The Anatomy of Realism: Cervantes, Coetzee and Artificial Life

And so by life I'm slain,
Unwelcome state that mingles life and death!
Living I die, and as my breath
Dies, death recalls me into life again. (Cervantes, Don Quixote, 906)

1. Dulcinea and Montesions’ Cave

At a critical moment in Cervantes’ Don Quixote, Don Quixote acknowledges that the lady for whose love he has committed himself to knight errantry might not exist. We are in part two of the novel, and the Don is staying with the unfathomably cruel Duke and Duchess, who take malicious pleasure in encouraging Quixote in his delusions. The Duchess asks Don Quixote to describe the “peerless Dulcinea,” to "delineate and describe the features of the lovely lady,” and Don Quixote responds with his characteristic rhetorical excess. "If I could pluck out my heart and place it before your highness's eyes on this table in a dish," he says, "I should relieve my tongue of the toil of expressing what is almost inconceivable." To "describe and delineate the beauty of the peerless Dulcinea, exactly and feature by feature," he goes on, is a "burden fitter for other backs than mine" (Cervantes 1950, 679). This is the madness for which Quixote affords the Duke and Duchess such sport – the incontinent adoration of ghosts and phantoms, the unchecked devotion to non-existent beauty. But to give an extra turn to the screw, the Duchess decides on this occasion to taunt Quixote with the fact of Dulcinea's non-existence, to present him with the base line of truth against which Quixote's fantasies must always be measured. She "gathers," the Duchess says sweetly to Don Quixote, "if my memory is correct, that your worship never saw the lady Dulcinea, and that this same lady does not exist on earth, but is a fantastic mistress, whom your worship engendered and bore in your mind, and painted with every grace and perfection you desired" (680). The Duchess confronts Quixote here with the untruth of Dulcinea, and by extension of the whole contraption of knight errantry, not in order to cure him of his madness, as those who care for him seek to do, but rather to fan the flames of his disease, to encourage another hilarious protestation of chivalric devotion for the amusement of herself and her husband. But Quixote's response, almost uniquely in the novel, is not to deny the attack on his fantasy as a blasphemy, but rather to offer a moving reflection on the nature of his understanding of Dulcinea's reality, a reflection which allows a species of doubt to "cloud," in Vladimir Nabokov's lovely phrase, the "limpid heavens of his madness" (Nabokov 1983, 57). "There is much to say on that score," Don Quixote replies:

God knows whether Dulcinea exists on earth or no, or whether she is fantastic or not fantastic. These are not matters whose verification can be carried out to the full. I neither engendered nor bore my lady, though I contemplate her in ideal form, as a lady with all the qualities needed to win her fame in all quarters of the world. (680)

Here, for perhaps the only time in the novel, Don Quixote's love for Dulcinea – what Erich Auerbach calls his "idée fixe" (Auerbach 2003, 343) – coexists with his understanding of its unreality. Auerbach writes that Quixote does have what he calls "an
understanding of actual conditions in this world" (344) – that he is capable of wisdom and good judgement. But, Auerbach argues, such understanding "deserts him as soon as the idealism of his idée fixe takes hold of him" (344). This play between Quixote's wisdom and his madness is familiar to anyone who has read Don Quixote; but here, in Quixote's grave and wounded response to the Duchess's taunt, we are given access to a hidden seam in the novel, at which the ideal and the real are somehow joined, rather than simply opposed to one another, a place where Quixote can love, in the understanding that such love is not subject to full verification.

This, as I say, is a singular moment in the novel. But it is closely entwined with another episode, which ramifies throughout the second part of the narrative, in which Quixote again expresses doubt about the reality of his knighthood, and of his love for Dulcinea. The episode I have in mind is that which concerns Quixote's visit to the 'cave of Montesinos' – in which he is lowered into a cave on a rope, where he believes himself to have met a cast of characters drawn from his beloved books of chivalry, as well as his lady Dulcinea (who oddly asks to borrow some money). This is one of the more famous scenes in Don Quixote, and perhaps the most symbolically overloaded. The prospect of Quixote "journeying through that nether region [...] hanging and dangling by a rope" (615) makes reference to sources from Plato to Virgil to Homer to the Christian tradition. According to his squire Sancho, who lowers him into the cave, Quixote is underground for "little more than an hour;" but Quixote himself insists that he "stayed three days in those remote and secret regions" (620), suggesting a powerful allusion to Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, which resonates in turn with Plato's reflections on the insufficiency of our perceptions of reality, embodied in the cave allegory in the Republic (Plato 2012, 240-249). Quixote is buried alive, he is Orpheus visiting Eurydice, he is Christ risen; but what I want to focus on here is not the intricate mythical and theological resonances of this scene, but its role in Quixote's developing understanding of the reality of his visions. When Sancho queries his master's version of events – trusting his own time sense over Quixote's – Quixote is insistent that his experiences in the cave were real. "For what I told you of," he says, "I saw with my own eyes and touched with my own hands" (621). But despite such confidence, there is something about this episode in the cave of Montesinos that neither Quixote nor Benengeli – the 'historian' upon whose account Cervantes' novel is based – can quite accept. Written in the margin of Benengeli's history, the narrator says, in Benengeli's handwriting, there is the following disclaimer:

I cannot persuade myself that all that is written in the previous chapter literally happened to the valorous Don Quixote. The reason is that all the adventures till now have been feasible and probable, but this one of the cave I can find no way of accepting as true, for it exceeds all reasonable bounds. (624)

