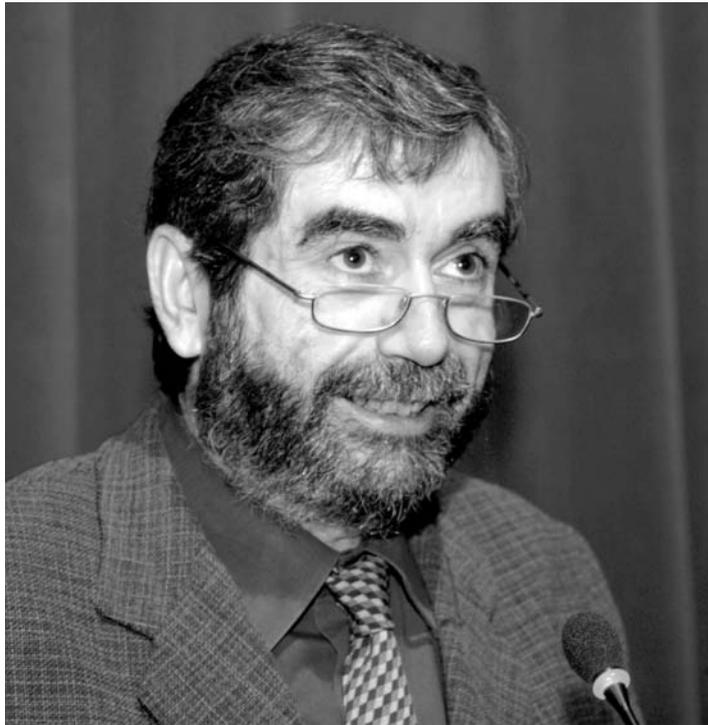


ENCUENTROS



Cervantes and the Art of Storytelling

Lecture by
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CERVANTES AND THE ART OF STORYTELLING

Antonio Muñoz Molina

In taking up the topic of the storyteller who was and is Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, it may be appropriate to begin precisely by telling some stories. One of them could be, for example, the one about two inmates at a prison farm in the southern United States. The physical characteristics of the pair will certainly sound familiar: one is short, heavy set, skeptical; the other, tall, skinny, given to melancholy. We don't know much, or it will take us some time to learn, about the crime that the first of them has committed, but the crime committed by the second is immediately obvious: he is serving a twenty-year sentence for armed robbery, and curiously, he confesses that he feels no hatred or resentment for the police who arrested him or the judge who sentenced him, but rather for the books and authors of books who, because they were so believable, ended up putting him in prison.

This man, who was a farmer from a

poor area of the Mississippi hills, had gotten into the habit of reading cheap novels, adventure stories of bandits, pulp fiction, and under their influence thought about imitating the heroes of these novels that he read. But not content with just reading them and imagining himself imitating them, he ordered by mail a toy gun that would very much resemble a real gun, a hat to wear slanted over his forehead, and a bandanna of the kind that bandits like to wear to hide their faces in movies and novels.

Thus armed with these things that he had received by mail at considerable expense, he decided to imitate in reality the heroes of these novels that he read and tried to rob a train. He got on the train, put the bandanna over his face, took out the gun, and was immediately arrested, with no time to rob a single passenger. Sentenced to a very long term on that prison farm in

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the southern United States, and while he was plowing the field behind a mule, he was constantly mulling over the hatred he felt, not toward the judges or the police, but toward the writers who invent novels that tell of absurd things that are not true, and had unsettled his mind.

Another story takes place some time later elsewhere in the United States, in St. Louis, Missouri. The main character is a young man named Tom, who is bored day after day working as a salesman in a shoe store, feeling that his life is a disaster, and what he dreams bears no resemblance to reality. When he can get away from waiting on customers in the shoe store, he slips off into a room and writes poems. At night, back home, stifled by the presence of his mother and a crippled sister, he again escapes, and when he comes back in the early morning, his mother always asks him the same question, "Where have you been?" And his answer is always the same, "I went to the movies." At a certain point, our young man decides that he is fed up and says, in a play on words, "I am tired of the movies and I am about to move."

A third story is about a woman during the Depression in New York. She also has a miserable job, she is poor, she has so little she can barely survive, and her only consolation is going to the movies. But what happens to her is different from what happened to the character in the second story, because at a particular moment a miracle occurs, and she suddenly becomes part of the plot of one of these films.

