

From: *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America*, 27.2 (Fall 2007 [2008]): 245-49.
Copyright © 2008, The Cervantes Society of America.
<http://www.h-net.org/~cervantes/csa/articf07/childersf07.pdf>

E[ric] C. Graf. *Cervantes and Modernity. Four Essays on Don Quijote*.
Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2007. 222 pp. ISBN: 0-8387-5655-7

During the 2005 centenary of still recent memory, many praised Cervantes as “modern,” but few gave a definite historical framework for their use of the term. This book offers a welcome opportunity to consider a specialist’s reflections on *Don Quijote*’s connection to “modernity.” Unexpectedly, though, Graf says nothing about the standard explanations of Cervantes’ role in founding modern *literature*; i.e. complex characters, sophisticated play with genres, exploration of psychological ambiguities, critique of the representation of reality, self-conscious use of metafiction, or freedom of the artist. He focuses on Cervantes, not as a modern *writer*, but as a modern *thinker*, indeed a “major foundational figure” of modern thought (18). His “modernity” is synonymous with progress toward four cardinal “values,” to which he believes Cervantes contributed

greatly: tolerance, feminism, secularism, and materialism.

Certainly, such an alignment of Cervantes with modern values does not come as a complete surprise. Graf's four main points are well-established critical positions, though not in quite the way he presents them. What sets his version apart is his bold overarching historical perspective: "I take the Enlightenment as the best vantage point from which to understand the true significance of *Don Quixote*" (16). As his downplaying of interpretations of Cervantes' work as a reflection of his circumstances in Hapsburg Spain makes clear, what really matters for him in *Don Quixote* is what has *survived*, what its author contributed to modernity's later unfolding. He sees current historicist emphasis on Cervantes' cultural specificity as reductive, in the quite literal sense that it makes the work less significant, impoverishing and trivializing it. Of course, this view presupposes that the ascension of modern values constitutes the one and only true path toward the betterment of humanity.

Such bold claims call for an equally striking hermeneutics, and Graf does not disappoint. His idiosyncratic, swashbuckling approach may not always persuade, but the results are always memorable, and often suggestive. Starting from minor details pulled out of context, he builds up a network of symbolic relations among seemingly disconnected textual moments. His technique operates through intermediary texts or images, to which Cervantes purportedly "alludes." Though some of these allusions may seem improbable, Graf indeed uses the term in the standard sense of a pointer *intentionally* placed by the author to guide the reader to a richer meaning than would otherwise be apparent. The unfolding of these allusive networks, chapter by chapter, is dazzling, and the risks Graf takes in their construction, the startling and sudden leaps, the farfetched connections, lend undeniable *brío* to the display.

Graf returns to certain scenes almost obsessively, such as the interruption of the fight with the Basque followed by the discovery of Cide Hamete's manuscript, Zoraida's arrival at the inn, or Don Quixote's attack on a procession carrying an image of the Virgin. These pages contain valuable contributions to our understanding of Cervantes' text that will leave a lasting mark. By reading what he terms "the Castilian's ethnic anxiety" across *both* the fight with the Basque *and* the encounter with the Morisco translator, Graf is able to frame the textual breakdown of Chapters 8 and 9 as a broad critique of "the aggressiveness of Spanish nationalism" (34-44). This critique is crowned by Cervantes' demand that his reader learn sufficient tolerance to accept Zoraida, a North African convert, as a figuration of the Virgin Mary (42-44). In his second chapter, Graf successfully manages to ground Cervantes' handling of the theme of masculine concupiscence in a straight-faced reading of Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* as Neoplatonic devotional literature (80-85). The structural and thematic analogies between Apuleius's interpolated tale of "Cupid and Psyche" and "The Tale of Foolish Curiosity" (71-73) provide food for thought, even if other texts could also be asserted as possible intermediaries, including Mateo Alemán's "Ozmín y Daraja." And though the notion that the episode of the dead body in *Don Quixote* I.19 is a rewriting of a scene from a 5th-century life of St. Martin might not be all that convincing (132-38), the analysis of that encoun-

ter as a mirroring of secular and religious fanaticisms grounded in the absent signifier *estantigua*, equally applicable to both Don Quixote and the friar who excommunicates him, definitely sheds new light on the text (149-51). Thus Graf accomplishes what must ultimately be the dream of every *cervantista*: certain passages of *Don Quixote* will never look quite the same to us after reading him.

