Don Quixote Untethered

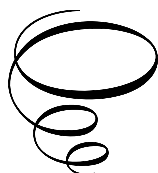
Don Quixote Untethered:

Madness and Philosophy in La Mancha

By

Donald Palmer

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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This book first published 2026

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN: 978-1-0364-6232-1
ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-0364-6233-8

For Leila, the love and editor of my life

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have lived with this project for longer than I am willing to admit to and am grateful to many people for their unstinting support and enthusiasm over these many years. I am most indebted to my wife, Leila May, without whom I could not get across the street, much less through these many pages. My appreciation also goes to Rogelio Miñana who read every page of my manuscript and saved me from innumerable errors. Leigh DeNeef gave me valuable advice after reading an early version of the manuscript. Deborah Wyrick looked at several chapters and made them more readable. Rebecca Akin and Julie Maia provided indispensable assistance with formatting the illustrations. Flossie Lewis has been a continual source of inspiration over the many decades of friendship that we have shared. Others to whom I owe a dept of gratitude for their friendship and support throughout this process are Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Baines, Katarina Brito, Jimmy Creech, Elliot Engel, Tony Harrison, Ingrid Kepler-May, Christian Marouby, Maggie O'Shaughnessy, Christian Palmer, Ed and Louise Reiss, Beverly Taylor, and Anne Wallace. Finally, thanks go to my editor at Cambridge Scholars, Adam Rummens, for his confidence and his patience with me throughout the final stages of this project.

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INTRODUCTION

How the Reader of *Don Quixote* Becomes a Cambrian Bug Trapped in Amber

> "May I?" I indicated the book. She passed it to me with a bemused patience…. I flipped the book over. I opened to the copyright page. Nine-hundred-page books cost $1.85 when I was twelve…. I turned to the First Sally. *In a village of La Mancha the name of which I have no desire to recall*…. These few words spread like a truth serum through me…. Those sixteen words from Chapter One bogged me down in old amber. Before the end of the clause, I felt mired as a Cambrian bug in molasses memory.
> --Richard Powers, *Galatea 2.2*[1]

Don Quixote's first words bog Richard Powers's narrator down "in old amber," and mire him like "a Cambrian bug in molasses memory." Why is he "mired in memory"? What memory is this? Is it the memory of one's own first encounter with *Don Quixote* or with stories in general? Or perhaps with one's first fascination with art? And what is the truth that this serum makes one speak? Why does this passage cause paralysis in the narrator of Powers' novel?... Or maybe it paralyzes Powers himself; the book that he is writing is named after another of Cervantes's novels, *La Galatea*. What hath Cervantes wrought? Why do we not scoff when Powers approves of the recommendation on the fly page of the old paperback: "Not less than three times in his or her life should everyone read *Don Quixote*: in youth, middle age, and old age" (Powers, 1996, 39).

Like so many others before me, I intend to address these kinds of questions. However, there is a stumbling block. I commence this project with some trepidation, having just read what the eminent French Hispanicist Jean Canavaggio wrote about Cervantes scholarship here in the United States. According to him, in America, "Cervantes is the fodder for everyone trying to make a name for himself.... [In America,] they produce avalanches of books and articles and apply their schemata to the point of obfuscation."[2] There are two accusations here: first, that we Americans write about *Don Quixote* in order to make a name for ourselves; second, that we produce avalanches of obfuscation. Concerning the first accusation, I assume the time-honored defense of an appeal to Authority. Don Quixote himself pronounced the pursuit of fame and glory as motivation enough for all sorts

of outrageous and laughable acts. I treat him as my model. Concerning the second accusation, I plead guilty. I now add this manuscript to the avalanche. Let it plummet down the mountainside and crash through the trees!

Don Quixote's Avalanche
Fig. 0-1

In fact, the "applied schemata" disparaged by Canavaggio are very much what this book is about, but the book is not addressed exclusively to the schematizers (a.k.a., philosophical theorists) themselves. Rather, it is also addressed to those readers who, knowing that Don Quixote de La Mancha is one of the most towering figures in literature as well as perhaps the most famous madman that never existed in the world, would like to learn about the different schemata explaining that famous infamy—and about why that opening line mires us in molasses memory.

