

## Quijote The Importance of Being an Ironist

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*In memoriam Ruth El Saffar, Anthony Close, Ted Riley*

A decade ago, José Manuel Martín Morán opened his study with this comment: “Será inevitable [he said] el diálogo—polémico a veces—con las voces de quienes han insistido en la evolución gradual de los personajes” (17). “La estructura del *Quijote*,” he added in 2009, “hace imposible el crecimiento de los personajes, pues si aprendieran de sus experiencias, uno de los motores del vector que mueve el relato, la locura de don Quijote y la simplicidad de Sancho, quedaría desactivado. Ni don Quijote ni Sancho evolucionan en contacto con el mundo. Sus cambios, innegables, son motivados por factores ajenos a sus vicisitudes” (406). Soon after having seen Martín Morán’s latest book, I came upon a similar comment from another critic who has delved deeply into *Don Quijote*. James Wood says that Don Quijote “is the same kind of character at the end of the book as at the beginning. That’s why [this author says] his deathbed conversion is so disconcerting” (164).

These specific, emphatic conclusions drawn by Martín Morán and Wood oppose diametrically those written by Ted Riley twenty-five years earlier. Riley had convincingly established the evolution of Don Quijote, noting that 1. “In the course of the Second Part the gap between Don Quijote and the society in which he moves narrows” and that this “is a constant feature of Part II”; that “there is less of the fanatic and more of the merely eccentric about him now” (108). 2. “Throughout the novel he shows a self-awareness which also is intensified in Part II, [together with] a new sensitivity to other people’s reactions” (114-5). 3. Riley further notes that in the Second Part Don Quijote “is now almost never spontaneously deluded simply by the physical appearance of things the way he was in the earlier book” (106). 4. He points out that “there was a perceptible progression in Don Quijote’s state of mind through the ups and downs of his adventures in Part I, but it was only intermittently apparent and not pronounced. In Part II a steadier development is evident [...] 5. He is a more complicated figure, because doubt, which was only a passing cloud before, now casts a more constant dark shadow” (106-7). Riley concluded that Don Quijote “markedly develops in the course of the novel” (46).

Such starkly contrasting observations are really troubling; they constitute yet another example of the extent to which the history of interpretation of Cervantes’ masterpiece is shot through with examples of divergent views of the trajectory of the protagonist among the most brilliant, learned, and articulate commentators.

I’ve been down this road before, of course—twice—, asking the question: Don Quijote: Hero or Fool? And now I am back for another look, this time for the examination of a very specific instance of exactly where we diverge, to look once again at how these differences arise in the course of our respective readings of *Don Quijote*.

I want to begin at the point in Don Quijote’s third sally when he faces off against the company of actors who played fast and loose with Sancho’s *rucio* early in Part II. This is a point at which careful readers have diverged, creating mutually exclusive interpretations of the dialogue. The way we read this passage influences very heavily how we understand Don Quijote in Part II; I believe that this is the point at which readers embark upon different paths. How we

read this particular exchange with Sancho may well lay the foundation for fundamentally different interpretations of Part II.

Don Quijote begins the face-off with a kind thoughtfulness that contrasts with the impulsiveness to which Part I had accustomed us:

Don Quijote [...] detuvo las riendas a Rocinante y púsose a pensar de qué modo los acometería con menos peligro a su persona. En esto que se detuvo, llegó Sancho, y viéndole en talle de acometer al bien formado escuadrón, le dijo: —Asaz de locura sería intentar tal empresa: considere vuesa merced, señor mío, que para sopa de arroyo y tente bonete, no hay arma defensiva en el mundo, si no es embutirse y encerrarse en una campana de bronce; y también se ha de considerar que es más temeridad que valentía acometer un hombre solo a un ejército donde está la Muerte, y pelean en persona emperadores, y a quien ayudan los ángeles; y si esta consideración no le mueve a estarse quedo, muévale saber de cierto que entre todos los que allí están, aunque parecen reyes, príncipes y emperadores, no hay ningún caballero andante.

