

Gender Fluidity in *Don Quixote*: Its Metaphysical Implications

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Medicine in Cervantes's baroque age was not a narrow scientific discipline but rather an all-encompassing knowledge, a *gnosis* spanning microcosm and macrocosm. Medicine in this perspective is a universal art and science. In this vein, the alchemical experiments of Paracelsus (1493-1541), for example, on the transmutability of metals were based on the hypothesis of some kind of universal material or spiritual being underlying distinctions between kinds. Our own time is currently challenged in myriad ways to learn how to think an open sort of universality unmoored to traditional binary and exclusionary categories. Particularly medical science today is challenged to think the inherent openness of gender. However, some of the classic texts of our tradition have anticipated this development. We find that Cervantes was already well advanced along this path of reflection. This essay considers *Don Quixote*'s figuration of gender as a kind of revelation of human being and social identity in their inherent uncircumscribability. Categorical distinctions, starting with art versus nature, are pushed to the limits where they break down and reveal something beyond themselves, some uncanny reality for which language, in which meaning is always differential, proves inadequate. This revelation consists in exposing the inadequacy of binary structures and in straining beyond them. In accessing an open space of the indefinable, such reflection can rise to a metaphysical level of insight. We can begin to explore this opening by a consideration of baroque aesthetics as breaking through classical paradigms presupposing stable categorical structures and piercing through to a dimension of the incommensurable.¹

Baroque Aesthetics of Contrast, the Grotesque, and Theatricalization of the World

As artistic style matures and becomes progressively more self-reflexive in the course of history, the idea emerges that art corrects nature and even prevails over it. This becomes more evident in Part II of *Don Quixote*, where generally a baroque aesthetic is operative. Grisóstomo's tragic suicide for love in Part I, 12-13, is reenacted in Part II, 21 by Basilio, but only as faked or staged and as leading this time not to tragedy but rather to comic reversal and a happy marriage out of love and for the satisfaction of all. Fiction is displayed in all its efficaciousness for impinging on reality and even for reversing the course of events.

Part II of the *Quixote* constitutes an apology for art as an instrument of *desengaño* – of disillusion that turns to a positive result. The deceptions wrought by art are not the final word. They are only instrumental to a remaking of reality. The deliberate deceptions of art are unmasked by Cervantes as having served for altering relations within real circumstances. This is what his book as a whole, is able to achieve, beyond being merely entertaining. Entertainment takes on a literally “re-creational” value. It enables us to face life and situations that would otherwise become intolerable for us.

Baroque aesthetics are a form of revelation that operate on the basis of a type of negative theology. They aim at the inexpressible. The Carmelite mystics, John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila, are exemplary exponents of a type of negative theology that belongs to this period and

¹ The following sections of this essay were composed by adapting extracts from chapters 5 and 9 of my book: *Don Quixote's Impossible Quest for the Absolute in Literature* (2024).

captures its quintessence in ways comparable to what Cervantes achieves in his own very different genre of fiction and the novel.² Of course, Don Quixote's force is in action, including the act of discourse. He, nevertheless, at times closely models also the silent, ascetic, contemplative comportment of the mystic (Groult 231–51). Alongside the mystical aesthetics of the unrepresentable, however, we find the aesthetics of simulation: the two form a pair in the baroque sensibility for the ineffable as disclosed through violent contrasts.

Feminine Beauty as Ideal and as Simulation

The story of countess Trifaldi suggests how feminine beauty is a deceptive veneer that is liable to be unveiled as its opposite. “Enchantment” supposedly gives the women beards, but is the enchantment a veiling or an unveiling of the truth? This difference becomes moot – or in crucial ways indiscernible. In this regard, the story is like the many others of betrayed beauty that it repeats. Dulcinea herself is revealed through her “enchantment” as a crude, uncourtly, and masculinized figure, as summed up by her final stunt of mounting a horse's rear-end with a prodigious leap. For the rest, she is purely a fantasy of the dreaming and deluded knight. Her real shape and figure are that of a peasant laborer, the one whom Sancho shows Don Quixote, who initially sees her exactly as she is. Does this dropping of veils perhaps show what really and unconsciously attracts the knight – unladylike sexual vitality? Is this then not likely the case also with the real woman, the village girl Aldonza Lorenzo, with whom Alonso Quijano fell in love? Does he perhaps completely mistake her for something she is not through his idealizations in contradiction to crude reality? Is this perhaps what love does to us all, “blinding” us, as the saying goes, by the power of our own ideal images, our delusions about ourselves?

When Sancho Panza finds out, as related in II, 40, that his collaboration is necessary to free the *dueñas* of their beards, the episode's cruel mockery is exposed in Sancho's brutal and uncourtly objections. The beards rob the women of their feminine identity. The feminine beauty that is evoked as an ideal all through the book and as a self-evident and overwhelmingly powerful motive inspiring the action of men is here grotesquely lampooned. Even though feminine beauty is central as a motivating force to one story after another, such beauty, is unmasked as a construction of fiction, a feature to be played around with, like every other human perception.

The beauty of women as the motor for men's actions is a constant motif in the narratives, yet feminine beauty turns out over and over again to be fake and not even distinct from its opposite. The nymph who impersonates Dulcinea in the pageant in the forest is actually a page of the duke. “She” appears “dressed in a thousand veils of silver cloth, each shimmering with an infinity of gold sequins, which made her, if not richly, then at least showily, attired” (“una ninfa, vestida de mil velos de tela de plata, brillando por todos ellos infinitas hojas de argentería de oro, que la hacían, si no rica, a lo menos vistosamente vestida”).³ “Her face was covered with a silk of transparent and delicate sandal in such a way as to reveal between and despite its folds the most beautiful face of a maiden, and the strong light made it possible to discern her beauty and years, which appeared to be no greater than twenty, nor less than seventeen.” (“Traía el rostro cubierto con un transparente y delicado cendal, de modo que, sin impedirlo sus lizos, por entre

² See my *On What Cannot Be Said*: vol. 1, 356-77, Chapters 27 and 28 on John and Teresa respectively. A Spanish version appears as “Un díptico apofático” (179-88).

