

CABEZAS DE VACA'S NAUFRAGIOS Y COMENTARIOS: THE JOURNEY MOTIF IN THE CHRONICLE OF THE INDIES

Many literary texts that chronicle the discovery, conquest and colonization of the Americas are based upon the narrative sequence of travel or voyaging. The notions of odyssey or quest, which generally implicate an adventurous journey of sorts, often lent thematic and structural cohesiveness to the letters and historiographical texts that were written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in an attempt to relate in detail the epic experiences of the Spanish explorers and conquerors. From Christopher Columbus' *Diario de viaje*, which, as the title expressly indicates, is a narrative account of the voyages and explorations of this discoverer; to Sigüenza y Góngora's *Los Infortunios de Alonso Ramírez*, a seventeenth century chronicle in the picaresque vein, which narrates the adventures and misfortunes of a young Puerto Rican sailor; to such a hybrid text as *El Lazarillo de ciegos caminantes* by Alonso Carrió de la Vadera, considered by many critics as more of a manual or guidebook for travelers than as a chronicle, the motif of journey has provided Hispanic chroniclers of the New World with a means of overcoming the spatial and temporal boundaries inherent in the historiographical text and depicting ineffable aspects or features of the fantasy that was the newly found American reality.

One of the earliest Latin American texts that effectively utilizes the journey motif as a means of conveying nonspatial experiences is Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *Naufragios y comentarios*. Written to the Spanish king, Charles V, as a report, it chronicles the Spanish expedition to Florida under Narváez, the shipwreck and the dramatic trek across the North American continent, from East to West, and most significantly, the hardship and misfortune endured by this adventurer and his three companions during their eight year odyssey in the wilderness in the New World between 1528 and 1536. Published under the title *La relación* for the first time in 1542, it appeared at a time when the expeditionary journeys of such explorers and conquerors as Pizarro and Coronado were of great interest to not only Spain, but all Europe. A second edition of the text later appeared in 1555, two years before Cabeza de Vaca's death. It is considered the first overland travel book describing the Americas, and valued as the earliest historic and ethnographic text related to the Indian races of the Southwest.

Like many other journey narratives, it is structured in terms of a simple, chronologically linear form, and within a narrative framework of values that is

associated with directional movement and space. Yet what distinguishes this historiographical narrative from earlier chronicles that also utilize the journey as a structuring and thematic device is the emphasis on the spiritual development that parallels the physical journey. In this report to the Spanish monarch, Cabeza de Vaca reveals his evolving attitude toward and relationship to the North American natives, which is the result of his interaction with them along his route during his eight year odyssey in the Southwest. Drawing heavily on such mishaps as storms, shipwrecks, famine, and cannibalism, the author utilizes a geographical account of his experience to trace simultaneously the inner movement of his spiritual awakening. Despite their striking cultural differences, the narrative reveals how eight years of coexistence and commiseration with the Indians had enlightened this explorer. This illuminating, redemptive experience is symbolically illustrated in the westward movement of his wanderings, with the West being equated with knowledge and spirituality in the symbolism of the Cosmos. There prevails in this mid-sixteenth century narrative text an unmistakable spiritual quality that is born of the conflict of man with nature, and of man with man, which is translated into geographical symbolism.

Cabeza de Vaca, like many European chivalrous entrepreneurs, looked beyond the Atlantic, to the West, for their Utopias, Islands of the Blessed and cities in the sun. The brave new world to the west of Spain was the threshold beyond which awaited not only the Elysian Fields and Eden, but also the glorious Seven Cities of Cíbola, the Amazon, El Dorado, and countless other myths that had become an integral part of a long national heritage. The Spanish explorers' first contact with America gave them a wealth of material about which to write, for many believed to have come upon the Terrestrial Paradise, a virgin terrain filled with countless marvels and wonders; and their narrative works are the result of the confrontation and interaction of these Old World preconceptions with New World realities.

The notion of the mythical Golden Age was revived by the Renaissance as explorers sought inspiration in the classical myths and ventured further westward on a quest to realize their dreams of gold and grandeur. The medieval legends and universal myths that were part of the baggage that the Spanish explorers brought with them on their voyages to the unknown were grafted onto and adapted to this newly discovered territory, a sort of Paradise regained, as a result of the dynamic interaction with an incredible, unfathomed topography that often defied description.

