

Miguel de Cervantes

Don Quixote

A New Translation by Edith Grossman

Introduction by Harold Bloom

 HarperCollins e-books

Contents

[Translator's Note to the Reader](#)

[Introduction:](#) Don Quixote, Sancho Panza, and Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, by Harold Bloom

[First Part of the Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha](#)

[Prologue](#)

[To the Book of Don Quixote of La Mancha](#)

[Part One of the Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha](#)

[Chapter I](#)

Which describes the condition and profession of the famous gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha

[Chapter II](#)

Which tells of the first sally that the ingenious Don Quixote made from his native land

[Chapter III](#)

Which recounts the amusing manner in which Don Quixote was dubbed a knight

[Chapter IV](#)

Concerning what happened to our knight when he left the inn

[Chapter V](#)

In which the account of our knight's misfortune continues

[Chapter VI](#)

Regarding the beguiling and careful examination carried out by the priest and the barber of the library of our ingenious gentleman

[Chapter VII](#)

Regarding the second sally of our good knight Don Quixote of La Mancha

[Chapter VIII](#)

Regarding the good fortune of the valorous Don Quixote in the fearful and never imagined adventure

of the windmills, along with other events worthy of joyful remembrance

[Part Two of the Ingenious Gentleman
Don Quixote of La Mancha](#)

[Chapter IX](#)

In which the stupendous battle between the gallant Basque and the valiant Manchegan is concluded and comes to an end

[Chapter X](#)

Concerning what further befell Don Quixote with the Basque and the danger in which he found himself with a band of Galicians from Yanguas

[Chapter XI](#)

Regarding what befell Don Quixote with some goatherds

[Chapter XII](#)

Regarding what a goatherd recounted to those who were with Don Quixote

[Chapter XIII](#)

In which the tale of the shepherdess Marcela is concluded, and other events are related

[Chapter XIV](#)

In which are found the desperate verses of the deceased shepherd, along with other unexpected occurrences

[Part Three of the Ingenious Gentleman
Don Quixote of La Mancha](#)

[Chapter XV](#)

In which is recounted the unfortunate adventure that Don Quixote happened upon when he happened upon some heartless Yanguesans

[Chapter XVI](#)

Regarding what befell the ingenious gentleman in the inn that he imagined to be a castle

[Chapter XVII](#)

Which continues the account of the innumerable difficulties that the brave Don Quixote and his good squire, Sancho Panza, experienced in the inn that, to his misfortune, he thought was a castle

[Chapter XVIII](#)

Which relates the words that passed between Sancho Panza and his master, Don Quixote, and other adventures that deserve to be recounted

[Chapter XIX](#)

Regarding the discerning words that Sancho exchanged with his master, and the adventure he had with a dead body, as well as other famous events

[Chapter XX](#)

Regarding the most incomparable and singular adventure ever concluded with less danger by a famous knight, and which was concluded by the valiant Don Quixote of La Mancha

[Chapter XXI](#)

Which relates the high adventure and rich prize of the helmet of Mambrino, as well as other things that befell our invincible knight

[Chapter XXII](#)

Regarding the liberty that Don Quixote gave to many unfortunate men who, against their wills, were being taken where they did not wish to go

[Chapter XXIII](#)

Regarding what befell the famous Don Quixote in the Sierra Morena, which was one of the strangest adventures recounted in this true history

[Chapter XXIV](#)

In which the adventure of the Sierra Morena continues

[Chapter XXV](#)

Which tells of the strange events that befell the valiant knight of La Mancha in the Sierra Morena and of his imitation of the penance of Beltenebros

[Chapter XXVI](#)

In which the elegant deeds performed by an enamored Don Quixote in the Sierra Morena continue

[Chapter XXVII](#)

Concerning how the priest and the barber carried out their plan, along with other matters worthy of being recounted in this great history

[Part Four of the Ingenious Gentleman](#)

[Chapter XXVIII](#)

Which recounts the novel and agreeable adventure that befell the priest and the barber in the Sierra Morena

