

PREFACE

The Marketplace at Toledo

I CAN'T HELP but consider all the innumerable ways I, American-born, am unqualified to write a preface to these thirty-two works of fiction that are united mainly, if not solely, by their having some connection to an entity called Europe. The language surrounding the publication of international literature today is, besides, so crowded with extravagant claims that I'm hesitant here to stake any of my own—except to venture that the work of Alberto Olmos, Sheila Armstrong, Ádám Bodor, Christopher Woodall, Lars Petter Sveen, Hélène Lenoir, and the other writers represented in these pages is incontrovertible evidence that there continues to be something like a Republic of Letters, whatever else may be unfolding in the world.

I do think, however, that I might be minimally qualified to say something about literature in general—which would of course include European literature—and the necessary gulf that separates literature from its so-called *national culture* and from the people who write it, the so-called *authors*, who, though they technically exist, are in fact nowhere to be found. Not at the dinner table, not at the lectern, and not, once the final paper-work has been filed, in the volumes of biography and correspondence attached to their names. Much as there may be to admire in, for example, the collected letters of Kafka, I don't believe even these can be said to derive, in toto, from the same substance as his novels, stories, or parables. The person who writes in one of his letters to Milena Jesenská, "If the occasion presents itself and you don't have anything against it, please say something nice to Werfel on my behalf," is not the same person

who wrote *The Castle*. I am not sure it would be correct to say that “a person” wrote *The Castle* at all.

Writers have often made this point themselves, by crediting their work to the Muses or the deity, ascribing it to imaginary authors, or inventing manuscripts from which their own purport to be transcribed or compiled. Fiction writers in particular have favored the latter two practices: Daniel Defoe presented *Robinson Crusoe* as the work of Robinson Crusoe. Jonathan Swift attributed *Gulliver’s Travels* to Lemuel Gulliver. Voltaire insisted that *Candide* had been compiled from the posthumous papers of Monsieur le docteur Ralph. And Nathaniel Hawthorne recounted at length how he was prompted to write *The Scarlet Letter* after discovering, on the second story of the Salem Custom-House, an affair of red cloth twisted around some dingy paper that contained many particulars regarding a woman named Hester Prynne.

All of these writers were, one way or another, following in the footsteps of Miguel de Cervantes, who claimed to have stumbled on the manuscript of *Don Quixote* one day while strolling through the marketplace at Toledo. Because this stumbled-on manuscript—signed by a historian named Cide Hamete Benengeli—was written in Arabic, Cervantes (not unlike the hapless editor penning this sentence) hired a translator, a Spanish-speaking Moor who happened to be hanging around the market, and who agreed to take the job for a fee of fifty pounds of raisins, three bushels of wheat, and a roof over his head until the work was through. “I took him to my home,” Cervantes tells us, “and there in little more than six weeks he translated it all exactly as it is set down here.” So it was that *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha* was born.

Of course, there’s no question who really wrote *Don Quixote*, unless we decide to take Cervantes at his word. But why shouldn’t we? In Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*, the character called Paul Auster does just that. In the course of a conversation with Daniel Quinn, Auster outlines an essay he is writing about the authorship of *Don Quixote*—not the authorship of the book itself, he explains, but of “the book inside the books

Cervantes wrote, the one he imagined he was writing.” Seeing how Cervantes goes to such great lengths to assure the reader that the events described actually took place, it follows—says Auster—that the true author of the tale has to have been an eyewitness to those events. However, Cide Hamete Benengeli never makes an appearance in the book’s pages, which would suggest that he cannot be, as Cervantes says he is, the true author of the tale.

What Auster proposes instead is that Cide Hamete Benengeli must be a conglomeration of four people: Sancho Panza, the illiterate eyewitness, who narrates the story aloud to Quixote’s friends the barber and the priest, who in turn take down what Panza says in Spanish and hand over the results to Sansón Carrasco, another friend of Quixote’s, who translates the Spanish into Arabic. This Arabic manuscript is the one that Cervantes discovers and has translated back into Spanish by the unnamed Moor he meets at the market. But there’s one last twist to Auster’s argument, and this is that Don Quixote himself orchestrated the whole “Benengeli quartet,” probably posing as the Moor in the marketplace and, as it were, lying in wait for Cervantes:

We shouldn’t put it past him. For a man so skilled in the art of disguise, darkening his skin and donning the clothes of a Moor could not have been very difficult. I like to imagine that scene in the marketplace at Toledo. Cervantes hiring Don Quixote to decipher the story of Don Quixote himself. There’s great beauty to it.

