

Don Quijote and the Art of Laughing at Oneself

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Our own peculiar condition is that we are as fit to be laughed at as able to laugh.

MONTAIGNE, "Of Democritus and Heraclitus"

NABOKOV'S COMPLAINTS OVER ITS "cruel and crude" humor notwithstanding, readers have responded to and identified a tremendous comic range in *Don Quijote*. As Michael Nerlich remarked, "In the case of Cervantes [...] we can say, as a hermeneutical minimum, that every understanding that omits laughter must be essentially wrong" (250). In what will probably long stand as the most substantial inquiry into cervantine humor, Anthony Close makes a similar point: "one cannot treat the comicality of Cervantes's fiction as simply an obvious and superficial layer, detachable from the more thought-provoking layers that lie beneath. It pervades and conditions the whole work, and if we neglect it, our understanding of the work is basically flawed" (7). Close's expansive study of humor and shifting cultural norms in early modern Spain is also constrictive, since he wants to temper the anachronistic exaggerations of critics who insist upon *Don Quijote* as the first modern novel, with all of the perspectivism, socio-political engagement, indeterminacy and metaphysical angst that such a label might imply.¹ Anyone who

¹ According to Close, Spitzer, building upon Castro, "opened up for Cervantes the rich quarry of prismatic reality, self-conscious narrative, and fictional

has sustained exposure to academic writing, and possessing a sense of humor, is compelled to acknowledge the virtue of Close's argument. Much interesting speculation exists regarding what, precisely, we are laughing at in *Don Quijote*: a decadent nobility, a Spain that refuses to relinquish antiquated chivalric and pastoral ideals, the hubris and injustices of imperialism, repressed sexual inclinations. But occasionally we go astray, sometimes hilariously, when elucidating the *phallo-hegemonic, ontic-transgressive negotiations* of Cervantes' jokes—especially when they involve caricature, solecisms, and timely flatulence issuing from ample buttocks.

Cervantes himself repeatedly pokes fun at various forms of pedantry, from the minutiae of hair-splitting scholarship to the over-determined formulas of theory. We have, for example, the figure of the *primo humanista* in Part II, always seeking grist for his superfluous books (II, 22-24). And after the farcical adventure of the Carro de la Muerte (II, 11), don Quijote pontificates on theater as metaphor, only to have Sancho point out that his analysis is not exactly groundbreaking:

...lo mesmo [...] acontece en la comedia y trato deste mundo, donde unos hacen los emperadores, otros los pontífices, y, finalmente, todas cuantas figuras se pueden introducir en una comedia; pero en llegando al fin, que es cuando se acaba la vida, a todos les quita la muerte las ropas que los diferenciaban, y quedan iguales en la sepultura.

—Brava comparación—dijo Sancho—, aunque no tan nueva, que yo no la haya oído muchas y diversas veces... (II, 12; 121)

The impulse to allegorize is checked. In such instances Cervantes forms part of a rich comic tradition, including two figures we will

viewpoint" (2). Curiously, Close focuses on Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque as the nefarious hinge upon which much "romanticising" theory turns. For a thoughtful argument against closing off such a potentially fruitful and historical approach, see the review article of Iffland.

consider further below: Erasmus and Montaigne.² There is of course an irony to this gentle ridicule, since the complex structure of Cervantes' novel compels us to interpret even while it illustrates the perils of interpretation. But Cervantes was also undeniably interested in the physical pleasure of a good laugh, or, as the narrator presages in one episode, at least a monkey grin or chuckle (II, 44). When, in the streets of Toledo the curious narrator asks a *morisco* if he is able to translate some of the papers he has happened upon, we are given an indication of a central narrative concern:

En fin, la suerte me deparó uno, que, diciéndole mi deseo y poniéndole el libro en las manos, le abrió por medio, y leyendo un poco en él, se comenzó a reír. (I, 9)

Amidst our ingenious explanations regarding the function of humor in *Don Quijote*, we do well to keep in mind that Cervantes, like Boccaccio, Castiglione, Huarte, El Pinciano and others, believed in the therapeutic effects of laughter.

At the risk, however, of exposing myself to Cervantes' ridicule as another pedantic scholar, I will venture to analyze some rather subtle aspects of the humor in *Don Quijote*. The humor in question is modern in the sense that it expresses a suggestive skepticism: if not exactly the "prismatic" relativism rejected by Close, at least the awareness that rational and insane responses to the world are often separated more by degree than kind. To illustrate this, I will focus on epistemological aspects of the humor, on how a range of contemporary knowledge systems is mischievously drawn into the comic vortex. While much of the humor is satirical in nature, finding resolution in the ultimate control of the narrator and the superior knowledge of the reader vis a vis the characters, in other instances there is a lack of clear resolution and restoration of order, a lingering disorientation. I do not intend to argue that Cervantes was necessarily a "subversive artist," overtly opposing the official values and epis-

2 For some delightful examples of academic satire, see *The Praise of Folly*, 52-54, and the *Essays*, I: 25 & II: 12, 442-43.

temology of his time. Rather, as is typical with humorists, when the comic logic of a particular situation ranged into sacrosanct terrain, Cervantes was sometimes willing to let it run its course. The result can be confusion as to precisely what we are laughing *at*. Laughing *with* Cervantes, we realize how, complicit in sustaining illusions, we are in certain ways not so different from don Quijote.

