

**Skepticism, Eutrapelia, and the Erring Exemplar in Cervantes' *Novelas ejemplares*:
Cues and Questions in the "Prólogo al lector"**

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The subject of exemplarity lies at the very core of the early modern intellectual sphere as Renaissance humanists shaped and reflected their ideals concerning the individual and society from lessons observed in ancient exemplars. While ancient cultural tradition provided a steady stream of exemplary individuals whose characters and deeds could be contemplated and imitated within the wide spectrum of the humanist agenda, it was within the creative laboratory of early modern literature that exemplarity came to both embody and question the universal applicability of ancient models. The revival of skepticism and the development of skeptical attitudes toward established conventions, themselves products of the humanist fixation on finding in the past a guide to answering contemporary questions, came to highlight the epistemological challenges that these very ancient models were called upon to moderate. Exemplarity, as can be clearly observed in works by Western European early modern authors, and particularly so in Cervantes' *Don Quijote* and *Novelas ejemplares*, ceases to be a reliable moral and poetic guide and becomes one more contestable, experimental canvas on which to exert authorial autonomy and reshape the relationship between past and present, reader and text.¹

Sebastián de Covarrubias' definition of "exemplo" found in *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española* (1611) seems to embrace subjectivity and to rely heavily on moral and ethical judgment. It also appears to hint at the fact that, at least for some seventeenth-century thinkers, exemplarity encompasses more than a mere reference to precise models. It is in fact connected not only to one's ability to exemplify but also to the observer's ability to assimilate and interpret exemplarity:

Absolutamente exemplo se toma en buena parte; pero dezimos dar mal exemplo. Exemplo, la comparación que traemos de una cosa, para apoyar otra. Exemplo, lo que se copia de un libro, o pintura. Y exemplar, el original. Hombre exemplar, el que vive bien, y da buen exemplo a los demás. Dexemplar a uno, vale deshonorarle en lengua aldeana. Estar dexemplado, estar infamado. Exemplificar, traer exemplos para declarar mejor alguna cosa. (Covarrubias 391)

"Exemplo" then, as defined in early seventeenth-century Spain, comprises that which should serve as a positive model and from which simulacra could rightly derive. It can be manifested in action and judgment as well as in the aesthetic characteristics of objects. It can, in spite of its "absolutely" positive nature, be simulated negatively, that is, by serving as a model for that which should be avoided and not duplicated. The moral connotation of the example, exemplar and, by extension, exemplarity cannot be overlooked in Covarrubias' definition. To be deemed as an anti-example (or "dexemplado") is equivalent to being stripped of one's honor. Whether or not the moral overtones of Covarrubias' definition reflect a Spanish obsession with honor and morality, Cervantes clearly associates exemplarity with these issues in his "Prólogo al lector." In fact, when Cervantes opts for presenting his collection as exemplary, he is perfectly aware of the instant association he invokes between his text and an ancient and ever-evolving tradition of persuasion through exemplarity and rhetorical excellence. He also entertains the skeptical view that assertions of honor and morality are no longer statically situated within an

¹ See Lyons, *Exemplum*, and Hampton.

epistemic frame of pre-conceived values and readily accepted truths. This skeptical attitude is unavoidably articulated in the prologue where, through questioning and redefinition, it will reposition the notion of exemplarity within the new paradigm created by skeptical ideas. Yet, within the traditional dialogue between new and old, author and reader, the concept of exemplarity does not need to be explicitly stated in order to be perceived and internalized. Don Quijote, Cervantes' protagonist who most vividly embodies the essence of emulation and most poignantly highlights the difficulties and complexities of exemplarity, is never labeled in the title of the novel as an exemplar per se. Exemplarity to Cervantes seems to be a three-directional beam that shines on traditions inherited from the past and on crucial epistemological questions of the present, as it suggests a new, less dogmatic system of perceiving and communicating reality. Within this new epistemology Cervantes' fiction succeeds in both honoring and confronting conventional models.

John Lyons reminds us that during the early modern period “humanist thought thrived on example,” which retroactively earned it the characterization of the “age of exemplarity.” More precisely, he explains how and why the humanist venture found in example such a constructive way to approach the agenda of personal and societal reform: “Example is textual, in keeping with the humanist emphasis on philology. Example is historical and thus suited those who wanted to recover the wisdom of antiquity. Example could be conceived as a tool of practical social change, as a guide to action, in keeping with the strong moral purpose of many early humanists” (*Exemplum* 12). Lyons substantiates this assessment with an elaboration on how thinkers and authors like Erasmus and Juan Luis Vives, in embracing the classical view that poetry (or literature, more pertinently) was an efficient way of transmitting moral messages, came to both uphold ancient tradition and broaden the definition of example in the way they resorted to *exemplifying* in their writings. Erasmus, as Lyons asserts, is keenly aware of the overabundance of examples available in the corpus of the literary tradition, and from this awareness and the wish to resolve the problem of selecting among the many applicable examples, comes to pragmatically redefine exemplarity as a process of selection rather than as a mere act of citing examples:

The Erasmian selection is not based on the quality of the conduct contained in the example but on the quality of the textual *res* and *verba* as they – separately or together as the occasion arises – offer themselves as useful to the writer. . . . Despite Erasmus's undeniable emphasis on the moral and religious utility of the act of writing, this emphasis does not provide the key to the selection of material. Instead the “striking” or “outstanding” [desired quality of the example], an aesthetic-rhetorical criterion, is for Erasmus the criterion for selecting in the gathering of *copia*. An example of good conduct that is not striking would be of no use, for example is not a moral concept but a discursive one. It is not conduct per se but the embodiment of conduct in an unusually noticeable form that lends itself to the needs of the writer or speaker. (Lyons, *Exemplum* 18)