Despite the suggestive power of the final product, the weak foundation of these networks is troubling. They seldom have any explicit connection to the concretization of the text as a coherent fictional experience for a reader *not* engaged in hermeneutical pyrotechnics. As a result, they float at a distance from *Don Quixote* read as a work of fiction to be enjoyed aesthetically, as Cervantes surely intended for us to do, even if only as a first step toward a more complex understanding. Nor do they relate its contents to extraliterary representations of social life or cultural practices from Cervantes' own time. The only historical relations that matter for Graf are the thin spider-web strands of allusion tying isolated literary, pictorial, and even architectural works to one another with at most vague, abstract references to their conditions of production. As far as his technique of interpretation is concerned, then, Graf himself is the most clearly "post-modern" reader of *Don Quixote* to date.

Would the brilliant spark of intuition that often shoots across these pages have been so diminished by fleshing it out in relation to Cervantes' and his readers' horizon of expectations? This would inevitably lead to a more nuanced view, however, of Cervantes' relationship to modernity, forcing Graf to restrain some of his sweeping transhistorical generalizations. He writes as if Renaissance humanism, including Neoplatonism, and Enlightenment rationality were one and the same, and most readers will come away with the sense that he believes current Neoliberal thought to be the epitome of enlightened reason as well. If we assume the triumph of modernity to be the only true meaning of history, then we can easily ignore such quibbling differences as may exist between Erasmus, Bruno, Hobbes, and Rorty. But this reasoning is ultimately circular, presupposing what it sets out to demonstrate, and it sometimes takes away from Graf's own valuable work. I would argue, for example, that there are original contributions here to such an important topic as Cervantes' enthusiasm for Neoplatonism, but the readiness to simply equate the latter with feminism, in order to prove Cervantes' modernity, blunts the sharpness of the insight.

Nowhere is this anachronistic tendency more dangerous than when Graf discusses Islam, as he does at some point in each chapter. To say he relies on a negative stereotype of Islamic doctrine and belief is an understatement. But what is more serious, and more relevant here, is that in his treatment of Cervantes' attitude toward Islam, he anachronistically presupposes the current relationship between Muslim and Western secular societies. In the early modern period, the Ottoman Empire was more tolerant of religious pluralism than Counter-Reformation Spain, and possibilities for class mobility independent of lineage prompted some European Christians to become renegades, "professional Turks." To project back onto the early modern Mediterranean the current imbalanced relation vis à vis modernity is at least as grave an intellectual

error as projecting an idealized image of *convivencia* forward from Medieval Spain to our own time, which Graf deplores (125-26). Neither approach will lead us out of the historical impasse in which we now find ourselves. But an honest attempt to reconstruct Muslim-Christian relations, including the hard-fought conflict over control of the Mediterranean, at the crucial moment when Western Europe took the path to modernity while North Africa and the Middle East did not, could be a useful starting point for constructing bridges of mutual respect and comprehension today.

This is part of a larger problem, however. Modernity is not just a set of values. It is a broad historical period involving far-reaching economic and political transformations and major changes in how people live and organize themselves in social groups. Cervantes lived at one end of that period of change, and we are at the other, with the Enlightenment to which Graf would assimilate *Don Quixote* somewhere in between. But Cervantes' characters, their patterns of behavior, his themes and the treatment of them, and his style and poetics all belong more to the early modernity of the Baroque than to the high modernity of bourgeois culture. And so we are left with a problem, how to reconcile the closeness we may feel with certain aspects of Cervantes' work with the relative strangeness of the cultural and social world in which he lived. This is arguably the major problem for Cervantes studies at present. But for Graf, it is non-existent, since modernity is the march, steady or vacillating, but unilateral, toward the major ideals he has indicated, and Cervantes was unambiguously committed to it.

