

Ricardo da Costa, *Delírios da Idade Média*, Santo André, SP, Armada, 2023. ISBN 978-65-87628-26-4. 370 pgs.

Reviewed by: Humberto Schubert Coelho
Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora, Brasil



A massive trilogy on medieval cultural history came to its closure this year. Following its relatively recent predecessors, *Impressions on the Middle Ages* and *Vision on the Middle Ages*, *Delusions of the Middle Ages* is a coherent collection of essays by the renowned Brazilian historian Ricardo da Costa. A spiritual opera, the trilogy expresses Da Costa's decade-long pursuit of virtue and excellence through the lens of medieval history. The books strike the reader as a careful technical work on medieval art, philosophy, theology and atmosphere, while reflecting professor Da Costa's classical approach to the perennial values and principles. Without incurring in political traditionalism – at least in the current sense of the word – or anachronism, the author consciously avoids applying contemporary (and judgmental) standards to the medieval mentality, in an effort to bring the readers to the proper cognitive and symbolic environment of his subjects.

I dedicated some effort to the analysis of Ricardo da Costa's work during the last years, having published a previous review on *Vision on the Middle Ages* (Coelho, 2021),¹ so I will start with a very brief consideration on the trilogy as a whole before analysing the last book.

Apparently, the author chose the texts for their thematic adequacy, and not necessarily in a chronological order. A specialist in Catalonia and the Catalan philosopher Ramon Lull, Da Costa's essays frequently address these subjects, but his

¹ Coelho, Humberto Schubert. Review on *Vision on the Middle Ages*. *Medievalia* 24, 2021. [146-151]

scope is far from narrow or restricted to one region and one time. To be fair to his own perspective, the author sustains an intense dialogue with Antiquity, Augustine, Boethius, the catholic orders and Aquinas.

What I consider the most relevant trace of Da Costa's trilogy, however, is the distinct spiritual tone underlying the essays. According to his thesis, the Middle Ages are defined by this spiritual (moral, philosophical, theological, aesthetic) tone, and ignoring it would result in deeply distorted understanding of the motivations and characters of medieval men. These distortions, however, have been rapidly becoming dominant among a generation of historians unprepared to distinguish their contemporary mentality from past ones. A general difficulty in elaborating fair comparisons between times is paralleled by an anthropological difficulty in making similar comparisons between cultures. While these difficulties may result in a disadvantage for times with different values than those of our days, in comparisons between cultures the exact opposite is the case: the general tendency is to positively appreciate the others while negatively appreciating one's own culture. That leads to a contradiction that the philosopher is more prepared to detect than most historians and sociologists, namely, the idea that our contemporary – western, democratic, liberal... – values are superior to those of the previous ages contradict the idea that western culture must/should be put on check by decolonial criticism.

This perception brings the author to an essentially suspensive and non-judgemental attitude towards medieval subjects. This basic concern with impartiality and intellectual honesty may sound too obvious, but the current academic scenario does not allow us to regard this attitude as the standard. When he says, for example, that “the medieval men went joyfully to war” (Da Costa, 2023, 44) his position about this fact is not to be spotted. The intention of the author seems to be restricted to communicate to the reader something that she may not be aware of.

Again, the books attempt to facilitate correct understanding, in Wilhelm Dilthey's sense of humanistic understanding. In order to do so, the author brings the values and the religious concerns of his subjects to his treatment of war, emphasizing that only religious world view and disposition would allow for the understanding of medieval praise for battles and wars. This subject is also connected to the notions of crusades and the search for the holy grail, which are also examples of how religious mentality coined dramatically different perceptions about warfare as necessary and even glorious, which contrasts with the Modern understanding of it as a waste of lives for the sake of empty ideologies. Another key point regarding the same subject is the idea of immortality of the soul, which was not only generalised but significantly stronger among the people and stimulated by the education. The medieval people, in resume, would not fear death as they Modern counterparts.

Political and economic processes, however, are not the focus of the cultural historian. The author is far more interested in art, religion, philosophy, literature and mentalities. In this sense, the trilogy presents insights on how medieval people experienced life, instead of what they did. Considering this, the third book seems to be a coronation of his intentions.

Delusions of the Middle Ages is divided in four parts: history, literature, philosophy, and art; but these parts are all centred on the cultural aspects and implications of these fields. The chapter on the conquest of Cordoba, for example, highlights the significance of this deed to the Hispanic understanding of their both national and religious destiny. If Ferdinand III had failed in this quest, not only the strategic and economic power of Spain would be diminished, but the expansionist and

proselytizing mood of its people, which shaped the Modern world as we know it, could have a dramatically different outcome.

I personally enjoyed the chapter on the wheel of fortune, which combines philosophy, art, religion and their impact on collective imagery and practical life. Da Costa starts with the origins of the concept in Greek and Roman myths, and in Seneca, moves to Augustin and Boethius, and then to literature, poetry and pictorial art, building a very comprehensive, while short synthesis of the key relevance of such philosophical perspective on chance and fortune. Based on Ancient and Christian notions of natural change, the wheel of fortune appeared to the medieval person not as an arbitrary chaotic determinism, but as patterned and logical process humans should wisely presuppose and adapt to.

A competent musician and an expert in the use of imagery, Da Costa's artistic analyses are filled with specific and technical consideration on medieval musical sheets and paintings, giving the reader a taste of his classes on Art History. In his classical approach, the author not only intends to bring readers closer the proper aesthetical tone of medieval characters, but he actually thinks and experiences life through the same aesthetical colours. In fact, according to him, appreciating paintings, sculptures and cathedrals, and listening or playing music are as essential for the proper humanistic understanding of mentalities as the scholarly knowledge of the sources. A purely textual immersion would result in dry and distant simulacrum of what medieval monks and knights actually thought and felt. The aesthetical atmosphere, therefore, is essential to communicate at least a semblance of the original *Lebenswelt* of the texts.

The three chapters on philosophy are dedicated to Ramon Lull, encompassing the tension between his tolerant and his militant attitudes, his considerations on the absolute necessity of an ethical concern on lyrics, and his considerations on melancholy (physical/medical, psychological and spiritual). Melancholy, according to Lull, would be the most evil and ungodly of the attitudes, for it opposes the desire to live, the joyful and grateful attitude towards life as a sacred gift, consisting, therefore, in a rebellious disposition, the very opposite of faith.

The closing chapter, in the art section, is dedicated to *The triumph of death*, by Peter Bruegel the Elder. Da Costa sees this painting as one of the iconic captures of medieval spirit. Full of symbolical meanings, the painting refers to a range of aesthetical elements, such as the sound of woodcutting and the screams of the agonizing.

The tone of facial expressions is of terror. More than any other artist of his time, Bruegel expresses in his faces the forces that act upon them: they are instruments of saying. Open mouths, perplexed, astonished before the speed and the mercilessness of the massacre.

At the bottom left of the viewer, a yellowish skull with an hourglass supports by the arm the fainting king that waits his death. While smiling mockingly (because not even the rulers scape their destiny), the skull shows respect: it is a monarch after all, and he deserves a last manifestation of dignity in this wait. (Da Costa, 2023, 44)

The rather disturbing picture of death has a consoling effect. It works, the author of *Delusions* writes, as the ultimate awakening process to the fact that our spiritual parts should have priority over the pale attractions of a veil of illusions. Death is the healthiest message for the soul, for it reminds us that metaphysics is the only yjiong that could provide anything capable of enduring the material transitions through time,

transitions that would render life meaningless if not mediated by this spiritual and metaphysical sense of a higher and deeper reality.