

◆ Afterword

A “Preposterous” Cervantes For Neo-Baroque Times

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The present volume of *Hispanic Issues Debates* is in dialogue with *What Would Cervantes Do?*, a well-argued study by David Castillo and William Egginton that places Cervantes, and a philosophy they call Cervantinism, at the center of discussions of, and advocacy for, literacy. According to the authors, new forms of literacy are needed for our age of “post-truth,” a time when media consumers across publishing platforms—from traditional venues to social media—are routinely exposed to ever-more sophisticated forms of disinformation that are reinforced by users’ own political blind spots. The dangers that this form of approaching reality poses to the body politic do not need to be pointed out as a warning, because they are apparent even in nations with solid democratic traditions. For Castillo and Egginton, an antidote to this current state of affairs would involve careful scrutiny of authority and the media by discerning “readers” capable of accessing a text both through their multiple contexts (political, philosophical, etc.) as well as their own context of “reading.” In addressing these issues, the authors bring into focus Cervantes’s experimental project, which challenges “reader-creators” to distinguish between the lies or “false statements that intend to deceive the receiver” and “what that receiver knows is false” (i.e., fiction) (20). Thus, they underscore the importance of fictional awareness, while at the same time reminding us that, in Cervantes, “the truth is found among the victims” (21).

Some of the most salient characteristics of the current environment of post-truth have precedents in the cultural environment that Cervantes dissected—the Hispanic Baroque. As we focus on *What Would Cervantes Do?*, it is useful to recall that it follows *Medialogies*, an earlier book by Castillo and Egginton, in which they distinguish between media conditions in Spain’s Baroque period and in today’s world. We might also recall that in his now classic *La cultura del Barroco. Análisis de una estructura histórica* (1975), José Antonio Maravall characterizes the Baroque as a conservative, guided, mass-oriented,

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and urban culture through which the monarcho-seignorial segments of Spanish society sought to preserve an established system of privileges by means of repression and socio-political propaganda, with the latter fomented through a variety of public spectacles and a thriving new theater, the “comedia nueva.” Since the publication of Maravall’s book, several scholars have underlined the parallelisms of that ethos with the media cultures of the late twentieth century and, now, our own, cultures that are shaped by a surplus of misinformation and disinformation and underpinned by the notion that, in a market society, “just about everything is up for sale” (Mandel cited by Castillo and Egginton, *WWCD?* 9)—including contradictory readings of reality. It is also useful to underline that, since the 1980s, authors working in a variety of disciplines, including the philosopher Christine Buci-Glucksmann, the semiotician Omar Calabrese, the cinema scholar Angela Ndalians, and the creative writer Severo Sarduy, have analyzed aesthetic and epistemological reworkings of baroque models in different realms, from the arts to political communication strategies. Thinking along complementary lines, Castillo and Egginton have placed a specific accent on the status of our neo-Baroque time as a second age of “inflated media.” The consequences of this characterization for the political realm urge us to look at the culture of the Baroque with renewed urgency.

Castillo and Egginton propose to re-read this situation through the lens facilitated by Cervantes. This move fits with an approach to cultural history that has been characterized by Mieke Bal as “preposterous” for its use of quotations and self-referentiality to complicate the idea of “precedent.” Bal rejects the conventional sense that history goes in a unique direction from past to present and, by so doing, opens up interpretive possibilities that cast new light on the contributions of predecessors such as Cervantes on our culture, thus revealing their reciprocal contemporaneity. (Julio Baena, in this volume, makes a similar defense of anachronism.) Significantly, the figure examined by Bal to test the validity of this “preposterousness” is that of another major Baroque creator, Caravaggio, and the forms of perception that can be inferred both from his art and its present-day interpretations around the globe.

