

Literary and Theatrical Resilience: Quixote, from Classic and (Post)Modern Character, to Syndrome

Ana-Magdalena PETRARU*

Abstract: A classic character brought to myth rank, Cervantes's Quixote was tackled philosophically, by Miguel de Unamuno in his essay *Vida de Don Quixote y Sancho*, 1905 on the realm of Spanish literature; we have been recently amazed from a postmodern, even postcolonial perspective, by Salman Rushie (*Quichotte*, 2019) and dramatically on the stage of the National Theatre of Iași by Carmen Dominte who initially proposed *The Quixote Syndrome* (2021) as a theatrical performance meant to be read. Without dealing with the adaptations in various arts (Minkus's ballet), we will study the resilience of a character with reference to the above texts and what was left of it on stage with insights into adaptation theory and theatrical interpretation in the context of pandemic distancing.

Keywords: Quixote, resilience in literature and theater, pandemic context

Introduction

As popular as the Homeric Achilles, Agamemnon or Odysseus, as the Shakespearean Hamlet, King Lear or Othello, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza are, according to Romanian exegesis, part of the “brilliant paricidal creations”¹ that almost eliminate their authors from history, especially since Cervantes's life was not a great one (as Goethe's or Hugo's), but humble and adventurous. A parody of the chivalric novel banned at the time in Spain, Cervantes preserves its feudal ideal and ethics through his conceptions of bravery, honor, fidelity, mutual respect and noble manners reflected in the cult of woman²; the author can be seen as a “father of realism”³ who aims at “a literature based on the probable, loaded with moral and social observation, positive heroes and criticism of the negative ones, because only in this way can a

* Associate assistant, PhD, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, and Associate lecturer, George Enescu National University of Arts, Iași

¹ G. Călinescu, “Cervantes”, preface to Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Iscusitul Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*, translated by Ion Frunzetti and Edgar Papu, Minerva, 1987, p. V.

² Cf. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. Reprezentarea realității în literatura occidentală/ Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Polirom, 2000, p. 123.

³ *Idem*, p. XXIII.

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literature be educational and exemplary.”⁴ If Sancho Panza is poor in spirit, Don Quixote is a fool, unable to see reality as it is, “his disease is hallucinatory. His delirium is either of perception or interpretation. Thus, he sees giants instead of windmills, but the peasant is terribly ugly for him, as in real life.”⁵ Specialists in neurology found him an interesting case and studied his tremor, insomnia, neuropsychiatric symptoms, dementia, loss of consciousness, headaches and other illnesses in the context of the monomania he was labelled with.⁶ In the literary instances considered, namely novel, essay, critique or theater and implicitly, stage adaptation, we do not see any rewriting / reinterpretation of Don Quixote in a negative way, as a second, secondary or inferior work; on the contrary, we adopt the postulate of the theory of adaptation according to which an equal, lateral and not vertical approach is the appropriate one in the interpretation of autonomous works that deliberately succeed an initial writing.⁷

Don Quixote’s literary resilience

In the picaresque epic *The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho*, Unamuno speaks of the “reason of the fool”⁸ the knight had according to which, in contemporary Spain, he would have been taken advantage of and his hidden motives behind the adventure would have been sought. Knight of the Faith, Don Quixote was a “contemplative, because only the contemplative indulge in deeds like his.”⁹ Madness came with the age of maturity, he was by no means an immature who was given a lesson by life and went crazy from too many chivalrous readings: “from too little sleep and too much reading, his brain dried up and he lost his mind.”¹⁰ His leaving for a life of adventure is similar to Iñigo/ Ignacio de Loyola’s in search of Christ, initially tempted by glory, then converted, resembling other moments in Don Quixote’s quest, as well: “Don Quixote took the road that Rocinante liked, because all roads lead to the eternity of fame when a burning desire trembles in the chest. And Iñigo de Loyola, on his way to Monserrate, when he said farewell to the Moor he had been talking to, decided to

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Idem*, p. XXVI.

⁶ Jose Alberto Palma, Fermin Palma, “Neurology and Don Quixote”, *European Neurology*, 2012, no. 68, pp. 247–257, <https://www.karger.com/Article/Pdf/341338>, retrieved February 10, 2022.

