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William H. Prescott and Inca Garcilaso de la Vega: Reshaping the Colonial Archive in the Nineteenth-Century

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The significance of Inca Garcilaso de la Vega’s works is one of the most disputed chapters of the intellectual history of the historiography of the New World. Beginning with the publication of his first book in 1590, Traduzion del Indio de los tres Diálogos de amor de Leon Hebreo, a version which was prohibited in the 1612 Índex and expurgated for the 1620 version of the Índex, Garcilaso’s work is established early on to be symptomatically polemic. This polemic nature is even more evident when we consider the reception of his later works, the Florida del Inca (1605), the Primera parte de los Comentarios Reales (1609) and the second part of this same work, posthumously published under the title Historia general del Perú (1617). Valuable investigations have been published on the subject, and it is possible to have a more or less clear idea of the reception of Garcilaso during the XVII and XVIII centuries. The general tendency in these investigations is to posit a chronology which situates the works of the mestizo chronicler as fundamental documents of Incan history during the XVIII century, in particular due to the French Enlightenment’s reading of Comentarios reales, and to the significance the book took on towards the end of that same century among Incan nationalist intellectuals. However, this authority was lost in the second half of the XIX century, when manuscripts from the XVI century with greater historical authority, according to new epistemological demands, were discovered and published. In this context, in light of the new historiographical paradigm, Ínca Garcilaso’s work passed from the field of history to the field of literature. Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo, in the introduction to the second volume of his 1894 Antología de la poesía hispano-americana, unequivocally states as much:
“Los Comentarios reales no son texto histórico; son una novela utópica . . .” (CLXIII). From this declaration (one not without its own polemic) onward, the name of the mestizo writer has held a special place in the variety of literary genealogies which have emerged from the Spanish-speaking world.2

How do we explain this abrupt shift from history to literature of an author such as Inca Garcilaso, fundamental to the configuration of Incan history during the XVII and XVIII centuries? What did this process entail and how has it enabled us to speak of a canon of colonial literature, in which Garcilaso’s work is a key element? The present text offers a hypothesis for such questions, thanks to the analysis of the works and figure of Garcilaso in the historiography project of William H. Prescott.

The History of the Conquest of Peru and the Colonial Archive

The way in which Prescott analyzes the works of Garcilaso, specifically in his History of the Conquest of Peru (1847), serves as an introduction to a more complex issue: the organization of his archive, fundamental to an understanding of the formation of the text corpus that Colonial Studies has been studying since the late XIX century. In this group of texts from the colonial period, both published and in manuscript form, which Prescott stored in his Boston home, lies the prestige and authority of his historical writings on Mexico and Peru. By examining the place held by Garcilaso’s works in Prescott’s writings, it is possible to understand the direction that the North American historian imposes on this colonial archive, proving that no archive is independent of its archivist’s intervention and his criteria of appraisal and selection.

At the time that Prescott decided to undertake the writing of his History of the Conquest of Peru, the historian had already honed his abilities as a researcher, both in the handling of printed and manuscript documentation and in the control of the subject matter and personalities (Lohmann Villena 47). The mastery shown by Prescott in his methodology, much more evident when contrasted with the anti-epic narration of Francisco Pizarro’s adventure in Peru, was quickly appreciated by South American researchers. Among them, Andrés Bello published a commentary on the book in the Revista de Santiago and translated the prologue; similarly, Diego Barros Arana, at the time a young historian, wrote a letter of admiration to Prescott, emphasizing above all the care taken with his sources (Jaksić 384-85).