There’s great beauty to Auster’s exegesis as well. Fanciful though it may be, it perfectly enacts the lunatic logic of a mad-cap reader, tilting at the windmills of Cervantes’s text. And what is a writer, anyway, if not a reader gone mad, a person—as the character called Paul Auster puts it—“who has been bewitched by book”?

“Bewitched,” if you’ll indulge me, is not an idle word. There is indeed something demonic about the writing of fiction, something that cannot be accounted for by common sense. The

writer is, first, a reader possessed by literature, a reader who casts out the demons of literature by writing, journeying forth from his study to do battle with the phantasmagorical hum of language that his reading has put into his head. No writer perhaps sensed this demonic side of literature more acutely than Kafka: “I don’t have literary interests,” he famously wrote in a letter to Felice, “I’m made of literature, I’m nothing else and can be nothing else.” And, less famously, in a letter to Robert Klopstock a few years later: “You need only keep in mind that you’re writing to a poor little man who is possessed by every possible evil spirit, of every type.” It’s little wonder that in the third of Kafka’s blue octavo notebooks, when he came to consider Quixote’s creation, he did so in demoniacal terms:

Sancho Panza, who, incidentally, never boasted of it, in the course of the years, by means of providing a large number of romances of chivalry and banditry to while away the evening and night hours, succeeded in diverting the attention of his devil, to whom he later gave the name Don Quixote, from himself to such an extent that this devil then in unbridled fashion performed the craziest deeds, which however, for lack of a predetermined object, which should, of course, have been Sancho Panza, did nobody any harm. Sancho Panza, a free man, tranquilly, and perhaps out of a certain sense of responsibility, followed Don Quixote on his travels and had much and profitable entertainment from this to the end of his days.

Here, in Kafka’s parable, the man bewitched by books is not Quixote but Panza, who’s so successfully avoided being possessed by the devil he names Quixote that this Quixote becomes harmless—to everyone, but particularly to Panza, who is now free to follow his devil’s exploits from a safe distance, without the necessity of taking part. So Sancho Panza reveals himself to be Quixote’s author. Miguel de Cervantes is absent from the scheme.

Different as they are in tone and scope, Auster’s outlined essay and Kafka’s twelve-line parable point in the same direction.

Whether Quixote conspired to bring *Quixote* into being or Panza drove Quixote out of his own soul onto the muddy roads of Spain, one thing is clear: Don Quixote and his adventures are not the patented invention of a single mind. They belong rather to the collective imagination—the mercifully individual collective imaginations—of their readers. This is what so fascinates both Auster and Kafka about Quixote’s creation. It is also, we might speculate, what incited Cervantes to narrate his discovery of the “original” manuscript in the first place—a narrative that dramatizes the mysterious means by which narratives make their way into the world.

This is the way of it then. In the marketplace at Toledo, a Spaniard so ravenous for the written word he has “a taste for reading even scraps of paper lying in the streets” is invited to inspect a bundle of manuscripts, an invitation he cannot turn down. Indeed, this Spaniard is so ravenous that, even when he realizes these manuscripts are written in Arabic, a language that he cannot read, he immediately seeks out another man who *can* read them, buys the manuscripts, and hires the man to translate them—all so that he’ll be able to read them himself. By the time he reads them, though, they will have been multiply transformed: first by the Moor’s translation of them into Spanish, and then again by the Spaniard’s unacknowledged additions, for after all, whoever Cid Hamete Benengeli was, he could not have foreseen the Spaniard’s discovery in the marketplace at Toledo. Thus Cervantes’s desire to read the story of Don Quixote in the end requires him to write the story of Don Quixote—a story that he insists, less whimsically than it may at first appear, is not his own. The manuscripts from the market have by now become a great work of fiction, and like all great works of fiction, they are the property of whoever goes to the trouble of opening them up.