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“The Knight-errant of Faith”: Graham Greene’s *Monsignor Quixote*

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Abstract:

Graham Greene’s *Monsignor Quixote* exemplifies the intertextual nature of literature, engaging in a dialogic relationship with Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the novel as a dynamic, evolving form and Gérard Genette’s concept of transtextuality, this paper examines how Greene reinterprets Cervantes’ themes, characters, and narrative structures within a contemporary socio-political framework. The paper studies how the novel explores the tensions between faith and doubt, Catholicism and Marxism, and reality and fiction, positioning Father Quixote as a modernized Quixotic figure and a critique of institutionalized religion. Greene’s engagement with existentialist thought further highlights the ideological and theological underpinnings of the novel. By analyzing *Monsignor Quixote* as a hypertext, this paper demonstrates how literature continuously reinvents itself, reinforcing that novels are deeply rooted in historical and literary precedents.

Keywords: intertextuality, faith and doubt, dialogism, existentialism, postmodernism.

The assertion that all novels are derived from historical precedent aligns closely with Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the novel as a literary form that is “born and shaped in the process of a free translation of others’ works” (378). This viewpoint emphasizes that literature by its very nature is intertextual, allowing new works to emerge due to a dialogic engagement with

earlier texts. Intertextuality posits that novels continually reshape and reinterpret the themes, structures, and motifs of their predecessors. Graham Greene’s 1982 novel *Monsignor Quixote*, a contemporary retelling of Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, is a powerful illustration of this intertextual process. Greene’s novel actively engages with Cervantes’ themes, characters, and narrative structure, modifying them to fit a modern socio-political setting rather than merely referencing it. By doing this, *Monsignor Quixote* illustrates how literary works can be reimagined for various historical eras, appealing to new audiences while preserving the connection to their original context.

Cervantes himself seemed to anticipate this literary reinvention process. In the second part of *Don Quixote*, Samson Carrasco notes that “every language or nation will have its translation of the book” (528). This metafictional moment emphasizes Cervantes’s awareness of the transcultural possibilities of the text and implies that since its inception *Don Quixote* was meant to go beyond its local linguistic and historical setting. Indeed, Vladimir Nabokov later described this enduring influence as the “long shadow” of *Don Quixote*, emphasizing the text’s persistent presence in the global literary imagination. Over time, *Don Quixote* has been widely translated and evolved into what literary scholar Barbara Barbaruk calls an “object of culture” (9). This transformation signifies that the novel has surpassed its original status as a singular literary work and has become a cultural phenomenon - adapted, referenced, and reinterpreted across cultural traditions. Through its countless adaptations in literature and film, *Don Quixote* exemplifies how novels can achieve an enduring legacy by continuously engaging with new cultural and historical contexts. The evolution of these texts underscores the novel’s ability to transcend temporal and cultural boundaries, reinforcing the idea that all novels, in some form, are products of historical and literary precedent. Bakhtin’s theory of the novel as a dynamic, intertextual form is thus observable through *Don Quixote* and its many literary descendants, including *Monsignor Quixote*.

This paper examines *Monsignor Quixote* as a hypertext of *Don Quixote*, drawing on Gérard Genette's definition of hypertextuality as "any relationship uniting a text B to an earlier text A, upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary... derived from a previous text either through simple transformation or through indirect transformation" (*Palimpsests* 5, 7). Greene's novel reinterprets Cervantes' work, preserving key elements while adapting them to a modern socio-political context. This study examines how *Monsignor Quixote* reimagines the Don Quixote character, emphasizing the text's similarities and differences. Curated within a chivalric framework, it delves deeper into thematic intersections like doubt, authority, political discourse, dialogism, fiction and reality, theology and faith, and the convergence of Catholic and Marxist ideologies. By doing so, this paper demonstrates how Greene's novel not only revisits Cervantes' text but also engages in a broader philosophical and ideological dialogue.

