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Quixano as Reader, Quixote as Author

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Throughout Cervantes' work, *Don Quixote*, the repeated question of Don Quixote's identity brings to mind certain themes readers are often not forced to think about, such as the what influences one's perception of reality, where one's true identity comes from, and, perhaps most importantly, exactly what makes one authentic. Authenticity plays a major role in *Don Quixote*, both in the plot and in analyzing the character himself. His newly-adopted persona is called into question when someone else claiming his name begins making himself known, and the outrage this induces in Don Quixote speaks to the importance of authenticity, not only throughout the novel, but to Don Quixote's own identity. Because of this, one cannot help but consider a comparison between Don Quixote and the man he appears as at the very beginning and very end of the novel, Alonso Quixano. These two characters, though embodied, at different times, by the same man, are entirely distinct from one another, and even demonstrate an important contrast: while Don Quixote is indeed quite authentic, Alonso Quixano is pointedly inauthentic by comparison. Throughout my paper, I will first offer a discussion of exactly what it means to be authentic, what is entailed by it, and, by extension, what inauthenticity may look like. I will go on to explain how the main character's journey consists of a transformation from inauthenticity, as Alonso Quixano, to undoubted authenticity as Don Quixote, right back to the inauthentic Alonso Quixano in the end.

In *Don Quixote*, what it means to be authentic is laid forth in an especially dichotomous way due to the stark contrast between the character of Don Quixote and his former self, Alonso Quixano. As a knight errant, Don Quixote lives a far more interesting and exciting life than that of Alonso Quixano, embarking on adventure after adventure and even managing to change the lives of those around him, such as Sancho Panza, with his perception of the world. Don Quixote manages this, in short, because of his adamant authenticity. In a greater sense,

Authenticity indicates a certain kind of integrity—not that of a pre-given whole, an identity waiting to be discovered, but that of a project to which [one] can either commit [him or herself] (and thus “become” what it entails) or else simply occupy for a time, inauthentically drifting in and out of various affairs. ... [To be authentic is] to be the author of oneself as a unique individual (Nehamas 1998; Ricoeur 1992). In contrast, the inauthentic life would be one without such integrity, one in which [one] allow[s] [their] life-story to be dictated by the world.¹

In this sense, authenticity in *Don Quixote* manifests itself as not only a determination to live by one’s own code and beliefs, despite outside pressures from the world around them; it manifests itself in a determination to live by certain ideals, and to be bold enough to pursue the things one has always longed for—to ‘commit to a project’—rather than simply drifting along, allowing their lives to be marked by a lack of pursuit of these things, living in a narrative ‘dictated by the world’. To be authentic, one must be true to one’s own self no matter how others may react to it, and even must fight, if necessary, for the right to one’s own identity. By contrast, traits like complacency and laziness are marked indicators of inauthenticity; an inauthentic person in the context of *Don Quixote*, by this definition, would be one who may hold certain ideals, but lacks the motivation to live them out or truly pursue their desires. If one is too scared or ashamed of what they believe and love to live by it, they are instead allowing the world around them to write the narrative of their lives, rather than remaining true to their own inner or desired narrative; and, of course, inconsistency between one’s beliefs and one’s actions is certainly a frequent mark of inauthenticity, as is a distinct lack of authorship of one’s own life.

This being said, the character we meet at the beginning of *Don Quixote*, Alonso Quixano, is nothing like authentic. He is described as spending most of his life in the same rather idle routine, save for one passion: chivalric novels.² Quixano is so very passionate about these novels, in fact, that he dedicates the majority of his time, energy, and even his money to being

¹ Steven Crowell, "Existentialism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2010, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/#Aut>.

² Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2003), 26.

utterly engulfed in them, be it reading them or discussing them. His actions and lifestyle, however, do not at all speak to the same ideals he clearly believes in, based on his obsession with such novels.³ He has let almost his entire life pass him by, longing for something that he makes no effort to pursue. Even a dream of his that is within reach, a dream to pen his own novel, never comes to fruition, as he lacks the motivation for it;⁴ and, furthermore, he is said to be in love with a girl in a neighboring village, to whom he not only fails to confess his feelings, but who apparently may not even realize he exists.⁵ Were Alonso Quixano authentic, he would do far more than simply read and ponder these novels. He would make some semblance of an outward attempt to bring them to life in a more tangible way, rather than being utterly lacking in action. The mark of an authentic person, after all, is to write one's own narrative and commit to the identity they want, rather than sitting about, too preoccupied with dreaming of an identity to actually realize it.

However, the main character crosses the threshold of beginning to live an authentic life when he leaves Alonso Quixano behind him to become Don Quixote. Don Quixote, rather than being the passive man Quixano was, instead takes his world into his own hands, actively working to bring his ideals to life. Despite immediately meeting resistance and opposition from those who know him, he takes it upon himself to live as a knight errant, no matter how outrageous or downright insane others may think him. At last, Don Quixote sets out on a series of adventures, during which he does not sway for a moment from his determination to live as a knight errant. Rather than being distantly and passively in love with a girl from afar, Don Quixote proclaims his love for the lady Dulcinea at every opportunity, even sending his defeated enemies to her in acts of chivalry. Don Quixote personifies exactly what it means to live

³ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2003), 27

⁴ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2003), 26

⁵ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2003), 29

authentically; he is true to himself and who he believes himself to be despite all outside pressures, as well as remaining true to his perception of the world, no matter what reactions it may draw from those around him. When encountering, for example, a field full of windmills, Don Quixote insists they are, in fact, actually giants. At first glance, it may seem that Don Quixote is letting his perception of these creatures be changed by Sancho, as he does indeed concede in the end that they are windmills⁶—and in fact, this is markedly different from earlier in the story when he mistakes an inn for a castle, yet refuses to think it anything different.⁷ However, far from renouncing his whole idea, Don Quixote simply accepts the new information and continues to mold it until it fits into his own world, insisting that the windmills are, indeed, only windmills because an enchanter has transformed them into such from giants.⁸ Overall, Don Quixote vigorously pursues his dreams and desires and lets all of his beliefs and ideals take form in his actions, rather than only in wistful words, like Alonso Quixano, and even fights for the right to his newfound identity, when necessary. After finding that another has been making a name for himself as a fake ‘Don Quixote’, the real Don Quixote does everything in his power to denounce this imposter’s fame and reputation, eventually going so far as to have an account recorded by the mayor as proof that he is the one and only true, authentic Don Quixote.⁹

In contrast to this, Alonso Quixano once again demonstrates his inauthenticity in his return at the end of the novel. Not only does Alonso Quixano awake from illness to be suddenly in quite a different mind than that of Don Quixote, but he is quick and nearly desperate to renounce all traces of his life as Don Quixote in his final moments before death. He swears off chivalric novels, and by extension, swears off the ideals that he spent so long sworn to—the very

⁶ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2003), 63-65

⁷ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2003), 32

⁸ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2003), 64-65

⁹ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2003), 969

ideals that, even before he was Don Quixote, he had always openly admired. He renounces the entirety of Don Quixote's world, adventures, and very lifestyle, writing it off as nothing but madness. Although this sort of adamant behavior may seem to be authentic in itself, Alonso Quixano was scarcely an authentic man himself to begin with. He was an 'identity waiting to be discovered', one who failed to claim authorship of his own life by committing to projects or committing to a marked identity. On the contrary, it would seem that the first project he did manage to commit himself to was, in fact, becoming Don Quixote. In renouncing Don Quixote as an identity, Alonso Quixano returns to his former self—the self who distinctly lacked any marked identity at all. Though he seems to now be committing to an identity or a project, indeed—the project of being Alonso Quixano, rather than Don Quixote—it is scarcely a commitment at all, as he is, more than anything, committing to a lack of identity rather than any identity at all. In this, Alonso Quixano is doing everything he can to claim the most authentic part of his life as a regrettable mistake. He had never lived as authentically as he did while he was Don Quixote, as clearly demonstrated by the contrast between Alonso Quixano at the beginning of the novel and Don Quixote for the bulk of it, and by stating his deep regret over this phase of his life and swearing off of all traces of it, he seems to be swearing off authenticity itself. He insists that all the days he spent living exactly as the man he had always quietly wanted to be, pursuing his true desires and upholding his true ideals, were nothing but utter irrationality.¹⁰ It is larger than a simple decision not to live as Don Quixote any longer; it is the decision that to live so authentically is nothing but insanity.

Furthermore, ironically, much like Don Quixote, Alonso Quixano summons authorities—a priest and a notary—to confess his previous madness to and leave it behind him forever.¹¹ The

¹⁰ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2003), 980

¹¹ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2003), 977

parallels between Don Quixote's proclamation to the mayor and Alonso Quixano's proclamation to the priest and notary, in fact, are very indicative of each man's authenticity on their own. Don Quixote knew very well who he was before authority figures were involved; he did not need them to have an identity, but only used them as a means of more publicly claiming it, selfishly defending it from any who were trying to strip it away from him. Alonso Quixano, on the other hand, summons authorities in a much more desperate manner; he treats their presence as the only thing that can yet save him from an identity of madness, even in his own eyes, and relies solely on them to give himself an identity—because, unlike Don Quixote, he had no actions behind him to speak for who he truly was. Don Quixote's use of authorities in stating his identity was almost an afterthought, simply a formality to establish things in the eyes of those around him, because his actions already spoke for themselves; for Alonso Quixano, authorities were the only means by which he could establish an identity at all in the end, providing a very obvious instance of Alonso Quixano allowing his identity to be “dictated by the world”.

Overall, Don Quixote's life—though sandwiched within Alonso Quixano's own—was a life of authenticity. Don Quixote's adventures and the way in which he touched the people around him were due to the strong convictions by which he lived his own life; indeed, he significantly changed the lives of those around him, as well, such as Sancho Panza and Cide Hamete Benengeli. Don Quixote's active participation in his own life was a clear and welcome contrast to the passive and quiet way in which Alonso Quixano had always lived. No matter how utterly mad many believed Don Quixote to be at first, his conviction in his identity and ideals caused many to wind up every bit as engulfed in it as Don Quixote himself. Although one may not need be as constantly active as Don Quixote in steering one's own world in order to be authentic, one certainly cannot achieve such authenticity by speaking of passion for a certain set

of ideals while living every day by another, as Alonso Quixano always had; and when Alonso Quixano renounces his identity as Don Quixote, it has much more gravity than simply being the name by which he calls himself. Alonso Quixano has entirely renounced the most authentic identity he has ever held.

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