to absolve himself when he absolves the priest], thus renouncing a stance that he had maintained throughout his life.

Writing about the same time as Sánchez Barbudo, however, Carlos Blanco Aguinaga, in a fundamental essay on *SMB*, acknowledges the apparent conflict between the “Unamuno agonista y despertador de conciencias” (“Sobre la complejidad” 571) [Unamuno the agonist and awakener of consciences] and the beliefs and actions of Don Manuel. In a nuanced consideration of the text, Blanco Aguinaga stresses that we should not read all of Unamuno’s creative works (poetry, theater, fiction) as essays and that *SMB* is a very ambiguous aesthetic text that both stands on its own and should be understood as a challenging and original work of fiction.<sup>8</sup>

A resounding refutation of Sánchez Barbudo’s thesis was written in a classic article by Ciriaco Morón Arroyo. Rejecting the idea of a religious crisis near the time of writing the novel, Morón Arroyo also refutes the claim that Unamuno ever endorsed the position taken by his fictional priest. Rather, he insists—and demonstrates in some detail—this work is consistent with the major themes and concepts that permeate all of Unamuno’s work. Perhaps the most important and convincing modern complement to Morón Arroyo’s essay is that of M. Gordon, in which he provides new and even more discerning arguments in favor of separating Unamuno and Don Manuel. Gordon’s unequivocal conclusion is that, in the whole context of Unamuno’s lifetime of writing, *SMB* “represents no radical new departure, no new conversion or consoling balm” (161).

The problem with all the positions that equate author and character is that they simplify the matter enormously, they improperly read the author’s biography into the text, and they lead to essentialist and simplistic, rather than nuanced and subtle, understandings. Don Manuel and Unamuno have basically the same sorts of spiritual concerns: the nature of the human being, the purpose of life, the soul, the existence of God,<sup>9</sup> and life after death. But this does not mean that the solutions

<sup>8</sup>In a later essay Blanco Aguinaga both reaffirms the validity of his original work and slightly modifies his original profound differences with Sánchez Barbudo by suggesting that *SMB* probably is in fact a reflection of its author’s state of mind late in his life (“Relectura” 112–15).

<sup>9</sup>John Butt calls into question Don Manuel’s atheism, noting that nowhere does Ángela ever say, or cite either Don Manuel or Lázaro as saying, that the priest does not believe in God, only that he does not believe in the soul’s immortality. It is true

they propose must be identical. For if author and character are similar in some ways, there are also some fundamental differences between them. For example, during the time he was writing *SMB*, in which Don Manuel forcefully rejects social action (see below), Unamuno was engaged in his characteristically fervent political activities (see Butt 24–31). Rather than equating Unamuno and Don Manuel and assuming that the latter is the spokesperson for the former, I suggest that quite the opposite is the case: I propose that Unamuno uses Don Manuel as a test case to illustrate what might happen if one started with his exact concerns and then acted in a way almost diametrically opposed to the option he chose throughout his life.

### III

Earlier I referred to Unamuno's essay "Mi religión." In this short piece, Unamuno responds to a question from a friend in Chile about the nature of his religious beliefs. Refusing to be pigeonholed, to be identified with any traditional religious label (such as Catholic, Baptist, or atheist), Unamuno insists that his religion is to struggle with the question of God throughout his life, even in the full knowledge that he will never find a definitive answer. The important thing, he affirms, is not to engage in what he calls "pereza espiritual" (259) [spiritual sloth (209)]: either ignoring the question completely or simply accepting someone else's answer (such as those provided by parents, the church, or a professor). If he believes at all in God, he says, it is because he *wants* to believe. If he lives his life as though trying to earn a life after death, it is because he *hopes* there is an afterlife. He struggles with God, as Jacob wrestled with God in the Old Testament, not in hopes of a victory or a revelation, but because the battle itself is noble. And he ends the essay by stating that those who want answers should look elsewhere:

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that at one moment, in response to a pressing question by Ángela about belief, Don Manuel responds "¡Creo!" (125) [I believe! (161)], but when Ángela asks him what it is he believes, the priest responds, "¡Mira, hija, dejemos eso!" (126) [My child, leave off, leave off! (161)]. So it is not clear whether this affirmation of belief is the truth, a lie, an equivocation, or in just what, if anything, Don Manuel might "believe." It is not, however, inappropriate to make the inference that when someone says he does not believe in life after death (and that neither did Christ himself) and other central tenets of Christian belief, that there is little room for any meaningful concept of a Christian God. I find it most consistent with the novel as a whole to assume Don Manuel's basic (agonizing, anguished) atheism.

