



Ricardo da Costa, *Visões da Idade Média*. Santo André: Armada, 2020. ISBN 978-65-87628-03-5

The second edition of *Vision on the Middle Ages* came to light in 2020. The book follows the pattern established by *Impressions on the Middle Ages*, from the Brazilian medievalist Ricardo da Costa (1962-). As the previous book, *Visions* is dedicated to cultural history, with significant emphasis on the history of art as a medium for broader cultural meanings and historical occurrences.

Da Costa is one the most prolific academic writers in Brazil, and the highest authority on Ramon Llull in the Portuguese language, with a very large portfolio of scientific articles and essays on a wide range of subjects. As a cultural historian, he is interested in the life of the spirit, and appreciates the full intellectual extension of the medieval culture, from its roots in Antiquity to its crisis in the Renaissance.

The present book is another clear picture of Da Costa's particular understanding of the mission and vocation of a historian: to make readers aware to the relevance of many medieval facts and living experiences to the constitution of modern civilized mind, and, of course, to bring the reader closer to the issues that raised intellectual contemplation and love in the souls of great medieval thinkers and artists.

In the foreword, Antonio Cortijo Ocaña summarized in a nutshell Da Costa's intention in these terms: "Truth, Beauty, Deity are three central axes of reflection in these pages centred in the Middle Ages" (p. 9).

Da Costa is indeed greatly concerned with the truth, a virtue that he sees as dependent on fidelity to the sources. Historians have been trained to build massive narratives from the sources, without carefully checking what could actually be concluded from them, and too often this process has been proved ideologically biased.

Typical examples are the artistic representations of the Inquisition, which Da Costa identifies as openly programmatic and politically interested, at least in the case of Pedro Berruguete's (1450-1504), Goya's (1746-1828) and Cristiano Banti's (1824-1904) paintings. Still popular today, the paintings of these great artists represent Inquisition through the untruthful lens of cultural prejudice against the ecclesiastic authorities. While the facts are that the clergy only judged the heresy – torture and executions being performed by state authorities, when real – the pictures present priests in high stages appreciating executions in clear suggestion

of a direct relation between the analysis of heresy and these executions; or a heroic Galileo Galilei confronting an oppressive clerical office.

Centuries of biased representations in art and books led to a general acceptance of the widespread myth about Galileo being tortured, imprisoned and even burned at the stake. “97 % of Spanish students are convinced that he was tortured” (p. 41). The dramatic misinformation would not take place if historians were trained to spot propaganda instead of actively reinforcing them.

But propaganda against who or what? Da Costa argues that, at least in this specific case, anti-Catholic propaganda is in the core of malicious or misinformed depictions of the Holy Office. An idea of which hunting is a good example. Da Costa observes that 4 processes ended in execution in Portugal, 59 in Spain and 36 in Italy, the largest catholic countries. In protestant Europe, in comparison, 100.000 woman were sued, and more than a half of them were executed (p. 30-31). In both cases (Catholic and Protestant communities), ecclesiastic authorities would only conduct the investigation. The death penalty was determined by the secular law of most countries, so that the State was mainly responsible for delivering the sentence.

Da Costa has no intention to make a defence of the institution of the Church of Rome, but to highlight how dramatic inaccuracies and consequent inadequacies of judgment which derive from ideological acceptance of implicit charges against it.

Provocative, Da Costa never stutters in the face of political correctness or the threat of academic scorn. He writes what he thinks, in the very words he thought, and it is remarkable that his sardonic discourse, full of intimacy, never loses in elegance. As a critic, more than as an apologist, his pen tells us how much the author is indebted to the satirical literature and the keen tongues of the 15th and 16th centuries.

The reflection on the systematic character of history is not detached from the historical analysis itself, for the latter has to face the consequences of the former.

Our tradition, at least until the forged crisis idealized and experienced since the mid-1960s, from the Europe of “it is forbidden to forbid” to the academic environment in the USA, always associated history to the truth. Although we all knew about the difficulties of reaching the truth through all dissimulation, filters, lies and distortions of life in time, even knowing that the real is not the truth, because we all construct our identities and play characters according to the circumstances, we had at least the pretension to rebuild it, to gather the sparse pieces, sometimes intentionally dispersed, to solve and understand the puzzle of times lost (p. 90).

After the *death of God*, theology had to return to the Scripture, or the the idea of a constitutive religious experience available to all mankind. After the

end of history, therefore, we should strive to return to documental sources (p. 92-94).

In the chapter on the Crusades and the Pogroms, Da Costa makes a case for the correct understanding of the radicalism of sectarianism and orthodoxy in all times and cultures. In an environment where Jews, Christians, Muslims and Pagans generally had very low acceptance for each other, conflict was inevitable. This lack of acceptance, however, did not reflect on open or legal intolerance as a rule. Jews practiced heavy interests on loans to the gentiles (p. 97), Christians held superstitious beliefs about the Jews, Muslims, reintroduced slavery in Europe and both Crusades and Jihads were moved against the infidels, but a significant amount of this heat was fed by the masses (p. 102), by popular discontent or secular authorities interests on the realm of the infidels. As examples, we could consider the mainly politico-economical interest behind the Reconquista, when Iberian lords constantly struggled to convince the Church to support them, or the fact that individuals and lay authorities often contributed to the escalation of conflicts simply for their lack of social, psychological and legal resources to solve them (p. 113-120).

Da Costa navigates with ease in the middle of documental obscurity, warning us about how this capital flaw prevents us from forming conclusive judgements about these episodes, and how far popular and academic history books are from this demand for caution.

