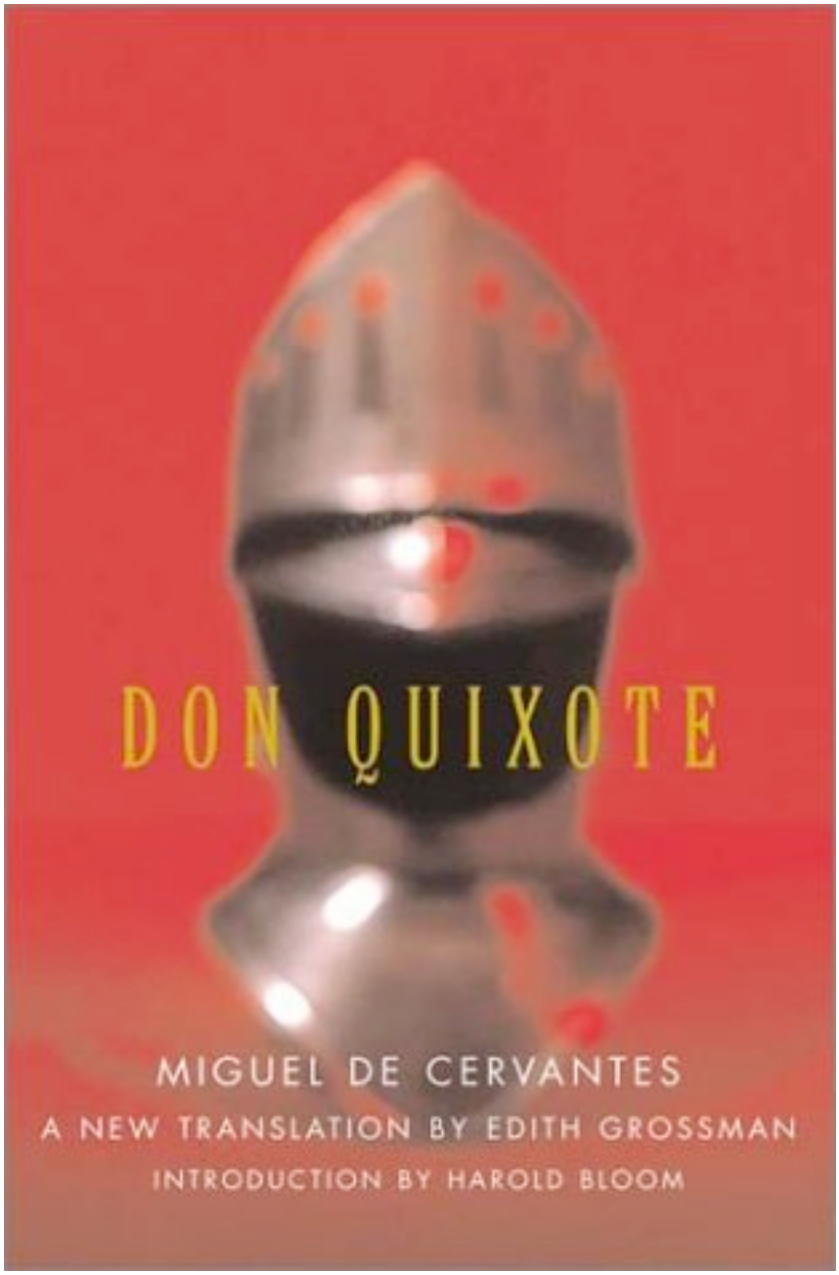
THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Jan '04 Nº 257



THE KNIGHT IN THE MIRROR

Don Quixote—the first modern novel—remains the finest.
As a new translation of the Spanish classic is published,
Harold Bloom argues that only
Shakespeare comes close to Cervantes' genius

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 cosmological scope and reverberation, no object seems beyond reach. Hamlet's frustration is that he is 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 Tolstoy or Goethe, Dickens, Proust, Joyce. Context cannot hold Cervantes and Shakespeare: the Spanish golden age and the Elizabethan-Jacobean era are secondary when we attempt a full appreciation of what we are given.

WH 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.

Herman Melville blended Don Quixote and Hamlet into 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 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 new version for the

extraordinarily high quality of her prose. The spiritual atmosphere of a 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 characterisation mingle strains of Shakespeare and Cervantes.

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 sombre. Shakespeare again is the illuminating analogue: Hamlet at his most melancholic will not cease his punning or his gallows humour, 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 for ever 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 Miguel de Unamuno termed this greatest of all narratives.

