
BOĞAZIÇI ÜNİVERSİTESİ DERGİSİ

Beşeri Bilimler – Humanities

Vols. 8-9. – 1980-1981

CERVANTES' DISCOURSE AGAINST GENRES IN DON QUIXOTE

Jale Parla ^a

ABSTRACT

Cervantes' confrontation in *Don Quixote* with the existing genres of his time is a parodistic discourse that is sustained throughout the book. Commencing as an "invective against chivalric romances," the book moves through the mock-heroic, pastoral romance, vernacular tale, oriental tale, parodies of the Petrarchan sonnet, the popular discourse on just government, and alludes to the picaresque in the unfinished story of Gines de Pasamonte. The novel communicates to the reader its author's sense of a mimetic crisis and its author's searchings for a proper vehicle to tell a tale that would answer his concerns to reflect his sense of contemporary reality. It is Cervantes' sensibility to that reality as well as his experimenting to find the means to capture it that has made *Don Quixote* the prototype of the novel.

Michel Foucault has brought to our attention again the ways in which scientific and literary discourse develop in various times and places and the rules that govern such discursive practices within the ideological restraints of every society. ¹ These restraints, according to Foucault, "appear as 'rules of exclusion,' rules which determine what can be said and not said, who has the right to speak on a given subject, what will constitute reasonable and what foolish actions, what will count as 'true' and what as 'false'.² With respect to *Don Quixote*, Walter Kaiser has shown us beautifully how Cervantes reverses the optimistic irony of Stultitia's humanist discourse in the *Praise of Folly* into the pathetic irony of the discourse of the "Knight of the Sad

^a Dr. Department of Linguistics and Literature, Boğaziçi Üniversitesi.

Countenance." ³ The Praise of Folly praised foolish discourse in the name of a freer day to come, unfettered by the grim, self-deprecating discourse of the Middle Ages whose task it was to remind the individual of the transience of earthly joys. By the time of Cervantes, that day had both arrived and not arrived; Sancho Panza as the direct descendent of the Renaissance fool seemed to be more at home in the world than Sultitia was, and yet this new "home" was not exactly the one envisaged by Erasmus. The world was relatively freer from the sedate point of view of the Middle Ages, but in Spain, "the last citadel of feudalism" in the words of Harry Levin, this was not yet readily recognized. ⁴ And that liberated world itself seemed to be falling into the fetters of another ideology; the liberating call of Stultitia for "philautia" was on the way to be transformed into Samuel Smiles' "self-help." Hence the pathetic irony that underlies the discourse of the last Renaissance fool, Don Quixote. Trapped between an old world that he repudiated (that of chivalry) and a new with which he could not come to terms (that of mercantilism), Cervantes carried his discourse through the words and abortive deeds of his wise-fool, Don Quixote. Cervantes "continues to be the exemplary novelist" says Harry Levin, for "he created a new form by criticizing the old forms." ⁵ Just as the example of the self-ordained Knight in his pathetic irony was instigated by the novel's hero in an ever renewed discourse in "tragic irony", so does the book *Don Quixote* stand as a discourse against the outmodedness of the existing genres available to Cervantes, clearing the way for an infinite instigations of the novel as open form.

The genres and modes of story telling available to Cervantes were indeed outmoded to render the experience of life in the Spain of the author's day. Realism, and this was Cervantes' aim, required that the irony of the quixotic Spanish ideal be exposed. This was the ideal of uniting all Europe under a single monarch (Spanish) and a single church (Catholic) in the midst of a newly emerging individuated world of trade and commerce. The picture provided by the contrast was the coexistence of "extremes of wealth and poverty, the fanatic effort to preserve medieval institutions in the midst of the Renaissance, and the punctilious formality of keeping up appearances which often masked desperation." ⁶ And in mock-desperation Cervantes apologizes for not having kept up appearances by adorning his book with a proper "Prologue, or the countless train of customary sonnets, epigrams, and eulogies it is the fashion to place at the beginning of books." ⁷

