

Alexandro Malaspina

*Critical Letter on the Work of Quixote and on the Analysis which the Spanish Academy
has Prefixed to its Latest Editions*

Text translated from the original Spanish, including epigraphs from the original Latin, by
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Manfredi y Bianca Saíz, Universidad de Alicante, 2005

*Easy is the downward path to Hell,
For night and day the gates of black Dis lay open;
But to retrace one's steps and escape to the fresh air above—
This is labor, this is toil...*

Virgil, *The Aeneid*

*When the chosen subject suits the writer's powers,
He is never at a loss for words,
And clearly and orderly his thoughts do flow.*
Horace, *The Art of Poetry*.

Foreword

I make no attempt to justify the reflections that follow on the work of Quixote. Arising from the solitude in which I live,¹ they are perhaps without foundation; and they are certainly out of season, for they treat of the demolition of a national idol, that is, an idol resting on the twin base of tradition and self-love. However, if ever these thoughts should be published, I beg the critics to read them, if possible, without prejudice.

To deprive the Quixote of some imaginary beauties is to give new lustre to the many that really do belong to it. And to identify the comparative idea of the beautiful for this sort of composition, in a work so generally acclaimed and read, is to take no small step towards a lesser imperfection in our studies of literature. Farewell.²

¹ Malaspina wrote this piece and several other essays on philosophical topics during imprisonment in the Castle San Antón in Galicia, where he was held from 1796-1802, on trumped-up conspiracy charges, after a suspended trial, and without due process.

² "Florian, the idolater of Cervantes, in his French translation has cut the *Quixote* nearly in half." (Note of Malaspina at the bottom of the manuscript.)

My Great Lord,³

It is a very difficult undertaking with which Your Honor charged me in your letter of the tenth. To write an impartial examination of *Quixote*, and of the *Analysis* which the Spanish Academy has prefixed to its latest editions, is to put oneself on a path full of thorns and burrs, on which no one ought dare to tread who does not possess the same talents and the same popular appeal as the author. It has been no less than two centuries since, by the common consent of the most illustrious nations, it was written at the head of this work, as it was beside the arms of Orlando,

Let nobody venture these arms to move

Who cannot equal to Orlando prove.

And in truth, if one ventures either to praise the work, or simply to point out what seems to merit blame—well, we must confess that the former is superfluous, while the latter is hateful, and dangerous besides.

To criticize the *Quixote*? To censure it before the tribunal of our own nation and in our own language? To say more than the erudite Mayans,⁴ and to speak against the opinions of the Royal Spanish Academy and Don Vicente de los Rios?⁵ Ah! If to obey Your Honor with my usual sincerity were to lead me, without the hope of remedying it, to such a level of disrespect, how could I not then deserve the most atrocious punishments from the Republic of Letters?

However, such is my fall from grace⁶ (*whether from my own doing, or because I am pursued by mischievous magicians*), that after having read the *Quixote* many, many times, it seems to me (I will confess it openly) that neither its most beautiful and happy conceits, nor the serious faults in the conception and execution of the work, have yet been examined with true and dedicated impartiality. —God help me! For what have I said? Your Honor may see what your orders can do: uproot from the secret depths of my heart

³ In response, presumably, to a now lost request, Malaspina addresses his letter to an unidentified correspondent, a judge. Dario Manfredi speculates that he is perhaps a member of the Spanish Academy itself (*Lettera Critica sull'Opera del Chisciotte*, ed. Dario Manfredi, Pontremoli: Paolo Savi Editore, 2005: 33).

⁴ Gregorios Mayáns y Sísacar wrote the first biography of Cervantes, published in London in 1738. The text contained many criticisms, which Vicente de los Rios took up in one of his late chapters.

⁵ Vicente de los Rios wrote a *Life of Miguel de Cervantes* and an *Analysis of the Quixote*, both of which were published by the Spanish Academy as part of its 1780 edition of the *Quixote* (reprinted in 1782 and 1787).

⁶ Referring to his imprisonment by the state.

an idea with which I have constantly struggled and which I would forever have hidden, in order to avoid the disrepute of being presumptuous, even though it be not from stupidity or ignorance. Therefore, this will be the idea that I will try to expound with a certain fullness in the following paragraphs. And if, as I believe, this letter scarcely deserves that Your Honor should read it with his wonted mix of compassion and patience, it will be for me a blessing without equal that, hidden from others, it has been quickly consigned to flames, as though it were a work of heresy.

If there were a way to destroy in one go the whole reputation of *Quixote*, it would certainly be that which was taken by the Academy in the publication of its *Analysis*,⁷ which is nothing more than a slavish copy, poorly executed, of what Addison did for Milton's epic (*Paradise Lost*). To compare Cervantes to Homer, Virgil, Tasso and Milton; to prefer it in any sense, whether concerning the novelty of the subject and the qualities of the plot, or the personalities of the characters, the purity of style, and the discretion and utility of the moral, is to repeat the very romance of the *Quixote* itself. Then, having forged in the imagination a new Dulcinea, this is to represent her as altogether an "unblemished beauty, grave but not proud, loving but modest, and courteous from good breeding," when in reality she is nothing but "the Aldonza Lorenzo, a ready wench, hale and hardy, with hair on her chest (so to speak), who knows how to toss a caber as well the strongest lad among the townfolk."⁸

Let us understand each other: as a collection of funny sayings, exceedingly opportune and natural, the *Quixote* is perhaps inimitable. But considered in all the significant light of what comes down to us from the epic tales of Homer and Virgil, and from the later imitations by Tasso and Ariosto, it is weak, not at all poetic, and lacking invention, as I shall demonstrate little by little.

Of course in no way can we make the *Quixote* suit the definition of an epic plot, even though we should like, following Aristotle, to express with this term the manner of arranging the action in the epic. It is merely drawn at random, without formal plan, in which there is no other variety introduced, neither poetic nor realistic, beside the most trivial objects that anyone can see on a single journey from La Mancha to Barcelona.

⁷ By Vicente de los Rios.

⁸ Malaspina is quoting (evidently from memory, since they are inexact) passages from Cervantes that are treated in the *Analysis*.

