

Experiencing the limits

The cave as a transitional space

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The meaning of the cave is ancestral. It is a transitional space that functions as a threshold between the real, the mystical, and the imaginary. Experiences in caves are highly important in the history of religions and literature, and have been adopted transculturally by mystics, esoteric organizations, alchemical treatises, and many literary forms, such as the Greek novel, Dante's *Commedia*, and chivalric romances. In my paper, I will first give an interdisciplinary overview of representations of this space in different traditions and literary works up to the Renaissance. I will then focus on how Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* updates these representations, and study how the visions and experiences of the knight in a cave are crucial in his recovery from insanity.

Introduction

During the episode of the Cave of Montesinos, *Don Quixote* passes through the three phases of liminality typically found in rites of passage. Cervantes in this episode is adapting a well-known motif in the history of classical literature that has its roots in ancient initiation rites and in the activities of mystics searching for a higher knowledge; the descent of the hero into a cave to achieve some sort of higher knowledge. What follows is a study of the meaning, functionality and different representations of the cave as a transitional space in cultural history and in *Don Quixote*. My objective is twofold: first, I will give a historical overview that will help to establish how this organic space belongs to a long tradition within the history of religions, Western esotericism, and literature; and secondly, my focus will be on Miguel de Cervantes's (1547–1616) novel *Don Quixote* (2003; originally published in two parts, in 1605 and 1615) and the episode in the Cave of Montesinos. There are a large number of cases of cave experiences; as such, my diachronic selection will be a representative sample, rather than a complete one, of various transcultural phenomena of a period up to the time of Cervantes's novel. To conduct this analysis, I will work mainly with the

concept of *liminality* to characterize the cave as a liminal space (from the Latin *limen*, ‘threshold’), confirming that it is associated with initiations and fear, but also that it represents a secure and pleasant environment. I will also use the concept of *initiation* within the framework of Western esotericism studies and also in the field of research within literary studies that I have come to call *cave studies*; that is, the study of representations and functions of caves and subterranean spaces in literary works. Due to limited space, in this work I will not discuss concepts such as *mysticism*, or the *visionary*.

The cave as a liminal and initiatory space

The cave is the organic place in which, the belief is, mystics and prophets experience visions and revelations. As the medievalist Victoria Cirlot recalls (2017: 115), that which Saint Augustine called *locus qui est non locus* (the place that is not a place) leads to inner reflection and claims a specific form – materiality; in other words, visibility. When I speak about returning to the cave, I refer to that process in which the individual feels the impulse to look for a physical and protective place for inner exploration. Once in the cave, the subject is stripped of possessions and removed from the material world.

What characterizes this particular space is its variety of functions and depictions in the history of religion, Western esotericism, and European literature, suggesting a dichotomy or dialectic between a desired paradise and an unwanted hell. Poets, mystics, and philosophers all sought inspiration in caves. The cave can be also a refuge, a threshold to other planes of existence, or the Hereafter, and a place to which the candidate is taken and in which his initiation takes place. This variety of functions is shown in multiple aspects, ranging from a place of suffering to the site of symbolic significations suggesting an original maternal uterus where the neophyte is symbolically reborn and regenerated. It is what Mircea Eliade once called *regressus ad uterum* or return to the womb (1963: 79–81). In addition, the cave is the setting for the *catabasis* or descent into the underworld (*descensus ad inferos*). Classical European mythology formulates the adventure of the afterlife and the journey to the world of the dead in which the hero travels through a cave, has to pass an initiation test, and returns to speak of what he has seen (Piñero 1995: 8). *Descensus ad inferos* literally means the ‘descent to lower places’ or to the lower world and the Latin word *inferos* should not be confused with *inferna*. *Inferos* would be comparable to the English ‘inferior’, or ‘lower world’. *Inferna* on the other hand is comparable to the English

‘infernal’, an adjective meaning hellish (Connell 2006: 264). The *catabasis* (a going down) must be followed by an *anabasis* (a going or marching up) in order to be considered a true *catabasis* rather than a death. First Arnold van Gennep and later Victor Turner elaborated on a similar three-phased scheme in their studies of rituals of initiation.

Among the fictitious representations of narrative space in literature, it is interesting to pay attention to those that involve some form of intermediate or border state for the characters; that is, some kind of threshold. Examples of such spaces are gardens, beaches, vehicles, and caves. Following this line of thought, it is relevant to recover the notion of *liminality*, based on the conceptual and terminological contributions proposed by the above-mentioned anthropologists van Gennep and, especially, Turner.¹ Van Gennep coined the term *rites de passage* (rites of passage) and suggested a scheme to highlight the transitions that affect the life cycle of the individual in his or her social development – for example, between youth and adulthood, singleness and the married state, travelling and returning. In the rites, first van Gennep and later Victor Turner distinguished three phases: separation, or the pre-liminal phase; transition, or the liminal phase or stage; and aggregation, or the post-liminal phase. The first involves a symbolic death, since it involves a separation from the old social environment. The next state is ambiguous for the candidate; he finds himself in a space between the old and new state. It is neither one nor the other. In the final stage of the rite, that of aggregation, or the post-liminal stage, the candidate rejoins society and acquires a new sense of being (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1967; Bogdan 2007, 2016). Such rituals are known in almost all cultures (Snoek 2016: 201). For Turner (Delanty 2006), liminality refers to a state of openness that is both free from the structures of society and beyond that which is considered normal. The crucial aspect of liminality is the ‘between and betwixt’ moments and ‘moments outside and within time’, such as carnivals, pilgrimages, or rites of passage – it is in this phase that the officers of the initiation transmit knowledge to the neophyte.

