

"UN MARE MAGNO E OCULTO": ANATOMY OF
FERNANDEZ DE OVIEDO'S
HISTORIA GENERAL Y NATURAL DE LAS INDIAS

"quedará lugar a quien en este officia historiógrafo me subcediere para mucho más y más copiosos volúmenes de estas materias: porque no es aquesto relatar la vida de un príncipe, ni muchos, ni de un reino o provincia, sino una relación de Nuevo Mundo e un mare magno, en que no puede bastar la pluma ni estilo de uno, ni dos ni muchos historiales, sino de todos aquellos que hobiere e supieren hacen y escrebir en todos los tiempos e siglos venideros hasta el final juicio de los humanos.

Oviedo
Historia General

Only published in full three centuries after its creation (1851), Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo's omniverous history of the whole of the known New World from its discovery through its author's lifetime has come to be a whipping boy for received notions of history. The conditions under which the *Historia general y natural de las Indias*¹ was composed expose the seams of the historian's task and seem to render it less of a "history": cloistered in his fortress in Santo Domingo, by mandate of the King Oviedo was sent reports from the surrounding lands which he then synthesized, edited or directly transcribed into the *Historia*, often as he received them. Faced with the work's resulting in-coherencies—its lapses in chronology, repetitions, discrepancies and generally perspectivist depiction of events—many consider the *Historia* more a transparent product of its author's physical circumstances than of his consciousness as an historian. Critics have therefore

¹ The *Historia general y natural de las Indias* was only published in its entirety in 1851 (ed. José Amador de los Ríos) by the Academia Real de España. For its greater accessibility we shall quote from the five volume edition of Juan Pérez de Tudela Bueso, *Biblioteca de Autores Españoles* 117-121 (Madrid, Real Academia Española, 1959). Citations shall appear in the body of the text according to the following abbreviations, to render the references less cumbersome, e.g. Volume I, Book VI, Chapter XXVII, p. 320, would read I/6/27/p. 320. According to Oviedo's divisions, part I of the *Historia* includes Books I-XXIX; part II, Books XXX-XXXVI; part III Books XXIX-L; these will not be listed in the reference.

discounted Oviedo's presence or prescience in shaping his work and passed down the following judgments, damming landmarks in the *Historia's* reception.

Edward Fueter (autor of *Historia de la historiografía moderna*): su exposición carece de toda ordenación artística, casi de plan. Escribiendo se abandona a menudo a las asociaciones de ideas del momento... Trataba de ordenar sus materiales bajo rubros especiales, pero no los trabajaba. Agregó capítulo tras capítulo, libro sobre libro, hasta que resultó una obra que nadie quiso imprimir. [...] Su obra es una mina de útiles noticias históricas, pero no es una historia.²

José Amador de los Ríos (editor of the 1851 version of the *Historia*): [The *Historia* lacks] cierta cohesión y armonía en la exposición de las costumbres de los indios, no hallando mayor enlace en la narración de los descubrimientos y conquistas, ni que se refieren siempre en orden cronológico, ni guardan entre sí la conveniente relación para que pueda comprenderse sin dificultad su influencia recíproca.³

Enrique Álvarez López (eminent natural historian): [Oviedo is] Menos elegante y concreto que otros historiadores de Indias, demasiado barroco y desordenado en el detalle quizá, inferior aparentemente en el método expositivo a algunos.⁴

Both sixteenth and twentieth century concepts of history espouse the sense of "narrativity" whose absence to the *Historia* these critics lament. In the words of Enrique Pupo-Walker, Renaissance historiography displayed a marked rhetorical tendency, viewing the work [not as] "un simple vehículo informativo o didáctico, sino más bien como un sistema coherente de relaciones y de hecho como un objeto en sí mismo que se ordenaba, en parte para otorgar la narración una obvia calidad literaria."⁵ Modern historiography, particularly that which follows the lines set out by nineteenth century historians, is no less demanding of literary craft, expecting the historian to rescue that "story-shape" buried under the chaos of events which constitutes their true meaning. As Hayden White observes:

Every historian must meet standards of coherence no less than those of correspondence [to reality] if it is to pass a plausible account of "the way things *really* were." For the empiricist prejudice is attended by a conviction that "reality" is not only perceivable but is also coherent in its structure.⁶

Bound, then, by either of these conventional notions of history, it would be

² Edward Fueter, *Historia de la historiografía moderna*, trans., Ana María Ripullone (Buenos Aires: Editorial Nova, 1953), p. 327.

³ José Amador de los Ríos, Introduction to edition of the *Historia* cited above, p. C.

⁴ Enrique Álvarez López, "La historia natural en Fernández de Oviedo," *Revista de Indias*, XVII, 69-70 (July-Dec. 1957), p. 452.

⁵ Enrique Pupo-Walker, *La vocación literaria del pensamiento histórico en América* (Madrid: Gredos, 1982), p. 83.

⁶ Hayden White, "The Fictions of Factual Representation," in *The Literature of Fact*, ed. Angus Fletcher (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1976), p. 22).

difficult for the critic to accept the *Historia*'s sprawling discourse as "historical," not to mention artful.

For Oviedo, as our epigraph (from the final chapter of the *Historia*) indicates, proposes to write the whole of the New World, in its amorphous totality. The global subject of his study cannot fail to impress for its spatial and temporal pretensions: to write the history of the discovery, explorations, conquest and colonization of Mexico, the Antilles, Central and South America in the first fifty charged years of their existence for Europe. Of course "history" in the sixteenth century also subsumed a variety of other fields that would later become genres unto themselves, including botany, zoology and ethnography. This General, of human events, and Natural, of natural phenomena, history thus combined both senses of the word history (Greek, as the compendium of all forms of knowledge; Latin, as the narration of events) to become something of a Book of the (New) World. Such a heterogeneous plenitude of material infinitely exacerbated the historian's ever-present dilemma of how to accommodate in writing the plethora of history. What is the "language" of the plurality of disorder? Where is the "coherence" and what the poetics of a Book of the World?

