Territories of History
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IN THIS CHAPTER I EXAMINE the Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España by Bernal Díaz del Castillo (ca. 1495–1584) with an eye to problems of narrative temporality, distance, and perspective and what they might suggest about the question of narrative reliability in his work. I hope to show that a study of some of the salient textual properties of the Historia verdadera brings further into focus a number of the problems specific to the writing of history, such as the representation of historical figures and the treatment of the historical tradition, which I highlighted in the works of Oviedo and Las Casas. Furthermore, by stressing some of Bernal Díaz’s narrative transgressions, I will show the manner in which his work invites one to contemplate discursive boundaries in historiography. A narratological approach that keeps in mind the context in which Bernal Díaz wrote his history enables one to describe with greater specificity the narrative strategies he adopts, as well as to better understand the textual codes that have enabled works such as the Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España to be so readily read as “literary” or even “novelistic.”

Bernal Díaz is not always the most reliable source on the events of his own life, as Wagner has shown.1 Born in Medina del Campo, Extremadura, Bernal Díaz is listed as a passenger to the Indies in October 1514, not, as he tells us, in Pedrarias Dávila’s expedition that sailed earlier that year.2 He claims to have participated in early expeditions in the Gulf of Mexico: that of Francisco Hernández de Córdoba (1517) and of Juan de Grijalva (1518), although Wagner casts doubt on the latter. After accompanying Cortés’s campaign in 1519, he later participated in the expeditions to Chiapas (1523) and Honduras (1524–26), and would eventually settle on an encomienda in

1. See Wagner, “Bernal Díaz” and “Notes on Writings by and about Bernal Díaz” for a careful study of the chronology of the encomendero’s life and writings, as well as “The Family of Bernal Díaz” for a reconstruction of the complexities of the cronista’s family life. Sáenz de Santa María’s findings complement Wagner’s in the “Suplemento” to his critical edition of the Historia verdadera (60–61) and also his Introducción crítica (43–78).

Guatemala. He began to write his history after 1551, and would send a completed copy to Madrid after 1568. This version ended up in the hands of the Mercedarian friar Alonso de Remón, who added extensive interpolations to the text about Bartolomé de Olmedo, a fellow Mercedarian and participant in Cortés’s expedition. The Remón copy was published in Madrid in 1632. Bernal Díaz appears to have continued working on the Guatemala manuscript until late in life. He died in Guatemala in 1584.

Critical Perspectives: Postmodernism and the Spanish-American Literary Tradition

Unlike the histories of Oviedo and Las Casas, which—despite the self-conscious stances and bitter allegations of their authors—have been quite consistently read as “historical” texts, the Historia verdadera has had an uneven fate in terms of critical reception. Verónica Cortínez, in her book Memoria original de Bernal Díaz, has summarized the changing fortunes of the old encomendero’s work, which, prized in the nineteenth century as the most accurate and detailed historical account of the conquest of Mexico, in the twentieth has paradoxically come to be considered by many as a work of Spanish American “literature.” As Cortínez writes: "Las mismas páginas que antes se valorizaban por la cantidad de detalles históricos que contenían, hoy se resaltan por la minuciosa belleza con la que describen un mundo asombroso" ("The same pages that were once valued for the quantity of historical details they contained are appreciated today for the careful beauty with which they describe an astonishing world").

This shift in perception of Bernal Díaz’s history can be traced through a number of small but significant changes in critical emphasis. In the 1940s Iglesia criticized the “dehumanization” of history, noting that “mientras un texto filosófico o literario se estudiaba procurando verlo..."
en su integridad . . . el texto histórico [era] tratado de modo inverso: se acudía a él en busca de determinados datos, de ‘citas’” (“while a philosophical or literary text was studied in an effort to see it as a whole . . . the historical text [was] treated in an inverse way; it was read in search of particular facts, of ‘quotes’”). O’Gorman, too, argued against the positivist practice of reading the crónicas not as integral works but as sources of empirical historical facts to be analyzed and agglomerated into an “objective” account of past events. At about the same time that Iglesia and O’Gorman were reexamining the intellectual legacy of their predecessors, other scholars explored the more “literary” aspects of these texts. Most prominently, Leonard hypothesized that chivalric romances such as the Amadís de Gaula were an active inspiration to the conquistadors, a kind of “unconscious” prism through which they perceived, acted, and, in the case of Bernal Díaz, later wrote.

Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, and later Steven Gilman, among others, sought to establish more direct textual parallels in terms of literary reference, while Rudolfo Schevill argued against any such clear links. In subsequent decades, the “literary” qualities of Bernal Díaz’s work received increasing critical attention. As Cortínez has aptly described it, “la incertidumbre entre historia y literatura marca no sólo el texto de Bernal, sino también la construcción del sistema literario por parte de críticos y escritores” (“the uncertainty between history and literature does not just mark the text of Bernal, but also the construction of the