I. LAUGHING AT, LAUGHING WITH

Before proceeding, some clarification of terminology is in order. Adrienne Martin's distinction between "humor" and "satire" in Cervantes helps illustrate a type of laughter I wish to emphasize:

While satirists refuse to forgive or to see in themselves the "vices" they castigate and instead remain at a critical distance, humorists use ironical distance to allow them to include themselves in the collective object of their humor. This is one *Don Quixote's* most important lessons to the reader: the recognition that all of us are to an extent quixotic or pancine. (165)

In his study of laughter and the novel, James Wood articulates what he calls a "comedy of correction," a *laughing at* that corresponds to a stable, theological, Aristotelian world-view, and which is "pre-novelistic." This he contrasts with a more lenient "comedy of forgiveness," a *laughing with* characteristic of an unstable and secular vision, and the domain of the novel (3-19). While Wood associates the full development of the novelistic "comedy of forgiveness" with late nineteenth and early twentieth-century innovations in form and character, he identifies a few "transitional" works that contain both types of humor, *The Praise of Folly* and *Don Quijote* among them.³ Like Pirandello's notion of "the feeling of the opposite" (and

³ Citing Cervantes' use of irony, parody and paradox, James Parr contends that *Don Quijote* is better understood within the Lucianic-Horatian satirical tradition than as an early example of "realism" (97-102). In addition to exposing pedants and the proximity of man and beast, Parr maintains that the principal function of the satire is "the repudiation of a sociopolitical ideology," which he

Martín's distinction of humor from satire), Wood's comedy of forgiveness involves an element of compassion, a breaking down of the derisive opposition between the laughing subject and comic object. A trace of pathos arises along with a broadening of our knowledge: we sense there is more to the laughable character than we originally judged. An example of such characterization, as Martín points out (171), is the unexpected dimensions taken on by Maritornes, who initially appears as the comic type of the grotesque prostitute. The effect becomes even more notable when she extends humane charity to Sancho after he has been decimated by the *bálsamo* (I, 17).

As chroniclers of wisdom such as Plato, Lucian and Montaigne have affirmed, greater knowledge can come at an epistemological cost, as we become less sure of our assumptions. Wood discusses how such a process is at work in the rise of the novel: "This comedy, or tragicomedy, of the modern novel replaces the knowable with the unknowable, transparency with unreliability, and this is surely in direct proportion to the growth of the characters' fictive inner lives" (10). Painting in broader strokes, Milan Kundera sees in Cervantes the first great novelist whose comic irony "tore the curtain" of our presumptions to knowledge, thereby disorienting but also freeing the reader, who must deploy an active imagination and judgment in order to make sense of the world. Of *Don Quijote*, he has written: "We are laughing not because someone is being ridiculed, mocked, or even humiliated but because a reality is abruptly revealed as ambiguous, things lose their apparent meaning, the man before us is not what he thought himself to be" (109). And then there are critics, such as Michael Wood, who claim that Cervantes outdoes the moderns in their own game:

In Nabokov we have endless grounds for a fine modern distrust, but find ourselves trusting (some of) what our shifty narrator says. In Cervantes the situation is more or less the reverse.

conceives as "a somewhat subversive message about the futility of trying to resurrect a largely illusionary golden age" (101-102). Trueblood has discussed laughter and sympathy, as well as therapeutic laughter in *Don Quijote*. For a focus on the humor generated by the incorporation of chivalric elements, see Eisenberg.

Broadly: where there is trust Cervantes finds multiple grounds for mistrust; indeed finds such grounds pretty much everywhere; devotes himself to finding them, gets many of his best jokes out of such moves. (33-34)

I grant that not all of the preceding observations are based on a rigorous historicism. But the dichotomy between the “hard school,” insisting on historical context, and the “romantic approach,” which seeks to bring out incipient or unappreciated potential meanings, is in certain respects false: both yield valid and important insights, and either can be taken to a distorting extreme. Of particular interest is the fact that some of the pillars of “romantic” interpretations, supposedly predicated on a disregard for the comic content of the work, can be supported by an analysis of the humor. Perhaps even more importantly, the aspects of humor I ascribe to Cervantes are also found in some of his illustrious contemporaries.

II. DEMOCRITUS, HORACE, AND HUMANIST VIEWS OF DELUSION AND KNOWLEDGE

In similar ways, Erasmus, Montaigne and Burton articulate an important refinement to Aristotle’s oft-repeated maxim that a defining trait of human beings is the ability to laugh. As Montaigne puts it, “Our own peculiar condition is that we are as fit to be laughed at as to laugh” (I: 50). Of course, an emphasis on risible humanity dates back at least as far as Diogenes and Democritus. But there was a tendency in early modern humanists to explore the tension between laughing *at* and laughing *with*, between ridiculing folly in others and acknowledging one’s own. It is an interesting tension because “corrective” laughter occasionally shifts to one that accepts and even validates the folly that occasions it. The rational faculty, which allows us to recognize laughable defects, cedes some of its authority to the affective, and there is deference to the pleasure of laughter itself. Key emblems for such an outlook are found in Horace’s Second Epistle, in his congenial image of the bustling banquet hall, and of the otherwise rational man from Argos who enjoyed theatrical per-

performances in an empty theater and laments the “cure” of his well-meaning friends. We will consider how Erasmus, Montaigne and Burton give such figures an ambiguity they may not have possessed in their original contexts.

