Research Article
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Don Quixote’s Quixotic Trauma Therapy: A Reassessment of Cervantes’s Canonical Novel and Trauma Studies

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Abstract: This article presents a non-canonical reading of Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra’s canonical novel Don Quixote. Using a trauma theory lens (from both cultural studies and psychiatry) to understand the pre-Don Quixote character Alonso Quijano, this research first advances several new arguments as to why Quijano appears to have endured a traumatic experience of ageing. Instead of interpreting his obsessive behaviour as madness, it is argued that he engages in a form of both individual and collective therapy consisting of reading to educate himself about emotions; engaging the body in adventures; listening to others’ stories of traumatic suffering; and stimulating “empathic unsettlement” toward others and his previously traumatized self, one of the main critical suggestions advanced. This article takes an original turn in trauma studies too by putting forward that Quijano’s therapy is effective because it addresses the “central dialectic of psychological trauma.” He embarks on an imaginative and collective adventure of self-identity, transforming himself into another who is exempt from the traumatic experience; he knows without knowing and speaks without speaking. His trauma therapy occurs outside the reality of trauma or inside the “unreality” of creative expression, and this is how he endures a traumatic experience of ageing.

Keywords: Don Quixote, trauma studies, trauma, post-traumatic growth, empathic unsettlement

A Reassessment of Don Quixote and Trauma Studies

While it remains unambiguous that Cervantes’s “quixotic” vision has had an impact on a wide variety of cultural expressions, has it enriched all dimensions of cultural theory? Provoked by Robert Bayliss’s position that Don Quixote distinguishes itself by “no prescriptive guidelines” (Bayliss 14), this research focuses on Cervantes’s masterpiece with a trauma studies lens, as this is one field of cultural studies that has yet to offer a critical reading of the text. Relying on notions from both cultural studies and psychiatry, this article advances first the argument that the pre-Don Quixote character, Alonso Quijano, has experienced a trauma of ageing. Taking definitions of trauma into account, it becomes obvious that ageing can indeed be traumatic. Consider sociologist Kai Erikson’s description of trauma: “Something alien breaks in on you, smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as a line of defence” (Erikson 183). This echoes Susan Sontag’s analogy of illness as a journey to a foreign land (Sontag 3). In both old age and illness, bodies and minds turn alien and lead us to a state of helplessness. How else should we define a traumatic experience?

1 Françoise Davoine is the only trauma studies specialist to study extensively Don Quixote. Still, her research centres on the author and the text itself, as we shall discover in this article, rather than on the traumatic experiences of the character Alonso Quijano.

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Another related critical suggestion is that Don Quixote’s traumatic experience of ageing consists of an existentialist crisis, as he struggles to comprehend the meaning of existence in the autumn of his life. To buttress this more fundamental notion that an existentialist crisis triggered by ageing can be traumatic, we turn to the research of psychiatrist and trauma theorist Henry Krystal. “In old age, as in treatment, we come to the point where our past lies unfolded before us and the question is: What should be done with it? The answer is that it must be accepted or one must keep waging an internal war against the ghosts of one’s past” (Krystal, Trauma: Explorations in Memory 78). In light of Krystal’s position, it is argued that Don Quixote’s literary and chivalric adventures help to cultivate responses to the haunting question: “What is to be done with my life as the end draws near?”

The third main finding of this research centres on Quijano’s healing experience from this traumatic experience, which involves: a) reading about traumatised characters (in order to build a lexicon of emotions); b) engaging his body in adventures; c) listening to others’ stories of trauma; d) sharing his expressions of grief with others, and e) building bonds of empathy that stimulate collective empathy (“empathic unsettlement”) toward his own traumatized self.

This research not only offers a new reading of a canonical work but also takes three original turns in trauma studies and specifically the notion of healing: first, it emphasizes the collective aspect of healing, between Cervantes’s hero and characters from the books he reads; those he encounters on his adventures; and with his own former traumatized self. Second, it puts forward that “empathic unsettlement” is effective, because it addresses precisely the “central dialectic of psychological trauma” (Herman 1), which refers to the urge to keep the traumatic experience a secret and yet to reveal it. More specifically, Alonso Quijano assumes the identity of Don Quixote through reading and then embarks on an imaginative adventure, transforming himself into another who is exempt from the traumatic experience. Kindred to Melanie Klein’s play therapy for children (Klein 37-38), it is argued that his therapy leads to a form of growth because he knows without knowing and speaks without speaking. The fourth main new finding pertaining to trauma studies is that it is from outside the reality of trauma or inside the “unreality” of creative expression that one (Don Quixote) is able to grow, which amounts to an acceptance of his life.

At the heart of the matter, this rapprochement between Don Quixote, cultural studies theory, and psychiatry is designed to explore post-traumatic therapies and address the “ethical significance” of trauma studies. The underlying questions are: how can Don Quixote enhance the burgeoning field of trauma studies, how can trauma studies embellish our understanding of Don Quixote, and unabashedly, how does this interdisciplinary research offer new modes of treatment for post-traumatic recovery?  

