Laberinto

An Electronic Journal of Early Modern Hispanic Literatures and Cultures



Special Issue: Cervantes In His 400th Anniversary In China

vOlUmE 10, 2017

LABERINTO JOURNAL 10 (2017)

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Laberinto is sponsored by the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (ACMRS), affiliated with the Spanish Section at the School of International Letters and Cultures (SILC), Arizona State University, and published in Tempe, Arizona.

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Salvador Dalí's Don Quixote: High Art or Kitsch?

William Daniel Holcombe Clemson University

Catalonian artist Salvador Dalí entered into the print history of illustrated editions of Don Quixote as an illustrator in the early twentieth century, at a time when many book illustrators began to wield free reign toward the development of their own artistic agendas. Frequently, such agendas were favored at the expense of accurate pictorial reinterpretations of the original narratives they sought to illustrate. Dalí developed his now famous paranoiac-critical method, which enabled the artist to focus on rendering oneiric imagery in paintings and other works. His textual illustrations, such as in Macbeth (1946) and Don Quixote (1946), although reflecting the artist's interest in dream imagery, did not promote an agenda that displaced the complexities of Shakespearean or Cervantine narratives. Rather, his methodologies added layers of didactic and pedagogical qualities to his book illustrations that complemented the original narrative. Yet despite Dalí's specific methodology and adherence to the complex nuances of the narration, his overall oeuvre was labeled as kitsch. This was due, in part, to his association with Surrealism that, by the 1940s, was considered by many as low art.

One of the most influential early-twentieth century North American art critics and essayists, Clement Greenberg, described Surrealism in 1944 as an artistic movement that at once influenced the arts and inspired the expression of political dissatisfaction. Such an expression seemed to validate Surrealism for Greenberg. While some surrealists remained true to their sociopolitical foundation by focusing on "revivalist socialism," the critic noted, others fomented a new "aestheticism and religiosity." The orthodox surrealists maintained their focus on socialism while an international bohemia of surrealists branched off who wished to "change life on the spot, without waiting for the revolution" ("Review" 225). Dalí clearly belonged to this second group because he rejected automatism and distanced himself from European Surrealism to develop his new methodologies. Indeed, while Greenberg was characterizing Surrealism in 1945 as a simple fixation on pictorial anecdotes ("Surrealist" 230), Dalí was already painting complex compositions with high-quality colorization and,

at the same time, was creating the watercolor illustrations and sketches for Random House and The Illustrated Modern Library's *The First Part of The Life and Achievements of the Renowned Don Quixote de la Mancha*, published the next year in 1946.¹

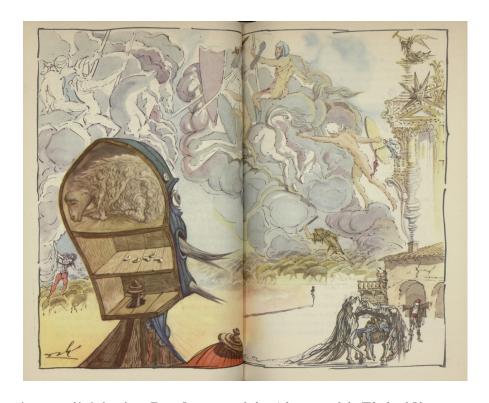


Fig. 1. Dalí, Salvador. Don Quixote and the Adventure of the Flock of Sheep. 1946.
Offset watercolor. Cervantes Project. Texas A&M University.
© Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 1946.