No another history but rather a novel comes to mind as having confronted these issues. João Guimarães Rosa's *Grande Sertão: Veredas*⁷ succeeds in capturing the amorphous totality of its *mare magno*, the vast backlands of the *sertão*, not by subordinating their plenitude to the so-called "natural" laws of discourse (coherence, chronology, correspondence), but by representing the *sertão* in its full dynamic complexity, its protean becoming. To create the illusion of a truly "natural" text, perceived as being devoid of structure, entailed the greatest craft of Guimarães Rosa's part and involved an extraordinary complication of text structure.⁸ Now, we can naturally expect no such artifice in a history, and particularly in one like the *Historia* produced under circumstances so little conducive to craft. What we will find, however, and take it upon ourselves to chart here, is an equally "natural" ideology and structure which follows nature's laws and reproduces the interrelatedness of its phenomena. For, much as the *Historia* may have been determined by circumstances, Oviedo's own *proemios* in conjunction with our overview and "alternate" perspective based on this maxim regarding the Bible:

"The Bible is unified (on different levels), writes Northrop Frye, "but displays a carelessness about unity, not because it fails to achieve it, but because it has passed through it to another perspective on the other side of it. We have now to try to get a glimpse of that wider perspective."⁹

⁷ João Guimarães Rosa, *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1956).

⁸ See Jurij M. Lotman, "Point of View in a Text," *New Literary History*, VI, 2 (Winter 1975), P. 344 for a discussion of these complications in Pushkin.

⁹ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), p. 207. This attitude is entirely consonant with Frye's perspective on the novel

reveal his departures from historical coherence as part of an intentional methodology, which we can call the order or disorder, accommodates the plethora of history and fulfill's Erich Auerbach's criterion that history represent "the confused, contradictory multiplicity of events, the psychological and factual cross-purposes."¹⁰

Our first and enduring impression, however, is of unmitigated disorder. Lost in the dance of the miscellaneous and particular, the *Historia* flaunts its servitude to the subject, seeming to refuse any poetics except that of the singular, the unexpected, the unsystematic and the uncontrollable assigned to history by Aristotle in his *Poetics*.¹¹ The word "uncontrollable" proves especially apt here in that the *Historia* is the terminus of Oviedo's lifelong graphomaniac impulse. His neglected romance of chivalry, *Libro del muy esforzado e invencible caballero don Claribalte*, proffers the emblem of life as a book with the past already written in and the future still to be transcribed.¹² And so the world must have appeared to Oviedo, who has been taking notes on current events since his youth and who was writing a contemporary history of Spain concurrently with the massive *Historia*, which he, moreover, was constantly revising. It is not surprising, then, that one who pretended to 'write the world' should be struck by "la abundantísima e cuasi infinita materia destas maravillas e riquezas que acá hay e tengo entremenos que escrebir" (I/6/8/p. 158), and feel overwhelmed by his material:

digo que es tanta la abundancia de las materias que me ocurren a la memoria que con mucha dificultad las puedo acabar de escrebir, e distinguir e no con poco trabajo ni con pocas minutas, continuar e conformar aquellas cosas que conciernen e son en algo semejantes e más apropiadas a la historia que se sigue (I/6/Proemio/p. 141).

Nor is it surprising, in view of Oviedo's reactions, that the work should display the unsystematic miscellaneous cast of a primal chaos, particularly on the level of its "microstructure" (units of a chapter or smaller). Chapters themselves, as we (together with the critics cited above) realize, merely represent convenient formal umbrellas for topics of general and natural

versus the menippean satire ("the appearance of carelessness that results reflects only the carelessness of the reader or his tendency to judge by a novel-centered concept of fiction"), a defining element of his *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 310—hence our title.

¹⁰ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans., Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), p. 20.

¹¹ Clearly we do not mean to suggest that Oviedo himself conceived of things in these terms, since the translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* into Spanish was only published in 1626, though its principles were well known before then.

¹² Claribalte finds himself in a magic castle where he is waited upon by twelve ladies, six of whom sing while the other six remain silent. The magician explains:

son las doce voces de vuestra fama las seis que hablaron y dijeron lo que por vos había pasado hasta aquel punto y tiempo en que las oistes son (sic) las cosas pasadas: y la que no hablaron son las que han de escribir y cantar lo que sucediere de aquí adelante en toda vuestra vida: y porque no tenían aun qué decir en lo venidero callaron...

(*Libro del muy esforzado y invencible caballero don Claribalte* /Valencia, 1519; facsimile edition, Madrid, Real Academia Española, 1956/, p. L verso).

history as disparate as the chaotic enumeration found in poetry, for example: (II/19/2) "De otras muchas particularidades e algunas dellas muy notables, de la isla de Cubagua; e de una fuente de betún que allí hay de un licor natural que algunos llaman *petrolio*, e otros le dicen *stercus demonis*, e los indios le dan otros nombres... —De las aves e animales, e arañas pozonosas, e otras particularidades... —Como se crían e pescan las perlas e otras particularidades de ellas..." and so on. And even so, these random slices of life contingent on Oviedo's flow of information generally contain loopholes, allowing "otras particularidades" or "otras cosas convenientes al discurso de la historia" to be addended to their already miscellaneous structure. Paragraphs zig-zag, at times functioning on an associative logic. Individual sentences, endlessly self-perpetuating and hypotactic, may attempt to incorporate all the available information on a given subject—no matter how heterogeneous—making them a kind of linguistic monad. All told then, the discerning reader of the *Historia* may rightfully lament its lack of a poetics or organizing criterion, deeming the notorious Book VI, of *mirabile* or *miscellanea*, the model for all levels of the work.

While undeniably correct, this assertion only assumes its true stature as the fruit of a premeditated ideology—a historical style and not the direct product of circumstances—when viewed from that "other" perspective which renders visible Oviedo's didactic imprint on the material, an ideology indissolubly bound to a poetics. Prologue upon prologue of the *Historia* elaborates and didactically reiterates its ideological framework, which effectively links Aristotle's definitions of history, as the particular, and poetry, as the philosophical, and thus endows the work with a transcendence absent to the otherwise similar *miscellanea* of Peter Martyr's *Décadas*. This ideology, no less than an epistemology, is typically Renaissance in character. Oviedo, we might say, was to (natural) history what Fray Luis de León was to poetry for their mutual and fervent adherence to Renaissance notions which understood the contemplation of nature as a vehicle to the contemplation of God: God is the Maker, we know Him through His works, the more varied the works the more they attest to His power. The New World provided an extraordinary testimony to its Maker's prowess and thus the opportunity to render homage to Him. Vast and largely unexplored the New World remained a *mare magno* bristling with infinite as yet uncomprehended works,¹³ "y lo que en esto se podría decir es un *mare magno* e oculto (whence our title); porque, aunque se ve, lo más dello se inora" (II/9/Proemio/p. 278), *secrets* in which one can eventually read the imprint of God: "Los secretos deste gran mundo de nuestras Indias siempre enseñarán cosas nuevas a los presentes e a los que después de nos han de

¹³ We note that Oviedo's stated model, Pliny, considered the sea the source of natural marvels. See H.N. Wethered, *The Mind of the Ancient World: A Consideration of Pliny's Natural History* (London and New York: Longman's Green & Co., 1937), pp. 90-94.

venir a esta contemplación e hermosa letura de las obras de Dios" (I/6/52/pp. 223-224). The phrasing of this last remark brings out the *espejismo* which underwrites the *Historia* in its discussions of natural history, that is, the *Historia* as the reading of a reading. A teratology, or study in marvels (and monstrosities), the natural history submits the mysteries of its subjects to the readers' eyes as *herygma*, an ongoing parade of revelations, with the intent that reading *about* these mysteries should produce the same awe and reverence as the original reading of these miracles.

