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# The Route of Writing

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# The Route of Writing

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Mary S. Gossy

*El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quixote de La Mancha*<sup>1</sup> was written, or “composed” (*compuesto* is the Spanish word), by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, and appeared in print in 1605. The title page of the book in which these words appear does not read “The Life of Don Quixote” or “The Story of Don Quixote” or “The Adventures of Don Quixote.” It is just imprinted with a name and identifying adjectival information. It is like a plain tombstone. Or it is like a business card, or more accurately, like an old-fashioned social calling card, the kind that lovers in Victorian novels drop into little baskets when they go to visit their beloveds, but do not find them at home. The calling card reads, “I was, and am still, here.” There is an identity between the person named and the inscription. Don Quixote and the text itself are inseparable. Person and text cannot be divided. The author, or composer, permits no distance between the text and the named being; no narrative genre’s name impedes the autonomous enunciation, *ex nihilo*, of the presence of *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quixote de La Mancha*. So when someone picks up what we call today the First Part of *Don Quixote*, that is, the part published in 1605 (the Second Part did not appear until ten years later), that person holds a human being in those reading hands. That reader holds a human subjectivity that is made of writing, reading, and printing. And when the *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quixote de La Mancha* is read, the reader’s subjectivity passes through a moment that is unrepeatable and irrevocable, the result of which is that Don Quixote and the reader can never be parted. This is true even if all the reader

has ever read of *Don Quixote* is the title page, or even just that first line. Cervantes names neither book nor character in the title; what is printed there is, rather, all of human life.

In order to understand this better, recall the first time that you ever read your own name. Perhaps the reader has never done this before; nevertheless, there is no text like the present. When did I first read my own name? How old was I? Was I a child or an adult? Where was I? How did I feel? Am I able to remember that moment? Is that moment lost in the haze of infantile amnesia? What about writing for the first time? Perhaps the reader or the reader's ancestors or loved ones conserve a memory or textual evidence of this work. What was the first thing you ever wrote? Think of the tremendous intellectual, psychic, and physical investment required to produce that first legible word. Everything you had to give, in addition to a good deal from your teacher, went into that word. You wrote it, your teacher having composed your faculties sufficiently so that you could bring them into harmony and do it. At that moment there was no separation between you, the writing subject, and that word. A whole life goes into the writing of one person's name. It is cruel to say of a person, "He can't even spell his own name." The implication of the insult is not that the person is illiterate, but rather that he is stupid. It also implies a person who cannot be bothered to get even the most crucial details of his own life right—so what can he do for me? Most people take extreme care in the spelling of their own name. A feeling of outrage will tend to accompany the experience of reading one's own name misspelled. Is this because of the herculean effort involved in learning to write it that first time? Is it because I am that name, and there can be no disjunction between me and the accurate spelling? I have friends whom I have known for years who persist in adding the letter "e" to my last name. Who is the person to whom they refer? I know who they mean, but their inaccuracy distorts the knowledge I think I have of myself. I am lost in transcription. This almost happens to Don Quixote, too.

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The first chapter of the book is a tale of origins that breaks in every way from the expected formula for beginnings. That formula seeks to meet a yearning for certainty that is closely tied to anxieties about paternity and power. The child who asks, "Where did I come from?," has (at least) two problems. One is, "Who is my father?"; that is, where do I fit

in the system of society beyond my mother's body? Another, implicit in the question, is that the speaking subject who asks that question knows that it did not create itself. And yet the knowledge that I did not create my own body interrupts all kinds of fantasies of control and omnipotence. Teresa de Lauretis has said that much of the work of canonical narrative is to affirm the fantasy of the autochthonous nature of man<sup>2</sup>—the idea that I have given birth to myself, that the mother is incidental or not necessary at all, and, ultimately, that I do not need anybody, that I am not now and never was dependent upon anybody else's body—especially not a female body. The beginning of *Don Quixote* addresses these anxieties head-on. Instead of supplying information that clearly indicates who, what, when, where, why, and how it all began, it is veiled in uncertainties and unclarified conditions.<sup>3</sup> The very first sentence will not specify the location of the action. It says, "*En un lugar de La Mancha, de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme*" (In a village of La Mancha, which I prefer to leave unnamed, I.i). The time is unclear also: "*no ha mucho tiempo*"—not long ago, but how long, we do not know. The age of the gentleman is "around fifty" (*frisaba...los cincuenta*). But most crucially, neither the reader nor the writer is sure of the protagonist's last name:

