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History of a Ban (1992)

Don Quixote is widely considered one of the first manifestations of modern literary discourse. As such, Costa Lima argues here – in the first chapter of *The Dark Side of Reason* (1992) – it is also one of the first manifestations of the ban on the fictional which effectuates the rise of the control of the imaginary in modern times. Here Costa Lima recounts the early conditions of this history of a ban, and in doing so he identifies the distinction between the fictitious and the fictional: ‘Whereas fictitiousness presupposes oral speech, which implies the general principle of truthfulness, fictionality places truth in brackets, so to speak, and presupposes written language.’

A related article is: Luiz Costa Lima, “The space of fiction and reception of Don Quijote in nineteenth-century Spain”, in *The Institutionalization of literature in Spain*, Godzich, Wlad & Spadaccini, Nicholas (ed.) Minneapolis, MN: Prisma Institute, 1987.

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HISTORY OF A BAN

Diran que siempre salgo de orden al mejor tiempo para contar cosas viejas. (They will say I always abandon the [chronological] order at the best time to tell of old things.) —Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*

THE DISCUSSION REOPENED

In recent works, Howard Bloch, Jacqueline Cerquiglini, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Jacques Le Goff, and Paul Zumthor, in different ways, have all pointed out that the crisis of Christian cosmology, particularly beginning in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, discredited the notion that truth was inscribed upon things and phenomena, and was therefore readily manifested in the appearance of the world; correlate to this notion was the idea that the divine will revealed itself to its creatures through clear, unmistakable signs.

These authors have also shown that, with this crisis, subjectivity came to be increasingly valued as a means of investigating truth. As God gradually withdrew from the Earth, as it were, subjectivity became ever more important as an instrument for the revelation of truth.ⁱ

The rise of subjectivity can be seen on several planes: Le Goff shows its effect on celestial geography, with the late-twelfth-century introduction of a new territory, purgatory, where souls were to suffer punishment *for a variable period, according to the value of the prayers of the deceased one's relatives and friends*.ⁱⁱ This must surely be seen as the Church's acknowledgment of the subjectivity of the faithful as a force capable of appealing to and even exerting indirect pressure on divine justice. And Howard Bloch shows how, at about the same time, judicial procedure in criminal cases began to change, as greater emphasis came to be laid on collecting and interpreting evidence for or against the defendant.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the case of poetic expression, the signs of this upheaval appeared later. According to Zumthor, the tendency to use *je* in poetry to refer to the author's personality, rather than as a mere grammatical figure to be temporarily assumed by the subject who pronounced it, became more widespread and generalized in the fourteenth century.^{iv} This was a break with a traditional practice that Georg Misch traces back to the ancient East:

As a rule, . . . the use of the first person in royal inscriptions was no more than a traditional literary form. . . . The situation was similar in the case of Egyptian funeral biographies, although for a different reason: here the use of the first person was suggested by the religious purpose of exerting influence on the destiny of the deceased.^v

Zumthor's insight is taken up by his student J. Cerquiglini, who, writing on Guillaume de Machaut, shows that the presence of the subjective *je* results from the fourteenth-century perception of the impotence of allegorical readings.^{vi} There is no longer an immediate movement from the specific text to its figurative interpretation, a movement upon which the sufficiency of allegorical reading depended; thus the authorial *je* must bear witness to the truthfulness of what is said, certify it by his or her experience of the world, saturate it with personality.

This approach is more than just a new path for academic research. On the contrary, it implies consequences that clash with time-honored traditions that are rooted in all the tendencies of the scholarly world. The first of these consequences is a head-on attack on the view of history as a continuum. Implicitly or explicitly, this view holds that subjectivity, if not everything we subsume as "human," has existed ever since Logos came to be taken as both the instrument and the proof of reason. Thus subjectivity was a "Greek discovery," part of the "Greek miracle," and once achieved it was henceforth forever to be present in human—that is, Western—history. Curiously and paradoxically, the continuum view of history begins by de-historicizing its own object, since from the outset it disregards the specific contents assumed by the categories and values historians deal with. Greece is supposed to have reached the very heart of the human—a heart so stable that from classical antiquity to the present day it has never beaten with a different pulse. Thus all that we—the elect descendants of Greece—need do is follow the constant course of the themes first raised by the Greeks.

