

KNIGHT-ERRANTRY OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY
IN GRAHAM GREENE'S *MONSIGNOR QUIXOTE*

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ABSTRACT

The article presents Graham Greene's 1982 *Monsignor Quixote* as a continuation of romance tradition. It demonstrates how the familiar motif of a quest undertaken by a chivalric knight errant organising the plot of the medieval genre, which conventionally revolved around the questions of truth and virtue, has been transformed by the modern novel to express the dilemmas concerning the place of spirituality in the materialist worldview of capitalism. Thus, in a series of comic adventures the titular Monsignor and his companion Zanca, a Marxist mayor, appear to be the last knights-errant, believing in either the divine design of the world or justice respectively. Their views, however, prove to be so incongruous with the reality that they are considered as sheer madness. The modern travesty of the medieval motif of quest only proves how the transformed ideology of the post-medieval times has enforced adjustments in the romance formula, which has survived in the novel, and which are accountable for its inherent parodic streak. The romance heroes with their spiritual values can but cut tragicomic figures in the modern world.

The diversification of literature into genres has always been a problematic task, since the nature of the relationship among the literary categories is unequivocal. The concept of the genre relies heavily upon the ideas of difference and discontinuity and yet nowadays most scholars agree that it is next to impossible to draw fixed generic boundaries, since genres enter in relationships one with another in all sorts of unexpected ways. Literature thus should be viewed simultaneously in terms of both continuity and discontinuity, whereas up to now, the genre theorists have overplayed either one or the other. As McKeon explains, "archetypalist theory", represented by Lévi-Strauss and Frye, "tends to overemphasise continuity and identity", whereas "its alternative approach", adopted by Auerbach and Watt, "tends to exaggerate alterity and difference" (McKeon 1988: 10). Watt and Auerbach relate the transformations of the literary form to the transformations of extra-literary reality: philosophy, religion, economic con-

ditions. Lévi-Strauss and Frye have tried to discover the perennial form, structure, or a “mythic archetype”, dissociated from content and history, epitomising that which is mutable, and thus accidental, rather than essential.

The history of the genre theory, however, demonstrated the inefficiencies of both the approaches to the development of literature, since form and content, structure and history, have proved to be entirely dependent one upon the other. Every genre, every text even, will demonstrate both the continuity and change in the history of literature. As Ortega y Gasset explains, genres are no more than “wide vistas seen from the main sides of human nature. Each epoch brings with it a basic interpretation of man. Or rather, the epoch does not bring the interpretation with it but actually *is* such an interpretation. For this reason, each epoch prefers a particular genre” (Ortega y Gasset 2000: 272). The world undergoes transformations and enforces alterations of genres, its conventions and motifs. What remains, however, in the centre of attention is the quest for truth about the world and the self. The modern genres thus adjust the medieval motifs of quest, chivalry and knight-errantry, peeling them off the heroic layer, at least in the martial sense of the word. The heroism of the modern knights-errant manifests itself in the adherence to spiritual ideals in the materialist world of the modernity. The modern chivalry, however, in the modern genres does not function as a role model. Quite the reverse is true, due to its incongruity with the modern ideology, chivalry is conventionally represented as another form of madness.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how the conventions of the medieval romance serve to portray the 20th-century quest for the meaning of the world on the example of Graham Greene’s 1982 *Monsignor Quixote*. The novel borrows the idea of a quest from medieval romance, the spirituality and nobility of the protagonist put him on a par with medieval knights-errant. However, the changed context of the chivalric story, as the action is set in contemporary Spain, produces a parodic effect, which situates Greene’s text in the centuries-old quixotic tradition. The novel thus, on the one hand, relies on romance formula to describe the human endeavours to comprehend the surrounding reality and the attempts to construct a noble code of conduct, on the other the parodic strain betokens its indubitable modernity and the modern “interpretation of man” and his dilemmas (Ortega y Gasset 2000: 272).

The source of the parodic strain in the novel is the adjustment of the romance formula to the ordinary experience, or rather the recognition of the romance formula underlying the realistic plot. The assumption in such a kind of reasoning is that romance can never represent the reality as it actually is, that its formula of quest pursued by a knight to prove his virtues was but a fictional design imposed upon a virtually meaningless and chaotic world. This conclusion is all the more justified given the fact that romances even in the chivalric world of the Middle Ages, in which knights-errant were not yet an anachronism, were regarded as

idealised and nostalgic pictures of the chivalric times. As de Rougemont says: “It is possible that chivalry as such originated as an ideal, since the first authors who mention it are mourning its decline. In other words, they mourn the decline of the ideal, at the moment when it is coming into existence” (de Rougemont 1999: 23). Huizinga describes the chivalric ethos as fiction used by chroniclers to impose certain order to the disorganised and unintelligible flux of events.