In highlighting the fact that for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thinkers example, and hence exemplarity, transcends the boundaries of pure morality and becomes tangled with the tensions and complexities embedded in discursive narrative, Lyons opens the way to a contemplation of exemplarity that involves the doubt and contingency implied in skepticism. Narrative, as perfectly observed in Cervantes' *Novelas ejemplares*, provides a stable epistemic platform that easily sustains examples. Yet it can also present an environment of epistemic instability that allows these examples to be tainted by the uncertainties that only a dogmatic code of signification could attempt to disguise. Assuming, as many critics have, that the *Novelas*

ejemplares display a deep and sustained epistemic instability, one ought to anticipate from Lyons' assessment that Cervantes' type of exemplarity is going to be one that, perhaps like Erasmus', embraces difference and ambiguity and exemplifies more by conjecture than by dogmatic assertion. If indeed Cervantes approaches exemplarity with renewed, skeptical eyes, and if this newly conceived approach also relies on selecting or highlighting through creative expression the "striking" and "outstanding" nature of the exemplar, then Cervantes' characters should either embody or visibly lack these characteristics, as to more effectively serve as communicators and educators to the reading public. Yet, the very fact that exemplarity depends on nuances of the hermeneutic process in order to be fully communicated and assimilated points to a dangerous set of contingencies, which as Covarrubias seems to realize, may result in a positive example being perceived as a negative one, or vice versa. Cervantes' engagement with exemplarity seems to reflect his willingness to experiment with contingency, plurality, and skepticism, as his protagonists demonstrate.

The risk of selecting or creating an exemplar that can be misunderstood is evidently alive in Cervantes' mind. He not only voices this concern in the prologue of the collection but also tries, whether ironically or not, to exonerate himself from any possible criticism he may encounter on such basis. Cervantes recognizes, perhaps better than any of his readers, that the crisis of signification brought about by skepticism has to affect the interpretation and acceptance of prescribed models. The very definition of model or exemplar becomes, under the liberating weight of skepticism, an intangible, nearly inapprehensible concept.

Critics have commented amply on the fact that exemplarity acquired a distinct complexion during Early Modernity.² They have not, however, explicitly articulated the relationship between what has been referred to as an early modern crisis of exemplarity and the recovery of ancient Pyrrhonian skepticism. Karlheinz Stierle, who has explained the new exemplarity in terms of its dynamic relationship to plurality and contingency, views the exemplarity of Cervantes' *Novelas* as an exponent of particular "moments in the crisis of exemplarity," a crisis that he delineates through a discussion of the development of *exempla* from Boccaccio and Petrarch to Montaigne and Cervantes. While recognizing that "there has always been . . . the possibility of questioning the exemplary truth of the *exemplum* by opposing it to a never-ending wealth of counter-examples," Stierle proposes that the shift in the essence of exemplarity resides in that "the correlation between *sententia* and *exemplum* was transformed into a more complex relation between moral reflection and particular case" (580). This assessment, while based partly on an analysis of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, is instrumental in contextualizing the problematic, sometimes distressing conclusions of Cervantes' *Novelas*. In an intellectual environment in which the pull of skepticism is so overwhelmingly evident, it is not surprising to find the *truth* or validity of the *exemplum* being systematically challenged. When the very axes upon which exemplarity rests are loosened, the process of affixing meaning to the *exemplum* – be it through personal bias or need, or hermeneutic dexterity – becomes less direct and predictable and more reliant on conjecture, interpretation, and approximation. The process also becomes a shared and yet unpredictable exchange between author and reader. In other words, by focusing on the word truth, and taking into consideration the impossibility of its verifiability as conveyed in skepticism, Cervantes' simultaneous construction and deconstruction of exemplarity find not only a philosophical tradition in which to anchor themselves but also a literary practice from which to diverge. Stierle reflects that the presence of these unstable, perhaps contradictory elements within the text does not challenge the idea of exemplarity itself:

² I refer in particular to Hampton, Cornilliat, Stierle, Scham, and Rigolot.

“The validity of the *exemplum* as a rhetorical form of narration that tends towards its own conceptual or ideological structure has an anthropological basis. It presupposes that over time, there is more analogy in human experience than diversity, or that in all situation of civil or political life the pole of equality is stronger than that of difference” (580). Yet he argues that contingency and plurality have infiltrated the realm of exemplarity deeply enough in early modern Europe (and in my opinion, due to the influence of skepticism) to challenge the presupposition of an overwhelmingly analogical human experience.

The implication of an anthropological basis for the unfixed nature of this new paradigm in exemplarity, as offered by Stierle, is that exemplarity can be stabilized by shared experience and, perhaps, by shared ideology. Cervantes must have counted on this presupposed “pole of equality” when he declared his *novelas* to be exemplary, despite their great thematic and generic richness and tendency to elude dogmatic interpretations. Yet he does not neglect to recognize, by means of proleptical argumentation, that to some readers the actions depicted in his stories might serve as negative exemplars, a possibility that he greatly fears and regrets in advance. Cervantes’ complex handling of exemplarity acknowledges therefore the contingencies of a varied readership and the heterogeneity of readers’ hermeneutics. It also evidences a contradiction between claims of universal exemplarity and an acknowledgement of a pluralistic audience, a contradiction that is perhaps mirrored in Cervantes’ verified affinity for hybridity, be it generic or epistemological. Both these characteristics of his fiction may point to an attempt to negotiate, in narrative form, the dynamics of a changing intellectual world. I argue that the *Novelas ejemplares* are Cervantes’ documented exploration and proclamation in regard to the state and function of exemplarity during his days.

