



El quixotic absurdity in *Madame Bovary* and *The Process*.

El absurdo quijotesco en *Madame Bovary* y *El proceso*.

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ABSTRACT

When Cervantes was writing the Quijote perhaps he did not expect the scope that the adventures of the knight errant would have. In this article is pretended to track the Cervantine influence trough the structure and the characters in two of the most important works in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert and *The Trial* by Franz Kafka. It is possible to establish a link between these authors with Cervantes thanks to Flaubert and Kafka show or confessed they read Don Quixote.

Keywords: Absurd. Character. Nonsense. Quixotic. Flaubert. Kafka.

RESUMEN

Cuando Cervantes escribía el Quijote quizá no esperaba el alcance que tendrían las aventuras de su caballero andante. En el presente artículo, se pretende rastrear la influencia cervantina a través de la estructura y los personajes en dos de las obras más importantes de los siglos XIX y XX: *Madame Bovary* de Gustave Flaubert y *El proceso* de Franz Kafka. Es posible establecer una conexión entre estos autores con Cervantes gracias a que Flaubert y Kafka muestran o confesaron haber leído El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha.

Palabras claves: Absurdo. Personaje. Sinsentido. Quijotesco. Flaubert. Kafka.



Among the great novels that have been written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries should undoubtedly be mentioned *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert and *The Process* by Franz Kafka. Both extremely important for literature either because of the unusualness of their situations or because of the endearing nature of their characters. These works do not belong only to the country of origin of their authors, since their transcendence goes beyond. What is embodied in the books about Joseph K. and *Emma Bovary* is not only limited to the Czech or French nation, but belongs to the collection of world literature. However, Flaubert and Kafka produced their texts thanks to the Cervantes influence. Don Quixote's stain is hidden in the shadows of the adventures—or misadventures—that Joseph and Emma embark on. In this triad of characters, at times, it is possible to realize the absurdity of certain scenes. The word "absurd" is understood not as something negative, but in the sense that the actions of the characters, in some moments of the works, are far from the coherent or the logical, due to the circumstances they go through. To deepen the previous ideas, the semiology of the characters, the conception of the concept of the absurd, proposed by Gilles Deleuze and some of the ideas about time and the characters of Roland Barthes and R el Ouellet will be used to identify the link that unites Don Quixote de la Mancha with the characters of *Madame Bovary* and *The Process*.

If literature is seen as an entity, almost as a deity, it is possible to affirm that it works in mysterious ways. Since the first publication of *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha* in 1615 in Spain, the impact it had transcended borders to be a well-known and primordial novel for writers outside the Spanish borders. Therefore, being the first modern novel, it is not strange to find traces of the Knight of the Sad Figure in environments and times as different, as in the provinces of France or the banking world of what is now the Czech Republic. Don Quixote became a spirit capable of possessing other characters to infuse them with their madness to commit absurd feats, in the case of *Emma Bovary*. Or to extend his arms like spears to pierce the members of a jury and affect with his lack of sanity the alleged criminal Joseph K. In the latter case, its power of possession is considered to be so enormous that it affects an entire city, its streets and the people who pass through them



(this idea will be deepened later). On the other hand, Emma was infected by the same evil that afflicted Alonso Quijano, generated by the insatiable reading of books. These implausible features or environments are possible to trace back to Miguel de Cervantes.

The character of Don Quixote is impossible to analyze in a few pages. It is an inexhaustible mine that changes according to the time. As already mentioned, the method that will be used is the semiology of the characters, which analyzes the actors of the literary works through their actions, physical characteristics or even by the environment that surrounds them. The characters have evolved just like literature, from the classic hero who appears in Greco-Roman epics, such as Achilles, a being with divine descent who comes dangerously close to perfection.¹ Since then, there has been a degradation of the characters, such as the inclusion of more flaws or errors to bring them as close as possible to reality. And, for their creation, writers can draw on their imagination or have a basis obtained from reality; one can speak of an intertextual relationship of the characters, since they "influence each other and make themselves known to each other, whether they are considerable groups such as the striking miners of *Germinal* or episodic figures such as the robust girl in the milk jug of *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*" (Borneuf & Ouellet, 1989, p. 172). Don Quixote is a one-of-a-kind species in that it moves away from any classification and flirts with the strange. Alonso Quijano is a walking knight and he is not, as his walk around the world and the adventures in which he is involved range from the heroic—on rare occasions—to the incredibly pathetic. Its integration into a world that has already forgotten the passage of the knights is out of time. However, the reality that he wants to impose is in constant conflict with the world around him, a fact that seems to be overwhelming and that seems to put the Knight of the Sad Figure at an enormous disadvantage.