At the price of dehistoricizing history, the task of the humanities is made secure and self-confident. Thus, for example, there is no reason why one should torment oneself with all this annoying literary theory when we can identify literature directly in the Homeric epic. Given sensibility and erudition enough, the argument runs, one can recognize the *well-written*, the literary, from Homer on. Sensibility is conceived as an inborn gift, a sign of aristocracy of the spirit, something that cannot be taught.

The approach outlined above has been extensively criticized, beginning with Nietzsche, and in our day most notably by Michel Foucault. History can no longer be envisaged as a sort of Olympic race in which each

generation hands down to the next the torch it received from the previous one; or as a continent crossed by a shining path, it being the case that among natural instincts, most of them selfish and evil, there is one that points in the opposite direction: an infallible thirst for truth. This smug, optimistic conception envelops the world in a reassuring certainty and sees the role of the thinker in unproblematic terms: the athlete who bears the torch of truth.

If, however, we abandon the reassuring myth, we see that history is made up of leaps and standstills. There is no such thing as an unquenchable thirst for truth, nor is there any torch to be borne and handed down. There is nothing a priori that stabilizes and justifies human productions. History is discontinuity, a place where values are constantly changing. Logos is not sound and sense, but rather sound and fury. Or rather, it is sound and sense only if we realize that its sense is simply what conforms to a historicized fury. Thus Logos is no longer seen as a timeless cell, which could be tracked down in its different manifestations in sets called "texts." Logos becomes a dated inscription, which we must now learn to analyze, understand, and, after we understand it, analyze once again in its discursive configurations. The term "discourse" is not simply a French fashion sold in the boutiques of the Western world to consumers grown weary of texts. "Text" is a neutral term, an indicator of material properties—a set of signs that narrate or describe something, aiming at completeness and having temporal references. "Discourse" is a concept implying that signs have the quality of forming distinct territories. Were I writing in Spanish, I would use the same words that Borges might choose; this, however, would not place my text in the region of Borgian *ficciones*—unless I saw my activity as a branch of fantastic literature, as Borges sees metaphysics. Critical discourse is not a literary genre, not because it is necessarily less inventive, but simply because it is not one of the forms of fiction.

Let me then set forth the theme of this essay. Beginning with the discovery of subjectivity in the late Middle Ages—a discovery that could also be considered a rediscovery, since there had been subjectivity in earlier times, though liable to other indicators—I will attempt to show that it caused the appearance of a *discursive dispersion*, something unknown in the early Middle Ages. I will also try to demonstrate that this dispersion implied the emergence of the problem of fiction;^{vii} and that this problem, born in the European context, stowed away aboard the ships bound for the New World, where it took on new strength.

CERVANTES: THE SEPARATION BETWEEN THE FICTITIOUS AND THE FICTIONAL

When the first part of *Don Quixote* was published in 1605, the romance of chivalry was already moribund. Henry Thomas shows that between 1508—the year in which *Amadis* was probably published for the first time—and 1550, almost one romance of chivalry appeared every year on the average; between 1550 and 1587, however, no more than nineteen new titles were published; and in the eighteen-year period before *Quixote* only three new books appeared.^{viii} Thus Cervantes seems to be flogging a dying horse; his ridiculing of a genre that was losing its old prestige, his biting irony directed at knights-errant, it would seem, could count on the indulgent smile of the better-informed public.

