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## Donoso Cortés: Cassandra of the Age

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## Book Reviews

*Donoso Cortés. Cassandra of the Age.* R. A. Herrera. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995. xxii + 144 pages.

We live in the age of Caliban. It is not necessary to read Nietzsche, Spengler, or Ortega to realize that the "last man"—"mass man," the "trousered ape"—has come into his own. . . . The new barbarian has been generated by the laborious and painful process by which Western man was surgically detached from his past and his God.

Thus begins a strange and disturbing little book about a strange and disturbing young man whose rise to power in Spain during the first half of the nineteenth century surely owed more to an unerring gift for sycophancy than it did either to intellectual acumen or a developed and consistent sense of ethics. The man who is the subject of Herrera's work is Juan Francisco María de la Salud Donoso Cortés. The words quoted are from the opening sentences of the author's preface, and are the author's own, announcing at the outset Herrera's identification with his subject, albeit indirectly.

The book's subtitle, *Cassandra of the Age*, identifies Donoso with the Cassandra of Greek mythology. Courted by Apollo, who promised her the gift of prophecy if she would agree to submit to him sexually, Cassandra consented, received the gift, then refused to submit. In retaliation, Apollo cursed her; she would continue to prophesy, but no one would ever believe her. Speaking of Lycophon's dramatic poem about Cassandra, Albin Lesky says: "Cassandra, the prophetess of Troy's doom, indulges in endless and enigmatic prophecies covering a long stretch of future. The wording has been contorted, so that a great deal of scholarship is needed to disentangle its meaning. This monstrous concoction can hardly be called a tragedy." It is in this sense only that Donoso Cortés can appropriately be called Cassandra. Over the course of his public career, Donoso did indeed prophesy accurately certain events in the future of Europe. But these are buried in a welter of foolishness and self-important bombast requiring patient scholarly effort for their retrieval. Were it not for the fact that he rose to a position of considerable power during the time of the reign of María Cristina

and the Carlist Wars, his life would be little more than the stuff of *opera buffa*.

This book is not biography; neither is it political history or a meaningful inquiry into the religious circumstances in Spain during the first half of the nineteenth century. It contains bits of all of these, but seems, in fact, to find its *raison d'être* in an effort to rehabilitate the life and works of Donoso. It is a task that probably few would find either congenial or necessary. Shortly after his death, Donoso and his works fell into oblivion. A modest revival of scholarly interest in him occurred in the twentieth century; the revival coincides with the rise of fascism in Spain and Nazism in Germany. A glance at the dates on the works Herrera lists in his selected bibliography easily confirms the fact. The reasons for this are not difficult to identify.

Donoso Cortés was born in Extremadura in 1809 and died in Paris in 1853, quite possibly from the progressive ravages of syphilis. Although he pursued studies at both Salamanca and Sevilla, he was essentially an autodidact who read widely if not deeply. Donoso's initial "student's zeal" for Enlightenment thought quickly foundered on the shoals of a pathological personal pessimism that led him to propound and take personal refuge within a deeply conservative, reactionary Catholicism, from which retreat he would publicly advocate highly restrictive and oppressive political measures. (He became, as the Spanish *refrán* so pungently expresses it, *más católico que el papa*, "more Catholic than the pope.") Sometime around 1842, he turned to what has, with some charity, been called a "quasi-theological" religious conservatism that was strongly influenced by Joseph de Maistre. Throughout his life, in both oratory and writings, Donoso turned to *sui generis* theologizing to buttress arguments in the domains of sociology, politics, and economics. In 1846 he was named Marqués de Valdegamas, and in 1847 he was elected to the Real Academia Española.

Donoso believed that the exercise of reason was antithetical to truth, opposed the public discussion of issues of commonweal, was critical of a free press (although he himself never hesitated to avail himself of it), thought democracy evil, and preached the need for dictatorship and a "traditional" Catholicism, which he understood as one that would serve and preserve the interests of those like himself. At the end of his life, in Paris, he wore a hair shirt beneath his elegantly-tailored clothing as he frequented the salons of the Faubourg St. Germain, and he practiced a kind of *noblesse oblige* charity among the poor which he understood to be modeled upon the life and teachings of St. Vincent de Paul. His spiritual disciplines would seem to have been as muddled as his politics.

Herrera is not blind to the darkness and foolishness of his subject.

He repeatedly cites material seen by others as evidence that Donoso was both narcissistic and dangerous. But Herrera raises the issues only to ignore them, as if to let us know that he is aware of their existence, but that they are, after all, irrelevant. He even seems to suggest that the death camps of Nazi Germany and the gulags of Stalinist Russia might somehow have been averted had sufficient numbers of Europeans grasped the prophetic truths uttered by this "Cassandra." Yet Donoso was a consistent and increasingly strident advocate of the very totalitarianism that issued in fascism, Nazism, and Stalinism. Only if one sees Donoso as a kind of alter ego for Herrera himself can any sense be made of this work. In the closing pages Herrera writes:

The liberation of the family from patriarchal tyranny has led to the destruction of the family, liberation from punitive law to massive crime; the abolition of capital punishment to killing *en masse*. The transfer of war from the physical to the spiritual domain has brought . . . terrible consequences. . . . This liberation from limitation . . . prepares the way for the coming of the "last man," the "trousered ape," "mass man" and his comrades-in-arms (132).

And finally, "Perhaps this gentle man, very possibly a saint, who was obsessed by the ubiquity of evil, was graced by Providence with the task of imparting an admonition . . . that the world was loathe to hear" (135). One can only conclude that Herrera and Donoso Cortés share a common confusion. It would be interesting to know the editorial criteria that led Eerdmans to select this work for publication.

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