Don Quixote may not be scripture, but it so contains us that, as with Shakespeare, we cannot get out of it 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.

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. De Unamuno names this transcendence as literary fame, the immortality of Cervantes and Shakespeare. 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 marvellous conversations, be they quarrels or exchanges of insights.

Poetry, particularly Shakespeare's, teaches us how to talk to ourselves, but not to others. Shakespeare's great figures are gorgeous solipsists: Shylock, Falstaff, Hamlet, Iago, Lear, Cleopatra, with Rosalind the brilliant exception. Don Quixote and Sancho really listen to each other and change through this receptivity. Neither of them overhears himself, which is the Shakespearean mode. Cervantes or Shakespeare: they are rival teachers of how we change and why. Friendship in Shakespeare is ironic at best, treacherous more commonly. The friendship between Sancho Panza and his knight surpasses any other in literary representation.

We do not have Cardenio, the play Shakespeare wrote with John Fletcher, after reading Thomas Shelton's contemporaneous translation of Don Quixote. Therefore we cannot know what Shakespeare thought of Cervantes, though we can surmise his delight. Cervantes, an unsuccessful dramatist, presumably had never heard of Shakespeare, but I doubt he would have valued Falstaff and Hamlet, both of whom chose the self's freedom over obligations of any kind.

Sancho, as Kafka remarked, is a free man, but Don Quixote is metaphysically and psychologically bound by his dedication to

knight errantry. We can celebrate the knight's endless valour, but not his literalisation of the romance of chivalry.

But does Don Quixote altogether believe in the reality of his own vision? Evidently he does not, particularly when he (and Sancho) is surrendered by Cervantes to the sadomasochistic practical jokes —indeed, the vicious and humiliating cruelties—that afflict the knight and squire in part II. Nabokov is very illuminating on this in his Lectures on Don Quixote, published posthumously in 1983: both parts of Don Quixote form a veritable encyclopedia of cruelty. From that viewpoint it is one of the most bitter and barbarous books ever penned. And its cruelty is artistic.

To find a Shakespearean equivalent to this aspect of Don Quixote, you would have to fuse Titus Andronicus and The Merry Wives of Windsor into one work, a grim prospect because they are, to me, Shakespeare's weakest plays. Falstaff's dreadful humiliation by the merry wives is unacceptable enough (even if it formed the basis for Verdi's sublime Falstaff).

Why does Cervantes subject Don Quixote to the physical abuse of part I and the psychic tortures of part II? Nabokov's answer is aesthetic: the cruelty is vitalised by Cervantes's characteristic artistry. That seems to me something of an evasion. Twelfth Night is comedy unsurpassable, and on the stage we are consumed by hilarity at Malvolio's terrible humiliations.

When we reread the play, we become uneasy, because Malvolio's socio-erotic fantasies echo in virtually all of us. Why are we not made at least a little dubious by the torments, bodily and socially, suffered by Don Quixote and Sancho Panza? Cervantes himself, as a constant if disguised presence in the text, is the answer. He was the most battered of eminent writers. At the great naval battle of Lepanto, he was wounded and so at 24 permanently lost the use of his left hand. In 1575, he was captured by Barbary pirates and spent five years as a slave in Algiers. Ransomed in 1580, he served Spain as a spy in Portugal and Oran and then returned to Madrid, where he attempted a career as a dramatist, almost invariably failing after writing at least 20 plays. Somewhat desperately, he became a tax collector, only to be indicted and imprisoned for supposed malfeasance in 1597. A fresh imprisonment came in 1605; there is a tradition that he began to compose Don Quixote in jail. Part I, written at incredible speed, was published in 1605. Part II was published in 1615.

Fleeced of all royalties of part I by the publisher, Cervantes would have died in poverty except for the belated patronage of a discerning nobleman in the last three years of his life. Though Shakespeare died at just 52, he was an immensely successful dramatist and became quite prosperous by holding a share in the actors' company that played at the Globe Theatre. Circumspect, and only too aware of the government-inspired murder of Christopher Marlowe, and their torture of Thomas Kyd, and branding of Ben Jonson, Shakespeare kept himself nearly anonymous, despite being the reigning dramatist of London. Violence, slavery and imprisonment were the staples of Cervantes's life. Shakespeare, wary to the end, had an existence almost without a memorable incident, as far as we can tell.

The physical and mental torments suffered by Don Quixote and Sancho Panza had been central to Cervantes's endless struggle to stay alive and free. Yet Nabokov's observations are accurate: cruelty is extreme throughout Don Quixote. The aesthetic wonder is that this enormity fades when we stand back from the huge book and ponder its shape and endless range of meaning. No critic's account of Cervantes's masterpiece agrees with, or even resembles, any other critic's impressions. Don Quixote is a mirror held up not to nature, but to the reader. How can this bashed and mocked knight errant be, as he is, a universal paradigm?