*Quieren decir que tenia el sobrenombre de Quijada, o Quesada, que en esto hay alguna diferencia en los autores que deste caso escriben; aunque por conjeturas verosimiles se deja entender que se llamaba Quejana. Pero esto importa poco a nuestro cuento; hasta que en la narracion del no se salga un punto de la verdad.*

Some say that his surname was Quixada or Quesada (for there is no unanimity among those who write on this subject), although reasonable conjectures tend to show that he was called Quexana. But this scarcely affects our story; it will be enough not to stray a hair's breadth from the truth in telling it.

No one knows how to spell or pronounce correctly the name of the most famous character in fiction. And yet the text is correct when it asserts that this matters little to "our story." The truth of the narration depends on uncertainty and inaccuracy. As soon as "we" human beings start to write and read "our story" to each other, we start to make mistakes and alternate versions of the text. We can only begin to understand each other when we accept that we will be, at least sometimes, misunderstood. And that is one way to understand the problem of origins: these are our best guesses, and we are not sure.

When we read of how Don Quixote names himself, again the problem of multiple and conflicting names appears:

*Puesto nombre, y tan a su gusto, a su caballo, quiso ponerse a si mismo, y en este pensamiento duro otros ocho dias, y al cabo se vino a llamar don Quixote, de donde, como queda dicho, tomaron ocasion los autores desta tan verdadera historia que, sin duda, se debia llamar Quijada, y no Quesada, como otros quisieron decir.*

Having got a name for his horse so much to his taste, he was anxious to get one for himself, and he spent eight days more pondering over this point. At last he made up his mind to call himself Don Quixote, which, as stated above, led the authors of this veracious history to infer that his name quite assuredly must have been Quixada, and not Quesada as others would have it.

Two different ways of writing and reading appear here. One comes from a desire for pleasure; it is a pleasure to name things. Many critics have noted that Don Quixote is a kind of Adam in his dusty Manchegan anti-Eden. He names the crucial elements in his new world. But unlike Adam, who is named by God, he names himself, too, and takes tremendous pleasure (and one day more than God took to create the whole world) in doing it. So he is author of himself, at least for a moment, and there is a tremendous childish pleasure in the belief that I am my own author. It avoids dependence on a way of reading and writing that enters into disputation in order unequivocally to establish, not my own name, but the name of the *other*. Cervantes's historical and cultural moment was one in which lineage was crucial to survival and success. Not to know one's own name was certainly to lose privilege, and possibly to be exposed to caste and class discrimination. As an "*hidalgo*," Don Quixote belongs to a caste that can trace its origins to "Old Christians," that is, people who have (at least officially) never intermarried with Jews or Muslims. It was a cultural situation in which a slip of a letter or a misspelling could conceivably have had life-or-death consequences. Don Quixote finds a way out of the dilemma by removing himself from the narrative of caste and religious orthodoxy, entering instead the narrative of the outworn chivalric romances, and then carefully renaming himself according to their formula.

