



Notes to Literature

Weekly
reading
booklet

#8 :
Cervantes'
Don Quixote
(1605/12)

NL

NOTES TO LITERATURE

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Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de, *The First Part of the Delightful History of the Most Ingenious Knight Don Quixote of the Mancha*, translated by Thomas Shelton. Vol XIV. The Harvard Classics. New York: PF. Collier & Son, 1909–14.

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Jehenson, Myriam Yvonne. *The Utopian Nexus in Don Quixote*. Nashville, Tenn. :Vanderbilt University Press, 2006.

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Cervantes

From *The History of the Valorous & Witty Knight-Errant Don Quixote of the Mancha, Part I* (Trans. by Thomas Shelton, 1612)

CHAPTER VIII

AS they discoursed, they discovered some thirty or forty windmills, that are in that field; and as soon as Don Quixote espied them, he said to his squire, 'Fortune doth address our affairs better than we ourselves could desire; for behold there, friend Sancho Panza, how there appears thirty or forty monstrous giants, with whom I mean to fight, and deprive them all of their lives, with whose spoils we will begin to be rich; for this is a good war, and a great service unto God, to take away so bad a seed from the face of the earth.'

'What giants?' quoth Sancho Panza.

'Those that thou seest there,' quoth his lord, 'with the long arms; and some there are of that race whose arms are almost two leagues long.'

'I pray you understand,' quoth Sancho Panza, 'that those which appear there are no giants, but windmills; and that which seems in them to be arms, are their sails, that, swung about by the wind, do also make the mill go.'

'It seems well,' quoth Don Quixote 'that thou art not yet acquainted with matter of adventures. They are giants; and, if thou beest afraid, go aside and pray, whilst I enter into cruel and unequal battle with them.' And, saying so, he spurred his horse Rozinante, without taking heed to his squire Sancho's cries, advertising him how they were doubtless windmills that he did assault, and no giants; but he went so fully persuaded that they were giants as he neither heard his squire's outcries, nor did discern what they were, although he drew very near to them, but rather said, so loud as he could, 'Fly not, ye cowards and vile creatures! for it is only one knight that assaults you.'

With this the wind increased, and the mill sails began to turn about; which Don Quixote spying, said, 'Although thou movest more arms than the

giant Briareus thou shalt stoop to me.' And, after saying this, and commending himself most devoutly to his Lady Dulcinea, desiring her to succor him in that trance, covering himself well with his buckler, and setting his lance on his rest, he spurred on Rozinante, and encountered with the first mill that was before him, and, striking his lance into the sail, the wind swung it about with such fury, that it broke his lance into shivers, carrying him and his horse after it, and finally tumbled him a good way off from it on the field in evil plight.

Sancho Panza repaired presently to succor him as fast as his ass could drive; and when he arrived he found him not able to stir, he had gotten such a crush with Rozinante. 'Good God!' quoth Sancho, 'did I not foretell unto you that you should look well what you did, for they were none other than windmills? nor could any think otherwise, unless he had also windmills in his brains.'

'Peace, Sancho,' quoth Don Quixote; 'for matters of war are more subject than any other thing to continual change; how much more, seeing I do verily persuade myself, that the wise Frestron, who robbed my study and books, hath transformed these giants into mills, to deprive me of the glory of the victory, such is the enmity he bears towards me. But yet, in fine, all his bad arts shall but little prevail against the goodness of my sword.'

'God grant it as he may!' said Sancho Panza, and then helped him to arise; and presently he mounted on Rozinante, who was half shoulder-pitched by the rough encounter; and, discoursing upon that adventure, they followed on the way which guided towards the passage or gate of Lapice; for there, as Don Quixote avouched, it was not possible but to find many adventures, because it was a thoroughfare much frequented; and yet he affirmed that he went very much grieved, because he wanted a lance; and, telling it to his squire, he said, 'I remember how I have read that a certain Spanish knight, called Diego Peres of Vargas, having broken his sword in a battle, tore off a great branch or stock from an oak-tree, and did such marvels with it that day, and battered so many Moors, as he remained with the surname of Machuca, which signifies a stump, and as well he as all his progeny were ever after that day called Vargas and Machuca. I tell thee this, because I mean to tear another branch, such, or as good as that at least, from the first oak we shall encounter, and I mean to achieve such adventures therewithal, as thou wilt account thyself fortunate for having merited to behold them, and be a witness of things almost incredible.'

