

◆ Chapter 3

P.S.: Truth, Madness and Defeat (On the Beach of Barcelona)

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“En la realidad no cabe la verdad”
(Truth doesn’t fit in reality)
—Agustín García Calvo

Truth and Reality

“Dulcinea del Toboso es la más hermosa mujer del mundo, y yo el más desdichado caballero de la tierra, y no es bien que mi flaqueza defraude esta verdad.” (*Don Quijote* II, chapter 64) (Dulcinea del Toboso is the most beautiful woman in the world, and I the most unfortunate knight on earth, and it is not right that my weakness should defraud this truth). Truth is a tautology. In the old style of Parmenides, “what is is,” or, more precisely, “what is what is what is what is what is.” Dulcinea del Toboso is the most beautiful woman in the world, for that is what she (or “it”) is, by definition. Dulcinea is nothing if not “the most beautiful woman in the world.” She is a construction by the deranged hidalgo who would be knight, loosely based on some peasant girl, but transcending her—or, better still, promoting her—into an undeniable truth.

We know of truth especially when it is cheated, *defrauded* (the word I chose to translate Cervantes’s *defraudar* differently from other translators). The genius of Cervantes knows that truth is especially vulnerable to Reality: to the ultimate reality of Power. That is why he has an old man, deranged, be truth’s champion, and why he and truth are logically pushed aside by Reality. And Cervantes knows perfectly well (like Lacan or García Calvo

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would formulate centuries later) how closely related to one another Reality and Death are.

It is on the beach of Barcelona that all this takes place. Contrary to an old school of Cervantistas that would insist on how *Don Quixote* is a funny book, and even *only* a funny book, Cervantes is dead serious, in his multi-layered humor, when presenting truth defended by a ridiculous, weak, old, deranged champion, flat on his back after a bad fall from his horse (please notice the oblique reference to famous “mounted knights” finding truth after falling from their horses, such as St. Paul), in the double *limes* of the land/sea terrain (the beach) and his own space of life/death: “como si hablara dentro de una tumba, con voz debilitada y enferma” (Chapter 64) (as if speaking from within a tomb, with a sick and feeble voice). That is how Cervantes carefully has his hero say what he says.

Reality is, as García Calvo often says, essentially false, because it is made-up of the objects that we fabricate (beginning with “I” and “you” as differentiated subjects, each full of one-ness, of oneself). In many ways, reality (or Reality, because it is a god—gods being some of the finest fabrications that make up reality) is the sum-total of deceptions at the opposite side of truth, which is always half-hidden, half-said (by logos, by common reason). Reality insists on being obeyed, as opposed to truth, which is self-evident, if we insist on making it subjected to the rules of evidence. Truly, there is no room for truth in Reality. And truth would seem to have been all but erased, especially in our times, from the bottom of our souls, or, as García Calvo loved to say, from “el sinfondo del alma” (the no-bottom of the soul).¹ And yet, this is when Don Quixote is—if I may use a contradiction in terms—truly invincible (when Cervantes makes Don Quixote be as formidably invincible as he had been formidably complex in his madness for a thousand pages). But, as I say, “truly invincible” is oxymoronic, because truth, in opposition to all the Hegels of this world, has nothing to do with victory or defeat, with the dialectics of winner and loser so dear to—say—Trump but also to our times.

Reality won’t hear of it. One of my favorite examples of how Reality has no room for truth is the very foundation of American democracy—and pride. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” There is truth; self-evident truth. And then there is Reality: those who wrote those words were slave owners; the newly formed country could not have survived without the work of slaves. Of course, there was no contradiction for the Founding Fathers, because all they had to do was to exclude slaves from the category of “men,” and thus save reality (the comfort of their own collusion of Capital and State) from the inconvenience of truth. “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.