Benengeli cannot vouch for the authenticity of this scene, and nor, it seems, can Quixote himself. While Quixote is being lowered into the cave, and upon first beholding the underground paradise that he discovers there, he undergoes a kind of reality testing. "I felt my head and my bosom," he says, "to make certain whether it was my very self who was there [por certificarme si era yo mismo el que allí estaba (Cervantes 1928, 615)], or some empty and counterfeit phantom" (615). But for the rest of the novel, and until his death bed denunciation of the entire idea of knight errantry, Quixote is plagued with doubts about whether the events in the cave, and his meeting with the impecunious Dulcinea, were real or imagined. He meets a fortune telling ape (belonging to a charlatan named 'Master Peter') and asks him if "certain happenings in Montesinos' cave were imaginary or real; for to him they seemed to partake of both,"
and is told, unhelpfully, that "the ape says that part of what your worship saw or experienced in the said cave is false and part true" (637). Thirty-seven chapters later, he meets another fortune telling creature, this time a severed and 'enchanted' head. Again he asks the same question – "tell me, you that reply, was it truth or a dream, the account I gave in the cave of Montesinos?" – and again he is given the same equivocal reply: "As for the matter of the cave, there is much to say: it has something in it of both" (874). From the episode of the Montesinos on, Don Quixote's contemplation of his lady is associated with the uncertainty that he feels about his experiences in the 'nether regions.' Even in his moments of serene reflection on Dulcinea's beauty – for example when the crystal clarity of the waters of the river Ebo recall "a thousand amorous thoughts to his mind" – he finds himself returning to it. "Especially," the narrator says, "he dwelt on his vision in the Cave of Montesinos, for although Master Peter's ape had told him that part of it was true and part false, he leaned rather to its being true than false" (657).

2. "Partly true and partly false"

These two episodes taken together, then – Quixote's admission to the Duchess that he does not know if Dulcinea exists or not, and his confusing experiences in the cave of Montesinos – are intricately woven together. Together I think that they allow us to feel for what I have called here the 'anatomy' of Cervantes' realism. Erich Auerbach, in his luminous response to Don Quixote, maintains a strict distinction, both in the novel and in our response to it, between the real and the ideal. The "difficulty" that we have in judging the force of Quixote's idealism, Auerbach argues, arises from "the fact that in Don Quijote's idée fixe we have a combination of the noble, immaculate, and redeeming with absolute nonsense" (Auerbach 2003, 343-344). For idealism to have any purchase in the world, for it to be "imagined […] as intervening meaningfully in the actual state of things, stirring it up, pressing it hard," it has to enter into some kind of dialectical relation with things as they are. "The will working for an ideal," Auerbach writes, "must accord with existing reality at least to such an extent that it meets it, so that the two interlock and a real conflict arises" (344). The quality of Cervantes' realism, for Auerbach, is determined by the failure of Quixote's idealism to enter in this way into a relationship with reality, to stir it up, or press it hard. That Quixote's wisdom, in Auerbach's view, is suspended the moment he enters into the fantasy world of knight errantry means that there is no dialogue between wisdom and the fantastical imagination, and so Don Quixote ends up mapping the separation between the real and the fantastic, rather than staging any kind of transformative meeting between the two. In the "clashes" between "Don Quijote and reality," Auerbach writes, "no situation ever results which puts in question that reality's right to be what it is. It is always right and he wrong; and after a bit of amusing confusion it flows calmly on, untouched" (345). Cervantes is responding, for Auerbach, to his perception that, in the early seventeenth century, the "phenomena of reality had come to be difficult to survey" (358); but his response does not bring the right of that reality to be what it is into question. Rather, it sets out to "portray contemporary reality," by displaying the comic gap which opens between reality and a diseased or mistaken apprehension of it.