For those few who attend to the genuine meaning of the terms, fable and romance, even accepting on this point the famous *Prologue with a Helmet* of Father Isla,⁹ the necessity of such a distinction will soon be brought to light. The fable ought much more to please the poet, for it opens to his imagination a vast terrain, where he might travel without end and give vent to that sacred fire which Apollo and the Muses have breathed into him and which they have nourished in his mind with fresh infusions. Hence that series, as varied as it is lucky, of ideas, now derived either from mythology, or from nature, or created anew as though by an instinct unable to subject itself only to vision and hearing; hence the marvels so justly admired by Horace in the works of Homer, the Elysian Fields of the *Aeneid*, the Gardens of Armida from Tasso and the dissension in Agramante's camp, so nobly invented by Ariosto.

To tell the truth, for the intervention of the pagan gods in Homer and in Virgil, whether to protect or to persecute their heroes, the same multiplicity of demigods, of nymphs, of shape-shifters dictated by the theogony and the heroic deeds that history has described, was able to furnish an endless supply of splendid concepts with nothing artificial among them. In the Catholic poets, to the contrary, it was impossible so frequently to introduce religious themes without falling into profanation or giving way to childish and monastic ideas. We might compare for a moment the continual contrasts of Juno and Venus in the *Aeneid* with those of Saint George and Saint Dionysius in the *Pucelle d'Orleans*, or also with the appearances of Saint Louis in the *Henriad*.¹⁰ We might notice, right away, that Ariosto and Tasso find themselves drawn to mythology and to the concepts of pagan religion, and it will become clear as day why epic poets should necessarily prefer the fable to any other genre of plot.

A romance, on the other hand, is better fitted to be the subject of a comedy or a tragedy: it cannot stray too far from the probable, or better yet, from reality. It admits no other facts than those which nature alone supplies, and for the same reason, being thereby more inclined toward dialogue, to the vices of men and to their passions, it has to seek out variety in the common trials of life rather than through the miraculous intervention of

⁹ José Francisco de Isla, Spanish Jesuit preacher and satirist, whose *Prólogo con Morrión* was prefixed to the novel, *Fray Gerundio de Capazas* (1758-1770).

¹⁰ *La Pucelle d'Orleans* (about Joan of Arc) and *La Henriade* (about Henry IV of France) are 18th century epic works by Voltaire, the former satirical and the latter elegiac.

the divine and its attendant agents. Cervantes himself says that fictional stories have value and delight insofar as they approach the truth or the impression of it, and that true stories are better the truer they are.

I will not venture, in imitation of the *Analysis*, to determine with certitude what the intention and method of the author were in the composition of the *Quixote*, but I shall be able to say frankly that they are quite mistaken who impute to him “the quite plausible idea of banishing knight-errantry.” Whoever should consider carefully the diverse phases of Cervantes’ literary career, his failed passion for comedies and his more successful one for the composition of novellas, will be inclined perhaps to believe that his whole moral doctrine in the conception of the *Quixote* boils down to substituting the reading of novels in place of reading about chivalrous exploits, as was so prevalent at that time. And, in truth, the same author, in the prologue, declares that he was waging war on books, not on customs.

With this suspicion alone, not so groundless that it does not merit the attention of critics, we should already be able to examine the novel of *Quixote* with greater impartiality than has been the case up to now; and omitting to compare it to epic tales, we may analyze it, on its own, as truly one of a kind, exceedingly hard to imitate and, above all, as dressed in witty clothes and written in a language that, for many centuries, have given great pleasure to its readers. In the famous painting of the *Madonna of the Fish*, in safe keeping at El Escorial,¹¹ we never cease to admire the ability of Raphael, even though the composition is at odds with his own principles. Raphael himself was loath to admit until later some of the poorly conceived combinations of the picture, which at the time presented a rather unremarkable subject. Yet the postures, the proportions and the colors remove and dispel the suspicions of the viewer who notices the anachronisms and the disjunctions that it contains; we admire the whole as beautiful, and because we turn our gaze everywhere, we find a consummately beautiful object.

May I, next, be permitted to put aside comparisons in this analysis: of the wedding of Camacho with the funeral games of Patroklos and the anniversary of the funeral of Anchises; of the dwelling of Don Quixote in the house of the duke and duchess

¹¹ The *Madonna del pesce*, 1514, by Raphael, has since 1817 been at the Museo del Prado in Madrid. El Escorial is a historical residence of the King of Spain, built in the 16th century.

with the detention of Aeneas in Carthage; of the hunting ground at the same house with that of Dido; of the narrative of the Countess Trifaldi with the sack of Troy; of the appearance of the Clavileño Aligero, or Clavileno the Swift, with that of the Trojan Palladium; of Altisidora's love with that of Dido; of the disenchantment of Dulcinea announced by Merlin with the magnificence of the Enchanted Forest of Tasso; and of Sancho's story about the head of the table with the tale of Niobe referred to by Achilles in his invitation to Priam.

Nor will I even agree that the *Quixote* can be compared to the sublime poem of *Paradise Lost*. Cervantes had no other thought in mind than to lead his hero down the common path, and from time to time, to have him transform whatever he encounters to accord with the amusing guises he carries in his own head. Milton, however, even though elevated from the first verse to the last into a state, into realms, and among characters whose perfection could hardly be captured by the mind given the effect of what he was hearing and what he had seen, did not lose faith in his imagery nor in the development and interest of the story. Nearly separated as he is from the rest of mankind and transported to the earthly paradise, much as Newton transferred himself to the Sun in order to consider the magnificence of the system of nature and to fix the invariable laws to which it is subject, readers, for the most part, grow tired of following him and, having grown faint, they lose sight of the object. There will be a few only who, with vibrant imagination and focused concentration, will be able to travel with him to the sublime realm in which he dwells.