³ Citations of the *Quixote* are from Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*, eds. Fajardo and Parr (1998). All translations, unless otherwise attributed, are my own.

ellos se descubría un hermosísimo rostro de doncella, y las muchas luces daban lugar para distinguir la belleza y los años, al parecer, no llegaban a veinte, ni bajaban de diez y siete,” II, 35, 672-73). Even Sancho admits that “she” is very beautiful and accepts the penance, which he at first so vigorously rejected, when “Dulcinea” appears in her unenchanted form just for this occasion by special decree of Merlin.

A woman’s appearing beautiful or not is a matter of perceptions, delusions, and enchantments: it is unveiled as not belonging to her being essentially. Dulcinea’s fabled beauty in this scene in II, 35 – and it is the only scene in which her beauty is even supposed to be actually seen by Don Quixote – is all just a simulation by the duke’s *male* page; it is not really feminine at all. Although all are stunned by “her” beauty when “she” unveils her face, “she” reproves Sancho “with manly assurance and a not very feminine voice” (“con un desenfado varonil y con una voz no muy adamada,” 675).

Later, Ana’s lover Gregorio (II, 63) will offer a further example of superlative feminine beauty which is not feminine at all but only a deceptive simulation of a man in a woman’s garb. And the same goes for the brother of the beautiful daughter whose jealous father kept from ever going out of her house until the siblings are both apprehended each dressed in the other’s clothes by Sancho’s night patrol on Barataria (II, 49). In spite of its power to motivate men to their most determined and craziest actions, feminine beauty is shown over and over again to be nothing more than an artful and often deceptive simulation.

The bearded *dueñas*, inversely, are used for a grotesque effect of cross-gendering. Duennas (Spanish: *dueñas*) are widows, therefore non-virgin yet single and sexually available. As widows, their sexual role has been prematurely truncated publicly but also freed for re-employment in secret. Their sexuality is essential to their social role and function. They characteristically serve as go-betweens (like Celestina in Fernando de Rojas’s homonymous 1499 tragicomedy) for sexual encounters. Countess Trifaldi plays this role for her princess protégé, Antonomasia, as will Doña Rodriguez later for her own daughter. Given that these characteristics define their social role, they depend on their femininity to live and function. So giving them beards is almost worse than death. It is at least a “civic death” (“una muerte civil,” II, 39, 693). It deprives them of their social identity. Yet it also reveals the veneer and false pretenses of their femininity as a social construction. This femininity can be, and often is, used for operating in deviously calculating and scheming ways.

This suggest how the object of human desire is fabricated as a product of mimetic desire, to use René Girard’s terms.⁴ In Don Quixote’s case, his love for Dulcinea is clearly and explicitly just an imitation of the model he follows – that of his imagined ideal knight errant, Amadís of Gaul or others he has read about – whom he deems to be necessarily in love (II, 32, 655 and I, 13, 89). He knows nothing of Dulcinea herself, but only of the devotion and love to her that is fitting for him as her knight.

With the ugly and grotesque (the duennas with beards), we move into what could be considered a mannerist aesthetics. But, more deeply, this sequence begins to sketch some elements of the book’s implicit philosophy of gender. It suggests that gender is largely a product of self-reflection and especially of its being occulted. This is pointed up by Don Quixote’s imaginary self-deluded prowess being called upon to save countess Trifaldi and her ladies from their beards and therewith the disgrace of their sex. If this is a matter for Don Quixote to rectify, it is looking for a fictive solution.

⁴ Girard deals with the *Quixote* inter alia in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Chapter VI, and at the outset of *Violence and the Sacred*.

Something symmetrical can be said of Clavijo, the seducer of countess Trifaldi, and of the flying horse Clavileño, to the extent that their phallic power all comes from the imagination. Clavijo seduces by the artifices of his poetry, which is trite but preys upon the susceptibility of the woman's romantic imagination. Clavileño's flight is purely imaginary and made to be believed only by all the supplements of blindfolding, simulation of wind with bellows, etc., trumped up for the occasion. The force of nature is distilled entirely into artifice and is unveiled as pure simulation to the point where nature itself seems to be only an artificially produced reflection.

At the same time, it is not quite right to say that feminine beauty is *only* a simulated illusion exerting its power over us purely by self-reflection preying on our ideals concerning ourselves. There is also something unmediated about the effect of beauty on us. We are, as we say, "enchanted." The manufacture of simulated beauty does not exclude but rather presupposes that beauty can immediately overpower and subjugate us. The power of simulations is a secondary, dependent power derivative from re-presentation of something that can at least in principle have an immediate and irresistible effect on us. We do not normally decide to fall in love. It just happens. Particularly in courtly tradition, the simple sight of beauty is most apt to make it happen – as when Tosilo already on the battlefield sees Doña Rodriguez's daughter in the audience, falls in love, and refuses to fight *not* to marry her since he suddenly and wholeheartedly desires her. Thus, beauty as immediate, incontrovertible revelation, on the one hand, and its artificial simulation, on the other, form poles of a dialectic. They prove impossible to completely separate in actual experience. This suggests why all manner of so-called "deviant" phenomena gather around and belong to the religious revelation that, by devious or at least indirect means, is accomplished in this book.

Transvestism, Love of Artifice, and the Transhuman

Transvestism or cross-dressing turns up over and over and constitutes a pervasive constituent of the plot, especially in Part II. It has already played a major role in Part I, with the figure of Dorotea, who uses it to restore her honor with her seducer Don Fernando (I, 28, 234). The barber and the priest take women's clothes provided by the innkeeper's wife in order to lure Don Quixote out of the wilderness by the entreaty of a damsel in distress (I, 27, 211). Cervantes has already explored transvestism's creative potential for rearranging plots and reversing situations in Part I, but in Part II cross-dressing reveals itself as more than just a strategic deception: it penetrates human identity in ways that raise fundamental questions concerning the construction of identity by desire and imagination.