Indeed, the concept of liminality works well with that of *initiation* when studying cave experiences. The initiation method involves the use of rituals that belong to the larger class of the rites of passage (Snoek 2016: 201) and

1 These concepts are explained in van Gennep’s *The Rites of Passage* (1960) and Turner’s ‘Betwixt and between: the liminal period in rites of passage’ (1967).

the performance of rituals of initiation is an integral part of esoteric currents, traditions, religions in general, but also in literary works such as *Don Quixote*. Although not all rites of passage are rites of initiation (Bogdan 2007: 40) and van Gennep based his descriptions of rites of passage on non-Euro-American sources, the three-phase structure works when studying the topic of initiation. In Western esotericism studies, Henrik Bogdan's definition of esotericism is linked to initiation. He describes the former as 'a form of Western [in our case, we also include Middle Eastern] spirituality that stresses the importance of individual effort to gain spiritual knowledge or *gnosis*, whereby man is confronted with the divine aspect of existence' (Bogdan 2007: 5). This revelatory experience is for practitioners a meaningful inner process which might change depending on the social context and its moment in history. Initiation has also to be connected to some of the points of Antoine Faivre's well-known taxonomy (1994: 3–19) of *imagination and mediations*, that is, imagination, considered as an 'organ of the soul' that enables access to different levels of reality (what Henry Corbin named *mundus imaginalis* or the imaginary world) through rituals, symbolic images or an intermediary being that gives access; the *experience of transmutation* of the subject; and *transmission* of the esoteric knowledge from one master to a disciple, which are of great importance in initiation and liminal experiences.

Henrik Bogdan defines initiation in the sense of admitting someone into something on the basis of a ritual of initiation, often of a secret nature, that the candidate has to go through. Finally, initiation can also be understood in the sense of an introduction into the mysteries of religion (Bogdan 2007: 39). The main difference with mystics then is that they might be isolated and not go through collective formalized and performative acts, as may be the case in a secret society. However, a common aspect might be the experiential knowledge, and eventually acquirement, of *gnosis*.

Liminality, on the other hand, is not exclusive to the second part of the rites of passage, as Bogdan points out (2007: 35). The term has also been used in literary studies and concerns space, time, the statutes of the characters characterized by indetermination, ambivalence, and the creation of a new identity.² In this sense, events in a novel can be structured, organized around *chronotopes*, which Bakhtin defines as 'the intrinsic connectedness of

2 See, for example, Viljoen *et al.* (2006) and Phillips (2015). See also, Gertsman and Stevenson (2012), and Forshaw (2016).

temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature' (1981: 84). The concept of liminality is therefore close to the Bakhtinian chronotope of the *threshold*, which combines temporal and topographical borders, and works well with the chronotope of *crisis* and *break* in a life (Bakhtin 1981: 248; Castro 2007: 258). Furthermore, the notion of liminal space has given rise to new nouns and metaphors in the field of border studies (aesthetics and poetics), such as 'interstitial' or 'in-between' (Schimanski and Wolfe 2017). Although the interdisciplinary use of these concepts is potentially fruitful, I will refer mainly to Turner's work to delimit the framework and avoid equivocal and indefinite interpretations, and because, although the concept of liminal has its origin in anthropology, it is applicable in literary studies.

Another point to note is that in literary studies we speak about space in relation to the setting (the physical-sensuous world, time, and atmosphere of a work), or as Mieke Bal defines it, space is 'the places seen *in relation* [my emphasis] to their perception' (1997: 133). Place is thus related to 'the physical, mathematical measurable shape of spatial dimensions', and space to perception, meaning, and 'the way characters bring their senses to bear on space'. Thus it becomes important how the text endows meaning to a specific area, and how place becomes an 'acting place', that is, a thematized space (p. 136).

The caves throughout history

The significance of the cave goes back to ancient history. In Mesopotamia, initiations took place in caves. Inside a mountain of Ekur ('E' for 'house' and 'kiur' for 'mountain') in Nippur, there was a dreary and dark cave called the *chamber of destiny* (Mayassis 1962: 45). Literature also dealt with the journey of the hero to the Hereafter. This was the case in the third century BCE, with the Sumerian myth of the journey, *The Descent of Inanna*, and the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In this last text the hero, in his journey to the underworld, contemplates a delightful garden adorned with precious stones. From these texts, the voyages to the afterlife proliferated in universal literature: the Egyptians collected these ideas in the *Book of the Dead* (around 1550 BCE to around 50 BCE) and in *The Osiris Myth*. In the first, the deceased was required to pass through a series of gates, caves, and mounds guarded by a supernatural creature (Alvar 2010: 189).



