Persiles and Allegory

JUAN BAUTISTA AVALLE-ARCE

he hospitality of Whitman College, for which I am profoundly grateful, has brought us all together to celebrate the last and posthumous novel of Cervantes: Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda, Historia sententiosal None of his previous works was preceded by so much self-advertising as this one. It all began back in 1613, when in the prologue to the Novelas ejemplares he wrote: "I offer you the Trabajos de Persiles, a book which dares compete with Heliodorus." The Aethiopica (or Theagenes and Charicleia) of Heliodorus had been discovered in 1526, its Greek text had come out in 1534, and then it was quickly rendered into French, Latin, Italian, English and twice into Spanish, in 1554 and 1587. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this new Greek classic, and Cervantes publicly proclaims that he will compete with Heliodorus. In the dedication of his Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses of 1615, Cervantes promises "el gran Persiles;" he also promises the second part of La Galatea and the Semanas del jardin, both lost, but he does not single them out by any kind of epithet. Also in 1615, and in the dedication of the second part of Don Quijote, Cervantes lapses into what has been seen as excessive blowing of his own horn, when he writes to his patron, the Count of Lemos (I quote from the Ormsby translation, Norton Critical Edition, 1981, page 418): "I offer Your Excellency the Travails of Persiles and Sigismunda, a book I shall finish within four months, God willing, and which will be either the worst or the best that

* This is a paper from a symposium on Los Trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda, as is explained in the Foreward of this issue of the journal.

Persiles has been composed in our language, I mean of those intended for entertainment. Yet I repent of having called it the worst for, in the opinion of friends, it is bound to attain the summit of possible excellence." Clearly, for Cervantes Persiles would be the best Spanish novel, and this he prints in the dedication of Don Quijote, the novel which all the world accepts as peerless.

For generations critics refused to study the reasons which may have led Cervantes to such an hyperbolic statement. In order to explain it traditional cervantismo sought refuge in its favourite hobbyhorse, which postulated the existence of two Cervantes: one was the genius, who authored Don Quijote, and a few other things; the other one was a dunce, and he authored Persiles and other lunacies. Fortunately, contemporary criticism has reacted against such intellectual bosh, and Persiles shines forth in an aura created by studies of an international team of first-rate cervantistas, such as the German Tilbert Stegmann, the Hispano-Italian Carlos Romero, and the American Alban Forcione. Clearly, we, the people gathered here in Olin Hall, are also firm believers in the top quality of Persiles.

Persiles came out posthumously, in 1617. Its dedication was dated April 19, 1616, in Cervantes' deathbed, since he died on April 22, 1616. It is quite evident that the book did not receive the final touches, as attested by the evident disorder in some paragraphs towards the end, or by the fact that of its 79 chapters, 52 have no epigraphs. Death stopped Cervantes' hand in midair. The question still remains, however, as to when this unfinished novel was begun. There are clear and concrete motives that have driven contemporary criticism to the conclusion that the four books that make up Persiles were written on two different occasions: Books I-II were written early on, and Books III-IV much later. Persiles I-II was composed between the years of 1599 and 1605. The date 1599 is proven by the fact that Cervantes uses Jerónimo de Huerta's translation of Pliny's Natural History, which came out in 1599. The date 1605 is a natural conclusion, since the general characteristics of these Books I-II (and not those of Books III-IV), are given in panoramic summary in the Quijote of 1605, Chapter XLVII, when the canon of Toledo, after roundly condemning the romances of chivalry, finds a few good things in them. He proceeds to enumerate them, and everything he goes on to say corresponds with the main characteristics of Books I-II.

When Cervantes began writing Books III-IV is much more difficult to ascertain; today let me just remind you that by April, 1616, he had not finished retouching them.

I want to underline the facts that the first half of Persiles was written in the years 1599-1605. These are the same years in which Cervantes was composing the first part of the Quijote, that is to say, on his desk sat, side by side, the two long originals of Persiles and Don Quijote, and he attended to their composition alternately. I will make two observations at this point: the first one has to do with the fact that the simultaneous composition of two or more books was Cervantes' habitual way of working. This is proven by the dedications of his various works. At the beginning of my paper I mentioned the dedication of the Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses, where he promised Persiles, the second part of La Galatea, and Las semanas del jardin. My second observation has to do particularly with the simultaneous composition of Persiles and Quijote. What this means is writing alternately two novels whose orientation and physiognomy...
are diametrically opposed. But it should be no surprise: geniuses can work that way. And this is no idle talk. In those same years of 1604-1605, when Cervantes alternated his work in Persiles and Don Quijote, another genius of no smaller stature, William Shakespeare, was alternating the composition of Measure for Measure with that of Othello, the first one a light-hearted comedy full of silly disguises, and the second a tragedy of the most pathetic impact. I cannot define with equivalent simplicity the two Cervantine novels. Let me just say to extricate myself from a taxonomic problem of my own creation, that Persiles is, basically, an allegory, and Don Quijote is everything else but an allegory.