In Greenberg's earlier seminal essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," published in 1939 in the *Partisan Review*, the critic had already written very politically-charged analyses of the relationship between the avant-garde, kitsch, and socialism. Greenberg noted that while "among the hopeful signs

in the midst of the decay of our present society," some art critics did not agree with the assessment that nothing new could be produced in the art world (6). What resulted in the 1930s and 40s was kitsch, a new cultural reaction—or overreaction—produced in the West that Greenberg defined as "popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc." (11). Concomitantly, it was also a direct result of the Industrial Revolution, "which urbanized the masses of Western Europe and America and established what is called universal literacy" (11). Yet the universality of such a concept of literacy—when considering the reception of Surrealism and kitsch—was instead deeply divided in early-twentieth century United States. The elite sought to collect it while the popular culture bought into its hype and purchased the products it was manipulated to promote. Yet, how did academia, specifically art historical studies, fit into this dichotomy?

Art historian Sandra Zalman considers Greenberg's 1939 essay as his first major contribution to art history (48), in which the critic traced the difference between urban and rural, capitalist and socialist, receptions of kitsch, the avant-garde, and Surrealism:

Kitsch is deceptive. It has many different levels, and some of them are high enough to be dangerous to the naive seeker of true light. A magazine like the New Yorker, which is fundamentally high-class kitsch for the luxury trade, converts and waters down a great deal of avant-garde material for its own uses. Nor is every single item of kitsch altogether worthless. Now and then it produces something of merit, something that has an authentic folk flavor; and these accidental and isolated instances have fooled people who should know better. (Greenberg, "Avant-Garde" 13)

Yet Greenberg also rejected Surrealism's anecdotal foundation on imagery produced from the unconscious mind. Art curator and author Scott Rothkopf notes that Greenberg "categorically opposed Surrealism's pursuit of the unconscious, particularly as practiced by Salvador Dalí" (67). Rothkopf reaffirms that the "psychosexual concerns" marketed as sexualized imagery and "sexual motifs implicit in early Pop Art" were considered by art critics such as Greenberg as "nothing more than a curious

side show" (67). Such a side show actually documented that the sexualized imagery found in many of Dalí's paintings from the 1940s reflected how the painter began to render (desublimate) his previously sublimated sexuality from the earliest traces of his artistic and classically-trained trajectory. This sexuality was also part of what made Surrealism and many of Dalí's works sell in the United States, kitsch or not, Pop Art and curious side show or not. It is essential to clarify, specifically regarding Dalí's overall oeuvre in comparison with his 1946 *Don Quixote*, that kitsch—in Dalí's case, often resulting from the overuse of previously sublimated sexuality—represented the inspiration behind popular culture's attraction to Dalí's paintings and other works, while colorful classical compositions represented the academic attraction to the illustrations of *Don Quixote*. Therefore, the only way to remove the kitschy categorization from Dalí's 1946 *Don Quixote* is to separate the illustrations from the artist's overall oeuvre based entirely on classicism and pedagogy as framing referents.

In her monograph, Consuming Surrealism in American Culture (2015), Zalman explains that in addition to the classics, Surrealism had an immense impact on society, marketing, art, and art history in the mid-twentieth century United States. While it challenged the role of politics in art and the concept of the museum as a legitimate venue for surrealist works, as mentioned by Greenberg, it also complemented popular photography, as well as the newly popular magical realism movement taking hold in the North American target reading audience. The author concludes: "Framed and re-framed for American audiences, Surrealism acted as a platform to challenge traditional ideas of modern art, because it presented art as a conceptual program that participated in contemporary life—from political events to consumer culture" (2).

Zalman also explains that Surrealism's revolutionary history was suppressed in North American cultural echelons so that both the cultural elite and the North American everyman from the emerging middle class after World War II could consume its imagery. Indeed, Dalí was advertised heavily while André Breton, as a French poet whose revolutionary ideals were widely known, was suppressed (26). The elite followed art critics such as Greenberg and were heavily influenced by art historians such as Alfred Barr, who was the first director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The North American common man, representing the emerging middle class, for the most part relied on journalists not very well-versed in

art or art history to tell them what to think of Surrealism. Art historian Keith L. Eggener explains:

Most Americans who knew something about Surrealism, however, got their information from printed accounts. American newspapers and magazines began discussing Surrealism with increasing regularity as early as 1925, just one year after the publication of André Breton's first Manifesto of Surrealism. By the mid-1930s articles on Surrealist art and artists could be found in a broad range of illustrated high-circulation periodicals, including Time, Life, and Newsweek. American authors writing in these publications associated Surrealism almost exclusively with the illusionist branch of the movement, the branch represented by Dali. (32)

By the time Dalí and his wife Gala lived in exile in the United States in the 1940s, Surrealism had already laid the foundation for the reception of his art as consumerism and kitsch, and as such, paired nicely with Dalí's carefully crafted, over-the-top, public persona designed to promote and sell his own work. Both Dalí and the 1946 Don Quixote were encapsulated and limited by this phenomenon, partly due to Random House successfully targeting popular class readers during and after World War II, and Dalí's own public antics that did not always turn out as he planned. The unfortunate result was that some of Dali's high art—especially within the genre of textual illustrations—was overlooked. Yet if one searches for pedagogical and didactic traces within Dalinian book illustrations, the 1946 Don Quixote stands out because it provides them in plenitude, especially when one realizes that these traces are, instead, the primary foundation of the illustrations' compositions. As such, they can be considered high art precisely because of these pedagogical and didactic themes, ones that were often glossed over when offhandedly labeled as Dalinian kitsch. Thus, contemporary and later scholars grouped Dalí's Don Quixote illustrations into the mix of consumerist low art, in part, because the text was directed towards popular class readers and not for elitist collectors.

The first three watercolor illustrations of Dalí's 1946 *Don Quixote* comprise a grouping based on compositional and methodological similarities that are very different from the other seven color illustrations in the edition. They are significant because they document Renaissance and

Baroque classical methodologies that are observable within the pictorial compositions.³ For example, in these three watercolors, Dalí creates strong diagonals and four quadrants that illustrate iconic passages from Cervantes's text while utilizing Surrealism to tell his own pictorial narratives. In comparison, the other watercolors of this edition reflect more singular pictorial storylines, some of which are much more surrealistic, and are not necessarily divided so strongly into quadrants or diagonals.

These thematic Baroque methodologies make Dalí unique as an illustrator of Don Quixote, and the artist achieves this primarily through the utilization of a surreal pictorial narration within the composition. Dalí focalizes this narrative through a sculptural head figure, metaphorically representing Don Quixote's fantastic gaze and showcasing an interaction between fantasy and reality in the same picture plane. First, Dalí renders fantasy juxtaposed with reality, and later builds upon this juxtaposition at the end of the narrative, as analyzed below. Second, Dalí does not portray the protagonist as a hero, as established by previous illustrators within the print history of illustrated editions of *Don Quixote*, and which is observable in illustrations by French painter Gustave Doré, but rather as a deflated figure. This is significant because it deprives the beholder of the longestablished artistic trend that renders Don Quixote's direct gaze upon the scene, thereby limiting any given composition's thematic content to quixotic heroism. Third, Dalí does not simply juxtapose reality as surrounded by fantasy in one single illustration as mastered by Doré; rather, Dalí composes Don Quixote's reality and fantasy as interacting with each other in the same illustration, drawing the beholder into a Dalinian reinterpretation of this interaction of fantasy and reality.

To underscore why this is so unique to Dalí, one must consider Hispanic historian and philologist Miguel Romera-Navarro's opinion regarding the role that fantasy and reality have held within singular pictorial compositions: "the plastic arts do not have any means through which the two worlds [fantasy and reality] can interact and join together intimately and harmoniously in one single body, in one single image" (33-34, my translation). This statement seems to be reified when one observes Doré's oeuvre and the masterful juxtaposition of fantasy and reality.