[Chapter XXIX](#)

Which recounts the amusing artifice and arrangement that was devised for freeing our enamored knight from the harsh penance he had imposed on himself

[Chapter XXX](#)

Which recounts the good judgment of the beautiful Dorotea, along with other highly diverting and amusing matters

[Chapter XXXI](#)

Regarding the delectable words that passed between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, his squire, well as other events

[Chapter XXXII](#)

Which recounts what occurred in the inn to the companions of Don Quixote

[Chapter XXXIII](#)

Which recounts the novel of The Man Who Was Recklessly

[Chapter XXXIV](#)

In which the novel of The Man Who Was Recklessly Curious continues

[Chapter XXXV](#)

In which the novel of The Man Who Was Recklessly Curious is concluded

[Chapter XXXVI](#)

Which recounts the fierce and uncommon battle that Don Quixote had with some skins of red wine along with other unusual events that occurred in the inn

[Chapter XXXVII](#)

In which the history of the famous Princess Micomicona continues, along with other diverting adventures

[Chapter XXXVIII](#)

Which tells of the curious discourse on arms and letters given by Don Quixote

[Chapter XXXIX](#)

In which the captive recounts his life and adventures

[Chapter XL](#)

In which the history of the captive continues

[Chapter XLI](#)

In which the captive continues his tale

[Chapter XLII](#)

Which recounts further events at the inn as well as many other things worth knowing

[Chapter XLIII](#)

Which recounts the pleasing tale of the muledriver's boy, along with other strange events that occurred at the inn

[Chapter XLIV](#)

In which the remarkable events at the inn continue

[Chapter XLV](#)

In which questions regarding the helmet of Mambrino and the packsaddle are finally resolved, well as other entirely true adventures

[Chapter XLVI](#)

Regarding the notable adventure of the officers of the Holy Brotherhood, and the great ferocity of our good knight Don Quixote

[Chapter XLVII](#)

Regarding the strange manner in which Don Quixote of La Mancha was enchanted, and other notable events

[Chapter XLVIII](#)

In which the canon continues to discuss books of chivalry, as well as other matters worthy of his ingenuity

[Chapter XLIX](#)

Which recounts the clever conversation that Sancho Panza had with his master, Don Quixote

[Chapter L](#)

Regarding the astute arguments that Don Quixote had with the canon, as well as other matters

[Chapter LI](#)

Which recounts what the goatherd told to all those who were taking Don Quixote home

[Chapter LII](#)

Regarding the quarrel that Don Quixote had with the goatherd, as well as the strange adventure the penitents, which he brought to a successful conclusion by the sweat of his brow

[Second Part of the Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue to the Reader](#)

[Chapter I](#)

Regarding what transpired when the priest and the barber discussed his illness with Don Quixote

[Chapter II](#)

Which deals with the notable dispute that Sancho Panza had with Don Quixote's niece and housekeeper, as well as other amusing topics

[Chapter III](#)

Regarding the comical discussion held by Don Quixote, Sancho Panza, and Bachelor Sansón Carrasco

[Chapter IV](#)

In which Sancho Panza satisfies Bachelor Sansón Carrasco with regard to his doubts and questions with other events worthy of being known and recounted

[Chapter V](#)

Concerning the clever and amusing talk that passed between Sancho Panza and his wife, Teresa Panza, and other events worthy of happy memory

[Chapter VI](#)

Regarding what transpired between Don Quixote and his niece and housekeeper, which is one of the most important chapters in the entire history

[Chapter VII](#)

Regarding the conversation that Don Quixote had with his squire, as well as other exceptional famous events

[Chapter VIII](#)

Which recounts what befell Don Quixote as he was going to see his lady Dulcinea of Toboso

[Chapter IX](#)

Which recounts what will soon be seen

[Chapter X](#)

Which recounts Sancho's ingenuity in enchanting the lady Dulcinea, and other events as ridiculous as they are true

[Chapter XI](#)