For how could you expect me not to be worried at what that ancient lawgiver they call the public will say when it sees me now, after all these years I have been sleeping in the silence of oblivion, come out with all my years on my back, with a tale as dry as a rush, barren of invention, devoid of style, poor in wit and lacking in all learning and instruction, without quotations in the margins or notes at the end of the book; whereas I see other works, never mind how fabulous and profane, so full of sentences from Aristotle, Plato and the whole herd of philosophers, as to impress their readers and get their authors

a reputation for wide-reading and erudition and eloquence? My book will lack all this; for I have nothing to quote in the margin or to note at the end. Nor do I even know what authors I am following in it; and so I cannot set their names at the beginning in alphabetical order, as they all do, starting with Aristotle and ending with Xenophon My books must go without introductory sonnets as well — or at least sonnets by dukes, marquises, counts, bishops, great ladies, or famous poets I have decided that Don Quixote shall stay buried in the archives of La Mancha till heaven provides someone to adorn him with all the jewels he lacks; for I find myself incapable of supplying them because of my inadequacy and scanty learning, and because I am too spiritless and lazy by nature to go about looking for authors to say for me what I can say myself without them.

(D.Q., p. 26)

Posterity, of course, has adorned Don Quixote with all the jewels that it deserved for it has been acknowledged to have fathered the "novel" in its protean forms.

Thus Cervantes prologues Don Quixote communicating to the reader his sense of a mimetic crisis, and it is at such a crisis that the comforting words of his friend are directed:

. . . If I understand you rightly, this book has no need of any of the things that you say it lacks, for the whole of it is an invective against books of chivalry, which Aristotle never dreamed of, Saint Basil never mentioned, and Cicero never ran across. Nor do the niceties of truth or the calculations of astrology come within the scope of its fabulous narrative; nor is it concerned with geometrical measurements; nor with arguments which can be confuted by rhetoric. In what you are writing you have only to make use of imitation, and the more perfect the imitation the better your writing will be.

(Emphasis mine, D.Q. pp. 29-30)

Before he can cope with his great task, imitation, Cervantes will have to confront all the past and current forms of imitation and only by proving their inadequacy, will he hail the new form: the novel.

Cervantes' confrontation in Don Quixote with the existing genres is a parodistic discourse that is sustained throughout the book. Commencing as an "invective against chivalric romances" the book moves through the mock-heroic, pastoral romance, vernacular tale, oriental tale, parodies of the Petrarchan sonnet, the popular discourse on just government, and alludes to the picaresque in the unfinished story of Gines de Pasamonte. When, by the end of the book, all these modes and genres are invalidated, they are all as passé as Don Quixote's armor eaten with rust and covered with mould, his helmet with the pasteboard visor, and his lean hack, Rocinante.

As Don Quixote leaves his home to try his arm at the calling of knight-errantry "seeing the grievances there were to redress, the wrongs to right, the injuries to amend, the abuses to correct, and the debts to discharge" he dreams of his future author who will tell of his heroic deeds in an epic:

Who can doubt that in ages to come, when the authentic story of my famous deeds comes to light, the sage who writes of them will say, when he comes to tell of my first expedition so early in the morning: 'Scarce had the ruddy Apollo spread the golden threads of his lovely hair over the broad and spacious face of the earth, and scarcely had the forked tongues of the little painted birds greeted with mellifluous harmony the coming of the rosy Aurora who, leaving the soft bed of her jealous husband, showed herself at the doors and balconies of the Manchegan horizon, when the famous knight, Don Quixote de la Mancha, quitting the slothful dawn, mounted his famous steed Rocinante and began to journey across the ancient and celebrated plain of Montiel.

(D.Q. I, II.)

But this is how it actually comes to be written:

Scarcely had the fair Aurora given shining Phoebus time to dry the liquid pearls of her golden hair with the ardour of his hot rays, when Don Quixote, shaking sloth from his limbs, stood up and called his squire Sancho, who was still snoring.