The novel explores the dynamic relationship between Monsignor Quixote, a self-proclaimed descendant of Don Quixote, and Zancas, a Marxist ex-mayor, by employing a picaresque structure. Through this, the novel transforms the traditional chivalric quest into a dialogic exploration of faith, ideology, and ethical responsibility within a late capitalist framework. By embedding the narrative within the structure of a journey, Greene mimics the episodic, wandering nature of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, reinforcing Bakhtin's notion of the novel as a dialogic form, where meaning is created through the interplay of competing voices and perspectives (365). *Monsignor Quixote* exhibits an intertextual relationship by explicitly engaging with *Don Quixote* and implicitly drawing from Giovannino Guareschi's *Don Camillo* series. Greene adapts the rivalrous yet affectionate dynamic between Don Camillo and the communist mayor, Peppone, to the relationship between Monsignor Quixote and Zancas, creating an ideological tension that is both averse and deeply personal. In addition to reflecting Genette's concept of hypertextuality, this synthesis of the picaresque genre, Cervantes' legacy,

and Guareschi’s political-religious dialectic also emphasizes Greene’s involvement with the ethics of belief in a time of political disillusionment and secularism. Moreover, this intertextual web places *Monsignor Quixote* in line with Roland Barthes’ idea of the writerly text by requiring the reader to interact with the texts’ points of convergence and divergence (5). Unlike a readerly text which presents a fixed and easily digestible meaning, a writerly text invites active interpretation, requiring the reader to participate in the construction of meaning rather than passively consuming it. Greene’s novel, through the interweaving of multiple literary traditions and ideological frameworks, resists a singular interpretation and fosters a space for plurality, where faith and doubt, tradition and modernity, and religious conviction and political ideology constantly negotiate. This openness allows for a nuanced exploration of moral and philosophical dilemmas, reflecting the complexities of human belief and the ever-shifting boundaries between the sacred and the secular.

Monsignor Quixote establishes Father Quixote as a model of ascetic virtue, positioning him in contrast to the opulence and political entanglements of the Church hierarchy. His humility, simplicity, and moral integrity highlight an idealized, almost utopic vision of the Catholic priesthood, devoid of the corruption, hypocrisy, and moral failings often depicted in literary portrayals of the clergy. Unlike many of his predecessors in literature, ranging from Chaucer’s Pardoner to the morally ambiguous priests of modern fiction, Father Quixote is portrayed as a figure of genuine faith, embodying the principles of charity, compassion, and selflessness. This characterization reinforces Greene’s broader critique of institutionalized religion, suggesting that true Christian virtue lies not within hierarchical power structures but in an earnest faith.

Structurally and thematically, Green’s novel closely mirrors *Don Quixote*, employing a two-part narrative that explores the interplay of reality and illusion. The novel further reinforces this mirroring through explicit intertextual references like Father Quixote identifying himself

as a descendant of Don Quixote, his Seat 600 acting as his 'Rocinante', and Saint Thérèse de Lisieux assuming the role of his 'Dulcinea'. These parallels allow the reading of Greene's protagonist as a modernized Quixotic figure, reinterpreted within a twentieth-century socio-religious context. However, Greene also subverts certain elements of Cervantes' original narrative. While Don Quixote's madness renders him a social outcast constantly ridiculed by those around him, Monsignor Quixote paradoxically emerges as the sole figure of clarity and moral consistency in a world dominated by political corruption and ecclesiastical rigidity. As Roston observes, "It is he, not the representatives of his church, who possesses the humility, gentleness, and charity advocated by the faith" (145).

Furthermore, Father Quixote represents a more self-aware and reflective character than Cervantes' Don Quixote, who displays grandiose self-delusion and an unwavering belief in his chivalric ideals. In contrast to his literary forebear, who holds fast to his fantasies until the end, Father Quixote admits his shortcomings, publicly struggles with uncertainty, and shows sincere regret for theological misinterpretations. His humility positions him as the bridge between faith and reason, belief and doubt, and acts as a counterpoint to Don Quixote's idealism and religious institution's dogmatism. By infusing the Quixotic archetype with a complex humanity and a critical perspective towards both religious and political authority, *Monsignor Quixote* not only reimagines Cervantes' protagonist but also replicates him.

