

CERVANTES WRITTEN BY RAMÓN J. SENDER; OR, THE CASE OF THE TWENTY-NINE CHICKENS

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Viendo en el viejo señor Quesada una vez más aquella dualidad
de grandeza y miseria Cervantes no sabía qué pensar.
Ramón J. Sender, “Las gallinas de Cervantes”

In this four-hundred-year anniversary of the publication of Part 1 of Cervantes’s masterpiece, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, commemorations of the event abound. It seems especially fitting in 2005 to undertake an analysis of a twentieth-century Peninsular Spanish short story, written in exile, that engages in multiple literary play with both parts of the Cervantine text and with the text of Cervantes’s life as we know it, even as it offers a tacit commentary, through literary forms, on the genesis and creation of literature. The text in question is Ramón J. Sender’s “Las gallinas de Cervantes,” a thirty-three-page tale contained in his 1967 collection of stories *Las gallinas de Cervantes y otras narraciones parabólicas*. The tales were composed in northern New Mexico, where Cervantes has been for centuries a literary presence and where, legend has it, Don Quijote is sometimes sighted in the mountains on rainy nights, mounted on Rocinante. Sender published the collection in Mexico City.

Sender, born in Chalamera de Cinca (Huesca) in 1901, is one of the foremost crafters of narrative of twentieth-century Spain, though he was also a prolific producer of essays and cultivated poetry and theater. A prominent leftist journalist, Sender had published nine books before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July of 1936. Fighting as a loyalist for the Second Spanish Republic, Sender soon passed into an exile that would last until his death in San Diego in 1982. Throughout his exile, Sender continued his abundant literary production.

A great admirer of the narrative master Cervantes, Sender paid him homage in his narrative works through recourse to a number of textual strategies appropriated from the *Quijote*: a predilection for the interpolated story and the *mise en abyme*; a playfulness with language and the invention of words, following the practice of the knight of La Mancha; a leisurely telling of the tale; at times an elliptical, cumulative style. The story under consideration in these pages embodies precisely these characteristics. An unhurried tale containing considerable repetition and anaphora, the story follows a first bemused, then increasingly sorrowful character named Cervantes from the signing of his contract of marriage to Doña Catalina Salazar through her gradual yet inexorable transformation into a full-fledged if greatly outsized chicken to his definitive departure from the home.

Senderian biographer Jesús Vived Mairal, in his exhaustive *Ramón J. Sender. Biografía*, records the apparent stimulus to Sender's creation of the story:

La idea de escribir "las gallinas de Cervantes" se le ocurrió a Sender al leer en una biografía del escritor que en su contrato de boda figuraba el número de gallinas que tenía su mujer en Esquivias. 'Eso de poner doña Catalina de Salazar las gallinas en el acta de matrimonio me había ofendido siempre y revelaba de pronto esa clase de ignominia a la que el hombre de imaginación ha estado siempre expuesto en España, por lo menos en el marco de ciertos sectores de la llamada clase media' ... ¹

Surrounding the recording of the twenty-nine hens and one rooster and the transformation of the Senderian Cervantes's wife, Sender's narrator toys with the connotations of the word *gallina* in relation to the female gender and engages in repeated linguistic play. The Cervantes character calls his wife "gallipavísima" (11). He follows the progressive "gallinificación" (15) and "engallinamiento" (23) of his mate and takes note of her "instinto gallináceo" (20). The reader is tempted to acknowledge a debt to *Don Quijote's* author in such verbal inventiveness.

The intellectual play with the Cervantine text is more suggestive still. Sender's narrator tells us that the Cervantes character had taken to calling his wife Dulcinea del Toboso during their courtship, thus evoking Don Quijote's idealized lady love. Doña Catalina's uncle, who comes frequently to the house, plays cards there with the town barber and two priests, mirroring the presence of such figures in the Cervantine novel. One of these clergymen is the priest of the town, Esquivias. The other is Doña Catalina's brother, who is vicar of the nearby town of Seseña, to which he travels on "un mal caballo" (13) reminiscent of Don Quijote's poor steed Rocinante. It is Doña Catalina's brother who is very concerned with the keeping of the terms of the marriage contract, always insisting that the number of chickens be kept constant at twenty-nine.

