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Anthony Close. *A Companion to Don Quixote*. Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2008. 287 pp. ISBN: 978-1-855-66170-7.

Anthony Close's new book is an updated version of his *Cervantes: Don Quixote* ("Landmarks of world literature," 1990), bearing the refinements of considerable scholarly activity in the interim. Meant as an introduction to *Don Quijote* for the English-speaking non-specialist, it contains a brief overview of Cervantes' life and times, a discussion of the novel's sources, narrative structure and strategies, the development of its protagonists, analysis of key episodes in parts I and II, an account of *Don Quijote's* reception by critics and novelists, and a guide to further reading along with informative bibliography. Close has long been a prominent and occasionally magisterial voice admonishing critics who would anachronistically imbue Cervantes' novel with meanings—political, epistemological, religious, psychological—that the author could never have intended. Some feathers have likely been ruffled along the way, and Close's "intentionalism" is susceptible, amidst the leaps and bounds of critical inquiry, to the charge of antiquation. When, in the present study, Close partly attributes a lack of overt political dissent in Cervantes to "innate good taste" (13), some readers may wince. There are those of us who may feel let down by someone who defers to the staid canon of Toledo (rather than the zealously imaginative don Quijote) in questions of literary theory, and who insists on the decency of the *caballero del verde gabán*, and on Cervantes' detached approval of the entertainments of the Duke and Duchess. But instead of strident polemics or aloof dismissals, this book offers a good deal of clear, well-informed, subtle and, not least, accommodating discussion of *Don Quijote* and its legacy.

Two fundamental and related aspects of Cervantes' art receive fine treatment

1 Juan Goytisolo, *Disidencias* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1997), p. 312.

in this study: the nature of *Don Quijote's* realism and comedy. With regard to realism, Close sorts out the generic messiness of the novel, and accounts for the beguiling vitality of knight and squire. More than an affirmation of Aristotelian verisimilitude and unity of action, the canon of Toledo as authorial surrogate sets forth a deceptively innovative aesthetic of "common nature," a foregrounding of "homely ordinariness" (46). Close discusses how Cervantes' attention to the domestic routine of unremarkable characters and the humble imperatives of the body (eating, clothing, sleeping) inspired the likes of Fielding, Sterne and Smollett, and anticipated the great reorientations of the nineteenth-century novel. But he also cautions against conflating Cervantes' representation with the sociological preoccupations and rigor of Flaubert or Galdós. The inn-scenes, for example, are drawn as much from previous literature and folklore as from journalistic observation, and Cervantes modifies the archetypes and stereotypes to his own ends—most notably the parody of idealizing romance. We thus have a "realism of the second degree" (48). Close likewise comments on the narrator's frequent declarations of "la verdad de la historia," which should be understood as a principle of narrative relevance, not a serious or mocking claim to objective veracity (65). This is related to Cervantes' inclination to compromise verisimilitude in favor of functionalism, "function being understood as any feature of the story determined by artistic necessity or convenience rather than by considerations of truth-to-life" (113).

Close maintains that a sort of functionalism is also at play in the representation of don Quijote and Sancho, whose behavior is sometimes determined more by the artistic possibilities of a particular situation than by a strict notion of consistency of character. Here Close pours some cold water on critics who might get carried away with psychoanalysis, despite the appeal such an approach has for certain episodes. Yet he does acknowledge, and helps us appreciate, how the protagonists, drawn from numerous literary and folkloric types, do in fact develop and gain dimension as the narrative proceeds, in part through accumulation of experiences, in part through their conversations and mutual influence, in part through the exigencies of circumstance. He also recognizes that the interactions of knight and squire represent a "radical shift in the development of narrative fiction from incident to dialogue and from action to character" (90). And while he does not accept the idea that the characters' perspectives pose serious epistemological problems, he does show how Cervantes creates a "graduated approach" to truth, as in the piecing together of Cardenio's story (58). In other words, Close keeps his grip on the reigns of modern critical exuberance while illuminating many ways in which *Don Quijote* forms a foundational part of a trajectory that goes through Dickens, Kafka, and Joyce.