Of course, this self-reinscription works only within a very limited sphere because none of us is our own author. "*Quixote*" means the piece of armor that covers the thigh. We know that Don Quixote's

armor was rusty and broken. Armored writing is the most vulnerable kind. Slavoj Žižek addresses this matter in *The Fragile Absolute*. Here, Žižek discusses the practice of John Gray, author of *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, itself, interestingly, a courtly love manual. Žižek says that Gray is pseudo-Freudian in that “Gray accepts the psychoanalytic notion of a hard kernel of some early childhood traumatic experience that forever marked the subject’s further development, giving it a pathological turn.”<sup>4</sup> The difficulty is that Gray suggests that the subject should regress to that primal scene, and then rewrite it as non-traumatic and helpful. Žižek continues:

[I]f, say, your primordial traumatic scene that persisted in your unconscious, distorting and inhibiting your creative attitude, was that of your father shouting at you: ‘You’re worthless! I despise you! Nothing good will come out of you!’ you should rewrite it into a new scene with a benevolent father smiling kindly at you and telling you: ‘You’re OK! I trust you completely!’<sup>5</sup>

Exercises like this were enacted by Gray and audience members on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. But Žižek (and Cervantes) has his doubts. He states them by creating his own absurd revision of one of Freud’s most famous case histories, that of the Wolf-Man. This analysis helped Freud to develop several important theories and concepts that have become crucial to the interpretation of narrative. Central to the case of the Wolf-Man is the idea of the primal scene, a crucial, traumatic tableau in which the child sees what he desires to see, but which he is not supposed to see, and which his limited intellectual, emotional, and physical experience makes it impossible for him to understand. Seeing his parents having sex is beyond his interpretive powers and gives rise to misperceptions and conclusions that will have a determining effect on his later life.<sup>6</sup> Žižek returns to the Wolf-Man, whose story is at the beginnings of modern ideas about original trauma, and imagines him following Gray’s instructions:

To play this game to the end: when the Wolf-Man ‘regressed’ to the traumatic scene that determined his subsequent psychic development—witnessing the parental *coitus a tergo*—the solution would be to rewrite this scene, so that what the Wolf-Man actually saw was merely his parents lying on the bed, Father reading a newspaper and Mother a sentimental novel.<sup>7</sup>

The problem with Gray's approach, for Žižek, is that it erases not so much "the 'hard facts' but the Real (in the Lacanian sense) of a traumatic encounter whose structuring role in the subject's psychic economy forever resists its symbolic rewriting."<sup>8</sup> The narrative of *Don Quixote*, in both the 1605 and 1615 parts, is the story of a man of La Mancha coming to terms with, and working through, the un-rewritable. Up to a point it is true that nothing is written in stone. But that truism also calls to mind, for example, the Arch of Septimius Severus in Rome. Someone's name was written in stone on that arch, and when the next emperor decided to rewrite a traumatic past, he had to excise those carved letters before inscribing his own. The excision left a scar on the stone of the arch. The new inscription rests on the evidence of the erasure of the old. In other words, rewriting redoubles trauma and calls attention to its own inefficacy. My attempt at rewriting requires an inescapable allusion to the trauma I wish to negate.

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What Cervantes does in *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quixote de La Mancha* is not to rewrite, but to write for the first time. The narrator's hatred of *libros de caballeria* in the prologue is a hatred of formula, of the kinds of rewriting that pose as originality but which do not take the irreducible trauma of human narration into account. Roland Barthes finds a way to write about this in *The Pleasure of the Text*. He distinguishes between the text of pleasure and the text of bliss (*jouissance*):

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.<sup>9</sup>

Barthes is aware that it is possible to read two texts, for example the *Don Quixote* of pleasure and the *Don Quixote* of bliss, simultaneously, but he is also aware that this kind of reading is "doubly perverse"<sup>10</sup> in that I am doing and undoing myself simultaneously. By way of Barthes, I could say that formulaic reading and writing puts to sleep in me that which cannot face difference (either difference from the *other*

or from myself). They work like a drug to induce oblivion and stupidity. Teaching “critical reading and writing” practices runs the risk of this kind of deadening formula, in which the rhetoric of critique stands in for feeling, thinking, and writing through traumas of difference and unpredictability.