But, this said, we seem to be accusing Cervantes of opportunism. This is plausible enough: Spanish booksellers, who had to bribe the functionaries of the Crown and the Inquisition so that they would shut their eyes to suspect works, could argue that the avowed purpose of *Don Quixote* was to mock the heroes of chivalry, which by now were ludicrous anyway. The Church's harsh censors could rejoice in the fact that the conduct of the clergymen in the story was always impeccable—all were upright, charitable defenders of proper doctrine. Nor could Crown officials object to anything, for nowhere in the book does anyone criticize the king's justice—not even the convicts freed by *Don Quixote*. Clearly Cervantes was shrewd enough to avoid offending all the zealous authorities of his day. He had suffered too much poverty and misery to risk his neck any further. But it would be inexcusable shortsightedness to let the matter rest with this observation. We must proceed to a rereading of *Don Quixote* in terms of the problem we have been considering.

Anyone who has read *Don Quixote* will surely remember that the hero is mad only where cavalry is concerned. There are countless passages underscoring this fact, as if Cervantes wished to make sure that it would not go unnoticed. In one of them, the curate, invested with the twofold authority of priest and friend, observes that "apart from the silly things which this worthy gentleman says in connection with his craze, when other subjects are dealt with, he can discuss them in a perfectly rational manner, showing that his mind is quite clear and composed; so that, provided his chivalry is not touched upon, no one would take him to be anything but a man of thoroughly sound understanding."^{ix} Elsewhere, after *Quixote* has dwelt on the respective advantages and drawbacks of arms and letters, those who had heard him were sorry "to see a man of apparently sound sense, and with rational views on every subject he discussed, so hopelessly wanting in all, when his wretched unlucky chivalry was in question."^x Even before the action starts, at the very opening of the book, the chronicler about to

tell the story observes: "His fancy grew full of what he used to read about in his books, enchantments, quarrels, battles, challenges, wounds, wooings, loves, agonies, and all sorts of impossible nonsense; and it so possessed his mind that the whole fabric of invention and fancy he read of was true, that to him no history in the world had more reality in it."^{xi}

What is the precise nature of Don Quixote's madness? Clearly it consists in his inability to make a distinction between the world of the feats of his favorite heroes and that of quotidian existence. More precisely, Quixote's madness lies in the fact that he cannot separate the thematization of sense perception from the world of imagination, that he cannot draw a boundary separating one from the other. This is where Sancho comes in as a foil of fundamental importance to Cervantes's purpose. In the episode in the Sierra Morena, for instance, Don Quixote, torn between the models of Roland, the renowned warrior, and Amadis, no less renowned as a lovelorn sufferer, decides for the moment to emulate the latter. He tells his squire that, before delivering his letter to Dulcinea, he must witness the insanities he is about to perform for her. The madman is to assume the role of madman. But Sancho will have none of it; one madness is, to him, quite enough; and he reminds his master that Amadis's beloved had given him reason for going mad, whereas the chaste Dulcinea had done no such thing: "It seems to me," said Sancho, 'that the knights who behaved in this way had provocation and cause for those follies and penances; but what cause has your worship for going mad? What lady has rejected you, or what evidence have you found to prove that the lady Dulcinea del Toboso has been trifling with Moor or Christian?'"^{xii} Faithful to his good perceptual reason, Sancho tries to avoid the danger of madness-within-madness, trying to talk his master into conforming to the principles of verisimilitude. But this would mean persuading him to act according to a certain logic—in other words, to act within his madness according to the dictates of causality and common sense—whereas for Quixote "the thing is to turn crazy without any provocation."^{xiii}

Could it be that Cervantes, in his own fiction, is giving support to the arguments of Antonio de Guevara and Pedro Mexía, using humor to demonstrate the noxiousness of such literature? At first this might seem to be the case. But a closer reading will show that an answer cannot be given in terms of black or white, yes or no. In this connection, E. C. Riley's observation is pertinent: "One of the most disconcerting things about the romances is indeed their authors' inability either to treat them as pure fiction or to sustain the illusion that they were fact"^{xiv}, Cervantes establishes the difference between his work and the romance of chivalry both by resorting to irony and by repeatedly emphasizing the method in Quixote's madness and its limits. Quixote is mad in that he imposes on quotidian reality a kind of thematization that disturbs it. But this disturbance does not yet characterize the *fictional*, only the *fictitious*.