A volatile blend of satirical with humane laughter pervades *The Praise of Folly*, in which the “madness of the Furies” is derided alongside the productive delusions of which we all partake. Although the distinctions between types of madness are not always clear, Folly embeds a tempering mechanism in the form of an additional Democritus: “...not even a thousand Democrituses would suffice to laugh at them; and then you’d need one extra Democritus to laugh at the thousand laughers” (49). Democritus is human, therefore also fit to be laughed at. Erasmus alludes to Horace’s banquet hall in the following passage:

As wisdom out of place is the height of the ridiculous, so prudence perversely misapplied is the height of imprudence. The perverse man fails to adjust his actions to the present state of things, he disdains the give-and-take of the intellectual marketplace, he won’t even acknowledge *the common rule of the barroom, drink up or get out—all of which amounts to demanding that the play should no longer be a play*. On the other hand, the truly prudent man reflects that since he is mortal himself, he shouldn’t want to be wiser than befits a mortal, but should cast his lot in with the rest of the human race and blunder along in good company. (29, my italics)⁴

Life in society involves role-playing, an acceptance of rules and conventions; to refuse to participate simply because one sees the ar-

4 Montaigne would cite from the common source—Lucretius, via Horace:

If you know not right living, then give way
 To those that do; you’ve had enough of play,
 Of food and drink; ‘tis time you left with grace,
 Lest lusty youth expel you from the place. (II: 12, 366).

bitrary nature of convention is more a sign of boorishness than wisdom. Such illustrations of the ludic element at the center of human intercourse blur the traditional distinction between play and seriousness. While Folly refers to prudence, reflection, and the intellectual marketplace, the dominant images are affective and corporeal: play, drinking, and blundering along in good company. And although an intellectual understanding of limits is important for social interaction, Folly repeatedly suggests that pleasure plays an even greater role. "For what is this life, should it even be called life at all, if you remove pleasure from it?" (13); "...but absurdities like these are what binds society together in mutual pleasure" (21). Fundamental to the wisdom of Erasmus' paradoxical praise is that happiness and community are achieved in part through rational reflection, but perhaps even more through felicitous delusion.

In "Of Democritus and Heraclitus," Montaigne distinguishes between the comic and the tragic outlook, preferring the former:

Pity and commiseration are mingled with some esteem for the thing we pity; the things we laugh at we consider worthless. I do not think there is as much unhappiness in us as vanity, nor as much malice as stupidity. We are not so full of evil as of inanity; we are not as wretched as we are worthless. (I: 50)

It bears emphasizing that this is an early essay, by a youthful and somewhat severe Montaigne. The passage cited describes ridicule, a satirical laughing *at*. In contrast with tragic commiseration, the comic outlook affirms a separation between subject and object, an analytical distance involving censorious judgment. It is not the novelistic humor discussed above, which entails a narrowing of the gap between subject and object, but rather what "hard critics" would identify as typical of Cervantes' age: an Aristotelian laughter at defects. But as the use of the first-person plural indicates, Montaigne does not exempt himself ("Our own condition is that we are as fit to be laughed at as able to laugh"). He expresses ambivalence toward a being that possesses a degree of rational function and discern-

ment, and is thus “able to laugh,” but which nevertheless remains mired in absurdity. Montaigne’s later essays contain a more lenient, Epicurean sensibility, with greater acceptance of human vanity and delusion. Like Folly, who deploys an extra Democritus to reign in the thousand censors, he develops an outlook more humorous than satirical. In his “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” Montaigne again cites Horace, recounting the anecdote of the man from Argos:

Alas, you have not saved me, friends, quoth he,
But murdered me, my pleasure snatched away,
And that delusion that made life so gay. (II: 12, 366)

Montaigne considered tenuous the foundations of knowledge, based on an unstable combination of conjecture, subjectivity, imaginative exuberance and custom. As a consequence, it is misguided to base one’s happiness on certain knowledge. The art of living well involves an acceptance of ignorance, receptiveness to pleasure, and an adaptive flexibility that allows us to interact in human community: “Greatness of soul is not so much pressing upward and forward as knowing how to set oneself in order and circumscribe oneself. [...] There is nothing so beautiful and legitimate as to play the man well and properly, no knowledge so hard to acquire as the knowledge of how to live this life well and naturally” (III: 13, 852). Endowed with imagination and an active, mediating intelligence, humans cannot simply *be*; we “play the man,” which means balancing freedom and constraint, the intellect and the senses, individuality and conformism. As Montaigne comments in his meditation on the absurdity of vilifying and repressing sexuality: “Our life is part folly, part wisdom” (III: 5, 677–78). Recognizing this central truth about humanity, Montaigne, like Erasmus before him, adjusted his discourse to the subject matter, and the resulting *serio ludere* was presented not just as a mode of philosophical writing, but also as an approach to life’s conduct.⁵

⁵ Incorporating the categories of Roger Caillois, François Rigolot discusses the theatrical element in Montaigne as the favored mode of play: “Pour reprendre les catégories proposées par Roger Caillois, on peut comprendre pourquoi les Es-

