

Don Quixote or the Critique of Reading



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*Pencil sketch by Pelegrín Clavé, 1840, for an oil painting
entitled El ingenioso hildago Don Quixote.*

Don Quixote is to Spaniards what Shakespeare's plays are to the English-speaking world. As it happened, Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra published his rich comic tale of the Knight of La Mancha in 1605, the year that *Macbeth* and *King Lear* first appeared in England. Cervantes' grasp of the complexity and tragedy of Spain helped to make him the first modern novelist in any language. Here a distinguished Mexican writer, Carlos Fuentes, a former Wilson Center Fellow, describes Cervantes' Spain and suggests that Cervantes' genius offers us "what amounts to a new way of reading in the world" and a new way of looking at the multiple faces of reality.

by Carlos Fuentes

There is a common saying in Spain that Cervantes and Columbus resemble each other in that both died without clearly perceiving the importance of their discoveries. Columbus thought he had reached the Far East by traveling a westward course; Cervantes believed he had merely written a satire on the epics of chivalry. Neither ever realized that they had landed on the new continents of space (America) and fiction (the modern novel).

This extreme view of a naive Cervantes finds its mirror image in the equally extreme view that, in fact, the author of *Don Quixote* was a consummate hypocrite, constantly disguising his barbs against the Church and the established order under the folly of the hidalgo's* acts, while all the time professing public allegiance to the faith and its institutions. According to this school of thought, Cervantes was no less a hypocrite than all the other authors and thinkers caught in the reaction-

*A hidalgo is a member of the minor Spanish nobility.

ary swell of the Counter Reformation: Campanella, Montaigne, Tasso, and Descartes, not to mention the most dramatic example of them all, Galileo.

There is a grain of truth in both assertions. Most great novels are not written on perfectly developed blueprints. Whatever the *a priori*s of the novelist, they tend to be drowned as the work itself achieves its own autonomy and takes off on its own flight. This is equally true of Cervantes, Stendhal, or Dostoyevsky. One could also contend that the declared satirical intentions in *Don Quixote* are ironical in nature, only a facet of the multiple game of mirrors the author promptly establishes when, after *Don Quixote's* first outing, Cervantes casts a dubious light on the whole problem of the authorship of the book. Is it conceivable that Cervantes, after writing the first few chapters of the book, suddenly came on what was to be its essence—the critique of reading—without including (or excluding) the satire of the epic of chivalry in his

broader intentions, and let it subsist as the naive principle that would guide the whole novel?

Certainly, too, Cervantes was a man of his age, not a thinker or scholar but, mostly, a self-taught, voracious reader who was quite aware, at the late stage of his life when he wrote his masterpiece, and after a peculiarly sad and intense existence, of the realities of his times. The failed physician's son, from childhood a wanderer of the Spanish land in his family's wake, certainly the fleeting disciple of the Spanish Erasmist Juan López de Hoyos; uncertainly, a student at the hallowed halls of Salamanca; the youthful composer of courtly verse that brought him to the attention of the court of Philip II and then to Rome in the retinue of the Cardinal Acquaviva; the cardinal's valet turned soldier at the "glorious hour" of Lepanto, where he lost the use of a hand in the decisive naval combat against the Turkish fleet; the captive of the Moors in Algiers during five long years; the harassed commissioner of provisions for the invincible Armada, who demanded too much from the Andalusian clerics and was excommunicated for his troubles; the incompetent tax collector who landed twice in jail because

of his jumbled numbers; the old, poor, and unhappy author of an immensely popular novel conceived behind bars and on whose meager royalties he was hardly able to pay his debts—surely, this man was aware of the historical and cultural context of late 16th- and early 17th-century Europe, and particularly so of the realities of Spain as the prime bastion of the Counter Reformation.

Irony, more than naiveté; awareness, more than hypocrisy. But beyond all these categories (and perhaps containing all of them), there is the writer of *Don Quixote*, the founder of the modern European novel; and there is the existence of Don Quixote as an aesthetic fact that profoundly altered the traditions of *reading* in relation to the culture that preceded Cervantes, the culture he lived in, and the culture that followed him.