An essential but little noted feature of this ideology (the teratology) is how it permeates both the natural *and* the general history, uniting both under its sign. Scholars instead accentuate the differences between the *Historia*'s two poles, and understandably so, since Oviedo outwardly rejoices in his role as natural historian and shrinks, burdened by the weight of the sins he must recount, from his duties as (general) historian. Tacitly, though, Oviedo conceives of both in similar terms for he understands the whole of the *Historia* in function of the unfolding of secrets: "y es que en la continuación desta *Natural y general historia de las Indias* siempre se irán descubriendo ya crescentando muchas novedades e secretos" (II/ 11/Proemio/p. 16). The historical events of the New World, no less amazing than its natural phenomena, also inspire praise of God (describing the conquest of Mexico): "Juntamente con la cual relación se dirán muchas cosas notables e de admiración para todo gentil peregrino entendimiento... para que nos acordemos dar muchas gracias a Dios" (III/32/12/p. 397), and these secrets, too, must be revealed, "no ha de haberse cosa alguna oculta que deje de ser revelado" (II/22/2/p. 346). Therefore, though Oviedo may have defined the difference between his history and that of his teratological model, Pliny's *Natural History*, as his own excursion into general history,¹⁴ he has somewhat mitigated that distinction by creating an isomorphism between the two poles which will extensively affect the work's structure.

For even in the seeming chaos of the *miscellanea* we find a will to a particular kind of style or structure in that the *Historia* develops the teratology into a "natural" historical model. A cross, in a sense, between Borges' Library of Babel and a *randonée* (an expedition filled with random discoveries), Oviedo's work implements the order of disorder, being a replica of the world's wonders in their "natural" state designed for maximum devotional effect. Its ideology directly translates into a poetics which, we see, imbues the work with the poetic disposition of a hymn ever sung beside the evolving universe. Here in the *Historia*, as in Oviedo's *Sumario de la natural historia de las Indias* before it (where, after apologizing for the work's disorder, Oviedo begs the King, "no mire vuestra majestad en esto, sino en la novedad de lo que quiero decir, que es el fin con que a esto me

¹⁴ Oviedo wrote in the *Proemio* of the *Historia*, "Una cosa terná mi obra apartada del estilo de Pinio, y será relatar alguna parte de la conquista destas Indias...", p. 11.

muevo"),¹⁵ awe inspiring novelty becomes the dominant of the discourse. Hence, Oviedo repeatedly admires Pedro Mexía's introduction of the *silva* or *bosque* as a type of history and likens his own work to a banquet of savory and varied dishes.¹⁶ To continually whet the appetite of the reader, the *Historia* "va salteada," jumping from wonder to wonder, or, as is often the case with the immoralities recounted in the general history, from one moral monstrosity to another. Even when a thematic axis unites a chapter, to attract the reader the heading will emphasize the variety of topics, the Marvel. And as do these marvels unfurl in life at their own pace, in a secret and natural rhythm of revelation, so will they appear in the *Historia*. Thus can one dignify in philosophical terms the fact that the rhythm of revelation in the *Historia* generally duplicates that in which these facts were revealed to Oviedo, locus of a news network, making them a corollary of his autobiography. Thus, too, can one understand in Oviedo's terms as a philosophical statement the open-ended nature of his work, constantly being enmended, rewritten, augmented—in short, *becoming*, a pact of history with the dynamic nature of things. In sum, if the ideology of the *Historia* provides an epistemology, its corresponding poetics entails a hermeneutics, a journey of interpretation through the New World's mysteries. "Ni se ha de perder esperanza de hallar más y más diversidades que acrescentar y memorar en esta *General historia*, para dar loores a Dios" (III/30/Proemio/p. 356): the material of the New World, it has been said, "not only renews the form, but impregnates it," assigning "a whole new reality to historiography."¹⁷

It would, however, be needlessly inaccurate to deny that Oviedo possessed a more conventional sense of structure, especially since it leads us unexpectedly to the second and most radical aspect of this new historiographical reality. Contradictory as it might sound, Oviedo's dis-order unfolds, on the level now of the "macrostructure," in an unusually (in both senses of the word) ordered fashion. Throughout he manifests an almost exaggerated concern for the work's overall articulation: emphatically cross-referencing topics that repeat, begging Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza to contribute his *relación* which would bring the number of books in the *Historia* to a neat fifty, profusely apologizing for his miscellaneous Book VI, and so on. This sense of order will engender—as one might expect—not a traditional chronological history but an alternate and concurrent set of structuring models suited to the global and syncretic ambitions of the *Historia*. To be total, a history such as this must reconstitute the overall system of the world depicted, the variety and interrelatedness of its compo-

¹⁵ We quote from the edition of the *Sumario* by José Miranda (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1950), p. 80.

¹⁶ *Historia*, I/6/49/p. 218.

¹⁷ Antonelli Gerbi, "The Earliest Accounts on the New World," in *First Images of America* ed. Fredi Chiappelli (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1976), v. 1, p. 40.

nents. We have already described how the teratology subsumes both natural and general history under its aegis. The same syncretic impulse penetrates the other fields of knowledge and thought implicated in the *Historia*, "naturally" and almost imperceptibly coordinating them into a seamless mesh such as that captured in Ben Jonson's lines which describes "the well joining, cementing and coagmentation of words; when as it is smooth, gentle and sweet, like a table upon which you may run your finger without rubs and your nail cannot find a joint,"¹⁸ to whose exploration we now turn. As a cosmographer, Oviedo theorized insistently about the Strait of Magellan; as an historian, we shall see, he perhaps unwittingly forged passages between the large islands of knowledge and representation which float beneath the *Historia's* surface.