Robert Burton joins Erasmus and Montaigne in citing Horace and proclaiming himself a partisan of Democritus. Insofar as it catalogues human dispositions and behaviors that lead to dysfunction and vice, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* is a panoramic satire. But it is also notable for rhapsodic accounts of the “sweet delights” contained in certain types of melancholy, reading and study in particular (II. ii. 4). Burton twice mentions the idea that the narration or reading of a thing brings a pleasure comparable to actually seeing or experiencing it (II. ii. 4, 78 and 81). Like Cervantes, who also voiced concern with alleviating melancholy, Burton’s enthusiasm for the tremendous variety and imaginative engagement offered by books frequently overrides the conventional moral and therapeutic concerns he cites along the way. A great practitioner of paradox, Burton ambivalently endorses many of the “vices” he has purportedly set out to remedy.⁶ It is therefore not surprising that Horace’s man from Argos should repeatedly resurface, as in the following discussion of the humors and the power of imagination in melancholy subjects:

...they are in paradise for the time, and cannot well endure to be interrupt; with him in the poet, *Pol, me occidistis, amici, non servastis, ait* [“In sooth, good friends, you have killed, not cured me, says he]; you have undone him, he complains, if you trouble him: tell him what inconvenience will follow, what will be the event, all is one, *canis ad vomitum* [like a dog to his vomit], ‘tis so pleasant he cannot refrain. (I. iii. 4, 406)

Like Erasmus, Burton recognizes that there are malignant as

sais refusent l’agôn, l’alea et l’ilinx. Par les activités compétitives (la chasse ou les échecs) on prend au sérieux les règles toutes arbitraires qu’on se donne (agôn); par les jeux de hasard (les cartes ou les dés), on se soumet inconditionnellement aux arrêts du sport pour de futiles raisons (aléa); par la recherche du vertige, on tente inconsidérément d’ébranler la stabilité de ses perceptions (ilinx). Seule l’illusion théâtrale permet de devenir «autre» en échappant à l’aliénation et donc, en un sens, de devenir soi-même (mimicry)” (337).

⁶ For a discussion of paradox in Burton, his indebtedness to Montaigne, and the tension between Democritus and Heraclitus in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, see Colie (430–60).

well as salubrious varieties and aspects of folly, and that one should curb the former while cultivating the latter. To attempt to eliminate all forms would be inhuman. It is telling that even the highly moralistic Juan Luis Vives cites the man from Argos while discussing the therapeutic value of laughter and the pleasures of the imagination: “pues algunos consiguen por el solo reflejo de la imaginación convencerse de que gozan de los mayores bienes.” According to Vives, Horace’s deluded man is not an aberrant exception, but the rule: “Harto sabido es el cuento. Es un fenómeno común en todas aficiones” (III: 9).

Here it is important to recall that a source for much of the above, Horace’s second Epistle, does not in fact hold a favorable view of delusion. The man from Argos, sitting happily in his empty theater, is meant to illustrate that “...it is profitable to cast aside toys and to learn wisdom; to leave to lads the sport that fits their age” (437). And the banquet hall image, like its model in Lucretius, promotes a rather stoic withdrawal, a deferential acceptance of old age and mortality. In his satire on human follies, Horace sketches a broad landscape of varied and nearly universal madness, with the goal of fostering a corrective awareness of vice (*Satires* II. iii). Erasmus, Montaigne and Burton, we might say, went some way toward “romanticizing” Horace. In the following consideration of *Don Quijote* we will see many instances in which the humor deflates not only the mad knight’s delusions, but also broader human pretenses toward *gravitas* and certitude. Furthermore, many of the same comic traits that come in for ridicule are revived in the generous light of Cervantine laughter, which is capable of vindicating the very foolishness it initially derides. In view of the preceding observations on humanist writers, it should be clear that assigning such characteristics to Cervantes’ humor need not be symptomatic of viewing *Don Quijote* through the lens of the modern novel. Rather, as Hugo Friedrich has shown, it involves an appreciation of Cervantes’ affinity with some of the greatest writers of the early modern period.⁷

7 Of Montaigne and Erasmus Friedrich writes the following: “They both have in common the fact that they replace ethical unconditionalness with a hu-

III. COMIC DOUBT AND DELUSION IN *DON QUIJOTE*

The “epistemological humor” I refer to above is introduced in the very first words of *Don Quijote*—“En un lugar de la Mancha, de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme”—, and sustained in the initial presentation of the hero:

Quieren decir que tenía el sobrenombre de Quijada, o Quesada, que en esto hay alguna diferencia en los autores que deste caso escriben; aunque por conjeturas verosímiles se deja entender que se llamaba Quejana. Pero esto importa poco a nuestro cuento; basta que en la narración dél no se salga un punto de la verdad. (I, 1, my italics)

Faced with such a flurry of uncertainty, Cervantes compels us to ponder what sort of precise narrative truth we are dealing with. The question increases in complexity as we continue reading. One notable instance is when don Quijote and the marginally sane Basque have their furious battle interrupted by the curtailment of the manuscript, and the author meanders through the streets of Toledo inspecting scraps of paper, generating news of a presumed “second author,” of the historian Cide Hamete Benengeli who composed the original in Arabic, and of visual illustrations of the characters accompanied by descriptive notes. Our narrator seems aware of the somewhat challenging implications all of this poses in transmitting a faithful account of his hero in Castilian, but he reassures us in the same terms employed some eighty pages earlier:

Otras menudencias había que advertir, pero todas son de poca importancia y que no hacen al caso a la verdadera relación de la

manity of modest averageness, and they shelter man in a wisdom that lies beyond the inconsequential contrast of reason and irrationality. Both also have in common the fact that they praise illusion as the mover of the human soul which brings happiness, regardless of whether the illusion manifests itself in the simplicity of fools or in the vision of believers, or in the poets’ process of getting outside of themselves” (309). Friedrich also discusses the common sources in *Ecclesiastes* and Horace.

historia, que ninguna es mala como sea verdadera. (I, 9)

Of course this can only make sense if we are dealing with something other than a factual conception of truth. Close dedicates considerable space to the problem, maintaining that Cervantes' notion of narrative truth derives from contemporary rhetorical precepts regarding the separation of extrinsic and essential information in storytelling, and the poetics of verisimilitude, of making that which is recounted both plausible and vivid, or "present" (Ch's 4-5). I believe that Cervantes also expands the notion of truth, extending the principles of well or poorly constructed narratives to extra-literary concerns. The humorous subversion that calls into question criteria of textual interpretation insinuates itself into the making sense of lived experience.

