“The most beautiful, the most gallant and the most ingenious book that could ever be imagined (…) the story of a dry shrivelled up, unpredictable child who was filled with thoughts never before imagined by anyone else”

Lecture at the 400th death day commemoration of Shakespeare and Cervantes
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1. Biographical information: Cervantes

In my first exposure to *Don Quixote* the “ingenious hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha” the spoke in fluent Afrikaans. (He was “die vindingryke ridder Don Quijote de la Mancha”). I read the first paragraph of André Brink’s Afrikaans translation as a young schoolboy and I was immediately hooked – lured into the book by the strangeness of a man whose brains had “dried up” as a result of reading too much fiction (something I was often accused of doing), partly amazed by the strangeness, partly shocked by the graphic violence and totally intrigued by the strange sense of humour.

Only when I borrowed the book from the school library for the second time, I read the “translators introduction” and realized that the Don actually spoke Spanish and that Cervantes was a contemporary of Shakespeare.

As is often the case with “classics”, one is constantly reminded about specific texts that you simply *have to* read – the cornerstones of the canon – however problematic the canon might be. *Don Quixote* is obviously one of those books that any student of literature is reminded about in almost any study of the novel – it is often referred to as the starting point of the modern novel. I was always satisfied that *Don Quixote* was at least one of the classics that I knew well. That was until I one day discovered an English translation and saw how thick it was in comparison to the 287 pages of the Afrikaans translation. I simply had to read the novel again in order to find out what happened in the other 700 pages! At one stage I even attempted to learn Spanish in order to be able to read Cervantes (and Marquez!) in the original. This effort to learn Spanish was inspired by a quotation from Don Quixote in Brink’s introduction where the knight errant compares a translation to looking at a Flemish Tapestry from the wrong side – although the picture is discernible, all the loose threads spoil the glory and the texture of the tapestry.

As we have been reminded today by several speakers and by the fact that this event was organized to commemorate these two great authors, Miguel de Cervantes was born 29 September 1547 and he died 22/3 April 1616 – which makes him a contemporary of Shakespeare and they died on the same day. (There is some evidence that Shakespeare has read Don Quixote, but no evidence that Cervantes has known Shakespeare.)

A lot is known about Cervantes. His father was a barber and surgeon. The young Cervantes wrote poetry and he became a soldier. In 1575, during military campaigns against the Turks in the Mediterranean he was captured and taken to Algiers as POW. He was kept as a slave for five years before a ransom was paid to buy his freedom (apparently a way in which the

Pirates raised money). These five years influenced all his work (and the tale of the captured soldier in Book 1 of *Don Quixote* is based on his own experience).

He lost his arm in a battle in Italy (battle of Lepanto) and returned to Spain where he tried to write dramas. He was not very successful although competent. In order to make ends meet he became tax-collector etc. etc. But Cervantes is really best known as the father of Don Quixote – a work described by Dostoevsky as "the ultimate and most sublime example of human thought". In the last paragraph of the novel Cervantes writes:

> For me alone Don Quixote was born, and I for him. He knew how to act and I how to write. Together we make a unit… (901).

2. Father of Don Quixote

The philosopher, A.N. Whitehead's description of philosophy is often quoted (also in our building on posters from the Philosophy department): "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato" (1979:39).

One could probably safely claim that in similar fashion all novels are footnotes to Cervantes. Just like Whitehead did not mean that Plato provides a fixed point of departure for philosophy but that there is a richness of ideas to be found in Plato to which philosophers constantly return, one is struck, when you read Don Quixote by the ways in which other novels draw from this rich work that is often described as the "first" novel. The work that serves as starting point for many histories of the novel.

Someone said that there are only 10 digits – 0 to 9 but that by combining them, we can write any number. Don Quixote provides to some extent the digits that other novelists can combine and recombine again and again.

Don Quixote is an encyclopaedic prose narrative in two parts published in 1607 and the second part was published in the year before Cervantes's death in 1615.

Most people think about Quixote as the mad knight who stormed windmills under the impression that they were giants – often a mad undertaking, a foolish fight in vain, is described as "storming of windmills". The English language even has a word "quixotic": meaning foolishly impractical especially in the pursuit of ideals.

Unfortunately very often this is the only knowledge that many people have about Don Quixote – a mad man who went on foolish and idealistic pursuits and ended up hurt (often seriously – loses teeth, breaks ribs, graphic details of serious injuries and hardship – as emphasized by Nabokov in his lectures on *Don Quixote*).