The trick of veiling or disguising beauty awakens desire. When the countess Trifaldi and her sister duennas have been announced to be de-bearded, Sancho rushes to see the fabled beauty she is supposed to possess ("y si era tan hermosa"), but she and all the duennas have disappeared. This is presumably necessary for sustaining Sancho's illusion. The impression of beauty is born more from imagination than from actual seeing. Transvestism and transgendering excite the imagination to transpose its representations from one gender to another, creating even more possibilities and the necessity of invention.

We already mentioned that making his rounds to patrol his island, Sancho surprises and apprehends the daughter of Diego de la Llana and then also her brother dressed in each other's clothes by the girl's request so that she would be able to go out incognita and secretly see the town in which she has lived her whole life while knowing nothing of it. The two are unmasked,

and their beauty is so extraordinary that Sancho's *mayordomo* wants to marry the girl, and Sancho himself desires the boy to be his daughter Sanchica's husband ("aun a Sancho le vinieron deseos y barruntos de casar al mozo con Sanchica su hija," II, 49, 761). Their being seen first not as themselves and then being unveiled as the opposite sex heightens the desire that they arouse. Evidently, the imagination is solicited to supply what was kept hidden, and this sets off a mechanism of attributing to them more beauty than can possibly be seen – the infinite and absolute beauty of the *unseen*. Some such power of imagination is activated by the deceptive disguises of cross-dressing.

Similarly, the story of the lovers Ana Félix and Gaspar Gregorio in II, 63 turns entirely on the reciprocal cross-dressing of the pair as the key to how their stories work out. Captured as the captain of a crew of Turks on a pirate ship, placed summarily on trial with the rope around her neck ready for hanging, Ana Félix reveals that she is neither Turk, nor Moor, nor renegade, nor any man at all, but actually a Christian woman (857). Her beauty is then overwhelming for all and again crucial for the story's outcome. However, specifically enamored of her beauty and intelligence is the *wife* of Antonio Moreno ("enamorada de su belleza como de su discreción," 861), who offers hospitality to her and her father, once Ana has been graced by the viceroy of Barcelona.

This tendency of beauty to inspire queer love applies to Gregorio, too, whom Ana herself disguises as a woman lest he be so desirable to Moorish men that it place him in danger. His beauty will be less coveted by them and more protected if he passes as a woman. Beauty can thus be hidden as well as simulated by cross-gendering. Is it perhaps because it can be hidden that cross-gendered beauty can also arouse such intense desire?

In this case, falsification of gender is used as a protection. In this Moorish culture, perhaps, since sexual dalliance with women is forbidden, sexual desire therefore fixes on the beauty of the boy. Does this suggest that love, deeply considered, can just as easily be same-sex and self-reflexive self-love? In any case, the enigma of love is evoked by these reversals of any of its presumably hetero-normative valences, preserving love's nature as a mystery.

Transvestism suggests, in any of these cases, that desire is engendered fundamentally by artifice. It is not the object itself, or the virtues of any of its intrinsic qualities, that awakens desire but rather its transformation, its re-dressing by art as what, by nature, it is not. The simulation of nature and of beauty is what is most attractive. This phenomenon brings out a self-reflexive turn of human art driven by desire for artifice itself. Hence the novel's pervasive accent on fiction and artifice, its revaluation of all values from this Archimedean point as the original source of the creation of value. This valorization of artifice and its power of transforming nature finds a particularly puissant and emblematic expression in the art of transvestism. As humans, do we perhaps desire to escape from our own being conditioned by nature? Can we make ourselves feel comfortable only by remaking ourselves through conscious choice and art? Tattooing both in primordial cultures and as a contagious contemporary fashion can be analyzed as having similar roots and mobiles.

Transvestism stands out as a kind of epitome of the art of celebrating artifice taken even to grotesque extremes that characterizes the *Quixote* as a whole. But all this becomes immensely more intense and takes on decisive emphasis in Part II. Transvestism occurs so frequently here as the epitome of the work because of its calling attention to how artifice can pretend to remake nature and how the changes it makes affect our perceptions and have concrete consequences for human action.

The fictional scenographies in the hunting scene in the woods, the parade staged by countess Trifaldi and her squire, the scene played out in the garden around the fiction of the flying Clavileño, are all orchestrated by the duke and duchess and their staff. All are absurd but superb performances employing all the theatrical means that fanciful imagination working with the physical and mental props of the times could body forth.

Artifice is a mode of reflection. It involves reflecting the image of some natural object through conscious activity. Transvestism shows, even in hiding it, the part of artifice and, with it, of self-reflection in our sexual identity and primal attractions. Beauty and the desirable are relative to our own idea of ourselves. And yet this relativity itself registers a limit where beauty and the good reveal themselves as absolute values. An immediate revelation of love without reflection occurs in numerous instances of love at first sight in the novel.

Love at first sight happens when Tosilo sees the daughter of duenna Rodríguez. He is summoned by the duke to defeat Don Quixote and so free the duke's subject from the obligation to marry the girl, but when he sees her, he wants to be defeated and to marry her himself. She reciprocates this willingness to marry him, even though he is not the man he was supposed to be, the one who had stolen her honor and was to be constrained to marry her. The free spontaneous choice of the will, his spontaneous love, is worth much more than consent obtained by constraint, and instinctively she responds in kind to his uncoerced love. There is something immediate about love beyond all the interfering mediations of our self-reflectiveness, and it can be released beyond the complicated knots in which we are tied by reflection and calculation and occur as their sudden overturning. The impasses instill in us an acute need to escape them.

And yet, beauty itself, with no mediation, would kill us. Man cannot see God and live. As in Exodus, the fully unveiled real would be fatal. Luis F. López González reaches similar insights focusing on Marcela's divine beauty that kills Grisóstomo (107–34). Is the message perhaps that artifice is necessary to disguise the real lest its intrinsic overwhelming beauty bewitch us and make us mad? Are beauty and its simulation a necessary disguise for the real?