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**Measuring the “Madness” and Trauma of Alonso Quijano**

A standard reading of Cervantes’s masterpiece is that Alonso Quijano has gone mad and transforms himself into the besotted knight-errant Don Quixote. (Like Russian nesting dolls, Don Quixote is a fictional version of Cervantes’s character Alonso Quijano.) Apparently, an obsessive-compulsive tendency to read books of chivalry is to blame for Quijano’s madness or in clinical terms, his “monomania,” “paranoid,” or “delusional disorder” (Gracia Guillén 106). The narrator sums up the circumstances surrounding his condition: “he became so absorbed in his books that he spent his nights from sunset to sunrise, and his days from dawn to dark, pouring over them; and what with little sleep and much reading his brains got so dry that he lost his wits” (Cervantes 25). Other characters, such as Quijano’s niece, the housekeeper, the curate, and the barber, among others, blame books for his madness and consequently, burn almost all of the content of his library (Cervantes 38). Their motivation to burn especially his books of poetry is spurred by the fear that

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2 Although it might appear that the field of trauma studies is concerned with exclusively “real” people, it endorses also imaginative narrative experiences, as psychiatrist Judith Herman maintains (Herman 176-77). Post-traumatic recovery, therefore, shares in common with Don Quixote and literature itself blurred lines between fiction and reality.

3 While psychoanalytic readings of literature tend to focus on the author—thus neglecting a hundred-year tradition of analysis of language, structure, culture, and the death of the author in a text—this research refrains from conjectures about Cervantes’s intentions.
his condition will only worsen: “what would be still worse, to turn poet, which they say is an incurable and infectious malady” (Cervantes 37). And yet, our hero confesses that he reads books in order to get up, thus intimating that books have not caused his madness, but rather provide a “remedy” (Cervantes 33).

This confession leads us to question the standard interpretation of Quijano’s madness and to argue that he is traumatised by a diminished state, which in turn provokes an existentialist crisis. It is in response to this crisis that Quijano absorbs himself in books and assumes the identity of Don Quixote. In short, his madness (interpreted as avid reading as well as assuming a foreign identity) is a form of therapy. This idea finds resonance in the research of psychiatrist Jodi Halpern who argues that “healing involves grieving, a process that includes phases of emotional irrationality” (Halpern 6). To categorise Quijano’s psychic disturbance as simply madness denies the possibility for irrationality to play a role in healing from trauma.

Is there other evidence to indicate that Alonso Quijano has been traumatised by the experience of ageing? Psychoanalyst Françoise Davoine appears to be one of the few critics to read trauma in Don Quixote. She argues that Cervantès’s two volumes “are the best antidepressants to heal trauma” (Davoine in Lost in Transmission loc. 2779). The text makes us laugh, thus stimulating the unconscious, including the “cut-out” unconscious, while Sancho Panza shows us how to talk and work through hardships (Davoine in Lost in Transmission loc. 2779-2782). She also maintains that the text itself serves a cathartic role for Cervantes who experienced trauma (Davoine in Lost in Transmission loc. 2854). Referring to the complete title (Don Quijote de la Mancha) and to the fact that la mancha means “stain”, she argues that the author felt the stain of “war trauma” and transfers and transforms that burden into an epic. This is how Don Quixote allegedly heals his author: “the hero’s work and science is devoted to the building of free speech and of thought, this despite the disasters of a century plagued by epidemics, religious wars, genocides, hijackings, and abuse” (Davoine in Lost in Transmission loc. 2865-2866). More recently, she maintains intriguingly that Don Quixote could heal psychoanalysis itself, as if the field had been traumatised by an overemphasis on brain sciences (Davoine Fighting Melancholia loc. 2872-2873). Still, much of her thinking about trauma revolves around the traumatic war experience of the author and how the “son” (Don Quixote) was put in charge to heal his “father” (Cervantes). Such a focus undercuts the traumatic experience of Alonso Quijano (the pre-Don Quixote character). While Davoine contends that it does not matter what caused Don Quixote’s folly, this research first considers the dyad character Alonso Quijano/Don Quixote in order to grasp the history of his trauma, folly, and post-traumatic experiences. Even if it seems tempting for psychoanalysts to approach Don Quixote from a Freudian perspective—by analysing the relationship between the “father” (Cervantes) and “son” (Don Quixote)—it should be stressed that Don Quixote is not so much the son, but rather the “stepson” of Cervantes. In the author’s note, he confesses: “for though I pass for the father, I am but the stepfather to ‘Don Quixote’” (Cervantes 22). By denying total responsibility for his hero, the author establishes an explicit distance between Don Quixote and himself.

One of Cervantes’s most remarkable literary coups confirms, in fact, the prevalence of this distance: The narrator informs us that the story of Don Quixote does not actually belong to him; he learned about it through a “mysterious Arabic manuscript” penned by Cide Hamete Benengeli (Cervantes 17). The narrator continuously reminds us of this fact throughout both volumes. Moreover, Don Quixote belongs to Alonso Quijano. He is the brainchild of Cervantes’s Quijano, and this fact creates at least a semblance of distance between the author and hero. Since the authorial hand has lost some of its force, Don Quixote appears freer to roam the world quixotically and to work out his previously traumatised self. The distance is established in order to give the traumatised the room to write his own script, not so much as a story, but as an embodied experience of growth, as “trauma is much more than a story about something that happened long ago. The emotions and physical sensations that were imprinted during the trauma are experienced not as memories but as disruptive physical reactions in the present” (van der Kolk 206).

Kindred to Davoine’s argument on Cervantes’s traumatic experiences, Josep Beá and Victor Hernández claim that Cervantes (who was in his fifties and sixties when he penned his masterpiece) created Don Quixote

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4 Davoine states, “What matters is not so much the cause of his folly...” (Davoine in Lost in Transmission loc. 101-102).

5 It is also useful to entertain the idea that “Don Quixote is not ‘about’ the character of that name: the character is just a device for holding together different kinds of narrative technique” (Eagleton Literary Theory 3).
in order to work through his “anxieties of approaching old age and death” (Beá and Hernández 143). They judge Alonso Quijano, nevertheless, more critically, arguing that Don Quixote is the “psychopathological answer to his inability to overcome the same conflict” (Beá and Hernández 143). To their mind, Don Quixote is curiously a “healthy” and “fertile” response to the author’s anxieties about ageing, whereas he is a “psychopathological” answer to Quijano’s same anxiety.