The book’s innovation lies in its relentless narrative exploration of what it is to write something for the first time. To speak of the text as being at the root of modern Western narrative is not inaccurate, but it overlooks the fact that few writers have been able to do anything like what Cervantes suggests might be necessary in order to work through the life-and-death implications of a culture and literature that depend upon formula. One might even say that what *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quixote de La Mancha* gives us is an opportunity to see the primal scene of Western narrative, not in order to rewrite it but to work it through by reading it unflinchingly for the first time. The argument would be that a liberating discourse is necessarily one that faces the traumatic past and tradition without anesthesia, and then lucidly writes what it sees and cannot see, feels and cannot feel, knows and cannot know.<sup>11</sup>

It is not coincidental that Zizek’s ridiculous version of the Wolf-Man’s rewrite should have his parents reading in bed. The key to the primal scene of Western narrative is in that version. As an adult, seeing someone else read when you want their attention is not entirely unlike a child seeing his parents having sex when he wants their attention. It can be traumatic to watch someone reading. In the current context, this happens, for example, in the workplace, where a computer screen with an active e-mail program captivates the person whose attention you are trying to get or hold. This is bad enough face-to-face, but in some ways even worse over the telephone, when you can sense that the other person is reading e-mail silently while you try to converse. It is annoying, to say the least, to sit patiently while someone plows through one e-mail after another right in front of you. Don Quixote annoys his family and neighbors because he abandons his social roles and lets his estate fall to ruin so that he can read one chivalric romance after another. His reading becomes traumatic when he begins to live the rhetoric of those stories, and to rewrite his life in accordance with their formulae. The first thing he must rewrite is his horse’s name, because there can be no *caballero* without a *caballo*. Once the *caballo* Rocinante (“the nag before”) exists, the *caballero* can come into being, and we have seen some of the process at work when Don Quixote names himself. In order to stabilize



the tripod that makes his remade identity possible, the knight needs a Lady, and so must name her:

*Oh, como se holgo nuestro buen caballero cuando hubo hecho este discurso, y mas cuando hallo a quien dar nombre de su dama! Y fue, a lo que se cree, que en un lugar cerca del suyo habia una moza labradora de muy buen parecer, de quien el un tiempo anduvo enamorado, aunque, segun se entiende, ella jamas lo supo ni se dio cata dello.*

Oh, how our good gentleman enjoyed the delivery of this speech, especially when he had thought of someone to call his lady! There was, so the story goes, in a village near his own a very good-looking farm girl with whom he had at one time been in love, though, so far as is known, she never knew about it or gave a thought to the matter.

At some time before the narration he had a “crush” on Aldonza Lorenzo, but she never knew of it. At the time of narration, renaming this woman—who never knew of his love—is to escape the difference of her body and to supplant it with a controllable textual anodyne. The formulaic text, as fetish, replaces the work of relationship with difference. In the nineteenth century, Flaubert gives us Emma Bovary, a tireless reader of sentimental novels, as an example of a simple kind of female quixotism: her choice of reading ruins her life. Žižek’s decision to say that the Wolf-Man saw his new, sexless mother reading a sentimental novel is important. After all, he could have said that she was reading a fashion magazine, which, in fact, would be more parallel with the idea of the father who reads a newspaper. But he says specifically that the mother is reading a sentimental novel. Does that mean that she is, like Madame Bovary, an adulteress, who must ultimately be punished? Is that part of the unavoidable kernel of the real, the trace of a trauma that is impossible to erase? Žižek does not escape the formulaic tendencies that Cervantes tries so hard to work through.

Like Emma Bovary, Don Quixote dies; unlike her, he does not kill himself. For him, reading takes the place of sexual activity and never gives way to it. But once he stops reading and gets out on the road, Don Quixote begins to encounter female bodies that cannot be controlled or renamed. The first people he meets on his first sally are two prostitutes at the gate of a roadside inn. He addresses them in the language of the romances:

*No fuyan las vuestras mercedes ni teman desaguizado alguno; ca la orden de caballeria que profeso non toca ni atane facerles a ninguno, quanto mas a tan altas doncellas como vuestras presencias demuestran.*

'Flee not, your ladyships, nor fear ye any harm,' he said, 'for it belongs not nor pertains to the order of knighthood which I profess to harm anyone, much less highborn maidens as your appearance proclaims you to be' (I, ii).

