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RETHINKING THE NEW WORLD'S NATURE: WONDER AND EXOTICISM IN GONZALO FERNANDEZ DE OVIEDO Y VALDES

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COELLO DE LA ROSA

The subject of this essay is to explore critically the grounds upon which Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo's imperialist chronicle superimposed binary oppositions, oriented towards mapping and showing the contours of the New World in which Spaniards' actions merged.

I begin with looking attentively at Oviedo's positive vision of the New World's nature, a vision that portrayed natural goods as God's donation. I then turn to the Amerindians, who in contrast were incorporated, in generous quantities, to a negative and evil category (idolatrous, lascivious, naturally prone to violence, and lacking any history). As I will underscore throughout, the importance of symbols and metaphors belongs to a level of communication whose vehicles, as it is well known, are social and historically determined. My essay concludes with a brief comparison with other emergent empires, like the English, who also constituted their colonial subjects through a *semiotic field*, thereby yielding a similar effect of disavowal and displacement from the Spanish encroachment onto the Amerindians¹.

*"Son las cosas del mundo y de la Natura tan grandes e de tanto valor e soberana investigación para los despiertos ingenios, que ningún buen entendimiento las puede oír ni considerar sin grande gozo e deletación del espíritu intelectual"*²

Contrary to the passage quoted above, *"Aguirre, Wrath of God"*, Werner Herzog's production (1982) of Lope de Aguirre's visionary pursuit of El Dorado disclosed a ferocious, overpowering image of the Amazon's natural scenery. For those who joined such a chaotic expedition, no golden paradise was awaiting them anywhere. Conversely, impenetrable jungles and colossal rivers swelling with water displaced the audience's attention away from anything else but that environment. In this context of hideously hostile surroundings, reality and fiction often intertwined, playing an important role in Aguirre's final failure. At the end of the movie, all of his illusions and longings for acquiring wealth and power rapidly collapsed like a house of cards before the inability to remove his

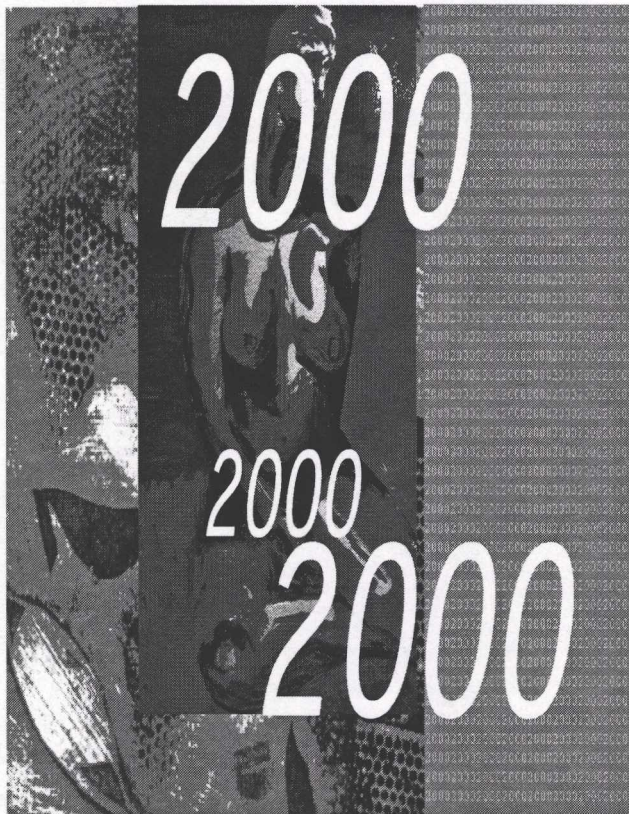


Ilustración: Carolina Tapia

Marañones out of the trap from which they could not escape: a harsh, uncontrollable nature, with natives lurking everywhere.