So Many Liminalities

Cervantes, of course, is the master of exploring insides and outsides, and the liminalities that both result from and form those realms (I stutter if I call them “spaces”). He begins his *Persiles* with the image of the protagonist being pulled out of a profound cave with a rope by barbarians (an obvious allegory of birth—that stubborn truth of being), and writes the last words that we know of him literally on his death bed, announcing both that he is dying and that he will finish writing the sequel to his first (unfinished) novel *Galatea*. Just as Periandro is pulled out of the womb/cave in the *Persiles*, Don Quixote is also pulled out of the cave of Montesinos with a rope (in the liminality of being profoundly asleep), after having descended there for no reason whatsoever. Long before that, his library (the Borges-like universe of his existence) had disappeared from the face of the earth, ostensibly at the hands of an evil enchanter (co-created by his niece and his housekeeper). They lie, but the library has indeed disappeared. It has been walled in, entombed in its own way.

In the *Exemplary Novels* Cervantes realizes perhaps better than anyone else the brilliant intuition of P.J. Smith about Spain’s masterpieces of the Golden Age having been written “in the margin.” They are populated by marginal individuals and collectives: Gypsies, rogues, organized syndicates of criminals, deranged characters, witches, prostitutes, renegades, speaking dogs, etc. It is from their marginality that Cervantes sees the normal world (the world of norms, the making of norms). It is in the margin that truth survives against the “reality of his times,” as those from that old historicist, mostly British school would like to put it.² It is from the cracks that “exemplarity” is exposed for what it is. The magnificent title *Exemplary Novels* shows a multi-layered irony from the first words of the prologue. Cervantes even uses his physical handicap in the process, threatening to cut off his writing hand if he has given the reader reason for “bad thoughts”—after having told the reader that he cannot use his other hand to cut it off because of an old battle injury. As Vanesa Jiménez puts it in a recent article about our own times of calamity, it is in the cracks of walls and pavements that flowers grow.³ It is no coincidence that *Don Quixote* is a book that—as I wrote long ago—rests on flaws: those of its author, those of its protagonist(s) and the other characters, and those of the very fabric of textuality, in which things and people disappear and reappear in

and out of thin air, and people and things seldom seem to have a name, but a plurality of names instead.⁴

The beach of Barcelona is a splendid *limes* for Cervantes to take Don Quixote. For the entire Part Two he has been insisting, chapter after chapter, that Don Quixote, who in Part One was truly errant, take the road to a specific place: Zaragoza. The narrator again and again ends the chapters reminding the reader of this (“Y siguieron su camino a Zaragoza”) (And they continued on their way to Zaragoza). Yet, when they are about to arrive in Zaragoza, Cervantes, with a splendid excuse—he uses his imitator Avellaneda’s book for it—has Don Quixote decide that he will never set foot in Zaragoza; that he will go to Barcelona instead. In doing this (centuries before characters from Pirandello or Unamuno do the same) he *disobeys* not one author, but three: the author of Part One, who wrote at its end that Don Quixote would go to Zaragoza, Avellaneda, who, following Cervantes’s lead, sends his Don Quixote to Zaragoza, and the author of Part Two, who has been pestering the reader with the insistence that Don Quixote was heading for Zaragoza. But Zaragoza is inland. Barcelona is a much better place of limit, place of no return. Don Quixote must be defeated, in order to confront Reality. That defeat—Cervantes knows—has to occur at the beach. And it has to be around the summer solstice (St. John’s feast). Cervantes knows the old myth/tradition of considering the shortest night of the year as magical, as almost breachable with a jump, as it is done in the *hogueras de San Juan* festivals. As in the old *Romance del Conde Arnaldos*, the sea is that absolute other space, unknown, enticing, and yet inaccessible (“Yo no digo mi cancion / sino a quien conmigo va”) (I only tell my song to those who come with me). The beach is the edge of those incompatible realms of the Real and the Imaginary, or of reality and possibility. As García Calvo puts it, “el mundo de la realidad y el mundo de la posibilidad son dos mundos que no se tocan [. . .] son mutuamente ininteligibles” (*Contra el Tiempo*, 11) (the world of reality and the world of possibility are two worlds that never touch [. . .] they are mutually unintelligible). Cervantes could read reality very well and see how it is from the resistance to it that we can begin to find . . . well: the impossible, perfectly compatible with truth. In Paris, during the May 1968 quasi-revolution, a slogan could be seen, mostly in the form of graffiti: “Soyons réalistes: Demandons l’impossible” (let’s be realistic: let’s demand the impossible). The contradiction has immense power, because it uses the logic of the enemy (to be realistic, not to be dreamers, to stick to what is possible, etc.) in order to subvert it. The slogan makes truth be “realistic,” in a majestic irony: the same irony that Cervantes uses all the time. That majestic demand can best be formulated flat on one’s back, on the beach of Barcelona, with the enemy’s lance an inch from one’s face. On the beach, and in defeat.

