

A RECOVERED LECTURE OF J. L. BORGES ON *DON QUIXOTE*

(Transcribed by Julio Orgtega and Richard A. Gordon, Jr.)

It may seem a fruitless task and a thankless one to discuss once more the subject of *Don Quixote*, as so many books have been written about it, so many libraries, libraries even more copious than the one that was burnt down by the pious zeal of the parson and the barber. Yet there is always a pleasure, there is always a kind of happiness in speaking of one's friend. And I think that all of us can look back upon Don Quixote as being a friend of ours. This does not happen to all characters in fiction. I suppose that Agamemnon and Beowulf are perhaps rather stand-offish. And I wonder if Prince Hamlet would not have snubbed us had we spoken to him as our friend, even as he snubbed Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. For there are certain characters, and those are I think, the highest of fiction, who we may safely and humbly call our friends. I am thinking of Huckleberry Finn, of Mr. Pickwick, of Peer Gynt and not too many others.

But, now we will speak about our friend, Don Quixote. But first, let it be said that the fate of the book has been a strange one. For somehow, we can hardly understand why, somehow the grammarians and the academicians have taken very kindly to Don Quixote. And in the nineteenth century he was raved and praised, I should say, for the wrong reasons, not for the right ones. For example, if we consider such a book as Montalvo's exercise, *Capítulos que se le olvidaron a Cervantes*, we find in it that Cervantes was admired because of the many proverbs he knew. And the fact is, as we all know, that Cervantes poked fun at proverbs by making his bumpkin Sancho Panza abound in them. Then, people thought of Cervantes as a writer of purple patches. And I should say that Cervantes had no use for purple patches; he was not too fond of fine writing, and, I read somewhere that the

famous inscription of his book to the Count of Lemos was written by a friend of Cervantes or copied from some book, since Cervantes was not especially interested in writing that kind of thing. Cervantes was admired for a fine style, and of course the words "fine style" bear many meanings. If we think that somehow Cervantes conveys to us the character and the fate of the ingenious country gentleman, Don Quixote de La Mancha, then we have to admit his fine style, or rather, something more than a fine style, because when we speak of fine style, we're thinking of something merely verbal.

I wonder how Cervantes accomplished that miracle, but he somehow accomplished it. And I remember now one of the most striking things I ever read, something that struck sadness in me. Stevenson said, "What is a character in a book?" And then he answered, "After all, a character is only a string of words." This is true, and yet, we think of it as a blasphemy. For when we think, let's say, about Don Quixote, or Huckleberry Finn, or Mr. Pickwick, or Peer Gynt or Lord Jim, and so on, we are surely not thinking of strings of words. We might as well say that our friends are made of strings of words and, of course, of visual perceptions. When we meet with a real character in fiction, then we know that he exists beyond the world that created him. We know that there are hundreds of things that we do not know, and yet that somehow exist. In fact, there are characters in fiction that come alive in a single sentence. And we may not know many things about them, but we know, essentially, all about them. For example, that character created by Cervantes' great contemporary Shakespeare: Yorick, poor Yorick, is created, I should say, in a few lines. He comes to life. We hear no more about him, and yet we feel that we know him. And perhaps, after reading *Ulysses*, we know hundreds of things, hundreds of facts, hundreds of circumstances about Stephen Dedalus and Mr. Leopold Bloom. But we do not know them as we know Don Quixote, of whom we know far less.

Now I come to the book itself. We might speak of it as a conflict, a conflict between dreams and reality. This sentence is, of course, wrong. Since there is no cause as to why we should consider a dream as being less real than the contents of today's newspaper or of things registered in today's newspaper. Still, as we have to use words we must speak of dreams and reality, for we might think of Goethe and might speak of (Wahrheit und Dichtung), of truth and poetry. Now, when Cervantes thought of writing his book, I suppose that [he considered] the idea of a conflict between dreams and reality, between the exploits recorded in the romances read by Don Quixote and taken from the Matier de Bretagne, the Matier de France and so on and that humdrum reality of Spanish life at the beginning of the seventeenth century. And we find this conflict in the very title of the book. I think that, perhaps, some English translators have gone wrong when they translate *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha* as the *The Ingenious Knight: Don Quixote de La Mancha*, because the words "knight"

and "Don" go together. I should say perhaps "the ingenious country gentleman," and there you have the conflict.