I first started thinking hard about Don Quixote when I read the Classic Comics version of his story as a child in Los Angeles (like Powers's narrator, at about twelve years of age). Do not disparage these humble origins. When Cervantes allowed his creature to escape and wander the plains, hills and mountains of La Mancha, he unleashed a power that surpassed his own intention (as did Mary Shelley when she released Dr. Frankenstein's creature upon the snowy fields of the Arctic; as did Bram Stoker when he freed his vampire from his tomb to sail into the docks of late-Victorian London; as did Arthur Conan Doyle at the same moment when he loosened the opium-addled Sherlock Holmes upon the underbelly

of that same city). I read a much-abridged version of *Don Quixote* as a teenager in high school, but the first time I read the complete novel it was in the original Spanish. I was part of New York University's Junior Year Abroad program, studying at the University of Madrid in 1959 and 1960. I have a particularly clear memory of opening to the first chapter of *El Ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* in Madrid in a dimly lit corner of a bar in the cellar of the building where I rented a room. I was tippling a few snub-nosed glasses (*chatos*) of very inexpensive *vino tinto* (seventy *chatos* for one dollar in those days).

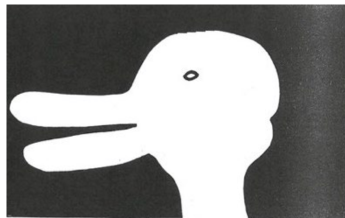
Seventy chatos for one dollar
Fig. 0-2

So began a triangulated affair among Dulcinea, Don Quixote, and me that continued throughout my whole life, reenforced by my return to Spain to study for a doctorate in the history of philosophy after receiving my bachelor's and master's degree in philosophy at the University of California in Berkeley at the beginning of the Free Speech Movement. During my long career teaching philosophy, my classroom references to Don Quixote were so frequent that students would suggest that I teach a course based on Cervantes's novel, and I would always respond, "One of these days I just might do it!" And such a day came. It happened in my last semester at the College of Marin in California (before moving to North Carolina where I finished my teaching career as Visiting Assistant Professor of Philosophy at North Carolina State University). In California I offered, as my swan song, a course called "*Don Quixote* and the Philosophy of the Baroque," based on notes compiled over many years. My old students came through for me. The class was overflowing. I turned away no one. This current book is based partially on the research I did in preparing for that course. In 2005, on the four-hundredth anniversary of the publication of the first part of *Don Quixote*, I started typing out this project. It is now 2025 as I write, shortly

after the 400th anniversary of Part II of *Don Quixote.* The idea of writing a book has been an enduring project.

A friend of mine, recently deceased, who taught at a well-known university on the West coast was, in his early days, very attracted to certain theoretical assessments of fictional literature. He eventually became disenchanted with what he decided were wasteful attempts to derive insights about fiction by applying non-literary theoretical constructs to them. He told the story from a few years ago when his grandson asked him, "Grandpa, what exactly do you do at the university?" He answered, "I teach literature; I help students understand books that they read," to which his grandson answered, "I don't see the problem: you open a book; there's a picture of an elephant on one page and of a giraffe on another. You read the page and see what the elephant does and then the other page to see what the giraffe does. What's the problem?" My friend ends the story, saying, "My grandson was right, but I discovered that too late." Despite the boy's insight—a welcome corrective to over-theorizing—I argue that truly complicated works of art invite theoretical interpretation. I believe this is particularly true in the case of the language arts. The natural ambiguity of language, and particularly the "unnatural" ambiguity of language in works of fiction, invite a variety of readings, and call out for the intervention of theory. One of the roles of literary criticism is to develop new ways of seeing—or perhaps I should say new ways of understanding, in the present case—that are unavailable to non-theoretical approaches or to those of competing theoretical standpoints. There is a problem to be reckoned with, however. Sometimes (or even often) philosophical theories artificially generate new ways of seeing the object under investigation by deploying a priori biases derived from epistemological and ontological presuppositions of the interpretive theory itself, and these presuppositions create new forms of self-fulfilling prophecies. The anti-theory critics are correct to combat this tendency.

Another access to the use (and sometimes the abuse) of theoretical interpretation can be gained from a consideration of the figure that has come to be known as "Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit."[3]



Wittgenstein's Duck-Rabbit

Fig. 0-3

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein uses this figure to illustrate his concept of "seeing as...." By concentrating on certain aspects of the figure in question we can see it as a duck, and by concentrating on others we can see it as a rabbit. In this case, the question, "But what is it really?" is not appropriate. Obviously, this concept can be extended beyond the idea of ambiguous visual figures and into the world of language. Many jokes, both good ones and bad ones, are based on the phenomenon of "hearing as...." The idea can be further extended to the realm of reading ("reading as…'). Wittgenstein calls the mental conversion in question "'the dawning of an aspect" (Wittgenstein, 1964, § II-11, 194). Sometimes this dawning is brought about spontaneously, or it can be brought about with the power of suggestion, and some of these suggestions are theoretical, as when Ptolemy suggested that the Earth and not the Sun moves across the sky. However, here too exaggerations can occur. Wittgenstein points out that not all seeing is "seeing as." He writes, "It would [make] little sense . . . to say at the sight of a knife and fork 'Now I am seeing this as a knife and fork.' This expression would not be understood.—Any more than: 'Now it's a fork'" (Wittgenstein, 1964, 195). Sometimes the appeal to theory is perverse. This brings us back to my friend's grandson ("there's a picture of an elephant on one page and of a giraffe on another"); or to Freud in one of his calmer moments: "Sometimes a cigar is only a cigar."