From Defeat

Contrary, then, to what Russell or Close would like, and with them the entire neo-philological school of Spain, *Don Quixote* may very well be a funny book, written according to what the ideology of Cervantes's times had to say about laughter, or comedy, or parody, but it goes down as a book about defeat, and about undeceiving oneself in the act of reading. Diegetic reason—I have argued elsewhere—places itself side by side with reason tout-court, and with the twin towers of *desengaño* and theatricality that Egginton and Castillo have been talking about for years.

Truth can only be half-said. This has been said by two very different close-readers of reality: Jacques Lacan (twentieth century) and Baltasar Gracián (sixteenth century).

Lacan loved to say, in his baroque prose—as baroque as Gracián's—and putting to use the maximum delight in the beauty and subtlety of his French language—just as Gracián indulged in the beauty and subtlety of Spanish—, about truth that “elle ne peut que se mi-dire” (*Seminar XVII*, section 3, 70) (one can really only half tell it). He always repeated that. For instance, when asked, in two words: “La vérité?” (Truth?) he responds that “Elle a une structure de fiction parce qu'elle passe par le langage et que le langage a une structure de fiction. Elle ne peut que se mi-dire” (“Conferences et entretiens... ” 35) (It has the structure of fiction because it goes through language, and language has the structure of fiction. It can only be half-said).

That was Lacan speaking about “truth” in 1975. This is Gracián in 1647: “Las verdades que más nos importan vienen siempre a medio decir” (150) (The truths that are most important to us always come half-said).

It may seem amazing that two thinkers so far apart from one another (it is highly improbable that Lacan ever read Gracián) arrive at the same conclusion with almost the same words. Of course, after reading *What Would Cervantes Do?* it doesn't seem so amazing. There are points in common, after all, between the first and the second medialogies.⁵

Truth can only be said (or half-said) flat on our backs, from defeat (as if from within a tomb), on the beach of Barcelona: the same Barcelona that (with permission of Anthony Close or Francisco Rico) has treated one (Don Quixote, that is) as a public buffoon. Cervantes is not laughing at his character: the good people of Barcelona are, after his hosts put a sign on his back, as he rides on its streets, that says “Este es don Quijote de la Mancha” (Part Two, chapter 62) (This is Don Quixote de la Mancha). It is the good people of Barcelona who look at Don Quixote “como a mona” (chapter 62) (as if he were a monkey).

The antidote for Trump's imbecilic “I am the ultimate winner” only comes from utter and unmitigated defeat. To quote a modern philosopher, “freedom's

just another word for nothing left to lose.” Modern revisions to the lyrics of *The Internationale* tend to soften the classic translation that was made in Spanish of the original French “les damnés de la terre” (the damned of the world). The strong Spanish word was “los parias de la tierra” (the pariahs of the world). It is not just “los pobres del mundo” (the poor of the world): it is the pariahs, the untouchables, those whom not just Trump but also Biden or Kamala Harris are so adamant in not allowing entrance from those “shithole countries.”