Armor and Rags

In the *Exemplary Novels*, Cervantes was an early writer of picaresque tales and, of course, a reader of the novels of chivalry that were then all the craze. Caught between the shining armor of Amadís de Gaula and the rags and ruses of Lazarillo de Tormes, Cervantes introduced them to each other. The epic hero is Don

Carlos Fuentes, 48, is one of Latin America's best-known and most widely translated writers. He was born in Panama City. The well-traveled son of a Mexican diplomat, he went into government service after study at universities in Mexico City and Geneva. In 1959, he began to devote himself full-time to writing. His fifth novel, A Change of Skin, was awarded the Biblioteca Breve Prize (1967) in Barcelona but was subsequently banned in Spain; his latest novel, Terra Nostra (1976), won the \$40,000 Rómulo Gallegos Prize in Caracas last August. He was named Mexico's ambassador to France in 1975; he resigned last spring and plans to teach in the United States. His essay is drawn from a lecture written at the Wilson Center and published by the Institute of Latin American Studies, the University of Texas at Austin.

Quixote, the earthy *pícaro** is Sancho Panza. Don Quixote lives in a remote past, his brain addled by the reading of too many chivalric novels; Sancho Panza lives in the immediate present, his only worries those of day-to-day survival: What will we eat? Where will we sleep? Thanks to this meeting of genius, Cervantes was able to go beyond the consecration of the past and the consecration of the present to grapple with the problem of the fusion of past and present. In his hands, the novel became a critical operation. The past (Don Quixote's illusion of himself as a knight errant of old) illuminates the present (the concrete world of inns and roads, muleteers and scullery maids); and the present (the harsh life of men and women struggling to survive in a cruel, unjust, and shabby world) illuminates the past (Don Quixote's ideals of justice, freedom, and a golden age of abundance and equality).

No Illusions

Cervantes' genius is that he translates these opposites into literary terms, surpassing and suffusing the extremes of the epic of chivalry and the chronicle of realism with a particularly acute conflict of verbal gestation. He has, in this sense, no illusions. What he is doing he is doing with words and words alone. But he realizes that words, in his world, are the only possible place where worlds *can* meet. Thus, the gestation of language becomes a central reality of the novel. The tense struggle between the past and the present, between renovation and the tribute due to the preceding form, is squarely faced by Cervantes in *Don Quixote*. And he solves this conflict and rises above its contradictions

*Adventurer, rogue.

because he is the first novelist to root the critique of creation within the pages of his own creation, *Don Quixote*. And this critique of creation is, as we shall see, a critique of the very act of reading.

A Man Divided

It is a thrilling experience to read this book with the knowledge that it was written during the childhood of the printing press, in an age when a reading public was rising in Europe, and the unique reading of unique volumes, laboriously handwritten by monks and destined for the eyes of a privileged few, was becoming an anachronism defeated by the triumphant coincidence of critical thought, capitalist expansion, and religious reform. It is a thrilling experience to read it today, when the very act of reading has been condemned to the dust heap of history by the gloomy prophets of the electronic millennium, with a goodly assist from the writers of the unreadable, the nonlanguage of the adman, the acronymic beeps of the bureaucrat, and the unquestioning clichés of the sensational best seller.

Cervantes, in truth, did not suffer from a situation comparable to that of our own time, but neither did he benefit from the winds of renovation that created modern Europe. He was supremely aware both of the energy, the flux, and the contradictions of the Renaissance and of the inertia, rigidity, and false security of the Counter Reformation. It was his lot to be born in the Spain of Philip II, the very bastion of orthodoxy, but perhaps only a Spaniard of his age could have written *Don Quixote*.

In *Don Quixote*, Cervantes is immersed in an extraordinary cultural struggle—an unparalleled critical operation to save the best of Spain

from the worst of Spain, the living features of the medieval order from the features Cervantes considers worthy only of decent burial, the promises of the Renaissance from its pitfalls.

I will go further into these matters, of great importance for the understanding of *Don Quixote*. Permit me, at this stage, to say only that the outcome of Cervantes' mighty struggle was a book of infinite levels of interpretation, the first novel that can be read from multiple points of view because it does not refuse its own contradictions but makes them the stuff of the intensity of its writing. Victim and executioner of his own book, a man divided between the moribund and a nascent order, educated in the culture of the Counter Reformation and thus the child of a culture eccentric to the mainstream of 16th-century Europe, yet very much aware of it, but also a child of the Renaissance and thus, in many ways, alien to the official culture of Hapsburg Spain, Cervantes is in more than one aspect similar to James Joyce. Cervantes, in the early morning of the modern age, invents a new way of reading; Joyce, at its hour of dusk, invents a new way of writing. Both draw support for their monumental works from epics of the past. And both, the author who opens and the author who closes the adventure of the modern European novel—Cervantes Alpha and Joyce Omega—are highly charged with the fruitful doubts and contradictions of their eccentric societies.