Y yo, para concluir, les diré que si quieren soluciones acudan a la tienda de enfrente, porque en la mía no se vende semejante artículo. Mi empeño ha sido, es y será que los que me lean piensen y mediten en las cosas fundamentales, y no ha sido nunca el de darles pensamientos hechos. Yo he buscado siempre agitar, y a lo sumo, sugerir más que instruir. Si yo vendo pan no es pan, sino levadura o fermento. (263)<sup>10</sup>

And I, in conclusion, will tell them that if they want solutions, to step over to the stand across the street, for I do not carry any such line of goods. My endeavor has been, still is, and will always be to make those who read me think and meditate on fundamentals. I have always sought to agitate and, at most, to suggest rather than instruct. If I start to sell bread, it will not be bread, but yeast and leavening. (216)

There is a moment in the novel when Lázaro suggests starting a union for the workers in order to better their economic status. But Don Manuel is opposed to the idea, insisting that they should have nothing to do with the economic or material status of the masses. Then, alluding to Karl Marx's famous dictum, he adds:

Si, ya sé que uno de esos caudillos de la que llaman la revolución social ha dicho que la religión es el opio del pueblo. Opio [. . . ], opio [. . . ] Opio, sí. Démosle opio, y que duerma y que sueñe. Yo mismo, con esta mi loca actividad, me estoy administrando opio. (133)

I know well enough that one of those leaders of what they call the Social Revolution said that religion is the opium of the people. Opium [. . . ] Opium [. . . ] Yes, opium it is. We should give them opium, and help them sleep, and dream. I, myself, with my mad activity am giving myself opium. (166)

This is, I believe, the most horrible passage in the novel.<sup>11</sup> It is here that the fundamental and irreconcilable differences between Unamuno and Don Manuel are most clearly delineated. Unamuno sells yeast, wants to agitate, educate, make people think. Don Manuel sells drugs,

<sup>10</sup>In several essays written very shortly after this one—"Verdad y vida" [Truth and Life], "De la correspondencia de un luchador" [From a Fighter's Correspondence], "Los escritores y el pueblo" [Writers and the People], and others—and later published in book form with "Mi religión," Unamuno repeatedly insists on the same themes: sincerity is a supreme virtue; lying is the worst of vices; the so-called "pious fraud" (see n20) should not be advocated; peace is often based on a lie; we should struggle for the truth; the common man wants a comforting illusion but should be forced to confront the truth; and so forth.

<sup>11</sup>It is significant that many of those readers who want to see Don Manuel as a true Christian saint and martyr often ignore or gloss over this passage. The attempt of Cerezo Galán (726–29) to explain it away as irony and to invert it into an affirmative statement is completely unconvincing.



wants to calm, soothe, keep people from thinking. Toward the end of his *Sentimiento trágico* Unamuno writes that he would add to the Christian Catechism that it is a work of mercy to wake up those who are asleep: “No hay que darse opio, sino poner vinagre y sal en la herida del alma, porque cuando te duermas y no sientas ya el dolor, es que no eres. Y hay que ser” (257–58) [There is no point in taking opium; it is better to put salt and vinegar in the soul’s wound, for if you fall asleep and no longer feel the pain, then you no longer exist (307)]. The contrast with the doctrine espoused by Don Manuel could not be greater. Shortly after that, in the conclusion to *Sentimiento trágico*, Unamuno recapitulates and summarizes his intentions:

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. (288)

But the truth is that my work—my mission, I was about to say—is to shatter the faith of men, left, right, and center; their faith in affirmation, their faith in negation, their faith in abstention, and I do so from faith in faith itself. My purpose is to war on all those who submit, whether to Catholicism, or to rationalism, or to agnosticism. My aim is to make all men live a life of restless longing. (349)

Later, in a short essay entitled “Almas sencillas” [Simple Souls] published in 1933, Unamuno specifically warned—as writers often have to do—against those “simple [in the sense of childlike] souls” who insist on equating the beliefs and statements of fictional characters and their authors. In this case, says Unamuno, if anything, Don Manuel speaks through him, not he through his character. Then, somewhat confusingly, he first restates his life-long program—“hay que despertar al durmiente que sueña el sueño que es la vida” (1200) [we should wake up the sleeper who is dreaming the dream that is life]—and then in the same paragraph goes on to write, “que cuando por obra de caridad se le engaña a un pueblo, no importa que se le declare que se le está engañando, pues creará en el engaño y no en la declaración. *Mundus vult decipi*; el mundo quiere ser engañado. Sin el engaño no vivirá” (1200) [for when as a work of charity we deceive a people, it does not matter that we declare that we are deceiving them, because they will believe in the deceit and not in the declaration. *Mundus vult decipi*; the world wants to be deceived. It could not live without deceit]. He then adds, somewhat like Don Manuel and the Grand Inquisitor

(see below), “¡Se paga tan cara una conciencia clara! ¡Es tan doloroso mirar a la verdad!” (1200) [The price of a clean conscience is very high! It is so painful to look at the truth!]. But he concludes by citing the famous biblical admonition that “la verdad os hará libres” (1201) [the truth shall set you free] (1201), hardly an endorsement of Don Manuel’s lies. Overall, the essay by itself is not sufficient to convince (me, at least) that Unamuno had changed his mind and renounced the values he worked for all his life.

