

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

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Upon finishing Presberg's much anticipated study of paradox in *Don Quixote*, some questions inevitably come to mind: why is it that the commentators of this novel tend to find in it some of the "hottest" critical issues of the commentators' own historical time? Is it because they were always there, as an integral and intentional part of Cervantes' masterpiece, awaiting the refinement of literary theory to be found, or because the impreciseness that characterizes this particular work is so pervasive that it will always allow for disparate readings? Is a book such as Presberg's the discovery of a mythical El Dorado, or just the mirage of a myth?

Without fully answering the preceding questions, one can, perhaps safely, state the following: it may be difficult to believe at times that Cervantes had a precise understanding of all the intricate discursive relationships in his text—such as the effects of the imitation of imitation—and, especially, their implications. But that as an artist he intuited at least in part some of these relationships and their significance seems hard to dispute after reading *Adventures in Paradox*. Its author offers too much evidence and solid argumentation that a genuinely creative mind was at play in *Don Quixote* for anyone to believe it is all a colossal coincidence.

One of the polemics that has surrounded *Don Quixote* in the latter part of the 20th century concerns whether or not Cervantes' novel is primarily a funny book in which serious matters are treated, or basically a serious book that includes different types of humor to entertain diverse types of reader. Presberg is not fazed by this quasi-conundrum: *Don Quixote* is "not only too illustrative of discourse and human action, but also too funny not to be taken seriously" (192).

And Presberg takes it very seriously indeed. His book is divided into four basic parts: in the first, he traces the concept of paradox from antiquity to the Renaissance; the second concerns Spanish authors prior to Cervantes (Fernando de Rojas, Antonio de Guevara, Pero Mexía); in the third segment he establishes the five topical strains of paradox he will observe in *Don Quixote*, and also analyzes some aspects of the text, primarily the roles of the narrators, and their interactions with the "history"/ "story" through the prism of the Prologue of the first part of the novel. The extraordinary importance of this Prologue—which Presberg scrutinizes in every detail—provides ample reason for his adopting this vantage point. In the fourth part, Presberg discusses Cide Hamete—who, according to Presberg, is not "verisimilar"; the Moorish sage is a "lie," that is, an invention of the "second au-

thor” (187-189)—some of the interpolated stories, and in particular, the character of don Diego Miranda, the Knight of the Green Overcoat. Presberg’s views on all that the names themselves, “Diego” and “Miranda,” entail are both fascinating and an invitation to discussion. Don Quixote and don Diego are, according to this critic, “two contrary and complimentary characters” (227).

In the eyes of this author, Cervantes was the first, and perhaps the greatest, of deconstructors, challenging Aristotle’s distinction between “art” and “nature,” and asserting, through its paradoxical discourse, the “naturalness of art and the artifice of nature” (103). Presberg hastens to point out the differences between Cervantes and Derrida (132, n.28), but nonetheless, both writers partake, he says, of “similar logical or semantic paradox.” Indeed, Cervantes engages in “dramatizing and thematizing the ‘being’ of ‘telling’” (111). Similarly blurred is the line between author and reader, since in the self-conscious text, “reading (decoding) [is] ... another form of ‘authoring’ or encoding” (137). Consequently, the author of *Don Quixote* also shows “an understanding of [his] readers that closely resembles that of a contemporary critical tradition called Reader-Response Theory” (161, n.38).

In discussing other passages of the Cervantine text, some of this author’s comments are sure to create controversy. For instance, Presberg refers to the “friend” of the “first author” as a “second-rate reader” (150). The problem here is that there is no textual evidence that the friend has read the book at all. In fact, this is what enhances his chutzpah when he offers to make annotations and marginal comments to the text. Equally disputable is Presberg’s reading of the words “*como el más pintado*” that Cervantes applies to his reader. (“The most perfectly wrought man” is Presberg’s translation, or the one he accepts.) According to him, Cervantes is deploying “idiomatic terms that implicitly equate the reader with such soulless, unfree entities as a literary character or ‘painted image’” (126). (Tom Lathrop for example, translates this idiom as “like the best of them.”) The problem lies with what Presberg believes is “implicit” in Cervantes’ usage of that idiom. On another topic, this author states that not only does Cervantes not share, but that he parodies the belief that the romances of chivalry will be read as true histories (152). He also maintains that the Alonso Quijano “The Good” who recovers his mental health at the end of the narration is another imaginary—moral and religious—self of the protagonist, and that his surnaming himself “The Good” reveals his “penchant for self-flattery” (199). The character is not “altogether cured” (199). Don Quixote’s statement, “I know who I am,” is, according to Presberg, an act of “spiritual cowardice” (229).

In the opinion of this reader, Presberg pays very short shrift to Sancho Panza. In fact, I don't remember his referring to Sancho in *Barataria* at all. To be sure, this is due to his interpretation of the role of this character as it relates to the topic of paradox—"Sancho's self-awareness remains limited and involves something less than a radical transformation" (195)—but nonetheless, Sancho is confronted with a variation of the Paradox of the Liar while he was a "governor" (II, 51), which he "solves" by transcending logic, remembering the teachings of his master, and resorting to "mercy" when "justice" cannot be applied. If only for this Sancho deserves some attention, and one can only hope that the author's keen interest in paradox will compel him to address that episode in future writings.

Presberg's intellectual pyrotechnics are edifying, stimulating, at times engrossing. To end this review in the comfort zone of a cliché, it certainly can be said about his book that *se non é vero, é bene trovato*. Returning to the question posited at the start, one can only wonder if Cervantes' genius was as wondrous as Presberg deems it to be. I, for one, will more likely than not assume that many of his commentaries probably are an integral part of the "Truth-as-One" as it concerns *Don Quixote*, and it will be up to my graduate students (*leisured*, not *idle* readers) to accept or reject my *doxa*. ✱