

BRIAN PHILLIPS

The First-Person Don Quixote

I. Pinnacle of All Beauty

If you put the whole world into a book, it would be a comedy; if you put just one human soul into a book, it would be a tragedy; *Don Quixote* does both, and so it is both: not some mingling of the two, but a whole tragedy and a whole comedy at the same time.

I thought of this not long ago on a trip to New York City. I was walking in Times Square on an evening in late autumn, at the hour when the City grows luminously gray. At first I was not thinking of *Don Quixote* at all, but only walking and looking. I suppose I was in the midst of one of those trains of half-unconscious thought that often go along with the rhythm of a walk. It had something to do with an essay I was supposed to write on the question of character in fiction—whether it was internal or external—whether there was such a thing as sympathy—whether anything was shared. But I hardly remember what I was thinking about. All along the sidewalks the shy flares of taxi headlights paused. The hurried crowd flowed everywhere, like something being poured.

If you have ever been in Times Square, you know how the City there is really on two levels, the crowded one on the ground, for people and magazine stands, and the spacious one above, full of brilliant, gargantuan images. Stock quotes go racing past. The names of musicals flash and disappear. There are movie posters, too tall to be imagined, showing actresses with universe-sized faces. A woman, impossibly beautiful, hanging twenty stories in the air, calmly brushes her teeth in close-up on a video screen. A sprinter a city block long crouches lightly in his starting stance, his absurdly perfect muscles honed in cold blue light.

Not one of them was real, of course; they had all been changed into pictures; there was something inhuman about them. Most of them were there only to sell something, they were all a hundred

feet tall . . . And yet as the sky grew dark, it seemed to me that they were phenomenally beautiful, by themselves and in the chaos of their nearness; and for some reason I thought of Marcela in *Don Quixote*, who says that it is natural to love what is beautiful, but not necessarily for what is beautiful to love that which loves it. That must be true, I thought, for what is beautiful is always a little impossible; what is beautiful is almost always strange. Three thousand years ago in ancient Egypt they painted their eyelids with malachite, because we are so constituted, our desires are so acute, that inhumanly large eyes attract us more than anything nature can give us. We make iambs of unpatterned speech. The mind is simpler than the world, is that it?—it squares the world's curved corners; it imperfectly overlays what surrounds it. Three-to-two is an arbitrary ratio in nature, no less so than sixteen-twenty-sevenths, but when applied to a vibrating string it fills us with such a sweet sensation that it inspires an aesthetics of sound. In the world outside there is no golden mean, but there is one in the mind. We are complex, elusive and various, infinitely so, and nothing like a manifesto or a theory of proportion can explain us. But the urge is universal for the structures of the world to match the structures of the mind; and the world disappoints us; and we form ideals in the pain of the mismatch. Some of them are hanging in museums. One of them is brushing her teeth in the sky above New York City.

The notion made me laugh; and I thought of Don Quixote, who drove himself mad with the ideals in his books, who saw giants in place of windmills, who made himself a knight for the sake of his image of images, the imaginary princess Dulcinea. In Times Square we were all seeing giants; and the thought of Don Quixote made the spectacle of the thing, this neon-drenched crowd under its Olympus of L'Oréal billboards, seem desperately funny, as though Don Quixote had only been the first to go mad, and now we had all followed after him. And what a magnificent carnival it made! I doubt whether there is anyone in America who is more sane than Don Quixote now, anyone whose thoughts are not forever passing through the sieve of these images—I mean the ones in Times Square or the ones on a movie screen. There are Raphaels in Manhattan, I am sure, but America is the country of film, of the photograph; this wild parade of images must now be the dominant form in which the ideal is every day experienced. The ideal becomes infinite, the ideal becomes absurd,

and what else can we do but laugh, knowing that the ideal does not love us? The Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset wrote as much in his book on *Don Quixote*: “Culture—the ideal side of things—tries to set itself up as a separate and self-sufficient world to which we can transfer our hearts. This is an illusion, and only looked upon as an illusion, only considered as a mirage on earth, does culture take its proper place.” And yet, “When I was writing that the novel shows us a mirage as such, the word *comedy* kept circling around the tip of my pen like a dog who hears his master’s call.”

And yet—such is the naïve openness of one’s solitary thoughts—it took only a little change of light for me to see the matter differently. I had stepped into a bookstore, I was paging through *Don Quixote*, when I noticed that I could see myself in the window next to me. I could see the Times Square signs superimposed in my image, but the light on the glass was such that I could not see the crowd outside. And it seemed to me that if the crowd faded away, if I were left alone, or if anyone were, beneath these hulking forms, then the absurdity I had found comic a moment ago would suddenly seem almost frightening. For it was clear that one would never be able to escape them. Wherever one went, they were absolute; they compelled devotion; they were better than real life. And yet there was no sense in them. All one’s thoughts would be of a woman brushing her teeth. The stadium of beauty was a stadium of monsters. The ideal became insane, and it was terrible.

Don Quixote looked at an inn and thought he saw a castle; he looked at the world and thought he saw forms from his books. The longer I wandered in Manhattan, the more it seemed to me that everything I saw was like something from *Don Quixote*. There were Dulcineas everywhere, unreal and out of reach.

2. Reason Without Reason

The question that I want to ask is this. *Don Quixote* is a book about the human experience of the aesthetic image. Why is it not written in the first person?

A minor country gentleman, not rich, a bit past middle age, becomes obsessed with stories about knights. He spends all his time reading. Eventually his reading infects his brain, and despite

his age, despite his poverty, despite his gaunt physique, he decides to become a knight errant. Never mind that he lives in the Spain of the late Renaissance, in the age of the Counter-Reformation, a practical, cynical, dangerous, mercantile world in which any notion of knightly chivalry is buried in a dim medieval past. Never mind that the books on which he has made himself mad are in any case pure fantasy, wherein single knights routinely vanquish armies, or chop giants in half with a single stroke of the sword. He will don a rusty suit of armor, hire a peasant, Sancho Panza, as his squire, mount himself on a horse even skinnier than he is, and set out over dusty country roads to right wrongs and have adventures. Though his real name is something else again, he christens himself Don Quixote; and because he knows from his reading that a knight without a lady-love is like “a tree without leaves or fruit, a body without a soul,” he chooses a peasant girl from a nearby village, reinvents her (without her knowing anything about it) as the Lady Dulcinea, and dedicates himself to her (possibly without ever having seen her) as the embodiment of perfect beauty, grace, courtesy, chastity, and goodness. He rides forth with Sancho, and whatever he sees he takes as something from his storybooks. When he is shown to be mistaken, he blames the confusion on evil enchanters, who pursue him placing figures in his eyes.