Here is the true, or at least the essential, reason why the tale of *Quixote* is “flipped through by little children, read by boys and girls, understood by adults, celebrated by the old folk, and finally, why it is so renowned, so widely read and so well-known by all types of peoples everywhere, etc.”¹² To wit: all its themes are ordinary, or at least very easily understood, whereas, on the contrary, epic themes need to be elevated to the level of sublime poetry, whose comprehension is

*A grace that wide heaven bestows to but a few.*¹³

¹² *Don Quixote* II. 3

¹³ A paraphrase (or misquotation) of Petrarch, *Canzoniere* 213, in Italian in the original: “*Grazia che a pochi largo concede*”; Petrarch's verse reads: “*Grazie ch'a pochi il ciel largo destina.*”

The argument of greater force for the staunch defenders of the excellence of the *Quixote* has always been that foreigners have found as much pleasure in their reading of it as we Spaniards have, or even more. Yet considering the peculiar quality of the work impartially, these defenders present varied reflections that serve rather to diminish the force of the argument. In the first place, insofar as it refers to the absolute authority of such judges, the *Analysis* at the same time destroys it by objecting to M. d'Argens, "that it is no great matter that a foreigner should not understand that in Castilian anything that moves one to laughter is called funny; what is worthy of surprise is that he should speak with such authority about things that he does not understand." Now we must accept that foreigners, little or not at all acquainted with our popular customs, will never be able to analyze the trueness and accuracy of the work with the refinement that we can. Nor, in truth, was his intention in reading and translating the novel anything more than to delight in the extravagances of the Hero, and even more so in the most amusing simplicity of Sancho. Such has always been the work's chief—or only—attraction, toward which the final lines of Cervantes' own introduction seem to be directed; and, according to these lines at least, it is Sancho whom we ought to regard as the chief protagonist, just as Dryden has very gracefully argued that Satan was Milton's true hero.

As the best evidence of what we were just saying, and to demonstrate that in the *Quixote* the ideas, rather than being directed to a real target, are either cut off from reality, or might well be considered as such, at least by foreigners, I would invite the dispassionate Spanish reader to review with me briefly the principal actions of the novel in order to discern, first, its lack of verisimilitude, and then, its disjointedness. Had the adventures of the windmill, of the enchanted inn, and of the Basque combat either not followed each other, or had some not preceded the others, as Cervantes himself hinted in his second chapter, the illusion of two armies, really made of two flocks of sheep, would still be in the same place. And it is easy, even for the least reflective person, to mix up the places of the majority of the adventures, without for all that affecting anything, either the charm or the naturalness, or the stiffness and incongruity, which these episodes present us all at the same time.

Surely it is certain that anyone who is not just idle, who wishes to amuse himself for some time in reading the disjointed material of the *Quixote*, would much prefer to

read and reread many times over the dialogues of Sancho, the transformation of Dulcinea into a country lass, or the timely reflection of that squire to the villagers about the braying, rather than reading even one time the news of the impertinent stranger, or about the captive, or the marriage of Camacho, or any of the adventures of the house of the dukes or of Barcelona.

Everyone will notice at first glance how strained are the reflections of the *Analysis* about the supposedly natural and opportune concatenation of the various parts of the novel. In regard to Mambrino's helmet, for example, it cannot be considered as a tight linkage that Don Quixote should have sworn to search for it and that, having afterward forgotten about it, Sancho should have occasion to remind him of it. Such determination is a tacit element of the Don's delirious scheming, and being able to forget the helmet should appear an inconsistency rather than a natural link in the chain of the plot. But above all, leaving aside for now a thousand other reflections that crowd my mind, I will never be able to agree with the author of the *Analysis* that there should be an opportune moment, in the middle of the manoeuvring of the galleys, for Don Quixote to propose to Sancho that he should avail himself of the boatswain to accelerate the desired disenchantment of Dulcinea. According to the decree of Merlin, the lashings were to be given by the hands of Sancho, so for this purpose the boatswain was not the opportune instrument; and anyhow, running in disguise all down the gangway, he never intentionally struck even one person.

After the preceding reflections it is pointless to detain ourselves in a prolix discussion about the supposed era in which, in accord with Cervantes' intention, the action of the novel takes place: whether in the age of Orlando and Amadis, or in the time of Godo and the Arabs, or after the battle of Lepanto or the expulsion of the Moors from the peninsula, as appears in the case of the story of the Captive and of the encounter with Ricote, or even after the founding of the "Order of the Carthusians, and the writing of the book of the disappointments of the nymphs and the shepherds of Henares."

Neither is it necessary, for the beauty of verisimilitude, that there should be in Aragon a pit into which Sancho fell with Dapple, that they should dwell for minutes and seconds upon the timing of the various phases of the hellish battle with the Basque, and that they should consider whether Camilla's soliloquy in the episode of the *Impertinent*

Stranger is or is not natural. Such accusations hardly find a place even in the most trivial and sophistic criticism; nor for all that can we even accuse Cervantes of having sometimes fallen asleep. The difference between a tale and a novel – so far as it is possible to present the contrasting aspects – constitutes also another difference between a novel and history, since the former contents itself with the possibility or verisimilitude of the episodes, while the latter requires precisely that such things have happened. It is not absurd that there should exist in Aragon a pit not far from the place where we envision the Duke's castle. Nor, as regards the battle with the Basque, should it cost us any great difficulty to place the coach and each character in this or in that position, in which Sancho had to encounter them in obedience to the commands of his boss; and, in the figure of the enchanting Dulcinea, it were not impossible “to remove the pearls from her eyes, and place them in her teeth.”

The same thing, with little difference, we should be able to say about all the cases of negligence pointed out by the *Analysis*: “These are in reality but slight defects, stemming for the most part from not having retouched and polished his work, and such minor blemishes cannot really detract from the brilliant beauty of the *Quixote*.” But there are much greater blemishes, as I will demonstrate somewhat later, having first to examine, in some detail, a variety of other assertions.