Auerbach maintains, then, a distinction between a reality which is simply itself, and an imagined landscape which loses its purchase on such reality; but I think the two episodes with which I have begun here at least complicate this scenario. The cave of Montesinos might offer itself as a kind of negative image of the quotidian Spain
through which Quixote and Sancho travel; underneath the realist surface are these yawning chasms of myth, and Quixote's passage from the above to the below, trussed in Sancho's rope, is one which takes him across the boundary between Auerbach's real and ideal. Quixote is a kind of upside down kite, who is allowed to soar into the net her regions of fantasy, before being reeled back to the realism that comes with his deathbed rejection of knight errantry. As Auerbach puts it, "dying, he finds his way back into the order of the world" (357). But if the cave of Montesinos is a negative image of Cervantes' realism, I would argue that it is also deeply interwoven with it. The repeated advice that Quixote receives – that his vision in the cave is partly true and partly false – is not, I would suggest, invalidated by the unreliability of his advisers – Mater Peter's ape, the ridiculous enchanted head. Rather, the novel is set up to trace Quixote's passage into the underworld, to act as a kind of dipstick or litmus paper, which passes across the threshold between the true and the false, in order both to mark where the boundary between them might lie, but also to establish or in some sense enact their mutual contamination. As Quixote finds himself in the cave – "in the middle of the most beautiful, pleasant and delightful meadow nature could create or the liveliest human imagination conceive" (615) – he undergoes, as I have said, some reality testing, to determine whether "it was my very self who was there or some empty and counterfeit phantom (fantasma vana y contrahecha)" (615/615), and in that test we can immediately feel the crossing or blurring of Auerbach's line between the real and the imagined. This is surely an odd kind of test, one which makes of the 'very self' a kind of amalgam of being and non-being. He does not set out to assure himself here of the reality of his surroundings, but of his own perception of himself; the possibility he entertains is not that the cave of Montesinos is unreal, or that the meadow that he finds himself is imagined, but that he himself might be 'empty (vana)' and 'counterfeit (contrahecha)'! He says to Sancho that he looked at the cave "with his own eyes," touched it with "my own hands," but he does so not simply or even primarily to ascertain that the cave before him is real, but to prove the existence of himself as the agent doing the perceiving. "Touch, feeling and the coherent argument I had with myself," he says, "assured me that I was there then just as I am here now" (615). He can be sure that the cave of Montesinos is real, only to the extent that he can be sure that he himself is real, either 'here' and 'then' in the cave, or 'here' and 'now,' as he relates the story to Sancho. If the cave of Montesinos is not real, then that unreality, he fears, would reside not in the cave but in his own self. The proof that he seeks of the reality of his visions leads him to put his own reality at stake, to suggest that his own being partakes of the same order of reality as that of the cave of Montesinos. And as he has that naked conversation with the Duchess, in which we are given the most direct access we have to the condition of Quixote's mind – to the texture of his perception – we find that same amalgam emerges, that same fusion, in the 'very self,' between the true and the false. As so often, Quixote's protestations of devotion to Dulcinea here take on an anatomical hue. To display to the Duchess the truth of his love would require him to cut out his heart, and place it on a dish for the Duchess' inspection. As he puts it a little later in the tale, his "adoration" of Dulcinea is "engraved and imprinted in the centre of my heart and in my innermost entrails" (772). His love is imprinted in his biological being, fused with his biomatter; and yet, in this conversation with the Duchess, he is ready to acknowledge that this most material of loves has no real existence, that he has not seen Dulcinea with his own eyes, or touched her with his own hand. In admitting this to the Duchess, in allowing for the possibility that the name that is branded into his entrails belongs to a 'fantastic' being,
he performs a feat of strange self-cancellation, an odd disappearing trick. He says to the Duchess that to "rob" him of his lady is to "rob him of the eyes with which he sees" (680), thus suggesting, again, that the nonbeing of the fantastical object is registered not in that object itself, but in the organs of sight with which the object is perceived; in the heartland of the knight's own self. A "knight errant without a lady," he goes on, again evoking the cave allegory in Plato's *Republic*, is "like a shadow without a body to cast it" (680). So, in acknowledging that his lady might not have a real existence, he condemns himself to become that empty, counterfeit being that he encounters in the cave of Montesinos. If his lady does not 'exist on earth,' this conversation with the Duchess suggests, then a part of Don Quixote too will consign itself to non-existence.

3. Cervantes, Coetzee, and the Meaning of Contemporary Realism

To attend to the anatomy of Cervantes' realism, I think, one has to find a means of accounting for this peculiar fusion between true and false, real and ideal, as it is registered in Quixote's own anatomy. Where, for Auerbach, writing in 1953, reading *Don Quixote* involves separating these elements out from each other, the shifts in our theoretical understanding, both of realism and of reality, have tended over the decades since *Mimesis* was published to sensitize us to the unreliability of such a distinction. Indeed, the critical and literary focus has been, over this time, increasingly trained not on the separation between the real and the imagined, but on their inter-relation, on the spectacle, as Quixote himself puts it, of "nature combined with art, and art with nature" (569). *Don Quixote* has become, accordingly, a rich resource for literature and philosophy which seeks to explore the possibility that reality itself is in some sense made of fiction, rather than its antidote. Cervantes' novel appears to Mario Vargas Llosa, writing in 2005, not to enact the divergence between fiction and the real, as Auerbach suggests, but to perform the directly opposite movement. In *Don Quixote*, Vargas Llosa writes, "reality, as if infected by [Quixote's] powerful madness, becomes less and less real" until "it becomes pure fiction" (Vargas Llosa 2005, 126). The experiments that have attended the fiction of the later 20th century, Vargas Llosa goes on, are thus indebted to Cervantes' erosion of the real. "Although they may not know it," he writes, "the contemporary novelists who play with form, distort time, shuffle and twist perspectives, and experiment with language, are all in debt to Cervantes" (132). The great postmodernists and magical realists of the later 20th century return again and again to *Don Quixote*, as a kind of origin, as Paul Auster does in the *New York Trilogy*, as Kathy Acker does in her *Don Quixote* (cf. Auster 1987, 97-103, and Acker 1986). The fate of Cervantes' book in the last five decades has followed the pattern set out in Borges' extraordinary "Parable of Cervantes and the Quixote." "The whole scheme of the work," Borges writes in Auerbachian vein, "consisted in the opposition of two worlds: the unreal world of the books of chivalry, the ordinary everyday world of seventeenth century Spain" (Borges 1970, 278). But if Auerbach seeks to maintain this distinction, for the narrator of Borges' parable, literary history sees their gradual and inevitable convergence. Neither Quixote nor Cervantes, Borges writes, as they mapped the gulf between windmills and giants, between Mambrino's helmet and a barber's basin, between one hour and three days, could have known that

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1 Cf. Plato (2012, 240), where Socrates suggests that the prisoners in Plato's cave would know nothing "of themselves or of each other except for their shadows, cast by the fire on to the surface of the cave in front of them."
"the years would finally smooth away the discord" between them – that the legacy of Cervantes' work would be the discovery that "in the beginning of literature is the myth, and in the end as well" (278).

