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In Praise of the Novel

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Not long ago, the Norwegian Academy addressed one hundred writers from all over the world with a single question:

Name the novel that you consider the best ever written.

Of the one hundred consulted, fifty answered: *Don Quixote de la Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra.

Quite a landslide, considering the runners up: Dostoevsky, Faulkner and García Márquez, in that order.

The results of this consultation pose the interesting question of the long-seller versus the best-seller. There is, of course, no answer that fits all cases: Why does a best-seller sell, why does a long-seller last?

Don Quixote was a big bestseller when it first appeared in 1605 and has continued to sell ever since, whereas William Faulkner was definitively a bad seller if you compare the meager sales of *Absalom, Absalom* (1936) to those of the really big-seller of the year, Hervey Allen's *Anthony Adverse*, a Napoleonic saga of love, war and trade.

Which means that here is no actual thermometer in these matters, even if time will not only tell: Time will sell.

One might think that Cervantes was in tune with his times whereas Stendhal consciously wrote for "the happy few" and sold poorly in his own life, was given the reward of Balzac's praise before he died and only came into his own thanks to the efforts of the critic Henri Martineau in the 20th Century.

Some writes achieve great popularity and then disappear forever. The best-seller lists of the

past fifty years are, with a few lively exceptions, a somber graveyard of dead books. Yet permanence is not a willful proposition. No one can write a book aspiring to immortality, for it would then court both ridicule and certain mortality.

Plato puts immortality in perspective when he states that eternity, when it moves, becomes time, eternity being a kind of frozen time. And William Blake certainly brings things down to earth: Eternity is in love with the works of time.

The works of time.

We could take each one of the writers I have quoted so far and undertake a fruitful excursion into their relationship with the times they lived.

Fascinating as this can and should be, I wonder how much it tells us about the books that they wrote, the imagination that moved them to write, their use of language, their critical approach to the art of literature, their awareness of belonging to the larger tradition that Milan Kundera invokes in his recent book *The Curtain*: the fact that a novelist belongs, more than to his country or even to his native tongue, to a tradition in which Rabelais, Cervantes, Sterne and Diderot are a part of the same family and that family, as desired by Goethe, lives in the house of world literature, the *welt-literatur* which each writer, Goethe suggests, fosters independently of national literatures that - he goes on - "have ceased to represent anything of importance".

If this be true, then all great works of literature contain both the tradition they spring from and add to and the new creation that depends as much on preceding tradition as tradition, if it is to remain in good health, depends upon the new creations that nourish it.

Since this is the year of the fourth centennial of *Don Quixote* and since I consider Cervantes's book to be the founding cornerstone of the novel as it has evolved since the 17th Century, permit me to root in it the vocabulary I have been employing.

Tradition and Creation.

Cervantes belongs to a tradition he can not speak of. This is the tradition of Erasmus of Rotterdam, the guiding light of the early Spanish Renaissance in the court of the young Charles V, a candle soon extinguished by the cold dogmatic winds of the Counter Reformation.

After the Council of Trent, Erasmus and his works are banned by the Inquisition, his legacy a secret.

Cervantes was steeped in this forbidden Philosophy. Erasmus searched for reconciliation between Faith and Reason, refusing not only the dogmas of Faith, but the dogmas of Reason as well. Thus, Cervantes, who was a disciple of the Spanish Erasmists, had to disguise his intellectual allegiance.

The Praise of Folly is the praise of Don Quixote as he wanders through an Erasmian universe in which all truths are suspect, everything is bathed in incertitude and the modern novel thus

acquires its birth-right.

Since Cervantes can not admit the liberating influence of Erasmian thought, he goes Erasmus one better: the wisdom of Rotterdam becomes the folly of La Mancha and the marriage of *la sagesse* and *l'incertitude* brings forth the novel as we understand it. A privileged space, indeed, of incertitude.

Uncertain place: a forgotten village in an insolated province of Spain. An unnamable place: "En un lugar de la Mancha de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme".

Uncertain author: Who wrote this book? Cervantes? De Saavedra? Cide Hamete Benengeli? An anonymous Moorish scribe? The masked funambulist Ginés de Pasamonte disguised as the puppeteer Master Pedro? The lack of author barely disguises the refusal of authority.