The first part of *Don Quixote* appears in Spain in 1605, when its author, a former soldier and literary failure named Miguel de Cervantes, is fifty-seven years old. It is an immediate and unprecedented success. Within a year there are four pirated editions, the novel is being shipped to Peru, Don Quixote and Sancho feature prominently in parades, masquerades and dances. It is universally regarded as a comedy. When King Philip III sees a student laughing hysterically and clapping his hand to his forehead while reading a book, so the story goes, he murmurs that the student is either mad or reading *Don Quixote*. Outside the book itself, there is little to suggest that Cervantes means the novel as anything but what he claims he intended, a satire of the absurd and histrionic books of chivalry that made for popular reading throughout Spain. There is little to suggest, outside the book itself, that Cervantes has any more transcendent purpose than the Italian novelist Sacchetti, who in the fourteenth century wrote a comical story about an old man who put on rusty armor and set off for a tournament; or the anonymous author of the *Entremés de los*

romances, a contemporary theatrical interlude which bears an uncanny resemblance to the first part of *Don Quixote*, and which may actually have preceded it.

And yet the more the book is read, the more it appears to contain. Let us take an unchronological sampling. To Auden Don Quixote is the picture of a Christian saint. To Unamuno he is almost Christ himself. Ruskin wept as he read *Don Quixote*—"It was always throughout real chivalry to me"—and found "deadly" the novel's mockery of the knightly ideal; in this he echoes Byron, who laments that "Cervantes smiled Spain's chivalry away" and accuses Don Quixote of killing his nation's heroic age. Nabokov, who calls the novel "an encyclopedia of cruelty," objects to its crudity and violence. Freud, who learned Spanish to read *Don Quixote*, credits the book with inspiring his psychological discoveries. There is no consensus anywhere. For Carlos Fuentes the knight is a perfect instrument of Erasmian humanism. The German Romantics turn him into an emblem of the soul in opposition to the body, the ideal in opposition to the real, poetry in opposition to prose. Others faintly recall that the book is a comedy. Kafka speculates that Don Quixote has really been dreamed up by Sancho. Dickens writes *The Pickwick Papers*, Fielding *Joseph Andrews*, Austen *Northanger Abbey*, Dostoevsky *The Idiot*, and Flaubert *Madame Bovary*, a list of books that could not possibly be more different, except that they all begin in the story of Don Quixote. (Indeed, in the decade before *Madame Bovary* is written, we find Kierkegaard noticing that "it is altogether remarkable that there is no female counterpart to Don Quixote in all European literature. Is the age not yet mature enough for that; has not the continent of sentimentality yet been discovered?") What Shakespeare thought of the story we do not know, because his *Cardenio*, inspired by an episode in *Don Quixote*, has been lost. Samuel Johnson, in a lovely passage, emphasizes our sympathetic connection with the knight: "When we pity him, we reflect on our own disappointments; and when we laugh, our hearts inform us that he is not more ridiculous than ourselves."

I suppose that any profound thing becomes more interesting the more it inspires disagreement, but *Don Quixote* goes beyond all bounds. What has led to such a range of variation? I mean what quality in the work itself, for differences in time and place will not suffice to explain it. The sense of some displacement or uncertainty at the center of the work, the sense of an infinitely

suggestive ambiguity, has been shared by many readers. It has often been explained by reference to *Don Quixote's* polyvocality, to Cervantes' neutral distance from the outlooks of his characters. But it has also led writers to perceive an accidental quality in the author's genius, and to question whether he understood what he was making as he made it. "If Cervantes had felt the tragedy and the satire as we feel them," Virginia Woolf asked, "could he have forborne to stress them—could he have been as callous as he seems?"

Thus it occurs to me to ask the undoubtedly naïve question which I proposed at the beginning of this section. Why is *Don Quixote* narrated in the third person rather than in the first? For if the ends of interpretation have habitually been philosophical—whether Don Quixote saves or destroys religious faith; whether his creator glorifies or fears imagination—then underlying them all is a question of experience, a question of character: the central question of what Don Quixote sees. Any interpretation of the novel must necessarily begin with either an answer to this question or what amounts to the same thing, a conclusion drawn from the absence of an answer.

If Don Quixote looks at an inn and actually sees a castle, then he is merely the victim of an improbable hallucination; he is experiencing a fantasy world established along the lines of his books. We must begin by relating the plane of his experience to the plane of reality, and the novel's possibilities are greatly reduced. It may simply be a parody of chivalric romances, as it claims to be.

If Don Quixote looks at an inn and sees an inn but confuses what he sees for a castle, then he is experiencing a delusion in which the line separating the world of his books from the world of real life has blurred: Don Quixote reads his books and so misreads the world. In this case we must begin by examining the collapse of a metaphysical distinction. We may conclude any number of things, depending on which line of reasoning we follow: that Don Quixote is unambiguously mad and the other characters in the book unambiguously sane; or that the novel demonstrates the universally distorting influence of belief; or that it questions the nature of reality; or that it is all a textual game.

If, however, Don Quixote looks at an inn and knows he sees an inn, but for personal reasons chooses to pretend he sees a castle,

then the problem he represents becomes a question of identity and will, and lends itself to the popular set of existential interpretations: Don Quixote as the man who “wills himself to be himself,” in Ortega’s phrase; Don Quixote as Christ; Don Quixote as the individual champion or fool.

If, however, we decide that Cervantes deliberately withholds the answer, that he deliberately declines to tell us what Don Quixote sees, then we may conclude that the knight suggests all these interpretations without confirming any one of them, that he is meant to be a broad and indefinite symbol. In this case he becomes a kind of Platonic grail into which we pour whatever terms we wish. He might just as well be Soul vs. Body, or the principle of justice, or the spirit of the age, or an evocative mystery which we look at from many angles.

There are other ways in which these patterns of reading can be laid out; the point is not to make an index of interpretations, but to show that all interpretations imply some particular answer to the question of Don Quixote’s experience. And this, I think, explains why there are so many contradictory readings of the book. For Don Quixote’s madness is an aspect of his inner life, and yet Cervantes portrays it as externally and objectively as possible. Its essential character is remarkably consistent—it involves the translation of the world into a book of chivalry, the transformation of the world into the image. This is a part of human life that has no being outside the complex of thoughts and sensations that comprise individual experience. And yet Cervantes’ manner of portrayal allows it to be interpreted inconsistently, even by the narrator of the book. Why should this be the case? Certainly the effect is successful—Don Quixote is a vivid and moving presence in the mind, and more so as the book progresses—but if Cervantes meant anything by it, how did he forbear from stressing what he meant? The simplest way to show us Don Quixote’s experience would be to tell the story from his perspective, to show us the world through his eyes. But Cervantes rejects this possibility. He gives us Don Quixote in the third person, and so keeps him distant from us.

