The Inn, the Castle, and Spaceman Spiff

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In the novel Don Quixote the main character looks at what is really an inn, and sees a magnificent castle. In the comic strip Calvin & Hobbes, Calvin is sent to detention for not paying attention, and sees the events as the capture of “Spaceman Spiff” by evil aliens. These two comedic episodes are, in their depiction, essentially equivalent, and both works repeat countless variations on this same episodic formula. The technique is central to both works, and to their charm and quality. The works’ reliance upon it carries with it a number of prominent textual characteristics. The end result of employing the technique again and again, the development of two rich but unbridgeable spheres of realism and imagination, poses the risk of an excessively static world within the work, and both Miguel Cervantes and Bill Watterson work against this difficulty in the same way. Through their use of ambiguity—the shielding of certain truths from the over-determining framework of their realism—the two authors avoid this danger and are able to represent something they wish for in the world but cannot openly introduce.

During his first sally, the valiant Don Quixote grows tired of riding and spies an inn in the distance. Miguel Cervantes writes that

since everything our adventurer thought, saw, or imagined seemed to happen according to what he had read, as soon as he saw the inn it appeared to him to be a castle complete with four towers and spires of gleaming silver, not to mention a drawbridge and deep moat and all the other details depicted on such castles. He rode toward the inn that he thought was a castle.¹

Cervantes here lays out the rules of the game that he plays for the rest of this episode. There is a real inn, and Don Quixote sees it as a castle. The reader encounters both perspectives, and Cervantes carefully delineates between them. Inhabiting them both simultaneously is impossible; it is either an inn or a castle. The reader considers what Don Quixote is seeing, and notes its major features, and having noted them moves back to considering the “real” scene, with the inn.

In Calvin & Hobbes, a late twentieth-century comic strip by Bill Watterson, the same technique is at work. In the strip’s first month in print, Calvin gets in trouble with his teacher, Mrs. Wormwood.² In the first panel, Calvin stares into the distance while she teacher announces she will bring him to the principal’s office. For the second and third panels, the perspective switches to a depiction of the “valiant Spaceman Spiff,” being led by an alien guard before a bespectacled alien leader sitting behind a desk. Spaceman Spiff then “springs into action.” For these two panels, due to the correspondences with the information at hand, the reader understands the scenes to be Calvin’s imaginative riff on what is really happening. In the last panel, depicted within reality, the principal and Mrs. Wormwood look on at Calvin, and the principal asks “why is he eating his hall pass?” Watterson establishes reality and then lets the reader know the way Calvin envisions his experience. The indication of a switch in perspective is now no longer linguistic, as in Don Quixote, but visual. To show what Calvin is seeing, Watterson draws the panel from his perspective. Accounting for the differences in mediums, the shifts have an equivalent vocabulary.

These two early episodes are paradigms of a technique that occurs throughout both works, though with many variations. All of these uses of the technique play the same game. There is a perspective that the reader recognizes to be what the hero sees or envisions, due to linguistic and/or visual indicators, and there is reality. The author lets the reader know what is really happening and what the hero makes of the experience. The intercutting between the real and the fantastic creates an enjoyable tension in what the reaction or consequences will be due to this disconnect in perspectives.

Beyond their equivalent uses of the technique, Don Quixote and Calvin & Hobbes share a number of features. These all appear related to the method they share, and therefore suggests the extent to which its use carries with it—or is simply the most notable part of—a wide set of textual features, all of which contribute to a depiction of reality that is both rich and static. The strength of this static reality receives a confirmation in the way in which the authors work against the worlds they create in order to provide a spark of magic central to their sentiments. The use of ambiguity in Watterson’s

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expansion of reality through the unclear nature of Hobbes’ existence, and Cervantes’ reconciliation of realism with Spanish reality through the bafflingly rapid printing of the first volume within the world of the second, indicate the extent to which pairing perspectives has a determining effect upon a work that extends even to the method of circumventing its static framework.

Cervantes and Watterson both depict the visions of their heroes in a richly realized and legitimate form. In *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach describes a passage where Don Quixote addresses the ugly peasant who he thinks is his lady Dulcinea, and declares that “in the middle of a parody against the knighthood ideology of love we find one of the most beautiful prose passages which the late form of the tradition of courtly love produced.” Cervantes does not sabotage the expressions of his hero by displaying his chivalric visions and his actions relating to them in a deprecated or inferior manner. He condemns the viewpoint, but represents it in good faith. Watterson matches Cervantes in this regard, and in some ways outdoes him. The enthusiasm he brings to Calvin’s visions, no matter how ridiculous, never flags. In a late strip, Calvin waits in line for a drink of water behind Moe the bully, and makes the two of them dinosaurs in a prehistoric scene. Watterson draws an allosaur and an ultrasaur in an anatomically realistic style, even with Calvin’s narration being what it is: “the big, stupid ultrasaur takes a long drink...a very long drink...” The narration is preposterous, but he carefully renders every detail of the dinosaurs. Cervantes and Watterson both acknowledge that the visions of their heroes are ridiculous, but choose not to sabotage their expressions in service of this view. The result is to sustain some of the legitimacy of the hero’s perspective despite the ceaseless demonstrations that they are imagining. This in turn strengthens the depictions of reality in both works, which assert themselves and triumph against even a richly realized and compelling fantasy.