CHAPTER IV

“ALL this liketh me well,” said Don Quixote; “therefore say on. Thou arrivedst, and what was that queen of beauty doing then? I daresay that thou foundest her threading of pearls, or embroidering some curious device with Venice gold, for me her captive knight.” No, that I did not,” quoth Sancho; “but winnowing two bushels of wheat in the yard of her house.”

“Why, then,” said Don Quixote, “thou mayst make account that each corn of that wheat was a grain of pearl, seeing they were touched by her delicate hand. And, friend, didst thou note well what the wheat was, whether of the best or ordinary?” “It was not, but red,” said Sancho. “Well, then, I assure thee,” answered Don Quixote, “that being sifted by her hands, it must needs make very fair bread and white. But pass forward. When thou didst deliver my letter, did she kiss it? Did she set it on her head? Did she use any ceremony worthy of such a letter? Or what did she?” “When I went to give it unto her,” said Sancho, “she was holding up of her arms with a good quantity of wheat that she had in her sieve, and therefore said unto me, “Friend, lay down that letter there on the sack, for I cannot read it until I have winnowed all that is here.”” “O discreet lady,” quoth Don Quixote; “she surely did that because she might read it at leisure, and recreate herself therewithal. Forward, Sancho. And as long as she was thus busied, what discourses passed she with thee? What did she demand of thee concerning me? And thou, what didst thou answer? Say all, good Sancho, say all; recount to me every particularity, and let not the least minuity remain in the inkhorn.”

“She demanded nothing of me,” quoth Sancho; “but I recounted unto her the state I had left you in for her sake, doing of penance, all naked from the girdle upward, among these rocks, like a brute beast, sleeping on the ground, and eating your bread without tablecloths, and that you never combed your beard, but was weeping and cursing your fortune.” “There thou saidst ill,” quoth Don Quixote; “for I do not curse my fortune, but rather bless it, and will bless it as long as I shall live, seeing it hath made me worthy to merit the love of so high a lady as Dulcinea of Toboso.” “She is in good faith so high,” answered Sancho, “as she surpasseth me almost by a whole cubit.” “Why, how now, Sancho?” said the knight; “hast thou measured thyself with her?” “I did measure myself with her in this manner,” replied Sancho, “that coming over to help her to lift up a sack of wheat on an ass, we joined so near as I well perceived that she was more than a great span higher than myself.” “That is

true,' quoth Don Quixote; 'but thinkest thou not that the tallness of her extended stature is adorned with as thousand millions of graces and endowments of the soul? But, Sancho, thou canst not deny me one thing: when thou didst thus approach her, didst thou not feel a most odoriferous smell, an aromatical fragraney, an—I cannot tell what, so pleasing as I know not how to term it—I say such a scent as if thou wert in some curious perfumer's shop?' 'That which I know,' quoth Sancho, 'is that I felt a little unsavoury scent, somewhat rammish and man-like, and I think the reason was because she had sweat a little doing of that exercise.' 'It was not so,' quoth Don Quixote, 'but either thou hadst the mur, or else did smell thyself; for I know very well how that rose among thorns dost scent, that lily of the field, and that chosen amber.' 'It may well be,' said Sancho, 'as you have said, for I have had many times such a smell as methought the Lady Dulcinea had then; and though she smelled too it were no marvel, for one devil is like another.'

From Roberto González Echevarría, “Don Quixote and Sancho on the Road: Books and Windmills” in *Cervantes’ Don Quixote* (2015)

Let me begin by repeating the last point I made in the previous lecture. The birth of Don Quixote is an act of self-invention by a man of fifty, and remember that in 1605 fifty is a very advanced age. He feels free to create himself beyond family and need. In this, the novel is directly opposed to most previous literature, particularly the romances of chivalry, where there were miraculous births. And to the picaresque, very much in particular the picaresque, in which family background and need determined the life of the protagonist and his poverty, and the family background weighs heavily on the rest of his life, as in the case of Lazarillo.

