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Regarding Cervantes, Multicultural Dreamer
By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

Why was "Don Quixote" originally written in Arabic? Or rather, why does Cervantes, who wrote the book in Spanish, claim that it was translated from the Arabic?

Much is being said this year about "Don Quixote," in celebration of the 400th anniversary of its publication. And indeed, much has always been said about this extraordinary epic, narrating the misadventures of a half-mad hidalgo who seeks to re-establish the traditions of knight errantry. Faulkner reread it annually; Lionel Trilling said all prose fiction was a variation on its themes.

But aside from its literary achievements, "Don Quixote" sheds oblique light on an era when Spain's Islamic culture forcibly came to an end. Just consider Cervantes's playful account of the book's origins. One day in the Toledo marketplace, he writes, a young boy was trying to sell old notebooks and worn scraps of paper covered with Arabic script. Cervantes recounts how he acquired a book and then looked around for a Moor to translate it. "It was not very difficult" to find such a Moor, he writes. In fact, he says, he could have even found a translator of Hebrew.

The Arabic manuscript, the Moor tells him, is the "History of Don Quixote de la Mancha, written by Cide Hamete Benengeli, an Arab historian." Cervantes brings the Moor to the cloister of a church and commissions a translation.

We know this is all a jest, as is the very name of the historian: "Cide" is an honorific, "Hamete" is a version of the Arab name Hamid, and "Benengeli" means eggplant.

But this eggplantish historian is no more a jest than any other thing in the novel, whether it is Don Quixote tilting at windmills or Sancho Panza governing an island not surrounded by water. Benengeli is, apparently, just as earnest as Don Quixote, just as peculiar and just as important to understanding what this novel is about.

At the time when Cervantes was writing this novel, nothing about this jest was possible. Neither an Arabic-speaking Moor nor a Hebrew-speaking Jew would have been readily found in the Toledo marketplace. And no Moor would have translated Arabic in the cloister of a church.

The Jews had been expelled from Spain in 1492; only converts remained. Books in Arabic had been burned with all the ferocity that the priest applies to Don Quixote's library of chivalric narratives. And while the Muslims hadn't yet been expelled from Spain (that would happen in the years just after the first part of "Don Quixote" was published), they too had to convert. So Spain was full of New Christians: converts from Islam (called moriscos) and Judaism (called conversos), some continuing to secretly practice their religion (like the Jewish marranos). One reason that pork became such a popular Spanish dish was that eating it was a way to publicly prove one was not following the dietary rules of Islam or Judaism. Eggplant, however, was associated with Muslim and Jewish tastes back when Toledo was home to a flourishing Jewish community.

So Cervantes is up to a bit of mischief with these allusions. And they could not have been missed. L. P. Harvey's important new book, "Muslims in Spain: 1500 to 1614," (University of Chicago Press) soberly recounts the ways in which Muslim culture and religion, which had been part of Spanish life for eight centuries, was forcibly suppressed, until Muslims were completely expelled from Spain, between 1609 and 1614. There was much trauma and bloodshed, much secrecy and much dissimulation.

Don Quixote could hardly have wandered around La Mancha without coming upon traces of this trauma; Moors and moriscos were part of the landscape. "A Moor she is in costume and in body," is how one character is described, "but in her soul she is thoroughly Christian." And the Moors of Spain are almost catalogued: "Tagarinos is the name given in Barbary to the Moors of Aragón, while those of Granada are called Mudéjares; but in the kingdom of Fez the Mudéjares are termed Elches."

In the novel's second part (published in 1615, after the Muslim expulsion), Sancho sees a Moorish shopkeeper from his hometown, in disguise. "Who the devil would ever have known you, Ricote, in that clown suit you are wearing?" Sancho asks. "Tell me, who has made a Frenchman out of you?" Ricote mentions Spain's forced exile of Muslims and its unavoidable sorrows: "Wherever we may be it is for Spain that we weep; for, when all is said, we were born here and it is our native land."

Cervantes also had firsthand experience with such confrontations. In 1571, he fought at Lepanto, an epochal battle against the Turks and a major victory for the Christian West against Islam; he lost the use of his left arm. A few years later, returning to Spain, he was captured by Barbary pirates - Muslims who were themselves engaged in a kind of guerilla war against the Christian West - and was imprisoned for five years, surviving four escape attempts until finally, his freedom was ransomed. When Cervantes wrote "Don Quixote" a quarter century later, this experience led to an extensive story about Moors and Christians involving kidnapping, conversion and betrayal. He wrote, though, not as warrior but as a philosopher. His empathy for the Moors is cautious but unmistakable. Recent scholarship suggests that Cervantes himself might have from a family of conversos; that could help explain why he was regularly denied the official appointments he sought. Other scholars have suggested that the novel itself is full of coded allusions to Judaism.

There is no need, though, to accept that hypothesis to sense how, by the end, Spain's triumph turns ambiguous. All pieties inspire melancholy. Even Sancho is not to be fully trusted. He, too, easily dons the mantle of an Old Christian, at one point declaring that since he believes firmly in "all that the holy Roman
Catholic Church holds and believes," and since he "a mortal enemy of the Jews," historians should treat him well.

But Quixote rejects the notions of caste and of blood purity that characterized 16th-century Spain. Benengeli's manuscript is partly a ghost story about a lost world. Quixote is born of ideas latent in extinct, condemned texts, whether Arabic or chivalric. He has unswerving principles, but even they are inadequate to a world of disguise, enchantment, illusion and delusion. In her book "The Ornament of the World," the scholar María Rosa Menocal compares Quixote's mental universe with the world of the Toledo marketplace, with its conversos, marranos and moriscos: "Who in this world ever says that he is what he seems to be? And who seems to be what he no doubt really is?"

So Don Quixote's Spain, instead of displaying triumphant absolutism, is a world of shifting appearances. "Don Quixote" is a resigned acknowledgment of a new kind of terrain that defined modernity: in it, very little is certain and much is lost. The book's power, though, also comes from Quixote's stubborn quest: he won't entirely let us accept that something else isn't possible.

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