But, it may not be that simple. Several scholars, in addition to Sánchez Barbudo, have pointed out that in addition to his life-long campaign to teach, energize, and agitate, Unamuno made frequent cynical statements about the ignorance and intellectual laziness of the simple, rural people of Spain; see, for example Jurkevich. In these writings, Unamuno—the paradoxical, inconsistent, ambiguous, self-contradictory, self-confident, self-doubting, ironic, uncertain, oxymoronic, complex Unamuno—specifically evokes the words and images of Don Manuel’s idea of not awakening the sleeping masses. Overall, however, as indicated above, the effect of these scattered statements is far from sufficient to counterbalance cancel the effect of the opposite stance, the stance that best characterizes Unamuno’s long life of teaching, writing, and political activism. That is, unless Unamuno himself explicitly stated, in clear and non-equivocal terms that he endorsed the ideology of his fictional priest. And he may have done so.

The Greek poet, novelist, and essayist Nikos Kazantzakis long admired Unamuno and visited him in Salamanca in October, 1936, shortly before Unamuno’s death. Kazantzakis included an account of that meeting in a book entitled *Ispania* (1937): *Spain* (1963). This fascinating account has been surprisingly ignored by Unamuno scholars;<sup>12</sup> in it, Kazantzakis describes visiting Unamuno’s house in Salamanca and finding the philosopher aged and infirm. Before the visitor can open his mouth, Unamuno begins to rant at some length, exclaiming that

<sup>12</sup>The only significant reference to the Kazantzakis passage that I have seen is in Gregorio Selser’s essay on Unamuno’s recantation of his support for the Nationalist uprising in 1936 and his heroic public criticism of General José Millán Astray’s espousal of the Fascist stance of “¡Viva la muerte!” [Long live death!] and “¡Mueran los falsos intelectuales, los traidores, los rojos!” [Death to false intellectuals, traitors, Reds]. Cerezo Galán (832) also makes brief reference to Kazantzakis’ memoir and the *SMB* reference, but does not discuss the matter in any detail. I became aware of what Kazantzakis wrote in the excerpt quoted at some length (111–12) in the “Documentos y juicios críticos” [Documents and Critical Judgments] section of the Castalia Didáctica edition of *SMB*, ed. Joaquín Rubio Tovar.

The face of the truth is terrifying. What is our duty? To hide the truth from the people! [ . . . ] We must deceive the people; deceive them, so that the poor creatures can have the strength and cheerfulness to go on living. If they knew the truth, they couldn't go on. They wouldn't want to live any more. The people need myth, illusion, deception. These are what support their lives. Here, I've written a book on this awful theme—my last book. Take it. [ . . . ] Take it. *The Martyr San Manuel Bueno*. Read it. You'll see. My hero is a Catholic priest who does not believe. But he is struggling to give his people the faith which he himself lacks, and in that way, to give them the strength to live. To live! For he knows that without faith, without hope, the people cannot go on living. (175)

You can't be much more explicit than that. The echo of Don Manuel's words, "¿La verdad? La verdad, Lázaro, es algo terrible, algo intolerable, algo mortal; la gente sencilla no podrá vivir con ella" (122–23) [The truth? The truth, Lázaro, is perhaps something so unbearable, so terrible, something so deadly, that simple people could not live with it! (158)] could not be more exact. But, recall, this scene took place in the final days of Unamuno's life, amidst the fanaticism, death, and destruction of the Spanish Civil War. Assuming that Kazantzakis' report is accurate, it is entirely understandable that the doubt-ridden, anguished, dying writer might lash out in these terms. Unamuno may have believed these sentiments as he said them; he may have believed them during much of the final years of his life. He may not.

But, in the end, it does not really matter what Unamuno himself believed or did not believe, or said or did not say, or wrote or did not write. As John Butt writes in his excellent monograph on *SMB*, we should not attribute a character's attitude to the author; it "is not reasonable to read fiction as though it were autobiographical fact" (79). It is always of interest to have some idea of authorial intentions, but in no case should these intentions (as best we can understand them) *determine* how we read a work. The history of literature abounds with cases where authorial intentions and textual affordances are at odds: Mateo Alemán probably intended *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599, 1604) as an edifying example of the power of Christian redemption, but many understandings of the novel are radically at odds with that intention; Cervantes may have intended *Don Quijote* (1605, 1615) as nothing more than a funny book, a satire and parody of the romances of chivalry, but that is not the way most of us understand the book; Daniel Defoe, like Alemán, appears to have intended his *Moll Flanders* (1722) to illustrate the power of religious redemption, but today most readers understand the novel as an example of how money confers

social respectability; and so on. Today we read *SMB* and not Miguel de Unamuno. And no one knew better than Unamuno that we read and understand the work itself, even if what we understand is in opposition to what we believe the author to have intended. Near the end of *Sentimiento trágico*, Unamuno comments on his own intentions in writing his *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho* [*Life of Don Quixote and Sancho*] (1905):

