

Research Article

Javier Martín-Párraga*

Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*: A Deconstructive Reading

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2017-0030>

Received July 19, 2017; accepted October 29, 2017

Abstract: Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* is one of the earliest and most influential novels in the history of Western literature. John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*, published almost three centuries later, can be considered as one of the most seminal postmodern novels ever written in the English language. The goal of this paper is to examine Cervantes's influence on John Barth in particular and in American postmodernism from a more general point of view. For the Spanish genius' footsteps on American postmodernism, a deconstructive reading will be employed. Consequently, concepts such as deconstruction of binary opposites, the role of the subaltern or how the distinction between history and story are paramount to both Cervantes and Barth will be used.

Keywords: John Barth, Postmodernism, Deconstruction, *Don Quixote*, *The Sot-Weed Factor*

Cervantes's Connections with Postmodernism

Trying to define postmodernism would be just as feasible as defeating *Don Quixote*'s gigantic enemies. It is not only evident but self-explanatory that postmodernism goes beyond modernism, chronologically, thematically as well as it does so from a merely structural perspective. In 1979, Jean François Lyotard published *The Postmodern Condition*. In the same year, Gerald Graff also offered an early explanation of postmodernism according to which postmodernism was born as a reaction to the faith in order and logic that modernist authors embraced:

[p]erceiving that the modernist's seriousness rests on admittedly arbitrary foundations, the postmodern writer treats this seriousness as an object of parody. Whereas modernists turned to art, defined as the imposition of human order upon inhuman chaos . . . postmodernists concluded that, under such conceptions of art and history, art provides no more consolation than any other discredited cultural institution. Postmodernism signifies that the nightmare of history, as modernist esthetic and philosophical traditions have defined history, has overtaken modernism itself. If history lacks value, pattern, and rationally intelligible meaning, then no exertions of the shaping, ordering imagination can be anything but a refuge from truth. Alienation from significant external reality, from *all* reality, becomes an inescapable condition. (Graff 55)

Linda Hutcheon agrees with Graff and argues that in order to defy its modernist enemy, postmodernism relies basically on irony, parody and self-awareness:

most of these postmodernist contradictory texts are also specifically parodic in their intertextual relation to the traditions and conventions of the genres involved. When Eliot recalled Dante or Virgil in *The Waste Land*, one sensed a kind of wishful call to continuity beneath the fragmented echoing. It is precisely this that is contested in postmodern parody where

*Corresponding author: Javier Martín-Párraga, Department of English and German Studies, University of Córdoba, Spain, E-mail: javier.martin@uco.es

it is often ironic discontinuity that is revealed at the heart of continuity, difference at the heart of similarity. Parody is a perfect postmodern form in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies. It also forces a reconsideration of the idea of origin or originality that is compatible with other postmodern interrogations of liberal humanist assumptions (Hutcheon 11)

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari define postmodernism as the result of both capitalism and schizophrenia (1983), and Fredric Jameson expanded this idea, explaining that it was but the cultural logic of late capitalism. Therefore, postmodernism constituted a very complex attempt to “think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (Jameson ix).

Gianni Vattimo, who shared Jameson’s assumption, declared that the fundamental, and probably only, goal of postmodernism was “to propose a ‘rhetorically persuasive’, unified view of the world, which includes in itself traces, residues, or isolated elements of scientific knowledge” (1988 [1985], 179). Jean Baudrillard adopted and adapted Lacan’s theories, declaring that postmodernism is essentially a manifestation of hyperreality and simulacra: “[f]rom now on, signs are exchanged against each other rather than against the real” (Baudrillard 7).

I started this section by declaring that trying to define postmodernism would be an erratic and chimerical ambition. In this occasion, achieving such a chimaera is far from the goal of this paper. Nonetheless, I considered it necessary to offer this short exploration into the deep and dark waters of postmodern theories before starting to consider to what extent did Miguel Cervantes not only influence but make possible John Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor*, together with many other postmodern narratives by authors such as Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon or Kurt Vonnegut.

