

◆ Chapter 5

Cervantes and Truth: Defying Gravititas

Edward H. Friedman

Postmodernism has been associated with the victory of chaos. Prevailing conditions in the order of things are certainly—and increasingly—chaotic. There is negligible distance separating the real, the unreal, and the surreal. What is happening around us becomes, on a daily basis, more frenzied and more difficult to decipher. The media provide outlets that can aid and abet comprehension and that can further obscure the picture. Is truth elusive, or is truth moribund or dead? Is it worth redeeming, and why (or why not)? What does baroque Spanish literature have to do with twenty-first century realities? And what does baroque Spanish literature have to do with Donald Trump? In *What Would Cervantes Do?*, David Castillo and William Egginton reframe, with incomparable perspicacity, the intersections of life and art over time.

A constant of the many literature courses that I have taught is an exploration of how to analyze works of art, which consists in great part of how to apply tools for analysis. In recent decades, interpretation has become ever more “meta”—more self-conscious, more self-referential—in that we look not only at an artistic product but at the process through which it was created and its effect on the consumer. During my twenty-plus years at Vanderbilt University, I taught undergraduate and graduate courses, in Spanish and in English, and courses for students as young as eleven in the Vanderbilt Summer Academy, part of the Programs for Talented Youth, and courses for significantly older students in the Master of Liberal Arts and Science program, designed for working professionals. I also have taught, virtually, courses on the short story and other topics in the Vanderbilt branch of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) and at a Nashville branch of the Brookdale Retirement Community, so I have officially become a senior teaching seniors.

In the initial session of my first Osher course, I used—perhaps a bit too matter-of-factly—the phrase “so-called reality.” One of the participants asked why I had employed the modifier “so-called.” I think that it had come naturally

Handling the Truth: A Debates Volume on *What Would Cervantes Do? Navigating Post-Truth with Spanish Baroque Literature*
Hispanic Issues On Line Debates 11 (2023)

to me, and the question made me contemplate how literature and literary study inform my approach to the world. I seemed to presuppose that there is no “genuine or unequivocal reality” out there, that reality is always mediated in some way, always relative rather than absolute, much like truth. My trusty and trusted guide repeatedly has been Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, published in two parts, in 1605 and 1615. Cervantes evokes Aristotle, who maintains in the *Poetics* that history is objective and that poetry (or fiction) is subjective. Cervantes begs to differ. He recognizes that history—the totality of events—must be differentiated from historiography, the writing of history. The narrator of the first chapter of Part One of *Don Quixote* calls the narrative a “true history” while demonstrating quite the opposite. Almost four centuries later, the renowned historian Hayden White, in *Tropics of Discourse*, contends that historians observe the same practices as do the authors of fictional narrative—selection, argumentation, cognizance of the reader—which he labels “*emplotment*.” Essentially, White is addressing perception, perspective, and, notably, multiperspectivism. Hayden White’s thesis and defense of that thesis are eloquently and convincingly presented, yet Cervantes makes the same case much earlier in an intricate, brilliant, and precocious work of fiction. One of his lessons is that judgments depend on particular points of view and that points of view vary radically.

Literature gives us many examples of narratives told from multiple—and frequently competing—points of view, but, arguably, nothing can match the rhetoric—and the rhetorical strategies—of current political discourse. We have reached a moment in which nothing is sacred: not science, not medicine, not what we can see directly or via video. Whatever one’s political or ideological leanings, that person can be assured that some 50 percent of the population has antithetical stances, antithetical explanations of words, ideas, and angles of vision. The Yale critic and theorist Harold Bloom suggested that “Every reading is a misreading,” and statements by the public, including powerful and highly placed individuals, appear to confirm that notion, to take it seriously—and literally. In short, logic has entered a new phase, and it will be interesting to see its lasting effects on teaching, learning, and the media.

Somewhat paradoxically, those of us in the “ivory towers” of colleges and universities are routinely looked upon as detached from the “real world,” from reality, because we deal in abstract principles and hypothetical situations, and because we are inclined to meditate while others act. We tend to answer that charge by affirming a “both/and” rather than an “either/or” protocol, and we hardly accept the premise that free and unrestricted discussion is superfluous or distracting. In today’s “reality,” it behooves us to study rhetoric, intensely and comprehensively, given that language has become more opaque, more impenetrable, and more deceptive, and that seeing is no longer believing. We

must face the fact—a word that is not as secure as it used to be—that we have retrogressed, that the starting point for debate has moved in reverse, and that the bar is at an all-time low. To put it dramatically—maybe overly dramatically—the young generation of thinkers must rehabilitate and restore—oh, irony of ironies—the validity of reality. This would not mean a one-dimensional definition, but a rhetorical thrust aimed at truth as opposed to skillful persuasion, at honesty as opposed to hidden agendas, and at rationality as opposed to predetermined conclusions.