In this volume, the Hispanic Baroque, and particularly Cervantes, are the privileged vantage points from which a series of “preposterous” readings elucidate what is increasingly looking like a neo-Baroque context. In this context, an indispensable tool for the survival of democracy are multi-perspectivist strategies for decoding the mesh of discourses produced and disseminated by the media. We might also add that the contributions to this volume demonstrate how the Humanities could play a role in the education of discerning readers and the fostering of reality literacy, a topic that has appeared in the pages of *Hispanic Issues Online* intermittently since our coedited volume of 2011. In fact, the companion to *What Would Cervantes Do?*

renews this discussion, with a substantive introduction by Stephen Hessel and Brian P. Phillips, incisive critical essays by Bradley Nelson, Julio Baena, Ana Rodríguez-Rodríguez, Javier Zapata Clavería, Edward Friedman, William P. Childers, and Julia Domínguez, as well as an eloquent response by Castillo and Egginton. All contributors are specialists in Spain's early modern period who work along interdisciplinary lines, with some having already made significant contributions as Cervantes scholars in their distinguished academic careers. They contribute a wide range of readings related to questions of identity; media manipulation; the reception of the satire and irony of our late-night comedians; the "fictional" nature and ideological bent of "reality" television, including "true crime" series that are characterized by the viewer's cooptation and psychological investment; discussions of race, gender, equity, and justice; and programmatic proposals about training students in literature and culture courses to enhance reality literacy. In the process, they make convincing cases for considering Cervantes and his context not merely as cultural monuments from the past that can still be understood and enjoyed but also as engaging precedents that can offer surprising counterpoints about some of the most challenging trends of our cultural landscape.

Within the current cultural and political environment in the U.S., examining in a "preposterous" manner the connections between the historical Baroque and our neo-Baroque moment from our particular corner of the Humanities is revealing. Consider the impact of political campaigns influenced by the free flow of money, the armies of lobbyists that influence elections and legislation, and the media entities that stir up emotions by targeting audiences receptive to the particular political and social views with which they identify. Those divisions have become especially manifest in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election, when the former President sought to convince a largely receptive constituency that a demonstrably free and fair election was stolen, no matter the fact that 61 of his 62 appeals through the legal system were found to be without merit. As is well known, the "stop the steal" lie culminated in the insurrection of January 6, 2021, when a violent mob of MAGA (Make America Great Again) faithful invaded the halls of the U.S. Capitol. Meanwhile, the deceiver-in-chief, skilled in the use of social media and commercial television, viewed the acting out of his own *Retablo de las malicias* (The Spectacle of Malice) in front of a television screen for nearly two hours, reportedly munching on fast food and splattering ketchup on the wall, before calling off the seditious rabble. Following the investigation of a special committee of the House of Representatives, it became clear that the lawless former President, aided by a band of accomplices, had planned well in advance what he would do if the reporting of votes did not swing in his favor by the time the winner was projected on election night by television outlets:

he would declare himself the victor, urge that all vote counting be stopped, fabricate the idea of irregularities with voting machines, and pressure state officials to find him the needed additional votes to win the election. It was a particularly troubling enactment of the *Ameri-can* dynamism that Hessel and Phillips point out in their introduction to this volume, with Trumpist theatrical hyperactivity seeking to sequester the fundamental political institutions and values of the republic—one that, historically, has been far from unique.

In their study, Castillo and Egginton refer us to the “attention harvesting culture of the baroque” and the “discontents” of that period and those who warned against a culture of spectacle and critiqued its numbing effects and manipulative uses. In this respect, Cervantes’s view of that culture, which is not too distant from Maravall’s views four centuries later, provides both a theoretical perspective and a practical illustration of reception. These often invoke a discerning reader, a “lector mío” (in contrast to the “vulgo”), whose critical faculties capture the nuances of the text, including the subtle irony and satirical bent of writing. This core irony allows Cervantes to address some of the pressing social and political problems of his time, among them the scourge of blood statutes, the inhumanity and injustice of ethnic cleansing, the importance of judging people on the basis of their deeds rather than genealogy, and the patriarchal system’s oppression of the potential of women for self-realization, which, as Ana M. Rodríguez-Rodríguez argues in this volume, is a topic on which Cervantes needs to be heard, not only alongside other early modern Hispanic authors, such as María de Zayas and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, but also within our contemporary feminist discourses.

