

## RICARDO QUINONES: A REVIEW

Jay Martin

Claremont McKenna College

- 82 Quinones, Ricardo J. *Dualisms: The Agons of the Modern World*. Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 2007. 451 pp.

Quinones, Ricardo J. *Erasmus and Voltaire: Why They Still Matter*. Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 2010. 222 pp.

“Le véritable ennemi est toujours celui qui est le plus proche de vous” (The true enemy is ever the one nearest to you), Jean-Paul Sartre remarked in *Les Écrits* (1970). He was not the first to say so. Neither was William Blake, when he called attention to the fact that “two classes of men are always on the earth and they should be enemies. Whoever seeks to reconcile them seeks to destroy existence”; or, more famously, “Without contraries is no advance.” Ovid and Virgil lived long before either.

Ricardo J. Quinones’ book *Dualisms* advances beyond all previous accounts of such enmities, not only in scope and specificity, but also in depth and extension. He credits Coleridge with being “our first and foremost theorist of dualisms” (*Erasmus and Voltaire* vii), and surely Coleridge’s commentaries in *The Friend* were remarkable; but with the publications of *Dualisms*, followed by that of *Erasmus and Voltaire*, we must now revise Quinones’ modest nod to Coleridge and acknowledge that it is he himself who is, if not the first, our foremost theorist of dualisms. What is more, in now joining his work on the clashes of great writers and presences with the new book that undertakes a theory of resemblances and convergences between major figures, he has re-enriched the theory of dualism with the corollary stream of great and powerful affinities between certain representative writers. The predecessor book anticipated and required the second; its successor required and then fulfilled the first.

In *Dualisms* Quinones selected four pairs of writers who vigorously and inevitably clashed with each other. These are Erasmus and Luther, Voltaire and Rousseau, Turgenev and Dostoevsky, and Camus and Sartre. The intellectual contests between each duo start as duets and turn into duels in which the central preoccupations, dilemmas, contradictions, and arguments of their ages were thrown into sharp, contrasting focus by their rivalries. “Confrontations,” “clashes of principle,” “dialectical dramas,” “cross-rivalries,” “complex involvements”—such metaphors abound in the book and give the study itself a tone of high excitement. Unlike George Bellows’ vivid boxing painting that graces the cover of *Dualisms*, the grappling of Quinones’ exemplary antagonists never ends, only begins over again in new persons. “One can terminate but not bring to completion a work such as *Dualisms*” (396), Quinones justly observes, since the character of the clash existed before the lives of any pair and will necessarily endure beyond them, to be recalled and reassessed by later exemplars.

Quinones complexly differentiates and inspects the two agons. The one strain goes to the edge of the abyss in intellectual daring, but then “pulls back” out of a civilization-preserving instinct, an adherence, at the last, to a cultural territory. The counter-strain plunges forward into the darkness. The first is reformist; the second, revolutionary. The first promotes the renewal of “man of the present day” (Nietzsche’s phrase); the second envisions new man. The first is drawn toward the objective and instrumental; the second is suffused with personality, self, “new knowledge,” and a wild experimental vision of the incredible transformation of man of the present day into a new ecstatic being. Quinones calls these two streams the “writers of consciousness” and the masters of the “daemoniac.”

The reflective reader soon understands that Quinones is not merely talking about his four pairs. They are merely representative. His book expands immensely beyond the boundaries of its examples. The student of American literature, for instance, is likely to see that the history of the American “mind” might be well disclosed through the successive encounters of Franklin and Edwards, Hawthorne and Melville, Henry James and William James, Fitzgerald and West, Eliot and Lowell, and Updike and Mailer. The historian of music would surely set out in a quest to understand the deep rivalry between Verdi and Wagner, who were almost exact contemporaries. Nor is the method limited to illumination of the Humanities. Surely the political scientist could begin to see that our politics today were shaped by the encounters of those great conservers, Washington, the Adamses (both father and son), Lincoln, Kennedy, and George Herbert Walker Bush, with those daemoniacs, Jefferson, Jackson, Teddy Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and William Jefferson Clinton. The historian of philosophy might start with Aristotle and Plato, and eventually reach Dewey and Marx; while the psychoanalyst might wonder about Adler and Freud, or Kohut and Lacan. All might well reach similar conclusions to those of Quinones.

What Quinones is making for and meaning in these two books, taken as one work, is a theory of cultural change and cultural continuity. What makes for these dual tracks has long been a vexed question in *Geistgeschichte*. Into this territory,

Quinones makes a far-reaching advance. His paired books show that culture and civilization are powerfully wrenched by the contests as well as powerfully steadied by the convergences he studies. It is almost as if these contestants and continuers are created by the inner needs and narratives of culture for both change and continuity, unyielding revolt, and mediating continuance. Man must have both tough settlements and wild schisms.