When I state that Persiles is an allegory I do not pretend to say that there is always an exact correspondence between the literal level and the allegorical level of interpretation in this novel. It would be useless to look for such a correspondence because allegory has never functioned that way. The great Florentine Platonist of the fifteenth century, Marsilio Ficino, warned us about that in the fourth discourse of his Symposium when he wrote: “One must not think that everything that is put into a figure has some meaning; many meaningless things are put there because of exigencies of order and transition.” Although it has nothing to do with allegories, the well-known Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, in his Cervantes o la crítica de la lectura has said of novels in general and Cervantes' in particular: “No great novel has been

written on perfectly calculated equations.” And I will add quickly: “Especially when the novel is an allegory.”

Upon deciding to give an allegorical meaning to his novel, Cervantes was in step with his times, and most especially with some of his favourite authors such as Ariosto and his Orlando Furioso, and Tasso with his Gerusalemme Liberata. Ariosto used allegory with the explicit aim of giving variety to his work, much in the same way as he used classical myths, medieval narrations, pious or spicy stories, and so much more. Just one example: Cantos XXXIV and XXXV of the Orlando Furioso present to us the most beautiful allegorization of the realms of Life and Death. By the year 1600 there were many published commentaries on the Orlando Furioso, allegorizing its plot to an extreme. Again, one example must do: in Venice, 1574, came out The Bellezze del Furioso di Messer Lodovico Ariosto, scelte da Orazio Toscanella con gli argomenti et allegorie dei canti: con l'allegorie de i nomi proprii. Insofar as Tasso is concerned it should suffice to say that his very own “Allegoria del poema” came out as a prologue to the editions of the Gerusalemme Liberata published in 1581 in Venice, Parma, Casalmaggiore, and Ferrara. In that prologue, the already half-demented poet defended himself from some of the objections of his critics, and in so doing he stated that the soul of the epic poem consisted of imitation and allegory. This is as good a time as any to remind you that cervantistas agree, especially since the studies of Alban Forcione, thatPersiles is an extraordinary attempt at writing an epic poem in prose. Therefore, according to Tasso's definition, the author of Persiles could not escape imposing an allegorical meaning on his plot. To make this clear from the outset, Cervantes did not have, unfortunately, an Orazio Toscanella, like Ariosto and his Orlando Furioso, nor did he write an “Allegoria del Poema,” like Tasso at the start of his Gerusalemme Liberata. I will return to this towards the end of my exposition.

I do not have the time nor the inclination to perform a detailed exegesis of all the allegories in Persiles. Some years ago, in my edition of the novel, I analyzed at some length the two fundamental ones: the great chain of being and man as a lifelong pilgrim. Upon considering these two structurally fundamental allegories of Persiles I will state that they make it the first romance conceived, written and structured as a Christian allegory, more than a decade before the birth of John Bunyan, whose elaborate Christian romance, The Pilgrim's Progress, dates from 1682. The allegories of Persiles are intellectually articulated by the idea

of the great chain of being, and in the narrative they are articulated by the simile of life as a pilgrimage. The chain of being was a traditional metaphor to express the plenitude, the order, and the unity of divine creation. It was a metaphysical given that oriented Western man in the search for his place in the universe, from the Timaeus of Plato right on through the eighteenth century. One end of the chain was supposed to be sunk deep into the minutest of inanimates, while the other end curled itself around the throne of the Divine Majesty. Everything in creation constituted a link of that chain, bigger than the one before, but smaller than the one coming after. In this fashion one ascended from the inanimate to the vegetable, from the vegetable to the sentient, throughout the whole scale of animals (from the ant to the lion), then man was to be found, to go on to the angels (in all its nine varieties of the celestial hierarchies, as expounded by “Dionysius the Areopagite”), that impelled one on to contemplation of the Divine. It must be obvious that the great chain of being was also a perfective ladder, or scale, since it ascended to the throne of God.

This arch-traditional metaphysical given of the ontological chain and scale is the structure of Persiles. The vigorous allegory of the chain of being can be demonstrated from three different points of view. First, consider the human types and the order in which they appear in the romance: at the beginning the barbarians, the lowest of human types; next link, types such as Clodio, the slanderer, and Rosamunda, the harlot, who with all their imperfections are still superior to the barbarians; Prince Arnaldo is greatly superior to them; but Persiles and Sigismunda are above him in the physical and the moral, though intellectually inferior to Mauricio and Soldino; who, in turn, are way below the Holy Father in Rome, where the romance ends.

