

Teresa PRÄAUER

On Reading the Don

When I was a child, there was a cartoon shown on TV every week: *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, a Spanish production from the late 70s. This Don Quixote was, concerning his looks, somehow a mixture of Uderzo's Asterix and Morris's Lucky Luke. I loved the knight with his gift of happily failing—and never missed an episode.

When I was a teenager and we started talking about literature in the snobbish way that adults do, a classmate mentioned the story of *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of la Mancha*. I was surprised. Why would this brainiac read a children's book?!

I was already in my 20s when I discovered the novel of *Don Quixote*, the one I would follow on his trips and adventures, mocking the medieval 'aventure' and at the same time creating a character so loveable in his tragic and funny fight against windmills.

So telling you about my own private history of reception of the oeuvre, I am talking about different ways of approaching literature. The narrative could be the first to open the doors: the seductive moment of story-telling. What childhood dreams in bright-colored stop-motion technique are made of.

But you would surely miss the biggest part of it by sticking to the narrative. There are so many criteria literary criticism today re-established that the old Don simply refuses to fit: There is no such thing as a so-called psychological development of the figure. Each adventure could stand separately; chapters could be switched easily. Cervantes is working with the techniques of storytelling as some later fairy tales do: they are queueing episode after episode—the principle of the bead chain—by neglecting the rules of physical realism. It's trial and error, very often NOT changing the behavior of the character through learning and growth.

Some of my favorite German fairy tales are "Of the Life of a Good-for-Nothing" (by Joseph von Eichendorff, early 19th century) and "The Story of the Youth Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was," collected by the Brothers Grimm at about the same time. At the end of the novella, the youth still has NOT learnt what fear was. And Don Quixote has NOT met his beloved maiden Dulcinea.

What we experience when reading texts like these is how language is constructing poetic reality. Only by thinking of our own history of reading will we see a development of the character, the many layers of a figure. By knowing the poems of, for example, Walter von der Vogelweide, I will laugh with Don Quixote quoting the books he read before.

"In short, he became so absorbed in his books that he spent his nights from sunset to sunrise, and his days from dawn to dark, poring over them; and what with little sleep and much reading his brains got so dry that he lost his wits. His fancy grew full of what he

used to read about in his books, enchantments, quarrels, battles, challenges, wounds, wooings, loves, agonies, and all sorts of impossible nonsense; and it so possessed his mind that the whole fabric of invention and fancy he read of was true, that to him no history in the world had more reality in it.”¹

Quixote’s journey is a trip through literature, through the mechanics of poetics. La Mancha is just another word for Literature itself. By giving the name of Sancho Panza to a small, fat farmer and by recruiting him as his squire does the author Cervantes himself, disguised as a knight, redefine the things the world is made of. So literature is inventing the world by spelling out words. Quixote gone mad by reading too many books means only to become sane in the world of text. Losing his mind to gain the mighty power of imagination.

So the Don for me is a *vade mecum*, being a writer myself: something I carry with me in my thoughts, reminding me of trusting and mistrusting my language. As readers, by reading books closely, carefully, always with one ear close to the rhythm and the rhyme, the melody, the quotations, the connotations, we ourselves are companions of Don Quixote de la Mancha.

¹ *Don Quixote*, Chapter 1. Translated to English in 1885 by John Ormsby. Available online: http://www.online-literature.com/cervantes/don_quixote/