

ALFRED NOYES / The Theatre of Criticism: An Adaptation of Ramon Fernandez's *Quixote Variations*

Introduction

It is a seemingly off-hand comment—a brief jotting in the Spanish poet Ramon Fernandez's slight and fragmentary archive:

"In the theatre of criticism [el teatro de critica] we mistake a theatre of war."

The comment would seem to be a pronouncement on the state of criticism, ironically comparing critical debates to the far more dramatic and disastrous "theatre of war." And it may indeed be so. But another possibility arises when we refer to a little-known notice in *Ambos* (April 1926), the journal edited by Fernandez's friend Manuel Altolaguirre, which announces the printing of a pamphlet by Imprenta Sur entitled "El teatro de critica," authored by none-other than Ramon Fernandez. The notice calls the work a "stunning new manifesto" and includes a brief quotation:

"The theatre of criticism is the dromenon of social life; why be surprised if we find in it expressions of affinity alongside critical discriminations?"

My searches to locate this obscure item have been entirely fruitless; after months combing various databases I can only conclude that the pamphlet was never actually printed. It could even be a joke (Altolaguirre was not above such pranks—announcing at one point, in *Poesia* (1932) a "new novel by Federico Garcia Lorca"). It is also worth noting that Fernandez, by all accounts, had ceased writing by 1925, after which point his whereabouts are little known (until his reappearance in Barcelona in the mid-1930s).

But there is one other only recently-unearthed piece of evidence: a small packet of letters, written by Altolaguirre to his future wife Concha Mendez when he was living in Paris (1930-32). One of these letters mentions a visit by a "Ramon" with whom Altolaguirre discusses "the theatre." They visit the critic Pierre Menard and Altolaguirre records "Ramon" telling Menard that "poets are simply becoming charac-

ters in a fiction.” What of critics, Menard asks? Ramon responds: “Actors. Actors who want to play the characters poets have become.”

If we are to entertain the idea (as I wish to do here) that “the theatre of criticism” was more than an off-hand comment; if, in fact, I am to entertain this phrase conceptually, even theoretically, I am up against a blank wall of historical silence. If Fernandez developed a theory of the theatre (or a theory of criticism—it is a little unclear), why does no one else from that era mention it? Fernandez himself comes up, and his work receives comment in a number of journals. He was friends, in the early 1920s at least, with a wide circle of leading Spanish literati, including Lorca, Altolaguirre, Buñuel. Lorca, especially, had an interest in the theatre; why would Fernandez’s interest in, or ideas about, the theatre never have surfaced?

The wise decision here, the circumspect decision, would be to walk away from the theatre of criticism as a topic about which anything else could be said. However, though I am usually just such a circumspect person, I will allow myself to pursue the subject, taking the licence poets have so often relied upon when crossing imaginary frontiers. I quote the physicist Niels Bohr for further permission:

“An independent reality in the ordinary physical sense can neither be ascribed to the phenomena observed nor the agencies of observation.”

One postulate, then, of the theatre of criticism, is that we too often delude ourselves with the idea that criticism is real, factual, disinterested, objective, empirical, material, and that the objects studied by criticism are in turn also real, material, empirical, etc. We make up what we say, and we make up the objects we discuss as we say what we are saying about them.

The only thing less relevant than poetry today is literary criticism. The theatre of criticism must begin with this postulate above all else. It must embrace its own irrelevance. As it falls *out of the world* we recognize, it must grasp that outside fiercely, and not let go. Its irrelevance is its relevance.

The theatre of criticism is entirely fraudulent. It commits crimes against property and veracity. But the gestures it makes, between one fraud and another, are entirely *sincere*. Really. Its claims about the unreal are—strangely *real*.

The theatre of criticism occurs outside institutional spaces and parameters. If the work you observe displays institutional credentials, or is institutionally sanctioned, it

is not the theatre. The theatre is entirely unsanctioned. It occurs in gutters and cafes, blogs and comments streams. It is “public”; thus, it is very nearly invisible, rapidly disappearing.

Sometimes we find ourselves in the theatre of criticism without recognizing it. We call this “networking,” or “making contacts.” Let’s pretend: you review me, I’ll review you. We read each other’s poems (barely) and whisper sweet nothings, banal praise. We attend “events” to “see” others and “be seen.” This is all the theatre of criticism. Who do you pretend to be today? What writer did you pretend to read?

If poetry has nowhere “real” to be anymore—no space or place of action—and if criticism is just as “displaced”—then the fictive is the only option left. Let’s pretend there’s a place for this, OK? You go stage left, I’ll go stage right. I wrote a book. You wrote about the book I wrote. Now—action.

In the theatre of criticism we face the pointlessness of our literary activities and efforts. We exist, there, in pure anxiety, writing with no net (no poet, no critic—no subject, no object—just writing). Doubt is everything in the theatre of criticism. In it all the negative affects of our literary lives are given free reign. We howl the unalloyed howl of our raw marginality. The theatre of criticism is petty, childish, aggrieved—slighted, jealous, egotistical. Turning on itself, its only hope is that “I is another.” I is. Theatrically thrown.

