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Research Article

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Cervantes, the Journey, and What it Tells Us About Becoming a Writer

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Abstract: The article traces the notion of empathy in fiction writing and how Cervantes's treatment of characters in *Don Quixote* initiated a tradition which is ongoing in literature even today. The path of the writer is examined as a means for understanding how a writer must develop empathy for others, beginning with quotes from writers Hélène Cixous and Henry James. Next, within the current political context of global upheaval and shift following on from the election of Donald Trump as president of the U.S.A. as well as the vote for Brexit in the U.K., the article argues for the relevance of Cervantes's novel, not as a dated work of fiction, but as a text relevant both in form and in content for the modern political climate. Finally, the connection is made between fiction writers' ability to feel empathy for others and create characters which readers will feel empathy for. The article follows on to proclaim the revolutionary and timely role of the fiction writer to help save us from ourselves in a tumultuous political landscape made unpredictable by social media-generated confirmation bias and insularity.

Keywords: Cervantes, fiction, writer's Journey, Don Quixote, empathy

Writing is learning to die. It's learning not to be afraid, in other words, to live at the extremity of life, which is what the dead, death, give us—Hélène Cixous

Everyone thinks writers must know more about the inside of the human head, but that is wrong. They know less, that's why they write. Trying to find out what everyone else takes for granted—Margaret Atwood

By the time Cervantes began *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*, he had been living at the “extremity of life” for decades. A cripple from his time in the war, poor and in debt despite his service to his country, Cervantes had long been on the path of extremity French writer Hélène Cixous describes. He had learned to die, learned not to be afraid. He transformed his own disappointment and failure into a new kind of writing, a new way of examining and understanding human interaction. William Egginton argues in his recent book, *The Man Who Invented Fiction: How Cervantes Ushered in the Modern World*, that Cervantes did what no other writer had been able to do in that his “prose brings into relief his characters’ emotions, their embarrassment, their fear, their desire to pull the wool over each other’s eyes, and their rueful responses when they fail” (17). It is a grand claim, and one perhaps argued against by contemporary critics, but Cervantes’s humour—as well as the readers’ empathy for the characters he creates—does seem to lie in the evocation of human emotions, the interplay of reality and the perception of reality. His failures, his living at the “extremity of life” for so many years provided Cervantes plenty of fodder for observing reality and the (mis)perceptions of it, for observing reality and our ideals. J. M. Cohen explains in his introduction to the translation of the Penguin Classics edition that, despite his hardships, Cervantes was not a social critic.

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Nor, despite his frequent shafts of satire against officials and ecclesiastics, can we think of Cervantes as a social critic. . . [T]here can be no reason to suppose that he saw the action [of officials and ecclesiastics] in the light of history, as an act of arbitrary cruelty which robbed Spain of an industrious and valuable population. The age of the Counter Reformation was on one of social protests, and Cervantes was by no means peculiar in confining himself to satire against individual corruptions rather than against a system which had once and for all suppressed such protestant and bourgeois criticism as had arisen. (15-16)

So, rather than seeing Cervantes's work as an intention to "take down the system," perhaps it's more accurate to acknowledge that he was poking fun at individuals. This is the realm of the storyteller, and this is also the aim of modern writers who try to elicit empathy in the reader for the characters in a story because, as Nicholas Kristof explains in the brilliant documentary *The Reporter*, we cannot understand the suffering or injustice endured by hundreds or thousands, but rather, we can understand the suffering of the individual. This is how all the best stories are told. And the best stories are often told by those who have suffered.