Summing up the definitions of postmodernism included above, together with many others which were not included here, it is safe to affirm that postmodernism is inextricably linked to late capitalism and modern technology and is characterised by a radical incredulity towards the certainties of the recent past. At the same time, it is safe to assume that it embraces parody, irony and accepts chaos, disorder and entropy as the fundamental elements determining historical and daily realities.

Moving from philosophy to literature, the closer one gets to a manifesto of American postmodern literature is John Barth’s 1967 seminal and ultra-influential essay “The Literature of Exhaustion,” which was first delivered as a conference at the University of Virginia and printed the same year in *The Atlantic*. Contrary to popular belief, Nietzsche never proclaimed the death of god. The German philosopher did, in fact, invite us to commit a deicide. In a similar manner, Barth does not certify the dead of canonical realism but demands its assassination.

In this essay (contained in *The Friday Book*), Barth deals with postmodernism as a new way of creating, disseminating and consuming art:

That a great many Western artists for a great many years have quarreled with received definitions of artistic media, genres, and forms goes without saying: pop Art, dramatic and musical “happenings,” the whole range of “intermedia” or “mixed-means” art bear recentest witness to the romantic tradition of rebelling against Tradition. . . . the intermedia arts . . . eliminate not only the traditional audience . . . but also the most traditional notion of the artist: the Aristotelian conscious agent who achieves with technique and cunning the artistic effect; in other words, one endowed with uncommon talent, who has moreover developed and disciplined that endowment into virtuosity. . . . personally . . . I’m inclined to prefer the kind of art that not many people can *do*: the kind that requires expertise and artistry as well as bright aesthetic ideas and/or inspiration. . . . The intermedia arts, I’d say, tend to be intermediary, too, between the traditional realms of aesthetic on the one hand and artistic creation on the other. (Barth, “Friday” 64-65)

Interestingly enough, the earliest referent Barth finds when searching for inspiration as a postmodern novelist is no other but Miguel de Cervantes:

[a]nticipations of the “postmodernist literary aesthetic” have duly been traced through the great modernist of the first half of the twentieth century—T. S. Eliot. William Faulkner, André Gide, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, Robert Musil, Ezra Pound, Marcel Proust, Gertrude Stein, Miguel de Unamuno, Virginia Woolf—through *their* nineteenth-century predecessors—Alfred Jarry, Gustave Flaubert, Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, and E. T. A. Hoffmann—back to Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1767) and Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* (1615) (Barth, “Friday” 195).

In the quotation above, Barth explicitly expresses his connection with both Sterne and Cervantes, precursors not only of the novel genre but of postmodern narrative as well. Nonetheless, the author's debt with the author of *Don Quixote* becomes even more explicit in the following lines: "[i]f this sort of things sounds unpleasantly decadent, nevertheless it's about where the genre began, with *Quixote* imitating *Amadis of Gaul*, Cervantes pretending to be the Cid Hamette Benengeli (and Alonso Quijano pretending to be Don Quixote), or Fielding parodying Richardson" (Barth, "Friday" 72).

Barth's link with Cervantes is, as we see, genealogical. Nonetheless, the American novelist's fascination with the Spanish genius is also purely narratological. Barth fully agrees with the ideas expressed by Vladimir Nabokov in his extremely famous (and controversial) *Lectures on Don Quixote* (1983). As a result, it becomes inevitable for him to accept Cervantes as his true literary father. As we see, Barth deals with Bloom's anxiety of influence (1973) by vindicating Cervantes as his true father, as well as the best argument when trying to kill the "realistic novel." Barth affirms in *The Literature of Exhaustion*, as he will do in an even more detailed manner in *The Literature of Replenishment* (1980), that once realistic novels are buried, they will be replaced by literary and cultural artefacts that are characterized by their "contamination of reality by dream" (71). Needless to say, *Don Quixote* cannot be understood without taking into account that same "contamination of reality by dream."

