Don Quixote at 400

Miguel de Unamuno called it 'the Spanish Bible'; *Don Quixote* may not be holy writ, but like all great literature it describes us. Cervantes steps out of the Spanish golden age when that golden age was well on the wane, and ambles through ours. We, on the other hand, remain within its 1000 pages and are unable to step outside it to close the vanishing point that would bring it within our historical purview.

I mention the vanishing point deliberately, because Cervantes lived at a juncture in European history that witnessed not only the Iberian discovery of the globe in the search for precious metals and spices, but also a ground-breaking shift in mercantile practices that would eventually to lead to the superseding of feudal Europe itself. Medieval Europe was essentially a barter system: in the world that followed money — first metal, then paper, and now imaginary and virtual — was to become the source of all value. The shock of goods exchanged on the promise of their future redemption by specie produced a new kind of reflexive consciousness. It still finds its theatricality rather perplexing. Shakespeare was Cervantes' exact contemporary: *King Lear* received its first performance exactly 400 years ago, the year part one of *Don Quixote* was published by Juan de la Cuesta in Madrid.

Lear is the paradoxical spectacle of a feudal king who tries to do a deal on his kingship, to transact it in the one dimension of the arithmetic alien to it. It is Gloucester who has his eyes plucked out in the play but Lear is blind too, blind to the workings of language. He reads things awry. Similarly, Don Quixote de la Mancha, our hidalgo nearing 50, 'who took to reading books of chivalry with such relish and enthusiasm that he almost forgot about running his property', and decides, 'for his honour and the common good', to become a knight errant. Bourgeois folk don't risk their lives, they invest in them: the limited risk company was later invented precisely to stop poor investments destroying people's lives. The knight-errant, on the other hand, sets out for glory by doing great deeds and by triumphing over whatever trials and defeats he finds in his way. Prudential thinking doesn't come into it.

In setting out into the world on his nag, Rocinante, in believing that the world of the Romances is real, Don Quixote surrenders his prerogative as an individual: self-determination. He copies the exploits of Amadis of Gaul. This is the paradoxical core of the novel: Cervantes asks us to acknowledge that imitation is the force behind cultural integration as well as the impulse that threatens to engulf it. Two aldermen run over the mountains, braying, in search of a missing donkey: their mimicry is so convincing that one keeps rushing up to the other, convinced he has found the lost donkey. Even when the famous episode with the windmills gives way to the comedy of the barber's basin doubling as Mambrino's helmet or the savage destruction of Master Peter's puppets, Quixote perseveres. The truly exalted thing about him is his will, and it has to keep him going through some pretty coarse and sordid adventures. Lucidity keeps breaking in on the dusty roads of Castille; it breaks in with final belated force on his death-bed when the Don repudiates his former existence. But along the way his desire has become contagious: his simple manservant Sancho Panza is no longer merely at the bidding of his unreflecting passion for food or wine: at one point he asks for the governorship of an island. And when his master dies as Alonso Quixano the Good — 'and one of the signs that led them to conclude that he really was dying was the ease with which he had turned from a madman into a sane man' — it is his squire who wants to continue the adventure and discover the lady Dulcinea 'behind some bush or other'.

A new kind of humour, it would seem, enters literature with Cervantes and the invention of the novel. Not belly-laughter, or the mockery or satire of Shakespeare, but a species of the comic that renders ambiguous what it touches: everything in the world has already been touched by the ambiguity of signs. Humour sweetens the relationship between the sorrowful knight and his increasingly resourceful servant. For Shakespeare, self is the man: most of his friendships are treacherous or deceitful, at best sardonic. The description of friendship in Cervantes' novel has few parallels in literary history. If Prospero and Caliban offer a dramatisation of the mind–body split, in a relationship that rapidly degenerates, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza on other hand find each other's company a perpetual source of diversion. For if the whole novel is about the Christian madness of Don Quixote taking leave of the world, he needs a neighbour who can be loved as himself, blemishes and all.

Books and the printed word are everywhere in *Don Quixote*. In the second part of the book Cervantes shows us the Don bumping into people who've read the first part. In Chapter VI, the point at which Cervantes realised he himself had entered the fictional world of Don Quixote rather being the author of the intended short moral fable, some of the characters discuss Galatea, one of his own pastoral romances. Hamlet's play within a play is an analogous paradox of self-inclusion. In the famous game of tennis recounted to Don Quixote by Altisidora, the duchess' maid, the devils are returning not balls but books, and as they do so they grumble and curse — with every volley the number of books increases. On his deathbed, the Don instructs his auditors, should they meet the author of the second part of the *Exploits of Don Quixote*, to ask him (the author) to forgive him (the fictional creation) for having motivated him 'to write all the gross absurdities contained in that book.' The protagonists of Quixote are also its readers. Cervantes is telling us that the world of print is a delirium and that literature and life are coextensive, not because literature imitates life, but because life imitates literature. As the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges suggested, Cervantes opens up a further vertiginous possibility: that the characters of a fictional work may well be readers, while we, its putative readers, are fictitious.