In *The Man Who Invented Fiction*, Egginton attempts to explain how the process by which Cervantes's experience as a soldier played an integral part in the interplay of reality and perception, the beginning steps that lead to Cervantes penning the complex, individual characters we now have come to think of as typical in modern fiction:

[w]hile he was proud of his own service, by the time he published *Don Quixote*, Cervantes had long been disabused of any expectation that honourable feats in war bring just deserts in life. In his writing, though, he translated this disappointment into a theme that animates his entire literary production: the inevitable and irresolvable clash between ideals and reality, a clash now sewn into the fabric of everything we recognize as fiction. (58)

And what is it that we "recognize as fiction"? Narrative prose, yes. Characters, setting, plot. A story. Yes. Is fiction true in some way? Of course. Unlike histories, unlike nonfiction, though fiction isn't required to declare itself true in any way at all. But in order to write any kind of "truth," must a person learn to die as Hélène Cixous proclaims? Or, could it be a bit less extreme, perhaps as American writer Flannery O'Connor suggests, that "[a]nybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days"? (*Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*) I propose that it lies somewhere in between, and that the path to becoming a writer is, yes, unique to each individual, but if we look closely, we see a commonality among writers, and upon looking, we begin to recognize how relevant, how crucial, Cervantes's journey is to us today.

In my university prose writing workshops, inevitably students will submit stories told from the point of view of a character from a different country than their own, a different gender or social class. This lies in contradiction to the adage among writers to "write what you know." This statement is often attributed to American writer Henry James. In fact, James's paper *The Art of Fiction* is actually arguing with another writer, Mr Walter Besant, who prescribes that one should only write within the limits of his own experience. In response to Mr. Besant's claim, Henry James writes this:

[t]he power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life, in general, so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it—this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience, and they occur in country and in town, and in the most differing stages of education. If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions are experience, just as (have we not seen it?) they are the very air we breathe. Therefore, if I should certainly say to a novice, "Write from experience, and experience only," I should feel that this was a rather tantalising monition if I were not careful immediately to add, "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!" (Para. 6)

This final exhortation is the key for fiction writers—if your world does not include a particular kind of character or setting or moment, observe the world around you so that you may be able to write it in a convincing way. In my university workshop, when a British student presents a story about an American living in Los Angeles, I gently but firmly suggest that they are able to write in a much more nuanced, complex way about their own culture, their own geography. They know so much more about their own

direct experiences than those they've only heard second-hand. Then I suggest, if I cannot talk them out of writing a story set in the States, that they travel to the US and observe directly themselves what it's like to live in L.A., not take bits and pieces from films and TV episodes produced in the States to cobble together a story. Next, though, I tell the students that actually, I believe the highest calling of the fiction writer is to be able to imagine the world of another, to have empathy for that other, and to endeavour to write it on the page in such a way that readers will then also have empathy.

The reader is able to walk a mile in someone else's shoes because of the efforts of the fiction writer, and we have Cervantes to thank for this. His *Don Quixote* and his Sancho Panza, in their misguided and often hilarious conversations about chivalrous knights and windmills and helmets and what is real and what is not, show us, the reader, what it is to struggle as a human, to understand the world around us and not just mock it or fight it or cower in defeat. And even though this tradition is begun some 400+ years ago, it actually matters to us now more than it did in Cervantes's time.

As an American, I am painfully aware of how the political landscape is shifting, not just in my country, but in the world. The immense swing of the pendulum from liberal to conservative is happening as we speak, as we eat and sleep and get on with our daily lives. Now, more than ever, we must be "one of those on whom nothing is lost," not in the sense of George Orwell's "Big Brother," watching and reporting, but rather in the sense of Cervantes, of seeing the inconsistencies within ourselves, within others, illustrating those faults and making light of them, yes, through stories, but also allowing our readers to empathize with and make sense of those who are entirely different than us, who may seem irrational in these swiftly changing times, but who, to themselves, are perfectly rational in their reaction to an economics that has become less and less in their favour. The rhetoric of the U.S. presidential campaign was polarising from the start, and it intensified through the last several months. Then, with the daily announcements of cabinet appointments, the "us and them" lens became sharper and sharper until it seemed there is no other way to view the situation.

