

# Miguel de Cervantes and J.M. Coetzee: An Unacknowledged Paternity

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## Summary

This article points to the 17th-century Spanish writer, Miguel de Cervantes, as one important literary predecessor of the contemporary South African writer, J.M. Coetzee, a relation that has generally passed unnoticed among critics. This relation is brought to the foreground in Coetzee's most recent novel, *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), but it also underlies his previous ones, *Age of Iron* (1998), *Disgrace* (2000), and *Slow Man* (2005), as well as his critical pieces, "The Novel Today" (1988) and the "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech" (1992b), all of which contain echoes of Cervantes's masterpiece, *Don Quixote* ([1605, 1615]2005). My argument is that the conflict between imagination and reality, the novel and history, central in Coetzee's fictional and non-fictional production, needs to be re-examined as a fundamentally Cervantine one. The adventures and fate of Don Quixote lie behind Coetzee's exploration of whether literature may be an effective and ethical guide in our dealings with reality, whether the ordinary may be transformed into the extraordinary, and of the relation between the literary imagination and the onslaughts of the real world.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel verwys na die 17de eeuse Spaanse skrywer, Miguel de Cervantes, as 'n belangrike letterkundige voorganger van die hedendaagse Suid Afrikaanse skrywer, J.M. Coetzee, 'n verwantskap wat gewoonlik nie deur kritici opgemerk is nie. Hierdie verhouding is na vore gebring in Coetzee se mees onlangse roman, *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), maar dit is ook onderliggend aan sy voriges, *Age of Iron* (1998), *Disgrace* (2000), en *Slow Man* (2005), en ook sy kritiese stukke, "The Novel Today" (1988) en "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech" (1992b), waarvan almal eggo's bevat van Cervantes se meesterstuk, *Don Quixote* ([1605, 1615]2005). Ek voer aan dat die konflik tussen verbeelding en realiteit, die roman en geskiedenis, sentraal in Coetzee se fiktiewe en niefiktiewe werke, weer ondersoek moet word deur te kyk na hierdie konflik as in beginsel Cervantaans. Die avonture en lot van Don Quixote is die basis van Coetzee se ondersoek om te bepaal of sy literatuur effektiewe en etiese riglyne is in ons handelinge met die realiteit, of die gewone moontlik verander in die ongewone, en van die verhouding tussen die letterkundige verbeelding en die aanslae van die regte wêreld.

## Introduction

Throughout his literary career, J.M. Coetzee has tended to make explicit the influence that some writers have exerted on him. The attention he has paid to certain writers in his fictional and critical production, and the incorporation of aspects of their work into his have alerted critics to intertextual links with Daniel Defoe, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, and many others. There is one name, however, and one work that have generally passed unnoticed, namely, Miguel de Cervantes and his masterpiece, *Don Quixote* ([1605, 1615]2005).<sup>1</sup>

The publication of *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) is likely to change this critical trend, given the explicit protagonism that Cervantes and his famous hero have in this novel. However, this article argues that the Spanish writer has always been an important presence in Coetzee's literary and critical production. In a 2002 interview, Coetzee asserted: "I have read *Don Quixote*, the most important novel of all times, time and again, as any serious novelist must do, as it contains infinite lessons" (Coetzee & Carlin 2002). The explicit references and covert allusions to Cervantes and *Don Quixote* that we find in Coetzee's critical pieces, especially in "The Novel Today" (1987), "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech" (1987), and in novels such as *Age of Iron* (1990), *Disgrace* (1999), and *Slow Man* (2005), suggest that Coetzee is especially interested in the Cervantine conflict between imagination and reality, and in Cervantes's treatment of the effects that literature may have on the lives of readers, questions that come to the foreground in *The Childhood of Jesus* and that point to the fundamental concern of whether literature may be an effective guide in our dealings with reality, both in pragmatic and ethical terms. In *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007a), JC chooses Johann Sebastian Bach as his father, but wonders: "Why not Schubert ...? Why not Cervantes ...?" (Coetzee 2007a: 222). Cervantes may not come first, but this passage suggests that, as I intend to show, the Spanish writer is indeed one of Coetzee's literary fathers.

## The Play of Writing

In his "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech", Coetzee refers to the tribute that Milan Kundera had made to Cervantes, as he had stood on the same platform two years before. Coetzee "would like to join him in that tribute", a tribute to "a world where a living play of feelings and ideas is possible", but novelists in South Africa, like himself, find themselves in "a world of pathological attachments and abstract forces, of anger and violence" (1992b:

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1. The only significant exception is Patrick Hayes, with whom I engage in dialogue below.

98). Coetzee made this speech in the 1980s, a decade in which violence and conflict, torture and censorship in South Africa reached inordinate peaks. In such a context, the form of the novel is “too slow, too old-fashioned, too indirect to have any but the slightest and most belated effect on the life of the community or the course of history” (pp. 98-99). Whereas Don Quixote “leaves behind hot, dusty, tedious La Mancha and enters the realm of faery by what amounts to a willed act of the imagination” (p. 98), the South African writer is prevented from doing the same:

What prevents him is what prevents Don Quixote himself: the *power* of the world his body lives in to impose itself on him and ultimately on his imagination .... The *crudity* of life in South Africa, the naked force of its appeals .... The story of Alonso Quixano or Don Quixote – though not, I add, Cervantes’ subtle and enigmatic book – ends with the capitulation of the imagination to reality, with a return to La Mancha and death.