The novel is much more than that of course. And I can't hope to say anything in a few pages that can remotely do justice to this masterpiece. So I'll focus on reading only a few paragraphs from the novel. (The Prologue and the first chapter)

I'll go back to the text itself because very often classics, as Italo Calvino reminds us, are the kind of books that you hear so much about and read so much about that by the time you

actually read them, you have to break through a crust of interpretations and preconceived ideas about the text. But, Calvino says, if it is a real classic, you are immediately surprised by the text itself.

3. Prologue

I'll simply look at the part that one could feel tempted to skip in order to get to the "real" story, the Prologue:

> Idle reader, without swearing to it, you can believe that I would like this book, the child of my understanding, to be the most beautiful, the most brilliant and the most discreet, that anyone could imagine. But I have not been able to contravene the natural order; in it like begets like. And so what could my barren and poorly cultivated wits beget but the history of a child who is dry, withered, capricious, and filled with inconstant thoughts never imagined by anyone else.

All books published during those times had prologues – usually ways of claiming authority for what is to come. Often containing references by authorities to the value of this book, the truth of the book. Cervantes follows this tradition, BUT he subverts the whole tradition as well.

3.1 Reader:

NB – addresses as "idle reader" (In Spanish = desocupado – someone who is not occupied – has nothing better to do):

NB This is not like reading Homer or Virgil or Dante – Readers read those – or rather had it read to them (in public – in groups!) to have the world reaffirmed – the order of things reaffirmed – an explanation of ***how things are!***

Here is a reader – reading for pass time – in own room (in second paragraph of Prologue it is clearly stated that the idle reader reads in his own house, on his own (and has to make up his OWN mind about Quixote – just like Kant in Was ist Äufklarung? encourages individuals to make own decisions.

3.2 Author

And the Author – who wants to be inspired spokesman of an entire community, knows that he is only an individual – "filled with inconstant thoughts" – he has no authority, no access to muses – only has his own imagination.

Trying his best with these restricted "barren and poorly cultivated wits" – In this way he is not a spokesperson for a community but a solitary individual.

He wants to write a prologue as required by tradition, but he doesn't know how to do it, what to write. He cannot skip the prologue altogether – that is what gives authority to the text – without a prologue his work will have no authority – no authority provided by the tradition. But then the prologue challenges the idea of a prologue, making it absurd, turning against the tradition, emphasising that the tradition has to be challenged. Cervantes is looking for a new form of expression:

A Form fitting for a world that is changing. The old forms (especially the chivalry novels and the picaresque novels) are ridiculed and clearly not suitable to describe or understand the

new era. He also rejects the classic tradition – Cervantes realized that the world in which he lived could no longer be served by the established forms and he looks for a new form.

4. The start of the novel - Chapter 1

The novel starts:

> In a village in la Mancha, which I won't name, there lived not long ago a hidalgo of the kind that has a lance in the lance rack, an old shield, a lean nag and a fleet greyhound. A stew of a bit more beef than mutton, hash most nights, bacon and eggs on Saturdays, lentils on Fridays and an occasional pigeon on Sundays consumed three quarters of his income. The rest of it went for a broadcloth tunic with velvet undertunic for holidays, with matching slippers, and on weekdays, he adorned himself with his finest homespun outfit.
>
> In his house he had a housekeeper who was past forty, a niece who was not yet twenty and a houseboy who saddled his horse and did the gardening. The age of our hidalgo was close to fifty. He was of sturdy constitution, but a bit thin, lean of face, a great early riser and fond of hunting. They say that his last name was Quijada or Quesada – for there is some difference of opinion among the authorities who write on the subject – although by credible conjecture we are led to believe that he was named Quejana. But this is of little importance to our story – it's enough that in the telling of it we don't stray one iota from the truth. (Lathrop translation: 21)

The first paragraph gives an understandable description of a man, his appearance, his possessions and his habits. This seems ordinary enough – this is how stories work: they provide details to create a world that draws the reader in. – it enchants us – it provides a secular magic as Hillis Miller calls it – to encourage that willing suspension of disbelief.

But then suddenly it changes, this detailed world is not really uncontested, the author doesn't fully know the world. We cannot really trust the author – he doesn't know everything.

Yet he gives us the assurance that he won't stray from the truth – which suddenly doesn't instil confidence – the person who swears to tell the truth isn't sure about the main character's name or where he comes from. What does truth mean then?