Wild Writing

In the section above I considered Miguel de Cervantes's role as the forefather of postmodernism and how John Barth accepted and vindicated the early Spanish novelist as his closest and most influential literary referent. I will now move on to examine *Don Quixote*'s echoes in Barth's novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960).

It becomes necessary first to justify why I have chosen *The Sot-Weed Factor* in order to study Cervantes's influence on Barth and not any other novel from the author's extensive, extremely rich and complex oeuvre. This justification is demanded not only by the quality of Barth's entire corpus but also as a result of Cervantes's life-long influence on the Maryland novelist. I could have opted for Barth's *opus primum* (*The Floating Opera*, 1956) or for the most recent *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (1991), where Cervantes's heft can be considered equal (if not larger).

The reason why I have decided to focus on *The Sot-Weed Factor* in this particular occasion is mainly based on the novel's plot and temporal setting, which is closer to *Don Quixote*. The Spanish novel was published in 1605 and 1615 (parts one and two, respectively), while the events in *The Sot-Weed Factor* take place in the 1680s-90s. The first common element between the Spanish Renaissance novel and the postmodern American one is that of "wild writing" (*escritura desatada* in Cervantes's language). María Encarnación Pérez Abellán defines "wild writing" and succinctly expresses why this concept is important to Barth in the quotation below:

[b]y "wild writing" Cervantes understands the disharmonious composition of chivalric romance by the incongruous sequencing of its constituent elements. However, he also proposes a positive reading of the expression whenever the theme compositional heterogeneity brings together the principle of unity and coherence. The *Quixote* himself exemplifies the "wild writing" integrating formally the Italianate *novella*, short stories and an embryonic essay in order to become the new genre: the novel. *Don Quixote* is the starting point of *The Sot-Weed Factor* (John Barth 1960), as well as it is uniquely amalgamate the three narratives submodalities, as a conscious tribute to Cervantes, already installed Barth in postmodern novel (Pérez 275-6).

Barth's "wild writing" is made possible by Cervantes. But, also, by postmodern philosophy. *The Sot-Weed Factor* can benefit from wild writing because of Derridean deconstruction (writing *sous-rature* as proposed by Heidegger is now no longer a possibility but a compulsion for postmodern authors) and Lyotard and Foucault's demolition of the barrier that had been separating History from history so far. At this point in the history of literature, freedom is absolute . . . again, since when Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote* he was equally free from any canon, from any formal treatise on the novel, from the anxiety of influence Bloom so sharply identified in the essay mentioned above. Thus, John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* does not pretend to be a

Renaissance novel but becomes an authentic, genuine Renaissance text in its own right. This paradox can only be understood if we take into account both quantum mechanics (Schrödinger's cat, essentially) and Derrida's *pharmakon*.

Once defended both Cervantes and Barth were wild writers in the sense they broke all previous (and future) thematic, structural and generic impositions, I will move on to consider further similitudes between *Don Quixote* and *The Sot-Weed Factor*.

The Literary Artefact Engenders Realities Which Are More Real Than Reality Itself

From the dawn of Western literature, Greek philosophers and literary critics established a clear dichotomy between two radically opposed ways of understanding art. On the one hand, Aristotelian thinkers posited that literature was merely descriptive and representative of external realities. Thus, the quality of literature was always linked to its mimetic values. Making an extremely long story short, the closer to nature the artistic artefact was, the more valuable it would be, both from ethic and aesthetic perspectives. On the contrary, Platonic and neo-Platonic philosophers positioned themselves on the absolute opposite conception: art was not intended to represent or portray external realities, but rather to offer audiences a glimpse of a reality which was purer and more enriching but remained absolutely hidden. This sublime realm was only achievable through fancy, madness and dreams. As a result, literature becomes a product of alternate realities that differ from daily objects, events and characters but are based on elements from an ideal realm which was equally abstract, distant and relevant to human psyche and evolution as people and citizens.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, religious dogma condemned fancy, imagination, creative freedom and recommended in quite a severe manner to embrace Aristotelian mimesis. As a result, Medieval literature becomes not only Horatian and educational but an extremely powerful authentic political and religious weapon. Without neglecting the obvious values of Medieval literature in English, it is not absurd to manifest that this rejection of Platonic fancy greatly affected the quality of medieval texts. At this point, it becomes impossible not to remember Umberto Eco's closing line from *The Name of the Rose*, which echoes twelfth century monk Bernard of Morlaix, "Stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus" (Eco, "Name" 538).