So a tradition of sorts has emerged, in the passage from Borges to Acker and Auster, in which contemporary narrative experiments that explore the erosion of the reality effect, the collapse of realism into forms of self-conscious artifice, draw on Cervantes as an archetype. And it is tempting to see J.M. Coetzee's quiet obsession with Cervantes as belonging to this tradition. With the beginning of his 'late phase,' or the period described by some as encompasing his 'Australian novels,' Coetzee's work has become increasingly experimental, and increasingly concerned with anatomising its own mimetic procedures. The novels of this period – Elizabeth Costello, Slow Man, Diary of a Bad Year, Summertime, The Childhood of Jesus – have tended to complicate the (always complicated) realism of earlier fiction such as Disgrace and The Master of Petersburg, and in doing so they have arguably shown a tendency to shift the balance of literary allegiance from Dostoevsky and Defoe to Cervantes. Recent essays by Urmila Seshagiri, James Aubrey and Maria J. López have traced this growing Cervantine influence in Coetzee's work. López quotes a 2002 interview, in which Coetzee says that "I have read Don Quixote, the most important novel of all times, time and again, as any serious novelist must do" (López 2013, 81), and suggests that this investment can be seen throughout his work, in Age of Iron and Disgrace, and then increasingly prevalently, in Slow Man, Diary of a Bad Year, and The Childhood of Jesus. And for all three critics, Coetzee's growing involvement with Cervantes is entangled with Borges' sense that literary history sees the cancellation of the Cervantine discord between the real and the fictional. For Aubrey, there is an originating connection between Slow Man's "metafictional strategies" and the novel's "intertextual links to Don Quixote," as it is through this connection that Coetzee explores the "construction of a fictional narrative," the "power and importance of stories," and the "complicated relationship between a writer and his or her characters" (Aubrey 2011, 99). Similarly, for Seshagiri, it is Coetzee's engagement with Cervantes, in The Childhood of Jesus, that allows him access to the "self-referential, impenetrable play of linguistic and narrative meaning," and to the "arbitraryness immanent in language and literature" (Seshagiri 2013, 648); and for López Coetzee's late fiction contains within itself the 'voice' of Don Quixote himself, a voice, she writes, that is "infinitely resistant to the constant and painful onslaughts of the real world" (96).

So it is tempting, as I have said, to see Coetzee's relationship with Cervantes as part of that shift in our understanding of realism that one can trace in the passage from Auerbach to Borges to Acker and Auster. But if this is so, it is also the case, I think, that understanding the kinds of challenge to Auerbach's conception of mimesis that is presented by Coetzee's dialogue with Cervantes requires a searching attention to the anatomy of realism itself, an attention that might not sit very comfortably with the postmodern and magic realist traditions as characterised by Vargas Llosa, and that might require a significant rethinking of the ways in which fiction is bound to reality, both in Cervantes' work and in Coetzee's.

It is in his 2013 work The Childhood of Jesus that Coetzee's dialogue with Cervantes is most sustained, and it is here, perhaps, that Coetzee comes closest to giving expression to the structure of his own realism – or to "revealing," as Seshagiri nicely puts it, "the substrate of [his] entire oeuvre" (2013, 648). This novel quotes a number of passages from Don Quixote – indeed it turns around precisely that connection in Cervantes' novel that I have already discussed, between the episode of the cave of
Montesinos, and the Don's admission to the Duchess of Dulcinea's questionable existence. Coetzee's novel tells the story of the arrival of a man and a young boy in a peculiarly evacuated time and space – which might be Limbo, but which is also a kind of displaced state named Novilla – and it follows the attempt of both man and boy to adapt themselves to the conditions of this strange and estranged place, to weave a narrative that might explain their relation both to each other, and to their new home. At its heart, the novel sets out to explore what is called the "mystery" of "how we elect those we love" (Coetzee 2013, 95) – that mystery that is at the heart, too, of Don Quixote. The man, Simón, has taken the boy, David, into his care, and has for him a boundless parental love, despite having no (apparent) biological relationship with him – a kind of phantom paternity that is matched when man and boy encounter Inés – a woman who Simón (apparently) arbitrarily decides is David's 'mother,' as Quixote arbitrarily decides that Aldonza Lorenzo is the "peerless Dulcinea" (Cervantes 1950, 36). As they settle down to life in Novilla – an oddly spectral family, like that at the heart of Ishiguro's novel The Unconsoled – Simón sets out to teach David to read, and it is in the course of these reading lessons that Cervantes' novel is woven into Coetzee's. Simón reads to David from the opening of an expurgated child's version of the novel – "there was a man living in La Mancha […] a man no longer young but not yet old, who one day got the idea into his head that he would become a knight" (Coetzee 2013, 152). He reads from the episode of the windmills ("A windmill may be what you see, Sancho, said Don Quixote, but that is only because you have been enchanted by the sorceress Maladuta. If your eyes were unclouded, you would see a giant with four arms bestriding the road" (153); from the cave of Montesinos ("But your honour, said Sancho, surely you are mistaken, for you were under the earth not three days and three nights but a mere hour at most" (163, italics in original)); and finally David takes the book from Simón, and begins to read for himself, from the passage in which Quixote addresses the Duchess: "God knows whether there is a Dulcinea in this world or not," reads the boy, "whether she is fantastical or not fatansical [sic] […] These are not things that can be proved or disproved. […] I neither engendered nor gave birth to her, but I venerate her as one should venerate a lady who has virtues that make her famous through all the world" (217).

