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Why We Read ‘Don Quixote’

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What does it mean to be “quixotic” today? Are street-corner preachers quixotic? Is Bono? What about film directors who dementedly pursue the unlikely grail of adapting a difficult book for the screen? The word endures because its source endures. *Don Quixote de la Mancha* is the first modern novel, and two weeks ago I found myself on the Upper East Side, at the Queen Sofía Spanish Institute, tracing the word part of the way toward its origin. In the inevitable absence of Miguel de Cervantes, it was left to the book’s most recent English translator, Edith Grossman, the publisher, Andrew Hoyem, and the artist, William T. Wiley to explain the book’s riverine significance. The Quixote Delta has proved fertile ground for world literature, branching off into numerous tributaries, irrigating any number of national traditions and, finally, trickling down into the work of some of the most singular figures in world literature, from Nabokov to Borges, Fielding to Garcia Marquez.

But doesn’t quixotic threaten to swamp Quixote? Aren’t these words, which get coined in tribute to an author or a book, almost always treacherous? Can all the possibilities and implications of a character, or even—more ambitiously—a life’s work, be contained within the semantic boundaries of just one word? We think of Orwellian as adjectival shorthand for a state apparatus of terror and surveillance, but what if we also took it to mean window-pane clarity of expression or even a marked aversion to the poetry of Stephen Spender? In the same way, *Don Quixote* is not only a cautionary tale about the perils of idealism: among other things, it is also the first great book about books, a visionary parable about the responsibilities of reading and writing fiction that arrived early on in the age of printing. The river feeds into an ocean.



Fittingly then, the Spanish Institute has created an exhibit for the Arion Press edition of Grossman’s translation of *Don Quixote*, which was illustrated by Wiley. Punctuated by exclamations of warm applause, Hoyem, the founder and director of Arion Press, presented us with an account of the press’s establishment in 1974, its commitment to printing as a craft, and the surely unparalleled achievements of publishing illustrated editions of *Moby-Dick*, *Ulysses*, and even the Bible.

As Hoyem spoke, Grossman and Wiley sat enthroned on two sumptuously upholstered chairs, as though they might have been waiting for Velázquez to make their portraits. They would have formed an interestingly contrasting pair of character studies: while Grossman was very elegantly attired in a trouser suit and silk scarf, Wiley loomed darkly in a broad-brimmed hat and bolo. Having translated not just Cervantes, but numerous novels by Marquez, Vargas Llosa, and Ariel Dorfman (not to mention “a short erotic novella,” whose

author went by sadly unnamed, in between Books I and II of *Don Quixote*), Grossman was well equipped to explain why *Don Quixote* was still being read. Afterward, at the reception, she told me that “you cannot write in Spanish without having Cervantes in mind ... there is no question, in my mind, that you couldn’t have Marquez, for example, without him. They are all heirs of that style.” I shared with her my enthusiasm for one of the book’s early translators, the evergreen churl Tobias Smollett, author of *Roderick Random* and *Humphrey Clinker*, and she agreed that “Cervantes’s influence blossomed in England ... it comes by way of the eighteenth-century novelists like Fielding and Sterne.”

If Grossman made a case for the cultural permanence of *Don Quixote*, Wiley argued for the book’s contemporary relevance. I asked him what appealed to him about the book, and he spoke, with gentle conviction, about “the idealism and the chivalry we’ve been lacking. *Don Quixote* reminded me of early cowboy films like *The Cisco Kid*. There was the idealist, who almost always had a buffoonish sidekick, and they balanced each other in an interesting way. They never killed anyone; they just shot the gun out of their opponent’s hand.” Did he think that the book told us something about our own times? “If Quixote were here, he’d be busy—he’d be over in Madison, Wisconsin.” Later on, Wiley would create a polite ripple of shock among the audience by nominating Bradley Manning as a successor to the Quixotic spirit.

But as well as celebrating the daring moral venture of *Don Quixote*, this was an occasion for confirmed bibliophiles. Four hundred years after Cervantes’s masterpiece emerged, we now stand on the farthest shore of the printing age. We still buy books; we still want them hanging round, causing clutter or mess. Or at any rate, I do. For me, as for Anthony Powell, books furnish a room. I can’t imagine a bare, shelfless wall, not even in a kitchen, and I usually keep enough spare copies of the *London Review of Books* in my bathroom to practically paper over the tiles. Whenever I visit someone at home, my first trespass is always to inspect—closely—their personal library. Whoever proudly displays an Arion Press edition of *Don Quixote* in their abode will not just be the person most likely to be picking up the check after dinner, but someone incurably in love with the book as artifact and objet.

This passion is significant now because we have some idea of how a world without books might work. We at least know that we would continue to read. This blog alone suggests as much. As do the sleek, gray tablets you see every morning on the subway. But I intend no jeremiad against technology. If anything, I would rather have it both ways: the book and the blog; the lavish endeavor of the lovingly prepared new edition and the take-out convenience of the virtual text. Of course, having it both ways is very far from being quixotic. I’ll leave that to Wiley.