In the second place, let us remember that the chain of being was also a perfective ontological scale, which impelled us naturally towards God. This is precisely what the reader can contemplate in cases such as the Italian abductor Rutilio, who ends his life as a devout hermit, or the former barbarian, Cloelia, who in the hour of her death intones a most solemn proclamation of the Catholic faith. Of course, the paradigms of the possibility of a spiritual perfective progression are the protagonists Persiles and Sigismunda.

Third, and lastly, the very geography of the romance is ordered in a way analogous to the chain of being. The mythical
Isla Bárbara, where the action begins, quickly disappears to make room for Denmark or Ireland, with semi-imaginary, inexact contours. The geographical precision is to be found from Book III on, when the pilgrims reach Portugal and travel on through Spain, France and Italy. And at last they reach Rome, “El cielo de la tierra,” as the romance calls it. It should be clear that one end of the chain of being sinks itself among the barbarians, and the other one is exalted all the way to the Papacy. In an analogous fashion, and link by link, the action progresses from the Isla Bárbara to Rome. And all along this chain, as allegorized in our romance, very much in accordance with the traditional interpretation, one finds amply illustrated the possibility of progression and perfectibility.

The second allegorical system that I mentioned earlier is the one that equates Pilgrimage and human life. The transition from one allegorical system to the other is explained by Cervantes himself, when Sigismunda reaches Rome, is catechized, and enters into the bosom of the Catholic Church. At this solemn juncture, she says (I find it most appropriate to use today the translation of Professors Weller and Colahan): “Our souls, as you well know, and they’ve taught me here, are always in constant movement and can come to rest only in God, their center. The desires of this life are countless and linked together in an endless chain, a chain that sometimes reaches all the way up to Heaven and at others sinks into Hell.” (The Trials of Persiles and Sigismunda, translated by Weller and Colahan, University of California Press, 1989, Book IV, Chapter X, page 337.) Pilgrimage —that “constant movement” of the quotation — as the sum and meaning of man’s life is a theme that goes all the way back to the Bible, and has the deepest of roots in Judaeo-Christian tradition. David, for example, in one of his Psalms, said that he is “peregrinus, sicut omnes patres mei” (XXXVIII, 13). Or as the apostle Saint Paul exclaimed in one of his epistles “quia peregrini et hospites sunt super terram” (Ad Hebraeos, XI, 13). In the Middle Ages the pilgrim, a symbol of the transitoriness of human life, acquired additional ideological weight as the pilgrim of love. Thus the exclamation of the prophet Jeremiah “O vos omnes qui transitis per viam” (Lamentaciones, I, 12), becomes “O voi che por la via d’amor passate” in a sonnet by Dante Alighieri; as Dante explains in his Vita Nuova, where Love himself appears dressed as a pilgrim (Chapters VII and IX).

After various transformations, the pilgrim reaches the age of Cervantes as a well established literary type, becoming a literary symbol for the Catholic Reformation, as has been demonstrated by my dear friend Antonio Vilanova. When Cervantes decided in his Persiles to make Christian pilgrims out of his protagonists he instantly surpassed the anecdotal meaning of the adventures of the pagan Heliodorus, the Greek novelist with whom he was self-admittedly competing. The adventures (the peripeteia of Aristotelian Poetics) acquire in Persiles a whole new meaning because they are entwined in a pilgrimage of love, which is an allegory of Christian life; which, most appropriately, ends in Rome, “el cielo de la tierra.” The often repeated Biblical phrase “omnes sumus peregrini super terram” echoes in almost every page of Persiles, and effectively Christianizes the Byzantine romance. Cervantes’ achievement in Persiles is comparable to that of Tasso in his Gerusalemme Liberata, a poem that triumphantly Christianized the classical epic. We must remember now that Persiles has been considered a prose epic from the canon of Toledo in the Quijote on to the learned studies of my dear friend Alban Forcione. But I can afford to be more precise: Persiles is an extraordinary prose epic veritably Christianized in its meaning and ends. The immense pride that Cervantes took in his posthumous novel, placing it above Don Quijote, should now be easier to understand.

The pilgrimage of human life travels over various links of the great chain of being and makes the two allegorical systems indivisible. The chain of being goes link by link from the Arctic barbarians to the Roman See of the Holy Father. The pilgrimage of love travels over the same links, and at the same time it goes up the perfective scale because the theme of love begins with the brutal love of the barbarians, ascends to a human category in various narrative episodes, all of them sinful, however, in one way or another, and is purified in the relations between Persiles and Sigismunda. But these relations cannot achieve perfection (an indispensable prerequisite for Christian union) until, in Rome, they are catechized into the Catholic faith. They drop their names of Periandro and Auristela (that they have used throughout the novel), and adopt their permanent ones of Persiles and Sigismunda, a transparent allusion to the sacrament of baptism. Now they are ready to reach the perfection of love and they accept the sacrament of Christian matrimony. To complete this ascent in the scale of love there are also episodic allusions to divine love and to mystic nuptials (Books I, Ch. 10 and IV, Ch. 10). In this way the narrative comes to an end, and so do the cycles of the two allegorical systems of the chain of being and of pilgrimage as Christian life. Now I can state that Persiles is the artistic demonstration of one of the fundamental statements of Tasso, which I mentioned earlier, that imitation and allegory are the soul of the epic poem, in our case of the prose epic, of course.

