The Inquisition of Erasmus

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In his middle years Hernando Cortez wondered if it might not be better to have discovered and died than to have colonized and then come back to a life of slow oblivion. The King and Queen were displeased with the way he had conducted himself in the Aztec Occupation. And yet he was a world-class explorer, a fact which could not be denied. Deference was shown to him. Civil courtesies were strictly observed. His name still figured on the guest list of parties at court. But he was an explorer who did no exploring. He was given the title of "emeritus," but no new ships.

He sat in the Plaza de Segovia, the middle of Madrid, on an August afternoon, sipping cognac and anisette with Balboa at the Club de Conquistadores. The combination of heat, humidity, idleness, gout and this drink that the Spanish called sol y sombra, sunshine and shade, gave him a heady buzz, a dreamy wistfulness, which he shared with the doltish Balboa.

"Do you ever miss it, Bo?"
"What is it, Hernando?" Balboa asked, his words twittering, his lips shimmering like the bulls at Pamplona.
"World-class exploring."
"¡Ay que te lleva la chingada!" Balboa said, cursing in the coarse Mexican accent he had affected to impress his friends.

Cortez waited for a saner response.
"Naw," Balboa said, "that was all a bunch of ships and diarrhea, that life. Ships and diarrhea. You list this way, you list that way. You fight with pirates. You dream about mermaids. Pretty soon you don't recognize a woman if she doesn't look too slippery, you know? I got tired of eating fish and having diarrhea. And all those dingy tars, you know? They stink up a ship and go potty wherever they feel like it. Like renters. They don't take pride in their vessel. And they tell the same Portuguese jokes, voyage after voyage, you know? Like, how can you tell the bride at a Portuguese wedding? She's the only one with curlers under her arms. I heard that one on six straight crossings."

"But you discovered Panama. Doesn't that mean something to you?"
"¡Pinche Panama!" Balboa said. "Is one big sand dune, Panama. Is not a continent. Is in between. I go half-way round the world to discover an in between place. If all I wanted was a canal, I could have gone to Amsterdam. Or Venice. They got canals. You know the only good thing to come out of Panama?"
"No. What?"
"That saying: 'A man, a plan, a canal—Panama.' Is the same if you say it backwards or forwards. I think maybe the Portuguese made it up, as revenge for all those jokes."
"I have regrets."
"The Aztecs weren't as rich as the Incas. Is a big regret, no?"
"No, I'm not talking about material gain."
"What other kind of gain is there?"
"I have. . ."
"Jes. . ?"
"I have nostalgia for the infinite."
"What is this cucaracha? This is like saying you have pockets full of rye. It doesn't mean anything."

"You are a baobab, Bo. A real baobab."

Outside the Club de Conquistadores, the children were playing tag with death's-head moth masks and singing.

"The world is flat,
The world is round,
The world is neither
Under the ground."

Mid-life crisis befell Cortez like a compound fracture: the same echoed urgency of snap, crackle and pop. He had seen other explorers go sour at the bib. He had witnessed their agoraphobia, their whining narcissism, the dyslexia in their penmanship. And more: their hurried decisions, their enanteodromia into other philosophies and religions, wasted energies at Pi, long depressions like calimares en su tinto. Their wistful wanton ways. He could have fallen back on his gout, spending his pension and his days sipping sol y sombra with high-tide bores like Balboa. He could retire to the country and quill his memoirs. Or he could go on the speaker circuit, like Magellan, de Soto, Jacques Cartier and Henry Hudson. He could even hire out to pirates, since he knew all the major explorers' routes. But no. He did not want to go especially gentle into that buena noche.

So he went to Barcelona and hired on with a whaling ship called the Punto de Vista. Its captain, an English greaser named Downey, was a coffee-addict, bent on riding bareback on a great white whale. He wore a red bandana, talked about harpoons a lot, and said a friend of his, a bloater named McGee, swam into the afterlife on the back of a whale.

Downey had his druthers about who crewed and who didn't. He had no inclination for exploring or explorers, so Cortez told him that he was a geographer and linguist. Downey was too high on java to care, one way or the other.

"Geography is nice."

"And necessary," Cortez said, feeling that he was being patronized.

"I bet we still get lost," Downey laughed, tossing doubloons underhand, like horseshoes, into a spittoon.

Three months later, lost somewhere near Tuli, Greenland, they spotted a gam of hunch­backed whales. Wearing fresh buckskins, Downey tried to ride one to his death, but the whale bucked him, and the crew had to fish him out, unceremoniously, like a drunk.

Still, the kill was three whales, so everybody worked and everybody ate well.

Then, a Japanese whaler approached them. Their captain cupped his hands and hollered, "Anatano blubberwa, totemo Oishii desuka?"

"What's he saying?" Downey asked Cortez.

"I think he's saying we'd better get out of his territorial waters."

"Okay, men," Downey said, shaking himself like a wet dog, "prepare to fire."