Don Quixote and Sancho are victims, but both are extraordinarily resilient, until the knight's final defeat and dying into the identity of Quixano the Good, whom Sancho vainly implores to take to the road again. The fascination of Don Quixote's endurance and of Sancho's loyal wisdom always remains.

Cervantes plays upon the human need to withstand suffering, which is one reason the knight awes us. However good a Catholic he may (or may not) have been, Cervantes is interested in heroism and not in sainthood.

The heroism of Don Quixote is by no means constant: he is perfectly capable of flight, abandoning poor Sancho to be beaten up by an entire village. Cervantes, a hero at Lepanto, wants Don Quixote to be a new kind of hero, neither ironic nor mindless, but one who wills to be himself, as José Ortega y Gasset accurately phrased it.

Don Quixote and Sancho Panza both exalt the will, though the knight transcendentalises it, and Sancho, the first post-pragmatic, wants to keep it within limits. It is the transcendent element in Don

Quixote that ultimately persuades us of his greatness, partly because it is set against the deliberately coarse, frequently sordid context of the panoramic book. And again it is important to note that this transcendence is secular and literary, and not Catholic. The Quixotic quest is erotic, yet even the eros is literary.

Crazed by reading (as so many of us still are), the knight is in quest of a new self, one that can overgo the erotic madness of Orlando (Roland) in Ariosto's Orlando Furioso or of the mythic Amadís of Gaul. Unlike Orlando's or Amadís's, Don Quixote's madness is deliberate, self-inflicted, a traditional poetic strategy. Still, there is a clear sublimation of the sexual drive in the knight's desperate courage. Lucidity keeps breaking in, re-minding him that Dulcinea is his own supreme fiction, transcending an honest lust for the peasant girl Aldonza Lorenzo. A fiction, believed in even though you know it is a fiction, can be validated only by sheer will.

I cannot think of any other work where the relations between words and deeds are as ambiguous as in Don Quixote, except (once again) for Hamlet. Cervantes's formula is also Shakespeare's, though in Cervantes we feel the burden of the experiential, whereas Shakespeare is uncanny, since nearly all his experience was theatrical. So subtle is Cervantes that he needs to be read at as many levels as Dante. Perhaps the Quixotic can be accurately defined as the literary mode of an absolute reality, not as impossible dream but rather as a persuasive awakening into mortality.

The aesthetic truth of Don Quixote is that, again like Dante and Shakespeare, it makes us confront greatness directly. If we have difficulty fully understanding Don Quixote's quest, its motives and desired ends, that is because we confront a reflecting mirror that awes us even while we yield to delight. Cervantes is always out ahead of us, and we can never quite catch up. Fielding and Sterne, Goethe and Thomas Mann, Flaubert and Stendhal, Melville and Mark Twain, Dostoevsky: these are among Cervantes's admirers and pupils. Don Quixote is the only book that Dr Johnson desired to be even longer than it already was.

Yet Cervantes, although a universal pleasure, is in some respects even more difficult than are Dante and Shakespeare upon their heights. Are we to believe everything Don Quixote says to us? Does he believe it? He (or Cervantes) is the inventor of a mode now common enough, in which figures, within a novel, read prior fictions concerning their own earlier adventures and have to sustain a consequent loss in the sense of reality. This is one of the beautiful enigmas of Don Quixote: it is simultaneously a work

whose authentic subject is literature and a chronicle of a hard, sordid actuality, the declining Spain of 1605-15. The knight is Cervantes's subtle critique of a realm that had given him only harsh measures in return for his own patriotic heroism at Lepanto. Don Quixote cannot be said to have a double consciousness; his is rather the multiple consciousness of Cervantes himself, a writer who knows the cost of confirmation. I do not believe the knight can be said to tell lies, except in the Nietzschean sense of lying against time and time's grim "It was". To ask what it is that Don Quixote himself believes is to enter the visionary centre of his story.

This curious blend of the sublime and the bathetic does not come again until Kafka, another pupil of Cervantes, would compose stories like "The Hunter Gracchus" and "A Country Doctor". To Kafka, Don Quixote was Sancho Panza's demon or genius, projected by the shrewd Sancho into a book of adventure unto death. In Kafka's marvellous interpretation, the authentic object of the knight's quest is Sancho Panza himself, who as an auditor refuses to believe Don Quixote's account of the cave. So I circle back to my question: Does the knight believe his own story? It makes little sense to answer either "yes" or "no", so the question must be wrong. We cannot know what Don Quixote and Hamlet believe, since they do not share in our limitations.

