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# Laughing Matters: Reading, *Gusto*, and Narrative Entrapment in *Don Quixote*

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There is nothing outside of the text.

—Derrida (158)



Some eighty years ago José Ortega y Gasset posed two fundamental questions that have since divided a large portion of cervantine scholarship: “¿Se burla Cervantes? ¿Y de qué se burla?” (167). Many critics now agree that Cervantes was joking. For example, James Parr’s recent book, *Don Quixote: An Anatomy of Subversive Discourse*, makes a convincing case for viewing the *Quixote* as a menippean satire. But an adequate response to Ortega’s second question remains elusive and controversial. In a well-known essay from 1958, Oscar Mandel summarizes the positions of two major critical camps formed around opposing answers to the question:

A “soft” school regards Don Quixote as the hero as well as the protagonist of the novel, and the world of windmills and Yangue-sans as the “villain” or, at any rate, the butt of Cervantes’ real satire. [ . . . ] Hardheaded readers who distrust *Schwärmerei* have steadily opposed all these interpretations. Don Quixote remains for them, in spite of his nobility, the butt of the satire. (154, 155)

The debate is encapsulated in the title of John Jay Allen's brief but influential book: *Don Quixote, Hero or Fool?*

Despite its date, Mandel's essay remains a valid characterization of a large portion of cervantine criticism. While more and more scholars have begun to concentrate on stylistic and aesthetic considerations, as indicated by the subtitle of Allen's book (*A Study in Narrative Technique*), few refrain from offering their opinion regarding the so-called ethical status of the protagonist and, in most cases, their judgement falls into one of the two categories described by Mandel.<sup>1</sup>

Both the hard and soft camps of *Quixote* criticism have presented well-documented theses and the tension between their positions attests not to the error of either but rather to the dense, polysemic nature of their object of analysis. Nevertheless, examining the *Quixote* from the narrow, kierkegaardian vantage point of "either/or" produces an excessively myopic reading that is not justified by any obvious methodological criteria. Furthermore, the surface difference between the two camps tends to conceal deeper structural similarities that are ultimately complicitous with the fictionalized ethical hierarchy that Cervantes constructs within his narrative world. A deconstruction of the opposition between hard and soft cervantine criticism will thus serve as a point of departure for revealing and questioning the pervasive logic that both underlies the *Quixote's* narrative structures and informs a large segment of its metadiscourses.

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In an essay published four years after Mandel's, Leo Spitzer, perhaps unknowingly, offers a major clue for getting beneath the division between the hard and soft camps: "It was the deed of a genius to visualize, as Cervantes did, the danger inherent in what is one of the basic tools of our civilization: reading" (86). Regarding the *Quixote*, "reading" naturally includes not only those who are literate but also those who are read to, as the epigraph to chapter 66 of part 2 suggests: "Que trata de lo que verá el que lo leyere, o lo oirá el que lo escuchare leer" (541). In this sense, all the main characters of the novel are readers, from Don Quixote, the object of ridicule according to the hard critics, to the priest, the barber, the innkeeper, the duke and duchess, Don Antonio, in short, all of those who the soft critics believe to be the author's real target. Spitzer's comment, when taken seriously and ap-

<sup>1</sup> See Mancing 122–25 for a concise survey of the two camps.

plied to the whole of the novel, suggests that Cervantes's playful satire is directed not only at the readers within the bounds of the book but also at those outside its periphery, whose only access to the inside is precisely through the process of reading. In utilizing this "basic tool of our civilization," all those who approach the text are forced to commit the same *disparates* as the protagonist.

Echoing Spitzer, Ruth El Saffar observes in a brilliant analysis that "*Don Quixote* is in many ways a lesson in reading. All the major characters are drawn into the story by virtue of their interest in imaginatively involving themselves in the lives of others or in ideas which carry them away from their daily routine" (117). She notes how the amount of control exercised by the readers or spectators within the novel is directly proportionate to the amount of critical distance that they are able to maintain between themselves and the objects of their observation. Furthermore, this critical distance inevitably breaks down:

It will be clear again and again throughout the novel, in both the major and the minor characters, that a loss of control of the sense of distance between the imagined and the lived world results in a loss of that character's control over his own actions and over those of the characters about him. (23)