Downey's reaction to any other ship he encountered was to blow it out of the water.

"Remember, boys," he said, "to baptize them as you're taking aim."

And then he looked around for Quintero, his best whaler.

"Quintero, I want to take out the captain. With a harpoon. Above the belt, if possible. I want to troll with him behind the boat. He might attract some whales."

It was done as he had commanded. The Japanese sailors were slaughtered with muskets and canons and cross-bows, while Quintero aced the captain with a harpoon in the stomach and ripped him off the deck of his ship, to dangle at the end of the line behind the whaling boat. The captain proved to be excellent bait, not only for whales, but also for sharks, grouper and barracuda.
And, when only the lower intestines remained on the end of the barb, Downey blessed that captain again, and Quintero crossed himself, saying, "La tripa del santo."
But then fishing with human bait proved so successful that Downey began harpooning his own tars as they slept or swabbed the deck, and trolling them behind the boat. As long as the fishing was good, nobody complained about the diminishing numbers of the crew.
"Pescado y pano," Quintero said, crossing himself again and proclaiming the miracle of the fishes and the loaves.
Cortez knew that a geographer-linguist was too non-essential a job on the Punto de Vista, and so he jumped ship when they docked in Newfoundland.
In the streets of Halifax the children sang.
"Le monde est plat,
Le monde est rond,
Le monde en has
Est si profond."

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After a year of feeling eclipsed by his own shadow, with numerous nightmares of Aztec corpses burning on a funeral pyre, Cortez resolved to devote the next three years to finding and deciphering the meaning of life.
He decided to go ask royalty, since they were supposed to have a divine right to know a thing like that.
He went to Granada, where he interviewed Boabdil, the last Moorish king of Granada, just before the latter's beheading.
"What is the meaning of life?" Cortez asked.
"You are a sot and a Christian. Why should I answer you?"
'Because my mind is open."
Boabdil was not convinced. He had never met a Christian with an open mind.
"My children shall feast on your children, vital organ by vital organ," he said defiantly. "My people shall reclaim this land, inch'al!'lah by inch'al.'lah."
"Tomorrow you will lose your head," Cortez said, "and they will baptize you. At the moment of your death, you will become a saint. Would you care to comment on that?"
"Yes," Boabdil said. "Why is martyrdom required to become a saint?"
"I don't honestly know," Cortez said. "But it's easier than working three miracles. They're asking me to leave. Please tell me what, in your estimation, is the meaning of life?"
"Read my lips tomorrow."
Cortez attended the beheading. When the axe fell and the head of St. Boabdil rolled off the block and into the bushel basket, the lips were moving. They seemed to be saying one thing: MENTIRA.
Cortez went to Italy and interviewed Cesare Borgia, who was in between Popes.
"What is the meaning of life?" Cortez asked.
"Indulgence," Borgia answered, without hesitation.
"You mean, tolerance?"
"No, indulgence."
"Self-indulgence?"
"Others.'"
"I don't understand."
"What's to understand? You sell them through the Church."
Cortez attended a roundelay at the court of Duc Charles de Bourbon, who was the Constable of France.

"What is the meaning of life, your Duke?" Cortez asked.

"Vous osez me provoquer avec ces mots," Duc Charles answered, dipping his fingers in his wine goblet for good measure.

"I simply must ask them," Cortez said.

"A healthy liver, then."

Cortez was still not satisfied. He voyaged far and wide to the throne of Muhammed Babar, who was laying plans for a Mogul Dynasty in India.

"Muhammed Babar, what is the meaning of life?"

"I like these big questions," Babar said, stroking his chin as though it were a fetish.

"You see," he grinned, speaking with pointillist diction, "this question has been asked by pundits and punjabi alike, and it is not multiple choice, as you say in the West. It is a correct question with a correct answer. But, to arrive at the one correct answer, you must first become an apprentice to all who are holy and know. You must curry their favor, and when you are old and alone, dying from some impeccable disease, then you must curry some more."

Cortez continued his Oriental swing and went surreptitiously, in the disguise of a prince chasing fireflies, to the tatami kingdom of the Iyeyasu clan in Kyoto, who were then laying plans for the Tokugawa Shogunate. He noted that the Japanese practiced crucifixions, without being Christians. They pronounced every syllable, just like the Castellanos. They ate *calimares en su tinto*, and the Portuguese rum or back home was false: they did not eat boiled dog. What Cortez especially liked about the Japanese was that they revered explorers, seeing them as ghost spirits or Gods.

Cortez attended a Noh play near Lake Hakkone and thought he understood the meaning of life: move very slowly, be mostly silent, and do your duty. A Zen master clarified these lessons for him.

"If a mortal lifts but one foot, he cannot then lift the other foot. The principle of roots. And, if a mortal hears two songbirds singing at once, he cannot hear them separately. The principle of synchronicity. And, if a mortal sees everything out of one eye, he still cannot see everything, because one eye cannot see the other eye. The principle of double vision. And the most valuable fruits fall to the least deserving hands."