The episodes within both works also often have a great deal of potential for sadness or tragedy, but their overwhelming tone is comic. This avoids the lasting change to the formula that would be threatened and promised by a tragic tone. The paradigmatic examples in both cases are the violent challenges of Don Quixote, and the beatings that result, and Calvin’s wagon or sled rides. These always seem to end with Calvin and Hobbes headed towards some awful fate, or the injurious crash actually depicted. Each provides slapstick humor, in the manner that harmless violence always has a tendency towards. Yet this would quickly turn into a sickening dread without the established expectation that this will never end too badly. Don Quixote always recovers, and Calvin never suffers lasting scars from his various calamities. Within an episode, harm can receive realistic depiction, but the heroes shake off their ill effects, and their conduct is incorrigible; Calvin perceptively notes that “we don’t want to learn anything from this.” When the works stray from this and present a danger that seems potent, the entire tone shifts. The encounter of Don Quixote and the lions is quite difficult to find funny, at least before the lion backs down from combat, because for once it really does appear as if his madness has led him to a real and fatal danger. Even Sancho notes that this is something unamusing, “compared to which the adventure of the windmills, and that of the waterwheels, and, in short, all the feats he had performed...had been nothing but child’s play.”

These similar features in the two works create a strong sense of the real and the fantastic, the profound divide between them, and the immutability of this state of affairs. This all furthers Cervantes’ most cherished goal. Joan Ramon Resina explains that Cervantes makes it very clear that he is after realism. “In the priest’s scrutiny of Don Quixote’s library (bk. 1, chap. 6) verisimilitude, or what we call realism, is the touchstone for literary criticism. The books the pass the scrutiny amount to a cultural literacy list for readers of fiction. They also furnish a pretext to outline the features of the genre Cervantes is trying to shape,” namely one with a heightened realism. The technique does not allow for permeability between the imagined perspective and the real world. That this rule is inviolable and essential is evident in the fact that nowhere in both of these very long texts does something certainly happen for a fantastic reason. In any situation where the authors present both perspectives, the imagined perspective never gains the upper hand in credibility.

Therefore, the possibility of enchantment lies only where the narrative does not extend its reach and establish the underlying reality. Cervantes and Watterson reserve this privilege for what is at the height of their sentiments, of such prime importance that they feel the need to work around their technique in order to preserve the possibility of its realization. The two achieve this in an equivalent fashion through the use of ambiguity. Through this, each author extends his
visions for what the world can or should be.

The reality of Hobbes within *Calvin & Hobbes* is fundamentally uncertain. Within the world of the strip, Calvin has a stuffed tiger, who he calls Hobbes. For Calvin, however, the tiger is alive. No one but Calvin ever sees a “real” Hobbes. Watterson tightly and precisely controls this through Hobbes’ appearance, on display in a strip where Calvin finds a missing Hobbes at Susie’s tea party. She stares at Calvin, but he looks behind her to a living Hobbes; in the next panel, Susie can see Hobbes, and he is back to being a stuffed animal. Calvin’s eye-line animates Hobbes behind an unsuspecting Susie. In this sense, where Hobbes is a fantastic element appreciable only to Calvin, Hobbes is similar to Calvin’s numerous other imaginative flights of fancy.

There are two differences, however. First, Hobbes has continuity. The collection of glosses upon reality which Calvin adopts is quite diverse, yet Hobbes is always himself. Hobbes is his friend, distinctively so, and it is possible (and inevitable) to speak of him as a character with a distinctive personality. Second, and far more crucial, the “reality” of Hobbes is not a settled question in the strip. On several occasions, a “real” Hobbes actually makes more sense than a stuffed tiger, given physical laws and other concerns. Hobbes can terrify Calvin by waking up on top of him, attack him unawares, or trick him outright while moving independently. All of these are a difference in kind from Calvin simply playing make-believe, on both a psychological and physical level. Perhaps the oddest instance comes in a strip where Calvin’s dad walks in and finds Calvin tied to a chair, after a living Hobbes ties Calvin up. Calvin’s only explanation is that Hobbes tied him up; that is, after all, what he, and the reader, saw happen. His dad does not believe this is possible and sends him to his room. He does not offer a clear counter-explanation in this instance, yet the only one available is even less helpful: what a living Hobbes would mean, and where a shape-shifting totemic demigod fits into the principles of the world, is not at all clear.

