

## Going Global: Cervantes' *Don Quixote* Rides into the Future

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In the Dedication to *Don Quixote*, Part 2, published in 1615, Miguel de Cervantes writes to his patron the Count of Lemos that his now famous knight finally has donned his spurs and is en route to serve him, and of course, all readers, present and future.<sup>1</sup> Cervantes also confides that the Emperor of China in particular has been eagerly awaiting Part 2 of the novel, and that in a letter written to him by this august personage, naturally in Chinese, and delivered to him personally by a special emissary, the Emperor wishes to establish a college in China in which students will study Spanish as exemplified in the novel *Don Quixote* with Cervantes as the president of the college. When our author inquires if the Emperor has provided any funds to defray the cost of the voyage, the emissary replies with some surprise that, no, frankly they had not really given it any thought, thus anticipating by nearly 400 years the current crisis regarding travel funds for academics.

I mention this amusing, and typically Cervantine, anecdote for two reasons. First, while the story reveals the gentle pride of the author, who at the age of fifty-eight found himself an overnight success in 1605 when Part 1 of the “great book” *Don Quixote* came into being and rapidly became an influential, international bestseller, this passage also demonstrates that in the West the concept of globalization was already part of the collective imaginary. In academic circles, we now acknowledge that Spain created the first truly global empire, and although we frequently speak of the Columbian or transatlantic exchange of ideas, peoples, plants, animals, objects, cultures, and so forth, as my colleague Carmen Hsu and others have rightly argued, we would be more accurate to refer to this dynamic flow as a transoceanic or global exchange.<sup>2</sup> This concept, by the way, is now expanding beyond academia and into the public mainstream, as we can see in Charles C. Mann’s *1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created* (2011). Second, this anecdote has provided the imaginative spark for my rethinking of *Don Quixote* for this essay, that is, for my view that the awareness of globalization evinced by and within Cervantes’ masterpiece, and present in our contemporary global community, is sufficiently acute and similar to generate new or at least refocused analogies particularly relevant to teaching the work in a 21<sup>st</sup> - century Great Books course, and at the same time, adds even more compelling impetus – as if one needed it – for *Don Quixote*’s inclusion in a Great Books course or core course in a Humanities curriculum.

First things first. I am not arguing for throwing out the baby with the bathwater. *Don Quixote* epitomizes what Great Books are and do, and while that is not new, in this century I think presenting *Don Quixote* as an exemplar of the “Great Book” is more important than ever. I believe that Great Books constitute a sort of global patrimony, a universal human heritage, and just as we have certain, special locales and monuments designated World Heritage Sites, we have

special books and artworks that we designate global, cultural sites of human consciousness and the imagination, cultural artifacts that are artful monuments of exceptional aesthetic quality, and also repositories of enduring human concerns and values. Great Books like *Don Quixote* are very much of their time and culture, and yet also timeless, universal, and transcendent. While this is a cliché, it is still an essential truth we must continue to impress on our students in a world in which communication is so rapid and so little seems permanent. This observation also is significant given that we are members of a global community in which individuals and cultural and / or sociopolitical entities struggle to maintain a unique identity even while they seek to form part of a world collective. That being said, we can actually trace much of the invaluable, critical insight into *Don Quixote* that remains crucial and relevant for teaching Cervantes' Great Book today, back to the German Romantics: the study of *Don Quixote* as the first modern novel, with Part 1 offering a summa of major fictional forms and Part 2 breaking new ground; as a model par excellence of Humanist and Bakhtinian dialogism and polyphony; as a breakthrough work in metafiction and Romantic irony that foregrounds fictional self-reflexivity, but simultaneously creates an illusion of fictional autonomy that generates a reality effect; as a gallery of innovation in characterization with Sancho as embodiment of both the carnivalesque Lord of Misrule and the Renaissance celebration of the dignity of the common man; and so on. Courses that focus more closely on the *Quixote* could discuss the reception of the novel across cultures and time periods, for that study reveals much about the audience and circulation of bestsellers, the growth of print technology, translation on a global scale, and the history of ideas, as *Don Quixote* has garnered new interpretations with the passage of time. Another commonplace with a basis in fact is that every novel composed since *Don Quixote* engages consciously or unconsciously with Cervantes' masterpiece in one way or another, and so some professors may choose to address the huge topic of the *Quixote's* influence, in courses which might include such varied works as Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* (1868-69), Soseki's *Grass Pillow* (1906), or more contemporary works like Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (1985).

