

SKEPTICISM AND THE PROBLEM OF CRITERIA IN THE *QUIJOTE*

Any reader of the *Quijote* is likely to be struck by the fact that objects and events as encountered in the novel are one thing for Don Quijote, another for Sancho, and perhaps still another for the townspeople of La Mancha. Certain episodes in the novel capture these incongruities especially well, and have become emblematic of the Cervantean perspective on reality: when Sancho sees windmills, Don Quijote sees giants; when the Squire sees a flock of sheep, the Knight sees an army; what Sancho takes to be a barber's basin, Don Quijote takes to be the fabulous Helmet of Mambrino. Critics of the *Quijote* have taken these episodes as evidence of Cervantes' "perspectivism," or of the fundamental "ambiguity" of the book.¹ I want to suggest that these incidents all raise the problem of skepticism by questioning the usefulness of criteria in making identifications. I want to show that whereas the skeptic will find that criteria fail to function, that we lack the capacity to judge whether things are one way or another, the *Quijote* shows the opposite, viz., that there are grounds for agreement about what we claim to know, that knowledge *is* possible. The necessary caveat to add is that this knowledge may not be rational, as the skeptic would lead us to expect: The *Quijote* is both anti-skeptical *and* anti-rational. Cervantes points up the limits of reason and of epistemology, the science of knowledge.

Philosophical skepticism is justly famous for some of the more radical consequences to which it can lead—Montaigne's Pyrrhonian doubts ("Que sçais-je?"), for instance, or Descartes' worry that he may not be able to know wakefulness from dreams. But the first and perhaps the most powerful step in skeptical argument has nothing to do with any of these charges, however troubling they may seem. The general complexion of skepticism is best captured in the problem of criteria; these are the means by which we judge things, the standards which enable us to tell what things are. The first question of skepticism is the problem of identification, of what we take things for. The objection that the skeptic will want to raise is not whether

¹ These views, too numerous to mention individually, are largely indebted to Ortega y Gasset, *Meditaciones del "Quijote"* (1914). I follow the edition in the *Obras completas*, I (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1963).

things exist at all but whether we can *tell*. What the skeptic questions is whether we have any way of discerning; he doubts that there are criteria that can tell us what things are.

The pervasive importance of skepticism to Cervantes' novel shows up first in the presentation of distinct, often contradictory, identifications of the world. Consider how Cervantes raises the question of criteria in a typical episode. Early in the novel, Part I, chapter 2, Don Quijote arrives at an inn. He sees two women whom he takes to be beautiful damsels; he takes the roadside inn to be a castle:

Estaban acaso a la puerta dos mujeres mozas, destas que llaman "del partido", las cuales iban a Sevilla con unos harrieros que en la venta aquella noche acertaron a hacer jornada; y como a nuestro aventurero todo cuanto pensaba, veía o imaginaba le parecía ser hecho y pasar a modo de lo que había leído, luego que vio la venta se le representó que era un castillo con sus cuatro torres y chapiteles de reluciente plata, sin faltarle su puente levadiza y honda cava, con todos aquellos adherentes que semejantes castillos se pintan. Fuese llegando a la venta que a él le parecía castillo, y a poco trecho della detuvo las riendas a Rocinante, esperando que algún enano se pusiese entre las almenas a dar señal con alguna trompeta de que llegaba caballero al castillo. Pero como vio que se tardaban y que Rocinante se daba priesa por llegar a la caballeriza, se llegó a la puerta de la venta, y vio a las dos distraídas mozas que allí estaban, que a él le parecieron dos hermosas doncellas o dos graciosas damas que delante de la puerta del castillo se estaban solazando. (I, 2)

Certain questions suggest themselves: Does Don Quijote actually see a castle (he says he did), or does he imagine that he saw a castle? Does Don Quijote see the same thing as the innkeeper when he appears and looks at the inn? How can we tell whether the thing which looks like an inn to the innkeeper and like a castle to Don Quijote is in fact an inn or a castle? How are we to judge? The importance of these questions to the problem of skepticism is this: if there are no grounds for deciding what a given thing, such as an inn, actually is, then the skeptic may well claim that criteria fail to function; and if this is the case, he will want to deny the possibility of knowledge altogether.

Taking problems like the identification of the inn to be problems of criteria and judgment, rather than problems of perception, means that their solution will be philosophical, not empirical. The difficulty does not stem from a lack of information which empirical inquiry could supply, but from an uncertainty about how to reconcile two different identifications of a thing.