¹ This intention of the authors is due to a need to show their most human characters. Instead of basing them on mythological heroes or demigods, the main foundations lie in ordinary people, nobles, bourgeois, rural people or workers. In other words, "Subjects in general were constructed and considered copies of people: directly (realism), abstractly, symbolically or allegorically (representation of virtues or general vices), actions, feelings, moral values, etc.; some texts transferred them to animals, to plants, to inert beings, invested with qualities, attitudes and human word, according to the idea of person, freedom, knowledge, prevalent in each culture" (Boves, 2018, p. 15).



The possible feats presented to him depend primarily on the participation of the secondary characters who interact with Don Quixote. Those who accept that their inn is a castle willing to shelter the knights walking or if the ladies-in-waiting agree to be momentarily princesses. If they accept the game, they intend that the world of yesteryear that the walking knight longs for returns to break time and settle, for a few moments, in the present they live. Otherwise, the reality proposed by the protagonist of Cervantes' work will be completely rejected and will enter the terrain of the absurd. That is, actions will lack logic simply because the office of walking knights is obsolete. A moment that is crucial for the development of the novel is the first clash of realities that Sancho witnesses, in the chapter of the windmills:

"Look at your mercy," replied Sancho, "that those who appear here are not giants, but windmills, and what in them look like arms are the blades, which, turned by the wind, make the millstones walk.

"It seems," Don Quixote replied, "that you are not involved in this adventure: they are giants; and if you are afraid, get out of there, and put yourself in prayer in the space that I am going to enter with them in fierce and unequal battle (Cervantes, 2005, p. 66).

The result is already known: the first vision of the giants is abruptly displaced by that of the mills. Don Quixote's way of acting will be repeated in later events, since, seeing that the giants have changed shape, he decides to blame an enemy sorcerer of his who prevented him from carrying out his feat.

Don Quixote travels to Yonville

It's time to dive into *Madame Bovary* to talk about the absurd. It was mentioned that quixotic feats walk a tightrope in which the weights of the heroic and the absurd are balanced; and for it to be presented, it is necessary the intervention of several characters to participate, this is because "The absurd points out a lack of coherence and correspondence, it goes against reason and the way in which it perceives reality" (Pérez, 2016, p. 867). This also occurs in Kafka's novel which will be



discussed later. Although the case that most resembles Don Quixote is Emma Bovary.² The idealized world she proposes has a better chance of success, because the reality she seeks is timeless. It is part of a collective imaginary, of a desire that both men and women of all ages of history have longed for. Its reality, moreover, responds to a need common to any society in the world.

Emma Bovary shares a resemblance that can only be considered quixotic. She comes from a life in the countryside and constantly dreams of spending her days in the city. These dreams she has began to emerge from her reading of novels, in which romance and lovers are seen as an essential part of Parisian life.³ She thinks her wishes are about to come true with the appearance of Dr. Charles Bovary, who marries her. Emma's pastime with novels is indispensable for the construction of this character:

He had read Pablo and Virginia and had dreamed of the bamboo hut, the black Domingo, the faithful dog, but above all with the sweet friendship of some good little brother who goes to look for red fruits from large trees, taller than bell towers, or who runs barefoot through the sand to bring him a bird's nest. (Flaubert, 1989, p. 29).

The fictional worlds that have entered Emma's head have accumulated so much that they have already exhausted all the space they could occupy. She will seek that her idealized image of reality is transferred to her current life. Here it is possible to see a very close similarity with Don Quixote, who seeks that chivalric times resurface, after having consumed a large number of books:

² This is not the only relationship between the two characters. Similarly, Flaubert wrote several letters, which express his admiration for the Cervantes work. "Letter to Louise Colet, November 1847: 'I am currently rereading Don Quixote in the new translation of Damas-Hinard. I'm impressed with him, I'm obsessed with Spain. What a book, what a book! How this poetry is so cheerfully melancholic'" (Flaubert, translated by Lilia Madrigal Ambriz, 2018, p. 58).

³ Undoubtedly, another of Flaubert's successes in his novel is the use of free indirect style. An antecedent of what would later lead to the stream of consciousness perfected by authors, such as Proust and Joyce. What makes Flaubert, Kafka and Cervantes equally valuable is that they, as novelists, communicate "above all -sometimes exclusively-, what their characters perceive of the world in which they move, the novel being the framework in which this perception is inscribed, in which the acts, the characters' projects and pasts count for less than the impulses, images and impressions that constitute every moment of their lives" (Borneuf & Ouellet, 1989, p. 232).