(Coetzee 1992b: 99)

In the reading he makes of the relation between Don Quixote and his world, La Mancha, as a conflict between imagination and reality, Coetzee follows the Romantic interpretation of the Cervantean text, which, as Anthony J. Close has argued, identified “the opposition between subject and object, mind and nature, spirit and matter, the sphere of freedom and that of necessity” (1977: 33) as the theme of *Don Quixote*. Borrowing Schelling’s words in *The Philosophy of Art*, “the theme on the whole is the struggle between the real and the ideal” (1989: 234). It seems that the ideal is finally defeated by the real, as on his deathbed, the knight errant abhors his existence as Don Quixote and returns to his previous identity as the hidalgo Alonso Quixano: “I was mad, and now I am sane; I was Don Quixote de La Mancha, and now I am, as I have said, Alonso Quixano the Good” (Cervantes [1605, 1615]2005: 937). In another critical piece in which he pays detailed attention to his Spanish master – his review of Gabriel García Márquez’s *Memory of My Melancholy Whores* – Coetzee points to the sadness that this final moment provokes in the reader:

Quixote’s return to sanity at the end of the book, his abandonment of the ideal world he has tried so valiantly to inhabit in favour of the real world of his detractors, strikes everyone around him, and the reader too, with dismay. Is that what we really want: to give up the world of the imagination and settle back into the tedium of life in a rural backwater in Castile?

(Coetzee 2007b: 265-266)

In the passage from the Jerusalem lecture quoted above, however, he suggests that the character’s capitulation to reality and renunciation of the world of the imagination does not entail the same for the book itself. In fact, it could be argued that since it is Alonso Quixano that dies, Don Quixote survives. As Alonso Quixano dies a Christian and exemplary death in the

real world, “the fame of Don Quixote can live on intact in its proper sphere, the world of fiction” (Murillo 1990: 261). On the contrary, the South African novelist writing in the 80s, and by extension, his literary creations, are defeated from beginning to end by “too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination” (Coetzee 1992b: 99).

According to Patrick Hayes, one of the few critics that have paid substantial attention to the Cervantine aspects of Coetzee’s narrative, Coetzee’s words in the Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech imply that for the writer in South Africa, the novel, as alternative to “history”, is as irrelevant and doomed to failure as Alonso Quixano’s embrace of the chivalric romance (2010: 135). However, as we have seen, in this lecture, Coetzee gives more credit to Cervantes than to the South African novelist. The opposition between the novel and history constitutes the focus of another speech by Coetzee, “The Novel Today” (1988). Critics have repeatedly turned to this text when discussing Coetzee’s views on the relation between literary and historical discourse, but have paid no attention to Coetzee’s references to Cervantes and Don Quixote in order to make his point. Coetzee places himself within a tradition inaugurated by Cervantes. If the aim of his speech is to interrogate “the relation of novels and novel-writing to the time and place in which we live”, this constitutes “a question that has been addressed by novelists and theorists of the novel since at least the time of Cervantes” (1988: 2). Coetzee argues that “in times of intense ideological pressure like the present ... the novel ... has only two options: supplementarity or rivalry” (p. 3), and that the South African tendency is to privilege history over the novel “to subsume the novel under history” (p. 2). Coetzee, however, opposes this tendency, appealing to Don Quixote as his ally: “people like myself will defend themselves by saying that a history is nothing but a kind of story that people agree to tell each other – that, as Don Quixote argues so persuasively but in the end so vainly, the authority of history lies simply in the consensus it commands” (p. 4).

In “The Novel Today” and his Jerusalem lecture, then, Coetzee posits a dichotomy – the novel versus history, and imagination versus truth/reality, respectively – whose terms correspond with each other: the novel as the realm of the imagination, and history as paired with truth and reality, with both realms and their elements in constant dialogue and conflict. Coetzee’s stance in relation to these dichotomies, however, is slightly different in these two speeches. In the Jerusalem lecture, the South African novelist is defeated, as imagination is defeated by South African violent truth. Coetzee’s attitude in “The Novel Today”, on the contrary, is of defiance, as he positions himself on the side of the novel, challenging the prevailing historical primacy. Similarly, Coetzee understands Kundera’s tribute to Cervantes in 1985 in Jerusalem as “a certain defiance of the role imposed on him by history (if you look at it in one way) or by fashion (if you look at it

in another)” (1992a: 66). Certainly, Don Quixote is probably the character in Western literature who most vehemently challenges history and fashion, as he continuously argues against the authority and consensus of the interpretations of the world – the stories, the history – shared by those surrounding him. As Gibson has put it, “the most important contrast in the novel is between the logic of the dominant narrative and the logic of the protagonist” (1990: 28).