But a curious parallel occurs between the readers inside the text (in the imagined world) and those outside its boundaries (in the lived world): "The reader [outside the text], while being privileged to peer into this kaleidoscope where characters successively become spectators, authors and actors in a world seemingly of their own making, also falls subject to authorial manipulation" (118). The manipulation consists of the reader's being so enticed by the charm of the narrative as to forget, even for a second, its fictional status and, consequently, to be drawn into the imagined world. As Bruce Wardropper states, Cervantes, "in seeking to undermine the reader's critical faculty, is carrying mimesis to its logical end; he is trying to make his reader participate in his hero's madness" (6).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Several critics have noted other parallels between the readers in and out of the text. For example, Riley observes that "No one can have failed to notice the readiness of Cervantine characters to tell and to listen to tales. They are an agreeable pastime for the audiences in the novels as well as the reader" (84), and Mancing insists that "The most important secondary characters of part II share with the critics discussed in I, 20, the inability to see the Don Quijote who stands before them; they continue to react to the Don Quijote of the early chapters of part I. [ . . . ] Cervantes has managed to merge reality and fiction on still another level" (188).

Nevertheless, most critics base their analyses of the novel upon a hierarchical distinction between “good” and “bad” reading. In doing so they imply that there is some lesson to be learned from the *Quixote* which will prevent an erosion of the critical distance between reader and text so crucial for El Saffar. Wardropper concludes that Cervantes’s “chief butt was man’s gullibility—gullibility about alleged historical facts” (10). The choice of the word “gullibility” reveals the underlying assumption that the good readers or *discretos*, in other words the less gullible ones, will not make the same mistake of total identification with the text that Don Quixote and the other “naive” readers or *vulgos* have made. James Parr, for his part, declares plainly that one of the “ancillary targets” of Cervantes’s satire was “bad readers” (134). Finally, El Saffar states that

*Unless* reminded of the distance separating him from the events narrated, the reader on the outside may come to think himself involved in the magic world set before him, first identifying with the spectators, then with the actors in the drama. But the reader, too, *must learn* to master the balance between suspension and judgement. (118, my emphasis)

In insisting that the reader “must learn” a certain critical technique, El Saffar, along with the other critics cited above, offers an implicit apology for a valorized hierarchy of reading.<sup>3</sup>

Many critics have noted and even admired the *Quixote*’s ambiguous epistemology and unstable distinctions between such traditional binaries as history/fiction (Wardropper), literature/life (Riley), lived/imagined (El Saffar). In light of these observations, it might seem surprising to note the affirmation of such black and white categories as good and bad readers. In fact, however, this quasimetaphysical distinction establishes the very preconditions for debate between the hard and soft camps of *Quixote* scholarship, since the putative argument for or against the knight’s sanity depends in large measure on how his literary skills are judged. Furthermore, in a supremely quixotic gesture, the distinction between good and bad reading is carried beyond the content of the novel insofar as critics

<sup>3</sup> See also Haley, who observes that “in proposing to discredit the chivalric novel, Cervantes does not suggest that we not read chivalric novels, but only that we read them *properly* for what they are, outlandish and sometimes beautiful lies, fiction rather than history” (164, my emphasis). Hart, commenting on Haley’s remark, adds that “*Don Quixote* is an *attack on a way of reading*—not just of reading the romances of chivalry, but of reading itself” (130, my emphasis).

use it among themselves to establish a mechanism of exclusion by which opposing views are labeled naive and rendered invalid. By exposing the inner logic of this mechanism the present study will demonstrate its intimate relation to the complex narratological and aesthetic questions of the *Quixote*.

The opposition between good and bad reading is predicated on the deeply seated binary of inside versus outside, evident in the term "distance" that El Saffar and others so frequently use. Cervantes tacitly acknowledges a difference between inside and outside in *Don Quixote* only to undo that difference in an act of narrative wizardry which leaves his readers deeply implicated in the very structures that they criticize. In three simple but devastating steps, he first demonstrates to the readers of the novel, through the example of Don Quixote and the other fictional readers, the consequences of reading; he then entices them to engage in the activity anyway; and finally, he makes sport of them for doing so.

For those who distinguish between good and bad readers, Don Quixote is a prime example of the latter, unable to see the boundary between the fantasy world of his library and the prosaic reality outside its walls. So addicted he became to his novels of chivalry that he sacrificed everything for the *gusto* that they provided: "se daba a leer libros de caballerías con tanta afición y *gusto*, que olvidó casi de todo punto el ejercicio de la caza, y aun la administración de su hacienda" (71; pt. 1, ch. 1). The notion of *gusto* is of crucial importance in Cervantes's strategies of framing the reader and can be traced back to one of the two chief functions of poetry—the delightful—according to Horace's *Ars Poetica*.<sup>4</sup> For E. C. Riley, this preoccupation with *gusto* or entertainment involved "a subtle shift of attention towards the reader's requirements and reactions" (82). In the first half of part 1 Don Quixote reacts to the interpolated tales with the same *gusto* with which he read the novels of chivalry:

DQ to Pedro the goatherd: —En cuidado me lo tengo [. . .] y agradézcoos el *gusto* que me habéis dado con la narración de tan sabroso cuento (167; 1, 12);

DQ to Cardenio: porque no le tuviera tan bueno como vos, señor, le habéis pintado, si careciera del *gusto* de tan sabrosa leyenda (297; 1, 24).

