

Anthony Close: A Remembrance

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LIKE ALL WHO KNEW Anthony Close, I was stunned on receiving word of his sudden passing on September 17, 2010. Distinct memories of his vigorous gait and beaming smile contrasted excruciatingly with the thought that he was gone forever. For me, Anthony was not only an admired colleague but a dear friend and neighbor.

Like most of this journal's readers, I first came to know Anthony through his scholarship. In the mid-eighties I was working on an extensive essay that focused on what I called the "social destiny" of *Don Quijote*, and Anthony's groundbreaking *The Romantic Approach to DON QUIXOTE* was proving very useful for me in its clear-eyed assessment of the ideological roots of the dominant readings of Cervantes's masterpiece over the past two centuries. I did have some serious reservations, however, about what I referred to, in a rather unkind footnote, as the startling "naiveté" of what appeared to be one of his basic premises—that is, that present-day scholars might be able to reconstruct what the actual response to *Don Quijote* was among readers in early seventeenth-century Spain. Anthony had already begun to emerge as a leading representative of the hard-line "funny book" strand within Cervantes scholarship (Russell, Eisenberg), and while I sympathized with the latter's historicizing tendency, I also found it to be overly restrictive in many ways.

I worked on this piece while summering in Frigiliana, a small mountain village in the eastern part of the province of Málaga, something I had started to do in 1981. Little did I realize that the individual whose work I both admired and (in part) rejected was sitting at the other end of the same town, slightly under a kilometer away.

It was Paul Julian Smith who alerted me to the fact that I was very probably Anthony's neighbor in Spain. I had invited Paul to speak at Boston University in the mid-eighties, and in one of our exchanges, he said that he thought that Frigiliana was where Anthony co-owned a house with his former wife, Lorna Close, who had been Paul's dissertation advisor at Cambridge. In the summer of 1988 I went down to the other end of town and met Lorna, who, over drinks, very kindly offered to alert Anthony about the American professor who wanted to meet him. Sure enough, a few weeks later, I heard a knock at the door and on opening it, there stood Anthony, blinking in mid-day sun. He graciously invited me down to his house, where I was introduced to his wife Françoise and their daughter Lucy, along with his stepchildren, Virginia and David. I returned the invitation a few days later, and thus began an enduring friendship—one that could have started some six or seven years earlier had we known that we were neighbors (“Más vale tarde que nunca...”).

I was working in Madrid at the time as the resident director of Boston University's study abroad program there, and Anthony very kindly invited me to give a lecture at Cambridge that fall. I gladly accepted, of course, but did so with a bad conscience. My “social destiny” piece had just come out, and though I knew that Anthony would appreciate the part where I had used so much of his *Romantic Approach* to prove my point, I dreaded the thought of his coming across my harsh footnote. I decided to act preemptively, providing him with a photocopy of the essay just as we were bidding adieu and finalizing some details about my trip to England.

The weeks went by during which I awaited the arrival of a curt missive, perhaps disinviting me. Thankfully it never came, and sure enough, there was Anthony waiting at Gatwick when I stepped off the plane. In the ensuing days at Anthony and Françoise's delightful home, my host behaved impeccably, generously introducing me at my lecture, driving me around the English countryside with his family, and even arranging for me to dine at “High Table” at Emmanuel College. Although Anthony himself had a thorough disdain for the academic rituals and ethos of Cambridge's colleges, he thought that I was in need

of an eye-opening anthropological experience. Afterwards he derived undiluted amusement from how astonished the young, left-leaning American academician emerged from said experience, laughing vigorously as we drove home in the rain that evening.

Only once during my visit did Anthony finally bring up the famous footnote. I forget what, exactly, he had to say, but it was clear that he wasn't pleased by it. (In subsequent years he would allude to it with a wry grin every once in awhile, showing me that he had never forgotten...) It should be noted that he was still smarting at the time from the many attacks to which he had been subjected in the aftermath of the publication of *The Romantic Approach*, particularly from Hispanists here in the U.S. (He would recount in great detail, and with sly humor, a verbal barrage he underwent at a session at the MLA in which he himself had been asked to participate.) Though Anthony was no doubt aware of the polemical nature of that book (and even relished his role as a provocateur), it was clear that he had been caught off guard by just how many hackles it had managed to raise.

