The syndrome of Don Quixote

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In 1979, Graziella Magherini described cases among tourists and visitors in Florence who experienced tachycardia, confusion and hallucinations when shown masterpieces of plastic art, particularly at the gallery of the Uffizi.¹ This psychosomatic reaction was called the Stendhal syndrome, after the French author of Naples and Florence: a Journey from Milan to Reggio, who provided a detailed account of the symptoms he experienced during his visit to the former Italian capital. The same experience was later reported by the Russian novelist Dostoevsky - a resident himself in Florence for several months - who described similarly the impact that the Dead Christ of Holbeins in a Basel museum had on him.

In a more elaborate but not necessarily disturbing way than the changes triggered after contemplating a work of art described by Magherini, the term Don Quixote Syndrome is proposed here to describe the transformations resulting from reading fictional literature. A term that bears the name of Miguel de Cervantes’ most famous character Don Quixote de La Mancha (Figure 1), who after reading books of chivalry that included the saga of Camelot as well as Greco-Roman mythology, was impelled to become a knight and went in search of adventures with the firm purpose of helping the weak, defend the offended, and lift the humiliated of the world. Don Quixote Syndrome could vary in intensity, from the mere if absorbing entertainment of reading to the radical religious conversion or even an atrocious inspiration like the reading of Salinger’s masterpiece The catcher in the rye, which was linked to the assassination of the Liverpool singer John Lennon.

Arguably the two greatest writers of all time, William Shakespeare and Miguel de Cervantes, also wrote about epilepsy. For instance, Shakespeare includes scenes of possible epileptic attacks in Othello and in Julius Caesar. According to Heaton Shakespeare reminds us of the power that emotion can have in causing faints or even epileptic fits.² Likewise, Miguel de Cervantes in his Don Quixote throws light on the early 17th century views about medicine in general and epilepsy in particular:

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¹ G. Magherini, La Sindrome di Stendhal (Firenze, Ponte Alle Grazie, 1989).
“Señor, I would like”, responded the farmer, “for your grace to be so good as to give me a letter of support for her father, asking him kindly to allow this marriage to take place, for we are not unequal in our fortunes or on our natures, to tell you the truth, Señor Governor, my son is possessed, and not a day goes by that evil spirits do not torment him; because he fell once into the fire, his face is as wrinkled as parchment, and his eyes are somewhat teary and runny, but he has the disposition of an angel, and if he didn’t beat and punch himself, he would be a saint”.  

A contemporary reader of Cervantes, Shakespeare co-authored a play (currently lost) entitled The History of Cardenio which was based on a subplot of the first part of Don Quixote (first published in 1605 and translated into English by Shelton in 1612), featuring a lover who goes mad after he finds out that his fiancée is having an affair with an aristocratic man with whom he was acquainted. Furthermore, Dostoevsky considered Don Quixote ‘the deeper and more powerful thing in the whole world’ and ‘the final and the greatest expression of human thought’, a novel which was inspirational and indeed quoted several times throughout the most detailed account ever written of epilepsy in literary fiction, The Idiot. Hence, Dostoevsky’s influential reading of Cervantes’ masterpiece per se constitutes a nice example of Don Quixote Syndrome. As opposed to other books of fiction including graeco-roman mythology,

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religious texts or indeed books of chivalry, one of the refreshing ironies of the novel is the reconversion of the "foolish" Don Quixote into his previous lucid self of Alonso Quijano towards the end. This lack of dogmatism in the novel has been particularly inspirational and incomparably virtuous in the sense of transforming its readers into better human beings.