Scholars regularly characterize interpretations of *Don Quixote* in terms of at least three categories: symbolic, satirical, or romantic.[4] Here, I will not apply these perspectives as primary to my arguments even though for certain discussions they are worthwhile categories, but in my view they are not necessarily mutually exclusive (for example, soon, we will look at José Antonio Maravall's sociological theory of the Baroque. I would call that theory both symbolic and satirical, and I would think of René Girard's triangulation theory that we will consider in chapter six as romantic and symbolic.)

I suggest that the impulse to apply critical theory to *Don Quixote* is not perverse. This is not merely a story about a madman. True, it has a plot that is simple enough (man goes crazy reading novels and comes to believe he is the hero of these novels; he acts out his heroic role in a madly noble manner but gets in lots of trouble doing so; he is laughed at and mocked by all, but nevertheless engages in foolish but nobly inspired activity; on his deathbed he comes to his senses and denounces his former madness). It is this plot that accounts for most of the humor in the novel and for its general entertainment value, but it doesn't explain why Don Quixote gets under our skin, nor, as Richard Powers says, "his words spread like a truth serum" and mire us like "Cambrian bugs in molasses memory."

In fact, Cervantes's work is a very complex and sophisticated novel addressing all sorts of philosophical problems of his age, as well as political, social, and artistic problems—and maybe it addresses *the* problem of art. (One modern critic has written, "all art is a form of Donquixoteism."[5]) However, because Cervantes lived at a time when it was dangerous to address those issues head-on and identify them as problems, he wrote in an elliptical manner that disguised his philosophizing and deceived the censors, but his strange product did not disguise his genius. As I say, his assault of cross-cuts, upper-cuts, and body blows disguised as feints and bluffs invites theoretical exploration.

To explain why I think no one theory is adequate to the job, I will use the analogy of viewing the Grand Canyon from a number of different points of view on the rim of the canyon, and I will suggest that a good theory about *Don Quixote* can be akin to a visual perspective on the canyon. Each point of view may bring into focus features of the canyon that will be minimized or even blocked from other perspectives. (For example, contrast the views from Point Imperial, the South Rim, Yavapai Point, Cape Royal, and Point Sublime.[6]) When a theory does find such features that really are part of the landscape but usually go undetected or undervalued, then that theory has made a contribution. In this book I will occupy a number of *puntos de vista* looking into the canyon, in order to see if these perspectives bring into focus features that will help explain the enchantment Cervantes casts over us. However, I will not insist too emphatically on my metaphor, because all metaphors eventually fail if pushed too hard. (For example, I may want to say, "My love is a red, red rose," but I don't mean that I need to water her, nor watch out for her thorns.) Also, in an actual walk around the rim of the Grand Canyon, any revelations from a particular point of view must be compatible with all other points of view from different locations on the rim. I believe that many of the theories about *Don Quixote* that I discuss are compatible with each other, but probably not all. For example, what I call the psychoanalytic perspective is in several ways incompatible with what I call the existential perspective. At some point, a choice will have to be made between the two.

I will here list some of the main "points of view" from which my readers will gaze at our Mad Knight. Chapter 1, "The Lying Dog of an Arab who Wrote this Book," shows us how Cervantes creates difficulties for us when we try to decide what stance we would best take as we try to interpret Cervantes' various messages to us. There are several stumbling blocks on this road, but the two rather large ones confront us early on, both concerning the story's narrators. The first one is that in the beginning sentence of the novel the narrator warns us that he chooses to withhold certain kinds of

information from his readers, seeming to inform us that he and not we readers is in charge of meaning here. The second shock is our discovery that the "true" author of the book is revealed to be a Muslim historian, writing not in Spanish, rather in Arabic (a language whose public usage in the time of our story can be severely punished). This revelation shocks Don Quixote himself who is quoted saying that Muslims cannot be trusted because they are all liars who are "our enemies." The narrator, who is such a creature, is forced to report to us that exact insult to himself.