Perhaps no journey of exploration could have made more of an impression upon the European consciousness than that of the Americas, for it is at this decisive moment when many of the preexisting myths were transfigured and transposed from a fundamentally chronological to a spatial, namely, geographical realm. The discoverers attempted to describe *the terra incognita* in a language that was intelligible to the European reader, one with an intrinsic spatial orientation, founded upon literary figures and tropes, which would appeal to the senses and the sensibility

of the *destinatario*. While many critics have pointed out the importance of the discovery of America upon the social, political and economic reality of the sixteenth century European community, few have underscored the significance of the journey as metaphor in the historiographical texts that chronicle the discovery and exploration of the Americas, the notion of voyage as a characteristic theme and structuring device, with its fundamental spatial orientation.

Journeys of exploration are at the heart of the earliest works that describe the American reality. The first account of exploration or geographical description in the New World by a Hispanic is that by Christopher Columbus. As Alexander von Humboldt¹ has pointed out, the *Diario* is the first case of a description of Nature for its own sake. These descriptions and the narrative account of Columbus' voyage are often valued less for their literary merit than for their historiographical significance, given the principles of authority and imitation that formed the basis of writing during the Renaissance, as well as the rhetorical formulas, derived from the three ancient interrelated arts of language-grammar, logic and rhetoric-which guided and conditioned all literary composition at the time. As a composition whereby the writer speaks to the reader not only directly, however, but also mediately through the interposed creations of his imagination, it is only fair to recognize the creative or poetic nature of these early historiographical texts.

Columbus, like many other explorers of the New World, found in the Americas a landscape and a people wholly unfamiliar to the European senses: "a land to be desired, and once seen, never to be left." For the Admiral, who was neither an artist nor a writer, the most adequate and intelligible mode of description was that which was based upon the rhetorical figures of comparison and contrast. The use of associative parallelisms in his description enabled Columbus to project onto the New World and thereby corroborate the classical myths and medieval romances of chivalry that conditioned his vision. These correspondences, or the lack thereof, can be observed, for example, in his description of the climate of the land that he believed to be the Indies: "las noches temperadas como en mayo en España, en el Andalucía"; and of the trees, "todos están tan disformes de los nuestros, como el día de la noche."

At the same time such a descriptive mode allowed Columbus to create or "invent"² a space that, while not continuous with Europe, in many aspects appeared contiguous with the Old World. The Admiral and his crew also reported that while sailing offshore in the West Indies they sighted mermaids and heard the singing of nightingales, neither of which are native to the western hemisphere, further evidence

1. Alexander von Humboldt, *Kosmos* (Stuttgart and Tübingen, I.G. Cotta, 1847), II, 54.

2. For more on the notion of the "invention" of America, I recommend the following readings: *La invención de América* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1958) by Edmundo O'Gorman, who suggests that "under the sway of his desire reality was transfigured"; and *Historia y literatura en Hispano-América; la versión intelectual de una experiencia* (Madrid: Fundación Juan Marcha, 1978) by Mario Hernández Sánchez-Barba.

of the discoverer's desire to authenticate his initial confrontations with the New World by means of literary commonplaces that were born of preconceived notions regarding a mythic time and space. In the early *cartas* or letters of navigation, the American reality is revised, reworked, rewritten in such a fashion so as to reconcile apparent contradictions:

...no se canceló el arquetipo sino que se aplazó simplemente su realización plena mientras comenzaba a funcionar como mecanismos de reducción, deformación, y ficcionalización de la nueva realidad.³

The descriptions evoked by Columbus and those of other early explorers had a significant impact upon the European mentality, and undoubtedly served as inspiration for geographical fantasies based upon the notion of the American ideal: Thomas Moore's *Utopia* (1516), *The New Atlantic* (1616) by Francis Bacon and *La ciudad del Sol* (1602) by Tomás Campanella. Interest in the exotic aspect of America was furthered fueled by the narrations of countless corsairs and pirates, buccaneers and adventurers of New Spain and the Antilles, such as the British Sir Walter Raleigh's *The Discovery of the Emyre of Guiana*, which details his exploration of the Orinoco in search of El Dorado. The *Relación del nuevo descubrimiento del famoso río Grande de las Amazonas*, by Gaspar de Carvajal, the Spanish chronicler who accompanied the conquistador Orellana on his expedition of the Amazon, was similarly motivated by the promise of finding such mythic places as El Dorado, the Land of Cinnamon, and the Kingdom of the legendary Amazon Women. These works exalted the American motif and occasioned the production of other texts similarly based on travels, both real and imaginary, such as John Dryden's the tragedy, *El emperador indio o la conquista de México por los españoles* (1665) and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719).

