

# Crazy Idealism or Idealism in a Crazy World - The case of Cervantes' The Adventures of Don Quixote

by Max awson

The Adventures of Don Quixote was written in two parts: the first part published in December 1604 or January 1605 and the second part was not published till 1615 - not long before Cervantes' death.

Not only is The Adventures of Don Quixote considered the first novel but is often considered the greatest comic novel.

At the simple plot level it is a series of adventures and episodes involving the delusions of the madman Don Quixote and his so-called squire "The rustic" Sancho Panza. The second part of the novel is more serious with Don Quixote becoming more lucid and Sancho Panza becoming as mad as his master.

Don Quixote became mad by reading himself into insanity immersing himself in his veritable library of books about chivalry and knight-errantry. Part of the ironic drollery of the novel is that Don Quixote and Sancho Panza are "absurdly unsuited for their roles"<sup>(1)</sup> - in fact in the romances, books on chivalry, knights-errants were always rich young men of high birth and their squires of similar background were serving their apprenticeship before coming knights-errant themselves. <sup>2</sup> Unlike the models in the romances, Don Quixote, with his broken down Rosinane, his horse, and his patch-work thread-bare armour and the pot-bellied Sancho Panza riding on his ass are

<sup>1</sup>) John Rutherford in his introduction to Cervantes The Adventures of Don Quixote (London: Penguin books, 2003), p. ix.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

parodies of the chivalric tradition. The fun of the novel is all, the absurd situations the decrepit pair get into - the famous, indeed archtypal episode being that of tilting at windmills, thinking them enemies.

Although the story line of The Adventures of Don Quixote is simple - almost a thousand pages of the deluded adventures of Don Quixote - there are interpretations of the meaning of the novel that are complex.

As well as a standard interpretation of the novel being a comic masterpiece at least two other interpretations vie for our attention.

The novelist Vladimir Nabokov, in his lectures on the novel at Harvard took the view that The Adventures of Don Quixote remains "a crude old book full of peculiarly Spanish cruelty that baits an old man, Don Quixote, in his dotage. It was written in an age when dwarfs and the afflicted were laughed at.... where dissenters from official thought were ,burned alive in city squares to general applause." <sup>3</sup>

You will recall the first part of The Adventures of Don Quixote was written in the first decade of the Seventeenth Century, the same first decade as Shakespeare was writing his great dark tragedies In this late Elizabethan world, hanging, drawing and quartering were still public spectacles.

To give one example of "the cruelty thesis" of the novel; in chapter 60 (Part 2 of the novel) Sancho

<sup>3</sup>) Guy Davenport forward to Vladimir Nabokov, Lectures on Don Quixote.(New York: Harcourt Brace, 1983) p. xviii.

is frightened saying to Don Quixote that the trees around them are full of human feet and legs. Don Quixote felt them, and immediately realised what the cause might be and said: "There's no need to be afraid of these legs and feet and you cannot see must belong to outlaws and bandits who have been hanged from these trees. In these parts the authorities hang them twenty or thirty at a time when they catch them, from which I deduce that we must be near Barcelona." <sup>4</sup> Thus far from being horrified, Don Quixote is calmly reassured that they are not far from their destination of Barcelona.

While acknowledging the truth of much of the views of the novel is a study in Spanish cruelty or that of a great comic novel, I am still drawn to the views of the novel (seen in its most romantic and sentimentalised form in the musical, The Man of La Mancha), The Adventures of Don Quixote is a study of the fate of an idealist in a crazy world.

Don Quixote himself claimed, "I am not a madman trying to make people believe me sire, I am merely trying to make the world understand the delusion under which it labours in not renewing within itself those most happy days when the order of knight-errantry carried all before it." <sup>5</sup>

Don Quixote is not modest as he tells an enquirer about his mission.

I decided to revive the extinct order of knight-errantry and for sometime now stumbling here, falling there, crashing headlong in one place, climbing back to my feet in another, I have in large measure been fulfilling my desires,

<sup>4</sup> Cervantes, The Adventures of Don Quixote (Penguin Edition), p. 893.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 493.

succouring widows, rescuing maidens, protecting widows, orphans and wards, the true, proper and natural occupation of knights-errants.<sup>6</sup>

Here we see the rational side of Don Quixote, who, while acknowledging all his mishaps, justifies his mission as a knight-errant. As one of Don Quixote's observers astutely remarks: "he is mad in streaks complete with lucid intervals."<sup>7</sup>

while Don Quixote believes he is often tormented by "malignant enchanterers" who lead him into many illusions and delusions ending in various disasters, (hence the cruelty behind the comedy thesis) nevertheless Don Quixote's idealisms results in much good. he Adventures of Don Quixote can be seen as a study in "the hazy dividing line between madness and sanity."<sup>8</sup> Indeed the background world of the novel is often seen as crazy itself.

In modern times the radical psychiatrist R. D. Laing has argued, particularly in The Politics of Experience (1967) that it' is not people who are mad but the world. Laing believed that mental illness was a sane response to an insane world and that a psychiatrist had a duty to communicate empathetically with patients,

Today the general appraisal of Laing's views within psychiatry is that they are the product of a wild utopian, romantic imagination - interesting

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 584.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 604.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. xii.

as museum artefacts but of no contemporary relevance.<sup>9</sup>

Laing could be defended as still relevant because the world is still crazy.

What is admirable about the character of Don Quixote, even if he was crazy, he was an idealist who acted on his beliefs.

Edmund Burke wrote in Reflections on the French Revolution: "the only thing necessary for evil to prosper is for good persons to do nothing."

To give but one graphic example German opposition to Hitler was notoriously weak<sup>10</sup> becoming almost non-existent under a developing Reign of Terror

In Germany, although Hitler's party became the largest single party it never achieved an absolute majority. Conservative political groups helped him over the line were convinced they could control the erratic Hitler who of course ended up controlling the conservatives. Does this sound like the current world of a foreign executive we know today?

In a crazy world, like in the dying days of the Weimar Republic, failure to act brings even further disaster.

Don Quixote was right in his idealism - in the words of Bertrand Russell, "one can always do

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Barston, The Wings of Madness: the Life and work of R. D. Laing, quoted in Elizabeth Day and Graham Keeley "My father, R.D. Laing: " he solved other people's problems but not his own"; The Guardian, Sunday 1st June 2018.

<sup>10</sup> John A. Moses, "Bonhoeffer's Germany: The Political Context" in John W De Gruchy The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999), p. 5.

something to help alleviate the awful sum of human misery".

As a member of Amnesty International (although no longer a member of a local activist group) when I was involved in letter writing it was easy to get disheartened when no responses came, but every now and again there was good news and Amnesty Newsletters often told documented stories of how much pressure saved people from execution.

One can always do something. For all its fun and jokes, The Adventures of Don Quixote to my mind is a disturbing book, the story of an idealist who acted, whom a crazy world thought crazy.