It was Doña Catalina's uncle, a tall and bony man named Don Alonso Quesada y Quesada, in seeming echo of the Cervantine Quijada or Quesada or Quejana, who has suggested the inclusion of the chicken count in the marriage contract at the time of its copying. The story thus presents the intromission of Cervantine fictional creations into Sender's fictive text as partial authors and arbiters of Cervantes's fate through the *text* of the marital agreement and its enforcement.

Sender's Cervantes character and his Quijote figure Don Alonso barely interact in the pages of the story, moving about an oft-shared domestic space in apparent veiled observation of one another yet with barely a spoken word crossing between them. It is Don Alonso who, during the drawing up of the marriage contract, suggests that Doña Catalina's chickens be counted and included in the description of the dowry she brings to the marriage. When Cervantes adds that, for the sake of accuracy, the rooster should be included as well, the odd uncle nods his assent, and it is he who completes the marginal annotation of the marriage contract to this effect. Later on, Don Alonso, offended perhaps by what he

might have taken as Cervantes's mockery, takes his revenge. During his occasional visits, he insistently subtracts from Cervantes's heroic rank of wounded veteran (of the Battle of Lepanto of 1571), claiming that injuries sustained from a distance were no match for the merit and heroism of close-up combat with lance and sword.

It is at this juncture that the Senderian Quijote figure, repeatedly parodied and mocked by other characters in the Cervantine text that bears his name, alters his opinion of the old man. Earlier, just prior to the writing of the contract that formed the textual framing of his life with Doña Catalina, Cervantes had viewed him "con gran respeto por su decorativa presencia. Después por su silencio" (8). Don Alonso does present an unusual aspect: "Iba vestido mitad de caballero a la soldadesca y mitad de cortesano y era alto, flaco, membrudo y de expresión noble y un poco alucinada" (8). The old gentleman seemed to Cervantes "espantosa e increíblemente contradictorio. En su cuerpo vivían dos seres distintos" (8). It surprised Cervantes that this figure, who "parecía reunir las apariencias y las secretas cualidades de generosidad y largueza de los héroes del linaje de Amadís" (8), would come up with the idea of counting the chickens. Later on, "Cervantes perdió el respeto que sentía por sus enfermedades y achaques y por su altiva presencia" (12).

The two Senderian characters have navigated around one another in a kind of discursive dance whose steps seemed to be measured in movement—spoken and unspoken criticism, revenge—and stasis. As movement is matched to movement, revenge to provocation, so, too, do both men engage in the stasis of the wait. Though the movements answer one another, their waits are parallel. The old man, when queried by the bristly cleric, Doña Catalina's brother, as to what he is doing in the town, responds,

- Esperar. Eso es lo que hago. Esperar.
- ¿Y que esperáis?
- Espero el ineluctable desenlace. (12)

Cervantes and the cleric read this wait as a passive wait for death – a posture Cervantes finds unworthy. He himself is engaged in a wait, but for release and greater life. Increasingly unhappy in a household in which he is marginalized and alone and—he and Don Alonso in parallel solitudes—he longs to leave forever. When he does depart, never to return to Esquivias or to Doña Catalina, he breaks out of the corral of normative mediocrity. Sender's narrator tells us that he heads south to Andalusia to acquire supplies for King Phillip II's Invincible Armada, "que fue vencida poco después" (40), crushed by English naval forces in 1588. The immediate impetus to his flight from Esquivias has been the completion of Doña Catalina's conversion into a chicken: her joyous laying of an egg. The egg, a beginning, thus provokes and marks an ending. Yet extra-diegetically, it does mark a beginning. Sender provides us with the temporal markers of this period of the Quixotic author's life: after the Battle of

Lepanto, his wounding, and his years of imprisonment and slavery in Algeria, yet before the defeat of the Invincible Armada. A further temporal marker is a two-time evocation by Sender's narrator of Cervantes reading his *Galatea*, the *Galatea* outside Sender's story having been published in 1585. (Of course, there is no necessary, obligatory correspondence between the Senderian Cervantes character and the extra-textual Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, though there are many textual suggestions that he is the referent. The Sender tale is an autonomous text. If we as readers do elect to enter the authorial game to which Sender clearly invites us, a game in which fictive and non-fictive identities flow in and out of one another, however, these textual markers are pertinent ones.)