Here, then, Quinones exposes an important fact about human nature and its development. A well-worn truth that we often forget is that in the healthy development of every person he or she must separate and individuate and at the same time hold on fast. Among the early phases of child development which Margaret Mahler and her followers and extenders have laid out is the phase of “rapprochement,” when the budding self hovers in a simultaneity of strong attachment fused with daring individuation. Society, it seems, is always in its own peculiar rapprochement phase. In order to change, it needs the unsettlement of dualisms. But in order to endure it requires continuity and connection. It is at once a happy and unhappy family. Civilization strives for the dazzling new, but like every individual is equally fulfilled by the pleasure of repetition compulsion. Without collision, no advance; without continuity, no contentment.

So in *Erasmus and Voltaire* Quinones turns from dualisms to convergences in order to complete the picture. In this account, Erasmus does not so much “anticipate” Voltaire. In the always recapitulative and projective activities of culture, they are contemporary, as are all those who are precursors or followers in the Erasmian genealogy, these champions of Western civilization. In this new book, Quinones engages in a “quest” to pass beyond the clash of differences in order to discern the equally significant recapitulative emergences. He is now not making “comparisons,” as *Dualisms* was not about “contrasts.” Rather, as his analysis of the remarkable affinities between Erasmus and Voltaire shows, for a truly vital confluence to exist, “there must be points of genuine association, historical connection, and spiritual convergence between the figures involved” (ix). It might be added that even beyond these, biological temperament, family history, acquired disposition, and learned attitudes are also likely to help form a solid matrix of convergence and to prompt a “meeting of minds.”

The persistence of dualisms corresponds to man’s and his culture’s need for divergence, while convergences, recapitulations and remediations respond to and create continuity. *Dualisms* gives one side and constitutes one of the “pillars of knowledge in Western culture” (*Erasmus...* 192). But man in culture needs a second pillar, and that is the subject of this second volume.

*Dualisms* was therefore written with a keen sense that it was to be but one of a two-volume set. In the midst of the first volume Quinones reflected: “it will be one of the purposes of this and a future study to explore more fully the affiliations between Erasmus and Voltaire...as well as those with the other writers of consciousness” (200). Books on the convergences between daemonic authors are noisily dramatic

and thus all too frequent, else Quinones might have chosen to examine, say, the connections between Rousseau and Sartre. Instead he chose to illuminate the quieter (but still fully dramatic) confluence between Erasmus and Voltaire. It takes courage to be an original critic.

*Erasmus and Voltaire* has a second appeal. The interim of a few years between the publication of these two books afforded Quinones the opportunity, indeed the foreknown necessity to reflect upon *Dualisms* even as he composed its antitype. The result is not a reassessment of the earlier work, but an extension and deepening of it. In this evolution of a concept, new ideas and new formulations arose. Additional critics brought new stimulations. Quinones briefly revisits the dualisms existing between Erasmus and Luther and Voltaire and Rousseau, and he points the reader in some fresh directions in “three additional areas of concern left untouched in my previous volume” (147). Later in this new book he writes “What I did not see in my work is another problem which awareness of dualisms can help resolve” (160). Perhaps the most original addition in this new book to the earlier volume is the Epilogue’s examination of the dualistic clash between Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger. Clearly, Quinones’ attention was brought to their great debate because Cassirer, himself a “writer of consciousness,” a continuer of Erasmus and Voltaire, contributed so importantly to Quinones’ depiction of the convergence between those two earlier writers. So the later book bred a renewed visitation to the drama of divergences.

85

This reader considers fortuitous the chance to examine this duet of books together. Take one of these volumes by Quinones and you must take the other. They are so tangled as to be indissoluble. And they stand as a major contribution not only to the works of the writers they treat; not only to an original inspection of the deeply divided nature of Western civilization; not only to a means and method whereby the Humanities and humanistic learning may be invigorated; but, finally, these books offer a profound insight into the most complex corridors of man’s nature.

That should properly be the conclusion and last word in this assessment of the achievement of these two books. But I would leave too gaping a lacuna did I fail to state that these two books, most especially *Erasmus and Voltaire*, are beautifully written. A collection of expertly crafted, finely expressed ideas of importance, and, yes, wisdom would be compiled from that work. Quinones has always, in all his books, possessed a gift for style, but here he is writing not merely as a commentator on those authors he treats, but also as their co-equal and companion in excellence. When profundity in conception and grace in execution are indissolubly fused with brilliance of composition, the reader must simply smile gratefully, then leave the rest to silence.