* * *

What seems most salient is the lengthy discussion of customs in the time of Cervantes, referring particularly to chivalrous vices and to the abuses of honor and of authority. Whoever has perused the history of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century cannot but admit that such customs were at this time in total disuse, abandoned and perhaps despised. During the second half of the 15th century there had already been a wholesale change in European opinions, legislation, customs and military practices. The discovery of gunpowder henceforth made personal valor and strength irrelevant, at least in war, if not also in tourneys and duels. With the gathering of the armies and their tacticians, in the school of the immortal Gonzalo de Cordoba, another kind of experience and tenacity in leading the troops was now demanded, well beyond valor and skill alone. Now the goal of invasions was not to devastate the countryside, to destroy cities, and to disperse, in a few weeks, a troupe of backpackers who might subsist

only on whatever they might steal and drag along with them. Realms and provinces were conquered; America appeared; the reins were applied to Moorish and Ottoman temerity. The laws, the soldiery, the civil government of huge countries, the requisite service in a court full of luxury and ostentation, and, finally, the gentle dominion of the sciences and the Muses, which, imported from Italy, rapidly took root in our great cities—all these were forces too powerful not to distract the nobility from ancient ideas and chivalric practices. And even if there had not been a gathering together of such causes sufficient to calm down the turbulent spirit of the preceding centuries, the energy and consistency of the reigns of the Catholic Ferdinand, Charles V and Philip II, would have been enough to deracinate it from our Spanish realm in any case.

Do not confuse with the chivalric injustices of the Middle Ages that brand of personal courage and skill which in the 15th century Don Gonzalo Guzman, Juan de Merlo, Juan de Polanco, Alfaran de Vivero, Pero Vazquez de Sayavedra, Gutierre Quixada, Diego Valera and others endeavored to display, solely in order to earn, as they said, esteem and respect. We have seen similarly, in the army of the Gran Capitan, fights carried out matching twelve French knights against twelve Spanish knights, or just as many Italians. These types of encounters and exploits, always aimed at the two fundamental maxims of nobility – individual courage and skill in times of war, moderation and useful study in times of peace – could in no way have been confused with the wondrous deeds of the Twelve Knights of the Round Table, to which, though fabulous in themselves, Ariosto later had given as much significance as he had given ridicule and disdain to the mass of writers whom, with as much reason, Cervantes castigated in his amusing “Scrutiny.”¹⁴

But, if the passion for chivalric vices in the time of Cervantes is a chimera, it is certainly not untrue that everyone liked to read chivalresque books full of strange, useless and absurd notions—reading tendencies which Cervantes strove to eradicate with his *Quixote*, whether driven by moral considerations or by a literary egotism, whichever it should please one to suppose.

¹⁴ See *Quixote* I.6, “Of the Diverting and Important Scrutiny, which the Curate and the Barber made in the Library of our Ingenious Gentleman.”

Such reading was always more pronounced among young women, who, cloistered in their homes and consigned to the tyrannical oversight of various duennas, so justly abhorred by Sancho, fell in love by hearing more so than by seeing. Courage is the characteristic of man, just as modesty and fidelity are those of woman, and, thus, how strange is it that when these young women should first delight to read of what great courage men displayed in ages past just to please their lady, there should afterwards be left a greedy little cupid nesting in their hearts, burning solely for the exploits of a well-born young gentleman?

Let us consult without bias the century in which we live, and we shall see, among our young women, that the reading of English and French novels replaces, with equal passion, that which reigned in the time of Cervantes so violently in favour of chivalric romances. Nowadays, it is the constancy and conduct of women, in delicate and dangerous moments of crisis, that forms the central concern of our novels, just as in former times it was the constancy and conduct of the men that was at issue. And through a curious inconsistency we read with equal pleasure and interest the playful teasing by Cervantes of the maidens of the chivalric age, who, “unless it happened that some rustic or some villain with hatchet and hood, or some huge giant, had ravished them, remained virginal; and at the end of eighty years, never sleeping a night under another roof, would go to their graves as intact as their mothers had born them.”¹⁵ And then we believe and admire with tacit approval the episodes in the novels of our own day, none too rare, in which a young woman, to seek out or to follow her lover, enlists in the army and dresses like a man amid a thousand soldiers, or gives herself over to wandering unknown regions, or, in imitation of Claudia Geronima,¹⁶ resorts to the most violent means in order to avenge her honor, under the protection of a company of bandits.

This short digression is not irrelevant to the demonstration, that the reading of chivalric novels in the age of Cervantes was not so unusual or blameworthy, and the benefits to be derived from the *Quixote* as concerns civil life were not so important, as one might at first believe.

¹⁵ From *Quixote* I. 9

¹⁶ *Quixote* II. 60

Nor, in truth, was Cervantes able to declare all out war with chivalric ideas, mixed up with the wonders of dwarfs, giants and sorcerers, when at the same time he confessed himself an admirer of Ariosto, whose stanzas he was proud to learn to sing, and whose book, as written in the original language, he wanted to place upon his head.¹⁷

Well, then: How can we justify, after all this, the notion that such moral utility should be attributed to the *Quixote*? How can we accept the fact that, to magnify the case, it declaims so extremely against the effects of chivalric ideas, while confounding reality with fantasy, some centuries with others, and vile notions of a despicable self-interest with glorious ones born of courage put to the test and of a love that is founded upon that? I have not read the authors of chivalric tales, but from the Italian poets Tasso, Ariosto, Pulci and Fortinguerra, the authors of *Amadis*, *Orlando*, *Morgante* and *Riciardeto*, one can form a fairly just idea of the structure and organization of other works of that genre. In these, I see constantly projected three very plausible principles pertaining to the affairs and the deeds of Knights Errant: fidelity to their king, which generally means Charlemagne, rushing to his aid with the greatest punctuality; the law of friendship, which very often leads some to help others; and the force of love, which sends them from one end of the known world to the other, either in homage to their lady, or to her rescue.

If, then, the connection and necessary variety of a long story suggest to the poet a thousand extraordinary adventures, and if the introduction of the necromancers was indispensable – though already by that age there was no proper place to include divinities, which were so useful to Homer and Virgil – in all these things there could be no suspicion of truly dangerous thoughts; and so, a corrective according to the precepts of Horace was neither useful nor necessary.

Let it be kept in mind, that fantasies and novels being two very distinct elements in the time of Cervantes, although both founded upon the legends of the ancient wandering knights, in no way was it possible to adapt to both genres one lone work of satirical and burlesque imitation; and especially if the author prescribed for himself verisimilitude in action, a demand of which the poets naturally had washed their hands.

¹⁷ Manfredi (op.cit., p. 60 n. 32) explains that this refers to the judgment that Cervantes places in the mouth of the curate in *Quixote* I.6. The expression parodies the practise at the time of placing on the head, as a sign of obedience and respect, papal bulls and royal decrees.