—Ahora sí —dijo don Quijote— has dado, Sancho, en el punto que puede y debe mudarme de mi ya determinado intento. Yo no puedo ni debo sacar la espada, como otras veces muchas te he dicho, contra quien no fuere armado caballero. A ti, Sancho, toca, si quieres tomar la venganza del agravio que a tu rucio se le ha hecho, que yo desde aquí te ayudaré con voces y advertimientos saludables.

—No hay para qué, señor —respondió Sancho —, tomar venganza de nadie, pues no es de buenos cristianos tomarla de los agravios; cuanto más que yo acabaré con mi asno que ponga su ofensa en las manos de mi voluntad, la cual es de vivir pacíficamente los días que los cielos me dieren de vida.

—Pues ésa es tu determinación —replicó don Quijote—, Sancho bueno, Sancho discreto, Sancho cristiano y Sancho sincero, dejemos estas fantasmas y volvamos a buscar mejores y más calificadas aventuras. (Allen ed., II, 11, 120)

Many years ago I brought up Don Quijote's response to this principled renunciation of violence on Sancho's part as a significant element in the consideration of the uses and effects of *irony* in Cervantes's masterpiece: "Sancho bueno, Sancho discreto, Sancho cristiano y Sancho sincero." Don Quijote cannot mean what he says. The straightforward, non-ironic meaning would be: 'Sancho, what you've just said reveals what a good person you are, how discreet, how Christian and how *sincere*.' Why did Don Quijote choose these particular words to praise Sancho: *bueno*, *discreto*, *cristiano*, *sincero*? *Bueno* and *cristiano* are the terms of Sancho's hypocritical self-characterization thrown back at him, *discreto* clashes with both of them, and *sincero* is the ironic zinger, bringing praise for the specific quality lacking in Sancho's demurral. The statement has all the earmarks of ironic characterization. It is a mistake to read Don Quijote's praise of Sancho straight, as simply naïve, as one more sign that Don Quijote is a fool, incapable of seeing through blatant hypocrisy. If they are not wholly ironic, Don Quijote's words are not acceptable as simply naïve. As expressions of ingenuous naïveté they are incoherent, the words strangely chosen. To stress that Sancho's reply is '*sincere*,' to single out, underline, and praise his *sincerity* is inexplicable in any sort of naïve response. If Cervantes has chosen to have Don Quijote characterize Sancho here with four emphasized adjectives, adjectives that he, Cervantes, or we, were we in his place, might well have chosen to use ironically with Sancho in this context, our assumption has to be that he knew what he was about. Selected to contribute to an ironic retort, each of these particular words makes a contribution to the effect.

“Sancho *bueno*”: Don Quijote begins the mocking riposte by picking up Sancho’s self-characterization uttered moments before, counting himself as one among the “buenos cristianos” who do not seek revenge from those who injure them. “Sancho *discreto*” immediately undercuts that supposedly ingenuous ‘goodness,’ impossible to pair here with ‘*discreto*,’ with the ‘discretion’—“the better part of valor,” remember—with which Shakespeare’s Falstaff elegantly redeemed his own cowardly act of *playing* dead to *escape* death at the hands of an angry Scotsman, at about the same time that Cervantes was writing. The next step, “Sancho *cristiano*,” finishes the riposte to the squire’s attempt to include himself among the “buenos cristianos” who turn the other cheek.

The common ironic procedure employed here with these two adjectives exactly parallels the irony in Cervantes’s presentation of *Don Quijote*’s very first encounter with someone in need, as he began his chivalric career. “Yo soy don Quijote de la Mancha, el desfacedor de agravios y sinrazones” (I, 4, 139). Don Quijote had said to Juan Haldudo, in the initial encounter with the farmer and his servant Andrés. Recall that that episode concluded with the flogging of Andrés, followed by the narrator’s pointedly ironic summation: “Y desta manera deshizo el agravio el valeroso don Quijote” (140).