Other passages tell us that this disturbance, this inability to find the proper thematization, was not peculiar to the Knight of the Rueful Countenance. Let us recall the exchange with the landlord concerning romances of chivalry. Whereas the good curate is ready to do away with his books in an auto-da-fe just like the one he has performed earlier with the Don's library, the landlord expresses so forcefully his pleasure in hearing those stories and his conviction that the feats they tell of are true, that Cardenio says, in an aside: "As he shows, he accepts it as a certainty that everything those books relate took place exactly as it is written down; and the barefooted friars themselves would not persuade him to the contrary."^{xv} Thus Quixote's illusion was no idiosyncrasy of his: simple folk, like the landlord, fell prey to the same error. But in the landlord's case there was a difference, for he made a distinction that the absolute believer in the fictitious was unable to make: "I shall not be so mad as to make a knight-errant of myself; for I see well enough that things are not now as they used to be in those days, when they say those famous knights roamed about the world."^{xvi} Although the landlord justified his belief in the truthfulness of such books by pointing to the fact that they were "printed by the license of the Lords of the Royal Council"^{xvii}, he protects himself from Quixote's madness by means of a temporal distinction: times have changed, and today such practices would no longer be conceivable. Note that the temporal argument is also used by Quixote himself, but with opposite intent, naturally. Finding himself caged by the curate and the barber, supposing himself to have been enchanted, Don Quixote finds it strange that he is being hoisted by slow-moving oxen. Perhaps, he tells Sancho, it is just because times and customs have changed: "But perhaps the chivalry and enchantments of our day take a different course from that of those in days gone by."^{xviii}

By now we can see how Cervantes conceives the problem of fiction. According to moralists, the fictional can be justified only when the ancient Horatian principle *prodesse et delectare* applies. As the canon says to the mad gentleman:

And if, still led away by your natural bent, you desire to read books of achieve-menrs and of chivalry, read the Book of judges in the Holy Scriptures. . . . Here, Senor Don Quixote, will be reading worthy of your sound understanding; from which you will rise learned in history, in love with virtue, strengthened

in goodness, improved in manners, brave without rashness, prudent without cowardice; and all to the honor of God, your own advantage and the glory of La Mancha.^{xix}

This, however, is not Cervantes's own position. To support my contention, I will now turn to the second decisive observation, which is in fact connected with the first and is a development of it.

The space of fictionality in Cervantes assumes a critical stance in the very act of creation. For this he must resort to distancing, the author's ability to place himself outside of his narrative. As Riley correctly observes: "Don Quixote the reader of popular romances is the grandfather of Emma Bovary and Joyce's Gertie McDowell. What distinguishes him from them is an obsession with the most impossibly fabulous form of fiction that could be imagined."^{xx} Thus it is important to emphasize that when modern fiction appears, critical activity is seen not as a mere supplement to creation, but rather as an activating part of its makeup. *Against the naïveté presupposed by pre-Cervantine fictitiousness, based on the illusion that its own territory is not to be distinguished from that of truth, modern fictionality is based on irony, on distancing, on the creation of a complexity that, without alienating the common reader, does not present itself to him as a form of illusionism.* Cervantes prizes his readers, knows that he depends on them, and, as his characters observe, likes to know that *Don Quixote* circulates among readers of all kinds. In other words, he is aware that the problem of literature of "entertainment" cannot be solved by the moralist's formula, let alone by the application of the classical aesthetic principles he has learned in Italy.

At this point, however, I take issue with the illustrious Cervantes scholar E. C. Riley. Riley believes that the author sets forth his own views on the role of romance and poetry in the curate's and the canon's speeches. Thus Cervantes objected to romances of chivalry because, contrary to the Renaissance reading of Aristotle, they presented "purposeless *desatinos* or *disparates*."^{xxi} But I feel that things are not as simple as that.