The second chapter, "The Baroque, Postmodernism and Cervantes," tries to explain at the same time both the madness and the creativity of the Baroque period (roughly, 1600 to 1680) and suggests that the roots of modernism are in Baroque art. Then I argue that *Don Quixote* is both a splendid exposition of the Baroque and a critique of its illogic.

Chapter 3, "The Baroque, Dreams of Madness and the Ambiguity of Self-identity: Descartes, Velázquez and Cervantes," discusses the questions of selfhood and self-knowledge as they were thought-of in the seventeenth century and today and suggests that Cervantes anticipated a very modern solution to that problem.

Chapter 4, "The Psychoanalytic Don Quixote," treats theories of lunacy, its causes and attempted cures, historically and analytically, including the possibility that it can be chosen as a solution to individual and social problems. Don Quixote certainly has something to show us here. We can call this the view from the second floor of Berggasse 19, Vienna; or, considering Freud's dangerous book, *Moses and Monotheism*, we might call it the view from Mount Sinai.

Chapter 5, "The Existential Don Quixote," claims that the criteria of the radical philosophical stance called "existentialism" by Jean-Paul Sartre in the twentieth century but created in the nineteenth century by Søren Kierkegaard, is anticipated 300 years earlier by Don Quixote.

Chapter 6, "Don Quixote and Triangulated Desire: Quixote Loves Amadís More than he Loves Dulcinea," tests the theory of Professor René Girard that characters in great novels have "imitative desire," which he also calls "borrowed desire," "mediated desire" rather than true desire for lovers and objects. When Don Quixote claims he desires Dulcinea (who does not really exist but is a creation of his mad imagination), he tries to prove it by imitation of Amadís of Gaul (a famous fictional knight in novels of chivalry), what he really desires is Amadis himself. This thesis leads me to Chapter Seven, the topic in *Don Quixote* of the role played by magic in the novel (a novel filled with enchantments and enchanters, some evil and at least one who benefits Don Quixote). This raises the question of whether the religious beliefs of Cervantes' 17th century readers are soaked in the kind

of magic that is a main component of the novel *Don Quixote de La Mancha.* I hope that my readers will not be disappointed to discover that I am unable to answer this question.

The "Afterword" is simply a summary of what I claim to be the main conclusions to be drawn from this book.

I would like to think that many of the ideas in this book are my own. Perhaps I will call them the view from the cliffs above the Lot River. During the many summers that my wife and I have spent in the Southwest of France, much of this book was written in my attic study whose window looks over that river—my wife, most recently writing in her studio about Sherlock Holmes, and I in mine, writing about Don Quixote. Both Quixote and Holmes saw themselves as redressers of "wrongs and injustices" (I, 4; 38); the detective fortified himself with opium and cocaine, but the knight carried with him the Balsam of Fierabrás, a much more potent mind-bender (I, 10; 72).

There are of course other theoretical perspectives on *Don Quixote* from which, for one reason or another (either restrictions of space or talent), I have declined to view the novel in any systematic fashion. These include especially political perspectives, such as: feminist perspectives, "left-wing" perspectives, or "right-wing" perspectives; I have not provided interpretation from the perspective of "queer theory," nor from colonial and post-colonialist theory. To credit scholars who have occupied these points of view, I will mention in an endnote a few worthwhile texts for those readers who would like to take the full Guided Tour of the Grand Canyon of La Mancha.[7]

Notes

First, A word about notation: unless otherwise indicated, quotations from *Don Quixote* will be taken from Edith Grossman's translation, *Don Quixote* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003). Several passages will be quoted from J. M. Cohen's earlier translation, *The Adventures of Don Quixote* (New York: Penguin Books, 1950). I will indicate Part One of the novel as "I," and Part Two as "II," followed by the chapter number, then the page number, so for example, a reference to Part Two, chapter 18, page 567 will appear as (II; 18, 567).

[1] Richard Powers, *Galatea 2.2* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 39-40. Published 410 years after the publication of *La Galatea*, by Miguel de Cervantes.

[2] In the Spanish newspaper *El País digital* (Feb. 9, 1997), quoted by Carroll B. Johnson in his introduction to *Cervantes and his Postmodern Constituencies*, eds. Anne J. Cruz and Carroll B. Johnson (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1999), xi.