While the works of many of these travelers, authentic and armchair alike, contributed to an enriched understanding of the American reality and an enhanced utilization of America as literary pretext, all too often these texts gave rise to a series of sentimental misconceptions, often presenting a superficial and fragmented vision of this newly discovered paradise, and incorporating false or uninformed notions about historical and geographical facts, as well as the customs and character of the inhabitants of the New World. It is only in the direct observation and confrontation with the American reality that the authentic landscape is depicted and the spatial consciousness of these early American authors becomes more apparent, most notably in the increasing space afforded to passages of a descriptive nature, and in particular, to the narration of journeys.

3. Beatriz Pastor, *Discursos narrativos de la conquista: mitificación y emergencia* (Hanover, N.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1988).

The theme of the odyssey, the expedition to and exploration of uncharted waters and unpathed lands, has played a significant role in the shaping of the Latin American narrative. These journeys, often transcribed as memoirs or the eyewitness account of personal experiences, both biographical and autobiographical, have provided Hispanic narrators not only with an engaging means of communicating the indescribable geography—both physically spatial and human—to their European contemporaries, but also with a creative medium for expressing their own spiritual odseys. For it is in the very process of narrative map-making, of relating those experiences and events that configure one's mythic journey through time and space, that narrators such as Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca begin to discover themselves, in the remembrance of the past, the understanding of the present and the envisioning of the future.

Central to the comprehension of Cabeza de Vaca's text is the understanding of the effective utilization of space in a manner that is at once illustrative and representative, in the use of the journey motif to convey both spatial and nonspatial experiences. As a historiographical narrative, *La relación* presents a series of actual events in a sequential fashion, in autobiographical form: as a literary text, it simultaneously underscores the progressive passage through a more intimate time and space that heightens the fictional quality of this narrative in the creation of an ambiguity between subjective and objective landscapes. Characteristic of narratives of discovery and adventure is the incorporation into the text of such mishaps as storms, shipwrecks, famine, and cannibalism. Yet what distinguishes this chronicle of meandering and misfortune from other historiographical texts that relate journeys into unknown regions is the use of the journey as a structuring and thematic device, and the utilization of a geographical account of the explorer's experience to simultaneously trace the inner, inward movement of his spiritual awakening.

The theme of the journey, particularly the voyage to lands of the marvelous, has been "the one formula that is never exhausted in literature," according to Northrop Frye (*Anatomy of Criticism*, 1973, p. 57). In the case of Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación*, the text recounts the details of an actual endured journey in the newly discovered lands that were later to be recognized as the Spanish Southwest. More importantly, it provides the reader with not only the material with which to imagine America, but with the vehicle that transports him through space and time to a land and people that, in some aspects, correspond to the Europeans' Edenic preconception of the New World:

La gente que allí hallamos son grandes y bien dispuestos; no tienen otras armas sino flechas y arcos... Es la gente del mundo que más aman a sus hijos y mejor tratamiento les hacen; (p. 60)⁴

4. Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *Naufragios y comentarios*, edited by Dionisio Ridruejo (Madrid: Taurus, 1969), p. 81. All subsequent citations will be taken from this text.

Es gente muy partida de lo que tiene, unos con otros. No hay entre ellos señor.
(p. 64)

In true autobiographical fashion Cabeza de Vaca selects and arranges the events of his life to give them a narrative shape and pattern, eliminating from his record countless trivial details. Composed solely on the basis of recollections of observations, without the aid of written notes or journals, Cabeza de Vaca's narrative cannot be expected to be completely accurate, as he himself states, "...anduvimos por tantas suertes de gentes y de tan diversas lenguas que no basta memoria a poderlas contar,..." (p. 107). Nonetheless, *La relación* is regarded as an unparalleled source of information on the topography and climate, the flora and fauna of that region of America⁵, with details of the rituals and customs of its inhabitants. Whereas the earliest descriptions of America in historiographical texts, such as those by Columbus, were merely attempts to corroborate preexisting Renaissance myths about the marvelous utopias that had been discovered, Cabeza de Vaca's text tells of a journey away from a static ideal of American space, through a land whose dramatic terrain and people often have no equivalents in the European vocabulary. His descriptions of the prickly pear, the bison, the opossum and the armadillo, for example, are considered the first of their kind, and are still considered among the most accurate.