Furthermore, as Cervantes’s narrative advances, the logic of the protagonist – his idealistic perception of reality – gains more and more strength, transforming the logic of those that come into contact with him, especially that of his squire Sancho Pancha, with his initial pragmatic, down-to-earth outlook. Thus, in chapter 10 of Part II, he swears to Don Quixote that the three women they have in front of them are Lady Dulcinea of Toboso with two of her damsels, whereas “Don Quixote looked, with startled eyes and confused vision, at the person Sancho was calling queen and lady, and ... could see nothing except a peasant girl” (Cervantes [1605, 1615]2005: 518). Similarly, in chapter 31, the duke and the duchess welcome Don Quixote in their country estate as if he indeed were a knight and their country estate a castle, “all of which astounded Don Quixote, and this was the first day he really knew and believed he was a true knight errant and not a fantastic one, for he saw himself treated in the same manner in which, he had read, knights were treated in past ages” (p. 658). As they begin to model their words and their acts according to Don Quixote’s logic, Sancho, the duke and the duchess have actually lapsed into quixotry even when they think that they are making fun of it, and “hard and fast distinctions and clear structural contrasts therefore break down” (Gibson 1990: 31).

This blurring of the distinction between madness and reality, fiction and truth, with the subsequent emergence of competing visions of the world leads André Brink to describe *Don Quixote*, following Carlos Fuentes’s interpretation of Cervantes’s novel, “as a fictional exploration of Erasmus’s concept of ‘folly’, and of the dawning, after the blind faith of the Middle Ages, of a new Age of Doubt” (1998: 29). The influence of Erasmus of Rotterdam and his *Praise of Folly* (1511) on Cervantes has been unanimously acknowledged by critics, and Martín argues that one of the lessons that Cervantes learnt from it was “that for any given truth, the opposite may be equally true, thus pointing out the necessity of considering all sides to any question and the subjectivity of truth statements” (2002: 164). We encounter this Erasmian and Cervantine lesson in a text like “The Novel Today”, with its emphasis on the constructed, and hence provisional, character of historical and moral categories: “The categories of history are not privileged, just as the categories of moral discourse are not privileged. They do not reside in reality: they are a certain construction put upon reality” (Coetzee 1988: 4).

Coetzee has paid detailed attention to Erasmus in his essay "Erasmus: Madness and Rivalry", in which he analyses how *The Praise of Folly* "sketches the possibility of a position for the critic of the scene of political rivalry, a position not simply impartial between the rivals, but also, by self-definition, off the stage of rivalry altogether, a *nonposition*" (1996: 84). According to Coetzee, Erasmus failed in his attempt to find this nonposition, as he could not prevent his text from being appropriated by different political rivalries (p. 100). Hence the value of literature, which Coetzee does not mention in this essay, but whose importance he indirectly signals as he suggests that the Erasmian (non)position of nonrivalry and madness can only be a position of fiction, a position of play.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, it is revealing to recall that Coetzee appeals to the notion of play in his discussions of the way the South African writer experiences the conflict between reality and imagination: he understands Kundera's tribute to Cervantes in Jerusalem as a tribute to "a world where a living play of feelings and ideas is possible" (1992b: 98), and where the task of the South African writer "becomes imagining this unimaginable, imagining a form of address that permits the play of *writing* to start taking place" (1992a: 68). Thus, whereas for Hayes, Coetzee, in his essay on Erasmus, abandons his earlier view of the literary text as a rival to history in favour of a "nonposition" which "involves the elaboration of a series of unstable and elusive ironies around the figure of the fool" (2009: 113), my point is that what Coetzee understands by rivalry in "The Novel Today" corresponds to Erasmian nonrivalry and nonposition: the novel does not choose sides between pre-existing positions and categories, but "operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions"; it "evolves its own paradigms and myths" (1988: 3).

This fictional (non)rivalry is a playful one, as opposed to Coetzee's description of "straight or orthodox history" (1988: 2), characterised by "authority", "consensus" and "forcefulness" (p. 4), qualities that can only be truly challenged by the playfulness of literature, by a madman like Don Quixote. In his "Jerusalem Address: The Novel and Europe", Kundera also advocates a similar kind of novel, positing Cervantes as the inaugurator of such a tradition. The Czech writer relates the genre of the novel to the Jewish proverb "man thinks, God laughs", arguing that "the art of the novel came into the world as the echo of God's laughter" (1986: 158).

The opposition between playfulness and consensus also traverses Kundera's argument: since "the art inspired by God's laughter does not by nature serve ideological certitudes, it contradicts them. Like Penelope, it undoes each night the tapestry that the theologians, philosophers, and

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2. Coetzee highlights the section in Erasmus's book devoted to the *theatrum mundi*, where Moria compares life to a play in which things are presented by shadows, affairs are played out in disguise, and nothing is what it seems at first sight.

learned men have woven the day before” (p. 160). Kundera refers to the rivalry that Rabelais saw between novelists and what he called “*agélastes*”, men who do not laugh, have no sense of humour and are hence “convinced that the truth is obvious, that all men necessarily think the same thing” (p. 159). The parallelism between this rivalry and the one I have traced in Coetzee is clear enough. “But it is precisely in losing the certainty of truth and the unanimous agreement of others”, Kundera argues, “that man becomes an individual. The novel is the imaginary paradise of individuals. It is the territory where no one possesses the truth” (p. 159). It is this imaginary paradise of playfulness and laughter that Cervantes managed to create, and that Coetzee yearns for when he laments that in South Africa, the writer’s imagination has been defeated by too much truth.