So saying, he gave Cortez a lotus blossom and a lily pad, and he bade him farewell.

Cortez continued on his eastward path, trusting in blind faith, slow movements and lots of silence for his navigational principles. He saw natives eating each other in the Fiji Islands. He witnessed absurd sexual practices in Samoa, like twin-swapping, incest-adulation, chicken-coupling and risqué limmericks. In Hawaii he saw his first volcano, which the natives swore spoke the word of God, but in "lava language that nobody listens to." In Baja California, he found Alonso de Alvarado, drunk and working as a caterer for a group of matriarchal Hopi Indians, whose motto was "She who laughs, lasts."

Alvarado was one of those rare men who had served under both Cortez in Mexico and Pizarro in Peru. He was an expert traveler, an affable story-teller, and multilingual. When Cortez found him, Alvarado was giddy with raucous laughter, professing that laughter, itself, was the one thing that neither Kings nor Popes could control.

At gunpoint, Cortez persuaded Alvarado to set sail with him for Peru. There they met Huáscar, the famous Inca prince, who was more kindly disposed toward Cortez than Monteẓuma had been.

"What is the meaning of life?" Cortez asked him.

"There is no meaning," Huáscar said. "that is how we have endured your domination."
Outside Huáscar's palace, the Inca children were dancing in a circle and singing.

"El mundo es triste,
El mundo es chiste,
Por dónde vaya
La vida es maya."

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Having struck out with royalty, Cortez went back to Spain, his pockets full of gold ingots from Peru, but his heart still empty with answers.

He decided to ask the artists next.

He went to England and asked to speak with that country's greatest writer. They sent him to Miles Coverdale, a noted Bible translator.

“What is the meaning of life?” Cortez asked.

“To translate is to betray,” Coverdale said. “Leastways, that's what them good-buddy Italianos say.”

“Why do you do it?”


“You talk strangely, Miles. Where do you come from? Sheffield? Leeds?”

“Nossir. I'm a country boy, myself.”

“And you're qualified to translate the Bible?”

“I don't cotton to splitting no angels on the head of a pin, if that's what you mean. Who you got doing the Spanish translations?”

“I don't honestly know.”

“Well! There you have it. It's a tough job, but somebody's gotta do it. I'm in Leviticus right now. You care to parse a few paragraphs with me?”

“Thanks, no. I have to be going.”

“Then, go with the Big One shining down on you.”

Cortez went to Holland next, where he met with Gerard David, the Dutch painter, and Josquin Des Prez, the famous contrapuntist.

“What is the meaning of life?” he asked them.

The two got into such a terrible row over semantics that Cortez had to leave, without an answer.

He went to France next, where he had interviews with Joachim Du Bellay and Clement Marot, both of whom thought he was trying to steal their poems. Du Bellay may have been light in his verses, but he was stuffy and overbearing in life. He said no weasel-eyed Spaniard was going to get any answers from him, and he would challenge Cortez to a duel before he would endure any Mediterranean cheek. Marot said pretty much the same thing, with less aplomb.

That left Italy, the boot of Europe, which reminded Cortez of several axioms: “If the cap has a question, let the boot answer it.” And: “Boots, boots, the feet have no roots.” Or: “If the boot fits, it soon will be stolen.”

Cortez went to interview Corregio, the Florentine painter of frescoes. He went to Corregio, because he was fascinated with a painter whose name meant “correction.” His real name was Antonio Allegri, but he was anything but happy. Cortez found him on a scaffold in Parma, painting the dome of a church. Cortez was at once impressed and astonished by the intense emotional feeling in Corregio's painting and the complex configurations of clouds, which created the illusion of a church ceiling opening onto sky.
"You are subtle, like a puppy," Cortez said, complimenting Corregio for the latter's soft treatment of human flesh, making women's cheeks look like spoiled peaches. "You have a strong, even harsh command of gentle light, and a delicate, even, staccato sense of shading."

"Light and shade, light and shade," Corregio muttered, coming down from his ladder. "Do you believe, sir, that I have succeeded in creating the illusion of an open sky up there?"

"Yes, I would say yes."

"Ah, but the test, sir, is with birds, not people."

Corregio took two turtle-doves out of a cage.

"Thus far, these birds have refused to fly, precisely because they know there is paint up there. Let us see if they can be fooled today."

He let go of the two birds, and they immediately made for the configuration of cumulus clouds on the dome, crashing their heads into the dome and falling, errant feathers and all, to their deaths below.

Corregio baptized them and put them into a burlap bag.

"God, I feel great," he said, and then he stopped and pondered for a moment. "Do you really think they have souls?"

"I don't know about that," Cortez said.

"This is a country in which all the holy people talk to birds. Francis of Assisi, Anthony of Padua, all the instant-halo people. I wouldn't want it getting around that two doves met their deaths because of my frescoes."

"I will go to the grave with your secret," Cortez promised.

