

Mini-Symposium: Critical Book Reviews & Academic Freedom

Where Does Scholarly Critique End? Where Does ...“Parody” Begin? A Mini-Contribution to a Mini-Symposium on Critical Book Reviews, with the Permission of Don Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra

*Ignacio de la Rasilla del Moral**

In a village of Europe, the name of which I have no desire to call to mind, there lived not long since one of those book reviewers that keep a soft-tongue in the lance-rack for his friends' books, an old buckler with partisan coat-of-arms as a mark of his feudal loyalty to his academic ancestors, a lean hack to accompany him in the dark alleys of scholarly fears, and a greyhound for coursing his civil-servant oriented career's ambitions. An olla of rather more beef than mutton, a salad on most nights, scraps on Saturdays, lentils on Fridays, and a pigeon or so extra on Sundays, made away with three-quarters of his income. His first years in academia were of such quality as to drive him to the verge of quitting this miserable life more than once. The rest of his income went to a doublet of fine cloth and velvet breeches to attend academic congresses, and shoes to match for holidays, that were always research-oriented, and on weekdays he made a brave figure in his best homespun.

He had in his house a computer past the age of five, a cat under twenty and a girl-friend and acting-research assistant for the field and market-place, who used *mutatis mutandi* to saddle the hack as well as handle the bill-hook. The age of this gentleman of ours was bordering on 40; he was of a hardy habit, spare, gaunt-featured, a not so early riser and a very lousy sportsman. They will have it his surname was *Figaro* or *Duende*¹ (for here there is some difference of opinion among the authors who write on the subject), although from reasonable conjectures it seems clear that he was called *El pobrecito hablador*.² This,

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¹ “Figaro” and “Duende” as well as (*vid. infra*) “El pobrecito hablador” (literally, “The poor little talker”) are some of the conspicuous literary pseudonyms of Mariano José de Larra (1809-1837) who was a Spanish romanticist writer noted for chastising with satire Spain's 19th century ills in his work. A true classic of the Spanish letters, he is considered as perhaps the best prose writer of 19th-century Spain.

² See: *supra* note 1.

however, is of but little importance to our tale; it will be enough not to stray a hair's breadth from the truth in the telling of it.

You must know, then, that whenever the above-named gentleman was at leisure (which was nearly all year-round) he gave himself up to reading reviews of international law books with such ardor and avidity that he almost entirely neglected the pursuit of his other academic interests, and even the management of his property; and to such a pitch did his eagerness and infatuation go that he sold many an acre of tillage-land to buy more books of international law in order to review them himself, or give them to others, and brought home as many of them as he could get.

But of all there were none he liked as much as those of international criminal justice composition, for their lucidity of style and complicated conceits were as pearls in his sight. This was particularly the case when in his reading he came upon procedures - and technicalities - where he often found passages like "the reason of the unreason with which my reason is afflicted so weakens my reason that with reason I murmur at your ICC Trial Proceedings", or again, "the high heavens, that of your divinity divinely fortify you with the stars, render you deserving of the desert the greatness of your book barely deserves."³

The poor gentleman lost his wits over conceits of this sort, and used to lie awake striving to understand and worm the meaning out of them; what Aristotle himself could not have made out or extracted had he come to life for that special purpose. He was not at all easy about the wounds which Calvo-Goller gave and took, because it seemed to him that, as great as the surgeons were who had cured her, she must have had her face and body covered all over with seams and scars. He commended, however, the Weigend way of ending book reviews with the promise of that interminable adventure, and many a times was he tempted to take up his pen and finish it properly as is proposed, which no doubt he would have done and made a successful piece of it, had not greater and more absorbing thoughts prevented him from doing so.

Many an argument did he have with the curate of his village (a learned man, and a graduate of Siguenza) as to which had been the better knight, Lauterpacht of England or Kelsen of Gaul. Master Nicholas, the village barber, however, used to say that neither of them came up to the Knight of Koskenniemi, and that if there was any that could compare with him it was Don Weiller, the brother of Kelsen of Gaul, because he had a spirit that was equal to every occasion, and was no finikin knight, nor lachrymose like his brother, while in the matter of valor he was not a whit behind him.

³ As it is well known, despite the fact that the excerpts appear in the original between brackets, Miguel de Cervantes does not provide sources for the quotations he takes from the half-fantastic works of chivalry that he parodies in the opening paragraphs *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de La Mancha* (1605)

In short, he became so absorbed in his international law book reviews that he spent his nights from sunset to sunrise, and his days from dawn to dark, poring over them; and what with little sleep and much reading his brains got so dry that he lost his wits. His fancy grew full of what he used to read about in his books, enchantments, quarrels, battles, challenges, wounds, wooings, loves, agonies, and all sorts of impossible nonsense; and it so possessed his mind that the whole fabric of invention and fancy he read of was true, that to him no history in the world had more reality in it.