The prostitutes can barely understand Don Quixote's elaborate rhetoric, but they do understand that he is referring to them as maidens, and they laugh:

mas como se oyeron llamar doncellas, cosa tan fuera de su profesion, no pudieron tener la risa (but when they heard themselves called maidens, a thing so much out of their line, they could not restrain their laughter).

There is no dialogue possible here. From within his fantasy, Don Quixote cannot see sex. In particular, he cannot see sexualized female bodies. Neither prostitutes nor wives are visible to him, which is why at this stage he never considers the fate of Sancho's wife and children. Marriage is entirely outside his rhetorical economy. It literally does not fit. It could be argued that an analysis of marriage is a central theme for Cervantes. Irresolvable dilemmas around marriage fill key positions in *Don Quixote*, his *Exemplary Novels*, and in other texts. The questions that preoccupied the Council of Trent in its attempts to establish canon law for modern matrimony still concern Cervantes decades later in his exploration of the meaning of free will, consent, and deception in relation to marriage. Broadly, what can be said is that Cervantes questions the degree to which formulae can be applied to any kind of human relationship. He also explores very thoroughly the degree to which formulae can bring life or death to people and texts. He refuses to romanticize; his explorations of love, literature, and relationships always foreground the impact that rhetoric has on flesh and blood. The one occasion I can recall in which he does lean towards the emotional, although not the sentimental, is in the prologue to the Second Part of *Don Quixote* (1615). Here he upbraids his imitator, Alonso Fernandez de Avellaneda, for *ad hominem* attacks made in Avellaneda's prologue, in which Avellaneda mocks Cervantes for being old and one-armed:

*Lo que no he podido dejar de sentir es que me note de viejo y de manco, como si hubiera sido en mi mano haber detenido el tiempo, que no pasase por mi. O si mi manquedad hubiera nacido en alguna taberna, sino en la mas alta ocasion que viero los siglos pasados, los presentes, ni esperan ver los venideros.*

What I cannot help resenting is that he charges me with being old and one-handed, as if it had been in my power to hinder time's passage, or as if the loss of my hand had occurred in some tavern and not on the grandest occasion the past or present has seen or the future can hope to see (Prologue, II).

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Cervantes lost the use of his left hand as the result of musket fire during the Battle of Lepanto (1571), a naval engagement that decided the dominance of the Mediterranean in favor of a coalition of Christian forces massed against the Turks. On the basis of his service in this important battle, he had tried to gain some kind of pension or preferment from the Crown, and possibly even a post in the New World. Yet nothing came of his efforts. His rhetoric is strong, as it is elsewhere in the Second Part. Mortality is a concern here, in a way that it is not in the First Part from ten years earlier. By the end of the Second Part, the reader has witnessed, without a doubt, the death of Don Quixote. Cervantes himself dies in 1616. Both the First and Second Parts take the body, whatever its gender or degree of sexual expression, extremely seriously, and teach that although violence can sometimes look very funny, it never is when it is happening to you. Cervantes's wounded and disabled hand marks the point where the body, the read, and the written meet. His unsought wound helps to explain a text in which male virgins, old married men, prostitutes, aristocratic wives, and lost lovers of any and all genders can meet and interrupt each other's expectations. In itself this is a great innovation. But Cervantes goes further. Instead of trying to contain or rewrite difference, sexual or otherwise, he risks a narrative strategy that few if any, before or after him, have attempted. There is marriage and heartbreak, violence and disappointment, in *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quixote de La Mancha*. The trajectory of Western narrative is filled with women, dead or dying, upon whose death the whole of the narrative depends. But Cervantes, perhaps because he knows what killing is, because he knows what war is, does not participate in the carnage.

