

CHRONICLE OF A DIS-ENCOUNTER: ANOTHER READING OF THE AMERICAS

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Anyone who has read some of the chronicles of the first European travellers to the New World is doubtlessly surprised to discover that paradise is inhabited by a savage with two faces. Depending on the historic moment in which we are situated, the savage can be either good or evil; a docile creature or a rebel.

For Columbus, as for Montaigne a century later, this savage is not only good but also wise in his own way, since he knows how to deal harmoniously with Nature. From all the qualities that Montaigne is able to see in the savage, one stands out, and, as with Rousseau, this quality is precisely what distinguishes the savage from the “civilized” European: his innocence. But the savage’s greatest virtue is also the element that makes him more vulnerable. Since he is innocent, Columbus informs the Catholic monarchs, it will be easy to Christianize him and, needless to say, to use him as labor. The latter idea, namely, that the savage is innocent, is indeed a kind of promise of a retribution or, so to speak, a type of promissory note paid to the Spanish Crown for having patronized such an expensive voyage. The promise of the infidels’ conversion (not only to Christianity, but also to the economic needs of the peninsula) is the first form of payment made by the Spanish adventurers — though it is still a symbolic one — to those who have gambled on a sailor’s enterprise, in a moment in which the most important task in Spain is to cast out of Iberia “those who are irremissibly dominated by religious sects”.

The conquerors who arrive years later to the New World will coincide with the Admiral in the wide spread idea of having arrived at the *topos* of unending wealth and wonder which Columbus so effectively depicted in his

diary, although these travellers never meet the noble savage within this Eden. Those who confront a people that resists domination can only see an ignorant, uncivilized and cruel creature (the Spanish and Portuguese chroniclers are most impressed by human sacrifices and cannibalism) alien to language, Christianity and to any form of obedience and civilization. In other words, the conqueror in the midst of paradise is confronted with precisely the image with which Shakespeare will forever define the American savage: Caliban.

But these voyagers' encounter with the noble and cruel savage does not blind them from admiring the marvellous world just found as well as the creature. Columbus is aware of the previous utopias dreamed by European men but he also keeps in mind that he has a debt to pay. Undoubtedly it is for the second reason that he describes the New World in the following terms:

This island is quite big and very flat and with very green trees and plenty of water and with a lagoon in the center, with no mountains and all of it so green that it is a pleasure... (my translation).

Columbus does not content himself with saying that the land just found is vast and good for raising crops. He rather resorts to adverbs of quantity and thus insists upon the fact that the land is **very** flat and of **very green** trees and **plenty** of water. And then, as if he were not convinced of his own argument, Columbus tries to persuade his audience of the validity of what he has just said:

Believe me, your majesties, since this land is the best and most fertile and warm and flat and good that there is to be found in the world. (my translation)

Suspecting that the Spanish sovereigns might be skeptical, Columbus must prove his credibility and he later underlines the benefits of the land just found by resorting to superlatives (the best and the most fertile) and in order to stress even further the idea of excess and prosperity, he then resorts to an enumeration by repeating the conjunction "and" which emphasizes the sense of wealth, since it suggests an addition of unending, lofty qualities: "it is the best and most fertile and warm and flat and good". There is no need to talk about gold yet; the promise of retribution is contained in a rhetoric that works to the advantage of the chronicler.

This form of discourse will be adopted by Hernán Cortés, the conqueror of Mexico, who finds himself with the necessity of making the Crown an even bigger promise than the one made by Columbus. Since Cortés knows that land alone is no longer the best way to accumulate wealth but rather that the times have changed to commerce, Cortés offers the following to the Catholic monarchs:

The city has many **plazas** with several markets in them and traffic of selling and buying. It has another **plaza** twice as big as Salamanca, all surrounded by portals where there are more than seventy thousand people daily, buying and selling; there are all kinds of merchandise to be found in any part of the world, as well as stocks of provisions, jewels made of gold and of silver, of lead, of brass, of copper, of tin... (my translation)