Before examining the “Prólogo” for clues as to how Cervantes may have internalized and expressed a potential crisis of exemplarity, it may be useful to explore the general critical opinion in regard to the status of exemplarity in early modern European intellectual thought. In general terms, the idea of exemplarity as a monolithic, static concept, be it as a reference for moral or artistic purposes, is no longer uniquely applicable during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Stierle, besides locating the departure from classical and medieval models of exemplarity in the importance acquired by plurality and contingency, asserts that

there are two different kinds of *exempla* to be found in Boccaccio and Petrarch. The *exemplum* mainly used in Petrarch to illustrate different virtues and vices is what we might call the type of paradigmatic *exemplum*. Its domain is prescriptive moral philosophy or ethics. The second type of *exemplum*, which we find mainly in Boccaccio, refers to a configuration or constellation of moral powers, and could be called a syntagmatic *exemplum*. Since its main use is not imitation but moral reflection, it is here that we may trace the crisis of exemplarity. (584)

It is easy to see how this alleged crisis could be associated with the complexity of characters and actions depicted in the *Novelas ejemplares*.³ With few exceptions, the protagonists illustrate complex, novelistic (as opposed to romance-like), and many times oxymoronic personalities that tend to combine virtuous and sinful traits and to resist simplistic characterizations. In an economy of exemplarity that relies on the steadfast contrast between right and wrong, one can almost anticipate the crisis of exemplarity as a by-product of the skeptical *crisis pyrrhonianna*. As a suspension of judgment is articulated as the new ideal rule of intellectual and moral engagement, a singular, dogmatic approach to exemplarity would seem not

³ One can also argue that Spanish authors have practiced syntagmatic exemplarity since the fourteenth century, since Don Juan Manuel’s *El conde Lucanor* illustrates a tradition of treating the *exemplum* in terms of contingency.

only old-fashioned but also obsolete. In Stierle's view, "[t]he crisis of exemplarity is the origin of a new moral, historical, and anthropological hermeneutics" (587). He identifies in Cervantes a clear example of the "copresence of exemplarity and its problematization," and explains that "Cervantes does not put exemplarity into question; however, he pushes it to its ironic corrosion" (588).

Stierle shares with Timothy Hampton the idea that exemplarity was an unstable concept during the Renaissance. Hampton's overall explanation of the cultural and socio-political environment that brought about this crisis seems to refer directly to Cervantes' intellectual context and to the hybrid nature of his fiction:

As paradoxes of humanist discourse are assimilated, the question of exemplarity becomes intertwined with issues of political and ideological struggle. Ideological anxiety and epistemological scepticism led to an erosion of the authority of exemplary figures. This erosion signals the beginning of a new, posthumanist attitude toward the representation of antiquity in literature. At the same time it helps to define the terms whereby literary discourse breaks away from the Renaissance privileging of ancient heroism and begins to develop new models of virtue and selfhood. (x)

These new models of virtue, one could argue, are implied in the complexity of characters like Constanza in "La gitanilla," in the contradictory actions of Leocadia in "La fuerza de la sangre," and even in the paradox identified in Cañizares' perceived perverse and lascivious satanic rituals and her acceptance of God's might and Christian doctrine in "El coloquio de los perros." Like Cervantes in the prolepsis articulated in his prologue, Hampton also recognizes that this new, flexible, and movable type of exemplarity is based on the individual reader's hermeneutic tendencies and abilities. In that way, through its reliance on the reader's idiosyncratic assimilation, the new exemplarity is bound to generate as many distinct exemplars as there are readers. Hampton goes so far as to express that "it is in fact from their relationships to their readers and to the space in which those readers define themselves through action that Renaissance texts derive their structure and rhetorical strategies" (5). Both the "relationship" and "space" to which Hampton refers could be qualified as being shaped by the skeptical tendencies and attitudes brought about by the revival of Pyrrhonian skepticism. To the discerning Renaissance reader, the common affairs of thinking, acting, and self-fashioning were all embedded in an atmosphere of epistemic instability and shaped by a hermeneutics of fluctuating signifiers. As these chapters have argued, the tendencies and attitudes to which Hampton refers have been reflected not only in the complexity and contradictory nature of the characters, themes, and images that permeate the *novelas* but also, as Hampton suggests, in the problematic endings and self-reflective structure of some of Cervantes' stories.

In synthesis, the skeptical attitude found within Cervantes' *Novelas* both contributes to and reflects the intellectual sphere to which he belonged. Similarly, the crisis of exemplarity that Cervantes' skeptical narrative articulates also emanates from and mirrors this dialogic exchange between author and reader. Like Stierle, Hampton also sees in the new paradigm of exemplarity a particular reliance on contingency, since it is through the understanding of how chance and circumstance change the relevance and applicability of examples through the ages that exemplarity comes to transform itself in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Hampton remarks on how "[h]umanism needs and promotes exemplarity even as it subverts it" (16). This subversion, as argued by Hampton and exemplified in Cervantes' *Novelas ejemplares*, takes place within narratives in which the dogmatic simplicity of the exemplar is complicated (or subverted) so to put exemplarity itself under scrutiny.

While Hampton acquiesces that it is only through narrative that an exemplar proves virtue and hence exemplarity (23), the reader is challenged to recognize, particularly in Cervantes' writing, that narrative also promotes the destabilization of the exemplar, which causes the pillars of exemplarity to crumble or, at best, be reevaluated. With that in mind, how does the reader, who has been historically urged to imitate the virtues embedded in traditionally exemplary characters throughout the ages, orient herself in this cloud of epistemological and exemplary instability? When Hampton reminds us that during the Renaissance exemplarity was of greater concern to readers and writers than verisimilitude, he is pointing to the fact that the main purpose of the exemplar (whether or not it perfectly reflected a historical entity or tradition) was to "move the reader to virtuous action" (26). Yet, the inappropriateness of the traditionally dogmatic and contingency-blind exemplar caused late sixteenth-century authors to recreate in their narrative endeavors the dissatisfaction felt toward the conventional model. Readers, on the other hand, were forced to contend with an example that no longer was self-explanatory or readily exemplary, and that relied on the reader's critical judgment and more sophisticated hermeneutics in order to articulate its own value as a source of imitation. Cervantes' *Novelas ejemplares* both address and illustrate this particular moment in the crisis of exemplarity.