As I pointed out in my comments decades ago on that episode: “It is clear that the initial affirmation in this passage simply cannot be taken as an expression of Cosmic or General irony underlining the paradox of the evil results that sometimes issue from good intentions. The adjective *valorous* counts too heavily against Don Quijote, for it is not an attribution that has been suggested by his activity in the episode; rather, it is a mocking echo of his vain self-description a moment before” (Allen ed., 35). Ted Riley, the most consistently perceptive *cervantista* of us all, missed Cervantes’s irony in this instance:

[As] Don Quijote searches for chivalric analogies in his everyday life, [said Riley] so does the sympathetic narrator. And so do we. Once, at least, the perspective is fractured by a tremendous irony. After the adventure with the ill-used Andrés, we read: “And thus did the valorous Don Quijote repair the injury.” He has in fact made it much worse, [said Riley] but the narrator’s comment mirrors the inordinate self-satisfaction. (156-57)

The irony here is Cervantes’s own: the narrator’s perspective is not fractured; the narrator is not sympathetic. He is *mimicking* Don Quijote, not “mirroring” him; he is *mocking* him, in repeating the adjective plucked from Don Quijote’s own self-congratulatory description moments before.

This is exactly the case with the use of both “Sancho *bueno*” and “Sancho *cristiano*,” pointedly taken from Sancho’s inclusion of himself among the “buenos cristianos,” separating the two to double down on the emphasis already accomplished by repeating “Sancho.” In addition, it is the separation of “bueno” from “cristiano” in Sancho’s phrase that allows the insertion of the jarring “*discreto*.” “Sancho *sincero*” is the *coup de grace*; bringing Don Quijote’s praise for Sancho’s *sincerity*, which is inexplicable and utterly out of place, if it is not ironic, if it’s not meant to highlight precisely the quality *lacking* in Sancho’s reply to his master’s challenge.

Why, we might ask, did Don Quijote not say: ‘Sancho bueno, discreto, cristiano y sincero.’ What role does the unusual and striking quadruple “Sancho” play in his addressing his squire in this peculiar manner? The effect involves four separate individual Sanchos set for demolition. It requires the consideration of the importance of each characteristic individually; it pairs each adjective in turn with Sancho; it sets them up for incongruous pairing or paired opposition among themselves; it requires considering the pertinence of each one of them in turn; and the

series builds to a triumphant climax: blame expressed as ironic praise on the most blatantly incriminating element of all: the *insincerity* of Sancho's hypocritical defense.

If I have insisted on boring you, hammering away on an obvious point that seems irrefutable, it is because Anthony Close (355) and Ruth El Saffar (254), two of the most brilliant *cervantistas* of their generation, did *not* find the statement ironic. What could Ruth and Anthony have possibly thought motivated Don Quijote's selection of this series of attributes? How were they able to convince themselves that Don Quijote was struck by the goodness and discretion—and above all the Christian sincerity—of Sancho's refusal to challenge the actors? They could do so because the Don Quijote that we first met in that little village in La Mancha was perfectly capable of that kind of blindness; he was in fact characterized by it.

Recall for a moment the picaresque autobiography, delivered in pseudo-chivalric style, by the innkeeper that Don Quijote encounters in his very first sally:

Le dijo que [...] él asimesmo, en sus años de mocedad, se había dado a aquel honroso ejercicio, andando por diversas partes del mundo, buscando las aventuras, [...] donde había ejercitado la ligereza de sus pies, [y] sutileza de sus manos, haciendo muchos tuertos, recuestando muchas viudas, deshaciendo algunas doncellas y engañando a algunos pupilos, y que, a lo último, se había venido a recoger a aquel su castillo. (I, 3, 129)

At this point, Don Quijote remained blissfully unaware of this blatant ridicule from the rogue who subsequently knighted him. He focused on the style alone, and blindly ignored the content.