I will stop here with the enumeration for your patience's sake and not because Cortés has any intention of coming to an end. What greater temptation for a merchant during the Renaissance could there be than to arrive to such a place? One could hardly find any mall at L.A. that could be compared to the Aztec plaza described by an over-enthusiastic Cortés and disseminated by an absent minded copyist who took out the word "plaza" from the original, with the effect that we read that "this place is twice as big as Salamanca", instead of reading: "twice as big as the **plaza** of Salamanca". Furthermore, speaking in terms of variety, this kind of XVI century mall is also able to insure the satisfaction of the most demanding consumer, since the place found by Cortés contains "all kinds of merchandise to be found in any part of the world". But beyond the promises of the New World as a rather good investment in the long run where commerce, more than gold would guarantee Cortés's economic success in his enterprise, he offers the Spanish Crown yet another deal, and not a bad one, at that, considering that this was still a world to be created: the abundance of indigenous labor. The problem now becomes a rhetorical one: how to confront the evil savage and substitute him with the docile and hard-working one envisioned by Columbus? What is the most effective way of confronting the New World for a Spain that has already received the texts of Machiaveli — we must remember, as Carlos Fuentes does, that Charles V was a frequent reader of *The Prince* — and a Spain which, nevertheless, considers man only insofar he assumes himself as an element of society, as a piece within a system, and someone to be judged according to his immobile social position and to his Christian mission on Earth? At the time the Iberian peninsula was debating the possibility of either peacefully "incorporating" the Indians to Christianity or submitting them to servitude, as well as whether it should limit the immigration and commerce in the West Indies to a medieval exclusivism or admit free access to the non-Spaniards, a different idea of the New World is initiated by English travellers. Another breed of adventurers whose best weapon is not the sword nor the crucifix but rather the Counterreformatist discourse conformed by the echoes of the voices of Calvin and Luther. Let us look at the kind of world envisioned by these other travellers.

While Philip II, the religious and austere Spanish monarch opts for an irremovable idea of a world he imagines divided in scales (a conception founded in Platonic notions), a German theologian and reformer known in Northern Europe as Martin Luther dares to affirm that the world is not a

given entity but rather one which is perfectible and which is always in the process of being built. The idea that starts as the Confession of Augsburg by an ex-Augustine ends up becoming the most profound conviction for the English adventurer in search of new opportunities. This traveller is convinced that there is a different world awaiting him somewhere and that he has only to put up the will in order for that world to do him justice. This Englishman feels himself cheated by a corrupt and decadent civilization. He wants to build a new world and he knows God is on his side in this enterprise. To him, America represents a "second chance for man on Earth". As if these differences between the Spanish conquerors were not enough, this voyager is not forced to promise a retribution to the English Crown either, as are the Spanish chroniclers, because it is not the monarchy who pays for the trip of the Puritans in the Mayflower nor do the Englishmen have to gain infidels for the Queen.

It is the second kind of travellers to the New World that give rise to the numerous images alluding to "building" in American literature. From the beginning to the present day "building" a world in North American imagery alludes less to physical structures than to analogous structures in politics, morals and language. Also, the references to building economic centers, dynasties of powerful families and other forms of associations of various kinds which are themes of movies and T.V. programs in the North American film industry derive from this original idea of the New World in Anglo Saxon America. The notion of building over the past, over any trace previous to the moment of arrival of the "New Adam" is not only justifiable to the travellers to North America but also necessary. The only way of building something "truly new", these voyagers think, is by getting rid of the ancient scaffolding, by rejecting the previous social structures and the old institutions. Therefore, as Fuentes points out, even though Thomas Moore is the intellectual author of the American Utopia in both hemispheres, Martin Luther is responsible for converting that utopia in history in the northern hemisphere of the New World.