Descriptions of the American phenomena become for Cabeza de Vaca a means of spatial and cultural clarification, and serve to initiate the reader into those marvels first observed by him on his journey and now discovered by the reader through the art of his narrative. The descriptive act in *La relación* serves as a gateway through which the reader is transported to the American scene where he, too, discovers and penetrates the mysteries that are revealed to the traveler. Cognizant of the needs of his travelling companion, the reader, who accompanies him in the narrative reconstructing of his journey of discovery, Cabeza de Vaca employs some tried rhetorical devices that not only enhance understanding through amplification, but also serve to incorporate the reader into the realm of the remarkable and the ineffable. Whereas Columbus often comments in broad sweeping terms on the distinctiveness of the trees in relation to those in Spain ("todos están tan disformes de los nuestros, como el día de la noche"), the Spanish castaway indicates with specificity the similarities between the trees in the New World and those in Europe, expressly identifying the phenomena:

por toda ella [la tierra] hay nogales y laureles, y otros que se llaman liquidámbaros, cedros, sabinas y encinas y pinos y robles, palmitos bajos, de la manera de los de Castilla. (p. 36)

5. His descriptions of the prickly pear, the buffalo and the armadillo are considered the first of their kind, and are further illustrations of the specificity of his observations of the phenomena that he encountered on his odyssey.

This attention to detail, this concern for the proper designation and authentic representation of reality is a result of the travelers' confrontation with and adaptation to his new environs. Once it was conquered and colonized, America was no longer the Paradise, Heavenly or Earthly, that had served as the vehicle of inspiration for many conquistadors. As explorers and conquerors were lured on by the illusive tales of El Dorado, the glittering legends of gold soon tarnished under the realities of an untamed and often hostile environment, and a land that left them famished. The narrative text of Cabeza de Vaca is a detailed and descriptive account of his confrontation with the forces at large in the New World, both animate and inanimate. It chronicles his eight year odyssey through the wilderness, and his encounters with the different indigenous peoples of Florida, those along the Mississippi, and those he met as he journeyed overland across Texas to California and Mexico.

La relación is conceived structurally like other journey narratives, in terms of a simple, chronologically linear form, and in a narrative framework of values that is associated with directional movement and space. Ostensibly, the narrative is composed as a chronicle of physical ordeal:

Los trabajos que en esto pasé sería largo contarlos, así de peligros y hambres como de tempestades y fríos, que muchos de ellos me tomaron en el campo y solo, donde por gran misericordia de Dios nuestro Señor escapé; ... (p. 81)

The author expresses not only his desire to relate his experiences with the native Indians and the nature of their customs, but also his concern for enlightening other travelers that may embark on adventures to those regions of the New World that he traversed during his epic journey:

Esto he querido contar porque allende que todos los hombres desean saber las costumbres y ejercicios de los otros, los que algunas veces se vinieren a ver con ellos están avisados de sus costumbres y ardides, que suelen no poco aprovechar en semejantes casos. (p. 96)

Suggested in his last passage is the awareness of the author that storytelling or the narration of a story, his story, is a communal act, that an audience is necessary for the journey to unfold and for the significance of that experience to be revealed. At several times during the narration this reader consciousness reveals itself in his desire to be brief and leave the particulars to the imagination of the reader, to keep the journey's end in sight:

Dejo aquí de contar esto más largo, porque cada uno puede pensar lo que se pasaría en tierra tan extraña y tan mala, y sin ningún remedio de ninguna cosa, ni para estar ni para salir de ella. (p. 83)

In his report to Charles V, Cabeza de Vaca reveals the changing motives behind his travels: from the expedition to Pánuco under the command of Narváez "para conquistar y gobernar las provincias que están desde el río de las Palmas hasta el cabo de la Florida," to the search for a harbor and better land for settlement ("en busca del puerto y de tierra que fuese mejor"), to the quest for the province known as Apalache, "en la cual había mucho oro, y ...muy gran cantidad de todo lo que nosotros estimamos en algo," to the land of Christians ("...que Dios los llevase con nosotros a tierra de cristianos"), to the mythic West, toward the setting sun, "porque siempre tuvimos por cierto que yendo la puesta del Sol habíamos de hallar lo que deseábamos."