Ferdinand and Isabella

The year 1492 is the watershed of Spanish history. After nine centuries of confrontation, coexistence, and integration of the Christian and Muslim cultures, the last Arab strong-

hold in Spain, Granada, fell to the first unified Spanish monarchy, Catholic Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile.* Ferdinand and Isabella had decided to sever the Arab heritage from the culture that they saw only in the light of their own political necessity, which was unity—a unity that superseded all considerations. It was a fragile unity since it went against the grain of the extreme fractiousness of the medieval kingdoms and the extreme regionalism (upheld to this very day) of Catalonians, Basques, Asturians, Galicians, Castilians, and Aragonese.

The Cost of Unity

To Ferdinand and Isabella, the Catholic religion and the purity of blood were the absolute measures of unity. The Catholic Queen admitted that she had been the cause "of great calamities and much havoc in towns, provinces, and kingdoms" but "only out of love for Christ and His Holy Mother." The "Faith" came to excuse all acts of political expediency. And the law came to define true Spaniards as "the old Christians, clean of all evil race or stain." This immediately shed suspicion, not only on the Arab heritage but on the Jewish culture of Spain and led to the expulsion of the Jews, also in 1492. In 1475, out of a total population of 7 million, there were in Spain but half a million Jews and *conversos*.† Yet more than one-third of the *urban* population was of Jewish stock. The result was that one year after the edict of expulsion of the Jews, the municipal rents in Seville dropped by one-third, and Barcelona, deprived of her

*The final expulsion of the Moors would be decreed by Philip III in 1609.

†Jews converted to Christianity.



Woodcut, Don Quixote, from the Lisbon 1605 edition.

bourgeoisie, almost wholly Jewish, saw its municipal bank go bankrupt.

The combined expulsion of Jews and Muslims meant that Spain, in effect, deprived itself of the talents and services it would later sorely need to maintain its imperial stature. The Jews were the doctors and surgeons of Spain, to a degree that Charles V, in the 1530s, congratulated a student of the University of Alcalá on being "the first hidalgo of Castile to become a medical man." The Jews were the only tax collectors and the principal taxpayers of the realm. They were the bankers, the merchants, the moneylenders, and the spearhead of the nascent capitalist class in Spain. They had been, throughout the Middle Ages, the intermediaries between the

Christian and Moorish kingdoms, the *almojarifes*, or finance administrators, for the sundry kings who incessantly repeated that, without their Jewish bureaucracy, the royal finances would crumble. They served as ambassadors, public servants, and administrators of the royal patrimony. In fact, they took upon themselves what the Spanish nobility would not deign to accomplish, considering it beneath their dignity as hidalgos.

Cultural Trauma

The mutilation imposed on Spain by the Catholic kings and sustained by their successors was not only an economic catastrophe. It also sired a historical and cultural trauma from which Spain has never wholly re-

covered. The singularity of Spain derives from the fact that she is the only nation in the West where three distinct faiths and cultures, the Christian, the Jewish, and the Muslim, cross-fertilized themselves for over nine centuries.

Rising Expectations

It is thanks to the Jewish intellectuals that the Spanish language itself became fixed and achieved literary dignity. Both aspects come together, as is well known, in the vast scholarly undertaking patronized by King Alfonso X, the Wise, in the 13th century. The purpose was to set down the knowledge of the times; its sum total would be an encyclopedia *avant la lettre*. But the extraordinary fact is that the Castilian king had to rely on Jewish scholars to do the job. It was of equal significance that this Jewish brain trust insisted that the work be written in Spanish and not, as was then the scholarly custom, in Latin. Why? Because Latin was the language of Christendom. The Spanish Jews wanted knowledge to be diffused in the language common to all Spaniards—Christians, Jews, and *conversos* alike. From their work at the court of Alfonso came the future prose of Spain. Two centuries after Alfonso, it was still the Jews who were using the vulgar tongue in commenting on the Bible, in writing philosophy, and in the study of astronomy. It can be said that the Jews fixed and made current the use of Spanish in Spain.

At the same time, within the Christian realms of Spain, a particular phenomenon was taking place. Feudalism was comparatively weak in Spain because the constant shifting of frontiers during the protracted wars of the *Reconquista* made it difficult for the nobility to stake a

permanent claim to the land. Also, medieval Spain had too many twilight zones and buffer kingdoms where the Christian nobility was under the protection of the Moors, or vice versa. These weaknesses and the lack of any unified central authority made it possible for civil power and local institutions to develop through charters of local autonomy granted to cities and villages, freedoms consecrated within many urban communities, independent judiciary authorities, and a continuing revolution of rising expectations spearheaded by the commercial and cultural centers of Christian Spain, notably Barcelona with its overwhelmingly Jewish bourgeoisie. There was social porosity. The serf could slowly but surely ascend to the status of the burgher.