The most prominent body of knowledge and accessible organizing principle is geography. If, as one writer states, Europeans gained from Oviedo "a broad and essentially complex geographical idea of the New World,"¹⁹ it was due to the primacy Oviedo accorded to his role as geographer and the relative orderliness with which he fulfilled the task. The overall design of the first two parts of the *Historia* (insofar as one is adhered to) defers to the spatial boundaries of temporal events²⁰ in that its three stages document first the discovery of each land under Oviedo's purview, then the exploration of each place, and finally their respective pacification or settlement. In his treatment of each country, Oviedo proceeds with the spirit of a true geographer, conscientiously tracing the outlines of the place and filling them in with the miscellaneous natural and geographic information we have described above. Rigorous in his geographical endeavors—attempting to paint the physical contours with words—yet flexible on both historical planes, adjusting to the information at hand, Oviedo's method remains faithful to both extremes of the word *carta*, map and letter. At the same time, Oviedo himself makes clear, the geographical criterion takes precedence over chronology ("porque yo, continunado con mis libros la costa, irán en algunas partes los modernos antes que los que en tiempo los preceden" [II/22/1/p. 342]), even obliterating it, as when he recounts the death of an explorer on one island only to resuscitate him on the next page in describing an earlier expedition to another island.²¹ Yet the geographical criterion served Oviedo well, facilitating the miscellaneous organization within each individual body and enabling the alternation between general and natural history to appear organic and motivated. Not only useful, the

¹⁸ Quoted in Northrop Frye, *Spiritus Mundi* (Bloomington and London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1976), p. 174.

¹⁹ David Beers Quinn, "New Geographical Horizons: Literature," in *First Images of America*, v. II, p. 653.

²⁰ This methodology obviously depends as well on the order in which information was received.

²¹ Both Enrique Alvarez López, in the article cited above, p. 555, and Alberto M. Salas in the monograph on Oviedo in his *Tres cronistas de Indias* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1959), p. 90, note the subordination of chronology to geography.

device was proper to Oviedo, a departure from Pliny's organization (solely by genus and species). Even Oviedo's heir in the field of natural history, Father José de Acosta, chose an Aristotelian organization (from lower to higher forms of life) making his work a cosmogony and not, like Oviedo's, a cosmography.

Though Enrique Alvarez López has described the *Historia's* shape as (auto)biogeographical, recounting the history of places in the order that Oviedo visited them,²² we should also note the purely bio-geographical coordinates of the work, how it inscribes history in the frame of biography, biography in geography. The notion of the full existence or *energeia*, that we know a person through his or her deeds, characterizes the link between biography and history in this work. Oviedo's six volume *Batallas y Quincuagenas* (imaginary dialogues with illustrious individuals of the times) reveals the degree to which the lives of outstanding individuals appealed to the author; it thus required little imagination on his part to understand the history of the New World as a function of a few heroic (or notorious) individuals' actions. Within each geographical zone, then, Oviedo's narrative often revolves less around the march of events than the course of the lives of the explorers, conquerors and rulers who shaped the events: tales of Grijalva's expeditions remove us for chapters from the supposed geographical base (Cuba); the conquest of Mexico is inserted within the parentheses of Cortés' life (Book XXXIII follows him to his unremarkable death, long after the conquest); Oviedo couches the third part of the *Historia* in biographical terms ("Pasemos a lo demás de la tercera parte... cuya memoria me da mucha pena e dolor porque tengo que relatar y decir los tristes y desventurados fines e muertes de muchos y diversos capitanes e personas señaladas" [IV/37/Proemio/p. 335], and so on. Biography orders history by personalizing it, giving it a set focus, vantage point and shape. And personalized history is domesticated history, for the actions of an individual lend themselves more directly to censure or praise on moral grounds, an aspect essential to Oviedo's didactic Erasmian concept of history.²³ But at the same time, biography dis-orders history in a way attractive to Oviedo, for what is more miscellaneous and random than the course of an individual life?

Equally dis-orderly is the most syncretic of the *Historia's* (overall) interlaced shapes, its encyclopedic cast. Only an encyclopedia accommodates and legitimizes the polymorphous variegated material that issued from Oviedo's graphomania: Alfonso el Sabio's *Grande y general estoria* had already provided the model of a work which proposed to bring the reader all the knowledge on a given subject. Yet, other more technical features earn

²² Alvarez López, "Historia natural," p. 551.

²³ Following the line of Thucydides and Cicero as well as Erasmus, it is well known that Oviedo viewed history as fulfilling an exemplary function, being the "maestra de nuestra vida," and the path to virtue ("por la experiencia que la historia pone, venimos a perfecto vivir").

the *Historia* the title of "First American Encyclopedia"²⁴ as well. As in an encyclopedia, the flexible amount of chapters within each book can always adjust and store in its own place any new information, often presented in an anaphoric listing style appropriate to the genre. Even more specific to the genre, each Book of the *Historia* can stand to a degree as an independent unit or entry, orchestrating its theme from all pertinent angles, though not with all possible information. This distinction leads us to the *Historia*'s two most infamous features, its repetitiveness and incompleteness, which make more sense when viewed as encyclopedic. Each individual entry may both repeat and supplement information present earlier under a different heading (to wit: "esta relación, que aunque va salpicada, hace mención de algunas cosas que se han dicho en las relaciones de Cortés, pero de otra manera" [IV/33/47/p. 223]). While each entry can therefore stand on its own, no one is ever complete, the secrets are never definitively revealed. Rather, again like a banquet, it just stimulates the appetite to sample the next dish. To this end, in addition to the reference features of the book (detailed index, *proemios*, and chapter headings) the network of self-conscious cross-referencing to which we referred above reviews and previews the "menu" of repetitions. The self-conscious remarks and cross-referencing also serve to betray Oviedo's awareness of the *Historia*'s distinctive organization, its deviation from historiographical convention. "Los secretos deste gran mundo de nuestras Indias siempre enseñarán cosas nuevas." And so they did, with Oviedo's sense of the secret imparting a jolt to chronological, orderly, history, exposing its underlying struggle between order and becoming. For, with a keen sensitivity to the material, further honed by ideological concerns, Oviedo's encyclopedia puts the *Historia* in contact with what Mikhail Bakhtin has called "presentness"²⁵ as well as the plethora of history: no history, as we have seen, was ever fully written, but rather evolving; no single mode of organization, except the multi-forms of the encyclopedia, would suffice to contain it.

According to Enrique Pupo-Walker, Renaissance historiography displays a special polyvalence, being a weave of interpenetrating generic codes. These, in turn, determine the hybrid nature of Latin American letters, their unique character.²⁶ Certainly the encyclopedic *Historia* is shot through with such generic substructures, which comprise its very foundations, "naturally" entangled with other structuring models. Yet, unlike the bodies of knowledge discussed above, whose interaction provides the overall structuring models of the *Historia*, certain of these codes while perva-

²⁴ This designation comes from an article by Daymond Turner, "Oviedo's *Historia general y natural de las Indias*: First American Encyclopedia," *Journal of Inter-American Studies*, V, 2, pp. 267-274.