Maybe beauty is not an objective quality at all but rather a sentiment that arises out of the potential for the imagination to make infinite associations that can grasp the real only in unlimited aspects of its plenitude. Immanuel Kant, in his *Critique of Judgment*, analyzed aesthetic impressions as arising from the free play of our faculties of perception and judgment. The unlimited freedom of the imagination in contemplating the real can be stimulated most by what is not clearly delimited or classifiable – hence the fascination with gender fluidity.

Again, with Claudia Jerónima, we have a stunningly beautiful transvestite. Her story is a gender-reversed version of Basilio's death-bed marriage but a tragic version of it because she has killed her fiancé out of jealousy, being misinformed that he was about to marry another woman that day. The trickery of transvestism here and its wild manipulations of desire can contribute to creating a tragedy as well as a comedy.

Transvestism can point in the direction of the quest for alterity, even the mystical journey to God, the ultimate Other, pursued by Dante in the *Paradiso*, with its “transhumanizing” (“trasumanar,” I.70) dynamic. Humanity becomes an open experiment in search of itself in relation to an ideal Other. The desire to transform oneself into one's other can take on this mystical connotation of an itinerary to the divine. But transhumanism can also usher in an apotheosis of technological control over human beings remade as cyborgs. This current is predominant in recent movements brandishing the banners of transhumanism. These diametrically opposed directions of development both inhere in the inventive, manipulative

powers of self-transformation into one's other and opposite, with which Cervantes's plays dangerously, but amusingly, in these episodes.

The current revolutionary social movement of *trans* uproots gender, in principle and potentially, from fixed determination and opens it to the infinite – to open and free determination without set limits. Perhaps this indeterminacy is what is fundamentally beautiful: the infinite capacity and plasticity and openness of form (Malabou 2005). And its transformations are intimately connected with artifice. This is one way that finite humans can manage to participate in the infinite and absolute, which otherwise completely transcends them.

One more dubious impulse behind the revolution in gender of our own time, however, is the drive to gain control over all givens of nature and make them matters of individual choice. Nothing, not even one's gender, is simply to be accepted as given.⁵ Indeed, the purely "given" is itself always something of a myth (Sellars 1956). Yet divinizing the individual and their free choices is equally illusory and idolatrous. Only by relating to the Other and the Infinite can we enter the trans-individual dimension of ethics and human community and dispose ourselves to spiritual communion with all reality. The phenomenon of *trans*, as it is coming out and being opened to view in our own day, could, possibly and provocatively, evoke this undefined infinity of gender. And here an absolute dimension of reality can be touched. This is a dimension of reality that can be revealed especially well (if not only) by literature, starting with the basic unit of language, the name.

Formal Dimension of Reality – Names as Revelation – Antonomasia

The foregrounding of fictiveness and exposure of artificiality that belong to the baroque aesthetic and to the character and thrust especially of Part II of the *Quixote* become manifest in specifically linguistic forms of self-reflection. Grammar, among the arts of the Trivium, could be contemplated as a kind of revelation of reality in a classical episteme that is worked out speculatively by a certain humanist philosophy of education. It was developed in the Italian Renaissance by Lorenzo Valla and Giordano Bruno, leading up to Vico in the Baroque Age. Disclosure of the real through linguistic form is taken up again by German Idealism – notably in Hegel's elucidations of the metaphysical implications of grammar, for example, in the speculative proposition. Nietzsche, too, albeit for his quite different purposes, exposes metaphysics as grounded in grammar.

The procedure of encoding revelations of the natures of things into the words that name them comes to some of its most transparent applications in a story composed by the duke's steward, his *mayordomo*. The story is a pure artifice invented by a fictional character himself and is built only on Don Quixote's fantasies as transmitted via Sancho and the duchess. But this invention becomes the basis determining the action of the novel through to its end.

The princess "Antonomasia," for whom the countess "Trifaldi" serves as ward, is the object of a typical story of maidenly innocence and virginity being betrayed by lying promises of deceitful male suitors. This type-story is repeated so frequently – with Dorotea, Luscinda, or the countess Trifaldi, alias Dolorida, herself, to name only some instances – as to become an archetypal pattern. Antonomasia's very name presents her as *the* seduced and betrayed woman par excellence. "Antonomasia" is a term of rhetoric used to mean "par excellence." For example, for Don Quixote, *Amadís de Gaula* is the chivalric romance "por antonomasia," the exemplary and paradigmatic individual work representing the whole genre of chivalric romances.

⁵ Judith Butler in *Undoing Gender* emphasizes how gender is "performed," whether consciously or not.

Etymologically, antonomasia means “instead of (*anti*) the name (*onoma*)” and consists concretely in using the proper name of an individual eminently distinguished by a certain quality as a generic noun become a sort of epithet for that quality. For instance, Sancho, by his wise judgments, proves himself to be a “Solomon” among governors (II, 45, 730).

The princess Antonomasia, representing all seduced women, becomes a rhetorical figure: she is made up of words. There is something of a rhetorical figure in each and every one of us to the extent that we are all the makings of our own and of others’ words about us. We become what we are in reaction to discourses about us, those of others and our own, which are in good part appropriations and internalizations of what we hear around us. Words, of course, are all general, and we are all in some ways made what we are by the general types that we embody. Even as unique individuals, we are typical – at least of ourselves and inevitably of certain groups as well. Thus, we commonly hear that some human individual is “one of a kind,” where, ironically, stating their uniqueness turns them into a universal type or kind.