Uncertain names: Don Quixote is really an impoverished hidalgo named Alonso Quijano --or is it Quijada?-- or perhaps, Quezada?

Or is it the other way around: Is the impoverished squire truly the brave knight errant, a Cid brought low, a diminished Cortez?

So, what's in a name? The onomastic instability of the novel *Don Quixote* undermines all certainty of a linear reading. Dulcinea is Aldonza, damsels in distress become queens and princesses, broken down nags are deemed heroic steeds, illiterate squires become governors.

Don Quixote's imaginary foes have extravagant names --for example, the giant Pentapolpin of the Rolled up Sleeve-- so his real foes must also have them: the Bachelor Sansón Carrasco has to be named the Knight of the Mirrors in order to enter Quixote's onomastic universe. And Quixote himself, the battle name of the country require Quijada... or Quijano... or Quesada... enters in full battlegear this nominative carnival, becoming the Knight of the Sad Countenance or the Knight of the Lions, or Quijotiz, when in a pastoral mode, or the ridiculous Don Azote, that is, Mister Whip, in the wayside inn or, in the Duke's palace, the mocked don Jigote, Mr. Hamburger.

Places, names, authorship, all is uncertain in *Don Quixote*. And uncertainty is compounded by the great democratic revolution wrought by Cervantes and which is the creation of the novel as a common place, *lieu commun*, *lugar común*, that is, the meeting place of the city, the central plaza, the *polyforum*, the public square where everyone has a right to be heard but no one has the right to exclusive speech.

This guiding principle of novelistic creation is turned by Cervantes into what Claudio Guillén calls a dialog of genres. They all meet in the open space of *Don Quixote*.

Here the picaresque --Sancho Panza-- shakes hands with the epic --Don Quixote--. Lazarillo de Tormes is introduced to Amadis of Gaul.

Here the linearity of narration is broken down, encircled, put on fast forward or in reverse by

the tale-within-the-tale interrupted by the pastoral interlude and then by the novel of courtly love and the strands of Moorish and Byzantine tales woven into the tapestry of a novel that, finally, proposes itself as both the identity and the difference of its verbal universe.

Before Cervantes, narrative could exhaust itself in a single reading of the past: the epic, or of the present: the picaresque.

Cervantes blends past and future, turning the novel into a critical process that, first, proposes that we read a book about a man who reads books and then becomes a book about a man who knows that he is being read.

When Don Quixote enters the printing shop in Barcelona and discovers that what is being printed is his own book, *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de La Mancha*, we are suddenly plunged into a truly new world of readers, of readings available to all and not only to a small circle of power, religious, political or social.

By multiplying both authorship and readership, the novel, from the times of Cervantes to our own, became a democratic vehicle, a space of choice, of alternate interpretations of the self, of the world, and of the relationship between myself and others, between you and me, between we and they.

Religion is dogmatic. Politics is ideological. Reason must be logical. But literature has the privilege of being equivocal.

The quality of doubt in a novel is perhaps a manner of telling us that since authorship (and thus authority) are uncertain and susceptible of many explanations, so it goes with the world itself.

Reality is not fixed, it is mutable.

We can only approach reality if we do not pretend to define it once and for all.

The partial verities proposed by a novel are a bulwark against dogmatic impositions. Considered politically feeble and unimportant, why are writers then persecuted by totalitarian regimes as if they really mattered?

This contradiction reveals the deeper nature of the political in literature. The reference is to the *polis*, the city, the evolving but constant community of citizens, not to the *autoritas*, the passing powers, essentially temporary but pridefully believing themselves eternal.

Kafka's fictions describe a power that makes its own fiction powerful. Power is a representation that, like the authorities in *The Castle*, gain its strength from the imagination of those outside the castle. When that imagination ceases to confer power upon power, the Emperor appears naked and the impotent writer who points this out is banned to exile, the concentration camp or the bonfire, while the Emperor's tailors stitch on his new clothes.