Aeneas and the Sibyl. Unknown artist, 19th century. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

In the Greek tradition, the allegory of Plato's cave shows the passage from ignorance – a group of people who have lived enchained – to enlightenment; from the idea that we only see shadows that we consider to be the truth to the truth itself. The cave represents this world; ignorance and the indirect light that illuminates its walls point at the way the soul must go to find goodness and truth. The experiences of Pythagoras, Epimenides, Parmenides, and Empedocles could be envisaged as initiations; their descent into caves and underground chambers in the pursuit of divine revelation shows us how close they were to being seers and prophets (Ustinova 2009: 260–1). Caves and closed chambers were essential as settings for many mystery rites. The Temple of Eleusis in the Acropolis contained a venerated cave that served as the entrance to the world of the dead. There, Hades, the god of the underworld, appeared.

The motif behind the visit to Hades had great repercussions for the Western tradition. The *descensus ad inferos*, or *catabasis*, was transmitted to classical epic poems, such as Homer's *Odyssey* (8 BCE) and the *Aeneid*, Virgil's Latin (19 BCE). Cervantes specialists have pointed to the similarities between the descent of Don Quixote and the descent to hell of Ulysses – although

Ulysses does not descend into Hades; it is the dead souls that rise to the surface – and Aeneas. Aeneas, in his journey through the Elysian countryside, has Anchises as his guide. It is mostly from this classical background that the motif from this point on impacts on literatures and religions. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 CE), mentioned by Cervantes in the episode of the cave, includes accounts of *catabasis* as well.

According to the Jewish tradition, Rabbi Simeon ben Yoha and his son spent twelve years in a cave during their escape from the Romans. They devoted themselves to worship and study of the Torah until finally the Roman Emperor died (Ustinova 2009: 36).³ Christianity adapted and actualized the theme of the visit to Hades in the famous parable of the Harrowing of Hell – *Descensus Christi ad Inferos* (the descent of Christ into Hell) (Connell 2006). Jesus Christ, who, it is believed, was born in a cave, was also buried in a cave. He supposedly spent three days in the underworld between his crucifixion and his resurrection, and rose triumphant to heaven.

During the times of the origins of Islam, the cave represented both a place of initiation and a refuge from threats, as the Islamic scholar Omid Safi recalls (2009: 97–103). Muhammad received the first revelation in the cave of Hira (*Jabal an-Nour* – Mountain of Light) and, later, on the way to Medina, fleeing from Mecca and his persecutors, he took refuge in a cave. The journey to the afterlife in the Arab world has, on the other hand, its counterpart in the *al-'Isrā' wal-Mi'rāj* (The Isra and Mi'ra, the two parts of the Night Journey) and ascent into the heavens of Muhammad; however, this did not occur in a cave. The mountain and cave are obviously very significant for Muslims. They are where Islam was born. There is broad consensus within Islam that Muhammad had his first visions and first encounter with Gabriel while sleeping. On other occasions, the visions occur while he is awake, such as the vision of Gabriel filling the sky.

The cave, which represents an opening inward, is also rich in symbolism. In Islam, the cave connects to the heart, another inward opening, where one can contemplate realities and seek illumination. The poetry of Rumi, like that of other Muslim mystics, invites its readers to 'Consider this heart as a cave, / the spiritual retreat of the friend' (in Safi 2009: 103). Muhammad states that after his experience in the cave of Hira, it is as if his heart were a

3 I would like to thank Carrie Sealine for providing me with an account of this during the conference 'Approaching Esotericism and Mysticism: Cultural Influences', 5–7 June, 2019, Åbo Akademi University.



Cave of Hira. hajjumrahplanner.com.

tablet upon which the words of the Qur'an were being inscribed. Up to this point, we can see that Muhammad encompasses the traits of prophet-hood: he retires to reflect on the historical conditions of his people, perceives the sufferings and aspirations of a community, and points out the need for change. On the other hand, not all mystics return to society. There are hermits who remain in caves and cloisters, and that for them is perfect peace.

Dante's *Commedia* (*The Divine Comedy*, 1472) also has a missionary/prophetic orientation. For the author, the work is not merely a theological piece of fiction but rather a prophetic vision with apocalyptic undertones that he felt was given to him by the divinity in order to admonish humanity (Carrera 1995: 91). In the *Commedia*, Dante takes Virgil as his guide and descends into the underworld/hell to the centre of the Earth. In Dante's work, hell is an underground cave, an immense cone-shaped abyss stretching down vertically from Jerusalem. The opening canto describes how Dante is lost in a dark forest and enters a cave at the foot of Mount Zion, near Jerusalem. It is interesting that within Western culture, the idea is that hell is full of flames, whereas for Dante it is ice; the cave, and darkness are associated with the house of Lucifer. Similarly, Cervantes, in his last novel, *The Trials of Persiles and Sigismunda: A Northern Story* (1617), locates the action of half of the novel in far Northern Europe, a place that during the Spanish Golden Age was associated with the fantastical, darkness, and paganism.