Cervantes’s text exposes some usually hidden aspects in the making of the story that we are and become. The making of stories takes place through words, and indeed the significance of many characters is already coded into their names: this device makes transparent our deep-reaching verbal constructedness – our dependency for our sense of identity on the stories we tell about ourselves. This can be seen with perspicacity in the names of the story told by the countess Trifaldi. The name for the impetuous and irresistible suitor is *Clavijo*, which in Spanish means “peg,” whereas its feminine inflection *clavija* denotes a “plug.” These references lend themselves to unmistakably sexual connotations. The young knight’s name bears a blatantly phallic force. The serving woman Dolorida herself falls in love with this stud and is herself tricked and vicariously seduced so that she willingly opens the way for him to seduce the princess. Perhaps not unrelated, *chiavare* in Italian, literally “keying,” is a vulgar term for sexual intercourse. The Italian language that Cervantes learned as a young man in Rome remains present to his ear and often has a demonstrable impact on his Spanish.

Countess Trifaldi herself can be called the pained one, “Dolorida,” by antonomasia – even though this epithet, meaning pained or dolorous, is used again of Donna Rodríguez a little later. They and their stories are, after all, versions of one another. Both ladies betray their young charges into the clutches of a predatory, or at least illegitimate, lover for whom they have themselves fallen.

As punishment, Antonomasia and Clavijo have been cast under spells turning them into metal statues of an ape and a crocodile on the sepulcher of the deceased Queen of Candaya, the cousin of the sorcerer who enchanted them (II, 40). The wicked enchanter is named “Malambruno,” which is as much as to say bad (“mal”) and dark, burned (“bruño”) or wicked man. Of course, names can also be deceptive, and we learn of some ways in which this name, too, does not tell us the truth about the character. Don Quixote and Sancho are later informed (II, 41) that Malambruno is actually very reliable, true to his word and a true Christian, when that serves to make them trust themselves blindly (blindfolded) to his flying horse! There is a dialectic between names as revelation of truth and as falsehoods, like the discourses made out of them: both possibilities inhere in the fictive nature of language. These contradictories can and must be disentangled; yet, at the same time, they remain always at their origin inextricable. Both possibilities need to be apprehended in their inherent unity and as reciprocally generating each other.⁶

⁶ This dialectical and aporetic logic is contextualized historically and theoretically by Antonio Cortijo Ocaña, *El Quijote o La paradoja del ser* (2019), especially 11-61: “Don Quijote se contradice.”

Malambruno's name reflects only how he is seen by those who fear him and construct their own story of grievances around the evil they attribute to him. We have just seen that he is also presented as totally reliable and true to his word when that suits the tale-teller's purpose. Don Quixote can rest assured that he is not malicious or treacherous ("no tiene nada de malicioso ni de traidor," 702). As it turns out, Malambruno exacts no violent encounter whatever as condition for undoing his enchantment – such as had been threateningly indicated in his challenge to the "valorous Manchegan" (II, 39, 692). His letter concludes the affair without any combat. He is satisfied that Don Quixote was *willing* to accept his challenge ("con solo intentarla," II, 41, 705) and on that ground alone disenchant the duennas (*dueñas*), the ladies attending to princesses or nobles. This suggests that the challenge is only to have the story be *believed*. Then the game is over. It is only about words, not action – it requires only artifice, not arms.

"Antonomasia" also reads as a name of names. The parents or principles who engender her are named "Maguncia" and "Archipiela," place names both (II, 38, 688). One is very precise, Mainz, the city in Germany famous for Gutenberg, the inventor of the printing press, and the other designates a desultory formation of landmasses (an archipelago) without continuity. This, too, depicts an aspect of language giving rise to its rhetorical capabilities to create essential identities, "por antonomasia," by paradigmatic institution of a name, as it were. A certain scattering of reference is intrinsic to language, even as it focuses and identifies its object, since any word is a reiterable token that can always be applied to further instances. The passion for giving names and thereby making up one's reality is patent from the opening scenes of the novel, in which the *hidalgo* not only chooses his own name but also baptizes his horse "Rocinante" and christens his lady "Dulcinea." The latter's name is "musical and original and significant to him like the others that he gives to himself and to his things" ("nombre, a su parecer, músico y original y significativo, como los otros que a sí mismo y a sus cosas había puesto," I, 1, 24). The penchant for name-making runs wild again in Don Quixote's inventing names for the circle of his household and associates imagined as metamorphosed into shepherds and shepherdesses in a pastoral idyll (II, 67). Linguistic laws of grammar are a prime source for gendering and often an impediment to gender fluidity, though literature finds playful ways of subverting them.

Archetypal Image and Primal Naming

An acknowledged distinguishing characteristic of a "great book" is its comprehensiveness. Typically, great books are held to proffer a vision of the whole of reality brought to focus as the history of a nation or era rendered palpable and immediate in singular emblematic images. Don Quixote stands out as such a figure who is immediately graspable, iconically reproducible, and yet also infinitely faceted and thus inexhaustible. Names such as "The Knight of the Sad Countenance" (*Caballero de la Triste Figura*) reflect this protagonist's own self-reflection, which shows immediately in his face. His self-feeling becomes his image and is then translated as his name. This changes several times in the course of his adventures in response to their peripeties: he becomes the Knight of the Lions (*Cabellero de los Leones*) and assumes other epithets as a result and in commemoration of his feats of prowess, his *hazañas*, or his fiascos. Starting from the opening chapter, the true name of the protagonist floats somewhat uncertainly between Quixada, Quesada, Quexana, Quixano (Watt 48).

These various names reflect different perspectives, as Leo Spitzer shows with exacting philological analysis in his essay "Linguistic Perspectivism in the Don Quixote" (41–85). Spitzer

observes the variety of names given to certain characters, starting with Sancho's wife (Juana, Mari, Teresa, I, 7, 56), and their instability, as well as the variety of the etymological explanations often given for names. Spitzer thus calls attention to the "polyonomasia" and "polyetymologia" of the language of *Don Quixote* as representing different perspectives on the different characters within the novel. He sees this as "a deliberate refusal on the part of the author to make a final choice of one name (and one etymology): in other words, a desire to show the different aspects under which the character in question may appear to others" (41). This practice is evidence of a "relativistic attitude" and suggests that "language in general was seen by Cervantes from the angle of perspectivism" (41).