Simón and David, then, use the Quixote as a kind of primer, and in so doing they establish a set of connections between Novilla and La Mancha, connections which build a kind of bridge between the two places, and between the two novels. The process by which David learns to read doubles throughout as that by which both David and Simón learn to find their place in Novilla - to tune themselves to the nature of the reality that they encounter there; and so this tuning, this reality testing, passes through a quixotic prism – and more specifically through that peculiar seam that runs through Cervantes' novel, the seam that is marked by the coming together of Dulcinea and the cave of Montesinos. As David gazes at the pages of his abridged copy of Don Quixote – at a "picture showing Don Quixote, trussed in a cradle of rope, being lowered into a hole in the earth" (162), as well as the (Spanish?) words of which this peculiar, inaccurate and expurgated version consists – he is both learning the mechanics of reading, and investigating the process by which written language itself works; he is both learning the rules, and the rules behind the rules. David's school teachers become convinced that he has some kind of dyslexia, because he appears to struggle to learn to read – they suggest to Simón that he is "not able to read words in the right order," or "not able to read from right to left" (Coetzee 2013, 212). But it turns out that David can read perfectly well – as evidenced in his accurate reading of Quixote's discussion
with the Duchess (with the exception of his rendering 'fantastical' as 'fatansical'). David's difficulty turns out to be not with the rules, but with the rules behind the rules – with the precept that language presupposes and requires a community of readers who share a common understanding of both language and of reality. David insists that "I want to speak my own language" (186), as he says that "I don't want to read your way." "I want to read my way" (165). Simón takes on a kind of Wittgensteinian coaching role, insisting that it is not possible to have a 'private language', what Wittgenstein calls, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, a "language which describes my inner experiences and which only I myself can understand" (Wittgenstein 2001a, 256). "There is no such thing as one's own language," he says to David. "Language has to mean something to me as well as to you, otherwise it doesn't count as language" (Coetzee 2013, 186). But if Simón maintains the necessity of common understanding, David's experiments in reading insistently undermine him, suggesting a kind of private undertow, a rejection of a shared perception which is mingled with Don Quixote's own. David's reading of *Don Quixote* not only refuses to obey the conventions of reading, it also does so in league with Quixote's wilful misapprehension, his electing to see giants instead of windmills. Simón tells David that what he is doing when he reads in "his way" is not reading at all – "you can't read," he says; "you can look at the page and move your lips and make up stories in your head, but that is not reading. For real reading you have to submit to what is written on the page. You have to give up your own fantasies" (165). But David insists, like Quixote himself, that his own unschooled, unverified reading has its own legitimacy. Where the orthodox reader of *Don Quixote* might be expected to correct Quixote's misapprehensions – "To Don Quixote, it is a giant he is fighting," Simón explains to David, but "most of us [...] will agree with Sancho that it is a windmill" – David refuses to correct Quixote in this way. "He's not a windmill, he's a giant" (153). David says, just as he suggests that "really" Quixote was "under the ground three days and three nights" when he visited the cave of Montesinos (165). When David teaches himself to read, he is schooling himself in reading *through* language to some private space, some nether region into which he might lower himself. "There is a hole," he says to Simón. "It's inside the page" (166). To read, for David, is to address the page as an entry to an underground space. He sees not simply the words on the page, but also the space beneath them, where private names lie, where a private language is hidden – a language that he shares only with Don Quixote. Simón presents David with the word 'Quixote', written on the page ("there is Quixote, with the big Q" (161)), but David refuses to read it, seeing it only as the sign for another name, as yet unrevealed. In the phrase that echoes throughout *Don Quixote*, a frustrated Simón begs David to see true – to "come to your senses" (160) – but David insists that Quixote is "not his real name," any more than is Alonso Quixano – that one can only discern Don Quixote, can only *read* him, by suspending the business of naming altogether.

Simón, as I say, seeks to correct David, to bring him to his senses as the priest and the Bachelor seek to bring Quixote to his senses. But it soon becomes apparent, both to Simón and to the reader, that to find one's way in Novilla requires one to learn to read after David's fashion, to find the hole in the page where the true names are hidden. Novilla, as its name suggests, is a new space – *a tabula rasa* where everyone who arrives is 'washed clean' of their memories of a former life. It is a kind of post-colonial, postnational space, in which everyone is a migrant from history, seeking asylum from the way things actually are, or were. But, as its name also suggests, Novilla is a novel space, a space made out of fiction. Coetzee has recently written that
"access to the other world – a world distinct from and in many ways better than our own" is gained "by giving the self up to fiction" (qtd. in Seshagiri 2013, 647), and the business of arriving in Novilla, like Costello's arrival "at the gate" at the close of Elizabeth Costello (Coetzee 2003, 193-225), involves this kind of giving up, this surrender to the novel. It is beautifully paradoxical that the currency adopted in Coetzee's Novilla is the 'real.' Money, of course, is the least real of substances. It is one of those "things," as Simón puts it, "that are not just themselves" (2013, 132). Money always stands in for something else; but money in Novilla, in referring not only to an abstract value but also to the currency of Cervantes' La Mancha, achieves a different kind of reality. The community in Novilla, trading as it does in the real, is summoned into being through its associations with a Cervantine economy, one which finds both value and reality endorsed through the capacity of things to become not simply what they are, but what we imagine them to be – an economy which continually questions, in Auerbach's phrase, "reality's right to be what it is" (2003, 345). One of the extraordinary achievements of The Childhood of Jesus is its capacity to summon a world which trembles constantly on the brink of a kind of transmutation, in which things seem always ready to yield to ideas, in which the reality of the surface covers thinly over the cave-like depths of myth, allegory, theology. As Quixote can look at an inn and see a castle, as he can look at a barber's basin and see 'Mambrino's helmet,' so the peculiarly fissile reality of Novilla is ready always to reshape itself around the hidden name that it harboors, and to collapse into that Cervantine world that is enclosed within it. If Mambrino's helmet appears to Sancho, and to the world, to be a barber's basin, this, Quixote declares, "is no consequence to me, who knows what it really is" (163); so, Simón can look at Inés – a woman neither he nor David have seen before – and know her to be David's mother, with a kind of innate knowledge that is simply immune to the claims of ordinary reality, a kind of knowledge whose "verification cannot be carried out to the full," (Cervantes 1950, 680) which can be "neither proved nor disproved" (Coetzee 2013, 217; we may remember the monologue of Samul Beckett's unnameable narrator here: "Innate knowledge of my mother, for example, is that conceivable?" (Beckett 1994, 300)). Simón is told his recognition of Inés is a "delusion" (Coetzee 2013, 84), as Quixote's recognition of the enchanted Dulcinea in Aldonza Lorenzo, or in the body of a Manchegan peasant girl smelling of garlic, is a delusion; but, Simón says, "I have no doubt that she is the boy's true mother. […] It is not from the past that I recognise Inés, but from elsewhere. It is as if the image of her were embedded in me" (98). If it is the case that, as Simón says to David, "we are like ideas" (133) – "ideas are everywhere" he says, "the universe is instinct with them. Without them there would be no universe, for there would be no being" (115) – then the reality of Novilla is always ready to give way to this likeness.