It’s not “WWDQD” instead of “WWCD.” Truth is—well—quixotic, in its opposition to reality, in its proximity to the possible (and therefore to the impossible), but we must not fall into the trap that Unamuno—for instance—fell into. We must show how it is Cervantes who refuses to simply (as in “simpleton”) laugh at Don Quixote at the moment of maximum lapsus between reality and madness. Cervantes had stopped laughing many chapters before, leaving the laughter to the despicable Duke and Duchess, for instance, or to the kids in Barcelona who torment Rocinante and Sancho’s donkey inserting poison ivy into their butts. Cervantes stops laughing in the exact measure in which his narrator tells the reader to be ready to “laugh by the bushel” (“Espera dos fanegas de risa” Part Two, chapter 44) while Don Quixote and Sancho are literally in tears.

The Endless Text

It was Edward Dudley who put it in those words: the text that never ends (the question is, of course, “what is a text?”). One of the achievements of Cervantes was to have actually been able to finish a book of chivalry: a type of text that doesn’t end, by definition.

But does “the text” really end? I am not referring to the comment that, course after course, students make at the end of a course on *Don Quixote*—namely, that Don Quixote cannot die, or that he never recovered his sanity, or that he was never crazy to begin with. I am referring to how reality and the hidalgo meet each other, at the end of the story.

There is no place to go but home, after the defeat on the beach of Barcelona. There is one step left before “home” slips into “death”: Don Quixote must embrace reality; he must be cured of his madness. Before any further discussion goes on, I must remind the reader (the close-reader) that everybody (narrator, the other characters) keeps calling Don Quixote Don Quixote, even after he, the priest, and even the notary, certify that he is no longer insane, and that he is Alonso Quijano.

The country hidalgo could simply have enjoyed his books, commented upon them endlessly with his fellow readers (the priest and the barber), in a

mini-social network of his time, but no: he has to become a knight errant, go out (the verb *salir* is prevalent in his story) and do something about a wicked world. Very unrealistic, indeed. To him, it was not enough “to increase his honor” (let’s say, in today’s terms, “to have millions of ‘likes’ in the social media”). He had to “serve the republic.”

For many years, most of us who have published for Hispanic Issues have commented on our dear books, like philologists insist on doing, but we have more at stake than “honor”—our respective status and reputation in Academia—: we have also deemed necessary to put those books to fight a non-academic war, an all-too-real battle.

The thing is that Alonso Quijano, upon embracing (or surrendering to) reality, doesn’t go about his *other* business. He wants to keep reading. Not adventure novels anymore, but “leer otros que sean luz del alma” (chapter 74) (read other [books] that might be light to the soul). Don Quixote had seen the title *Luz del alma* in Barcelona, in a printing shop. He never does so, though, since the collusion of Reality with death is the only thing offered him. We never get to see what sanity or insanity the old man engages in after reading *Luz del alma*. What we do get is an engagement with Don Quixote (not necessarily with Alonso Quijano, except if we call him by the old—but recently discovered—epithet of “El Bueno”—the Good). Through the pages that Cervantes gives us, we arrive at a point in which reality is put in perspective, after having been dissected, belied, analyzed (please remember that the word “analysis” means “dissolution” in Greek). What we have intact, for the Knight of the White Moon could never conquer it, is the honor of Dulcinea del Toboso. She is still, by definition, “the most beautiful woman in the world.” Truth, half-said truth indeed. What does she (it) stand for, in the eternal game of tropes? What are we standing for, when we stand up to reality, having perceived its ugliness?

Dulcinea del Toboso (Make Me One, Sancho)