And here we get to the crux of the path Anthony followed within the field of Cervantes studies and Hispanism in general. The early part of Anthony's career coincided with the surge of interest in "Theory" in many parts of the world, but particularly here in the United States. His historicizing deflation of the "Romantic approach" appeared to walk hand-in-hand with a rejection of many of the theoretical trends bursting onto the scene (albeit belatedly in the realm of Hispanism) at American universities as well as in Great Britain. Slowly but surely, Anthony began to be featured in the role of an anti-theoretical Uncle Scrooge, snorting "Bah, humbug!" every time he encountered attempts to apply "Theory" to his beloved Cervantes. Most of these attempts connected up, in Anthony's view, with strains of the Romantic approach, particularly as they painted a "subversive" or "oppositional" *Don Quijote*. Anthony could be particularly trenchant when it came to Bakhtinian approaches to Cervantes's masterpiece. For him, any thought of a carnivalizing or popular-festive current within the work was simply an anachronistic misreading of its *vis comica*.

This notion set Anthony on a collision course with the author of these lines. During the nineties Anthony was hard at work on what is arguably his most important work, *Cervantes and the Comic Mind of His Age*. At the same time I was writing *De fiestas y aguafiestas: Risa, locura e ideología en Cervantes y Avellaneda*. We finished our books at roughly the same time, though I was able to send him a copy of *De fiestas* while he was still putting the finishing touches on *Cervantes and the Comic Mind*. This provided Anthony with just enough time to get in a punch against my neo-Bakhtinian approach as well as against those of several other colleagues (see p. 11).

It should be pointed out that in this extremely important work Anthony *does* employ critical tools more associated with much-maligned “Theory” (Foucault, for example, appears prominently). Indeed, the fruit of his analysis using those tools would have been extremely useful for my argument in *De fiestas*, centering, as it does, on fundamental changes of the socio-cultural parameters of humor occurring between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Anthony argues that Cervantes is carried along by those currents moving away from cruder, more rambunctious or aggressive forms of humor (which he terms “Aristophanic”) in court-related culture and its literary and para-literary products, all of which culminates in a more oblique and “humane” way of provoking laughter in his readers. And, as goes without saying, Anthony downplays the notion of a “subversive” Cervantes in favor of an author much more aligned with Establishment values. While *Don Quijote* does, of course, break new ground, even being “revolutionary” within the terrain of literary praxis, this comes about largely through Cervantes’s return to precepts of Classical aesthetics, including that of decorum. In sum, a kind of “revolution through tradition.” Any notion of a Cervantes nurtured by the ideology of popular-festive culture is completely banished.

Here is where Anthony and I parted ways in dramatic fashion. Whereas my dear friend saw Cervantes as firmly ensconced within the new “comic mind” which strived to distance itself from more vulgar (“Aristophanic”) proclivities, I saw him as being one of the last exemplars of that strain of Renaissance authors (emblemized best by

Rabelais, of course) who drank deeply from the sources of popular-festive culture. And rather than seeing Cervantes as an “innovator through tradition,” I saw him precisely as a flouter of inherited aesthetic practices or values—precisely something against which Avellaneda reacts, in my reading, when composing his own continuation.

In sum, despite our shared views about socio-historical trends in humor taking place at the time, Anthony and I came out on diametrically opposed sides on the issue of how Cervantes himself fit into those trends. Either Anthony was right or I was right—there really was no middle ground.

And here we arrived at a key moment in the friendship that united us—a moment that also shows Anthony’s true caliber as human being. Convinced that both of us could not be right, I decided to write a review-article (entitled “Laughter Tamed” and published in this journal) in which I would both give Anthony the full credit he was due, while at the same time striving to refute the ultimate stance his book takes. Given that a long friendship was potentially at stake, and at a historical moment within academia in which pernicious “food fights” have become ever more common, I had to find a way to rebut Anthony without causing offense. As he pointed out to me on more than one occasion, *Cervantes and the Comic Mind* was a work in which he had invested enormous amounts of time and effort. It was scheduled to be published just a lustrum before the obligatory retirement age at Cambridge. And to be perfectly frank, Anthony could be corrosive, in his bitingly ironical fashion, towards those with whom he locked horns. If Anthony did take serious umbrage at this attempt to question the key argument of his crowning contribution to Cervantes scholarship, I had to be prepared, potentially, for the worst.

In the weeks after “Laughter Tamed” came out in 2003, I held my breath in the hopes I would not receive an email from Anthony, the opening of which would reveal that our friendship had just moved on to shaky ground. No such email ever arrived. Indeed, Anthony didn’t respond at all, either in the form of an official response (to which he was entitled) or in any other venue that I know of. When it came time for our summer encounters in Málaga, I girded myself for some of

Anthony's better barbs, delivered with that quintessential British iciness of which he was, in fact, perfectly capable. Instead, on opening the door of his house, there he stood with the broad, oddly sheepish smile that was also very much a part of his usual demeanor. Whatever he might have thought about my attempt to bring into question the central points of his book, it appeared that he wasn't going to let it interfere with the wonderful dinner he had prepared.