In seminars on theory, I have begun with an emphasis on two elements from classical antiquity: rhetoric and poetics. Rhetoric, the art of persuasion, leads to structural design, embellishments, and tropes. Poetics summons rules and prescriptions, which can be followed or countermanded. Rhetoric and poetics are reigning guideposts for the study of literature and beyond. In classes on *Don Quixote*, my orientation to analysis opens with a consideration of the terms *intertextuality* and *metafiction* (and variations of the prefix *meta*-). Cervantes achieves major innovations while bringing the literary and cultural past into the frame. He combines the thrust toward realism with metanarrative techniques. Idealism becomes a type of moving target, with rejoinders at both extremes of the fictional spectrum. Reality cannot be stationary or exclusive, nor can discernment be complete. (See Friedman, *Cervantes in the Middle*, esp. 33–106, and “*Don Quijote y las paradojas del realismo*.”) *Don Quixote* is a rich and dazzling narrative experiment and a unique depiction of early modern Spanish society, with insights into all manner of issues—sacred and profane, profound and commonplace, serious and lighthearted, philosophical and nonsensical—and with heavy doses of irony at every stage. *Don Quixote* has a set direction, whereas *Don Quixote*, befitting its baroque sensibility, moves in a variety of directions and lends itself to diverse analytical methods. The choice of intertextuality and metafiction as starting points for a reading of *Don Quixote* underscores the literary parameters of the narrative, but Cervantes never isolates the story from its referents in the world that lies beyond fiction. The blurring of boundaries is a staple of *Don Quixote* and a link to a reading strategy based on the examination of truth.

The plot of *Don Quixote* progresses in parallel routes. Don Quixote sets forth in search of adventures that will reward him with fame and glory. His deeds and his foibles on the road fill a good portion of the narrative. An accompanying plot device is the account of gathering the materials for the chronicle, from the archives of La Mancha, to informants, to other sources. The events of the sallies have a counterpart in the compilation of the data. Cervantes makes readers aware of the dialectics of reading and writing by showing the results of Alonso Quijano’s obsession with books and the ensuing madness alongside the documentation of his exploits. Don Quixote himself,

in chapter 2 of Part One, imagines the printed history of his heroic acts before he has been dubbed a knight or had a confrontation. A third plot line treats questions of critique, literary and otherwise (see Friedman “Three-Dimensional *Quijote*”). The theme of judgment—in its broadest sense—comes into play throughout the narrative, sometimes directly, as in the scrutiny of the library in Part One, chapter 6, and often indirectly, as the threat of censorship would dictate. Toward the end of Part One, the canon from Toledo and the priest from Don Quixote’s village discuss the romances of chivalry and the *comedia nueva* of Lope de Vega. In the opening chapters of Part Two, the dialogue centers on reception of the published chronicle, as the primary intertext shifts from chivalric romance to Part One itself. Narrators and characters—including, of course, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza—appraise and opine on the events that transpire and on a range of topics, artistic, cultural, political, social, theological, philosophical, and psychological. Commentaries may be subtle or explicit, depending on the circumstances and the objectives and the objects, and they are present from the prologue to Part One to the final chapter of Part Two.

The action on the road, the construction of the manuscript, and the ongoing critique—internal and external—intensify the force and the depth of the narrative, and there are additional components in the advancement of textual messages and in the interplay of conventions. Anticipating Wayne C. Booth’s concept of *the implied author*, Cervantes constantly communicates with the reader, through signs that indicate that one needs to read between the lines. If Cervantes is the figurative puppeteer and the narrator and characters are the puppets, the implied author can be understood as the strings, abstract yet present. This communication begins in the 1605 prologue and continues to the end of the second part of *Don Quixote*, and it relates to the ongoing themes of perception and perspective. The dialogical engagement between author and reader reflects a pattern of signaling consistent with the overall structure of *Don Quixote*, with complementary trajectories and inevitable recourse to irony. The knight errant (or errant knight), the chroniclers, the critics of various stripes, and the implied author—collectively and independently—contribute to the forward movement of the narrative. Cervantes the writer, as creator and symbol, is prominent in the scheme as is, logically, the reader, likewise real and symbolic. The question of “navigating post-truth” invites the reader to investigate Cervantes’s handling of history and truth in *Don Quixote* and thereby to follow another extensive plot line: the transitory nature and the mutability of reality. Madness serves as a motif and as a marker of the shifting frames of the narrative, which surely will surprise, challenge, disorient, mystify, and entertain the reader. The complexity of *Don Quixote* and its probing of the realms of literature and life are undeniable, as is the author’s ability to amuse the reader with unending doses of comedy, verbal and physical, sophisticated

and slapstick. Cervantes seems never to forget the Horatian dictum of *dulce et utile* as he pushes enjoyment and instruction to their limits.