From time to time, Don Quixote hints at a previous existence defined by trauma. He confesses to his squire Sancho that he “was born to live dying” (Cervantes 362). This could mean that he suffered his whole life long from alexithymia or felt physically and/or cognitively depleted. Either way, his condition resembles an ill-defined pathology. His life story remains sealed off in a protective envelope, and hence the nebulous definition of the pre-Don Quixote character: “They will have it his surname was Quixada or Quesada (for here there is some difference of opinion among the authors who write on the subject), although from reasonable conjectures it seems plain that he was called Quexana” (Cervantes 25). The narrator’s uncertainty about the original character’s name speaks volumes about his insignificance (at least ostensibly). His identity “is of but little importance to our tale” (Cervantes 25). Readers finally meet Quijano at the end of the epic. Don Quixote has shed his armour literally and figuratively when his real self is prepared to die. Otherwise, Quijano is always presented as the other, the one who dwells in the shadow of his alter ego Don Quixote.

The very existence of a proxy character that dwells in the imagination of the character Quijano is the first piece of circumstantial evidence that he had experienced trauma. Don Quixote, the so-called brave knight, and Dulcinea, his imagined noble mistress, are remnants of his trauma. Such a reading is rooted in theory. “The traumatised individual lives outside time, in his or her own separate reality, unable to relate to the consensual reality of others” (Epstein 149). To drive home the message of separate realities, we should recall that Don Quixote makes up stories that defy the so-called reality in which he dwells. For instance, instead of telling the truth that she along with the housekeeper, curate, and barber burned Don Quixote’s books, his niece dreams up a story of a magician, a certain Sage Munaton, who arriving on a cloud, dismounted a serpent and committed an act of mischief in the library. Don Quixote snatches the bait of his niece’s overactive imagination, responding that it must have been Friston, not Munaton and that he is a sage magician, a great enemy of his (Cervantes 39). This illustrates how Don Quixote’s reality is not only unreal but surreal, while fiction becomes even more fictional. Both extreme conditions point to separate realities and signs of lingering trauma, as Epstein has reminded us.

Related to this first piece of evidence, the missing character Quijano is also the epitome of depersonalization, one of the symptoms of the massive dissociation created by trauma (van der Kolk 72). Dissociation is characterised by sensing that some other force is in control of one’s thoughts, feelings, or even actions. In metaphorical terms, it is being a passenger on one’s own ship rather than the captain. Instead of labelling his condition madness, it seems more fitting to argue that he has lost executive functioning. Psychiatrist and trauma therapist Bessel van der Kolk explains that trauma deactivates the left hemisphere, which is responsible for analytical reasoning and organising experiences into a logical sequence (van der Kolk 45). This describes Don Quixote’s behaviour as he undertakes adventures such as duelling over the exquisite beauty of his fictitious Dulcinea; fighting the supposed giants (the windmills); or battling the apparent armies (the flocks of sheep covered in dust clouds) (Chapters IV, VIII and XVIII, Vol. I). The intensity and absurdity of these imagined acts reflect the intensity of his trauma.

In her The New Wounded, philosopher Catherine Malabou claims that cerebral pathologies, such as dementia can be one of the most perplexing and intense forms of suffering (Malabou xii). This leads us to question whether Quijano might have experienced a form of cognitive decline and felt consequently traumatised. In their article “Neurology and Don Quixote,” neurologists Jose-Alberto Palmab and Fermin Palmab point out:

Cervantes portrays some of the characteristics of cognitive impairment, including . . . time disorientation: “three days passed in one hour” (part II, ch. 23); misidentification of people, such as the episode where he identified the modest priest of his town, an old acquaintance, as the “Archbishop Turpin” (part I, ch. 7), and agitation: “When they reached Don Quixote he was already out of bed, and was still shouting and raving, and slashing and cutting all round, as wide awake as if he had never slept.” (Part I, ch. 7). (Palmab and Palmab 250)
This reading provokes us to wager that Quijano’s madness could be the result of cognitive impairment. That is, it is induced by physiological changes in the brain. Following Malabou’s position of the “new wounded,” this research puts forward, nevertheless, that while Quijano might have experienced cognitive impairment, he also might have experienced psychic disturbances (trauma) associated with that cognitive decline. And to return to Halpern’s research, to categorise Quijano’s psychic disturbance as simply madness denies that, “unrealistic moments within grief make it possible for a person to arrive at a more realistic emotional state” (Halpern 6). More succinctly, irrationality can pave the way for sharpened emotional reasoning.

Carroll Johnson offers still another interpretation of Quijano’s madness. He claims that “psychosis is not a cause, but an effect, the last and most drastic weapon in the arsenal of defences we humans can mobilize to cope with intolerable reality” (Johnson 64). According to Johnson, Quijano’s life had been boring, devoid of meaning, and defined by unbridled erotic desires. To deny this reality, Quijano “mobilizes as a first line of defence an all-consuming passion for books of chivalry, which offers the possibility of a vicarious experience of a more fulfilling life” (Johnson 65).