With the emergence of Renaissance, the cultural scenario changed in a dramatic manner. Theocracy was replaced by a conception of the world which centred around the human being, his skills, capabilities, dreams, aspirations and inherent curiosity. Aristotelian mimesis gave way to Platonic and neo-Platonic love towards fancy, creativeness and disgust of both internal and external limits. From the Medieval, frightening conception of this world as a purgatory in which men were supposed to atone, repent and suffer before being worth the graces of the divine afterlife, we moved to a Platonic fascination with natural and human love. It is now compulsory to remember the extremely famous and seminal passage from Shakespeare's *Midsummer's Night Dream* in which it is declared that "Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,/ Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend/ More than cool reason ever comprehends (Act 5:1).

As it becomes evident in the citation above, Renaissance mentality gave poets a privileged position as seers and prophets; almost as Gnostic *демиургоs*. This is exactly Cervantes's understanding of poets and the poetic realm. In *Don Quixote*, the external reality Alonso Quijano is not only boring, unimportant and tormented but also meaningless. In the Prologue to the first volume of *Don Quixote*, Cervantes stated the following, "[a]nd to what can my barren and ill-cultivated mind give birth except the history of a dry, shriveled child, whimsical and full of extravagant fancies that nobody else has ever imagined—a child born, after all, in prison, where every discomfort has its seat and every dismal sound its habitation?" (3)

The author is referring to a real and a metaphysical prison. The real one was placed in Seville, where Cervantes was an inmate between 1597 and 1602. The metaphysical one is Alonso Quijano's real, ordinary, house. In this decadent residence, reality reigns for everyone but Quijano himself. The protagonist of *Don Quixote*'s understanding of the world has not been forged through contact with real events and people. Quite on the contrary, his reality emanates from the chivalric books he devours day and night. Books in

which the very nature of reality is deconstructed in proto-Derridean terms: “[t]he reason for the unreason to which my reason turns so weakens my reason that with reason I complain of thy beauty” (Cervantes 20).

In the first section of this paper, I did study the origins of postmodernism, which were clearly rooted in contemporary technology and the development of late capitalism. At this point, it becomes necessary to consider to what extent Renaissance and Postmodernism could be connected. First of all, it is essential to reflect on the historical moment in which both artistic and philosophical movements emerged. The rise of the Renaissance took place at a time in the history of Western culture in which the whole world was being explored and many new exciting territories discovered, traditional religious dogmas were shattered to pieces by the Reformation, producing bloody and apparently endless religious wars that devastated Europe and the modern economy was starting to mature with the advent of modern bankers and international trade. Needless to say, the Renaissance was also the age of scientific and technical discoveries that were destined to change the world.

On the other hand, postmodernism happens after not one but two terrible world wars which killed millions of innocent citizens. These high-tech massacres and mayhems would not be possible without the modern warfare and scientific advances that, at that time, were changing our understanding of, not only the world, but also the universe. At the same time, capitalism was evolving into late capitalism and, with our entire planet mapped and explored, humans were starting to dream and plan imminent and inevitable space explorations.

If these two very different but at the same time similar historical backgrounds are compared, we need to accept that the socio-cultural climate in which Renaissance and postmodernism were born were not so different after all. As a result, Renaissance philosophers and scholars understood traditional dogmas, theories and schools of thought as useless in this new and radically different scenario. Thus, they went back to the origins and re-discovered Plato. A very similar process took place in the case of postmodern philosophers, such as Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, who rejected the philosophies of mathematical order and certainties, opting for more entropic understandings of the world. And, one more time, Plato became fundamental.