Two other themes that set Dalí apart from other illustrators are mockery (burla) and self-deception (engaño), traits traditionally rendered by other artists who focused solely on Don Quixote as a hero. Although this

statement at first seems oxymoronic, the mocking, buffoonish nature was in reference to Don Quixote portrayed as a hero, while the laughter originated in the rendering of his self-deception and the fact that he wielded a sword and lance. It was simply fall-down funny that an older, mad gentleman had chosen to look backward toward chivalry as his guiding social code. For example, Jacob Savery created 26 illustrations for the first fully-illustrated edition of *Don Quixote* published in 1657 in The Netherlands. The compositions of these illustrations were considered nothing short of slapstick, as Cervantist Mark McGraw observes: "Jacob Savery's Don Quixote is an overwhelmingly martial, but slapstick character. Don Quixote appears in twenty-one of the twenty-four chapter illustrations in [this] edition, and he has his sword drawn or lance in hand in all but four of those" (116).

These character traits are not present in Dalí's Don Quixote. While Dalí molds Don Quixote as clearly un-heroic, the artist does not compose a burlesque pictorial narrative that mocks Don Quixote's heroic self-deception; rather, he satirizes it by focusing his sad reality as counterpoint to the oneiric fantasy that dominates the illustrations. More importantly, as stated above, Dalí satirizes Don Quixote's metaphoric, fantastic gaze as observing reality in a pictorial narrative that suggests an interaction between reality and fantasy, a concept adamantly rejected by Romera-Navarro. While such a gaze can be considered satirical, it also lacks a moral judgment that readers and beholders had become accustomed to by the Romantic period of the nineteenth century. Therefore, Dalí's pictorial narrative forces twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers—now on this side of the universalization and romanticizing of quixotic iconography in the nineteenth century—to consult the original language for clarification, underscoring the presence of didactic qualities within Dalí's composition.

Specifically, the beholder must seek clarification in Chapter 18 of the first part of *Don Quixote*, where Cervantes wrote an iconic narrative, that of the adventure of the flock of sheep. In the previous chapter of the novel, Don Quixote realizes that the inn in which he is staying with Sancho is not really a castle, but merely a simple inn. They decide to leave without paying, and as a result, three guests at the inn force Sancho from his donkey and toss him into the air with a blanket, another iconic moment often rendered in illustrated editions. Later, while contemplating the details of chivalry on

the road, they encounter two flocks of sheep converging in the distance in a great cloud of dust:

As Don Quixote and his squire were having this conversation, Don Quixote saw a large, thick cloud of dust coming toward them along the road they were traveling, and when he saw it, he turned to Sancho and said: "This is the day, O Sancho, when the good fortune that destiny has reserved for me will be revealed! This is the day, I say, when, as much as on any other, the valor of this my arm will be proved, and I shall perform deeds that will be inscribed in the book of Fame for all time to come. Do you see that cloud of dust rising there, Sancho? Well, it conceals a vast army, composed of innumerable and diverse peoples, which is marching toward us." "If that's the case, there must be two," said Sancho, "because over in the opposite direction there's another cloud of dust just like it. Don Quixote turned to look, and he saw that it was true; he was overjoyed, thinking, no doubt, that these were two armies coming to attack and fight each other in the middle of that broad plain. Because at all times and at every moment his fantasy was filled with the battles, enchantments, feats, follies, loves, and challenges recounted in books of chivalry, and everything he said, thought, or did was directed toward such matters. The dust clouds he saw had been raised by two large flocks of ewes and rams traveling along the same road from opposite directions, which could not be seen through the dust until they were very close. (Don Quixote I, 18; 125- $26)^4$

This passage, in which Don Quixote reinterprets reality within his mad fantasy, is much more complicated than the more famous narrative that describes his battle with the windmills. This narrative is much longer, for instance, and throughout the chapter, Don Quixote explains to Sancho that the armies he sees consist of "people from diverse nations" and that some of them are "clad in iron, ancient relics of Gothic blood" (*Don Quixote* I, 18; 128). They are medieval knights that pose a greater threat than the giants of the windmills.