And yet there is also something beyond the perspectival that shows through in the novel. Some sort of divine vision is asserted. A repositioning of the divine is the drift of Spitzer's interpretation of the novel and specifically of its linguistic procedures. He follows up his opening observations with the statement: "And yet, beyond this perspectivism, we may sense the presence of something which is not subject to fluctuation: the immovable, immutable principle of the divine – which, perhaps, to some extent, is reflected in the earthly *artifex* himself: the novelist who assumes a near-divine power in his mastery of the material, in his own unshaken attitude toward the phenomena of his world (and even in his aloofness from the reader). And it is in this glorification of the artist that the main historical significance of the Spanish masterpiece is to be seen" (41). This historical significance, I think, might change and shift as history continues to develop, and in any case the "near-divine power" evoked by the book is perhaps not so easily to be mastered.

Spitzer admits that "Cervantes never denies God or His institutions" (61), and if Spitzer places his own emphasis elsewhere (namely, on the artist's sovereign and Godlike freedom) this is because God is placed by Cervantes "above the perspectives of language" (61) – which is exactly what apophatic theology discerns and asserts. Honoring what is above or beyond language is apophaticism's founding act and intuition. This recognition or avowal disables us from speaking directly about God but makes God into an inarticulable background bearing on the sense of everything that *is* said and on every perspective. In analyzing the captive's story from Part 1, Spitzer recognizes that "linguistic perspectivism is made subservient to the divine" (61). Spitzer's philology has clearly detected an apophatic understanding of divinity at the foundation of Cervantes's entire artistic undertaking. Spitzer even links this God with the ineffable divinity, the great "Entendedor," of Neoplatonic philosophy – one of the crucial historic sources of apophatic theology.⁷ Spitzer insists on Cervantes's showing up the perplexities and impassés of a theocratic order and even the immorality of a Christian daughter who betrays her Muslim father ostensibly out of devotion to the Virgin Mary – therewith anticipating Nietzsche yet without turning, like Nietzsche, against nor even abandoning Christianity. Spitzer lucidly perceives that this was possible for Cervantes because he placed the divine beyond all human perspectives ("This acme of submissive daring has been achieved by placing the divine beyond the perspectives which appear to the human eye," 67). Bringing his observations together, Spitzer returns again to this insistence on the divine as a super-perspective overseeing the entire universe of the novel, even while apprehending such a divine vision only through its multiple and often contradictory human manifestations: "Thus we may conclude that, while, for the medieval world, the procedures of polyonomasia and polyetymologia amounted to a recognition of the working of the divine in the world, Cervantes used the same devices in order to reveal the multivalence which words possess for different human minds: he who has coined the names put into them

⁷ I present this Neoplatonic background in *On What Cannot Be Said*, vol. 1, 37-110: "The Ineffable One."

other meanings than those conceived of by the characters themselves: a *Trifaldín* who is for Cervantes a *truffatore*, a cheater or practical joker, is understood by Don Quijote and Sancho to be the servant of a Countess *Trifaldi* who wears a three-flounce skirt” (49-50).

Spitzer draws a contrast here between a medieval perspective and a more modern one that presumably calls it into question by the multiple, immanentist, human perspectives of the emerging modern world. Nevertheless, this calling into question can be absorbed as part of the whole vision that the novel conveys, and this transumption is very much in the spirit of Cervantes’s creation, as well as of Spitzer’s original insight. The overarching divine omniscience beyond every perspective is still there, but it has been transferred onto the artist or artwork itself as comprehending all of the perspectives occurring within it. There is even something infinite about the artwork’s own outlook since it cannot be delimited by any of the perspectives represented within it. And yet this unlimited vision can be represented only negatively – as reaching beyond any perspective represented within it – and can never be presented simply in itself. The crucial role of perspectivism and irony consists in their translating the basic insights of negative theology into the evasiveness of any absolute reality or reference. Especially literary modalities are apt for exploring this register of irony. What Spitzer does not yet bring out fully is the way that the figure of the sovereign artist is dissolved by Cervantes into an elusive author function made out many authorial components, each negated in its respective limits and finitude.

The rhetoric of divine revelation has to be ironic in order not to become idolatrous. This lesson is driven home in many particular ways by Cervantes, starting already with the irony inherent in the names themselves. The simplest and most intuitive meaning of the name “Trifaldi” is that it connotes three folds, which suggests the holy Trinity and thus a sacramental significance but also the three-foldness of the personage who has different faces and personalities, being transgressive but penitent, scrupulous but also careless, a character full of contradictions or folds and refoldings (II, 38, 686; cf. 682; 684), even a crooked cheat or “truffatore” in Italian, as we saw. The use of poetry in this story to seduce and deceive shows the dialectical potential of the greatest goods to be perverted to evil purposes. Words are especially susceptible to such perversion. This opens divergent perspectives on their “virtues” or powers.

Words are not just repositories of truth, speaking often obliquely the secret essences of things, as in a certain medieval perspective prolonged by various modern language mysticisms from Franz von Baader to Walter Benjamin, but also sources of deception. Cervantes applies the baroque aesthetic of *desengaño* in exposing the illusions of the world of books of the humanists, as well as of enthusiasts, like Don Quixote, of books of chivalry. Cervantes’s declared purpose in the Prologue to Part I was to “demolish the ill-founded machine of the books of chivalry” (“derribar la máquina mal fundada de los libros de caballería,” 9). At the very end of Part II, he reaffirms that his only aim has been to make people abhor the fake and crazy histories of the books of knight-errantry (“no ha sido otro me deseo que poner en aborrecimiento de los hombres las fingidas y disparatadas historias de los libros de caballerías,” 74, 916).

Spitzer contrasts Cervantes’s appreciation of dialects as different inflections or “reflections of reality” (55) with Dante’s quest for an ideal language of reason common to humans that would stand above all local variations and perspectives. Dante seeks after an illustrious vernacular, a *vulgare illustre*, in his treatise *De vulgari eloquentia*, searching among all the dialects of Italy, only to conclude that it can be none of them in particular but must be a regulatory norm that all illustrious authors aim even unconsciously to realize in their works.