In Prescott’s work there is a dialogical coexistence of two fairly exclusive tendencies in historical writing. One narrative, which explores tropes, rhetoric and a romantic philosophy towards history (Levin 74-8); the other a methodological practice of documentary rigor that, although it followed the example of Edward Gibbon and William Robertson (Jaksić 322), also has
points of contact with other discourses of the period, such as those originating in the teachings of Leopold Von Ranke, who sought to give scientific merit to the practice of history. This duality in the writings of Prescott locates his work in a period of transition between different concepts of the writing of history. However, this duality should not be interpreted as the end of one era and the future of another; these concepts of the historical coexist inclusively in Prescott’s work. His approach to a corpus that had not been jointly studied, and with it, the inauguration of a research field, is fundamental. As Guillermo Lohmann Villena states, Prescott’s work is a clear beginning: “It is no exaggeration to assert that with the History of the Conquest of Peru by this Boston historian a new concept of the conquest phase of Peruvian history came into being. The conquest became a theme integrated to a larger environment and examined in accordance with modern standards” (46). This inaugural aspect of Prescott’s work refers to the systematization, before him only just emergent, of the study of a period such as the conquest. The way in which Prescott undertakes his study of the documentation of the colonial period, as an analysis of the point of view expressed in them, whether through an indictment of biographical elements or by comparison with other texts, is a practice that is still relevant in studies of the period. In this sense, Richard Kagan is correct in affirming that Prescott is a paradigmatic writer. Kagan refers to the way in which Prescott had successfully circulated ideas, some of them very old (such as those related to the Black Legend) among researchers of the Spanish and American worlds (253-54). Most noteworthy, however, for our purposes, is the fact that Prescott also became a paradigmatic author for Andean colonial studies, in methodological terms, due to the way in which he defined, precisely through his heuristic digressions, an idea of the colonial archive as the theoretical basis for his books about the conquests of Peru and Mexico.

In the bibliographic essays that appear at the end of each chapter of his History of the Conquest of Peru, Prescott wages a battle for textual authority among his sources. From his desk in Boston, hindered by partial blindness that would worsen as the years went on, and which limited his archival research and his visits to the countries he studied, Prescott appears as the great hero of desk research, existentially obliged to develop his analytic abilities in his exegesis of the texts. Thanks to his situation of economic privilege, Prescott successfully established an international network of bibliographic agents, who would send documentation to his Boston retreat. John Eipper has characterized this endeavor as a process parallel to the territorial expansion of the United States, establishing political and military continuities with the North American war enterprise which took more than half of Mexico’s territory in the decade of 1840. According to Eipper, in his “worldwide bibliographical project”, Prescott directs his international network of “research
‘ambassadors’ with the urgency of a general commanding troops in the field” (422). Regarding his communications with Pascual de Gayangos, one of his principal bibliographic agents in Spain and London, Eipper concludes that “[b]y characterizing Hispanic texts as the birthright of those who could best exploit their potential, the historian replicates the discourse of Manifest Destiny in its overt political forms” (422). Paradoxically, Prescott’s labors appear to be marked by the very United States political expansion to which he was opposed. With respect to this, Eipper affirms: “if Polk’s war incorporated California, New Mexico, and adjacent territories into the United States, an outcome of Prescott’s war, quite literally, was the codification of the Latin American Colonial literary canon” (422).

From Prescott’s treatment of Inca Garcilaso’s work it is also possible to understand some of the directions taken in his organization of the colonial archive. On this point, Eipper has made several contributions, by pointing out the historian’s romantic approach to his sources (423). This romanticism is translated into a set of criteria regarding style, considerations on mimesis and the literary; the latter understood “as biologically reflective of race” (Eipper 423). From these considerations we take away an idea of North American superiority against Spain and its colonies, which both Jaksić (336-37) and Stephanie Merrim (87-88) have understood in terms of the opposition of civilization versus barbarism, so productive to date for interpreting society and politics in Latin America. In methodological terms, this romanticism translates into the privileging of alphabetic writing over other registers; and in the realm of the written word, into an appreciation of style and literary devices. As we will see in the following pages, the shift of Inca Garcilaso from historical to literary author illustrates, in practice, the mechanisms behind this appreciation for style and alphabetic writing, a criteria that is still present in conservative positions in the study of the colonial period when we speak of the literary characteristics of the principal texts of the Latin American colonial canon.