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Let me pause, now, to review Wayne Booth's exposition of the four steps of reconstruction involved in "the transformations of meaning experienced in reading any passage of stable irony":

*Step one.* The reader is required to reject the literal meaning. It is not enough that he may reject that meaning because he disagrees, nor is it enough that he should add meanings. If he is reading properly, he is unable to escape recognizing either some incongruity among the words [as we've seen to be the case between '*bueno*' and '*discreto*,' for example, in this passage] or between the words and something else that he knows. In every case, even the most seemingly simple, the route to new meanings passes through an unspoken conviction that cannot be reconciled with the literal meaning. [...]

*Step two.* Alternative interpretations or explanations are tried out [...]. The alternatives will all in some degree be incongruous with what the literal statement seems to say. [...] It is a slip, or he is crazy, or I missed something [...].

One possible alternative [...] is [...] that the author [that is, in the case at hand, Don Quijote] himself is foolish enough not to see that his statement cannot be accepted as it stands. [...] We accept this alternative only when other more plausible ones fail to emerge and satisfy us.

*Step three.* A decision must therefore be made about the author's [that is, Don Quijote's] knowledge or beliefs [...]. It is this decision about the author's own beliefs that entwines the interpretation of stable ironies so inescapably in intentions.

Note that the first two steps by themselves cannot tell us that a statement is ironic. No matter how firmly I am convinced that a statement is absurd or illogical or just plain false, I must somehow determine whether what I reject is also rejected by the author, and whether he has reason to expect my concurrence. (10-11; the italics are mine)

Thus far, Wayne Booth. In this case, then, I must establish not only that the statement in question is rejected by the author of the book—by Cervantes—I have to convince you that it is also rejected by the speaker—by Don Quijote.

The key difference between Cervantes's characterization of the *valorous* Don Quijote in the first sally and the example I have belabored lies, of course, in the fact that *the ironist here is not the narrator*; it is Don Quijote. Don Quijote is here ridiculing Sancho exactly as Cervantes had ridiculed Don Quijote in the episode with Andrés, flinging his own words back at him. The butt of that joke is now the joker. Acutely conscious of the radical change he is bringing about in the development of his protagonist, and anticipating the likelihood of a reaction like that of Anthony and Ruth, anticipating the force of our fixed idea of Don Quijote the *ingénu*, Cervantes came down hard here with the multiple markers of irony that I have insisted upon.

But he brought his protagonist's irony to bear at this crucial point only after carefully laying the groundwork as he began to write Part II, in preparation for this pointedly ironic response to Sancho, because, as Ruth and Anthony would have pointed out, Don Quijote was *always* naïve, in Part I; he was *never* ironic there, in his dealings with any of the other characters. He is ironic only once in the first Part, in the rhetorical irony of the beautiful set speech on Arms and Letters, where the travails of the soldier are enumerated in a pair of *double entendres* involving “el colete acuchillado [que] le sirve de gala” and “la borla [del doctorado] en la cabeza, hecha de hilas, para curarle algún balazo” (I, 38, 518-9). As I noted some years ago, “even this restricted use of overt oratorical irony by Don Quijote moves him away from ridicule towards pity; the speech on Arms and Letters is, in fact, the first occasion in the novel when we are told that he is an object of pity” (2008, 145).