Don Quixote does not depend on dead female or feminized bodies. The female body may scare him, it is true, so he armors himself before he goes out on his first sally. But his shabby, rusty, broken armor is itself traumatized. His greatest triumph—perhaps his only triumph—is that he leaves home and goes out on the road unprotected. He has faith that the chivalric vocabulary will uphold him, but that rhetoric is shortly seen to be as rickety as his horse. If he wishes to be a *caballero andante*, a knight-errant, that is, if he wishes to wander, to err, then he has to give up the hermetic seal of chivalric discourse. This does not happen until after his first sally, when the priest, the barber, and the women of his house deprive him of his chivalric cookbooks. When he goes out a second time, without access to them, he becomes susceptible to dialogue. This entry into dialogue happens first with Sancho Panza. He promises Sancho a governorship, and that hope of something different is enough justification for Sancho to go along for the ride. Crucially, Don Quixote does not rename Sancho. Sancho's is the first difference that Don Quixote can confront on its own terms. It is an unyielding difference that permeates even Sancho's language; his malapropisms make it impossible for Don Quixote to insert Sancho into the purity of his orthodox chivalric rhetoric. Because he is able to face Sancho's difference (slowly, over hundreds of pages, in a narrative process that makes psychoanalysis look fast and easy), Don Quixote can gradually face the trauma of otherness in what has historically been, in the West, its most graphic form: sexual difference. Don Quixote can begin to discover difference in dialogue with another man, in a situation in which the differences and likenesses do not disrupt the flow of his inquiry. I do not think that Don Quixote's and Sancho's relationship is homoerotic. I do not think it is even homosocial. In fact, I do not think it is homoanything, insofar as the prefix "homo-" means "the same." (For what it is worth, I would not be willing to argue for anybody's heterosexuality in this context either, in that the "hetero-" [different] of heterosexuality in today's rhetoric of sexuality could not more emphatically mean "the Same," with a capital S.)

The concept of "same difference," perhaps the dominant formula in global capitalism and its social formations, is the subject of *S/Z*, another of Roland Barthes's crucial works. Here Barthes does a microscopically close reading of Balzac's short story, "Sarrasine." In terms of sexual difference and the problem of the Same, what is important about "Sarrasine" is that, at least according to conventional French onomastics, it is misspelled. The name should be spelled with a "z"

instead of with a second “s.” The story tells of a powerful man, Sarra-sine, who falls in love with La Zambinella, believing that La Zambinella is a woman, and then of the traumatic effects of his discovery, or admission, that La Zambinella is certainly feminized, but not a woman, and not a man, either. La Zambinella is, in fact, the name that a beautiful castrato assumes. For Barthes, the strange use of the letter S where the letter Z should be is the mark of cutting and difference in the text. The un-rewritable trace of its crucial trauma, which is linked to sexuality and sexual difference, is ever before the reader, right in the middle of the title and professional name of the text’s key character. Z reverses S, breaking its curves into pointy shards.<sup>12</sup> Barthes’s study, the fruit of a term-long seminar at the College de France, gives emphatic evidence of the difference one little letter can make.

Balzac, of course, was not the first author to make literature of this observation. Cervantes knows what a difference a letter can make, too. All of the names of our hero have something in common, and that is the letter Q. If you are still willing, find something to write with and something to write on, and slowly begin to write the letter Q. Do it more than once. Try to recall writing the letter Q when you were just learning how to write. Think of the block letter Q, and the strange cursive Q, and its unusual variants. What makes the letter Q so queer? Why is it so much fun to write? Or perhaps it is not fun to write at all. Maybe it is too difficult. Why do we use Q, anyway? Who needs it?

Sebastian de Covarrubias tries to explain this in his 1611 dictionary, *Tesoro de la lengua castellana*.<sup>13</sup> “*la razon de usar della es porque siguiendole siempre la U ayunte en una silaba la vocal siguiente. Vide Quintilianum, lib. 12, cap. 10, Apud latinos saepe Q mutatur in C, ut loquor, locutus, sequor, secutus*” (the reason for using it is that it being always followed by U it joins into one syllable with the following vowel. See Quintilian, book 12, chapter 10, according to the Latin speakers, the q often changes to a c, so *loquor, locutus, sequor, secutus* [I speak, having spoken; I follow, having followed<sup>14</sup>] (843). One reason for using Q, even though K and C can sometimes seem sufficient, is that Q and U go together and work a kind of magic over any vowel they run across. For all its eccentricity, Q needs U more than any other consonant needs any other vowel. Q does not make any sense without U. Some of this understanding of Q becomes clear from the practice of writing the letter. First, make a circle. Don Quixote leaves his home in La Mancha at the beginning of the First Part, and over a thousand pages and ten years later he returns to die, finishing at his starting point. The narrative starts and ends at