While I agree with the notion of an “intolerable reality” of the past that triggered Quijano’s madness, I part company with Johnson’s research on a fundamental level. He misunderstands the symbolic importance of the knight, which is not defined by “egoism” but rather “self-sacrifice” (Huizinga 81-82). Huizinga’s historical research on the Middle Ages propels us to argue that Quijano reads books about self-sacrificing knights to work out an existentialist crisis, which is found at the heart of his trauma of ageing. He embarks on chivalric adventures in literature and in “reality” not to fulfil “erotic desires” (as argued by Johnson), but rather to fulfil a haunting desire to understand the meaning of his life. The obsession is not so much with books, but with the questions that books of chivalry explore: the intrinsic goodness and evil of the individual and of humanity in general. To prove just how obsessed Quijano is by these questions and how he employs his literary and chivalric adventures to work them out, Don Quixote reminds us time and again of how his “profession is to give aid and succour to those that need it in this world, it will also extend to aiding and succouring the distressed of the other, who cannot help themselves” (Cervantes 1370). Moreover, he is very concerned with how he is portrayed in Cide Hamete’s version of Don Quixote, asking the Bachelor Carrasco what others think of him (Chapter III, Volume 2) and insisting that Avaro Tarfe swear that the imposture Don Quixote was nothing like him (Chapter LXXII, Volume 2). On his final return home, our hero confesses furthermore that, “I know very well what my duty is; help me to bed, for I don’t feel very well; and rest assured that, knight errant now or wandering shepherd to be, I shall never fail to have a care for your interests, as you will see in the end” (Cervantes 399). On his deathbed, he confirms his main concern in life. “Good news for you, good sirs, that I am no longer Don Quixote of La Mancha, but Alonso Quixano, whose way of life won for him the name of Good” (Cervantes 399). Thus, thanks to this plunge into “madness” (reading books of chivalry and embarking on chivalric adventures as an imposture), Don Quixote provokes Alonso Quijano to cultivate responses to the haunting question: What is to be done with my life as the end is near? If scepticism still abounds about the possibility of Quijano’s encounter with trauma, the following imagery may offer a final segue into such an interpretation: “As in the Greek myth of Medusa, the human confusion that may ensue when we stare death in the face can turn us to stone. We may literally freeze in fear, which will result in the creation of traumatic symptoms” (Levine and Frederick 19).

Readjusting Alonso Quijano’s Emotional Compass Through Reading

Having laid the groundwork for understanding Quijano’s traumatic experiences associated with ageing, we focus now on how the act of reading is therapeutic, by drawing on literary theorists and affective scientists’ research. At first glance and as pointed out earlier, Quijano seems to be propelled by a passion for reading. The narrator warns us that our hero reads books of chivalry with such “ardour and avidity that he almost entirely neglected the pursuit of his field-sports, and even the management of his property; and to such a pitch did his eagerness and infatuation go that he sold many an acre of tillage-land to buy books of chivalry to read” (Cervantes 25). The terms “ardour,” “avidity,” “entirely neglected,” “to such a pitch,” “eagerness,”
and “infatuation” convey in no uncertain terms an obsessive-compulsive tendency. It does seem to make sense to maintain that reading actually harms him, just as the niece, housekeeper, barber, curate and most critics do. His niece offers, in fact, a critical reading of her uncle: “It was often my uncle’s way to stay two days and nights together pouring over these unholy books of misadventures, after which he would fling the book away and snatch up his sword and fall to slashing the walls” (Cervantes 34). The fact that he is “pouring over” intimates once again compulsive behaviour, whereas his “snatching up his sword and slashing the walls” transmits an image of madness.

The author sounds a word of caution about judging Quijano’s “eagerness.” In the “author’s preface,” Cervantes relays advice received from a friend: “Strive, too, that in reading your story the melancholy may be moved to laughter, and the merry made merrier still; that the simple shall not be wearied, that the judicious shall admire the invention, that the grave shall not despise it, nor the wise fail to praise it” (Cervantes 24). Even if it remains unclear whether reading is therapeutic for Quijano, Don Quixote itself appears designed to be therapeutic for readers. It is easy to consider the text a mise en abîme, such that Quijano is moved from melancholy to laughter by reading books, just as readers of the masterpiece are moved from melancholy to laughter.

Even though the narrator might have conveyed a sense that Quijano’s reading is obsessive, he is also careful to draw a tempered conclusion about our hero’s mental condition. Don Quixote navigates between apparent madness and lucidity. “Their master was now and then beginning to show signs of being in his right mind” and “he is a madman full of streaks, full of lucid intervals” (Cervantes 207 and 254). The narrator also offers a cautious and subtle interpretation of our hero: “His fancy grew full of what he used to read about in his books, enchantments, quarrels, battles, challenges, wounds, wooings, loves, agonies, and all sorts of impossible nonsense; and it so possessed his mind that the whole fabric of invention and fancy he read of was true” (Cervantes 25). On the one hand, Quijano has been “possessed” by material that just is not true. On the other hand, he is an extremely careful reader who relished (“his fancy grew”) the complexities of reading. He practices a close reading, distinguishing between “quarrels” and “battles”; “loves” and “wooings”; “wounds” and “agonies,” while comparing “enchantments” with “all sorts of impossible nonsense.” This description of his reading practice brings to mind what van der Kolk writes about hallucinations. He asks: “But if the stories I’d heard in the wee hours were true, could it be that these ‘hallucinations’ were, in fact, the fragmented memories of real experiences?” (van der Kolk 25).

van der Kolk’s rhetorical question intimates that hallucinations—kindred to Quijano’s belief in “all sorts of impossible nonsense”—may not simply be concoctions of a deranged mind. They are rather creative endeavours designed to heal. Such a statement leads us to ponder whether there is a “clear line between creativity and pathological imagination” (van der Kolk 25). Alonso Quijano does not seem to engage in this creative enterprise simply for art’s sake. His mind creates an atmosphere of creativity and health while reading. As we shall discover, he entertains new thoughts; builds new images; finds a new voice; inoculates himself with new emotions, and eventually forms “therapeutic alliances” with characters. These steps are precursors to Quijano’s transformation into Don Quixote.