The question of *Don Quijote's* realism is inextricably bound to its comedy, an area to which Close has dedicated considerable thought and ink (most notably, *Cervantes and the Comic Mind of His Age*, 2000). The present book includes some cataloging of types of wit in *Don Quijote*—while the least fluid sequence in the

study, it provides a useful resource and contextualization (126-58). Our critic is best when dealing with entire episodes. Taking us through adventures such as the *galeotes* (I, 22) and the *Cueva de Montesinos*, he deploys an exhaustive knowledge of source materials and a fine ear to modulations of linguistic register and echoes of style, theme and image from previous scenes. By such means he succeeds in demonstrating how *Don Quijote* is, indeed, a “funny book,” and how such a designation does not limit its influence and implication. Close has contributed to our understanding of the “empathetic parody” of Cervantes, “his ambivalently intimate relationship to the target texts” (55). As Close illuminates the fugal quality of *Don Quijote*, the “compositional principle of repetition with variation and transference of motifs” (127), he also shows how such principles are at work in Cervantes’ entire *oeuvre*, in which quest narratives, underworld journeys, ennobling love, country and court are sometimes explored with a festive or mischievous levity, sometimes with sincere pathos. Despite a predominance of the comic mode, *Don Quijote*’s unprecedented mixture of what is normally kept separate makes it difficult sometimes to distinguish between the ridiculous and the dignified.

The following inventory and comments regarding don Quijote’s preparations for his *penitencia* (I, 25) indicate the attention to nuance, reference and register in this study:

an elegant exposition of the Renaissance doctrine of literary imitation; Aristotle’s concept of poetic universality; rehearsal of the precedents of his penance in *Amadís* and *Orlando furioso*; echoes of Albanio’s farewell to the natural world in Garcilaso’s Second Eclogue; satire of the indecipherable script of scribes, the affectations of love-poets, the faking of lineages; the amusingly vulgar anecdote of the merry widow and her lover; an edifying maxim about the nature of true love, adduced to justify the choice of low-born Aldonza as mistress; the drafting of two letters, one to Dulcinea couched in the archaic convolutions of chivalric novels, the other authorising the gift of three donkey-foals to Sancho in the wooden jargon of commercial bills of sale. Though the effect is absurd, the range of reference is dazzling in its scope, *and latent seriousness is perceptible in the absurdity*. (56 my italics)

Close’s subtle and spirited reading of the *galeotes* episode provides another illustration of how such varied sources and styles produce rich comedy, a ridiculousness with a residue of gravity (79-89). After surveying the literary, social and religious backgrounds of the figures and references, he exercises restraint in judging whether don Quijote’s freeing of the prisoners is meant to convey a conservative *cría cuervos* example, or a transgressive Christian affirmation of charity and human freedom. While casting light on how such opposing interpretations can be (and have been) made, Close reminds us of the curious detachment of the narrator, offering that, in the silent aftermath of the imprecations and violent clamor of the episode’s disastrous *desenlace*, it is the continued twitching of the traumatized ass’s ears that provides “the nearest thing to a comment on the moral

of the affair" (85). Such observations reveal how Cervantes was more interested in complex ironies, and delightful effects of image and tone, than in heavy-handed didacticism. Throughout, Close places Cervantes' singularity in context. He traces the connections to Aristotelian notions of laughter and Spanish Baroque *ingenio y agudeza*, the serio-comical counterpoint in Lope's *comedia*, the grotesque inversions of the picaresque, while delineating Cervantes' particular disposition and humorous mode. In contrast to the frequently humiliating and divisive humor of the picaresque, Close argues that Cervantes "insists on the therapeutic and restorative power of laughter, and presents a world in which it momentarily dissolves social barriers, creates affable relations between sane and insane, and makes the latter objects of sympathy rather than contempt" (158-59).

In *A Companion to Don Quixote* we find an affable Anthony Close who, during his concise account of the trajectory of critical views of *Don Quijote* from the seventeenth century, through Enlightenment Classicism and the Romantics, to modern and postmodern derivations (227-53), even has encouraging words for Bakhtin and Milan Kundera. While he convincingly insists that Cervantes was "a man of his Age," and that the history of *Don Quijote* criticism is rife with spectacular examples of the novel being made to conform to a disparate array of "prevailing ideologies," elements of Close's own historicist readings frequently come to mind during accounts of some rather modern interpretation: for example, the discussion of Bakhtinian "competition amongst languages," identified in Salman Rushdie by Fuentes (251), recalls Close's teasing out of diverse linguistic registers in Sancho, don Quijote, the *galeotes* and the narrator himself. And while he tempers them, he does not close off the potential social and political implications of Cervantes' ironies. As an audience member at a conference a few years ago, I observed Prof. Close as he was invited to comment on the disquisitions delivered by a panel of specialists gathered upon the stage. Exhibiting a range of facial expressions that endorsed his authority as a scholar of the comic, he stated his critical criteria: "¿es verdad, o no es verdad? Y si es verdad, ¿qué más da?" Then, like a new embodiment of governor Sancho, he proceeded to apply this elementary code to the cases before him. Regarding the first question, I would say of *A Companion to Don Quixote*: yes, it rings true. *Y ¿qué más da?* Well, there is nothing particularly new here, no provocative theory or revelation that could provide grist to a skyrocketing academic career. But for generalists—or specialists—interested in an informed and genuine work of appreciation, it is a study of not inconsiderable import.

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