It is, therefore, to know that this oversaid hidalgo, the moments were idle, which were the most of the year, he gave himself to read books of chivalry, with such hobby and taste, that he forgot almost every point of the exercise of hunting and even the administration of his hacienda. (Cervantes, 2005, p. 31).

Both, when given the opportunity, come out to distort their surrounding reality. Previously it was said that the reality of the Knight of La Mancha is more easily rejectable, because the society with which he interacts sees as mere madness a nobleman who still believes in giants or sorcerers. On the other hand, Emma's is more feasible, since her world of lovers is a reality that not only she shares: relationships outside of marriage remain in force in any era of humanity. Although his way of acting is enhanced by novel fictions. This makes his attitude towards the people who decide to enter his game exacerbated, almost desperate or crazy. As it happens at the moment in which Rodolfo, the first lover, decides to break his extramarital relations with Emma: "Have you thought your decision well? Do you know what abyss would drag you, poor angel? No, right? You went, confident and crazy, believing in happiness, in the future... Ah, unhappy about us! Fools!" (Flaubert, 1981, p. 164). Unlike Sancho, as in the episode of the windmills, Rodolfo decides to renounce Emma's idealized reality. Another difference between the protagonist of Flaubert's work and that of Cervantes is the possibility of reforming it at his convenience. Don Quixote, if he wishes, can justify his failures by blaming an enemy who is following in his footsteps. With Emma this is impossible, since the reality proposed by the walking knight, for the most part, is based on fantasy, where magic exists and objects can disappear or transform objects according to their will. The thing about Madama Bovary is that her

Ideal fully identified, from here, with the tangible voluptuousness of that indolent and unoccupied life, of that brilliant mirage that confuses with true life and that will prevent you from accepting reality as it is. Once again Emma is deceived by what is nothing but illusion. (Martínez, 2007, p. 69).

In her own way, Emma, as a character, shows enormous coherence. With its absurdities, it reaches meaning; the conflictive situations in which she finds herself make her fall into a state of absolute



despair. His actions, despite being considered absurd, cannot be developed in any other way, due to the altered state he is going through. The character undergoes several changes, although she maintains the same line of woman who seeks an idealization of reality. He remains faithful from his presentation in the novel, until the moment of his death. It can be said, then, that

he who is born crooked will continue like this all his life and will be twisted what he does, and education will not be able to change him; in this case, the behaviors of the characters will have nothing to do with ethical or pedagogical values: they are placed above good and evil, and follow a trajectory independent of any ethical scheme, with unique dependence on the will of the character. (Boves, 2018, p. 14).

And Emma enters this definition, since her role in the novel is to embody the femme fatale, to represent doom wherever she goes, even though the decisions she makes lead only to her self-destruction, which affect her husband and, in the end, even indirectly, her daughter.

Between the work of Cervantes and Flaubert, we see two chaotic worlds that rest in apparent calm. The clash of realities is what is altering them. Emma's France⁴ loses its meaning as the protagonist intervenes, and this "allows a realistic reading, but that integrates in that plausible world incongruous, incoherent elements, from a realistic and rational logic" (Martínez, 2007, p. 78). This apparent lack of congruence is integrated with Emma's desires, her feeling with what surrounds her. That is, she demands of the world to give her what she lacks, what she needs to achieve her happiness. Unlike Don Quixote, who has an unusual strength for reality to bend before him, in a continuous tug-of-war. Or as Deleuze (1969, p.57) explains, "nonsense is what opposes meaning in a simple relationship with it; to the point that the absurd is always defined by a defect of meaning, a lack." And this is reflected in both Emma and Don Quixote, as one seeks to bring into existence a novel

⁴ Regarding madame Bovary's time, it is possible to notice a great handling of it in Flaubert's novel. He knows at what point to anticipate events, pause or stop at the most precise moment, all from the perspective of Emma Bovary, who "prisoner of her small provincial life, harbors the feeling that days and months accumulate on top of each other like the several floors of Charles' cap or wedding cake: a cyclical time rhythm by the tinkling of the cracked bell or by the passing of the seasons and from which it can only escape with suicide" (Borneuf & Ouellet, 1989, p. 156)



drama similar to what she has idealized; and the other wants the walking knights to revive so that the Golden Age returns, a time when it was better before.