The stories mentioned here represent three variations on the theme of Don

Quixote of the Mancha and on how fiction makes people crazy or causes them to become unhinged, or impels them to introduce substantial change into their life. The first story is part of William Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*; the second is a scene in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, and the third of course is Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo*.

The same situation recurs in these three characters: rebellion against the limits of one's own existence and against reality itself. The stories show fiction as an imaginary model that in no way resembles the life one has, but is a model in which one would like to be reflected. This fiction is also assumed not only as an imaginary flight, but also as the invitation to an actual real life flight. There comes a moment when the fictional characters become bored, because they can no longer be satisfied merely by reading novels or watching movies, and they decide that they are going to do what the heroes in movies and novels do: they are going to put into practice what they have seen in movies or what they have read in books.

Clearly, what I have just noted is the legacy of *Don Quixote*, and just as I have referred to these three examples, I could refer to many more in which the model of the story of our gentleman who wants to be a knight errant is repeated: the self-absorption, the dissatisfaction with reality, the search in fiction for a different life, and finally, breaking away, or attempting to break away, which is something very attractive but also very dangerous. Because at the very moment when the attempt to

break away takes place, fiction begins to be put to the test. While literature reflects the opposite of real life, it can only promise wonders; it cannot offer gifts. But the moment when fiction becomes a guide for practical life, it begins to have real consequences on people.

In film, literature, and the theater, there are many characters with these features. For example, there is Emma Bovary, the main character in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, who feels driven into adultery, into surrendering to her lover and into desiring a different life. And what leads her to become aware of the boredom of her marriage is precisely reading—not reading great books, but cheap novels, as Flaubert himself makes sure to note.

The Birth of the Modern Novel

We see, then, that the heroes of the modern novel tend to be people influenced by fiction, people chafing at their own life, who are being affected by other stories, by other fictions. But they also do something that sets them completely apart from any previous hero, and that is the decision to become the masters of their own tale, and narrators of their own story. This is unquestionably begun by *Don Quixote* and comes down to our own day. There is nothing like it in the literature known until that time. Indeed, let us consider that the classic hero is the one who fulfills an inexorable fate, and that is the very reason why he becomes a hero. Achilles has to be heroic to the end and Ulysses has to be clever to the end. The hero's adventure, which is

told in the epic poem or in tragedy, is fulfilling a destiny. The story told in a modern novel is exactly the opposite: it is rebellion against a fate, rebellion against a life that has been stamped with a seal, and the attempt to change it.

But what is attempted is a new life in which fiction has a fundamental presence. Don Quixote, let us recall, is fated to live in a time when everything seems to have been written beforehand. He is a gentleman living in a remote town in Spain, in a time when every person has a well-defined position in the social class system, in which there is no social mobility of any kind. And Don Quixote decides that he is not going to be what the world thinks he *ought* to be, but what he *wants* to be.

A disturbing episode in the novel is told toward the end of Don Quixote's first outing: he has been thoroughly beaten up by a mule driver accompanying a group of merchants from Toledo, whom our gentleman had challenged to his own misfortune. As it happens, a farmer who is a neighbor comes by, recognizes him and asks him, "Master Quijana, who has put your worship in this plight?" Absorbed in his madness, Don Quixote, who imagines himself to be the hero of a set of ballads, speaks to him of Dulcinea del Toboso, "for whom I have done, am doing, and shall do the most famous deeds of chivalry that the world has ever seen, can see, or will see." Tired of listening to such nonsense and foolishness, the farmer replies, "Your Grace is that worthy gentleman Master Quijana." And Don Quixote responds, "I know who I am, and I know too what I am capable of being."

This is the founding moment of the modern novel, which occurs at the very same time as the founding of modern consciousness. A modern consciousness that has given rise to this expression so widespread in America: self-invention. Don Quixote wants to invent himself and have a different fate.

This is a fundamental reading of Cervantes, and it brings us to another question: the place that fiction occupies in people's life. As has been said, it is books that make Alonso Quijano want to escape reality, and it is books that he tries to live. But when he attempts to live his life as if it were a book, this already mentioned confrontation between books and reality takes place.