Regarding the strange adventure that befell the valiant Don Quixote with the cart or wagon of the Assembly of Death

[Chapter XII](#)

Regarding the strange adventure that befell the valiant Don Quixote and the courageous Knight of the Mirrors

[Chapter XIII](#)

In which the adventure of the Knight of the Wood continues, along with the perceptive, unprecedented, and amiable conversation between the two squires

[Chapter XIV](#)

In which the adventure of the Knight of the Wood continues

[Chapter XV](#)

Which recounts and relates the identity of the Knight of the Mirrors and his squire

[Chapter XVI](#)

Regarding what befell Don Quixote with a prudent knight of La Mancha

[Chapter XVII](#)

In which the heights and extremes to which the remarkable courage of Don Quixote could and did go is revealed, along with the happily concluded adventure of the lions

[Chapter XVIII](#)

Regarding what befell Don Quixote in the castle or house of the Knight of the Green Coat, along with other bizarre matters

[Chapter XIX](#)

Which recounts the adventure of the enamored shepherd, and other truly pleasing matters

[Chapter XX](#)

Which recounts the wedding of rich Camacho, as well as what befell poor Basilio

[Chapter XXI](#)

Which continues the account of the wedding of Camacho, along with other agreeable events

[Chapter XXII](#)

Which recounts the great adventure of the Cave of Montesinos that lies in the heart of La Mancha which was successfully concluded by the valiant Don Quixote of La Mancha

[Chapter XXIII](#)

Regarding the remarkable things that the great Don Quixote said he saw in the depths of the Cave of Montesinos, so impossible and extraordinary that this adventure has been considered apocryphal

[Chapter XXIV](#)

In which a thousand trifles are recounted, as irrelevant as they are necessary to a true understanding of this great history

[Chapter XXV](#)

In which note is made of the braying adventure and the diverting adventure of the puppet master along with the memorable divinations of the soothsaying monkey

[Chapter XXVI](#)

In which the diverting adventure of the puppet master continues, along with other things that are really very worthwhile

[Chapter XXVII](#)

In which the identities of Master Pedro and his monkey are revealed, as well as the unhappy outcome of the braying adventure, which Don Quixote did not conclude as he had wished and intended

[Chapter XXVIII](#)

Regarding matters that Benengeli says will be known to the reader if he reads with attention

[Chapter XXIX](#)

Regarding the famous adventure of the enchanted boat

[Chapter XXX](#)

Regarding what befell Don Quixote with a beautiful huntress

[Chapter XXXI](#)

Which deals with many great things

[Chapter XXXII](#)

Regarding the response that Don Quixote gave to his rebuker, along with other events both grave and comical

[Chapter XXXIII](#)

Regarding the delightful conversation that the duchess and her ladies had with Sancho Panza, or that is worthy of being read and remembered

[Chapter XXXIV](#)

Which recounts the information that was received regarding how the peerless Dulcinea of Toboso was to be disenchanted, which is one of the most famous adventures in this book

[Chapter XXXV](#)

In which the information that Don Quixote received regarding the disenchantment of Dulcinea continues, along with other remarkable events

[Chapter XXXVI](#)

Which recounts the strange and unimaginable adventure of the Dolorous Duenna, also known as the Countess Trifaldi, as well as a letter that Sancho Panza wrote to his wife, Teresa Panza

[Chapter XXXVII](#)

In which the famous adventure of the Dolorous Duenna continues

[Chapter XXXVIII](#)

Which recounts the tale of misfortune told by the Dolorous Duenna

[Chapter XXXIX](#)

In which the Countess Trifaldi continues her stupendous and memorable history

[Chapter XL](#)

Regarding matters that concern and pertain to this adventure and this memorable history

[Chapter XLI](#)

Regarding the arrival of Clavileño, and the conclusion of this lengthy adventure

[Chapter XLII](#)

Regarding the advice Don Quixote gave to Sancho Panza before he went to govern the ínsula, along with other matters of consequence

[Chapter XLIII](#)