²⁵ See the first chapter, on the "dialogizing" of the epic, of Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogical Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981).

²⁶ See the long introductory chapter of Pupo-Walker's *Vocación literaria* cited above.

ding the whole of the *Historia* function only intermittently—if dramatically—as structuring models. A case in point are the various layers of the *Historia*'s autobiographical dimension. On the most imposing and oft-noted level, Oviedo's *yo*, in the form of his character (austere, patrician, polemical), prejudices (against the "diabolical" Indians) and harsh moral judgments (on Indians and Spanish alike), color the entire work, causing it to be viewed with widespread suspicion. Probing beyond this obsessive theme, however, we find that Oviedo invented himself as a *persona* on several levels, which connect with the *Historia* in central ways and have varying structural implications. In the end his always formidable *yo* makes the *Historia* not only intensely personal but a personal apology.

The graphomaniac Oviedo's synchronizing—ultimately *syncopation*—of writing and living underline the *Historia*'s difference *vis-à-vis* chronological history. For Oviedo as *cronista oficial* (after 1532), and particularly in his later years of encroaching deafness and increased retreat into the fortress, writing *is* living. Writing forms a constant and inalienable part of his life, "ningún día se me pasa fuera desta ocupación algunas horas trabajando todo lo que en mí es y escribiendo de mi mano" (I/6/Proemio/p. 142), and he surrenders his life to chronicling:

ocuparé lo que me queda de vivir en dejar por memoria esta dulce y agradable *General y natural historia de Indias*, en todo aquello he visto y en lo que a mi noticia ha venido e viniere, desde su primero descubrimiento, con lo que más pudiere ver y alcanzar dello en tanto que la vida no se me acabare (I/Proemio/p. 9).

More than one of the *Historia*'s distinguishing features depends from the vital conjunction of living and writing: its open-endedness, constant enmendations and rewriting, its direct relation to Oviedo's incoming reports. The time frame of the *Historia*, 1493-1548, also coincides with Oviedo's life span, since he had either followed or witnessed the events of the New World's "first" fifty years.²⁷ Yet, if his life unfolded alongside the events of the New World, Oviedo realized in his last years that the teratology follows another, more elusive, development: "Bien conozco que estoy al cabo de la vida e véome casi al principio de la médula de los grandes e innumerables secretos que están por saberse del segundo hemisferio e partes ignoradas e incógnita a los antiguos" (IV/39/Proemio/p. 336). In other words, the author here recognizes the existence of two separate rhythms (both of which, we know, co-exist in the *Historia*): the inexorable and chronological march of life and events versus the secret and unfathomable rhythm of revelation proper to life's mysteries.

Adjusted to this second rhythm, as the *Historia*'s *espejismo* (being the

²⁷ Oviedo first travelled to the New World in 1514 with the posts of "Veedor de oro" and "Escribano general."

reading of Oviedo's reading of nature) implied, the work contains a latent autobiography of its author's intellectual discoveries, a fact which Alberto Salas emphatically confirms:

La naturaleza personal, vital, diríamos, de la obra de Oviedo, constantemente referida a la propia experiencia, a las palabras, "Yo lo conocí", "lo vi", "probé", "gusté", "oí", "lo sufrí", hace extrañamente confusa la delimitación de la materia histórica y la biográfica. Por eso creemos no cometer error al decir, no la *Historia general* sino la *Historia de Oviedo*.²⁸

A constant in both the general and natural histories, Oviedo's empirical *yo* can affect the work in curious ways, 1) dis-ordering the text, since whatever he has experienced must be included, and 2) corroding its concern for decorum and audience, for Oviedo abandons his ingrained sense of propriety to document his facts with personal experiences (his wife figures in the book because she never spit; *tunas*, we learn, made Oviedo urinate blood). Such lapses indicate the weight of personal experience as a guarantee of truth sanctioned by Erasmus.²⁹ For his part, Oviedo intimates that a personal experience lies as a kind of subtext behind each natural fact recorded in the *Historia* ("En verdad, si los trabajos que por mí han pasado hasta haberlas aprendido o visto aquí se dijese, doblado sería el volumen de tales historias" [II/12/8/p. 37]), which fact he uses as a weapon against other chroniclers lacking this subtext: "Desta manera se han de enseñar a escribir los que han de relatar estas cosas de Indias" (II/12/8/p. 37). In like fashion does Oviedo aggressively tender the other half of this intellectual autobiography, the scientific theories formed from personal experiences or investigations. Rarely does the author pass up an occasion to further promote his theories regarding the habitability of the zone below the equator, the Strait of Magellan, or other geographical issues. Now, any gently speculates ("También se me ocurre otra causa, aunque la tengo por inválida, me parece bien exponerla"),³⁰ Oviedo chastizes others for erring where he has not: "quiero en este último capítulo tractar de cosas que confunden e reprueban, e muestran ser vana e errónea la opinión de todos los autores pasado..." (IV/37/Proemio/p. 331). Similarly, when Oviedo "transcribes" Cortés *Cartas de relación* (Chapters I-XLI of Book XXXIII), he surreptitiously rewrites them, adding scientific information of his own knowledge. Here we can discern an overlay of voices analogous to Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora's "scientific transcription" of Alonso Ramírez'

²⁸ Alberto Salas, *Tres cronistas*, p. 64.

²⁹ See Myron P. Gilmore, "Erasmus and the Study of History," in his *Humanists and Jurists* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1963), p. 91 and p. 112, as well as José Luis Abellán, *El erasmismo español* (Madrid: Ediciones Gráficas, 1976), pp. 122-125, for discussions of the importance of experience to Erasmism.

³⁰ Pedro Mártir de Anglería, *Décadas del Nuevo Mundo*, ed. Luis Arocena (Buenos Aires: Bajel, 1944), p. 186.

tale:³¹ Oviedo, scientist, pits his empirical and broad knowledge against the limited information of Cortés, actor in the drama ("yo le tengo a Hernando Cortés por mejor capitán e más diestro en las cosas de la guerra que habemos tractado, que por experto cosmógrafo" [IV/33/41/p. 189], thus intermingling his now superior *yo* with that of the famed conqueror.