### **This Is All Very Quixotic, But Can We Afford It?**

Let me now turn to the analysis of some of Coetzee’s characters – Mrs. Curren, in *Age of Iron*, David Lurie, in *Disgrace*, and Paul Rayment, in *Slow Man* – pointing to what I see as quixotic traits of their personality that determine the way they interact with their surrounding reality. Mrs. Curren is a retired classics professor who feels allied with a European literary and artistic tradition: she reads Tolstoy (Coetzee 1998: 14) and Shakespeare (p. 40), alludes to Hawthorne (p. 114) and Zola (p. 139), and plays at the piano musical pieces by Bach, Chopin and Brahms (p. 23). This cultural background leads her to speak about Thucydides to John, the friend of his servant’s son, Bheki: “If you had been in my Thucydides class ... you might have learned something about what can happen to our humanity in time of war” (p. 80). She then goes on to analyse their current South African situation in the light of Thucydides’s account of the Peloponnesian War. This action on Mrs. Curren’s part is entirely inappropriate: she behaves as if she were delivering a university lecture, while she is talking to a township boy, sick in hospital after having suffered an accident, completely ignorant of and impervious to her cultural allusions and thought categories.

In this sense, Mrs. Curren’s act is a quixotic one that reminds us of numerous moments in Cervantes’s novel in which Don Quixote delivers a speech whose relevance to the situation in question is seen by him only, and which leaves those around him in a state of perplexity. At the most, he is followed by Sancho Panza, who becomes eloquent in his master’s discursive categories derived from books of chivalry, as when they spend a night with goatherds who “do not understand their nonsensical talk about squires and knights errant, and they simply eat and are silent and look at

their guests” (Cervantes [1605, 1615]2005: 76).<sup>3</sup> Like Don Quixote’s speech to the goatherds, Mrs. Curren’s lecture to John is a “foolish speech” (p. 78). But can such a foolish speech have any value in the South African context of the 1980s in which it is uttered? Coetzee argues that “against the voices of history and historical judgement”, Mrs. Curren brings to bear “the authority of the dying and the authority of the classics”, both of which “are denied and even derided in her world” (1992a: 250). She is indeed aware of the negligibility of a white old woman’s words: “My words fell off him like dead leaves the moment they were uttered. The words of a woman, therefore negligible; of an old woman, therefore doubly negligible; but above all of a white” (Coetzee 1998: 79). Her voice is utterly silenced in the moment in which she most directly confronts the violence and ugliness of South African reality, the onslaught of reality: the expedition to the township of Gugulethu, where she faces the dead body of Florence’s son, Bheki, killed by the police.<sup>4</sup> When Mrs. Curren is demanded by the surrounding crowd to give a name to this crime, she acknowledges her inability to do so: “To speak of this ... you would need the tongue of a god” (p. 99).

Coetzee, however, asserts that the important point is that “the contest is staged” and that “even those who speak from a totally untenable position” (1992a: 250) have their say. *Age of Iron*, then, stages the Cervantine conflict between the authority and consensus of history and the authority of a dissonant voice – in this case, Mrs. Curren’s – as argued in the first part of this article. The words of the fool – in the Erasmian sense – have a value in themselves: that of being uttered from a position of rivalry, a rivalry that, according to Coetzee, is valuable in itself. We can go further and wonder whether the words and ideas derived from a Western literary tradition can have any value in South African apartheid beyond the staging of rivalry, the staging of a contest. After all, Mrs. Curren remarks to John: “That is what you could have learned from Thucydides” (1998: 81). Is there a lesson to learn from Thucydides for a black township kid and an old white woman in apartheid South Africa? Behind this question lies the quixotic one of whether literature can prepare us for life, or on the contrary, whether it may distort our reading of and approach to it. Putting it in ethical terms, the

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3. In the speech he addresses to the goatherds, the parallelism between Don Quixote and Mrs. Curren becomes obvious, as he makes an opposition between an ideal, ancient golden age and the “detestable times” (Cervantes [1605, 1615]2005: 77) of their current “age of iron” (p. 76).

4. Hayes identifies a parallel between Mrs. Curren’s expedition to Gugulethu and the Cave of Montesinos episode in *Don Quixote* (2010: 149). Early in the novel, Mrs. Curren compares her car to Don Quixote’s horse – it is “willing but old, like Rocinante” (Coetzee 1998: 18) – and as Hayes argues, both Elizabeth and Don Quixote go out in their respective Rocinantes to confront a reality that despises and mocks them (2010: 137).



question is whether reading may turn us into a better person, or on the contrary, whether it may pervert us. *Don Quixote* was the first novel – without probably ever having been surpassed – to explore these questions, as Coetzee points out when he remembers his having read René Girard's *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* in the 1970s “with a sense that something important was being said not only about the workings of fiction but about the effect of fiction on the lives of readers (in the latter respect Girard takes his lead from Cervantes, as he clearly acknowledges)” (1992a: 104).

