

## Selections from Jay's Writings on Cervantes

*This section focuses on some of Jay's lesser-known writings. Except for the introduction to the collection of documents, these are all excerpts. They have been reformatted in accordance with MLA documentation style, and some minor adjustments were necessary because they have been removed from their original context.*

### Coping with *Don Quixote*

*From Approaches to Teaching Cervantes' Don Quixote, ed. Richard Bjornson (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1984): 45-49.*

The range of the novel's appeal astonishes quite as much as the extent of it. Catholic thinkers find their Catholicism vindicated by it, reformers find their criticism of the status quo supported, and Marxists discover that it prefigured their analysis of capitalist society. Throughout modern history, *Don Quixote* has inspired everything from ballads to ballet. How are we, as teachers, to cope with such a prodigious book?

There are so many innovations in Cervantes' novel—so many elements of previous works are refined and brought to perfection in it—that even a partial list is staggering: the creation of a self-conscious narrator, the illusion of the autonomous character as achieved by the subversion of narrative reliability, the integration of a multiplicity of styles, the assimilation of many different narrative genres, the profusion of various levels of fictionality, the transformation of events into experience through the manipulation of point of view, the elaboration of a subtle and pervasive irony, the masterful use of dialogue in the creation and development of character. The fundamental problem of the relation between art and life is developed in *Don Quixote* with respect to every conceivable

set of paired opposites: illusion-reality, lies-truth, fiction-fact, poetry-history, mystery-revelation. Moreover, Cervantes' shift from action and passion per se to the development of character involved impressive perceptions of the way people change, dream, and fantasize.

Anyone who has taught *Don Quixote* has become involved in the complications of Cervantes' narrative, but it is always useful to remind students that the book entails the story of readers reading, or misreading, and of writers writing, or failing to write. Don Quixote's reading drives him mad, and his final regret is that he has no time left to read a different kind of book. The author's reading is said to have provoked him to write the novel. All the important characters of part 2 are readers of part 1, and most of the principals in both parts are readers of chivalric romances and other kinds of fiction. Both Don Quixote and the canon are would-be writers, and Ginés de Pasamonte is glimpsed at a moment when he is between two parts of the book he is writing. The "humanist" guide to the Cave of Montesinos is a professional author. As a writer, Cide Hamete is potentially so prolific that he asks to be praised for his restraint in limiting himself, as he has, in part 2. In the text, there is explicit discussion and criticism not only of narrative fiction but of drama and lyric as well. Books and manuscripts are bought and sold, handled, read aloud, acted out, annotated, translated, criticized, printed, plagiarized, burned, buried, and even kicked around by the devils of hell. Because the production and consumption of fiction are primary activities in *Don Quixote*, it is an ideal text for the teacher of literature.

The responsibility of introducing students to a work that has had such a profound impact on the most serious and discriminating minds of the past three hundred years is an awesome one, and the incredibly diverse array of interpretations can only dismay us further. Northrop Frye's injunction that we bring to literature "an understanding as little inadequate as possible" has never seemed more appropriate. Fortunately, *Don Quixote* resists emasculation and destruction in the classroom more tenaciously than any other work I know. It gets through to students despite the teacher's

biases and obfuscations and pedantry, partly because such shortcomings are satirized in Cervantes' characters and narrators and thus easily discounted. Don Quixote's declaration that "there are some who wear themselves out in learning and proving things that once known and proved are not worth a penny to the understanding or memory" has always struck me as an apt inscription for the portico of a university library. When I teach *Don Quixote*, I try to acknowledge my consciousness of inadequacy and partiality at the outset, as much to protect myself from exposure by Cervantes as for the benefit of my students. If I seem at times (in class or in print) to be more presumptuous, it is because so much is at stake in the interpretation of this book. Cervantes' novel fairly begs to be argued over, as a look at the history of *Quixote* criticism reveals. But there is a good explanation for this phenomenon. When the imagined world in a work of fiction approaches the scope and complexity of the world we live in, we perceive the interpretation of the one as a test of our adequacy to comprehend the other, however different they may be from one another in actuality.

As I see it, the study of literature is essentially a response to the question "Whence comes this power?" We study literature not primarily in order to appreciate it but in response to an intuitive appreciation. When students are told that the study of *Don Quixote* will lead to an appreciation of its power, we should not be surprised if their response to our analysis is "so what?" The effect is similar to that of needing to explain a joke to someone who hasn't found it funny. Unamuno suggests this perspective when he turns a classical aphorism on its head. "To be able to love something, one must first know it" is a characteristic instance of Roman banality, but it acquires a new sense when Unamuno transforms it into the maxim: "to be able to know something, one must first love it" (92).

My ideal student is the one who comes to me with a copy of *Don Quixote* and says: "I love this book. Help me find out why."

## Work Cited

Unamuno y Jugo, Miguel de. *Our Lord Don Quixote. The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho, with Revised Essays*. Trans. Andrew Kerrigan. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976.