After the inaugural moment of the dis-covery, the presence of the Indies lying beyond the Western limits began to be positively categorized in various ways. Described as exultant, astonishing, yet somewhat perturbing and eccentric, natural features of the Antillean scene were one of the main elements profusely reported at the moment of Columbus's landfall. Most of the Admiral's logbook entries (October 14, 21, 1492) are peppered with a simplified version of the mythical garden wherein everything was marvelous, fertile, and green³. Likewise, the Milanese Humanist Peter Martyr of Anghiera defined nature in 1495 as "exuberantly happy"⁴, and five years later, Amerigo Vespucci dwelled with pleasure on the countless beauties of the New World. His first report portrayed a colorful and dithyrambic image of marvel, greenness, and aromatic smells, as though he and his companions were indeed in the Earthly Paradise⁵.

For Greenblatt, "wonder is the central figure in the initial European response to the New World, the decisive emotional and intellectual experience in the presence of radical difference"⁶. Defined simply in such an aesthetic manner, though, diversity of nature ran the risk to become something unapproachable. To be readily assimilable, the marvelous must be gradually rationalized according to the Western categories. Thus, by transforming the scenery of the New World as part of God's creation, Oviedo carried out an ideological form of scriptural appropriation. The underpinnings of this discursive procedure consisted in drawing the reader towards the contemplation of natural scenery first and foremost as something eminently positive. Beyond Columbus's perfunctory descriptions about the New World, the novelty of nature proved to be for Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés (1478-1557) the most prominent body of knowledge and the main organizing principle. Firmly anchored in a Eurocentric self-fashioning, as well as formulated in accordance with different categories of perception, the inner logic of Oviedo's teratology conveyed different nuances of the New World that ranged from the grotesque and the macabre to the exotic and wondrous⁷. By contrast to a generally positive stand about nature, the native Amerindians became a quintessentially negative element steeped in total licentiousness⁸.

My reading of Oviedo's representational practices is contrary to that of Angel Luis Méndez, who in his scholarly contribution to the Spanish chronicler, overlooked this binarian characteristic of colonial narratives. For Méndez, the *Historia* is a chronicle framed into a mere literary exercise based upon a historiographic and naturalistic pattern⁹. No necessary correlation between the historical, the naturalist, and the artistic discourses seems to exist, and therefore, Oviedo's detailed descriptions of nature are examined in isolation, as though they were a purely objective value. This analysis is extremely misleading because it provides an oblique vision of reality. Moreover, in doing so, Méndez has blatantly de-ideologized Oviedo's *Historia*, turning it into a stylistic resort whose rationale is geared primarily to foster what he has incisively called the "estética de lo imaginativo"¹⁰.

I am approaching Oviedo's intellectualism from an entirely different angle, looking in a variety of ways at the ideological role that "the sheen of the exotic" played upon his vast chronicle¹¹. This is not to argue that metropolitan modes of representation are necessarily and inherently unidirectional, but rather they must be understood as part of a constitutive process of the European Atlantic empires and the colonial languages that ensued¹².

According to Isidorus's *Etymologies*, Claudio Ptolemy's *Geography*, and especially, having Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* [*Natural History*] as a model to imitate, Oviedo undertook by far the first serious attempt to both classify and subordinate the new lands' natural entity as a whole¹³. Despite the fact that the ancient philosophers had been ignorant of the basic principles of cartography and the new cosmography, much of their physics still formed a corpus of knowledge difficult to debunk. The intellectual and political milieu at that time did not easily allow historians to move away from the accumulated wisdom of the Ancients. They provided certain cognitive structures – postulates, axioms – with which to interpret the New World according to a particular sense of "recognition". Embedded in such epistemological soil though, Oviedo's use of Pliny revealed nonetheless a tension between empiricism and authoritative texts that challenged imitation as a valuable strategy for rendering a truthful, more empirically based history¹⁴.