The theatre of criticism brays from the margin not because poetry (and criticism) makes nothing happen. In fact, it makes pretend things happen. But it’s difficult to separate the pretend from the uselessly “real,” and the margin only ever expands. The margin is, in fact, huge now, vast, very nearly the entire world. We’re all on the edges. Looking in at what?

The theatre of criticism believes in bogus theories. Because it is a bogus theory.

Or—all theories are bogus by definition (and in the theatre revealed as such—in character)—a supposing to know by subjects supposed to know.

Now—let’s suppose there’s such a theatre.

I have found Ramon Fernandez’s *Quixote Variations* to be one of the most fascinating and impossible, fraudulent and complicit poems I have ever read. I have pursued its various editions and versions. I have translated it. I have hoarded and protected it. I have lived with it. I have crushed it under my pillow and woken drooling on its scattered pages. Now, I subject it to its only possible fate—the theatre of criticism. It’s yours now. Open the doors.

Characters:

Pierre Menard—a French literary critic

Ramon Fernandez—the dead Spanish poet

Helen Vendler—an American literary critic

Setting:

Possibly an apartment in Paris (or New York), anywhere from 1938 to 2008. There are three objects on the stage: a bookshelf, a wing-back chair in front of the bookshelf, and, lying on the floor a few feet in front of the chair, an open pine coffin. Pierre Menard sits in the chair, hands folded in his lap, legs crossed, studying the audience. It is clear that there is a body in the coffin (this is Ramon Fernandez). Helen Vendler remains off-stage throughout

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MENARD: Good evening. My name is Pierre Menard, and I will be speaking tonight about the poetry of Ramon Fernandez—in particular, his acknowledged master work, the “Quixote Variations.” As a long-time student of Cervantes’s great work, I am perhaps better situated to understand Fernandez’s undertaking than many others, despite the fact that I am French, not Spanish. It also helps that I met Fernandez, in Paris in 1930, and was able to ascertain certain aspects of his intentions and beliefs that remain beneath the surface of his work and have been a cause of confusion for many of his readers.

One obvious reading of Fernandez’s “Quixote” is to read it as an attack upon, or deconstruction of, Cervantes’s masterpiece. Indeed, one could consider it an attack on the very notion of “masterpieces,” with the hierarchies they connote and the scarcity they imply. Masterpieces would be impossible in a world without property (they are wholly dependent upon the concept of private property), so if we are to read Fernandez as a radical poet, even as an anarchist poet (though it is somewhat difficult to clarify the relationship between his literary activities in the early 1920s and his later political activities in the 1930s), we must suppose him to be one opposed to the hierarchical and exclusive notion of the masterpiece. Though he says so nowhere, we must see him as opposed to the very privileged position of the *Quixote* in Spanish literature and culture.

FERNANDEZ (from the coffin):

Through crushed Saturdays
And broken Mays

Never with three soft days
Overwhelming us

Having neither marginal
Nor critical remarks

Nothing to register
Delight

That expression
Is eloquence's reason

Thus I agree to fill
Your margin

And offer a few pages
At the end of your book

Sublime stars and
Aristotle raised

From the dead
For that very purpose

MENARD: The opening lines here can indeed be read as the words of a radical working class poet bemoaning the lot of an underclass which has all sense of leisure ("Saturdays") and hope ("May" with its invocation of rebirth) "crushed" and "broken." The context, however, immediately shifts and beginning with the words "Having neither marginal / Nor critical remarks" we are thrown into the Preface of *Don Quixote* and Cervantes's lament for his "bare words." Much of the rest of this poem is comprised

of language stripped from Cervantes's great work—and indeed such literary pilfering and plagiarism might in fact be read as a critique of property and the exclusions and privileges assigned to certain texts in the canon.

VENDLER (interrupting from off-stage): You are basing your comments on an ideological *a priori* that has nothing whatsoever to do with criticism, the task of which is simply to *describe* the work of art.

MENARD (looking angrily off stage): Vendler—I'm getting there. Please bear with me. (Faces the audience again.) Where was I? Oh yes—

Fernandez hand has arisen from his coffin, holding an unlit cigarette aloft. As Menard continues talking, he gets up, pulls a lighter from his jacket, lights Fernandez's cigarette, and returns to his seat. Fernandez smokes in the coffin.

I am offering the hypothetical and perhaps expected reading: finding evidence of the later political "radical" in the earlier aesthetically "radical" work of his bohemian youth. But the tricky part here is that there is no way of knowing exactly what Fernandez's attitude to Cervantes's work—as canonical text or cultural icon—was. Many lesser writers might borrow from a great writer's masterpiece; why should we read Fernandez's borrowings—raw, bald, and blunt as they are—any differently? In fact, in invoking the "friend" from Cervantes's Preface, who offers to assist the author by "agree[ing] to fill / Your margin" and "a few pages / At the end of your book," isn't Fernandez fulfilling a supportive and ultimately dedicatory function with regard to the prior work? Isn't he, in fact, not "critiquing" Cervantes's *Quixote* at all, but rather, acknowledging its priority and declaring a sort of aesthetic affinity?