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator tells us very little about Dulcinea del Toboso. As a construct of the mad hidalgo’s mind, she (it) is mostly a missing piece in the entire new persona that he is building; a knight needs an object of love—ladies in all stories bound to the epistemes of courtly love are, as Žižek put it in Lacanian terms, “objets petit a” (89). As the novel goes on, however, the self-appointed knight begins to confront this piece of his construct against reality. As *his* lady, she (it) begins to show insufficiencies, contradictions. Sancho, for instance, will tell him that Aldonza Lorenzo (Dulcinea’s foundation in real life) is somewhat mannish, and even smells like

a man. In Part Two, the first thing that Don Quixote does upon leaving home is to go straight to El Toboso to see his lady. Desire interferes with abstraction: *this* particular lady (my lady) in tension with “the most beautiful woman in the world.” Don Quixote sends Sancho to find his lady. He, in a magnificent psychoanalytical insight by Cervantes, stays away, hidden in a “grove,” or “forest,” or “jungle” waiting for Sancho to bring him his desired Dulcinea. Sancho, of course, cannot possibly find a Dulcinea, so he builds one (out of a not very good-looking peasant girl), and presents her to his master. Don Quixote cannot possibly recognize her at all. She is, of course, “enchanted,” and they will spend the rest of Part Two looking for a way to disenchant her. This enchanted Dulcinea is actually seen again by Don Quixote in the interior of the Cave of Montesinos, as he reports when he is out of the cave and awakened from his strange deep sleep.

On the beach of Barcelona, though, what Don Quixote defends is not *his* lady, a particular *objet petit a*, but a universal truth, metaphorized as “the most beautiful woman in the world.” When he created Dulcinea, it was not his desire that created her (it), but the need to fill a fundamental void in the blueprint of the perfect knight. It is not desire that dictates his words on the beach of Barcelona, then, but the need to proclaim “esta verdad” (this truth): Dulcinea has become a universal, half-said truth worth defending. His weakness prevents the particular Dulcinea from being defended. His words “as if from within a tomb,” though, absolutely succeed in defending the universal truth. His opponent immediately concedes that truth, without reservation: “viva, viva en su entereza la fama de la hermosura de la señora Dulcinea del Toboso” (chapter 64) (long live, long live untarnished the fame of the beauty of lady Dulcinea del Toboso). Truth, then, has been successfully defended.

The price, of course, is defeat: personal defeat, defeat of the particular knight who could not defend, because of his weakness, the particular lady, still enchanted, still his. His opponent forces him to go home, to stop being unattached to reality. It is inevitable that Don Quixote, upon returning home, must die. We are, after all, anchored in that Reality which García Calvo warns us against time after time. Don Quixote dies because he has reached, in his *desengaño* (disillusionment) a point of no return in relation to the past, to memory. The past is not real: it is, though, something we possess: a representation of what was. Memory is our claim to that possession. Not the zombie memory of computers, but the reflection of the soul of what was, precisely because it is no more: because we miss it. As Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio liked to say, in poetry—that way to half-say the truths of what Kristeva explored as “the semiotic”—“se canta lo que se pierde, y solo se lo canta porque se lo pierde” (233) (one sings about what one loses, and one only sings about it because one loses it). In memory we internalize, we personalize universal

truths. Plato was half-right in this, when he saw these memories, these personalizations as mere shadows or bad copies of the Ideas. He could see how the Idea always emerged triumphant; he paid little respect to the necessary defeat that one must endure in losing what belongs to one, and not to the gods.

That is, perhaps, what Dulcinea del Toboso signifies (or articulates within the semiotic: within the body): what we miss, what we all—even a Donald Trump or a Bill Gates—miss. The truth will emerge triumphant in direct proportion to the pain of our defeat in defending it.

P.S.

I just bought a cell phone. My friends know that, until now, I stood up to the Enemy. Quixotically, I stood my ground, stubborn against Reality, for longer than anybody else that I know. What I am trying to say is that I too have been vanquished on my own beach of Barcelona. Also, I just retired. And my feeling is not one of accomplishment, but of defeat. That is why I open the title of these pages with “P.S.”: because it is, in many ways, a post-scriptum, from some “other side” (as if from within a tomb).