From this problematic epistemological and hermeneutical scenario, one in which readers are being asked to consider literary and intellectual tradition, to measure themselves against a perhaps ambiguous exemplar, and to reject or accept the example as indeed worthy of imitation, Hampton discerns a relationship between narrative and self discovery or assessment. In this light, the text, given its unsettled epistemic nature and perhaps unpredictable outcome, provides a narrative laboratory where rhetoric leads to knowledge of the self and world. In the case of the *Novelas ejemplares*, the act of reading ceases to be, despite Cervantes' declaration in the prologue, uniquely a source of "pasatiempo" and "diversion" and becomes an exercise in philosophical, psychological, and socio-political discovery.⁴

By labeling the collection as "ejemplar" and by providing in the prologue a convoluted, ironic, and highly critical view of his social and intellectual world, Cervantes sets the tone for the hermeneutical and epistemological challenges his texts will pose. The prologue, as the vast body of criticism suggests and as the stories it introduces exemplify, communicates by insinuation, which magnifies the reader's interpretative liability. Cervantes' insistence on asserting the exemplary nature of his stories points to an effort to both articulate the purity of his alleged intent and exonerate his stories of any unintended harm they may cause. Yet, his characterization of exemplarity, like the very exemplarity that he claims to embrace, is clouded by an ambiguous and complex amalgamation of signs that seem to question the very essence of what the author sets out to define. The reader perceives here a feature of Cervantine narrative that will be exposed many times within the body of his *novelas*, in that Cervantes promotes his (soon to be proven ambiguous) exemplarity by engaging in a very critical meta-exemplary discourse.

Following the model that he himself established in the prologue to *Don Quijote I*, Cervantes invokes the figure of a friend – in this case an absent and uncooperative friend – who fails to provide a portrait of the author as an introduction to the collection, hence forcing him to write a prologue himself. What follows is an ekphrastic digression in which Cervantes engages in a meta-exemplary narrative that invokes both self-assertion and criticism of his socio-political

⁴ For a response and challenge to the ideas of both Stierle and Hampton in regard to exemplarity see Cornilliat. See also Rigolot, who defends the idea that "[a] strong case might be built for an active coexistence of humanism and scholasticism in the way that exemplarity becomes the locus of displaced dogmatism and experimental freedom" (563).

milieu. The good-natured tone of his opening lines and the vivid description of his physical traits – including an account of his few remaining teeth and how these are unevenly disposed in his mouth – fail to conceal the persistent concerns, practical and philosophical, that lie just below the surface of the text.⁵ The prologue purports, among other things, to assert the exemplarity of the stories that it introduces while also questioning exemplarity. Cervantes' reference to his years in captivity, his participation in the battle of Lepanto, and the evident pride he holds for his most famous battle wound conspire to create a covert but palpable sense of exemplariness. By promoting himself as a traditional exemplary figure – one that embodies the essence of the brave Christian soldier who masters the art of the pen and who awaits with faithful stoicism for his freedom from captivity – Cervantes taps into a traditional and suitable model from which to mirror the alleged exemplariness of his *novelas* and positions himself, despite his *hidalgo* status, next to celebrated figures like those praised in the narratives of authors like Pérez de Guzmán and Fernando del Pulgar. An exemplary man, one is asked to believe, is more likely than common folk to produce exemplary texts.

In “Cervantes’s Exemplary Prologue” Stephen Boyd, contrary to my reading, locates the exemplarity of the introductory prologue in the absent portrait of Cervantes. He explains: “Because of its richness of implication, the fiction of the missing engraving serves as an exemplary introduction to stories which, as a body, constitute a composite, self-consciously incomplete portrait of human nature and of the possibilities of fiction. Cervantes holds his own imperfect image before us, and offers the *Novelas ejemplares* as an approximate ‘imago hominis’ (67). By focusing on the absence of the portrait and on a subsequent “imperfect image” that Cervantes creates of himself, Boyd deems the ekphrastic construction of the prologue to be an exemplar of imperfection. Alternatively, by focusing on the narrative that supposedly would have come attached to the portrait, I find that this section conveys a message that hints at epistemic integrity and wholeness; a message that, as explained, Cervantes is too willing to contradict.

It should not be too difficult to envisage a contemporary reader’s reaction to the implied exemplariness of the prologue. She may readily embrace the traditional, dogmatic, and largely static exemplar Cervantes concocts of himself, and may herself be prepared to apply the same standard of exemplariness to the texts that follow, given the explicitness of the collection’s title. She may, having perhaps experienced the complexities of the brand of exemplarity offered in *Don Quijote I*, be grasping for an explanation for the traditionalism of this approach. She only needs to read on to see that the questions raised by the problematic exemplariness depicted in *Don Quijote* are about to be reengaged both in this prologue and in the collection it presents.⁶ Cervantes seems to signify the paradigmatic, Petrarchan mode of exemplarity in his prologue only to immediately jolt it out of its conventional axes. No sooner has he established grounds upon which to introduce the forthcoming exemplarity contained in his *novelas* than Cervantes turns the table on his own suggested model: “pensar que dicen puntualmente la verdad los tales elogios, es disparate, por no tener punto preciso ni determinado las alabanzas ni los vituperios” (1: 51). In a blunt invocation of skepticism, Cervantes discredits others’ and his own recently assembled mode of exemplariness. Neither praise nor vituperation is grounded in truth, for they lack, as Cervantes puts it, both preciseness and determinateness. It can be justifiably inferred

⁵ One of these concerns is illustrated by Cervantes’ allusion to the fact that his works may circulate anonymously - “éste . . . es el rostro del autor de . . . obras que andan por ahí descarriadas, y, quizá, sin el nombre de su dueño” (1: 51).

⁶ For a discussion of exemplariness in *Don Quijote* see Hampton 237-296.

that Cervantes refers here to the fact that character and moral judgment, which are both actively involved in determining exemplarity, rely on the contingencies pertaining to personal interpretation, and hence lack universal applicability. The virtues and commendable acts exalted in narratives of acclamation – the very narratives from which traditional exemplarity originates and, alternatively, which exemplarity perpetuates through emulation – are, according to Cervantes' redefinition, universally *un-truthful*. The Pyrrhonian vein that runs through this realization is evident, and the alteration it imposes on the idea of exemplarity is that only imprecise and non-dogmatic cultural constructions – ones that may, after all, take into account the plurality and contingency ignored in traditional models – can be deemed exemplary.