The Toledan Merchants episode (I, 4), in which don Quijote affirms the importance of faith and the merchants favor empirical evidence, is an early example of Cervantes' playing with—if not "problematizing"—the notion of truth; the interpolated tale of the *Curioso impertinente* (I, 33-35) does so in a more serious and troubling manner. While Part I begins with complicating the notion of narrative truth, Part II starts off by drawing into the humorous field a striking range of knowledge sources, as the priest and barber test the convalescing knight's sanity. In response to don Quijote's *arbitrio* recommending knight-errantry to save Spain, the barber tells the story of the "loco" with "lúcidos intervalos" in Seville. The comic anecdote recalls Horace's man from Argos ("a man who would correctly perform all other duties of life"), and has the purpose of eliciting a didactic, corrective laughter. Don Quijote will have none of it, and rejects the intended exemplarity of the tale: "¿éste es el cuento, señor barbero [...] que por venir aquí como de molde, no podía dejar de contarle? ¡Ah, señor rapista, señor rapista..." (II, 1; 47). He proceeds to give a moral defense of chivalry, deploying a conventional topos of social decline similar to that delivered in his Golden Age speech (I, 11). The curate then voices his doubt regarding the historical existence of the famous knights: "...imagino que todo es ficción,

fábula y mentira, y sueños contados por hombres despiertos, o, por mejor decir, medio dormidos” (II, 1; 50). Rather than mimic the “loco de Sevilla,” who, once diverted from his good reason is completely insane (“que soy Neptuno [...], lloveré todas las veces que se me antojare y fuere menester”), don Quijote expresses his belief in an interesting way:

la cual verdad es tan cierta, que estoy por decir que con mis propios ojos vi a Amadís de Gaula, que era un hombre alto de cuerpo, blanco de rostro, bien puesto de barba, aunque negra, de vista entre blanda y rigurosa, corto de razones, tardo en airarse y presto en deponer la ira; y del modo que he delineado a Amadís pudiera, a mi parecer, pintar y describir todos cuantos caballeros andantes andan en las historias en el orbe, que por la aprehensión que tengo de que fueron como sus historias cuentan, y por las hazañas que hicieron y condiciones que tuvieron, se pueden sacar por buena filosofía sus faciones, sus colores y estaturas. (II, 1; 50)

This is an example of narrative truth in the form of a compelling verisimilitude, of making the character “present” before the reader. The vivid detail of don Quijote’s description recalls his account of the massing armies in the *rebaños* episode (I, 18) and his famous “knight of the boiling lake” narrative (I, 50), delivered in refutation of the canónigo’s objections to chivalric romance. In place of the clear exemplarity of the *loco de Sevilla* story, which warns against being fooled by temporary appearances of sanity, we see a defense of belief which, although risible in a literal sense, rests upon venerable aesthetic ideas.

As the barber, in humorous condescension, inquires about the size of Morgante, the distinction between narrative truth and larger epistemological issues becomes more tenuous:

En esto de gigantes—respondió don Quijote— hay diferentes opiniones, si los ha habido o no en el mundo; pero la Santa Escritura, que no puede faltar un átamo a la verdad, nos mues-

tra que los hubo, contándonos la historia de aquel filisteazo de Golías, que tenía siete codos y medio de altura, que es una desmesurada grandeza. (II, 1; 50)

Now, when the narrator at the beginning of Part I says that “basta que en la narración dél no se salga un punto de la verdad,” we can either take it as a dismissive joke (“of course this is all make-believe, not really to be compared with serious texts”) or, following Close and others, as an example of how Cervantes is interested in illustrating others sorts of truth (rhetorical, artistic). But when nearly identical terms are applied to the Bible (“no puede faltar un átomo a la verdad”), the implications are more complicated. At the very least, we can say that the Goliath references goes some way, according to contemporary standards of proof, toward legitimizing don Quijote’s belief in giants. The knight then adds two additional layers to his argument, referring to the archeological evidence of large bones found in Sicily, and concluding that, since Morgante was described sleeping indoors, he could not have been so huge. As with don Quijote’s literary debate with the canon of Toledo (I, 47-50), part of the humor here resides in the spectacle of a confirmed lunatic managing to destabilize some assumptions of his learned interlocutors. One is inclined to agree with Michael Wood’s assertion that where there is certainty, Cervantes finds grounds for doubt.⁸