Now, of course, during the whole book, especially in the first part of the book, the conflict is very brutal and very obvious. We see a knight wandering on his errands of philanthropy throughout the dusty roads of Spain and being beaten and in pain. But besides that, we find many hints of the same idea. For of course, Cervantes was too wise a man not to know that even if he opposed dreams to reality, reality was not, let us say, the real reality, or the humdrum commonplace reality. It was a reality created by him; that is to say, the people who stand for reality in *Don Quixote* are as much a part of the dream of Cervantes as Don Quixote and his high-flung notions about knighthood, defending innocent people and so on. And all throughout the book, there is a kind of mingling of dreams and reality.

For example, a fact that may be noted, and I dare say has very often been noted, since so many things have been written about *Don Quixote*. It is a fact that even as people are talking about drama all the time in *Hamlet*, so people are talking of books all throughout *Don Quixote*. When the parson and the barber go over Don Quixote's library, we find, much to our astonishment, that one of the books is a book written by Cervantes and we feel that at any moment the barber and the parson may come upon a copy of the very book we are reading. In fact, this happened, you may remember, in that other splendid dream of mankind, the book of *A Thousand and One Nights*, or, as Captain Burton has it, the book of *A Thousand Nights and a Night*. For in the very middle of the night Sheherazade begins absent-mindedly to tell a story and that story is the story of Sheherazade. And we might go on to infinity. Of course, this was due to a mere, well, a mere mistake of the copyist who hesitates at that one fact, if Sheherazade telling the story of Sheherazade is as wonderful as any other of the wonderful tales from the nights.

Then, we have also in *Don Quixote* the fact that many stories are woven in. We may think at first that this is due to the fact that Cervantes might have thought that his readers might tire of the company of Don Quixote and Sancho and so he tried to amuse them by interweaving other tales. But, I think there is another reason. The other reason would be that those stories, the *Novela del curioso impertinente*, the tale of the captive and so on, are other stories. And so there is this linking together of dreams and of reality, that is an essence of the book. For example, when the Captive tells us about his captivity, he speaks of a fellow captive. And that fellow captive is, we are made to feel, none other than, in the end, Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, who wrote the book. So [there is] a character who is a dream of Cervantes and who, in his turn, dreams about Cervantes and makes a dream about him. Then, in the second part of the book, we find, much to our surprise, that the characters have read the first part and they have also read the imitation of the

book written by a rival. And they abound in literary judgements and they take the side of Cervantes. So, it is as if Cervantes was peeping in and out of his own book all the time and, of course, he must have greatly enjoyed this game.

Of course, since then, this game has been played by other writers (let me remember Pirandello) and also once, by one of my favorite writers, by Henrik Ibsen. I wonder if you'll remember that at the end of the third act of *Peer Gynt* there is a shipwreck. Peer Gynt is about to be drowned. The curtain is about to fall. And then Peer Gynt says, "After all, nothing can happen to me, for how can I die at the end of the third act?" And we find a similar witticism in one of Bernard Shaw's forewords. He says that it will do no good to a novelist to write: "Her eyes were full of tears, for she saw that her son had only a few chapters to live." And this kind of game was, I should say, invented by Cervantes. Except that, of course, nobody invents anything because there are always some confounded forerunners who have invented ever so many things before us.

So we have this double character in *Don Quixote*. We have reality and dreams. But at the same time Cervantes knew that reality itself was made of such stuff as dreams are made of. He must have felt that. All men feel that at some time or [another] [in] their lives. But he amused himself by reminding us of the fact that what we are taking as sober reality was also a dream. And thus, the whole book is a kind of dream. And in the end we feel that after all we may be dreams also.