Don Quixote is a testament to incongruity. Fiction is the bearer of truth, though periphrastically so, by claiming to be its traditional opposite, history. Cervantes disrupts dichotomies and juxtaposes items in distinct and bold reformulations. Truth may not only be hidden, but redefined and recontextualized. *Don Quixote* is a poetics of the novel—a review of narrative precedents and a template for future development—and a treatise on rhetoric, a treatise embedded in a work of fiction that pretends to be a true history. *Don Quixote* is a primer on how to approach reality, yet the passage is convoluted, precarious, and, as one would expect, ambiguous, open to interpretation. *Don Quixote* is, I firmly believe, geared to please and edify readers and to unite (and to decompartmentalize) fiction and reality, that is, to go all over the map, geographically and metaphorically speaking. *Don Quixote* celebrates the transformational power of words. Cervantes blurs distinctions and places art within reality. He devises an impossible chronology. He fictionalizes himself. Pero Pérez, the village priest, mentions in passing—as he judges the books, including *La Galatea*, in the knight's library—that for many years he has been a friend of Cervantes, “more versed in misfortunes than in verses.” When the narrator bemoans the fact that he has run out of data at the end of chapter 8 of Part One, the manuscript of the Arab historian and the Morisco translator come to the rescue in the following chapter, thus compromising, from the Catholic perspective, the veracity of the “true history.” And so forth. In Part Two, the university graduate and trickster Sansón Carrasco and, especially conspicuously, the duke and duchess base elaborate actions on their reading of Part One. When Carrasco describes the reception of the book, Don Quixote asks if there is a second part planned. Cervantes inserts two extensive interpolations into Part One—*El curioso impertinente* and the captive's oral history—one acknowledged as fiction and the other with references to Cervantes's experiences in North Africa. The contradictions and inconsistencies hardly seem inadvertent; they promote assessment and reassessment, and the act of reading requires flexibility and, one might submit, perseverance. *Don Quixote* encourages the reader to dissect language and to be conscious of polysemy and of the art of persuasion. See, to cite a single example, the rationalizations of the galley slaves in chapter 22 of Part One, who deploy streams of euphemisms to mask their crimes. Cervantes strains credulity to make the point that rhetoric is continually in force and is a function of explication, elucidation, and evaluation.

Don Quixote and Cervantes belong to the first decades of the seventeenth century. Neither can be disconnected from the ambiance and imperatives of imperial Spain. The individualism of Cervantes coexists with the imposition of restrictions and restraints by the conjoined Church and State. Cervantes's

rhetorical strategies are, to a degree, influenced by the dialectics of dissidence and conformity. This gray area is of interest to the authors of *What Would Cervantes Do?*, who recognize that no one could elude the propaganda campaigns of the period. The focus opens the door for new readings of *Don Quixote* built on apparent concession to the reigning mechanisms of those in authority. The hypothesis would be that *Don Quixote* radically transforms narrative and literary theory and that it contests socio-political doctrines, while simultaneously adhering to operative—and regularly reactionary—laws and mandates. An accent on Cervantes as a product of social determinism would modify and reshape the analytical equation, and it would expand the scope of authorial self-representation.

A final—or enduringly penultimate—thread might be the record of a given reader's response to the evolving and ever-changing narrative, a blending of subject and object that cannot remain stable. To call *Don Quixote* an overdetermined text is an understatement. Cervantes merges literary satire with a fanciful story, and he converts what some may deem as a funny book into something that is substantially more penetrating and far-reaching. The plot is dense, if amusingly so, and the baroque field of interpretive decisions can be enriching, bewildering, and disconcerting. There are more puzzles than resolutions in *Don Quixote*, and that seems to be part of the plan (and part of the legacy). Truth and history were at the forefront of my approach to *Don Quixote* prior to my reading of *What Would Cervantes Do?*, but David Castillo and William Egginton have prompted me to be more observant, as well as more metacritical and more self-critical. Their expertise in traversing time and space is inspiring and thought-provoking, and their points of inquiry remind one of the extraordinary openness of *Don Quixote* and of its multilayered and fluctuating itinerary. E.C. Riley notes that *Don Quixote* is Cervantes's theory of the novel. Castillo and Egginton seem to argue that *Don Quixote* is Cervantes's theory of the dynamics of creation, which involves the creator, the created, and the interpreter, and which refers to the world at large. There may be no such thing here as surface meaning, since the search for meaning is neither simple nor fixed and readers are never bound to their previous thoughts. Multiperspectivism operates within the narrative and outside its pages, so as to unify the interpreters within both domains. Readers can trace their analytical paths, and, in an extratextual progression, they can compare their opinions with the countless scholars, critics, and devotees of the novel who have addressed *Don Quixote*. Closed systems and complacency are not viable options. Widening and updating the panorama, Castillo and Egginton touch on theory, scholarship, and pedagogy.