Cervantes uses the metaphor of a *pepitoria* – or stew made of “*pescueços y alones del ave*” (Covarrubias 584) – to describe, in negative terms, what his *novelas* cannot be turned into, for they lack the body parts necessary to make the stew. Boyd recognizes the conceit offered by Cervantes and the fact that, by its nature, it obscures the meaning of the *pepitoria* metaphor (“Exemplary Prologue” 52). After all, Cervantes has just explicitly warned that “*verdades . . . dichas por señas, suelen ser entendidas*” (1: 51), which leads the reader not only to expect the challenge of a metaphorical, whimsical language but also the idea that signification within the prologue and the texts will become epistemically and hermeneutically unstable. The reader may have, by now, anticipated that the exemplarity of the following stories will also share this instability.

Boyd asserts that the *pepitoria* metaphor may allude to the fact that “with regard to their content, the stories that follow are not what we might term ‘pornographic’: they do not contain ‘spicy’ description of body parts” (52). He also offers that “individually or collectively, the stories have the ordered, rational integrity of a complete body: they are works of art written in accordance with reason and Christian principles, not an incoherent mishmash of titillating sex scenes” (52). Boyd recognizes that by the very choice of explaining the nature of his *novelas* through metaphor and conceit Cervantes is informing the reader that he expects a more active and critical interpretive involvement. By recognizing the possible existence of careless and careful readers – “*descuidado o cuidadoso lector*” (1: 52) – Cervantes embraces the contingency associated with the reading process and acknowledges the plurality both of his audience and of the product of their hermeneutic venture. Within this premise, signification, and hence exemplarity, is understood in terms of the fluctuating epistemic sphere that skepticism so powerfully helps to delineate, for not only does it rest upon an unpredictable variety of readers but also on variable personal hermeneutics that could oscillate incessantly as the individual herself changed from moment to moment. As skepticism advocates for the recognition of contingency and plurality in its defense of non-dogmatism, so the *new* exemplarity relies on these two destabilizing agents in order to reflect the changing skeptical intellectualism from which it stems. Exemplarity, after all, is built upon the same epistemological and hermeneutical blocks as any other intellectual or ideological construction, and will reflect any instability contained in its foundation. In recognizing variety and interpretative uncertainties, and in evoking relativity and the *untruthfulness* of dogmatic judgments, Cervantes informs the reader of the instability embedded in exemplarity and alerts her to the interpretative perils she is about to encounter in the stories that follow.

The fact that, albeit in a dismissive way, Cervantes acknowledges the possibility that his texts may induce immoral or harmful thoughts in the reader demonstrates his awareness of the instability of exemplarity and of the incontrollable multiplicity of readings his texts may generate. He expresses: “[Q]uiero decir que los requiebros amorosos que en algunas hallarás, son

tan honestos y tan medidos con la razón y discurso cristiano, que no podrán mover a mal pensamiento al descuidado o cuidadoso que las leyere” (1: 52-53).

That he should be nervous about providing potentially harmful examples is more than understandable. Riley recognizes Cervantes’ anxious defense of the moral rectitude of his *novelas*.⁷ Rejecting the idea that Cervantes’ prolepsis is ironic, he states categorically: “He surely meant what he said when he said it” (101). In an environment of so much epistemic instability, the task of separating irony from literal signification is a difficult one. As Riley points out, the word *novela* – which Cervantes voluntarily applies to his collection and which he voluntarily couples with the term *ejemplares*, to complicate things – “as well as being unflatteringly interchangeable with words like *patraña*, or ‘deceitful fiction’, must have conjured up for the public the names of Boccaccio and Bandello and other *novellieri* well known in Spain, bywords for salaciousness” (102). Irony, or at least a playful desire to challenge and confuse, is indeed very possible here, especially if one takes into consideration the amazingly diverse and contradictory list of ingredients that Cervantes activates to introduce his stories: his awareness of the salacious connotation of the term *novela*; his willingness to not only apply the term to his collection but to further destabilize it by joining it with the term *ejemplares*; his decision to make it clear that exemplarity, within the context of this set, is an unstable, questionable convention. However, one should not dismiss Riley’s contention that Cervantes “meant what he said” entirely. Cervantes is certainly sincere in regard to the pride he holds for the battle wound he suffered in Lepanto, as he very likely is of his respect for Christian precepts and morality. Again, Riley reminds us how “Cervantes’s literary ideals included purity as something taken for granted; and things taken for granted are sometimes neglected.” He adds that “the artistic truth or falsity of a work was a matter of greater moment to him . . . than the presence or absence of a few bedroom scenes” (102).

In view of the tradition that Cervantes evokes by asserting the exemplariness of his *novelas*, and considering his sustained effort to challenge the very exemplarity that he recalls, both in the prologue and in the stories themselves, Cervantes may be extending the liberties he allows himself on behalf of the “artistic truth of the work” to the truth or falsity of his philosophical enterprise. Pyrrhonian skepticism advocates for the suspension of all judgment, including that upon which exemplarity rests. Under the skeptical light that shines throughout the *novelas*, it is not necessarily Cervantes’ beliefs or moral preferences that shape the content and form of his narrative but rather the beliefs and expressions of morality that most effectively lead the reader to a critical approach to the text and a self-critical approach to existence. As François Cornilliat points out, “[s]yntagmatic examples have renounced their prescriptive or injunctive function, as well as the fixed set of values that justified such a function and guaranteed its efficacy. Instead, they allow expansive reflection on a confused ethical landscape where values are prone to ambiguity, contradiction, and reversal – but where, nevertheless, one has to make choices for oneself” (620). Cervantes’ exemplarity exemplifies negatively by reminding the reader that all examples – whether based on Petrarch or Boccaccio or Bandello or Timoneda or whether totally *original* – are only as valid and effective as the perceptive ability and bias of the reader, and as valid and veracious as any of the other *truths* that skepticism is so eager to debunk.

⁷ Riley points to the fact that Cervantes “submitted the book to the ecclesiastical, before the civil censor, although the latter alone was strictly necessary.” He also mentions the “unusually large number of *aprobaciones* (no less than four),” and the fact that after having taken such care to reflect the appropriateness of his collection he “felt at liberty to tone down the somewhat over-emphatic title, which . . . seem to previously have been *Novelas ejemplares de honestísimo entretenimiento*” (102).