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Think back, now, to the beginning of Part II, where a different set of ironies from those in Part I begins to emerge in the very first chapter. The barber follows Don Quijote's suggestion that a single knight errant might suffice to annihilate the full power of the Turks with the story of the “loco de Sevilla” whom the chaplain came very close to liberating from the madhouse, thinking him cured. Don Quijote sees the point of the story immediately: “‘Pues ¿este es el cuento, señor barbero,’ dijo don Quijote, ‘que por venir aquí como de molde, no podía dejar de contarle? ¡Ah, señor rapista, y cuán ciego es aquel que no vee por tela de cedazo!’” (II, 1, 38). How strikingly different this is from his reaction to the innkeeper's parodic autobiography in Part I to which I've just alluded. Immediately after this, the barber goads don Quijote about the giants in the books of chivalry: “¿Qué tan grande le parece a vuestra merced, mi señor don Quijote, [...] debía de ser el gigante Morgante?” Don Quijote's reply must surely give us pause: “En esto de gigantes,” he said to the priest and the barber, “hay diferentes opiniones, si los ha habido o no en el mundo; pero la Santa Escritura, que no puede faltar un átomo en la verdad, nos muestra que los hubo, contándonos la historia de aquel filisteazo de Golías, que tenía siete codos y medio de altura, que es una desmesurada grandeza.” Not content to stop the barber in his tracks—and confound the priest—with a biblical reference, when we might have expected allusions to chivalric literature, Don Quijote brings up news of an anthropological confirmation, a recent discovery of human bones in Sicily that seem clearly to have belonged to an outsized human being. These early deviations from the consistently credulous behavior of don Quijote throughout Part I put the careful reader on notice: our protagonist has clearly gone through significant changes during his month-long convalescence. And Cervantes has been considering the possible changes for ten years.

In the initial chapters of Part II we get a sense of the extent of these changes as we follow the crucial progression of don Quijote from naïve, credulous *ingénu* to accomplished ironist. There is the impressive reply to his niece's attempt to dissuade him from sallying forth again—the elegant distinction between *caballeros cortesanos* and *caballeros andantes*, which replaces his original inability to distinguish between *caballeros ficticios* and *caballeros históricos*, and the contrast between ascending and descending lineages, that reduces her to silence: “—¡Ay, desdichada de mí! [...] Todo lo sabe, todo lo alcanza” (II, 6, 80).

And then we have the confrontation with Sancho over money. Bear with me, please, while I remind you of just how that scene plays out in Chapter 7, when Teresa has pressured Sancho to ask his master for a fixed salary for their upcoming sally. He struggles with his reluctance to come to the point, ashamed of the crass practicality of the matter:

—Señor, ya yo tengo relucida a mi mujer a que me deje ir con vuestra merced a donde quisiere llevarme.

—*Reducida* has de decir, Sancho —dijo don Quijote—; que no *relucida*.

--Una o dos veces —respondió Sancho—, si mal no me acuerdo, he suplicado a vuestra merced que no me enmiende los vocablos, si es que entiende lo que quiero decir en ellos, y que cuando no los entienda, diga: “Sancho, o Diabolo, no te entiendo”; y si yo no me declarare, entonces podrá enmendarme; que yo soy tan fácil. [...]

—No te entiendo, Sancho —dijo luego don Quijote—, pues no sé qué quiere decir *soy tan fácil*.

—*Tan fácil* quiere decir —respondió Sancho— *soy tan así*.

—Menos te entiendo agora —replicó don Quijote.

—Pues si no me puede entender —respondió Sancho—, no sé cómo lo diga; no sé más, y Dios sea conmigo.

—Ya, ya caigo —respondió don Quijote— en ello. Tú quieres decir que eres *tan dócil*, blando y mañero, que tomarás lo que yo te dijere, y pasarás por lo que te enseñare.

—Apostaré yo —dijo Sancho— que desde el emprincipio me caló y me entendió, sino que quiso turbarme, por oírme decir otras doscientas patochadas.

—Podrá ser — replicó don Quijote—. Y en efecto, ¿qué dice Teresa?

—Teresa dice —dijo Sancho— que ate bien mi dedo con vuestra merced, y que hablen cartas y callen barbas, porque quien destaja no baraja, pues más vale un toma que dos te daré. Y yo digo que el consejo de la mujer es poco, y el que no le toma es loco.

—Y yo lo digo también —respondió don Quijote—. Decid, Sancho amigo; pasá adelante, que *habláis hoy de perlas*. (II, 7, 82-3. The italics are mine)

“I’ll bet you understood me from the beginning,” says Sancho. Surely every reader understands that Don Quijote’s “Could be” is ironic for “Of course I did.” “*Habláis hoy de perlas*,” says Don Quijote, recognizing and relishing with caustic irony his squire’s discomfiture.