So, if there can be political power in writing, it is exceptional. Under so-called "normal"

circumstances, the writer has scarce if any political importance. He or she can, of course, become politically relevant as citizens. Yet he or she possess the ultimate political importance of offering the city, however quietly, however postponed, however indirectly, the two indispensable values that unite the personal and the collective:

Words and imagination.

Language and memory.

Speech and purpose.

Fiction then, from Rabelais and Cervantes to Grass and Goytisoló and Gordimer, is another way of questioning truth as we strive for it through the paradox of a lie.

That lie can be called the imagination. It can also be seen as a parallel reality. It can be observed as a critical mirror of what passes for the truth in the world of convention.

It certainly sets up a second universe of being, where Don Quixote and Heathclif and Emma Bovary have a reality greater, though no less important, than the host of hastily met and then forgotten citizens we deal with. Indeed, Don Quixote or Emma Bovary bring into light, give weight and presence to the virtues and vices --to the fugitive personalities-- of our daily acquaintance.

Perhaps, what Ahab and Pedro Páramo and Effie Briest possess is, also, the living memory of the great, glorious and mortal subjectivities of the men and women that we forget, that our fathers knew and our grand parents foresaw.

In *Don Quixote*, Dostoevsky wrote, truth is saved by a lie.

With Cervantes, the novel establishes its birthright as a lie that is the foundation of truth. For through the medium of fiction, the novelist puts reason to the proof. Fiction invents what the world lacks, what the world has forgotten, what it hopes to attain and perhaps can never reach.

Fiction is thus a way of appropriating the world, giving the world the color, the taste, the sense, the dreams, the vigils, the perseverance and even the lazy repose that, to go on being, it claims.

Enter your own self and discover the world, the novelist tells us.

But also, go out into the world and discover yourself. In the dark hours preceding World War II, Thomas Mann crossed the Atlantic with *Don Quixote* as his surest lifeline to a Europe in the throes of death.

And even before, under the clouds of the First World War, Franz Kafka had discovered that Don Quixote was a magnificent invention of Sancho Panza, who thus became a man free to follow the adventures of the knight errant, without hurting anybody.

And finally, in his *Pierre Menard Author of Don Quixote*, Jorge Luis Borges tells us that it suffices to re-write Cervantes' novel, word by word, but in a different time and with a different

intention, in order to recreate it.

A different time.

Cervantes lived his age: the decadent Spain of the last Hapsburgs, Philip III and the devaluation of money, the fall of the economy due to the successive expulsion of the industrious Jewish and Arab populations, the compulsion to disguise Hebrew or Moorish origins leading to a society of brittle masks, the lack of efficient administrators for a far-flung empire, the flight of the gold and silver of the Indies to the mercantile powerhouses of Northern Europe. A Spain of urchins and beggars, hollow gestures, cruel aristocrats, ruined roads, shabby inns and broken-down gentlemen who, in another, more vigorous age, might have conquered Mexico and sailed the Caribbean and brought the first universities and the first printing presses to the New World: the fabulous energy of Spain in the invention of America.

Cervantes and the other great writers of Spain's Golden Age truly demonstrate that literature can give the society what history has drained from the society.

"Where are the birds of yesteryear?" sighs Don Quixote as he lays dying.

They are dead and stuffed, which is why Don Quixote has to give his novel the renewed flight of the eagle, the wing-span of the albatross.

As Cervantes responded to the degraded society of his time with the triumph of the critical imagination, we too, face a degraded society and must reflect upon it as it seeps into our lives, surrounds us and, even, casts us upon the perennial situation of responding to the passage of history with the passion of literature.

We are aware of the danger of postponing the human agendas as the 21st. Century begins.

Military spending exceeds by far investment in health, education and development.

The urgent demands of women, the aged, the young are left to chance.

The offenses against nature multiply. In Heaven, wrote Borges, to conserve and to create are synonymous verbs. On Earth, they have become enemies.

The root causes of terror are left unattended. Terror can not be the answer to terror, but rather better intelligence, democratic governance and socioeconomic development, while strengthening cultural identity, in nations long subject to authoritarian and colonial rule.

International values won with critical perseverance and sacrifice --human rights, diplomacy, multilateralism, primacy of the law-- are assailed by the blind haste of unilateralism, preventive war and the blind pride that "precedes destruction" (Proverbs, 16: 18).