The conception of chivalry constituted for these authors a sort of magic key, by the aid of which they explained to themselves the motives of politics and history. ... It served them as a formula to understand in this poor way, the appalling complexity of the world’s way. What they saw about them was looked primarily mere violence and confusion. ... [T]hey required a form for their political conceptions, and here the idea of chivalry came in. By this traditional fiction they succeeded in explaining to themselves, as well as they could, the motives and the course of history, which thus was reduced to a spectacle of honour of princes and the virtue of knights, to a noble game with edifying and heroic rules (Huizinga 1955: 68).

The novel, as a modern genre, can in many respects be seen as a more self-conscious form of romance, which borrows the motifs of quest and chivalry to address the perennial questions of truth and virtue.

In *Monsignor Quixote* the theme of the fictitiousness of a design or purposefulness of the world is signalled by the motif of the protagonist’s ancestry. Father Quixote’s name is not fortuitous as he is a descendant of the belated knight-errant created by Cervantes, not only in a literary but also in the literal sense of the word. Naturally, such an ancestry must provoke strong reactions. Father Quixote’s superior insists upon the necessity to maintain the distinction between the empirical and fictional reality. “How can he be descended from a fictional character?”, he asks, “a character in a novel by an overrated writer called Cervantes – a novel moreover with many disgusting passages which in the days of the Generalissimo would not even passed the censor” (Greene 1982: 12-13). The reaction of the Italian bishop of Motopo, whom Father Quixote helps to fix the car and invites to his modest dinner, is entirely different: “It is an honour for me to be a guest in the house of Don Quixote” (Greene 1982: 15), he says, and goes on to explain that there is always a possibility that “perhaps we are all fictions ... in the mind of God” (Greene 1982: 24).

The result of casting God in the role of the constructor of the plot for human lives is a rich source of humour in the novel. In one of his adventures Father Quixote conceals a runaway criminal, who according to Guardia, “robbed a bank at Benavante. Shot the cashier. Escaped on a Honda” (Greene 1982: 144), but then abandoned it. The robber, in gratitude, deprives his benefactor of shoes,

since his own had been too old and worn out to continue the escape. Father Quixote, however, never fails to see the hand of God.

Father Quixote said, 'I don't understand why you went to rob a bank ... in a pair of rotten shoes.'

'I took the wrong pair by mistake. That's why...'

...

'Whatever happened to your Honda? The Guardia said you abandoned it.'

'I ran out of petrol. I had forgotten to fill the tank.'

'Wrong pair of shoes. No petrol. It really does look as though God was against your plans.'

...

'[And what about the] poor fellow in the bank whom you killed [?]'

'I didn't kill him. I missed.'

'God does certainly seem have been working overtime', Father Quixote said, to preserve you from grave sin' (Greene 1982: 149).

The conviction about the presence of a design is so strong in Father Quixote that he is determined to look for it in the commonest occurrences around him.

The emplotment of reality, however, does not only affect Father Quixote's surrounding. It is above all his own holiday excursion that bears close relation to medieval quests. Yet, his own expedition and his worldview, which are so close to those of medieval heroes, turn out to be so ill-fitted to the modern world, that he himself refers to himself as "a poor priest-errant" on an "absurd pilgrimage" (Greene 1982: 85, 151). The direct reason why the Father sets off for the quest is an unexpected and undesired promotion to the rank of Monsignor. The priest has never been a great favourite with his superior and the promotion has only fuelled the bishop's resentment. Thus, the best idea to solve, or at least to postpone the solution of the problem, is to leave El Toboso. The idea originated from the conversation with a mayor of his town, or to be more exact, with the former mayor, who after the lost elections wanted to leave El Toboso for a while. From then on, the plot of Father Quixote's mirrors not only the medieval quests, since it becomes for the priest revelatory about the world, different facets of faith and himself.

Monsignor's Quixote's quest is both continuous and discontinuous with the romance world and values. A little Seat 600, "which he had bought, already second hand, eight years before" (Greene 1982: 11), plays the role of his horse, "called in memory of his ancestor 'my Rocinante'" (Greene 1982: 11). Purple socks and *pechera*, the insignia of the rank of Monsignor, serve the function of armour guarding him against Guardia Civil, which, on the Mayor's admission, "respects purple socks" (Greene 1982: 68). The Mayor himself, accompanies the Father, in the capacity of a squire, although as a confessed Marxist he makes as strange a companion for the priest-errant as Sancho Pansa made for Don Qui-

xote. Mayor's name, Zanca, "the surname of the original Sancho Pansa in Cervantes' truthful story" (Greene 1982: 30), as Greene explains, only reinforces the conviction that the mismatch of the pair of travellers is intended. The father has also a lady of his heart: St Therese Martin, the patroness of priests, whose letters consoled him "when things were difficult with the bishop" (Greene 1982: 104).