Another problem raised by Cervantes, one that is extremely important, is that of clarifying what place books and stories occupy in our existence, and what the stories can do for us, how they influence our way of seeing the world. One casual interpretation is that what Cervantes is doing in *Don Quixote* is honoring the right to imagination, which is one of the advantages of literature over reality: celebrating the ideal which rejects the already established. Cervantes exhibits this impulse toward the ideal, rejection of the real, and he also shows that great care must be taken with the way one interprets stories and narratives, because that can deeply affect our place in the world.

If we pay close attention, what we find in *Don Quixote*, especially in Part One, are a set of stories that take place one after another. Don Quixote reads books, printed books. Therefore, it is paradoxical —as

Martín de Riquer and Leo Spitzer have pointed out— that *Don Quixote* is the first book that is about a world where the emergence of the printing press changed the nature of the book as an object, as a possession of the reader in reality. Until the invention of the printing press, books were very rare and difficult to obtain. They were copied by hand, and there could not be many copies of each one. The printing press made it possible for many books to be available, for books to occupy a distinct place in the world, and for many more people to have access to them.

In addition to printed books there were also tales. In fact, all of *Don Quixote* is full of episodes in which people narrate tales that can be easily contradicted or interrupted and there are also manuscripts. In one passage of the book, the action is halted because someone reads a hand-written book. In another passage it is narrated that watchmen listen at night as books of chivalry are narrated. There are people who are continually telling stories to others. At each moment reference is also made to the various literary genres that were in fashion in Cervantes's time. At each moment, Cervantes forces us to notice how these narratives act on reality, and how they function internally. And he does so by always questioning the nature of the story itself.

In classical literature and poetry, the story is never placed in doubt. The *Iliad* begins and we implore the goddess, the muse, to sing of "the wrath of Achilles" and no one questions what is going to be narrated. In *Don Quixote*, from the outset, awareness of uncertainty is in there. The

story is doubtful; it is not sure. We are not even sure of Don Quixote's name; we do not know whether his name is Quezada, Quijana, or Quijada. There is a scene —another of the great moments in this stupendous literary work— in which Don Quixote is fighting with the Basque. Their swords are raised, the great battle is imminent, and at this very moment, “our delightful history stopped short and remained mutilated, our author failing to inform us where to find the missing part.” At that point, there begins another story within the story, in which Cervantes —the narrator who is Cervantes— finds some manuscripts in Arabic that must be translated into Spanish, which by itself entails another uncertainty because, as the narrator himself says, “if any objection can be made against the truth of this story, it can only be that its narrator was an Arab—men of that nation being ready liars.”

The Weight of the Individual Gaze

Elsewhere in the book, as the story of Cardenio in Sierra Morena unfolds, hints gradually appear, as in an Arthur Conan Doyle novel: first a dead mule, then a bag, a book with some poems, a bag with money inside; then some shepherds tell the beginning of a story. When Cardenio arrives, he tells a part of his story but he has an attack of madness, and the story does not continue.

In *Don Quixote* we are always forced to face up to the flimsiness or the doubtful value of the stories being told. Another issue also emerges: that each story, each vision,

must be subjected to a confrontation with the real world, and it is also subject to different possible readings. In my view, this is absolutely modern.

For example, the very familiar story of the windmills is a story of misunderstandings. It is the story of the conflict of two versions of the facts: the version of someone poisoned by literature and, by contrast, of someone observing what is going on. At another moment there is the discussion of the barber's basin. Don Quixote thinks it is Mambrino's helmet but the others are sure that it is a barber's basin. There then takes place a very humorous discussion in which a conclusion is reached: it is neither a basin nor a helmet, it is a hybrid specimen called a “basin-helmet.” That is to say, it is something that is between fiction and reality. It is what determines, in my view, the nature of literary creations, that they are neither entirely fiction nor entirely reality.

Nevertheless, the fact that stories are partial and are subject to doubt, to discussion, even to being refuted, is a very important aspect, because again we are faced with the significance of modern consciousness and of the individual gaze. Things are not as the law decrees nor as authority says they are. Things are as we see them, as we remember them, as we imagine them. Things depend on the attention that we give them, which may be a great deal or little, and also on whether we subject them to our prejudices or our gaze.