Yet Sancho realizes that they are simply two flocks of sheep moving toward each other:

Lord save me! [...] Señor, may the devil take me, but no man, giant, or knight of all those your grace has mentioned can be seen anywhere around here; at least, I don't see them; maybe it's all enchantment, like last night's phantoms. [...] Your grace, come back, Señor Don Quixote, I swear to God you're charging sheep! Come back, by the wretched father who sired me! What madness is this? Look and see that there are no giants or knights, no cats or armor or shields either parted or whole, no blue vairs or bedeviled ones, either. Poor sinner that I am in the sight of God, what are you doing? (Don Quixote I, 18; 128-30)

This language represents the third iconic narrative in Part 1 of the novel, which Dalí chose to reinterpret for his third color illustration of the 1946 edition.

Dalí's interpretive pictorial narrative begins in the lower left quadrant where the predominant figure is a sculptural, clearly wooden, open-headed Don Quixote. This figure is situated in reality and functions as a narrator and focalizer that guides the beholder's gaze upon both reality and fantasy. Yet its metaphorical gaze—upon both the fantastic representations in the sky as well as the satirized reality of Don Quixote entering the inn—foreshadows an interaction between reality and fantasy. The real Don Quixote is unable to gaze upon the scene, thereby negating the beholder an interpretation composed as if viewed by protagonist Don Quixote, a perspective commonly rendered by previous illustrators.

Dalí divides this sculptural head into three compartments in which the beholder views a sheep, beans, and an architectural wooden fastener that suggests that the head wobbles back and forth but does not fall to the ground, serving as a literal interpretation of, if not a conceptual allusion to, the English idiom "tilting at windmills," itself derived from *Don Quixote*. The beans represent war for the artist, as can be observed in one of Dalí's earlier paintings: *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)* (1936). Dalí emphasizes this figure's gaze upon the scene by forming representations of eyes, which "gaze" upon the right-hand quadrants.

In the lower right quadrant, Dalí forms Don Quixote's reality, rendering the inn, the innkeeper and his wife, and Rocinante, his horse, behind which the beholder observes Sancho Panza and his ass, or donkey.

Don Quixote rides on the donkey's back while Rocinante is so emaciated that the beholder can view Don Quixote sprawled across the donkey within the space between the horse's belly and the ground. Don Quixote lies on his back, with his head at the rear of the donkey, and they are clearly arriving at the inn. The lower right-hand imagery undercuts and satirizes the "real" Don Quixote and Sancho Panza at the inn, an occurrence in the narrative that happens before the adventure with the flocks of sheep.

In this quadrant, one of the shepherds who tries to control his flock, is another actor within Dalí's reinterpretation of Don Quixote's reality. Additionally, the artist inserts his famous leitmotif of a small, almost indistinguishable figure that here casts a long shadow to the left, indicating a setting sun. This figure wears a red hat and red sash, just like the innkeeper. The shadow it casts is most significant because it suggests that the figure is female. Within the shadow, the shoulders and slightly-lowered head allude to the mother figure in *El ángelus* by François Millet. This figure likely represents a peasant woman or laborer, as Dalí often signals both absence and anguish through allusions to Millet's work.⁵

As the beholder's gaze moves up to the upper right quadrant in this pictorial narrative, the smoke from the inn transforms into a castle, signaling the narrative focalization toward fantasy. Dalí renders this castle as a church and a Catholic theme is linked to Sancho's use of Catholic vocabulary—devil, God, and father—in the narrative from the scene this image illustrates, as cited above. Within the swirl of the clouds in the sky, Dalí forms naked knights with only a hint of protective armor. One wears a helmet, one carries a shield, and members of the opposing army, also naked, wield lances. Clearly, Dalí satirizes Don Quixote's narration of what he sees as medieval knights by removing their clothing and armor. The two clouds produced by the two flocks of sheep meet slightly left of top center where the two armies are about to clash. Yet Dalí renders the army on the left in simple black and white sketches, with no color, alluding to a caricaturized performance by the actors in the imagined battle.

