

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

A Letter to the Editor

This letter, published in PMLA 92 (1977): 125, is in response to Michael McCanles, "The Literal and the Metaphorical: Dialectic or Interchange," PMLA 91 (1976): 279-90. McCanles responds to Allen and other letterwriters in PMLA 92 (1977): 125-26.

To differ with Michael McCanles' interpretation of Don Quixote's recantation is not to disagree with the thrust of his illuminating and persuasive article, yet the issue is of such capital importance for our understanding of the work that it must be raised. It is true that "Don Quixote is a literalist par excellence" (p. 284), but it is not strictly true that, as McCanles goes on to say, "he cannot grasp the metaphorical, fictive existence of Amadis of Gaul and Orlando, but takes the verbal heterocosms in which they dwell as literal histories." There are explicit indications in the novel that Don Quixote engages in the literal-metaphorical interchange willfully. The clearest example is the passage in which he explains to Sancho his relationship to Dulcinea/Aldonza:

¿Piensas tú que las Amariles, las Filis, las Dianas, las Galateas, las Alidas y otras tales de que los libros, los romances, las tiendas de los barberos, los teatros de las comedias, están llenos, fueron verdaderamente damas de carne y hueso...? No, por cierto, sino que las más se las fingen, por dar sujeto a sus versos. (I, 25)

What it is that drives him to embrace literalism is not an issue to be discussed here, but there are clear suggestions that the literal-metaphorical interchange is rather a symptom of Don Quixote's problem than its cause. Yet, while the knight's return to sanity and his recantation have their reason for being only in relation to that problem and its resolution, we may expect a concomitant alleviation of the symptom if a cure really has been effected.

McCanles thinks not:

For even when the dying knight renounces all of his former life and his enslavement to the metaphor of knightly romances, has he achieved an understanding of the necessary ways in which literal and metaphorical mutually cause and oppose one another? No.... For the literalism of his recantation is merely the obverse of the literalism of his madness. It is the sane literalism of a literalist who rejects metaphors because he can see no way of accommodating them except at the expense of taking them literally. (285)

And yet, is this really the way we are to characterize this man who on his deathbed sums up his gravely serious situation in a metaphor: “En los nidos de antaño no hay pájaros hogaño”? I think that if one does not expect Cervantes to speak to us from the twentieth century one can see that Don Quixote’s recantation moves, not toward a new obverse literalism, but rather, in McCanles’ terms, to a more self-conscious verbal heterocosm: the Christian formulary as exemplified in the books he would not substitute for those of knight-errantry, “otros que sean luz del alma.” This allusion to the transparently metaphorical title of the religious work Quixote had seen at the printer’s in Barcelona—*Luz del alma*—points to a transcendent and divinely inspired literal-metaphorical dialectic, understood as such, though not in those terms, by Cervantes and his contemporaries. Long before the inadequacy of the copy theory of word-object correspondence became manifest, it had been widely understood that verbal formulations of the transcendent reality of the divine could only be metaphorical, as, for example, in St. John of the Cross.

It is tempting to imagine that McCanles’ characterization of Alonso Quijano as “the dying *knight*” in the passage quoted above is in unconscious homage to the victory that this movement of transcendence presents.

John J. Allen
University of Florida