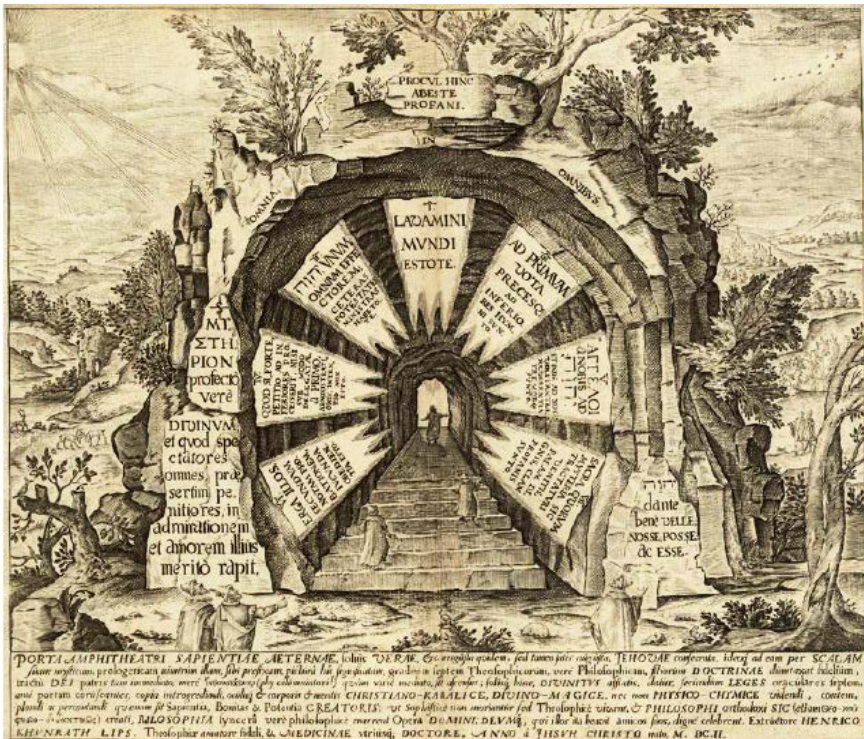
The novel begins with an anabasis; the protagonist is rescued from a dark dungeon, analogous to a cave.

In Spain, Spanish Catholic mystics retreat into caves to meditate, their objective being to get closer to God. The belief is that in around the year 1274 Ramon Llull (1235–1315) spent time in a humble cave located in Mallorca and received illumination. Presumably, his philosophical system was revealed to him inside the cave, the *Ars luliana* or *combinandi* (Lull's art or the *combinatorial* art). Llull's theological and metaphysical legacy – Lullism – also spread during the Renaissance and the eighteenth century in Europe as a result of the trail left by the art of philosophers such as Nicholas of Cusa or Leibniz. Two famous mystics from the Spanish Golden Age (1492–1681), Teresa of Avila (1515–82) and Saint John of the Cross (1542–91), sought refuge in the now famous caves of Segovia and Pastrana, respectively. Saint Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), the founder of the Jesuit order, spent several months in retreat in a cave in Manresa, where he practised asceticism and composed his *Spiritual Exercises* (Meissner 1999: 90–100).

The cave recalls literal mystical experiences and also has metaphorical meanings. In the *Spiritual Canticle* (1578 [2007]) by Saint John of the Cross, the cave represents the inner world (soul) where the Lover (the mystic) and the Beloved (God) must find each other. Later, Cervantes seems to parody another common metaphor that mystics used in their texts – that being, going into 'the deep caverns of the rock' – to explain a process of going inward and becoming nothing (in the mystical sense) so as to experience the divine, as Saint John himself states in his explanation of the stanzas: 'The reason why the soul longed to enter the caverns was that it might attain to the consummation of the love of God, the object of its continual desires; that is, that it might love God with the pureness and perfection with which He has loved it, so that it might thereby requite His love' (St. John of the Cross 2007: 148). Caves became symbolic of the passage from this world to the divine realm (Ustinova 2009: 32), and these texts and accounts seem to reflect the belief that the withdrawal into a cave was likely to lead to mystical experiences. It is worth mentioning that Spanish mystics were familiar with chivalric romances. For example, Saint Ignatius performs a chivalric ritual to become a knight of God in which he guards his weaponry throughout the night (Percas 1975: 481).