<sup>4</sup>The delightful is opposed to the other chief function of imaginative literature for Horace, the instructive: "Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae / aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere vitae" (333–34).

*Gusto* is one of the crucial factors in maintaining Don Quixote's chivalric delusions: when he is pleased by the narrative techniques of those whom he encounters, his fantasy world is reaffirmed. In the second half of part 1, which corresponds, in Howard Mancing's view, to the beginning of the end for Don Quixote, it is not surprising that there is a telling lack of *gusto* in his reactions.

Meanwhile, it becomes readily apparent that the knight is not the only character motivated by *gusto*. Early in part 1 the reader learns that a mysterious "second author" was so disappointed with the original manuscript's unfinished ending that he resolved to hunt down the continuation himself: "Causóme esto mucha pesadumbre, porque el *gusto* de haber leído tan poco se volvía en *disgusto*, de pensar el mal camino que se ofrecía para hallar lo mucho que, a mi parecer, faltaba de tan sabroso cuento" (140; 1, 8). Ruth El Saffar comments on this scene that

The Second Author, of all the readers of Don Quixote's deeds whose reactions are staged in the novel, is most sympathetic with the ambitions and intentions of the hero. He clearly believes in the historical existence of Don Quixote, and is as likely as Don Quixote himself to confuse historical with literary characters. It is his very credulity and involvement in the character of Don Quixote that makes him most likely actively to pursue the lost manuscript, for he has no doubts that the famous Don Quixote's records exist somewhere. (40–41)

Parr sees the second author in a similar light:

This second author is obtuse and impercipient, for he fails completely to grasp the ironic, negative attitude of the first narrator or the fact that the main character is so transparently a mock-hero. He is, I am tempted to say, the first of an illustrious line of Romantic readers, the first of that school of well-intentioned, humanistic, charitable commentators who quixotically impose their humane and positive perspective upon an ironic fictional world. (13)

Both El Saffar and Parr see the second author's naive *gusto* received from reading *Don Quixote* as a reaction that the intelligent, distanced reader may and should avoid. But beneath the second author's supposed innocence lie the snares of a trap set for all readers, naive and intelligent alike, a trap constructed from the desire to be entertained.

It turns out, in fact, that almost all the characters in both parts of the novel are very fond of books of chivalry and tend to lose themselves in the same *gusto* as Don Quixote when reading or hearing a narration. Don Quixote's notable lack of *gusto* in the second half of part 1 is thus amply replaced by that of his companions:

A esto le respondió [a Cardenio] el cura que no sólo no se cansaba en oírle, sino que les daba mucho *gusto* las menudencias que contaba, por ser tales, que merecían no pasarse en silencio [ . . . ] (338; 1, 27);

the innkeeper: Porque cuando es tiempo de la siega, se recogen aquí, las fiestas, muchos segadores, y siempre hay algunos que saben leer, el cual coge uno destos libros en las manos, y rodeámonos dél más de treinta, y estámosle escuchando con tanto *gusto*, que nos quita mil canas [ . . . ] (393; 1, 32);

Sosegados todos, el cura quiso acabar de leer la novela, porque vio que faltaba poco. Cardenio, Dorotea y todos los demás le rogaron que la acabase. Él, que a todos quiso dar *gusto*, y por el que él tenía de leerla, prosiguió el cuento (441; 1, 35);

[Dorotea], con breves y discretas razones, contó todo lo que antes había contado a Cardenio; de lo cual *gustó* tanto don Fernando y los que con él venían, que quisieran que durara el cuento más tiempo [ . . . ] (455; 1, 36);

Don Fernando to the captive: Por cierto, señor capitán, [ . . . ] es de tal manera el *gusto* que hemos recibido en escuchalle, que aunque nos hallara el día de mañana entretenidos en el mismo cuento, holgáramos que de nuevo se comenzara (514; 1, 42);

General *gusto* causó el cuento del cabrero a todos los que escuchado le habían; especialmente le recibió el canónigo, que con extraña curiosidad notó la manera con que le había contado [ . . . ] (596; 1, 52).

By inserting so many supposedly bad readers into his text in part 1—readers who, like Don Quixote, completely identify with the narrative world and against whom the “good” readers oppose themselves—Cervantes fills the latter with a false sense of security, elevating them to a pedestal from which he will topple them in part 2.