This second utopia in America thus begins with "an individual standing alone, self reliant and self propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources". The New Adam is portrayed as an individual miraculously liberated from any vestige of family and, even more important, this hero is responsible for an exemplary act of parricide. The New Adam no longer has any conflict with God himself but rather with the terms with which he used to relate to him. To the Bible's phrase "In the beginning, there was the word", John Locke opposes his famous phrase "In the beginning, there was America", and with it he not only inaugurates the ideological foundations but also the new style of referring to the New World. But it is precisely this style that betrays the New Adam's ideals of beginning the world under a fresh, original initiative. The

utopian dream of originality dies the minute the New Adam begins to construct his world, that is, as soon as he situates the “Golden Age” in a determined place. Man’s devotion to property, the use he makes of his instruments of possession and the language with which he tries to express the originality of his experience in the New World, all these circumstances show the human inability to be another, namely, to renounce language and history, to be able to forget the paradigms inherited from the Old World and to make something out of language which does not represent a mimicry of itself. Indeed, the proclamation of a different world by the American Adam is immersed in a paradox: the novelty, real or imagined, is always expressed in terms that show the Old World is still in possession of the means of expression.

This irony is a frequent motif in almost all contemporary narratives in the Americas and it is exemplified by a book of adventures written by someone usually considered to be “the first truly original writer” of the North American epic: James Fenimore Cooper. In the novel to which I will be referring, entitled *The Deerslayer* and written in 1841, an adventurer in the style of Tarzan or Daniel Boone is depicted as “silent, marvelously alert, capable of irresistible mechanical proficiency without explanatory claptrap, the servant of principles the more eloquent for being vaguely defined, and with a will undisrupted by muddled personal feelings of sexual love or the desire for gain”. This hero decides to conquer the vast American land. But the conqueror ends up being conquered since Deerslayer deprives the savages — which in this case are far from the “noble savage” envisioned by Columbus, of course — in the name of a civilization that will dispossess him in turn. The irony involved in the American hero’s victory is present in every hero portrayed in the major North American contemporary novels, some of them written by Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, Nathanael West, Faulkner, Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison and Don DeLillo, among many others. These kind of heroes invariably fail in the face of a society that imposes its prejudices and dogmas at the expense of man’s right to individuality. Emerson and Thoreau conceived the American utopia as the possibility of finding a world of one’s own in which man would be able to express himself once liberated from social and institutional prejudices. Both authors saw Eldorado (The Golden Age) as the symbol for the New Adam’s spiritual and ideological nudity, for he who renounced Western civilization and its products. But the conquest of the new space — the possession of vastness, which the New Adam interprets as the symbol for freedom and expansion of the self — should only occur through aesthetic contemplation. For the transcendentalists, the Great American enterprise consisted in the appropriation through an “eyeball” namely, through the spirit, in order to achieve the conquest not of land but rather of the self which would eventually be released from its ancient, worn out garments.

But Emerson himself is enmeshed within an irony. In “Nature” the poet finds utopia in the inner experience of the individual who tries to give up culture. But only the inner vision and the mere instant in which man dreams the utopia can be close to experiencing it since utopia (**u-topos**) is the place which is nowhere. At the same moment that the poet talks about the experience of possessing, the reader perceives that this experience can only be the result of a way of understanding and ordering a world as learned from Western culture. The dream of a different world dies the moment the New Adam attempts to possess the American land, even though this possession can only occur through contemplation. Despite his efforts to keep himself free of the atavism of the Old World, language and culture are imposed prior to his “new” birth since he still relates to the world in terms of possession.

The corruption of the values that the first English travellers denounced in European culture during the XVI century is that which the North American authors of the present now denounce. The “authentic” American who dreamed of situating himself at the beginning of a new history, that Adonis of heroic innocence and unlimited potentiality is betrayed by the language through which he expresses his difference, thus he becomes the devoured-devourer. Furthermore, the violent style of the XX century North American novels and the Adam’s struggle with the previous social and historical institutions of power over environment and language, reveal an undeniable complicity between the New Adam and the Old World. The only difference between the American hero and the European archetype of heroism is the former’s need to break with the past, and his desire to build a “New World Order” that could contain and represent the difference he has been unable to achieve. The tautology of the new Adam’s desire is self evident since the search for the New World can be reduced to the search for a style filled with the desire to build a world... which reflects, as in an infinite mirror, a world that looks for a way to become something other than its own image. Ironically, the author that more precisely represents the useless labors of the New Adam is a Latin American writer. I cannot think of a better exponent of the paradox immerse in the will to create an alternative world, different from its own reflection, than Jorge Luis Borges.