Of course, we may say, there are other ways for a novel to show us a character’s experience. Even in the third person, we remember, it has any number of methods at hand. It may describe experience directly or indirectly, for instance by attaching itself to a character’s perspective or charting a character’s thoughts. It

may allow a character to give an impression of his own experience through dialogue. It may position a character in relation to his world in such a way that his experience is easily inferred, for instance by contrast, or by causing his actions to appear within the network of meanings represented in his environment. It may give a sense of a character's experience by its manner of narration, as is the case when the style of a book is concentrated to give an impression of personality. We might find that any one of these techniques, if it appeared in *Don Quixote*, would solve the problem of the knight's experience, and any one of them might carry thematic implications that would be impossible to achieve in a first-person novel. For example, an idea underlying many readings of *Don Quixote* is that Cervantes emphasizes the contrast between the knight and his world, critiquing the sanity of the second with the madness of the first, and vice versa. In a first-person narrative, filtered through Don Quixote's thoughts, perhaps Cervantes could not have portrayed the relation as he wished without relying on a degree of psychological irony that was not attainable in seventeenth-century prose techniques, even with Cervantes' innovations. (Or if it were attainable, it might have unacceptably diminished Don Quixote, imprisoning him in something like Gogol's *Diary of a Madman*.)

What does the novel itself tell us about Don Quixote's experience? We might begin by looking to the narrator of the book, who, though he claims that Don Quixote was a real, living person and not an imaginary character, also appears to have access to his thoughts. At the onset of Don Quixote's madness, the narrator tells us that "his fantasy filled with everything he had read in his books":

Since everything our adventurer thought, saw, or imagined seemed to happen according to what he had read, as soon as he saw the inn it appeared to him to be a castle complete with four towers and spires of gleaming silver, not to mention a drawbridge and deep moat and all the other details depicted on such castles.

This would appear to be pure hallucination: Don Quixote actually sees the castle. During the adventure of the windmills, the same process is repeated. When he looks at the real object, Don Quixote perceives an imaginary object in its place.

He spurred his horse, Rocinante, paying no attention to the shouts of his squire, Sancho, who warned him that, beyond any doubt, those

things he was about to attack were windmills and not giants. But he was so convinced they were giants that he did not hear the shouts of his squire, Sancho, and could not see, though he was very close, what they really were; instead, he charged and called out:

“Flee not, cowards and base creatures, for it is a single knight who attacks you.”

Here are two instances in which the narrator gives us a consistent account of a perfect hallucinatory madness, which affected Don Quixote at the level of his senses and effectively sealed him from the world. And yet at other times, the narrator makes clear that Don Quixote does make some distinction between his fantasy and the reality outside. Late in the book, the narrator appears to cancel his early portrayal altogether, implying that Don Quixote *always* had reservations about the things he claimed to experience. The knight and Sancho arrive at the palace of a duke and duchess who have read about Don Quixote’s madness and plan to mock him by pretending he is a real knight errant. When Don Quixote sees the lavish greeting they have prepared for him, the narrator tells us that “this was the first day he really knew and believed he was a true knight errant and not a fantastic one”—suggesting, despite what we have already read, that Don Quixote was never fully convinced of the story he told to the world.

When Don Quixote speaks for himself, he presents an even greater problem, because we can never be sure how far we are meant to believe him. Certainly he says a great many things which imply that his madness is complete. He addresses whores as noble ladies; he presents a challenge of armed combat to a distant flock of sheep. But of course, if the existential assumption is correct, Don Quixote’s madness is a matter of conscious will, and we would expect him to adopt such disguises in the course of playing his role. He need not be mad, only committed to his vision of himself. And throughout the book, enough of his statements seem deliberate for us to wonder where the truth really lies. Other characters in the novel, particularly in the second part, frequently marvel at his intelligence and discretion, on every subject but one; and even when he discusses his own experience, he says just enough to imply that he regards it with an inkling of doubt. He seizes upon the device of the wicked enchanters to explain the discrepancy between his own vision and that of those around him, but when he uses it, he often appears shaken by its thinness. “Is it possible,” he asks Sancho after the adventure of

Mambrino's helmet, "that in all the time you have traveled with me you have not yet noticed that all things having to do with knights errant appear to be chimerical, foolish, senseless, and turned inside out?" A little later he gives the squire an extraordinarily insightful account of his invention of Dulcinea, implying that, at this moment at least, he is perfectly conscious of fabricating his ideal: "I imagine that everything I say is true, no more and no less, and I depict her in my imagination as I wish her to be in beauty and in distinction." And yet in the second part, after his encounter with Master Pedro's puppet show, he seems to say that his madness overwhelms him only in moments of great enthusiasm, and he has phases of relative sanity:

"Now I believe," said Don Quixote at this point, "what I have believed on many other occasions: the enchanters who pursue me simply place figures as they really are before my eyes, and then change and alter them into whatever they wish. I tell you really and truly, you gentlemen who can hear me: it seemed to me that everything that happened here was actually happening."

It *seemed* to him—but it does not seem so now, for where a moment ago he believed that the puppets were living warriors, he now offers to pay for the damage he has done in attacking them.

Certain tendencies of Don Quixote's behavior, especially in the second part of the book, would also seem to indicate that he is not at all times irrevocably given over to fantasy. He is capable of testy embarrassment when one of his actions backfires. He seems to learn from his mistakes; he begins paying for inns, for example, after his insistence that knights are entitled to free lodgings has caused him a great deal of trouble. Eventually he restrains himself from attacking everyone who doubts the reality of his books and comes to regard them instead with mounting sorrow. Despite his belief in his own knightly prowess—"I am worth a hundred," he proudly tells Sancho early in the book—he has moments of cowardice, as he proves when he abandons Sancho to be beaten by the men from the braying village. None of these actions suggests either perfect conviction or a sealed hallucination; and there are times when Don Quixote shows an extraordinarily rational cunning in defense of his conception of himself. In the second part of the book, he ventures down into the Cave of Montesinos and emerges with such an incredible tale about his adventures that even Sancho does not believe him. But later, after Sancho has been trying to impress the duke and

duchess with an incredible story of his own, Don Quixote leans over to him and whispers: "Sancho, just as you want people to believe what you have seen in the sky, I want you to believe what I saw in the Cave of Montesinos. And that is all I have to say."