Moving to literature, in the chapter on the seven liberal arts in Dante's *Convivium*, Da Costa manifests his until now hidden role of a critic of art and an accomplished novel translator.

As expected, he seems to be enthralled by the supreme literary delight of medievalists: Dante Alighieri.

Da Costa is particularly interested in the philosophical vein of Dante's work, and how his appealing metaphors helped to change the intellectual environment in favour of the metaphysical and cosmological conceptions of the great poet. In his "Christian-poetic reinterpretation of Aristotle and Ptolemy's cosmology" (p. 132), Dante managed to associate the celestial spheres to the court of angels, and the intelligent and abstract nature of Aristotle's first mover to the spiritual nature of Heaven in its primacy and hierarchical superiority over the physical reality.

The second literary analysis deals with Bernat Metge's *The Dream* (1399), and the philosophical dimension of the subject. Here, Da Costa makes even more evident the vast erudition that allows him to walk so gently and naturally from Cicero and Aristotle to Boethius, Lull and Bernard of Clairvaux. He does not

only read much, being actually familiar with the classics; a virtue threatened of extinction.

To this last analysis Da Costa adds some technical remarks on the chivalry novel he translated from old Catalan to Portuguese: *Curial and Guelfa* (1460). For the surprise of some, considering how pervasive our prejudices about the Middle Ages are, the novel is based on the actions of strong female characters (p. 173-174). Da Costa draws attention to the fact that the first documental sources to acknowledge legal equality among sexes are declarations from Carolingian bishops in the turn to the 9th century (p. 180). These texts would not only denounce sexual violence as a serious crime, but also consider marriage as a contract between free individuals.

In moral theory, one of the most significant changes that occurred in the Middle Ages was the emphasis on Hell and punishment for the wicked, which introduces in popular mentality the idea of cosmic moral order in a very plastic form.

Different from more abstract revelations, the words of Jesus were frequently weaved in very sensorial symbolism and metaphor, so that one can easily feel weeping of sorrow and laughs of joy, sweetness and perfume from the side of the blessed, and smoke and dryness from the side of the damned. The visual impact of many parables helped, therefore, coining new cultural understandings that recognized the practical inequality of the essentially equal children of God (p. 198-199). Practical inequality because, in practical terms, some would choose the path of evil while others would choose the path of good, and divine justice was expected to differentiate them accordingly. "In an exceedingly stamental society they would not conceive eternity without the same hierarchy and escalation" (p. 200).

The medieval scholar was comfortable with the idea that most people deserved Hell, for this idea holds the profound sense of distance and conflict between the incorruptibility of Christ's ideals and the degenerate state of the world. They would also not forget, as Ramon Llull wrote, that "false" prophets should not be tolerated, and their sins not relativized. Consequently, those that promoted "the evils of injustice and luxury", as Mohammed did, should be found on the side of Lucifer (p. 203).

In other words, medieval ideas on Hell played an opposite role to the classical concepts of cosmopolitan universality, discriminating flaws, sins, crimes and even ideas and beliefs that deserved to be repudiated and punished. Without this in mind it is very difficult to understand why the majority of the population was favourable to death sentences in the case of doctrinal deviations.

More theoretical subjects, however, were still measured in Platonic and/or Aristotelian terms (p. 218-221). The ideas of perfection, exactness, eternity, generality and stability that still orient contemporary's scientific thinking, were heavily dependent on Classical Greek intellectualism.

The last two subjects – the rigorous judgment of error and the pursuit of universality and stability – are present in Da Costa's reconstruction of the battle between Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter Abelard.

Da Costa carefully builds a case to explain Councils and inquisitions as a balanced dialectical mixture of militant zeal and demand for intellectual accuracy.

The last three chapters are dedicated to the analysis of art works. Da Costa takes as his models the sculptures and paintings of Benedetto Antelami (1150-1230), Bernat Martorell (1390-1452) and several representations of the Biblical character Susanna. Between aesthetics and a cultural theory of art, Da Costa discourses on the sensual and enrooted nature of these works. They not only reflect specific understandings and meanings about life, the body, work and nature, but are also significantly cultural references; that is to say, these and many art works of all times and societies tell a story about the lives, mentalities, worldviews and experiences of their correspondent communities.

More passionately than in relation to the previous subjects, Da Costa dives in the web of meaning that allowed these works do emerge, to be constituted as intricate carriers of meaning that are both allegorical and very concrete.

Since some of these art works depict Biblical scenes, it is also telling that a large part of medieval imagination and aesthetical experience existed under the light of their presence (p. 290-292), and both characters and teachings from the Scriptures played a role in the actual and daily conscience of these men and women.

As a conclusion, Da Costa evokes the words of Fernand Braudel about what he (Da Costa) considers a rational passion for history. Without such passion, Da Costa says, the author will not be able to communicate the living experience of the past, and to arise the interest in what is long gone. "To captivate, to involve, to give pleasure to the reader, to enchant him/her, to make him/her want to turn the page, these are the imperative obligations of those who deal with words" (p. 319).

It is true that history is not practical and useful. The ones that try to sell it as essentially practical either lie or are mistaken about the actual possibilities of such a study of the past to shape the structure of the present and future. In a sense, the influence of history on present reality is much more a tacit stimulus to human action than a guide of how to act.

As Da Costa says in his concluding remarks, we must reject the contemporary temptations – let us be honest, pressure – to change the past according to new visions of what “should have been”, which is related to the idea that truth is a myth. We have to say what happened, as faithfully as possible, not only because it is the moral duty of each and every writer, but also because the truth is both unavoidable and better than the alternatives. We can only grow and change to better social forms of living if we truly understand what we are, what we did and how our ancestors lived.

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