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Journal

Mester, 25(1)

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Publication Date

1996

DOI

10.5070/M3251014468

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Glass Characters and Glass Fictions: The Poetics of “El curioso impertinente” and “El Licenciado Vidriera.”

Abundant criticism has dealt with various aspects of “El curioso impertinente” and “El Licenciado Vidriera.” Yet much remains to be said about the relation between their narrative technique and their thematic content. In particular critics seem noticeably uninterested in the use of *vidrio*—glass— as poetic image. In this paper, then, I will point to the glass motif as the key to unlock hidden narrative dimensions in the two novellas. For I read the *vidrio* metaphor not only as a symbol of the fragility of the characters—Camila, Lotario, Anselmo, and Tomás—but also as a powerfully revealing image of the fragility of fiction, the medium used to fashion the stories themselves.

In a suggestive article on *Don Quixote*, Mary Gaylord speaks of the “close connection” between the language of literary discussions and the context—place and scenery—that the action of the novel provides for them (365). For instance, the practically futile debate on *decorum* and neo-Aristotelian verisimilitude towards the end of Part I images the futile attempt to convince Don Quixote to return home with terms of social *decorum*: *salida / locura* versus *regreso / cordura*. This example illustrates what she calls the “conflictive posture” of Cervantes in his supposed role of parodying the unruliness of Don Quixote’s imagination, and of imposing laws on imagination in general by means of

certain literary precepts (368). Just as Gaylord uses the term “poética del espacio,” then, we could think of a “poética del vidrio,” which the author employed in “El curioso impertinente” and in “El Licenciado Vidriera.”

Significantly, the two stories were composed very close in time, in 1604,¹ and they both thematize people who are made out of glass, be it literal or figurative. In each instance also the case is not entirely an invention of the author, but a rhetorical imitation of material accessible in the period. Thus, the famous verse by Lotario regarding Camila,

Es de vidrio la mujer;
 pero no se ha de probar
 si se puede o no quebrar,
 porque todo podría ser.
 Y es más fácil el quebrarse,
 y no es cordura ponerse
 a peligro de romperse
 lo que no puede soldarse. (DQ, 335)

actually comes from a popular proverb in Spain —*es de vidrio la mujer*— which can be found as early as in Núñez de Guzman’s collection of 1553 (Burke 63). In addition, Avalue-Arce points to the influence of the “dos amigos” theme recurrent in previous European literature, and of Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* (163-235). In the latter, a magical wine goblet has the virtue of testing a wife’s fidelity: if it breaks in the hands of the husband, then his wife has been unfaithful (Murillo 103).

In the case of *El Licenciado*, his particular form of madness was not unheard of at the time. Cesare Segre’s study points to at least four

documented cases of people who thought they were glass vessels, or whose feet or other parts of their bodies had turned into glass (59). The chronicles of that period, furthermore, contain the famous story of Charles VI of France, who went mad in 1392, and of whom it is written: *Existimabat nonnunquam se vitreum esse, nec tangi patiebatur. Virgas ferreas vestimentis inserebat multisque modis sese armabat ne, cadens, frangeretur.*² How should we understand then Cervantes's selection of this theme? Was he just trying to appeal to images that would attract and entertain an audience? That explanation is plausible, if we consider the context of Spain's Golden Age literature, where authors like Lope de Vega would compose entire plays around a popular medieval romance verse, like the one in *El caballero de Olmedo*: "*Puesto ya el pie en el estribo.*" Lope in fact would recommend this approach to playwrights in his *Arte Nuevo* of 1609. So it makes sense to find the *vidrio* motif at the imaginative source of these stories.

On the other hand, at a deeper level, the question ought to deal not so much with the different receptions — i.e. *es de vidrio la mujer*, a magical wine goblet, a peculiar form of insanity — as with what exactly the poet saw in the image of *vidrio* that seized his imagination, and what he did with it that may be considered original. Critics such as Avalle-Arce or Murillo are led to think that Cervantes was deliberately untraditional when imitating the subject of the "historia de los dos amigos" in "El curioso impertinente," because from the beginning Anselmo's obsession threatens and then obliterates that category of "dos amigos." I think a similar case could be made that Cervantes's use of *vidrio* reaches beyond a traditional symbolism of moral or psychological fragility — that of "someone made out of glass" — and applies to the very medium that shapes the stories. For there is a certain fragility in these fictions