Perhaps the fantastic truth about *Don Quixote* is that we can't really begin to understand it unless we take on its adjective. It occurred to me recently, working freelance myself, just how curiously old-fashioned the word is. Etymologically, freelancing has an extremely shaky status in the modern exchange system. For the original 'freelance' was a lance for hire selling his service to a lord, someone whose moral codex came from knight errantry and was respectful of those archaic values like 'honour' and 'glory' which still have no price-index. But the real irony is that to enjoy the peculiar status of being your own person, you have to put yourself on the lance-for-hire market. What price autonomy?

IAIN BAMFORTH

Chronology

1547: Miguel de Cervantes born near Madrid to barber-surgeon Rodrigo de Cervantes and Leonor de Cortinas
1552: Father imprisoned for unpaid debts
1556: Philip II crowned emperor
1558: Elizabeth becomes Queen of England
1560: Geneva Bible published
1571: Cervantes loses his left hand at the Battle of Lepanto, one of the greatest naval battles ever that saw the defeat of the Turkish fleet by the Spanish under Don Juan of Austria
1575: Cervantes captured by Barbary pirates and sold into slavery in Algiers
1580: Ransomed for 500 ducats after four attempts to escape from prison and returns to Madrid
1583: Sir Walter Raleigh lands in Virginia
1588: Destruction of Spanish Armada
1592: Cervantes signs contract to write six plays at 50 ducats apiece
1597: Cervantes briefly imprisoned for tax offenses, during which time he has his first thought of writing Don Quixote
1605: *Don Quixote* (Part I) published in Madrid
1612: First English translation published by Thomas Shelton in London
1614: A 'bogus' *Don Quixote* II appears from an unknown author in Tarragona named Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda
1615: *Don Quixote* (Part II) published along with Eight Plays and Eight Interludes
1616: Deaths of Cervantes and Shakespeare.

Mike Fitzpatrick

John Berger and the healing power of diagnosis

In the March issue of this Journal, Gene Feder described John Berger's *A Fortunate Man* as 'still the most important book about general practice every written'.[1] This 'story of a country doctor' is full of profound insights and provocative aphorisms (www.johnberger.org).

Berger wrote that the task of the doctor when confronted with an unhappy patient offering an illness was to recognise the person behind the illness.[2] This act of recognition itself could help to overcome hopelessness and even begin to offer 'the chance of being happy'. To make an unhappy person feel recognised, the doctor 'has to be oblique' and yet has to appear to the patient as a comparable person, a process that demands 'a true imaginative effort and precise self-knowledge'. This well captures the challenge of general practice.

'The whole process' of recognition, observed Berger, 'as it includes doctor and patient, is a dialectical one'. The doctor must recognise the patient as a person, but for the patient, 'the doctor's recognition of his illness is a help because it separates and depersonalises that illness'. This is why 'patients are inordinately relieved when doctors give their complaint a name'. Even if the name means little, it gives their condition an independent existence: 'they can now struggle or complain against it'. For the patient to have a complaint 'recognised', in the form of a diagnosis that is 'defined, limited and depersonalised ... is to be made stronger'.

Reading Berger's account nearly 40 years after it was written, we can still appreciate the importance he placed on recognition. What has changed is the healing power of diagnosis: we can no longer claim that giving the patient a name for their illness makes them stronger, even if it may still give them some relief.

Take, for example, the sphere of psychiatry. If we look at the features of the diagnosis that Berger considered gave people strength to deal with their afflictions, major changes are apparent. Whereas in the past mental illnesses were few and clearly defined, today disease labels are both more numerous and more diffuse. At the time that Berger wrote, there was a general inclination to emphasise the discontinuity between the normal and the abnormal; today, the concept of a continuum has become fashionable. The invention of new disease labels — such as 'attention deficit hyperactivity disorder' in children or diverse forms of addiction in adults — reflects the trend to define a wider range of experience in psychiatric terms. It also results in a further blurring of the boundary between the normal and the abnormal.

Whereas diagnoses previously suggested the limited character of the condition, modern disease labels imply disorders that are unrestricted in the scope of the symptoms to which they give rise and in the duration of their effects. Post-traumatic stress disorder or recovered memory syndrome, for example, can be expressed in the widest variety of symptoms, which may arise long after the traumatic events believed to have triggered them. There is also a widespread conviction that these may continue indefinitely as people are 'scarred for life' by past traumas. Today's sufferers from addictions or compulsions can never claim to have been cured; they live their lives 'one day at a time' in an on-going process of 'recovery'.

The depersonalised character of traditional diagnoses allowed the sufferer to objectify the condition as something 'out there', perhaps a somewhat forced abstraction, but one with some pragmatic value. By contrast, a diagnosis like 'chronic fatigue syndrome' is inescapably personal and subjective in character. Every sufferer exhibits a different range of symptoms, and there is no way of objectively confirming or monitoring the course of the illness. The net effect of the dramatic expansion in the range of psychiatric diagnosis is that, instead of conferring strength on the patient, bestowing any such label is more likely to intensify and prolong incapacity.

As Berger put it, 'all frustration magnifies its own dissimilarity and so nourishes itself', resulting in a process of enduring suffering doctors are now more likely to intensify than alleviate.

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2. Berger J, Mohr J. *A Fortunate Man: the story of a country doctor.* London: Penguin, 1967.