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THE INSTABILITY OF TRUTH IN MIGUEL DE CERVANTES' DON QUIXOTE

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ABSTRACT

The aim is to display Cervantes' art in posing profound philosophical questions, especially his questioning of the concept of truth and reality. Consequently, the central question is how Cervantes undermines naturalized concepts like truth and reality and as a result questions established "truths." In other words, the purpose of this study is to see how Cervantes displays the instability of accepted "truths." On a larger scale, it reveals that in the light of the poststructuralists' premises of plurality, uncertainty, and open-endedness (expounded by Barthes and Derrida, among others), Grand-narrative Truth breaks into individualized truths.

Keywords: Death of the author, Difference, Structuralism, Post-structuralism

1. INTRODUCTION

Miguel de Cervantes, the renowned seventeenth century writer, exerted notable influence on his contemporary literature and changed the course of Western literature. His writing techniques, artistic use of language, and innovations have influenced many writers after him. The present essay intends to study Cervantes' masterpiece from a Barthesian-Derridean point of view and tends to reveal the more complex aspects of Cervantes' novel, *Don Quixote*.

Unlike the structuralists, who viewed language as a disciplined, predictable structure, the post-structuralists viewed language as unstable, unpredictable, and extremely dynamic. Derrida's deconstruction views language as an amorphous and wavering "system." J. Hillis Miller, the American deconstructionist, says that "deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text, but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself. Its apparently solid ground is no rock but thin air" (1976, 341). According to Derrida, language, like all existing structures, has a center and is created of binary oppositions. He argues that Western thought, in general, is founded on the basis of thinking in terms of opposites— dichotomies like white/black, good/evil, beginning/end, presence/absence and speech/writing are all binary oppositions. These oppositions are not simply oppositions but tiny hierarchies; that is, one term is viewed as positive and superior while the other is seen as negative and inferior. This privileging of one term over the other, according to Derrida, has its roots in "logocentrism"; that is, "they are centered or grounded on a 'logos' (which in Greek signified both 'word' and 'rationality') or, as stated in a phrase he adopts from Heidegger, they rely on 'the metaphysics of presence'" (Abrams 56). Consequently, "logos"— God, reason, origin, being, essence, author, presence, and speech— forms the center of Western thought and the superior term of the binary pair gains its superiority by connecting itself to this "logos." Derrida, in his famous essay "Structure, Sign, and Play"(1966), says that

the function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure— one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure —but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the play of the structure. (352)

However, this center, which is traditionally considered the source of meaning for the elements of the structure, is itself unstable, thus making the whole structure unstable. Its instability lies in the fact that it is and, at the same time, is not a part of the structure. In the same essay, Derrida says:

As center, it is the point at which the substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible. At the center, the permutation or the transformation of elements (which may of course be structures enclosed within a structure) is forbidden. At least this permutation has always remained interdict (and I am using this word deliberately). Thus it has always been thought that the center, which is by definition

unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality. That is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it... The center is not the center. (352)

Barthes, in his *The Empire of Signs* (1982), views Japan as a text which has been decentered. Comparing Japan to a text, he says:

The entire city turns around a site both forbidden and indifferent, a residence concealed beneath foliage, protected by moats, inhabited by an emperor who is never seen, which is to say, literally, by no one knows who. Daily, in their rapid, energetic, bullet-like trajectories, the taxis avoid this circle, whose low crest, the visible form of invisibility, hides the sacred 'nothing'. (30-2)

Japan, to Barthes, is like a text in which the signs are not limited and stabilized by the center. Japan is the kingdom of writing where the signs are free from the tyrannical system of meaning which has infested the West. Through this analogy, post-structuralists like Barthes mention that "texts are decentered, lacking in specific structure...Logocentric, subject-centered texts are a fallacy of the *metaphysics of presence*, whereby 'authors and readers believe that real subjects can be found in the real world and then relocated in texts'" (Dotter 25). This is how he expresses his post-structural view about the decentered text. Therefore, according to post-structuralists, language, as a system, is unstable and words do not have a stable meaning. According to J. Hillis Miller, "any literary text, as a ceaseless play of 'irreconcilable' and 'contradictory' meanings, is 'indeterminable' and 'undecidable'; hence, that 'all reading is necessarily misreading'" (Abrams 60). Words fail to deliver fixed meanings and solid truths. Language is both multiple and specific. It has its roots in schisms and oppositions among its elements. The binary oppositions, according to Derrida, display this instability in language and philosophy. In binary oppositions, each term of the opposition, Derrida says, gains its meaning from the other. Thus, each term of the opposition is a part of the other, and as a result, no clear-cut boundary exists between these terms.