In these years, as Sender's Don Alonso engages in his long wait, he extratextually awaits birth in the non-fictive Cervantes's immortal creation of him. Indeed, Sender's Cervantes, as he prepares to leave, believes he understands the old man at last. The key to his understanding is yet another text: the *Jardín espiritual* of Luis de Avila. In reflecting upon this text's relationship to Jewish thought, Cervantes thinks of King David,

que no rehuía lo grotesco risible porque sabía que por encima de todas las manifestaciones más impúdicamente bufonescas del hombre estaba la divinidad invulnerable e invilificable. Por encima de lo ridículo sublime y de lo grandioso mezquino. Del hidalgo que aconsejaba apuntar las gallinas y recibía una paliza en un camino y hasta de la esposa engallinecida. (40)

The old nobleman himself remains behind, still reading his novels of chivalry and waiting. Extratextually, the mad knight in this time period awaited birth at the pen of Cervantes. Sender's Don Alonso is nearly ready to sally forth, voicing fears of incantations, playing cards with two priests and the barber, and suffering a preliminary beating. Sender's Cervantes, who has been increasingly overtaken by sadness, as the extra-diegetic Cervantes's creation will take on the name Caballero de la Triste Figura, the Knight of the Sad Countenance, leaves in order to breathe freely. He has earlier gone from the *corral* of his home to the *corrales* or theaters of Madrid in an unsuccessful attempt to sell a theatrical manuscript. In heading now to Andalucía to supply the Armada, he sallies forth into the extra-textual Cervantes's further sorrow, the vilification he endured upon accusations of fraud in this enterprise, the mockery with which the publication of the first book of his masterpiece in 1605 was met, and his years of penury and illness in the care of the Trinitarian nuns on what is now Lope de Vega Street, whose convent windows look toward the now-named Cervantes Street and the prosperous house of Lope de Vega, who envied and despised him.

The matched waits in Sender's story, that of Don Alonso for the "ineluctable conclusion," read (erroneously?) as death by Cervantes and his brother-in-law the priest, and that of the Cervantes character, for escape and hence release from a stultifying domestic world gone mad, are both shot through with a set of textual tensions that give the lie to their surface stasis. The tensions are intra-, inter-

, and extra-textual. First, both waits are necessary to the dialogic dance between the Cervantes and Don Alonso characters. It is the wait that keeps them in the dance. In the case of Don Alonso, there also exists for the reader an intertextual tension. The old nobleman's wait is filled with portent for that reader who brings to the Senderian tale a knowledge of the fictively "later," projected rupture of the stasis of his wait, the four sallies forth recorded in the non-fictional Cervantes's seventeenth-century work. Don Alonso's chivalric readings, his enigmatic statements and his silences, the strange gaze that the Cervantes character notes in him all alert the reader to the coming birth of the crusading knight and the death of the waiting one, even as two other Senderian characters see the wait as a kind of self-death watch. The reader is thus drawn toward the *Quijote*, that extra-diegetic, "other" text, one that is, in the textual play, both earlier and later.

In Cervantes's case, the temporal markers within which Sender encloses his character's chickenized domesticity draw the reader out of the Senderian text toward the text of Cervantes's life and a "reading," both anticipated and repeated, of sorrows, triumphs, and failures yet to come. In a doubly extra-textual awareness, outside both the Senderian story and the masterpiece in the shade of which Sender crafted it, the reader may well find the Senderian text to be an allegory of Cervantes's own struggles against mediocrity, bigotry, and incomprehension. There are numerous references in Sender's story to the Cervantes character's Sephardic heritage, his *converso* roots, though his brother-in-law insists that the number of chickens remain constant at the original count of twenty-nine out of deference to Cervantes, who elevated the family's social standing by his marriage into it. Apprehension about the Inquisition punctures the text. When the Cervantes character's desire for escape leads him to apply for a permission to depart for the Indies which is denied him, the alleged reason for the denial lies in his *converso* heritage. The falcon that flies over the house and is befriended by Cervantes is disliked and resented by the increasingly fowl-like Catalina, earth-bound as opposed to the falcon's capacity to soar. She clips its wings and plans to kill it. The wild bird escapes by her husband's design, as will he. The Cervantine reader will see in the allegory the struggles in Cervantes's own life-text. In Doña Catalina's will to rob the falcon of its ability to see above the petty obsessions, the prejudices, the asphyxiating strictures of the *corral*, one can read a demonization of the different, the vengefulness of a normative mediocrity applicable to the text of Cervantes's life. The old knight's "dualidad de grandeza y miseria" (29) in Sender's story was indeed, Cervantes's own.

