

Guzal BEGIM

A Letter to Don Quixote

I needed a longer time to think about this essay. I tried to find a shape for it, and finally I decided to write a letter to the past, to Don Quixote. So, let me start.

A letter to Don Quixote:

Dear sad-looking Don Quixote, I come from the country of Khoja Nasriddin Effendi. Remember, he was the one who deceived kids by saying that someone was giving away nuts for free over there and ran after the kids himself as well. I am sending you benevolent regards from the motherland of Effendi, who believed in his own lies. As I took a photo of the monument to Effendi on his donkey, in the ancient city of Bukhara, I was absorbed in deep thoughts about his donkey, smarter than some people, as well as about your Rocinante. And I see the harmony in the spiritual faces of both you and of Nasriddin Effendi, standing here, laughing for centuries at oppression, violence and incompetence. Thus, life preferred to erect statues in honor of your Rocinante and the Effendi's donkey instead of commemorating some great people.

You lived at a time when chivalric romance was everywhere, and when Literature observed its reflection in the broken mirror. The beautiful work about you put an end to those “fermented” romances. Today, Literature is not broken; perhaps, though, it is looking at its face in a broken mirror to make itself visible. Impact, imitation, plagiarism, graphomania—can these be abolished completely? Are we a generation living at a time when one might say, with Borges, that “everything has already been written”?

Can you please tell me when the first imitation, or rather the impact of Don Quixote of La Mancha appeared? Or are you saying that this is the question you wanted to ask of me? In my humble opinion, it could be connected with the legend of Cain and Abel, the two sons of Adam and Eve. I believe it was also written in the books you read that Cain watched how a crow killed another crow, dug out the soil and buried it. After that, he buried his brother Abel, whom he had already killed. As you see, it is impossible to completely eradicate brutality from the heart of mankind. Similarly, it is impossible to eradicate imitation and influence from the roots of literature because imitation is directly connected with the creation of human beings. I don't think literature without imitation or influence can ever evolve. However, to clean literature from plagiarism and graphomania, I think it is necessary to wash out the blood of those who are sick of words. Perhaps it is also necessary to inoculate writers against plagiarism. For this, as a French poet stated, we must first of all induce the feeling of shame in our hearts, foster inner embarrassment.

Both sugar and salt are white, says the great Uzbek poet Alisher Navoi. We took up pens with the hope that generations capable of distinguishing sugar from salt would rise. Every writer should have the third eye—an inner gaze—so as to distinguish a true poem from one that is plagiarized, or a novel from the product of a graphomaniac.

Iowa City Public Library and the International Writing Program Panel Series, September 11, 2015
“The Don Dreams On” at 315 Phillips Hall

Antônio Xerxesesky (Brazil), Teresa Prãauer (Austria), Guzal Begim (Uzbekistan),
Kirill Timurovich Azernyi (Russia), and Yao Feng (Macau)

For electronic texts, please visit <http://iwp.uiowa.edu/archives/iowa-city-public-library-presentations>

Mr. Don Quixote, before I started writing this letter to you, I walked the streets of Iowa City for hours, talking to myself. I had been reading what Ivan Turgenev and Vladimir Nabokov had said about you, and was a bit sad seeing how intensely negative Nabokov's attitude towards you was, since I grew up in a world in which respect for others is above everything, and where courtesy and comportsment count even higher than telling the truth.

With your abundance of kindness, hope and imagination, you sometimes seem like an Uzbek man. You only need an Uzbek scull-cap, a *do'ppi*, on your head. So I went in search of these qualities in the books that make up Uzbek literature. We had Abdulla Qadiri in the beginning of the 20th century. His love story, titled "Bygone Days," is given to newly married Uzbek couples as a gift at their wedding. Qadiri had a series of stories about "Kalvak Mahzum," a lovely and funny character who pays half price at the barbershop because he is half bald. Or, let's take another Uzbek writer, Ghafur Ghulom, who lived in the middle of the 20th century. In his story "The Prankster," the picaresque adventures of a young boy were described with humor. But I doubt that Abdulla Qadiri or Ghafur Ghulom were aware of your beautiful novel, since it had not been translated into Uzbek during their lifetimes. Sarcasm and irony, characters with expansive soul and colorful imagination—all of these also remind us of Uzbek writers of our time: Erkin A'zam and Murod Muhammad Do'st.

Please, Mr. Don Quixote, do not think, however, that these are Uzbek imitators of Cervantes. No! I only meant that there is a harmony, the detail of description, the strength of the language in their works. Today we live in technical turmoil and amidst the noise of progress. Your or Sancho's long letters aren't popular today. We chat with each other on the Internet now, using only one button or a smiley. A poet sitting in the rose garden with a pen in his hand is the most beautiful image of quiet. My teacher told me one day that the only way to fight against a bad book is by writing a good one. This is similar to the words of Sancho Panza who said that "The saddle shouldn't be punished because of the ass."

My dear Don Quixote! In this letter to you, I tried to think over literary impact and influence. Jelaliddin Rumi said that when the sea waves, a light haze may arise, but the pearls and the jewels will remain at the bottom of the sea. Today I only tried to share a small water-wave of my soul with you.

Having learned about this letter, my Uzbek friends also sent their warmest wishes to you. It is a great honor for me to extend the sincere love and greetings of Uzbek readers who have been reading for four hundred years.

With all good wishes and Eastern love,

Guzal Begim

7 September, 2015
Iowa City

(Translated by Aazam Abidov)