As Cabeza de Vaca's itinerary is shaped and determined by the conditions of his confrontation with the natural and human forces at large in the American wilderness, so is his attitude toward the Indian, which evolves as the result of his interaction and interrelationship with them during his eight year odyssey in the Southwest. After years of wandering in the American wilderness, this Spaniard has become aware that because of his travels and encounters with the different indigenous peoples of the Southwest, he has undergone a spiritual transformation with regard to his vision and comprehension of the Indian:

y cierto ver que estos hombres tan sin razón y tan crudos, a manera de brutos, se dolían tanto de nosotros, hizo que en mí y en otros de la compañía creciese más la pasión y la consideración de nuestra desdicha. (p. 56).

Having lost their clothes and worldly possessions ("desnudos como nascimos y perdido todo lo que traíamos, y aunque todo valía poco, para entonces valía mucho."), this heroic Spaniard and the other three surviving compatriots, these "children of the sun," ventured forth on an epic quest to find the Spanish frontier settlement within the parameters of civilized existence. Their journey, however, led them to discoveries far beyond the anticipated destination of their proposed itinerary, as their passage through space and time led them away from previously held conceptions and beliefs, toward a greater understanding and appreciation of the New World.

In the epilogue that follows the English version of Cabeza de Vaca's text, translated and edited by Cyclone Covey (New York, 1961), William T. Pilkington writes that a recurring motif of American literature is the voyage of exploration, the journey that is at once a physical and spiritual odyssey, a voyage to the interior, to a land of discovery where, once alone with himself, alone in the wilderness, man is able to discover himself. In *La Relación*.

Cabeza de Vaca's experiences elevated his spirit to a domain above the physical landscape around him and contributed to the near mysticism—or perhaps it was only a kind of fevered asceticism brought on by hunger and pain—into which he apparently lapsed. The knowledge of human suffering and its psychological, if not physical, alleviation seemed to expand and alter his vision of life; it chastened

him, taught him humility, and encouraged his spiritual growth-growth that paralleled with almost calculated artistry his geographic progress.⁹

The journey furthermore serves as a means of representing his conquest of space. The narrator's heightened sensibility and understanding of the psychic landscape that he had discovered in America is underscored in the theme of adaptability that prevails throughout this chronicle of ordeal, as he evolves from a captive of the Indians to a roving trader and intermediary between warring factions, and ultimately to a medicine man and a miracle worker. Cabeza de Vaca's evolution and transformation from one type of person, the quintessential Spanish explorer who acts in the name of God, gold and glory, to another, that of the truly Renaissance man, with a vision of New World order by which all races coexist peacefully, parallels the geographical passage through time and space. He arrived to the Florida coast, with 300 other men, motivated by the search for El Dorado and the Seven Cities of Cibola, but the workings of Fortune altered his destiny and he was forced to spend the next several years stripped of all his clothing and armour, living in a symbiotic relationship with his surroundings. His relentless search for his compatriots, and the ensuing interrelationships that arose of his dynamic interaction with the native American peoples, rekindled within him the utopian vision that once fueled the Renaissance man, the vision of a society that is forged not by the force of conquest, but rather through understanding, kindness and love.

The narrative art that is at the core of the *Relación* is the art of story-telling, and as with more sensitive men, Cabeza de Vaca, the writer, feels creative pressures that drive him to seek beauty or truth at the expense of fact; which may explain, perhaps, the occasional omissions or narrative art as an art of compromise, in which gains are purchased at the expense of sacrifices. It is almost impossible to separate fiction from non-fiction, artful from factual narrative, for there are actual lives, such as that of Cabeza de Vaca's, which resemble fiction because they seem to have been shaped by circumstance with an esthetic eye. The true autobiographer must select and arrange the events of his life to give them a narrative shape and pattern, eliminating from his record countless trivial details, and in so doing, move toward fiction.

Unlike so many of its predecessors, *La relación* de Cabeza de Vaca proposes a new world order of sorts. It calls for an ethical revolution on the part of the Spanish that have designs to conquest and colonize America. He pleads to the king that the Native American Indians be treated with justice and respect, on the basis of the highest moral principles, that they be "won by kindness, the only certain way." His ideals and vision could only be those of one who has travelled a good distance and has learned to see this phenomenal landscape with the eyes of the heart.

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