

TOLEDO MY LOVE...

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Com'esser, donna può quel ch'alcun vede
per lunga esperienza, che più dura
l'immagin viva in pietra alpestra e dura
che 'l suo fattor, che gli anni in cener.

MICHELANGELO.

"Toledo the glory of Spain, light of the arts, the Holy City", wrote Cervantes, by this apotheosis revealing the intellectual and spiritual greatness of that City in the lifetime of El Greco, then the epicentre of Spanish culture at its peak, and the haunt of poets, writers, artists and thinkers, who used to assemble at Cardinal Sandoval's palace and at those of the Conde de Fuensalida, the Conde de Mora, and at the conventions of the two illustrious universities. To that enlightened circle El Greco and Cervantes belonged and I was therefore inrriuged by two fascinating questions: 'Did they ever meet?' 'And, if so, what was the significance of that meeting?'

Hitherto no documents substantiating such a meeting have ever come to light, but that did not in any way discourage me from speculating on the subject. Cervantes's life is not well-documented, but much more is known about El Greco's life, particularly his courageous defence of himself before the Courts of the Inquisition. We can at least be reasonably sure that both men were in Rome in 1570. Then when Cervantes lived at Esquivias between 1584 and



Toledo by Marian Kratochwil. (Collection of Senor Xavier de Salas, formerly Director of the Prado).

1587, a meeting could equally well have taken place (and did take place, I will argue, towards the latter end of this period when El Greco painted his King Louis of France). In fact Cervantes must have visited Toledo very often when El Greco lived there. It is highly probable that he was there again between 1595 and 1599. And in 1602 and 1604 it appears that Cervantes actually had a job in the city.

So I had no difficulty at all in imagining Cervantes visiting El Greco's studio. It would have been quite natural if a priest of Santo Tome, known to both of them, had arranged the meeting. What an impact it would have had on Cervantes's aesthetic horizons to be suddenly confronted with El Greco's visionary world. An unforgettable experience indeed! Certainly his writing would have been deeply affected.

It is not easy, however, to imagine two such different characters becoming friends. El Greco was very much the grand seigneur, wealthy proud, and dynamic; admired by all the famous men in the city. Cervantes on the other hand was a loner, always in debt, with only a single book published, his 'Galatea', and he was not well-known to the public. He was something of a dreamer, and his whole future seemed uncertain and overshadowed by Lopez. True he had been a hero at Lepanto, only recently freed from slavery in Algiers. But what so often happens in the lives of writers and artists happened to Cervantes too: hardship and ill-chance left behind an inevitable legacy of shyness and timidity. Nor could he escape bitterness: though, along with disdain for humanity, he carried within his heart its antithesis, love and forgiveness. Writing poetry was one kind of defence against rejection. This poem of his is appropriately called 'Disdain'.

DISDAIN

So accustomed is my heart
To your disdain, ungrateful one,

That is has come to feed on it
Like the asp on its own venom.
I thought to lose myself in your love;
In your flame I thought to be consumed;
But I no longer fear your embers,
Nor of your iciness am afraid.
Torments to me are bonanzas
And dread shipwrecks safe harbours.

One might think that the prickly Cervantes was just the kind of man whom El Greco and his circle would scarcely deign to notice. Yet creative people -these two particularly- had a deeply religious feeling for beauty and harmony. So art would have been a strong bridge between them. And art, it should be remembered, had brought El Greco's circle into existence in the first place. I will go further, and suggest that El Greco quickly discerned the genius of Cervantes -even that secret spark of sainthood which is hidden in some exceptional souls, and, in the case of Cervantes, would later shine forth on the pages of Don Quixote with so much beauty.

In his biography of Cervantes, William Byron perceptively put his finger on a rare quality shared by the two men. Writing of Cervantes's last book, 'Persiles', Byron observed: 'Persiles has the cool grace, the mystical serenity we find in El Greco's paintings'. That these two geniuses had a shared sense of spirituality is not the only vital link between them. I will argue that the extraordinary beauty of the women in El Greco's paintings found their counterparts in the work of Cervantes. However slender the record of his journeyings, and however sporadic his sojourns in Toledo, that city left an indelible impression upon the great writer's mind.