Vived Mairal offers the view that "Las gallinas de Cervantes" may have been infused by its author with autobiographical content. Indeed, Sender may well have seen in certain of his life circumstances resonances with the trajectory of the seventeenth-century narrative master. Sender, too, often found himself at odds with his surroundings. Coming from Aragón, which together with Catalunya gave Spain its best anarchist theoreticians, Sender felt a perhaps natural affinity for anarchist thought. He associated informally with the anarchist group Espartaco in Madrid in the early Thirties, only to part

company with them due to what he perceived, as he relates in conversation with Marcelino Peñuelas, as “la falta de sentido práctico. ... Había una desproporción tremenda entre el heroísmo que derrochaban y la falta de eficacia de lo que conseguían” (Peñuelas 94). His next ideological association, with the Communists in the mid-Thirties, yielded the fervent essays contained in *Madrid-Moscú* (1934). Sender’s disenchantment with the Communists began, however, in the early days of the Spanish Civil War, despite his seemingly passionate paeon to Communism in *Contraataque* (1937-38), a work written as a pro-Second Republic propaganda instrument that became a far more complex, self-contradicted text.

Sender’s disillusionment and bitter breach from the Communists enclose a second parallel with Cervantes: the facing of an ill-founded accusation that caused him prolonged humiliation and from whose shadow he was never able wholly to emerge. When Sender learned in November of 1936 of the assassination of his wife, Amparo Barayón, by the fascists in Zamora on October 10 of that year, he was on the Seseña (Toledo) front near Esquivias, where he served Communist general Enrique Lister as chief-of-staff. The two evidently had a serious confrontation over Sender’s need to determine the well-being of his two small children. Lister, in his memoir *Nuestra Guerra* (1966), records Sender’s departure from the front as desertion. However, careful investigation in the records of the War Ministry by Sender scholar Donatella Pini uncovered no record of such a desertion. The charge would resurface periodically throughout Sender’s life.

Sender, too, like Cervantes, was no stranger to the permutations of exile. The year 1967, in which he published the collection containing “Las gallinas de Cervantes”—and in which he also brought into print the essay work *El infrngimiento cristiano*, the expanded edition of his short story collection *La llave*, and *Tres novelas teresianas* on the saint of Avila—marked exactly thirty years of exile from his native Spain. Exile had taken him first to Pau in the south of France, then to Paris for a year and Mexico for three years. In 1949, Sender entered the United States, where he taught briefly at New Mexico Highlands University, and then for many years at the University of New Mexico, and later at the University of Southern California. Persuaded by repeated invitations to return to Spain, he found his exploratory visit in 1974 to be mutually frustrating. Two additional visits followed in 1976. Sender decided against the permanent return to Spain and his beloved Aragón. He remained in the United States, dying, as noted above, in San Diego, his longtime home.

Sender surely pays homage in “Las gallinas de Cervantes” to the master teacher of novelists of the Western world. His story of Cervantes in Esquivias—a town he, too, knew, and under conditions of duress—moves by means of a continuous play with that later/earlier fictive text and with the non-fictive text of Cervantes’s life. The master work of Western narrative gestates within another fictional narrative that postdates it by more than three-and-a-half centuries, its gestation a wait laden with a portent and an import conferred by Sender’s reader. As one story ends with Cervantes’s departure from Esquivias, another awaits birth. Cervantes sallies forth, out of Esquivias and out of Sender’s story, only to double

back to pick up the old knight he carries within, Don Alonso, now fully imbued with his own texts of import, the chivalric romances, and ready to venture, with his creator, into immortality.

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Notes

¹ Vived Mairal 532. The quotation from Sender included in this passage is from the author's "Nota preliminar" to the story as published in his *Obras completas*, vol. 2 (Barcelona: Destino. 1977) 317 (Vived Mairal 536n29).