Fusillo points to “Don Quixote's overwrought and pathological reading of reality through literature” (2006: 50). Certainly, in his reading of reality, Don Quixote follows the errant knights he has encountered in his books of chivalry, especially the one he considers to be his greatest model, Amadís of Gaul. Throughout the narrative, he frequently refers to his French hero, as when he discusses with the canon and Sancho the latter's ability to govern the estate that Don Quixote has promised to him: “I am guided only by the example of the great Amadís of Gaul, who made his squire count of Ínsula Firme” (Cervantes [1605, 1615]2005: 431). Passages such as this one made Girard develop his theory of mediated desire, which Coetzee analyses in “Triangular Structures of Desire in Advertising”, where he points to Don Quixote and Emma Bovary as “the major exemplars of vicarious desiring. Not only do they imitate the outward behaviour of models they find in books, but they freely allow their desire to be defined for them by these models” (1992c: 130).

In the case of Coetzee's quixotic characters, Don Quixote's pathological state is not reached, but their approach to reality and their desire is certainly mediated, and sometimes distorted, by literature. This is the case of David Lurie, who has often been read in Romantic terms, but whose quixotic traits have been barely noticed by critics. Like Mrs. Curren, Lurie is an academic in the humanities, and also like her, he has focused on subjects – opera, vision as eros, Wordsworth and history (Coetzee 2000: 4) – whose deeply European provenance makes their status and role in Africa uncertain and problematic. Like Don Quixote's, Lurie's models are literary. He considers Wordsworth to be “one of [his] masters” (p. 13), and refers to himself as the “disgraced disciple” of the Romantic poet (p. 46).

Don Quixote shapes his words following the pompous and inflated language of books of chivalry, stringing together his “foolish remarks, all in the manner his books had taught him and imitating their language as much as he could” (Cervantes [1605, 1615]2005: 25). Furthermore, his perception of reality is completely distorted by the categories coming from the discursive universe he inhabits: “Everything our adventurer thought, saw, or imagined seemed to happen according to what he had read” (p. 26), so that instead of windmills, he sees giants; instead of inns, castles; instead of swineherds, dwarfs; instead of prostitutes, ladies. Similarly, Lurie's thoughts and words are coloured by his literary readings. The first time that

Melanie, his student, goes to his apartment, he quotes the opening lines from Shakespeare's sonnet 1, "From fairest creatures we desire increase, / that thereby beauty's rose might never die", only to immediately realise that it has not been "a good move": "The pentameter, whose cadence once served so well to oil the serpent's words, now only estranges. He has become a teacher again, man of the book, guardian of the culture-ward" (Coetzee 2000: 16). When he calls Melanie the following Sunday, he feels that "he is in the grip of something. Beauty's rose: the poem drives straight as an arrow" (p. 18). Lurie makes reality match not only poetry, but also art. Thus, he sees the image of Melanie and him after making love under the optic of the German painter George Grosz: "*After the Storm*, he thinks: straight out of George Grosz" (p. 19).

In spite of the evidence provided by reality, in this case, by Melanie – the change in her smile when she listens to Shakespeare's words, her uncertainty on the phone – Lurie lets himself be guided by Shakespeare's sonnet's projection of sexual desire as a response to beauty, which he sees as embodied by Melanie. He is, hence, another example of Girard's mediated desire, as in the question of desire he follows his literary masters, especially, the Romantic poets. Thus, in a conversation with Lucy about this question, he quotes Blake to make his point: "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires" (p. 69).

In his review of García Márquez's *Memory of My Melancholy Whores*, Coetzee points out that Florentino Ariza's "inflexibility, his insistence that his beloved adhere to the form in which he has idealised her" has its precedent in Don Quixote and his devotion to Lady Dulcinea of Toboso (2007b: 265). Lurie also shares this quixotic trait of inflexibility and stubbornness: "his temperament is not going to change, he is too old for that. His temperament is fixed, set" (Coetzee 2000: 2). Later on, we read that "his mind has become a refuge for old thoughts" and for "settled down" prejudices (p. 72). We see him persisting in his chasing of Melanie, even when he senses that something is wrong: "That is where he ought to end it. But he does not" (p. 18). When he faces the committee of inquiry, he stubbornly refuses to provide them with the act of apology they ask him for, which makes Farodia Rassool tell him: "This is all very quixotic, Professor Lurie, but can you afford it?" (p. 49). The situation is quixotic, due to Lurie's adamant refusal to play according to the rules of their game and his decision to only follow the dictates of his own conscience and desire. According to Pavel, characters in late-nineteenth-century Spanish novels "are irrevocably flawed by pride and even by a grain of folly", arguing that "the influence of Cervantes is surely responsible for his alliance of folly and idealism" (2006: 27). This mixture of pride, folly and idealism is also present in David Lurie.

Like Don Quixote and Florentino Ariza, Lurie's infatuation with Melanie follows an idealised projection of Romantic love. In a lecture on the

Wordsworthian conflict between “the pure idea” and “the visual image”, he makes a comparison with the process of falling in love, and asks his students the following question: “[D]o you truly wish to see the beloved in the cold clarity of the visual apparatus? It may be in your better interest to throw a veil over the gaze, so as to keep her alive in her archetypal, goddesslike form” (Coetzee 2000: 22). This is exactly the course of action chosen by Don Quixote, when Sancho Panza swears to him that the ugly and short peasant, smelling of raw onion, that he has in front of him, is his beloved Dulcinea of Toboso. Don Quixote’s imaginative universe, however, is much stronger than any visual perceptions he might have. Thus he manages to keep Dulcinea intact in the “goddesslike form” he has constructed for her by finding the following explanation: enchanters have changed and transformed her into that low-born and ugly peasant (Cervantes [1605, 1615]2005: 519-520).