such that in one, "El curioso impertinente," the end comes more to shatter than to consummate the action that had developed from the beginning; and in the other, "El Licenciado Vidriera," the entire plot seems to fragment before our eyes into a puzzling series of incidents. This "shattering," in turn, calls into question the ideal of the unity of the work based on ancient theory prevalent at the time. Specifically, neither the *peripeteia* or *anagnorisis* (reversal, recognition) proper to the Aristotelian tragic plot seem to conform to the endings of "El curioso impertinente" and "El Licenciado Vidriera." Both stories, it could be argued, lack the Greek element of fate that drives an action to its tragic end, because the deaths of Camila, Anselmo, Lotario or Tomás, though tragic, keep little proportion to the rest of the story. Besides, the characters and situations of Cervantes are certainly not the expected "larger-than-life" paradigms proper to tragedy, but, if anything, the low types of comedies.

In a book attuned to recent criticism, *Through the Shattering Glass: Cervantes and the Self-Made World*, Spadaccini and Talens claim that Cervantes's continuous transgression of the limits of traditional genres constitutes "an epistemological project" (171). Namely, the real world exists only as a construction, a text, shaped by the conventions of perception and interpretation (168). Cervantes's literature, then, does not double the world—as a mirror would, in the classical understanding—but it re-constructs fragments or perceptions of it into a new construction. The "classical mirror" thus turns into a "shattered glass" mirror, to follow the analogy. In practice, the process represents a displacement from the traditional concern with content and sources towards "the problem of the medium" (Intro. xv). *Don Quixote*, several *entremeses*, and Cervantes's poetry provide instances of that

metadiscursive quality, which undermines the rational principle of unity imposed by Aristotelian poetics. This thesis, which they consider applicable to "Cervantes's entire discursive production" (171), will prove particularly appropriate to the present study of the *vidrio* image. For though I do not intend to establish an "epistemological project," I do find enough evidence to speak about a poetics of "glass" in Cervantes based on his departure from the traditional understanding of Aristotle and of classical poetics. In consequence, taking the stories separately, I will pursue issues related to fragility and fractures, interpolation and interruptions, and the breach of *decorum* with the resulting interferences of life and literature.

Contemporary critics of Cervantes supposedly questioned the integrity of his narrative technique on the grounds that "El curioso impertinente" was unrelated to the rest of *Don Quixote*. Modern critics, however, agree that the novella's interpolated character is no coincidence, or in any case not an artistic flaw. Francisco Ayala, Juan Bautista Avalle-Arce, Ruth El Saffar and Luis A. Murillo hold this general view. Yet it soon becomes problematic for anyone to explain Cervantes's innovative style of interpolation.

Ayala's starting point will help to illustrate what I think is at stake; namely, how adequate is a reading of "El curioso impertinente" that isolates it from the rest of *Don Quixote*? As we will see, a prevalent approach in modern criticism has been to debate in favor of the pertinence of the short story, which is ultimately an attempt to rescue its *decorum* and that of *Don Quixote*, especially in regard to their internal

unity, versus a certain fragmentation or fragility. By contrast, Ayala remains on the margin of that debate, and although he accepts that the story of Anselmo bears some significance to the story of Don Quixote, he settles for reading the novella solely “como unidad autónoma” (146). However, he bases his reading on the famous passage by the narrator of *Don Quixote* Part II: “la gala y artificio que en sí contienen [las novelas] . . . se mostrará bien al descubierto cuando *por sí solas* . . . salieren a la luz” (emphasis added; *DQ* II, XLIV, 877). There, responding to a particular accusation of them being unrelated, the narrator explains that Cide Hamete was simply bored of writing about the same character without interruption—“era un trabajo incomportable”—and avoided it by inserting some connected and unconnected tales (877). Ayala, therefore, extrapolates from this passage a mere Baroque taste for thematizing fictions within fiction, and makes no further reference to the issue of pertinence, interpolation or insertion. Rather, he goes on to compare “El curioso impertinente” to subsequent adaptations in Golden Age drama, notably to a *comedia* by Guillen de Castro with the same title. Cervantes’s genius is only then considered by contrast to the works of lesser quality it inspired.