Don Quixote is beyond family and social determinisms. In most previous stories, young people leave home in search of adventures that will give substance, meaning, and individuality to their lives. Can you think of another old protagonist before Don Quixote? How old was the pilgrim in the *Divine Comedy*? How old was Odysseus in the *Odyssey*? How old was Aeneas in the *Aeneid*? Celestina, it is true, was old, but she shares the limelight with young lovers. Don Quixote, as I said in the last class, is beyond Freud, beyond the family romance. In fact, though we learn a great deal about him in the first chapter, we learn nothing of his parents. His genealogy is literary, the books he has read.

The most innovative aspect of Don Quixote is the character’s self-fashioning, as Stephen Greenblatt would put it in a book called *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. The reader witnesses this self-transformation at all its levels, from the mental to the physical, from what Don Quixote thinks to what he wears. He, not an author, names himself, his horse, and his lady. His is a life that will be shaped like a work of art. Life will imitate art. But what is the significance of this self-invention, of this resurrection, as it were? Renaissance humanism emphasized the power of human agency. It is the beginning of a liberation from a God-centered conception of the world and of humankind. Remember the Lukács quotation about the Quixote being the first story of a

world that has been abandoned by God. So in this world abandoned by God man creates himself, Don Quixote creates himself.

“En un lugar de la Mancha de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme . . .” (In a certain village of La Mancha, the name of which I do not choose to remember . . .) (my translation). This is the first sentence of the book. This is a sentence, by the way, that most literate native speakers of Spanish know by heart even if they have not read the rest of the Quixote. It is known as well as English speakers know, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” from *A Tale of Two Cities* or “Call me Ishmael,” the beginning of *Moby-Dick*.

In the *Quixote*, literature appears, as I have been saying, as a realm of self-legitimation and for the display of wit and capacity for invention, which is what Cervantes appears to be affirming in that first sentence of the book. As a narrator, Cervantes does not wish to remember the place in La Mancha where Don Quixote lived. It is a display of authorial will. The sentence is full of other implications, for example, there is the echo of the opening of traditional stories as well as that of official documents that attest to one’s being by stating where one is from. In the stories, “in such-and-such a country long ago,” and the country is named. Or “my name is so-and-so and I live in such-and-such a place, and was born in such-and-such a place,” a legal document. To make such a statement about place is one’s strongest form of grounding, but here it is willfully omitted. A place-name that is erased by the creative will of the author: “No quiero acordarme,” I choose not to remember, against the traditional or legal formulas in which it is usually given.

The origin, this corner of the world, this place, this village, this *lugar*, as it is called in the sixteenth-century Spanish, to which the protagonist returns several times and definitively at the end, is not named. It is as if the source were nondetermining, as Don Quixote’s family background is nondetermining in his adventures. This is perhaps why the origin—which is also the destination because Don Quixote will return to die at home (giving away the plot here, I am sorry)—is left blank, deliberately effaced from the story. It is a nonplace, although many towns in Spain claim to be the one in which Don Quixote lived.

Don Quixote’s real surname was Quixano, his full name was Alonso Quixano. This issue of naming is prevalent throughout the book: the fluctuations of language in reference to meaning and to truth. If language is so shiftily, how can we express the truth in language? Leo Spitzer, a great German critic who worked in this country for many years and taught at Johns Hopkins University, in the piece “On Linguistic Perspectivism” (which you will

read in your *Casebook*) makes much of this, applying the knowledge of the linguist and philologist that he was. Language and its vagaries also constitute Cervantes' point of view about what is commonly accepted as the truth and how the truth can be commonly accepted in a medium as shifty as language. But the blurry name, Quixote, *quijana, quesada*, is also a way of playing with the absence of determinisms, like his being from La Mancha, a nonplace, as it were. A place marked the characters in the epic, the romances of chivalry, and the picaresque novels: Amadís de Gaula, of Gaul; Lazarillo de Tormes—Tormes is the river that goes through Salamanca, by the way, in which the *pícaro* is supposed to have been born; Gúzman de Alfarache, a place that is named Alfarache. But not in the *Quixote*, significantly.