This scene is followed immediately by the discussion with Sansón Carrasco about Cide Hamete’s Part I (II, 7, 86), when Sansón, as Ted Riley tells us, “overdoes the linguistic parody,” and Don Quijote replies in what Riley once described as “*a tone of burlesque irony very difficult to imagine in the Quijote of Part I*” (112; the italics are mine), speaking of

el inaudito bachiller Sansón Carrasco, perpetuo trastulo y regocijador de los patios de las escuelas salmanticenses, sano de su persona, ágil de sus miembros, callado, sufridor así del calor como del frío, así de la hambre como de la sed, con todas aquellas partes que se requieren para ser escudero de un caballero andante. (II, 7, 86)

Later, even Sancho’s rustic eating habits spark a burlesque ironic barb:

—Por cierto —dijo don Quijote—, la parsimonia y limpieza con que Sancho come se puede escribir y grabar en láminas de bronce, para que quede en memoria eterna en los siglos venideros. Verdad es que cuando él tiene hambre, parece algo tragón, porque come apriesa y masca a dos carrillos; pero la limpieza siempre la tiene en su punto, y en el tiempo que fue gobernador aprendió a comer a lo melindroso: tanto que comía con tenedor las uvas y aun los granos de la Granada. (II, 62, 544)

The linguistic mastery of Don Quijote and his dominance over Sancho are emphatically established at the outset of Part II, as Cervantes very carefully prepares us for a series of plot twists in which all of the tricksters will be tricked—*burladores burlados*—in the adventures of the third sally: first Sancho, about to be reduced to tears in Chapter 5 when Sansón offers to replace him as Don Quijote's squire, and later asked to lash himself to free Dulcinea from the enchantment that he himself had inflicted upon her; then Sansón Carrasco, in his defeat by Don Quijote in the duel; then Altisidora, spurned by Don Quijote; the Duke, foiled by the lackey Tosilos; and the Duchess, her personal circulatory problems a matter of conversation between don Quijote and doña Rodríguez; each in turn will have the tables turned on him.

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Douglas Muecke wrote a book called *The Compass of Irony*, a perfect title for an exploration of this complex phenomenon. When I first picked up his book, I was looking for ways to identify and pin down examples of irony in *Don Quijote*, and it became fundamental for the second Part of *Don Quijote: Hero or Fool?* I was looking for some way to locate the 'extent' or the 'range' or the 'boundaries'—the *compass* of the irony in the book. When I sat down now, thirty years later, to work out these thoughts that I'm offering today on Cervantes's uses of irony, I became more and more interested in the other associations of 'compass,' with its connection to 'measurement' and 'guidance'; a compass as a 'device with which you orient yourself'; it's a 'tool' or a 'guide.'

Anyone who thinks you don't need a guide to read *Don Quijote* hasn't looked at much of what's been written about the book. "Is Cervantes joking?" was what Ortega y Gasset wanted to know. "Y ¿de qué se burla?" he asked. Irony is not always easy to track, in that book; it requires painstaking attention. When I set out to look at it those many years ago, I had to begin by realizing that "to attempt to investigate systematically the targets, the limits, and the relative stability or instability of the irony in *Don Quijote* and its deployment in the service of the norms which govern life in the world of Cervantes' masterpiece is a quixotic endeavor" (115)

The passage we have been dealing with here is a textbook example of ironic expression. I have pointed out how incoherent, how diminished it is if read 'straight'; I have justified my insistence that it demands an ironic reading; and I have pointed out the changes in Part II that establish Don Quijote's new-found capability to perceive the hypocrisy in Sancho's self-characterization and to highlight it in this ironic *riposte*. This process of re-orientation of the reader's perspective toward don Quijote and his confrontations in the series of episodes that constitute the second Part is absolutely fundamental to the interpretation of Part II of Cervantes's masterpiece. Ruth and Anthony took a radically different path from mine at this precise point in the 1615 continuation of *Don Quijote*, and this alternative has huge consequences for a decision about where Cervantes is taking us in Part II.