Indeed, before he becomes Don Quixote, he transforms his identity by reading. Quijano reads books about self-sacrificing knights in order to work out an existentialist crisis that develops as he, “wages an internal war against the ghosts of the past” (Kristal in Trauma: Explorations in Memory 78). By exposing himself to the lives of fictional knights, he encounters explicit examples of nobility. His books of chivalry become librettos to follow in gest and in word, while he assumes new thoughts, images, voices and therapeutic alliances. What alchemy of the mind creates these new thoughts, images, voices, emotions, and eventual therapeutic alliances with characters? The act of reading is an experience of personal amplification. As literary theorist Wolfgang Iser contends, reading literature stimulates new thoughts in the reader’s mind, thus provoking a greater sense of self-awareness (Iser 157-58). Quijano entertains the thoughts of the knights of the fictional tales and yet reformulates them on his own terms. Georges Poulet describes this process as: “Because of the strange invasion of my person by the thoughts of another, I am a self who is granted the experience of thinking thoughts foreign . . . I am the subject of thoughts other than my own” (Poulet in Armstrong 135). Quijano obviously does not disappear, since without him the imagined characters could not come alive. Still, his identity begins to fade away as it becomes imbibed with the knights’ thoughts and experiences, which have just as much Quijano’s mark as the authors’ of the original tales.
Iser also argues that reading literature stimulates new images in the mind that are then juxtaposed with past images. This juxtaposition of new and old images results in an expansion in thinking (Iser 148). This mental process has the potential to be therapeutic to survivors, as they often do not display “the mental flexibility that is the hallmark of imagination” (van der Kolk 17). And yet, “"without imagination there is no hope, no chance to envision a better future, no place to go, no goal to reach” (van der Kolk 19).

The act of reading also becomes a phenomenological experience, as whenever I read, I utter an “I” which does not completely belong to me. Referring to this experience, Iser contends that the reader (composed of an alien “I” with “alien thoughts”) “places his mind at the disposal of the author’s thoughts” (Iser 154). Iser should have written, “narrator’s thoughts,” as the author is not necessarily the “I” of the narrative. It is obviously important to distinguish between the author and narrator (even though Iser fails to): the “I” as narrator dwells in an imaginative realm; he exists within the limits of the reader’s imagination, as opposed to some unknown reality of a real author. If the reader is truly engaged in the act of imaging and re-telling the story in his mind, then he becomes the author of both the story and the narrator transmitting the story. By reading the imaginative narrative, the reader engages in a creative exercise of establishing firmly his voice in the story, which should serve as practice to the traumatized to “give a voice to the unspeakable” (van der Kolk 137).

Thanks to a new voice, new images and new ideas, the survivor of trauma can approach the hidden story of his own trauma. It is perhaps more fitting to claim that he discovers almost unwittingly his own story of trauma by reading pieces of literature. And yet, he discovers it on his own terms, as he formulates thoughts and images in his mind and listens to different registers of his own voice. In this respect, he knows without knowing and speaks without directly speaking, while stimulating, in turn, new emotions.

The topic of emotional stimulation and reactions while reading literature has caused much ink to flow in both the humanities and the sciences, as witnessed in the birth of affect theory and affective science, which cannot be reviewed within the confines of this article. I should like to put forward instead that the act of reading has the power to introduce a new lexicon of emotions and especially a mental encyclopaedia of human experiences. By forming “therapeutic alliances” with other characters, Quijano inoculates himself with emotions experienced by those characters and those he experiences while reading. Consequently, he develops emotional antibodies (in the absence of a real emotional immunity) to encounter his own private trauma. More precisely, just as trauma survivors are urged to form “therapeutic alliances” with their mental health-care provider (as argued by psychiatrist Judith Herman 127), Quijano finds resonance in the characters’ experiences, especially in those of the knights confronting death. These alliances become apparent as Quixote assumes the identity of the knights Amadis or Roland (Chap. XXVI, Vol. 1) and are characterised by both projection (he projects his emotions onto others) and contagiousness (he assumes the emotional experiences of others). Perhaps more accurately, reading is kindred to an immunotherapy. That is, Quijano uses his own physiology—the part of his brain altered by reading—to prepare his body for the attack of the trauma of ageing and dying. It is by engaging in reading that he is able to grasp better and in turn mourn his own impending death, for “effective mourning requires total emotional responses” (Krystal, Explorations in Memory 88). Just as children are exposed therapeutically to fairy tales, which are designed to luxuriate in topics such as death, ageing, faithfulness, and erotic desire, Quijano exposes himself to chivalry tales in order to confront that which his conscious mind is afraid to explore, life’s disappointments, diminishment, and death. Relying on Bruno Bettelheim’s theories regarding the therapeutic effects of fairy tales (Bettelheim 31), one can argue that Quijano’s unconscious mind is revealed to him through the images of the chivalry tales. As his conscious and unconscious minds unite with the books of chivalry, meaning is no longer simply an object to be defined, but rather develops as an experience, which leads him to assume another identity—Don Quixote—and to engage in another form of therapy centring on the body.

Before examining the therapy centring on the body, it should be stressed that reading is a first step toward post-traumatic growth for Quijano. It proves to be therapeutic since he creatively develops new images, new voices, and new emotions through therapeutic alliances with characters that help him to comprehend noble behaviour. This is a collective experience of treating trauma. He reads and interprets his own trauma in their lives. He approaches his own hidden pathos and suffering associated with the trauma in a masked form, in the form of other characters’ emotional experiences. He remains inside and outside
the traumatic event and “to occupy a territory while loitering sceptically on the boundary is often where the most intensely creative ideas stem from” (Eagleton *After Theory* 40).