In the quotation from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, poets are characterised by their innate ability to see beyond the external, tangible realities. And, what is more, to create alternate realities through art which are closer to the realm of ideas than those perceived by non-poetical senses. As a result, Renaissance artists and philosophers defended the idea that art and language are not merely denotative but, on the contrary, prolific and seminal in nature. This Renaissance, neo-Platonic idea is at the very core of postmodern philosophy, as Jacques Derrida's *De la Grammatologie* (1967) or Jean Baudrillard's *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1991) clearly prove. Thus, Harold Bloom, one of the best-known postmodern literary critics, did not hesitate to write a one thousand pages' volume on Shakespeare which conclusions were contained in its very neo-Platonic title, *Shakespeare, the Invention of the Human* (1998).

Returning to *Don Quixote* and *The Sot-Weed Factor*, if Cervantes and Barth are neo-Platonic thinkers, after all, it is not surprising that the protagonists of their novels understand ordinary, external, reality as false while the many worlds contained within the numberless books they consume is, to them, genuine and absolutely real. Thus, Alonso Quijano is not the alter ego of Don Quixote, but the contrary. And, similarly, the Ebenezer Cooke real people identify every day is not but a pale reflection of the Cooke who writes himself in his projected epic poem, Maryland. Maryland, the poem, not the colony. Because in Barth's novel, reality is literary, never geographical. Just as it happened in *Don Quixote*, which imaginary territories convey more reality than the real places. As a matter of fact, accurate geographical setting is so deprived of importance that the book starts by stating that it takes place “somewhere in La Mancha, in a place I do not care to remember” (Cervantes 19).

Deconstructing the Binary Opposite Sanity/Dementia

A fundamental connection between *Don Quixote* and *The Sot-Weed Factor* is madness and the way it is understood in both novels. Traditionally, madmen have been criminalised, prosecuted, tormented,

imprisoned and even executed. As explained by Craig Leigh in a recent article, dementia was to the medieval eyes a moral and social crime, not a disease (2014). As a result, mental asylums were dark, cruel and painful prisons where crazy people were kept away from society, not for patients who deserve humane treatments that could alleviate or even cure their maladies. Not surprisingly, the concept of madness throughout Western history became a paramount preoccupation to postmodern scholars such as Michel Foucault or Jacques Derrida. Foucault opened his seminal *Madness and Civilization* (1965) as follows:

[a]t the end of the Middle Ages, leprosy disappeared from the Western world. In the margins of the community, at the gates of cities, there stretched wastelands which sickness had ceased to haunt but had left sterile and long un-inhabitable. For centuries, these reaches would belong to the non-human. From the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, they would wait, soliciting with strange incantations a new incarnation of disease, another grimace of terror, renewed rites of purification and exclusion (Foucault 4).

As it becomes evident in the quotation above, madness becomes the new leprosy and madmen are pushed to the margins of society, both psychically and metaphorically. Focusing on those margins and the possibility of granting marginalised people a voice of their own is crucial to postmodern thinkers. Gayatri Spivak developed the concept of *subalternity*, departing from Derrida's concepts (1988). Derrida himself devoted a fundamental essay included in *Writing and Difference* (1978) to Foucault's study of madmen as voiceless individuals, "Cogito and the History of Madness." In this text, Derrida defends that:

[a]ll our European languages, the language of everything that has participated, from near or far, in the adventure of Western reason—all this is the immense delegation of the project defined by Foucault under the rubric of the capture or objectification of madness . . . Total disengagement from the totality of the historical language responsible for an exile of madness, liberation from this language in order to write the archeology of silence, would be possible in only two ways. Either do not mention a certain silence (a certain silence which, again, can be determined only within a language and an order that will preserve this silence from contamination by any given muteness), or to follow the madman down the road of his exile (Derrida, "Writing" 35-36).