Also during the Renaissance, alchemists conceptualized the motif of descending into the cave, here a symbol of the inner self, with the acronym V.I.T.R.I.O.L. It stands for the Latin expression *Visita Interiora Terrae*

Rectificando Invenies Occultum Lapidem, which synthesizes the alchemical Great Work. It translates as: ‘Visit the interior of the Earth, and by rectifying (correcting or purifying) what you find there, you will discover the hidden stone’. The first mention of this term dates back to the second half of the sixteenth century among German Paracelsians (Telle 1988: 193), and it became popular thanks to the popular illustration that appeared for example in *Azoth* (1624: 146) by Basile Valentine (or Basilius Valentinus). In this work, the protagonist meets a mysterious character inside a cave during a trip to the holy city of Rome. The episode has some points in common with Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, as we shall see; the cave as a setting, similar preparations prior to the esoteric visions (i.e. invocation of God), and similar visionary experiences: the appearance of a guide full of light and the contemplation of a glass palace. Another famous engraving, in this case a Christian Kabbalist one (Forshaw 2015: 547), is in Heinrich Khurnrath’s *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae* (*The Amphitheatre of Eternal Wisdom*,



Portae amphitheatrum sapientiae aeternae, in Heinrich Khurnrath, *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae*, Hanau, 1609. Courtesy of the Gershom Scholem Library, Jerusalem National University Library.

1609). It depicts a cave – *the porta (gate, entrance) amphiteatri* – with Greek, Latin, and Hebrew inscriptions on its walls through which a person is moving towards a light. Above the entrance, we have a quote from Virgil's *Aeneid*: *procul hinc abeste profane* (O you profane one go far away from here). The quote comes from the moment where Aeneas meets the oracular Sybil in a cave who gives him information (Forshaw 2011: 183; Virgilio 1990, book VI: 102). The cave, also, as we have seen, the symbol of the heart, is the place where the regeneration of a neophyte takes place, at which time he will receive knowledge (presumably in the form of light), and then be reborn. In contemporary Freemasonry, for example, the cave finds its analogue in the so-called Chamber of Reflection. During the ritual of the first degree before they are accepted into the brotherhood – that of Entered Apprentice – (Bogdan 2016: 252), the candidate is placed alone in a dark room to meditate on his commitment to the Order.

The cave is one of the most frequent literary *topoi* or commonplaces in tales of chivalry. The knight, as part of his apprenticeship and journey of initiation, descends into the depths of a cave, where he is made aware of new and extraordinary realities. The featuring of caves in chivalric romances leads to an ambiguous atmosphere where the fearsome and the delightful, darkness and light, blend. It is a place, then, in which everything is possible, and what happens inside it acquires a logic of its own, alien to the outside world. The use of caves as a magical space and location of the Hereafter is present in medieval and Renaissance texts such as *De nugis curialium* (1183) by Walter Map, *Itinerarium Cambriae* (c. 1191) by Giraldus (Alvar 2009: 131), and *Amadís de Gaula* (*Amadís of Gaul*, edited first in 1508). In Germanic and Arthuric legends, the cave is the space of the spirits of the past, a kind of enchanted underground court. In this sense, the episode in the cave in Cervantes's *Don Quixote* comes from an established literary tradition. However, as we shall see, it is extremely original and its significance transcends mere parody.

When it comes to stories of the Holy Grail, the cave (as well as the cabin in the woods) is where the knight meets a hermit who discloses the meaning of events. The hermit works as a hermeneutist who has the ability to interpret the esoteric side of the experiences of the knight. For instance, in *Perlesvaus* (c. 1230, translated as *The High Book of the Grail* or *The Legend of the Grail*) the protagonist acquires a new name, Parluifet, while he is living with the hermit in a cave (Cirlot 2017: 116), and I quote: 'But the good Hermit, the good King had named him Par-lui-fet, because he was a self-made knight'

(*The Legend of the Grail* 2006: 116). This symbolic name – *Par-lui-fêt* (for-himself-made) – alludes, therefore, to the process of self-realization that is taking place.

Don Quixote in the Cave of Montesinos

Cervantes actualizes and parodies the motif of *catabasis* in a rite of transition in which Don Quixote descends into the Cave of Montesinos.⁴ The main objective of Cervantes seems to be to demystify the classical topic and, in so doing, incorporate new traits: for example, (1) the ‘hero’ here suffers from madness; (2) Don Quixote’s introspection is narrated by himself alone in a novel with multiple narrative voice shifts and points of view. The mission of the knight is to find his beloved Dulcinea and to lift the spell on her. In the solitude of the cave, a ‘resurrection’ occurs as a result, on the one hand, of dormant psychic states and, on the other, of a progressive step towards sanity.

Augustín Redondo (1998: 403) argues that Don Quixote undergoes a ritual of initiation in the cave. However, it is necessary to differentiate here between ritual of initiation and ritual of transition. ‘Initiate’ derives from the Latin *initiare* and means ‘to begin or to originate’ (Bogdan 2007: 35). The acceptance and pseudo-ceremony of initiation where Don Quixote is presumably admitted to an organization, that is, the ancient (and literary) Order of Knighthood, takes place at the beginning of the novel (I, chapter 3). The second occurs in a liminal and transitional place, the cave, after he has been already initiated (II, chapters 22–3). Whereas Aeneas and Dante had one guide, we notice that in the case of Don Quixote, he has two: one in the real and external world (the cousin), and another in the underworld (Montesinos). The function of these guides is to lead the way.