**Setting Out on a Bodily Adventure to Promote Healing**

Could Quijano’s transformation into Don Quixote really be both a consequence of traumatisation as well as a form of therapy? The narrator informs us that Don Quixote had contemplated on several occasions whether it would be: “better and more to his purpose to imitate the outrageous madness of Roland, or the melancholy madness of Amadis” (Cervantes 100). Don Quixote actually admits to being cognizant of the roles he plays. “Long live the memory of Amadis and let him be imitated so far as is possible by Don Quixote of La Mancha” (Cervantes 101). His assuming the personality of an errant knight—cast in the mould of Amadis or Roland—was a conscious decision and not simply an irrational one. Quijano assumes the identity of a knight who ventures into the world, experiencing it in intense physical ways, because it is therapeutic. He does not simply mistake windmills for giants, flocks of ewes for enemy armies. He attacks the windmills with a joust and hits himself against the blades (Cervantes 15). He charges at the so-called enemy armies of dust-covered ewes and spears them, while the shepherds peg him with stones and almonds that knock out his grinders and crush two fingers (Cervantes 69). He even performs somersaults or capers naked from the waist down on a mountaintop (Cervantes 100). Since the residue of trauma is stored in the tissues of the body, therapies that involve the body serve an important role (Herman 52). Don Quixote consciously engages in bodily experiences, fuelled by the imagination to respond to that stored trauma. While engaging his body in these adventures, he also tells tall tales. For example, his imagination is so rife that he is able to devise glorious names and attributes of imaginary armies that he wages war against: “[h]o, knights, ye who follow and fight under the banners of the valiant emperor Pentapolin of the Bare Arm, follow me all; ye shall see how easily I shall give him his revenge over his enemy Alifanfaron of the Trapobana” (Cervantes 69). His stories, nonetheless, should not be seen simply as products of an overactive imagination. He constructs himself by telling stories about himself, since “narrative does not merely capture aspects of the self for description, communication, and examination; narrative constructs the self” (Fireman 5). Still, this means that his moral repair takes place within a lie, which seems contrary to accepted practices of trauma recovery, if not unethical. Psychiatrist Peter D. Kramer reminds us all the same that, “Lying is just a necessity of human discourse, and the therapeutic relationship is not exempt from having to depend on it now and again” (Kramer 25).

There are other ways to read this unorthodox form of therapy. It may be that Don Quixote navigates his body through harmful circumstances in order to master fear and break the anxiety of helplessness. “When anxiety is associated with helplessness, it may be experienced as distressful, but in association with other feelings—for example, optimistic expectation—it is usually downright pleasure” (Krystal, *Integration and Self-Healing* 94). By putting his body into a vulnerable and dangerous position, Don Quixote engages precisely in a therapy to quell his anxiety about ageing and a sense of helplessness to redefine the past and future. These intense physical experiences prepare him for the impending pain of dying. Instead of feeling nothing, he welcomes physical pain to feel still alive.

Whether it is provoking the body to come alive through pain or an excited state; whether it is creating new images and a new voice in his mind; or learning a new lexicon of emotions through a collective reading experience, Don Quixote has prepared himself for his next steps toward healing from the trauma associated with ageing. He engages in collective therapies with other traumatized victims (such as poets and pastors) in the community.7

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6 Evidence of Don Quixote being consciously aware of role-playing also appears in chapter I, volume 2 when after hearing the story about the licentiate’s condition, he exclaims: “I, master barber, am not Neptune, the god of the waters, nor do I try to make anyone take me for an astute man, for I am not one” (Cervantes 210).

7 Even if it might seem that these “real” experiences with poets and pastors are just as contrived as the characters in the books of chivalry, such a reading is misinformed, since Alonso Quijano’s act of reading occurs at another phenomenological level than Don Quixote’s adventures. As Alonso Quijano reads, he is both unveiling and a creating images in his mind, whereas the content remains hidden from readers’. Conversely, when we read about his encounters, we become co-“unveilers” and co-creators in our mind.
Exploring Don Quixote’s Collective Arts Therapy and Empathic Unsettlement

There are two features that stand out about this stage of Don Quixote’s therapy: a newly forged relationship with a community and a heightened sense of empathy for others and eventually, for his traumatized self. Unlike his previous steps of therapy—that take place mostly within the mind and body—this next step takes place within a community, but a community that will need to be nuanced. As Herman contends, reconnection and commonality remain key for growth. “The solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against terror and despair, and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience. Trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging . . . Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group restores her humanity” (Herman 214). Before connecting with a community, Don Quixote finds first a visceral sense of safety by embarking on his journey with his trusted squire Sancho, who listens time and again to his master’s imaginative stories and follows him in every pursuit. He is so faithful that he appears to serve a therapeutic role. Indeed, he likens himself to Don Quixote’s doctor: “[s]urely, senor, I’m the most unlucky doctor in the world . . . but with me though to cure somebody else costs me drops of blood, smacks, pinches, pinproddings, and whippings, nobody gives me a farthing” (Cervantes 393). Though Sancho and his unwavering dedication to his “master” may appear at times pathological, it does serve as a source of illumination about a therapeutic alliance. Sancho combines both dedication and leeriness; intimacy and objectivity; empathy and distance as a way to provoke Don Quixote to reveal and eventually tell his story.