Perhaps one of the most perplexing rhetorical moves in the entire prologue is Cervantes' evasive *negatio*: "Heles dado nombre de *ejemplares*, y si bien lo miras, no hay ninguna de quien no se pueda sacar algún ejemplo provechoso; y si no fuera por no alargar este sujeto, quizá te *mostrara* el sabroso y honesto fruto que se podría sacar, así de todas juntas como de cada una de por sí" (1: 52, emphasis added). Boyd sees in the author's simultaneous offering and withholding information another conceit, this time possibly attempting to entice the reader to "re-evaluate the apparent innocuousness of the language in which it is framed" (53), a technique that Cervantes may well be counting on in order to engage the reader's acute and more critical hermeneutical sensibilities, both here and throughout the stories themselves. Boyd concludes that "the fact that Cervantes does not offer us any such clear statements here or in the stories suggests that this is because what they teach us is not expressible in those terms" (54). In fact, if what the *novelas* teach us is derived from the epistemic instability that is reflected both in their problematic exemplarity and in their sustained engagement with skepticism, then to simply *tell* or *posit* ("mostrar") their message would be to betray not only the story's inherited hermeneutical challenge but to discredit all the plurality and contingency that, within skeptical precepts, they appear to convey. *Mostrar*, within the epistemic reality conveyed here, is no longer a matter of the author's willingness to show but a question of individual hermeneutics. As Nicholas Spadaccini and Jenaro Talens remind us in regard to the "Coloquio," "[t]he reader-critic brings to the reception of stories his or her own horizon of expectations while interpretations are at least partially shaped by the conventions used in reading and by the assumption made about those conventions" (225). If indeed Cervantes conceives and structures his *novelas* to imply and not to tell, then the prologue becomes an erring exemplar to the narratives that will follow.⁸

That Cervantes should strongly imply a link between his *novelas* and the virtue of *eutrapelia* immediately after questioning the traditional pillars of exemplarity should be seen as an invitation to pause and consider again the possibility of a further digression from conventionality.⁹ He writes: "Mi intento ha sido poner en la plaza de nuestra república una mesa de trucos, donde cada uno pueda llegar a entretenerse sin daño de barras; digo sin daño del alma ni del cuerpo, porque los ejercicios honestos y agradables, antes aprovechan que dañan." He adds: "no siempre se está en los templos; no siempre se ocupan los oratorios; no siempre se asiste a los negocios por calificados que sean. Hay horas de recreación donde el afligido espíritu descansa" (1: 52). Bruce Wardropper interprets Cervantes' words literally, and affirms that "esta expresión del intento del autor es una declaración inequívoca de la doctrina de la verdadera *eutrapelia*" (157). . . . De acuerdo con el estilo juguetón de la *eutrapelia*, [Cervantes] se ríe de su lector ocultando la clave de su obra, según dice, 'por no alargar el sujeto'" (158). Colin Thompson sees in Cervantes' allusion to *eutrapelia* a sign that "Cervantes' locates the moral and spiritual significance of his stories in their ability to restore to the soul its capacity to resume its serious duties once it has rested from weariness which is the inevitable consequence of any form of labour" (264). Indeed, Cervantes' purpose in so clearly calling upon the accepted and valued concept of *eutrapelia* may have been to allow his epistemically troubled texts to partake in the traditional and purely benign aspects of this idea. In evoking the ancient practice of constructively releasing both body and soul from the hardships and preoccupations of life and work, Cervantes reasserts his trust in the power of tradition to bring to his fiction the respect and

⁸ Spadaccini and Talens go so far as to claim that "Cervantes does away with the power exercised by traditional models in the reading process by renouncing the private property of the signifieds – what is said or told. In so doing he destabilizes the canonical interpretation and exposes its rhetorical character" (217).

⁹ For an overview of the *eutrapelia*, see Rahner and Wardropper.

righteousness with which he wants to see it associated. *Eutrapelia*, not unlike exemplarity, conjures images of moral propriety and civil rectitude. The fact that Cervantes' *Novelas* will challenge the reader to rethink and reassess, among other ideas, the very concepts of moral propriety and civil rectitude further illustrates the author's reformist agenda. A good story, it is unquestionable, can indeed provide a means of entertainment that does not harm either soul or body. But between the concept of *eutrapelia* and Cervantes' suggestion of embracing it (he actually never uses the term in the prologue) there lies a gap that may point to the author's inclination to redefine *eutrapelia* as he redefined exemplarity.

Cervantes' simultaneous appropriation of the concept of *eutrapelia* and reformulation of the idea of exemplarity ask the reader to re-examine the *eutrapelia* implied here. After all, stories like "La fuerza de la sangre" or "El coloquio de los perros," for example, will go a lot further than merely providing innocent, wholesome entertainment for the mind. Instead, they seem to challenge the mind in ways that all the serious and important activities of human life hardly could do. Given their power to possibly provoke critical thinking and engender subversive views of the world, I argue that in these *novelas* Cervantes subjects *eutrapelia* to the same epistemological shift that he used to redefine exemplarity. In doing that, he moves *eutrapelia* from the realm of the regenerative, harmless, and mostly pleasurable, to an analytical dimension in which contingency, plurality, and hermeneutic biases play a defining role. *Eutrapelia* in Cervantes' *Novelas ejemplares* ceases to be a regenerative avenue to a better rested, more deeply invigorated mind and spirit. Instead, it acquires an autonomy of its own and becomes an end in and of itself. In alignment with skeptical precepts and with an observed effort to entice the reader to suspend judgment, Cervantes informs his audience of his willingness to free exemplarity and *eutrapelia* from their centuries-long epistemic frames. In this way he acquiesces that both concepts are subject to the reader's discretionary interpretation and hence become both unpredictable and inexact. Cervantes' proleptical statement in regard to the possibility that any of his *novelas* may cause an adverse moral effect in the reader may be interpreted as a hint toward lifting *eutrapelia* from its traditional association with wholesomeness and moral propriety. Thomas Hart observes that "[*eutrapelia*] is both a temporary turning away from more serious concerns and a preparation for returning to them with renewed strength . . . thus [dissolving] the apparent opposition in the familiar Horatian doctrine that poetry should be both pleasant and morally beneficial: poetry is beneficial *because* it gives pleasure" (15-16). If one agrees that for Cervantes, entertainment, like exemplarity, is subject to personal nature and interpretation and thus linked to plurality and variation, it could be further derived from Hart's idea that literature is beneficial because it questions the nature of pleasure more than because it produces pleasure. As Cervantes' brand of exemplarity challenges and modifies exemplarity's traditional definition, so does his version of *eutrapelia* challenge the conventional interpretation of the term.