Don Quixote names his lady Dulcinea del Toboso and his horse Rocinante. In the case of the lady he follows literary convention. Her name rhymes with Melibea, as we have seen, one of the protagonists of *Celestina*, a beautiful young woman. And *dulce* means 'sweet' in Spanish, so you can see the origin and the intention behind naming Dulcinea. The horse's name reflects something of his physical reality, Rocinante, *rocín-ante*, meaning he was a *rocín*, a 'workhorse,' before; *antes* is 'before' in Spanish. Rocinante, the name, reflects in a very direct, comical way the horse because it reflects precisely the appearance of this nag. Don Quixote's capacity for naming, as we will see, is quite extraordinary; he is a man of words and of the word. But the crucial point here is that he is naming himself, his lady, and his horse as part of this process of self-invention, like Adam giving names to things in the Garden of Eden or God giving names to things in the universe. This is part and parcel of the process of self-invention.

Chapter 2 contains one of the most remarkable moments in all of literature. The protagonist has created himself, and he leaves at dawn, the beginning of a new day, a new life, and sets out on the Montiel Plain alone riding Rocinante. It is a beginning from zero, from a voluntary severing of ties with any possible determining force except chivalry and literature. It is a moment of freedom, of freedom achieved, freedom from the past. But as he goes along Don Quixote anticipates the literary text that will be written about the exploits he is in the process of accomplishing or thinks he is in the process of accomplishing. There is a gap between the high-flown rhetoric of the romances of chivalry he uses and the literal plain upon which he trots. But this is precisely the gap between literature and reality, between writing and experience, that will be at the core of Cervantes' exploration of the nature of writing. The present and the writing of the text hang somewhere in between

reality and this high-flown rhetoric, which are parallel and simultaneous in their appearance in the book. This is quite remarkable, and it may pass unnoticed, but I want you to take notice of it. It is on pages 30-31 of the translation we are using. As he goes forward on the Montiel Plain, Don Quixote says to himself, “Who can doubt but that in future times, when the true history of my famous deeds sees the light, the sage who chronicles them will, when he recounts this my first sally, so early in the morning, write in this manner: ‘Scarce had ruddy Apollo spread over the face of the wide and spacious earth the golden tresses of his beauteous hair, and scarce had the speckled little birds with their harmonious tongues hailed in musical and mellifluous melody the approach of rosy Aurora who, rising from her jealous husband’s soft couch . . .’ ” (I, 2, 30-31). He is using all of these references to classical mythology to refer to himself as he projects the text that will be written about him.

From Myriam Yvonne Jehenson and Peter N. Dunne, “Discursive Hybridity: Don Quixote’s and Sancho Panza’s Utopias” in *The Utopian Nexus in Don Quixote* (2006)

It is a given of social theory that no discursive field is homogeneous. It produces different meanings and subjectivities, exposes conflicts and contradictions, and thereby enables new forms of knowledge and practice to emerge. Nowhere does this truism become more apparent than in the sixteenth century, when new realities exposed ancient discourses that were once held to be indisputable and not open to contradiction. Nicolaus Copernicus seemed literally to turn the Ptolemaic world upside down by moving the sun to the center of the universe: “In the middle of all sits the sun enthroned” (quoted in Boas 81); and Andreas Vesalius’s dissection of human bodies revealed systemic inaccuracies in Galen, the most respected of medical authorities. Already in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the views of ancient writers had begun to be challenged, but by the middle of the sixteenth century Vesalius could write, in 1542, that “those who are now dedicated to the ancient study of medicine, almost restored to its pristine splendour in many schools, are beginning to learn to their satisfaction how little and how feebly men have laboured in the field of Anatomy from the time of Galen to the present day” (quoted in Boas 129). The Jesuit José de Acosta, on passing the Torrid Zone and finding it cold and not, as Aristotle had said, scorching, would exclaim, “[w]hat could I do then but laugh at Aristotle’s Meteorology and his philosophy?” (quoted in Grafton 1).

The Reformation had already shaken the roots of the Church’s certainties. And no less unsettling was the fact that many of these new realities had been discovered not by traditional Scholastics, nor by the hermeneutical tools of the Humanists, but often through empirical evidence. The invention of the printing press, which had furthered the acquisition of ancient knowledge, now became crucial in promulgating awareness of the contradictions between the old and the new. It also made available to a wider audience the early modern age’s challenges to ancient theories in mathematical geography and

astronomical methods. The authority of revered books, then, seemed to be sharply challenged everywhere. And it is from this world of change that Don Quixote emerges still holding on to the same—the absolute truth of his treasured books.

