

Charles D. Presberg. *Adventures in Paradox: Don Quixote and the Western Tradition*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001. 250 pp.

In *Adventures in Paradox*, Charles Presberg contends the following two points: 1) although it caught on later there than in the rest of Europe, paradox was cultivated in Spain with an unsurpassed exuberance; 2) Cervantes' *Don Quixote* contains a compendium of Western paradox as well as many innovations in the field. The study draws upon a variety of works, from Classical to Baroque, and engages a good deal of the critical literature, particularly that bearing upon key issues in *Don Quixote* related to paradox. Presberg weighs in on topics like the reliability of narrators and sources, the relationships Cervantes posits between the author and the reader, "hard" vs. "soft" readings of don Quixote, and the don Quixote vs. don Diego de Miranda controversy. As one might expect, the focus on paradox foregrounds many traits we have come to associate with Cervantes: parody, irony, ambivalence, anti-dogmatism, and so forth.

Presberg's use of contemporary theory is eclectic, with a healthy focus on the primary literary texts as well as the abundant works on paradox by Classical and Renaissance writers. He discusses and makes productive use of figures and concepts such as Plato's Silenus, Aristotle's opposition of nature and art, and Erasmus's Folly. The parallels he highlights between paradox and Renaissance poetics provide a useful way of conceptualizing and understanding the vogue of such rhetoric in the period: concern with earthly, contingent matters, mixed forms, temporality and "process," satire that ostensibly contradicts received opinion. Indeed, one of Presberg's points is that paradox could be far more than a rhetorical exercise—that, in more complex writers, it can be characterized as a mode of thought. As with other conceptual frameworks, a danger with Presberg's approach is that it can lead him to characterize nearly any work or "utterance" that is not somehow completely intelligible and conclusive as "paradoxical"; on the other hand, the five categories of paradox he proposes seem useful, and while many of his conclusions involve a sort of rephrasing of previous critical observations, some offer fresh and valuable insight into Cervantes' art.

The first part of the study provides an overview of paradox from Antiquity to the Renaissance, with brief discussions of Plato, Cusanus, and Erasmus. Beginning with the *Parmenides*, Presberg discusses the foundations and development of some of his basic operating concepts: *serio ludere*, *discordia concors*, *via negativa* and "resolution in mystery." Also included in this section are observations on the varied incorporation of such ideas into

Christian thought, for example in Neoplatonism and Mysticism. Presberg mentions St. Francis of Assisi as a pivotal figure who anticipates the less abstract and intellectual, more earthly and practical concerns of Christian humanism.

Predictably, Erasmus' *Moriae Encomium* represents a sort of pre-Cervantine culmination of Western paradox. Presberg fruitfully sustains the Erasmian thread in his later discussion of Cervantes, particularly with regard to the spirit of self-deprecation, ambivalence toward convention and authenticity, and the wisdom of folly; I also agree with him that Erasmus's comic masterpiece does not completely resolve the tensions it sets forth in its first two sections. I occasionally felt, however, that Presberg overplays his hand, indulging in suggestive minutiae at the expense of clarity. The following is a representative passage:

In such a text as Erasmus's *Folly*, the reader faces contradictions at every turn between what the protagonist says and what she seems to mean on a multiplicity of "issues"; between what she states either ironically or straight and what the author or the reader or both may take to be valid on the same subject. In addition, the original texts that she and, through her, the author, deploy in their inventive (and self-serving?) *imitatio* exert pressure on the declamation and on the "whole" text (including what is unstated). Thus, the "new" text both asserts and parodically disputes the validity of its original(s), thereby opening up countless other levels of inter- and extratextual debate. In what Terence Cave aptly calls the "cornucopian" texts of the Renaissance, a true plurality of contrary "voices," opinions, and apparent truths engage in a struggle—now gamelike, now warlike—for simultaneous occupation of the same textual platform, somehow occupied by none and all. (32)

Such writing strikes me as more elaborate than illuminating, and the intense awareness of textual tropes, unreliable narrators (and ulterior authorial motives?), etc., suggests a text so infused with paradox as to elude interpretation. A passage like the one cited above—and there are many—would require substantial "decompressing" and clarification.

A discussion of Rojas, Antonio de Guevara, and Pero Mejía serves to illustrate the cultivation of paradox in Renaissance Spain, and to further elaborate different categories and effects of paradox. The principle of *contienda* in *Celestina* exemplifies a version of *discordia concors*, and Presberg argues for an open-endedness to Rojas' *Tragicomedia* that is paradoxical and thus inimical to the traditional didacticism set forth in its prologue. Guevara's *Menosprecio de corte* is, according to Presberg, a work that undermines

itself while foregrounding the issue of self-knowledge. And while Mejía employs a rather conventional, un-ironic paradox, his writings attend to the tension between *usus et experientia*, theory and practice. The stage is thus set to examine Cervantes' "synthesis and refashioning" of Western paradox.