Another memorable story in the novel, in my view, is the one that takes place in Sierra Morena, when the shepherd Crisóstomo falls in love with Marcela, a woman

not of his rank. When it is first being told, it is a classic pastoral novel with its two typical characters, according to a tradition that comes from Virgil, and even before him from the Greek eclogues. In love with Marcela but disappointed with her indifference, Crisóstomo commits suicide. However, when Crisóstomo's funeral is about to take place, something happens that breaks away from this classic plot: Marcela appears and speaks. This constitutes a true Copernican revolution, because this woman is the imaginary and ideal woman (the models for which were Beatrice and Laura, created long before by Dante and Petrarch, respectively), the figure of the beloved whom the poet adores but of whom we know nothing, save what the poet says about her. This woman, who is beautiful but has been cruel, appears high up on a rock and tells those gathered there that this story told about her, which everyone has accepted as true, is in fact not true. She acknowledges that this man was in love with her but she did not ask him to love her. So what obligation did she have to be pleased with the discourse that others wanted to impose on her. And after saying that, she adds some words that are of tremendous poetic intensity: "Beauty in a modest woman is like a distant fire or a sharp-edged sword: the one does not burn, the other does not cut those who do not come near it."

This episode signals the beginning of something that will be a topic in modern literature: the polyhedral character, the peculiar feature that each story can be interpreted depending on the viewpoint of the teller and on how it is told; and also

that when we tell a story, we are doing two things: we create a narrative, and at the same time, we create a vision of the real. And we have to accept responsibility for it. Again and again throughout the entire novel the question is raised that life is not determined in advance, just as books are not made in advance.

In Part Two of the novel we witness the greatest example of sophistication and refinement, when Part One of *Don Quixote* reappears. Don Quixote is so conscious, the novel is so self-conscious, that it appears itself in the form of a book. Don Quixote is conscious that he is the character in a book.

At another point, Don Quixote visits a print shop, and there the hero is confronted with the book, with the place where his adventures are going to be represented. Immediately after this maximum act of self-consciousness, Don Quixote is defeated on the beach of Barcelona, he goes back to his village and dies. Another key passage in the story is in Part Two where Don Quixote tells of his adventure in the Cave of Montesinos. There we come face to face with the fundamental issue in the whole story: is our interlocutor lying or not?

In other stories, at other moments in the book, the testimony of other characters emerges. There are other characters who can attest to what is happening, but in the Cave of Montesinos, when Don Quixote emerges, there is no one who can tell us whether what he is telling is true. And there we confront that doubt, that uncertainty, which has a literary angle, but also an important practical dimension in the life

of each one of us: how far do we trust the stories we are told?

The Relevance of *Don Quixote*

When we celebrate the 400th anniversary of the publication of Part One of *Don Quixote*, we are in danger of converting the work into a monument from the past, of covering it with rhetoric, as Rubén Darío pointed out when the 300th anniversary was celebrated. We are celebrating something that happened, that was published in 1605, and that has lasted four hundred years. But to me it seems certainly much more important to celebrate that what was published four hundred years ago is still relevant, that it has remained alive and active in culture, in the literature with which we are familiar, and it remains relevant for those who read and write.

Very recently at the New York Public Library there was a gathering of writers from around the world for a reading of *Don Quixote*, and it was moving to see how each of them read and interpreted the book and made it their own each in their own way. The Indian writer Salman Rushdie said something very moving. *Don Quixote* is a collection of stories within another story. The inn, that lodging place where so many things happen, is the place where many stories are told, where the pilgrims of *The Canterbury Tales* come together, or where the stories in *The Decameron* take place. According to Rushdie, this way of telling stories that are within other stories began in India, and from there it passed to the Arab world, and from the Arab world it reached

Spain, and from Spain it went through all of Western culture. Thus, when the young Rushdie read *Don Quixote* and learned from it, it was as if the book had come full circle: after having begun in India and traveled throughout Europe, when it reached him it was returning to India. At that gathering Claudio Magris, another Cervantes scholar, also said something very important when he argued that *Don Quixote* was the focal point for a debate that had a very specific significance for him: the struggle or the dialectic between utopia and disenchantment.

Utopia —Don Quixote as a utopian— is the dream of a radically different world, an utterly new world; but utopia left to itself leads to tremendous dangers as we have seen throughout the twentieth century. Utopia needs to have as its counterpart the constraint of disenchantment; alongside the idealistic knight there needs to be the squire who sees things as they are, or as they seem to be, and brings him certain disillusionment.