And there is another fact I would like to remind you of: When Cervantes spoke of La Mancha, when he spoke of the dusty roads, of the inns of Spain in the beginning of the seventeenth century, he was thinking of them as being very humdrum, as being very commonplace. Much in the same way that Sinclair Lewis felt when he spoke of Main Street, and so on. And yet now such words as La Mancha, such words have in them a romantic significance because Cervantes poked fun at them.

And there is another fact that I would like to remind you of. The fact is that Cervantes, as he said two or three times, wanted the world to forget the romances of Chivalry, that he was in the habit of reading. And yet if such names as Palmerín de Inglaterra, Tirante el Blanco, Amadís de Gaula and so on, are remembered today, it is because Cervantes made fun of them. And somehow those names are immortal now. So then you should not complain if people laugh at us because, for all we know, those people may make us immortal by their laughter. Of course, I don't suppose we'll ever have the luck to be laughed at by such a man as Cervantes. But let us be optimists and let us believe that that may happen.

And now, I come to something else. And this is, perhaps, quite as important as the other facts I have reminded you of. Bernard Shaw said that a writer could only have as much time as his conviction gave him. And, in

the case of Don Quixote, I think that we're all sure that we know him. I think that there is no possible doubt whatever of our conviction concerning his reality. Of course, Coleridge wrote about a willing suspension of disbelief. Now, I would like to go into the details of this statement.

I think that all of us believe in Alonso Quijano. And, strangely enough, we believe in him from the first moment he's introduced to us. That is to say, from the first page of the first chapter. And yet, when Cervantes introduced us to him, I suppose he knew very little about him. He must have known quite as little as we did. He must have thought of him as the hero, or the butt of a humorous novel, and there is no attempt to go into what we might call his psychology. For example, had another writer taken the subject of Alonso Quijano, of how Alonso Quijano became a madman through much reading, he would have gone into details of his madness. He [would] have shown us the slow twilight of his reason. We would have seen how he began with some hallucination or [another], how at first he played with the idea of being a knight errant, how at last he thought of it seriously, and perhaps all that would have done the writer no good. But Cervantes merely tells us that he went mad. And we believe in him.

Now, what does believing in Don Quixote mean? I suppose it means believing in the reality of his character, of his mind. For, one thing is to believe in a character, and quite another to believe in the reality of the things that happened to him. In the case of Shakespeare, this is plain enough. I suppose we all believe in Prince Hamlet, we all believe in Macbeth. But, I'm not quite sure that I believe that things happened as Shakespeare tells us in the court of Denmark, or even that we believe in the three witches of *Macbeth*.

Now in the case of Don Quixote, I am quite sure that I believe in his reality. I am not so sure—and maybe this is a bit of a blasphemy, but after all, we are speaking among friends, and I am not speaking to all of you but with every single one of you; this is different, no? I am speaking in confidence—I am not quite sure that I can quite believe in Sancho as I believe in Don Quixote. For sometimes I feel, I think of Sancho as a mere foil to Don Quixote.

And then you have the other characters. I think I believe in Sansón Carrasco, I believe in the parson, in the barber, perhaps in the Duke, but after all I don't have to think much about them, and when I read *Don Quixote*, I get a strange feeling. I wonder if you share this feeling with me. When I read *Don Quixote*, I feel that the adventures are not there for their own sake. Coleridge remarked that when reading *Don Quijote* we never ask ourselves "what next?", we ask ourselves what came before, and that we are more disposed to reread a chapter than to turn over to a new one.

Now, what is the cause of this? The cause is, I suppose, that we somehow feel, at least I somehow feel, that the adventures in *Don Quixote*

are mere adjectives of Don Quixote. We have been contrived by the author in order that we may know the character thoroughly. That is why such books as Azorín's *La ruta de Don Quijote* or Unamuno's *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho*, strike us as somehow idle. For they take the adventures or they take the geography of the story too seriously. While we really believe in Don Quixote and we know that the adventures have been invented by the author in order that we [might] know him better.