4 This episode has been interpreted from many different points of view: some have studied the sources and compared the novel to other chivalric novels (Alvar 2009); others have studied it from the perspective of demonology (Padilla 2011; Williamson 2015) or have argued that it is an Erasmian parody (Egido 1994). Helena Percas de Ponseti (1975), Edward C. Riley (2001), and Augustín Redondo (1998) have studied the presence of the classical allegory of descending into hell. I do not refute these studies but broaden them with the theoretical concepts that I use.

I mentioned that the descent into the underworld and rites of passage consist of three phases: preparation of the novice (i.e. separation); the trip to the afterlife or other dimensions of existence (the margin, or liminal phase); and the return or rebirth of the hero or candidate (aggregation). Let us see how this unfolds in the novel.

During the preliminary phase and separation of the world, an isolated place is needed. The setting of the cave meets this requirement perfectly. Crow symbolism and invocations evoke some sort of purification. Don Quixote does not submit to a physical ritual of purification, which would invalidate his rite; however, he does perform acts of faith and a purification of the location: the first is a prayer to God; right after, committing himself to the Beloved and unattainable Dulcinea; and finally, by cutting with his sword the thicket at the entrance of the pit. Don Quixote thus follows the chivalric literary convention of first committing himself to God and then to his beloved. The immediate mention of crows coming out of the cave is also significant. Besides bringing bad luck and being associated with death according to popular belief in Cervantes's time, the colour of the crow in terms of alchemical symbolism represents the raw material of the alchemical *nigredo* (blackness), blackened, on the way to the philosopher's stone. We can see an example of this representation in the aforementioned Valentinus's *Azoth* (Valentine 1624: 160). In the case of Don Quixote, the flock of crows flying from the cave is the first step to the access to the underworld (or liminal state). It is thus logical that the crow – that which has to be purified – appears before Don Quixote penetrates the womb of the cave. Don Quixote enters a place that is 'at the right hand' and into which a small light enters through small cracks. We do not know if he had the choice of going to the left, but the dark place inside the cave reveals itself as dazzling. Cervantes knew of a poem at the time that was attributed to Virgil – because of its similarities to his underworld – in which there is reference to the Pythagorean Y: 'The letter of Pythagoras, cleft by a two-pronged division, may be seen to display the very image of human life. For the steep path of virtue takes the right-hand way' (Magrinyà Badiella 2014: 188; Tucker 2003: 91–2). The idea of the Pythagorean Y is that men follow the same path until at a given moment it divides into two. A few take the right path, arduous and steep, which leads them to virtue, to wisdom, and to gnosis, while others take the one on the left, a flat and peaceful but 'sinister' path, which leads them to the path of vice. In the first quarter of the seventeenth century, connoisseurs of the *prisca teologia* (ancient theology) used

the symbolism of the Pythagorean Y to differentiate between the possible paths in philosophy: between the speculative traditional philosophy and the new philosophy of hermetic character (Arola 2012: 313). Don Quixote had already referred to Matthew (VII, 13–14) and to the path of the right or path of virtue versus vice in chapter 6 of the second part when talking about the benefits of chivalry: ‘I know that the path of virtue is very narrow, and the road of wickedness is broad and spacious’ (518). The distinction between those on the right and those on the left also has its representation in the Qur’an. Those on the right are those who will enjoy Paradise after the Day of Resurrection. Those on the left, on the other hand, will suffer the pains of Hell. This idea relates conceptually to that in Chapter 6 (II) of Don Quixote that we have just mentioned – that being that the path of virtue is narrow and hard, as opposed to the width and ease of the path of vice. Cervantes, consciously or unconsciously, refers to a Pythagorean, Christian, and Islamic doctrine.

The second phase (margin, liminal) corresponds to access to another state of consciousness after Don Quixote presumably falls into a ‘deep sleep’ and walks further into the cavern (II, 23). He insists that he is aware of his senses. Concomitantly, rituals also involve an impact on sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch (Bogdan 2016: 249). This represents a symbolic death, a kind of limbo state. Cervantes probably borrowed ideas from Macrobius, a commentator of Cicero’s *Somnium Scipionis* (The Dream of Scipio, 146 BCE). According to Macrobius, there are five kinds of dreams: the *somnium* or dream (the dream itself), the *visio* or vision (of prophetic and premonitory nature), the *oraculum* or oracle (includes the presence of an advisor who announces future events), the *insomnium* nightmares (dreams that deal with problems), and *visum* (apparition, when one is neither asleep nor awake). Egido (1994: 149) discarded the first three types of dreams and argued that the episode combines the last two. On the other hand, what Don Quixote experiences is some sort of dream-vision that reminds us of that *other* world of magicians, shamans and alchemists in what Victoria Cirlot calls *visionary experience* (2010: 15) – her conceptualization is developed from the already mentioned notion of Corbin’s, *mundus imaginalis* (imaginal world), designating an intermediate or double place. We have indications that Don Quixote accesses another world on two occasions in the words of Sancho: ‘It was an evil moment and a worse time and an ill-fated day when your grace went down to the *next* [*otro* in Spanish, ‘other’] world’ (p. 637); ‘may God be your guide and bring you back safe and sound and free to the light