The 21<sup>st</sup>-century has begun and will likely continue as a period of increased awareness of diversity or multiculturalism as an inherent and desirable quality in our global community, even while in a wide variety of places around the globe stereotypes regarding race, class, religion and gender are in conflict or being challenged. Looking back, Spain was arguably the first nation in the West to confront the challenges of cultural pluralism both within its own geopolitical space, as Américo Castro contended in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with his concept of three cultures "living together" [*la convivencia*] – a view contested if not rejected by many now – and abroad as an imperial power confronting alterity, dealing with the "others" on several continents.<sup>3</sup> These contested issues of alterity embedded in *Don Quixote's* fictional world are not identical to those in the forefront in our contentious era in search of unity with differences and mutual respect intact, nevertheless the situation is analogous, and a fruitful one for intense, meaningful discussions that will create among students a new appreciation for what great literature across time and cultures can teach us about ourselves and the world in which we live.

In regards to diversity, since 9/11, after a period of tremendous interest in Cervantes and gender issues, the critical lens in the US has shifted to Cervantes' engagement with Islam, both in his life, as a proud member of the Christian forces who triumphed over the Ottoman Turks at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, and who was subsequently enslaved by Barbary pirates and imprisoned in Algiers; and in works like *Don Quixote*, where the author's treatment of the *moriscos* is both complex and highly ambiguous. A largely unassimilated population of Muslims forced to convert to Christianity and live under Christian rule, the *moriscos*, after over forty years of debate, politicking, and military incursions, were eventually expelled by Philip III in 1609. Islam and the *morisco* question arise in various places in the *Quixote*, and a number of fine Cervantes scholars have dealt with this issue – Frederick DeArmas (2011), Barbara Fuchs (2001, 2003), William Childers (2006), and María Antonia Garcés (2002), among others. My own opinion is that Cervantes' true feelings about the matter are impossible to discern in the dialogic, multivoiced space of *Don Quixote*, and what is probably closest to the truth is that his own thoughts about the cultural/religious struggle and eventual expulsion were likely conflicted and fraught with ambiguity. In a Great Books course, and in studying the *Quixote* in general, I would suggest a more lively and meaningful pedagogical and interpretive strategy than trying to argue that Cervantes wishes to advance a specific sociopolitical agenda in this regard.

What would that strategy be? How about studying issues, qualities, and characteristics that tend to divide, distinguish, and separate humans – race, class, religion, gender, culture, and other bases for identifying someone else as “the other” – in dynamic relation to the Cervantine ideal of the community, which unites people of diverse backgrounds and divergent beliefs across boundaries, and Renaissance notions of utopias and ideal governments, which can be compared with our current ideal of a united global community linked by common goals and interests beyond economic ones? Benedict Anderson stresses that all communities are *imagined*, the distinctions residing in the ways in which they are imagined (Anderson 1991, 6-24). And imagine them Cervantes does, as do Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Communities unite around the tomb of the scholar-shepherd Grisóstomo, scene of a debate over freedom, women's rights, and the obligation to community, over the story of the “Recklessly Curious Man” [*El curioso impertinente*], which launches a discussion about morals and interpretation; and at the Inn, towards the conclusion of Part 1, in which for one night, held spellbound by Cervantes' quill, muleteers and nobles, a judge bound for America and a soldier recently held captive in Algiers, a Moorish Christian lady, a farmer's daughter, the innkeeper and his family, assorted servants, and Sancho and Don Quixote, among others, constitute against all odds – differences of class, gender, culture, and so forth – a community linked by storytelling, that is, the imagination, and a common sense of humanity and good will. In Part 2, communities emerge at the Cave of Montesinos, at the palace of the Duke and Duchess, in Barcelona, and even in the scene at Don Quixote's deathbed. Cervantes champions freedom and diversity thematically and stylistically in *Don Quixote*, and yet he always underscores as an ideal the quest for community and for the ties that bind humans together. In one memorable scene in Part 2, chapter 54, Sancho, who has just voluntarily renounced the governorship of his island kingdom, an episode that simultaneously