And I wonder if this is not true of all literature. I wonder if a single book, a single good book can be found where we accept the plot, though we may not accept the characters. I think that this never happens. I think that in order to accept a book, we have to accept the central character. And we may think that we are interested in the adventures, but really we are interested more in the hero. For example, even in the case of another great friend of ours—and I apologize to him and to you all for not having mentioned him—Mr. Sherlock Holmes, I wonder if we really believe in *The Hounds of the Baskervilles*. I do not think so, at least I don't believe in those stories. But I believe in Sherlock Holmes, I believe in Dr. Watson, I believe in that friendship.

And the same thing happens with Don Quixote. For example, when he told of the strange things he had seen in the cave of Montesinos. And yet, I feel [that he is] a very real character. The stories, they are of no special account; there is no special anxiety shown in weaving them together but they are, in a sense, they are as mirrors, as mirrors wherein we may see Don Quijote. And yet, at the end, when he goes back, when he comes back to his hometown to die, we feel very sorry for him because we have to believe in that one adventure. He had always been a brave man. He was a brave man when he said those words to the masked knight who struck him down: "Dulcinea del Toboso is the most beautiful lady in the world, and I the most wretched of knights." And yet, in the end, he discovered that his whole life had been a delusion, a folly, and he died in the saddest possible way; he knew that he had been mistaken.

And now we come to perhaps the greatest scene in that great book: the actual death of Alonso Quijano. It is, perhaps, a pity that we should know so little about Alonso Quijano. He's only shown to us in one or two pages before he goes mad. And yet, perhaps it is not a pity because we feel that his friends left him. And so we can love him also. And in the end when Alonso Quijano finds out that he has never been Don Quixote, that Don Quixote is a mere delusion, and that he's about to die, then we feel overcome by sadness and Cervantes also.

Now, any other writer would have yielded to the temptation of a purple patch. After all, we must think that Don Quixote had kept Cervantes company for so many years. Don Quixote is still keeping us company, and will go on keeping us company. And, when the moment comes for him to

die, Cervantes must have felt that he was bidding farewell to an old friend and a loved one. And, had he been a lesser writer, or perhaps had he felt less sorry for what was happening, he might have attempted fine writing.

Here, I am on the brink of blasphemy, but I think that when Hamlet is about to die, I think that he should have said something better than "the rest is silence." Because this strikes me as quite bogous fine writing. I love Shakespeare, I love him so much that I can say these things about him and I hope he'll forgive me. Well, but now, I will say: Hamlet, "the rest is silence," let another use that sentence and go to death. After all, he was a bit of a dandy and was fond of showing off.

But in the case of Don Quixote, Cervantes felt so overcome with what was happening, that he wrote: "El cual entre suspiros y lágrimas de quienes lo rodeaban," and I'm not quite sure of all the words, but the drift of it is "dio el espíritu, quiero decir que se murió" [he gave up the ghost, I mean to say that he died]. Now, I suppose, that when Cervantes read that sentence over, he must have felt that this was not at all what might be expected of him. After all, he was saying farewell to Don Quixote. And yet, he must also have felt that somehow a major miracle had been wrought. Somehow we feel that Cervantes is feeling very sorry, that Cervantes is as sad as we are. And so he may be forgiven a blundering sentence, a groping sentence, a sentence that really is not a groping or blundering sentence but one through which we see what he felt.

Now, perhaps if you'd ask me a few questions and I'll try to answer you. I feel I have not done justice to my subject, but after all, I also am not quite myself. I have come back to Austin after six years. And maybe this feeling has overcome my feeling for Cervantes and for Don Quixote. I think that men will go on thinking of Don Quixote because after all there is one thing that we do not care to forget: a thing that life gives us now and then, and then perhaps takes away from us, and that thing is happiness. And, in spite of the many misfortunes of Don Quixote, the book gives us as a final feeling, happiness. And I know that it will keep on giving happiness to men. And to repeat a rather hackneyed and famous passage, but of course all famous passages become hackneyed: "A thing of beauty is a joy forever." And somehow Don Quixote—beyond the fact that we have become a bit morbid about him, that we were all sentimental about him—is essentially a cause of joy. I always think that one of the quite happy things that have occurred to me in my life is having become acquainted with Don Quixote.