[3] Wittgenstein himself attributes the figure to psychologist Joseph Jastrow, in Jastrow's *Fact and Fable in Psychology* (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, New York: Macmillan, 1953), § II, xi, 94).
[4] E.g., Anthony Close, *The Romantic Approach to Don Quixote* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 201-21.
[5] Arnold Hauser, *The Philosophy of Art History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), 55. Harold Bloom writes that *Don Quixote*, "the world's first best-seller," contains within itself "all the novels that have followed in its sublime wake" (quoted by William Egginton, "Quixote, Colbert, and the Reality of Fiction," *New York Times Opinionator* [September 25, 2011];
https://archive.nytimes.com/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/25/quixote-colbert-and-the-reality-of-fiction/).
[6] See *Ansel Adams: 400 Photographs*, ed. Andrea G. Stillman (New York, Boston & London: Little, Brown and Co.), 194-98.
[7] There are a number of fine feminist interpretations of *Don Quixote*, including Ruth Anthony El Saffar's *Beyond Fiction: The recovery of the Feminine in the Novels of Cervantes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Mary S. Gossy's, *The Untold Story: Women and Theory in Golden Age Texts* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989); Anne J. Cruz, "Cervantes and his Feminist Alliances," in Anne J. Cruz and Carroll B. Johnson, eds., *Cervantes and His Postmodern Constituencies* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999). Barbara Fuchs's *Passing for Spain: Cervantes and the Fictions of Identity* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), is an excellent study of gender role-playing and cross-dressing in Cervantes's works, one that could stand as a contribution to "queer studies" (though Fuchs does not identify her book in that fashion). Students of colonial and post-colonial studies will derive insight from Elvira Vilches' *New World Gold: Cultural Anxiety and Monetary Disorder in Modern Spain* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). Vilches does not directly address *Don Quixote*, but her argument explains much of the economic and cultural backdrop of Cervantes's work. A classical example of what might be called a materialist or leftist perspective is from a member of the Frankfurt School, Leo Löwenthal, in his *Literature and the Image of Man: Sociological Studies of the European Drama and Novel, 1600-1900* (New York: Beacon Press, 1957). I cannot identify any specifically "right wing" perspectives on *Don Quixote*, but E. C. Graf's *Cervantes and Modernity: Four Essays on 'Don Quixote'* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007), contains a number of theses that might be called politically conservative; for example, he sees Cervantes as a "Counter-Reformation critic of Islam," and Graf applauds Cervantes for that posture (146), as well as approving of Cervantes's transgression of what would later become "the vague and inconsistent morality of today's multiculturalists" (121). Graf expresses annoyance at a whole generation of contemporary feminist Hispanicists for following a "post-Marxist" pessimism (186, note 38). He thinks Cervantes could teach a lesson to those who think that threats to our personal freedom come more from "civil authority at home" (Homeland Security forces?) than from "the religious enemy abroad." Graf writes: "the question remains: at what moment and under what circumstances are we prepared to fight against one in the name of the other?" (155).

CHAPTER ONE

THE LYING DOG OF AN ARAB WHO WROTE THIS BOOK

For years and years, important *Cervantistas* warned the readers of *Don Quixote* not to look for a political component in the novel, reminding them that Miguel de Cervantes, despite being a wounded war veteran, had already been in trouble with the law on several occasions, and was writing under the threat of censorship and even imprisonment by the combined forces of the Inquisition and the absolutist monarchy.[1] The formal Catholic response to the upheaval caused by publications of Martin Luther and the sudden upsurge of militant Protestantism—called by the Protestants "the Reformation"—was a tightening of discipline and control exercised by the Papal forces, a movement that came to be called the "Counter-Reformation." In Spain this movement was particularly leery of subversive artistic expression and, through its inquisitional arm, the authorities carefully controlled writing, painting, and drama, making sure that the only political content in art would be such as to be supportive of King and Church. More recently, literary critics have discovered that many artists of the period circumvented these strictures through forms of indirect discourse, in words, images, or dramatic action.

In this opening chapter, I will suggest that Miguel de Cervantes came to understand that in Spain politically conservative forces controlled not only the creation and content of art but also of "the science of history" (i.e., the narration and explanation of Spain's past), making certain that published accounts of past events all confirmed Spain's divinely ordained superior status in the world and the divine right of Spain's monarchs. The blatant censorship of art came mainly from Rome and took place in broad daylight and was meant to apply to all Catholic communities worldwide, while the specifically Spanish control of "historical truth" was exercised off-stage in a realm of shadowed enticements and warnings. Cervantes must have concluded that the result of this control of historical discourse effaced the distinction between history and fiction. Because he was an artist, this fact deeply annoyed him, and he decided to do something about

it. Cervantes responded to this realization not by expressing reformist views in his art or by rewriting history, but by finding an ingenious way to attack both "art" and "history' in its officially established manifestation. He demonstrated how they had in fact become the same. (The Spanish language makes this equation easier than in English. In Spanish, *la historia* means both "history" and "story"). Cervantes worries about how easily both were manipulated by wealth and political power. He could only do this in a consciously paradoxical manner, using the authority of *arte* and *historia* to undermine that very authority.