The *barco encantado* adventure (II, 29) is one of those episodes,

8 Wood judiciously refrains from seeing in Cervantes a full-blown relativism, although he does not dismiss the possibility: “...the most ordinary truths can be made to look unsafe. Whether they are unsafe because they can be made to look so, is one of Cervantes’s great questions” (34). In a very good recent book, the hispanist Martínez Mata rejects the idea that *Don Quijote* contains epistemological quandaries, although his analysis at times borders on such a view: “En el *Quijote* [...] la realidad no se muestra ambigua (y así lo señalaba Parker en 1948), son los personajes los que falsean la realidad cuando les conviene” (107). Martínez Mata also maintains that, given the “contexto burlesco” and fantastical nature of his narrative, don Quijote’s response to the Canon’s neo-Aristotelian aesthetic cannot be taken seriously. I express some partial disagreement with this position in my review of his book (forthcoming in *Cervantes*).

like the Cueva de Montesinos (II, 23) or the *cabeza encantada* (II, 62), that functions as a sort of concentrated illustration of the mechanisms and concerns of the entire novel, and it contains a striking density of resonances—of image, theme, diction—with other parts of the work. It is also one of the novel's funniest scenes. The comedy ranges from farcical to linguistic, and includes some epistemological games similar to those examined above. As usual, don Quijote's imaginative transcription of the mundane phenomena (the Ebro River, an oarless boat on the banks) works on the principle of association and signs, although the process has been complicated by recent experiences. A sort of focalization occurs as the narrator modulates into a pastoral register:

...llegaron don Quijote y Sancho al río Ebro, y el verle fue de gran gusto a don Quijote, porque contempló y miró en él la amenidad de sus riberas, la claridad de sus aguas, el sosiego de su curso y la abundancia de sus líquidos cristales, cuya alegre vista renovó en su memoria mil amorosos pensamientos. (II, 29; 261)

The conventionality of the pristine *locus amoenus* may be a set-up for another prosaic deflation, but, as elsewhere, Cervantes delights in the very material he travesties: there is ambivalence between parody and æsthetic pleasure. The crystalline waters, the love associations, the boat—all unmistakably beckon don Quijote, “porque éste es estilo de los libros de las historias caballerescas” (262). But he is preoccupied by his recent grotesque visions in the Cave of Montesinos, and by the monkey's equivocal pronouncements on them: “puesto que el mono de maese Pedro le había dicho que parte de aquellas cosas eran verdad y parte mentira, él se atenía más a las verdaderas que a las mentirosas, bien al revés de Sancho, que todas las tenía por la misma mentira” (261). The doubt accompanying the interpretive freedom that the narrator playfully instilled in the reader (e.g. II, 5 & 24) has crept into the consciousness of our protagonist.

In addition to foregrounding the question of truth, the accompanying concern of transcendent order emerges at the outset of the

episode. The boat signifies that another knight is in trouble, and only a true peer can help: “que no puede ser librado dél sino por la mano de otro caballero.” Despite the uncertainty occasioned by the skeptical comments regarding our hero’s consecrated status by the captives in the Cave of Montesinos (“cuando así no sea, paciencia y barajar,” II, 23; 217), and by his financial inadequacy when asked there to lend money to Dulcinea (221–22), don Quijote commands Sancho to prepare for the adventure: “ata juntos al rucio y a Rocinante, y a la mano de Dios, que nos guíe; que no dejaré de embarcarme si me lo pidiesen frailes descalzos.” The potential contradiction between a religious order and divine will generates a dissonance, as does the odd juxtaposition of God’s *hand* and the bare *feet* of the friars. It is a curious variation on what El Pinciano would call “adjunto de lugar” (IX, 399).⁹ Don Quijote attempts to mitigate Sancho’s dismay at leaving behind the animals, and his reference to the mysterious powers that guide them commences the scene’s linguistic comedy:

Don Quijote le dijo que no tuviese pena del desamparo de aquellos animales; que el que los llevaría a ellos por tan longincuos caminos y regiones tendría cuenta de sustentarlos.

—No entiendo eso de *logicuos*—dijo Sancho—, ni he oído tal vocablo en todos los días de mi vida. (II, 29; 263)

Although don Quijote excuses Sancho’s misunderstanding of the Latinate “longincuos,” (“que no estás tú obligado a saber latín”), the knight resumes his erudite register, albeit with explanatory rephrasing: “*Santiguarnos y levar ferro*; quiero decir, embarcarnos y cortar la amarra con que este barco está atado.” Such humor does not serve the exclusive function of undermining chivalric delusion. Sancho’s solecisms and facetious etymologies draw attention to the

9 As we consider Cervantes’ playful representation of pious gestures in this scene, it is worth recalling that Juan de Valdés satirizes these very friars in his *Diálogo de la lengua*: “Ora sus, vedme aquí ‘más obediente que un fraile descalzo quando es conbidado para algún vanquete” (131). As Barbolani notes in her edition, the Erasmian quip was censored in Spain.

physicality of words, expressing his own corporeal, earthy values.¹⁰ As Spitzer illustrated, the great range of linguistic registers in *Don Quijote* has epistemological implications. Even if, as Martínez Mata and others have argued, this does not involve the radical subjectivity of what Spitzer termed “hybrid reality,” Cervantes does examine the dynamic relationship between characters’ life (and reading) experience, language, and perception of the world. We will see further instances of this linguistic humor below.