A Modern Revolution

As long as the Catholic kings did not interrupt this political process, the cities went along with their unitarian purposes. But when the Hapsburg prince, Charles I of Spain (better known by his title as Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V), acceded to power in 1517 as the heir of the mad Queen Juana and her deceased husband Philip the Fair, the urban communities saw their freedoms menaced in several ways. There was an element of xenophobia. Charles was a Fleming who could not even speak Spanish, but what the *comunidades** rightly saw was that Charles's policy was to further centralization without respect to the civil rights of the cities and the local institutions. The citizens' drive towards constitutionalism was pitted against Charles's conception of absolutism as reproduction, and

*Urban communities functioning under medieval charters.

extension, of the medieval imperium.

The civil war that ensued has justly been called by José Maravall "the first modern revolution in Spain and probably in Europe," in fact, the forerunner of the English and French Revolutions. The human composition of the revolt speaks for itself: a few urban noblemen; a greater number of mayors, aldermen, and judges; quite a few lesser clergymen (canons, abbots, archdeacons, deans); a sprinkling of university teachers (most of them of Erasmian persuasion); a great number of doctors, physicists, lawyers, and bachelors of arts; an even greater number of merchants, moneychangers, public notaries, and pharmacists; and an overwhelming majority of storeowners, innkeepers, silversmiths, jewelers, ironmongers, butchers, hatmakers, cobblers, tailors, barbers, and carpenters.

The Rebels' Demands

If this reads like the cast of *Don Quixote*, a conclusion can quickly be drawn. Cervantes deals with the very men who defied the absolutism of the Hapsburgs and fought for the development of civil rights. But what is, in Cervantes, a silent majority was, in 1520, a very outspoken and defiantly active one, for what the people of Spain could no longer express in 1605 they had fought for in 1520. The demands of the *comuneros** were for a democratic order. I do not hesitate in using the word. It appears constantly in the written demands of the rebels. It is inherent in what they fought for: the suppression of political and administrative posts held in perpetuity; the control of the responsibilities of public

functionaries; a stop to the harassment of converted Jews; no taxation without representation; a refusal to pay extraordinary tributes. The defeat of the *comunero* forces at Villar in 1521 dealt a further, crushing blow to the forces working for a modern, democratic, humane Spain.

It is against this historical complexity—the mutilation of the Arab and Jewish cultures, the defeat of local democratic forces, the royal absolutism of the Hapsburgs, the power of the Inquisition, the impoverishment of middle-Spain, the rigidity of Counter Reformation dogma, and the growing swell of post-Renaissance contradictions, doubts, and affirmations—that we must place the life of Miguel de Cervantes and the gestation of his masterpiece, *Don Quixote*.

Faith and Reason

Caught between the flood tide of the Renaissance and the ebb tide of the Counter Reformation, Cervantes clings to the one plank that can keep him afloat: Erasmus of Rotterdam. The vast influence of Erasmus in Spain is hardly fortuitous. He was correctly seen to be *the* Renaissance man struggling to conciliate the verities of faith and reason, and the reasons of the old and the new.

The influence of Erasmian thought on Cervantes can be clearly perceived in three themes common to the philosopher and the novelist: the duality of truth, the illusion of appearances, and the praise of folly. Erasmus reflects the Renaissance dualism: *understanding* may be different from believing. But reason must be wary of judging from external appearances: "All things human have two aspects, much as the Silenes of Alcibiades, who had two utterly opposed faces; and thus,

*Rebelling townspeople.

what at first sight looked like death, when closely observed was life" (*In Praise of Folly*). And he goes on to say: "The reality of things . . . depends solely on opinion. Everything in life is so diverse, so opposed, so obscure, that we cannot be assured of any truth."

Erasmus promptly gives his reasoning a comic inflection, when he smilingly points out that Jupiter must disguise himself as a "poor little man" in order to procreate little Jupiters. Comic debunking thus serves the unorthodox vision of the double truth, and it is evident that Cervantes opts for this Aesopian short cut in creating the figures of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, for the former speaks the language of universals and the latter that of particulars; the knight believes, the

squire doubts, and each man's appearance is diversified, obscured, and opposed by the other's reality. If Sancho is the real man, then he is, nevertheless, a participant in Don Quixote's world of pure illusion; but if Don Quixote is the illusory man, then he is, nevertheless, a participant in Sancho's world of pure reality.