But we must look to Cervantes, to his keen powers of observation and to his revolutionary way of describing how characters try to make sense of the real and the imagined to understand the world today and how it is changing. It is fiction—the way that fiction works in the modern world as a result of Cervantes's innovation—that will shield us from the trap of thinking we can only choose one side or the other. In our modern, social-media saturated world, we are more likely than ever to surround ourselves with those who talk like us, look like us, think like us. Confirmation bias—the reinforcement of our own worldview via the words of those with whom we surround ourselves—lures us into a further entrenchment of our own beliefs. We think "we" are right and "they" are in the minority and surely wrong. Fiction addresses this: it exposes us, the reader, in a deep, intimate way to the "other," and also to supposing a world as it might exist, allowing us the space to imagine "what if" while the stakes are still relatively low. As Eggington suggests, fiction has shaped our very way of thinking, of being in the world: "We think by connecting and relating ideas to one another, by entertaining and rejecting hypotheticals; by learning to distinguish the real from the imaginary, the existent from the possible, yes, but *from the vantage of the imaginary and possible worlds*, not from a preordained or given reality" (9 italics the author's).

Joseph Campbell, a scholar of comparative mythology, influenced a generation of writers of all kinds with his theory of the hero's journey. George Lucas, the writer of *Star Wars*, based his film characters' lives on the multiple stages of the hero's journey as described by Campbell. Many stories are structured in this way, including *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and I would argue, *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*. In the classic arc of the hero's journey, there is the ordinary world, a call to adventure, the possible refusal of the call, the meeting with the mentor, crossing of the threshold, tests, the ordeal, the reward, and then the return (Vogler 205). In the return to the world, the hero carries the elixir in his hands, the boon, but how to cross back over the threshold without the hard-one gift turning to ash?

Matsuo Bashō, a zen poet of the 17th century, is one of the most revered of Japanese *haiku* poets. He wrote *haibun*, including *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, which are travel narratives that include a mix of prose and poetry. When Bashō was a young man, he entered into the service of the Tōdō family as a page, and when the young heir he served, Yoshitada, died at the age of twenty-five, Bashō resigned his service and ran away to Kyoto. He wandered for years until finally settling in Edo where he met a prominent

poet, Sōin (Yuasa 20-1). The death, the wandering, the meeting with the mentor which leads to powerful, innovative writing, these are all markers of the hero's journey, the writer's journey. An essential ingredient to all of this is that the writer becomes an outsider, to his family, to his culture. He begins to see the world from the other side once he walks through the threshold, and if he is lucky, he brings back the elixir, the gift of seeing the world, seeing ourselves, in a new way.

One way to think of the journey is to begin at the beginning, the death, or "learning to die" that Hélène Cixous says is the writer's initiation. Cervantes's initiation, or rather *initiations*, include banishment from his homeland after a duel and capture by Barbary pirates followed by five years of captivity (Egginton xx). Over the course of his life, despite his exemplary military service, Cervantes endured humiliation and defeat. However, he wrought these experiences into something instructive, something humorous and wise. He critiqued human foibles, the laws of the time, the king, even, through the mouths of his characters. It is only a mad knight errant and his squire speaking nonsense, it is the fool's chattering. But it is the truth as only fiction can present it. Vogler equates the writer with the shaman, claiming that his words have the power to heal. "Shamans have been called 'the wounded healers'. Like writers, they are special people set apart from the rest by their dreams, visions, or unique experiences. . . . Many writers come to their craft only after they have been shattered by life in some way" (294). And some of those writers, those shamans, their writing is so powerful it echoes down through generations and continues to guide us in the times when we need it most. "Our stories have the power to heal, to make the world new again, to give people metaphors by which they can better understand their own lives" (Vogler 295). Writers must walk the long journey, and, if we are lucky, they return, like Bashō, like Cervantes, and they give us the golden elixir, the insight into the other through an imagined world of "what if" that just may be the thing that keeps us all alive in the uncertain times ahead.

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