In a critique and refinement of the categories set forth in Rosalie Colie's masterful study, *Paradoxia Epidemica*, Presberg offers five more or less distinct "strains": ontological, cosmological, psychological, axiological, and logical paradox. These categories do help the reader grasp the variegated realm of paradox, although the distinctions and types do not always remain clear in the heat of textual commentary. Presberg first applies his categories to the Prologue of part I, which, containing every type of paradox, functions as an illustrative analogue to the tone and narrative dynamic of *Don Quixote* as a whole. Presberg makes much of distinguishing Cervantes the author from the narrator of the prologue, whom he characterizes as a naive reader and writer. This focus yields some conclusions that seem sound if unremarkable: for example, we must guard against taking the narrator's words as straightforward propositions, univocal statements of authorial purpose. On the other hand, the lack of resolution inherent in much paradox provides an illuminating lens through which to appreciate how Cervantes manages to seemingly come down on both sides of an issue—parody and praise of historical and poetic discourse, for example (an interesting variation on a tendency that Borges called *magias parciales*). The characterization of the author / reader relationship as *coincidentia oppositorum* also seems apt, as does the observation that the ultimate effect is an unprecedented bestowal of responsibility on the reader.

Perhaps Presberg is inclined to overstate Cervantes' confidence in his readers. In order to strengthen his argument regarding the naiveté of the prologue's narrator, whom he likens to don Quixote, he asks, "Is it at all plausible to think that in creating his protagonist, the author of *Don Quixote* shares, rather than ridicules, such a social and moral 'concern'? Is it really plausible to hold that Cervantes thinks that some readers of *Don Quixote*, like the protagonist and, perhaps, the 'second author,' the narrator and his friend need to be thoroughly disabused of the opinion that the romances are historically true?" (152). While it is rather easy to make Cervantes a kindred spirit to our most modern ideas and sensibilities, Presberg's question is somewhat anachronistic. Such "concerns" were treated as quite serious and legitimate by many respected and influential thinkers of Cervantes' time, including Juan Luis Vives. More importantly, Cervantes' writings quite frequently address just these concerns: the range of readers at Juan Palomeque's inn, and the rather sophisticated canon of Toledo come readily to mind, as do "El retablo de las maravillas" and a good part

of the *Novelas ejemplares*, including the prologue, “El licenciado Vidriera,” “El coloquio de los perros,” and “El celoso extremeño.” Granted, these passages often contain much irony and “paradox”; but they also most definitely contain a sincere preoccupation on the part of Cervantes with a very complicated phenomenon—the mysteries of aesthetic engagement and “belief,” including the moral and social implications of such activity. For a scholar who elsewhere insists upon the fusion of the aesthetic and the moral in Cervantes (228), such a contention on the part of Presberg is a bit peculiar. Finally, we must not forget that much of the “game” here and elsewhere has as much to do with Cervantes *educating* as with “liberating” the reader, and perhaps even more to do with bestowing upon himself increased artistic freedom.

The final section of the book focuses on the ambivalent relationship between don Quixote and don Diego de Miranda. Skirting a confrontation that has polarized some modern critics, Presberg does not fully endorse or condemn either character, and he insightfully examines the way each character, through a subtle interchange of words and deeds, draws out the virtues and flaws of the other. Particularly interesting is Presberg’s contention that don Diego’s experience with the “insane” hidalgo propels the wealthy country gentleman toward self-knowledge and potential modification. As elsewhere, Presberg makes some good use here of the dialogic principle in paradox: the lack of neat resolution does not always mean aporia and stasis, but can lead to negotiation and broader, more nuanced understanding. For while paradox often functions by subverting the categories, codes, and models upon which we rely for knowledge and identity, Presberg wisely observes that the result of this is not necessarily relativity or radical skepticism. His study provides insight into how Cervantes shows us that imitation and conventions are perhaps unavoidable, and can in fact be quite beneficial, even productive of knowledge. A key consideration, as Presberg argues, lies in the extent to which Cervantes’ characters, narrators, and readers are consciously aware of the artifice and limitations involved in the forms and ideas they adopt, as well as the degree to which they are able to reflect upon and modify their beliefs accordingly, in an imperfect process of confusion and enlightenment. This is surely one of the most profound lessons Cervantes offers to his discreet readers.

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