

Forum

Forum Policy: Members of the Association are invited to submit letters commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of scholarly and critical interest generally. Decision to publish will be made at the Editor's discretion, and authors of articles commented on will be invited to reply. Letters should be fewer than 1,000 words of text; footnotes are discouraged.

The Literal and the Metaphorical

To the Editor:

I have read Michael McCandles' article, "The Literal and the Metaphorical: Dialectic or Interchange" (*PMLA*, 91, 1976, 279-90), with great pleasure. But I would like to point out two things about it: first, that his argument is purely formal; and, second, that under such formalism lies a deeper problematic, which he has not seen and which can turn his argument around.

I will limit my comments to the implications of what he says about Don Quixote. He describes Cervantes' hero as "a literalist par excellence" (p. 284), unable to keep the distance between the literal and the metaphorical. By mistaking fiction for reality, Don Quixote turns reality to fiction ("the literal and the metaphorical have symmetrically changed places," p. 284). In other words, the "literalist par excellence" is mad. We are then surprised to hear, a few pages later, that "a 'literal world' is one in which it is possible to distinguish the difference between fictions and nonfictions, between metaphorical and literal usages of language. . . . We *postulate* a literal world as one wherein we believe we can plant our feet solidly and say that 'this is a metaphorical usage'" (p. 288; my italics). The implication seems to be that there are two kinds of literalism, a "sane literalism" and a "literalism of madness" (p. 285). But the distinction again eludes us, since the "sane literalism" of scientific or "nonfictive discourse" is open to the same "covert, and therefore uncontrolled, interchange between literal and metaphorical meanings" (p. 281) that we find in the mad literalism of Don Quixote. Furthermore, the literal world of sanity is only "postulated" for pragmatic reasons (so that we can avail ourselves of the benefits of a naïve literalist science, unaware of the metaphors with which it operates).

Is there any difference between sane and insane literalism? The answer is somewhat ambiguous: the sane literalism of Don Quixote, we are told, "is merely the obverse of the literalism of his madness" (p. 285). Then how are we to understand this obverse-reverse relationship? Well, there are, again, two ways: as "interchange," in which there is no way to

tell the one from the other with any certainty, or as a "dialectical relation," in which the two are kept safely apart. If we remember that "literal discourse" is the discourse of "interchange," while "fictive discourse" is that of the "dialectical relation," we can see how the tables have been turned on the old belief, from Plato on, that associated "literalism" with sanity and fiction with madness. As it turns out now, the situation has to be seen in reverse. The secret of the difference between sanity and madness (and therefore the secret of sanity) lies in "fictive discourse," which thus appears to be a most extraordinary instrument of knowledge. It reveals to us our literalist madness and, by doing so, keeps us sane, literally sane. It takes away our mad "literal world" and gives it back sanely "postulated" as literal.

How does "fictive discourse" perform such an extraordinary feat? Simple. "Fictive discourse" is essentially a *framing* procedure (it operates through a "literal heterocosm," whose function is analogous to that of a "framed canvas in an art gallery," p. 284). It takes a human situation which appears particularly distressing and *frames* it. That is to say, the framing allows the distressing situation to exist in our literal world, while draining the situation of all danger. By this procedure the danger itself becomes a source of pleasure and reassurance (cf. the Aristotelian catharsis). As long as we do not get carried away by such pleasure, and keep the frame intact, the experience can be exhilarating, not only a source of reassurance but a source of knowledge as well: It reveals the meaning of sanity (keeping the frame in place between the metaphorical and literal) and even reveals the literal world as "postulated" (since we rightly realize—caught as we are in the logic of the framing—that the literal world is only a function within the totality of the process).

The term "frame" is particularly appropriate, since we are really blaming something or somebody within the frame for a situation that is of our own making. Thus, through the marvels of "fictive discourse," we are capable of performing, verbally and bloodlessly, what more primitive societies, deprived of such a wonderful tool, could perform only by means of a bloody scapegoat ritual. (Even these primitives, however, knew the importance of keeping the frame in

place. In spite of the bloody mess, everything was done in a highly stylized form.) Apart from the mess, perhaps the only difference might be that, while for primitives the dangers were tangible all around, for us, in most cases, the dangers have already been eliminated by our naïve literalist progress. Therefore, in order for this mechanism to work, we have to keep on inventing the dangers (fighting giants where there are only windmills).