He has written the passage with exquisite care, precisely so as to preclude his readers' taking the statement straight, guiding us with the compass of irony. In the wider context, with even greater care and with far-reaching consequences, he has transformed the blissfully naïve Don

Quijote of the First Part into an accomplished practicing ironist, alert to the self-revelations of his squire and the others he meets.

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In *Don Quijote: Hero or Fool?* (reed. 2008), I juxtaposed relevant quotations from the novel with a paraphrase of Soren Kierkegaard's three essential stages of human existence, showing how the trajectory of Don Quijote's life moves through an esthetic phase and on to an ethical one, culminating finally in a religious phase. To each of these "existence-spheres," according to the Danish philosopher, "there is a respectively corresponding *confinium* [border territory]: irony is the *confinium* between the esthetic and the ethical; humor is the *confinium* between the ethical and the religious (501-2) [...]. Irony is the cultivation of the spirit and therefore follows next after immediacy; then comes the ethicist, then the humorist, then the religious person" (504). The development of the ethical stage of Don Quijote's existence begins with the ironic comments of these initial chapters of Part II, initiating the phase in which he "commits himself and becomes involved (*engagé*) at the ethical level" (199).

I have realized in recent years that Don Quijote's trajectory through this ethical stage is much more fraught and drawn out than I had originally understood. It does indeed begin here, at the outset of the third sally, in the opening chapters of Part II. But it follows a very troubled path on which he stumbles and slips back, then moves forward, only to regress again and slowly make his way haltingly ahead. This is what causes Martín Morán to conclude that there is no development in his character, but only this kind of back and forth. In the initial, esthetic stage of his development, Don Quijote's imitation of his chivalric heroes ignores the content of his actions, focusing on the form and the style, as we've seen in the innkeeper's parody of chivalric activity, and he only very gradually moves on to the ethical stage (Allen 2011, 118-9). At this point, according to Kierkegaard's scheme, as he "takes sides in the great struggle between right and wrong, assuming his burden as a finite being who submits to an infinite requirement, [...] the individual becomes increasingly aware of his own and others' failures in comparison with what ought to be, the perfect, the infinite demand. Painful awareness grows of how far he and mankind in general fall short of the ideal" (199). When he encounters the statues of the saints in Chapter 58 of the Second Part, Don Quijote reflects on his situation: "Yo hasta agora no sé lo que conquisto a fuerza de mis trabajos; pero si mi Dulcinea del Toboso saliese de los que padece, mejorándose mi ventura y adobándoseme el juicio, podría ser que encaminase mis pasos por mejor camino del que llevo" (II, 68, 508). Soon after, when he meets the Catalan outlaws, Roque Guinart gives Don Quijote this advice: "no os despechéis ni tengáis a siniestra fortuna esta en que os halláis, que podia ser que en estos tropiezos vuestra torcida suerte se enderezase; que el cielo, por estraños y nunca visto rodeos (de los hombres no imaginados), suele levantar los caídos y enriquecer los pobres" (II, 60, 530).

At this stage, according to Kierkegaard, "the individual acquires a deepening sense of wrongdoing, weakness, distress, and a desire for repentance" (200). "Cada uno es artifice de su ventura," says Don Quijote. "Yo lo he sido de la mía, pero no con la prudencia necesaria, y así, me han salido al gallarín mis presunciones" (II, 66, 581). "At the end of this second phase, the individual recognizes that he is guilty. [...] The ethical phase culminates in repentance. There is a yearning for something further that shall lead us beyond the world of natural existence. Such an attitude of despondency at not finding what we sought [...] leads to a transition to the third level of the *religious*, with its awareness of an eternal power permeating existence" (200). "Vuelva en sí, y déjese de cuentos," Sansón Carrasco tells Don Quijote on his deathbed. "Los de



hasta aquí [said Don Quijote] que han sido verdaderos en mi daño, los ha de volver mi muerte, con ayuda del cielo, en mi provecho” (II, 74, 634).