Cervantes does not openly advocate any particular political party or stance; rather, the political component of Cervantes's novel is overshadowed by a philosophical skepticism about claims to knowledge in general.[2] It is true that the most egregious versions of such claims, both the claim to be the source of knowledge and the claim to have the right to control that knowledge, come from powerful individuals and groups who find such demands necessary for the protection and maintenance of power—that is, from political and religious sources. Cervantes himself was personally inconvenienced and even endangered by these powers, therefore many of the barbed darts that Cervantes appears to throw at lesser targets are in fact aimed at the larger ones.

If knowledge, history, and art are manipulated by political power, Cervantes will not mock the powerful; he will appear to mock knowledge, history, and art. Possibly his attack is at least as much motivated by genuine philosophical skepticism as by a political agenda, but in either case, it will have political consequences that would be punished if they were understood by the authorities. However, his methods are more like those of a contemporary (and more circumspect) Stephen Colbert than of a philosopher or political theorist. I do not know if many readers in his own age thought of Cervantes's book in this way; they probably mostly thought of it as a very funny story. In our age, Cervantes's work can be read as a kind of deconstruction of the ideas of Art, History, and Truth (with capital letters) in the name of a politico-philosophical point. It is this feature of the novel that makes this, the first modern novel and first best seller, an anticipation of post-modernism. This deconstruction is exhibited prominently from the very beginning of his novel as the problem of the unreliability of the narrative authority beginning with its first line and hinting at such an unreliability in all books.

The Unreliable Narrators of *Don Quixote*

As we saw in the Introduction, the novel, *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote de la Mancha*, begins with this well-known line written by an anonymous narrator: "Somewhere in La Mancha, in a place whose name I do not care to remember, a gentleman lived not long ago,..." (I, 1; 19). Why does the narrator not care to remember? Why does he begin his tale by brazenly announcing that he will withhold information from his readers? Can this narrator be trusted? If not, what are the implications for the way we should read the rest of the novel? Normally, we readers are prepared to accede to the aesthetic convention requiring a suspension of disbelief while viewing an artist's paintings or a sculptor's statues or reading a novelist's fiction. And, in this latter case, usually we do not question how omniscient narrators know all the things they *do* know (often including the innermost thoughts and secrets of characters in the novel). But *this* narrator begins his history by challenging us in a somewhat insulting manner, as if to show us from the first moment who is in charge here. In Looking-Glass Land, Alice challenges the narrative authority of Humpty-Dumpty, who, from his perch on the wall, has just stipulated his new definition of the word "glory," saying that it means "a nice knock-down argument." Alice objects that "glory" doesn't mean that at all. The anthropomorphized egg responds:

> "When I use a word," Humpty-Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."
> "The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."
> "The question is," said Humpty-Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all.")[3]

Fig. 1-1

After Tenniel

The narrator of the *Quixote*, like Humpty-Dumpty, wants it made clear that he, and not his listener, is the master of language (perhaps somewhat in the manner of the monarchy and the Church in Spain and other European countries in the early sixteen-hundreds).

In fiction, there are other narrative conventions, of course, besides that of the omniscient narrator. There is the first-person narrator: *Moby Dick*'s first line, "Call me Ishmael"; *Robinson Crusoe*'s "I was born in the year 1632, in the City of York"; *David Copperfield*'s "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show;" or Dostoevsky's Underground Man's "I am a sick man. I am a spiteful man. I am an unpleasant man. I think my liver is diseased, but I refuse to consult a doctor."

Fig. 1-2

We know in the case of these four novels that their authors are *not* their narrators. (Herman Melville's name was not Ishmael; Daniel Defoe was not born in 1632; "these pages" will not show if Charles Dickens is the hero of his own life; and Fyodor Dostoevsky did not consider himself to be spiteful and unpleasant, nor did he believe that his liver was diseased.) I think that we are allowed to have more doubts about the veracity and reliability in the case of first-person narrators than in the case of all-

knowing narrators because first-person storytellers are not like omniscient, omnipresent gods but more like people we know. Indeed, they are quite like ourselves, and we "catch out" the fibs and exaggerations of the tales told by people we know; we even catch out ourselves occasionally about fibs that we tell. Still, we do not approach these narrators suspiciously—we approach them with what the philosopher Donald Davidson has called "the principle of charity." That is, we begin to doubt our narrators only if they give us reason to do so. (I think we come to be suspicious of Dostoyevsky's "underground man" when he reveals his motives early on. He claims that he is never motivated by self-interest but always by perversity and spite [the Russian word is "*Zlost"*], but as we read, we begin to wonder if he doesn't see perversity and spite as being in his own interest.)