While indirectly a literary autobiography as well (for it repudiates the novel of chivalry and thus *Claribalte*, and incorporates verbatim the *Sumario*) the *Historia* also subsumes a wealth of explicit autobiographical information, even an embarrassment of riches. This journey is also a journal whose autobiographical elements remain faithful to the teratology, presenting the most curious, controversial or dramatic aspects of Oviedo's life. While many of the odd facts enter the work associatively in piecemeal fashion, illustrating or documenting other information, the orchestration of one all-important incident sets off a calculated strategy which underlies at least the whole Part II of the *Historia*. Boris Tomaševskij has written that "There are writers with biographies and there are writers without biographies"; for those with biographies, "in the work themselves the juxtaposition of the texts and the author's biography plays a structural role."³² Here, Oviedo first mentions his notorious plan for the Order of Santiago (an order of nobles to be established in and help rule the New World) and its defeat in Spain, in Chapter I of Book XXVI. Over and around this defeated plan swarm the immoral and unpardonable acts which are the very stuff of the general history, as defined by Oviedo himself:

porque en el discurso destas historias y destes nuevos descubrimientos se han tractado y tractarán algunos motines y ruindades y feos hechos mezclados con traiciones y deslealtades y poca constancia en algunos hombres que por acá han venido... (II/24/4/p. 400).

In Oviedo's eyes, under the sway of the diabolical *mundo al revés* of the Indians, motivated by a thirst for power and riches, the Spanish had suffered a moral reversal³³ which led to the scandalous acts that populate the general history. All these Oviedo describes in great detail, but not only, we see, to comply with the didactic functions of history: "Excusáranse cosas que en aquellas tierras han subcedido de que se tractará en el presente libro si Dios fuera servido que esta Orden allí tuviera un convento" (III/27/11/p. 62), wrote Oviedo referring to his projected Order.

What is more, the only administrative relief from the chaos comes in

³¹ See Ester Gimbernat de González, "Mapas y texto: para una estrategia del poder," *Modern Language Notes* 95 (1980), pp. 388-399.

³² Boris Tomasevskij, "Literature and Biography," in *Readings in Russian Poetics*, eds. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), p. 55.

³³ Oviedo has been credited with providing the first documentation of this moral reversal, later termed the "tropicalization" of the white man. See Antonello Gerbi, *The Dispute of the New World*, trans., Jeremy Moyle (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), particularly pp. 40 and 571.

Book XXIX when Oviedo himself, now an actor in the events, enters the scene as Governor of Darién. He immediately imposes order, listing his achievements at length, and inspires hatred for his unpopular moral convictions: "luego me puse con la vara de justicia en castigar los pecados públicos (en que muchos habían envejecido), presto fui aborrescido..." (III/29/14/p. 265). Yet he persists in his just rule, preserving the riches due the Crown, with no vested interest ("El fin que yo tengo en esto, mostrará... [que]... no me mueven otro interese sino que sirvan a Dios e Sus Majestades, y esta cibdad se conserve" (III/29/16/p. 269). Perhaps only Cortés receives so favorable a treatment for his abilities as ruler. Considering together this whole cluster of events (the defeated Order, chain of evil acts, Oviedo as just ruler), we see how cleverly the author plotted Book XXIX to be the centerpiece of the second part, and the second part to be a vehicle of his apologetic vendetta, a showcase for his *yo*. In the absence of the Order, Oviedo would stem the tide of chaos, with his government a credit to himself and, indirectly, a tribute to his plan. Keeper of the morals and the riches of the Crown, he holds the key to both facets of its enterprise. Finally he would claim his share of glory as a force in the conquest, fulfilling the role of the new historian that underlies *Claribalte*³⁴ as chronicler *and* conqueror of the New World, his morality unimpeachable on both fronts.

The hybrid character of Renaissance historiography explains, as well, another set of generic messages the *Historia* emits, messages which have lead several critics to note, not incorrectly, its points of convergence with the novel of chivalry. For even the infernal landscape of the New World attains heroic, or chivalric dimensions at times, and particularly in Book XXXIII. Introduced under the sign of the marvelous and heroic ("en la verdad me parece que es un nuevo modo de conquistar e padescer" [III/32/2/p. 397]), the story of the conquest of Mexico takes on a markedly "novelistic" tone, similar to Prescott's romantic *History of the Conquest of Mexico*.³⁵ Oviedo justifiably casts the vast proportions and superlative achievements of the conquest in epic terms, emphasizing constantly how few Spaniards conquered the many Indians. He marshalls a range of stylistic devices: untoward descriptions of setting, heraldic details, and at times forces novelistic causality, dramatic contrasts, direct discourse of all sorts (which, although a feature of the period's history, gives the work a

³⁴ See my article, "The Castle of Discourse: Fernández de Oviedo's *Don Claribalte* (1519)," *Modern Language Notes* 97 (1982), pp. 329-346, for a discussion of *Claribalte*'s unexpected "historical" leanings from which emerge this portrait of the new historian.

³⁵ It would seem that in the first two parts of the *Historia* only in the conquest of Mexico did Oviedo find an episode of sufficiently heroic proportions to warrant this chivalric mode of representation, though other leaders are also presented as heroes.

William H. Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Mexico* perhaps best corresponds to our contemporary notion of novelizing in history due to his love of the picturesque detail, dramatic recreation and shaping of the emotional, visual, physical and factual aspects of history into an enthralling story. Despite their shared predilection for the marvellous, then, Oviedo's miscellaneous narrative is a long way from Prescott's seamless "novelistic" history.

novelistic flavor). However, it is a novel of chivalry as "purified" as the rather earthbound *Claribalte*³⁶—teratological, political, moralistic—that Oviedo perpetuates in the *Historia*. The presence of a base text, Cortés's *Cartas* which introduce all the central events, enables Book XXXIII to follow a teratological criterion, jumping from novelty to novelty with few connections. An image of Mexico as a Macondo-like landscape of hyperboles, wonders and spectacles results. The combination of awe-inspiring facts and Oviedo's not very subtle bias together produce an "interested" and "white legend" version of the conquest of Mexico which purges the Spanish, for instance, of all blame in the events of the so-called "Noche triste." That Oviedo's Montezuma is a mere puppet of the devil (who "puso en el corazón de Montezuma que echase los cristianos de México... porque la misa y evangelio que predicaban e decían los cristianos le daban gran tormento" [IV/33/47/p. 224], justifies any or all attacks on the Indians or their leader. At the same time the presence of the devil invites and renders verisimilar the various miracles that Oviedo includes in his "true" history, for in the Renaissance concept of verisimilitude, what *should* be (the moral test) often overrode what *could* be (the scientific test).³⁷