"Good. That's what I wanted to hear. I'll introduce you to a living saint for your promise. Her name is Saint Angela Merici. She founded the Ursuline Order of nuns. Everybody wants to sleep with her, but she's a living saint, you know, and so they can't. America was named after her. Did you know that? It was definitely not named after Amerigo Vespucci. But after Saint Angela Merici, only she didn't want anything as big as a continent named after her, so she lets on that it's Amerigo's claim to fame. This is a great day for me. We'll invite Saint Angela for supper. You'll see."

Apparently, Corregio saw Cortez as a good omen, that his arrival had something to do with finally being able to deceive the doves. Cortez was not about to dissuade him from this belief. It was an auspicious beginning, and he meant to capitalize on it.

"Tony, I've been around the world several times, asking everybody the same question. Now I've come to you. What is the meaning of life?"

"I suffer in the shadow of Andrea del Sarto and that cuisinartist, Leo da Vinci. Everybody asks da Vinci that question. You see, he's not only a painter and sculptor. He's an architect and an engineer. He puts on a modest face and says he dabbles, and what would a dabbler know? Makes me sick, that sort of modesty. All the while, I'm twice as spiritual, and I get his leftover interviews. Did you go to him first?"

"No, I came straightway to you."

"God, I like you better and better. What was your question again?"

"What is the meaning of life?"

"Arguably, a tough question. Hmmm. Well, it seems to me it's a matter of distinguishing between figure and ground: between that which is enclosed and that which is not. There is gravity, of course, which is body-based, but that doesn't explain perspective nor our perceptions of perspective. Do you think anyone has ever asked that question from a completely primitive state, which is to say, without any preconceptions of bias at all? Like asking, what is a straight line in nature? What is an angle? What is a period? A mise-en-abime! You see, I have rephrased your question, in terms of optics. I have given
you parallel questions, which amount, finally and in a phenomenological sense, to the same thing. What, then, is the meaning of life? I think it is singularly instructive that I have succeeded in convincing two turtle-doves that the dome of this church was the same as the open sky on a clear or semi-clear day. If that illusion is possible, and you are witness that it is, then it must mitigate any empirical answer I might give to your question. Do you see?"
"Frankly, no."
"Repeat your question."
"What is the meaning of life?"
"I don't know."
They had supper with Saint Angela Merici, an excellent veal, as it turned out. She wore a halo, which, after several attempts to disprove its existence, Cortez had to admit was real. When the sun went down, Corregio didn't have to bother with candles. They supped by the light of Saint Angela's halo.
Cortez thought that she was an incredibly beautiful woman. After four glasses of wine, he found himself saying so.
"I have to admit, Saint Angela. . ."
"Call me Angie."
"I have to admit, Saint Angie, that I am quite taken by you."
"And I by you, Spaniard. I have always had a soft spot for fellows of the truly Latin persuasion."
It turned out that her idol was Odoacer, who was the first barbarian king to rule the Holy Roman Empire, after its collapse.
"I find pagans frightfully attractive," she said.
"May I ask you a question?"
"Of course."
"What, in your holy estimation, is the meaning of life?"
"I think it depends upon what one has never experienced. We always tend to think in terms of what has evaded our senses, exceeded our grasp, or estranged us with its other-ness."
"Is this your answer?"
"No. It's the qualification, without which my answer would be absurd. Repeat your question."
These Italians had a fondness for having questions repeated.
"What is the meaning of life?" he repeated.
"Orgasm," she said, without batting an eyelash, and it seemed to Cortez that, for a moment at least, her halo was on fire.

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Having strived, nay, striven these many years for an answer to the question, "What is the meaning of life," Cortez decided to give up. Having searched high and low these many years for an answer, he decided to give up. He did not want his old age cluttered with such a question. He was even beginning to salt, pepper and otherwise season his conversation with vague inanities like "these many years," and he didn't like it.
It was so easy to be mediocre. Kings and princes, poets and saints, all of them were chiseled on the cutting edge of mediocrity. Their mediocrity echoed in him like an abscessed tooth.
So it was that Balboa complained of a toothache, as they sipped sol y sombra in the
Plaza de Segovia at the Club de Conquistadores.

“You are drunk, Bo. Let’s go to the bulls.”

“Vamonos,” Balboa concurred.

“I like you, Bo,” Cortez said. “You are so middle gray.”

“You’ve been talking like a painter ever since you got back from Italy.”

They went to the corrida, and Cortez watched the bulls go charging to their stupid deaths, one after another. He was about to contemplate suicide when he saw Saint Ignatius of Loyola blessing the severed ear of one of the bulls. Ignatius was a saint, everybody knew he was a saint, he even said he was a saint, but, contrary to Saint Angela Merici, Ignatius did not have a halo, or, if he had one, he never wore it in public.

He was a founder. His forte was founding things. The Society of Jesus, the Fraternal Order of Jesuits and Jesuettes, Opus Dei, Agnus Dei, the Lavatory at Pompeii and Bulls for Jesus, he had founded all of them. In addition, he was known far and wide to be a world-class Inquisitioner.

