

Miguel de Cervantes

Don Quixote

A New Translation by Edith Grossman

Introduction by Harold Bloom

 HarperCollins e-books

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Translator's Note to the Reader

In the author's prologue to what is now called part I of *Don Quixote* (part II appeared ten years later in 1615, following the publication of a continuation of the knight's adventures written by someone using the pseudonym "Avellaneda"), Cervantes said this about his book and the need to write a preface for it:

I wanted only to offer it to you plain and bare, unadorned by a prologue or the endless catalogue of sonnets, epigrams, and laudatory poems that are usually placed at the beginning of books. For I can tell you that although it cost me some effort to compose, none seemed greater than creating this preface you are now reading. I picked up my pen many times to write it, and many times I put it down again because I did not know what to write; and once, when I was baffled, with the paper in front of me, my pen behind my ear, my elbow propped on the writing table and my cheek resting in my hand, pondering what I would say, a friend of mine...came in, and seeing me so perplexed he asked the reason, and I...said I was thinking about the prologue I had to write for the history of Don Quixote...

Cervantes's fictional difficulty was certainly my factual one as I contemplated the prospect of writing even a few lines about the wonderfully utopian task of translating the first—and probably the greatest—modern novel. Substitute keyboard and monitor for pen and paper, and my dilemma and posture were the same; the dear friend who helped me solve the problem was really Cervantes himself, an embodied spirit who emerged out of the shadows and off the pages when I realized I could begin this note by quoting a few sentences from his prologue.

I call the undertaking utopian in the sense intended by Ortega y Gasset when he deemed translations utopian but then went on to say that all human efforts to communicate—even in the same language—are equally utopian, equally luminous with value, and equally worth the doing. Endeavoring to translate artful writing, particularly an indispensable work like *Don Quixote*, grows out of infinite optimism as the translator valiantly, perhaps quixotically, attempts to enter the mind of the first writer through the gateway of the text. It is a daunting and inspiring enterprise.

I have never kept a translating journal, though I admire those I have read. Keeping records of any kind is not something I do easily, and after six or seven hours of translating at the computer, the idea of writing about what I have written looms insurmountably, as does the kind of self-scrutiny required. The actuality of the translation is in the translation, and having to articulate how and why I have just articulated the text seems cruelly redundant. Yet there are some general considerations that may be of interest to you. I hesitated over the spelling of the protagonist's name, for instance, and finally opted for an *x*, not a *j*, in Quixote (I wanted the connection to the English "quixotic" to be immediately apparent); I debated the question of footnotes with myself and decided I was obliged to put some in, though I had never used them before in a translation (I did not want the reader to be put off by references that may now be obscure, or to miss the layers of intention and meaning those allusions create); I wondered about consulting other translations and vowed not to—at least in the beginning—in order to keep my ear clear and the voice of the translation free of outside influences (I kept the voice for the first year, and then, from time to time, I glanced at other people's work); I chose to use Marti de Riquer's edition of *Don Quixote*, which is based on the first printing of the book (with all its

historic slips and errors) and has useful notes that include discussions of problematic words and phrases based on Riquer's comparisons of the earliest seventeenth-century translations into English, French, and Italian. Finally, I assure you that I felt an ongoing, unstoppable rush of exhilaration and terror, for perfectly predictable and transparent reasons, at undertaking so huge and so important a project.

Every translator has to live with the kind of pedantic critic who is always ready to pounce at an infelicitous phrase or misinterpreted word in a book that can be hundreds of pages long. I had two or three soul-searing nightmares about rampaging hordes laying waste to my translation of the work that is not only the great monument of literature in Spanish but a pillar of the entire Western literary tradition. The extraordinary significance and influence of this novel were reaffirmed, once again, in 2002, when one hundred major writers from fifty-four countries voted *Don Quixote* the best work of fiction in the world. One reason for the exalted position it occupies is that Cervantes's book contains within itself, in germ or full-blown, practically every imaginative technique and device used by subsequent fiction writers to engage their readers and construct their works. The prospect of translating it was stupefying.