In a course on *Don Quixote*, I would look to the series of “plot lines” as a foundation for discussion, along with carefully selected critical commentaries.

The introduction would foreground the contexts of *Don Quixote*. As a prelude to the reading per se, I would choose short stories that illustrate facets of literature and theory that I anticipate would have an impact on the analysis of *Don Quixote*. Following the reading of the primary text and criticism, I would assign portions of *What Would Cervantes Do?* as a lead-in to the key issue of post-truth. I then would have the students study other texts that intersect, in one way or another, with *Don Quixote* and, accordingly, with its assorted takes on art, life, and, crucially, the mediating junctures of the two. I would like to propose a reading list for a graduate seminar in comparative literature on “*Don Quixote*, History, and Truth.” The list will resemble those of past courses, but the selection will be affected by the theses of Castillo and Egginton.

“*Don Quixote*, History, and Truth”

Introduction: The Contexts of *Don Quixote*

Reading:

Introduction to the Signet Classics edition of *Don Quixote* (2001) by
Edward H. Friedman

Short Stories

Topics:

Perspective and multiperspectivism
Storytelling techniques and forms of narration
Preconceptions (the other side of the story)
Questions of authorship
Poetic justice
The blurring of fact and fiction
Interpretation and mitigating factors
Reading between the lines

Selections:

Marco Denevi, “Apocalypse” (“Apocalipsis”), “The Lord of the Flies”
 (“El dios de las moscas”)
Augusto Monterroso, “The Eclipse” (“El eclipse”)
Kate Chopin, “The Story of an Hour”
Nadine Gordimer, “A Beneficiary”
George Saunders, “The Falls”
Toni Morrison, “Recitatif”
Jorge Luis Borges, “Emma Zunz”
Julio Cortázar, “The Night Face Up” (“La noche boca arriba”)
Margaret Atwood, “Happy Endings”

Clarice Lispector, "The Fifth Story" ("A quinta história")
 Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*

Selected Critical Studies

David R. Castillo and William Egginton, *What Would Cervantes Do?*
Navigating Post-Truth with Spanish Baroque Literature
 Prologue: "The Deadly Devolution of Language" (3–13)
 Part One, Chapter 1: "Reality Entitlement" (17–25)
 Part Three, Chapter 13: "Surviving the Post-Truth Age" (148–58)

Novels, a film, and a Play

Topics:

Fiction, history, truth, and post-truth

Works:

Miguel de Unamuno, *Mist (Niebla)*
 Javier Cercas, *Soldiers of Salamis (Soldados de Salamina)*
 Paul Auster, *City of Glass*
 Woody Allen, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*
 David Henry Hwang, *Yellow Face*
 Ariel Dorfman, *Cautivos: A Novel*
 Benjamín Labatut, *When We Cease to Understand the World (Cuando dejamos de entender el mundo)*

The list, obviously, is lengthy as is. Were it feasible, I would include Salman Rushdie's *Quichotte*, a singular and unpredictable display of Cervantine motifs.

The longer texts and the film mix fiction and reality in exceptionally inventive ways. Fiction is a means to an end and, if not an end in itself, a conduit that retains and strengthens its original identity. *Don Quixote* becomes an all-purpose vehicle for probing questions metaliterary and metaphysical. It belongs to the early modern period and to the present, a present in which respected sources of authority have lost their status, their indisputability. Rhetoric reigns supreme. Truth is suspect. Little can be taken for granted. Logic has taken a fall. The baroque setting of seventeenth-century Spanish literature, self-consciously unfathomable, can help to clarify—or further complicate—the linguistic and conceptual maneuverings of the present. Reflection on *What Would Cervantes Do?* led specifically to the choice of the works by Dorfman and Labatut, which strike me as ideal contemporary companions to *Don Quixote* and purveyors of the theme of post-truth. Labatut ponders the mysterious organizing principles of the universe, intermingling the history of science and mathematics, descends into madness, factual incidents, and poetic license. Dorfman brings together the life and career of Cervantes, the temperament of the self-appointed knight

errant, and his own background and journey, cast as a “meditation.” Dorfman has some tricks up his sleeve, as it were; point of view may be the *sine qua non* of the undertaking.