parodies paradigms of utopias and “mirrors of princes” and suggests serious, ideal models of good government, presides over a utopian picnic community in which he, his former neighbor the *morisco* Ricote, who has returned to Spain illegally, and a nearly incomprehensible German traveler merrily share wine and food together, linked by a common bond of thirst, hunger, and a desire for laughter and good will. While scenes such as this one certainly provide a springboard for discussions about Early Modern utopias and notions of the ideal monarch, they might also spark classroom discussions regarding ideals of global governance and global citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Near the end of the novel, in Part 2, chapter 62, Sancho and Don Quixote’s hosts in Barcelona take them on a tour of this very modern, progressive city. At one point, the knight, whose adopted identity is among other things an anachronism writ large as he seeks to reinstitute a chivalric code and lifestyle linked to feudalism, medieval times, and also to a mythical, Arthurian *illo tempore*, spots a modern publishing shop. Fascinated, Don Quixote steps in and marvels at the wonders of the new publishing industry and gazes in amazement at the printing press, representative of revolutionary technology, marker of the shift from oral to print culture, harbinger of sea changes in society as well, and symbol of a pre-industrial society transformed by innovative ideas and inventions that will usher in the modern, industrial age. Encounters of this sort, in which world views and changing values confront each other across traditional barriers of time and culture, occur throughout Cervantes’ novel. Such encounters provide analogues to experiences with which we can all identify as the digital revolution continues to unfold, and as our world changes in rapid and dramatic fashion. The pace may be different, but the paradoxical mix of anxiety and excitement about a future indelibly marked by technological advancement is a sentiment shared across over 400 years of time.

In the Prologue of *Don Quixote* Part 1, the authorial voice tells us that we do not owe him much for the creation of the knight errant, “but I do want you to thank me for allowing you to make the acquaintance of the famous Sancho Panza, his squire, in whom, in my opinion, I have summarized for you all the squirely wit and charm scattered throughout the great mass of inane books of chivalry” (Grossman 2003, 9). At the time in which we consider the myriad implications for the average citizen of a movement like “Occupy Wall Street” and contemplate what the results may be for the rebels who claim their voice in an “Arab Spring” that has continued on into Summer and Winter, we may in fact wish to thank Cervantes for the invention of Sancho Panza, the complex sidekick who bursts through the doors of Don Quixote’s house at the beginning of Part 2 asserting his fame and importance as a major character in Part 1 even as he effectively steals Part 2 from Don Quixote. Sancho can trace his roots to such Bakhtinian, carnivalesque figures as the clown, trickster, and Lord of Misrule. Nevertheless, his voice and presence function powerfully in the development of the entwined central, Cervantine themes of freedom and the dignity of the common man, calling to mind the famous oration on this topic by Pico della Mirandola as well as the writings of a number of Christian humanists, among them Erasmus of Rotterdam, a major influence on Cervantes’ thought and works. Sancho, clown prince of *Don Quixote*’s fictional world, literally and figuratively embodies the role of walking

belly – Panza – comic protagonist and complement to his tall, skinny master, but over the course of the novel, he also comes to represent the ennobled human individual exercising moral, enlightened choices in resolving difficult decisions. Through this process, Sancho achieves a higher level of self-understanding and moral ennoblement. Those pithy, often witty maxims and popular sayings that pour effortlessly from his lips – much to the irritation of Don Quixote – encapsulate the distilled wisdom of the common people and their experiences, and at the same time, are reminiscent of the collections of apothegms and *sententiae* produced by the great humanists of the epoch, like Erasmus. Sancho’s particular gift of the gab thus suggests that Cervantes places faith in the innate dignity of all individuals, and their capacity for moral betterment. As a result, the lowly peasant Sancho grows in dignity and importance so much as the novel progresses, that by Part 2, he has completely broken the mold of the stereotypical Lord of Misrule and expanded way beyond the character limits of his two-dimensional counterparts trodding the boards in the popular farces of the day. In Part 2, the Duke and Duchess pretend to make Sancho governor of an island to entertain themselves by transforming him into an unwitting buffoon, but Cervantes turns the tables on Sancho’s social “betters” as his common man employs wit, experience, common sense, and a profound sense of Christian morality to execute his duties in a wise, just, and compassionate manner. The erstwhile simple, walking belly reaches the high point of his ennoblement in renouncing his governorship and his former desire for power and riches to embrace his essential humility and common humanity by embracing and giving a kiss of peace to his beloved donkey, and then by extending friendship to the outcast Ricote and the German stranger who accompanies him. The values embedded in these episodes, and embodied in the complex character Sancho, are perhaps even more relevant today than in 1615, if possible, as so many people in so many parts of the globe struggle to be recognized as individuals with inherent dignity who are entitled to certain fundamental rights, justice, and freedom.