2. DISCUSSION

The basic binary opposition in Derridean philosophy is presence vs. absence. Sheri M. Weinstein, in her thesis "Heavy with the Unspoken": the Interplay of Absence and Presence in Margate Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1995), says that, "language takes the form of absence and presence. These forms do not oppose one another, but occur as displaceable and exchangeable conditions for communication. The relationship of presence to absence is ultimately one of mutuality, not polarity. The two states do not contrast one another, but rather fulfill, negate and engender one another, often simultaneously" (3). Consequently, each term of the opposition can be inherent within the other. When defining the word "presence," we have to contrast it with its opposite in order to make its meaning "graspable." Terry Eagleton, in his *Literary Theory* (1996), says that

Since the meaning of a sign is a matter of what the sign is not, its meaning is always in some sense absent from it too. Meaning, if you like, is scattered or dispersed along the whole chain of signifiers: it cannot be easily nailed down, it is never fully present in anyone sign alone, but is rather a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence together. (111)

Every word in language— including binary oppositions —has the trace of other words in it because "for the words to compose some relatively coherent meaning at all, each one of them must, so to speak, contain the trace of the ones which have gone before, and hold itself open to the trace of those which are coming after" (111). As such, the meaning of a word is never wholly present in it, its meaning having roots in other words forming its context. This "flickering" play of presence and absence in language is what Derrida calls "difference." Concerning "difference," in *Margins of Philosophy* (1982), he says

It is because of différance that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called 'present' element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element, this trace being related no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and constituting what is called the present by means of this relation to what it is not: what it absolutely is not, not even to a past or a future as a modified present. An interval must separate the present from what it is not, in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present, that is, in our metaphysical language, every being, and singularly the substance or the subject. (13)

Language being the basic component of literature and literary language being a function of language, the text of literary works exhibit this play of absence and presence throughout their structure. The 'death of the author' in *Don Quixote* implies the author's absence and, thus, echoes Derridean deconstruction of binary oppositions. In Derridean deconstruction the two terms in a binary opposition are not two distant poles. They, by replacing each other, display a mutual relationship rather than a polar one. Hence, the binary pairs come hand-in-hand and exist simultaneously. The two states do not oppose one another; instead they engender each other. In Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, the presence of the author is equal to his absence. That is, his presence engenders absence; the line dividing absence from presence has been erased. We notice that the story is written in the third person omniscient point of view and as such the author's presence is felt throughout the novel; the author keeps on interfering and commenting on the characters and events. His voice is heard everywhere in the novel. However, this presence has a strong sense of absence in itself in that the identity of the author of the work is lost. The narrator being a spectral figure, the reader is not able to attribute the narrator's voice to a specific person. Consequently, the narrator can be anyone— Cervantes, Benengeli, the Moorish translator or someone else. This sense of absence is dispersed throughout the novel.

The structure of Cervantes' novel displays the play of absence/presence artistically. In his novel, Cervantes alludes to different texts like *Amadis of Gaul* by Garcia Rodriguez de Montalvo, *Palmerin of England* by Francisco de Moraes Cabral, *Orlando Furioso* by Ludvico Ariosto as well as many ballads and poems, making his novel a textual mosaic. He inserts into his work passages from different literary works. In one instance, he inserts a whole story called "A Story of Ill-advised Curiosity" in the first part of the novel which forms the contents of chapters XXXIII, XXXIV, and XXXV. These texts form a part of the novel but at the same time are not parts of it. They are, in a sense, a "supplement," to use Derrida's term. Thus, they are at once present and absent in the text. Nicholas Royle says that "a supplement is at once what is added on to something in order further to enrich it *and* what is added on as a mere 'extra' (from the Latin word for 'outside')" (48). Further, he says that, "the supplement entails a kind of crazy logic: it is neither inside nor outside, and/or both inside and outside at the same time. It forms part without being part, belongs without belonging" (49). Derrida, in *Of Grammatology* (1976), says that, "the supplement is neither a presence nor an absence. No ontology can think its operation" (314).

