Foreword

Ilan Stavans: 21st Century Pícaro

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When I think of Ilan, a Rolodex of mercurial, seemingly omnipresent, playfully insightful, and smart figures come readily to mind: Pantagruel, Alonso Quijano, Tom Jones, Candide, Tristram Shandy, Felix Krull, Augie March, Saleem Sinai, Melquíades, Zelig (Woody Allen), Chance (Kozinski), Gnossos Pappadopoulos (Fariñas), Brown Buffalo (Acosta), PaPa LaBas (Reed), Cantinflas, and Tin-Tan. These are all cheeky figures who dance across time and space, waking us to unduly restrictive ways of behaving. They frustrate all sorts of bounded ways of thinking. They are playfully slippery. They are all fertile interrogators and shapers of world cultures. They are our planetary *pícaros*.

While Ilan's interests are multitudinous and his erudition in all cultural matters is legendary, a very strong gravitational force pulls him repeatedly toward *Don Quixote*. So much so that now this over-abundant, most fertile, and most original source of all forms of narration in our distraught world since the early seventeenth century has become inseparably linked with Ilan's work in all its varied manifestations. To this powerful novel and its protean *pícaros*, he has devoted many brilliantly crafted essays, and in Spanglish, a translation and a graphic novel recreation. Also, Ilan's interest in *Don Quixote* and the circumstances of the *pícaro* experience appears in more or less cloaked ways in much other of his work, including writings on Cantinflas, Tin-Tan, Chespirito, and *Cien años de soledad*.

Here, I suggestively position Ilan's creative and intellectual worldview within the cultural tradition of the *pícaro*. This is a tradition that stretches back to Spain's conquest of the Americas, and its simultaneous instituting of the Alhambra Decree of 1492 that marked the violent uprooting of Moors, Roma, and Jews, and caused the massive dispersal of peoples from Spain across the

Middle East, the Americas, Turkey, the Netherlands, the Balkans, Northern Africa and Italy. It was during this period that the *pícaro* appeared in narrative fictions, in New World chronicles, and in diaries. The *pícaro*, with its socially creative ways and means of survival, landed in the literary domain as a playful, socio-politically aware character who displayed new geographical spaces and guided surprised and amused readers into them. From the margins, the *pícaro* disrupted and de-centered those traditionally centered agents of repressive power. Through episodic adventuring and quixotic play, the figure of the *pícaro* would lead readers to new deep insights and truths about society.

Malleable, imaginative, adaptive, experienced, knowledgeable, artful, humorous, and playful, the *pícaro* appears in many guises and with many faces in Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. This is so much so that Cervantes, in his role as a trickster, constantly deludes us about the real name of the main character in his novel. Many settle for *Alonso Quijano* as the name pertaining to Don Quixote before his mental derangement, but already in the first chapter, Cervantes informs the reader that he is known as *Quijada* or *Quesada* or better even *Quijana*. Cervantes also tells us the character in question spent eight days of reflection and finally came upon the definitive name he chose: Don Quixote. Then, in chapter 19, he becomes the *Caballero de la Triste Figura*, as Sancho Panza has named him, and in the second book he is known as *Caballero de los Leones* and he himself will say he is *Alonso Quijano*, *el Bueno*, and not *Don Quijote de la Mancha*. So, which is it? Alarming, in *Don Quixote* the floor is always moving. The extraordinarily conceived narrator is also ultimately unknown. Is he the anonymous individual Cervantes suggests we should accept as the narrative voice, or is he a *Morisco* (a Spanish Moor who converted to Christianity after the so-called *Reconquista*) who goes by the name of *Cide Hamete Benengeli* and who wrote the novel in Arabic. Or is the narrator the man who translated the novel from Arabic into Spanish, as we are informed by the "other narrator," the anonymous one apparently telling the story of Don Quixote in Spanish?

Almost everyone in *Don Quixote* is unreliable and a *pícaro*, the capacious narrative envelope of the *picaresque* genre. As we follow Don Quixote's episodic journey, Cervantes uses the doubleness of humor and social critique (I call this the Aesopic method in *Laughter Matters*, a book coauthored with Ilan) to reveal sociopolitical truths. The worldview of the *pícaro* becomes the container for Cervantes to deftly comingle all variety of genres: from plays, romances, short stories, novellas, and epistles to essays (on translation, for instance) and philosophical musings. In and through the worldview of the *pícaro*, Cervantes

embeds all genres—and in a novel, often meta-reflexive manner. Recall Cervantes’s exquisite layering of its fun-house mirror-like “authorship” that involves the novel having been a translation of an Arabic original. And, it is this worldview of the *pícaro* that leads the reader to experience awe of something new: the birth of the modern novel that gives a further twist to the ancient “know thyself” dictum, by making that “knowing” something akin or identical to “narrative” or “narration” or “invention” of the self.

As mentioned already, the *pícaro* and its worldview run thickly through the veins of the world’s modern cultural traditions. It runs deep through Ilan’s veins. Testimony to this is another of Ilan’s passions: Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. I love that Ilan mentions how he came to know the joys of this novel while taking care of his daily bowel needs. The relishing in the body (individual and society) and its waste is a central preoccupation of the picaresque narrative, and one that is complexly embraced in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*—a story, as it turns out, that is filtered through the lens of the racial outsider and wanderer, Melquíades who sees beyond the reality of things.

Ilan is Quixote, Lazarillo de Tormes, Melquíades, Tristram, Candide, and Zelig, among the others mentioned above. He is the inheritor, embodiment, and transmitter of the picaresque mode. Indeed, to engage with his intellectual and creative work is to embark upon a picaresque journey that will ruffle feathers, blur the lines of scholarship, opinion, and invention, and crisscross linguistic divides in ways that inspire us to think more deeply about all our waking and dreaming activities.

Ilan’s work is antithetical to disciplinary boundaries of any kind. As some note in this volume, there are those who may not have signed on to the *pícaro* impulse that informs Ilan’s worldview. His seemingly quick jumps from one subject to another in his whiplash-quick book publications have led some to dismiss his work, instead of recognizing his writings as playfully sharp interventions and epistemological contributions; or, as provocative (multilayered and multilinguistic) locutions that force us to rethink our own understanding of literary canons, language (and its repression), culture, borders, national belonging, society, history, and even today’s fragile democracy. If framed within this worldview of the *pícaro*, Ilan’s work can and does sharpen ideas about Latinx culture writ large. We may or may not agree with Ilan. However, if we welcome his *picaresque* approach and worldview, as *pícaro*-guide he will certainly keep us busy thinking sharply, playfully, and seriously about the world in which we live. And, in this way, he might help spur us forward in our active pursuit of a better life, and a better future.