home in La Mancha. It is like the great circle we must draw in order to make the letter Q. The initial movements required in writing Q track Don Quixote's movements. But then, in order to distinguish Q from O, the writer has to do something unforeseen, which is to mar the perfection of that great O. To write Q, you have to break the circle with a line. The circuit must be interrupted or what is written is just another O. That mark is a blow, a sign of trauma. It is what makes Q different from O. It is something extra, an excessive mark that interrupts the clarity of the circle. The little line is the mark of difference itself. The little line that crosses over the circle interrupts the circuit of repetition. A wished-for wholeness and unity and seamlessness must be interrupted if I wish to write Q. I have to mar the repeatable in order to be able to write that which needs U in order to mean anything.

Of course the pun does not work in Spanish in the same way that it does in English. In English, the point is that *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quixote de La Mancha* shows the reader that without U, Q is nothing, a big zero. Without Q there will be all kinds of important things that U will never be able to say. In Spanish, Q needs U, too, and vice-versa. U is one way to say "or" in Spanish. Not surprisingly, the other way is "O." U is used instead of O before words that begin with "o" or "ho." To the extent that Q in English always pronounces the second person (you), Q in Spanish is always saying "u," other. In both cases, the letter is unusual in that it insists on a relationship. It relies on its own brokenness in order to make sense. It is not a matter of repetition; in fact, it is an insistence that the rote is no way to go.

Sancho personifies the rupture with the rote. He constantly interrupts Don Quixote, most regularly when Don Quixote is spinning off down a vortex of chivalric rhetoric. Don Quixote hates having his monologues interrupted, and upbraids Sancho. But as the two travel along the road together and begin to experience events together, Don Quixote's chivalric monologues diminish, and dialogues begin to develop between the two men. A conversation opens up, and love blooms. But it is not romantic or chivalric love, or even the love of friendship. What blossoms as Don Quixote and Sancho move along the road together, never knowing what is going to happen next, is charity. The hermetic, formulaic rhetoric of dead chivalry breaks open to reveal what makes charity possible. Sancho is possibly the first practitioner of what Neil Wilson, W.V. Quine, and Donald Davidson have called "the Principle of Charity."<sup>15</sup> Davidson explores the ways in which people

can use language to understand each other. To explain the Principle of Charity, he says:

the fact that a theory does not make speakers universal holders of truths is not an inadequacy of the theory; the aim is not the absurd one of making disagreement and error disappear. The point is rather that widespread agreement is the only possible background against which disputes and mistakes can be interpreted. Making sense of the utterances and behaviour of others, even their most aberrant behaviour, requires us to find a great deal of reason and truth in them. To see too much unreason on the part of others is simply to undermine our ability to understand what it is they are so unreasonable about.<sup>16</sup>

That last sentence summarizes the position of the women of Don Quixote's household and that of his friends in relation to his literary madness. To call someone crazy can be a way to shut down any possibility for dialogue, to eradicate relationship. To reiterate, the Principle of Charity is the idea "that widespread agreement is the only possible background against which disputes and mistakes can be interpreted." The "purpose is to make meaningful disagreement possible, and this depends entirely on a foundation—*some* foundation—in agreement." Finally, "Charity is forced on us; whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters."<sup>17</sup> Before he met Sancho, everyone he knew counted Don Quixote wrong on all matters. But Sancho is able to practice the Principle of Charity. Colloquially, he agrees to disagree with Don Quixote. He finds a tiny space for agreement, an excuse for agreement, in the form of the promise of the governorship, and then spends many succeeding chapters meaningfully disagreeing with Don Quixote. As a result, love, in this charitable sense, develops between the two men.