Reading Inca Garcilaso from Boston

As opposed to Robertson and Cornelius de Pauw in the second half of the XVIII century, who directly questioned Inca Garcilaso, denying him historical authority on many points (Cañizarez-Esguerra 30-32), Prescott’s criticism is more polite, and in a certain sense, more constructive, when we consider the literary affiliation that he proposes for the Inca. However, by changing the historiographical paradigm which he uses to evaluate Inca Garcilaso’s contribution to the historiography of the New World, Prescott’s work establishes a before and after. The interpretation in question appears at the end of the second book of his History of the Conquest of Peru in the form
of an essay on the life and works of the mestizo from Cuzco, a biographical analysis which begins by recognizing the central role the Inca plays among Incan historical sources, despite the criticism he had been subject to. Prescott states: “[o]f all the writers on ancient Peruvian history, no one has acquired so wide celebrity, or been so largely referred to by later compilers, as the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega” (293). It is important to keep in mind this beginning as Prescott’s point of departure, because by the end of his essay the Inca will no longer occupy this position. Following this recognition of the place of the work of Garcilaso in the existing corpus is a brief biographical narration explaining his mestizo condition (the son of a Spanish conquistador and an Incan princess). However, the biography is not merely a rhetorical component; in Prescott’s case, the biography plays an additional role, since it is his primary tool of analysis to establish the point of view of the text analyzed. This abstraction of point of view will allow Prescott to organize his documentary archive, establishing hierarchies among his materials and enabling this identification of point of view to serve as an index of the historical veracity of the information presented. The type of analysis presented by Prescott shows us his preoccupation with establishing a balance between a documentary nature, which would give it “historical objectivity”, and an effort to include literary elements in the historical narration, so important in the romantic period. An additional element evidenced in Prescott’s practice, in his eagerness to achieve objectivity in his sources, is an anachronistic reading. In passing judgment on the work of the Inca, he fails to consider that Garcilaso wrote history under the renaissance paradigm, in which the truth of history depended on its rhetorical disposition as dictated by a transcendental, providential belief, as studied by Pierre Duviols, and was not factual. History, in the Renaissance, was part of rhetoric, not a scientific genre. Prescott’s attribution of literary merit to the Inca would imply an emphasis on the formal aspect and its narrative pleasure, central to the renaissance paradigm for the writing of history, but denying, at the same time, that he may be writing history according to more positivist criteria. The general critical reading of Inca Garcilaso carried out in the XIX century neglected to situate him in his intellectual context, which was pre-enlightenment, that is, grounded in religious and transcendental fundamentals rather than scientific ones.6

The brief biography developed by Prescott for the Inca emphasizes the noble status of his parents, to later include his education in Cuzco, his journey to Spain, his participation as a soldier under the command of don John of Austria, and ultimately, Garcilaso’s retirement in old age (in Cordoba, according to Prescott), which are the years in which he wrote his work. In this biographic narrative, Cordoba appears as a locus amoenus, ideal for intellectual activity and writing. It is there where Prescott positions the
Inca, a philosopher, and practitioner of literature who thematically addresses historical questions: “Here our philosopher occupied himself with literary labors, the more sweet and soothing to his wounded spirit, that they tended to illustrate the faded glories of his native land, and exhibit them in their primitive splendor to the eyes of his adopted countrymen” (294). Of course, it is not difficult to detect a certain identification with Prescott’s own vocation as a writer in this portrait of the Inca, for whom Boston would serve as the equivalent of the Inca’s locus amoenus in Cordoba. It is important to note, however, the plurality of discursive lines that permeate the work of Inca Garcilaso according to Prescott –philosophy, literature and history– which allowed him to consider a new reclassification and disciplinary affiliation for Garcilaso. It is obvious that the interpretation proposed by Prescott weakened what, up until that point, had been the most important characteristic of Inca Garcilaso: his authority as a historian. But at the same time, it generated another classification, expressed in his treatment as a literary author.

The opening up of the disciplinary classification of the Inca is carried out by Prescott using an investigation of a biographical nature. After emphasizing the exceptional conditions of the Inca’s biography, such as his serving as a witness to various indigenous ceremonies that were still being practiced when Garcilaso was an adolescent, his understanding of quipus, his competency in the Incan language “to an extent that no person could have possessed [...] speaking the same language, and with the same Indian blood flowing in his veins” (295), Prescott concludes with a note that reaffirms the position of historical authority occupied for so many years by the writings of the Inca: “the difference between reading his Commentaries and the accounts of European writers is the difference that exists between reading a work in the original and in a bald translation. Garcilasso’s writings are an emanation from the Indian mind” (296). But the same biographical impulse which locates the Inca’s authority in his social condition is later used to question him. If the Comentarios reales were the product of an Indian mentality, it would allow the Boston historian to establish his first objection to this authority by situating the point of view of Garcilaso’s discourse: “Yet his Commentaries are open to a grave objection —and one naturally suggested by his position” (296). Even so, Prescott recognizes that in considering his discursive position, we must not lose sight of the fact that “Garcilasso wrote late in life, after the story had been often told by castilian writers” (295). Because of this, for Prescott, what Garcilaso does, in addition to questioning the direction of a historiographic tendency regarding the Incas, has a practical element: “[a] dressing himself to the cultivated European, he was most desirous to display the ancient glories of his people, and still more of the Inca race, in their most imposing form” (296). The Inca wrote with a precise objective: “He stood forth as a counsel for his unfortunate countrymen, pleading the cause of
that degraded race before the tribunal of posterity” (296). Thanks to his biographical analysis of point of view, Prescott can now explain the politics of the Inca’s text, indicating a “tone of panegyric” in its pages, which leads him to conclude that the Inca writes like a utopian philosopher: “He pictures forth a state of society, such as an Utopian philosopher would hardly venture to depict” (296). This utopian reading of the Inca is far from coincidental in the case of Prescott, who through this classification shows himself to be informed as to the reception that Garcilaso’s work had received among the utopian philosophers of the XVII century, such as *La città del Sole* (1623) by Tommaso de Campanella or the *The New Atlantis* (1627) by Francis Bacon, in addition to Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire.7 Most important, however, is that Prescott emphasizes this classification in order to refer to the imagination of the Inca, an imagination understood as having political interests and defined by its fictional nature: “Even the material splendors of the monarchy, sufficiently great in this land of gold, become heightened, under the glowing imagination of the Inca chronicler, into the gorgeous illusions of fairy tale” (296).