When we come to Miguel de Cervantes's novel, *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote de La Mancha*, what impression do we receive about the "authority" and reliability of the narrator? In that first sentence of the novel we confront a first-person narrator ("in a place whose name *I* do not care to remember"). But he is not writing about himself. In addition, that "I" wraps itself in an almost fairy-tale timelessness. ("Once upon a time, in a far distant land, there lived a....") We do not know who the narrator is, nor (at first) do we know how he knows what he knows. In fact, early on we realize that the narrator himself is not always sure of what he knows, and he soon begins deferring to an earlier authority by calling himself the "second author" (I, 9; 64-5). For example, concerning the true name of the gentleman who assumes the title, "Don Quixote," the narrator says, "Some claim that his family name was Quixada, or Quexada,…although reliable conjecture seems to indicate that his name was Quexana. But this does not matter very much to our story;…" (I, 1; 19-20). Only at the end of the 900-page novel has the narrator arrived at the conclusion that the knight's real family name is Quixano (II, 74; 936), but the storyteller does not say how he arrived at that conclusion.

We are soon made aware that our "second author" (as he calls himself and I will continue to do) is in fact only the last of several who have related the story of Don Quixote, and that some of the facts presented by this narrator are contested ("Some authors say…others claim..." [I, 2; 25]). The arithmetic of this sentence tells us that there were at least four other historians of Don Quixote's life. We are also told that our narrator has derived his information or confirmed some of it from "the annals of La Mancha" (I, 2; 26), or "the archives of La Mancha" (I, Prologue; 5).

In chapter 8, the "second author" recounts the story of Don Quixote's battle with a Basque squire (*escudero*) who has insulted our knight.

Quixote raises his sword in the air and the Basque parries with his sword; they take a powerful swing at each other, then suddenly the story breaks off at the moment that the two swords are about to cut each combatant into two pieces.

Fig. 1-3

The sensation is akin to that of watching an old movie when suddenly the film stalls. We hold our breath hoping that the projectionist is able to free the film strip before it burns on the screen before our very eyes.

The "second author," either referring to himself or to an earlier author, writes: "the author of the story" apologizes because he has not been able to find the end of the tale (I, 8; 65). The context of the sentence seems to imply that "the second author" and "the author of this story" are not the same person, but we cannot be sure. Probably the author who wrote everything up to the missing part was one of several anonymous contributors to the annals or the archives of La Mancha, but none of the archivists with whom our narrator is acquainted has managed to tell the end of the story of the battle with the Basque. However, the "second author"—our current narrator—is hopeful that he can find the rest of the story because he cannot believe that so curious a history would be subjected to the laws of oblivion, or that the great minds of La Mancha possessed so little interest that they did not have in their archives or on

their writing tables a few pages that dealt with this famous knight (I, 8; 65).

Yet, after more archival research the "second author" is unable to find any such pages. Nonetheless, quite by chance our narrator does find the historical information he needs to finish the story—not in archives or writing desks of "the great minds of La Mancha," but in a rather curious manner. "This is how I happened to find it" (I, 9; 67), he says. One day in the marketplace of Toledo, he runs across a boy who is selling some old papers and notebooks to cloth merchants. The narrator flips through some pages brought in by the boy and realizes that they are written in Arabic. He buys the manuscript for pennies, and excitedly looks for a "Morisco [Muslim convert to Christianity] who knew Castilian" to translate for him.

In Spain, at the historical moment that the "second author" makes his find, it would be dangerous to admit publicly that one knows how to read Arabic. Yet, despite the risk, both the narrator and the Morisco discuss the translation that the latter should make, and they strike a deal.[4] The Morisco tells our narrator that in Arabic the book is called *History of Don Quixote de la Mancha,* and was written by a Muslim historian, Cide Hamete Benengeli. The narrator offers the Morisco whatever price he demands to translate the complete manuscript, and the Morisco accepts fifty pounds of raisins and three bushels of wheat to do the job, which he does in the privacy of the narrator's home, and "in a little more than a month and a half, he translated the entire history, just as it is recounted here" (I, 9; 68). Does our narrator trust the translator's skill? He does not say. Does he trust Benengeli? Hardly. He says:

> If any objection can be raised regarding the truth of this [history], it can only be that its author was Arabic, since the people of that nation are very prone to telling falsehoods, but because they are such great enemies of ours, it can be assumed that he has given us too little rather than too much.... [I]f something of value is missing from it, in my opinion the fault lies with the dog that was its author rather than with any defect in its subject. (I, 9; 68-9)