As "Cogito and the History of Madness" proceeds, it becomes evident that the only real way to give demented people their voice back is precisely by "following the madman down the road of his exile."

And what is *Don Quixote* about if not exactly that very journey in which commonsensical, healthy readers accompany the most celeritous and famous of roaming madmen? Miguel de Cervantes becomes a modern-day Cicero who guides us through Umberto Eco's "fictional woods" (1994), accompanying Don Quixote in his many absurd, hilarious and enlightening quests. That way, the madman becomes not only voiced but the best spokesman for freedom, independence, loyalty, honour and love in the whole history of Western literature. In other words, hundreds of years before Derrida was even born, Cervantes becomes the first practitioner of deconstruction. At this point it is important to note that *Don Quixote's* journey into madness is at the same time a physical journey since once transformed into Don Quixote, Alonso Quijano becomes a roaming anti-hero who cannot be motionless for a single second. And that's also common to Ebenezer Cooke in *The Sot-Weed Factor* and the vast majority of protagonists within postmodern fiction. As an example, I would like to quote Benny Profane, from Thomas Pynchon's *V.*, who is described as a "schlemil and human yo-yo" (Pynchon 1).

In *Don Quixote* virtually every traditional binary opposite related to sanity/dementia is not only broken but shattered to a myriad of broken glasses. The madman is silenced by society and religion, but voiced and extremely talkative; his chivalric readings are both fictional and architects of reality, at the same time they are simultaneously high and pop art and by the end of the novel, Sancho Panza becomes Don Quixote and the other way round; demonstrating that reality can only be understood when reflected in a convex mirror, as John Ashbery defended in his 1975 masterpiece.

As Monserrat Ginés describes in "Don Quixote in Yoknapatawpha: Faulkner's Champions of Dames" (1995), William Faulkner, a novelist who becomes necessary to understand the evolution of American postmodern literature, was obsessed with Cervantes's novel. And the main reason why Faulkner visited *Don Quixote* so often is no other but the way in which Cervantes deconstructs the binary opposite sanity/

dementia. According to Faulkner, and I must necessarily agree, Cervantes is only upright, honest, brave and modelling when he is absolutely crazy. When he is forced to recover traditional sanity, he becomes a dull, coward, absolutely grim and an uninteresting marginal character who has little, if anything, to say. At this point, it becomes convenient to quote Paul de Man, who defended that, “literature as well as criticism—the difference between them being delusive—is condemned (or privileged) to be forever the most rigorous and, consequently, the most unreliable language in terms of which man names and transforms himself” (1979, 19). So, to Faulkner and Paul de Man, in *Don Quixote*, the subaltern is the only one with a voice of his own.

In John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*, an almost identical situation is found. First of all, the binary opposition historical person/literary character is deconstructed. The protagonist of the novel is Ebenezer Cooke, an American who travelled to England being very young and returned to the American continent as an adult, in order to discover his natal Maryland. But there was a real Ebenezer Cooke, with a very similar biography who wrote a poem about his enterprise entitled *The Sot-Weed Factor* in 1705. As a result, Barth's novel is simultaneously historical and fictional. In other words, understanding Barth's novel without doing so with Roland Barthes's concept of literary texts as palimpsests (1977) is virtually impossible.

The second binary opposition to be broken in this novel is also related to dementia/sanity. From the very beginning of the narrative, Cooke is described as follows:

[v]ery well, then. I shall tell thee only that he was Platonist to the ears, and hated Tom Hobbes as he hated the Devil, and was withal so fixed on things of the spirit on essential spissitude and indiscerptibility and metaphysical extension and the like, which were as real to him as rocks and cow-patties that he scarce lived in this world at all. And should these be still not sufficient clues, know finally that he was at that time much engrossed in a grand treatise Against the materialist philosophy, which treatise he printed the following year under the title Enchiridion Metaphysicum (Barth “Sot-Weed” 30).

