

Inti: Revista de literatura hispánica

Number 45
Para no volver a La Mancha

Article 4

1997

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Carlos Fuentes

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Citas recomendadas

Fuentes, Carlos (Primavera 1997) "Memory Lapses," *Inti: Revista de literatura hispánica*: No. 45, Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/inti/vol1/iss45/4>

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MEMORY LAPSES

Carlos Fuentes

Don Quixote rises from an obscure village in an obscure province in Spain — so obscure, indeed, that the even more obscure author of the novel does not even remember the village's name, or pretends he doesn't, or chooses not to recall it. The modernity of *Don Quixote*, which is the founding novel of the modern era, starts right there.

The epic poet has total recall: Homer or Virgil do not forget anything. But Balzac's Colonel Chabert is forgotten by his wife, his friends, his society. Everyone thought that he had died at Eylau. Between two flights of stairs, the maid forgets the name Walter Shandy wishes to give his son, and so Tristram is forever damned with that name.

Gogol gives this relation between memory and identity a superb turn: his rogue, Khlestakhov, is remembered by everyone, but remembered as what he is not: the dreaded Government Inspector. With Kafka, we are back in the Cervantean tradition: no one remembers K., the land surveyor. Milan Kundera gives the tradition its final modern twist in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, where those who remember, forget. To forget is the only memory of those who do not wish to identify themselves or others.

So, at the beginning, always, there is Cervantes. But there is also the man who died on the same day in 1616, William Shakespeare. Don Quixote starts with a faltering memory. So does Hamlet. The ghost returns to denounce a crime, but also to demand a memory: "Adieu, Adieu, remember me." And so Hamlet sees to it that the world remembers, that memory indeed remains green. It is the act of forgetting that is at the root of his tragedy. "But two months dread, nay, not so much, not two... And yet within a month she married."

To make the world remember, Hamlet the hero of the North, imposes death — for himself and others — as a measure of his historical energy. To make the world imagine, Don Quixote the hero of the South, imposes art, and absolute art that takes the place of a faltering, even dead history. Hamlet is cast as the hero of doubt, and how much energy does his skeptical folly unleash: his sacrifice is finally for reason, the triumphant offspring of his malady. Don Quixote is the hero of faith: he believes in what he reads and his sacrifice is to recover his reason. Then he must die: when he becomes reasonable, he can no longer imagine.

Another modern quality shared by Don Quixote and Hamlet is their generic indeterminacy. All the existing genres meet in Don Quixote, speak to each other, mock each other, and desperately demand something beyond themselves, something beyond their exhausted formality. The epic of chivalry and the pastoral poem; the picaresque novel and the interpolated novella in the Byzantine manner; the ballad and the Moorish tale; the novel of courtly love and the allegorical theatre, all the contemporary genres have a representative, a voice in Don Quixote. But in Hamlet, does not the Shakespearean freedom of genre, which so horrified Voltaire and the French Enlightenment, the magnificent mixture of styles, sublime and vulgar in the same breath, coincide with the Cervantean confrontation of styles?

Sancho Panza gives the literary *démarche* its maddest meaning when the representative of earthy realism becomes the illusory governor of the isle of Barataria and must, like his mad master Don Quixote, act out a fiction within a fiction, a breakdown and multiplication of genres. Perhaps that anti-Sancho, the pompous Polonius, most gratifyingly spells out this very modern disrespect of indetermination of genre (which he obviously respects) when he announces the excellence of the actors come to Elsinore:

The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragic-historical, tragical-comical, historical-pastoral: scene individable, or poem unlimited.

The dividable and limited worlds of Cervantes and Shakespeare refuse the unity of the individable, the unlimited poetry of eternity. They are both here and now, Renaissance men, one sadder than the other because his Spanish history, having spent too much energy in discovering a New World, is tired; the other sadder still because he has no illusions about the actors strutting out their glorious hour upon the stages of England or Scotland, Egypt or Rome. Both of them are the first totally modern creators of literature because (I believe) they do not believe in God but cannot say it.

Shakespeare believes in the tragedy of will, Cervantes in the comedy of imagination. Both know how difficult it is to maintain one and the other except in “words, words, words.”

Don Quixote and Hamlet know that this is their brittle claim on reality: words. Hamlet, spelling it out — literature is words — casts a splendid light on Don Quixote, who one day enters a printing shop in Barcelona and comes to know that he exists only in “words.”