Nor can the path of Cervantes be considered untraveled by others. The *Aeneid Burlesqued*,¹⁸ the *Stolen Bucket*¹⁹ and even the *Ricciardetto*²⁰ are so many other burlesque parodies attacking the fabulous tales of knights errant, but extremely varied and embellished with all the colors of the poetic imagination. I don't know why the balsam of Fierebras – by virtue of which, as Don Quixote paints it, “by placing a touch of the ointment upon half the body, cleft asunder and fallen onto the ground, and a touch upon the other half, orphaned in the saddle, you, Sancho, shall see me grow sounder than an apple”²¹ – should be preferred to the two verses of Tassoni, about the fellow who'd had his head chopped off yet still carried on with the battle:

The poor devil really had no wits in his head;
He kept on fighting, even though he was dead.

I don't know what greater moral could present the picture of the religious table of the Duke, than these two other verses about that preacher

Who instead of saying vespers and matins,
Liked to gamble at backgammon.

Olivier, from the *Ricciardetto*, found in the belly of a whale a monastery of friars; and after having chatted and dined very handsomely, as a signal demonstration of his valor, the Paladin of France went out on his ass.

The Lectern of Boileau,²² *Ververt* by Gresset,²³ *Gil Blas*²⁴ and *Gerundio*²⁵ are equally delightful compositions, and all perhaps more useful and plausible. They don't contain particularly pertinent episodes, it is true, but speaking in good faith, can we still consider the *Quixote* as an epic poem with a coherent intention, and can we maintain that it observes all the laws of rhetoric and displays the beauties of poetry?

It were hard to even know, with much probability, what contributed most to the very success of Cervantes' enterprise. And the author himself, although not at all shy when it came to self-praise, in the second part of the novel, did not, however, indicate

¹⁸ By Giambattista Lalli (1567-1632). See Manfredi, op.cit, p. 61 n. 34.

¹⁹ By Alessandro Tassoni, 1622

²⁰ By Niccolo Forteguerri, 1674-1735

²¹ Paraphrase from *Quixote* I.10

²² N. Boileau-Despréaux. *Le Lutrin: Poème héroï-comique*, 1672-83.

²³ J.-B.-L. Gresset, *Vert-vert, ou le voyage du perroquet de Nevers*, 1734.

²⁴ A.-R. Lesage, *Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane*, 1715-35.

²⁵ J.-F. de Isla, *Fray Gerundio*, 1758.

that he harboured any grand intentions, limiting himself instead to characterizing his work as “a story of the most delightful and least injurious entertainment that has heretofore been seen, for in all of it there is not to be found even the semblance of an indecent word, nor any less than catholic thought.”²⁶

And then to judge, through a drawn-out comparison of the *Gerundio* with the *Quixote*, which of the two is the most amusing, most useful and most realistic; to analyze the difficulties that one or the other character should continually present to one who should intend to treat them with propriety and decorum, would require a quite extended digression beyond what is relevant here. But it is fitting to observe that the setting of the *Gerundio* is infinitely more focused, being limited to a cloister, a pulpit, or at most, a small village in which in which he should preach. And it is not such a defect not to imitate Homer or Virgil concerning the state of the hero at the beginning of the action, that, for that alone, we should think “how difficult it is to snatch the key from the hand of Hercules.”²⁷

But let us put aside the *Analysis* and pass on to a direct examination of the *Quixote* itself, which, I hope Your Majesty will again understand, is really ‘north of my reasoning,’ and which issues more from the desire to obey Your Majesty and to say what I feel, than from the hope of rescuing our compatriots from the exaggerated judgment which they have formed of this novel. And in order to follow a certain method, which, since neither so vague nor trivial as that of the *Analysis*, should be all the more intelligible and clear, I shall begin by abandoning any notion that Cervantes should have thought to compose an epic tale, and I shall restrict myself, for that very reason, to those defects which would be considered real and true no matter what quality Cervantes had intended to impart in the composition of the *Quixote*.

I expressed at the outset that the points of view from which we Spaniards and foreigners must have regarded the work were very different. To them it must have appeared an invention, and that Don Quixote traveling across Spain is akin to Astolfo, Brandimarte, and Orlando traversing Hircania, Persia and Cathay. Whether or not the episodes were realistic, neither were they able, nor did it matter to them, to verify it: “All

²⁶ *Quixote* II.3

²⁷ *Analysis*, para. 17 (Manfredi, op.cit, p. 64).

men besides have a secret propensity toward satire and burlesque, and we are also all inclined to mimicry; there is no scene, in the theater of life, where our self-love attains greater complacency, than in the satirical representation and burlesque mockery of a vice.” And much more so if the annoyance or outrage that results should remain confined to definite persons, and the thing that entertains us should thus not threaten us in any way. The moral character of Don Quixote had, according to them, all these advantages, and it was besides of such a great and continuing usefulness that they considered him a comparative and comic image for all those, in whatever society, who should desire to exalt themselves to the highest reach of the passions, whether as valiant knights or as lovers, only to see themselves suddenly laid low. As long as there is no dearth of such characters, they should always perceive a certain utility and delight in the text of the *Quixote*. This story is become a universal allegory (perhaps the only one) adopted among all the nations of Europe, and the same thing must happen to those who desire to imitate it as should happen to persons who wish to substitute a new word for another one already in use – that is, the project alone arouses either sympathy or annoyance.

Because a satire must please everyone, for this reason it is absolutely necessary that it feature obsolete customs and nonexistent types of persons. And incidentally, it should be noted, this same reflection, combined with the universal pleasure with which the *Quixote* was received, proves to us once again that already by that time the traces of knight-errantry no longer existed.

For this reason, foreigners, naturally charmed by the extravagances of the hero and the amusing simplicity of the squire, have perhaps added another pleasure to their reading, namely reproaching us Spaniards, although unjustly, with the saying of Horace: *quid rides, de te fabula narratur*.²⁸ So if they should want to analyze the circumstances of the story thoroughly, in search of verisimilitude, either they should have to abandon the whole undertaking right away, or they must perforce come to look upon Spain as a theater well-suited for such adventures.

