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Julio Baena. *Discordancias cervantinas*. Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 2003. 371 pp. ISBN: 1-58871-030-0.

In an essay on the historical consequences of a painting by Georges de la Tour in both art and literature which gives the title to his splendid book, *On the Uses of Error* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991), the Anglo-American critic Frank Kermode noted that “the history of interpretation, the skills by which we keep alive in our minds the light and the dark of past literature and past humanity, is to an incalculable extent a history of error. Or perhaps it would be better to say, of ambiguity, of antithetical senses” (431). The reason for this is simply that “we bring ourselves and our conflicts to words, to poems and pictures, as we bring them to the world; and thus we change the poems and the pictures, or perhaps it is ourselves we change” (432). Julio Baena’s new book on Cervantes seeks to explore how Cervantes’ work, a text plagued with both intentional and unintentional error, has itself been the object of erroneous, yet often fruitful interpretation.

Baena brings to the exploration of error in and about Cervantes’ work an enthusiastic commitment to the subject he studies and offers a compelling, if at times overly personal, critical perspective on it. Through the application of insights gained from contemporary literary and cultural theory, Baena succeeds not only in refocusing and reevaluating many of the received ideas about the cultural logic of Cervantine textual production but in exploring in new ways traditional fields in a traditionally conservative sector of the profession. Although restrictions of space prevent me from rehearsing in detail the arguments of Baena’s interesting and sprawling book, I shall offer a brief commentary and assessment of the most significant aspects of it.

*Discordancias cervantinas* is a first of its kind. Rather than dedicate itself to the correction of error, it seeks to offer an appreciation of it and how error functions and what it does in Cervantes’ work. Combining views from contemporary theory with acute close reading skills and a broad knowledge of seventeenth-century literary culture, Baena’s meticulous reading of *Don Quijote* and his exploration of its internal contradictions and hermeneutical aporias exposes the work’s rich intentional and unintentional ludic textuality, readerly games, and the persistent problematic of a truth that remains contumacious and unstable not only for don Quijote but also for the multiple narrators and the real and not only readers who struggle to perceive it in their mediation of the text. Baena’s exploration of textual gaps makes both an interesting and commanding contribution to the current debate centering on the modern and postmodern reception of *Don Quijote*. Especially since the publication in 2000 of Anthony Close’s historicist study, *Cervantes and the Comic Mind of His Age*, added to the already well-known work of Russell and

Eisenberg, the issue of whether Cervantes may be read as modern or even postmodern has acquired a renewed sense of urgency, focus, and intensity. Baena's book jumps into the fray with gusto and articulate advocacy for a sort of Cervantine postmodernity *avant la lettre*, posited upon the notion of *Don Quijote* as a kind of productive, readably pastiche whose internal contradictions become springboards for imaginative readings that greatly enrich the work's sense and the very act of its perusal. Seen as a compendium of both conscious and accidental but productive textual breaks and fissures that delay or defer continuity and provoke misreadings, and misprisions, Baena's approach to Cervantes' work seeks to extract and underscore the text's prodigiously generative artistic qualities. On the whole, in spite of an unabashed radical and rambling character, this is a smart, incisive study that makes a strong case for seeing Cervantes as a crucial, primary precursor of contemporary ideas and sensibilities.

Just as it recuperates and vindicates Cervantes for the present, Baena's book also comprises a powerful institutional critique not just of Hispanism but of the practice of philology, textual editing, and the traditional positivistic notions that have traditionally guided the approach to the inconsistencies in Cervantes' masterwork, especially among Spanish academicians. This is accomplished through an implicit, and on occasion quite explicit, dialogue with modern reconstructions of the work from Clemencín on to Sevilla-Rey and Rico, and the critical theories that have justified them, as found in their editions. From Baena's discussion, it becomes ironically clear that many modern editors have continued the very process that Cervantes inscribed in the writing, telling, and reading of *Don Quijote*, to the point where the editors have become narrators of the work who rewrite and reshape the very text that is the focus of a supposed "objective" and "scientific" interest.

The model Baena constructs makes problematical many of the prevailing assumptions these editors and other critics have brought to the text and places into question their authority concerning the composition and constitution of Cervantes' masterpiece. Although Baena's book will doubtless be castigated by less theorized colleagues for placing into question the surety and confidence they invest in philology's efforts to "stabilize" and "fix" (in both senses) an errant text of the *Quijote*, this type of skepticism would fail to grasp that the very "errors" they so often find and seek to correct through textual emendation are symptoms of the work's inherent narrative infidelity; the readerly unreliability that is one of its artistic glories. Rather than extract instructions and strategies for reading it from the text of the *Quijote* itself, these textual critics and editors bring to bear presumptions of authorial sloppiness, fault, bad judgment, and other abominations, as they adopt an attitude of intellectual and "scientific" superiority over Cervantes, and hence proclaim their right to challenge and change his book. As such, editors eager

to intervene and make “wrongs” right become little more than presumptuous technocrats who, ironically, show themselves as little more than very poor readers of novels. Put another way, Baena’s book, as it gives primacy to the unstable text, and the momentousness of its errors, stands out for its theoretical courage in a field still shackled by unexamined positivism; one still wedded to modernist epistemologies that, as they affirm the superiority of rationality and the scientific methods of textual editing, find nothing but fault in every gap and “error” they perceive. The fact that Baena’s book will be capable of raising some hackles is, in my estimation, its highest recommendation. In fine, *Discordancias cervantinas* marks a notable contribution to understanding the complexity of both the composition and reception of Cervantes’ work and to the way it has continued to provoke the imagination of later generations of readers and scholars.

If I must level a criticism at Baena’s book, it would be in relation to the mode of exposition he chooses to use, which I, alas, find convoluted and at times unnecessarily complex. Although Baena’s ideas are compelling, they are often couched in overly difficult, almost baroque (pastiche?), constructions filled with personal references and zig-zagging analogies that, while perhaps after a few strained synapses may ultimately be relevant, can seem *outré*. Scholarship is most effective when it strives for clarity and concision, and when we try not to write ourselves into it, when it seeks to adopt a more distanced perspective. Although I understand the paradox of my own statement and that the very critical stance Baena adopts serves as the ultimate apology for his unabashed rhetorical specularity, personal taste and my own modernist intellectual formation prevent me from accepting it uncritically. Baena is best when he is reading closely and discussing Cervantes’ text itself rather than engaging in back-and-forth associations and polemic. When he reads texts closely and concentrates on conveying what the errors in Cervantes’ text do, he is very good indeed.

In fine, this is a book that makes a powerful case for the fact that the history of literature is as much one of its reading and reception as it is one of its writing and composition.

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