Castillo and Egginton have long been advocates for a humanistic, liberal education along interdisciplinary lines and have argued for the importance of engaging the classics in their multiple contexts, including that of our own state of emergency, to use Walter Benjamin’s image. Along these lines, they view the experimental work of Cervantes as a counter-cultural model of reflection and criticism while also touching on the work of other dissonant voices of Baroque Spain (such as Zayas) and its colonies (Sor Juana), among others, calling attention to their respective strategies for dealing with racist, religious, and misogynist biases. Moreover, they urge readers to “put ‘the classics to work’ (and not just in the classroom!)” (*WWCD?* 151–52) and to “search for allies in Orwell’s, Huxley’s and Atwood’s dystopian parables” (*WWCD?* 149–150) to counter peddlers of misinformation and disinformation within our own media ecosystem. Those peddlers include unscrupulous politicians and their acolytes, who undermine democracy by tapping into a cauldron of grievances against the so-called Deep State, multiculturalism, the flow of undocumented immigrants, and other touch-button issues, including racial and gender equality, currently afflicting American society.

It is hard to argue about the importance of developing and sharpening analytical and pedagogical tools to scrutinize the uses of verbal and visual cultures in this age of post-truth, when authoritarianism is on the march, when everything (including the most trivial and intimate details of our lives) is considered apt for monetization, and when there is a sense of entitlement to one's "own fundamentalism" (*WWCD?*10). The dissonant classics, who warned about the Baroque culture of the spectacle, are indeed extraordinary models, as are the parables of Orwell, Huxley, and Atwood cited by Castillo and Egginton. While one might have only limited faith in the impact of reading "the right texts," as Javier Zapata reminds us in this volume, it is nevertheless important to gain some awareness of the procedures by which emerging types of visual production generate different models of spectatorship.

Putting the classics to work in the sense proposed and illustrated by *WWCD?* and the essays in this volume makes a great deal of sense. Yet, one wonders about the reception of those classics among certain segments of our "educated" elite, especially if one examines recent events in the U.S. and learns that Trump's immediate circle of accomplices included prominent lawyers, a convicted ex-Army general and unabashed admirer of Putin, a range of businesspeople, ex-administration officials, current members of Congress, leaders of militias, and people from other walks of life. Many of these individuals attended elite universities and may have even read Orwell, Huxley, Cervantes, and other dissonant authors, including the Jesuit Baltasar Gracián, whose 1647 *Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia* ("The Art of Wordly Wisdom") was meant for courtly readers of mid-seventeenth century Spain but became a bestseller in the U.S. and was even used as a manual for business practices in our consumer-driven society (Romano, "Baltasar Gracián").

To return our previous point, what is certain is that these "educated" people bought into the Trump conspiracy, subverted the rule of law and the U.S. Constitution, and sought refuge in the Fifth Amendment, refusing to answer questions regarding their seditious conduct for fear of self-incrimination. We raise this question even if we believe strongly in the importance of Castillo and Egginton's proposal about training students to be discreet readers and viewers by studying dissonant voices of the past and present to counter our current media conditions and the tendency toward fundamentalism, self-entitlement, and authoritarianism. Regarding the latter, let us also recall that Hannah Arendt, another important voice from our not-too-distant past, warned us about people who are "the ideal subject of totalitarian rule," namely those who fail to distinguish "between 'fact and fiction' (i.e., "the reality of experience") and between 'true and false' (i.e., the "standards of thought")" (474). In another study (*Un-Deceptions*), Castillo picks up on the reception of Arendt's thought by Michiko Kakutani. In a text about the crude appropriation