Sancho Panza, Don Quixote's crass, illiterate, greedy farmer neighbor who agrees to become Quixote's squire if he is remunerated, also participates in the same offensive metaphor, calling Benengeli a "son of a dog" (DQ II, Cohen 3; 478).[5] The narrator and his early seventeenth-century Spanish readers, and probably Sancho, know perfectly well what a calumny it was in the Muslim culture, then and today, to call someone a dog, so he has slandered him thrice over, yet he vouches again and again for the truth of the very stories related by this lying dog. (I remind you that when the Iraqi journalist, Muntader al-Zaidi, threw his shoe at President

George W. Bush in Baghdad on December 14, 2008, he yelled at him, “This is the farewell kiss, you dog!”[6]).

President Bush as a Dog
Fig. 1-4

So, our “second author” has already proved to be perplexingly unreliable: he "does not care to remember" our hero's birthplace; he is not sure of his name: ". . .Quixada, or Quexada,...[or] Quexana..." (I, 1; 19-20); the other historians whom he consults—at least four of them—are not identified, and they seem to disappear after Benengeli comes on the scene. It is at this point that he hands us over to another narrator, a Muslim historian from La Mancha (I, 22; 163) who is a lying dog, and, because he is “our” enemy, his motives cannot be completely trusted. Yet, our narrator calls the work of this dog of an Arabic Manchegan a "most serious (*gravísima*), high-sounding, detailed, sweet, and inventive history" (I, 22; 163), and he refers to Benengeli as "*el sabio,"* the sage," or "the learned one" (I, 15; 102).

Spain and the Muslims

In the year 711, a Muslim army from North Africa made up of Berbers and Arabs was invited by the Visigoth King Rodrigo into a Christian Spain that had deteriorated into civil war. Rodrigo wanted the Muslim armies in North Africa to aid him against a rival Catholic monarch. The “Moors,” as they were called by the Spanish, accepted the invitation, crossed the Straits of Gibraltar, but rather than joining King Rodrigo’s troops, they simply

overran the peninsula, establishing their domain over the whole of Iberia except for the mountains of northwestern Spain. (Gibraltar: “Gibral” after an Arabic word meaning “mountain, and “tar,” after the name of the Saracen general, “Tariq.”) The conquered Christians were allowed to remain in place and, in most cases, to practice their religion, all the while becoming culturally and linguistically more Islamified over the years.

The supposedly miraculous discovery of the body of Saint James (Santiago) “miraculous” because he had been beheaded in Rome centuries earlier—took place in the year 800. In the early Middle Ages James was believed to be the brother of Jesus (see The Gospel of Mark 6:3), who, as one of his last acts, may indeed have traveled from Rome to Spain to preach. Therefore St. James had tremendous authority in the eyes of Spanish Catholics. The supposed discovery of his body in northwestern Spain (a headless body that had been transported in an otherwise empty boat made of stone[!] directed to Spain by an angel) was interpreted as a divine commandment to reconquer Spain in the name of Christianity. The city of Santiago de Compostela (Saint James of the Field of Stars), in that same northwest corner of Spain, developed around St. James’s burial place and became a holy site that inspired visions, miracles, and militancy. Christian armies sallied forth from the nearby mountains of Asturias with the battle cry of “¡Santiago!” and experienced their first victories over the Muslim armies (during which some Christian warriors claimed to have seen St. James, riding a white stallion, in their lead. “I was there and did not see him. But he may have been there,” wrote one honest participant). By then Muslim emirs and caliphs, despite creating glorious architecture and the best libraries in Europe, had early on fallen into conflict with each other.

The Reconquest (*la Reconquista*) spread in starts and fits, with Muslim troops sometimes fighting for Christian kings, and Christian warriors, such as El Cid, sometimes fighting for Muslim emirs. Eventually the seven-hundred-year Reconquest reduced the Moors to a last stand in the glorious city of Granada, which fell to the troops of the “Catholic Kings,” Isabella and Ferdinand, in 1492. The Agreements of Capitulation signed by *los Reyes Católicos* and the Moorish king Boabdil made the surrendering Muslims full citizens of the state, with the right to practice Islam without harassment. But almost immediately the cunning Ferdinand and the fanatical Isabella annulled the Agreements and began persecuting the remnants of Islam, outlawing the use of Arabic in spoken or written form, and giving Muslims the choice of conversion or exile. Similar strictures were simultaneously imposed on Jews, who had also inhabited Spain—usually in peace—for hundreds of years. Converted Muslims were called