Cortez asked him, in the middle of that bloodthirsty throng, what, in his estimation, the meaning of life was. Loyola recognized him immediately, for, as a teenager, Loyola had dreamed of being a world-class explorer, and not a Jesuit priest.

“I would just love to hear your confession,” he bubbled. “I would dearly love it.”

The next day, then, Cortez went to confession at the Cathedral.

“I have had arrogant thoughts,” Cortez began, “and even unruly ambitions.”

“Cut the shimmy,” Loyola said. “You’ve killed Aztecs.”

“Yes, I have,” Cortez began, “but I baptized each and every one of them in blood.”

“That’s very good, then. What about women?”

“What about them?”

“You’ve been around the world, my friend. Did you indulge in strange and exotic practices? Did you do them in bizarre and perverse positions, other than the missionary? Come on now. Did ya? Did ya?”

“Here and there, I tarried and dallied.”

“I want numbers. Names and numbers and an exact accounting. I need to know, uh, for the sake of giving you your penance. Everything. Blow by blow.”

After four hours, they were finished. Cortez felt spent. Loyola, too, seemed to have a flushed face, but he did not look spent.

“I’ve never had such a thorough confession, Ignazio.”

“I’d like to do that again sometime,” Loyola said, with a wistful wanton look on his face.

“What is the meaning of life?” Cortez said bluntly.

“For that, you must go on a pilgrimage.”

“Another trip?”

“You’re used to it. It’ll be a snap. Besides, you’re going with me.”

“Where, may I ask?”

“The Netherlands. I’m going to inquisition Erasmus. You can come along and watch. Besides, it’s one of my stock questions when I inquisition.”

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Cortez had nothing better to do, so he went along. They stayed one night in Basque country, and Loyola complained that the people who lived in border territories were usually pagan, political and rooted to the land, not to the heavens.

“You can’t teach a Basque to make a leap of faith. He simply will not leap. He’s interested in relics, but only of the most provincial sort. And he’s not interested in
indulgences at all. Give him good crops and he'll worship you. But he will never obey a Pope in Rome or a King in Madrid."

Loyola had to stop talking, so that he could whip himself for an hour. Cortez watched, astonished. When he was full of bloody welts, Loyola stopped.

"There are some places on my back I can't get to. Would you mind?"

He was offering the whip to Cortez.

"I don't think I could. Really."

"Come on. It's simple."

"I've never whipped a priest before."

"You ought to try it on yourself sometime. You would see how much closer to the narrow path you would be, and then would be no problem for you to come to the aid of a fellow Christian."

In Paris they were met by a cortege of clerics, all Loyalists, who wanted to show the Grand Inquisitioner their body-welts and get his blessing. Loyola was pleased by this group display. He took it as a sign that the word of God was spreading, like margarine, over the entire extinct Holy Roman Empire.

"Do you see, Hernando?" Loyola said, standing up in their carriage and waving to the populace, his fingers replicating those of the elderly Popes when they bless at the Basilica. "Wheat and chaff alike, people are taking to the streets and whipping themselves. Such public displays cannot fail to attract the attention of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who was, himself, whipped pretty good."

Cortez was familiar with the practice of giving forty lashes to insubordinate tars, but he had never attached any religious significance to this practice.

"Tell me about Erasmus."

"Desiderius Erasmus."

"Yes?"

"He's a priest. And a wondrous Bible translator. His translations into Greek and Latin are ground-breaking works. But then Martin Luther is a priest as well and his translation of the Bible into German is also a masterpiece. I wonder, what is it with these priests who translate the Bible? What makes them become Reformers?"

Cortez was intensely curious now. A priest whose name meant Desire. Father Desire. How coolly concupiscent.

"Have you inquisitioned Martin Luther, Iggy?"

"Too late. He broke from the corral already. Excommunicated. I hear he's sorry now. Sent him off the deep end. I hear from my spies that he sits alone in a hair-shirt, brooding, sticking pins in his skin, trying to write Christmas carols. But Erasmus is more cunning. He's stayed within the Church. He's known as a wit, you know? You can get away with saying the most horrible things, if you say them with humor. Comedy has always been the least censored of the arts. But we'll get him on the rack and see if he still makes jokes then."

"Have you ever made a mistake, Iggy? I mean, is it possible to torture a Saint?"

"Absolutely, in which case I have only sped up his sainthood. Every martyr needs a hatchet-man, you know? Where would Moses have been, without the Pharaoh running interference for him? Even Jesus, himself, needed a Judas, to look even better. It is quite probable that Erasmus is a saint, just like I am. If so, all the more sanctifying this experience will be for both of us. Two saints never made a devil, you know."

Cortez studied the brief on Erasmus, while Loyola whipped himself in the outer rooms of the Inn outside Rotterdam, where Erasmus had been born.