Hypertextuality remains the most prominent transtextual relationship in *Monsignor Quixote*; however, other forms of textual interplay are also at work within the novel. Zancas' discussions of the Prodigal Son and Father Quixote's reflections on the Gospels exhibit metatextuality, which involves a critical or reflective commentary on another text (Genette, *Palimpsests* 4). These instances do not merely reference biblical narratives but actively engage with them by offering a layer of analysis that shapes the novel's broader theological and ideological

discourse. The novel presents itself as a meta-commentary on religious doctrine and individual faith by challenging and re-examining the meanings of these sacred texts. Similarly, intertextuality enhances the novel’s thematic depth, as it refers to the implicit or explicit presence of one text within another (Genette, *Palimpsests* 1). Father Quixote’s dispute with his Bishop, for example, is reminiscent of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, particularly in its examination of authority versus personal conviction and in the original Quixote’s defiance of conventional wisdom. The procession incident evokes Christ’s expulsion of the money changers from the temple- a biblical reference that supports the novel’s central conflict between institutional corruption and spiritual integrity. Furthermore, Father Quixote’s self-conscious reference to Mambrino’s helmet, “Sancho, we are going into battle. I must have my armor” (163), a metafictional nod to Cervantes’ original, humorously acknowledges the absurdity of knightly idealism while reaffirming its moral significance. This intertextual layering is consistent with what Genette calls “transposition,” in which a later text reworks and recontextualizes parts of an earlier work, requiring some level of source material mastery (386). As Genette observes, “It is inevitably necessary to acquire at least a partial mastery of a text in order to imitate it” (*Palimpsests* 6). Thus, Greene’s work with *Don Quixote* is not merely a tribute but a complex process of reimagining in which he incorporates Cervantes’ ideas into a contemporary framework of religious and ideological discourse.

Monsignor Quixote serves as a pastiche hypertext, a modern reimagining that aims to expand its philosophical questions into a contemporary context rather than merely subvert *Don Quixote*. By engaging with Cervantes’ writings from the perspectives of transtextual relationships, Greene creates a story rich in literary tradition and particularly relevant to issues of the twentieth century. *Monsignor Quixote* thus confirms the continued relevance of Quixotic idealism, reframed as a deep moral necessity in a world increasingly characterized by institutional failure and cynicism. In Greene’s retelling, idealism serves as a necessary

counterforce to disillusionment and provides a model of integrity and conviction in the face of spiritual and political decay. This interplay between idealism and reality becomes more pronounced as *Monsignor Quixote* blurs the lines between fiction and lived experience. The Bishop's disbelieving query, "How can he be descended from a fictional character?" clearly expresses this concern (4), only to later propose, "Perhaps we are all fictions, father, in God's mind" (12). The novel's broader examination of faith, skepticism, and the constructed nature of reality aligns with this metafictional examination of identity and existence. The Bishop introduces a paradox at the heart of Greene's book when he claims that "it was only by tilting at windmills that Don Quixote found the truth on his deathbed" (12), thereby allowing readers to understand that often accepting illusion can lead to more profound truths. Father Leopoldo's statement, "Fact or fiction in the end you can't distinguish between them, you just have to choose" (172), and Father Quixote's conversation with Professor Pilbeam, "Fact and fiction again, professor, so hard to tell apart" (174) furthers this ambiguity. At the novel's climax, when illusion and reality collide during Monsignor Quixote's deathbed Mass, this thematic concern comes to its conclusion. He administers the Eucharistic rite while in a delirious state, which results in the mayor receiving an "invisible Host", "Companero," he said, "you must kneel, companero... The mayor opened his mouth and felt the fingers, like a Host, on his tongue" (181). This scene illustrates the central theme of the book: that perception and belief shape reality, and that fact and fiction are inextricably intertwined.