Then the story goes on – a man who has read too much and lost his mind etc. His brains dried up as a result of all these books and he started to live in a fictional world – created by the chivalry novels he has read:

> In short, he became so absorbed in his reading that he spent his nights poring over his books from dusk to dawn, and his days from sunrise to sunset. Thus, from his little sleep and considerable reading, his brain dried up and he lost his sanity. Fantasy filled his mind from everything that he read in books – enchantments, quarrels, battles, challenges, wounds, flirtations, love affairs, misfortunes and impossible nonsense. As a result, he came to believe that all those fictitious adventures he was reading about were true, and for him there was no history more authentic in the world. (Lathrop translation: 22-3)

He decides to become an knight himself – gets the armour from the cellar, cleans it up, rebuilds the helmet (tests it and rebuilds it after it brakes to pieces but then rebuilds it again without testing it) and then goes of as a knight errant to set the wrongs right and to make the world a better place.

There is only one problem – the time of knights errant has passed. He is a couple of hundreds of years too late. His idealistic world clashes with the real world – with disastrous results. The standard interpretation is that the novel is a critique of idealism of unrealistic expectations, of human endeavours to make the world something that is not.

The following pattern emerges in the novel:

1. The Don sees giants or armies that are threatening or individuals in need of help. He intervenes – as these circumstances provide opportunities for a knight errant to set wrongs right, to help the poor and downtrodden and to avenge wrongs.
2. Sancho Panza tries to prevent him form doing something foolish – he provides a reality check by noting that there are no Giants, merely windmills, no armies, only flocks of sheep, no good people incarcerated by evildoers but thugs guarded by soldiers. Panza's dialogue consists mainly of clichés, sayings, platitudes, very conservative quotes)
3. The Don doesn't listen to Sancho Panza.
4. It proves that Panza was right and the Don was wrong
5. He gets beaten up, suffers hunger, is humiliated and even Sancho is humiliated or punished with him
6. However – this doesn't deter him from his ways – he merely ascribes the unfortunate results to enchantment. This reality is not what it seems – it only seems to be this way because of the work or enchanters.

In other words, he sticks to his idealized vision of the world and no pain or warnings or reason is strong enough to change his ways of seeing the world.

5. Interpretations

His idea of the world – is an ideal word (idea and ideal are closely related) – it is an ideal world that he wants to create: a world containing knights errant with a code for knights. But the problem is this code according to which he wants to live is not relevant in the world anymore (and there probably never was such a world where it had been relevant in the first place – apart from in the fiction that he has read).
Yet he holds on to values and standards and moral ideas that are not suitable for the world in which he lives.

That is why the novel is often interpreted as a critique of idealism – Quixote's illusions are repeatedly shown up. At the end of the second book he confesses his errors and then dies. By owning up to his folly in the end, it seems like the whole novel is an acknowledgement that we should beware of idealism.

On the other hand the novel is often interpreted (especially in the Broadway version) as the celebration of a hero who sticks to his ideals, who follows his dream in the face of all adversity: (Sounds like motivational speaker: Stick to your dream! You can be anything you

want to! Don't listen to the world telling you otherwise – Yes you can!) This “romantic” interpretation is sometimes blamed on wrong translations.

Which interpretation is correct – we can still ask today after 400 years?

Both are correct of course and neither of them. The novel is way more complex than this kind of reduction.

Quixote tries to make sense of a world in which meaning is not to be found, is not fixed by the tradition and to be handed down by authority. It is not mere a satire of chivalric romances, This novel is a reflection on the tradition and our place in the tradition and the place of art in the tradition, a reflection about our place in a world that is losing its enchantment, a secular world without a single Truth that can be found, that can be handed down by tradition or that can be discovered and established again.

6. Birth of the novel: a new world and a new image and model of that world

As Milan Kundera once put it:

> As God slowly departed from the seat whence he had directed the universe and its order of values, distinguished good from evil and endowed each thing with meaning, Don Quixote set forth from his house into a world he could no longer recognize. In the absence of the Supreme Judge the world suddenly appeared in its fearsome ambiguity; the single divine Truth decomposed into myriad relative truths parcelled out by men. Thus was born the world of the Modern Era and with it the novel, the image and model of that world. (*Art of the novel* 6)

His “only purpose” with Don Quixote was, as Cervantes explicitly states in the novel’s last paragraph, “to make men loathe the fictitious and foolish histories of the books of chivalry” (Lathrop translation: 901), and he certainly succeeded. But he succeeded in countless more and unforeseen ways. He also provided a new form of literature for a new era.

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