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It is important to note that Davidson introduces a condition in his explanation of the Principle of Charity. The key phrase in that sentence is "if we want to understand others." So a desire to understand others on their own terms, which I think must be connected to a wish to be understood oneself, is the precondition for meaningful agreement and disagreement. This is not a desire to convert, compel, or convince the other. This form of understanding is closest to the activity of bearing witness to and with the other. And this can be done only from



a position of radical “undefendedness,” or what Shoshona Felman calls (after Paul Celan) “shelterlessness,” in which one “gives reality one’s own vulnerability, as a condition of exceptional availability and of exceptionally sensitized, tuned in attention to the *relation between language and events*.”<sup>18</sup> He may interrupt a lot, but Sancho is a great listener. He knows how to stand by Don Quixote, how to come back after he flees, how to take his own beatings, and how to salve Don Quixote’s wounds. And then he knows how to enter into conversation about all of it.

“If we want to understand others,” we have to see first that we cannot even spell our own names, not because we do not care, but because we have so many. We need each other to help us each understand our many names. Books alone cannot accomplish this. Books are great but their greatness is only revealed when you have someone with whom to talk about them. This *other* does not even have to have read the book. The *other* does not have to agree with your reading. The *other* just has to want to understand you. Of course, there are some things you cannot say, and that is what writing is for. Literature is a special kind of writing. Barbara Johnson says, “Literature...is not to be understood as a predetermined set of works but as a mode of cultural work, the work of giving-to-read those impossible contradictions that cannot yet be spoken.”<sup>19</sup> When we put pen to paper and write Q, we are near the root of literature. The hand and the pen make strange twists and turns as they write Q. The ink never breaks into the circle at the same place twice, no matter how many times you have written the letter. The eye, reading Q, makes an effort to distinguish it from O, and then looks for U.

You can go to La Mancha and find many businesses engaged in selling tourist maps that trace out “*La ruta de Don Quixote*” (The Route of Don Quixote). People try to follow it, but they cannot, because there are stretches in the book in which Don Quixote is missing in action. It is not possible to follow in his footsteps because nobody knows where he went. If you add a U to “rote” you get “route,” but I am not going to tell you where you will end up. ●

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## Notes

1. Miguel de Cervantes, *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quixote de La Mancha*, ed. John Jay Allen (Madrid: Ediciones Catedra, 1994) and *Don Quixote*, the Ormsby translation, revised, ed. Joseph R. Jones and Kenneth Douglas (New York: Norton, 1981). Some people have strong preferences about the editions and translations of *Don Quixote* that they use. For this reason, I have cited the text by Part and Chapter rather than by page number.



2. Teresa de Lauretis, "Desire in Narrative," *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 156.
3. *Genesis* itself provides two narratives for the origin of the world, so in fact the canonical text of origins eludes the desire for a unitary narrative, too.
4. Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 107–108.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
6. "Primal Scene [:] Scene of sexual intercourse between the parents which the child observes, or infers on the basis of certain indications, and phantasies. It is generally interpreted by the child as an act of violence on the part of the father." J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 335.
7. Žižek, p. 108.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 109
9. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, translated by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 14.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is an example of a novel that does this uncompromising work.
12. Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, translated by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).
13. Sebastian de Covarrubias y Orozco, *Tesoro de la lengua* (Madrid 1611), p. 843.
14. Prof. Sarolta Takacs in Classics at Rutgers University kindly provided the Latin translation and searched for the citation from Quintilian. Covarrubias may have used a corrupt text. A thorough search of databases could not find this quotation, although it did turn up something similar.
15. Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Davidson explains the development and meaning of the Principle of Charity throughout the essays in this collection.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 196–197.
18. Shoshona Felman in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, edited by Shoshona Felman and Dori Laub, M.D. (New York: Routledge, 1992).
19. Barbara Johnson, *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 13.

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