With the inn, as in most cases in the *Quijote*, there is a ready answer that is quick and pat. One might say that while Don Quijote and the innkeeper identify the inn/castle differently, the reader is able to choose between their judgments and to identify the object in question correctly as an inn. This is true, and it would be a good reason to conclude that criteria do work in the *Quijote*. But it leaves inexplicit certain doubts that the skeptic will want to voice—doubts which Cervantes' text seems to suggest. The skeptic is likely

to point out that the narrator, who seems reliable here, may be mistaken or lying, and he is likely to reinforce this objection by reminding us that the unreliability of the narrator becomes a prominent and explicit concern in the novel; this is particularly true after chapter 8, as we learn that the text is a translation of a circumspect Arabic history. The skeptic will remind us that the entire narrative is couched in uncertainty and feints: the name of the hero is in doubt ("Quieren decir que tenía el sobrenombre de Quijada, o Quesada, que en esto hay alguna diferencia en los autores que deste caso escriben; aunque, por conjeturas verosímiles, se deja entender que se llamaba Quijana," I, 1); the exact nature of the first adventure is uncertain ("Autores hay que dicen que la primera aventura que le avino fue la del Puerto Lápice; otros dicen que la de los molinos de viento," I, 2); our author has drawn his information from the annals of La Mancha and from a translation of the Arabic history written by Cide Hamete Benengeli, but there is no evidence that the first source is reliable, and there is every reason to be suspicious about the second. The skeptic may suggest that the inn is not, rigorously speaking, an inn at all, but the literary figuration of an inn, not an inn bodied forth and present to us but one merely conjured up in words. Indeed, the skeptic may seem convincing on these points: the narrator is not always reliable; the inn is only the representation of an inn.

These objections by reference to the unreliability of the narrator and the fictional nature of the inn can be taken collectively to have the following force: How can we claim to resolve a problem of identity that occurs *inside* the book by recourse to an *external* judgment? To resolve the problem of criteria in the *Quijote* by appeal to "what the reader knows" is to forget that the characters in the book are sealed inside it, that they cannot hear tell of our judgments. We cannot use *our* knowledge to solve *their* problems. To say that the reader knows how to identify the inn is to say nothing that might resolve a dispute between Don Quijote and the innkeeper, for instance. Cervantes himself works consistently against a "transcendental" solution by placing the characters and events of the novel at a textual level that is elusive to such determinations. A critic like Leo Spitzer who thinks that the author of the book is a kind of demiurge, a stable point of appeal on such matters, has failed to consider just how evasive the "author" of this text really is; (he says that "Cervantes, while glorifying in his role of the artist who can stay aloof from the 'engaños a los ojos,' the 'sueños' of this world, and create his own, always sees himself as overshadowed by supernal forces;" "the transparence of language is a fact for God alone").² He

² "Linguistic Perspectivism in the *Don Quijote*," in *Linguistics and Literary History* (1948; rpt. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 59, 68. He says that "the real protagonist of this novel is not Quijote [*sic*], with his continual misrepresentation of reality, or Sancho with his skeptical half-endorsement of quixotism—and surely not any of the central figures of the illusionistic by-stories: the hero is Cervantes, the artist himself, who combines a critical and illusionistic art according to his free will" (p. 69). This glorification of the artist dilutes much of what he has to say about the linguistic "perspectivism" of the *Quijote*.

misunderstands that when we are asking about the identification of an object, we mean to limit our answers to the field in which the questions were put (i.e. the world of the characters). (I am assuming that the problems of skepticism and criteria as seen in the *Quijote* are instructive of general philosophical problems: we want to be able to identify the things of our world by reference to *our* world alone, and not to any other; we want to decide for ourselves what things are, not have to ask God, for instance, about them.)