The relations between Novilla and La Mancha, then, suggest the victory of ideas over things, or what Vargas Llosa calls the "infection" of reality with "pure fiction" (2005, 126). But if this is the case, it is so only to the extent that the opposite is also the case – to the extent that things exercise a kind of power over ideas. If one of the achievements of Coetzee's novel is its capacity to produce a reality which is, in Joyce's iridescent phrase, "thought-tormented" (Joyce 2000, 160), then its other equally extraordinary achievement is to fashion this shifting allegorical ground out of the most tangible of stuff. The air in Novilla can feel thin, "somewhat starved" (Coetzee 2013, 139) – as Simón complains, there is a sense that "things do not have their due weight here" (64), that "our very words lack weight" (65) – but against this insubstantiality, there is an obsessive attention in the novel to what is called 'the thing itself,' a
capacity to capture the weight, texture and grain of things in the language of the novel itself. When Simón arrives in Novilla, he takes a job as a stevedore, unloading heavy sacks of grain from a container ship to a dock, and there is in this occupation a kind of joy – the joy of feeling the weight of things pressed against one's body. Simón finds that bearing the weight of the sack on his back, as he climbs the ladder from the cargo hold, requires him to attain a certain posture, a certain attitude to things; "he is beginning to learn something about the ladder," he says, "that if you rest the chest against it the weight of the sack, instead of threatening to topple you off balance, will stabilise you" (13). If the ladder, in a Wittgensteinian analogy made by Simón later in the novel, might be imagined as a means of making the "ascent towards the good and the true and the beautiful" (141), here at the docks the ladder belongs resolutely in the realm of the material. As one of the other stevedores puts it, to "hoist a load onto our shoulders, feeling the ears of grain in the bag shift as they take the shape of our body," allows us to keep in "touch with the thing itself" (113). Fully as much as the things in this novel offer themselves as ciphers for ideas, they insist upon being what they are. It may be that we "partake of the ideal" (133), that we are, like the universe itself, instinct with ideas; but we are also "just brute things" (132), bodies that are made of stuff, and that can be "afflicted with death" (133). If the novel captures the capacity of language to give expression to the idea, then it also and at all times suggests that language has an affinity with the body, with the brute things for which it stands.

4. Realism and Artificial Life in Cervantes and Coetzee

It is this contradiction between the real and the ideal, what Simón calls this "double nature" (133), that characterises Coetzee's realism, and that shapes his dialogue with Cervantes. Just as Don Quixote insists that his love for Dulcinea is "imprinted" in his "innermost entrails," (772) so Simón declares that the image of Inés, as David's mother, is "embedded" (98) in him; in both novels, the reaching for the ideal – for the love of Dulcinea, or for the parents' love of a child – does not only involve the release from the material but also the immersion in it. Quixote declares that the purpose of his life is to strip away the material that obscures the idea. He will, he says, "live in perpetual tears till I see Dulcinea in her pristine state" (682). But what finally emerges from the labour of Don Quixote is the recognition that this pristine state is the effect of a besmirchment, is only imaginable as it enters into a struggle with the things of the world, with the garlicky body in which spirit is immured ("first dirty," Beckett writes, "then make clean" (Beckett 1994, 302)). The mechanics of Cervantes' realism, the mechanics of Coetzee's realism, are tuned neither to escape from the material to the ideal, nor to enact the primacy of reality over fantasy – neither to allow reality to give way to pure fiction as Vargas Llosa suggests, nor to demonstrate that fiction leaves reality, as Auerbach puts it, to "flow calmly on, untouched" (2003, 345). Rather, this is a realism that seeks to make the very space of this contact palpable, to bring that connective tissue that binds us to our bodies, that binds words to what words mean, that binds being to the idea of which being is made, into the sphere of the thinkable; to make the very sinews of reality visible. A fear that runs through The Childhood of Jesus is that

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2 See the close of Wittgenstein's Tractatus: "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)" (2001b, 89).
there is no such connective tissue; that there is only world and idea, and nothing to connect them to each other. If this novel is concerned, fundamentally, with the question of how and whom we love, then this question is intricately interwoven with the way that we approach the linguistic and philosophical binding mechanisms of the world. David's experiments with reading are an analysis at once of the anatomy of realism and of the anatomy of love – an exploration of that material which binds one person to another, which binds words to things, and which binds us to ourselves. To make the leap between world and idea is to risk falling – falling into the emptiness that is both a kind of epistemological insufficiency, and the loss of a loved one. Coetzee's work, at least since The Master of Petersbourg, has evinced a certain obsession with this kind of falling, the dropping into "plummeting darkness" (Coetzee 1999, 121), the "plunging through the air" (21), that has stood in Coetzee's work, since The Master of Petersbourg, for the loss of one's son, for the wracking grief that a parent feels for a dead child. The mournful lines from Goethe's "Erlkönig" that make their way into The Childhood of Jesus give a kind of bleak European colour to this threat. 