VENDLER: What do you mean by "aesthetic affinity"?

MENARD (again looking annoyed): That the artistic choices a poet makes can be as much about identifying with a particular source as they can be...distantiations from or critiques of a predecessor.

VENDLER: You're trying to invoke old weird Harold Bloom.

MENARD: Not at all. But now that you've called him to mind, certainly. Yes. Most of our models of critique and argument are based upon competition over scarce resources, privacy and individuation, distinguishing the unique, original. These are inflected with capitalist epistemology. But what I'm interested in, and what I think you can see in Fernandez's work, is an expression of authorial or aesthetic affinity. One responds to Cervantes by writing Cervantes—re-creating him anew, in a new historical context. And that's what Fernandez was doing. He was *being Cervantes*, if Cervantes were an anarchist poet working in a Barcelona book factory in the twentieth century. What then would he write?

FERNANDEZ:

Beyond
Water
Bodies
Flutter
Sleeves
Cry
Oceans
Masks
Heard
Grinding
Phrases
Songs
Tragic
Spirit
Spain
Sunken
Summer
Vanished
Artificer
Myself
Out of
Order

VENDLER: I am curious, Menard, about the fact that Fernandez is such a marginal, minor, even forgettable figure—what is your attraction to his work? Isn't this just the case of a lesser figure who tried—unsuccessfully—to attach his wagon to a star?

MENARD (Indignant): Are you calling *me* a “lesser figure”?

VENDLER: No, you idiot—Fernandez.

MENARD (Self-importantly): We are all “lesser figures” until someone makes masterpieces of us.

VENDLER: Good luck then. As for myself, I like to pick the winners.

MENARD: The losers are infinitely more interesting. Anyway, I thought Marjorie Perloff said that?

VENDLER: Misattribution is everything.

MENARD: I must get on with my talk—

FERNANDEZ:

Born free
I retired
So I might continue
To these solitary hills
Where only companions
And sources are ours
And the clear trees
Seem of crystal

With wind
I communicate
Cunning
And my thoughts

Go towards absence
I am a distant flame
And a sword far off
Having attacked seeing
They now deceive
Words demanding
The impossible
Speech of windmills

MENARD: Fernandez here appropriates the voice of Marcela from Chapter 14 of the first part of the *Quixote*. Blamed for the death of the shepherd-poet Grisóstomo whose love she rejected, Marcela comes to defend herself. In doing so, she lays claim to a particular autonomy, and to the “voluntary” nature of love. In Fernandez’s hands, Marcela’s words become the words of Spain’s defeated anarchists whose “demand” for the “impossible” echoes out of the grave—just as the pathetic poet Grisóstomo’s words do when his poem is snatched from his funeral pyre.

VENDLER: Couldn’t we also read this as the lament of the unread poet? Fernandez, more Grisóstomo than Marcela, has his poems snatched from history’s silent grave by you, Menard. Otherwise, we’d never have heard him.

While Vendler speaks, Fernandez’s hand once again rises from the coffin, this time holding an empty wine glass aloft. Menard sighs and, while responding to Vendler, he reaches behind his chair for a wine bottle, approaches the coffin, and begins to fill the dead poet’s glass. However, looking off stage at Vendler the entire time, he does not pay attention to the glass, and continues to fill it. Wine overflows all over Fernandez, who keeps his glass aloft until the bottle is empty. His hand and the glass then descend into the coffin.

MENARD (Dumbfounded): You...no one can...you can’t.... Look. (Long pause. Then, thoughtful.) “Poetry is a womb of souls which we as poets attend.” That’s what I’m doing here—attending to poetry. It involves an intimate and unbreakable link between reading and writing, watching and acting. That’s what Fernandez did too. It’s all we can do as critics (and poets). *Pay attention.*

Menard notices the bottle is empty, looks at it, looks down at Fernandez, shrugs and returns to his seat before continuing.

MENARD: Thinking, analysing, inventing are not anomalous acts; they are the normal respiration of the intelligence. To glorify the occasional performance of that function, to hoard ancient and alien thoughts, to recall with incredulous stupor what the *doctor universalis* thought, is to confess our laziness or our barbarity. Everyone should be capable of all ideas and in some utopian future this will be the case. (Pause.) I simply want to enrich the halting and rudimentary art of reading—as Fernandez did too.

FERNANDEZ:

I tell it you as all tales are told
To wrest fiction from the dead hands of prose

From dense histories
Feeble cries

Apparatuses for
Forging chains

To think of situations
From books I have read

Nothing but fire
Steel pounding into shape

Just as if it belonged
To heretics

The perverse and complicated
Language of their authors