As Oviedo put it at the commencement of his

Historia, “todo hombre desea saber”¹⁵. Although he never made any distinction between the late Medieval Ages and the spirit of the Renaissance, Oviedo’s detailed and realistic descriptions nevertheless revealed a shift of attitude as to the self-enclosed Scholastic philosophy. Nature ceased now to be a danger zone of the first order, from which anxiety and fear constantly intrude into individual life, thereby becoming not an obstacle but a vehicle to God. Thus conceived, Oviedo’s interest as to how to frame historical facts into the natural environment that surrounded him favored an expositive order characterized by a heterogeneous chain of events and descriptions. As already noticeable in the *Sumario* (1526), a living almanac analogically reproduced in very different ways an Edenic image, deeply sensitive, of a sacred territory that nobody had ever been able to profane. At first glance, Oviedo’s ethnographical experience might ultimately demonstrate that, as Clifford Geertz put it, he was truly there¹⁶. Yet, on close examination, the joyful sentiment that interweaves Oviedo’s *Historia* only acquired full meaning under the production of rhetoric structures, which were not only determined by aesthetic, but also specific legal, political, or religious constraints¹⁷.

In particular, Oviedo’s dualistic strategy, much more calculated than it might appear at first sight, did not consolidate the colonial forms of subjectivity and power upon comparing the Amerindians’ feeble-mindedness with the Spaniards’ mental superiority, intelligence, and virtue, but rather upon scrutinizing in full detail all aspects of natural life. In the following pages, I want to shed some light on the creative dimension of Oviedo’s narrative, showing how the cult of the marvelous neutralized the ideological dimension of a historical discourse as such, symbolically instituting a distant paradise to be consecrated through the inexorable spread of God’s word. In effect, Oviedo’s religiously conditioned understanding of nature did not tackle the vague, ambiguous representation that Columbus cast roughly on his four voyages. Instead, the Court Chronicler inaugurated a pre-scientific approach that, besides combining a spiritual - namely, divine - revelation with a classificatory and technical language, ultimately subordinated the material value of the Indies to report its undeniable beauty.

The picturesque scenery of the Indies was to a high degree a constant surprise and challenge to the

observer’s contemplative mind. To this extent, the way in which Oviedo entirely envisaged nature corresponded to an accurate reproduction of the Garden of Eden. As a sort of new Adam¹⁸, Oviedo actually looks like a conqueror hurled back and forth by his own feelings. As a nature’s prisoner, he aspired to record God’s handiwork in great detail and with precision, echoing a polyphonic perception of over-abundance for the benefit of his potential readers:

*“Maravillosas son las obras de Dios, e muy diferentes en géneros las cosas animadas en diversas provincias e partes del mundo, así en sus especies e formas, como en su grandeza e proporción, y en sus efetos y particularidades: y en tanta manera, que ni de los animales de la tierra, ni de los pescados e animales del agua, no se puede acabar de escrebir ni saber por la diligencia humana, ni han bastado las vidas de los hombres que en esto se han ocupado, a decirlo todo, ni faltarán cosas que notar a todos los que son vivos o vernán después de nos”*¹⁹

Nature was the book upon which God wrote the prodigality of the New World, and to contemplate nature was the best vehicle to contemplate God: God is the Maker, the Lord of all creation, whose imprint is everywhere. Inasmuch as there was no impediment for sensitive eyes to unveil a reality so spiritual, describing geography would be, as Ptolemy put it, a mode of painting the world with words²⁰. But Oviedo’s experience was not that of an individual communion with nature. Rather, he viewed it from outside as potent, if disturbing, symbol of innocence and power barely tinged with economic perspectives of profit, regardless of its prodigality²¹. Instead, the undeniable beauty of nature appears analogically mapped out through exotic landscapes, an enormous variety of tangled jungles, scorching climates, tornadoes, lakes of uncertain origin, stunning mountains and an endless list of large areas of forests, rivers, and so forth. The aura of the sacral, that seemed to pull out the old myth of *terrae mater*, submitted from now on to Oviedo’s observant and scrutinizer look.

Sometimes Oviedo seemed incapable of giving his readers anything else but an idea of surprise and astonishment. The simplest human being cannot but feel overcome with and enthralled by bolder scenes of nature rich in abundance and plenitude that arises to the dream of the Garden of Eden. Such a powerful senti-

ment of fascination before the majesty and harmony of God's accomplishment runs along with the insufficiency of language for an adequate understanding of all that exists. Only superlatives proved to be useful to satisfactorily describe so much sensuality and visual pleasure. Oviedo's sensitivity notwithstanding, the variety of languages, habits, animals, and types of vegetation went fully beyond the possibilities of textual representation.

