

Ricardo J. Quinones. *Erasmus and Voltaire: Why They Still Matter*.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010. xvii + 222 pp. index. bibl. \$55. ISBN: 978-1-4426-4054-2.

In this comparative study, Quinones juxtaposes the lives and careers of two eminent public intellectuals, Erasmus and Voltaire, offering an interpretation of cultural history by “explor[ing] the various and even unexpected areas through which they travel together” (v). The genre of comparative biography has a long history, from Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* to Desmond Seward’s bestselling *Napoleon and Hitler*. Quinones’s book demonstrates the significance of this approach for contemporary historiography. Comparative biography traditionally focuses on character and personality, inducing parallels that may strike some readers as ahistorical. Quinones does include elements of psychology, but he investigates the historical setting and does not level the differences in a facile manner. His comparisons are subtle and nuanced, and his methodology sound. He rigorously ties psychological readings to text-critical analyses and has an admirable grasp of the

mentalité of the two movements, humanism and Enlightenment, represented by the protagonists. Thus his book transcends the psychological approach, lifting it into the literary and intellectual sphere, paralleling the “philosophical charge behind the arguments of philology” (84). The comparative approach is further justified in Quinones’s case because he is principally interested in the typology of dualism, a phenomenon that requires an overarching study to reveal patterns.

The topics selected for discussion in the book are the social setting in which Erasmus and Voltaire grew to maturity, their sense of belonging and lack of attachment, the influence of travel and of exposure to other cultures on their intellectual development, the defense of the new intellectual movements that characterized the protagonists’ time, the choice of narrative as a vehicle for social criticism, the appeal of the perennial favorites. The chapters clearly proceed in ascending order of importance, with the last being reserved for the grand polemics in which the protagonists were involved. The conclusion draws the study into the twentieth century, showing that the battles fought by Erasmus and Voltaire on behalf of the humanities and, more broadly, on behalf of culture and civilization, were fought anew in the polemic between Cassirer and Heidegger.

In a sense, the present work is a sequel or complement to Quinones’s earlier *Dualisms: The Agons of the Modern World* (University of Toronto Press [2007]). However, familiarity with *Dualisms* is not a prerequisite to understanding what the author has to say here about Erasmus and Voltaire. Indeed, where a crossreference allows for a deeper appreciation of the points made, Quinones himself provides the needed context.

The book has many commendable features. It showcases the author’s erudition and his impressively broad reading. It offers original and insightful interpretations of the writings of Erasmus and Voltaire and argues them convincingly. I particularly enjoyed the comparison between the *Colloquies* and *Contes* and the Shakespearean link connecting them. It was an inspired decision to make these works a matrix for discussing the protagonists’ intellectual development. As Quinones rightly says, they “bring out the [author’s] neglected or invisible self” (140). I am less enthusiastic about the long endnotes in this book, some of them exceeding a printed page. In my opinion, if a subject warrants extended discussion, it should be incorporated in the text. Finally, Cassirer, who is the subject of the epilogue, does not match Erasmus’s or Voltaire’s stature and the scope of their writings.

Such criticism notwithstanding, Quinones’s book is a superb piece of work that will appeal not only to scholars but also to the learned general reader. Juxtaposing the lives and writings of Erasmus and Voltaire, Quinones makes good on his claim (xiv) that comparison brings an added dimension to entities by drawing them into a new web of relationships.

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