While anchoring his argument on the view that Cervantes articulates exemplarity in a purely traditional manner, Thompson comments that the *Novelas* provide a connection between the didactic element of the Horatian formula and the Christianized acceptance of amusement as spiritually and mentally necessary: "[Cervantes] was familiar with the concept of *eutrapelia*, and that . . . enabled him to reflect on the two poles of Horatian literary theory, *prodesse* and *delectare*, instruction and entertainment, with a frequency and depth rare in Golden-Age writing" (264). What Thompson does not take into consideration is that throughout the *novelas* Cervantes systematically anchors his writing in tradition only so that he can question and deconstruct these established practices and definitions. Within the world that Cervantes postulates in the *Novelas*, instruction and entertainment comprise a much more dynamic, epistemically unstable pair than

Horace's *prodesse et delectare*. With their overtly articulated epistemic anxieties Cervantes' *novelas* will challenge the very notion of instruction, entertainment, and exemplarity, as well as the readers' tools of assessing and determining these accepted concepts. Taking into consideration the recognized plurality of his readership, while some of Cervantes' stories may indeed provide "horas de recreación, donde el afligido espíritu descansa," others may do just the opposite, particularly for the reader who is neither aware nor fully capable of suspending judgment. It is precisely there that Cervantes' take on *eutrapelia* diverges from the norm. His *novelas* do not convey that entertainment, as evidenced by *morally sound* literary fiction, is not a beneficial, sanctioned activity of a virtuous citizen but they do question, despite Cervantes' dogmatic claims and forceful associations, the one-dimensional type of respite from spiritual and mental activity with which *eutrapelia* has been traditionally associated. After all, the epistemically convoluted nature of Cervantes' texts may send both mind and spirit nervously clinging for a fanciful space of stability in which what seems to *be* infallibly *is*, and in which dogma can be comfortably (albeit deceptively) perceived as a representation of *reality*. Thompson concludes: "If Cervantes disguises or hides his *ejemplos*, hints at them in apparently unimportant phrases, it is perhaps because he is inviting us to see ourselves as we are and our world as it is, and offering to undeceive us with the light touch of *eutrapelia*, an effective, entertaining and refreshing form of therapy" (281). Cervantes most likely is inviting the reader to see beyond the surface of the text, past accepted semantic conventions, and over and above traditional epistemic models. Yet it would be naïve to assume that this motion is restricted to the content and structure of his stories and not generalized to the literary and cultural precepts these texts evoke and critically engage. The "therapy" of *eutrapelia* comes embedded with the transformational power and skeptical effects of any therapy that is designed to shift perception and reassign values and views, and is far from being engaged as a light, purely recreational type of literary elixir.

To compound the problem, plurality and contingency pertaining to the reader rather than the author's altruistic and reparative intensions will determine the effect (and affect) of the reading experience. Cervantes knows that he cannot have it both ways, that is, that he cannot appreciate the variety of his readership and recognize their hermeneutic variability while also claiming the absolutely positive, invariably regenerative nature of *eutrapelia*. Therefore, the fact that he affirms the presence of an "honesto fruto" capable of providing "horas de recreación" must be perceived as an expression of irony and as a companion to the dubious, multifaceted kind of exemplarity and *eutrapelia* his texts encompass. Paradoxically, Cervantes' irony in the prologue, rather than adding a playful touch of wit, expresses the seriousness of his skeptical agenda and highlights the sobriety of the epistemic crisis the prologue and the *novelas* reflect.

Riley maintains that the classical tradition of using literature to delight and instruct is reflected in "Cervantes's definitive statement on the function of the novel . . . that imaginative literature (the writing as well as the reading of it) is a relief from work and a solace for care. By agreeably occupying the mind, literature for the time being releases it from toils and troubles" (*Theory of the No*86-7). If indeed this was Cervantes' understanding of the function of the novel, by recognizing the unpredictability involved in the readers' reception – which he evidently does – his *Novelas* may be the result of a deliberate experimentation with the tradition of "agreeably occupying the mind" and a reevaluation of the idea of an entertaining narrative. In fact, I would argue that Cervantes performed this experiment previously when he released Alonso Quijano, perhaps his archetypal reader, to the perils of the adverse effects of *eutrapelia*. In other words, Cervantes not only is aware of the contingencies associated with having a heterogeneous

readership but he is also willing to probe the fact that, under the new skeptical epistemology of Early Modernity, *eutrapelia* is also subject to the same contingency and plurality that released exemplarity from its classical, static denotation. In this light and to the extent that *eutrapelia* is here evoked as an integral element of the exemplary *novelas*, even the most forceful and eloquent defenses of the exemplarity of these texts must be seen as only partly persuasive.¹⁰ Cervantes' great advantage resides in that he was well acquainted with the demands of his institutional readers – the Church and the Crown's censors – as to be able to satisfy their demands without compromising the intellectual and artistic integrity of his output. At the same time, he reserves the right to signify by “señas,” and trusts that he will be understood by a discriminating group of careful readers.