Is it possible to find a trend in these discrepancies? When we examine the question of Don Quixote's experience in light of the narrator's statements, Don Quixote's dialogue, and Don Quixote's behavior, we arrive at a mass of evidence that can selectively be used in support of almost any possible conclusion. Don Quixote is entirely contained in his fantasy world, because he cannot see the windmills. Don Quixote is entirely aware of reality, because of what he whispers to Sancho. Don Quixote sometimes perceives his fantasy, sometimes reality, and sometimes a combination of the two, because he attacks, but then pays for, Master Pedro's puppets. Thomas Mann, who read the novel on his first transatlantic voyage, called it "sovereign in its contradictions." But when we arrange these isolated moments in their chronological sequence, an imperfect pattern emerges. Most of the evidence suggesting a hallucinatory madness is located in the first part of the book, and most of the evidence suggesting either sanity or a mitigated madness is located in the second. It would seem that as the novel progresses, Don Quixote grows less mad, or else the character of his madness changes, becoming more mournful, less fanatical, less sure. Perhaps the book can be explained along the lines of traditional character development, as a story in which Don Quixote, initially convinced of the reality of his fantasy, is chastened by his encounters with the world and grows to doubt his experience until, on his deathbed, he rejects it. Though this hypothesis neglects many moments of stark madness in Part Two, and many moments of apparent sanity in Part One, it may contain some truth. Certainly it matches the emotional curve of the book. And it explains why most readers find the knight sadder, more moving, and more evidently real in the second part of the book, suggesting either that he has developed as a character or that the manner of his portrayal has deepened.

Don Quixote grows calm and sorrowful, and with good reason, as he approaches his final defeat at the hands of Sansón Carrasco. In the second part of the book, Cervantes introduces the fiction that the text of the first part has been published and widely read in Don Quixote's world. Now everyone he meets has

read about his madness, and he becomes an object of almost universal mockery. So many people parrot his fantasy back at him that he is no longer required to imagine his chivalric world. It is freely imagined by everyone he meets. Now the world he wants to live in comes into being around him, and all he must do—the knight whose aim is to defend the ideal of chivalry—is submit to the hidden laughter of all who help to make it. Moreover, a second book, a false book, has been written about him (as one was written, to Cervantes' rage, in Spain), and many people who know of his adventures know lies. There is an impostor, a false Don Quixote, in the world. And worst of all, Sancho convinces him that Dulcinea has been enchanted. His ideal of beauty is now incarnated in a grotesque peasant girl.

These occurrences have their effects. The enchantment of Dulcinea obsesses him. When it is demonstrated for him that his pure ideal is not immune from the corruption of reality, some of his strength departs him. He has turned the world into an image, and now, against his will, the image re-enters the world in the form of a monstrous parody. At just this moment, when the source of his identity faces its greatest threat, the paradox of the two books arrives to undermine it further. "Don Quixote," Carlos Fuentes writes, "the reader, knows he is read." As his image of the world is compromised, he discovers that the world has formed its own image of him. His authority is constrained, his uniqueness is challenged, his liberty corrodes. He has set out to fight in the jousts at Zaragoza, but when he learns that the false sequel portrays him doing that very thing, he must abruptly change his plans to prove that the false author does not control him. He asserts his freedom at the cost of his freedom, and as the world comes more and more to resemble his madness, he is slowly alienated from himself. He becomes external to his own experience.

Rather than the kind of character development we might expect, in other words, in which the knight would change according to what he learned about himself, Cervantes subjects him to something altogether different, to a kind of anti-development. He becomes less sure of what is happening to him; he changes according to what he ceases to know. Forced to invent increasingly bizarre and elaborate explanations for the circumstances that surround him, he slowly disappears into contemplation of the mystery. "God help us, for the entire world is

nothing but tricks and delusions,” he sighs at one point. It is not simply that he begins to be confused, or that he begins to doubt the reality of his illusion, but that he comes to regard the whole tissue of his experience as an insoluble problem whose terms he can no longer articulate. This could not happen to a real person, nor, perhaps, to the narrator of a first-person novel. Don Quixote transforms himself as a literary character by abstracting himself from his book.

By the time we lay the book aside, we have witnessed an extraordinary reversal. Rather than leading the reader to understand Don Quixote’s experience, so that Don Quixote seems as real to the reader as he does to himself, Cervantes leads Don Quixote not to understand his own experience, so that he seems as uncertain to himself as he does to the reader. At one point, he requires a man he meets to sign a certificate confirming that he is really Don Quixote. He seems to feel himself slipping away. He functions in scenes, but his thoughts are brooding outside them. When the duchess asks him whether Dulcinea exists, the Knight of the Mournful Countenance replies gravely that he cannot be sure.

“There is much to say about that,” responded Don Quixote. “God knows if Dulcinea exists in the world or not, or if she is imaginary or not imaginary; these are not the kinds of things whose verification can be carried through to the end.”

Don Quixote’s madness, critics generally agree, is the most important instance in the early history of the novel of a character being determined by his inner life. Cervantes’ biographer Jean Canavaggio has argued that *Don Quixote* is the first modern novel for precisely this reason. And yet in the end, after a long struggle to force the world to match his fantasy, he is lifted up out of himself, and paradoxically becomes real to us because, like us, he finds his inner life impossible to penetrate.

It is extraordinary, this book about knowing and not knowing. It gives us a character who becomes more real as he becomes less real; it gives us an intensely moving vision of a man about whom it tells us almost nothing. It teaches us for the first time that character is an expression of experience, but gives us a teacher so outwardly conceived that the question of his own experience is unanswerable, even to himself. He ends where we do—outside the book, in the real world, at arm’s length.

3. The Real World

The moment “the real world” occurs as a subject of discussion to the critic of *Don Quixote*, the critic begins to resemble Don Quixote, for he has imagined the real world as something bound inside a book. We know that Don Quixote is mad, we know that he transforms the real world into a literary image; but how, within the fiction of the book, do we distinguish the real world from the false? In our own real world we would have the luxury of our eternal functional simplicity: we would ask what really happened. We can tell an inn from a castle. But as soon as the real is conceived as a level of fiction, this luxury dries up, because, despite the narrator’s protestations to the contrary, precisely nothing in *Don Quixote* really happened. Don Quixote no more charged a windmill than he charged a giant. He no more slept in an inn than he slept in a castle. He was the greatest knight in the world and a deluded Spanish gentleman to precisely the same degree. The real world that Cervantes opposes to Don Quixote’s imaginary world is also an imaginary world.