*Don Quixote*, as Great Books usually do, also celebrates certain innately and perhaps uniquely human qualities that are at least as needful in 2012 and in years to come as they were when Cervantes first composed his masterpiece so many years ago. In the Prologue to his *Exemplary Stories*, published in 1613 – between Parts 1 and 2 of the *Quixote* – the authorial voice reminds us that “[t]here is a time and place for recreation, when the weary spirit may rest” and that “for this reason poplar groves are planted, fountains created, slopes levelled, and gardens neatly laid out” (Lipson 1998, 4). In the Cervantine garden that is *Don Quixote*, laughter and imagination reign supreme. Cervantes remains one of the greatest comic geniuses this globe has ever produced, and the Spanish author unleashes his full arsenal of humor-inducing strategies in *Don Quixote*, in which comedy ranges from puns and slapstick to ambiguous irony and sophisticated wordplay. Remarkably, even though as Don Quixote observes, “translating from one language to another, ... is like looking at Flemish tapestries from the wrong side” (Grossman 2003, 873) much of Cervantes’ humor translates very well so that audiences all over the world, generation after generation, will long continue to read and laugh as they walk through Cervantes’ garden. After many years of teaching this Great Book, there is still nothing quite so satisfying as seeing

the anxiety on the face of students on that first day of class as they gaze at a 1,000-page tome, dissolve into smiles and laughter after they plunge into the novel – a phenomenon that never fails to happen. Finally, the course I teach on *Don Quixote* often bears the subtitle “The Birth of the Imagination” – and once again we owe a huge debt to the German Romantics for recognizing the pivotal role of Cervantes’ novel in defending and advancing the human imagination as a divine gift worthy of cultivation and meriting the expressive vehicle of fictional literature. We do well to remember that *Don Quixote* emerged during what has been called the Age of Criticism, when imaginative literature was under attack by many authorities, and hotly contested and debated in terms of its potential merits. I cannot imagine a more convincing advocate for the power of the human imagination and the notion of poetic truth, for the importance of literary studies, Great Books, and the humanities, than Cervantes’ novel. As another great author, Fyodor Dostoevsky, has stated: “There is nothing deeper and more powerful in the whole world than this piece of *fiction*. It is still the final and greatest expression of human thought [ . . . ] and if the world came to an end and people were asked somewhere *there*: ‘Well, did you understand anything from your life on earth and draw any conclusion from it?’ a person could silently hand over *Don Quixote*” (Lantz 1993, 1: 411). In 2010, the Royal Spanish Academy and YouTube collaborated to make a group reading of *Don Quixote* in Spanish available to viewers all over the planet. People of all ages and backgrounds read a short snippet of the novel, and these snippets are assembled, like a wonderful collage, to provide a collective, truly global reading of this book that is part of the universal, human patrimony. Cervantes would have loved it – a virtual community. A concept beyond his wildest dreams? Perhaps, but certainly not beyond his imagination. *Don Quixote* rides into the future.\*

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## Notes

1. The more recent English translation by Edith Grossman and the older English translation by Walter Starkie are excellent and readily accessible.
2. See Hsu (forthcoming); Phillips 2007, 2009 as examples of approaching the Spanish empire as transoceanic.
3. For more on the much contested concept of *convivencia* see Castro 1948, 206-31, 493-560, 596-604; and in English, 1954, 221-52, 466-550, 607-15. It is important to keep in mind that Castro’s thought on this subject was complex, and neither static nor monolithic.

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