of *this life that you are leaving* to bury yourself in the darkness you are looking for!’ (p. 628). The allusion to the opposition of light and darkness permeates the novel, and it is present in the motto of the book cover of the first editions of the novel from both 1605 (I) and 1615 (II): *Post tenebras spero lucem* (‘After darkness, I hope for light’). It should be noted, however, that this emblem was the trademark of the editor (Juan de la Cuesta) and that it was not specifically designed for the novel of Cervantes. The motto comes from the apostle John’s phrase *Lux in tenebris lucet* (John 1:5 ‘And the light shineth in darkness’), found also in early modern works attributed to Ramon Llull or Heinrich Khunrath (1560–1605) (Forshaw 2017: 4).

Don Quixote now wakes up and finds himself in a *locus amoenus* (a pleasant or idealized place). We cannot actually rely on the knight’s version of the events, as the main narrator will confirm afterwards. The very nature of the experience Don Quixote relates is intended to be mysterious and ambiguous. Cide Hamete Benengeli, the main Arabic narrator, abdicates responsibility and leaves it to the ‘prudent’ reader to judge (1) whether the events really happened, (2) whether somebody staged them, (3) whether Don Quixote made up the whole story, or (4) whether it was a dream or some kind of visionary experience. The only textual evidence is circumstantial and supports 3 and 4 and not merely the last, 4, as Riley suggests (1986: 141). Benengeli states that Don Quixote might have made up his account (‘though certain it is they say that at the time of his death he retracted...’, p. 640). As for the visionary experience, the words of Don Quixote give us his own version of a glimpse of his sense perception of the liminal experience: ‘... I was overcome by a profound sleep ... I opened my eyes wide, rubbed them, and saw that I was not sleeping but really was awake; even so, I felt my head and chest to verify whether it was I myself ...’ (p. 630). In fact, the whole episode, together with the continuous contradictions and ambiguities later in the novel, for example, in the episode of the divinations of the divining ape, reflect this sense of mystery that Cervantes wants to display: ‘The monkey says that some of the things your grace saw, or experienced, in the aforesaid cave are false, and some are true’ (p. 654); there is the same ambiguity in the episode of the enchanted brazen head: ‘With respect to the cave, replied the oracle, much may be said: the adventure partakes both of truth and illusion’ (p. 786). The narrative voice shifts; the fact that Don Quixote is mentally ill, and the uncertainty as to whether what happened inside the cave was true or false, leads us to the conclusion that this

speleological adventure is structured around *doubt*. We never get a univocal explanation.

The visions are now suddenly majestic: a crystal palace full of transparency and purity. Similarly, the glass palace appears also in *Tristan and Isolde*, in the *Folie d'Oxford* (c. 1200) and in the alchemical text *The Green Dream* (n.d.) attributed to Bernard Trevisan (1406–90) in which the protagonist also falls into a deep sleep and meets a 'venerable' old man with silver hair. For Teresa of Avila, the inner castle is a simile of the soul addressing God and is made of glass. Then comes the meeting with the master Montesinos, also described as full of light, who guides him inside the cave. Don Quixote experiences a period of confusion, and he is given the experience of confrontation with death through the vision of an ancient knight (Durandarte, who, together with Montesinos are figures from a group of Spanish ballads of Carolingian chivalric derivation) lying in a sepulchre with his heart sprinkled with salt – note here the reference to the heart in the cave setting, yet with a different meaning than that of Saint John of the Cross.



Don Quixote in the cave. Antonio Gómez de los Ríos, *Don Quijote en la cueva de Montesinos*, tapestry from the eighteenth century (in Lenaghan 2005: 69).

The dream-vision henceforth set out is ludicrous, with the redemption of all the inhabitants of the cave (including Dulcinea) from the enchantment imposed on them by the wizard Merlin. It also touches on absurdity, which frustrates the knight's chivalric vision and ideals (the rosary beads the size of ostrich eggs, the vision of the maid of Dulcinea asking him for money and cutting a caper) (Riley 1986: 142). Without forgetting that it is Don Quixote who is narrating the episode, the presence of Merlin and the question of the enchantment, together with the majestic visions, create an ambivalent atmosphere that combines paradisiacal visions with hellish visions. It should be also stressed how this quixotic liminal space is an echo of the Roman opposed notions of *locus horridus* (fearful place) and *locus amoenus* (pleasant place). While the *locus horridus* is menacing, gaunt, represents a wild and untamed aspect of nature, and evokes danger, fear and a constant remembrance of death, the *locus amoenus* is a place redolent of beauty, serenity, quietness and propitious for pleasant loneliness that stirs philosophical reflection or poetic inspiration in a safe and protected environment (Bodei 2008: 20; Giacomoni 2007: 84–5). The latter became a popular literary topos later on in the Renaissance in the development of the Pastoral novel, a genre in which Cervantes made his literary debut with *La Galatea* (1585).