Thomas Mann loved Don Quixote for its ironies, but then Mann could have said, at any time: "Irony of ironies, all is irony." We behold in Cervantes's vast scripture what we already are. Johnson, who could not abide Jonathan Swift's ironies, easily accepted those of Cervantes; Swift's satire corrodes, while Cervantes's allows us some hope.

Johnson felt we required some illusions, lest we go mad. Is that part of Cervantes's design? Mark van Doren, in a very useful study, Don Quixote's Profession, is haunted by the analogues between the knight and Hamlet, which to me seem inevitable. Here are the two characters, beyond all others, who seem always to know what they are doing, though they baffle us whenever we try to share their knowledge. It is a knowledge unlike that of Falstaff and Sancho Panza, who are so delighted at being themselves that they bid knowledge to go aside and pass them by. I would rather be Falstaff or Sancho than a version of Hamlet or Don Quixote, because growing old and ill teaches me that being matters more than knowing. The knight and Hamlet are reckless beyond belief; Falstaff and Sancho have some awareness of discretion in matters of valour.

We cannot know the object of Don Quixote's quest unless we ourselves are Quixotic (note the capital Q). Did Cervantes, looking back upon his own arduous life, think of it as somehow Quixotic? The Sorrowful Face stares out at us in his portrait, a countenance wholly unlike Shakespeare's subtle blandness. They match each other in genius, because more even than Chaucer before them, and the host of novelists who have blended their influences since, they gave us personalities more alive than ourselves. Cervantes, I suspect, would not have wanted us to compare him to Shakespeare or to anyone else. Don Quixote says that all comparisons are odious. Perhaps they are, but this may be the exception.

We need, with Cervantes and Shakespeare, all the help we can get in regard to ultimates, yet we need no help at all to enjoy them. Each is as difficult and yet available as the other. To confront them fully, where are we to turn except to their mutual power of illumination? 🕮

The following is an edited extract from Harold Bloom's introduction to a new edition of Don Quixote, translated by Edith Grossman, published by Random House.

Extract: Don Quixote by Cervantes

The opening of Cervantes' entrancing tale of a gentle knight and his servant, Sancho Panza

Somewhere in La Mancha, in a place whose name I do not care to remember, a gentleman lived not long ago, one of those who has a lance and ancient shield on a shelf and keeps a skinny nag and a greyhound for racing. An occasional stew, beef more often than lamb, hash most nights, eggs and abstinence on Saturdays, lentils on Fridays, sometimes squab as a treat on Sundays - these consumed three-fourths of his income.

The rest went for a light woollen tunic and velvet breeches and hose of the same material for feast days, while weekdays were honoured with dun-coloured coarse cloth. He had a housekeeper past 40, a niece not yet 20, and a man-of-all-work who did everything from saddling the horse to pruning the trees. Our gentleman was approximately 50 years old; his complexion was weathered, his flesh scrawny, his face gaunt, and he was a very early riser and a great lover of the hunt. Some claim that his family name was Quixada, or Quexada, for there is a certain amount of disagreement among the authors who write of this matter, although reliable con-

jecture seems to indicate that his name was Quexana. But this does not matter very much to our story; in its telling there is absolutely no deviation from the truth.

... this aforementioned gentleman spent his times of leisure - which meant most of the year - reading books of chivalry with so much devotion and enthusiasm that he forgot almost completely about the hunt and even about the administration of his estate; and in his rash curiosity and folly he went so far as to sell acres of arable land in order to buy books of chivalry to read, and he brought as many of them as he could into his house...

His fantasy filled with everything he had read in his books, enchantments as well as combats, battles, challenges, wounds, courtings, loves, torments, and other impossible foolishness, and he became so convinced in his imagination of the truth of all the countless grandiloquent and false inventions he read that for him no history in the world was truer.

For forty years Harold Bloom has been an original mind and provocative presence on the international literary scene. Born in New York City in 1930 and educated at Cornell and Yale Universities, Bloom has taught at Yale since 1955 and since 1988 at New York University as well. Over these decades he has been a prolific writer, producing more than twenty major books of literary and religious criticism, in addition to hundreds of articles, reviews, and editorial introductions.

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THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE
is published weekly for its members by the
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann
Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor
E-mail: TGIdeas@speedsite.com
Homepage: http://www.thegreatideas.org/

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