Escribí aquel libro para repensar el *Quijote* contra cervantistas y eruditos, para hacer obra de vida de lo que era y sigue siendo para los más letra muerta. ¿Qué me importa lo que Cervantes quiso o no quiso poner allí y lo que realmente puso? Lo vivo es lo que yo allí descubro, pusiéralo o no Cervantes, lo que yo allí pongo y sobrepongo y sotopongo, y lo que ponemos allí todos. (278)

I wrote that book in order to think my way through *Don Quixote* again, in the face of Cervantists and scholars, and to resurrect a living work out of what was and is a dead letter for most people. What do I care what Cervantes did or did not mean to put into that book or what he actually put into it? The living part of it for me is whatever I discover in it—whether Cervantes put it there or not—and it is whatever I myself put into or under or over it, and whatever we all of us put into it. (335–36)

Ultimate interpretive authority rests with the reader and is never restricted to authorial intentions.

#### IV

It is legitimate, indeed obligatory, to recognize in this case that novelist and character share fundamental concerns, but it is not legitimate to assume that one equals the other. But, given the basic relationship between the two, it is necessary to acknowledge that while Unamuno's nonfiction writings and biography may in some ways illuminate or inform our understanding of the novel, what we read is the novel, not Unamuno's other writings or his life. And when we read a novel each of us constructs an understanding of that work. Let me repeat: *we* readers each *construct* the meaning of the work. This means at least three important things. First, the text *affords*—allows us to construct—a number of possible understandings (as the critical history of *SMB* illustrates), but not just any understanding.<sup>13</sup> Second, the language of

<sup>13</sup>The term “affordance” comes from psychologist James J. Gibson: “The *affordances* of the environment are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill” (127). Along with McCormick, I suggest that literary texts afford us certain readings, but not others.

the text also *constrains* the possible range of meanings.<sup>14</sup> No one can honestly claim that *SMB* is an auto-repair manual, a study of rape and incest, or a retelling of an episode from “The Simpsons.” And third, just as the text constrains understanding, so too is understanding of a text constrained by the individual mind. Someone who does not know Catholic dogma and misses the significance of the dropped communion wafer, or who does not recognize the reference to Karl Marx and the opium of the people, or who fails to see how Ángela’s narrative undercuts the reliability of the story she relates, will of necessity understand *SMB* in ways different from those whose experiences enable them to see the significance of these elements. Someone who is incapable of thinking that a human being can simultaneously be an atheist and a good person will not be able to view Don Manuel in the same way as one who knows that being Christian does not necessarily entail being morally superior to someone who is not.

Just as the neuronal structure of every person’s brain is unique, so every individual’s mental schemata—generalized knowledge structures—built up over a lifetime of perception, experiences, memories, and thoughts, are different.<sup>15</sup> Because of our species’ evolutionary inheritance and the general commonality of our cultural, personal, and social backgrounds, we all share the great majority of our schemata, at least in a general sense. Thus, all readers of *SMB* share a substantial degree of unanimity about what takes place in the story. But it is not just *what happens* that matters, it is *why it happens* and *what we understand to be its significance* that is important.

*Meaning* is always *meaning to* (or, better perhaps: *understanding is always understanding by*) an embodied, imaginative, contextualized agent; meaning (understanding) is an active construct. No one has discussed this better than M. M. Bakhtin. For Bakhtin, meaning does not exist already *in* an utterance or *in* a text, waiting to be discovered by a listener or a reader or about to impose itself on a passive subject; rather, meaning must be actively constructed by the listener or the reader. The co-creative role of the listener or reader, the active nature of understanding or meaning-construction, and the dialogic relationships that exist among all participants in communicative situations, are all consistent with today’s cognitive approach to linguistics and the

<sup>14</sup>For the concept of constraint as a complement to affordance, see Hunt and Vipond.

<sup>15</sup>On schemata and image schemas as crucial structures of knowledge and understanding, see Arbib and Hesse, Johnson (*Body in the Mind*), Neisser, and Rumelhart.

reading process.<sup>16</sup> For Bakhtin, all true understanding is “sympathetic” (*Art and Answerability* 102–03), “creative,” “inherently responsive,” and “active-dialogic” (*Speech Genres* 7, 68, 159):

In the actual life of speech, every concrete act of understanding is active: it assimilates the world to be understood into its own conceptual system filled with specific objects and emotional expressions, and is indissolubly merged with the response, with a motivated agreement or disagreement. *To some extent, primacy belongs to the response, as the activating principle:* it creates the ground for understanding, it prepares the ground for an active and engaged understanding. Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other. (*Dialogic Imagination* 282; emphasis added).