(D.Q. II, XX.)

Harry Levin has already pointed out to "the calculated anticlimax of the last word."⁸ Indeed, through the last word "snoring" quixotic discourse is undercut by Cervantesian, the heroic is tested by the vulgar and the prosaic, which in turn, gives us the mock-heroic.

Quite an early sign in the book that Don Quixote will be a discourse about all books written and how to write another book, is the book burning episode by the barber, the priest, and Don Quixote's niece. The chapter is entitled "Of the Great and Pleasant Inquisition Held by the Priest and the Barber over Our Ingenious Gentleman's Library." Here again Cervantesian irony cuts both ways: the major point of the chapter, is of course, critical; it aims to assess the existing literature of Cervantes' day. The complementary argument, however, should not be underestimated: even when done by sage critics, burning of books will not guarantee the wiping out of ideas. The first work that falls under the scrutiny of the Barber and the Priest is the *Four Books of Amadis of Gaul*. They decide to spare it being the first and the unsurpassed of all romances. They destroy all the rest of the romances until they come to Cervantes' *Galatea*, a pastoral romance, and here we get an authorial plea for a little tolerance. The Priest says:

That Cervantes has been a great friend of mine for many years, and I know that he is more versed in misfortunes than in verse. His book has some clever ideas; but it sets out to do something and concludes nothing. We must wait for the second part he promises, and perhaps with amendment he will win our clemency now denied him. In the meantime, neighbour, until we see, keep him as a recluse in your room.

(D.Q. I, IV)

But the niece is just as suspicious of the pastoral romances as she is of chivalric romances:

'Oh, Sir,' (she cries), 'your worship should have them burnt like the rest. For once my uncle is cured of his disease of chivalry, he might very likely read those books and take it into his head to turn shepherd and roam about the woods and fields, singing and piping and, ever more, turn poet; for that disease is incurable and catching, so they say.'

(D.Q. I, VI.)

Cervantes seems to be of a divided mind concerning the pastoral romances. He seems to have a weakness for the genre, not, I think, only because he himself wrote a pastoral romance, but also because the lure of Arcadian literature had too strong a hold for the Renaissance mind; that literature about the earthly paradise where equality, mirth, and poetry reigned among the shepherds and the shepherdesses. We have to wait for five chapters, however, for a sally on the outmodedness of that literature too. In book XI of *Don Quixote*, the hidalgo and Sancho Panza spend a night with the goatherds in an Arcadian setting. Don Quixote proposes that the occasion requires the difference of rank between the master and the squire be forgotten and invites Sancho Panza to sit beside him and enjoy the dinner on equal terms with him. Sancho Panza, however, refuses to do so with a mere shake of the shoulders: His democratic rejoinder is to remind his master that nowadays simple folk value natural comforts more than aristocratic favors:

'I thank you' said Sancho, 'but I must confess to your worship that so long as I have plenty to eat, I can eat as well and better, standing by himself, as seating beside an emperor. And to tell you the truth, even if it's only bread and onion that I eat in my corner without bothering about table manners and ceremonies, it tastes to me a great deal better than turkey at other tables where I have to chew slowly, drink little, and wipe my mouth often, and where I cannot sneeze and cough when I want to; nor do any of those other things which solitude and freedom allow.'

(D.Q. I, XI.)