This was the tenor of the presentations that were made at the gathering in New York, and throughout that afternoon, I was thinking that all these questions that I ask myself as a novelist were already there in *Don Quixote*. That is not a rhetorical statement. Two of these fundamental questions have to do with the origin of literature. One of them has to do, as I said at the beginning, with the nature of stories: what are stories like, what is their use, what place do they occupy in life? And the other is about the relationship between stories and the world. On the one hand, the rejec-

tion of or disdain for everyday life is made manifest, along with the need to invent for oneself a better destiny and life. On the other hand, the need for, and pleasure in, telling things as they are, subjecting them to the scrutiny of rational observation, likewise becomes clear.

In reading *Don Quixote*, we feel the presence of this Cervantine figure who is divided between two interests, and in whom we all surely recognize ourselves. On the one hand, is the passion, the love for fiction, for stories, that we have inside us from childhood, that teaches us to invent the world and imagine things in other places. It also teaches us to break the boundaries of the life we know. On the other hand, together with what looks like an escape, there is the attraction that other things awaken in us: how people talk, what other places, voices, and stories are like. Certainly, we find these two interests in most novels and in our lives: the need to invent a brighter, more romantic, more attractive world, and also the need to look at and judge the world as it appears before our eyes.

Cervantes was Galileo's contemporary, and he was also one of those investigators who were beginning to knock down the myths about the world, and replace them with actual examination. Cervantes was Galileo's contemporary when he first looked through a telescope and saw that the moon was not a perfect sphere, as held by Aristotle's cosmology, but rather an irregular surface, full of craters and mountains. The age in which Cervantes wrote was the age of the Baroque, when the art of Caravaggio, for example, showed that the

saints, heroes, and virgins were not ideal or extraordinarily beautiful beings, but that often they were ordinary women, peasants with cracked hands and with weatherworn faces.

Cervantes reflects this continual tension between dream and reality, between the stories we are told and the value each of them has in life. It also shows what I consider a key of literature in our time: fiction is not innocent. Today the writer is perfectly conscious that each fiction is a convention that conceals other possible fictions. Writers are aware that in writing they are playing with genres, they are mocking the very act of storytelling. The writer now has to face the fact that stories, narrative techniques, in many instances have lost their prestige, their luster, and have to be replaced by stories full of cleverness, irony, or self-mockery.

This is a lesson that continually heartens me. It heartens me as a writer, and also as a citizen in my relationship with the world. The irony of Cervantes lies in observing things while knowing that they can be better, but also knowing that human beings are limited and often do not give the best of themselves. Perhaps his is an irony that bears very little resemblance to the humor commonly attributed to Spanish culture. Spanish-style humor seems to be more that of Quevedo, that of the belly laugh, of mockery, or of jokes. The humor of Cervantes is a delicate and ironic.

It is curious that the great tradition of the novel which began with Cervantes has had a much greater impact outside Spain than within. This is apparent, for exam-

ple, in the way in which Cervantes is read and reread in England, and has influenced English writers like Sterne, Dickens, and Fielding. Cervantes influenced even Mark Twain and subsequently Faulkner, as I have already noted. In Spanish literature, it is curious that it took three centuries for the first disciple of Cervantes to appear. Don Benito Pérez Galdós is the first Spanish writer, and almost the only one, to inherit the irony and tenderness of Cervantes. Every time I read *Don Quixote*, every time I go back to it, I am overtaken by a double sensation, in which I recognize the love Cervantes had for books, and the love he had for genres. As we know, he always cherished the idea of writing Part Two of *La Galatea*. He loved novels of chivalry, pastoral novels, and literary discourse, but at the same time he knew that these discourses were no longer of any use, that another kind of storytelling, another way of looking at the world had to be invented. The writer is always immersed in this tension.

When I began writing, for me the equivalent of these novels of chivalry were fantasy novels or detective stories, because they offered me a world already organized, closed, with a determinate system and order, as an alternative to the disorder, vagueness and unfinishedness of the real world. Little by little you gradually learn that you have to try to rely on this disorder, this vagueness of the real world, and its unfinishedness. At these times, when you are narrating, from start to finish you are in *Don Quixote* territory, the territory of Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra.

It is often said, with some sarcasm, that

when we honor *Don Quixote* we are being rhetorical, that this is an old book from a long time ago. In my opinion, the best tribute that can be paid to *Don Quixote* is to read it. It has to be read unceasingly, trying to imagine how the people who started reading it in 1605 would have read it, as a book full of laughter, humanity, mockery; as a book full of life. The truth is that as a writer I aspire, as I think all writers aspire, to be capable one day of telling a fragment of the world as full of life and literature as the world of Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra.