The skeptic is insistent on doubting that we can know whether a given thing is what we identify it as, but it is not clear whether he could advance a coherent proof that our customary identifications of the world are wrong. In order to do so, he would have to show that something—an inn, for instance—is not what we ordinarily take it as, but is in fact something else. This would mean discovering something about it, something which we did not know or about which we were (he says) mistaken. He might for instance show that the innkeeper is in error, that what he sees as an inn is really a castle in disguise, as Don Quijote says it is. The skeptic may or may not be able to make such discoveries; we have no way of telling in advance whether he can or not. But the question is important because it places a corresponding burden on the skeptic's opponent, the epistemologist. In order for him to be successful against the skeptic, he must construct a proof to the contrary; he must show us, for instance, that the tautological identification of the inn as an inn is not in fact a tautology, that it is not hollow. And this is something his own grammar will not allow him to do. Consider that where it might make sense to say that Don Quijote sees a castle in the guise of an inn, we could not meaningfully say that the innkeeper sees an inn "in the guise of an inn." Wittgenstein gave some attention to this problem in the *Philosophical Investigations*, and one of his remarks may reinforce the point: "One doesn't 'take' what one knows as the cutlery at a meal *for* cutlery"³—just as one does not "take" an inn as an inn. At some point, notably at the point where we cease to think that the problem of knowledge can be conclusively decided by a proof in the form of a discovery or demonstration, we find that there are no grounds for doubt about whether things are what we take them for; we find that the question does not make sense.

I have characterized the skeptic and the epistemologist as adversaries, each with certain arguments available to him in a dispute over our identification of things. But they share the belief that the matter of our knowing is dependent on rational arguments, proofs, discoveries. In the *Quijote*, however, we see certain ways of knowing which are grounded more deeply than the skeptic's doubts can penetrate and which are shored up at a point

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1953), II, xi, p. 195e.

beyond the epistemologist's ability to claim as a proof. The *Quijote* points up the bounds of reason, but this does not mean that the skeptic wins the argument, that knowledge is not possible; on the contrary: it means that there are types of knowledge which lie outside the domain of rational proof or contradiction.

When Don Quijote approaches the windmills in chapter 8 of Part I, Cervantes prepares for a similar clash of perspectives, and for the same apparent breakdown of criteria, as in the episode of the inn. The narrator leaves no reasonable grounds for doubt about the identity of the windmills; yet Don Quijote judges them to be something quite different from what we ordinarily take them as ("En esto descubrieron treinta o cuarenta molinos de viento que hay en aquel campo, y así como Don Quijote los vio, dijo a su escudero: 'La ventura va guiando nuestras cosas mejor de lo que acertáramos a desear; porque, ves allí, amigo Sancho Panza, dónde se descubren treinta o poco más desaforados gigantes, con quien pienso hacer batalla,'" I, 8). The perspectives of Knight and Squire are no less divergent here in the second sally than earlier, at the inn, in the first. The misalignment is direct, almost schematically drawn. Here, as at the inn, Cervantes contrasts Don Quijote's extraordinary vision with Sancho's perfectly ordinary vision, that is, with a perspective immune to doubt that the windmills are windmills (" '¿Qué gigantes?' dijo Sancho Panza. 'Aquellos que allí ves' respondió su amo 'de los brazos largos, que los suelen tener algunos de casi dos leguas.' 'Mire vuesa merced' respondió Sancho 'que aquellos que allí se parecen no son gigantes, sino molinos de viento, y lo que en ellos parecen brazos son las aspas, que, volteadas del viento, hacen andar la piedra del molino,'" I, 8).

The question again is: How do we tell—How might the characters tell—whether the thing in question is a windmill or a giant? This time the answer comes for Don Quijote in a painfully physical way: his identification of the windmills as giants leads him to a brutal clash with reality; this provides him with evidence about the windmills that no rational argument could refute or, conversely, prove more strongly: "bien cubierto de su rodela, con la lanza en el ristre, arremetió a todo el galope de Rocinante y embistió con el primero molino que estaba delante; y dándole una lanzada en el aspa, la volvió el viento con tanta furia, que hizo la lanza pedazos, llevándose tras sí al caballo y al caballero, que fue rodando muy maltrecho por el campo" (I, 8). This is one of the first and most remarkable times that we see Don Quijote actually butt-up against reality while trying to deny some ordinary identification of it; this is all the more reason to say that there are no grounds for doubt that the windmills are what they are; their very physical presence should make it difficult for Don Quijote to mistake them or to question whether they are what they seem to be.