If one made a list of all the genres parodied only to be invalidated, that list

would be long and include every single genre practiced in the Renaissance. *Orlondo Furioso* is parodied by Don Quixote (I, XXIII), Chrysostom who died for Marcela parodies the pastoral romance and the shepherds' verses (I, XII); the inns that are taken for castles provide us with the slapstick of the picaresque tale (I, XVI); the fearful night that Sancho Panza spends very close to his master is an example of low comedy (I, XX), the "Tale of Foolish Curiosity" and the story of Ferdinand, Cardenio, Dorothea, and Lucinda are exercises in the vernacular tale in the manner of the *Decameron* (I, XXV); the *Captive's Tale* recapitulates on the many oriental adventures that were fashionable; the advice of Don Quixote to Sancho Panza when the latter is about to leave for his governorship is formulated along the lines of the many tracts of the time on the principles of just government (II, XLII and XLIII). But the key chapter of the discourse on genres is Chapter XXII of Book I. The chapter is entitled "How Don Quixote set at liberty many unfortunate creatures who were being borne, much against their will, where they had no wish to go." The unfortunate creatures were, of course, criminals, their offenses ranging from petty theft to murder, and the place they had no wish to go were the galleys where they would have to suffer their sentences. It is these galley slaves that Don Quixote sets free by the valour of his arm, and among them, it is Gines de Pasamonté, the rogue, the typical picaroon, with whom Don Quixote engages in a significant conversation. "I am Gines de Pasamonté, and I have written my life with these very fingers" says Gines as he introduces himself to Don Quixote.

'He is speaking the truth,' put in the serjeant, 'he has written his own story as fine as you please, and left the book behind at the prison pawned for two hundred reals.

'And I mean to redeem it,' said Gines, 'even if it were pledged for two hundred ducats.'

'Is it so good as that?' said Don Quixote.

'It's so good,' replied Gines, 'that Lazarillo de Tormes will have to look out, and so will everything in that style that has ever been written and ever will be. One thing I can promise you, is that it is all the truth, and such well-written entertaining truth that there is no fiction that can compare with it'

'And what is the title of the book?' asked Don Quixote.

'The Life of Gines de Pasamonté,' replied that hero.

'Is it finished?' asked Don Quixote.

'How can it be finished,' replied the other, 'if my life isn't?'

(D.Q. I, XXII)

The passage supports our view of Don Quixote's being, among other things, a discourse on a mimetic crisis. Gines de Pasamonté's unfinished book is a picaresque and more, for Gines claims that it is truth and no fiction can compare with it. The fact that it cannot be finished before Gines' life isn't points to the emphasis he put on his book's truthfulness. The "truth" that Gines de Pasamonté was after had an extra dimension

compared to the truth captured by the picaresque so far. The picaresque set the picaroon on a journey, depicting, in the meantime, the variety of life and life style in the newly emerging society of the fourteenth century. It put the rogue into intercourse with people from different social strata in the inns where he stopped, for it was these inns that provided the probable occasions for people from different social classes to run into each other in the more mobile society of the fourteenth century compared to the previous centuries. In the final analysis, the emphasis of the picaresque, however, was on the society rather on the individual. Gines de Pasamonte shifts the emphasis toward the picaroon when he protests that his book cannot be finished before his life isn't, thus paving the way for a more balanced rendering of the individual and the society which we have come to call the *Bildungsroman*.

It is not only the above quoted passage that heralds the novel in *Don Quixote*. The second book starts with a discourse on the question of writing a book. Just how much must be told to tell a story truthfully, what are the means that are available to the author to render a lived experience have haunted the novel writer ever since Cervantes. The paradox that the more truthful one tries to be about facts, the less one can tell about them is demonstrated by the quixotic hero of Laurence Sterne, *Uncle Toby*, and the book *Tristram Shandy*. The question of point of view which Cervantes posed in his editorial role in relation to *Cide Hamete Benengili* will, following him, become a problem both for the writers and the theoreticians of the novel.

The second book of *Don Quixote* confronts us with the ontology of a work of art. It starts with Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, temporarily back at their village, discussing the published account of their adventures related in Part One. Sancho has just heard of the book from Sampson Carrasco, and informs his master of its existence:

For last night Bartholomew Carrasco's son arrived from studying at Salamanca, where they made him a bachelor. And when I went to welcome him he told me that your Worship's story is already in print under the title of the Ingenious Gentleman of Don Quixote de la Mancha. He says that I am mentioned too under my own name Sancho Panza, and so is the Lady Dulcinea del Toboso, and so are other matters which happened to us in the private.