The tricks and powers of Merlin are what keep the inhabitants of the delightful castle imprisoned. The figure is interesting in his ambivalence. According to Turner, liminal entities that are hybrid in nature can appear during rituals. In the same manner, in myths, legends, and folklore, we find ambiguous beings, such as shapeshifters, difficult to classify. Merlin has many representations in the history of literature, but in the chivalric novels, he is the prototype of the *Homo Sylvester*, a mixture of wizard and prophet brought up in the woods, whose function is to be the bridge between magic and the world of humans (Alvar 2010: 153). The nature of this being is dual: he is a cambion, an offspring of a woman and an incubus, but even the nature of his father casts serious doubts on the novel of Cervantes if we pay attention to how the wizard is defined in the staged representation of Merlin offered by the Dukes, after the adventure in the cave: 'I am Merlin, who, the histories say, was sired and fathered by the devil himself (a lie made true by the mere passage of time)' (p. 720). This portrayal of Merlin in the episode of the Dukes denies his devilish ancestry and highlights his attributes as a Zoroastrian magician as well as his admiration for the good deeds of authentic knights. For Don Quixote, it is out of the question to categorize what is inside the cave as infernal. He argues in his discussion with Sancho

and the cousin (the first guide) after the experience and before narrating it: 'You call it hell? ... Do not call it that, for it does not deserve the name...' (p. 629).

The third phase of the *catabasis* leaves Don Quixote with a sensation of having been reborn. During the limbo and liminal state, time has a different dimension. Sancho and the guide lowered Don Quixote into the cave by a rope, waited for half an hour, and then pulled him up, only to find him asleep. It is very difficult for them to wake him up. Don Quixote says that he has been in the cave for three days – note the symbolic number (recalling Jesus) – and three nights without eating and sleeping, and that he saw Dulcinea in her enchanted form.

If a ritual means a kind of transformation, then the one that concerns us, after the hermetic three days, implies a change in Don Quixote's perception. In this dream, the hidalgo 'savours' a small death and the experience transforms him. There is a qualitative change in his perception that points towards Don Quixote's eventual rejection of chivalric fiction and his recovery of sanity. He is projected to a new perception of reality: now the other characters (like the Dukes) believe the fantasies of Don Quixote and create an alternative world for him. It is in Barcelona that his adventures end before he rides back to his hamlet. In this city – where he remains for three days (note again the number three) – he comes to experience real situations: he is confronted with fear and real death for the first time – that is to say, in the form of the cadavers, hanging from trees, of outlaws that Roque Guinart and other bandits killed because they broke the code of their fraternity of men.⁵ In the Cave of Montesinos, Don Quixote begins to separate illusion from ideals, which is the beginning of sanity. He returns home, where he falls ill and then sleeps. Upon waking up, he is no longer crazy. This last dream means the end of ignorance and craziness, prior to death.

Conclusions

In all of the cases in the previous analysis, it is clear that liminality affects space and subjectivities, since much of the esotericism and practices of prophets, neophytes, mystics, and fictional characters such as Don Quixote deal with achieving higher forms of knowledge. Chambers of initiation are

5 The leader, inspired by the real historical character Perot Rocaguinarda, compares himself to Osiris, the Egyptian god of the afterlife and resurrection.

set in caves and this space also serves as a threshold or 'doorway' to contact with the world of death (Mesopotamia, Greek mystery rites and novels). It is where the experience of revelatory visions takes place (Lull, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, Saint John of the Cross) thanks to the appearance of intermediary beings (Gabriel–Muhammad, Montesinos–Don Quixote). It is also a place for imprisonment and freedom (in Plato, Durandarte and the other characters in the episode of the Cave of Montesinos). On the other hand, the ambiguous trait of liminality is clearly expressed in the quality of these visions: in Don Quixote these are pleasant but also fearful, suggesting binary opposites of light and darkness.

Personal transformation is at the core of initiation. Key to the motif of the *catabasis* is the trope of a journey to the realm of the dead and being transformed by the experience. And for this to occur it is crucial that all heroes, prophets or mystics – whether they are called Jesus, Muhammad, Ramon, Saint Ignatius, Ulysses, Aeneas, Dante, or Don Quixote – are isolated in caves. Excepting the account of Simeon ben Yoha and his son, who seek refuge in a cave, loneliness characterizes the cave experiences. The cave also provides metaphorical meanings in the plane of expression (Rumi, Saint John of the Cross) and structure an allegory (Plato).

Cervantes satirizes a classical myth that is present in chivalric novels as well as in alchemical treatises, which shows how continuities and discontinuities of the motif have evolved. In the ritual of transition in the Cave of Montesinos, Cervantes incorporates the symbology of the journey towards perfection of the alchemist, expressed in the form of V.I.T.R.I.O.L. in a crucial moment of the novel of crisis and break of the main character. The ritual embodies an experience that is not only psychological but also physical. We can corroborate then that the Spanish author used rites as a structural device that led key moments in the process of transformation in a fictional characterization. Returning to the cave implies a passage from the organic and material to the metaphysical and spiritual. It is in this convergence that new realms of possibility are created.

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