For Don Quijote, though, the things of the world are not to be so easily accepted. He insists always on seeing the world as mediated by the identifications he gives to it, as sheathed in some guise, some appearance. This is what Ortega meant, in his meditation on the windmills, by the two-sided

reality: "Caminando... con Don Quijote y Sancho, venimos a la comprensión de que las cosas tienen dos vertientes. Es una el 'sentido' de las cosas, su significación, lo que son cuando se las interpreta. Es otra la 'materialidad' de las cosas, su positiva sustancia, lo que las constituye antes y por encima de toda interpretación."⁴ The revelation of this double nature in the ordinary things of the world would be reason enough for crediting Cervantes with the invention of a "poetry of the commonplace." But Ortega overlooks most of the slapstick and irony in this poetic "transformation" of the world of the everyday. He imputes to Cervantes a vision that is Don Quijote's. For Sancho, who does not share this vision, any "interpretation" of the world, any "explanation" of the windmills, for instance, (as windmills) would be superfluous, a tautological and hollow statement which he would not make unless prompted by Don Quijote's mad ideas. Don Quijote, for his part, must find ways to explain the most ordinary identifications of things; he accounts for the world as the work of evil demons and enchanters (" 'yo pienso, y así es verdad, que aquel sabio Frestón, que me robó el aposento y los libros, ha vuelto estos gigantes en molinos, por quitarme la gloria de su vencimiento', " I, 8). Unlike Sancho, Don Quijote requires an interpretation of the world, an accounting of what Ortega calls its "sense" ("el 'sentido' de las cosas, su significación").

In the episode of the windmills, we have moved beyond the initial problem of criteria to one of its concrete consequences for skepticism. Because the skeptic claims that we cannot tell whether reality is one way or the other, he can threaten that we have no way of knowing whether the material world is real. He claims that the world is *only* our (different) interpretations of it, and in so doing he denies its other, material, side. Through Don Quijote, Cervantes takes pains to resist this skeptical reduction of the world. Hence he shows both Don Quijote's painful experience of the materiality of the world *and* his interpretation of it; and because of the materiality of the world, he maintains his interpretations of it at great peril to himself and at the risk of being ridiculed and thought insane. His encounter with the world is not a matter of rational knowing, but a constant adventure, something that requires his willingness for conviction.

Don Quijote is an anti-intellectual character. He acquires his knowledge of the world in physical rather than mental ways, largely because he is in fact convicted at its hands. His interpretations of the world are animated by the values of knight-errantry, which command him to action beyond the bounds of reason. In the clash of "perspectives" with those who maintain a one-dimensional view of the world, he has the effect of a philosophical catalyst: his function is to unseat the false confidences of those who have failed to take stock of their relationship to the world or adequately to

⁴ *Meditaciones del "Quijote"*, p. 385.

question their lives. The bittersweet of this comic drama of knowledge is that so few are able to follow this example.

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THE CID OF GUILLÉN DE CASTRO: THE HERO AS MORAL EXEMPLAR

Stephen Gilman has shown how Lope de Vega seemed to have conceived of Spanish national history as "a kind of three-act play with a happy ending."¹ For Lope, as for Juan de Mena in the fifteenth century, the late Middle Ages represented a perilous epoch for the Christian kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula in that an earlier, formative period "characterized by noble virtue and simple customs" was replaced by "a time of decadence, self-seeking, and ruptured harmony."² In Lope's archetypal scheme it is the restoration of power by the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, that signals the restoration of these original values and virtues and sets Spain once again on the road to national glory and internal harmony.

This vision of Spain's medieval past as a period of violent moral crisis is stated by Lope's contemporary, the Valencian dramatist Guillén de Castro. In a pair of historical-legendary plays, *Las mocedades del Cid* and its sequel *Las hazañas del Cid*,³ Castro re-creates a tortuous period of history, the reign of King Ferdinand I of Castile and his son Sancho, and portrays it as plagued with internal warfare and alienated from its true Christian mission, the unfinished work of the Reconquest. Rather than unite in a concerted effort against the Moorish infidel, Spanish Christians—Castilians, Aragonese, Zamorans—turn against one another, allowing egoistic interests to take precedence over any sense of national welfare. Castro's indictment extends even to the royal family, which he places at the very center of this national disintegration. If Lope's exalted view of Spanish monarchy in general allows him to envision the Catholic Monarchs as Spain's redeemers, Castro, whose early plays reveal a fiercely critical—and, therefore, "un-Lopean"—view of kingship, chooses as the incarnation of moral and Christian values placed at the service of national unity not any royal personage, but rather a Castilian hero closely identified with Castro's

¹ Stephen Gilman, "The Problem of the Spanish Renaissance," *Folio*, 10 (1977): *Studies in the Literature of Spain, 16th and 17th Centuries*, ed. M.J. Ruggiero, Brookport, New York, p. 51.

² Gilman, p. 49.

³ In the 1618 edition of Castro's published plays the two works are given the following titles: *Las mocedades del Cid, primera* and *Segunda de las hazañas del Cid*. Henceforth, we shall refer to them as *Mocedades* and *Hazañas* respectively.