⁷ Linda Hutcheon with Siobhan O’Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd edition, Routledge, 2013, p. XV.

⁸ Miquel de Unamuno, *Viața lui Don Quijote și Sancho/ The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2004, p. 14.

⁹ Miquel de Unamuno, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 32.

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leave it to the horse to choose his path and his future.”¹¹ At Unamuno, Don Quixote is the one who wants to be, which becomes the most real part of reality, “the core of all human life: to know what you want to be.”¹² The good squire Sancho ‘completed’ Quixote who “needed him to be able to speak, that is, to think aloud, in all his will, to hear himself, to hear the living echo of his voice in the world. Sancho was his choir, he was the whole Mankind. And the love for Sancho is for him the love for all Mankind.”¹³ According to Unamuno’s Don Quixote, because of fear we see windmills instead of giants or we would have seen them in the time of Cervantes; today, fear would make us see locomotives, automobiles, ships, machine guns, and other machinery of the modern world, “Fear and only Sancho Panza’s fear inspires our worship and veneration for steam and electricity; fear and only Sancho Panza’s fear makes us fall to our knees in the face of the enormous horrors of mechanics and chemistry, begging for mercy. And finally the weary and disgusted spirit of the human race will prostrate itself at the feet of a huge factory that produces elixirs for a long life. And the crushed Don Quixote will live because he has sought his own salvation and dared to rush upon the mills.”¹⁴ The wandering knight gave his heart to his lady who became his mistress and not to God, and if a knight who is not in love is to Cervantes like an unstarry sky, in Unamunian philosophy, “out of love for woman springs any heroism. (...) the most fruitful and noble ideals, (...) the thirst for immortality, because in it the instinct of perpetuation prevails and subjugates that of conservation, thus overlapping what is substantial over what is only appearance. The thirst for immortality makes us love the woman, and so Don Quixote ends up uniting the woman and Glory in Dulcinea, and if he could not perpetuate himself through her in carnal sons, he sought to perpetuate himself through her in the bravery of the spirit. He was a man in love, yet he belonged to the righteous and the restrained, as he himself admits somewhere. Did he betray with his righteousness and restraint the purpose of love? No, for in Dulcinea he gave birth to spiritual sons who would last. Married, he couldn’t have been such a fool; the sons of the flesh would have brought him down from his brave adventures.”¹⁵

A postmodern vision of Don Quixote is given to us by Salman Rushdie in *Quichotte*, a rewriting-retelling of *Don Quixote*, a novel worthy of the magical realism with which the author accustomed his readers, with elements of science fiction,

¹¹ *Idem*, p. 47.

¹² *Idem*, p. 54.

¹³ *Idem*, p. 56.

¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 60.

¹⁵ *Idem*, pp. 78-79.

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espionage, a critique of the phenomenon of migration, global warming, fake news and the Trump administration. This time, the protagonist Ismail Smile, a native of the United States of Indian descent, is “a tragicomic Don Quixote of the contemporary world (...) and his hopeless love makes him embark on an initiation adventure, to give life by quasi-magical means to an imaginary son, the new Sancho, and to embark on a series of adventures that will eventually lead him to the end of the world. At the same time, the mysterious author of the new Don Quixote adventures, who has reached the same age as his hero, is trying to put his life in order and fix – like Mr. Smile – the great mistakes of the past.”¹⁶ Rushdie, in *A Quixotic Note on Pronunciation*¹⁷ recommends the French “key-SHOT” for reasons that the text will reveal later (“*Quichotte (sounds like) key shot*. A key shot was a tiny bump of cocaine or heroin scooped up on a key.”¹⁸), leaving it to the readers to articulate the ‘universal Don’ as they wish. Mr. Smile, seized by a passion for a television star, Miss Salma R, “an infatuation which he characterized, quite inaccurately, as love. In the name of this so-called love he resolved zealously to pursue his “beloved” right through the television screen into whatever exalted high-definition reality she and her kind inhabited, and, by deeds as well as grace, to win her heart.”¹⁹ Smile is Ismail, the Americanized version, “He was a brown man in America longing for a brown woman, but he did not see his story in racial terms. He had become, one might say, detached from his skin. This was one of the many things his quest would put in question, and change.”²⁰ A dream and a flourish of the vinyl LP of Jules Massenet’s *Don Quixote* (“Only loosely based on the great masterpiece of Cervantes, isn’t it,” mused the phantom. “And as for you, it seems you’re a little loosely based yourself.”²¹) causes him to choose the pseudonym of Quichotte in his love letters to Salma. Sancho comes to life in ‘the Age of Anything-Can-Happen’: “The magic child manifested himself in black-and-white, his natural colors desaturated in the manner that has become fashionable in much modern cinema. Perhaps (...) he had been seized long ago and now returned by the aliens in the mothership hiding in the sky above the meteors illuminating the Devils Tower, after many years during which he had been studied, drained of color by their experiments, and somehow failed to age.”²² Miracle of the Perseids, the embodiment of his father’s imagination, like Athena for Zeus, the young