To come back to Don Quixote. The question is whether Cervantes believed in the saving virtue of the framing. I do not think he did. What he said is that the "sane literalist" Alonso Quijano became a "mad literalist" because he read too much fiction. In other words, there is only so much "literal-metaphorical dialectic" that one can take safely. Beyond that, the "dialectic" will turn to "literal-metaphorical interchange." The "interchange," therefore, is a direct result of the "dialectical tension." It marks the point at which the tension becomes so tense that it breaks down. McCandles' argument, on the other hand, rests on the optimistic assumption that the tension can be kept under control. In fact, he defines such tension as the power to control the "interchange" between the literal and the metaphorical. He would cure Don Quixote with the same potion that turned him mad in the first place. To borrow, on behalf of Don Quixote, the words of schizophrenic Lara Jefferson (quoted by Marion Vlastos, "Doris Lessing and R. D. Laing: Psychopolitics and Prophecy," *PMLA*, 91, 1976, 249): "If that is not a vicious circle, I hope I never encounter one."

I will briefly recapitulate by saying that McCandles' critical "instinct" is right when he goes to Cervantes for proof of what he says. All the signs are there; he just reads them, so to speak, backward. To use the catchy terminology of modern critical theory, his insight is paralleled only by his blindness.

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To the Editor:

To differ with Michael McCandles' interpretation of Don Quixote's recantation is not to disagree with the thrust of his illuminating and persuasive article, yet the issue is of such capital importance for our understanding of the work that it must be raised. It is true that "Don Quixote is a literalist par excellence" (p. 284), but it is not strictly true that, as McCandles goes on to say, "he cannot grasp the metaphorical, fictive existence of Amadis of Gaul and Orlando, but takes the verbal heterocosms in which they dwell as literal histories." There are explicit indications in the novel that Don Quixote engages in the literal-metaphorical interchange willfully. The clearest example

is the passage in which he explains to Sancho his relationship to Dulcinea/Aldonza:

¿Piensas tú que las Amarilis, las Filis, las Dianas, las Galateas, las Alidas y otras tales de que los libros, los romances, las tiendas de los barberos, los teatros de las comedias, están llenos, fueron verdaderamente damas de carne y hueso . . . ? No, por cierto, sino que las más se las fingen, por dar sujeto a sus versos. (Pt. I, Ch. xxv)

What it is that drives him to embrace literalism is not an issue to be discussed here, but there are clear suggestions that the literal-metaphorical interchange is rather a symptom of Don Quixote's problem than its cause. Yet, while the knight's return to sanity and his recantation have their reason for being only in relation to that problem and its resolution, we may expect a concomitant alleviation of the symptom if a cure really has been effected.

McCandles thinks not:

For even when the dying knight renounces all of his former life and his enslavement to the metaphor of knightly romances, has he achieved an understanding of the necessary ways in which literal and metaphorical mutually cause and oppose one another? No, . . . for the literalism of his recantation is merely the obverse of the literalism of his madness. It is the sane literalism of a literalist who rejects metaphors because he can see no way of accommodating them except at the expense of taking them literally. (p. 285)

And yet, is this really the way we are to characterize this man who on his deathbed sums up his gravely serious situation in a metaphor: "En los nidos de antaño no hay pájaros hogaño"? I think that if one does not expect Cervantes to speak to us from the twentieth century one can see that Don Quixote's recantation moves, not toward a new obverse literalism, but rather, in McCandles' terms, to a more self-conscious verbal heterocosm: the Christian formulary as exemplified in the books he would now substitute for those of knight-errantry, "otros que sean luz del alma." This allusion to the transparently metaphorical title of the religious work Quixote had seen at the printer's in Barcelona—*Luz del alma*—points to a transcendent and divinely inspired literal-metaphorical dialectic, understood as such, though not in those terms, by Cervantes and his contemporaries. Long before the inadequacy of the copy theory of word-object correspondence became manifest, it had been widely understood that verbal formulations of the transcendent reality of the divine could only be metaphorical, as, for example, in St. John of the Cross.

It is tempting to imagine that McCandles' characterization of Alonso Quijano as "the dying knight" in the passage quoted above is in unconscious homage to the victory that this movement of transcendence represents.

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