The assumption most commonly shared by critics of the novel is that the character of Don Quixote is revealed in contrast to the world around it. The standard terms in which the contrast is expressed are madness and sanity, illusion and solidity, the real and unreal worlds. “The whole book is a comedy in which well-founded reality holds madness up to ridicule,” Erich Auerbach writes in *Mimesis*; and, “the world which Don Quixote encounters is not one especially prepared for the proving of a knight but is a random, everyday, real world.” Clearly we are meant to distinguish between the world envisioned by Don Quixote and the world perceived by the other characters, and to see the latter as continuous with our own. But what do we find when we compare these representations?

I wandered through Times Square seeing forms from *Don Quixote*. Don Quixote wandered through the real world seeing forms out of his books. But what if there is no real world in *Don Quixote*?

In Don Quixote’s unreal world, time is fluid, forms shift, knights rescue princesses from the Moors, squires become kings, all is determined by implausible coincidence, knights errant walk the earth. In the novel’s real world, time is stable (except that, at the start of Part Two, ten years pass in the space of thirty days); forms are fixed (except that the barber becomes a damsel in

distress, the priest becomes a squire, the rugged madman Cardenio becomes a polished gentleman, lovers become shepherds, and a shepherd boy becomes the impossibly beautiful maiden Dorotea); no princesses are rescued (but a Spanish captain is rescued, by a Moorish princess); squires do not become kings (but Sancho does become the governor of an island); there are no implausible coincidences (except for the sequence in Part One in which three sets of wrongfully parted lovers are reunited and the Captive discovers his long-lost brother in the space of one night at an inn); and no one believes in knights errant (except that, by the end of the book, the bachelor Sansón Carrasco has become the Knight of the White Moon, and when Don Quixote recants on his deathbed, his friends all urge him to reconsider).

What is the difference, in the fiction of the book, between the illusory world and the real? Certainly the other characters in the novel seem to share a frame of reference from which Don Quixote is excluded. The system of values and definitions that comprise his chivalric world strikes the other characters as insane. But by the end of the book, they are mimicking him; a stranger tells Don Quixote that his madness is contagious; the narrator notes that “the deceivers are as mad as the deceived.” The opposed sets of self-contained images interpenetrate one another; by the end of the book it is impossible to say that Don Quixote is mad, and impossible to say that the duke and the duchess are sane.

Clearly, despite Auerbach’s contention, reality in *Don Quixote* is not “well-founded,” and the world is not “random” or “everyday” or “real”—at least not if those terms are taken to imply any similarity to the world outside our windows. Really, when we look to distinguish the knight’s character by the contrast it makes with its setting, in our objective third-person narrative we cannot quite make it out.

One of the games Cervantes plays with his mock-epic is to stuff it full of captured miniatures of popular literary genres, rather as a film comedy today might include a spy-movie scene, a horror-movie scene, and so on. Characters in the novel, even the ones who supposedly represent the real world against the knight, are forever shimmering into literature. The wealthy young people who go about imitating shepherds live in a little slice of pastoral

romance. Ginés de Passamontes, the criminal who writes down his own adventures, satirizes picaresque novels in the manner of *Lazarillo de Tormes* and *Guzmán de Alfarache*. The beautiful lovers at the inn, with their improbable sentimental reunions, inhabit a series of Italianate novellas of the sort that we find in Cervantes' own *Exemplary Novels*. These little generic enclaves, like the embassies of other books, operate more or less according to the rules that conventionally govern them. We find as a general rule that the characters who already belong to one of these enclaves when they meet Don Quixote are much more likely to be indifferent to the knight, or to adjust to his presence easily as their own stories unfold, than to pay him any mind. Conversely, the other characters, the ones who live without a genre, are more likely to mock him, obsess over him, and chase him, as we see with the barber, the priest, the bachelor, the duke, and the duchess, as if they are trying to orient themselves by invading his chivalric world.

For the most part, the characters who become literary in the novel do so, as Don Quixote attempts to do so, through the activity of love. The touch of love drives Cardenio mad and Dorotea into costume; love for Marcela inspires Grisóstomo's life as a shepherd and his poetic suicide. What is extraordinary is that, in a novel in which "well-founded reality" supposedly holds madness up to ridicule, these characters are allowed to fit perfectly within the conventions of their genres and to be accepted by others on that basis. Love gives them power to refashion themselves, and it is only Don Quixote for whom the action fails, only Don Quixote for whom the transformation is incomplete. In this sense we could argue that Don Quixote is one of the only characters in the book to live in the real world, since he is one of the only significant figures for whom the image fails to be actual. He is one of the only characters who is divided, as we are, between himself and the world he desires. Perhaps the malice of the duke indicates a similar division and a similar unhappiness, but it also deprives him of our sympathy. Don Quixote, the madman, as improbable as it seems, becomes our representative in the unreal world of the book.

In this light perhaps we can understand the most insistent and inarguable aspect of this fictional real world: the anonymous horde of mule-drivers, carriage-guards, convicts and Yanguesans

who seem to rise up from the earth to beat Don Quixote and Sancho at every opportunity, as if to punish them for their unfulfilled defiance. They are joined by the instruments of the physical world itself: windmills, fulling hammers, flocks of sheep, and droves of pigs, which terrify, trample, batter and abuse the knight whenever he encounters them. The crude physical comedy inspired by the appearance of these figures is not to the taste of many modern readers; it appears capricious to some, cartoonish to others; Nabokov, remember, found it sickeningly cruel. "A torture house," the author of *Lolita* called *Don Quixote*. "One of the most bitter and barbarous works ever penned." Readers today find it slapstick, or else explain it away by saying that, in Cervantes' Spain, social standards regarding the mentally ill left much to be desired.

Perhaps it is a hopeless task to argue that these scenes serve a vital purpose in the novel, or even to say that I have always found them funny, at the same time as they have made me very sad. I think I may point out, in any case, that the critics who have called these scenes "slapstick" have generally failed to see how much of the comedy lies, not in the physical abuse to which Don Quixote is subjected, but in the stoical composure with which he responds to it. We might, if we are honest, admit that some unmannered part of ourselves finds a small amount of comedy in the sight of a man crushed under a horse; but if from under the horse we hear the man's voice saying proudly, "It is no fault of mine but of my mount that I lie here," the comedy becomes something more again.