"Words, Words, Words"

How do the spiritual realities reflected on by Erasmus translate into the realm of literature? Perhaps Hamlet is the first character to stop in his tracks and mutter three minuscule and infinite words that suddenly open a void between the certain truths of the Middle Ages and the uncertain reason of the brave new world of modernity.



Etching, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza by George Cruikshank, 1885.

These words are simply "Words, words, words . . ." and they both shake and spear us because they are the words of a fictional character reflecting on the very substance of his being. Hamlet knows he is *written* and represented on a stage, whereas old Polonius comes and goes in agitation, intrigues, counsels, and departs himself as if the world of the theater truly were the real world. Words become acts, the verb becomes a sword, and Polonius is pierced by Hamlet's sword: the sword of literature. Words, words, words, mutters Hamlet, and he does not say it pejoratively. He is simply indicating, without too many illusions, the existence of a thing called literature—a new literature that has ceased to be a transparent reading of the divine Verb or the established social order but is yet unable to become a sign reflecting a new human order as coherent or indubitable as the religious and social orders of the past.

Knight of the Faith

All is possible. All is in doubt. Only an old hidalgo from the barren plain of La Mancha in the central plateau of Castile continues to adhere to the codes of certainty. For him, nothing is in doubt and all is possible. In the new world of criticism, Don Quixote is a knight of the faith. This faith comes from his reading, and his reading is a madness. (The Spanish words for *reading* and *madness* convey this association much more strongly. Reading is *lectura*; madness is *locura*.)

Like the necrophilic monarch secluded at El Escorial, Don Quixote both pawns and pledges his life to the restoration of the world of unified certainty. He pawns and pledges himself, both physically and symbol-

ically, to the univocal reading of the texts and attempts to translate this reading into a reality that has become multiple, equivocal, ambiguous. But because he possesses his reading, Don Quixote possesses his identity: that of the knight errant, that of the ancient epic hero.

The Shelter of Books

So, at the immediate level of reading, Don Quixote is the master of the previous readings that withered his brain. But at a second level of reading, he becomes the master of the words contained in the verbal universe of the book titled *Don Quixote*. He ceases to be a reader of the novels of chivalry and becomes the actor of his own epic adventures. As there was no rupture between his reading of the books and his faith in what they said, so now there is no divorce between the acts and the words of his adventures. Because we read it but do not see it, we shall never know what it is that the goodly gentleman puts on his head: the fabled helm of Mambrino or a vulgar barber's basin. The first doubt assails us. Is Quixote right? Has he discovered the legendary helmet, while everyone else, blind and ignorant, sees only the basin?

Within this verbal sphere, Don Quixote is at first invincible. Sancho's empiricism, from this verbal point of view, is useless, because Don Quixote, each time he fails, immediately re-establishes his literary discourse, undiscouraged—the words always identical to the reality, the reality but a prolongation of the words he has read before and now enacts. He explains away his disasters with the words of his previous, epic readings and resumes his career within the world of the words that belong to him.

We know that only reality confronts the mad readings of Don Quixote. But he does not know it, and this ignorance (or this faith) establishes a third level of reading in the novel. "Look your mercy," Sancho constantly says, "Look you that what we see there are not giants, but only windmills." But Don Quixote does not see. Don Quixote *reads* and his reading says that those *are* giants.

Don Quixote, each time he fails, finds refuge in his readings. And sheltered by his books, he will go on seeing armies where there are only sheep without losing the reason of his readings. He will be faithful unto them, because he does not conceive any other licit way of reading. The synonymy of reading, madness, truth, and life in Don Quixote becomes strikingly apparent when he demands of the merchants he meets on the road that they confess the beauty of Dulcinea without ever having seen her, for "the important thing is that without having seen her you should believe, confess, swear, and defend it." This *it* is an act of faith. Don Quixote's fabulous adventures are ignited by an overwhelming purpose: What is read and what is lived must coincide anew, without the doubts and oscillations between faith and reason introduced by the Renaissance.

"They Mention Me!"