Father Desire was the foremost Christian humanist of the whole Renaissance. A Classics
major. Greek and Latin stylist. —Leave it to the Dutch, to speak anything but Dutch, Cortez thought. Studied in Paris. Went to England, where he became friends with Sir Thomas More. There was a note on More and the apparent need for an inquisition on him at some later date. Apparently, it was More's humor that first charmed Erasmus into exploring his own wit. Came back to Holland. Less travel, more writing. In books like *ADAGIA* and *PRAISE OF FOLLY*, Erasmus satirized the clergy, accusing them of ignorance with witticisms, like calling them "priests of burden" and making rhymes like "mass" and "ass." He accused the clerics of failing to educate the masses. —No rhyme in the plural, Cortez thought. Erasmus accused his fellow priests of not practicing charity, of not studying the Bible, of selling indulgences, of creating imaginary saints for the purpose of selling their relics.

And yet, even in the brief that Cortez read, there were quotes attributed to Erasmus that clearly showed that Erasmus cared about the unity of Christianity, did not wish to follow in Luther's footsteps, was even willing to recant everything, if the Church could be bettered by his doing so.

The more he read, the more Cortez liked this Desiderius Erasmus, whose nickname was Geert. Cortez was sure, without ever having met the man, that Erasmus was an enlightened being, a smart and humble fellow, one who was blessed with bliss beyond his years and cursed by a Catholicism that was behind the times.

When they arrived at the Great Hall in the Hague, Erasmus was waiting for them, stripped to his long underwear, his hands and feet in chains.

"I would shake your hand if I could," Erasmus said when he was introduced to Cortez.

"Free him," Loyola commanded, and it was done. "I must tell you, Father Erasmus," Loyola said, scanning the man with the scrutiny of a farmer about to slaughter his pig, "that I can see auras. Your aura is most impressive. It threatens to break out as a halo on the visible plane at any moment."

"Thank you for your confidence," Erasmus said. "Your reputation precedes you, as always, Your Eminence."

Erasmus had a decidedly dry wit, long thin lips that always grinned but rarely smiled, like the British. He had high arching eyebrows that turned his every stare into a test of irony.

"It will be my pleasure to torture you," Loyola said.

And they set in to long discourses on theology. The more abstract Loyola tried to be, the more puns Erasmus made. The former kept insisting on blind faith and whip-pings. The latter kept insisting on charity, good works and a sense of humor. They had, it seemed to Cortez, irreconcilable differences.

In the spectator's gallery Cortez was not alone.

"We meet again, good buddy."

Cortez recognized immediately the country drawl of Miles Coverdale.

"What are you doing here, Miles?"

"I got what ya'd call a vested interest here. Y'all may not be big on Bible translating in Spain, but up North it's big. Well sir, Luther, he was a good'un, but now he done got himself excommunicated. And now, iffen ole 'Rasmus here gets thrown out on his cassock or martyred or such, well, that would leave a lot of reputation left for yours truly. I might even get to be official Bible scholar down to Rome."

"I see what you mean."

Cortez perked up his ears when he heard Loyola say to Erasmus, "What is the meaning of life?" Unfortunately, the answer came in Greek with, according to Miles Coverdale, two bilingual puns.
Loyola had Erasmus' knuckles broken, and then the proceedings moved outdoors, since the weather was clement, to the apple orchard, where Erasmus was tortured in the orchard. He was tied by his feet and left to dangle upside down, while Loyola threatened to swing him like a pendulum and then turn him into a human pretzel, if he didn't recant. Of course, Erasmus recanted immediately, but Loyola pretended not to hear. He had not come all this way to get such quick contrition from a contortionist like Erasmus.

"Who is thy master?" Loyola demanded.
"The same as thine."
"Nonsense. You see things in reverse."
"Honi soit qui bien y pense."
"Carthago delenda est."
"The periphrastic."
"Indeed. How many angels on the head of a pin?"
"Safety or Bobby?"
"What was the correct answer to the riddle of the Sphinx?"
"Man."
"What is the most sanctifying sacrament?"
"The Eucharist."
"The least?"
"Extreme unction."
"What is the worst sin?"
"Pride."
"Who discovered America?"
"Opinion varies."
"After whom was America named?"
"Saint Angela Merici."
"Where do babies go when they haven't been baptized?"
"Limbo."
"Is it a nice place?"
"It has all the creature comforts. It lacks only the sight of the divine."
"Is the Pope infallible?"
"In matters of faith."
"What do you think of indulgences?"
"Depends."
"Upon what?"
"Upon who they indulge."
"And relics?"
"Like obscenities. They cannot hurt a good soul. They will not help a bad one."
"What do you think of Martin Luther?"
"A brilliant man."
"And?"
"A great writer."
"And?"
"A spirit to be reckoned with."
"But he ridiculed you in THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL."
"He's not the first. Nor, apparently, the last."
"He argues that salvation is a gift from God. One cannot do anything to earn it. He ridiculed your belief in charity and good works."
"He has his opinion."
"Have you read his book?"
"Yes."
"Have you read any of my books?"
"No."
"Pity," Loyola said, turning to his aides-de-camp. "Cut him down. We'll begin anew tomorrow after matins."

