INTERRUPTED MYSTICISM IN CERVANTES’S PERSILES

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Here is a mystery of our race… the propensity of Spanish people is all for action, common sense, and a tendency for preferring the art of life…

—Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo (1879)

INTRODUCTION

Miguel de Cervantes made sure that his views on religious issues remained veiled and expressed so ambiguously that literary historians and critics will probably never know what his personal religious beliefs were. What we do know, however, is that this most celebrated of Spanish writers was keenly aware of the central role played by religion in the lives of Spaniards of all backgrounds. In all his works of fiction, he shows an anthropological interest in depicting how his contemporaries lived in a world ruled to a large extent by religious myths and rituals. Mysticism is a subject that Cervantes tackles in a similar manner. He is not interested in fictionalizing or dramatizing a mystical and / or visionary

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1 I would like to thank Ron Surtz for an enlightening conversation on Spanish mystics and fallen women. Marcelino Menénedez y Pelayo’s original Spanish says “[en el siglo XVI] tuvimos tantos y tan excelentes autores e inventores de fortificación, de artillería, de arte de navegar, de cosmografía y de arquitectura naval, y relativamente tan pocos geómetras y astrónomos; tantos y tan gloriosos médicos, y relativamente tan pocos cultivadores de la Física experimental y de la Química. Hay aquí un misterio de raza, que conviene dilucidar apartándose de las vulgaridades admitidas, por lo mismo que lleva consigo cierto germen de imperfección que importa combatir y desarraigar. La gente española propende a la acción, y se distingue por el sentido práctico y por la tendencia a las artes de la vida” (Marcelino Menénedez y Pelayo, La ciencia española: polémicas, indicaciones y proyectos [Madrid, 1879], p. 97). I first came upon this reference through E. Allison Peers’s book on Spanish mysticism (Spanish Mysticism: A Preliminary Survey, London [1924], p. 41).

2 Most records of mystical experiences come from the lives of nuns, monks, or other people associated with religious orders. Inquisitorial documents of the 16th century also record cases of common folks who attested to having received visions and miracles (a few recognized as authentic by authorities), but they did not pass on to form part of hagiographical or exemplary collections (see William Christian Jr., Apparitions in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain [Princeton, 1981]).
event according to the literary paradigms set up by hagiographical literature. In this essay, I discuss how Cervantes refashions mysticism within the context of his secular and material world.

It is in an intercalated story—often referred to as “the episode of Feliciana de la Voz”—within his last and posthumous novel The Trials of Persiles and Sigismunda (and nowhere else in his fiction) where he envisages the only event approaching the paradigm of a mystical and/or visionary experience. Cervantes questions the value of the mystical experience by first leading readers to believe that they will witness a supernatural event—during which his protagonist Feliciana and the Virgin Mary will form a divine union—and then abruptly defying the readers’ expectations by interrupting the mystical moment right before its climax. In broad terms, Cervantes casts Feliciana’s episode as a perspectivistic exploration of mysticism itself. More specifically, he legitimizes the yearning for supernatural divine intervention by highlighting the protagonist’s mother-quest while clearly making the point that the resolutions to her earthly problems are to be found exclusively in the realm of the empirical world.

**The Sacred Space of Guadalupe in the Persiles**

It is significant that the only near-mystical or visionary moment in Cervantes’s literary works is textually placed at the center of the *Persiles.* It takes place soon after the eponymous protagonists leave the fruitless lands of the North and enter the fertile countries of Southern Europe. In the novel, the mysterious North is characterized as dark, fruitless, life-threatening, and barbaric, while the identifiable South (Portugal, Spain, France, and Italy) is fertile, redemptive, and what Cervantes’s contemporaries would have considered “civilized”. Following Mircea Eliade’s understanding of religious spaces, the Northern lands represent the space of the profane, while the South symbolizes the sacred. As the pilgrims transition into the early modern Western world, the chaotically amorphous space of dungeons and caverns gives way to the cosmicized territory of Christian temples and shrines.

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