¹⁶ Salman Rushdie, *Quichotte*, translation and notes by Dana Crăciun, Polirom, Iași, 2021, p. 4.

¹⁷ Salman Rushdie, *Quichotte: a novel*, New York: Random House, 2019, p. 6

¹⁸ *Idem*, p. 164.

¹⁹ *Idem*, p. 9.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Idem*, p. 10.

²² *Idem*, p. 15.

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Sancho (lover, first of all, of baseball, fast food, in general and hot dogs, in particular, apple pie and Chevrolet cars), becomes a companion and his father's scout who already daydreams them as inseparable as Starsky and Hutch, Kirk and Spock, Mulder and Scully, Batman and Robin²³, to name but a few references to mass and consumer culture. In wooing Miss Selma, the character Quichotte is worried about competition and finds inspiration in 'classics' (Hollywood TV show *The Dating Game*, ABC-TV, 1965) and is ridiculed by his companion son who questions his father's 'wise teachings' of going "on dumb dating shows"²⁴. Sancho is also the voice of reason saying that the lady may not love his father back and, and thus the son's words become "the splutter of a fish out of water (...) the twitch of an amoeba that thinks it's a human being (...) an insult to the greatness of (...) quest" that his father embarked on.²⁵ Sancho becomes a real human being, showing us that anything is possible: "a second miracle had occurred, because this was his Sancho in high definition, full color, and wide-screen aspect ratio. Farewell, monochrome phantom! Here was a visible, tall, handsome (if a little bony-faced), strapping teenage lad with a grin on his face and a hearty appetite for food"²⁶, and the needs of a teenager. The two embark on the initiation journey in which the knowledge of the Beloved becomes the only way of salvation.

In the East, the resilience of a Don Quixote is perhaps best embodied by the Romanian author Octavian Paler who entitles his collection of essays precisely so, *Don Quixote in the East*. He identifies the counterpoint of the Occidental character in the Oriental knight, the new man, as understood by the communist period. If in America the Romanian essayist felt 'incompatible' with the place, perhaps reminding us of Sting's lyrics ("I'm an alien, I'm a legal alien, I'm an Englishman in New York"²⁷), he can only picture Don Quixote across the ocean in a parody, "in a cowboy costume, entertaining spectators at a rodeo, or aided by philanthropic societies dealing with vagabonds and idealists whose ideals failed them. (...) Don Quixote (...) would not have a chance to be understood"²⁸. That is why "Don Quixote did not cross the ocean in the footsteps of the conquistadors."²⁹ Don Quixote was born in Spain, under the pen of Cervantes, which is no coincidence, although there is something 'non-

²³ *Idem*, p. 16.

²⁴ *Idem*, p. 59.

²⁵ *Idem*, p. 62.

²⁶ *Idem*, p. 64.

²⁷ Sting, *Englishman in New York*, composed by Gordon Sumner, Sony Music Publishing, 1987, www.lyricfind.com, Retrieved on February 11, 2022.

²⁸ O. Paler, *Don Quijote în Est/ Don Quixote in the East*, Polirom, Iași, 2017, p. 10.