(D.Q., II, ii.)

And Don Quixote orders Sancho Panza to give him a truthful account of what people think of the book. Making sure first that his master will not be angry at what he is going to report, Sancho says:

Let me say that the common people take your worship for a very great madman, and they think I am a great simpleton too. The gentleman say that you are not content with being a country gentleman, but must turn yourself into a Don and launch forth into knighthood, with no more than a paltry vineyard and two acres

of land, and hardly a rag to your back. The knights say that they don't like the petty gentry to set up in competition with them, especially squires who black their black knitted stockings with green silk.

(D.Q. II, ii.)

The import of the report is that Don Quixote has presumed too much. He is a marginal aristocrat who has aspired to redeem the dying chivalric order. Or as Erich Auerbach has put it better:

Cervantes makes it perfectly clear, at the very beginning of his book, where the root of Don Quixote's confusion lies: he is the victim of a social order in which he belongs to a class that has no function. He belongs to this class; he cannot emancipate himself from it; but as a mere member of it, without wealth and without high connections, he has no role and no mission. He feels his life running meaninglessly out, as though he were paralyzed. Only upon such a man, whose life is hardly better than a peasant's, who is educated and who is neither able nor permitted to labor as a peasant does, could romances of chivalry have such an unbalancing effect.⁹

The fact of his marginality and his disproportionate wish-dreams make Don Quixote the prototype of the hero of the nineteenth century *Bildungsroman* whose adventures "might be summed up in the juxtaposition of two of their titles – *Great Expectations* and *Lost Illusions*" as Donald Fanger has put it.¹⁰ It is this marginality, too, that has inspired the quixotic heroes in the ever renewed thematics of quixotism in the modern novel, as quixotism and marginality came to be defined in different terms in different times. The novel, indeed, takes its open form from the open-minded discourse against genres achieved by Cervantes in *Don Quixote*. For *Don Quixote* is punctuated with a creative, non-dogmatic gesture by refusing to fix the reader at any premise or thesis that had previously been defended by the unyielding hidalgo. At the end of the book when Don Quixote claims he has regained his senses, when he abandons his *idée-fixe*, the Cervantesian discourse against genres abandons its obsessive quality too. Don Quixote dies as Alonso Quixano the Good, but the reader is left with an anticipation of infinite stories to read, of all those unfinished lives and uncompleted books, like the *Life of Gines de Pasamonte*.

NOTES

- 1 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I (New York, 1980).
- 2 John Sturrock, ed. *Structuralism and Since* (Oxford, 1979), p. 89.
- 3 Walter Kaiser, *Praisers of Folly* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), pp. 278 – 286.

- 4 Harry Levin, *The Gates of Horn* (New York, 1966), p. 41.
- 5 Harry Levin, "The Example of Cervantes," *Contexts of Criticism* (New York, 1963), p. 79.
- 6 Harry Levin, *The Gates of Horn*, p. 41.
- 7 Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. J. M. Cohen (Penguin, 1963), p. 26. All further references to this work will be abbreviated within the text as **D.Q.**
- 8 Harry Levin, *Contexts of Criticism*, p. 85.
- 9 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton, 1968), p. 138.
- 10 Donald Fanger, *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism* (Chicago, 1967), p. 11.

ÖZET

Cervantes'in başyapıtı **Don Küşot** çağının bütün edebi biçimlerinin o çağın gerçekliğini yansıtmakta geçerliliğini yitirmiş olduğuna ilişkin bir söylem olarak okunabilir. Bu söylem'in bir çok yönüyle romanın öncülüğünü yapması bir yana, Cervantes'in çağının edebi biçimlerini yadsıtmadaki açık ve katilikten uzak tutumuyla, roman'ın en değişken yazın biçimi olmasında ilginç bir koşutluk vardır.