Regarding the second set of precepts that Don Quixote gave to Sancho Panza

[Chapter XLIV](#)

How Sancho Panza was taken to his governorship, and the strange adventure that befell Don Quixote in the castle

[Chapter XLV](#)

Regarding how the great Sancho Panza took possession of his ínsula, and the manner in which he began to govern

[Chapter XLVI](#)

Regarding the dreadful belline and feline fright received by Don Quixote in the course of his wooing by the enamored Altisidora

[Chapter XLVII](#)

In which the account of how Sancho Panza behaved in his governorship continues

[Chapter XLVIII](#)

Regarding what transpired between Don Quixote and Doña Rodríguez, duenna to the duchess, well as other events worthy of being recorded and remembered forever

[Chapter XLIX](#)

Regarding what befell Sancho Panza as he patrolled his ínsula

[Chapter L](#)

Which declares the identities of the enchanters and tormentors who beat the duenna and pinched and scratched Don Quixote, and recounts what befell the page who carried the letter to Teresa Sancho's wife of Sancho Panza

[Chapter LI](#)

Regarding the progress of Sancho Panza's governorship, and other matters of comparable interest

[Chapter LII](#)

Which recounts the adventure of the second Dolorous, or Anguished, Duenna, also called Doña Rodríguez

[Chapter LIII](#)

Regarding the troubled end and conclusion of the governorship of Sancho Panza

[Chapter LIV](#)

Which deals with matters related to this history and to no other

[Chapter LV](#)

Regarding certain things that befell Sancho on the road, and others that are really quite remarkable

[Chapter LVI](#)

Regarding the extraordinary and unprecedented battle that Don Quixote of La Mancha had with the footman Tosilos in defense of the daughter of the duenna Doña Rodríguez

[Chapter LVII](#)

Which recounts how Don Quixote took his leave of the duke, and what befell him with the clever and bold Altisidora, the duchess's maiden.

[Chapter LVIII](#)

Which recounts how so many adventures rained down on Don Quixote that there was hardly room for all of them

[Chapter LIX](#)

Which recounts an extraordinary incident that befell Don Quixote and can be considered a great adventure

[Chapter LX](#)

Concerning what befell Don Quixote on his way to Barcelona

[Chapter LXI](#)

Regarding what befell Don Quixote when he entered Barcelona, along with other matters that have more truth in them than wit

[Chapter LXII](#)

Which relates the adventure of the enchanted head, as well as other foolishness that must be recounted

[Chapter LXIII](#)

Regarding the evil that befell Sancho Panza on his visit to the galleys, and the remarkable adventure of the beautiful Morisca

[Chapter LXIV](#)

Which deals with the adventure that caused Don Quixote more sorrow than any others that had befallen him so far

[Chapter LXV](#)

Which reveals the identity of the Knight of the White Moon, and recounts the release of Don Gregorio, as well as other matters

[Chapter LXVI](#)

Which recounts what will be seen by whoever reads it, or heard by whoever listens to it being read

[Chapter LXVII](#)

Regarding the decision Don Quixote made to become a shepherd and lead a pastoral life until the year of his promise had passed, along with other incidents that are truly pleasurable and entertaining

[Chapter LXVIII](#)

Regarding the porcine adventure that befell Don Quixote

[Chapter LXIX](#)

Concerning the strangest and most remarkable event to befall Don Quixote in the entire course of this great history

[Chapter LXX](#)

Which follows chapter LXIX, and deals with matters necessary to the clarity of this history

[Chapter LXXI](#)

What befell Don Quixote and his squire, Sancho, as they were traveling to their village

[Chapter LXXII](#)

Concerning how Don Quixote and Sancho arrived in their village

[Chapter LXXIII](#)

Regarding the omens Don Quixote encountered as he entered his village, along with other events that adorn and lend credit to this great history

[Chapter LXXIV](#)

Which deals with how Don Quixote fell ill, and the will he made, and his death

[About the Author and the Translator](#)

[Praise](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

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 clear 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 a felicitous 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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