Shortly before I began work, while I was wrestling with the question of what kind of voice would be most appropriate for the translation of a book written some four hundred years ago, I mentioned my fears to Julián Ríos, the Spanish novelist. His reply was simple and profound and immensely liberating. He told me not to be afraid; Cervantes, he said, was our most modern writer, and what I had to do was to translate him the way I translated everyone else—that is, the contemporary authors whose works I have brought over into English. Julián's characterization was a revelation; it desacralized the project and allowed me, finally, to confront the text and find the voice in English. For me this is the essential challenge in translation: hearing, in the most profound way I can, the text in Spanish and discovering the voice to say (I mean, to write) the text again in English. Compared to that, lexicographical difficulties shrink and wither away.

I believe that my primary obligation as a literary translator is to recreate for the reader in English the experience of the reader in Spanish. When Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote*, it was not yet a seminal masterpiece of European literature, the book that crystallized forever the making of literature out of life and literature, that explored in typically ironic fashion, and for the first time, the blurred and shifting frontiers between fact and fiction, imagination and history, perception and physical reality, and that set the stage for all Hispanic studies and all serious discussions of the history and nature of the novel. When Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote*, his language was not archaic or quaint. He wrote in crackling, up-to-date Spanish that was an intrinsic part of his time (this is instantly apparent when he has Don Quixote, in transports of knightly madness, speak in the old-fashioned idiom of the novels of chivalry), a modern language that both reflected and helped to shape the way people experienced the world. This meant that I did not need to find a special, anachronistic, somehow-seventeenth-century voice but could translate his astonishingly fine writing into contemporary English.

And his writing is a marvel: it gives off sparks and flows like honey. Cervantes's style is so artful it seems absolutely natural and inevitable; his irony is sweet-natured, his sensibility sophisticated, compassionate, and humorous. If my translation works at all, the reader should keep turning the pages, smiling a good deal, periodically bursting into laughter, and impatiently waiting for the next synonym (Cervantes delighted in accumulating synonyms, especially descriptive ones, within the same phrase), the next mind-bending coincidence, the next variation on the structure of Don Quixote's adventures, the next incomparable conversation between the knight and his squire. To quote again from Cervantes's prologue: "I do not want to charge you too much for the service I have performed in introducing you to so noble and honorable a knight; but I do want you to thank me for allowing you to make the acquaintance of the famous Sancho Panza, his squire...."

I began the work in February 2001 and completed it two years later, but it is important for you to know that “final” versions are determined more by a publisher’s due date than by any sense on my part that the work is actually finished. Even so, I hope you find it deeply amusing and truly compelling. If not, you can be certain the fault is mine.

EDITH GROSSMAN
March 2003
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BY HAROLD BLOOM

1

What is the true object of Don Quixote's quest? I find that unanswerable. What are Hamlet's authentic motives? We are not permitted to know. Since Cervantes's magnificent Knight's quest has a cosmological scope and reverberation, no object seems beyond reach. Hamlet's frustration is that he was allowed only Elsinore and revenge tragedy. Shakespeare composed a poem unlimited, in which only the protagonist is beyond all limits.

Cervantes and Shakespeare, who died almost simultaneously, are the central Western authors, at least since Dante, and no writer since has matched them, not Tolstoi or Goethe, Dickens, Proust, or Joyce. Context cannot hold Cervantes and Shakespeare: the Spanish Golden Age and the Elizabethan and Jacobean era are secondary when we attempt a full appreciation of what we are given.

W. H. Auden found in Don Quixote a portrait of the Christian saint, as opposed to Hamlet, who "lacks faith in God and in himself." Though Auden *sounds* perversely ironic, he was quite serious and I think, wrong-headed. Against Auden I set Miguel de Unamuno, my favorite critic of *Don Quixote*. For Unamuno, Alonso Quixano is the Christian saint, while Don Quixote is the originator of the actual Spanish religion, Quixotism.

Herman Melville blended Don Quixote and Hamlet in Captain Ahab (with a touch of Milton's Satan added for seasoning). Ahab desires to avenge himself upon the white whale, while Satan would destroy God, if only he could. Hamlet is death's ambassador to us, according to G. Wilson Knight. Don Quixote says that his quest is to destroy injustice. The final injustice is death, the ultimate bondage. To set captives free is the knight's pragmatic way of battling against death.

Though there have been many valuable English translations of *Don Quixote*, I would commend Edith Grossman's version for the extraordinarily high quality of her prose. The Knight and Sancho are so eloquently rendered by Grossman that the vitality of their characterization is more clearly conveyed than ever before. There is also an astonishing contextualization of Don Quixote and Sancho in Grossman's translation that I believe has not been achieved before. The spiritual atmosphere of Spain already in steep decline can be felt throughout, thanks to the heightened quality of her diction.