FROM NEFROTITY TO DULCINEA

In the dusk of the Second Millenium BC there appeared in the annals of art history the immortal beauty of Nefrotity. Until then painters and sculptors had left us many images of feminine beauty, buy these only glorified individuals in portraits. It was a sulptor of genius at the court of the Pharaoh Aghnaton who gave the world for the first time a symbol of the eternal feminine: such is the status of Nefrotity in the history of art.

Venus de Milo follows, a masterpiece of restrained allurement. This too was an early prototype of the symbol of beauty, rather than a portrait of an individual woman. When Praxitiles was commissioned to sculpt a statue for one of the Greek islands, he requested that a number of the islands' most beautiful girls be brought as models for this statue.

Botticelli's Venus is another symbol of eternal womankind represented as the mother of humanity, not as a portrait. Her beauty was more complex and her appeal is of a more sophisticated kind.

The Middle Ages gave us the Icon -in which women became mothers of a very sublimated breed- and the aethereal Gothic Madonna. Then came a gallery of metaphorical representations of feminine beauty: Georgione's Fete Champetre, the masterpieces of Leonardo and Henrikje Stoffels, of Rembrandt in the Louvre; then Goya's Condesa de Chinchon with its Goyaesque compassion for suffering women, and right on till we reach Manet's 'Le Dejeuner sur L'Herbe' and Wan Gogh's 'L'Arlesienne'.

But we must pause now in the Toledan studio of El Greco, since we have reached the time when the beauty of El Greco's women revealed itself to Cervantes. And I have in mind particularly the form of divine beauty manifested by his Madonnas. A wonderful example is 'The Holy Family with St Ann' in the Toledan hospital

of San Juan Battista de Afuera. How Olumpian these women of El Greco's are.

Cervantes did not leave behind any romantic pages about his personal loves; in reality his life appears in that sense rather colourless. But for him, as for many artists, as William Byron suggests, 'love is an emotinal luxury'. So it is surprising with what extraordinary lavishness he plants on his pages veritable flowergardens dedicated to the female heart and feminine beauty. Among the most striking is Maritornes, the dwarf, who with her mellow feminine tenderness took pity upon the brute bumpkin Sancho. Finding him with his ribs bruised and his soul in despair, she lavished on him all her feminine compassion. She is herself a miniature but painted as if with the broad brush-strokes of Velasquez.

But whence came the particular enchantment of Cervantes's feminine creations? Surely we are not far from the magic of El Greco's paintings? Again one is impelled to visualize his visit to the studio of El Greco, where he would have seen the inspired and unforgettable beauty of the painters women. Cervantes created so many female characters, the strangest of whom is Dulcinea: a symbol for all womankind, peerless and of crystalline perfection. Again one wonders whether she was taken from the pictures of El Greco?

Dulcine is not a person. Don Quixote leaves us in no doubt about that. 'Sancho, you will drive me to despair. Come here "heretic". Have I not told you a thousand times that I have never in all the days of my life seen the peerless Dulcinea, nor ever crossed the threshold of her palace, and I am enamoured of her only by hearsay and the great fame of her beauty and wisdom.'

If she is not meant to represent a living person, what is she then? With her extraordinary grace, she is an image of idealised womanking -almost a picture in a frame. Very likely the original inspiration for Dulcinea lies in El Greco's timeless and universal art. I suspect that 'The Holy Family and St Ann' may be the very



Detail from *The Holy Family with St Ann* by El Greco.

picture Cervantes had in mind when inventing Dulcinea -not that I can prove it.

THOU ART THE KING

Pushkin: 'To the Poet'.

In april 1587, shortly before the dramatic departure of Cervantes from Esquivias to Seville in search of a job, Toledo was festively decked out for a glorious occasion: the arrival of the remains of St Leocadia, the patron saint of the city.

In its most ceremonial raiment, the city greeted King Philip the Second. Possibly El Greco tried to draw the monarch's eye to his 'Martyrdom of St Maurice'. This masterpiece had failed to find favour with the king in 1582, and failed again now just as his 'King Louis of France' probably failed to impress too. King Philip now favoured his beloved Titian. But, in spite of lacking royal patronage, El Greco left to posterity an enigmatic and exuberantly bejewelled masterpiece. In this picture of the French king, El Greco used his son as the king's page. But who was the male sitter whose head supports St Louis's crown? Painted with dazzling mastery, this masterpiece reaches into the penumbras of the human soul, suggesting some wiled mystery in its essence traig. The artist seems to be challenging the spectator to answer questions to which he alone knows the answer.