Our individual understandings and valuations of the story differ because Don Manuel’s beliefs and deeds, and parts of Ángela’s narrative, are what cognitive linguist George Lakoff calls *contested concepts*: “concepts for which everybody seems to have a different idea of what the concept is” (223). That is, there are no commonly-agreed-upon meanings for concepts like “good,” “Christian,” “religion,” “manipulation,” “lie,” “confess,” and much more.<sup>17</sup> Rather, these ideas are understood differently by each of us, even when we agree that we are talking about the same things.<sup>18</sup>

## V

Therefore, the only lesson from Don Manuel that I can write about is the lesson that I understand from my experience with the novel. It is not the lesson in the text, for there is no lesson in the text. It is not the lesson of the implied reader (the supposed ideal reader in

<sup>16</sup>As is the case with Bakhtin (see also Shepherd), Louise M. Rosenblatt’s work in the decade of the 1930s and subsequently make her a precursor of contemporary cognitive research and theory on reading. For examples of the latter, see Crawford and Chaffin, Gerrig, Olson, and Smith.

<sup>17</sup>Perhaps the critic who has best explored the implications of such contested concepts as “religion” and “belief” in Unamuno’s writings, especially *SMB*, is Nicholas G. Round.

<sup>18</sup>It is in cases like these contested concepts that code theories of language break down. There is simply no way to “decode” an idea like “belief” or “Christian,” especially as they are used in an ambiguous context like *SMB*. These words are not simply signs that represent (signify) something, but are contextualized cognitive concepts that must be actively understood by embodied agents who understand language in terms of what is relevant and meaningful to them (see Sperber and Wilson).

the text, or the reader constructed by the text) for there is no such thing. It is simply what I have come to understand after years of reading and teaching the novel, reading and contemplating the criticism, and talking about it all with students and colleagues.

And in my view, the lesson of Don Manuel Bueno is entirely a negative one. For I see Don Manuel as one of those self-appointed conservative intellectual élites who believe that while they can struggle with the important philosophical, religious, political, economic, and/or social issues, the masses cannot. The poor, pathetic common people just aren't up to handling the hard problems, so they shouldn't be bothered with them. Let's just give them answers that don't necessarily satisfy those of us who must shoulder the burden of doubt and anguish in order to keep them happy and out of our way. It's probably a good idea if, along the way, we keep them ignorant, poor, obedient, and compliant, since that will make our job easier. Those readers who maintain that Don Manuel acts out of a sense of duty to his fellow human beings, and that he is a highly ethically motivated martyr on their behalf (see, for example, Glannon), are, I believe, very wrong. Such readers close their eyes to his cynicism, hypocrisy, and lies, and try to sugarcoat his despicable actions. It is hard for me to believe that there are actually intellectually honest readers who fail to react with outrage when Don Manuel says he wants to drug people to keep them content.

The prototype for this sort of figure is Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor, the protagonist of the cautionary tale told by Ivan Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov* (288–311).<sup>19</sup> In Ivan's story, Christ returns to earth but is locked in a prison in order to keep him from the people, because they are incapable of understanding and dealing with what he would have to say. The Grand Inquisitor and his fellow leaders know the 'truths' about ultimate realities but feed simplistic, comforting, pabulum to the masses.<sup>20</sup> As the Inquisitor, anticipating Don Manuel's words, tells his prisoner Christ:

<sup>19</sup>The Grand Inquisitor-Don Manuel relationship has frequently been noted before, but (with the exception of Larson; see n23 below) most frequently—as in Cerezo Galán's forceful effort (717–18)—in order to stress the differences between the Russian and Spanish writers, and certainly not with the degree of negative interpretation that I suggest here.

<sup>20</sup>The origin of this concept is apparently Plato's *Republic* and has become known as "the noble lie" or "pious fraud": the guardians, or rulers, of Plato's imagined city promulgate a myth about origins that supposedly makes those ruled content with their inferior status. Mere truth is sacrificed to what is considered a greater good—social stability and contentment. The social and moral order are preserved by means of a

[The masses will bring everything to us and] we shall give them our decision for it all, and they will be glad to believe in our decision, because it will relieve them of their great anxiety and of their present terrible torments of coming to a free decision themselves. And they will all be happy, all the millions of creatures, except the hundred thousand who rule over them. For we alone, we who guard the mystery, we alone shall be unhappy. There will be thousands of millions of happy infants and one hundred thousand sufferers who have taken upon themselves the curse of knowledge of good and evil. Peacefully they will die, peacefully will they pass away in your name, and beyond the grave they will find nothing but death. But we shall keep the secret and for their own happiness will entice them with the reward of heaven and eternity. For even if there were anything at all in the next world, it would not of course be for such as they. (304)