But there is much more that is funny and more that is wise in these scenes, where the muddy, arbitrary, unelevated world rides roughshod over the knight's gleaming image. When we see a distracted man walk into a wall, we chuckle; when we see a man staring so intently after a beautiful woman that he walks into a glass door, we laugh out loud. There is a strange delight in seeing the punishment of a wish. Some deep form gives it meaning. We would not encourage it; we stir uncomfortably when we feel it; we all make wishes; but it remains a part of our living response to the world. Think of the genie in Aladdin's lamp.

When we make a wish we split the universe in two, we create a universe of fact and a universe of will. We will the universe, however hopelessly, to be different from what it is. A wish makes a small presumption against the universe, which is why we laugh

when it is punished: because the wisher has, if only for a moment, attempted to control the universe in his imagination, and the universe has shown that it cannot be controlled. The regularization of this process in art is an exaggeration of the real world, but it is an exaggeration that is true to the character of the world as we know it. When we see it objectified in art, we recognize the truth, even if we are not disappointed in our own lives, for the universe is only what it is, and it will do as it likes.

Don Quixote is a novel of wishes lightly fulfilled: the Captive misses his lost brother, and a moment later he strolls into the inn; Doña Rodriguez's daughter wishes to be married, and a husband miraculously appears. The art of the novel, to say nothing of the universe, demands some expiation. Don Quixote, who has devoted himself to the image of Dulcinea, the image of absolute perfection, has in a sense made his own wish absolute. The punishment that follows is aesthetically appropriate, and we laugh, though the depth of its appropriateness is terrifying. Readers like Ruskin, who weep while they read *Don Quixote*, and readers who merely decline to smile, dismissing the knight's punishment as low comedy, have been bypassed by something essential. If there is a more desperately funny or a more consolingly heartbreaking image of our position in the universe than the portrait, at the end of the book, of the self-anointed knight trampled by swine, I have not discovered it. There is a real world in *Don Quixote*, but Don Quixote alone is transfixed by it. He is subject to the logic of a wish.

4. The Wrong Side of the Tapestry

The trouble is that *Don Quixote* is already a first-person novel. There is an "I" in play throughout the book, but it has nothing to do with Don Quixote's mind. This is because, in the folds of the main story, Cervantes has included another story, the ghost of the first, and it is from this second story that the "I" of the novel speaks. But as with almost everything that touches Don Quixote, there is a paradox in this, because the two stories share one narrator, and the stories are really the same.

In the first chapter, as early as the first paragraph, we begin to hear occasional reports from the historian-editor who, according to the fiction of the book, has retraced the legend of Don

Quixote and assembled the text from a number of obscure sources. (He claims to have consulted “the annals of La Mancha,” for instance.) At first he confines himself to impersonal editorial asides, noting minor discrepancies in the historical material from which his own work draws. Soon he begins to speak to us more openly, describing his efforts to isolate the truth in the competing versions of the tale. In the ninth chapter, he breaks away from the main story altogether in order to recount his miraculous discovery, at a silk merchant’s stall, of the notebook that allowed him to complete his researches. Thus he is both the third-person narrator of Don Quixote’s story and the first-person narrator of his own story. The second story chases the first, and it is the pursuer, the chronicler, who speaks. He claims wryly that the heroic difficulties of his scholarly work have put him on a footing with Don Quixote himself: “I say, then, that for these and many other reasons, our gallant Don Quixote is deserving of continual and memorable praise, as am I, on account of the toil and effort I have put into finding the conclusion of this amiable history.” He is being ironic, of course, but his comparison is also appropriate. To search for any single idea of the truth in the book of Don Quixote is a profoundly quixotic endeavor, and it is a matter of great significance that the character who speaks to us most directly is the one in charge of piecing together the text.

But who is he? Another paradox appears the moment we begin to frame an answer, for the man who speaks to us directly is by a considerable margin the least definite, least stable, least knowable figure in the book. At first this is true simply because he gives us so little information about himself. We receive enough to distinguish him as a character, rather than the mere editorial convention in which he at first appears confined, but not enough to say what he is like or assign him to any station. He is immensely good humored and funny; he has enough money to carry out his research; apart from that, there is not much we can say. He is the sort of person who likes to joke about mad knights and visit silk merchants’ stalls. Like a little shower of merriment, he appears and disappears, and it is left to us to wonder whether he is continuous with the speaker of the Prologue, whether they are separate characters, or, as seems most likely, whether they are both meant as versions of Cervantes.

The chronicler’s main purpose, or I should say Cervantes’

main purpose in using him, is to parody the narrators of books of chivalry, in whom the tendency to stumble upon ancient parchments in out-of-the-way places often coexists with the most clairvoyant intuitions about their characters' intimate experiences. "It seemed impossible and completely contrary to all good precedent," he tells us as he searches for clues to Don Quixote's adventures,

that so good a knight should have lacked a wise man who would assume the responsibility of recording his never-before-seen deeds, something that never happened to other knights errant . . . because each of them had one or two wise men whose purpose was not only to record their deeds, but to depict their slightest thoughts and fancies, no matter how secret they might be; and so good a knight could not be so unfortunate as to lack what Platir and others like him had in abundance.

But in the course of playing out his spoof, Cervantes replaces the omniscience of the typical chivalric narrator with a pervasive uncertainty that detaches from the parody and becomes, in its own right, an aspect of the book. The chronicler tells us that "there is absolutely no deviation from the truth" in his account; but all his authorial intrusions, especially in the early chapters, are calculated to suggest the opposite. Wherever he peeks in, he lays some ambiguity before us. He cannot be sure of Don Quixote's real name. Sancho Panza may have been called Sancho Zancas. We cannot know precisely where they went. "There is a certain amount of disagreement among the authors who write of this matter," the chronicler says dryly. He uses his first-person narration not to tell us about himself, but to undermine the authority of his third-person narration. It is as if Don Quixote, as he rides deliberately onward, is always on the verge of leaving his narrator behind.

In the ninth chapter of the first part, with the discovery of the mysterious manuscript, this state of affairs becomes considerably more entangled. The notebook, which is written in Arabic, is illegible to the Spanish narrator. He takes it to a Morisco, a Spanish Moor, who tells him that it is the *History of Don Quixote of La Mancha*, by an Arab historian named Cide Hamete Benengeli. Astonished by his good fortune, the narrator hires the Morisco to translate the entire notebook. When we return to the story of Don Quixote—which the narrator has left suspended at a

moment of terrible crisis, as the knight battles against the Basque who uses a pillow for a shield—we return to a story that is different from the story we left. It is no longer the original narrator's work, but the Morisco's translation of Cide Hamete's history. The style has changed drastically, into a kind of overripe pseudo-chivalric pomp. "With the sharp-edged swords of the two valiant and enraged combatants held and raised on high, they seemed to threaten heaven, earth, and the abyss," Hamete writes: "such was their boldness and bearing." It is Cide Hamete, and not the original narrator, who is now in possession of the "I." We are led to expect that the rest of the novel will follow in this vein, with the Spanish narrator acting merely as the editor of the Morisco translator's version of Cide Hamete's book. This state of affairs would also be consistent with Cervantes' parody of chivalric romances, which frequently pretended to be written by exotic historians and translated into Spanish.