There is, however, an important difference between Lurie and Don Quixote. Whereas, as Coetzee has put it, Don Quixote dedicates himself “to a life of service” (2007b: 266), including the service of Dulcinea, Lurie’s literary models seem to have led him to a selfish life centred on his own ego and disregard of the feelings and necessities of others. His “aestheticisation of desire” (Attwell 2001: 865) from a dubious conception of Romantic love proves to be disastrous and unethical in so far as it blinds him to Melanie’s feelings and makes him commit an abuse of power, thus placing him on the same level as Lucy’s rapists. *Disgrace*, then, can be seen as part of that tradition of novels that, as explained by J. Hillis Miller, “represent their own moral badness”, as they contain “an oblique self-affirmation of their dangerous authority”. Miller reminds us that there are many fictional characters who become “morally corrupted about the world by reading novels”, or by reading poems, we may add. As this critic points out, “Don Quixote is of course the archetype for his motif” (2002: 95). In the case of Lurie, furthermore, his literary knowledge is totally useless when he has to confront the most critical situation in his whole life: the attack on the farm. He is shut in the lavatory and thinks of what the intruders may be doing to his daughter: “He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa” (Coetzee 2000: 95). This is the moment in which Lurie *falls* into reality, just as Mrs. Curren *falls* into reality in her expedition to Gugulethu. What Mrs. Curren sees in the township makes her mute, and similarly, the onslaught of reality shatters the discursive and cultural universe that Lurie has inhabited until then.

Near the end of the novel, Lurie seems to realise the ineffectiveness and immoral effects of literature: “So much for the poets, so much for the dead masters. Who have not, he must say, guided him well” (p. 179). However, he immediately adds: “*Aliter*, to whom he has not listened well” (p. 179). The possibility, then, of learning from literature, from the dead poets, and thus, their ethical value and meaningfulness, is not completely ruled out.

Given his stubbornness and fixed frame of mind, Lurie will go on turning to the dead masters for guidance, as we see at the very end of the novel, when he contemplates Lucy in his pregnant state and reflects upon his future role as grandfather: "He must have a look again at Victor Hugo, poet of grandfatherhood. There may be things to learn" (p. 218). He will do so even if he knows that there is a gap between literary lessons and dealings with reality: "The truth is, he has never had much of an eye for rural life, despite all his reading in Wordsworth" (p. 218). At the end of Cervantes's novel, Don Quixote abandons the literary universe of knight errants, returning to the prosaic world of Castilla-La Mancha. David Lurie, however, is unable to deal with reality without turning to literature. His composition of an opera on Lord Byron is relevant in this sense, especially the progressive attention he pays, first, to Teresa Guiccioli, Byron's lover, and then to Allegra, Byron's five-year-old daughter. Both Teresa and Allegra were abandoned by Byron, so that their miserable states are a result of the poet's having followed "the rights of desire" (Coetzee 2000: 89) without any sense of responsibility for the consequences, or any concern for the feelings of her lover and daughter. Lurie, then, comes to experience, in a world of imagination and fiction, the misery that giving free rein to one's desires can provoke in others. The connection between that experience and his behaviour in the real world is not straightforward, but his imaginative capacity to engage with the feelings of others is not utterly devoid of ethical value, however uncertain and unpredictable this ethicality might be.

Near the end of *Age of Iron*, there is also a return to the dead poets, in a scene that parallels the earlier one between Mrs. Curren and John centred on Thucydides. There is a key difference, however, between the two scenes: whereas in the first one, John is presented as totally indifferent to Mrs. Curren's words, in the second one, Vercueil, the vagrant that has settled in Mrs. Curren's house, is shown as apparently interested in the Latin language, listening with eagerness to Mrs. Curren's quotations from Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid* (Coetzee 1998: 191-192). It is not possible to derive any lesson about the value or meaning of literature from the apparent fascination of a vagrant with the sounds of Latin poetry. Similarly, it is uncertain whether Lurie will actually learn an ethically valid lesson from Victor Hugo. Extracting from literature lessons about how to live in the real world and how to behave ethically may certainly lead to delusion, folly, madness, or escapism, quixotic states that we probably cannot afford. However, as Coetzee has argued, we cannot simply dismiss Don Quixote's assertions "about the power a dream may have to anchor our moral life, or deny that since the day Alonso Quixano took on his chivalric identity the world has been a better place; or, if not better, then at least more interesting, more lively" (2007b: 266).