To my mind, Ayala misses the irony of those lines in Part II. For, rather than a serious justification of interpolated tales, they reveal just how humorously and subtly Cervantes dealt with his critics. As I read it, the narrator himself imitates the voice of a critic, and answers the charge of lack of artistic seriousness with an even less serious argument: boredom. Paraphrasing, the passage states that Cide Hamete is said to have become frankly tired of *Don Quixote*, and that is why he distracted himself with a few short stories in Part I. Thus, instead of defending the integrity of the story, this narrator further attacks it, reassuring the

reader—now thoroughly confused, though amused—that the historian did not employ “useless” digressions in Part II. Yet from the very first sentence ambivalent terms undermine the credibility of this narrator / critic: “Dicen que en el propio original desta historia se lee que . . .” (877). As he had done in the preface, Cervantes once more appears to mock literary critics, this time in their task of speculating based upon insufficient evidence.

In short, though Ayala seems to have fallen into the trap laid by the narrator of Part II—i.e. entirely disregarding the context of *Don Quixote*—he raises a crucial question: to what degree should one read this novella “por sí sola,” and how? I propose a reading of the story which is both disengaged from its frame yet mindful of one of the most salient aspects of its interpolated character: the peculiar double ending that results from the interruption of the wine-skins episode at Palomeque’s inn. In other words, I want to consider the impact of that interruption on “El curioso impertinente,” rather than on *Don Quixote*.

A good way to understand this question would be to consider what happens when it is ignored. In the case of El Saffar, Murillo and Avalor-Arce, the prevailing intention becomes that of establishing the pertinence of the story to the larger plot of *Don Quixote*. For example, El Saffar’s interest in triangular love relationships that become “four-somes” in Part I leads her to see the story of Anselmo, Camila, and Lotario, with the destructive intrusion of Leonela, closely related to that of Cardenio / Dorotea and Fernando / Luscinda, which in turn ends harmoniously (66-80). In Murillo and Avalor-Arce the focus remains on the moral comparison Anselmo / Quixote, to the point of considering it the key to understand the deepest recesses of Don Quixote’s character. Thus, while discussing the story’s interrupted end, Murillo sees in

it "the moment" (107) to reflect and compare Don Quixote's benign madness to Anselmo's obsessive and selfish one. The ensuing anagnorisis and death of Anselmo constitutes, according to Murillo,

. . . the most obvious parallel between Anselmo and Quixote as protagonists of their respective 'exemplary novels.' Quixote's error is that he believes he is a real knight. When he recovers his sanity at the end of Part II, he confesses his error and the admission is tantamount to dying. (107)

Avalle-Arce deals at greater length but from a similar perspective with this interrupted versus real ending. For him the interruption serves to show how Don Quixote is victim of an illusion created by Dorotea, the Queen Micomicona, just as Anselmo is victim of Camila's illusion, or fiction (138). Moreover, the interruption emphasizes a twofold level of destruction: the moral one, achieved upon completely deceiving Anselmo, and then physical death as a result following the wine-skins episode. Avalle-Arce compares that last reversal of fortune to a "quick hand movement," *ademán* of the author (139), with which he makes his fictional world suddenly disappear. The outcome is perfectly explicable, however, and at a later point he states that it is the new "twist" given from the beginning to the traditional "historia de los dos amigos" that accounts for its tragic end (189). In fact, he claims that all the major incidents —adultery, the ensuing "truth and lies game," and final tragedy— constitute a significant departure from the "dos amigos" theme, traceable in several stories since the XII century, including those of Boccaccio, Lope de Vega, and even in *La Galatea*.

While these two assessments are sharp, intelligent and most pertinent, one cannot but wonder why there remains an unresolved conflict in them. On the one hand, the plot is seen as a tight unity where the end follows necessarily from the beginning. Murillo points out that "the outcome seems inevitable . . . the narrator's strategy is to bring his themes to their consummation with Anselmo's discovery of the truth" (106). So the final destruction is inevitable, even predictable. On the other hand, the action keeps swinging from one extreme to the other, from tragic reversal to comic outcomes, in a "juego de rebote entre verdad y mentira," as Avalle-Arce says, which culminates in the comic scene at Camila's bedroom as a "colosal fraude léxico, ideológico y vital," where words such as "'fama,' 'honra,' 'crédito,' 'lealtad,' etc., encubren sus antónimos" (137). Nevertheless, one might argue, while constant bouncing or reversal of the action and its predictability could be compatible—if one subscribes to that predictability—, it is not clear at all how Cervantes sought to culminate his themes in such an anticlimatic fashion: namely, with a distracting interlude in between a double end. Avalle-Arce's and Murillo's explanation that we are to reflect on the moral destruction brought about by Anselmo, or to recognize both Anselmo and Quixote as victims of someone else's fiction, is just not the impression we form when we are told that Anselmo was left "el hombre más sabrosamente engañado que pudo haber en el mundo" (*DQ I*, XXXIV, 316).