In other words, neither of the explanations really satisfy. Because the episodes in question are not always put to the challenge of the paired representations of the two perspectives—a test reality always and everywhere wins in the work—the text’s main verifying tool is useless. Yet this does not unravel the entire work precisely because no consistent (and unsatisfactory) explanation receives complete confirmation. In this manner Watterson provides a spark of magic to the work, something not entirely explained, yet not decisively fantastic. This loose end in the text adds a great deal of interest and legitimacy to the central relationship and the perspective of the hero. It is line with Watterson’s aspirations for the mundane world he depicts, where reality otherwise continually confounds the free play of a child’s imagination.

Cervantes in *Don Quixote* provides a similarly prominent ambiguity, the incredible publication of the first book within the world of the second. In the first chapters of the second book, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza learn that Spain knows all of their adventures, recorded in *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* (the title of Cervantes’ first book). The timeframe is entirely too short for this to make any sense, “less than a month” after the return to La Mancha at the end of the first book. Don Quixote, feeling “extremely thoughtful,” “could not persuade himself that such a history existed, for the blood of the enemies he had slain was not yet dry on the blade of his sword and his chivalric exploits were already in print.” He has not slain anyone, of course, but his remarks as to the short timeframe are sound. Odder still, it is clear that the text of the book is entirely accurate to what has happened because it is the exact text of the first book. Sancho remarks that upon hearing of the work, “I crossed myself in fear at how the historian who wrote them could have known about them.” Cervantes goes out of his way to point out that is a very strange occurrence on both counts. Yet Cervantes does not employ his customary enthusiasm for full explanation, never depicting the publication of the first book or revealing the circumstances of its creation. It occurs somewhere far off and unseen. Don Quixote can only verify a mundane origin for the detestable forged version of the work, in his encounter near the end of the second volume with the printing presses (Appropriately for Cervantes, combating plagiarism at the time, only the knock-off has a tangible origin). Cervantes furnishes the closest thing to an explanation when he states that Don Quixote “imagined that some wise man, either a friend or an enemy, by the arts of enchantment had printed them.” Don Quixote appears wrong because he tries to force events into the framework of his chivalric worldview, *not* because it is clearly wrong to imagine a fantastic explanation. Laying responsibly on the arts
of enchantment” is not implausible because the whole issue is a muddle.

Any consistent interpretation introduces a problem for the rest of the text. Spain cannot explicitly have a magical printing press for an omniscient observer and remain a realist paradigm for Cervantes, nor can Don Quixote’s chivalric notions receive confirmation. Yet it is even less plausible for Cide Hamete to have trailed along unnoticed and recorded the entirety of the first text, moving heaven and earth to get it into as many Spanish homes as possible. Therefore, by shielding the matter from strict definition, Cervantes achieves both a real excitement and a change in line with his hopes for the world. The wonder of the dissemination of the first book in the second in Don Quixote contributes to the sense of a world that is changing in uncertain ways, without toppling the careful framework of reality. Everything old is new again, and the idea of discovery fills Don Quixote and Sancho Panza’s adventures. Cervantes has Spain preemptively recognize the realist paradigm of his hopes, and the results are delightful.

These ambiguities are special cases. Nowhere else in the two texts could readers really find themselves believing in something fantastic occurring. Even the most indulgent interpretations run up against the careful repetitions and delineations Cervantes makes to keep the two spheres separate, or the endless inaccuracy of Calvin’s visions. Whether the ambiguous aspects under our scrutiny happened in a manner in accordance with the principles of reality, however, or due to something genuinely fantastic, does not receive a settled answer. The authors do not provide a definitive explanation, so something occurs that eludes a concrete description. The most stable way of treating the material is, oddly enough, to leave it uncertain. This stable fluctuation, an oscillation between two contradictory and problematic explanations, goes a long way towards instilling the works with a much-needed vibrancy. Reality and the heroes’ visions receive rich depictions, but the spheres are immobile. Ambiguity provides a striving motion that is exciting and engaging without destroying the other benefits of the technique it works around. The texts shelter a hope not fully determined by avoiding the method that has otherwise provided their works a distinctive character. That the ambiguities themselves remain wholly characteristic of their authors I find quite appropriate.

References

Notes
1. Cervantes: 26
3. Auerbach: 308

4. 1994 July 17

5. 30 November 1985
6. 31 March 1991

7. Ibid.
8. Cervantes: 558-565
9. Cervantes: 562
10. Resina: 294

11. 31 May 1986
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