This imagination that pushes the Inca’s work towards the terrain of fiction is not a deliberate exercise, according to Prescott. For the North American historian, the mestizo from Cuzco did not intend to lie to us in his works, even if at times it ventures into fiction; the Inca does not lie, Prescott states, because he himself believes what he tells us: “it would be unfair to the Indian historian to suppose that he did not himself believe most of the magic marvels which he describes” (296). Such credulity, for Prescott, in addition to being the sign of an inferior state of civilization of the indigenous mind, also requires a historic explanation, which makes Garcilaso’s situation doubly serious. The Inca, Prescott reminds us, although he was not a new convert because he had been born in a Catholic home, was, nevertheless, surrounded by a family of converts and neophytes “who, after practicing all their lives the rites of paganism, were now first admitted into the Christian fold” (296). In addition to this indigenous influence, defined as irrational, Catholicism itself was another problem, since it had taught the Inca to give credit to the marvelous Catholic legends of the saints and their equally “marvellous accounts of his own victories in his spiritual warfare for the propagation of faith” (296). In this way, thanks to the biographical explanation of the childhood social environment of the Inca, Prescott is able to formulate a second objection to the historical authority of the Inca, his irrationality: “Thus early accustomed to such large drafts on his credulity, his reason lost its heavenly power to distinguishing truth from error, and he became so familiar with the miraculous, that the miraculous was no longer a miracle” (296). Despite his previous questioning, Prescott goes on to affirm that in the Inca’s works “there is always a germ of truth which is not difficult to detect
[... ] and after every allowance for the exaggerations of national vanity, we shall find an abundance of genuine information” (297). Once the validity of the indigenous narrative has been questioned for its incapacity to distinguish fact from fiction, it would seem that for Prescott the abundance of “true” information in the Inca’s works is limited to its linguistic data and to any other information that Prescott could corroborate by comparison with other chroniclers of the period. But such corroboration with other historians is an equally arduous task for the Bostonian historian, and this is why Prescott achieves this sensation of triumph over his documentary materials, because these other chroniclers shared the same credulous mentality and commitment to fiction that is criticized in Garcilaso. In general, the European world of Garcilaso was, for Prescott, one “addressed to the imagination, more than sober reason” (297).