In his assessment of Cervantes' engagement with the concept of *eutrapelia* in the *Novelas* Hart estimates that “Cervantes probably did not care greatly whether all his readers interpreted the stories in the same way or as he himself might have interpreted them” (17). Although partly correct, this conclusion implies that the author himself had a fixed, preconceived idea of the types of exemplars he intended to communicate. If indeed the *Novelas* can be seen as a laboratory in which to exercise the narrative possibilities as well as the philosophical properties of skepticism, then it is not viable to assume that Cervantes intends to posit a dogmatically message through his work. That he should be concerned with the potentially harmful effects of having any immoral, politically subversive, or religiously heretical message identified with his writing is a real and totally justified concern. That he should have abandoned the epistemic variability that a fiction based on an exploration of skepticism affords him, is difficult to fathom. Thompson remarks that “[t]he therapeutic value of literature written for times of leisure is central to the practice of Cervantes, and failure to grasp this risks misunderstanding the nature of exemplarity in his *Novelas* (264). He also reiterates that Cervantes employs a traditionally Horacian approach to *eutrapelia* in the *Novelas* and asserts that “[t]o take the concept of *eutrapelia* seriously in reading the *novelas* liberates critics from having to make an inappropriate choice between a serious or a comic reading, and enables them to reconcile the entertainment of the *novela* with the presence of exemplarity – ‘enseñar deleitando’, o ‘deleitar enseñando’” (265-266).

Recognizing the manifestation of Cervantes' skeptical tendencies and attitudes both in regard to issues of exemplarity and *eutrapelia* does not trap the reader into making a “serious or comic” reading of his fiction. On the contrary, it allows the reader to recognize the push toward a non-dogmatic system of signification in which established tradition is met with a newly invoked critical interpretative tool: skepticism. It is evident that Cervantes communicates in his prologue that his talent and intelligence have been employed toward creating *novelas* as a way of providing opportunity for recreation. It is also strongly suggested that the level or quality of recreation is in great part dictated by the reader, through the profile of her intellectual and hermeneutic abilities and her social, religious, and political biases. In asserting the originality of his *novelas* Cervantes states: “Mi ingenio las engendró, y las parió mi pluma, y van creciendo en los brazos de la estampa” (1: 52). This acknowledgement makes clear Cervantes' belief in the continuing development of a text after its conception. He reiterates this idea at the end of the prologue by recognizing that not even the Count of Lemos can protect him from the adverse opinion of critics: “[S]é que, si [el libro] no es bueno, aunque le ponga debajo de las alas del hipogrifo de Astolfo y a la sombra de la clava de Hércules, no dejarán los Zoilos, los Cínicos,

¹⁰ I refer here to Cervantes' own defense in the prologue and Fray Juan Bautista's, which comes as an endorsement before the “Prólogo al lector.” See *Novelas ejemplares* 1: 45.

los Aretinos y los Bernias de darse un filo en su vituperio, sin guardar respeto a nadie” (1: 54, original font). In regard to his *novelas* he adds: “*Tales cuales son, van allá, y yo quedo aquí*” (1: 54). Naturally, Cervantes understands that the expansion that his creation is destined to encounter will take place beyond the printed page, that is, in the minds and spirits of the reader. The way in which he articulates this partnership between author and audience – by means of establishing an almost genetic, evolutionary line – illustrates his understanding of the partial control of the author over his creation. This understanding results in the awareness that exemplarity, as an implied and constructed notion, is not solely dictated by the author who articulates it or by the exemplar itself but is the product of a dynamic exchange between creator and observer, author and reader. Similarly, the degree to which texts can serve as sources of entertainment, frustration, or preoccupation is not uniquely dependent upon the author’s perceived agenda. The crisis of exemplarity that manifests itself in the *Novelas ejemplares*, as an extension of the epistemic crisis brought about by the rediscovery and renewed engagement with Pyrrhonian skepticism, penetrates all levels of epistemology, hermeneutics, and hence, all dialogue between present and past, author and reader. The concept of *eutrapelia*, despite (or perhaps due to) its classical roots and its Thomistic vein, is not excluded from skepticism’s overpowering destabilizing influence. In a world of constantly changing individuals and shifting hermeneutic paradigms, no human fabrication can claim to be stable.

Cervantes’ “Prólogo al lector” therefore directs the careful reader into anticipating the interpretative challenges that she will face in the ensuing *novelas*. The skeptical attitude that is so evidently present in this collection is articulated in the prologue through a destabilization of traditional concepts and practices. In Cervantes’ epistemically reconfigured fictional environment, codes and measures of exemplarity absorb and reflect the acknowledged heterogeneity of his readership and the plurality and variability embedded in each pseudo-static exemplar. These newly configured cases of exemplarity also integrate the epistemic instability proposed by Pyrrhonian skepticism, which warns against affixing stagnant, meaningless labels and adhering to a culture of dogmatic, un-verifiable truths. Similarly, Cervantes extends the same procedure of epistemic destabilization to the concept of *eutrapelia* by highlighting the subjectivity involved in the concept of recreation and acknowledging, again, a multiplicity of readers and the variability of each reader’s approach to both text and personal enjoyment. By extending the same skeptical treatment to both exemplarity and *eutrapelia* Cervantes communicates, in anticipation of what will be observed in the body of many of the following texts, an interest in both engaging and reforming tradition.

It is characteristic of his intellectual depth and of his profound engagement with literary tradition that Cervantes should have chosen, in 1613, to claim to be the first to compose *novelas* in the Spanish language while, at the same time, infusing this traditionally grounded genre with the innovations that, according to Lyons, became associated with the more forward-looking novel (72).¹¹ The epistemic challenge brought about by the revival of skepticism demands a reassessment of all established conventions, whether they apply to genre, structure, or the content of a written work. The crisis of exemplarity articulated by Cervantes in his “Prólogo al lector” and in the stories it introduces constitutes one more manifestation of a persistent attempt to construct a more open standard of knowledge based on the deconstruction and reformation of old, inflexible models. Within this motion toward the decentralization of the sign and a non-

¹¹ Cervantes was surely aware that he was not the first Spanish author to write short fiction. His claim expresses a wish to assert the originality of his *novelas*, and to see them separated from the many that were adapted directly from Italian sources. See Boyd, “Introduction” 8-12.

dogmatic approach to cognition, long established concepts like exemplarity and *eutrapelia* become, in life as in literature, a matter of personal bias and individual hermeneutics. Within the fabric of Cervantes' skeptical rhetoric, the ultimate task of forging meaning rests in the minds of the readers, "cuidadosos" or "descuidados" as they may be.

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