Beginning with the prologue, the frame of part 1 reinforces the false sense of security that its contents produce: “Todo lo cual te esenta y hace libre de todo respecto y obligación, y así, puedes decir de la historia todo aquello que te pareciere, sin temor que te calunien por el mal ni te premien por el bien que dijeres della” (51). Cervantes’s honeyed treatment of his readers, whom he addresses as “carísimo[s],” seems to be at odds with the insults that his contemporaries such as Alemán and Quevedo frequently hurled at their public. Nevertheless, it forms the beginning of a well-laid trap that seduces the readers into doing exactly what they have seen by example can have such catastrophic consequences.

The frame of part 1 closes with the following verse from Ariosto, which reappears in the first chapter of part 2: “Forsi altro canterà con miglior plectio.” The humble sounding verse cited in bad Italian

completes the bait set for the readers in part 1 and entices them to assume precisely the role of the second author of chapter 8: to lose themselves in the *gusto* of the narration to such a degree as to reinvent part 1 to their own liking or, even more daringly, to imagine its sequel. The frame of part 1 as a whole serves to lure the readers gradually into its boundaries, to lull them into an act of complicity with a text that simultaneously bombards them with the baneful consequences of complicity.

After demonstrating the disastrous and at the same time laughable effects of reading in part 1, Cervantes steps up his campaign of framing the reader in part 2. Referring to the physical impossibility, unquestioned by most readers, of the fictionalized printing of ten thousand copies of part 1 in the month or so of narrative time between part 1 and part 2, Allen notes that "Cervantes seduces the reader into acquiescing in a wholly untenable perspective. [. . .] Is it not much easier to identify with Don Quixote if one has, however superficially, shared his delusions?" (1, 78). Still, Allen clearly views this move as a mistake on the part of the readers, something that they could have avoided had they been more cautious. Likewise, Bruce Wardropper declares that "[Cervantes] chose to satirize human credulity in a dangerous way: by encouraging, by seeking to some extent to cultivate, in his reader the very defect he was ridiculing" (6). Since he believes the "defect" to be gullibility, Wardropper implies that the wise (that is, non-gullible) reader can avoid the trap although the going may prove "dangerous."

Wardropper's analysis is penetrating and clearly signals the stakes involved in reading the *Quixote*, yet the present study disagrees with the use of the word "defect." The trap that Cervantes lays for the reader is unavoidable precisely because it is inherent in the nature of reading and *gusto*. Even as critics, we read because, at some level or another, like Don Quixote and like all of the other readers of part 1 whom we prefer to call naive, we derive pleasure from it. Our heartfelt laughter on reading the novel is a testament to this pleasure. P. E. Russell has convincingly shown that for Cervantes's contemporaries the *Quixote* sought primarily to evoke "that boisterous laughter from the spectator which Cervantes so frequently describes" (312). Although some of the objects of satire may have lost meaning for the twentieth-century reader, no one would deny that there are moments, in both part 1 and part 2, of overwhelming joviality. This laughter betrays any supposed critical distance that one may hope to achieve. As soon as we release the first snicker, we have fallen into Cervantes's trap: we have, in spite of ourselves and in

spite of the scores of “naive” readers of part 1, willingly suspended our critical disbelief, lost control over the object in front of us. And as soon as we pick up part 2 because we so enjoyed part 1, we are responding to and exposing our own motivation for *gusto*.<sup>5</sup>

After Cervantes has successfully led the reader into the trap of part 2, all that remains for him is to sit back and enjoy his work. He makes fun of the *Quixote*'s real-world readers by mirroring their reactions within the text. It is highly significant that the majority of appearances of the word *gusto* in the second part of the novel come not from Don Quixote's reactions to those around him but rather from their interaction with him and Sancho Panza:

[el cura], *gustando* de oírle decir [a don Quijote] tan grandes disparates, [ . . . ] (51; 2, 1);

Sansón to DQ: Finalmente, la tal historia [part 1] es del más *gustoso* y menos perjudicial entretenimiento que hasta agora se haya visto [ . . . ] (64; 2, 3);

[los duques], por haber leído la primera parte desta historia y haber entendido por ella el disparatado humor de don Quijote, con grandísimo *gusto* y con deseo de conocerle le atendían, con presupuesto de seguirle el humor [ . . . ] (270; 2, 30);

Con estos razonamientos, *gustosos* a todos sino a don Quijote [ . . . ] (276; 2, 31);

Grande era el *gusto* que recibían el duque y la duquesa de la conversación de don Quijote y de la de Sancho Panza [ . . . ] (304; 2, 34);