Don Quixote’s therapy is not limited to a talking cure, however. He becomes a faithful if not voracious consumer of stories, transforming himself into a knight who listens empathically to the downtrodden rather than rescue them from physical distress. To understand how Don Quixote reacts empathically to others, it is necessary to outline how these connections develop. Empathic connections are forged by stories. In a literary coup, the narrator unveils the rich, complex, and multi-layered nature of stories, almost as if to emphasise the necessity to chip away slowly and methodically at the hidden content of narratives sealed off by numbed emotions or masked by visceral ones. For example, the goatherd Pedro tells Don Quixote about the tragic love story of Chrysostom and the shepherdess Marcela. The next day, our hero encounters travellers on the road and insists that they share their version of the same tragedy. The following day, Don Quixote attends the burial of the broken-hearted Chrysostom. There he is captivated by Ambrosia’s rendition of the tragedy and by Vivaldo’s reading of Chrysostom’s poem “Lay of Despair,” which by echoing through the mountains provokes Marcela to appear. She shares her side of the story, summing up her position: “If Chrysostom’s impatience and violent passion killed him, why should my modest behaviour and circumspection be blamed?” (Cervantes 57) No sooner does Marcela vanish into the thick of the woods than Don Quixote exclaims that the fair lady should not be held in contempt, but rather esteemed for her virtuous resolution, which indicates that he has responded empathically.

Don Quixote’s longing to hear others’ stories and his resolution to listen with an empathic ear resurface throughout the epic. He is captivated by the story of the ragged knight of the Sierra. Again, the theme of the complexity of stories is underscored when Don Quixote unearthed an old valise that contains a book full of letters and poems. The written artefacts are a treasure finer than the booty of fine linen and gold crowns accompanying the book. The literary treasure trove contains, “complaints, laments, misgivings, desires and aversions, favours and rejections, some rapturous, some doleful” (Cervantes 89). A sonnet is one of the diadems crowning the book, and Don Quixote makes haste to admire it. Pages of moving pathos propel him to seek out the author who hides in the mountains. Eventually, he meets the ragged knight, a nobleman named Cardenio, and assures him of his most noble intents.

8 The multilayered structure of Don Quixote provides a segue for understanding how one can feel empathy for different layers of the self. Alonso Quijano transforms himself into Don Quixote, while the impostor Don Quixote (by the infamous author from Aragón) circulates in the “reality” of the story, while another fake version of Don Quixote is tossed around by the devils in Altisidora’s story of hell (Cervantes 391). In parallel form, the self is comprised of many levels. In a traumatized person, there is a) the original victim of the traumatic event; b) the victim of a post-traumatic recovery period; c) and the survivor who has moved “beyond” the initial trauma of the event and the mind.
Mine is to be of service to you, so much so that I had resolved not to quit these mountains until I had found you, and learned of you whether there is any kind of relief to be found for that sorrow under which from the strangeness of your life you seem to labour; and to search for you with all possible diligence, if search had been necessary. And if your misfortune should prove to be one of those that refuse admission to any sort of consolation, it was my purpose to join you in lamenting and mourning over it, so far as I could; for it is still some comfort in misfortune to find one who can feel for it. (Cervantes 91)

These words serve as a powerful sign of Don Quixote’s motivation to build a bridge of understanding with others. He longs to be of “service” at all costs by providing “consolation.” He seems to understand so well the yoke of “sorrow” on the stranger’s shoulders. Even more remarkable, he vows to share the stranger’s “mourning,” stating with compassion that suffering is more easily endured when others share it.

The narrator employs a literary trick to suggest how difficult it is to share and decipher the meaning of both stories and trauma. Namely, Cardenio grows so vexed by Don Quixote’s interruptions that he abruptly departs leaving his troubles trailing behind. Left with Cardenio’s book of sorrows, Don Quixote pens in the book a love letter to the object of his desire, Dulcinea, and incorporates Cardenio’s penname signature “Knight of the Rueful Countenance” into his letter. He assumes another identity in addition to his already assumed one. He also assumes a new identity of author. He assumes a new level of independence as he writes a separate script of identity. This act alone suggests how the vocabulary of sorrow is contagious.

As soon as he finishes the love letter and sends Sancho off to deliver it to his imaginary lady love, he pens new verses, “writing and carving on the bark of the trees and on the fine sand a multitude of verses all in harmony with his sadness, and some in praise of Dulcinea” (Cervantes 101). Cardenio, Marcela, and Chrysostom serve as mirror images of Don Quixote. By listening to and reading their stories of regret, Don Quixote understands from a collective perspective his own misfortunes or better those that plagued his life as Alonso Quijano. However, is this any different from his collective reading therapy? Doesn’t reading stimulate self-awareness, too? The principal difference is that empathy is stimulated when Don Quixote encounters real-life stories, when traumatic suffering is embodied.

While a synthesis of the topic of empathy is outside this article’s scope, Don Quixote’s post-traumatic growth and the role of empathy are at the very heart of this research. Just as “a growing body of research showing that emotional communication in the patient-physician relationship positively influences healing” (Halpern 67), this article puts forward that emotional communication, and most notably empathy toward the traumatized former self, positively influences healing in the survivor. More precisely, by feeling empathy for others, survivors can begin to experience it as well for the traumatized self, which remains so often sequestered in a no-man’s land of self-identity. Trauma theorist Dominick LaCapra believes that empathy is a “counterforce to numbing” recapturing the “possibly split-off, affective dimension of the experience of others” (LaCapra 40), whereas Psychiatrist Helen Riess describes empathy as a “process with both cognitive and affective components, which enables individuals to understand and respond to others’ emotional states and contributes to compassionate behaviour and moral agency” (Riess 1280). To describe this cognitive and affective connection with others while relating to survivors of trauma in “compassionate ways that remain respectful of their otherness,” LaCapra has coined the term “empathic unsettlement” (LaCapra 41). How is Don Quixote “unsettled” or “enabled” to respond to others’ emotional states?