²⁹ *Idem*, p. 235.

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European' about him and he would not have been popular in Romania: "He is not familiar with the Cartesian spirit of the French and German discipline and has nothing to do with Swiss neutrality, the noisy exuberance of the Italians, or the phlegmatic spleen of the British. One cannot picture him on horseback through the ruins of Greece, competing with the myths of the gods, much less on a Dutch road, despite the fact that there are windmills in the Netherlands. In Russia, he would certainly have reached Siberia, and in Norway he would have failed by a fire. (...) Only in Spain can illusions be more important than reality and play the same role as ghosts in Scotland."³⁰

In our country, in the East, the issue of love is also settled mercilessly. "Only a man could think of such madness: that he would win a woman's heart by going out to fight the windmills. (...) if he had gone directly to Dulcinea, to tell her that he loved her, he would have been exempt from all the bullshit that makes a fool of him."³¹ But Don Quixote is a "happy madman"³² and his love for Dulcinea is enough for him, without her loving him back, so he dismisses those who claim him to prove the truth. He remains (un)intentionally deaf to what does not suit his purposes and listens to his heart which "gives him the strength to turn poor inns into palaces and prostitutes into ladies (...). If necessary, he would be able to live in the world of his illusions, even if he were its only inhabitant."³³ This makes admiration for the character remain "a beautiful imposture"³⁴; thus, the Romanian essayist can be accused of bringing Don Quixote to the gates of the Orient out of a complex of Eastern European vanity that frowns upon the West, or out of an 'untreated' sentimentality."³⁵ However, the cause of Cervantes's character is defended, because who else could help us better analyze our defects, and become aware of what is happening to us (the post-communist context can be superimposed on the current, pandemic one). Only through love, as Don Quixote shows us, can we overcome hatred even though detractors would make fun of us and leave the famous character in the time of Spain's knights and windmills, for the 'turbulent and insecure'³⁶ current times proposing other symbols or none at all. Due to the stress and the rush, the world no longer pays attention to Don Quixote, much less to the east. Chivalrous love is despised in favor of pornography³⁷, and the

³⁰ *Idem*, p. 235.

³¹ *Idem*, p. 27.

³² *Idem*, p. 34.

³³ *Idem*, p. 35.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *Idem*, p. 45.

³⁶ *Idem*, p. 48.

³⁷ *Idem*, p. 55, *passim*.

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Spanish character maintains its high rank in the world literature heritage as “a learned mummy” that no longer has its place on the streets, not even as a “clown”³⁸. The unconscious quixotic courage is different from that of the revolutionary Romanian of 1989 who found a way to overcome his fear of despair.³⁹ A communist Don Quixote, at least in our country, could no longer rely on his companion Sancho Panza because of the terror, the squire explaining to his master that it was impossible to follow him because he thought he was being followed and persecuted. Don Quixote, an alter ego of the Romanian author, would have felt avoided as well, people would have turned their back on him because they would have considered him a “suspicious dissident”⁴⁰, he would have felt alone like a ‘fool’ for whom ‘the wise’ longed for; he was secretly admired “For his idealism was a lung through which the whole society breathed.”⁴¹ Unfortunately, he has become a ‘thorn’ that put his fellows in a bad light, and the latter just wanted to do their best and find the peace that Quixote disturbed, showing them a way other than cowardice and caution, thus attracting resentment and suspicion of going abroad with a passport to the West. The moment of the revolution (1989) brought Don Quixote ‘ultimate ephemeral glory’ and to the assault with proof of love and admiration, hatred and beating of the miners followed. If in the West Don Quixote was regarded with indifference and ridiculed, in the East he felt terrorized and the threat of the psychiatric hospital was upon him⁴².