It may, of course, have been that Anthony thought I was so full of hot air that "Laughter Tamed" didn't merit a response. I would prefer to believe, however, that he recognized the review-article to be a good-faith effort to engage with his argument, that he realized that I had been pretty much forced to take him on, and that I had done so within the "friendly ethos" that he saw as being the mark of *Don Quijote* itself. In the course of dinner, the centerpiece of which was one of the *paellas* on which Anthony prided himself (and rightfully so), he did make a sly aside here and there to "Laughter Tamed," but never in a way designed to leave a wound. I returned from dinner that night with a great sense of relief: we were still friends! (The reader may think I am dramatizing this whole episode to excess, but I have been in academia long enough to know just how fragile our professional egos can be.)

Subsequent years brought us the tidal wave of the *cuarto centenario*, which coincided, in bittersweet fashion, with Anthony's retirement from Cambridge. The flurry of invitations he received to a host of commemorative events (including one at Boston University) constituted a very welcome confirmation of just how prominent a position he had achieved in Cervantes scholarship. In the run-up to the "efeméride" Anthony managed to win the promotion to the rank of "Reader" at Cambridge that had not been forthcoming earlier in his career when he most certainly had already accumulated the necessary merits for it. (Anthony was quick to point out that, from his perspective, the primary importance of the promotion derived less from the enhancement of his self-image than from the fact that his retirement pension would be significantly larger—a matter of real concern as his departure from Cambridge neared.)

It was extremely gratifying to me, as Anthony's friend, to see the honors pile up even after he retired—including his election to the presidency of the Asociación Internacional "Siglo de Oro" (AISO). In Spain, in particular, Anthony achieved near-celebrity status as his work was perceived as the embodiment of a sober, commonsensical response to the "folly" that had gripped Hispanism as practiced on this side of the Atlantic. Even though Anthony rejected the *persona* of the Cantabrigian "don," much about him certainly made his Spanish colleagues (among others) see him in that light—in this case, to his distinct advantage.

The all too few years during which Anthony enjoyed his retirement marked an incredible burst of scholarly creativity as he published article after article, spoke at conference after conference, and was invited to give seminars at many universities. Despite the fact that *Cervantes and the Comic Mind* had left him exhausted and with very little desire to write another book, Anthony proceeded to compose his very helpful *A Companion to DON QUIXOTE*, published just two years before his death. Cervantes was "in Anthony's blood," so to speak, and he continued to write about him until the very end.

Fortuitously, Rodrigo Cacho Casal, Anthony's successor at Cambridge, had the idea of honoring him with a well-deserved *Festschrift* just a few years prior to his passing. Aided by Anthony's beloved wife Françoise, Rodrigo discreetly contacted a wide spectrum of Anthony's friends and colleagues to solicit contributions. Miraculously, the secret was kept by those who agreed to write something, and on March 5, 2009 Anthony was lured into a room where he was expecting to attend some social event or another, only to discover that he was actually there to be presented with a brand-new copy of *El ingenioso hidalgo: Estudios en homenaje a Anthony Close*, with essays by Jean Canavaggio, Aurora Egido, Francisco Rico, and Eduardo Urbina, among others. When we met that summer in Frigiliana, Anthony swore up and down that he did not know that the homage was in the works, and that he was left quite flabbergasted on receiving it. (He also engaged in one of his characteristic displays of humor, suggesting—in light of my own contribution to the volume in which I strive to deflate

the silly pretensions of an interdisciplinary group of professors at the Complutense who were intent on showing (“scientifically,” of course) that the “lugar de la Mancha” was, indeed, Villanueva de los Infantes—that I program the GPS system in my Spanish rental car so as to steer a wide berth around this specific Manchegan town.)

One of the reasons I think Anthony was truly surprised by the homage is that he had carried out his career without truly “playing the game” in the way characteristic of the adroit politicians one tends to find at the pinnacle of the academy. Anthony never curried favor from more powerful colleagues in the profession. To the contrary, during much of his career he could strike people as somewhat standoffish or even prickly. As he approached retirement, however, with his achievements increasingly recognized and celebrated, Anthony “softened up” in his dealings with others, even taking on an avuncular air at times, especially with younger colleagues. But even during this later stage of his life, Anthony in many ways continued to be a resolutely private, and ultimately very shy, person. (Indeed, I think Anthony’s fundamental shyness was what was responsible for some of that thorniness with which some colleagues associated him.)