However, the contrast is only relative and provisional. Dante’s poetry, especially as he turns toward conveying the experience of God in the divine vision of the *Paradiso*, is as full of

the ambiguity of perspectives as any (see Franke 2021, 56–57 and *passim*). Similarly, Cervantes’s perspectivism, as explained by Spitzer, does not entail that there is *only* a perspective. Quite the contrary. The play of perspectives takes place in the field of artistic creation and consciousness, and another superior reality that remains untouched and absolute is still admitted and in fact relativizes perspectivism itself. Perspectivism, in its turn, is placed in perspective. It inevitably evokes its own opposite, something not perspectival, some kind of absolute. Spitzer himself realizes as much:

Such perspectivism, however, had, in the age of Cervantes, to acknowledge ultimately a realm of the absolute – which was, in his case, that of Spanish Catholicism. Cervantes, while glorying in his role of the artist who can stay aloof from the *engaños a los ojos* [deceptions for the eyes], the *sueños* [dreams] of this world, and create his own, always sees himself as overshadowed by supernal forces: the artist Cervantes never denies God, or His institutions, the King and the State. God, then, cannot be attracted into the artist’s linguistic perspectivism; rather is Cervantes’ God placed above the perspectives of language, He is said to be, as we have seen, the supreme *Entendedor* [Understander] of the language He has created – just as Cervantes, from his lower vantage point, seeks to be. Perhaps we may assume with Cervantes the old Neoplatonic belief in an artistic Maker who is enthroned above the manifold facets and perspectives of the world. (Spitzer, 61)

Spitzer’s Cervantes exalts the all-encompassing perspective of the artist in its analogy to divine omniscience but at the same time recognizes this perspective as only an imitation and as subordinated to God’s total vision:

High above this world-wide cosmos of his making, in which hundreds of his characters, vistas, themes, plots and subplots are merged, Cervantes’ artistic self is enthroned, an all-embracing creative self, Naturelike, Godlike, almighty, all-wise, all-good—and benign: this visibly omnipresent Maker reveals to us the secrets of his creation, he shows us the work of art in the making, and the laws to which it is necessarily subject. For this artist is Godlike but not defied; far be it from us to conceive of Cervantes as attempting to dethrone God, replacing Him by the artist as a superman. On the contrary, Cervantes always bows before the supernal wisdom of God, as embodied in the teachings of the Catholic Church and the established order of the state and of society (72-73).

Spitzer sees his own interpretation as moving against Unamuno’s because of his own clear distinction between divine and human orders: “In my opinion, it is Cervantes the ‘artistic dictator’ who dictated the story to his pen, and Cervantes, no half-Christian like Unamuno, knew how to distinguish the earthly plane from the transcendental. On the former plane, he obeyed his own *sovereign reason*. He does not, then, belong to the family of Pascal and Kierkegaard, but to that of Descartes and Goethe” (84). The distinction between human order and the unspeakable reality of the divine is right on target. However, the more secular preferences and alignments seem to me to suit Spitzer himself as a master of philological science more than Cervantes. The analogy of the artist to God is registered even in the above quotation from Spitzer. God is apprehended as a Maker, and His divine creative Power is recognized and acknowledged by Cervantes, especially through the creativity of his art. As Spitzer shows, Cervantes combines critique and illusion in his creation as an author, as well as in the double personalities, creative

and critical at once, of Don Quixote and Sancho. Modern writers (Gide, Proust, Joyce, Woolf, et al.), imitate Cervantes's perspectivism but miss the unity behind it in Cervantes ("they have failed to sense the unity behind perspectivism," 72).

González Echevarría aligns Spitzer's thoughts on perspectivism with its supposed precursors in Ortega and Castro. González Echevarría summarizes Spitzer's overall interpretation (which he deems the "the most insightful essay ever written" on the book) as follows: "Don Quixote is about the freedom of the individual to choose and to create according to what he perceives and feels as being the true and real" (González Echevarría 20). However, this view, while it certainly emphasizes a crucial aspect of Cervantes's outlook, remains blind to the theological vision of the book. González Echevarría sees more the secular individualism of the modern world than the medieval negatively theological vision that is also projected by the book. At least, this latter view remains available, ironically, as a possible and recommended individual appropriation of the novel's purport. It is frequently represented and evoked within the novel in diverse remarks. In II, 5, Sancho says impatiently to his wife: "It is enough, woman, that God, who understands all things, hears me" ("Basta que me entienda Dios, mujer – respondió Sancho que Él es el entendedor de todas las cosas," II, 5, 486).

For this transcendent aspect of the vision of the *Quixote*, we have to turn, instead, to Unamuno and explore the dialectic between his and Ortega's more secularizing approach. Radical individualism and a kind of negatively apprehended absolute finally support each other. The crease between the subjective and objective modalities of knowing – the limit at which each proves inadequate and is transcended into the other – is where divinity can be glimpsed negatively in the reflection on human limitations. Don Quixote never fails to mention these limits when speaking, for example, to the pretended pastoral society of the duty of gratefulness toward God (II, 58, 819) or to the duchess of his ignorance concerning Dulcinea's actual existence (II, 32, 656) or to Sancho about his own difference from the saints of knight-errantry depicted in the tableaux in transport (II, 58, 814). The highly individual *perspectives* forged by a variety of internal authors are revealing in an analogous manner – through strict limits – of a higher dimension of reality from which all partial perspectives are orchestrated and transcended, although it remains itself above and beyond all explicit and exhaustive articulation.

Transcending Gender through the Negative Genre of the Novel

Such a harmonization of the whole is the only way to achieve a healthy relation among genders, and it requires a certain transgression of the laws of literary genres. Cervantes invents a new all-comprehensive literary form with his novel. It subsumes ancient epic and lyric and drama together with more modern psychological and legal forms of writing, including the picaresque. Gender and genre alike are ultimately transcended in the infinitely open creativity that this absolutely innovative novel models.