Another aspect of the novel which displays the play of presence and absence is the complicated structure of the levels of fiction in *Don Quixote*. These levels of fiction help question the notion of reality by transforming reality (presence) into fiction (absence). Cervantes, when he claims that he is recounting a history from a manuscript he found and bought in the marketplace, becomes a character in the novel. In fact, in the fourth chapter of *Part I*, the priest, who is a friend of Don Quixote, along with the barber, Don Quixote's niece and the housekeeper, while gathering Don Quixote's books in order to decide which one of them deserves to be burned, finds a book with the title *The Galatea* written by Miguel de Cervantes. Noticing the name of the author, the priest says: "That Cervantes has been for many years a great friend of mine ..." (Cervantes 53). In other instances, he enters his novel "as the soldier 'something Saavedra' whom the Captive knew in Algiers; and we are also indirectly reminded of him as the author of the *Curiosoimpertinente*, *Rinconete y Cortadillo*, and *Numancia*" (Riley 131). Thus, the border between reality and fiction being violated, we have Cervantes, the character and Cervantes, the author. What is real to Don Quixote is illusion to the other characters. However, that which is real to the characters is fiction to Cervantes (character). Therefore, what is real and "present" to Don Quixote and the other characters is fiction and "absent" to Cervantes (character). To Cervantes (character), Don Quixote, Sancho, and the other characters belong to the world of the manuscript written by Benengeli, which he bought in the marketplace while his level is the level of the real world. But further we see that the world in which Cervantes (character) lives and considers as real and "present" becomes fiction and "absent" on Cervantes' (author) level whose book we have in our hands. Cervantes, thus, creates a world which "is deliberately fragmented in multiple perspectives, or presented as an enigma that permits divergent interpretations, or assimilated to the subjective flow of individual consciousness" (Close 248). By playing such a game of presence and absence, Cervantes displays the instable nature of notions such as presence, absence, and reality. These are notions which owe their significance to their opposing pairs. He "play[s] with such fictions of authenticity, teasing the readers with layers of source materials until all narrative is called in doubt" (Welsh 82). Thus, he shows that truth is made rather than found. This "play"— which shows the instability of "truth" as a traditionally believed stable, eternal concept —displays the "complex relations between fiction and life— the way life produces fictions and these fictions, then, revert to life, brightening it, changing it, giving it colour, adventure, emotion, laughter, passion, and surprises" (Llosa 66). This instability has its roots in language. Because language is absent, the events that occur in the realm of language inherit this game of absence and presence. In *Don Quixote*, "reality is a point of convergence of innumerable points of view. Consequently, the narrator [and/or the author] opts for self-effacement, adopting a non-judgmental complicity with the impressions and perceptions of the characters" (Close 248).

On the level of characters, the novel displays a number of binary oppositions— wisdom vs. madness, truth vs. fantasy. Don Quixote, as the principle character, represents the absence of wisdom. After reading chivalric romances, he becomes obsessed with the world of knights, dames, and demons and loses his senses. He believes that the chivalric romances are "true" histories and that its chivalrous characters did exist in the past. To him Amadis

of Gaul, Orlando, and Lancelot are “real” historical characters. Thus, what is believed to be fantasy and fiction by others is considered to be “true” and “real” by Don Quixote. Things that are fantastic and, hence, absent are, to Don Quixote, real and present. Under the influence of illusion—the nature of which implies absence—he sees things which others do not notice. To him the windmills are giants; the herd of sheep is an army; Aldonza Lorenzo, the village girl is Dulcinea the princess. His thirst for the unreal is actually his wish for the absent.