Unlike traditional societies from Iberia, the virgin, flawless nature of the New World turned out to be a physical space with no morality. Nature was amoral because no principles over rules, customs, or "civilized" behavior existed in that place. While Western societies were human artifacts created by imperfect beings, nature itself manifested - and this is an important element of contrast - a stainless purity as though it had been neither manipulated nor polluted by any evil agent. At this juncture, Oviedo's imagination easily recognized that God's goodness was reflected in every single element of a flourishing primal nature as such. However, what he does here is not "confirming" and "identifying", as Columbus did, but rather "dispossessing" and "appropriating" the natural exteriority of the Indies²².

In compliance with a "logic or theology of colonization" prevalent in his mind, Oviedo judged nature in a certain manner as a *tabula rasa*. His version of the Indies as a vacant space was actually a metaphor that fostered the production of ideological images from outside²³. For unlike Columbus, who did not expect to find any inferior humanity beyond the outlying limits of the Ocean Sea, Oviedo knew of the existence of "barbarian" or "savage" peoples from others, albeit he purposely set them aside. The reason is quite clear. In the process of writing his chronicle, Oviedo produced a sense of distance and strangement because of the impossibility to think of the New World's inhabitants in terms of historical subjects. Ultimately though, dehumanizing others not only entailed a violent act of detachment, but also it stood for refilling the Indies with moral values and beliefs, like an intelligible language and Christian faith. Or, what amounts to the same thing, the Amerindians, reduced now to the status of sheer objects, must be transformed through the "blank page" into potential subjects as a way to wipe the slate clean and thereby produce a new sense of positive history²⁴.

This blatant strategy to straightforwardly displace certain aspects of reality in favor of others constituted part of an ensuing ideological dimension of European expansionism. To a great extent, this rhetorical device was by no means accidental. Nor was it new. In 1185, Gerald of Wales (*Giraldus Cambrensis*), a loquacious Norman clerk in the service of Henry II (1133-1189), had already written a laborious description of Ireland that was utterly in tune with the monarch's dilatory interests to colonize the island²⁵. Of his *Topographia Hibernia* [*The History and Topography of Ireland*] I would like to underline some key aspects. The first one involves a certain admiration of the secret wonders of nature; the second one, a profound disdain towards the "barbarous", filthy, and inhospitable Celtic-Irish peoples, who were unabashedly "wallowing in vice"²⁶.

Justification for settlement in those areas previously unconquered was found in the argument of land utility, inasmuch as it was erroneous that profitable Irish soil should not go uncultivated. As Gerard of Wales forwardly contended, "the wealth of the soil is lost, not through the fault of the soil, but because there are no farmers to cultivate even the best land: 'the fields demand, but there are no hands'"²⁷. Thereupon, in recording this wonderland, imperfection only could come from hostile peoples not organized into societies and economics, and probably incapable to make up a civilizing model.

Although Spanish accounts on the habits of the "barbarians" found in the Indies were quite different in style and proportion, some parallelisms might yet be drawn out. Particularly, the way in which Gerald of Wales despised Irish costumes throughout his storytelling rested on the conviction that the Anglo-Norman was morally superior to the Irish "barbarian". To authenticate this, the English pope Adrian IV issued in 1155 a bull whereby he granted away the sovereignty of Ireland to Henry II. According to similar hints of partisan politics, the Spanish Pope Alexander VI did the same. In a particular striking move, two papal bulls issued in 1493 established the rights of the Catholic Kings by dividing the newfound lands, both in the Americas and the Orient, between the Spanish and Portuguese crowns. The imaginary line was at first drawn from north to south, one hundred leagues west of the Azores and the Cape Verde islands, then hastily amended at the behest of Jean II of Portugal (1481-

1495) by the Treaty of Tordesillas, to three hundred and seventy leagues west of those islands²⁸. Portuguese position strengthened. Brazil fell under the Lusitanian sovereignty, though what they really fought for was to consolidate their rights over the route to India, whose economic importance was well known.