We Spaniards, to the contrary, whether through linguistic identity, or through the almost daily view of the objects, roads and places that form the nucleus (so to speak) of the novel, or whether, finally, by that secret pleasure which the natural jocosity and the

²⁸ “What are you laughing at? The joke’s on you.”

language of Cervantes arouses in us – we see ourselves invincibly swept away in seeking new delights and amusements where we've already encountered them in such great abundance. Desire enflames us, national pride dazzles us; disillusionment is thwarted by common opinion, and, at last, we confuse art with nature and the work as a whole with some parts of it.

In effect, considering the action impartially, we cannot fail to note, soon enough, what little difference there is between the two epics mentioned, if, in the one a wandering knight should be able to kill with impunity, at the crossroads, whoever would not acknowledge the beauty of his lady; and in the other, a complete and generally furious madman can cross an entire realm, assaulting, and not lightly, unfortunate travelers with the sole intent that they should write his story.

I do not know whether those who assert verisimilitude in Cervantes' narration have noticed this serious problem of the plot. I do not know how the Spanish reader, as entertained as he is, as much as foreign readers, by the repeated craziness of the hero, cannot sometimes ponder with interest the mule driver's head split into four pieces when our knightly cavalier was donning his armor; or the monk Benito, suddenly thrown headlong from his mule; or the Biscayan, spewing blood from his nose, mouth and ears in the presence of his ladies and his coachmen; or the broken sword of one of the Yangueses; or the terrible fate of the bachelor and the procession of the cadaver transported to Segovia; or the injury and mistreatment meted out to the barber who possessed Mambrino's helmet.

Those condemned to the galley free themselves, badly wounding with a lance one of the guards; an unlucky goatherd finds himself cracked in the nose, with face full of blood and beaten like Sancho's dog; Bachelor Samson Carrasco falls in such a way that, moving neither foot nor hand, he seems dead; the cage of two lions is opened in the middle of the Camino Real; a village of a thousand inhabitants becomes the insipid entertainment of the odious Dukes.

And all this is moral? These are pleasant circumstances? These are the guises with which the fantasy of Don Quixote clothes the objects that present themselves to him? And finally, these are the characteristics of the story? The bullfights which the *Analysis* condemns with such determination and eloquence, and whose delicious ferocity should

be put into perspective by the force of the *Quixote*, are surely much less bloody and a good deal more rational than those spectacles and acts of destruction just mentioned.

But what, then, is the moral that we might draw from the wilful fraud of the hundred ducats, committed shortly afterward by Sancho to Cardenio's detriment, especially comparing that, to push the point further, with the comportment of the goatherd, who in six months had no desire to touch them? And what of the wicked behaviour of Zoraida toward her father? What of the ill-timed spending of the Dukes, in the episode in which one of their rich workers should have to lend them money and also serve as guarantor of their debts? The same Sancho, even though not without money from Don Quixote with which to pay for the lodging, preferred to be tossed in the air instead of paying up punctually. Roque Guinart and his gang execute their infamous murders almost at the gates of Barcelona. There is an intimate friendship between Roque and Don Antonio Moreno, and between him and the viceroy. In the plaza in Barcelona, and in the sight of the viceroy, an armed stranger, commending himself neither to God nor to the Devil, charged another man and left him laid out on the ground half dead; and Don Antonio Moreno and his companions have such little respect, even before their childish stunt of putting a cart on the shoulders of Don Quixote, "that some of these mischievous urchins put a bunch of spiny weeds under the tails of Dapple and Rosinante, who flung their riders to the ground."²⁹ What happens in this novel is precisely what we see happen with any other lunatic exposed in public, so long as he's not raging. The common folk and the wealthy can amuse themselves with him for some time, and can make his disgrace the object of their laughter. But his parents, his friends, and sane and caring people – can they suffer him with patience and rejoice at his plight? Will they themselves not try to take him off the streets, when he becomes an object of ridicule? And if he is dangerous, must the police not take similar measures?

We believe that the ancient custom of damsels falling in love, behind their father's backs, with the Chevalier of the Sun, of the Serpent or of the Stars, and riding on the back of the horse with virginity intact, can be corrected by the ironic mockery of the loves of Dulcinea. And then, in the character of Dorotea, we see a lovely, innocent, well-bred young woman, the sole consolation and support of her parents' old age, devote

²⁹ *Quixote* II.61

herself voluntarily to a shepherd, so that he might direct her; to another, that he might feed her, in the solitude of the woods, by the security of conjugal faith; and to a priest and a barber, inventors of a farce, as consolation and a respite from her former preoccupations.

Violent love, that frenzied passion, which has been and will always be the principal motive of impetuous actions, the idol of poets and the one worthy subject of romances; this love, which drove Cardenio to raging madness and a brutal life, and Dorotea to an unhappy and unrecognizable condition, is disappearing to the point that, setting aside the objections and discourses of the priests, it sees itself converted into a playful disposition, into a total forgetfulness of trials past and into a recovery of health and robustness, which by force of love's nature had once been so prone to deteriorate.

And then the *Analysis* claims that in Cervantes we see the picture of love in natural form, in all its aspects and modifications: the precipitous and changeable in the histories of Cardenio and Dorotea; the fake and burlesque in the passion of Altisidora, and the light and little decorous in the adventure of Doña Rodríguez. Ah, if in the spectacle, as novel as it is horrible, of the famous night-time adventure of the Doña, one should have an imagination capable of luxuriating in the analysis of love, we should have to believe her subject to a greater madness than that of Don Quixote, and we should be unsure whether she were not the Devil himself in woman's guise.

From these reflections about morality, which I shall augment no further, in order not to draw out the study in an irritating and annoying portrait, there follow others, no less important, touching upon the propriety of customs and mores.

In the most pleasing voyage on the Ebro, Sancho is presented to us regularly full of lice; then he appears, in his same clothes, at the table of the Duke and Duchess. The Duke, for his part, with the inappropriate and attentive face of a madman, has his face soaped up by his servants after dinner, and the kitchen boys are so bold as to enter the dining room with linens, troughs, and wash water, and in the presence of their masters also to take a break, relax and enjoy the ingenuity of Sancho. This same squire, whose amusing mischief in the enchantment is the most felicitous and best executed idea of Cervantes' invention, soon destroys that idea by going on to persuade the Duchess that Dulcinea really had been enchanted; in this way also Don Quixote destroys on two

occasions his most wondrous visions of Montesino's cave, first responding to Sancho that he believes them, if he must believe them in the case of the seven sisters,³⁰ and then asking the head of Antonio Moreno if the business about the cave was true.