Don Quixote’s theatrical resilience

On stage, Don Quixote has been played since the end of the 17th century (in English, at Dorset Garden, to music by Purcell, in 1694), and musicals drawing on him were also made (*Man of La Mancha*, United States, 1965)⁴³. At Carmen Dominte, Quixote becomes a syndrome, in the contemporary family formed by mother, father and son, this translating into one’s desire to look different than one is, to simulate perfection in the eyes of the other (family member, authorities). Marked by the pandemic, the stage performance is subject to the rule of social distancing, and all the services that the protagonists need are available online, at a click away (food, social interaction, etc.). The virtues of chivalry are preserved only in appearance, the son mimicking the compassion for the dead boy and we find out that he knew him better

³⁸ *Idem*, pp. 68-69.

³⁹ *Idem*, p. 78, *passim*.

⁴⁰ *Idem*, p. 80.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² *Idem*, pp. 82-84.

⁴³ Hartnoll, Phyllis, Found, Peter (ed.) *The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 82.

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than he wanted to convey. One thing is said and another is intended and done; father tries to evade family and professional duties as much as possible, planning erotic getaways, mother takes refuge in her work, she is as modern woman who puts her career first. The son pretends to be a bright student, winner of school contests, struggling to learn, getting private tuition and always trying to help colleagues with their homework; in fact, he proves to be a bad egg (instigator of violence, (moral) perpetrator of crime). As for the chivalrous ideal of love, it is sublime but it is totally nonexistent, to put it in Caragiale's words: because of the planned sexcapades, father does not seem to show mother the respect and love a proper marriage requires; the son does not know what love is, he does not understand it, he is not interested in it at the moment and he is not going to find it until he graduates from high school and starts college to get a promising job in IT. There is, however, some respect shown in the form of complacency ("My mother taught me that I must always respond to a greeting."⁴⁴) The role model son with excellent results at school only goes out to get private tuition, not in clubs where music is too loud and people cannot hear each other, he helps his colleagues with homework even on weekends and obeys his parents who manage his little free time as they know best. The family does sports (the Faith of the Modern Knights), the son was disciplined by karate, his mother got rid of her headaches due to tennis. Like any modern busy family, they only eat together on weekends and watch a movie. The son is like a robot, he sleeps dreamlessly, he knows what time he turns off the light at bedtime during the police investigation, and he cannot provide any facts on the dead obese boy. Fiddling while Rome burns, mother is too busy with work to answer questions, she is only concerned with her fashion house and the events she attends; she finds time to accuse the dead boy's mother of negligence regarding her child, though, as if he had become obese because he had been fed out of love. Mother thus becomes an occasional psychologist (drawing on Freudianism and arguing that the child, frustrated by his weight, became depressed and committed suicide). She praises her husband who is a doctor that attends conferences abroad, whereas the latter plans erotic getaways with friends and complains about his car that was barely damaged. Father is proud of his son, his conscience is clear, the boy is an investment that has paid off, he has not thrown money out the window on karate and private tuition, he is an exemplary boy, he does not lie and he does not hide anything from his parents.

⁴⁴ Carmen Dominte, *Sindromul Quijote/ The Quixote Syndrome*, p. 2. https://www.teatrulnationaliasi.ro/data/_editor/%E2%80%9ESindromul%20Quijote%E2%80%9D%20de%20Carmen%20Dominte.pdf. Retrieved on February 19, 2022.