Papal bulls were grounded on the Caesaro-papal assumption of 'plenitude of power', meaning temporal authority over both Christian and pagans²⁹. However arbitrary these bulls of donation might be, particularly from the perspective of natural law, what I would like to stress here is that the crucial importance of inventing essentialist stereotypes in relation to the Atlantic expansion to the West was certainly not new. Just as the Anglo-Normands had previously taken advantage of such legal ruses to invade Ireland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, so, also would the Spaniards in order to acquire sovereignty over those "backward peoples" and their lands living beyond the confines of the Western world.

This pejorative categorization of Gaelic Irish or Scottish as worthless or, at least, inferior peoples, was evident throughout the sixteenth century³⁰. In this respect, one Englishman observed that "we have Indians at home: Indians in Cornwall, Indians in Wales, Indians in Ireland"³¹. Similarly, the Catholic Church's ideals of religious supremacy overseas ranged from a negative categorization of the "barbarous Indians" to their most absolute negation.

From the first stages of their Atlantic expansionism, Portuguese and Spaniards had taken formal possession of foreign soil in the name of their respective monarchs in order to exclude all other nations from the benefits of the discovery. As other European rulers with similar claims, particularly Francis I of France, refused to acknowledge the validity of the papal arbitration³², the Spanish Crown sought to introduce juridical rules to make legitimate the seizure and occupation of territory³³. In this way, the sophistication of rhetorical formalism made the new lands uninhabited to better appropriate them through a series of ritualistic proceedings and protocolarian dispositions that, needless to say, the natives living there had no hope of understanding³⁴.

According to the ancient Roman law and the medieval spirit still alive, possession was largely based on the principle of bodily occupation whether by right of conquest or by virtue of placing one's body upon a fixed and permanent establishment³⁵. The first serious effort as such was led by the governor Nicolás de Ovando (1509-1509), who strove to stabilize the society of Hispaniola through the founding of cities and the *repartimiento* of the indigenous inhabitants to settlers in return for their instruction and conversion³⁶.

Most important, for the consolidation of the Spanish colonial monopoly, was nonetheless the lack of labor force. In 1518 white emigrants were promised a free passage, free grants of land, livestock and plants, and exemption from payment of taxes for twenty years, while some officials of Hispaniola strongly recommended to the Emperor in 1523 the importation of more black slaves as well³⁷.

Yet, although a small network of villages, churches, and *encomiendas* had already been set up in the Caribbean as Oviedo began to write his *Historia*, no large-scale emigration resulted from the imperial decree³⁸. By the late 1530s, the indigenous population from Cuba was so drastically reduced as a consequence of epidemic disease and relentless labor demands that the system of *encomienda* did not guarantee in fact any notable source of wealth³⁹.

From the beginning of the colonial period, the pursuit of easy riches and control of labor was more important to the newcomers than ownership of land. The Dominicans and other members of the regular clergy had vigorously protested the inhumane treatment accorded to the Indians, which was closely related to enslavement, and launched themselves to arouse the conscience of the Spanish imperialism⁴⁰. For the Crown's purposes, however, the moral and economic significance of so spectacular a decline must be adequately balanced. Here is the juncture where the twin terms of power and knowledge concur, thereby producing effects of truth within colonial discourses⁴¹. Consequently, a displacement of aggression moved from Spaniards, whose aspirations of wealth depended upon the deployment of force at innumerable moments, onto the "barbarous tyrants" Amerindians. Regardless of the existence of hostile natives who seemed not to appreciate material riches⁴², a carcass of beauty and

splendor was molded more and more by intertwining peaceful activities, such as the development of sugar plantations, trade and transport⁴³. Now, to pacific settlers, a correspondingly plentiful nature – rather than a ‘wilderness’ waiting to be developed – became visible⁴⁴.