of “post-modernist thinking” by the alt-right, Kakutani cites conspiracy spinner Mike Cernovich, who is reported as saying the following in a 2016 interview: “Look, I read postmodernist theory in college. If everything is a narrative, then we need alternatives to the dominant narrative [. . .] I don’t look like a guy who reads Lacan, do I?” (cited by Castillo, 44). The point here is that those who feel entitled to their own truth have alternate ways of listening and processing thoughts. Moreover, they seem to have little compunction in declaring their dissonance from anything that deviates from their fundamental ideas and ways of thinking. The incisive essay by Bradley Nelson in this volume speaks to this point. Nelson examines the reception of Stephen Colbert’s political satire by referencing social psychologists and communications scholars to argue that the spectator’s reaction to the humor of the late-night television comedian hinges largely on one’s political identification and worldview.

Along these very lines we could well return to Cervantes’s reflections in *Adjunta al Parnaso* (Addendum to Parnassus), where his alter ego (Miguel) tells his interlocutor (Pancracio) that his plays *Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses nunca representados* (“Eight Comedies and Eight Interludes Never Represented [on stage],” 1615) had not been performed on the public stage for two reasons: a lack of interest by producers and the playwright’s own reluctance to having them performed, choosing instead to relegate them to the private sphere of reading so that what would have transpired quickly on the public stage might be viewed slowly on the printed page (“porque se vea de espacio lo que pasa apriesa”). This thoughtful reading allows audiences to bypass the mediation of producers and actors as well as a rather predictable, mass-oriented reception by a theater-going audience that, while socially differentiated, possessed a code (i.e., a horizon or system of expectations, thanks to Lope de Vega and some other practitioners of the *comedia nueva*) that identified with the values of the dominant social groups (Spadaccini, “Writing for Reading” 164–73). Addressing the discreet reader as opposed to the “vulgo” and speaking in his own voice in the “Prologue” to the collection, Cervantes rebuffs those producers who overlooked his plays for their lack of “outlandish idiocies” (164). Pero Pérez, the village priest and friend of Don Quijote, had already defined the Lopean theater as a marketable commodity, a “mercadería vendible” (DQ, I:48), that sought to satiate an indiscriminating consumer (“el vulgo”), who is later defined by Don Quijote as “el que no sabe” (II:16), i.e., he who lacks knowledge, discernment, and imagination.

One can see why Cervantes’s experimental fiction and the philosophy of Cervantinism are productive starting points for an educational project that relies on the reader-creator to critically engage the text in its multiple contexts of production and creative reception, as Edward Friedman reminds us in his reflections on his own teaching (of Cervantes and other writers), on art and

literature, and on their connections to reality as they reflect on themselves. Cervantes was exemplarily aware of these issues and thought about the implication of the media conditions of his own time, especially the popular theater and other public spectacles that played a role in perpetuating myths that tended to reinforce an established system of values. His break with that theater was complete; some of the aforementioned plays that he wrote late in life did not make it to the public stage and were only celebrated several centuries later by audiences with different sensibilities (Spadaccini and Frye). Among those plays is *El retablo de las maravillas* (ca. 1612), which, in the Spain of the early 1600s, might have provided little more than comic relief as a “juguete de un cuarto de hora” (Asensio cited by Spadaccini, “Introducción” 21) if performed (as were many “entremeses”) between acts I and II of a three-act “comedia” or as part of an “ensalada de entremeses.” The raucous audience of the “corral” would have undoubtedly been entertained by the imaginary spectacle concocted by Chanfalla, Chirinos, and their accomplice Rabelín and might have laughed themselves silly at the credulity of the sterile, impotent country bumpkins (Castrado, Repollo, and company) duped by the magical producers with their declaration that it could only be seen by those born of legitimate matrimony and without a trace of Jewish blood. Many decades ago, Eugenio Asensio articulated an idea that concerns us today—although, under different circumstance, to be sure. According to Asensio, *El retablo* is “a parable of people who believe what they want to believe. It is a strategy for criticizing the morbid mania of purity, that creator of false values that poisoned Spanish society. And it is a satire of the peasant contemplated not as a rising force who aspires to full dignity, but as a comic object for producing raucous laughter in the spectator; within the apparent free play of the imagination a social antagonism lies hidden” (cited by Spadaccini, “Writing for Reading” 174). Needless to say, *El retablo de las maravillas* is also a satirical answer to the well-known exaltation of the rich peasant in the “comedia” of the early 1600s (Maravall, *Teatro y Literatura en la Sociedad Barroca*), but Cervantes’ underlying critique concerns the scourge of blood purity and its corrosive effects on a social body that was all too ready to accept those beliefs as a form of self-assurance in the presence of real or imaginary difference. Connecting that notion with the present moment, Julia Domínguez in this volume suggests that Cervantes’s exploration of homophily (“the propensity to huddle with like-minded individuals”) reveals “an alt-reality, a continuation of the group’s experience drawing on their existing convictions and obsessions, as well as the images already fixed in their minds.” Interestingly, one can barely distinguish those propensities from those of many contemporary users of social media.

