

## ◆ Chapter 8

### **Gazpacho Police and Cervantine Companionships: A Penultimate Response**

*David Castillo and William Egginton*

What Would Cervantes Do? we asked. . . . In taking on our question, or rather making it their own, our Cervantine companions have handed us a most precious gift. Their intimately engaging readings have effectively turned our (by necessity) rhetorical question into a question about our rhetoric, in which “our” refers as much to “our” medialogical environment and “our” history (disciplinary and otherwise), as it does to the form of “our” authorial intervention. This is how the volume accomplishes, in true collaborative fashion, the pedagogical goals of a companion—to our book and, much more important, to Cervantes’s work. If we could borrow from Edward Friedman’s characteristically generous remarks about our authorial efforts in WWCD and redirect them to qualify the quest for Cervantine truth that guides this volume as a whole, we could indeed say that its contributors “highlight and magnify the allusive quality of the text, enabling students of *Don Quixote* [and other Cervantine works] to go back and forth, constructively and deconstructively, and to appreciate more fully the messages of Cervantes, the realities of story and history, and the persistence of rhetoric” (Friedman 87). Indeed, Friedman’s own contribution in response to our arguments about how the work of Cervantes (and other authors from the Spanish Golden Age) can help us navigate our post-truth environment includes a fascinating pedagogical project focused on “*Don Quixote*, History and Truth.”

For his part, Julio Baena targets the abyss between truth and Reality with philosopher Agustín García Calvo as his guide. Baena’s conviction that there’s no room for truth in Reality (insofar as Reality is always unavoidably a construction of power) is anchored in García Calvo’s distinction between the world of reality and the world of possibility: “el mundo de la realidad y el mundo de la posibilidad son dos mundos que no se tocan [ . . . ] son mutuamente ininteligibles” (*Contra el Tiempo*, quoted by Baena 44). There are clear

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echoes of this vital distinction in our own discussion of the need to defend the imagination of the possible against the force for quietism that's behind our fidelity to reality, though in our case this comes up in conversation with Gianni Vattimo. Here's the relevant passage:

Could it be, as Vattimo claims, that the real calling of philosophy, like that of science (and we would add fiction—at least in its Cervantine variety), is not the depiction or representation of reality but its dissolution? Shouldn't philosophy, fiction and cultural criticism, like science, like politics, strive for something other than what presents itself as already the case? Should they not be driven by the imagination of the possible instead of the assumption of the real?" (WWCD 33)

As Baena perceptively notes, the chasm between Reality and truth, or more precisely between the world of reality and the world of possibility is the focus of our strategy of (and urgent calling for) "reality literacy" as a form of reading that keeps the margins and frames in view: "'Reality literacy'—the precise and powerful formulation of our weapon that Castillo and Egginton propose—has to include, as when reading any literary artifact, *close reading*, reading all the nooks and crannies, and all manners of contradiction and escape from margins, and from frames" (Baena 42–43). If there's no room for truth in Reality—we agree with Baena's synthetic comments here and with his more extensive psychoanalytic argument in *Dividuals*—this is because Reality has a way of excluding from its frame of reference those pesky truths that threaten its stability. As he reminds us by way of illustration, the founders of democracy could proclaim that *all men are created equal* and simultaneously exclude their slaves from this self-evident truth simply by framing them out of the category of "all men."

The opposition between Reality and truth that animates our thought in WWCD also owes much to psychoanalytic theory, especially to Jacques Lacan's use of them to describe the intervention enabled by what he called the discourse of the analyst. In broad strokes, a patient narrates his or her story, problems, suffering, persecutions, etc., while the analyst sits out of view, a blank screen upon which to project the Reality of the patient's carefully woven fantasy. Caught in the illusion of the transference, the patient projects an ultimate knowledge on the part of the analyst, the subject supposed to know: a knowledge that completes him or her, a knowledge that explicates the whole, that ties the coherent narrative of the patient's Reality into a neat, logical bundle. In fact, of course, like Socrates, the only thing the analyst

knows is that he or she knows nothing. What the analyst is doing is listening carefully for tells, stains, moments that indicate the fragility of the analysand's shambolic edifice, an edifice ultimately built to protect his or her ego from the radical truth of its own complicity. Reality: the illusion that enslaves us to the self-perpetuating inertia of social and political hegemonies. Truth: the flash of insight whereby we see how our own behaviors have made that possible.