In order to justify my position, I will now turn to the prevalence of *imitatio* and the function of decorum and verisimilitude in relation to the role of distancing. The force of these elements, which are decisive for classical poetics, is evident in the curate's and the canon's discussions of literature. Owing to considerations of space, we will examine no more than two passages in the canon's speech. In both of them we notice that the canon is not presenting a purely theological argument, but attempting to harmonize religion and aesthetics. In the first passage, the canon justifies his disapproval of books of chivalry:

Plots in fiction should be wedded to the understanding of the reader, and be constructed in such a way that, reconciling impossibilities, smoothing over difficulties, keeping the mind on the alert, they may surprise, interest, divert, and entertain, so that wonder and delight joined may keep pace one with the other; all which he will fail to effect who shuns verisimilitude and truth to nature [*imitación*], wherein lies the perfection of writing.^{xxii}

What is explicitly condemned here is the avoidance of imitation and verisimilitude. The principle of decorum appears shortly after, in the same speech: "And besides all this they are harsh in their style, incredible in their achievements, licentious in their amours, uncouth in their courtly speeches," and so on.^{xxiii}

In both passages, the influence of the Italian preceptists is evident, particularly where the ethical-religious argument becomes aesthetic. The presence of a literary viewpoint is even more obvious when the curate explains why he will refrain from burning some of Quixote's books. The *Amadis* is preserved because it has begotten a large progeny, though an evil one; Ariosto would also be spared if it were in the original Italian; the *Palmerin* is saved because it is said to have been written by a Portuguese king; *Tirante el Blanco*, because unlike most romances it is not overly fanciful. Though liberal, however, the curate's doctrine is the same as the canon's. They agree as to the reasons why, for all their absurdity, such books are still written and read. Having heard the opinion of learned and intelligent men as well as of ignorant people, says the canon, from all he obtained "flattering approval." And, even though such works clash with the principles (aesthetic ones, we would say nowadays) they ought to follow, still people write them because authors and actors care more for the bread they gain from the admiration of the many than for the criticism they hear from the few.^{xxiv}

Could this be Cervantes's actual position? If we believe that the most advanced poetics of his time amounted to construing religious reasons as pseudo-Aristotelian justifications, then we will tend to agree with Riley, and answer the question in the affirmative. But this answer seems to disagree with what *Don Quixote* itself shows. Let us consider the most important argument: the question of *imitatio*. In support of his argument, Riley comments that such a famous preceptist as A. S. Piccolomini had already anticipated and defended imitation within imitation: "And in truth, when imitating an imitator, one also in a certain fashion imitates what is true, since it is true that that imitated imitator imitates."^{xxv} But let us see what happens in *Don Quixote*.

The adventures of the mad gentleman are at first said to have been based on the writings of several chroniclers of La Mancha. However, their chronicles break off at an early point, and the author could not have finished his work had he not discovered a manuscript in Arabic, which he bought for a trifle and had translated by a Morisco. The real author, then, was Cid Hamet Benengeli, an "Arab historian." Cervantes's device was, and is, a very familiar one: by means of it, the real author washes his hands of his creation, so to speak, and attributes it to someone else. But what is Cervantes's purpose in this? To begin with, the device gives him ampler possibilities for irony and for breaking with the illusionism of the fictitious. Thus Cervantes can mention himself in passing, as the author of *La Galatea*, or as a poet with "more experience in reverses than in verses"^{xxxvi}, or yet as one Saavedra, whom a Christian freedman remembers having seen among the Spaniards imprisoned by the Moors. In addition, the Morisco translator allows himself certain liberties, now questioning the truthfulness of the tale, now shortening a chapter. Let us skip these well-known details and concentrate on the characterization of the alleged author of the story as an Arab. Immediately after he tells us about the discovery and the translation of Cid Hamet's manuscript, the narrator warns us: "If against the present [history] any objection be raised on the score of its truth, it can only be that its author was an Arab, as lying is a very common propensity with those of that nation."^{xxxvii} But this epithet is not attributed to the Arab historian with any consistency. Rather, Cervantes has much fun presenting Cid Hamet in the most contradictory ways: from unfaithful chronicler to "a historian of great research and accuracy in all things."^{xxxviii}