Sometimes our answer to these realities is passive beatitude. There are those who believe that we live in the best of all possible worlds because they have been told that the indispensable is impossible.

But on the other hand, we are assailed by the agitated though passive fear of latent

Apocalypse when, as Goethe put it, “God ceases to love his creatures and must destroy it all and begin all over again”.

Space has capitulated. Thanks to the image, we can be everywhere instantly.

But time has pulverized, breaking down into images that are in danger of refusing us both the imagination of the past and the memory of the future.

We can become the slaves of hypnotic images that we have not chosen.

We can become cheerful robots amusing ourselves to death.

I believe that these are realities that should move us to affirm that language is the foundation of culture, the door of experience, the roof of the imagination, the basement of memory, the bedchamber of love and, above all, the window open to the air of doubt, uncertainty and questioning.

I find, in all great novels, a human project, call it passion, love, liberty, justice, inviting us to actualize it to make it real, even if we know that it is doomed to fail.

Quixote knows he fails, as do Pere Goriot and Anna Karenina and Prince Myshkin. But only through the consciousness, implicit or explicit, of such failure, do they save, and help us save, the nature of life itself, human existence and its values as lived and proposed and remembered by all the ages, all the races, all the families of humankind, without alienating themselves to an illusion of unending, certified progress and felicity.

After the experiences of the past century, we can not ignore the tragic exceptions to happiness and progress that humankind constantly encounters.

In *Light in August*, William Faulkner opposes and embraces two dissimilar characters, the mature nymphomaniac Joanna Burden and her young Black lover, Joe Christmas.

Christmas is an agent of freedom. But he knows that his liberty is limited, even prometheical. He feels like an eagle, hard, powerful, remorseless, sufficient. But that sensation passes and then he realizes that his skin is his prison. Joanna Burden wishes, in possession of Joe’s body, to condemn herself, not forever but just a bit more:

“Don’t make me pray, God”, she pleads. “Let me condemn myself just a bit longer”.

These are but two of the Faulknerian cast that discover in love the tragic nature of both freedom and destiny. In Faulkner, knowing that we are capable of resisting means that we are also capable, in certain moments, of victory.

I highlight this tragic and time-resisting truth in Faulkner because I find it essential to the very heart-beat of the novel: Freedom is tragic because it is conscious both of its necessity and of its boundaries.

“I do not hope for victory”, writes Kafka. “Struggle in itself is not blissful, except in the measure that it is the only thing that I can do ... Perhaps I will finally surrender, not to the

struggle, but to the joy of the struggle”.

“Between pain and nothing, I choose pain”, Faulkner famously said, adding: “Man will prevail”.

And is this not, perhaps, the truth of the novel?

Humankind will prevail and it will prevail because, in spite of the accidents of history, the novel tells us that art restores the life in us that was disregarded by the haste of history.

Literature makes real what history forgot. And because history has been what was, literature will offer what history has not always been.

That is why we will never witness --bar universal catastrophe-- the end of history.

Compare then, the words of Franz Kafka and William Faulkner to the half-baked notions of the end of history and the clash of civilizations.

I speak as a writer in the Spanish language from a continent that is Iberian, Indian and Mestizo, Black and Mulatto, Atlantic and Pacific, Mediterranean and Caribbean, Christian, Arab and Jewish, Greek and Latin.

If I am faithful to the accomplishments but above all to the purposes, to the attainments as well as to the possibilities of my own culture, I can not accept that we live in a clash of civilizations because all those that I have evoked are mine, not clashing, but talking, speaking to one another, disputing in order to understand, communicating in my very soul the relativity of both triumphalism and dejection, the need to venture what will never perish even if it has fallen back --my ancient Indian and Islamic cultures-- and to earn what thinks of itself as permanent --the Western, Christian strains of my being beyond their present sufficiency-- and to celebrate the meeting place of all of them, the place of speech and thought and memory and imagination that each one of us carries with him and her, asking us to participate in a dialog of civilizations and to deny the end of history.

For how can history end as long as we have not said our last word?