But here something extraordinary happens. With no interruption, without any explanation, the prose gradually eases back into the original narrator's voice. Nothing happens to indicate that we are no longer reading the direct translation of Cide Hamete's words, but before long we find Cide Hamete referred to in the third person. It would appear that, without breaking the continuity of the text, the original narrator has begun to *rewrite* the Morisco's translation of Cide Hamete's book, still following it closely, but allowing himself to comment on and at times to criticize it. ("This long harangue," he calls one of Don Quixote's speeches, "which could easily have been omitted.") But there are other moments when it appears that we are reading Cide Hamete's text without the original narrator's intervention. Third-person discussions about Cide Hamete, presumably added by the Spanish narrator, lead to explicit statements that what follows is Cide Hamete's text ("and so he continues, saying . . ."), which in turn lead back to third-person discussions of Cide Hamete, with no transition between them. The uncertainty of motive that has been trembling at the edges of the book—judging from the Prologue, the narrator intends both to attack the absurdities of books of chivalry and to glorify Don Quixote as the greatest knight in the world—becomes more pronounced. We begin to distinguish, roughly, between a tone belonging to Cide Hamete, in which Don Quixote's merits are loudly praised (with an irony

intended by Cervantes but not by Cide Hamete), and a tone belonging to the original narrator, in which the knight's madness is more clearly a source of amusement. But the distinction is wildly imprecise. Much of the time we simply cannot tell which narrator is speaking. The occupancy of the "I" becomes a matter of doubt. There are even moments when the *translator* interferes with the text. At one point, he claims not to believe Cide Hamete's version of events, and later he refuses to translate a long descriptive passage which bores him. Everything that happens in the main story—everything involving Don Quixote, Sancho, Dulcinea, the duke and duchess, the barber and the priest, the bachelor, the housekeeper, the niece—comes to us through the warp of this three-way uncertainty. There are two fictional historians and a fictional translator between ourselves and any inkling of the truth.

In the novel, this is all dashed off with an air of inspired carelessness—indeed, one of the miracles of Cervantes' art is that his intricate narrative design reads so easily that it is never remotely confusing—but its implications nevertheless have a profoundly unbalancing effect on our relation to the characters and the story. It may be part of Cervantes' joke, for instance, to have one of his narrators mock books in which the author seems to know the characters' thoughts, while his other narrator routinely tells us what Don Quixote is thinking—it may be part of the joke, but it also undermines our trust in what we are told about Don Quixote's perception; it deflects any attempt to see into Don Quixote's mind. The question of Don Quixote's experience is made, not only unanswerable, but practically impossible to ask. "These are not the kinds of things," as Don Quixote says, "whose verification can be carried through to the end."

There is a wonderfully absurd moment near the end of the book when the distortion of the first-person voice literally turns the narrative order upside down. Don Quixote has split a pair of stockings and cannot afford to buy a new one. Cide Hamete interrupts the story with a long and personal meditation on the ills of poverty. The original narrator interrupts him. Cide Hamete resumes his speech, and when he finishes, the original narrator tells us that "all this was repeated in Don Quixote's thoughts." But Cide Hamete and the original narrator have been speaking without reference to Don Quixote and have each made an

individual contribution to the discussion of poverty. Their observations cannot be present in the mind of Don Quixote unless Don Quixote, rather than having his own thoughts described by his narrators, has somehow anticipated their discussion and is inwardly describing *them*. Of course the narrator probably means to say only that Don Quixote's thoughts were also about poverty, or followed roughly the same lines as Cide Hamete's; but the effect is bizarrely to suggest that Don Quixote, the character, is at the top of the narrative hierarchy, gathering in the thoughts of his narrators as they would normally stoop to gather his.

At every turn, through all this indeterminacy, the narrators continue to insist on the absolute truth of their story; and yet at every turn Cervantes throws complications in their path. In the first part of the novel, especially in the sequence at the inn, the already compromised third-person narrative is interrupted at regular intervals by the "interpolated novels," long stories told by the characters themselves, so that for dozens of pages at a stretch the narrative triangle is crowded by yet another first-person narrator, telling yet another subsidiary story. In the second part, of course, Cervantes introduces the fiction that the first part has been published in the world of the novel, so that the manner of narration has a material effect on the characters' impressions, and they are able to discuss Cide Hamete's story in their own right, even as they are simultaneously appearing in it. Twice, Cervantes introduces himself as a character mentioned in passing by other characters in the book. Perhaps the most completely decentered moment in the novel occurs during "The Man Who Was Recklessly Curious," an interpolated novel in the first part, which is discovered as a manuscript in a drawer and read aloud by the priest. In the middle of the story there is a single instance of the narrative first-person ("Certainly I do not know"). At this moment there are no fewer than five layers of narrative between ourselves and the events of the story: there is the event, the writer's version of the event, the priest's reading of the writer's version of the event, Cide Hamete's narration of the priest's reading of the writer's version of the event, the Morisco's translation of Cide Hamete's narration of the priest's reading of the writer's version of the event, and finally the original narrator's rewriting of Cide Hamete's narration of the priest's reading of the writer's version of the event, which is the text we are given to read.

In Spanish the distance between reading and madness is the space of two letters: *lectura* and *locura*. In a world so wound and unwound in the issues of the text, how are we to see into the mind? The first-person *Don Quixote* is what keeps us from knowing the first-person Don Quixote.

5. "The one who is deranged and enchanted"

Don Quixote is mad, because he wishes absolutely; but his book is also mad, and it is through the book, and not the sane world, that he travels. If I have wished to see into Don Quixote's mind, it is because I have learned what is possible in fiction from novels that made an art of filling in his implications. I have inherited his aftermath. With Don Quixote's madness Cervantes taught the novel that character is inward, and it is no wonder that, as he improvised the lesson, his conception suggested prospects of sympathy that his technique was not equipped to reach. Whatever we might wish, we do not know Don Quixote as we would know a character addressed to the modern world; but then the difference only occurs to us because that category of knowledge was invented in *Don Quixote*.