It is not without irony that we must note that, on this point in Prescott’s essay addressing the presence of imagination in historic writing, both the works of the Inca and his own are operating at not just a thematic level but one of the poetics of writing. Consequently, Prescott’s essay undergoes a change in tone and those same elements that had previously threatened the historical authority of the Inca on a thematic level, become, on the poetic level, an advantage that makes the mestizo’s narrative “an agreeable relief to the reader” (297). These elements, which appear as digressions from the main narration of the Comentarios reales in the form of “variety of amusing details”, “animated gossip” and “discussion on topics illustrating its progress” in the First part; or “garrulous reminiscences, personal anecdotes, incidental adventures, and a host of trivial details” in the Second, make the Inca’s work a space that, according to Prescott, “make up so much life, and not less of character” (297). It is in this meeting of things large and small, which is part of the charm of the romantic chronicle of the Middle Ages and still persists in the romance of Prescott’s age, that the historian finds “the form and pressure of the time” (297) to be best exemplified. In Prescott’s historical studies, limited to the confines of his office and the exploration of the old relics and exotic elements of his archive, the “worn-eaten state-papers, official correspondence, public records”, all of them indispensable to history, are represented as the skeleton of a book, the necessary frame, that only a picturesque, detail-oriented narrative could complete: “They are the framework on which it is to repose; the skeleton of facts which gives it its strength and proportions. But they are worthless as the dry bones of the skeleton, unless clothed with the beautiful form and garb of humanity, and instinct with the spirit of the age” (297). On this point, the new classification of Inca Garcilaso is almost complete. While his work, after an arduous job of dissection, to continue with Prescott’s anatomic tropology, may produce a few tiny bones for forensic reconstruction (that is, the writing of history),
the importance of Garcilaso’s work lies elsewhere: in its capacity to be a mirror of its times, a mirror that shows us the interior, private life of a period. In this way, the work of the Inca, historically problematic because of the data it contains, is reclaimed within a broad notion of novelized fiction that dates back to the Middle Ages, and is converted into a central element for the historic writings of Prescott, who paid equal attention to the data and to the spirit of the period that such data attempted to reconstruct. In this sense, it is possible to suggest an identification of labors between Prescott and Inca Garcilaso, to the extent that the object of both their works was to humanize the data of both the Incan past and the period of the Conquest. However, while Garcilaso, according to Prescott, is inclined towards novelized fiction due to his biographical condition, evident in his Indian mentality and his propaganda-like intentions to defend Incan civilization; Prescott, thanks to his formal skeleton of arid documentary materials, maintains his feet firmly on the ground in his supposedly scientific historicity without forfeiting artistic composition. The result is doubly satisfactory for Prescott: on one hand, he has successfully displaced Inca Garcilaso’s historical authority with his own work; on the other, he has suggested that other authors of the Incan and colonial past are only useful to provide the skeleton for the forensic reconstruction of history. From his archives in Boston, Prescott seems to be arguing that his is the only writing that has managed to forge an organic version of the Peruvian past.

NOTES

1 On the reception of Garcilaso in the Peruvian Viceroyalty, see Pedro Guibovich’s “Lectura y difusión de la obra del Inca Garcilaso en el virreinato peruano (siglos XVII-XVIII)” and José Antonio Mazzotti’s “Garcilaso y los orígenes del garcilasismo”. On the European reception in the XVIII century, see Macchi’s Incas Ilustrados. Rowe’s “El movimiento nacional inca del siglo XVIII” is a classic text for understanding Garcilaso’s influence on the Tupac Amaru II revolution, as are Flores Galindo’s later developments in Buscando un Inca. On his reception by the independentist criollos, see Jesús Díaz Caballero’s “Nación y Patria: las lecturas de los Comentarios reales”.

2 To better understand the continuity between Menéndez Pelayo’s opinion on Garcilaso the literary author and his early formulation in the work of William H. Prescott, see my article, “Canon, hispanismo y literatura colonial”.

3 This opposition, documented in his correspondence, not only with North Americans but also with Spaniards and Mexicans, has been explained by Jaksić in relation to his Whig party convictions (376-77 and 381). On his political affiliation, see also Kagan (252). However, as Eric Wertheimer points out, it is also possible to infer that theoretically, Prescott ultimately approved the United States expansionist
war, understood as an enlightened expansion of progress (327).

4 On this point, Wertheimer specifies: “the interpretive technique has been established that will shape the reading of the ‘racial character’ as comprising both individual and nation. Prescott works hard to disinherit the individual Indian from the semi-civilization he can legitimately lay historical claim to by consigning him to racial categories connected to the ability to express one’s self rationally” (311).

5 In an important analysis of the History of the Conquest of Peru, Rolena Adorno has noted that this North American superiority takes the form of a moral discussion on issues like individual freedom and social mobility. In her reading, narrating the history of Peru is for Prescott a way to distinguish North American values (112).

6 For a broader understanding of history in the Renaissance, Nancy Struever’s The Language of History in the Renaissance continues to be a fundamental source. On the providentialist meaning of Garcilaso’s work, see Duviols’s “Providencialismo histórico en los Comentarios Reales de los Incas”.

7 On Inca Garcilaso in the European utopian discourse, an excellent source is Iris Zavala’s early article, “El Inca Garcilaso en las utopías revolucionarias”. On Prescott’s reading of Montesquieu and Voltaire, see Jakić 343-45.

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