Cervantes was the master of “P.S.” When Derrida and deconstruction were in fashion, my graduate students elated when we noted in our readings of *Don Quixote* or the *Novelas ejemplares* how devilishly Cervantes would use his “*olvidábaseme de decir*” (I forgot to say) to literally re-semanticize the entire text. The post-scriptum, like the preface, are illusions, instant self-contradictions. In my case, after having surrendered to Reality in such an ignominious fashion, I hold to my P.S. as a next-to-last straw of stubbornness. I can’t call it “free will” because it is an act of resistance: I am (we are) under attack, and freedom loses much of its meaning when one defends something (not necessarily oneself) but would rather be playing *mus* at home with one’s fellow villagers (pandemic willing).

I am not that old, just like Don Quixote was not that old (Cervantes briefly mentions that he is about fifty), but I am ancient, like Don Quixote was. A main point of Cervantes’s masterpiece is that his protagonist be a walking anachronism, with an anachronistic soul and purpose. A fundamental point in Cervantes’s story is that his hero fights the Present (that other avatar of the Real) seen as a distributor of the Future (i.e.: of Death itself). The windmills: Progress (now the plains of La Mancha are home to thousands of aerogenerators). We who invoke Cervantes are to win our battles (against pretty much the same enemies—evil enchanters and Bill Gates mostly, but also Haldudo the rich) anchored in anachronism. Anachronism is not “just there” in the soul of Don

Quixote and of *Don Quixote*: it is essential. If we proceed in the name of the present, or—worse—in the name of that distribution of death called “the future,” we are anchored in reality. And just as one must detach oneself from *Don Quixote* when one reads it—and Cervantes constantly reminds the reader of that necessary detachment from the prologue to the last page—one must detach itself from reality in order to read it. Power over reality of the kind that states that we can shut the laws of nature out of existence (it may come from James Clapper or from Donald Trump) is not power *over* reality, but reality asserting itself over truth. It is not from power that truth can be half-said, but from weakness, from cracks in power, and from defeat. The problem is to call “law” indistinctly what we adopt as norm, according to common reason, in order to be able to coexist, or what, with the same objective, comes not from common reason but from—say—the American Congress with the legalized corruption we call “lobbies,” or, even worse, what cannot be altered by us by definition, such as the law of gravity. The same ones that proclaim that we can alter the laws of nature defend their eternity when such laws are the principles of capitalist economy. In all cases, it all depends on what kind of a god presides over legislation. As with the history of Jewish (Biblical) Law, there is an underlying tension between a benign god and a strong god. The benign one, in its P.S. (the New Testament) achieved salvation from defeat: he was crucified. Ask any Christian: no salvation without accepting crucifixion. To quote (un-cynically) a post-Christian thought about it: Always look at the bright side of life.

Notes

1. “En la realidad no cabe la verdad” (in reality there is no room for truth) is how García Calvo puts it in the lecture given for the Seminar on Ontology *Phisis*, delivered at the Facultad de Filosofía y Ciencias de la Educación in Donostia entitled “Sobre la verdad” (“About Truth”). He has, however, stated often, and in many of his works, the incompatibility or incommensurability between reality and truth (see, for instance, *Contra la Realidad* 199–202).
2. I am referring to the school that would like to tie down Cervantes’s masterpiece to a supposed “intention” and a supposed historical/ideological frame, such as P.E. Russell or Anthony Close. These scholars repudiate two ways of reading *Don Quixote*: a) the decidedly non-funny reading done by classic scholars such as Unamuno or Sismondi (the first trying to oppose Cervantes to his character, and symbolically killing the author, and the second calling *Don Quixote* “the saddest book ever written”), and b) the reading done through the lenses of critical theory—*any* critical theory—in the

name of Philology. I absolutely thank Castillo and Egginton for accompanying me in the not-at-all-quixotic recovery of Cervantes as an amazingly complex master of all un-deceptions (Castillo) related to the theater of truth (Egginton).

3. What Jiménez says of our place/mode of resistance we said about Cervantes in *Novelas ejemplares: Las grietas de la ejemplaridad*.
4. Please see *Discordancias cervantinas*, especially the appendixes.
5. I am referring to Castillo and Egginton's previous work *Medialogies*.

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