So many inconsistencies amid the general harmony of ideas do not surpass, in number or in quality, those which pertain directly to nature. The *Analysis* observes that it is not easy to understand the internal mechanism of Clavileño the Swift, because, flying through the air with a strange noise (its parts, no doubt), it falls to the ground with knight and squire, half-scorched, and without the riders suffering any injury. I believe much more worthy of note and supernatural the fall of the hero with Rosinante, his lance being stuck in the blades of the windmill, and the other adventure "when the drove of fighting bulls and tame bullocks, together with the group of herdsmen and other folk, passed over Don Quixote, and over Sancho, Rosinante and Dapple, knocking them all to the earth, and rolling them over on the ground."³¹ The day after the adventure of the windmills is when Don Quixote and Rosinante exhibit greater strength and more flair, in the encounter with the Biscayan, and, a little after the misfortune with the bulls, "as a clear and fresh spring had remedied the dusty fatigue of both knight and squire,"³² the latter gives himself to eat with gusto and the former begins to preach to him. Nor is there time for Ricote to take the treasure and return to Barcelona, during the time his daughter Ana Felix is in prison. Don Quixote, in these cases, had to suppose that some enchanters were protecting him and guiding his affairs to a happy conclusion, rather than believing them to be his persecutors and conducting an all-out war against him.

In this class of inconsistencies, I cannot pass over in silence the great implausibility of the effects of Don Quixote's madness: walking for days on end, lodging with all kinds of people; encountering, as is natural, an endless variety of objects; and nothing drawing him out of delirium except occasions chosen by fate. The violent quarrel with Cardenio about the character of Queen Madasima and about maestro Elisabeto, and the sudden breaking of the puppets of Maestro Pedro, are both certainly natural and fitting for this type of madness. But to charge a poor monk on horseback, and to ask Sancho to strip him once he's fallen; to confuse an empty shaving bowl for Mambrino's

³⁰ Alluding to the constellation of the Pleiades (in Spanish, lit. the 'seven stones').

³¹ *Quixote* II.58.

³² *Quixote* II.59.

helmet; to confront a group of fighting bulls; or to challenge a lion face to face: these are very unnatural things in themselves, and very unusual amid the other circumstances of the narrative. For how many empty, hanging shaving bowls did Don Quixote not see, after he began his peregrinations, yet without mistaking them for helmets? How many monks, without them seeming to him to be necromancers? How many bulls, even though on the loose, to which he did not believe his powers adequate? If the giants transformed themselves through magic into windmills at one time, the stories which he had read must have given him to understand that they would not always be that way; and sometimes they should charge him, while other times he should assail them, until he should in the end realize that they are windmills and not giants.

In a word, the imagination of Don Quixote is presented to us in the discourse of the novel as altered sometimes by what he has read, other times by what he sees, and other times still by what those who are making fun of him want him to see; or again, in these same three cases, as perfectly adjusted to reality and good judgment, which is in no way something natural and plausible; at any rate, this is detected, more than in any other place, in the tiring adventures of Barcelona.

Also, the character of the Bachelor, Samson Carrasco, displays aspects that little conform with natural necessity: this “lively joker of the courtyards of the school of Salamanca, a famous ironizer,”³³ enters into contest with an idiot with outmoded arms, and he chooses for himself a worse steed than Rosinante. His story isn’t over here: barely recovered from his deadly fall, he crosses half of Spain searching to confront anew that same danger, fully burdened, amid great inconvenience, and looking ridiculous under the weight of antiquated arms. And he does all this as a difficult and unlikely work of charity, emerging thereby as the one and only charitable man in the whole discourse of the story.

But let us not blame Cervantes for the numerous inconsistencies up to here, nor for many others which have been omitted for the sake of brevity. Never did he think, as we have seen, of composing an epic that might compete – I won’t say with Homer or with Virgil – but with Tasso and Ariosto. Rather, to let his playful imagination run free in the solitude of prison; to weave together many ideas and leftover compositions from earlier times; to brand a certain person, by the terrible arms of ridicule, with what at that

³³ *Quixote* II.3

time would have contributed to his disgrace; not to lose sight for an instant of the customs and qualities of the country in which he lived; to exhibit his irresistible inclination, though always unfortunate, for the plots and the style of comedies; and to display the erudition with which he was adorned: this is the conjunction of things, which, in my opinion, determined the first part of the *Quixote*, a work that is truly inimitable for the nature and grace of its dialogue and for the purity and elegance of its style, though it be not so blessed in originality and morality.

If Cervantes had set out to compose an epic, how many ideas would this genre not have presented to him right away, however weak his poetic instinct! Montesino's cave would have occupied a proper place and contained all the requisite elements: Sancho, lured by his usual credulity, going down together with his boss; the darkness and mournfulness of the place; the review of the giants and other adversaries, either dead or gravely wounded from previous battles; at one moment the rapture of delightful visions, at another the horror of sad and melancholy images; the mirage of delicacies tantalizingly alongside real hunger; imaginary music followed by veritable dreams and fatigue; phantasms, giants, and dwarves; damsels wandering freely – this one pleased with her luck and with her beau at her side, that one aloof, another distressed; and capping it all off, a certain difficulty escaping the cave, and the sharp, perplexing reflections of Sancho. What delicious entertainment, depicted by the elegant hand of Cervantes, would all that not have provided for readers!

If the hero should walk through a wood, or down a main highway, the transformation of the trees, of the rocks, and so many other objects he should see, either into nymphs and sirens, or into giants and ruffians, should provide enough material for him to deliver all the lance thrusts, sword cuts and hand slaps he should desire, without thereby endangering either himself or unfortunate wayfarers. This is really why the adventure of the puppets of Maestro Pedro is so delightful and amusing. If Dulcinea, enchanted, should follow him, through an odd circumstance similar to his enchantment, what greater significance must not the ideas of the hero have, amusingly combined with the impossibility of the three characters – Quixote, Sancho and Dulcinea – to understand each other amid such different perceptions of everything? In fine, in the house of the Duke, the woods, the gardens, the domestic sphere, the general gaiety and happiness, the

path of the river, the charms of the season, the fruits, etc., would have led our author virtually to depict for us the gardens of Armida.