On the contrary, in those words there is a strong sense of the triumph, power, and even the beauty of fiction. It is worth repeating, for the text does not say "trágicamente" or "desgraciadamente," but "sabrosamente engañado." Though fully aware that he has just become—again—an actor for Camila's sly production, and most decidedly a

cuckold, we somehow do not feel much pity for him as victim, at least for the moment; nor do we feel horror for the moral destruction of Lotario and Camila, because by this time their deceiving cannot surprise us. But we somehow find it possible to pity and fear, as though we were the audience of *Oedipus Tyrannous*, the unmasking of a fiction, a play, so well plotted and performed as Camila's. In a way, this ultimate deception culminates all the other deceptions which generated the story from the beginning, including Anselmo's own delusion about marriage. Only in this light then does it make sense to find Anselmo "sabrosamente engañado," deliciously deceived, because Camila's fiction delights the reader as well as it delights her husband. Moreover, the sense of closure after the statement "el hombre más sabrosamente engañado" is such that one could think of it as a Boccaccian ending from the *Decameron*, as a story complete in itself: Camila and Lotario commit the perfect adultery, and yet Anselmo thinks Camila the perfect wife, Lotario the perfect friend, while being himself the perfect idiot. That would in fact be Boccaccio's perfect tale, perfect fiction, if we consider fiction as he and Cervantes do in this particular case —fiction of fidelity— the opposite and alternative to a reality of adultery. But then, hinting at yet another reversal to Anselmo's happiness—"al cabo de pocos meses volvió Fortuna su rueda" (316)—a new level of complexity is introduced which does not sound like the *Decameron* anymore, and which gives Cervantes's story a new perspective.

Finally, then, it may be possible to understand how Cervantes worked on "El curioso impertinente" as though with a glass figure. In a story about marital infidelity, the central metaphor for the virtue of fidelity is a glass vessel. Women, Lotario affirms, are made out of glass, *vidrio*. But glass is as fragile as it is beautiful, and if one handles

it harshly to test its resistance, it could easily break. As the story unfolds, however, one quickly realizes that women are not the only ones to be made out of glass. In a systematic way, the rest of "El curioso impertinente" deals with one fracture after another. The first to give way is Lotario's better judgment under Anselmo's pressure; then Camila's better judgment in Anselmo's absence; then Lotario's own friendship with and fidelity to Anselmo; and finally Camila's marital fidelity under Lotario's pressure. But all along, as a figure fashioned out of glass, as a child born of these infidelities, what develops is a new very fragile creature, which is the fiction of fidelity itself. So much so, that it is about to break under the constant pressure Cervantes himself inflicts on it. For in only a few pages there are several reversals in the action, as Anselmo's suspicions batter against Lotario's and Camila's ever more resourceful figment. Resulting from this "blowing" and molding of the plot, "El curioso impertinente" itself grows in power; appeal; humor; ability to entertain; artistic beauty; but also in fragility; just as a glass figure becomes more fragile the larger, finer, and more complex it is made. The interruption after the deception of Anselmo works as a way of cooling down this new shining work which is the perfect infidelity, that is, the appearance of heroic fidelity: "[Anselmo] se veía levantado a la más alta felicidad que acertara a desearse, y quería que no fuesen otros sus entretenimientos que en hacer versos en alabanza de Camila, que la hiciesen eterna en la memoria de los siglos venideros" (DQ I, XXXIV, 363). In this context, an interruption fits in perfectly. Cervantes has just demonstrated the power of attraction a well crafted lie, a well crafted fiction, and more significantly a well crafted novella holds over an audience. It makes sense that he does not break the spell just yet. Rather than considering "El curioso impertinente" an interpolated tale