As we see, Cooke “scarce lived in this world” but, rather in a realm of fantasy and imagination which is both far away from reality and more real than the external, sensorial territory.

The first example of Cooke's disconnection from the real world is, in fact, a very clear echo of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, since Ebenezer Cooke also has her own Dulcinea. If Don Quixote's imaginary Dulcinea was the fairest princess on Earth and the real one a very poor, unpleasant, common woman; Ebenezer's own Dulcinea will be a prostitute. Once again, Barth's postmodern retelling of *Don Quixote*'s adventures is both loyal to Cervantes and more hyperbolic:

“[n]ay, nay, lady!” Ebenezer cried, falling to his knees before her. “Nay, I have the five guineas, and more. But how price the priceless? How buy Heaven with simple gold? Ah, Joan Toast, ask me not to cheapen thee so! Was't for gold that silver-footed Thetis shared the bed of Peleus, Achilles' sire? Think thee Venus and Anchises did their amorous work on consideration of five guineas? Nay, sweet Joan, a man seeks not in the market for the favors of a goddess!” (Barth, “Sot-Weed” 65)

Another very clear example of this paradoxical and utterly postmodern deconstruction of the binary opposites truth/fantasy, history/story, sanity/dementia is the way Pocahontas's myth is re-told in *The Sot-Weed Factor*. According to the canonical American founding myth (which is by no means closer to historical accuracy than Barth's histrionic version), Captain John Smith discovered Pocahontas and her Indian family, fell in love with the beautiful indigenous woman and took her to England with him, rescuing her and her tribe from barbarity. Ebenezer Cooke transmits a very different account of the same myth:

her name being Pocahontas. By this name is signify'd, in there tongue, the smalle one, or she of the smallnesse and impenetrabilitie, and this, it seem'd, referr'd not to the maidens stature, wch was in sooth but slight, nor to her mind, wch one c* penetrate with passing ease. Rather it reflected, albeit grosslie, a singular physi- cked short-coming in the childe to witt: her prMtie was that nice, and the tympanum therein so surpassing stout, as to render it infrangible. This fact greatlie disturb'd the Emperour, for that in his nation the barbarous custom was practiced, that whensoever a maid be affianc'd, the Salvage, who wisheth to wed her, must needs first fracture that same membrane, whereupon the suitor is adjudg'd a man worthe of his betrothed, and the nuptials followe. Now Powhatan, we were told, had on sundrie occasions chosen warriors of his people to wedd this Pocahontas, but in everie instance the ceremonie had to be foregone, seeing that labour as they might, none had been able to deflowr her, and in sooth the most had done themselves hurt withal, in there efforts; whereas, the proper thing was, to injure the young lasse, and that as grievouslie as possible, the degree of injurie being

reck'd a measure of the mans virilitie. Inasmuch as the Salvages are wont to marrie off there daughters neare twelve yeares of age, it was deem'd a disgraceful! thing, the Emperour shd have a daughter sixteene, who was yet a maide (Barth, "Sot-Weed" 169).

Faced with this situation, Captain Smith is only given two alternatives. The first one was to deflower the lady himself. The second one would end with his head smashed by an iron axe. Smith happily accepts the task, as Cooke explains in the novel:

This alone, I wot, wd have suffic'd to unstarch an ordinarie man, my selfe included, who am wont to worshipp Venus (after my fashion) in the privacie of darken d couches; but my Capt appeared not a whitt ruffl'd, and in sooth seem'd eager to make his essaye publicklie. This, I take it, is apt measure of his swinishnesse, for that whenas a gentleman is forc'd, against his witt, to some abominable worke, he wiU dispatch it with as much expedition, and as little noticer as he can, -whereas the rake & foole will noise the matter about, drawing the eyes of the world to his follie & license, and is never more content, then when he hath an audience to his mischief... (Barth, "Sot-Weed" 170).