It would be incorrect to say, however, that the century’s “new” learning wholly supplanted the “old.” In fact, as Anthony Grafton points out, these scientific thinkers were “no intellectual radicals.” They “used classical precedents as well as modern evidence to support their iconoclastic enterprises” (Grafton 115). The same can be said of legists and reformists of the century. As we shall see below, Spanish theologians, philosophers, and lawyers will blend Biblical narratives, the tradition of the Church Fathers, pagan myths, and historical precedent in dealing with questions of legal theory, ethics, and history in the century.

One of the issues that would be heavily impacted in this heady intellectual age was the ongoing question of the originary condition of humankind, which the discoveries of the Indies (as the Americas were then referred to) had intensified. Since the “barbari” were not civilized, how was their condition to be categorized? Were “barbari” natural slaves, as Aristotle had maintained, or were they “educable?” As such, could they be Christianized? This question spawned others. Since the “barbari” had never been exposed to civilization, could they be said to be living in a state analogous to the original condition of our first parents? Could the lost Eden itself, which scholars, theologians, and folklore never affirmed to have disappeared altogether, be found in this New World, as Columbus believed? Traces of these contemporary conflicts will be discernible in *Don Quixote*. The fact that they are often refracted and distorted in the discourse of a madman does not make them less relevant to our study.

Don Quixote, then, is a product of an age of hybridity, in which the experience of practical men enlarged and challenged knowledge once restricted to scholars. It was an age in which feudalism yielded to capitalism, in which the wealth of merchants created possibilities of acquiring titles once reserved to aristocrats, a period in which the views of the ancients were both challenged and employed in explaining the new and the experimental. This cultural polyphony resonates throughout Cervantes’s novel.

Further Reading Suggestions

Recommended Secondary Literature:

- * Elliott, J.H. *Imperial Spain 1469-1716* (2002)
- * Quint, D. *Cervantes Novel of Modern Times: A New Reading* (2003)
- * González Echevarría, R. Ed. *Cervantes' Don Quixote: A Casebook* (2005)
- * Watt, I. *Myths of Modern Individualism: Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan and Robinson Crusoe* (1996)

You can find a full list of suggestions for further reading and secondary literature on all of the primary texts in these booklets on the website:

<https://www.notestoliterature.com/twelve-books-to-have>

About Notes to Literature

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If you would like more information about Notes to Literature, please do get in touch with me at jonathan@notestoliterature.com or visit the website: notestoliterature.com.

If you are a school, or a company, and would like to inquire about arranging courses for your students or employees, please reach out. I can provide further details on the different kinds of approaches and services I offer depending on the particular learning contexts.

If you would like to pursue further independent reading on any of the authors in the booklet, or if you are setting up a reading group, I'm always happy to send on reading lists and guided reading questions that might be helpful for your discussions.

And of course, if you are interested in taking a course with Notes, I'd be delighted to hear from you. I offer free no-obligation meetings to discuss your goals, talk about some aspects of my approach, and think about how the courses could be tailored for you.

Happy reading.



About Me : Jonathan Gallagher

I received my doctorate in 2019 from the University of Edinburgh, where I taught several undergraduate courses, ranging from medieval and early modern literature, to Romantic, Modernist and Late-Modernist poetry and drama. My doctoral research examined the relationship between processes of state-formation in early modern England and the spectacular flourishing of religious poetry witnessed during the same period. This work has been published by leading academic journals in my field, and tries to show that religious poetry was vitally and critically responsive to broad changes in social relations and practices of rule in 17C England.

In my teaching, as in my research, I'm drawn to examining intellectual history and literary art in the context of given social and political conditions. With that in mind, in 2022, I founded Notes to Literature. My hope is that Notes will grow into a distinguished provider of personalised adult education in the humanities. The plan is to go about this one client at a time.

You can learn more about Notes and me here: <https://www.notestoliterature.com/my-work>

<https://edinburgh.academia.edu/JonathanGallagher>