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The resilience of Don Quixote is foreshadowed in the second act when the son truly reveals himself; the chivalrous ideal is embodied by a local fairy tale character, a Prince Charming in whom the child believed because of his mother as he was dreaming of the adult life in which he would fight with dragons (the windmills pictured by Cervantes). He lost his innocence with puberty, and forgot the battle between good and evil in the story; he does not care about it anymore, he is a consumer of malls, clubs, computer games and online dating applications. Mother is strongly convinced that she has done her best providing her son with a proper childhood, a beautiful one, full of stories that would contribute to his emotional development from an early age. In the story, the boy was waiting for Prince Charming in the bus station because he thought he was a friend, but his mother shattered his hopes; the character does not come home to children, but stays in his fairy tale. Mother is bad for not letting him out when he wants, Prince Charming is good and loves him more than she does. The son fancies other parents, warmer, more loving, that would get involved in his life (a housewife for a mother, a father to play football with) but it was not meant to be. His dream is to have the superpowers of several Marvel superheroes (Spider Man, Ironman and Batman), as the main character in Rushdie's novel who pictures himself and his son as Hollywood partners (in crime); Sancho, his son in black and white, who later became a real boy like Pinocchio would grant his wish to a certain extent. Father claims that he educated his son to be consistent, to finish what he started; the boy feels misunderstood, though, he wants to be a poet and father does not let him do it, become a failure and bring shame to his family; father would particularly feel ashamed before the hospital manager he works for. The boy has to forget about poetry and learn math, even though he does not like it and has never been any good at it. The parents are the sort of people that would have mocked Don Quixote in the East and would have felt threatened by him, as Paler argued. Their son is not allowed to cry to show his weakness or any other sexual orientation than heterosexuality. Mother lives in her world where sleep and diet bring happiness and where everything is weighed accurately to avoid excesses and become unhappy. The son is a dangerous rebel and his parents do not know anything about it; moreover, they cannot believe their ears that he could have instigated violence to seek attention and love in any situation (the beating of the math teacher with the help of colleagues for the humiliation suffered by less hardworking students). Mother and Father blame themselves for giving him too much credit and having blindly believed him. The son is a loser and an ungrateful young man who ran away from home lying to his host about the divorce of his parents. He enjoys the meal at his colleague's house and worries his parents that ignore him when he returns home pretending that nothing had happened. He keeps to himself; he is not rebellious and tries to obey them as they would have liked a good child with

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excellent results at school that stayed away from trouble. What they don't know can't hurt them, their son is wasting his time with billiards, drugs and an unhealthy entourage. He thinks he is smarter than the others and mocks those he believes are weaker than him, he is a jerk, the kind of person that would have mocked *Don Quixote in the East*. He's an antihero, a joke, Don Quixote is nothing than a syndrome in what concerns him; chivalrous love, the cult of the woman in Cervantes, the obsession for the Beloved in Rushdie correspond to a playboy of a teenager who takes advantage of a girl he likes, and is aggressive in behavior and language towards her. This is the unstarry sky of Unamuno's Cervantes. He takes French leave from karate after his mother drives away, and skips private tuition pretending to be ill. He hangs out with friends in bars, smokes joints, and gives the obese a joint to smoke to forget about being a poet. He blames himself for the obese boy's death but it does not bother him that much, actually. He is only willing to confess and knows that he cannot tell anyone what happened in the station with the dead boy who fell after he smoked from his joint. In this respect, the *key shot* which inspired Rushdie is different from the one that the boy perished from (Salma R also receives drugs from the one who worships her, but they are for therapeutic purposes). He keeps the confession to himself and the public he acts for, his mistakes stay hidden somewhere in the depths of his mind in a Pandora's box that he never wants open. Parents are more upset than the police imagine: father complains about the only like received from posting the death event on social media; mother thinks it is the kind of upsetting news that it is best to forget after you turn off the TV, for your own good. An exceptional trio, a seemingly ordinary but dysfunctional family, in which things are not what they seem: a son who wants to live the apocalypse, a mother who wanted a successful life and apparently got it (a career, a family), a father who kept avoiding monotony and decided to do everything that crossed his mind and climb the corporate ladder (unlike his boy who preferred to go live his life painlessly like a bear in hibernation). Don Quixote turned into a syndrome with inverted chivalric ideals.

Conclusions

Consecrated by Cervantes, Don Quixote has been majestically rewritten/reinterpreted in the modern and postmodern era. Thus, we speak of its resilience: from Unamuno we have extracted philosophical conceptions which, applied to *Sindromul Quijote/ Don Quixote Syndrome*, reveal the exact opposite of the knight and his ethics. Closer to contemporaneity and Carmen Dominte's text is Rushdie's *Quichotte* due to the involvement of drugs and *Don Quijote în Est/ Don Quixote in East* by means of the communist and post-communist experience of the Romanian essayist Octavian Paler in which a knight was driven into a corner by detractors who initially adored

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him and needed him, then avoided him. The texts and their interpretation, a performance on stage in the case of the play, testify to the immortal resilience of the symbolic character who is reborn with each rewriting and develops laterally, not secondarily according to adaptation theory.

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