In addition to Dostoevsky, one of the best and most powerful explorations of the sort of non-questioning happiness that Don Manuel promotes is Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, published in 1939, only a few years after *SMB*. As opposed to George Orwell's world in *1984* (1949) of constant observation and brutal repression, Huxley anticipated a world in which drugs and soporific culture made surveillance and repression unnecessary. In Huxley's brave new world the motto of the World State is "Community, Identity, Stability," a theme Don Manuel would endorse (as would many conservative ideologues in contemporary America). Genetic engineering and a steady supply of the drug *soma* (more effective than Don Manuel's opium) results in a world in which a few Controllers (rather like Dostoevsky's Inquisitor) make sure that everyone is satisfied and happy in their ignorance and happiness. "'Stability,' insisted the Controller, 'stability. The primal and the ultimate need'" (28). In two chapters (16 and 17) near the end of the novel, Controller Mustapha Mond speaks at length about the value of keeping the masses drugged and happy:

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paternalistic dishonesty. Interestingly, biologist Paul R. Ehrlich describes today's anti-evolution Christian creationists and their neoconservative political spokespersons in precisely these terms: "American neoconservatives promote creationism because, as their own statements reveal, they apparently fear an educated population and see the theory of evolution as a threat to the religious beliefs they deem essential to keeping society from disintegrating" (324). In a long footnote to this passage, Ehrlich adds that perhaps these neoconservative journalists and politicians "support what Plato regarded as the noble lie—in this case, preserving the faith of the common people in Genesis and thus in social order. Stratification rears its head as usual, and neoconservatives apparently take their cue from Karl Marx in treating religion as the opiate of the people" (430 n111).



The world's stable now. People are happy; they get what they want, and they never want what they can't get. [. . .] Actual happiness always looks pretty squalid in comparison with the over-compensations for misery. And, of course, stability isn't nearly so spectacular as instability. And being contented has none of the glamour of a good fight against misfortune, none of the picturesqueness of a struggle with temptation or a fatal overthrow by passion or doubt. Happiness is never grand. (149–50)

We should be ever vigilant of those who claim to want to make us happy, whether by drugs, belief systems, or entertainment.<sup>21</sup>

For me, Don Manuel is like those individuals (some parents, politicians, professors: Inquisitors all) and those institutions (some governments, churches, universities: Inquisitions all) that paternalistically want to tell you what is good for you rather than have you decide for yourself. Don Manuel is, in other words, the antithesis of some of the values that, like many others, I personally hold most dear. With philosopher Mark Johnson, I believe that “Our aim ought to be, above all else, to enhance the dignity of human beings by making it possible for them to direct their own lives” (112). Like Unamuno throughout most of his life and Johnson, I believe that it is important to respect others (that is, treat them as moral equals) and encourage them to learn, think, challenge, and question. Don Manuel wants not to liberate others so that they can *tell* their own story, but wants instead to *give* them a story, one that is for him a fiction. Unamuno's brilliance in *SMB* is to make Don Manuel such a superficially attractive figure—with early emphasis on his good deeds and exemplary spiritual leadership—that it is difficult for many to perceive the ugly truth that lies beneath the surface appearance. Don Manuel himself is like the beautiful heaven and the majestic mountain deceptively reflected on the surface of the lake near the town of Valverde de Lucerna.<sup>22</sup> Some

<sup>21</sup>The comparison between the visions of the future of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley is also discussed at various points by Neil Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, a ringing critique of modern American culture (a culture drugged into ignorance by mass media, especially television) that ends with these words: “What I suggest here as a solution is what Aldous Huxley suggested, as well. And I can do no better than he. He believed with H. G. Wells that we are in a race between education and disaster, and he wrote continuously about the necessity of our understanding the politics and epistemology of media. For in the end, he was trying to tell us that what afflicted the people in *Brave New World* was not that they were laughing instead of thinking, but that they did not know what they were laughing about and why they had stopped thinking” (163).

<sup>22</sup>The *lago* [lake] (doubt, despair, death) and the *montaña* [mountain] (faith, energy, life) are the two main symbols in *SMB*. Their function in the story has been discussed frequently in the criticism, but much remains to be considered with regard to these two

readers have been (to use a popular term) “brainwashed” by parents, religious figures, politicians, and/or figures in the popular media, to the extent that they can’t even conceive, let alone perceive, that anything more than the superficial meaning even exists. Others—the elitists, the manipulators, the Inquisitors—know that an alternative understanding of Don Manuel’s lesson is there, but for them that’s the way the world is, and since they’re among those who profit from keeping the masses ignorant and happy, so be it.