David sings:

Wer reitet so spät durch Dampf und Wind?
Er ist der Vater mit seinem Kind;
Er halt den Knaben in dem Arm,
Er füttert ihn Zucker, er küsst ihm warm. (Coetzee 2013, 67)

Who rides by night in the wind so wild?
It is the father, with his child.
The boy is safe in his father's arm,
He holds him tight, he keeps him warm. (Goethe 1983, 87)

The opening of the song suggests the protection that a father might offer his son, but calls irresistibly to Goethe's conclusion:

Dem Vater grausets, er reitet geschwind,
Er hält in Armen das ächzende kind,
Erreicht den Hof mit Müh und Not;
In seinen Armen das Kind war tot. (86)

Now struck with horror the father rides fast,
His gasping child in his arm to the last,
Home through thick and thin he sped:
Locked in his arm, the child was dead. (87)

When David contemplates the leap from word to thing, he risks being wrenched from his father's grasp – he risks falling into death, as Dostoevsky's son Pavel slips from his father's grasp in The Master of Petersbourg. But the difficult discovery of Coetzee's work – "a truth," he writes, "that wrings the heart" (121) – is that this risk is what realism entails. The truth, Coetzee's Dostoevsky recognises, is that "we live most intensely while we are falling," when we cast ourselves into the "plummeting darkness" that extends between "here" and "there" (121). As much as The Childhood of Jesus expresses a fear of that falling, it recognises too that the novel's urge is to plunge into this space, because it is here, in the midst of the fall, that we brush against the fabric of love, the fabric of being itself, and that we come closest to making such fabric thinkable. As David retreats into his private language, and as Simón becomes frustrated with his obstinate refusal of the protocols of shared life, an interval opens in the novel in which this space becomes suddenly available, this yawning gap between words, where all is lost, but also where the very possibility of the real might lie. "He
looks into the boys eyes," the narrator says: "For the briefest of moments he sees something there. He has no name for it. It is like – that which occurs to him in the moment. Like a fish that wriggles loose as you try to grasp it. But not like a fish – no, like like a fish. Or like like like a fish. On and on" (187).

As Simón looks into David's eyes here, he looks into that bottomless emptiness for which there is no name, the emptiness into which Dostoevsky's Pavel falls, the emptiness into which Goethe's son falls, the emptiness which threatens to swallow up the devout love for the child with which this novel is infused. But what he sees here also, for the briefest of moments, is the fugitive anatomy of shared being, upon which love, thought, and reality itself are based.

It is this glimpse that lies at the heart both of Coetzee's realism, and of Cervantes' – the glimpse of a seam between the word and the thing, between the real and the ideal, that is not itself nameable, but which grants the name its signifying, world-making, self-making power. We live most intensely, Coetzee's Dostoevsky says in *The Master of Petersburg*, when we are falling. The purest form of life, life in its pristine state, might reside in that plummeting dark, in the plunge to a space that contains no body, and no idea. The descent into this space is what Don Quixote, bravest of knights, risks, as he prepares to lower himself into the cave of Montesinos. The desire that thrills through the work both of Cervantes and Coetzee is the desire to give oneself to this uncontaminated being. For both writers, the ultimate drive is perhaps towards a kind of nudity, a kind of life which has, in Flaubert's resonant phrase, no "external attachments" (Flaubert 1954, 131), which cannot be "afflicted with death" (Coetzee 2013, 113), or weighted down with any of the crude, embarrassing appurtenances of being. "I would have wished," Cervantes writes in the prologue to *Don Quixote*, "to present it to you naked and unadorned (monda y desnuda)" (26, Cervantes 1928, xvii). At the heart of *Don Quixote* is a kind of love, a kind of wisdom, that does not clothe itself in chivalric rhetoric, any more than Dulcinea presents herself in the body of a peasant girl, and it is this spirit in its naked form that the book sets out to capture. The book desires to be naked, as Sancho is naked after he frees himself from the falsehoods of power that the cruel Duke and Duchess grant him when they make him 'governor' of his own 'isle.' "Tell the Duke my master," he says, as he leaves behind his isle, "that naked I was born and naked I am now" (814). Cervantes wants *Don Quixote* to be naked and unadorned, but he knows, from the beginning, that such nakedness is not possible, or at least that one can only aspire to nakedness by clothing oneself, in the 'ornament' of a self-cancelling prologue, as much as in Quixano's rusty armour, or Mambrino's golden helmet. One is most alive when one is falling, but this kind of life does not come to thought, without some kind of artificial extension, some kind of prosthetic, and in Cervantes, in Coetzee, the very possibility of realism emerges from this play between a naked life, a pristine life which has no extension, and the forms of artificial life, bound to us with that word 'like,' with which we make for ourselves a shared world, a world that we can share with those we love.