[Roque Guinart opinó] que las locuras y discreciones de don Quijote y los donaires de su escudero Sancho Panza no podían dejar de dar *gusto* a todo el mundo (505; 2, 60);

Don Antonio: ¿No veis, señor, que no podría llegar el provecho que cause la cordura de don Quijote a lo que llega el *gusto* que da con sus desvaríos? (536; 2, 65);

De aquí tomó ocasión el duque de hacerle aquella burla: tanto era lo que *gustaba* de las cosas de Sancho y de don Quijote [ . . . ] (564; 2, 70).<sup>6</sup>

Through the reactions of the readers in the text, Cervantes mirrors and mocks those outside its boundaries. Riley has conjectured

<sup>5</sup> The gradual identification of the reader with Don Quixote that Allen and others have skillfully pointed out, if valid, would be another way that Cervantes succeeds in undermining the reader's critical distance.

<sup>6</sup> Similar reactions actually begin to appear in the second half of part 1: “No quisieron [el cura y el barbero] cansarse en sacarle del error en que estaba pareciéndoles que, pues no le dañaba nada la conciencia, mejor era dejarle en él, y a ellos les sería de más *gusto* oír sus necesidades” (325; 1, 26); “Agradeciéronselo [a

Cervantes's "definitive statement" on the function of the novel to be that "imaginative literature (the writing as well as the reading of it) is a relief from work and a solace from care. By agreeably occupying the mind, literature for the time being releases it from toils and troubles" (86–87). Even so, mixed in with this philosophy is a "trace of that tendency, inherited from the Middle Ages and still very prevalent in the Renaissance, to treat poetry as a mere pastime, and to excuse oneself for wasting one's time on such juvenile frivolities" (82); after all, by the one "absolute" measure of literature, "only sacred writings and devotional works were absolutely beneficial; in comparison with these the rest must be trivial" (83). The combination of these conflicting views of literature produced the brilliant trap that is the *Quixote*. First using the novel to lure the readers away from the drudgery of their daily routines, in the same way that Don Quixote "olvidó casi de todo punto el ejercicio de la caza, y aun la administración de su hacienda," Cervantes then punishes and mocks them for engaging in such idle pursuits.

Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda was the first and most famous of the outside readers to fall into the trap. Inspired to write the sequel to part 1 of the *Quixote*, he found himself in the authentic part 2 converted into a ridiculous fictional character to be eternally laughed at by all readers. But each of us, in a way, shares his fate. For we critics too delight in the actions of Don Quixote, and the *gusto* that we receive from him is the same *gusto* that he derived from his romances, for which we are so quick to call him naive. One of the most rigorous ironies of the novel is that laughing at the Caballero de la Triste Figura necessarily implies laughing at ourselves: the logical but unsettling culmination of the famous *burladores burlados* theme.

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Returning to Ortega's second question, one is forced to conclude that the joke is on everyone: a conclusion that radically disrupts the debate

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Don Quijote] los que le conocían, y dieron al oidor cuenta del humor extraño de don Quijote, de que no poco *gusto* recibió" (520; 1, 43). This type of response occurs with notably increasing frequency, however, in part 2. Mancing does an admirable job of showing how the initiative in seeking chivalric adventures is slowly ceded by Don Quixote to those around him. Not surprisingly, the transfer of roles begins to occur in the second half of part 1 (when *gusto* first begins to disappear from Don Quixote's reactions) and gains force above all in part 2 (where there is a critical lack of *gusto*).

between the hard and soft critics. Riley has suggested that Cervantes "betrays in various ways that he ideally envisages satisfying both the *discretos* and the *vulgos*" (113). The *Quixote* is proof positive that he achieved this ideal, as both *discretos* and *vulgos* become caught in the quixotic trap whose bait is precisely satisfaction or *gusto* itself. For critics in particular, the delight produced by reading the *Quixote* encourages us to study the novel, yet any critical distance that we attempt to maintain between ourselves and the text is inevitably compromised and ultimately destroyed by the same delight.

With this impeccable formula Cervantes creates a foolproof, or one might say critic-proof, trap that catches us all in its satirical web as it seamlessly undoes the oppositions between hard and soft, good and bad, inside and outside. Possessing knowledge of this internal logic will certainly not exempt us from its influence, for as Derrida's now notorious aphorism suggests, it is impossible to extricate ourselves completely from the structures that we criticize. Yet a heightened awareness of the unsettling logic of the *Quixote* and a scrupulous attention to its workings will undoubtedly illuminate previously unnoticed features of Cervantes's inexhaustible satire.<sup>7</sup>

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