The king is placed like an actor as if on a stage under a proscenium in a theatre. The drama of this picture generates a mournful tension. El Greco's psychological insight into the depths of the human soul is more profound than that shown by most playwrights. El Greco could exalt the genius of exceptional men, even coveying the subconscious and mysterious aura of sainthood which such men sometimes carry within themselves. El Greco conveys in St Louis's face extraordinary compassion for humanity

and great sensitivity to the enigmas of existence: why human beings inflict pain on one another, why the innocent suffer injustice, why there is so much unhappiness in the world. So did Cervantes not only detect this veiled saintliness, but also incorporate it into the character of Don Quixote himself? There is a remarkable pathos in the king's bearing, and lustrous humanity in a gaze which seems to tremble on the brink of disdain without becoming disdainful. Many a tear flowed from these eyes, now dry, as if aristocratic pride has stopped them. I could not help feeling that it was almost as if "The Knight of the Mournful Face" was looking out at me.

Or in reality was I seeing Don Quixote's creator?

There are two so-called portraits of Cervantes, but neither has much to support its authenticity. The first is simply too amateurish to be seriously considered, and the second is dubiously attributed to Jauregui. It shows an idealized Cervantes much too young for his age at the date at which this 'portrait' was painted.

So let us return to the strange and haunting St Louis. In spite of superb mastery in paint and theatrical imagery, there is a hint of nervousness in the painting which is most unusual for El Greco. He seems to be overcome by a strange emotion, almost like a boy who has caught a rare bird and is somehow frightened by his captive. El Greco seems overawed by the genius of the man he has painted and "caught" so perfectly. But how did this mysterious admiration arise? I do not of course refer to his feelings toward the long dead king, but his attitude towards the living sitter.

It was customary in those days for authors to read their work aloud to friends by the gleam of flickering candles. Cervantes would have read the first chapters of Don Quixote to friends in this way. The thought came to me that Cervantes had started to write his Don Quixote at Esquivias and not in the jail at Seville as that pretty legend has it.

After a lengthy study of the portrait of King Louis, I noticed



King Louis of France by El Greco.



King Louis of France by El Greco: detail of hand.

something very strange. The finish of this masterpiece is exceptionally fine, with great care and attention being lavished on every inch of the canvas. Yet there is one curious exception: the left hand of the king gives the impression of being only sketched in and of being unfinished. The king holds a sceptre in each hand; but whereas the one in the right hand is grasped firmly, the one in the left is scarcely held at all, and the hand even requires an artificial support to enable it to hold the sceptre. It is supported partly by the boy's body, and partly by the helmet.

That unfinished hand intrigued me for a long time, until one day by chance I came across the testimony of Beltran del Santo who in 1573 stated that Miguel Cervantes had a crippled left hand which he could not control. In his prologue to 'The Exemplary Sotires', Cervantes himself stated that his left hand had been hit by an arquebus shot in the naval battle of Lepanto. (He was, incidentally, very proud of this wound suffered in such an historically significant battle). But the hand is not my only reason for supposing that Cervantes was the sitter for St Louis. I then compared this man's face with that of the sitter in El Greco's 'Portrait of an Elderly Gentleman' in the Prado. I noted the same high cheekbones and bone-structure. It is clearly a portrait of the same man. A third portrait of Cervantes was painted by El Greco and this is somewhere in the United States.

So how did it happen that these three portraits of El Greco were never acknowledged as such by El Greco himself and by later authorities? I believe it was probably because El Greco had to be constantly alert to possible danger from the Inquisition. Cervantes would not have been popular with the Inquisition for many reasons: irregularities concerning his marriage, his addiction to gambling and his imprisonment for debt. Certainly the Inquisition would have thought Cervantes a most unsuitable sitter upon whom to model a saint such as St Louis. El Greco would have had every reason for



Portrait of an Elderly Gentleman by El Greco.