The world, according to Don Quixote, lacks the chivalric order which was once the defender of faith, honour, and the weak. The chivalric ideals, which were once sacred and meaningful, have turned into absurd illusions of the past generations and writers. This lack of meaning is an absence which Don Quixote is trying to transform into presence through illusion. But this presence which he is questing for is only another form of absence. All his visions are illusory and schizophrenic and, thus, mere absence, absence being their “nature.” However, Don Quixote is not a totally crazy character. In fact, it is hard to call him a mad person. At times he acts and speaks so wisely and eloquently that he makes his listeners doubt their own judgment in considering him mad. In the second part of *Don Quixote*, Don Diego, noticing Don Quixote’s strange attire, considers him to be a crazy old man. But after listening to Don Quixote’s eloquent speech on poetry, he “was filled with astonishment... so much so that he began to abandon his suspicion that the speaker was crazy” (Cervantes 510). As such, “the opinion he formed was that he was a man of good sense who had gone mad, and a madman on the verge of rationality” (517). Don Diego’s son, Don Lorenzo, after talking to Don Quixote concludes that “his is a madness, streaked with lucid intervals” (522). Thus, Don Quixote is neither mad nor wise and as such, he represents both. We notice that “on the one hand they [Don Juan and Don Jeronimo] regarded him as a sensible man, and on the other he seemed to them a madman, and they could not make up their minds where between wisdom and folly they ought to place him” (754). In him, madness and wisdom do not oppose each other as much as they transform into one another; the line making a clear distinction between madness and wisdom is blurred in him.

The other character which represents absence is Don Quixote’s beloved, Dulcinea. This character is absent throughout the novel and the readers never happen to “see” her in it. All of Don Quixote’s actions are directed towards disenchanting her and gaining her favour and love. She is Don Quixote’s goal and ambition. But all the characters and the readers know that she is a creation of Don Quixote’s schizophrenic thoughts. No one occupies her place in the novel and thus she is “absent.” But her absence is presence in two ways: From one angle, she is real to Don Quixote and thus “present” to him; she is not an illusory character to him. She gives his adventures meaning and significance because it is for her sake that he performs his “chivalric” expeditions and errands. From another angle, it is her absence which has a sense of presence in the novel. Her absence is itself a presence in the sense that everywhere in the novel the reader sees her as Don Quixote’s motivation. Every adventure in which Don Quixote gets involved, reminds the reader that Dulcinea is the main cause of it. Thus, her absent footprints and her shadow can be noticed in all the “nook and corners” of the novel.

Dulcinea’s absent presence is also shared by another character—the enchanter. From Don Quixote’s return from the first sally and the burning of his books of chivalry, the idea of the enchanter comes into existence. After burning the books, the barber, the priest, the housekeeper and Don Quixote’s niece tell him that an enchanter named Sage Munaton, “came on a cloud one night” and “dismounted from a serpent that he rode” and through magic took away the room and the books with him (Cervantes 56). Whatever (illusory) adventures happen to Don Quixote, this Sage Munaton is considered to be the cause of it, an enchanter who is absent throughout the novel. When Sancho and Don Quixote go to La Mancha to meet Dulcinea, but find her to be “transformed” into an ugly “wench,” Don Quixote concludes that she has been enchanted by the Sage, who has a grudge against him. However, this magician, like Dulcinea, is never seen in the novel. He too, like Dulcinea, declares his presence through his absence. Although he is absent and actually does not exist, it is Don Quixote’s imagination that brings him into existence and, thus, makes him present.

Another event which brings in the play of absence and presence in the novel is the phenomenon of acting or role playing. Throughout the novel we have various instances of role playing. In *Part I*, the inn-keeper plays the role of the knight of the castle (inn) to dub Don Quixote a knight; the priest and the barber along with Dorotea, Cardenio, Don Fernando, and Lucinda carry out a play in order to persuade Don Quixote and take him back to his village; Don Quixote, in the valley of Sierra Morena, imitates Orlando to show his love to the absent Dulcinea. In *Part II*, SansónCarasco plays the role of the “bold Knight of Mirrors” to disillusion Don Quixote and bring him back home; the Duke and the Duchess organize a series of amusing plays in order to trick Don Quixote and entertain themselves. Thus, we see that acting or role playing exists throughout the novel. A notable point about role playing is its link with crisis of identity.