Grossman might be called the Glenn Gould of translators, because she, too, articulates every note. Reading her amazing mode of finding equivalents in English for Cervantes's darkening vision is an entrance into a further understanding of why this great book contains within itself all the novels that have followed in its sublime wake. Like Shakespeare, Cervantes is inescapable for all writers who have come after him. Dickens and Flaubert, Joyce and Proust reflect the narrative procedures of Cervantes, and their glories of characterization mingle strains of Shakespeare and Cervantes.

2

You cannot locate Shakespeare in his own works, not even in the sonnets. It is this near invisibility that encourages the zealots who believe that almost anyone wrote Shakespeare, except Shakespeare.

himself. As far as I know, the Hispanic world does not harbor covens who labor to prove that Lope de Vega or Calderón de la Barca composed *Don Quixote*. Cervantes inhabits his great book so pervasively that we need to see that it has three unique personalities: the Knight, Sancho, and Cervantes himself.

Yet how sly and subtle is the presence of Cervantes! At its most hilarious, *Don Quixote* is immensely somber. Shakespeare again is the illuminating analogue: Hamlet at his most melancholic will not cease his punning or his gallows humor, and Falstaff's boundless wit is tormented by intimations of rejection. Just as Shakespeare wrote in no genre, *Don Quixote* is tragedy as well as comedy. Though it stands forever as the birth of the novel out of the prose romance, and is still the best of all novels, I find its sadness augments each time I reread it and does make it "the Spanish Bible," as Unamuno termed this greatest of all narratives. Novels are written by George Eliot and Henry James, by Balzac and Flaubert, or by the Tolstois of *Anna Karenina*. *Don Quixote* may not be scripture, but it so contains us that, as with Shakespeare, we cannot get out of it, in order to achieve perspectivism. We are inside the vast book, privileged to hear the superb conversations between the Knight and his squire, Sancho Panza. Sometimes we are fused with Cervantes, but more often we are invisible wanderers who accompany the sublime pair in their adventures and debacles.

If there is a third Western author with universal appeal from the Renaissance on, it could only be Dickens. Yet Dickens purposely does not give us "man's final lore," which Melville found in Shakespeare and presumably in Cervantes also. *King Lear*'s first performance took place as part I of *Don Quixote* was published. Contra Auden, Cervantes, like Shakespeare, gives us a secular transcendence. Don Quixote does regard himself as God's knight, but he continuously follows his own capricious will, which is gloriously idiosyncratic. King Lear appeals to the skyey heavens for aid, but on the personal grounds that they and he are old. Battered by realities that are even more violent than he is, Don Quixote resists yielding to the authority of church and state. When he ceases to assert his autonomy, there is nothing left except to be Alonso Quixano the Good again, and no action remaining except to die.

I return to my initial question: the Sorrowful Knight's object. He is at war with Freud's reality principle, which accepts the necessity of dying. But he is neither a fool nor a madman, and his vision always is at least double: he sees what we see, yet he sees something else also, a possible glory that he desires to appropriate or at least share. Unamuno names this transcendence as literary fame, the immortality of Cervantes and Shakespeare. Certainly that is part of the Knight's quest; much of part I turns upon his and Sancho's delightful apprehension that their adventures in part I are recognized everywhere. Perhaps Unamuno underestimated the complexities involved in so grand a disruption of the aesthetics of representation. *Hamlet* again is the best analogue: from the entrance of the players in act II through the close of the performance of *The Mousetrap* in act III, all the rules of normative representation are tossed away, and everything is theatricality. Part II of *Don Quixote* is similarly and bewilderingly advanced, since the Knight, Sancho, and everyone they encounter are acutely conscious that fiction has disrupted the order of reality.

3

We need to hold in mind as we read *Don Quixote* that we cannot condescend to the Knight and Sancho since together they know more than we do, just as we never can catch up to the amazing speed of Hamlet's cognitions. Do we know exactly who we are? The more urgently we quest for our authentic selves, the more they tend to recede. The Knight and Sancho, as the great work closes, know exactly who they are, not so much by their adventures as through their marvelous conversations, be the

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