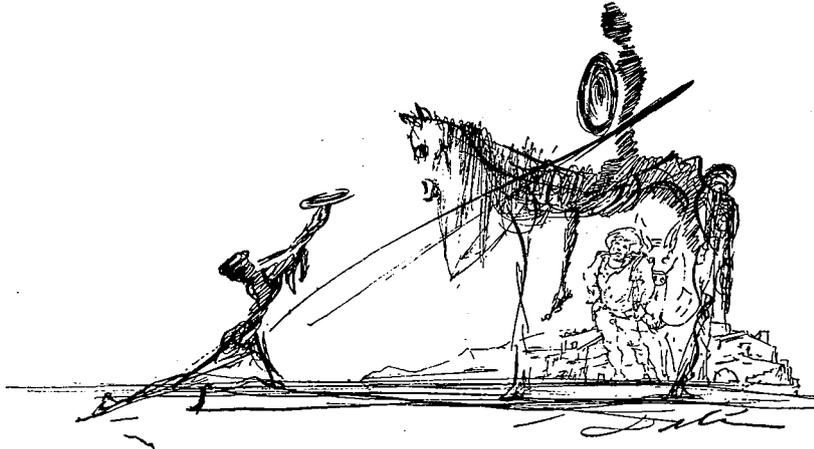
But the very next level of reading in the novel *Don Quixote* starts to undermine this illusion. In his third outing, Don Quixote finds out, through news that the bachelor Sansón Carrasco has transmitted to Sancho, that there exists a book called *The Most Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha*. "They mention me," Sancho says in mar-

velment, "along with our lady Dulcinea del Toboso, and many other things that happened to us alone, so that I crossed myself in fright trying to imagine how the historian who wrote them came to know them." Things that happened to us alone. Before, only God could know them. Now, any reader who can pay the cover price for a copy of *Don Quixote* can also find out. The reader thus becomes akin to God. Now, the dukes can prepare their cruel farces because they have read the first part of the novel *Don Quixote*. Now, Don Quixote, the reader, is *read*.

Reality Vanquished

On entering the second part of the novel, Don Quixote also finds out that he has been the subject of an apocryphal novel written by one Avellaneda to cash in on the popularity of Cervantes' book. The signs of Don Quixote's singular identity suddenly seem to multiply. Don Quixote criticizes Avellaneda's version. But the existence of *another* book about himself makes him change his route and go to Barcelona so as to "bring out into the public light the lies of this modern historian so that people will see that I am not the Don Quixote he says I am."

This is surely the first time in literature that a character knows that he is being written about at the same time that he lives his fictional adventures. This new level of reading is crucial to determine those that follow. Don Quixote ceases to support himself on previous epics and starts to support himself on his own epic. But his epic is no epic, and it is at this point that Cervantes invents the modern novel. Don Quixote, the reader, knows he is read, something that Achilles surely



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Drawing, Don Quixote by Salvador Dalí, 1946.

never knew. And he knows that the destiny of Don Quixote the man has become inseparable from the destiny of *Don Quixote* the book, something that Ulysses never knew in relation to *The Odyssey*. His integrity as a hero of old, safely niched in his previous, univocal, and denotative epic reading, is shattered, not by the galley slaves or scullery maids who laugh at him, not by the sticks and stones he must weather in the inns he takes to be castles or the grazing fields he takes to be battlegrounds. His faith in his epical readings enables him to bear all the batterings of reality. But now his integrity is annulled by the readings he is submitted to.

It is these readings that transform Don Quixote, the caricature of the ancient hero, into the first modern hero, observed from multiple angles, scrutinized by multiple eyes that do not share his faith in the codes of chivalry, assimilated by the very

readers who read him, and, like them, forced to recreate "Don Quixote" in his own imagination. A double victim of the act of reading, Don Quixote loses his senses twice. First, when he reads. Then, when he is read. Because now, instead of having to prove the existence of the heroes of old, he is up against a much, much tougher challenge: He must prove his own existence.

And this leads us to a further level of reading. A voracious, insomniac reader of epics that he obsessively wants to carry over to reality, Don Quixote fails miserably in this, his original purpose. But as soon as he becomes an object of reading, he begins to vanquish reality, to contaminate it with his mad reading—not the reading of the novels of chivalry, but the actual reading of the novel *Don Quixote*. And this new reading transforms the world, for the world, more and more, begins to resemble the world contained in the pages of

the novel *Don Quixote*.

So Cervantes need not write a political manifesto to denounce the evils of his age and of all ages; he need not resort to Aesopian language; he need not radically break with the strictures of the traditional epic in order to surpass it. He dialectically merges the epic thesis and the realistic antithesis to achieve, within the very life and logic and necessity of his own book, the novelistic synthesis.