Once underway, don Quijote embarks on a lengthy disquisition regarding the distance they have traveled. There is talk of the astrolabe and Ptolemy, the poles and Equator and the Indies. When, sensibly observing that he can simply look at the shore, Sancho refuses to gauge their position relative to the equinoctial line by checking whether his lice have died, don Quijote delivers himself of the following barrage:

que tú no sabes qué cosa sean coluros, líneas, paralelos, zodíacos, clínicas, polos, equinocios, planetas, signos, puntos, medidas, de que se compone la esfera celeste y terrestre; que si todas estas cosas supieras, o parte de ellas, vieras claramente qué de paralelos hemos cortado, qué de signos visto y qué de imágenes hemos dejado atrás, y vamos dejando ahora. (264-65)

There is an impressive energy of comic accumulation here, al-

10 El Pinciano’s discussion of linguistic comedy dealing with the “body” of words provides fine illustrations: “Vamos, pues, a las figuras; de las cuales digo que unas tocan al cuerpo del vocablo; otras al alma. Las que al cuerpo, o le añaden o quitan; otras ponen o mudan [...] Mudando, como si alguno por decir tanto dijese ‘tonto’; añadiendo como por decir lengua latina decir lengua latrina y, por decir latina, decir ‘latinaja’” (402). It is tempting to connect such a view of the plasticity of language and Sancho’s physical orientation with the atomistic materialism of Lucretius: “Now do you see the point of my previous remark, that it makes a great difference in what combinations and positions the same elements occur and what motions they mutually pass on and take over, so that with a little reshuffling the same ones may produce forests and fires? This is just how the words themselves are formed, by a little reshuffling of letters, when we pronounce ‘forests’ and ‘fires’ as two distinct utterances” (I, 53).

though don Quijote is in fact indicating one of the virtues of the chivalric genre praised by the Canon of Toledo: "...que era el sujeto que ofrecían para que un buen entendimiento pudiese mostrarse en ellos [...] Ya puede mostrarse astrólogo, ya cosmógrafo excelente..." (I, 47; 566). It is also quite similar to Burton's awestruck enumeration of cosmographical topics in his praise of books and study:

But in all nature what is there so stupendous as to examine and calculate the motion of the planets, their magnitudes, apogees, perigees, eccentricities, how far distant from the earth, the bigness, thickness, compass of the firmament, each star, with their diameters and circumference, apparent area, superficies, by those curious helps of glasses, astrolabes, sextants, quadrants, of which Tycho Brahe in his *Mechanics*, optics (divine optics), arithmetic, geometry, and such-like arts and instruments? (II. ii. 4, 95).

Of course, Cervantes does not suggest that don Quijote is modeling the type of ideal narrative, based on verisimilitude and variety, outlined by the Canon. Rather than epic "perfección y hermosura," don Quijote's creation is absurdly hyperbolic, and subverted on numerous counts. For one, his speech is framed by Sancho's virtuosic mis-hearings and informal etymologies: from Ptolomeo and cosmógrafo, he comes up with "puto y gafo, con la añadidura de meón, o meo, o no sé como," causing one of the very few incidences in which the Caballero de la Triste Figura actually laughs. But, as in Burton's wonder at the folly and range of human endeavors, the variety and detail of don Quijote's account carries a peculiar force, as does the "layering effect"—seen also in his discussion of giants—of referencing so many concepts that had contemporary currency.¹¹

don Quijote insists that Sancho conduct the experiment of checking for lice:

11 Not much later Sancho will claim, in his own particular idiom, that he also knows something about "la esfera celeste y terrestre" when he gives his account of the cosmos seen from Clavileño (II, 41). For a discussion of the centrality of the Clavileño episode in Sancho's emergence as an artist figure, see Forcione.

...tórnote a decir que te tientes y pesques; que yo para mí tengo que estás más limpio que un pliego de papel liso y blanco.

Tentóse Sancho, y llegando con la mano bonitamente y con tiento hacia la corva izquierda, alzó la cabeza, y miró a su amo, y dijo:

—O la experiencia es falsa, o no hemos llegado adonde vuestra merced dice, ni con muchas leguas.

—Pues ¿qué?—preguntó don Quijote—. ¿Has topado algo?

—¡Y aun algos!—respondió Sancho. (265)

Sancho's expressive coinage—the plural “algos”—confirms not only what looking over at Rocinante and the ass on shore tells them (that they have not traveled very far), but also that it was foolish of don Quijote to assume that Sancho would be *limpio*. There are numerous echoes from the *batanes* episode of part I, in which Sancho's uncontrollable corporeality deflates don Quijote's vision of adventure. One is the narrator's adverbial flourish when describing Sancho's surreptitious lowering of his trousers: “bonitamente y sin rumor alguno, se soltó la lazada corrediza con que los calzones se sostenía” (I, 20; 245).¹² But also, in his attempt to delay don Quijote's departure by saying dawn is near, it is Sancho who claims knowledge of the constellations and don Quijote, observing that it is too dark to even see the stars, who undermines the speculation with empirical evidence. Sancho concedes this point, while offering two interesting counterarguments: “Así es [...]; pero tiene el miedo muchos ojos, y vee las cosas debajo de la tierra, cuanto más encima en el cielo; puesto que, por buen discurso, bien se puede entender que hay poco de aquí al día” (I, 20; 240). On the one hand, Sancho entertains the pseudo-perspectivistic notion that one's state of mind enhances perception—an idea that will find fertile ground in the underworld

¹² During the Clavileño episode, Sancho removes his blindfold in similar manner: “...bonitamente y sin que nadie lo viese, por junto a las narices aparté tanto cuanto el pañizuelo que me tapaba los ojos” (II, 41; 353). Martínez Mata also comments on the use of the term, which he interprets as “disimuladamente” (64), in the description of the bálsamo de Fierabrás (I, 10).

and celestial realms of the Cueva de Montesinos and Clavileño episodes. On the other hand, the practical squire falls back on “buen discurso”: they both have a sense for how long it has been dark, and may thus reasonably anticipate the arrival of dawn. Here we recall don Quijote’s concluding logic in his discussion of Morgante, his common-sense deduction based on the information that the giant slept indoors.

