

MEMORIES OF LA MANCHA

BY TONY BECKWITH



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The mere mention of La Mancha triggers a host of memories, the very earliest of which takes me back to my childhood. A popular game at the elementary school I attended was called “Mancha.” It was the Uruguayan version of “Tag” and involved chasing your little friends around the playground, trying to touch them with your hand and calling out “*mancha*, you’re it!” Every culture, it would seem, has a version of this simple child’s game.

It was not until many years later that I learned that our playground game shared its name (though not its etymology) with the site of one of the most famous stories ever told. The story, of course, was *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, the novel by the Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes, whose fictional hero—the knight-errant of the book’s title—played a sort of tag of his own invention, tilting at windmills in the company of his loyal squire, Sancho Panza.

La Mancha is a high, dry, windswept plain in central Spain, just southeast of Madrid, roughly speaking between the towns of Toledo

to the west and Cuenca to the east. Though arid, the land is fertile and has long been used to grow wheat, oats, barley, olives and, of course, grapes. It is actually the country's major wine region, and produces about fifty percent of Spain's wines. Those fortunate enough to have visited the area will surely have heard of the legendary *tempranillo* or *cencibel* grape, and will no doubt have pleasant memories of sitting in a tavern sipping a glass or two of sturdy, ripe, fruity red (with a nice balance of toasty oak). An afternoon can easily slip away in such a place, as one contemplates the fact that wine has been produced there for many centuries, all the way back to the Phoenicians who are said to have introduced winemaking to the Iberian Peninsula in the ninth century BC. History does not record whether the Phoenician traders, or the Roman conquerors who came after them, were aware that nothing goes better with a glass of the local red wine than a chunk of the local Manchego cheese and a few salty olives.

It is generally assumed that the name La Mancha is derived from *al-mansha*, the Arabic word for "wilderness" or "dry land." Such a claim is hardly surprising given the environmental conditions of the terrain and the fact that this part of Spain was under Moorish rule for centuries until King Alfonso VI brought it back into the Christian fold in 1085. The assumption is further bolstered by the fact that the Spanish word *mancha*—which means a mark, stain (on one's character or clothing), blemish, spot, or "tag, you're it!"—does not appear to be in any way connected to the name of the area.

I lived in Madrid in the mid-1960s and spent many pleasant weekends traveling here and there in the surrounding countryside. The Spanish Ministry of Tourism was doing everything it could to attract foreign visitors, and was refurbishing castles, monasteries, and palaces and converting them into *Paradores*, or state-owned hotels. For very little money, you could spend the night in a fourteenth-century castle near Toledo, for example, and remind yourself that you were sleeping not very far from where Cervantes was born, in a building that had already been standing for over two centuries by the time he published his famous book.

Franco had been in power for about twenty-five years when I arrived in Madrid, and the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) still prompted passionate debate in certain circles. The universal implications of the conflict intrigued me, as did its potent appeal to contemporary British and American writers and intellectuals, so I'd been reading about it and asking my older Spanish friends to tell me anything they remembered. One of them said, "You should talk to my mother. Her memories of the war are still very vivid." I said I'd love to, and as he gave me her address he added, "I can almost guarantee she'll tell you a story about an olive." He smiled enigmatically but would say no more.

So, one Sunday afternoon I set off to meet Margarita. She lived somewhere in La Mancha, in a village whose name I do not remember. Her house was on a narrow, winding street and I had to stoop as I stepped across the threshold. Inside it was dark and cool, sparsely furnished, rustic and spotlessly clean. We sat at her kitchen table and, with very little prompting, she talked about what she remembered. Her husband left soon after the war started, and never returned. "He went to join the *Republicanos* and left me with four small boys. Things went from bad to worse because, as you know the *Republicanos* lost, and we nearly starved to death."

I asked how they'd survived and she said, "I'll give you an example. One day I scavenged a dried-up old olive and a moldy crust of bread from someone's trash. I sat my boys at the table on the patio, each with a tin plate in front of him, and broke the bread into four pieces. I tied the olive to a long piece of string hanging from the lattice above them, and pushed it so that it would swing in a circle over their heads. When the shadow of the olive moved across their plates I told them, "There, moisten your bread there and enjoy your lunch.'" She threw me an impenetrable look, her black eyes glinting in her lined old face. "You wanted to know about the Civil War. That was my Civil War," she said.