As the world comes to resemble him more and more, Don Quixote, more and more, loses the illusion of his own being. He has been the cipher of the act of reading: a black-ink question mark, much as Picasso was to draw him. By the time he reaches the castle of the dukes, Don Quixote sees that the castle is actually a castle, whereas, before, he could *imagine* he saw a castle in the humblest inn of the Castilian wayside.

The Saddest Book

Thrust into history, Don Quixote is deprived of all opportunity for imaginative action. He meets one Roque Guinart, an authentic robber, alive in the time of Cervantes. This Guinart, totally inscribed in history, was a thief and contrabandist of silver cargoes from the Indies and a secret agent of the French Huguenots at the time of the St. Bartholomew's Night massacre. Next to him and his tangible historicity, as when he sees (but does not partake in) a naval battle off Barcelona, Don Quixote has become a simple witness to real events and real characters. Cervantes gives these chapters a strange aura of sadness and disillusionment. The old hidaglo, forever deprived of his epic reading of the world, must face his

final option: to be in the sadness of reality or to be in the reality of literature—this literature, the one Cervantes has invented, not the old literature of univocal coincidence that Don Quixote sprang from.

Dostoyevsky calls Cervantes' novel "the saddest book of them all"; in it, the Russian novelist found the inspiration for the figure of the "good man," the idiot Prince Mushkin. As the novel ends, the knight of the faith has truly earned his sorrowful countenance. For, Dostoyevsky adds, Don Quixote suffers from a disease, "the nostalgia of realism."

Another Life

This phrase must give us pause. What realism are we talking about? The realism of impossible adventures with magicians, chivalrous knights errant, and frightful giants? Exactly so. Before, everything that was written was true, even if it were a fantasy. "For Aristotle," explains Ortega y Gasset, "the centaur is a possibility; not so for us, since biology will not tolerate it."

And this is what Don Quixote feels such intense nostalgia for: this realism without inner contradictions. What shatters the monolith of the old realism Don Quixote yearns for are the plural readings, the illicit readings to which he is subjected.

Don Quixote recovers his reason. And this, for a man of his ilk, is the supreme folly. It is suicide. When he accepts conventional "reality," Don Quixote, like Hamlet, is condemned to death. But Don Quixote, thanks to the critical reading invented by Cervantes in the act of founding the modern novel, will go on living another life. He is left with no resource but to prove his own existence, not in the univocal reading that gave him his original being, but in the

multiple readings that deprived him of it. Don Quixote loses the life of his nostalgic, coincidental reality but goes on living, forever, in his book and only in his book.

Truth in Art

This is why *Don Quixote* is the most Spanish of all novels. Its very essence is defined by loss, impossibility, a burning quest for identity, a sad awareness of all that could have been and never was, and, in reaction to this deprivation, an assertion of total existence in a realm of the imagination, where all that in reality cannot be, finds, precisely because of this factual negation, the most intense level of truth. Because the history of Spain has been what it has been, its art has been what history has denied Spain. Art brings truth to the lies of history.

This is what Dostoyevsky meant when he called *Don Quixote* a novel where truth is saved by a lie. The Russian author's profound observation goes well beyond the relationship of a nation's art to its history. Dostoyevsky is speaking of the broader relationship between reality and imagination. There is a fascinating moment in *Don Quixote* when the Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance arrives in Barcelona and forever breaks the bindings of the illusion of reality. He does what Achilles, Aeneas, or Sir Lancelot could never do: He visits a printing shop. He enters the very place where his adventures become an object, a tangible product. Don Quixote is thus sent by Cervantes to his only reality: the reality of fiction.

The act of reading, in this manner, is both the starting point and the last stop on Don Quixote's route. Neither the reality of what he read nor the reality of what he lived were

such, but merely paper ghosts. Only when freed from his readings—but captured by the readings that multiply the levels of the novel on an infinite scale—only alone in the very center of his authentic, fictional reality can Don Quixote exclaim:

Believe in me! My feats are true, the windmills are giants, the herds of sheep are armies, the inns are castles, and there is in the world no lady more beautiful than the Empress of La Mancha, the unrivaled Dulcinea del Toboso! Believe in me!

Reality may laugh or weep on hearing such words. But reality is invaded by them, loses its own defined frontiers, feels itself displaced, transfigured by another reality made of words and paper. Where are the limits between Dunsinane Castle and Birnham Wood? Where the frontiers that bind the moor where Lear and his fool live on that cold night of madness? Where, in fact, does Don Quixote's fantastic Cave of Montesinos end and reality begin?