Portrait of King Louis compared with Portrait of an Elderly Man.



Portrait of Gentleman by El Greco, in US collection.

keeping quiet about the identity of the unforgettable face beneath St Louis's crown.

I am happy to admit that I have relied heavily on my painter's intuition and in doing so have been drawn into a veritable forest of conjecture. My only evidence lay in a few paintings and some pages from Don Quixote. Sadly, after Cervantes's death, his family must have burned his letters and papers, thinking them useless. This has been my worst handicap. But I believe that I have thrown enough light on this fascinating subject to encourage scholars to explore the same territory in greater detail in search of corroborative evidence. I hope that some future writer will confer on my inquiry a final 'placet'.

SOME AFTERTHOUGHTS ON CERVANTES AND EL GRECO

CERVANTES'S MASTERY

The mastery of Cervantes's writing reveals itself to intelligent observers by the way in which he manipulates, even orchestrates, the feelings of the reader, who, totally unaware of doing so, takes sides with the characters in the novel. How very often my sympathy slid towards Sancho, and how willingly I shared with him all sorts of absurdities, laughing to myself, completely oblivious to all around me.

The enormous bulk of "Donquixotry" in art, especially in painting, is proof of the masterly orchestration of his plots and of his power of generating sympathy for his fictional creations. This explains why so many painters became obsessed with Don Quixote. In Poland, I met one painter whose only subject for his paintings was Don Quixote.

As an artist I found myself caught in the philosophical net of the writer's metaphysical thinking. Such was the origin of my large composition: 'Sancho in Heaven'. How often Cervantes reminds his readers of the limitations of man's earthly perspectives.

Another afterthought from Cervantes's metaphysics prompted me to paint my composition 'The Frog'. The frog looks from a rock at the diminutive scale of man, dwarfed into ant-like proportion by a world which is itself dwarfed by the timeless and enigmatic universe.

ST MARTIN AND THE BEGGAR

European civilization has two cultural streams; one derives from Greek traditions, the other Latin. In reality they are one. In eastern Europe, the Greek is predominant, in the West, Latin. A kind of tension pulsates between them.

At High School, in my boyhood, I learned both languages, but in my youthful estimation the Greek tradition was preferable; to me Plato had more weight than Cicero. Homer I preferred to Vergil. Even in my boyhood in my head oscillated that strange conflicting tension between these two great traditions. I was not surprised by the feelings of El Greco when he stood for the first time on Toledan ground and faced the tremendous wall of the Catholic Church and its traditions, the rule of the Latin language and above all that despised and feared Inquisition. Possibly behind the defences of Greek tradition, he found a kind of spiritual shelter, and even felt intellectually superior to all that surrounded him in Toledo?

On the surface he manifested this by his Greek signatures. But let us not overrate this. It was only a very superficial manifestation. The forces around him were too powerful for him not to surrender to them at the end. Finally he became not only a Spanish painter, but he also became a Spaniard at heart and Spain



St Martin and the Beggar by El Greco.

his new fatherland. In no way can we call him a Greek painter.

His 'St Martin and the Beggar', strange as this may seem, demonstrates his state of mind and that unavoidable transformation of his psyche. On its compositional side the picture calls to mind an icon; his characteristic tendency to express movement is absent here. The composition is rather static, even monumental; but it has a controversial theme: that of Spanish pride, which we know so well as "that Spanish Hidalguya which seems to appear from nowhere". The Spanish agitation or tension disturbs the static element of the composition. Though we see, in the saddle his son, now a young man, the picture is full of the soul of the painter himself.