A simple association of ideas leads me on at this point. I mentioned earlier that Tasso had written the explanatory “Allegoria del Poema” as a prologue to his Gerusalemme Liberata. Cervantes wrote no such thing as an “Allegoria del Romanzo,” but he did write an allegorical prologue to Persiles, as I will show you. This prologue is built upon a brief personal anecdote. Cervantes tells us that he was travelling along a road when he met a student. They enter into a most interesting dialogue, in which they talk about literature, about life and about death. They reach Madrid, they part and the author intones a pathetic farewell to the muses and to his friends, til the next life.
by the student of the prologue), and he received great solace and profit from them all his life, but now his life has come to an end, he has reached his final port of call. Cervantes has arrived at his celestial city, and with the composure of the good Christian he will intone his last goodbye: “Goodbye, humor; goodbye wit; goodbye merry friends; for I am dying and I hope to see you soon, happy in the life to come!” The pilgrimage of Cervantes, the good Christian, has come to an end.

Doubtless, the prologue to Persiles is a heartfelt and diaphanous allegory, one of the fundamental ones to give meaning to the life of a Christian: life is a pilgrimage and the arrival to the city of destination is the entrance to the afterlife. All of this is a good preparation for the reading of Persiles, but now I want to pay attention to another aspect of our allegorical prologue. In many occasions I have said that the designation prologue is a deceitful misnomer, because a prologue is only editorially and physically what comes before the narrative discourse. In other words, a prologue is not what one writes first, but, rather, what one writes last, after the work has been finished. A prologue, in a strict sense, is an epilogue. Consequently, the prologue to Persiles constitutes the last thing that Cervantes wrote in life. As a result, we should attach to it the greatest importance, more than to any other Cervantine prologue. It fulfills its mission of bringing together the author's final conclusions on his work. The prologue is a brief and clear allegory that should prepare us for the reading of a long and very complicated web of allegorical systems. Among these I have singled out the one that identifies man's life with a pilgrimage, and this is precisely the target identified in the prologue. It is time to remind you that this prologue was written on its author's deathbed. With a pathos fitted to the circumstances, he writes: "My life's race is slowing at the rate of my pulse and by this Sunday at the latest it will complete its course and with it my life." This shows a strange sense of temporality, since Cervantes died that Friday. But it fits perfectly well in the traditional Christian concept of death, recently studied by the French historian Phillippe Ariès (The Hour of our Death). The moribund always knew when Death would come to them, and this preternatural science was possessed by Don Quijote as well as by his creator. This is why Don Quijote warned his friends: "I feel, sirs, that I am rapidly drawing near death."

Cervantes knew when he was going to die, and with this knowledge he wrote the prologue in which he interprets and presents his life as the object of the fundamental Christian allegory of life as a journey, that humankind is a traveller, and death is the city of destination. I am not interested in the fact that this is an age-old allegory. What astonishes me is the fact that Cervantes, in his last official act as a writer and a novelist in this world, can conceive of his life as something worthy of an allegory. That is to say, Cervantes dedicates his last and most solemn moment to writing the allegory of his life. The allegory of life as a journey is no longer important to me; what is of the utmost importance now is the fact that the writer is dedicated to allegorizing himself. The truth of the matter is that I know no antecedents that express literary intention of creating a literary allegory out of oneself, an intention that becomes tangible reality in the prologue to our monumental allegorical novel. I understand that an author allegorizes from the inside to the outside, that is to say, he wishes to allegorize his circumstances, but he does not allegorize himself. Persiles, in this respect, is an extraordinary allegorical novel, articulated at every moment by the concept of life as a pilgrimage, and its prologue will present to us the last pilgrimage in the life of the novelist Cervantes. I cannot but marvel at this achievement. When Cervantes was turning the last page in the book of his life, it was to write of his fleeting life as an allegory.

It is flattering to see oneself as an inspiring subject for literature, and autobiographies are full of these attitudes. But to consider one's own life as a subject worthy of Christian allegory, and, moreover, to allegorize oneself in this fashion and face to face with the public, the reading public, as Cervantes does, this pushes literary reality to its ultimate frontiers, quite beyond the subjective introspections of Saint Augustine or Petrarch. If Cervantes' last work was a great allegory, the last page in the book of his life had written on it: "My life as an allegory."