Both Emma and Don Quixote are characters who have stood the test of time. His function, as the protagonist, and that of Flaubert as a writer, is to clarify the abstract, as Ortega y Gasset mentions:

This would be timely; the novelist consumes his task when he has managed to present to us in concrete what we already knew in the abstract. At the close of the book we say: 'This is indeed the adulterous provinces. And these agricultural elections are, in truth, agricultural elections.' With such a result we have satisfied the novelist. (2012, p.63)

The character, like the work, has time as its definitive critic. Just as it is said whether a novel aged well or not, it is thought that it can also be applied in isolation with the characters, either because their actions are outdated or simply because the era has changed. With this, we try to say that the actors of literary works respond to the needs of society. What Ortega y Gasset (2012, p.64) mentioned about presenting the abstract in concrete. Tastes change or, in other words, "we want the illusion of appearance, but other ages have had other predilections. To presume that the human species has always wanted and will want the same thing as us would be vanity."

The quixotic madness in the world of bankers

On the other hand, Kafka's literature is characterized by a very defined style that, in the same way as Cervantes, has been replicated to exhaustion by authors who preceded him. Arguably, *The Process* is his most quixotic novel because of the picturesque nature of its secondary characters. Before going into the novel in depth, it is considered necessary to establish a connection between Kafka and Cervantes. The Czech writer knew the existence of the creator of *Don Quixote*, had read it and it would not be strange to assume that he influenced the production of his literature. Proof of this is his text "The truth about Sancho Panza" in a clearly quixotic game

Sancho Panza, who, moreover, has never boasted of it, managed after many years, in the night hours, by reading a large number of novels of chivalry and bandits, to separate from



himself gives such a way to his demon, which he later baptized with the name of Don Quixote, that he dedicated himself to carrying out the craziest and most absurd actions, which, lacking a predetermined objective, since this should have been Sancho Panza, did not cause harm to anyone. Sancho Panza, a free man, remained indifferent, perhaps only because of a certain sense of responsibility, to Don Quixote in his adventures and about them he held a great and useful conversation until his end (Kafka, 2003, p. 435).

Parody is present in both the stories of Quixote and Sancho. His writing is a game of misrepresentation of chivalry novels. Kafka, in this story, not only shows having read the work of Cervantes, but voluntarily enters the reality of knights, proposed by the nobleman of La Mancha. Above all, he takes the liberty of contributing to Don Quixote's labyrinth of mirrors. Metafiction was one of Cervantes' games and is present at the moment that the extradiegetic narrator of the novel claims to have found the manuscripts of the adventures of the knight, supposedly written by an Arab named Cide Hamete Benengeli: "With this imagination, I hurried him to read the beginning and, making him anxious, suddenly returning Arabic in Spanish, said that it said: History of Don Quixote of La Mancha, written by Cide Hamete Benengeli, Arabic historian" (Cervantes, 2005, p. 74).

Kafka reflects this spirit of quixotic madness in his unfinished novel *The Process*. The protagonist is Joseph K. a banker⁵ who, out of nowhere, is arrested for a reason he does not know. The captors monitor him in his pension to inform him of the beginning of his process; however, despite what Joseph initially thinks, his detention does not prevent him from carrying out his daily activities:

"How can I go to the bank, if I am detained?"

⁵ Kafka, much of his life, kept working as a bureaucrat. The characters of his most important narrative works are involved in the office world, at a time when the world of work is beginning to be increasingly suffocating. Kafka seemed to feel suffocated by his work, but he enjoyed writing about it. Always. "Between the writer and the predominant culture there is an unequal and contradictory relationship: thus, while the novel reflects bourgeois individualism and the ideology of liberalism, his affirmation of man's freedom occurs in a fictional world that seems to deny him" (Swingewood, 1988, p. 73).



"Wow! Exclaimed the inspector, who was already near the exit door. You have not understood me well, You are detained, of course, but it does not prevent me from attending to your chores. No one will prevent him from leading his normal life (Kafka, 1985, p. 73).

It is considered that at this time there is a similarity with the Cervantes novel, since, from that moment, the course of the following chapters in the work will be established. In addition, Joseph K. will be forced to undertake a misadventure, going from one place to another, meeting characters who will only make the intricate process to which he has been subjected more difficult. In this passage, it is necessary to return to the theme of the absurd present also in both Madame Bovary and El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha, since Joseph K., upon learning of his arrest, is confused not knowing why he is being prosecuted and this "presents a conflict to the senses and to understand the essence of the absurd it is necessary to know what makes our experiences possible" (Pérez, 2016, p. 868).