The quest pursued by the priest-errant and the Marxist squire becomes a perfect opportunity to bring the materialist and the spiritual ideologies to confrontation. Although father Quixote and the Mayor at the beginning of their expeditions assert that they "disagree too profoundly to dispute" (Greene 1982: 30) they spend most of their time together on ideological debates. The conclusions are astounding: both Catholicism and Marxism turn out to be but modern facets of chivalry. The same belief in the possibility to build a just society, free of misery and evil, which informs Father Quixote's books of chivalry: "St John of the Cross, St Teresa, St Francis de Sales. And the Gospels..." (Greene 1982: 40), suffuses the Mayor's guides through the world: *Das Kapital* and *The communist manifesto*. At some point, the Mayor casually observes, "is there much difference between [a hammer and a cross]? They are both protests against injustice" (Greene 1982: 46). Father Quixote sees in Marx a second Don Quixote – "He was a very good man at heart, wasn't he? I was quite surprised by some of the things he wrote" (Greene 1982: 120), he said, quoting fragments wherein Marx, like Cervantes' hero, lamented the advent of modernity, which shattered the spirituality of the pre-modern epoch: "The bourgeoisie has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. ... It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, in the icy water of egoistical calculation" (Greene 1982: 122). Marx, in the Monsignor's eyes is a prophet of a new religion equally idealistic as his own.

The quest, however, also abounds in moments of doubts. Both the priest and the Mayor see absurdities in their religions. The most severe doubt, however, is evoked by the thought that the idealism may be as misdirected and out of place as was that of Don Quixote, that it is the modern, bourgeois world, which is in the right.

It was humanism ... which turned the pauper into bourgeois and behind humanism there is always the shadow of religion – the religion of Christ as well as the religion of Marx. We are all bourgeois today. Don't tell me that Brezhnev is not as much bourgeois as you and me. If the whole world becomes bourgeois, will it be so bad-except for dreamers like Marx and my ancestor (Greene 1982: 125).

All the dilemmas, however, flee, when Father Quixote is confronted with a scene which is a profanation of everything that he holds sacred. The sight of

Mexican procession in Galicia dispels all his doubts and galvanises him to action. The Mexican priests first put the privilege of carrying the statue of Virgin Mary up to auction and then encourage the offerings of the believers in a way that strips the effigy of all dignity.

Father Quixote could not understand what he saw. He was not offended by the customary image, with the plaster face, and the expressionless blue eyes, but the statue seemed to be clothed entirely in paper. A man pushed him to one side, waving a hundred-peseta note, and reached the statue. The carriers paused and gave him time to pin his note on the robes of the statue. It was impossible to see the robes for all the paper money – hundred-peseta notes, thousand peseta notes, a five-hundred-franc note, and right over the heart a hundred-dollar bill. ... He thought: Was it for this she saw her son die in agony? To collect money? To make a priest rich?

(Greene 1982: 227).

The remonstrance against the blasphemy, however, ends up in Father Quixote's defeat: wounded and humiliated he has to escape from Guardia Civil. His unflinching protest and the ensuing riot are seen as an act of a madman.

Father Quixote's death, which is the price for his exploit, provides an apt conclusion to his life since it seems to bring the resolution of the struggle between spirituality and materialism, idealism and capitalism, and between fact and fiction. The mad escape from the pursuit of civil guard ends in Rosinante's crashing against the wall of the monastery, where Monsignor and the Mayor expected to find shelter. In the last moments of his life, the Father sleepwalks to the church of the monastery and in his dream celebrates mass, which due to his putative mental disorder his bishop forbade him to do, with no Host and no wine and eventually gives the invisible Communion to Sancho. This scene assumes symbolical proportions since it is a clear defiance of all the irreconcilable dualities. The professor, who was a guest in the monastery and witnessed the Father's mass cast doubts upon the validity of the ceremony. Yet, the monk, who knew that it was never far from Cartesianism to faith, asked "Do you think it's more difficult to turn empty air into wine than wine into blood? Can our limited senses decide a thing like that?" (Greene 1982: 254), and thus confirmed that "one can't distinguish [fact and fiction] with any certainty" (Greene 1982: 252). He is equally convinced that Communism is but the other side of faith, trying to dispel the mayor's doubts whether he was a worthy recipient of the Communion. "Perhaps Monsignor Quixote knew your state of mind better than you do yourself. You have been friends. You have travelled together. He encouraged you to take the Host. He showed no hesitation. I distinctly heard him say, 'Kneel companero'" (Greene 1982: 254). In this way the priest-errant recognised in Sancho the same chivalric faith, which he professed in his own life.

The conclusion of Father Quixote and the Mayor's adventures puts forward an ambiguous resolution to the dilemmas of Monsignor's life. The struggle between the belief in the divine emplotment of the world and its mechanistic aimlessness, between the idealism and materialism, spiritual and bourgeois values in the scene in the scene of the mass comes to an end. Father Quixote is no longer perplexed by the world: for him it is an enactment of the divine plan, and its principles though elusive and virtually impossible to encode, rely on the foundation of God's love. The modern facets of chivalry can assume various shapes, sometimes as unexpected as that of Marxism. The irony of the resolution is that in the context of the modern, materialist, bourgeoisie world Father Quixote's chivalry appears to be an absurdity, which takes up a parodic dimension. The madman fighting against the whole world in defence of his ideals, however far from the conventional image of a knight he may be, is a clear illustration of the fact that "parody is the reverse of rhapsody ... the comic is only tragic seen from behind" (Genette 1997: 15).

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