Cervantes stages those representations of power that conform Reality over and over in his theatrical tableaux, as well as in his fiction, while moving the frame and making the margins visible. This is why we see the Cervantine text as a model of "reality literacy" that dissolves the walls between categories of men (and not only of men). Another way of saying this is that inside the fictional world of Cervantes (a world of possibilities, not certainties; of truth, not Reality), the language of power is confronted with the truth of its own contingency. Julia Dominguez offers a good explanation of this notion in her transhistorical reading of *El retablo de las maravillas*, which she frames as an explicit answer to our (con)foundering question:

Therefore, and to answer the question, "What would Cervantes do?," the answer is clear: he, like Orłowski, Zuboff and others, and thanks to the power of literature, sets out to challenge the manipulative algorithm by uncovering its undisclosed gaps in order to seek the truth, a truth that reaches beyond the confines of their characters' 'little' theaters of the mind. (Dominguez 74)

In the context of Dominguez's pithy discussion, "the manipulative algorithm" would simultaneously apply to the opaque AIs that power the big data economy in the age of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff) and the magical reservoir of illusions that animate Chanfalla's wondrous tableau.

Indeed, the persuasive technologies on which social media platforms (for example) have built the optimization models that glue us to the screen exploit our own biases to maximize profits in the same way that Chanfalla's magic tableau mobilizes the peasants' beliefs in the superiority of their Christian genealogy. This is the truth behind the magic of the wondrous tableau, which Chanfalla attributes to the enchanting powers of the legendary Montiel:

Chanfalla has studied very carefully the profile of his ignorant audience to successfully anticipate and predict their desired behavior and to carry on effectively his devious spectacle [ . . . ] Chanfalla knows the peasants'

penchant toward certain social and racial prejudices [ . . . ] and their obsession with both social legitimacy and *limpieza de sangre*. By taking the character name Montiel, Chanfalla parodically alludes to the known stereotype of the enchanting magician, renowned as a manipulator of magical artifacts. (Dominguez 61–62)

Recent exposés of the manipulative core of much of our digital media landscape, from the documentary film *The Social Dilemma* (2020) to Cathy O’Neil’s *Weapons of Math Destruction* (2016) have focused on the pseudo-magical nature of the algorithms that persuasive technologies employ to “sort, target, or ‘optimize’ millions of people” (O’Neil 12). If the creators of *The Social Dilemma* quote Arthur C. Clark to make the point that “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,” O’Neil goes even further when she calls up the behind-the-curtain scene in *The Wizard of Oz* to describe the opaque and unaccountable bowels of Facebook (now Meta). As one of us argued in *Un-Deceptions* (2021), there’s something keenly Cervantine about O’Neil’s exposé of the algorithms that power digital media today in the context of the big data economy. The same can be said about such documentaries as *The Social Dilemma* and *Merchants of Doubt*. They all resort to the figure of the magician to explain how persuasive technologies (much like Chanfalla’s—or Montiel’s—wondrous tableau) work the vulnerabilities of the human mind. The creators of *Merchants of Doubt* understand that magicians distract us from the truth of what is actually happening by focusing our attention on the wrong objects. This explains why they entrust the framing of their exposé of climate change denialism to an actual magician or illusionist who provides the backstage view that makes visible the sleight of hand. Isn’t this precisely what Cervantes does in his Wondrous or *Magic* Tableau? As a professional of illusion in his own right, Cervantes redirects our gaze from the distractions of the illusion to the form of the illusion itself, and in so doing exposes the sleight of hand at work, along with our own complicity (*Un-Deceptions* 35). This is the kind of refocusing of the gaze that Slavoj Žižek attributed to the work of both Marx and Lacan in his own foundational formulation of the functioning of ideology in the section “How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?” of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989).