The figure in the lower left quadrant with red pants represents a second shepherd who, like a stagehand, attempts to pull back the cloud as a theatrical curtain and signals with his other hand the existence of his flock of sheep. This figure, although easy to overlook, in my view, represents the most important actor in this illustration. I interpret it as the only figure in this composition that is based in Don Quixote's reality, but which also

"physically" interacts with fantasy through its actions. It is a simple shepherd tending to its flock, yet it signals the fantasy unfolding beyond the theatrical curtain that is rendered here as a cloud of dust by holding the dusty curtain aside to indicate and recognize the fantasy in the sky beyond. Dalí clearly challenges Romera-Navarro's insistence that reality and fantasy cannot interact in a single image precisely because this figure touches and moves the clouds, facilitating the beholder's gaze—and the metaphoric gaze of the sculptural head—upon the fantastic rendering in the sky.

Dalí therefore situates this figure in both reality and fantasy, representing what I consider to be the most important modeling the artist creates within the first three watercolor illustrations of the 1946 *Don Quixote*. On one hand, by going against Romera-Navarro's notion of the impossibility of interaction between reality and fantasy, it presents an example of pedagogy within the pictorial composition by inspiring both readers and beholders to investigate the themes presented. On the other, it demonstrates that Dalí carefully contemplated both Cervantes's original narrative and the methodologies, styles, and forms that previous illustrators utilized to reinterpret it. Both actions suggest that Dalí maintained a respect of epic Cervantine storytelling that the painter faithfully reproduced.

Therefore, to classify this illustration as high art, the loyalty of Dalí's diegetic pictorial narrative to Cervantes must be underscored, a narrative that creates the greatest effect on the beholder: we no longer see through Don Quixote's noble gaze. The universalization of iconography within such a rendering began in the eighteenth century and continues to the present day, underscoring Don Quixote as a heroic figure whose morality inspires emulation, not pity. Dali's third watercolor leaves the beholder with no choice but to perceive Don Quixote as a deflated figure precisely because the artist forms a character narrator—the sculptural Don Quixote head whose gaze inspires the beholder to "read" the illustration as if it were a text. As such, our gaze is focalized by this character narrator as we follow along, viewing Dalí's rendering of the "real" Don Quixote as a fool lying atop Sancho's ass. This deflates and satirizes the protagonist and forces us to view him as humorous. By challenging both reader and beholder in this manner, Dalí created what can be considered a representative example of Dalinian high art, and as a result, the artist carved out a unique niche for himself as one of many illustrators of one of the most famous novels in history.

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¹ It is important to clarify that Dalí first illustrated *Don Quixote* for Random House and The Illustrated Modern Library in 1946, but would later illustrate subsequent editions in the 1950s and 60s. In the 1946 text, Dalí raised anecdotal narrative to pictorial diegetic narrative through classical imagery and Baroque methodologies that challenged the beholder to consult the original text for clarification. That is, while Dalí's renderings of Cervantes's narrative were anecdotal, the artist's methodologies added additional pedagogical value to the images.

² For desublimation and Dalí, see Robin Adèle Greeley.

³ See Holcombe for similar analyses of these methodologies in the second offset watercolor from Dalí's 1946 edition, *Don Quixote and the Windmills*. In that image, Dalí also formed a sculptural head figure and molded it into a metaphoric narrator and diegetic focalizer, affecting the beholder in much the same manner.

⁴ All passages quoted from *Don Quixote* are from the 2003 translation by Edith Grossman. The parenthetical citations reflect: book, chapter number; page number.

⁵ See Dalí's book *The Tragic Myth of Millet's Angelus*.

⁶ Catholic themes coincide with Dalí's return to classicism in the 1930s and 1940s. Dalí, a self-proclaimed devout Catholic, will later utilize Catholic imagery in many of his paintings.

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