A number of critics have insisted that while Don Manuel may reject Christianity for himself, he sincerely believes that it enriches the lives of those who do believe in it, and therefore he truly is a saint and a martyr in his *de facto* Christian efforts to make his parishioners more fulfilled and happier.<sup>23</sup> I disagree. *If* Don Manuel truly thinks that the believing people of Valverde de Lucerna lead richer, more fulfilled, happier lives because of his lies—something which I doubt—then he is, I suggest, wrong on two counts of the three. A life that depends on lies and hypocrisy can be neither richer nor more fulfilled—but it can be happier. There is good reason for the popularity of the proverb that states, “Ignorance is bliss.” The happiest person in Valverde is Blasillo, the village idiot, who believes everything (to the extent that he can actually believe anything) and constantly goes around parroting Don Manuel’s (and Christ’s) “Dios mío, Dios mío, ¿por qué me has abandonado?” Blas is Don Manuel’s perfect Christian: an idiot who believes anything.<sup>24</sup> Don Manuel may make his followers happier,

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powerful symbols. It is significant that the word *lago* is mentioned fully twice as often (41 times) as is *montaña* (20 times, including one reference to the mountain’s name, la Peña del Buitre, and one *brisa montañosa* [mountain breeze]) in Ángela’s narrative. Each word is mentioned twice more in the final lines of the postscript written by Unamuno, who has come into possession of Ángela’s manuscript. The only other scholar who has commented on the frequency of these two words is Hugo Rodríguez-Alcalá (412).

<sup>23</sup>Kevin S. Larson has provocatively and perceptively proposed that, according to most accepted standards of Christianity, Don Manuel’s parishioners will not gain the afterlife, even if it exists. Blind faith, one that never struggles with doubt or reason, does not earn eternal life: “Don Manuel is, then, a false savior, one who damns rather than saves, one who causes sin rather than atoning for it. Despite or even because of his apparent sincerity, he is an anti-Christ of the most insidious sort, leading people away from Christ in His name. His contempt for his people, however unconscious it may be, is no less real and no less destructive than that of Dostoevsky’s character” (110).

<sup>24</sup>Blas is a common, rustic, name in Spain, but in the context of *SMB* it also carries two interesting connotations. First, it is the equivalent of the French *Blaise* and as such cannot help but evoke Blaise Pascal who is cited (but not named) by Don Manuel when he says to Lázaro, “Toma agua bendita, que dijo alguien, y acabarás creyendo” (122) [“Dip your fingers in holy water, and you will end by believing,” as someone said (157)],

but he also dehumanizes and brutalizes them, leaving them happy in their stupidity. Happiness—the sort of happiness based on ignorance and drugs—is not a positive value, but exactly the opposite. All those critics who praise Don Manuel for making his flock happy are, I believe, profoundly in error. It is precisely from those who are like the happy parishioners of Valverde that dictators and demagogues recruit their massive followers; the move from unthinking religious faith to unthinking patriotism is easy to make. I cannot even begin to respect the sort of person who, like Don Manuel, prepares the way for a Hitler or an Osama bin Laden.

## VI

So it is that I understand the lesson that Don Manuel teaches to be an ugly, cruel, and cynical one, one that I reject in its entirety. But I also think that there is a parallel and positive lesson to be learned from this story. It is the implicit lesson of the narrator Ángela.

When Ángela first meets the parish priest as a young girl fresh out of her religious boarding school, she is in awe of his imposing presence and the aura of sainthood that surrounds him even as a young man. Her earliest encounters with him are extremely revealing. Whereas she is hesitant and inarticulate in expressing her personal doubts and questions about religious matters, Don Manuel mocks her studies, dismisses her concerns, changes the subject by asking about her brother, urges her to accept all matters of official dogma, and hurry up, marry, settle down, and raise a family. In other words, he treats her like one of the other ignorant peasants, far short of an intellectual or moral equal. When she begins to ask questions about faith, he dismisses her concerns out of hand; he advises her not to read or think too much, and he puts pressure on her to conform. He uses a series of patronizing and insulting terms when he talks with her: *corderilla* (111) [my dear (148)], literally “little lamb,” implying innocence and simplicity; *marisabidilla* (112) [Miss Bluestocking (148)], a term derived from *María* [Mary] and *sabia* [wise], sort of a smart-mouthed,

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a reference to Pascal's recommendation that the following of religious rituals can lead to true belief. This passage forms part of the scene in which Don Manuel admits his nonbelief to Lázaro and is located at the very heart of the text (see n6); immediately after this revelation, Blas again passes by crying out the words of the dying Christ. This leads directly to the second way in which the name of Blas is significant in the novel: it is the first syllable of the word *blasfemia*: blasphemy. The priest's blasphemy is his secret denial of the central dogmas of Christianity.

presumptuous female; and *doctorcilla* (113) [my little theologian (149)], simultaneously contemptuously dismissing her with the diminutive and ironically promoting her, because of her studies, to the presumed rank of holding a doctorate. All of this gives him full status as what today we might call a Male Chauvinist Pig.<sup>25</sup> Don Manuel befriends Lázaro and first reveals his secret privately to him alone. Only from Lázaro does Ángela learn of the priest's atheism. Throughout their lives, Don Manuel considers Lázaro his primary disciple, his intellectual equal in their own private Old Boys' Club of Nonbelievers, while Ángela is considered little more than the sole member of the Women's Auxiliary. At no point does he show any true interest in her as a person as he does throughout with her brother.