The allegorical stratum also signals the unexpected confluence of myth and history in Book XXXIII, through the mythos of romance. According to Northrop Frye, romance tends to "displace myth in a human direction and yet, in contrast to realism, to conventionalize content in an idealized direction."³⁸ Certainly the close proximity of God and the devil to the (already fantastic) human arena, and the allegorical implications of the events—banishing the devil from the New World—have something of the mythic to them. And the dominant presence of direct discourse invokes the so-called "methaphysics of presence" of Biblical discourse, with its largely spoken character.³⁹ The infrastructure of romance as the descent of a hero into the darkworld of chaos, evil and magic, from which he gains ascent by bravery to a world of stability, good, and order, well applies to more than Book XXXIII. Oft-recurring, the obsessive motif of the Amazon women (who rule their own realm, kill or otherwise discard men, raise no children) would seem to symbolize the nature of the New World as a darkworld or *mundo al revés* in Oviedo's view. "The closer romance is to myth, the more divine the hero will seem, the more demoniacal the enemy."⁴⁰ Of the

³⁶ Unlike the traditional novel of chivalry (of the Breton cycle) so criticized at the time, but more akin to *Tirant lo Blanc*—which has been called the "First modern novel"—*Claribalte* is rarely supernatural, sporadically moralistic and often prosaic.

³⁷ For a relevant discussion of the prevailing notion of "truth" or verisimilitude, see Edmundo O'Gorman's chapter on José de Acosta in his *Cuatro historiadores de Indias* (Mexico: SepSetentas, 1972), pp. 166-230. Alban K. Forcione's *Cervantes, Aristotle and the Persiles* and E.C. Riley's *Cervantes' Theory of the Novel* are other indispensable works on the subject.

³⁸ Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 136.

³⁹ Frye, obviously referring to Walter Ong and Jacques Derrida, writes in *The Great Code*, p. 213, "It is already clear that what has been the metaphysics of presence meets us at every turn in the Bible, and that the spoken word either takes precedence of the written word or lies closely behind it."

⁴⁰ Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 187.

demonic nature of the Indian for Oviedo there remains little doubt; but what of the heroes? Given the didactic nature of the *Historia* there should be some exemplary figures. Interestingly enough, in face of the omnipresent deceptions or *froda* of the conquest at large, most of the heroes are men of *forza* or bravery (Oviedo seems to take little note of Cortés' cunning): discoverers, explorers, men of arms.

When one one of these heroes, Cortés, completes his mission in the darkworld, he begins an ascent which restores textual as well as social order. The King, it is well known, awarded Cortés the title of *Marqués*. This fact seems to have impressed Oviedo (who thereafter refers to Cortés and his wife by their titles), perhaps signalling in his mind the beginnings of a new aristocratic social order. Be that as it may, Oviedo portrays Cortés as the implementer of order: pacifying the Indians, putting rebellious Spaniards in cage(!) overcoming conspiracies, and setting up a government and churches as effectively as Oviedo himself. Textually, this move from chaos to order, dark to lightworld, *mundo al revés* to *mundo recto*, takes us from romance to history. (Though it may well simply reflect the quality of his information), in narrating the aftermath of the reconquest of Mexico (see chapter XLVII of Book XXXIII) Oviedo radically, if briefly, switches stylistic gears from the dramatic and ex-centric mode of romance to an unusually—for him—chronological, metonymic and almost annalistic discourse, as if he were imposing order on his own language. The return to the world of order thus entails a temporary return to orderly words.

Undeniable as the similarities to romance may be, Oviedo himself cautions the reader not to equate the *Historia* with the novel of chivalry. In the heart of Book XXXIII, after listing the miracles that took place during a particular battle, he denies that he is "novelizing," that is, inventing things ("Ya sé que los incrédulos o poco devotos dirán que me ocupación en esto de milagros... es superfluo o perder tiempo, novelando..." [IV/33/47/p. 228]), for these miracles actually occurred. At other moments he launches into his famous tirades against the novel of chivalry, in accordance with contemporary trends attacking them as "libros apócrifos," "llenos de mentiras" and "fabulosas vanidades." Nevertheless, as one critic astutely notes, Oviedo and other chroniclers would rather disclaim their works' affiliation with the novel of chivalry than temper their fabulous cast.⁴¹ In the case of Oviedo, a singular and syncretic maneuver lies behind the seeming contradiction. For Oviedo is not novelizing in his sense of the word nor in ours, but rather what we could call *counter-novelizing*: setting the *Historia*, so novelistic in its interest, over/against the novel of chivalry as a corrective counterpart to and substitute for the abhorred genre. A facsimile of the novel of chivalry, the counter novel possesses its own set of features displaced (and purified) from literature. By way of proof we note that, justifying

⁴¹ Ida Rodríguez Prampolina, *Amadises de América* (Mexico: 1948), p. 71.

the act of reading as did Juan Luis Vives (in *De institutione christiana*), Oviedo pledges to continue writing the *Historia* "para recreación de los hombres que desean saber y no se apartan de tan loable y virtuoso ejercicio, como es leer, con tanto que esa ocupación sea en libros provechosos e verdaderos" (IV/33/47/p. 228). He opposes his history, a feast of novelties, to the apocryphal marvels of romance "que hacen pecar los oídos y entendimientos que se acostumbran a escuchar o leer fabulosas vanidades, del cual delicto van desviados los que en historia veras e honestas son ejercitados" (I/6/31/p. 189). It is here, then, that the teratology (as ideology and aesthetics) finds its ultimate justification, as Oviedo replaces the "fabulosas vanidades" with the *real* marvels of the New World that turn one's thoughts to God. "Cuanto más que son en sí estas cosas tan apartadas e nuevas, que no hay necesidad de ficciones para dar admiración a las gentes ni para dejar de dar infinitas gracias al Maestro de la Natura..." (II/10/Proemio/7). Moral and truthful in its representation of the past, history outdoes romance's magicians and soothsayers in that "de las cosas que en ellas [histories] hasta aquí están escriptas se pueden conjeturar parte de los eventos futuros" (IV/33/54/p. 257). Viewed in these terms, we can understand how the counter-novelistic aspect of the history at once harmonizes with the teratology and finally purifies the novel of chivalry, fulfilling its promises (as from *Claribalte*) of "cosas peregrinas" with wonders from the kingdom of this world.

