

José Ángel Ascunce Arrieta. *Los Quijotes del Quijote. Historia de una aventura creativa*. Kassel: Reichenberger, 1997. 547 pp.

In 1549, when the Emperor Charles introduced his son Philip to the courts of Europe as hereditary Prince, he did so as a “Perfect Christian Knight,” and many of the triumphal entries and ceremonies featured the Prince as well as a “Valiant Knight of Christendom.” Such pageantry was emblematic of the aspirations and grandiose fantasy that drove the politics of the Habsburgs, in the defense and propagation of Catholicism, through endless wars that exhausted the treasury and the country. José Ángel Ascunce Arrieta embeds his study of *Don Quijote* within just such a frame, finding in the novel implicit criticism of the political and cultural reality of the day. There is nothing new in such a view, of course, but Ascunce’s delineation of the issues is forceful, and its lack of novelty does not undermine its impact. In fact, this represents the book’s weakness and its strength as well: that, strictly speaking, it offers little that is truly new, but there is cogency and persuasive power in its recension of unexceptional views. On the other hand, some readers may indeed take exception to Ascunce’s thoroughgoing insertion into *Don Quijote* not only of the politico-cultural conditions of the time, but also of its author’s own circumstance. And here I am not speaking of a “historicist” turn, but rather of the traditional, even old-fashioned, view whereby considerable explanatory power is sought in just those extra-textual matters.

Such is the thrust not only of the book’s first chapter, “Historia, vida y pensamiento de Miguel de Cervantes,” but also of Chapters 2 and 3, which he devotes to Part I of *Don Quijote*, and which constitute about two thirds of the book. It is somewhat muted thereafter but remains as a consistent referential background. Ascunce Arrieta’s own contribution to our understanding of the composition of *Don Quijote* I is his notion of “núcleos seriadados,” whereby he shows how Cervantes gradually liberated himself from the grip of the short novella form. He adopts the idea, advanced by Geoffrey Stagg among others, that Cervantes originally wrote a “novela ejemplar” (the first sally) and then proceeded to expand it working retroactively and interpolating episodes to introduce variety. The critic then identifies three “núcleos seriadados” developed as a means of generating narrative continuity: the “bálsamo de Fierabrás,” the “yelmo de Mambrino,” and the “misiva a Dulcinea.” He describes this process as “el agrupamiento de distintos capítulos o anécdotas narrativas reunidas en torno a un tema central y organizadas a base de unidades de sentido”(152). Thereafter the book, in his view, begins to acquire the characteristics of the modern novel, which he

identifies as organic coherence, the psychological complexity of the characters, and the primacy of semantic as opposed to physical activity, i.e., action becomes predominantly symbolic. These new interests required Cervantes to go back to the beginning and give prominence to the narrative voice, in particular to that of Cide Hamete Benengeli, and to introduce “*duplicaciones narrativas*” in order to produce as much continuity as the material would allow. Furthermore, these new directions obviated the need for the division in parts and explains the fact that the last “*Parte*” of *Don Quijote I* is about as long as all the others combined.

Chapter 4, “*Tercera salida: Conquista de una aventura creativa,*” underlines the emphasis on dialogue that allows Cervantes to give further delineation to his characters, and in particular to foreground the complexity of the protagonists, while giving fuller play to what the critic has termed “*acción semántica,*” or wide-ranging symbolic significance of action and exchanges. Ascunce identifies as well three general motifs that underlie the action of Part II. The first of these is “*sueño-ensueño*”: action begins with don Quijote waking up from sleep at his home and ends with him falling asleep, to wake up as Alonso Quijano; in between, and approximately equidistant from one another, are the dreams of the Cueva de Montesinos, and Clavileño. Second, “*la vida como farsa*”: this motif incorporates Sancho’s enchantment of Dulcinea, the involvement of Sansón Carrasco, and the various theatrical games at the Ducal Palace and the home of don Antonio Moreno. Finally, “*la vida como ficción*”: the background presence of Part I in Part II, and, to a lesser degree, that of Avellaneda’s *Quijote*, as contrasts and stimuli to behavior.

In Chapter 5, “*Sentido y función del Quijote como novela moderna,*” the critic summarizes his analysis, emphasizing from the outset how Cervantes’ book “*revela la lucha sostenida de un escritor por lograr la forma exacta de expresión y la manera precisa de significación*” (489). And this may well be the most interesting aspect of this study, as it shows systematically the gradual advances made by Cervantes in his craft, emphasizing his sustained attention to such matters, and thereby the conscious care with which he focused on form. For Ascunce these advances, together with the complexity achieved by the characters—what Keats termed “*negative capability*”—represent the foundation of the modern novel.

As I mentioned above, there is little in the book that is strictly new, and some readers may find that the burden of cultural and political significance that *Don Quijote* is made to shoulder may be too heavy. This interpretation of the novel and its protagonists is definitely in the “*romantic*” tradition, in that it views its world through the lens of a contemporary mindset. I found the psychological analyses to be less compelling than those of form, and I

was at times disconcerted by the critic's willingness to assign the statements of characters and narrators—as in the prologues, or in the literary debates—uncritically to Cervantes. On the other hand, the book is a pleasure to read, quite jargon-free, and it will certainly prove rewarding to lay and professional readers of Cervantes alike.

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