in the events going on at Palomeque's inn, and draw all kinds of conclusions about the Anselmo / Quixote parallel, I consider this incident an interruption or fracture within "El curioso impertinente" with the purpose of focusing our attention on its two closures. Thus, Ayala's argument that the novella should be read "por sí sola" may not be that far-fetched, and the narrator's argument may contain more sound criticism than we thought, despite its irony. The second ending, then, comes to fulfill the notion of the author fabricating a glass fiction: he pauses, and then shatters it. Even if a calamity could have been surmised from the beginning, the swiftness and the extent of it shock the first time reader as few stories do. It seems that Cervantes wanted to emphasize just how fragile the most powerful fiction can be, and to achieve that he challenged our expectations with the quickest possible end. Avalle-Arce's notion that Cervantes made his world of fiction disappear "con un ademán" actually describes best what the author intended. But whereas Avalle-Arce compares him to a magician, he could be pictured as an eccentric artist out to shock and marvel us, letting shatter on the ground the beautiful glass figure he just completed. Of course, this is where the analogy stops. We still possess the entire work; though there is a strong sense of it being irreversible and irreparable. The ease, brevity, and even *sprazzatura* with which Cervantes brings about the tragedy make it all the more effective.

A reading of "El Licenciado Vidriera" that brings to bear the questions of fragility, fractures, and the breach of *decorum* aforementioned could begin by considering the protagonist's response to those

who ask him whether he is a poet. His answer, like previous ones, is spontaneous and somewhat cryptic: "Hasta ahora no he sido tan necio ni tan venturoso" (311). But in this case he does not move on to other topics. Instead, upon a request for clarification and a further question about what he thinks of poets, he goes on to expound for two pages, oddly enough, in contrast to the few unconnected sentences the author had given him so far. Moreover, the opening remark—"No he sido tan necio que diese en poeta malo, ni tan venturoso que haya merecido serlo bueno"—sets up a dichotomy between good poets and bad poets that contrasts with the sheer attack on other professions thereafter. The good poets, according to Ovid and *Vidriera*, are divinely inspired, they constitute a "delicia de dioses y reyes," enjoy "respeto y nombre venerable," and on many occasions are bestowed upon "riquezas." Bad poets, on the other hand, are ignorant, charlatans, and altogether harmful to the republic. Significantly, this speech occurs right after Tomás has arrived to Valladolid, which was the Court at the time. And he went there, we are told, because a certain "príncipe, o señor," received the news about his madness and his "respuestas y dichos" (309), which had spread throughout Castilla. After the amusing passage describing the trip and mode of transportation, we are also told that "El caballero gustó de su locura y dejóle salir por la ciudad, debajo del amparo y guarda de un hombre que tuviese cuenta que los muchachos no le hiciesen mal . . ." (310). In my opinion these few details show how Tomás actually meets his own conditions to be a good poet. By walking around in public admiration, he has obtained a certain fame around the country, and has become the delight of the aristocracy at court, which in turn provides him with personal protection, a sign associated with wealth. Is this not a model of Ovidian *vates*? Furthermore, in that

process *Vidriera* has somehow acquired the poetic ability to make believe; or, at least, he has endeavored to have everyone treat him as if he were indeed made out of glass: his friends, the people in Salamanca, the prince who accedes to transport him as a glass vessel all the way to Valladolid, and even the little kids that try to break him with stones, all act accordingly. Thus, in a way, even if a clownish way, he has become an high-priced entertainer, an Ovidian *vates* and a poet.

Nonetheless, it could be argued that he is not the real author of his new fictitious identity, but that his friends and the prince and the people in the street are the ones who have made him believe they recognize his new condition. Even then, as the originator of their make-believing, Tomás remains at least co-author and protagonist of his own glass identity, to give it a name; just as Camila's heroic fidelity was staged thanks to Lotario and Anselmo's cooperation as supporting actor and audience respectively within "El curisoso Impertinente."³ This peculiar emphasis by Tomás and Camila —and ultimately by Cervantes— in mixing the real with the fictional constitutes yet another breach of literary etiquette in the Aristotelian tradition. Since not only does our author confuse the boundaries between actual historical events and plausible or fictional ones, as in Camila's fidelity concealing an adultery; but also, in a character like *Vidriera* he tampers with the very notion of plausibility or verisimilitude as a literary precept. For he makes someone virtually turn into glass simply by having an audience — friends, people in the street, etc.— willing to agree and act as if it were plausible, or verisimilar. One could think of the water basin that turns into "baciyelmo" through mere convention in *Don Quixote* as a parallel case, another instance of Cervantes exposing and stretching the limits of verisimilitude and literary *decorum*.