On the way back to Madrid the land was flat and the fields were the color of ripe grain. Grazing sheep dotted the landscape, working on their next batch of Manchego cheese. Small villages rushed toward me, crowded the windshield, then vanished behind me again, their houses huddled together in medieval proximity under corduroy roofs



Windmills of La Mancha
Photograph with permission from Ron Sutton
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of terracotta tile, with the late afternoon sunlight angling across the road from low in the west, picking out every detail with breathtaking clarity. Most beautifully of all, the light reflected off the whitewashed walls of the iconic windmills made famous by the “Ingenious Gentleman” who set out to restore chivalry, right all wrongs, and bring justice to the world some three-and-a-half centuries ago.

Don Quijote (with a *j* in Spanish) is considered the founding work of modern Western literature, and has been translated many times, into many languages. One of the recent English versions was translated by Edith Grossman as *Don Quixote* (with an *x*, which is the customary English spelling). In her “Translator’s Note to the Reader” Grossman explains that: “I hesitated over the spelling of the protagonist’s name, and finally opted for an *x*, not a *j*, in Quixote (I wanted the connection to the English ‘quixotic’ to be immediately apparent)¹.”

In her book *Why Translation Matters*² Grossman discusses “some of the fears that plagued” her as she embarked on this epic project. “It was a privilege, an honor, and a glorious opportunity – thrilling, overwhelming, and terrifying.” One can only imagine. Among her early concerns was how to go about translating “the opening phrase – probably the most famous words in Spanish, comparable to the opening lines of Hamlet’s ‘To be, or not to be’ soliloquy in English.” She goes on to say: “The first part of the sentence in Spanish reads: ‘*En un lugar de la Mancha, de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme....*’ I recited those words to myself as if they were a mantra, until an English phrase materialized that seemed to have a comparable rhythm and drive, that played with the multiple meanings of the word *lugar* (both ‘place’ and ‘village’), and that echoed some of the sound of the original: ‘Somewhere in La Mancha, in a place whose name I do not care to remember....’ It felt right to me, and with a rush of euphoric satisfaction I told myself I might actually be able to translate this grand masterpiece of a book.”

Anyone who has spent any time somewhere in La Mancha will know that there is more to the region than *El Quijote*, windmills, and wine. As you drive south from Madrid on your way to the storied plain, you soon come to Aranjuez, the town that the Catholic Monarchs, Queen Isabella I of Castile and King Ferdinand II of Aragon, once used as

their spring residence. These two were married in 1469, over a century before *Don Quijote* was published, thus forming the union that laid the foundation for modern Spain. In later years, the Habsburg and Bourbon kings all retreated to Aranjuez in the summer, and Philip II built a magnificent royal palace and gardens there in the late sixteenth century.

In 1939, Joaquín Rodrigo composed his masterpiece, the *Concierto de Aranjuez*, inspired—it is said—by the gardens and fountains of the royal palace. The *Concierto*, for classical guitar and orchestra, premiered in November 1940 in Barcelona and was a huge success. It has been immensely popular ever since, and is in fact one of the best-known pieces of music ever written for the classical guitar. It has been performed by an eclectic assortment of musicians in a remarkable range of styles³. The work was actually composed in Paris, where Rodrigo and his wife were living at the time, and the original score was written in braille, because the composer was blind.

Just as a sudden fragrance can take us back—the scent of freesias on the evening air, for example, or the first thick drops of rain on a dusty road—certain sounds can sweep us away. Rhythms and melodies can transport us to other moods, other moments, sometimes to places we've never even been. That's what happened the first time I heard the *Concierto de Aranjuez*, long before I ever ventured south from Madrid to explore La Mancha. In time I came to know it as an unforgettable place of haunting beauty, steeped in a timeless sense of chivalry and the pursuit of noble ideals.

Notes

1 Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. Edith Grossman (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), xviii.

2 Edith Grossman, *Why Translation Matters*, (Yale University Press), 2010, pp. 83-85.

3 Click here to listen to Paco de Lucía playing the Adagio, the second movement of the *Concierto de Aranjuez*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e9RS4biqyAc>