Thus, to conclude that Cervantes follows the precepts of classical poetics would seem to be naive, at the very least. On the contrary, he adopts them as a sort of legitimating disguise, which at the same time concedes him some protection against the rigor of humanists and religious authorities and allows him to free the space of fictionality from the requirements of normative truth. Indeed, the distance between Cervantes's fictional practice and the liberal rules proposed by Piccolomini, the future Pope Pius II, is very large. If *imitatio* presupposes truth as the center and model, what is the truth that *Don Quixote* imitates? The conclusion seems far from trivial. It shows that Cervantes is aware, in his work, that classical poetics tames writers, and also that fictionality—unlike fictitiousness—must challenge the common truths.

Finally, it should be stressed that this critical potential, exercised simultaneously with artistic creativity, would not be possible except in a given context. Whereas fictitiousness presupposes oral speech, which implies the general principle of truthfulness, fictionality places truth in brackets, so to speak, and presupposes written language. As Nick Spadaccin observes, Cervantes's interludes were intended for private consumption so that demystifying and subversive material could be included.

In *Don Quixote* fictional discourse bears the marks of written language, of private reading, of demystification. They are manifest not as a distancing from quotidian reality—which would be subject to the control of the moralists—but precisely in the suggestion of a new relation to it. *Don Quixote* relates the fictitious to the quotidian, but not just to make fun of the latter and reinforce the wholesome common sense of the latter. If such were the case, it would be merely sanctioning the ban on fiction. But neither does it follow the lead of the romances of chivalry, where the fanciful and the would-be verisimilar are hopelessly confused. With Cervantes, modern fictionality is born from a double negation: the negation of indiscriminating fantasy and the negation of the ineffability of the quotidian. Cervantes demystifies precisely because he denies the exclusiveness of both the world of knights-errant and the world of the squire Sancho.

If we see *Don Quixote* as the first manifestation of literary fiction—that is, of the discursive category that begins to reflect and theorize about itself only in the late eighteenth century—we must add that it also works a peculiar sort of *Aufhebung*. The original sense of this German word, as is well known, implies something that at once conserves and transcends its initial terms. The *Aufhebung* of *Don Quixote* is peculiar because it relies on the negation of its own terms: both the belief in the adventures of Amadis and his imitators, and the belief in the exclusiveness of quotidian space—that is, of a space that could only be covered with the perceptual appetite of Sancho Panza. Peculiar, too, because the initial terms are not contradicted so that, as in Hegel, a higher synthesis could be reached.

In the peculiar *Aufhebung* of fiction, the fictitious (fantasy) and the quotidian (supposedly unquestionable reality) are retained, but also seen with some distancing—subject to irony, to questioning, to relativization. *Don Quixote* is not, as some have suggested, the allegory of another world or simply a put-down of *fingidas y disparatadas historias*. If we see it as either, we fail to understand that Cervantes gave *the alternative answer* to a problem that had been given its first solution by Fernão Lopes.^{xxix} If we listen only to the answer given by the Portuguese chronicler—and we can hear it even without reading him—we will understand why History has

come to assume its intellectual role in the West. If we fail to listen to Cervantes's answer, we will go on unconsciously domesticating imagination and banning fiction.

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- vii When I speak of the emergence of the problem of fiction I do not necessarily mean that this problem did not exist in the ancient world. All I mean is that the parameters were then different. For Eric Havelock, for instance, Plato's attack on poets was related to the conflict between the masters of the spoken word, the "poets," and the masters of written culture, the philosophers—for all Plato's own denunciations of the deleterious effects of written culture (see Havelock, Eric. 1963. *Preface to Plato*. Oxford: Blackwell). Moreover, since modern fictional discourse implies a given conception of the self and of its role in the discovery of truth, the modern conception of fiction could only be in agreement with the Greek conception if our notion of the individual were already known to the Greeks. (Against this view, see Costa Lima, Luiz. 1992. "The Joys and Sorrows of the Self" Chapter Three in *The Dark Side of Reason*. California: Stanford University Press.)
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