Still further, beyond becoming a poet on his own right, Tomás has implicitly turned himself into poetry, into a work of fiction. For his identification with the fragility of glass seems concomitant to his power of make-belief; and make-belief is by definition fragile, as we know from "El curioso impertinente," so that Tomás's fragility and fictionality seem inseparable. Thus, when he complains to those testing his madness that he cannot stand being hugged, he means it literally, because he falls down in fright and passes out. From then on he even changes his name and wants to be called "licenciado Vidriera."⁴ Could not then an extreme identification with a fragile medium like glass also mean an identification with that other fragile medium: fiction? This explanation makes sense when we find *Vidriera* fixed on an exaggerated lack of distinction between fiction and reality, between metaphors and the things they represent. For instance, when asked why is it that poets are always poor, he responds that they should be able to make money off of their mistresses' "diamond eyes" and "golden hair" (313), as absurd as that may sound: women are jewels, literally, just as his body is glass, literally.

In brief, the familiar Cervantine pattern of a story within a story — in this case the story of *Vidriera* within the story of Tomás— on closer examination yields unexpected levels of complexity. Even structurally, to depart from the foregoing discussion, it could be said that the story "El Licenciado Vidriera" turns into glass, whereas Tomás himself —for all his fictionalized fragility— never really does for one moment. Thus, the story unfolds into what seems a bunch of broken and loose interpolations around a central person, rather than a carefully arranged series of incidents about a single action. It would seem as if Cervantes wrote a story just to see how many Aristotelian rules he could break at one

time. Because in the *Poetics* Aristotle claimed a good plot ought to be whole, which means having “a beginning, a middle and an end,” and that “one must neither begin nor end haphazardly but make a proper use of these three parts” (1451a). He adds that, in order for the plot to be beautiful, the parts must not only be in the right order but must also have a definite size, meaning they must have a length such that they can easily be remembered (1450b). Another crucial quality is unity. Aristotle says:

A story does not achieve unity, as some people think, merely by being about one person. Many things, indeed an infinite number of things, happen to the same individual, some of which have no unity at all. In the same way one individual performs many actions which do not combine into one action. [therefore] . . . the various incidents must be so constructed that, if any part is displaced or deleted, the whole plot is disturbed and dislocated. (1451a)

These observations could explain the fragmentations within “*El Licenciado Vidriera*,” because its beginning, middle and end parts follow each other precisely in a haphazard fashion, challenging the reader’s expectations at every turn. A brief summary of the plot may help to see that fragmentation clearly. Tomás receives protection from some nobles who take him to Salamanca, where he studies law. After a short vacation, upon hearing some nice stories, he decides to visit Italy. He travels with the military and enjoys the trip, but doesn’t become a soldier. When he returns to his studies he gets tricked by a woman and

falls sick from a love potion. But for some unexplained reason he goes mad and thinks he is made out of glass. Then he is cured suddenly by a friar after a random series of episodes celebrating his madness. But because his reputation has suffered so much he feels incapable of practicing law credibly. So he goes to Flandes and dies at war, without anticipation and without fulfilling any whole, unified, ordered, sizable single action in the story other than that of his own life. There is no indication that he will go mad during his travels, and no reference to these during his madness. His healing comes as mysteriously as his derangement, and his death comes as unexpectedly as normal tragic reversals do inevitably. Several of those incidents could thus very well be displaced, and some even deleted, without seriously disturbing the plot. Yet, because such fragmentations defy traditional notions of unity, it may be that our desire to find a unifying thread in them arises from the false premise that “El Licenciado Vidriera” tells the story of “someone who thinks he is made out of glass.” Instead, what if it simply were “the story of someone,” Tomás, who happens to go mad and think he is made out of glass? That is, rather than the action or plot taking primacy over the character, the latter would be primary, and as such give unity to a plot that deals only partially with his madness. In that sense it becomes a story about a person, Tomás Rodaja —or Rueda— not about *Vidriera*, as anti-Aristotelian as that may sound.