PURIFICATION OF THE TEMPLE

Often surrounded by admiring poets, El Greco was inevitably sensitive to the written word. Cervantes belonged to his circle of admirers and was profoundly affected by the paintings and visions of the Toledan master. He listened attentively to their mysterious voices. But he was selective and chose carefully which celestial spirits should infiltrate and inspire his imagination. There was one picture which his eye could not miss: 'The Purification of the Temple' the subject to which El Greco returned again and again and which must have planted a most fertile seed in Cervantes's mind. Some time later the writer sent his hero hurrying into La Mancha in search of adventures, eager to accomplish the noblest longings of the human soul and to punish with his knight-errant's lance all the wrongs of the world. By usurping for himself God's prerogatives to administer justice on humanity, he created conflicts within himself. And herein lies the tragedy of Don Quixote. God's justice is not man's justice. The ideal behind both is the purification of the human soul, but we can detect a shadow of pessimism, in the painting of El

Greco. Yet in Cervante's struggle with all aspects of wrong, there is no gloom or pessimism. Optimism prevails. By immersing reality in the world of illusion, and by changing illusion into reality he escaped the coarseness of life. In *Don Quixote*, through purification, there is always "a door wide open to a better world".

LAOCOON

Again terra incognita...

It is not a difficult assignment to unravel who Laocoon really is. Of course it is a self portrait of the painter himself in a most tragic situation. He is in danger of bankruptcy owing to the schemings of the Governors of the monastery of Illescas; so it is no mystery whom the snakes symbolize. That truly enchanting view of Toledo is only a screen veiling the quintessential subject, the anger of the painter himself. "They destroy me and my son", he seems to say. The Greek legend masks his anger and fury. And he seems to point to the originators of his disaster and calamity accusing them of foul play against himself.

And there is more to it...

Who are these strange beings on the right of the composition? This man-female and next to him this female man? These strange degenerate beings who brought misfortune upon him and his son? Read it who can. And with his stunning wit, he transforms intelligent spectators into judges. How brilliant... And nothing, just nothing can erase the accusation. The invisible attorney is placed there for ever. And the Inquisition, with its strange intellectual game of chess, feels outwitted again by that quick-witted Greek. They enjoy the view of Toledo for sure, they love Toledo as El Greco did. But, though cruel, they were intellectuals of the first order and knew the rules of the games. El Greco had certainly won that chess game.

Certainly the art historian's work is never done. In Ludwig



Laocöon by El Greco.

Goldscheider's book on El Greco's painting published in 1933, he reproduces 'A Portrait of an Old Man', which he suggests was a portrait of El Greco's brother, Manusso. But this struck me as most improbable since the gentleman depicted is wearing the dress of a Polish nobleman. As it happens, many years after the publication of Goldscheider's book, a superb St Francis of Assisi by El Greco was discovered in the church of a small village in rural Poland. It was said that this picture had been brought home from Spain by a Polish officer in Napoleon's service. Well, I was once an officer and I happen to know that officers on active service do not carry pictures about. So who was this Polish nobleman painted by El Greco? Did he bring St Francis back with him after a visit to Toledo? Surely some dedicated researcher would like to solve this puzzle?

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After reflecting so much on the identity of El Greco's sitters, it is fitting that we should give a final thought to the identity of the artists who in many instances did more than assist El Greco. In other words we ought to consider the authenticity of many paintings commonly attributed to El Greco. It is a striking feature in most books about El Greco that they are cluttered with the works of his assistants. Hardly one book exists which is free from the intrusion of the commercial side of El Greco's studios. Not even the greatest technical skill and the artistic capacity and labour of these assistants could approach the mastery of the great painter. El Greco's brush works like a sculptor's chisel with masterly tactile feeling for forms. The easiest way to detect the difference is to study the treatment of the drapery by The Master and the clumsy effects achieved by the brushwork of his followers.

The illustration A is by El Greco and the illustration B is not, and it explains the difference between the work of El Greco's hand and that of his assistants.



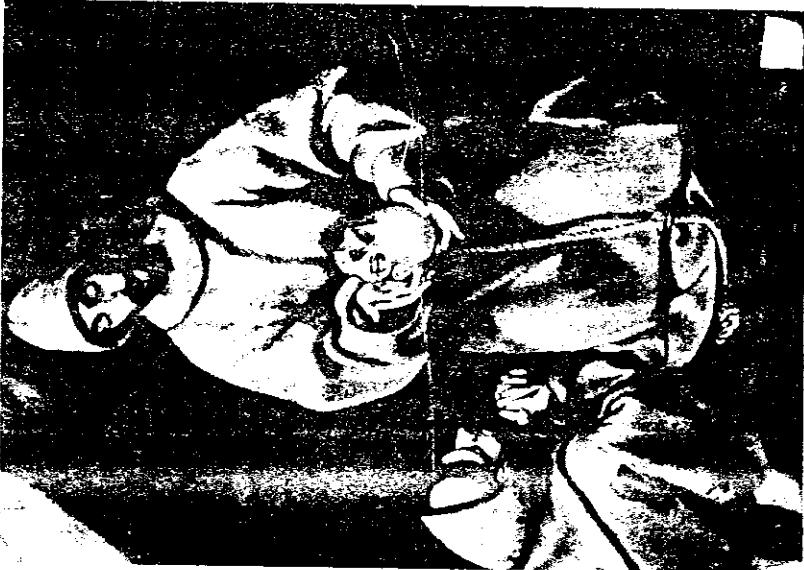
Portrait of an Old Man by El Greco.