Doubt emerges as a key theme in *Monsignor Quixote*, serving as a link between Marxism and Catholicism. According to Patrick Henry, "the word doubt occurs with uncommon frequency" (68) throughout the book, emphasizing the ambiguities that allow religious and political ideologies to communicate. This convergence highlights the flaws in both spiritual and materialist frameworks, which are made possible by mutual skepticism. The novel's epigraph from *Hamlet* further develops the idea of relative truths, implying that reality depends on one's

perspective. The dialogue between Father Quixote and Zancas in Chapter 4, “How Sancho in his turn cast new light on an old faith,” is an obvious example of this idea. By challenging the arbitrary preference for sheep over goats, Zancas questions biblical traditions, “The goat has all the uses that a sheep has and in addition many of the virtues of a cow. The sheep gives wool all right—but the goat gives its skin in man’s service” (36). Father Quixote responds by expressing his theological doubts, particularly regarding divine justice and the idea of hell, saying, “St Matthew was a tax collector, poor man, and he probably believed in the efficacy of punishment” (37). Here, doubt serves as the cornerstone of their relationship, encouraging an understanding of the limitations in each other’s worldviews. Their arguments are a prime example of Bakhtinian dialogism, which holds that meaning develops via the interaction of opposing viewpoints rather than strict adherence to doctrine (426). Moreover, Greene’s examination of doubt is significantly influenced by Miguel de Unamuno’s existentialist philosophy. As a model of existential faith, Unamuno claimed that “Don Quixote is the prototype of the vitalist whose faith is based upon uncertainty, and Sancho is the prototype of the rationalist who doubts his own reason” (Henry 65). In *Monsignor Quixote*, the priest, like Cervantes’ main character, upholds faith as a continuous battle with doubt rather than as a set of absolute truths. Echoing Unamuno’s opposition to rigid theological structures, Father Quixote’s resistance to ecclesiastical authority emphasizes the value of individual conviction over an institutionalized doctrine.

Father Quixote’s contempt for “Moral Theology” (24) and his denunciation of clerical materialism (158, 164) further support the novel’s criticism of dogmatic religiosity. Father Quixote advocates a more humanistic and compassionate view of faith in contrast to the institution of the Church, which uses strict moral precepts to gain control. He exemplifies this viewpoint in his final Mass, which he celebrates without the use of canonical instruments. When the formal ritual is removed, the act transcends doctrinal limitations and becomes a pure

expression of belief. In a moment of theological paradox, Father Leopoldo asks, “Do you think it’s more difficult to turn empty air into wine than wine into blood?” (184), emphasizing the ability of faith as an act of will to transform. Here, Greene reiterates Unamuno’s claim that faith endures through ongoing conflict with doubt rather than in the absence of it.

In addition to its theological aspects, *Monsignor Quixote* also delves into Spain’s post-Franco political transition. The contrast between Unamuno’s modest memorial and Franco’s imposing mausoleum symbolically criticizes the Catholic Church’s involvement in Franco’s rule. One of the primary beneficiaries of Franco’s victory after the Spanish Civil War was the Church, which held considerable social and political influence. By enforcing religious conformity, Spain was ‘re-Catholicized’, which is similar to the institutional rigidity that Father Quixote subtly opposes. Thus, the novel repeatedly portrays faith as an act of free will and a form of resistance against religious dogma and political tyranny. Father Quixote’s unshakable devotion, despite ridicule and institutional resistance, further supports Greene’s view of faith as an existential choice rather than a doctrinal duty. Father Quixote’s spiritual journey demonstrates an unwavering dedication to belief in a world that is becoming more and more characterized by skepticism and ideological fragmentation, much like Don Quixote’s loyalty to his chivalric ideals.