They cleared the orchard, until only a few stunned spectators remained.

"Who are these people?" Cortez asked Miles Coverdale.

"Well, those two over yonder, they's Nicholas Ridley and Michael Servetus. Both theologs, both would-be martyrs. That wild boar over there, that's John of Leiden. He's a Dutch Anabaptist fanatic. They say he eats his shoes for penance. And the dapper gent behind him, that's Ulrich von Hutten. He's one of Luther's spies. Whenever anyone talks, Hutten listens."

"And who are those wet people behind the peach trees?"

"They's devotees of Jan Hus. They soak themselves in petro. If the inquisitioner mentions the name of Jan Hus, they set themselves on fire. If he doesn't, they go home, disillusioned. They's regulars at these proceedings."

"A strange and motley crew, all," Cortez mused.

"Frankly, I expected more royalty myself," Miles said. "Well, I'm off to work on Galatians. Hasta manzana," he quipped.

Loyola approached and asked Cortez if he had enjoyed the proceedings. It seemed to Cortez a funny word to use. Then, Loyola announced that he would have to sequester himself for the duration of the inquisition, and he hoped that Cortez could manage on his own for a few days.

Cortez did, after supping on blood-squalor soup, braised beef tips, baby onions and baked beans, go to the cell of Erasmus. To his surprise, Cortez was neither frisked nor questioned. Apparently, everyone knew that he had come with Loyola, and so he was allowed to enter the penitent's cell without impediment.

"How are you holding up, Erasmus?"

"Who wishes to know?"

"I come of my own free will."

"There's a theological debate in what you say, but we shall let it pass. I ache, Hernando, to answer your query."

"May I call you Geert?"

"Why would you want to do that?"

"I feel that I know you. I admire you. I wish this cup could pass away for you."

"Don't get too blasphemous, son. The walls have ears. And you'd best curb your admiration before your countryman ties you to the apple tree. At least, he didn't shake the tree, huh?"

"Geert, may I be frank with you?"

"Why not?"

"What is the meaning of life?"

"Are you earnest or do you jest?"

"I am earnest."

"You are a refreshing simp, my son, I dare say."

"I said I am earnest, Geert."

"Do you want the Church answer?"

"Which is?"

"To know, love and serve God, in this world and in the next."
"Are there any other answers?"
"I have a personal one."
"May I have that one?"
"Find work that is play for you and help others. That is the meaning of my life."
"It's a better answer than any I've gotten so far," Cortez said.
"It doesn't come to many of us in dramatic fashion," Erasmus said. "Like Saul on the road to Damascus. Or Martin Luther's thunderstorm."
"Well, I'm retired from exploring, so I guess I don't have to worry about turning work into play."
"On the contrary. You have to worry more than most. You see, for most people, living gets to be hard work when they don't have their work anymore. You have to turn living into play. And, then, of course, you have to help others."
"For salvation?"
"For the hell of it."
"Maybe I could help you out of your predicament?"
"You have influence over the inquisitioner?"
"He likes my confessions."
"I can't ask you to do that. On the other hand, I wouldn't stop you either."

So it was that Cortez sent a message to Loyola, pleading with him for an end to the inquisition of Erasmus. Further, Cortez suggested an ecumenical council for all the great minds of Europe: Corregio, Da Vinci, Erasmus, Thomas More, even Martin Luther, in a non-voting ex officio capacity.

The answer came back in three hours.

Querido Hernando:

What you suggest is both heretical and wise. You are a deep thinker, with visions that will take centuries to realize. The council you suggest is not feasible. The pardoning of Erasmus that you suggest is possible. However, I need to have a few more days with him, so that the Church does not lose face in this matter. Thanking you in advance for your concern, I am

Yours at the Whip,
Ignazio

The next day, Loyola stretched Erasmus on the giant wheel and rode him to market and back. Children were encouraged to throw stones at Erasmus, but, of course, they didn't.

The interrogation consisted of a series of story problems that had to do with ethics and snap judgments.

Loyola: It's your birthday. You are given a calf-skin wallet.
Erasmus: I wouldn't take it.
Loyola: You have a little boy. He comes to you with a butterfly, plus the killing jar.
Erasmus: I am not permitted by my vows to have a little boy.
Loyola: You are watching an execution. Suddenly, you notice a wasp on your arm.
Erasmus: I would bless it, in Jesus' name.
Loyola: You are watching a stage play. Afterwards, there is a banquet. Appetizer of raw oysters. Entrees of boiled dog.
Erasmus: I would talk discreetly about the stage play and mind my table manners.
Loyola: You are on a desert island with a naked woman.
Erasmus: I would swim all day around the island, averting my eyes all the while.
Loyola: The naked woman calls to you for help.
Erasmus: I would inquire into the nature of her predicament, all the while averting my eyes.

