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Editor's Note

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EDITOR'S NOTE

"All art," writes James Baldwin, "is a kind of confession, more or less oblique. All artists, if they are to survive, are forced, at least, to tell the whole story, to vomit the anguish up." Baldwin is pointing to the explosive and perhaps automatic intersection of artistic expression and the concreteness of *being*. It is not only the vicissitudes of literal survival that compels but, equally significant, it is the force of creativity itself that, in the end, refuses to be kept under wraps for too long. For some, however, the natural bursting forth of the aesthetic battles with another and newer impetus—mechanical and abstract calculation.

In a provocative and meditative slim volume, Milan Kundera reminds us, by way of invoking Edmond Husserl and Martin Heidegger, of a distinctive feature associated with the cultural world we have inhabited since the dawn of the "modern era:"¹ the ascent and subsequent dominance of scientism at the cost of a marginalization of feeling and, most of all, the pulsating roughness of existence. Scientism stresses technical and experimental knowledge that is attained as a result of mechanistic hypothesis and highly specialized investigation, with the ultimate purpose of domesticating nature.²

On the other hand, the purview of sensibility is the adventure of living itself, or, in Husserl's phrase, "*die Lebenswelt*." But if the two eminent phenomenologists were confident in their assertion of the high price of the supremacy of the scientific paradigm as bequeathed by Galileo's observations, Bacon's induction, and Descartes's indubitability, then Kundera proposes that *being* and the insights that accompany it and the perceptions grounded in the throbbing moment were never as vanquished. On the contrary, it was Miguel de Cervantes who, through his now canonic work *Don Quixote*, set up a parallel and equally powerful notion of knowing about the world and human rootedness in it.³ This is the branch of knowledge we call literature, one in which the novel is a supreme representative.⁴ Relevant to this context, one might propose a genre even older and comparatively more expressive of deep subjectivity: the poetic impulse—one that combines, among others, acute insight with sensibilities that range from beauty to compassion and sorrow. Poetry, as a sensate discourse, though displaced of its prime seat at the heart of modernist life, is not dead yet. In fact, there are societies, such as the Somalis in East Africa, in which Homeric expressiveness is still celebrated as a supreme art form—one that, at its best, combines art, beauty, and usefulness. Nonetheless, the declining

stature of poetry continues to remind us, across diverse geographies, of the collateral cultural impoverishment that comes with dominance of abstract and formulaic laws identified closely with the "Thanatos of Science," revolutionary material transformations notwithstanding.

Besides reminding us of the other and older ways of knowing, what else makes Cervantes's work so enduring? For some, such as the French historian Jules Michelet and the American writer Herman Melville, *Don Quixote* is trailblazing and profound in that it captures the story of one man's chimerical exploits to rehabilitate gallantry and magnanimity in a time of crassness and vulgarity. For Marx, "Don Quixote long ago paid for wrongly imagining that knight errantry was compatible with economic forms of society." Still for others, such as Salman Rushdie, the work is at once an early affirmation of internationalism and an indictment of the artificiality of tight borders. This angle is particularly worth considering, given our own moment in which exclusive claims and purity of identity, akin to sixteenth-century Spain, are rampant. To be sure, literature comes in many forms and packages. However, it seems that Cervantes's work, through the travails of its characters, is an example of the preciousness of literature in human culture and life. "Love," writes Octavio Paz in his essay *The Double Flame*, "doesn't save us from time; it opens it a crack, so that in a flash Love's contradictory nature is manifest: that vivacity which endlessly destroys itself and is reborn, which is always both now and never."⁵

Great literature, then, even in moments of playfulness or grim melancholy, is in one sense like great love. It does not rescue us from the ravages of the ultimate destroyer, but it has a special power to impress upon us the permanence of this dialectic: individual biological temporality and a supreme desire for eternity in *logos* or timelessness.

If an encounter with ourselves to make meaning of time has been a fundamental feature of being human, then there is hardly any other form of creative production that equals the value of literature in the making of liberal humanistic culture. This, one might wager, holds true for the English, the French, the Sudanese, the Chinese, or the Brazilians.