Significantly, there is a modern text inspired on this story —“*El Licenciado Vidriera*” visto por Azorín (1915)— whose title was changed to *Tomás Rueda* in the edition of 1941, because it seemed to the author “más concreto” (Azorín 17). Azorín’s thoughts on Cervantes reveal even more on the person-oriented vs. action-oriented approach I just mentioned. He claims in his essay “Cambio de inteligencia” that Cervantes

had never put more of his own personality in any work as in this one. Tomás's trips through Europe, his earnest desires to know and make sense of the world, reflect Cervantes's trips to Italy, Flandes, France, etc. The graduate did not visit Paris, says Azorín, simply because Cervantes never went there (184). As regards his madness, it symbolizes a new sensibility "extremada, delicadísima, vidriosa . . ." which does not make one lose his judgment, but rather sharpen it. Azorín characterizes this phenomenon as a radical change of intelligence:

Cuando pasamos de un modo de ver la realidad, con demasía, extremosamente —en literatura, en arte—, ¿qué es lo que hacemos sino cambiar de inteligencia? . . . Sintiendo ardores románticos, pensando románticamente, si llegamos a una visión clásica de la realidad, con todas sus alleganzas, ¿qué hacemos sino cambiar, como Tomás Rueda, de inteligencia? ⁵

Much has been written about Azorín's reading of Cervantes and about the lyric and psychological nature of his novel *Tomás Rueda*. After all, he re-wrote Cervantes's story more than merely analyze it. Nonetheless, as a critic, his interpretation pertains to this discussion in that it grows out of the anomalies of Cervantes's work, suggesting a pattern different from classical Renaissance standards. Yet, what pattern exactly is this? What type of humanism or modernity does that sensibility reflect? To what extent is it even fair to speak of modernism in Cervantes, just because he wrote a story of some-one and not of some action?

An approach to these questions can be found in a more recent study of "El Licenciado Vidriera" by Alban Forcione, *Cervantes and the Human-*

ist Vision. He contextualizes the epistemological significance of Tomás's adventures, though clearly discarding any sensibility in his madness. He claims the story is "a tale of intellectual *hubris*" similar to the myth of Faust, in the context of a world troubled by sudden expansions in the field of knowledge: "his transformation must be viewed in moral terms as a fall, and . . . his fall must be connected with his acquisition of knowledge" (240). Drawing on Erasmus' vision of man, Tomás meets the definition of the cynic, a flawed philosopher whose conduct belies the virtue of *humanitas* on account of his "breathless pursuit of glory through study" and his derisive dealings with others (263). Thus, for instance: ". . . his terrified reaction to his friends' kind offer of an embrace, in its powerful irony, is undoubtedly the most eloquent dramatic expression of his failure in the work" (274). This process of dehumanization becomes even comic when it reaches the point of self-contradiction:

. . . one of the faults that he consistently castigates in others is malicious speech. He laments that poets slander one another and compares them to growling curs . . . At the same time he devotes nearly all his energies to denouncing those around him, and he evidently enjoys being approached as an expert in the art of defamation (279).

Therefore, Cervantes, the Renaissance man, seems to warn us severely against "the poisons of the intellect" (305), and to uphold the Erasmian principle of *humanitas* through the implicit critique of his protagonist. Then, ultimately, Tomás's healing —the withdrawal from his "fragile

paradise of intellectuality" (316)— and his virtuous death as a soldier represent a significant redemption from his fall.

In this light, though, I would ask whether Forcione's presentation of Tomás as a Diogenes, a flawed cynic, also excludes his characterization as an Ovidian *vates*. It seems it would, if we take the embrace incident, for instance, as "the most eloquent expression of his failure," rather than as a turning point for success in making others believe his new condition.⁶ On the other hand, Forcione's insight into the essence of Cervantes's novelistic art may help to reconcile those two sides of *Vidriera*, and to explain the kind of innovation in story-telling that someone like Azorín considers radical. In a chapter dealing with the paradoxical portrait of Cervantes's cynic —namely, his "fine critical powers" coupled with his "ruthless stereotyping"— Forcione claims the author exposes traditional Renaissance theories of *decorum* (266). Especially, Tomás follows a notion of "exemplarity" based on limited "types," rather than "individuals," shown by his "little interest in pausing to examine carefully, to distinguish, and to judge." A poignant example of this unfair and narrow outlook comes when, "following his . . . satirical observations on the canonization of friars, a charitable Hieronymite appears to cure him of his torment" (267). Tomás's vision thus opposes diametrically that of Cervantes in *Don Quixote*, who often presents characters in "non paradigmatic" situations. This later approach disengages characters from the defining "features," "habits" and "attributes" of their particular social type (264).