But, on the mantle of a polarized narrative that entwined fear with pleasure, Oviedo’s premises offered nonetheless a potential key to explaining this apparent contradiction. To recapitulate briefly: the marvels of nature were set against their negated alterity as a way of fostering a symbolical distance between the awe-inspiring “Indians”, and his impatient readers. Once again, the fetishization of nature as a positive element is here of prime importance to cloak the ideological projection of Oviedo’s discourse, smoothing the way for the consolidation of a hierarchized colonial society in places where native population was virtually dying out⁴⁵. For Greenblat, however, wonder went far beyond moral categories⁴⁶. In my view, wonder did not stand for all that cannot be understood, as he suggests, but especially for all that must be concealed, or to a great extent, minimized.

In the mid-sixteenth century, the inhabitants of remote parts of the world were not already monsters, as portrayed in Pliny’s *Natural History*. They promptly became the bone and blood of the colonial system. In terms of political necessity, Spaniards judged American natives not only as an end in itself but rather as a means to achieve an end. Parallely, a new History now assumed its universality over the pagan peoples of the New World as a consequence of God’s providential mandate⁴⁷. Therein America became the right place to expand the gospel: “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations⁴⁸, beginning from Jerusalem⁴⁹”. In the final balance, however, Oviedo guaranteed not only the moral and civil justification of the Spanish actions in the New World, but also those actions would henceforth restore the covenant between the Great Redeemer and the humankind.

ENDNOTES

¹I have borrowed the notion of semiotic field from Terry Goldie, *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Literatures*, Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1989.

²Oviedo, *Historia General y Natural de las Indias* (hereafter, *Historia*), Vol. 117, Bk VI, Chap. XXIX, 1959: 186.

³Christopher Columbus, Letter to Luís de Santángel, 15 February 1493, in Morales Padrón, 74.

⁴Martyr de Anghiera, *Cartas sobre el Nuevo Mundo*, Madrid: Polifemo Editions, [1530] 1990: 48.

⁵Americo Vespucci’s letter to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de Medici (18 July 1500), in Morales Padrón, 213.

⁶Greenblat, 1992, 14.

⁷Natural things were not necessarily admired for their beauty. As Greenblat points out, “the marvelous was bound up with the excessive, the surprising, the literally outlandish, the prodigious” (1990). On Oviedo’s fascination with certain harmful elements existing in nature such as hideous cacti, venomous snakes, and swarms of pestiferous insects, see the comments of Merrim, 173. For a wider perspective of Oviedo’s penchant for the macabre in his *Historia*, see Méndez, 292.

⁸Oviedo, *Historia*, Vol. 117, Bk III, Chap. VI, 1959: 67.

⁹Méndez, 10; 579.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 24; 579.

¹¹Merrim, 181.

¹²Pagden, 1995, 8.

¹³Oviedo, *Historia*, Vol. 117, (Prologue to Bk. II), 1959: 13. On the relation between Pliny and Oviedo, see Enrique Álvarez López, “Plinio y Fernández de Oviedo”, *Anales de Ciencias Naturales*, Instituto José de Acosta, Madrid, 1940-1941. See also Merrim’s discussion of Oviedo’s use of Pliny, 174-175.

¹⁴For a detailed discussion on Oviedo’s dual approach to sixteenth century theories of imitation – namely, nature and the prevailing canon – see Myers, 1991: 523.

¹⁵Oviedo, *Historia*, Vol. 117, Bk. I, 1959: 7.

¹⁶Geertz, 5.

¹⁷Rabasa, 1993: 5.

¹⁸Soria, 58.

¹⁹Oviedo, *Historia*, Vol. 118, (Prologue to the Bk. X or XIII), 1959: 56.

²⁰Oviedo, *Historia*, Vol. 118, (Prologue to the Bk. XXI), 1959: 305.

²¹As Merrim pointed out, any allusion to gold or economic benefits as the sole symbol of wealth, so present in Columbus’s narrative, is surprisingly absent from Oviedo’s *Sumario* (Merrim, 190). The reason of nature’s profound detachment from any economic aspect is by no means accidental. Following Enrique Otte’s points, Oviedo might have portrayed natural objects not as a productive force, but as a metaphor, partially because he himself was involved in dubious transactions related to slave and pearl trade in Panama (Otte, 1958, 33-36).