The psychoanalytic dimensions and formal focus of what we call reality literacy is also key to Zapata’s astute reading of the current “true crime” phenomenon and its parallels to similar manifestations of cultural voyeurism in the first age of inflationary media, in particular the rise of the picaresque genre. As Zapata correctly points out, at one level we could interpret an abiding interest in the potential injustices of unsolved crimes or wrongly meted justice

as “ethical,” an investment on the part of the more comfortable in the fortunes of those in particular dire straits. When seen through a reality-literacy lens, however, and one moreover polished by familiarity with the prurient early modern interest in the purported first-person experiences of such pícaros as the repentant Guzmán de Alfarache, what comes to light is the highly conventional crafting of narratives intended to construct captive viewers who binge episodes the way a thirsty drunk binges booze.

Indeed, the trope of inviting readers or viewers to follow the clues toward an announced ultimate reveal around the next page or in the next episode reiterates the very structure of desire so effectively abused by marketing machinery that promises fulfillment with the purchase of the next new thing. Where reality TV-styled true crime shows, like the beloved rabbit holes of conspiracy theorists, hook us with the promise of a red pill that will rip off the veil of our illusions, reality literacy seeks to inure us to such promises by reminding us of the extent to which our own fantasies of knowledge and autonomy are woven around precisely such shiny lures.

This is the point of William Childers’s supple take on *Caliphate*, the notorious podcast released by the New York Times in 2018. The podcast follows the investigative adventures of Rukmini Callimachi, his true-crime style narrativization of the life-story of an Isis jihadi who would turn out to be nothing but an eloquent impostor, a self-made fictional hero or “jedi jihadi” (to use Childers’s wry image). The echoes of Quixotic desire filtered through Cervantine irony are omnipresent in Childers’s commentary on *Caliphate*, which makes brilliant detours into a range of “impostures” born of the mediology of Cervantes’s own time, chiefly among them the archeological forgeries known as the *Lead Books* of Granada. The paradoxes abound here, as Childers’s transhistorical triangulations make clear. If the self-styled fake jihadi at the center of the podcast is a sort of real-life analogue of the Cervantine protagonists of *The Deceitful Marriage* and *Don Quixote*, the true-crime format of the podcast itself invites comparisons with the pseudo-historical genealogies that proliferate in the early modern period, including self-aggrandizing accounts of familial genealogies and “official” histories. Childers sees the imposture of the real life “jedi-jihadi” at the center of *Caliphate* as an opportunity to make visible (and call attention to) the fictional entanglements of the true-crime genre itself, along with other forms of infotainment today, in the same way that Cervantes had pulled on the thread of the morisco forgeries of Granada to make broader points about officially authorized and sponsored genealogies, including the historical genealogies commissioned by the Habsburgs known as *Cronicones*.

Childers is thus rehearsing a symptomatic reading of *Caliphate*, an illuminating exercise in fictional awareness that sheds light on the web of

mediological fantasies of violent masculinity. These are indeed the fantasies at the core of “the military-entertainment complex,” which continue to structure and mobilize our desire:

If we laugh at *Caliphate*'s failure, what are we laughing at? How much are we all not caught in the web of the military-entertainment complex? Free-market capitalism, preying on our individualist fantasies to create for us the embodied experience of killing, of narrowly escaping being killed, the adrenaline rush of pursuit, capture, escape [ . . . ] Chaudhry, in spite of what he may believe to the contrary, remains a product of Western secular individualism. He is only a Jedi jihadi, manipulated into fantasizing about killing by digital capitalism, as Callimachi was drawn to interview him and beg for graphic details of the murders he said he committed, and as we are drawn to listen or to watch representations of violence done in our names, or against us. In this sense *Caliphate*'s failure is its saving grace. It never really had anything to teach us about ISIS, it was only a mirror to our own desire. (115)

Ana Rodríguez also focuses on the plague of violent masculinist fantasies and the ways in which we may be able to make them visible in the Spanish Golden Age classroom when we reframe them through the lens of the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements. As she writes in reference to class discussions on the subject, “reading and discussing together texts by Cervantes, Zayas, Caro or Sor Juana under this prism made clear the urgency of making sense of the present, the past, the future and their undeniable three-way relationships” (Rodríguez 89). Rodríguez provides a powerful defense of transhistorical readings of the Spanish “classics” alongside the products of our own culture, a convincing response to the kind of “archeological” approaches that would insist on protecting their “original meaning” against the threat of contaminating presentism.

