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The Editor's Column

If Cervantes Were Alive Today

by **Daniel Eisenberg**

As a recreation, feeling that after three years of intense work with Cervantes I had gotten some grasp of his personality and values, I began formulating and answering hypothetical questions about him. "If he were to come back to life," I asked myself, "what book would I give him to read?" (Erasmus' *Moriae Encomion*, a work he did not know directly and would probably have much enjoyed.) If he were living in the United States, where would he choose to live? (In Washington, with a retreat in Virginia.) When I got to asking myself what kind of car he would drive (an economical and unostentatious one), emboldened by a recent article on George Orwell,¹ I decided to think seriously about what Cervantes would have to tell us today. As this is not scholarship in any conventional sense, I have not embellished it with references to Cervantes' works, and have attributed to him views

¹Norman Podhoretz, "If Orwell Were Alive Today," *Harper's*, January 1983, pp. 30-37. An answer to this article and response from the author are found in the following issue, pp. 56-68.

for which there is no direct support in his writings.

Cervantes, looking at the world today, would find much that a Golden Age Spaniard could be proud of. The lands to which the *conquistadores* carried the cross and the Spanish language are, on the whole, still Catholic and still Spanish speaking. If the Lutherans and other non-Catholics were not defeated, at least they were contained; the religious map of the world is much as it was in his day. The Turks are confined to their homeland and a minuscule portion of the Balkan Peninsula. Piratry for financial gain is gone, although political kidnaping has unfortunately replaced it.

The independence of Spain's American colonies would no doubt cause Cervantes some sorrow, but he would, I believe, accept it. Revolt against an unjust ruler had a considerable tradition in Spain; that of the *comuneros* in the early sixteenth century was only the most recent example, and it was not much discussed in Golden Age Spain, as if it were viewed as a national embarrassment that the king could have been wrong. Cervantes would certainly note the role of the French in the American colonies' independence, and would probably see the French domination of Spain in the eighteenth century as the inevitable result of Golden Age Spain's failure to adhere to its traditional values.

Cervantes would surely appreciate the care with which our American founding fathers set forth in detail the justification for their precedent-setting revolution. Of the system of government they devised, the only part a novelty (for legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government existed in Hapsburg Spain and before) would be the election of legislators and, indirectly, a president, and the rejection of nobility. Cervantes was quite skeptical about the ability of nobles to govern well; at least he believed that nobles were not necessarily any better at government than anyone else. That intelligent, knowledgeable men should choose their own rulers I believe he would find an attractive alternative; that the ignorant *vulgo* participate in the process he would think absurd. The choice of a *comediante* as president would be an unsurprising

result.²

Cervantes, like anyone of his day, would be amazed at our technological progress and wealth, our public works (roads, water supplies), libraries, communications facilities, and ease of travel. Surely he would also appreciate modern dentistry. He would, however, find the world confused and spiritually poorer, lacking faith, and point out that wealth has not made people happier than in his day, for happiness comes from within. Our current problems he would see as properly addressed through spiritual, not technological means. With the correct principles, solutions to problems are easily arrived at; all that is needed is the will power, discipline, and sacrifice to carry them out. He would certainly favor an active government role in both domestic and foreign affairs. That others might disapprove, as the Italians and Dutch resented the Spanish presence and activities, is of little importance if action is based on conviction.

Cervantes would appreciate the freedom and meritocratic nature of our society. He would say, however, that marriage is known in his day had disappeared in most countries; a contract that can be set aside is not what marriage, to him, was or should be. Probably his paternalistic view of the nature and proper role of women would be the most archaic part of his thought.

However, Cervantes would find our society one without goals, without leaders, and without heroes. From his perspective, for example, we do not honor sufficiently our military forces, who are moved to fight by patriotism, not material reward, and we do not give a successful general the same prestige as in his day. Even civilian heroes are ignored. Why do we not celebrate the Wright brothers, as the Brazilians do Santos Dumont? Where is the monument to the first men to travel to the moon? Is not space travel the modernequivalent of “fiar la vida a un leño,” taking great risks in

²[An allusion to Ronald Reagan.]

exploration to advance humanity?

In part this would be seen as a consequence of disinterest in history and focus on the transitory, even more pronounced than in his own day. Yet the solution to the disinterest in historical and moral writing, according to Cervantes, is good literature; better literature would be an important step toward solving our problems. I fancy that he would prefer science fiction, which is heavily based on reality, somewhat inspirational and didactic, and a legitimate form of speculation about the future, to the fantasies of Tolkien. I think he would also appreciate the love of nature and reason of Hesse, and the observant eye, interest in the psyche, humor, Catholicism, and experimentation of James Joyce. I suspect that he would admire the plays of Shaw.

Yet, in general, Cervantes would find our literature even worse than that of his own day, with most of our authors providing entertainment for a reward of money. The descendants of the *libros de caballerías*—mysteries, romances, Westerns, and other books and films which do not try to reflect the real world and benefit the reader—still rule the marketplace. Little literature tries to show us how to live, to provide inspiration and guidance, to teach us. Many authors have no values they care to impart, ultimately a consequence, Cervantes would feel, of the loss of religious faith and the system of values derived from it.

In short, Cervantes would find today's world much like his own, though materially richer and spiritually poorer—a world where the *vulgo* is still too powerful, the cities still unpleasant, yet nature, God's creation, always beautiful and inspiring. A world, like his own, with much to be proud of, yet still short of realizing its potential, in need of a leader to give direction and *ánimo*.