Yet, Forcione continues with the theme of the cynic, without taking the further step of considering Tomás as yet another creature of Cervantes able and called to transcend predetermined types. For even if the graduate does not discriminate in others between types and individu-

als, Cervantes creates in him a few clear stages of character development, or different types. Now, from the point of view of the fragility of fiction one could define a "type" as a rigid semblance, a single-dimensional fake representation of someone, and therefore a fragile image inclined to break and shatter upon a substantial change in the action. And this is precisely what happens to Tomás when he visits Italy, namely, that the inexperienced and naive type in him starts to crumble, and when he falls for the poisoned meal it actually shatters. Similarly, when he goes mad and begins to deal with people from all social classes, the introverted type in him shatters. When he overcomes his madness and tastes the bitterness of rejection, the Ovidian *vates* in him shatters. And when he goes to war and dies for his country the Cynic type in him shatters. Forcione reiterates that dying at war constitutes the ultimate redemption of his flawed philosophy of life. Nevertheless, I would say that in the most fundamental way Tomás breaks out of his fragile typification when he returns to sanity, because he comes to grip with reality and stops acting as fiction, as a fictional character, as a "glass man." He then appears before our eyes as a mature and experienced real person, as far as the limits of fiction may ever allow for such reversal of life and literature.

Cervantes's greatest challenge in writing this novella, and similarly in writing "El curioso impertinente," could thus be understood as the re-definition of what it means to write a story. Characters like Camila or Tomás, rather than single actions, hold together and mold the plots of these stories. By contrast to classical models, these glass characters and glass fictions inaugurate a tradition where turns and transformations do not have to arise from tragic determinism and inevitability. Moreover, his concern with "the problem of the medium" and his bold

incursions into the limits of verismilitude and *decorum* deserve an altogether separate category in the theory of poetics, even of modern poetics. His ability to fashion ever more complex and fragile layers of make-belief, only to expose and shatter them afterwards, provides the particular charm and the personal signature of his authorial genius.

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NOTES

¹ “El curioso impertinente” dates to the fall of 1604, when the author is known to have submitted his work for publication (Cervantes, intr. *DQ*, xviii) and “El Licenciado Vidriera” has also been dated to ca. 1604 (Segre 59).

² My translation: He sometimes thought to be [made out] of glass, and would not allow to be touched. He binded rods of iron to his clothing, and equipped himself in many ways so that, upon falling, he would not shatter. The Latin text is quoted by Enea Silvio Piccolomini *I Commentarii*, Milán, Adelphi, 1984, book VI, ch. 4. (Segre n.11)

³ From a perspective of poetics, then, since Tomás’s madness results in his fragile, fictional, and poetic qualities, it would be fair to say that madness inspires Tomás’s fragility just as lust inspired Camila’s fidelity. C.B. Johnson has written about “madness” and “lust” in *Don Quixote* from a psychoanalytical perspective (*Madness and Lust: A Psychoanalytical Approach to Don Quixote*, Berkeley: U of California P, 1983). I find very significant that madness and lust are so closely connected with poetic inspiration in Cervantes’s stories.

⁴ El Saffar offers a psychoanalytical view of Tomás's fragility based on an "awareness of vulnerability" that she sees present from the beginning in "the refusal to give his family's name or his place of origin, the fear of a sea voyage and repugnance of soldiers . . . , his solitary, restless travels, and his avoidance of love and marriage" (56-57). Personally, I find greater discontinuity between a rather naive Tomás that leaves his studies to visit Italy or gets food poisoned by a stranger, and the surprisingly quick and witty *Vidriera* who distrusts everything and everyone.

⁵ Rather than Cervantes, however, a prime example of this "sensibility" and change of intelligence, according to Azorín, is Frederick Nietzsche, who in *El viajero y su sombra* reacts against a certain romantic pessimism and sets out to create "a new climate: . . . a climate of soul contrary to my old soul" (182). Azorín finds Nietzsche's new "climate" strikingly similar to Tomás's transformation, down to the details of having a special "diet and discipline" to free the spirit, or a certain "cynicism" he says he acquires, to the point of comparing himself to Diogenes, the famous pre-Socratic Cynic.

⁶ The failure in that episode —if any— would be that of the "friends," whose insensitivity calls for a disproportionate display of grief before yielding to the prerogatives of a "glass graduate." Tomás's failure, on the other hand, would come at the end of the story, upon returning to sanity and losing all those people he had entertained and gained as an audience. This could be the reason why he thinks it such a blow —to the point of abandoning his career— the fact that no one takes him seriously anymore, and that they stop listening to him in boredom.

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