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The Enamoured Critic: Douglas Glover Reads *Don Quixote*

The Enamoured Knight by Douglas Glover. Normal, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005.

In the 1970s a TV spot for dental hygiene showed a cartoon of an old bearded Spaniard attacking windmills with a toothbrush. That was my first reading of *Don Quixote*, a stupid reading, but somehow enough to make me feel that I knew the book, knew the character, knew what it was all about. This is a problem with iconic texts, especially those popular enough to enter social consciousness at the most general level: their ubiquity destroys their particularity. They become shorthand, something we all feel we know as long as we don't look at them too closely. The problem is not just with pop culture, either; critical (academic) discourse adopts a similar practice all the time. Thus, while it's hard to imagine a critical discussion of *Don Quixote* that is not also about the history of the novel as a form, it's easy to imagine a discussion of *Don Quixote* that is not really *about Don Quixote*, i.e., that considers the book's historical status without really considering the book.

The consequences of treating a text this way are not only ethical but also practical, reflecting on the specificity and accuracy of the argument being built. Any large-scope discussion about aesthetics or book culture or the evolution of narrative and its relation to technological and social shifts (for example) is bound to be strongest when rooted in specifics—of text, of history—and weakest when glazing over what's *actually there*. On the other hand, a critical study that simply rehearses the history and/or formal characteristics of a work as seminal as *Don Quixote* is also in danger of being extraordinarily dull, if not entirely redundant. It's a tricky situation—but then a writer should not take on *Don Quixote* unless he or she has the ability to create something both attentive to the text and at least a little bit new.

Canadian novelist and critic Douglas Glover has this ability, I think, not only because his thinking is simultaneously attentive and curious, scholarly and speculative, but also because his *Quixote* study *The Enamoured Knight* is structured to bring these critical impulses together

with a kind of aesthetic coherence, an artfulness. Glover builds an argument in layers, the analytical (formal) beside the scholarly (historical) beside the speculative—layers that proceed both forward and back, resonating against one another. He traces the development of formal devices of narrative and ties them to historical changes in the nature of human experience. He considers various schools of thought on the novel as a whole and *Don Quixote* in particular, and positions his own ideas in relation to them. He builds an argument that is at once a critique of past and present book culture, a study of Cervantes's impact on the novel as a form, a generalized theory of what novels *are* and *do*, and a thoughtful explication of *Don Quixote* itself.

To handle this much material economically (the book is 191 pages), Glover organizes his argument around two primary themes (that is, it seems to me there are two themes; Glover never identifies them as such). The first is literature and desire. Glover writes:

The difference between pornography and literature is that in pornography everyone has orgasms all the time. There is no gap between desire and consummation. In literature there is always an element of frustration, displacement, delay and incompleteness (even if someone does eventually manage to have an orgasm). *Don Quixote* is the quintessential novel because it's about a man in love with a woman who doesn't exist. At the outset [of the novel tradition], Cervantes invents the limiting case.

Glover's second theme, tied to the first, is technology. His argument—a kind of materialist formalism—relates historical changes in print technology to developments in narrative form, and both of these to the evolution of memory and mankind's sense of self. Within this theme, *Don Quixote*, the "quintessential novel," is also the quintessential book *about* books; not only the key text at the beginning of the novel tradition, it also outlines the trajectory of that tradition and of its critical discourse. "It's no stretch to say [Cervantes's] narrative becomes a dramatic meditation on reading," Glover writes, "on the logical interplay of text, truth, fiction and meaning, and on the book as a constructed artifice and as a technology."

These two themes—desire and technology—wind through *The Enamoured Knight's* comprehensive examination of Cervantes's narrative techniques. Like a more thorough, more sweeping version of Viktor Shklovsky's 1925 essay "The Making of *Don Quixote*," Glover scrupu-

lously examines the workings of plot, subplot, leitmotifs, framing techniques, and set-pieces. He explores the dynamic parallels between characters and, in general, outlines the specific devices that Cervantes borrowed or invented and that would eventually (Glover argues) come to define the novel as a form. Particularly interesting is his analysis of novelistic humor, including individual discussions of seven types of humor at work in *Don Quixote* (verbal, dialogic, reverse-trend, situational, slapstick, Rabelaisian, and parodic)—although this section, like the rest of his formal study, he presents as a “rough sketch, not an exhaustive analysis.”

A good example of how such analysis gets tied into Glover’s themes is in his account of the historical development of plot, which he traces from the so-called Greek novel to the European “road novel,” at which point plot encounters the concept of desire: “The next development in novel composition,” Glover writes, “occurs when the actual road is replaced as a unifying device by a consistent and singular desire. This is true plot and the structure on which most modern novels are based.” This is also, he tells us, the moment when *Don Quixote* is born. Adept at making these thematic connections between the literary work and the world, Glover is nonetheless careful to recognize whenever he leaves the realm of analysis and scholarship and steps into speculation. Thus we get passages such as “This is only a sketch, but it’s fascinating to speculate that in solving a technical problem related to length, novelists also were beginning to invent psychology, which I take to be the modern science of mental structures based on the accumulation of personal history.” Such a combination of enthusiasm and self-awareness allows Glover to pack his writing with ideas without pretending to “know” more than any of us are able to.

Most interesting to me is that, in the process of bringing his various critical strains together, Glover invents his own contemporary formalist mode, one that is informed by Lacan, Žižek, and Foucault, draws heavily on Anne Carson and Viktor Shklovsky, spars with Nabokov, revisits Northrop Frye, and seems more interested in the Bakhtin of *Rabelais and His World* than of *The Dialogic Imagination*. *The Enchanted Knight* is not a strict New Critical “close reading,” but a self-conscious assembly of critical approaches and theories that nonetheless places formalist analysis at the center of its project. It results in a reading of Cervantes that is eclectic, personal, scholarly, and smart, and that suggests, I think, a direction for future literary criticism to take.

In short, I like Glover’s breed of formalism and his craftsmanship as much as his ideas on *Don Quixote* and the novel form. I like his

style, the way he goes about things. And I like that with so many ideas and insights, so many things to say, he never fails to ground his discussion in the particulars of the text or to recognize those particulars as the place where literature *happens*.