Turning now to *Slow Man*, its quixotic intertextual dimension is made explicit when Elizabeth Costello calls Paul Rayment "my knight of the

doleful countenance” (Coetzee 2005: 256), a name that Don Quixote receives several times in Cervantes’s novel. Furthermore, *Slow Man* finishes with what constitutes a clearly quixotic invitation by Costello to Rayment to tour the Australian continent just as Quixote and Sancho wandered around the Spanish geography: “We could tour the whole land, the two of us, the whole of this wide brown land, north and south, east and west. You could teach me doggedness and I could teach you to live on nothing, or nearly nothing” (p. 263).<sup>5</sup> More importantly, the metafictional game created by Coetzee in this novel very much resembles that created by Cervantes in *Don Quixote*. Rayment suspects that the writer Elizabeth Costello, who unexpectedly introduces herself into his house and his life, is trying to somehow accommodate him into a story she has created for him: “‘You treat me like a puppet,’ he complains. ‘You treat everyone like a puppet. You make up stories and bully us into playing them out for you’” (p. 117). Don Quixote goes through an experience similar to Rayment’s when in chapter 49 of part II he is astonished to discover that he has been turned into the main character of Avellaneda’s apocryphal *Don Quixote*. As put by Carlos Fuentes, “this is probably the first moment in the history of literature in which a character knows that he is being written at the same time that he is living his fictional adventures” (1994: 78).

Certain traits of Rayment’s personality and some of the experiences he goes through can be seen as traversed by the spirit of the Spanish hidalgo. Like Don Quixote, Rayment is “a book collector” or as Marijana calls him, “a book saver” (Coetzee 2005: 47). When Costello reproaches him for speaking like a book – “Once upon a time you were a pale, well-behaved little boy – I can just see you – who took books too seriously” (p. 231) – we certainly agree with her. Again, like the Spanish knight – and like Lurie, as well – he falls into an impossible and idealised love, in his case, for his Croatian and married nurse, Marijana, in whom “he begins to see if not beauty then at least the perfection of a certain feminine type” (p. 50).

In the passage quoted above, Costello presents Rayment as a master of “doggedness” (p. 263), another term for “inflexibility”, which, as we have seen, constitutes a quixotic trait of personality shared by Lurie and apparently also by Rayment. Certainly, this character, immersed in his solitary and lonely routine, is not liable to change his opinions or perceptions at this stage of his life, though the bicycle accident he suffers shakes his whole existence. But Rayment’s “dogged” character could also be understood in the more literal sense of having the characteristics of a

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5. Coetzee also employs the knight and squire analogy in *Elizabeth Costello*, when John formulates the support he is going to give to his mother in the following terms: “He will be her squire, she will be his knight. He will protect her as long as he is able. Then he will help her into her armour, lift her on to her steed, set her buckler on her arm, hand her her lance, and step back” (Coetzee 2003: 7).

dog. Due to the loss of his leg, he tells himself that “if you have hitherto been a man, with a man’s life, may you henceforth be a dog, with a dog’s life” (p. 26), and describes himself as a “*doggy*” lover (p. 45). This new dogged, reduced existence that Rayment is obliged to adopt is a consequence of the fall, the bicycle accident, with which the novel begins: “The blow catches him from the right, sharp and surprising and painful, like a bolt of electricity, lifting him up off the bicycle” (p. 1). In the case of Mrs. Curren and Lurie, the onslaught of reality undermines their discursive capacities; in *Slow Man*, it is manifested at a more physical level. Rayment’s fall from his bicycle reminds us of Don Quixote’s innumerable falls from his horse Rocinante. In fact, his probably most famous adventure concerns the following fall, which takes place when he attacks the windmills that he believes to be giants: “he charged at Rocinante’s full gallop and attacked the first mill he came to; and as he thrust his lance into the sail, the wind moved it with so much force that it broke the lance into pieces and picked up the horse and the knight, who then dropped to the ground and were very badly battered” (Cervantes [1605, 1615]2005: 59).

Having said this, Rayment’s behaviour and attitude to life have to be seen, in certain aspects, as a reversal of Don Quixote’s. Costello exhorts Rayment to accelerate his wooing of Marijana, and thus, to behave in a passionate way, “so that you may be *worth* putting in a book. Alongside Alonso and Emma. Become major, Paul. Live like a hero. That is what the classics teach us. Be a main character. Otherwise what is life for?” (Coetzee 2005: 229). Costello endows Don Quixote and Emma Bovary with literary exemplariness; they are passionate characters who commit extraordinary and vehement acts. As Murillo has argued, “like all great artists, Cervantes did not think that truth lay in depicting perfect or even normal or realistic behaviour. A more profound (and entertaining) way was the depiction of abnormal passions and deeds” (1990: 2). On the contrary, there is nothing extraordinary in the figure of Paul Rayment. He is certainly transformed by Marijana, but this transformation is mainly an inner one that does not lead to abnormal actions or dramatic changes. Even though he ends up telling Marijana about his love, and a series of conflicting episodes between him and her family consequently develops, everything remains within the fairly commonplace and ordinary. Furthermore, though Rayment has fallen into “an unsuitable passion” (Coetzee 2005: 85), it is a “tortoise variety of passion” (p. 228) in Costello’s words. She complains about his tendency to do things in a too slow and thoughtful way, whereas

it is passion that makes the world go round .... Think of Don Quixote. *Don Quixote* is not about a man sitting in a rocking chair bemoaning the dullness of La Mancha. It is about a man who claps a basin on his head and clammers onto the back of his faithful old plough-horse and sallies forth to do great deeds.