Finally, and rather crucially, the production of a piece of literature is not immune to the context of its birth. To the contrary, a magnificent work at once bears the imprints of its own historicity and a transcendence of that particularity. Cervantes's *Don Quixote* is simultaneously time- and location-specific and yet transhistorical. In the first sense, the work appears in an age marked by three defining issues: the demise of

chivalry, the forcible suppression and subsequent expulsion of Muslim and Jewish cultures and religions that had been constituent elements of Spanish life for nearly a millennium, and the plunderous conquest of the Americas.⁶ In the second sense, among the most translated works of literature, *Don Quixote's* influence on writers, artists, intellectuals, commerce, and politics across civilizations is incontestable.

The year 2005 marked the 400th anniversary of the publication of Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Part I (1605), and Macalester College celebrated Cervantes's universal legacy from an internationalist angle. The specific questions we identified for reflection include: What constitutes the global legacy of Cervantes's masterpiece? What characterizes a "Quixotic Offspring?" What might be its relation to the world of Art? Is there a gender question in the text?

We begin the proceedings with the daringly antinomic meditations of **Walter D. Mignolo**. His essay has a number of important objectives, but three seem to loom largest: a reading of *Don Quixote* from a perspective outside of the European historical developments; an attempt to bring out the implications of such an approach for a better understanding of the world we have inherited; and to urge us to conceive of a future shaped by "de-linking" from the incubus of "Western totalitarian epistemology."

The next conversation is triggered by **Mary S. Gossy**. Her intervention underscores the point that "Don Quixote and the text itself are inseparable." For Gossy, ways of reading and writing are inextricably tied to subjectivity, and meaning is a gateway to connecting with others as well as being understood. **Megan Thieme** examines the act of naming and the relationship between "authorship," "authority," and "paternity." She asserts that Cervantes has succeeded in transforming Spanish and Western literature. **Scott Morgensen's** response affirms Gossy's warning of the constrictions that accompany formulaic narration. Morgensen proceeds to bring together Gossy's idiom and insights from feminist and queer theories. Of special concern to Morgensen is the queer intellectual and community work in the context of an evolving one world.

The third discussion is organized around an essay by **Frederick A. de Armas**. His observations forge a link between Cervantes's vocabulary, both uttered and unspoken, so as to gauge the degree to which

Don Quixote could be construed as a “world emperor.” **Nishad Avari** agrees with the proposition that the novel is so rich that it could be read in myriad ways. One such interpretation is to see Cervantes’s kinship with Antonio Gramsci in that Cervantes also was “foregrounding...the consensual dimensions of political power rather than the coercive one.” The last contributor is **Rogelio Miñana**. His piece uses Cervantes’s insights to make cogent observations about contemporary political life in Spain. Here, the novel’s mobility as a piece of world literature for all seasons is manifest.

The 2006 Macalester International Roundtable will examine the current condition and future prospects of the United Nations Organization.

Notes

1. Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993).
2. Margaret C. Jacob, *Scientific Culture and the Making of the Industrial West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000).
3. Here, the concept of *hilaritas* in its classical meaning arises; that is, a form of thinking desire that takes advantage of the delights and challenges of being alive. An end point is to broaden purposefulness and advance the act of human becoming and capabilities.
4. For more on this point, see Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990). Pointing to the importance of language as a key to inter/intra subjectivity, Vico writes:
Humanity is the affection of one [human] helping another. This is done most effectively through speech—by counseling, warning, exhorting, consoling, reproving—and this is the reason I think that studies of languages are called ‘humanities’ [*studia humanitatas*], the more so since it is through languages that humanity is most strongly bound together.
Giambattista Vico, *De Constantia*, quoted in Michael Mooney, *Vico in the Tradition of Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 1
5. L.P. Harvey, *Muslims in Spain: 1500 to 1614* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990); and Richard Fletcher, *Moorish Spain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). It is important to note that the second part of *Don Quixote* was published in 1615, after the Muslims and Jews had been banished.