A need to perpetuate the vision of the “bad savage” (Caliban) in Latin America is opposed to the vision of the New Adam and his need to build a world in North America. This condemnatory vision of the “other America” as José Martí used to call it is perpetuated throughout the XIX century in the chronicles of the voyagers to the New World. Nothing is more alien to the American utopia than the world depicted by the English, French and German travellers to the tropics. The dream of America does not exist in American lands. The **topos** of unending wealth — a product of European excess and of a need to create an alternative image of itself — has been

displaced, misplaced, replaced. The travellers that, immersed in the ideas of a growing capitalism gave everything they got for the messianic idea — and later, for the Rousseauian utopia — of equating paradise with the State of Nature and therefore with innocence, only found an America which resisted the imposition of that image.

The frequent allusions to laziness and to the rebellious attitude of those who inhabit the other America oppose Colón's image of the "good savage". An image which prefigured an augury of labor for those who wanted to put into practice the principles of capitalism. This vision of the New World as a land of barbaric and idle people is widely extended in books written in the XX century and in most of the movies produced out of Latin America. This is the case of novels such as *Under the Volcano* by Malcolm Lowry or some of the works of Graham Greene or Aldous Huxley. It is also the case of most of the Westerns made in Hollywood and the so called "Spaghetti Westerns", where Mexicans are depicted in the act of stealing some honest foreigner's wallet, singing at a cantina, killing someone, singing again at a cantina and getting drunk.

One last image of the tropics, and ironically the most profitable one, is the heir to the "marvelled vision" of the first voyagers to the New World. A vision which, needless to say, is present in most of the best novels of Latin America, those novels inscribed in what has been called "tropical barroque" and magic realism. Through those works, America is again the hyperbolic, fantastic world seen by the first chroniclers, the **topos** of the linguistic, imagistic wealth where myth and reality are one and the same. This is the case of the prose in García Márquez' *A Hundred Years of Solitude*, Severo Sarduy's *Cobra* and Carlos Fuentes' *Terra Nostra*, to mention only the best examples of this rhetoric opposed to economy and contention.

Traditionally considered "apocalyptic narratives" in the innumerable works by scholars and critics, these novels show a struggle between the represented world and the language with which it is represented. The digressions, hyperboles and verbal richness serve the purpose of transmitting a more important message than the one conferred through the story. The rhetoric is thus the place of dystopic narration: if the "New World" is not the **topos** of material wealth then it is the place where need and desire are revealed through verbal abundance. Neither the **utopia** implicit in the dreams of characters who try to connect such dreams with a reality that rejects its role as the crystallization of myth, nor the apocalyptic vision of the world condemned to be nothing more than the caricature of the dream, but rather suspension, uncertainty, perpetual contradiction between what is represented and the discourse with which it is represented. It is indeed a writing that makes it impossible to decide by conventional (grammatical or linguistic) devices which of the two (incompatible) meanings must prevail. A rhetoric opposed to logic and one that opens up new possibilities of meaning.

The dystopia or the place which is itself in another place, out of the text, a verbal construct that denies which it means is also present, although in a different way, in some of the contemporary Latin American novels written by women. In these, the world of masculine oppression is subverted through a farcical carnivalized language and through an impudent tone which works as a masquerade. The contrast between the disenchanting vision and the feat of language is present in some of Rosario Ferré's works, in Clarice Lispector's *The Hour of the Star*, in Angeles Mastretta's *Mexican Bolero* and is certainly a device which guided my depiction of the first Mexican empire in *La corte de los ilusos*.

One is tempted to say that there cannot be a world that reflects chaos and disaster through a discourse that signifies its opposite, this is, through a sanctuary language that evokes the mental image of richness and wealth or through a carnivalized vision of a world offered as a counter strategy to undermine what is being said. A world like this cannot exist physically but rather as writing. Latin American literature, in some of its most representative moments offers two meanings, two visions of the same world that exist side by side. The two readings of the "other" America within these texts must confront each other, to work simultaneously in order to explain the paradox involved in what Edmundo O'Gorman called the "invention of the Americas": a world condemned forever to be at once what it is and what it is not.