Well, now, let's move on to questions.

Question: You have shown how Cervantes influenced Faulkner, Williams, Woody Allen, etc. How has he influenced you? In scenes or moments in your novels?

Answer: He has influenced me in many ways, because I have had the good fortune of reading the book many times since I was very young. I began to read it by chance, because it was in my house, and I liked to read everything I could get my hands on. In my native city the only thing we knew about *Don Quixote* was a verse that went: "*Don Quixote de la Mancha, come mierda y no se mancha*". ["*Don Quixote de la Mancha eats shit and doesn't get dirty.*"] This was our sole Cervantine connection. I have read it so much that I think it has made me conscious of how fiction, the dream or illusion of a better world, influences the real life of each one of us. I have written a novel in which the characters have gone completely

crazy, I think, because they have seen too many movies, just as Don Quixote read too many novels. Too many movies make them imagine that they are living in *Casablanca*, or that they are players in *The Maltese Falcon* or some American film noir, in which the two lovers, instead of seeing one another, see fantastic or romantic projections of the love shown in the movies.

No doubt I have been likewise influenced in my way of appreciating, in each novel, that it is very important to notice the misunderstandings of the gaze and perception. As I have noted previously, each story is made up of various possible stories and voices; each story has a degree of imperfection or uncertainty, and a set of voices is being constructed.

The last novel I wrote goes to this extreme, because it is a novel in seventeen chapters that has a great many voices, each telling fragments of stories. In the end these story fragments more or less make sense, but that is precisely what is made plain: that there is no sure story, every story is made up of doubts, shadows, misunderstandings, and also possibly lies.

Question: What does the book *Don Quixote* reflect of the life of Cervantes?

Answer: That is a tricky question, because we don't know a great deal of the life of Cervantes. We do know, for example, that it was a life in which there was a strong presence of the ambition of reaching new worlds and attaining literary, political, and heroic dreams, and also of the dreary reality of disappointment and poverty. Cer-

vantes lived by the canons of a Renaissance education that very much influenced his journey to Italy, and his subsequent falling in love with that country and its language. The time when he lived there was for him, no doubt, the best time in his life. Afterwards, we know he took part in the battle of Lepanto, was a prisoner in Algiers for five years, and then endured a rather dismal and painful life. He was extremely familiar with failure, mediocrity, and even shame. He attempted many things and none came out well; he failed at practically all of them. He attempted to travel to the Indies, and here the question inevitably asked is what book he would have written if the king had allowed him to sail to the Americas.

Fortunately the king did not give permission, and Cervantes did not journey to the Americas. He tried to be a playwright and got nowhere: he was upstaged by the popularity of Lope de Vega. In his personal life he also tried several jobs, and that was how he got that job as a tax collector. So I think that what *Don Quixote* reflects of the life of Cervantes is that huge contrast between dreams, love for literature and reality. His love for literature, for literary genres, was truly unlimited. As I have already said, Cervantes very much enjoyed and mocked all these genres novels of chivalry, pastoral novels, adventure novels. He enjoyed all of this, but he also enjoyed reality a great deal.

What emerges from *Don Quixote*, the more one reads it, is in many cases the experience of a man who traveled the roads, who stayed at the inns, who heard people talk, and paid attention to the way they did

it. A great writer always has a mixture of mockery—because we human beings are on the whole rather ridiculous in many of our aspirations and our hungers— and of tenderness and curiosity. You can't write literature without curiosity and without love for people and things. All this was part of his life.

Question: What do you think there is of Cervantes in “*su*”*, that is, in your/his, work?

Answer: In mine or that of Cervantes? There we have the problem of the “*su*” in Spanish, which gives rise to so much confusion...

I would like for my work to contain a mixture of curiosity and tenderness, and, if possible, an irony similar to what Cervantes abundantly displayed. For me tenderness and irony are the most valuable treasures a writer like Dickens can have.

He was crazy about Cervantes. If you read *Pickwick Papers* you realize that they are a Cervantine tale with one major difference: in *Pickwick Papers* people eat and drink stupendously, whereas in *Don Quixote* they eat very poorly. I think this difference is substantial.

