

[Selections from John Jay Allen's Writings on Cervantes]

The Aims of *Quijote* Criticism

This excerpt, chosen by Jay, is from "Generational Conflicts within Hispanism: Notes from the Comedia Wars," published in Cervantes and His Postmodern Constituencies, ed. Anne J. Cruz and Carroll B. Johnson (New York: Garland, 1999): 68–78. The volume contains selected papers read at the Southern California Cervantes Symposium held at UCLA on May 23, 1996, entitled "Colloquies in Conflict: Cervantes and His Postmodern Constituencies."

The question we must ask of a piece of criticism is a...simple... one: *how does it illuminate the work it treats?* Not "How does it reveal the limitations of the text's author" or "What clues does it offer as to the nature of those limitations?" nor "How elegantly does it validate the theory being applied?" Those are perfectly legitimate questions, but they are not literary criticism. Which brings us to the real issue: what question do we put to the literary work?

What do we ask of *Don Quixote* when we presume to study it? I would maintain the question is not "How does *Don Quixote* reveal the limitations of Cervantes?" or "What clues does it offer as to the nature of those limitations?" Nor "How elegantly does it validate the theory being applied to it?" I am willing to concede, as Barry Jordan would have it, that "reading, interpretation, and the production of meaning are matters of negotiation, between the discourses of the text and those of the reader, which take place, ...in a field of relationships and forces and according to certain sites and positions in which the text is both produced and consumed" (28). But insofar as this is true, it is true of what happens every time you write me a memo; we do still manage somehow to communicate.

And who is to say that I am wrong to feel that I am closer in interpretive community with Cervantes than I am with many of my colleagues and some of my relatives?

Our primary interest, it seems to me, especially in our capacity as teachers, is to respond to the power of the work, to its appeal. If theory helps in that endeavor, as it often does, then bring on the theory. But often, as Brian Vickers said in speaking of Freudian and Lacanian analyses of *Hamlet*, "there is a strange disproportion between the erudition and energy with which the critical model is erected and the actual insight that it yields" (308). Or as Cervantes put it more simply: "There are people who exhaust themselves, investigating matters that, after all their learning and all their investigations, don't add a speck to our understanding and aren't worth remembering" (II, 22; 466).

Another option advanced by proponents of recent trends, in an attempt "to make the American curriculum genuinely liberating," is picked up by Richter: "Traditional texts are to be kept in the curriculum but read *critically*, with an eye toward exposing the internal contradictions and false consciousness" (20). Recall Raman Selden's generalization: "for the New Critic, the unity of a literary work is its mark of genius, whereas for the Deconstructionist it is a mark of failure, or worse, bad faith" (cited by Hart, 417). Then listen to Cervantes' plea: "If *aliquando bonus dormitat Homerus*... [the critics] ought to stop and think how wide-awake he had to be, most of the time, to make his book cast so much light and so little shade" (II, 3; 369).

Malcolm Read "argues that the New Critics' desire for unity in the text... betrays... a narcissistic intention" (Hart 417), an astonishing charge from such a source, for surely the breathtaking narcissism of 1980s-90s critic-centered writing admits no rival. In fact, one curious feature of some recent theory-based criticism is the ease with which people otherwise skeptical of any sort of pretense to objectivity about one's subjectivity privilege their testimony by reference to their own experience. Read, for example, trumps Paul Julian Smith (and Foucault) with "the period I spent as a privileged visiting professor of Hispanic studies in the Third World, and sub-

sequently, as a very underprivileged member of the dole queue in the First World" ("Traveling South" 143).

A fundamental premise of the New Criticism was that the *work* was the center of our interest, the assumption being that its enduring appeal meant that it had something important to communicate. If you came across a passage in Cervantes that seemed out of place or superfluous, then, as Frye—who was speaking of Shakespeare—suggested, either Cervantes didn't know how to write, or you don't know how to read. Look closely at the passage, said Frye, because the odds are overwhelmingly in favor of Cervantes' competence. The New Critical presumption of unity in a classic that so exercises Malcolm Read is simply a provisional recognition of its authority relative to that of the critic; it expresses a kind of minimal critical humility. If we are to look closely at the passage to find what it reveals *despite* Shakespeare's or Cervantes' best efforts, *that's* narcissism.

Recall that another of Read's charges against A. A. Parker and his methodology is that of "ethicalism."¹ I take it that this is related to the providential world-view that Parker ascribes to the world of the *comedia* as well as to *Don Quixote*, but—to speak only of the latter—the point is not whether Parker believed his own world to be providential (presumably he did), or whether I do (I don't), but whether it can be argued persuasively that the world of *Don Quixote* is providential. On the other hand, Read chides Paul Julian Smith for not contributing to the liberation of the proletariat. Isn't the expectation of contributing to someone's liberation through literary criticism "ethicalism" with a vengeance? On this point, Richter is surely correct when he says that "both the Right and the Left...have massively overestimated what is at stake in the culture wars of the 1990s. ... It is hard to believe," he says, "that Western

¹ To oversimplify an already simplistic, though pedagogically useful, formulation: Parker argued in his "approach" that in the *comedia* character was subordinate to action, which was subordinate to theme. The theme was the focus of dramatic unity, and was subordinated in turn to a moral purpose exemplified or illustrated through dramatic causality issuing in a providential or "poetically just" denouement.

culture could be in any serious danger from an elite so briefly and transiently radicalized, or that a cultural revolution could be expected from those who have the most to gain from the status quo" (25). And as for the disdain for the New Critics' search for unity in the work, isn't the desire and the effort to put the work (*and* the author) meaningfully into a totalizing context, including the unconscious and the repressed within (through psychoanalysis), and the excluded and the oppressed without (through Marxism), to reach for an encompassing "unity" beside which the poor, small, text-bound "organic unity" of the New Criticism pales in comparison?