Moreover, in so doing, the *Historia* met Erasmian criteria both for fiction and history. With respect to fiction, the Erasmians only allowed works of imaginary travels, sprinkled with moralizing comments; in history, Bataillon places the *Historia* among the works of truth that Spanish Erasmism opposed to the novel of chivalry.⁴² Now, Hayden White has observed that "for every identifiable kind of novel, historians produced an equivalent kind of historical discourse."⁴³ Oviedo's counter novel amply supports this statement as well, eventually, as its observe, in that the romance or counter novel features of the *Historia* make it a testing ground for novels based on the wonders of this world. And so it would go with future histories, too, for New World prose fiction (short story, novel) would be spawned by non-fictional genres as the literary "code" (in Pupo-Walker's terms) distinguished itself and finally came to stand on its own.

This discussion of the intermingling of literature and history returns us to our opening remarks on the relationship between *Grande Sertão: Veredas* as a Book of the World, and the *Historia*. "What," we asked, "is the 'language' of plurality?" In *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, its very title states, that language is spatial: as the work's protagonist, Riobaldo, travels through the confounding reaches of the great *sertão*, he discovers the few *veredas*—

⁴² Marcel Bataillon, *Erasmus y España*, trans., Antonio Alatorre (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1950), v. 2., p. 247.

⁴³ Hayden White, "Fictions," p. 27.

paths, oases—which comprise the reassuring threads of knowledge in the caos. Spatial or iconic (in the semiotic sense), too, is the configuration of knowledge in the work of Oviedo, geo-grapher. His history, we have suggested, aspires to the condition of a cosmography (“estotra pintura del mundo” [IV/33/44/p. 208]) with the implications such a condition entails. Exhuastiveness, precision, and the attempt at plastic representation through verbal means all converge in the general and natural history of a writer who understood the primacy of the image over the word (one among many similar statements: “porque es más para verle pintado... que no para entender con palabras” [II/10/Proemio/p. 7]). In this, Oviedo, taps a vein close to the heart of Renaissance thought:

Cusan’s metaphor of a man the map-maker is most illuminating of Renaissance attitudes: while God is the creator of the world, man is the cosmographer; man may share certain physical attributes with other living creature, but only man can map the contours and the relationships of these attitudes.⁴⁴

Given these iconic or plastic pretensions, the *mare magno* (or *sertão*) of the *Historia* links up with the *mapa mundi* where to read is to journey: on one hand the teratology, with its landscape of secrets; on the other the cosmography, with its bodies of knowledge. To read is to journey *and* to know, as does Oviedo purveyor of the journey:

Conténtese el letor que lo que yo he visto y experimentado con muchos peligros, lo goza él y sabe sin ninguno... para su pasatiempo y descanso haya yo nascido, peregrinando, vistos estas obras de Natura, o, mejor diciendo, del Maestro de la Natura, las cuales he escripto en veinte libros, que contiene esta primera parte... (I/Proemio/p. 11)

A “*mare magno e oculto*” (our emphasis)—such is the iconic anatomy of the Book of the World, which forges unsuspected textual paths between the great bodies of knowledge. “The essential thing,” Michel Serres has written, “for an exact discourse *de rerum natura* is relation or interrelation.”⁴⁵ We have seen how the *Historia* effectively coordinates the chronotopes (space and time coordinates) of natural history, general history, geography, biography, autobiography and literature in a braided narrative more philosophically ambitious than a mere *miscellanea*, more structurally complex than a chronological “narrative” history. “The best model,” Oviedo might concur with Serres, “is the thing itself, or the object as it

⁴⁴ Nancy S. Stuever, *The Language of History in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970), p. 185.

⁴⁵ Michel Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, eds. Josué V. Harari and David F. Bell (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1982), p. 113.

exists,"⁴⁶ for while operating within the bounds of Renaissance theology, our author opened the notion of historical "correspondece" to an iconic dis-order, a more natural "in-coherence."

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GARCILASO AND BERNAL:
INTERPRETATIONS INTERPRETED

The events that led to the conquest of America by the Spaniards of the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries have become familiar to us from, among others, two sets of narratives regarding the same events.¹ In the "Prologue" to the first of these narratives, *Comentarios Reales*, published in 1609 by the Peruvian mestizo, El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, the following reasons are given for the writing of the narrative: "por dar cuenta al universo su patria, gente y nación" of the Incas (Vol. III, p. 11); "para celebrar las grandezas de los heroicos españoles que con su valor y ciencia militar ganaron para Dios, para su rey y para sí aquez rico imperio" (Vol. III, p. 12), and to "servir de comento para declarar y ampliar muchas cosas que ellos [the historians] asomaron a decir y las dijeron imperfectas" (Vol. II, p. 32).² In the second of these narratives, *Historia verdadera de la nueva España*, published in 1632, Bernal Díaz del Castillo writes to acclaim his own participations in the important events that led to the downfall of the Aztec empire and, like Garcilaso, to refute previous histories.³

Two native Indian interpreters play a significant part in the outcome of

¹ The present article was first written taken at the School of Criticism and Theory at Northwestern University the summer of 1991, entitled "The Narrative of America" under Prof. Irvin Dolaron. Prof. Dolaron has recently published a book on this theme entitled, *La conquista de la América. La invención de la cultura* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992). Those interested in previous works on this general topic may wish to consult the following bibliography: on the *Comentarios Reales de los Incas* Francis Crowley, *Garcilaso de la Vega, El Inca and his work in Comentarios reales de los Incas* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971); José Durand, "Garcilaso: Beyond the World of the Incas and that of Renaissance Europe," *Le Monde*, No. 45 (Paris, 1987); James Fitzmaurice Kelly, *El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega* (London: Oxford University Press, 1981); Aurora Miel Quezada Sosa, *El Inca Garcilaso y otros estudios garcilasos* (Madrid: Ediciones Cultura Hispánica, 1971); Julio Ortega, "El Inca Garcilaso y el discurso de la cultura," in *Cuadernos Hispánicos*, Vol. 187 (Madrid, 1980); Luis Alberto Sánchez, *Garcilaso Inca de la Vega, primer virreinato* (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Ercilla, 1989); On the *Verdadera Historia de la Conquista de la Nueva España* Alberto Cardín, *Bernal Díaz del Castillo, descubridor, conquistador y cronista de la Nueva España* (México del Norte, 1965); Carmelo Sáenz de Santa María, *Introducción crítica a la Historia verdadera de Bernal Díaz del Castillo* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1967) and María Rodríguez Fernández, "Bernal Díaz del Castillo y su concepto de verdad y realidad," in *Anales de la Universidad de Chile*, Vol. 124 (Santiago de Chile, 1966).

² All direct references in the text come from *Comentarios Reales de los Incas*, Vols. II and III (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, 1980).

³ References to the text itself come from *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, Vol. III (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1971).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. XVI.