We who have often and closely read *Don Quixote* and other works by Cervantes may find it difficult to recognize our author in this one-sided affirmation of universal progress. If there is anything that distinguishes Cervantes, it is his extraordinary ability to see and present both sides of an issue, to treat with subtle irony both the anachronistic defender of outmoded values and the smugly self-confident proponent of Progress. In Don Quixote's encounter with the Canon of Toledo or in Sancho's debate with Teresa, to name just two of many instances, the bold forward-thinking individual who has all the answers is confounded and flabbergasted by the stubborn traditionalist who refuses to see the Light. Curiously, Graf never discusses the modern value that seems to have been closest to Cervantes' heart, human equality despite barriers of social class. Baroque Spain was a highly stratified society in which the public representation of status was explicitly tied to lineage. Overcoming this social injustice was one of the great achievements of the modern age, and many scholars from the early Américo Castro forward have emphasized Cervantes' espousal of the view that true nobility is not inherited, but rather is achieved through a person's actions. But this issue, tied as it is to specific circumstances in the past that no longer hold sway, receives no mention here.

It is fascinating to imagine a dialogue between Graf—who has, after all, for better or worse staked out for himself a certain ground — and those whose understanding of *Don Quixote* and Cervantes' other works emphasizes more the specificity of their historical context in early modern Spain. But at this point, unfortunately, it is necessary to break off and admit to ourselves that such a debate will probably never be possible,

at least with Graf as a participant. Because for those whose view of modernity is less triumphalist than his own, he exhibits only disdain. Their arguments are never really considered, only rejected out of hand. Throughout the book, Graf ridicules the ideas of, as he puts it at one point, "most of today's humanities professors," (175n4) showing that he simply will not take seriously any attempt to question the superiority of modern Western civilization. Instead of counter-arguments, however, he relies on caricatures of others' views and, at times, the wholesale rejection of schools of thought without mention of specific individuals. From the first page of the introduction forward, Graf attacks a parade of straw men representing tendencies he excoriates, such as "historicism," "postmodernism," and, worst of all, "postcolonialism." He even denies that those with whom he disagrees really mean what they say, explicitly attributing, for example, skepticism vis à vis the degree of progressivism Cervantes exhibits, as expressed by George Mariscal, to the hypocrisy of fashionable academic posturing (51). And Graf does not hesitate to resort to terms that gratuitously belittle others' thought processes, sarcastic mockery, and insulting epithets ("angry," "cynical," "dishonest," "flimsy," "frivolous," "misguided," "muddled," "niggling," "paranoid," "twisted"). Employing a polemical tone of passionate self-righteousness may be in poor taste, but it can be accepted in academic discourse. The arrogant tactics to which Graf resorts, however, should not be. It is important to point out that the worst excesses occur in pages added as introductions or supplementary conclusions to the previously published articles on which these essays are based, and indeed it is hard to imagine they would have passed the editorial standards of such respected journals as *Diacritics* and *MLN* or scholars of the stature of Frederick de Armas and Francisco Caudet, who acted as editors of volumes where two of the essays first appeared. Thus at the same time as this illiberal and—ironically—unenlightened rhetoric reflects badly on Graf's own judgment, one cannot help but feel it does nothing to enhance the reputation of Bucknell University Press. For his own good, as well as for the good of Cervantes scholarship in general, let us hope that in the future this brash, creative, opinionated scholar will listen more carefully to others' ideas, and, even when there is nothing to be learned from them as far as he can tell, at least try to moderate the virulence of his rejection.

William Childers
Modern Languages and Literatures
Brooklyn College
2900 Bedford Ave.
Brooklyn, NY 11218
wchilders@brooklyn.cuny.edu