In a role play, a person plays the role of a character that, in many instances, does not correspond his personality and character. In a sense, he *is* what he *is not* and he *is not* what he *is*. In Robert Bresson’s *Notes on the Cinematographer* (1997), we see the following lines quoting an actor: “The actor: ‘It’s not me you are seeing and hearing, it’s the other man’. But being unable to be wholly *the other*, he is not that other” (54). Thus, he is present and

absent at the same time; his presence becomes a kind of absence and his absence is his presence. This state refers to a crisis of identity—a state in which the character cannot/does not differentiate between what he *is* and what he *is not*.

Traditionally, man was thought to have a single, “true,” stable self. But this notion of a stable self was questioned by the postmodern and post-structural writers. They claimed that human beings have numerous “selves” none of which can be called stable and “what might be called postmodern identity is an extension of the freely chosen and multiple identities of the modern self which accepts and affirms an unstable and rapidly mutating condition” (Kellner 247). None of these identities can be called “real.” The technical term would be Laurel Richardson’s “crystallized self.” In their co-authored book, *Fracturing the Real-Self-Fake-Self Dichotomy: Moving Toward Crystallized Organizational Identities* (2005), Tracy and Tretheway mention that,

The crystallized self is neither real nor fake....The crystallized self is multidimensional; the more facets, the more beautiful and complex. Certain crystals may feel solid, stable, and fixed. But just as crystals have differing forms, depending upon whether they grow rapidly or slowly, under constant or fluctuating conditions, or from highly variable or remarkably uniform fluids or glass, crystallized selves have different shapes depending on the various discourses through which they are constructed. (186)

Therefore, when the characters get involved in a role play they display a self which is only a mask put on for a specific period and a specific purpose. Don Quixote, dissatisfied with his present “real” role of a country gentleman, Alonso Quixana, takes up the role of a knight called Don Quixote. He is desperately looking for an identity which would bring him honour and dignity. The corrupt world in which he lives seems to him an abominable world where honour, true (Platonic) love, courage, loyalty, virtue, chastity and humane ethics and morals seem to have lost their former value. In such a world, Don Quixote feels alienated. His present character and personality which has its roots in the present corrupt world do not satisfy him. Therefore, he looks for a new self which might breathe in him the former honourable values and make him alive in a time when all are “dead.” He finds these morals in the chivalric romances which claim to portray the ideal, dignified world of the past and, hence, desires to be a knight. He is aware that he is not a knight and therefore asks the innkeeper to dub him a knight. His previous “real life role” as a country gentleman becomes meaningless to him while the role that he adopts does not belong to him. As a result, like the actor, he becomes an empty space not knowing who he really is. He becomes an actor on a stage which encompasses the whole world. John L. Styan, in his *Drama, Stage and Audience* (1975), says that “...either in tragedy, or in farce, the actor immersed in its spirits, stands outside his role, while seeming to believe utterly in its reality” (83). In this situation he personifies absence—he *is* what he *is not* and he *is not* what he *is*. Don Quixote was an impoverished nobleman; then became a knight and then a mad lover in the valley of Sierra Morena. He exhibits different “selves” in different parts of the novel becoming an absent space of fluctuating personalities. It shows his desire for a new self and, at the same time, his inability to attain that desired self. This play of personality puts on stage the play of absence and presence and Don Quixote’s identity crisis.

3. CONCLUSION

All of the abovementioned elements refer to the play of absence and presence in the different layers of Cervantes’ novel. This play of absence and presence denies the author’s authoritative presence and his traditional role of being the source of his work and, as a result, denies the existence of an “ultimate truth.” Truth, according to Cervantes, seems to be an ideological product shaped by human societies, and not something “natural” with an unalterable essence. It is a relative concept which is seen and interpreted in a unique way by every individual.

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