Question: Could you tell us something about the role of the story, the novel, literature in general, in the modern world, in film and television?

Answer: Film and television are continuations of the narrative story shaped by other media. Martín de Riquer has documented many cases of real people who literally went crazy from reading in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I think this madness was a result of the printing press, because it was a new medium. People didn't know exactly how to situate fiction in its proper place, they weren't accustomed to doing so.

For example, a child starts out wanting to be told stories, but there comes a moment, around age four or five, when he is no longer satisfied with the story we tell him, and he asks, “But is that true?” There comes a time when Superman flying isn't enough for a child: he wants to know whether Superman really exists. I was thirteen or fourteen years old when television reached my town—yet mine was a generation that grew up without television. And it sometimes happened that when the news broadcaster said, “Good evening” some people, especially older women, answered him, “Good evening.” Many older people were unable to distinguish one thing from the other: they didn't think the news was true, but they thought that movies or serials were. Obviously, people who aren't accustomed to dealing with fiction have a hard time understanding this.

When García Lorca was crisscrossing Spain with the theater group “La Barraca” in the early 1930s, he came to villages where there had never been a theater presentation, and so it would happen that in the middle of the play someone from the audience would come up to attack the fic-

* *su obra*; In Spanish *su* can mean both “your” and “his.”

tional villain. We are accustomed to fiction, we are habituated to it, but this is something learned, a very important lesson. My grandmother on my mother's side, for example, always became very indignant when a little boy appeared in the first scene of a film and fifteen minutes later he was a grown man. My grandmother would say "But who can believe that this child has grown up so quickly, if a moment ago he was a little boy? How can he be a man already?" Although this may seem funny, it is a matter of learning. We who think we are so modern and up to date, are continually facing these same dilemmas. That is, we know that Superman doesn't fly and that an actor who is shot doesn't really die, something that it was so hard for my grandmother to understand. However, it has taken us a fairly long time to know, for example, whether there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. To what extent do we believe tales? And someone who talks about weapons of mass destruction can also talk about lots of other things... I remember that in 1969, when human beings landed on the Moon, there were many people in my village who didn't believe it, who thought all this was theater. Then a film was made about the issue, in which a journey to Mars fails, and to keep people from being disillusioned and keep NASA from losing federal funds, a Mars landing is simulated. In 1969 I was thirteen, and I remember a man, a friend of my father, said to me: "Fine, they've gotten to the moon, I accept it, I believe it; but how did they get in?"

In short: if we are continually being

confronted with tales and are forever pondering whether what is being said is true or isn't true; if the elements of representation of reality are being, as we can see, more perfected every day, then it is ever more difficult, and more indispensable to learn to train oneself. Ultimately, the book is a primitive form of virtual reality, and we all have to learn how to interpret it. Thus literature, and particularly works like *Don Quixote*, are more relevant every day. Don't you think so?

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. Muñoz Molina'.

Antonio Muñoz Molina was born in Úbeda, in the Jaén region of Spain, in 1956. He studied journalism in Madrid and received a Master's Degree in art history at the University of Granada. He is author of the essay "Córdoba de los Omeyas" (Planeta, 1991) and has collected his articles in the volumes *El Robinsón urbano* (1984; Seix Barral, 1993 and 2003), *Diario del Nautilus* (1985), *La huerta del Edén* (1996), *Pura alegría* (1996) and *La vida por delante* (2002). His work has recently been awarded the González Ruano Prize for journalism, and the Mariano de Cavia Award, both in 2003. His narrative work includes *Beatus Ille* (Seix Barral, 1986 and 1999), which won the Icarus Award; *El invierno en Lisboa* (Seix Barral, 1987 and 1999), which received the Criticism Award and the National Literature Award, both in 1988; *Beltenebros* (Seix Barral, 1989 and 1999); *El jinete polaco* (1991; Seix Barral, 2002), which won the Planeta Award in 1991, and again the National Literature Award in 1992; *Los misterios de Madrid* (Seix Barral, 1992 and 1999); *El dueño del secreto* (1994); *Nada del otro mundo* (1994); *Ardor guerrero* (1995); *Plenilunio* (1997); *Carlota Fainberg* (2000); *Sefarad*, and *En ausencia de Blanca* (2001). He is a member of the Spanish Royal Academy and is currently the Director of the Cervantes Institute in New York City.

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