Portrait of St Francis in Polish Church, represented as Polish Postage Stamp.



B



A

Example A shows painting by El Greco, example B is by an assistant.



Example A shows work by El Greco.



Example B shows work by assistant.

THE SPANISHNESS OF EL GRECO

Many years ago in a discussion I had with the distinguished English painter, Ethel Walker, we touched upon the different characteristics of lines in the art of drawing. She said that there are two kinds of line, which differ from each other. One she called the classical line, reposeful in character, which tends to return to its starting point. The other, once started, will never return to itself. If we look at paintings by Piero della Francesca, the first kind of line prevails; the other type we often find in paintings by El Greco. The first is classical or Byzantine, the second Gothic. Some years later the memory of that conversation returned to me when looking at the pictures by El Greco at the Santa Cruz Museum in Toledo. The art of the Greek who became Spanish posed many questions that required answers.

Firstly, can we call him a Greek painter? I have to answer, definitely not, he is a Spanish painter. Yet how often do historians try to erase his Spanishness in favour of his Byzantinism? One most important watershed in his artistic career was the moment he entered the gates of Toledo. Up till then he had seemed to wrestle with himself. In Italy he had shown talent of the first rank, but without the final orientation and style of the Toledo period. There the spirit of Spain overtook his whole being. Always susceptible to influences, here he was overtaken by the sway of the Gothic, then still much alive in Spain, which transformed his art completely. With his Byzantine echoes one could say the seed was Greek but the tree grew Spanish.

He arrived in Toledo talented, but he became a genius there. Slowly his longings for the past started to fade away. His "Purification of the Temple" will always embody his longings for the past, but at the same time it shows the stages of his transformation. His Italian past has an obvious pull on him; the "Purification", in the National

Gallery in London, is already Spanish through and through.

In Toledo his line is already Gothic and the increasing drama in his Toledan art is already impressive. The transformation is sudden and irrevocable. His Byzantinism becomes no more than an echo from the past.

There are of course some paintings which recall his Byzantine past. Such is "the Martyrdom of St. Maurice", containing that Byzantinism which was the main cause for the rejection of the painting by King Philip the Second. In the Apostles' Series, the painting of Christ is strikingly reminiscent of an icon. "St Jerome in Penitence" is also remarkably Byzantine. In it, El Greco portrays himself at the time of his bankruptcy, surrendering his will to God. This is a typical example of the divinization of man often seen in Byzantine art. This painting is also a self-portrait. By now though, the Gothic influence prevails. By now too his Greek signatures cannot convince anybody that he is a Greek painter. It is surely significant that no Greek icons were found with his things after his death.

In 1956 I passed through the gates of Toledo myself and my own art, in a humbler way, underwent its Spanish transformation. And though I lived in Toledo for no more than twelve months in all, I have remained a Toledan ever since.

And for some time I searched for a painting which would mark that crossing-point where the painter surrendered to Spanishness, and as I have already stated, I found it in "St. Martin and the Beggar" -that portrait of El Greco's new spirit and manifestation of his Spanishness. Looking at it we seem almost to hear Don Quixote muttering somewhere.



Adoration of the Name of Jesus by El Greco, example of Gothic influence.



Martyrdom of St Maurice by El Greco, example of Byzantine influence.



St Jerome in Penitence, example of Byzantine influence.



Don Quixote and Sancho by Marian Kratochwil.



Don Quixote by Marian Kratochwil