What Would Cervantes Do? captures the spirit of *Don Quixote* and its astonishing elasticity and durability. Cervantes’s narrative is a veritable magnet for reader response. Everyone is a critic, and everyone is an arbiter. This is an object in which stability disappears and conundrums multiply. *Don Quixote* positions history and truth at the core of a narrative that exalts fiction, that stretches signifiers and signified to the maximum, and that likely will make the reader laugh at and feel sympathy for the exasperatingly endearing protagonist. Castillo and Egginton—in cutting-edge and resplendent fashion—highlight and magnify the allusive quality of the text, enabling students of *Don Quixote* 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.

Works Cited

- Allen, Woody, dir. *The Purple Rose of Cairo*. Screenplay by Woody Allen. Orion Pictures, 1985.
- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. James Hutton. Ed. and rev. translation by Michelle Zerba and David Gorman. New York: W.W. Norton, 2018.
- Atwood, Margaret. “Happy Endings.” *NapaValley*. 1983. Web. 16 Feb. 2022.
- Auster, Paul. *City of Glass*. *The New York Trilogy*, vol. 1. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.
- Bloom, Harold. *A Map of Misreading*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. “Emma Zunz.” *Medina502*. Sept. 1948. Web. 16 Feb. 2022.
- Castillo, David, and William Egginton. *What Would Cervantes Do? Navigating Post-Truth with Spanish Baroque Literature*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2022.
- Cercas, Javier. *Soldiers of Salamis*. Trans. Anne McLean. New York: Bloomsbury, 2004.
- Cervantes, Miguel de. *Don Quijote de la Mancha*. 2 vols. Ed. John Jay Allen. Madrid: Cátedra, 1977.
- _____. *Don Quixote*. Ed. and Trans. Tom Lathrop. New York: Signet Classics, 2011.
- Chopin, Kate. “The Story of an Hour.” *VCU*. Dec. 1894. Web. 16 Feb. 2022.
- Cortázar, Julio. “The Night Face Up.” *BPI*. 1956. Web. 16 Feb. 2022.
- Denevi, Marco. “Apocalypse.” *MfreeseSpanish2130*. 1966. Web. 16 Feb. 2022.
- _____. “The Lord of the Flies.” *CafeIrreal*. 1966. Web. 16 Feb. 2022.
- Dorfman, Ariel. *Cautivos: A Novel*. New York: OR Books, 2020.

- Friedman, Edward H. *Cervantes in the Middle: Realism and Reality in the Spanish Novel from Lazarillo de Tormes to Niebla*. Newark, Delaware: Juan de la Cuesta, 2006.
- _____. "Don Quijote y las paradojas del realismo." *Anuario de Estudios Cervantinos* 12 (2016): 341–52.
- _____. "An Introduction to *Don Quixote*." *Don Quixote*. By Miguel de Cervantes. Ed. Walter Starkie. New York: Signet Classics, 2001. 19–38.
- _____. "Three-Dimensional *Quijote*: Reading Cervantes." *La vida como obra de arte: Essays in Memory of John Jay Allen*. Ed. Moisés R. Castillo. Newark, Delaware: Juan de la Cuesta, 2021. 49–72.
- Gordimer, Nadine. "A Beneficiary." *New Yorker*. May 2007. Web. 16 Feb. 2022.
- Hwang, David Henry. *Yellow Face*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009.
- Labatut, Benjamín. *When We Cease to Understand the World*. Trans. Adrian Nathan West. London: Pushkin Press, 2020.
- Lispector, Clarice. "The Fifth Story." *Serichardson*. 1964. Web. 16 Feb. 2022.
- Monterroso, Augusto. "The Eclipse." *Medina502*. 1952. Web. 16 Feb. 2022.
- Morrison, Toni. "Recitatif." *Cusd80*. 1983. Web. 16 Feb. 2022.
- Riley, E. C. *Cervantes's Theory of the Novel*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Quichotte*. New York, Random House, 2019.
- Saunders, George. "The Falls." *New Yorker*. January 1996. Web. 16 Feb. 2022.
- White, Hayden. "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact." *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978. 81–100.

Friedman, Edward H. "Cervantes and Truth: Defying Gravititas." *Handling the Truth. A Debates Volume on What Would Cervantes Do? Navigating Post-Truth with Spanish Baroque Literature*. Eds. Stephen Hessel and Brian M. Phillips. *Hispanic Issues On Line Debates* 11 (2023): 79–88.