Barth's erotic and hilarious version of the Pocahontas myth is as diametrically divergent from the historical facts as the sweetened story told at American Thanksgiving dinners. Nonetheless, from a metaphorical point of view (and as Paul de Man, Roland Barthes and many other postmodern critics defend, in literature meaning is always displaced from its most immediate signifiers), it is also much closer to reality than the traditional one. If the original myth tried to convince Western audiences and Indians alike of the redemptory and civilized role English invaders played and the desperate need of British civilization aboriginals lived in during the seventeenth century; then, John Barth's new version is not but going one step beyond: Indians were so useless and defenseless on their own before people like Captain Smith arrived to their shores that they would not even be able to deflower their own princesses; which basically would imply the end of their ancestral political and social system. As we see, Ebenezer Cooke's myth of Pocahontas is much more fantastic than the one we are used to. However, at the same time, it is also more genuinely rooted within the deepest layers of meaning of the canonical one that American citizens have come to accept as real.

Concluding Remarks

It is not necessary to assert that Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* is not one of the earliest examples of novels but also the most seminal one. This idea has been fortified since the first publication of the novel by critics such as Samuel Johnson, Vladimir Nabokov, Harold Bloom, John Barth himself and a virtually endless list of equally prominent and respected scholars. John Barth's status within contemporary American literature and the fundamental role he played in the consolidation of postmodern literature is equally obvious. So far, many scholars have devoted their efforts to analyse Miguel de Cervantes's influence on postmodern writers such as Thomas Pynchon or Donald Barthelme, but the process by means of which *Don Quixote* not only influences but justifies John Barth's oeuvre, has not been studied in depth.

Similarly, regardless of the numberless connections that exist between deconstruction and Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, this connection has not been sufficiently considered. Throughout this paper, I have studied all the above-mentioned aspects, employing as a theoretical framework deconstruction because I am fully convinced that Jacques Derrida could not be understood without taking *Don Quixote* into account and that once you have read Derrida it is equally impossible to re-visit Cervantes's masterpiece without deconstructing it. And the very same applies to John Barth and *The Sot-Weed Factor*.

Works Cited

- Ashbery, John, Jacqueline Schuman, and Brian Bristol. *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror: Poems*. New York: Viking Press, 1975.
- Barth, John. *The Sot-Weed Factor*. 1st ed. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960.
- , *The Floating Opera*. Rev. ed. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967.
- , *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction*. New York, NY: Putnam, 1984.
- , *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*. 1st ed. Boston: Little, Brown, 1991.

- Barthes, Roland, and Stephen Heath. *Image, Music, Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Theory, Culture & Society. London; Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1993.
- . *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.
- . *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998.
- . *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life*. New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011.
- Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel. *Don Quixote*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2005.
- Craig, Leigh Ann. "The History of Madness and Mental Illness in the Middle Ages: Directions and Questions." *History Compass* 12.9 (2014): 729-44.
- De Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading : Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. European Perspectives. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. 1st American ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- . *Writing and Difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978. Print.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Name of the Rose*. 1st Ed. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.
- . *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*. The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994.
- Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1965.
- Ginés, Montserrat. "Don Quixote in Yoknapatawpha: Faulkner's Champions of Dames." *The Southern Literary Journal* 27.2 (1995): 23-42.
- Graff, Gerald. *Literature against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.
- Guha, Ranajit, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Selected Subaltern Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Theory and History of Literature. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lectures on Don Quixote*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.
- Pérez Abellán, María Encarnación. "Cervantes, Plantador De Tabaco. La «Escritura Desatada» De John Barth, Revisión Contemporánea De Modelos Narrativos Cervantinos." *Anales Cervantinos* 48 (2016): 275-304.
- Pynchon, Thomas. V., *a Novel*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1963.
- Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Concordance to the Text of the First Quarto of 1600*. Oxford Shakespeare Concordances. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970.
- Vattimo, Gianni. *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press in association with B. Blackwell, 1988.
- Wood, Sarah. *Derrida's Writing and Difference: A Reader's Guide*. Continuum Reader's Guides. London; New York: Continuum, 2009.