This difficult play between the real and the artificial, in the very nucleus of realism itself, is caught perhaps most powerfully in the shared fascination in Cervantes and Coetzee with hands, and with eyes – those most intimate of bodily extensions. "For what I told you of," Quixote says, as he insists on the reality of the cave of Montesinos, "I saw with my own eyes and touched with my own hands" (621). The hands and the eyes are our means of touching and seeing, of reaching out to the world around us – as David finds when he resorts to a kind of braille in his attempt to read *Don Quixote* in 'his way.' "I'm reading," he says, "I'm reading through my fingers" (161). But it is the
central discovery of *Don Quixote* that, in the heartland of the hand, and of the eye, there lies a kind of emptiness, a suspension of the very forms of reality that one seeks to verify when one feels, when one sees. Even if the prologue to *Don Quixote* is a falsehood, Cervantes' friend tells him as he frets about whether he should write it or not, he should not worry too much, because "they cannot cut off the hand you wrote it with" (28). Cervantes' bodily integrity, his friend tells him at the outset, cannot be compromised by the adornment, the ornament of *Don Quixote*. But of course the discovery of the novel is that the hand, the eye, require a narrative supplement, are not nakedly, simply themselves. To rob Quixote of his lady is to rob him of his eyes, as his eyes 'partake of the ideal,' are made of the fantasy they gaze upon. And his hands, too, are made both of sinew and of fiction. "Take this hand," Quixote says to one of his female admirers, "that you may gaze on the structure of its sinews, the interlacement of its muscles, the width and capacity of its veins" (393). The hand is offered here as the proof of a kind of bodily reality – which calls to the hand in the prologue, Cervantes' own hand, which was injured in the battle of Lepanto, and which, Cervantes writes in *The Epistle to Mateo Vásquez*, "was bruised and shattered past all human aid" (qtd. in Byron 1978, 132) ("Let the cruel loss of your hand be forgotten," says Coetzee's JC, in *Diary of a Bad Year* (Coetzee 2008, 222)). This is the biological hand which can be afflicted with death, but it is also of course the imagined hand of knight errantry, the hand with which he feels for the truth of the cave of Montesinos, and which he pledges to his lady Dulcinea. "Take this hand," he says, "or rather this scourge of the world's malefactors. Take this hand, which no other woman's has touched, not even hers who has complete possession of my whole body" (393).

Quixote's body is made of flesh, and it is made of his love of Dulcinea, and the two are twined together, just as eyes and hands in Coetzee's work are an amalgam of the real and the ideal. David has an accident at the close of *The Childhood of Jesus*, in which he burns his hand and is temporarily blinded by a flash of magnesium. The injury grants him access, he thinks, to an invisible world, to the world perhaps that Quixote sees and feels, with hands and eyes, in the cave of Montesinos. The blindness that he suffers, like Quixote when he imagines himself to have become 'empty' and 'counterfeit,' does not mean that he cannot see others around him, but that they cannot see him, that he has slipped out of the world, into that space in which Pavel plunges, into that space without name, that hole in the page. "I keep telling you," David says, "I can see, only you can't see me" (274). But the doctor who treats David insists that his invisibility does not free him from his attachment to sinews, to the interlaced muscles which truss him, as Quixote is trussed in Sancho's rope. "Aha," the doctor says, "I get the picture. You are invisible and none of us can see you. But you also have a sore hand, which happens not to be invisible. So shall you and I go into my surgery, and will you let me look at the hand – look at the visible part of you?" (274).

The realism of Coetzee's novel is structured by this relationship between the visible and the invisible hand – between the hand that can be 'afflicted with death,' which hung numbly at Cervantes's side after the battle of Lepanto, and the invisible hand, the "unseen hand" (79) as Simón puts it, which directs him to Inés, and to the truth of paternal love.

5. "A true living world"

Coetzee reflects in 1987, in his acceptance of the Jerusalem Prize, on how a 20th-century South African writer can take lessons on reality, and on realism, from Cervantes, 'the first of all novelists.' "How do we get," he asks, "from our world of violent..."
phantasms to a true living world" (Coetzee 1992, 98). This is a question, he suggests, that Cervantes solved "quite easily:" "He leaves behind hot, dusty, tedious La Mancha and enters the realm of faery by what amounts to a willed act of the imagination" (98). To enter a "true living world," Coetzee suggests here, one has to enter the world of the imagination. But if this seems to bring Coetzee close to Borges' and Vargas Llosa's sense that reality somehow converges with myth, with fiction, he goes on to make one of his most striking statements about the craft of writing, and the nature of realism. If Cervantes can escape into a true living world, he asks, what prevents the South African writer from doing the same? What prevents him or her, he says, is what prevents Don Quixote himself: the power of the world his body lives in to impose itself upon him and ultimately on his imagination, which, whether he likes it or not, has its residence in his body. The crudity of life in South Africa, the naked force if its appeals, not only at the physical level but at the moral level too, its callousness and its brutalities, its hunger and its rages, its greed and its lies, make it as irresistible as it is unlovable. The story of Alonso Quixano or Don Quixote – though not, I add, Cervantes' subtle and enigmatic book – ends with the capitulation of the imagination to reality, with a return to La Mancha and death. We have art, said Nietzsche, so that we shall not die of the truth. (99)

Don Quixote might "come to his senses" on his death bed, might "find his way back into the order of the world," but, Coetzee suggests, Don Quixote undergoes no such readjustment. Cervantes' "subtle and enigmatic book" refuses the pull of such reality, the "naked force of its appeals;" but this does not mean that it abandons the world, whose power continues to impose itself upon it. Rather, Don Quixote offers a model, to the writers that come after Cervantes, of an imagination that is able to find the place where world and imagination meet, where the invisible, unseen hand meets with the "visible part of you;" to find this place, and to make it, for the briefest of moments, imaginable. To do so, though, means that the quivering stuff of naked, undaunted, life, that we feel "most intensely while we are falling," does not come to us unalloyed. To live is to couple the quickness of being with the artificial appendage, the dead hand, the "dead eye" with which David's despicable teacher coldly regards him in the Childhood of Jesus. As Quixote himself puts it, his love for Dulcinea inducts him into a "...welcome state that mingles life and death." "And so," he says, "by life I'm slain, [...] living I die" (80). Art might stop us from dying of the truth; but the anatomy of realism, as revealed by Cervantes, and by Coetzee, demands that it is also made of it, as the imagination binds itself, with joy, with despair, and with love, to the dying things of the world.

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