Let us return to Quijano’s reading therapy to understand such an unsettlement and enablement. Recall that he formed first therapeutic alliances with characters by locating a resonance of experiences and emotions and by inheriting (or catching contagiously) new emotions from those characters. Reading involved incorporating characters’ emotions, such that Quijano’s pre-existing images, voice, and emotions were transformed. Empathy is dependent upon this reservoir of emotions since it is an “emotion-guided activity of imagination” (Halpern 11). Thanks to an “obsessive compulsive” passion for reading, Don Quixote accrued emotional information to understand others’ misfortunes and his own. However, does this reservoir of emotions guarantee an empathic response? Could one not benefit from a lexicon of emotions—having observed and mused on them in books and in reality—but respond to others in a detached and purely cognitive manner? Halpern emphasizes that “the empathizer must be in a mood that is interested in the human predicament that another faces” (Halpern 76). It is not so much that a sense of empathy is fostered when people share the same exact experiential histories. Rather, it is cultivated when one person can creatively imagine common human “possibilities” with another. It is not so much that Don Quixote
relates to the exact experiences of Cardenio, Marcela, and Chrysostom. Rather, he appears first and foremost curious to learn about those experiences (he is in the right mood) and relates to the underlying pathos of regret and sorrow, having grown “aware” of those through reading.

Finally and most importantly for the critical findings of this research on collective trauma recovery methods, Don Quixote can feel empathy toward himself once he feels empathy for others. How does this work? Empathy is feeling as someone, whereas sympathy is feeling for them (Eagleton How to Read Literature 76). In metaphorical terms, the distinction between empathy and sympathy is kindred to the difference between an actor on stage engaging fully in a role and an actor in a photograph dressed in a costume. Still, as an actor performing on stage, one is aware that one is not truly the character. That is, “the emotional response comes with respect for the other and the realization that the experience of the other is not one’s own” (LaCapra 40). When Don Quixote feels as others, not only does he learn new vocabulary and experience new emotions, but he also becomes acquainted with an ethos of care, as evidenced in his reaction to Cardenio (Cervantes 91). This is a vital step toward growth since traumatized individuals often remain sealed off and become “unreliable” about caring for themselves (Herman 167). By assuming the role of the empathic listener, Don Quixote interprets gradually his own traumatic story with empathy. In the simplest of terms, growth occurs when the self that has begun to heal cares for the traumatized self that lingers.

In summary, Don Quixote learns to read himself from outside himself, care for his traumatized self by caring for others, and imagines new ways of understanding his traumatic experience and moving beyond it thanks to others’ experiences. Thus, while his traumatic experience might be individual in nature, his healing is collective. The fact that Don Quixote acknowledges and accepts himself as Alonso Quijano is indicative that the dyad-character experienced healing from the traumatic events of an existentialist crisis through an imaginative arts therapy. He realizes that he was capable of acting nobly as the noblest of knights, a reading confirmed by this statement of the curate, “Alonso Quixano the Good is indeed dying, and is indeed in his right mind; we may now go in to him while he makes his will” (Cervantes 400).

Concluding Remarks

Focusing first on the pre-Don Quixote character Alonso Quijano, this article sought to explore the traumatic experience of ageing, which centres on an existential crisis. At first glance, it appears that this traumatic experience might have triggered his “madness,” manifesting itself in “obsessive” reading and a transformation into an imaginary errant knight. It was argued, nonetheless, that the act of reading was therapeutic in nature, for it helped Quijano to entertain new thoughts; build new images; find a new voice; and establish new emotional responses, all reinforced by therapeutic alliances with fictional characters. Thus, the act of reading, which consisted of a collective experience with imagined characters, was a first therapeutic step. The second step entailed a bodily experience with danger. Since trauma, in general, is stored in bodily tissues, Don Quixote had to confront his trauma of ageing through the body, as he chased down ewes or charged at windmills. Again, his “mad” behaviour was a form of healing. The third stage of his therapy consisted of encountering others who had suffered as well as building empathic bonds with them. This in turn led us to the conclusion that once Don Quixote felt empathy for others and experienced “empathic unsettlement” (a collective form of healing), he felt empathy for his previously traumatised self, Quijano, and could acknowledge himself, as he does on his deathbed.

It must be stressed that while this article puts forward that healing post-trauma takes place within the context of reading; bodily “adventures” and imaginative arts therapy, a collective experience between the survivor of trauma and the victim remains also responsible for growth. Obviously, this should not be seen as a prescription for all sufferers of trauma. In fact, Don Quixote’s healing never seems complete, as he oscillates between a sound mind, folly, and madness in his final days, discussing the possibility of becoming a pastor while refusing the life of an errant knight. This observation corresponds with clinicians’ observations about the traumatised: “the resolution of the trauma is never final; recovery is never complete” (Herman 211).
Although these findings correspond with the common notion that trauma narratives can accentuate the incomprehensibility or unknown feature of the initial trauma, it also highlights that imaginative arts therapies and those engaging the body (limbic system therapy) can reveal that which we do not wish to have revealed in a non-threatening way. Alonso Quijano explored his trauma outside the confines of his own traumatised mind. He consumed books of chivalry celebrating courage and nobility; heard the traumatic stories of others; and embarked on a creative adventure of assuming an identity exempt from the original trauma. This form of therapy heals and eventually leads to growth, because Quijano knows without knowing and speaks without speaking, assuming a role and undergoing a type of liberating play therapy. Finally, such a conclusion leads us away from the current emphasis on melancholy in trauma studies toward an understanding of “quixotic” psychic resilience and recuperation, which may very well furnish trauma studies with a new ethical dimension.9

Works Cited


9 See Irene Visser’s criticism of trauma studies current obsession with melancholia (Vissier 14).