My friend and colleague Steve Hart said in his attempt at mediation between the generations that "we should beware of following the wide path in which we delude ourselves in the belief that, as inhabitants of the 1990s, we know *de facto* more than our forebears of the 1960s, since this is a misreading of the Other as full of epistemological pitfalls as the colonialist subjugation of the Third World and the adult's rejection of the child's world" (417). Having lived in both the 1960s and the 1990s myself, I share his desire to seek eclectically a middle ground, but not the faith in infallible progress (or the Oedipal slip?) implied in the progression from Third to First, and from child to adult. More disturbing yet, in the search for internal contradiction and false consciousness in the canonical works, Shakespeare and Cervantes, I am afraid, are the children, and the critic is the adult.

For my part, I believe that both Parker and Read—both of these ideologues—can help us. On the one hand, I hope that some worth can continue to be conceded to the effort to understand why some works of literature have had persistent appeal in widely varying times and cultures, and within radically divergent social and economic systems; why *Don Quixote* is such an important part of the "enduring heritage of European literature," as Patrick Geary said in his unpublished opening remarks to the 1996 "Colloquies in Conflict" conference at UCLA; why, in the terms that Anthony Cascardi proposes elsewhere in this volume, so many *different* desires are persistently projected on this book. On the other hand,

I hope equally that the assumption in these works and in my own commentary on them that serve my social, economic and psychological needs at the expense of truth and justice will continue to be exposed through the exercise of current theory-based literary investigation. As Round put it: "the actual world-changing social relevance of the Hispanic trade is a fairly modest affair.... We are, when it comes down to it, the skilled producers of mental objects that are locally useful, we hope durable.... To do this kind of thing, well requires a mode of discussion that will blend openness and exact judgment in emphatic yet equal proportions" (144).

Before I close these considerations, let me hint darkly at another of the deep misgivings I have with respect to the consequences which some recent theoretical orientations portend. I hear Barry Jordan again: "reading, interpretation, and the production of meaning are matters of negotiation between the discourses of the text and those of the reader, which take place, ...in a field of relationships and forces and according to certain sites and positions in which the text is both produced and consumed" (28). History, "herstory"²; our respective accounts of how things are have a dismaying relativity to them, relativity that one cannot read *Don Quixote* without acknowledging. But the relativity is never total for Cervantes, nor can it be for us. What about the Holocaust? There are thriving "interpretive communities" producing accounts of how it never happened. O. J. Simpson? As Jeffrey Rosen has recently written, in a review of books about that celebrated case and the acquittal of the accused:

Drawing on strains of literary theory, some critical race theorists claim that no event or text has an objective meaning, that each community of readers must determine how the text will be understood, that every community has a responsibility to

² [Nota ed.: Se avisa a los lectores cuya lengua no es el inglés: la pintoresca voz "herstory" se acuñó hacia 1970 en respuesta al supuesto sexismo de la palabra "history." Se trata de un magnífico ejemplo de etimología popular: la "his" de "history," derivada del latín, no tiene nada que ver con el posesivo masculino "his," derivado del anglosajón.]

create its own stories out of every text. Of course, if the community of readers is racially defined, and if no racial community can extricate itself from its socially constructed perspectives, then our perception of facts will be racially contingent. This cult of contingency may be bracing, or forgivable, in literature departments, where what is at stake is the interpretation of *Huckleberry Finn* or the boundaries of the canon. For the law, however, the cult of contingency holds the seeds of nihilism. Judges, juries, lawyers and legal scholars are charged, among other things, with being objective, and if objectivity is unattainable, then so is the rule of law itself. (32)

There is something vital at stake here and I, for one, cannot be comfortable knowing that an important and influential chunk of our theoretical vanguard can only be tolerated, forgiven, simply because we are all of us irrelevant to real life.

1153 Stirling Drive
Danville, KY 40422
jjallen@kih.net

WORKS CITED

- Cascardi, Anthony J. "Romance, Ideology and Iconoclasm in Cervantes." *Cervantes and His Postmodern Constituencies*. Ed. Anne J. Cruz and Carroll B. Johnson. New York: Garland, 1999. 22–42.
- Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de. *Don Quixote*. Trans. Burton Raffel. New York: Norton, 1995.
- Frye, Northrup. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957.
- Hart, Stephen. "'Mientras que en mi casa estoy, rey soy': More on the Politics of Hispanism." *Journal of Hispanic Research* 1 (1992–93): 415–23.

-
- Jordan, Barry. *British Hispanism and the Challenge of Literary Theory*. Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1990.
- Parker, Alexander A. *The Approach to the Spanish Drama of the Golden Age*. London: Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Councils, 1957. "The Approach to the Spanish Drama of the Golden Age." *Tulane Drama Review* 4 (1959): 42–49. Reprinted with important modifications as "The Spanish Drama of the Golden Age: A Method of Analysis and Interpretation." *The Great Playwrights. Twenty-Five Plays with Commentaries by Critics and Scholars*. Ed. Eric Bentley. 2 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1970. 1: 679–708.
- Read, Malcolm K. "Traveling South: Ideology and Hispanism." *Journal of Hispanic Philology* 15 (1991): 191–207.
- Richter, David H. *Falling into Theory: Conflicting Views on Reading Literature*. Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1994.
- Rosen, Jeffrey. "The Bloods and the Crits." *The New Republic*. December 9, 1996: 27–42.
- Round, Nicholas G. "The Politics of Hispanism Reconstructed." *Journal of Hispanic Research* 1 (1992–93): 134–46.
- Vickers, Brian. *Appropriating Shakespeare: Contemporary Critical Quarrels*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1993.