Loyola: The naked woman is a nun. It might be Saint Angela Merici.

Erasmus: In that case, I would consider the situation to be in God's hands, and I would swim to shore to be of service.

Loyola: You are asked to rank the Jesuits, the Franciscans and the Dominicans. In what order would you rank them?

Erasmus: In the order prescribed by my superiors, all the way up to Our Holy Father in Rome.

Etc.

Cortez spent that entire night awake and alone, fasting and praying for forgiveness. It seemed to him a colossal injustice that Desire Erasmus should go on trial for having edified the poor with instruction and alms, while he, Cortez, had slaughtered so many Aztecs and was, nonetheless, allowed to sit as a privileged spectator at these manic proceedings. By early morning, he was given to hallucinations.

The morning of that third day began in a most dramatic fashion. Erasmus was stripped and whipped without breakfast. Then, he was stretched on the rack. Then, his head was tonsured, and eggs were broken on his bald spot. The spirit of Erasmus flagged visibly.

Miles Coverdale swooned in ecstasy and had to be carried out of the Great Hall. John of Leiden began reciting the Scriptures backwards, forcing rhymes in clang association, and he, too, had to be removed from the Great Hall.

Nicholas Ridley and Michael Servetus began chanting the Lives of the Saints, especially those that had ended in the most garish displays of bloodshed, and they were not able to continue in the Great Hall.

The followers of Jan Hus looked especially wet that morning, and they began to shimmer and glow with gasoline. When one of them produced a flint, they were all asked to leave the Great Hall. They left, shouting inflammatory remarks.

And then the interrogation began, this time focusing on facts, trivia and world addenda.

"Who wrote the Book of Love?"
"The Corsairs."
"What is the one language the Bible has not been translated into?"
"Sign language."
"What do England and Spain have in common?"
"The moors."
"What is the medical name for female genitalia?"
"Pudenda."
"And what does that word mean in Latin?"
"It means 'shame.'"
"What kind of fruit prevailed in the Garden of Eden?"
"Apples."
"What was the secret identity of Zoroaster?"
"Don Diego de la Vega."
"If Pyramus built the pyramids, what did Thisbe build?"
"I don't know that one."
"In what year was Jesus Christ born?"
"In approximately four B.C. Accounts vary. Some put it at eight."
"And what does B.C. mean?"
"Before Christ."
"How can he, then, have been born four to eight years before himself?"
"Time is relative. Timekeepers are worse."
"What is Holland famous for?"
"Elms, edam cheese, canals, clogs, gingerbread housing, dams, windmills, world-class explorers and religious reformers."
"What was the final score of the Crusades?"
"Six to two, Christians."
"What was Ovid's favorite myth?"
"Narcissus."
"How many times is the phrase 'increase and multiply' used in the Old Testament?"
"I don't remember."
"Who invented the yo-yo?"
"Archimedes."

Etc.

Finally, Cortez could endure no more. He came out of the gallery and onto the parquet floor of the Great Hall, ripping his shirt as he strode, revealing the welts of the whip that he had used the night before for the first and last time.

"Take me instead," Cortez shouted, "and let this holy man go."

Ignatius of Loyola accepted this outrageous intrusion by a fellow Spaniard as a sign of divine intervention, and he ordered the inquisition officially closed. Erasmus was reinstated, with full privileges and retroactive benefits. As a sign of good faith, Loyola and Erasmus agreed to hear each other's confessions. Privately, each thanked Cortez for helping them to save face.

Outside the Great Hall, mobs of Dutch children were singing:

"Scheie, zie jy die ulieglmachine?  
Scheie, zie jy er twee misschien?  
Scheie, ik kan niet velen  
dat jy er twee ziet en ikke maar één."

(Crosseyes, do you see that plane?  
Crosseyes, do you see two planes maybe?  
Crosseyes, I can't stand it  
That you see two, and I see only one.)

Back in Madrid, Cortez receded once again into relative obscurity, sipping sol y sombra with his semi-friend Balboa at the Club de Conquistadores.

"We missed you at the old watering hole," Balboa said.

"Thank you, Bo."

"So, tell, Hernando. Did you get an answer to your question about the meaning of life?"

"Not exactly, Bo. But I don't seem to need to ask it any longer."

At that moment, a courier came into the Club and delivered a letter to Cortez. He opened it.

Hernando:
Heard about your good work in Holland. You remind me more and more of Odoacer.

Your Secret Admirer

"Bad news?" Balboa asked.
“Not really. A bill came due.”
“Oh that. Everybody has that.”

Hernando Cortez was suddenly happy. Happy as . . . happy as . . . a halleluia of larks. His mind began to wander, as it will in most world-class explorers, until it fixed on the image of two turtle-doves, breaking through the domed illusion of a church and soaring up to the vast unanswerable open sky.

William V. Van Wert