María Zambrano pairs Unamuno with Ortega as her two alternative guides ("Guías") to deciphering the mystery of the *Quixote* in all its ambiguity and vital thrust toward liberation (Zambrano 107). She, too, treats this work filtered through the philosophical readings of her two teachers as a "revelation," specifically as a "poetic revelation" ("revelación poética"), but with very different valences in her two masters. Unamuno works by feeling his way towards a properly and avowedly religious truth, while Ortega aims at knowledge (*conscientia*) in a philosophical sense of the mystery – a disclosure that reveals reason to itself in its own dark and ultimately impenetrable grounding in life.

The ambiguity around which Zambrano's reflections revolve consists essentially in Don Quixote's madness and the claim to liberation that it asserts – liberation from the madness or enchantment of the world. “Don Quixote is a sacred madman, an innocent who clamors for his liberation from the enchantments of the world” (“Don Quijote es un loco sagrado, un inocente que clama por su liberación de los encantos del mundo,” 106). In a further accentuation of the ambiguity and pointing up its inherent paradox, Zambrano writes: “Don Quixote is possessed by his madness for liberation” (“Don Quijote está poseído por la locura de su liberación,” 106). She then outlines the solutions proposed by the two leading philosophical interpreters of the *Quixote* as “two ways or manners of resolving the ambiguity of the Quixote” (“dos caminos o maneras de disolver la ambigüedad del Quijote,” 107), one of them being properly philosophical in nature and the other, rather, religious.

The dissolution of the ambiguity will consist – one deduces from the entire philosophical work of Ortega – of knowledge. It is philosophical knowledge that resolves the essential ambiguity of all mythological or *figurative* revelation.

La disolución de la ambigüedad estará – se deduce de toda la obra filosófica de Ortega – en el conocimiento. Es el pensamiento filosófico quien resuelve la ambigüedad esencial de toda revelación mitológica, *figurativa*. (108)

Knowledge here is the resolution rather than the source of ambiguity. “In view of the poetic revelation of the Quixote, [Ortega] proposes to us that we dissolve this nearly mythological figure [of liberation] into consciousness” (“Ante la revelación poética del Quijote nos propone disolver esta figura casi mitológica en la conciencia,” “Liberación,” 108). Ortega proposes philosophy as a mode of life that is profoundly anti-tragic because based on the effort to escape from the tragedy of existence by knowledge and the total acceptance of the reality of history as our true reality.

This marks Ortega's difference and distance from Unamuno. Although both can agree that “every poetic revelation is ambiguous” (“toda revelación poética es ambigua,” 108), resolution comes rather from philosophy, on one side, and religion, on the other. Unamuno resolves the ambiguity of Don Quixote by converting him from a roguish knight in quest simply of the vainglory of fame to a Christian saint who attains to eternal life. Unamuno thereby absorbs death into life in an application of the central move and revelation of Christianity as the religion of liberation and finally of liberation even from death. Interpreting Unamuno, Zambrano stipulates that “eternal life presents itself to humans only in the religion that made liberty its central revelation, that is to say, in Christianity” (“la vida eterna se presenta a los hombres sólo en la religión que hizo de la libertad su revelación central, es decir, con el cristianismo,” 107).

By this Christian baptism of his exemplary hero and model for Spain, all the ambiguity of our being in the world and the particularity of bodily suffering would be overcome for Unamuno in the universal meaning of eternal life. Don Quixote would thereby be taken out of the novel to become an unambiguously tragic figure (“de extraer a Don Quijote del ámbito de la novela de Cervantes y rescatarle de su ambigüedad, transformándolo en personaje de tragedia,” 109). Here, however, Zambrano would seem to ignore the inherent ambiguity of Unamuno's reading of the book as “tragicomedy.” While incarnating the historical tragedy of Spain, Unamuno's Don Quixote is nonetheless still a perfectly comic figure – after the Dantesque model of *commedia divina* – to the degree that he attains to eternal life.

Similarly, Spain gains eternity through being a victim sacrificed and consummated by its own history (“el sacrificio total de España, su consunción histórica para ganar la eternidad,” 108-109). Unamuno had participated in the revival of Don Quixote by the generation of 98 as key to the spiritual meaning and vocation of Spain (Descouzis 1970). Concordantly, Unamuno uses the *Quijote* to confront his own and contemporary Spain’s most burning and topical philosophical and social issues.

Zambrano emphasizes that from an original undifferentiated state of myth where there are no clear lines between humans and gods, humanity emerges through reflection or philosophy into separate existence and as freed. Unamuno remains attached to the ancestors and thus to a tragic outlook, whereas Ortega believes in philosophy’s ability to liberate the human.

For both philosopher guides, the protagonist’s suffering attains to an authentically universal significance. But the reactions of Ortega and Unamuno then diverge. The total acceptance of the reality of history is the purely rational solution embraced by Ortega, but the nightmare of history continues to haunt us, at least unconsciously. As contemporary Spanish history made all too clear, we have not escaped from tragedy. The “anguish of the nothing” (“la angustia de la nada,” 110) disturbs us, according to Zambrano, penetrating to the core of the mode of Spain’s existence.

Now, this “nothing” is exactly where apophatic thinking finds its saving resources. Any authentic expression of the Nothing, in art and expressly in the novel, turns out to be ambiguous. The novel is the genre of ambiguity par excellence for Zambrano. Indeed, the novel can enable an infinite degree of reflection and is in essence unlimited in self-reflection. Accordingly, it cannot but render ambiguous the being that it reflects on infinitely. This is why the issues of cross gendering and of transsexuality have their place of privilege within the novel. Especially Cervantes’s novel plays up the ambiguity of genre and distills existing genres into an unprecedented comprehensive and evolving sort of mega-genre or meta-genre—in effect, a non-genre because of its transcending every rule of genre.

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