The trajectory that Don Quijote has followed, in a process that so moved Flaubert and Dostoevsky, is not, as Martín Morán would have it, a composite of different pieces cobbled together as a whole, but rather a narrative that anticipated, in his chivalric career, Kierkegaard’s formulation of the stages of man’s passage through life.

It is very difficult to reproduce this process in a work of fiction, and representation of the conversion experience is particularly challenging. At that point, the transformation is internal—“la procesión va por dentro”—and the objections of many critics bear witness to the difficulty of representing this crucial experience appropriately. We’ve seen how disconcerted Wood was with Don Quijote’s deathbed conversion. I have pointed out elsewhere the pains that Tolstoy took to show us the deathbed conversion of the protagonist of *The Death of Ivan Ilych* from the inside, describing each moment in his agonized coming to terms with death, a process of which none of the family members who surrounded him was aware. Tolstoy comes up with a marvelous metaphor to communicate this critical moment: “Suddenly,” he says, speaking of Ivan as he lay on his deathbed, “some force struck him in the chest and on his side, making it difficult to breathe, and he fell through a hole, and at the bottom of it there was a light. What happened to him,” says Tolstoy, “was what happens to you in a railway car when you think you are going backwards, and suddenly become aware that you are really moving forward” (Allen 126-7). Cervantes must get this conversion across to us without the resources of nineteenth-century psychological realism.

Don Quijote’s realization of the limitations of his perspective is the culmination of his conversion—the radical change in attitude—that comes at the end of his life, allowing him to transcend the limitations of a purely comic character and become a much more complex figure. “The comic element,” Mary McCarthy once remarked, “is the incorrigible element in every human being; the capacity to learn, from experience or instruction, is what is forbidden to all comic creations and to what is comic in you and me. The capacity to learn is the prerogative of the hero or the heroine” (289).

James Wood has written that among the many kinds of comedy, “one rough division could be made between the comedy of correction and the comedy of forgiveness. [Comedy of correction] is a way of laughing *at*,” he says; “[comedy of forgiveness] a way of laughing *with*” (25). “Secular or modern comedy, the comedy of forgiveness,” he says, “seems to me almost entirely the creation of the modern novel.” And *Don Quijote* is, as he has said elsewhere, “the founder of secular comedy. The trick of the unreliable narrator can only work, can only be funny, if we think initially that we know more about a character than he knows himself—thus we are lulled at first into the comedy of *correction*,”—as in I, 16—“only to be taught that we finally know less about that character than we thought we knew at the outset; thus we are lulled into the comedy of *forgiveness*” (*id.*).

As I have argued in earlier studies of Cervantes’s masterpiece, the reader comfortably shares the narrator’s initial perspective on and ridicule of his protagonist. But Don Quijote slowly begins to realize in the course of his adventures that he has erred. He changes focus, from style to content, from the esthetic to the ethical, he learns, and he changes. He confesses his error in the encounter with images of the saints, though he continues to struggle, resisting the implications of this anagnorisis. At the same time that this process advances we, as readers, become less and less certain of our own interpretation of events, diametrically opposed to that of

Don Quijote. We draw closer to him as he advances on the trajectory that I have tried to indicate here, one that leads him to resolve the irony in his own situation.

Reinhold Niebuhr once pointed out that “an ironic situation is distinguished from a pathetic one by the fact that a person involved in it bears some responsibility for it. It is distinguished from a tragic one by the fact that the responsibility is not due to a conscious choice, but to an unconscious weakness. [...] If [...] a religious sense of an ultimate judgment upon our [...] actions should create an awareness of our own pretensions of wisdom, virtue or power which have helped to fashion the ironic incongruity, the irony would tend to dissolve into the experience of contrition and to an abatement of the pretensions which caused the irony” (166-7, 169).

It doesn't matter very much whether you noticed that my title alludes to Oscar Wilde's play, but it matters very much indeed that, as you read Cervantes's masterpiece, you be aware of just when Don Quijote is *in earnest*, and when he is *an ironist*.

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