

REVIEWS

Kurt Reichenberger and Rosa Ribas. *Ein kryptischer Cervantes. Die geheimen Botschaften im Don Quijote*. Kassel: Edition Reichenberger, 2002. 180 pp. ISBN: 3-935004-59-1.

If you wanted to present a radically new thesis regarding *Don Quijote*, would you address it primarily to Cervantes specialists, or to a wider audience of intelligent non-specialists? Kurt Reichenberger and Rosa Ribas choose the latter path, and the results are frankly, mixed.

This is the thesis in brief: Cervantes launches a wide-ranging allegorical attack on contemporary institutions through the interactions of his protagonist. But, cowed by the censors, he is forced to hide his accusations between the lines, to be decoded by perceptive readers, who, overjoyed at recognizing the cryptic message, could not help but give the novel an enthusiastic reception (8). And once the novel had snowballed into a raging success, and the message supposedly became obvious and unstoppable, the authorities were too embarrassed to admit their censorship lapse to stop the printing (95).

Here are some details of the message: The novel's most famous adventure, the windmill episode, is an allegorical protest against "the overwhelming power of the state and the omnipresent tax collector" (28). The same also applies to the *galeotes* episode (66). The Golden Age speech reflects an anti-war stance drawn from Cervantes' personal experience (35), which is also reflected in the battle of the sheep, which in turn allegorizes the incompetent European lords engaging in wasteful mutual slaughter (49). The *batanes* episode serves to show up Sancho, as a representative self-important *cristiano viejo*, to be an uncouth, yet simpering hillbilly redneck (66). Don Quijote's mad assault on the *encamisados* indicates a critique of the Church institution, an impression enhanced by the negative portrayal of the clerics (97).

The style of the book is surprisingly, refreshingly clear. From the paraphrase of the relevant chapters of *Don Quijote* to the exposition of the thesis, there is none of the distracting post-modern obfuscation that is almost *de*

rigueur in today's academic writing. The book is obviously meant to be eminently accessible to its intended wider audience, in the fine tradition of the German *Sachbuch* ("non-fiction"). Even the annotated bibliography is a pleasure to peruse. These are its strong points.

Now to the weak points. The radical thesis of this book cries out for proof—in fact, for reams of scholarly evidence. Yet none is given, not even in the bibliography. Now, this could be excused on account of the intended audience. The tradition of the *Sachbuch*, while demanding, generally allows for the skipping of highly technical material in favor of readability. Fine. This, however, also implies an ethics of trust, namely that the conclusions presented by the authoritative expert have been sufficiently vetted to give them an acceptable degree of epistemological solidity. Yet, this has obviously not been done with respect to this book, because those *cervantistas* who still believe in straightforward proof—their number admittedly declining fast—will find the conclusions unsupportable.

Now, the most convincing, most empirical proof would be Cervantes' own direct statements. But the authors show us none. Instead they plead censorship, i.e. Cervantes' fear of it. But where is the evidence of that fear? Surely, the few paltry excisions in *Don Quijote* do not at all indicate a severe censorship. Moreover, they were, in the normal spirit of the Inquisition, very narrowly theological, and mostly posthumous. If Cervantes could risk these why would he be so reluctant to risk even a hint of controversy over non-theological items? Why would he be so obsessed with leaving it all to "cryptic" reading? And if millions of readers could "get" the message of institutional criticism, how could all the educated censors of the realm miss it? It defies credulity, and regrettably, it leaves the impression that "kryptisch" is used as a convenient cover word for "lack of evidence." No, this thesis will not hold.

That is my finding. Yet that said, I am realistic enough to acknowledge that the book will most likely have little to fear from most current Cervantine critics. My attendance at recent conferences convinces me that many, if not most *cervantistas*, like most literature specialists in general, have little concern for proof and facts, treating them as mere "constructs" to be ignored at will. And those who should know better by virtue of their training and mentoring are too cowed or too jaded to speak up! Most have succumbed to, or seek shelter in, the relativizing propaganda of Foucault and Derrida, who turned Nietzsche's frivolous *dictum* that "there are no facts, only interpretations" into a brilliantly perverse cosmology that has served to justify thirty years of junk scholarship. It has undermined most sound judgment in today's Academia, and turned formerly elite humanities departments from Stanford in the west to Harvard and Yale in the east, and further into Western Europe, into an archipelago of epistemological *gulags*: reeducation camps, where minds

are imprisoned, where truth is tortured with mindless deconstructive frenzy, where unsuspecting students are preyed upon by conscienceless ideological raptors and are force-fed counter-factual utopian social theory. Welcome to the twenty-first century!

In this environment Reichenberger's and Riba's thesis will, I predict, indeed find sufficient favor, because its conclusions are congenial to the dominating ideology. The principal themes presented here, the hegemonic obsession, the systemic criticism, the anti-war stance, the critique of established religion, though unprovable, do "sound" good in this environment. They ring politically correct. They ring of Adorno and the Frankfurt School, of Lenin, Gramsci, and 1960's student rebellion. Never mind that this means the totally anachronistic, a-historical interpolation of an entirely modern concept into the past, which even the painfully concocted term "Early Modern" cannot cover up or "legitimize." All this in the name of trolling the past to satisfy modern ideologies, of ruthlessly conscripting every available able-minded author into the army of armchair revolutionaries. This is not scholarship, this is *Zeitgeist*-peddling.

The fact is, while some degree of social criticism can indeed be found in all serious literature in all periods, the form of dogmatic institutional criticism espoused here is not found in Cervantes' time. Contemporary critics would always concentrate on the individual first rather than the institution, regardless of whether it be a king, a churchman, or a peasant. Yes, Protestantism did aim at institutions in its limited sphere, but this never really touched Spain, and most importantly of all, it never translated into the secular version of the type proposed here by Reichenberger and Ribas. Luther prevented that; he refused to be coöpted into the Peasant Revolution, and thereby set the tone. Secular institutional criticism thus really does not go back further than the eighteenth century, and in Spain only to the nineteenth. Rousseau is usually claimed as the spiritual ancestor by most modern-day radicals. Spaniards could claim modest antecedents in Larra or the Generation of '98.

I hope that the preceding takes adequate account of what to me are the book's positive and negative points. I repeat, the results are mixed. And whatever its prospective place in Cervantine studies, there is one area where its place can be assured: there is an illustrious—and illustrative—history of cryptic readings of *Don Quijote*, going back, appropriately, to the Romantic Age. Nicolás Díaz de Benjumea, who proclaimed *Don Quijote* to be a *biblia humana*, mixed esthetics, philosophy, and imaginative history to produce esoteric readings that would resound phenomenally throughout much of the nineteenth century. And, like today's academics, he also added a good dose of institutional criticism and contemporary radical politics into the mix. (Some things do not change!) To top it off he also indulged in some imaginative *roman-à-clef* readings that always fascinate a proportion of readers in any

age. The danger, of course, in any such imaginative endeavors is that someone brutally sober might come along and burst the speculative bubble, as did the scholar-diplomat Francisco de Icaza who in 1918 called such critical enterprises “puramente parasitarios,” alien to the spirit of Cervantes’ book. I personally do not wish to invoke labels, but only wish to state that there are times in history that cry out for clear and sober minds, and their clear and sober words.

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