What makes Joseph K.'s case peculiar is that, unlike Don Quixote, madness does not go from the inside out, but goes from the outside in. This is an attempt to explain that the quixotic spirit is not found in the protagonist, but that it is the secondary actors with whom he interacts, who provoke the clash of realities. Those who embody the carnivalesque justice system that holds Joseph K.'s fate in its hands are also representatives of the absurd, as can be seen in the following passage:

"Ah! K. exclaimed, raising his arms upwards, as if this sudden discovery required more space to elaborate. From what I see, you are all justice officials, you belong to that gang of sellouts that I was referring to and you have gathered here to listen and spy on me. They have pretended that they belonged to different parties to deceive me (Kafka, 1985, p. 110-111).

The place where he is summoned for interrogation can even be considered quixotic, since it is any building in which trials are held, there are immeasurable records of all cases, in addition to even lawyers having their offices in the same construction. It is a tower of babel of laws in which a small part of the justice system lives. This site, in addition to representing a contradiction, proves that



[...] propositions designating contradictory objects also have a meaning. However, their designation cannot be made in any case; and they have no significance, which would define the kind of possibility of such an effect. They have no significance, that is, they are absurd. (Deleuze, 1969, p. 31).

These impossible objects are representations of the absurd, which Deleuze also calls the "extra-being."

The places have a special importance in *The Process*, since it is in the different enclosures that appear in the novel, where the absurd is confronted with the logical. It is where beings that enhance the implausible inhabit. Joseph K. represents the rational, he has a straight mind, formed by his work on the bench. His thinking seems to crumble the moment he is stopped by a mere unknown whim. In addition, he is put to the test as he tries to figure out a way to free himself from his process. To achieve this, he is forced to face characters who only end up complicating his case even more. Therefore, as Deleuze mentions:

If we distinguish two classes of beings, the being of the real as the matter of designations, and the being of the possible as a form of meanings, we must still add this extra-being that defines a common minimum to the real and to the possible and to the impossible. (1969, p. 31).

A space is needed, in which two opposing terms can coexist. Also, these places have the facility to increase with the depth of the narrative to give logic to their nonsense. It is thought that to achieve this, both authors, both Kafka, and Cervantes, resorted to the use of integrating another story, within the main plot, as a way to continue the game of metafiction.⁶ For example, in *Don Quixote* it is also possible to find these "extra-beings", except that they are deformed at the convenience of the whims

⁶ This same game might seem like a completely despotic temporary mess. The authors of these novels, like many others, show great mastery in the distortion of time. It can then be said that "Focused from this perspective, the inextricable temporal network of the novel is neither as gratuitous nor as arbitrary as it seems to many readers, but corroborates the complexity of a particularly lucid, vivacious and ingenious spirit" (Borneuf & Ouellet, 1989, p. 162).



of the walking knight, as in the inn where the novel of "The Curious Impertinent" begins to be related: "The guest took them out, and, giving them to read, he saw even the work of eight folds written by hand, and at first they had a title so large that it said: *Novela del curioso impertinente*" (Cervantes, 2005, p. 265). And, in Kafka, in the penultimate chapter, with the cathedral that Joseph K. visits and meets the priest, who tries to illuminate a little the absurd situation he is going through, telling him the story that has been named as "Before the law":

"You are an exception among all the people of justice." I have more confidence in you than in any other of them, and I already know many. I can talk to you openly.

"Don't kid yourself," said the priest.

"How could he deceive me?" K asked.

"You deceive yourself about justice," the priest told him, "and this error is said in the writings that prolong the law (Kafka, 1985, p. 258).

Conclusion

Cervantes' novel was undoubtedly a watershed for literature. So much so that it has been an important influence on the development of contemporary literature. However, this could not have been possible without good writers who have understood the work to the fullest, as Franz Kafka and Gustave Flaubert did. Emma Bovary is a character who had the function of delving into the aspects of infidelity in the agricultural provinces, without neglecting the intertextual reference that refers to Cervantes. On the other hand, Kafka could also be considered, as an apprentice of Don Quixote, who learned and appropriated the techniques he could identify from the first modern novel. If we take into account, as a starting point the work of Cervantes, and even if one looks even further back, it is possible to realize that literature refers to itself, just as the same characters may be built with traits of others who preceded them. It is obvious that the novels show an evolution over the centuries and respond, through their characters, to the needs caused by the problems of a certain era. However, only those who are timeless, such as Emma Bovary and Joseph K., will be able to attain transcendence.



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