Greene creates a story that is both a tribute to its literary forerunner and a critical engagement with the theological and political anxieties of the twentieth century. Ultimately, the book claims that faith, like fiction, is about the stories we choose to believe in rather than absolute truths. Father Quixote’s last act of devotion exemplifies this idea, where illusion and reality, doubt and faith, merge into one. As he says,

You can mock me as much as you like, Sancho. What makes me sad is when you mock my books, for they mean more to me than myself I know I’m a poor priest errant,

travelling God knows where. I know that there are absurdities in some of my books as there were in the books of chivalry my ancestor collected. That didn’t mean that all chivalry was absurd. Whatever absurdities you can dig out of my books I still have faith (57).

Throughout the book, Father Quixote maintains his composure, except for the times when his faith is openly questioned. His claim, “Whatever absurdities you can dig out of my books I still have faith” (57), demonstrates how strong his faith is in the face of doubt. “Oh, I know what you think. You think my God is an illusion like the windmills. But He exists, I tell you, I don’t just believe in him. I touch him” (114). This statement reveals the intensely personal and experiential nature of his faith. Adamson asserts that “faith keeps alive the possibility of finding a satisfactory purpose and order for mankind, skepticism keeps away the belief that any solution to the human condition is absolute” (192). This insistence on concrete experience over abstract dogma is consistent with the text. Father Quixote embodies belief as a certainty, rather than an intellectual abstraction that reason can completely refute. His unwavering faith contrasts sharply with Zancas’s ideological skepticism, but their continuing conversations imply that doubt and belief are not mutually exclusive; rather, they exist in a dialectical relationship.

The core of the text is Bakhtin’s idea of “novelistic dialogue” as “pregnant with an endless multitude of dialogic confrontations, which do not and cannot resolve it” (365). Due to the novel’s essentially dialogic structure, Catholicism and Marxism can coexist without imposing a single, conclusive truth. Neither Zancas nor Father Quixote ‘win’ their ideological arguments; instead, their discussions foster an evolving comprehension that goes beyond dogmatic doctrine. Rather than accepting monologic resolution, the novel embraces diversity, ambiguity, and the coexistence of opposing viewpoints. The end of the book demonstrates this,

when Zancas, despite his atheism, has a strong emotional reaction to Father Quixote's last act of faith. "The love which he had begun to feel for Father Quixote seemed now to live and grow in spite of the final separation and the final silence," he reflects after receiving communion from the dying priest (185). The novel's central claim that human connection, not doctrinal certainty, is the most enduring force is embodied in this moment when love transcends ideological boundaries. As evidenced by the novel's claim that faith transcends institutionalized belief systems, the act of communion—once written off by Zancas as merely ritual—becomes a profoundly personal and transforming experience.

Fundamentally, *Monsignor Quixote* reframes chivalry in light of contemporary ideologies, reiterating Barbaruk's claim that "the ethical ideal of Quixotism is broader - it seeks to institute justice and freedom as a norm for the world destructively assaulted by evil" (35). Greene emphasizes the ongoing conflict between faith and reason, tradition and progress, conviction and doubt by transforming Cervantes' knight-errant into a modest priest-errant negotiating the religious and ideological tensions of the twentieth century. The novel examines skepticism and the diversity of truths, critiquing dogmatism while celebrating human understanding and the value of discourse, which gives it a lasting relevance. In a world where inflexible ideologies frequently divide people, *Monsignor Quixote* emphasizes the value of empathy and intellectual openness through its engagement with political and theological discourses. By doing this, Greene carries on Cervantes' legacy and reaffirms *Don Quixote*'s timeless value as a prism to view current ethical and philosophical conundrums. The search for justice, truth, and meaning is still as pressing today as it was in Cervantes' day, and *Monsignor Quixote* ultimately serves as both a tribute and a reinvention—an intertextual link between the past and present.

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