After the scatological climax on the Ebro (“¡y aun algos!”), which undermines don Quijote’s navigational and cosmographical references, Sancho washes his hand:

Y sacudiéndose los dedos, se lavó toda la mano en el río, por el cual sosegadamente se deslizaba el barco por mitad del corriente, sin que le moviese alguna inteligencia secreta, ni algún encantador escondido, sino el mismo curso del agua, blando entonces y suave. (II, 29; 265)

The absence of a transcendent order is perhaps deceptively simple here. An indifferent if pleasant natural phenomenon (“el mismo curso del agua”) contrasts with the malign forces of an “encantador escondido”—or *any secret intelligence*, for that matter. Without putting too fine a point on it, we might notice, as the farce resumes in the collision with the flour-coated millers, the description of a terrified Sancho:

Púsose Sancho de rodillas, pidiendo devotamente al cielo le librase de tan manifiesto peligro, como lo hizo, por la industria y presteza de los molineros, que oponiéndose con sus palos al barco, le detuvieron. (266)

While his behavior recalls the frenzied ceremony and superstition in Erasmus’ “The Shipwreck,” Sancho’s prayers are answered, but in the mundane form of the “industria y presteza” of the millers. Where is the “mano de Dios” or “inteligencia secreta”? As Basilio memorably answered the astonished onlookers at Camacho’s wed-

ding a few scenes earlier, “¡No <<milagro, milagro>>, sino industria, industria!” (II, 21; 200). After the narrow escape from drowning, Sancho renews his pieties, this time requesting deliverance from don Quijote: “...puesto de rodillas, las manos juntas y los ojos clavados en el cielo, pidió a Dios con una larga y devota plegaria le librase de allí adelante de los atrevidos deseos y acometimientos de su señor” (266-67). And don Quijote makes a final, frail appeal to divine assistance, before recognizing that his is not the “mano de caballero” capable of prevailing in such an incoherent world: “Dios lo remedie; que todo este mundo es máquinas y trazas, contrarias unas de otras. Yo no puedo más” (II, 29; 267). As in the aftermath of Maese Pedro’s puppet show, there is nothing left for don Quijote to do but pay the fishermen for their broken boat.

While don Quijote and Sancho are undoubtedly the objects of our laughter, the range of their responses and the subject matter encompassed turns our laughter, at first confidently uncomplicated, in sometimes unexpected directions: notions of narrative truth, the comparative efficacy of chivalric and religious ceremony, common sense versus theory, elements of pathos and doubt that give complexity of character. Don Antonio’s famous plea against Sansón Carrasco’s “curing” of don Quijote expresses another aspect of the ambiguity I have been trying to bring out:

—¡Oh señor —dijo don Antonio—, Dios os perdone el agravio que habéis hecho a todo el mundo en querer volver cuerdo al más gracioso loco que hay en él! ¿No veis, señor, que no podrá llegar el provecho que cause la cordura de don Quijote a lo que llega el gusto que da con sus desvaríos? [...] y si no fuese contra caridad, diría que nunca sane don Quijote, porque con su salud, no solamente perdemos sus gracias, sino las de Sancho Panza su escudero, que cualquiera dellas puede volver a alegrar la misma melancolía. (II, 65; 536-37)

The therapeutic value of pleasure (“el gusto”) overrides rational didactic concerns (“el provecho”), and the alleviation of melancholy

is again affirmed. Don Antonio's lament provides a final variation on Horace's man from Argos, although in this case the primary beneficiaries are not the deluded subject, but those with whom he comes into contact ("todo el mundo"). Nevertheless, the effects of Carrasco's remedy are swift and, despite the conventional exemplarity expressed in the knight's renouncement of chivalry, don Antonio's concern seems to resonate with that of Horace's disillusioned man: "Egad! you have killed me, my friends, not saved me" (435).

R. B. Gill observed that "Comedy not only wishes its form to be appreciated, it demands that our understanding of the strategies of meaning become part of the meaning itself" (244). I have indicated some ways in which *Don Quijote* compels the reader to appreciate the strategies of creating literary meaning, as well as those by which the world beyond the book is ordered. Cervantes explored the satirical "comedy of correction" in the uncompromising Licenciado Vidriera. Although I would argue that he tired of the severe judgments of such a figure, it is worth recalling that the prologue to the *Novelas ejemplares* invites the reader to approach the stories as a sort of billiards game, in the public setting and open air of "la plaza de nuestra república." Such communal, transparent imagery would seem consistent with the didactic function and unambiguous meaning of satire—much like the "romance" stories of the collection serve the ostensible purpose of reinforcing social structure and a clear hierarchy of values. The reader of *Don Quijote* is described in very different terms, alone at home, involved in a possibly subversive activity: "estás en tu casa donde eres señor della [...], y sabes lo que comúnemente se dice, que debajo de mi manto, al rey mato" (I, Prólogo). Given such freedom and lack of the homogenizing laughter of a surrounding community, the reader of *Don Quijote* may delightfully lose his or her bearings.

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