After this rapid review, I am forced to suspect that the imagination of Cervantes was very limited and not at all poetic. I see him excessively lacking in ornamentation, exceedingly uniform in ending adventures by means of enchantment, too limited by the actual features of the country in which he lived, too prone to introduce impertinent episodes to lengthen his novel, and in sum, all too inclined to recount with great frequency things relating to an impoverished, though honourable life, rather than recounting those things which the illustrious patrons who protected Tasso and Ariosto might have suggested to him.

Never will I agree that the second part can be considered a continuation of the novel. It springs entirely from the publication of the first part and from the work of Avellaneda. Chance, momentary occurrences, posterior to the time of Cide Hamete, whenever that might have been, present this new production as an apologia for the first, subject to the same plan so far as plotting and style are concerned. In both parts combined, the worthy material is barely enough to fill three volumes, instead of six. And it really is a shame (at least for those who care truly for the good reputation of Cervantes) that the author was so committed to extending the work so much. In any event, by less than halfway through the work one notices, in all its forms, a violence, a verbosity, an adoption of so many indecencies and vulgar notions then in circulation that, truly, the elegance and pleasantness of the style were hardly enough to make them suitable material for right, honest entertainment.

There is in the *Quixote*, nevertheless, more than an average amount of material for study. There is an enumeration, not at all superficial, of a great many customs of Cervantes' age—just as we owe most of what we know of Greek customs to Aristophanes—customs which, in truth, do not reflect favourably upon the state of Spain at the end of the 16th century, but which for that very reason ought to be examined with an interest that is above all free from national pride and from the depictions and illusions which the political writers of times past forged out of their own wilful biases. Farmhands, noblemen, the elites of Spain, courtiers, churchmen, mule drivers, bandits, players, merchants, and Moors, all display to the attentive reader a good part of their manners and

customs. There is seen the multiplicity of foreign products and influences which at that time were overrunning the peninsula: the priest's frock of Florentine satin, the shirts from Holland, and the amber-dyed collar of Cardenio; Sancho's dream, to be attired in gold and pearls, like a foreign count, and to sell slaves from his island in order to buy a title or office on which to live in leisure; the windows of the judge in Madrid, adorned with curtains in winter and lattice in summer; on return from Italy, the Captain Vicente de la Rosa, dressed like a soldier, done up in a thousand colors, covered with dangling crystals and fine chain mail, sporting one piece of finery today and another tomorrow, though always refined, embroidered, lightweight and of little practical value; the repugnance of Teresa Panza that Sanchita should wear a farthingale and Savoyard silk; the presentation of the governor of Montesino's cave in a black Milanese cap; and the use, in the house of the Dukes, of Neapolitan soap, German towels, and sheets and capes from Holland.

From the book one learns about the quality of inns, and the means of travel; the burdens of pilgrims and puppeteers; the hardships and the wants of wounded rank-and-file soldiery; the seduction of the young; the state of the Sierra Morena and the total absence of Justice, whether in the liberation of prisoners and the failed capture of those in the Sierra Morena, or in the multiplicity of thieves and murderers, or in the business of the tale, which Sancho relates, of seeming to be taken prisoner by two murderers and then being set free without harm, or whether finally, in the complaint, again related by Sancho, of the swine sellers, who "because of cheating and swindling had earned somewhat less than the swine were worth."³⁴

It is worth recalling "[the practise of] tracing of those figures called horoscopes, which is now so widespread in Spain that there is no housewife, no page boy, no cobbler in Spain who doesn't claim to read them, as if a jack of diamonds could know and tell all, such that they spoil through their ignorance and lies *the marvellous truth of the science*."³⁵ Finally, various ecclesiastical customs are noted: the discipline of the orders, the effigies of the saints, and the ritual procession of the Dead on the Octave of Corpus Christi. All these matters, and many more similar ones, will be instructive material for those who want to investigate the *Quixote* for something more than its perfection of style,

³⁴ *Quixote* II.45

³⁵ *Quixote* II.25

its endless witty remarks, very naturally told, and to treat it as something more than a pastime, though not at all tiresome, that might distract one from more significant worries.

But let us not in any way let the melodious song and beautiful features of this latter-day siren deceive us: let's not seek reality in what is purely a chimera. If we only try to draw nearer to it, we shall see it suddenly disappear, and our eagerness to multiply its pleasures will do nothing but dampen those pleasures which we first enjoyed passively.

Finally, I will explain an idea, already noted previously, namely, that a little reflection upon the novel as a whole reveals it immediately to be a collection of comedic ideas, the favourite occupation of our Cervantes, and consequently to be convertible into material for several comedies. In this effort, obviously, as many sayings, dialogues and ideas of the original author as possible should be adopted. On the other hand, greater care should be taken to consult the demands of verisimilitude and decorum. In every way, one should respect chronology, locality and accuracy in the unfolding of the adventures. Greater use should certainly be made of the character of Dulcinea, giving her, like Sancho, a double aspect: she should be either maliciously enchanted, or innocently deluded with hopes of a splendid fate. Then the nation could enjoy more extensively, and more often, the wit and elegance of the *Quixote*; and it would not be unusual to hear from the people's mouth, frequently repeated, a good number of Cervantes' words and refrains, just as episodes of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* are sung in the towns of Greece and verses of *Jerusalem* echo through the canals of Venice.

My Lord, I will now close this prolix letter, in which, it is easily perceived, my intent has been less to analyze the *Quixote* in meticulous and minute detail, or to make an annoyingly ostentatious display of rhetorical and poetic principles, than faithfully to obey Your Majesty's request, giving you an idea of the standpoint from which I regard this book, which in my view does greater honor to its author than to our nation, as the nation has tried to hide behind its shield, with all its wisdom, as though it were a new Palladium.

END