(Coetzee 2005: 228-229)

If, as Welsh puts it, Cervantes's hero is "the model of rare heroism in the face of mundane reality" (2002: 80), Rayment remains a mundane man – "so incurious, so unadventurous" (Coetzee 2005: 230) – in a mundane reality. He is aware of this and thus believes that he does not qualify as a puppet or character for Costello, not even after his having lost a leg: "[W]hat I don't understand is, seeing that I am so dull, so unresponsive to your schemes, why you persist with me .... I am not a hero, Mrs Costello. Losing a leg does not qualify one for a dramatic role" (p. 117). As Costello puts it in the passage quoted above, Don Quixote is a man of action that abandons his house to do great deeds in the outer world, which is precisely the proposal she makes to Rayment at the end of the novel. He declines, however, and in the last scene of the novel we see him saying goodbye to her and entering his flat, back to his lonely and solitary life.

Another central difference between Rayment and Quixote lies in the way in which the Spanish knight overcomes the onslaughts of the real world: he is always victorious in his imagination, which constitutes an unfailing weapon. His continuous physical falls signal continuous clashes against reality, which he, nevertheless, always transforms and hence transcends through his imagination. Thus, after the brush against the windmills, he elaborates the following theory: "the same Frestón the Wise who stole my room and my books has turned these giants into windmills ... but in the end, his evil arts will not prevail against the power of my virtuous sword" (Cervantes [1605, 1615]2005: 58). Rayment has no such imaginative refuge and solace when on repeated occasions he finds himself on the floor, unable to move, being obliged to rely on Marijana and her son, Drago. These episodes are described at length, with an emphasis on Rayment's helplessness, pain and handicapped mobility, as when he slips in the shower, getting tangled in the Zimmer frame, and has to wait on the floor until Marijana arrives (Coetzee 2005: 206-207). Or when he crawls out of the bed and pain makes him urinate on the floor, where he is found by Drago (p. 214).

Marijana and Drago become Rayment's squires, just as Don Quixote is repeatedly helped by his loyal squire Sancho Panza. In the absence of an imaginative world that may offer comfort to us, and having to face an ugly and painful reality, in the absence of the extraordinary, and predominance of the ordinary, the care and company of others may be the only possible solace. This is the final offer that Costello makes to Rayment when she invites him to tour together the Australian continent and that he declines, arguing that "this is not love. This is something else. Something less" (p. 263). Costello and Rayment's relationship does certainly not resemble in the least Don Quixote and Sancho Panza's, one of the most memorable friendships in the history of Western literature. In none of Coetzee's novels do we find a relationship characterised by similar intimacy, faithfulness and trust. Going back to the categories he employs in his Jerusalem lecture, in

Coetzee's novels there tends to be too much truth and too much reality, often accompanied by "a failure of love" (Coetzee 1992b: 97).

### **The Conflicting Coexistence of Imagination and Reality**

In his discussion of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, David Lurie makes the following quixotic reflection: "Yet we cannot live our daily lives in a realm of pure ideas, cocooned from sense-experience. The question is not, How can we keep the imagination pure, protected from the onslaughts of reality? The question has to be, Can we find a way for the two to coexist?" (Coetzee 2000: 22). As I have tried to show, this question traverses Coetzee's fictional and nonfictional production, in which "the onslaughts of reality" are always too strong, whereas the imagination tends to be too weak, ethically dubious or patently absent. In his approach to Cervantes, I would say, Coetzee belongs to the critical current that, according to Close, has become prevalent since 1800: "there has been a fundamental shift in readers' conception of Don Quixote's mania, which is no longer seen as a ridiculous, albeit amiable, aberration, but as a paradigm of the human imagination's struggle to transcend the pull of base reality, and thus to achieve some form of salvation, religious, artistic, or other" (2003: 27). Full salvation, however, is never achieved by Coetzee's characters, nor is there in his works a reconciliation between literary imagination and base reality.

This trend, however, seems to have been partly reversed in *The Childhood of Jesus*. David, the child protagonist of the novel, develops a strong and even abnormal attachment for *An Illustrated Children's Don Quixote*, with which Simón tries to teach him to read. But while Simón urges to David that "for real reading you have to submit to what is written on the page" (2013: 165), David will just make his own interpretation of language and of reality in general. He is, then, another quixotesque character, unable and unwilling to adapt to the interpretations of the world surrounding him, fully convinced, in spite of Simón's contrary protestations, that Don Quixote did indeed fight against a giant and not a windmill (2013: 152). As his teacher puts it, "the real ... is what David misses in his life" (p. 217). However, and this is what makes him different from Coetzee's previous quixotesque characters, David is apparently not defeated by "the real". As we leave him embarked on a journey to Estrellita del Norte, where he expects to find a new life, having recruited a new member for his "brotherhood", the feeling is that he is a new Don Quixote seeking out new adventures.

To the question of whether literature may be an effective guide in our dealings with reality, Coetzee's novels do not provide a definite answer, which is the only answer that fiction can provide, given its nonserious and playful character; given its incapacity, unlike history, to command consensus, primacy and authority. The voice of literature, on the contrary, is



a marginal voice, the voice of the fool, the voice of the child, the voice of the madman, Don Quixote's voice; a voice, nevertheless, infinitely resistant to the constant and painful onslaughts of the real world.

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