In the real world we cannot know the terms of another person's experience, and yet we know that we are more than what another person sees. The functioning of our everyday lives depends on the rough outward consensus by which we mutually agree to balance those propositions. We make some allowance for the hidden lives of others; we accept that, to the rest of the world, we have only a limited depth. That there is a "we" at all demonstrates what this negotiation makes possible, though it also means that wherever we meet, most of the truth, including the truth about ourselves, is lost.

Don Quixote breaks the consensus. His madness, by insisting that the outside world conform to his inner vision, also insists that the inner vision is the only true source of his identity. If he is to be dealt with at all, it must be on that basis. For the first time in fiction, in Don Quixote's absolute inwardness, we discover something like the self. But it is the absoluteness, and not the mere fact of the inwardness, that allows us to make the discovery. After Cervantes' innovation, fiction learned to portray the inner life of the individual within the normal social plane; it gave us

Clarissa Harlowe, it gave us Leopold Bloom; it gave us what we never had in life, an unfrustrated insight, an illusion of perfect sympathy. With *Don Quixote*, Cervantes marks a point in the wilderness; but though throughout the novel we sense with growing urgency a conviction that the point has meaning, it is not left to Cervantes to develop it. He sees *Don Quixote* from the outside, as we do, and drives himself to a blank indication of something so mysterious that, in the end, it makes the character and the novel disappear.

Indeed, we might say that *Don Quixote* runs itself mad precisely as it realizes the implications of *Don Quixote's* inwardness. It has no recourse to free indirect style or to the concentration of style in a personality, so it invents multiple narrators, it confounds its own presentation, it dramatizes its own uncertainty, in an effort to outline its consuming central paradox. It cannot see into *Don Quixote*, so it shows him from every angle, it throws up hypotheses, it abstracts him from himself. It lacks the realism of detail necessary to figure him against a stable world, so it sends him wandering through a succession of hostile literary genres in an effort to find his own. It has often been noted as a kind of bizarre curiosity that if *Don Quixote* represents the beginning of the novel, then postmodern fiction came into being before regular fiction did. But there is nothing so surprising about that. The same incapacibilities inspire the same fantastical recourses. *Don Quixote* had not yet learned what fiction today has forgotten.

But the wonder of *Don Quixote* is that, having arrived at a principle impossible to reach with the methods at his disposal, Cervantes discovers an equal profundity in the heat and excess of the attempt. *Don Quixote's* alienation from himself is the palpable result of the narration remaining outside his experience, and yet it is the same phenomenon that makes him, of all fictional characters, the freest and most sovereign, for he seems to escape from the text. The mad fracturing of the real world in the prism of literary artifice is the result of Cervantes' inability to show *Don Quixote* against realistic surroundings, and yet the skewed hierarchy of unrealities that follows allows the knight to occupy fully the tragic gap between our world and what seems just out of reach. The dizzying multiplication of narrators keeps us distant and at odd angles from the story, and if this is the disguise Cervantes gives to a removal he could not overcome, it is also the

exhilarating ground of the exploration, mirroring Don Quixote's own, of the relation between the ideal and human life.

In other words, the novel that *Don Quixote* sets out to be (a simple parody of books of chivalry, with a mad knight wandering through a version of the real world) is overlaid on the novel that *Don Quixote* discovers the potential to be (a revelation of the individual's inwardness against the outer world) and again on the novel that *Don Quixote* is (a cloak of literary tricks and metaphors in which the self remains out of sight). It contains the whole world, because the whole book is the outside of an inwardness; and it reveals a single human soul, because the size of the inwardness is too great to be contained.

Is it not possible, after all, that even as he eludes us, we identify with Don Quixote? Have you never wished to live inside a book? There are writers who have found his madness inconceivable and arbitrary, merely a premise we must accept as the key to a number of metaphors. For all I have said about not knowing Don Quixote from the inside, I have never found it so. To long for an escape into the image seems to me a universal wish; and the lesson that the escape will not change the nature of the world, which Ruskin missed and which Cervantes teaches, seems almost the modern definition of maturity. For most of human history the aesthetic image, the world transformed in the order of the mind, was, in myth and ritual, the secret to our understanding of the universe; over time the image shook loose from our metaphysics; we came to perceive that the structure of the universe does not match the structure of the mind. This does not diminish the power of the image, but it does undermine the certainty of its place in our lives. Cervantes wrote in a time and place where, for many reasons, the consequence of this development was beginning to be keenly felt. Nine centuries of overlap with Muslim and Jewish societies and a world opened by new scientific discoveries were met by the opposing pressures of the Inquisition and a fervent nationalism unprecedented in Spanish history. As a young man, Cervantes was captured by pirates and spent five years as a slave in Algiers; in middle age he was a commissary officer for the Invincible Armada. It is no wonder that the madness of the unfixed image would have presented itself to him in new forms, outside those sanctioned by the Catholic authorities of Spain. And it is no wonder that we should respond to his presentation. What was a

hint in the early seventeenth century is a thousand times exaggerated today, to the point that, as I wandered in Times Square, I felt that all of America had gone madder than Don Quixote.

If Don Quixote's character is not expressed in the portrayal of his experience, not expressed by his position in the reality of his world, and not expressed by the manner of Cervantes' narration, then the depth of our response to him must begin here, in his role as a metaphor for an aspect of our experience. I do not mean that Don Quixote is an allegory for some psychological principle, but that, through a strange circularity, his whole character becomes a metaphor for the single point of commonality that exists between us and him. We identify with the depth of his reliance on the ideal, even if we do not know what to make of the particular form in which he embodies it; then all the secondary aspects of his character, including the comic aspects, are invested in that tendency, with the result that he seems to symbolize us by first symbolizing himself. And this is entirely appropriate to the character of a novel whose highest end lies in its achievement of just this sort of dizzy congruence. It becomes, itself, an image of the transformation of the world into images. It features a character who sets out to become an image to the world and finally becomes an image to himself. Don Quixote separates from his own experience as he becomes involved in ours, and this, finally, is why he could not have appeared in a first-person novel; because the image has no experience, it has nothing to narrate, it could only live or die. Don Quixote becomes human because, as he ceases to resemble humanity, as he lifts away from himself, as he becomes a separate ideal, he becomes so surely a part of us that we read him back into his book. There is no character in literature like him.

To stand in Times Square is to stand inside his mind. We see what he saw everywhere.

We are all the first-person Don Quixote.