Speaking of María de Zayas's seventeenth-century stories of femicide, for example, Rodríguez insists that failing to see or take into account instances of the same in our own time weakens our analysis. By contrast, transhistorical approaches can empower our students to shed light on and denounce the patriarchal norms and assumptions, which, to this day, continue to reify notions of gender difference that justify the unequal treatment of women, even femicidal violence:

Visibility and denunciation of this type of violence are nowadays the most powerful tools to de-authorize it. Writing in a world which downplayed and normalized gendered violence, Zayas [ . . . ] denounces what we know today as femicide (the killing of a woman or girl on account of her gender). She gives visibility to the unlimited violence that women suffer and exposes the impunity for these crimes. Few authors from any time period have so eloquently carried the banner for the change of gender norms in their society. (93–94)

In her defense of comparative and transhistorical readings of Zayas, Caro and Sor Juana, among other authors of the Spanish Golden Age, Rodríguez offers insightful illustrations of the interpretive and pedagogical interventions we have been proposing and rehearsing in our collaborations, especially in Part Two of *What Would Cervantes Do?* If in *Medialogies* we called for humanistic training in the art of reading reality, in WWCD we double down on the need for *lectores avisados* or forewarned readers capable of navigating our post-truth media environment. These would be the kind of readers who would recognize the signs of Chanfalla-like manipulations in the “newspeak” (to use Orwell’s unforgettable trope) that continues to manufacture shiny objects to distract us from the violent truth of power. To answer (again) our own question in this penultimate response, what Cervantes would do today is point out that when Marjorie Taylor Greene stumbles into her Gazpacho Police and Marshall Law blunders, she is actually (if unwittingly) revealing the truth behind the shiny objects of (her own) Trumpist newspeak, from “CRT” and “Parental Rights” to “Wokeness” and “Election Integrity.” As in Chanfalla’s wondrous puppet show, there’s nothing here but racist nonsense.

This would be our response to, and redirection of Brad Nelson’s convincing argument about the inescapable ambiguity of satire and the necessary flawed nature of interpretation, which clearly aligns with the Cervantine lessons on reading in *Don Quixote*, *Persiles*, and his *Novelas ejemplares*. This is especially true of *El Coloquio de los perros*, the frame tale of his collection of exemplary novellas, which was supposed to help us make sense of the entire volume. The talking dog at the center of the narrative had considered different explanations/interpretations of the witch’s prophecy that might explain his gift of reasoned speech before arriving at the inescapable conclusion that it all hinges on whether he and his companion might have (at some point in their life-stories) witnessed a game of bowling. While the dog’s “reading” of Camacha’s prophecy may seem preposterous to us, the ubiquitous ambiguities of this playfully eccentric novella disallow the comforts of a secured interpretation to not just the dog but anyone who dares enter its fictional labyrinth.

This is the kind of humbling self-knowledge or “confession” of which Nelson speaks when he reminds us that satire is ultimately in the eye of the beholder. Yet, this is also the kind of “weak thought” à la Vattimo we can weaponize against Trumpist newspeak. Indeed, while some may take at face-value the stock images of racial otherness that populate Cervantes’s work, as well as Colbert’s delicious digs at right-wing rhetoric in his signature TV program *The Colbert Report*, we would make the case (and believe Nelson would agree) that reading Cervantes and watching Colbert can train us to see the (laughable) non-sense inherent in the representations of power, even when presented at face value. As we mentioned earlier, Childers makes this point most effectively in his Cervantine reading of *Caliphate* and the *Lead Books* of Granada side by side with the historical genealogies commissioned by the Habsburgs, as he turns their respective impostures into opportunities to discuss the non-sense of reality-making fantasies in Cervantes’s time as well as our own. This is precisely the demystifying potential that Walter Benjamin recognized in *Don Quixote*, the Cervantine “light” that turns Reality into a laughing matter. Indeed, for all the absurdity of Taylor Green’s Gazpacho Police, much like that of Sarah Palin’s malapropisms before her, it would be a mistake to stop at the point of mere ridicule. The message of reality literacy, a lesson so gorgeously demonstrated in these pages, is that another effort, a further step, is required. We need to see what is tempting us to cover over the tears in Reality’s screen for what it is: a carnival barker’s snake oil, an imposture masquerading as a cure for our aching souls.

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