It is worthwhile pointing out that, within five years of the writing of the *Retablo* (ca. 1612) and within the timeframe of the expulsion of the “Moriscos”

(1609–1614), Cervantes addressed ethnic cleansing, through irony and satire, in an episode from *Don Quijote* (1615) dealing with the expulsion of Ricote and his family (II: 54–63), as well as in the words spoken by the “jadraque” in *Persiles y Sigismunda* (1617). Cervantes’s strategy was to have the Morisco victims mouth the views of the victimizers, but in Ricote’s case in particular, those views were to be undercut by the ironic suggestion of the cruelty unleashed by the powers that be on innocent victims, including Ricote’s wife and daughter (Spadaccini, “Metaficción”). The case of the “jadraque” is more complex, but here, too, Cervantes’s strategy of critique, whereby he places the defense of the expulsion in the mouth of a self-hating Morisco victim, in line with a prophetic tradition and official propaganda, would have been transparent to the discerning readers that he envisioned. Michael Gerli, in his analysis of the term “jadraque,” makes a similar point to underscore the importance of taking Cervantine irony into consideration: “Cervantes’s most careful readers [. . .] would have seen and appreciated the prophecy as an example of the deepest Cervantine irony” (cited by Nelson in this volume).

As for other essays in this volume, William Childers recounts the fascinating historical episode of the Lead Books of Sacromonte hoax against the failure of one of the most reliable institutions of the US, *The New York Times*, in assessing the veracity of its sources in a podcast on jihadi terrorism. The urge to believe our own myths (even negative ones, as in the cruelty of those seen as enemies), and the seemingly relative importance of facts as mere parts of a larger equation when confronting history and stories, reverberate in these cases centuries apart. As Childers puts it, “what was true four hundred years ago is evidently still true today: when it comes to public discourse, power and prestige weigh at least as much as truth in what we are allowed to know.” Julio Baena, another scholar fond of a “preposterous” approach to Cervantes, revisits the beach in Barcelona—the sight of Don Quijote’s moving encounter with the Knight of the White Moon (of winter and death)—accompanied by Agustín García Calvo, another innovative philologist who knew that textual transgression operating from the margins to the center was the most fecund path to truth. Guided by the two, with Lacan as another neo-Baroque guest, Baena concludes that “truth is especially vulnerable to Reality: to the ultimate reality of Power . . . Truth can only be half-said.”

From the fabulation about election outcomes to the dubious managing of vastly influential social media and their role in constructing public discourse, these neo-Baroque times offer constant reminders of the danger of taking the value of truth for granted. Reflecting and educating on forms of “reality literacy,” as postulated by Castillo and Egginton following a “preposterous” reading of Cervantes, will help us to navigate information traps, old and new. Unfortunately, these traps seem inherent to modern societies, authoritarian

and democratic alike. As the media fights for citizens' attention, offering them competing, and often conflicting, versions of reality, it seems safe to assert that the integrity of democratic societies will largely depend on their ability to promote a capacity for discernment.

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