²²Pastor, 1992, 10.

²³Subirats, 34-35; 80.

²⁴De Certeau, 135.

²⁵Bottigheimer, 68.

²⁶Wales, 106.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 102.

²⁸These Papal bulls – *Inter Caetera*, May 3rd – 4th; and *Dudum siquidem*, June 1493 – are published, among other places, in *Missionalia Hispanica*, 28, Year X, Madrid, 1953. A very clarify-

ing article concerning the first Papal bulls that granted away the sovereignty of the Indies for the purpose of establishing ecclesiastical institutions in the newly conquered territories is De la Hera, 1960.

²⁹Pagden, 1986, 82.

³⁰In a passage that reveals such festering antagonism, the English historian William Camden (1551-1623) referred how "Savage (Henry) a Gentleman which amongst the first English, had planted himselfe in Ulster in Ireland, advised his sonne for to builde a castle for his better defense against the Irish enemy, who valiantly answered: that hee woulde not trust to a castle of stones, but ho his castle of bones" (227).

³¹Hill, 20.

³²Challenging Charles V's universalistic empire, Francis I adamantly contended that "I should be very happy to see the clause in Adam's will which excluded me from my share when the world was being divided" (Hanke, 148).

³³Seed, 72.

³⁴Greenblat, 1992, 82-83; Zamora, 3.

³⁵Greenblat, 1992: 27-28.

³⁶Pagden, 1987, 52-53.

³⁷Sánchez-Albornoz, 72-73.

³⁸Williams, 38-39. Sánchez-Albornoz, citing Sauer's work (1969), pointed out that the 1514 census of Hispaniola listed 392 male Spanish inhabitants, of whom 92 had Spanish-born wives and 52 were married to Indian women (67).

³⁹Altman, 8. For a further analysis on this particular issue, see especially the pioneer work of statistical analysis for Spanish America by Borah and Cook, 1963; 1971, especially Volume I, pages 376-410.

⁴⁰A few years later, the Dominican Bartolomé de Las Casas' impassioned pamphlet, *Very Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, denounced the Spaniards for systematic killing, appalling cruelty, and excessive overwork of the Caribbean natives (Librería de la Vda. de Ch. Bouret, Paris, 1946 [1552]: 22).

⁴¹Foucault, 1980: 118-119.

⁴²Oviedo, Vol. 117, Bk. III, 1959: 67.

⁴³The business of sugar was one of the most profitable granjerías for the first Spaniards who arrived to the Antilles (Oviedo, Vol. 117, Bk. IV, Chap. VIII, 1959: 110).

⁴⁴The reason why Spaniards did not share the English conception of American nature as a 'wilderness' waiting to be developed might lie not only in their different attitudes to wealth, as Elliot seems to suggest (1990: 53), but in a distinct cosmological notion of universe. While the English regarded God's handiwork to be instrumentally used, nature was already endowed with perfection in Spanish eyes. A perfection that does not need any further modification to be completed, as the English thought, but simply glorification of God's work.

⁴⁵Astonished by the effects of epidemics over the native population, Oviedo also endorsed the idea that God was protecting the Spaniards by killing off untrustworthy "Indians" who obstructed the goals of the Christians (Salas, 168). By contrast, Bartolomé de Las Casas's impassioned pamphlet refused to search for any providentialist language of imperialism. According to the Dominican, no historical or providential justification could be argued for the atrocities committed over the Amerindians (A *Very Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, Librería de la Vda. de Ch. Bouret, Paris, 1946 [1552]: 22).

⁴⁶Stephen Greenblat, 1992: 21-22.

⁴⁷Oviedo, *Historia*, Vol. 117, Bk. II, Chap. III, 1959: 22.

or nations. Beginning from Jerusalem, you are witnesses.

⁴⁸Luke 24, 46-49.

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