The Knight's Lady

The power of Don Quixote's image as a madman who constantly confuses reality with imagination has made many a reader and commentator forget what I consider an essential passage of the book. In Chapter XXV of the first part of the novel, Don Quixote decides to do penance, dressed only in his night-shirt, in the craggy cliffs of the Sierra Morena. He asks Sancho to go off to the village of El Toboso and inform the knight's lady Dulcinea of the great deeds and sufferings with which he honors her. Since Sancho knows of no highly placed lady called Dulcinea in the miserable hamlet of El Toboso he inquires further. Don Quixote, at this extraordi-



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Lithograph, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza by Pablo Picasso, 1955.

nary moment, reveals that he knows the truth. Dulcinea, he says, is no other than the peasant girl Aldonza Lorenzo; it is she Sancho must look for. This provokes gales of laughter in the roguish squire; he knows Aldonza well. She is common, strong as a bull, dirty, can bellow to the peasants from the church tower and be heard a league away; she's a good one at exchanging pleasantries and, in fact, is a bit of a whore.

Don Quixote's response is one of the most moving declarations of love ever written. He knows who and what Dulcinea really is; yet he loves her, and, because he loves her, she is worth as much as "the most noble princess in all the world." He admits that his imagination has transformed the peasant girl Aldonza into the noble lady Dulcinea. But is not this the essence of love, to transform the loved one into something incomparable, unique, set above all considerations of wealth or poverty, distinction or commonness? "Thus, it is enough that I think and believe that Aldonza Lorenzo is beautiful and honest; the question of class is of no consequence. . . . I paint her in my imagination as I desire her. . . . And let the world think what it wants."

Bridge Between Worlds

In Don Quixote, the values of the age of chivalry acquire, through love, a democratic resonance; and the values of the democratic life acquire the resonance of nobility. Don Quixote refuses both the cruel power of the mighty and the herd instinct of the lowly. His vision of humanity is not based on the lowest common denominator but on the highest achievement possible. His conception of love and justice saves both the oppressors and the oppressed

from an oppression that perverts both.

It is through this ethical stance that Cervantes struggles to bridge the old and new worlds. If his critique of reading is a negation of the rigid and oppressive features of the Middle Ages, it is also an affirmation of ancient values that must be lost in the transition to the modern world. But if Don Quixote is also an affirmation of the modern values of the pluralistic point of view, Cervantes does not surrender to modernity either. It is at this junction that his moral and literary vision fuses into a whole. For if reality has become plurivocal, literature will reflect it only to the extent that it forces reality to submit itself to plural readings and to multiple visions from variable perspectives. Precisely in the name of the polyvalence of the real, literature creates reality, adds to reality, ceases to be a verbal correspondence to verities immovable, or anterior to reality. Literature, this new printed reality, speaks of the things of the world; but literature, in itself, is a new thing in the world.

Through his paper character Don Quixote, who integrates the values of the past with those of the present, Cervantes translates the great themes of the centerless universe and of individualism triumphant, yet awed and orphaned, to the plane of literature, where they become the axis of a new reality. There will be no more tragedy and no more epic, because there is no longer a restorable ancestral order or a universe univocal in its normativeness. There will be multiple layers of reality.

It so happens that the rogue, convicted galley slave, and false puppeteer Ginés de Pasamonte, alias Ginesillo de Parapilla, alias Master

Pedro, is writing a book about his own life. "Is the book finished?" asks Don Quixote. And Ginés answers, "How can it be, if my life isn't over yet?"

Who writes books and who reads them? Cervantes asks. Who is the author of *Don Quixote*? Is it a certain Cervantes, more versed in grief than in verse, whose *Galatea* has been read by the priest who scrutinizes Don Quixote's library, burns the books he dislikes in an immediate auto-da-fé, and then seals off the hidalgo's library with brick and mortar, making him believe it is the work of magicians? Or is it a certain de Saavedra, mentioned with admiration because of the acts he accomplished, "and all of them for the purpose of achieving freedom"?

Mallarmé will one day say, "A book neither begins nor ends; at the most, it feigns to. . ."

Cervantes wrote the first open novel as if he had read Mallarmé. He proposes, through the critique of reading that seems to start with the hidalgo's reading of the epics of chivalry and seems to end with the reader's realization that all reality is multileveled, the critique of creation within creation. *Don Quixote's* timeless and, at the same time, immediate quality derives from the nature of its internal poetics. It is a split poem that converts its own genesis into an act of fiction. It is the poetry of poetry (or the fiction of fiction), singing the birth of the poem, and narrating the origin of the very fiction we are reading.



Engraving, from the 1865 Gaspary y Roig edition of *Don Quixote*.