Where Anthony felt truly at home was, indeed, *at home*, or better said, with his immediate family—that is, with his daughter Lucy and Françoise. This does not mean that feeling at home involved actually staying inside the confines of his abodes in England or Spain. To the contrary, Anthony loved traveling—yes, preferably with his family. Anecdotes from these travels often added spice to dinner conversations in which, with his typically puckish sense of humor, he would narrate one or another mishap or comical exchange with the locals. The former included the story about the time he was driving through Death Valley in the western United States in a rented car with Françoise and the children; much to his horror, the keys ended up getting locked inside the vehicle: 115 degree temperatures with no help in sight. (I forget how the story ended, but Anthony and family did survive the ordeal.) More recently, Anthony recounted how on yet another desert excursion, this time to the Giza pyramids in Egypt, a guide offered him one thousand

camels (!) in exchange for his beloved Françoise. (No, Anthony didn't go for the deal.)

Despite that reserve that often formed part of his public *persona*, Anthony had a warm relationship with the ebullient (and superhumanly loud) townspeople of Frigiliana. He would somehow be remarkably up-to-date on the local gossip and recent scandals—no doubt a relief from their equivalent in the “small world” of Cambridge. He was helped by a natural onomastic fit into village life given that one of Frigiliana's patron saints is San Antonio, which translates in practical terms into roughly 40% of local males bearing the name “Antonio” (the rest being either “Sebastián” or “José”). Given the substantial overlap of surnames that occurs as well, this means that everyone has a nickname to distinguish himself from the other bearers of the same name. Anthony was quite knowledgeable about the wide range of local monikers—a testament to his integration with the local ethos. (This contrasted dramatically with what is typically the case among the many other Englishmen who also have houses in and around the village and whose clannishness irritated Anthony no end.)

A few more personal details about Anthony as we come to a close. He was a great hiker, often going up into the mountains behind Frigiliana or occasionally venturing into the Pyrenees or the Picos de Europa. He also did a great deal of windsurfing in the Mediterranean until very recently and loved to race sailboats on small lakes in the English countryside. He preferred to speak French to Françoise, and it was from that language that he took most of the terms of endearment with which he showered her. A great lover of classical music (Bach, Brahms, Schubert), he was particularly interested in opera (Wagner), and frequently recorded live performances broadcast on the radio. He was a splendid cook, his *chef d'oeuvre* being that remarkably convincing *paella* that seemed to get better every year.

Other passions Anthony pursued: gardening, at his homes both in England and Spain, and cricket, which he played into the early eighties. (He explained the rules of the game to me at least a dozen times, but I would always forget them almost immediately. With exemplary

patience, Anthony would go through them in detail yet again the next summer we met.)

Anthony's aversion for the "Rule, Britannia" mentality in virtually all of its variants may have been generated in part by the two years he spent as a conscript (starting at age 18) in the British army (just before obligatory service was abolished). He served in Nigeria as a lieutenant, learned some Hausa, and was apparently a good artillery instructor. (He never told me much about his military service; the details I note here were kindly provided by Françoise.)

Anthony deserved to continue flourishing in his energetic retirement. He deserved to keep enjoying his rich family life, particularly after having just witnessed the wedding of his daughter Lucy a mere two weeks before his passing away.

Alas, life is not fair, as Anthony would be the first to point out. Indeed, he would no doubt discourage any attempt on the part of friends and family to turn his abrupt departure into a maudlin exercise of pity for him (or self-pity among those who survive him). As together we watched the slow but inexorable departure of so many distinguished members of the *cervantista* fellowship over the past decade and a half—Maurice Molho, Ted Riley (Anthony's dissertation director, for whom he wrote a touching eulogy in this journal [22.1 (2002)]), José María Casasayas, Carroll Johnson—Anthony would express his true dismay at each loss, but always with that pensive irony and hard-boiled realism that always characterized him. It may have been my unconscious memory of our conversations about those departed colleagues that helped to generate the oddly persistent, and very vivid, sensation I felt in the hours just after I learned of Anthony's death. I kept hearing his voice saying, in the resonantly subdued tone and crisp British accent that characterized it, "Carry on, Jim, carry on." An imperative, in brief, not to get overly sentimental, not to react in excess to the "fact" of human mortality, at least as it applied to him.

Given how strong our friendship was, this is a difficult mandate to follow. I will sorely miss Anthony, as will many others, ranging from

fellow *cervantistas* to his neighbors in Andalusia and, of course, his loving family. And even those colleagues with whom he crossed verbal swords over the years will have to admit that our on-going dialogue about things Cervantine will be considerably impoverished now that he is gone. Fortunately for us, however, his written work will continue to enlighten and, yes, provoke us.

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