But Ángela has the last word.<sup>26</sup> As she looks back on the life of Don Manuel, and as she worries about the bishop's campaign to place the priest on the road to official sainthood in the Catholic Church, Ángela decides to write her complex text that is simultaneously a self-questioning biography, a personal spiritual confession, and an alternative to the "official" record being compiled by the priest looking into the possible beatification of Don Manuel.<sup>27</sup> As she beautifully

<sup>25</sup> Don Manuel can also be deceptive and self-serving. For example, in an early conversation with Ángela, he says "¿Cómo voy a salvar mi alma si no salvo la de mi pueblo?" (109) [How should I save my soul if I were not to save the soul of my village as well? (147)]. If he believes that there is no afterlife, there is no such thing as the salvation of the soul, so his statement again rings hollow as a lie and deception: his work is not the salvation of souls—his or his parishioners—but the control of the stupid.

<sup>26</sup> Ángela's wresting of voice and agency from the oppressive priest is an example of the power of women's first-person narrative, as discussed by Joanne Frye: "A woman who speaks in her own voice of her own experience is a subject rather than an object, and as such, she is capable of self-definition and autonomous action" (143).

<sup>27</sup> C. A. Longhurst writes at length of Ángela as an unreliable narrator: "so the gospel of San Manuel written by Ángela is her novel: not a record of a life but a personal interpretation of it, the work of Ángela's imagination and fantasy having only partial links with an external reality" (595). Of course she is less than totally "objective" (whatever that is) in what she writes; all first-person narrators are, at least to some degree, "unreliable." One writes from a specific context, a point of view, with retrospective and fallible memories, and multiple conscious and nonconscious desires and feelings. How can this ever be "reliable"? But this does not mean that we should suspect that she is a liar and that perhaps Don Manuel really did believe in the basic tenets of Christianity. If we begin to reject the "facts" as Ángela presents them, we have no story at all; see also Gordon's criticism of Longhurst's position. Writing exactly contemporaneously with Longhurst, John Butt (37) also discusses the unreliable aspects of Ángela's narrative, but he shares none of Longhurst's nihilistic conclusions (see also Anderson). Longhurst (596–97) is correct, however, in seeing Ángela as a sort of devil's advocate in opposition to the crusading bishop's drive to beatify Don Manuel (she even uses the term *endemoniada* [135] to refer to herself near the end of her manuscript). In the very last lines of her manuscript, Ángela herself expresses her suspicion of the official

winds up calling into question her own memory, her belief, and her obligations to both the community and the memory of her brother and Don Manuel, she states that she doesn't really know why she is writing or what she intends to do with the manuscript.<sup>28</sup> But the mere fact of writing what she does—that what her brother and the priest had done was a lie and a deceit; she even calls it their “su piadoso fraude; [ . . . ] su divino, su santísimo juego” (146) [his pious fraud [ . . . ] his divine, his most saintly, game]—is an act of courageous defiance of everything that Don Manuel stood for: manipulation and deceit. This is her best version of the truth. And although she says she's not sure what she'll do with it, it clearly has come into print. It is only Ángela who ultimately believes that one's most honest statement of what one believes to be true is what most liberates. Ángela—not Don Manuel—is the closest thing to an Unamuno-figure in the story. The Ángela-Unamuno identity is even implied by the author's postscript when he refers to his own patron saint, San Miguel Arcángel, and adds, “arcángel, archimensajero” (149) [and archangel means arch-messenger (179)]: Miguel = (Arc)Angel(a). Ángela is, like her creator, the character who respects others therefore and wants to give them yeast so that they can bake their own bread, not opium to put them to sleep, and she is the angelic messenger who brings the story to the readers. Thus it is the lesson of Ángela, rather than that of Don Manuel, that is life-affirming; in the end, it is Ángela's positive lesson that I take from *SMB*.<sup>29</sup>

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record and the Inquisitors of the world: “Les temo a las autoridades de la tierra, a las autoridades temporales, aunque sean las de la Iglesia” (148) [I distrust all authorities on this earth—even when they are Church authorities (179)].

<sup>28</sup> Clearly, the title of her manuscript—*San Manuel Bueno, mártir*—is significant of the writer's attitude. The only two words Ángela adds to the priest's name are, as she knows perfectly well, both ironic: Don Manuel is neither a *saint*, and she is writing against his possible canonization, nor a *martyr*, someone who dies for his or her faith.

<sup>29</sup> I am thankful to my colleague and good friend Patricia Hart for her suggestions and comments after a careful reading of this manuscript.

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