5. Iglesia, Cronistas, 11.
7. In researching the sixteenth-century book trade between Spain and America, Leonard documented in Books of the Brave that, despite legal prohibitions, novels of chivalry and other literary works, including the Quijote, circulated within the Spanish colonies: “Light literature . . . was unconsciously helping to shape historic events, and it assuredly played an important, if a subjective and impalpable, role in this first act of the drama of expanding Western civilization. Moreover, the Conquistador’s addiction to fiction brought the habit of secular reading to the remotest portions of the earth at the very moment that Occidental institutions and laws were transplanted there.” Leonard, Books of the Brave, 315.
8. More recently, Adorno has also criticized Leonard’s view, suggesting that the chivalric novels were less an inspiration to soldiers than a reference point for explaining the experience of the conquest to Europeans. The problem presented by writing about the discovery of America and the conquest of its indigenous peoples was not formal, but semantic and eminently political, she argues, noting that in writing about native Americans, the cronistas de Indias exploited chivalric romance to both “celebrate the military values of medieval caballería and extol over things unheard of and unseen,” and to “reject the idea of the fictional romance, not because their own representations were immoral, but because, unlike the romances, they were true.” See Adorno, “Literary Production,” 17–18, and also her excellent summary of scholarship on this question in her introduction to the 1992 edition of Leonard’s Books of the Brave.
As I will suggest, the techniques of narratology may assist in clarifying the nature of this uncertainty in Bernal Díaz’s text.

Roberto González Echevarría and Walter Mignolo have made important strides in sorting out the general nature and sources of the paradoxes inherent in contemporary readings of colonial texts. González Echevarría criticizes the “literary” approaches to the crónicas that focus exclusively on the “imaginative” interpolations, and suggests that, while many of the insights from this sort of approach have been important, they are restricted to a partial view of the works, as had been the positivist historical analyses of the past. González Echevarría further notes that interest in the imaginative aspects of the crónicas de Indias has been fostered by the embracing of these texts by many contemporary Spanish-American writers as a “chosen origin” for the novel. One critical proposal that he puts forth is to adopt a “bifocal” approach to these texts, one that accounts for both the sixteenth-century norms for writing history and the properties that have earned them modern “literary” recognition.10

Mignolo, addressing a similar concern from a different angle, suggests that the presence of such historiographical works within the Spanish American literary “canon” is emblematic of a broader intellectual trend, in which there has been

un cambio epistemológico en el cual se consolidan la historia literaria y la historia de la historiografía y se recuperan, del pasado, aquellos textos que “muestran” desde la perspectiva de la recepción, ciertas propiedades o historiográficas o literarias, aunque estas propiedades no sean características en la producción de tales discursos.

[an epistemological change in which literary history and history of historiography are consolidated, and those texts from the past that “show” from the perspective of reception certain historiographic or literary properties are recuperated, although these properties may not be characteristic of the production of such discourses themselves.]

9. Cortínez, Memoria, 22. See chapter 4 of this book for a review of the reception by contemporary novelists and writers of the Historia verdadera as a foundational work in the Spanish American tradition.
Margarita Zamora, too, highlights the blurring of boundaries as one that critics tend to “avoid or ignore.” While Mignolo’s and Zamora’s distinctions between the time of production and that of reception have helped to sharpen contemporary critical sensibilities toward colonial texts, especially as regards the recognition of rhetorical and historiographical conventions, their analyses hint at, but do not ultimately address, the assumptions underlying (nor the difficulties following from) the “epistemological” shift to which they allude, that is, the broader question of the ways in which the recuperation of the crónicas de Indias as “literary” texts has coincided with (or perhaps even anticipated) the larger poststructuralist questioning of what constitutes “history.”

To be precise, the recovery of the chronicles of the Indies has coincided with—and thus to some degree been colored by—not just the sort of aesthetic or cultural project hinted at by González Echevarría, but also the contemporary critique of the value and method of historical studies. Certainly one can say that under the umbrella of postmodernism, history as a discipline—and not just the study of the early historiographical accounts of the Spanish Indies—can be said to find itself at a point of reversal vis-à-vis the status envisioned for it by the sixteenth-century humanists. What for Vives and other preceptors was the supreme discipline, one that was both preserved in and embodied by narrative discourses that aspired to truth, has in recent decades become relegated by some to the category of “verbal fictions,” to borrow Hayden White’s phrase, and thus, as legitimate a subject for literary as for historical study. In its most extreme form, as Carlo Ginzburg notes, this approach has resulted in the reduction of history to rhetoric.

14. The phrase comes from White’s article “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact” in Tropics, 82; see also “The Fictions of Factual Representation” in the same volume. Although White modifies this notion in later works, he continues to argue, in Figural Realism (6), that literary and historical discourse “are more similar than different since both operate language in such a way that any clear distinction between their discursive form and their interpretative content remains impossible.”
rhetorical analysis to works of historiography) has only more recently begun to receive in-depth critical consideration by literary critics.

Carlos Fuentes’s essay on the Historia verdadera, titled “La épica vacilante de Bernal Díaz del Castillo” and included in his book of essays, Valiente mundo nuevo, seems to be an example of a reading that freely adopts such a postmodern perspective in the sense that it would appear to assume no difference between historical and fictional texts. About Bernal Díaz, Fuentes writes:

Tiene un pie en Europa y otro en América y llena el vacío dramático entre los dos mundos de una manera literaria y peculiarmente moderna. Hace, en efecto, lo que Marcel Proust hizo recordando el pasado. . . . Busca el tiempo perdido: es nuestro primer novelista. . . . Bernal, como Proust, ha vivido ya lo que va a contar, pero debe dar la impresión de que lo que cuenta está ocurriendo al ser escrito.

[He has one foot in Europe and another in America and he fills the dramatic vacuum between the two worlds in a manner that is literary and peculiarly modern. He does, in effect, what Marcel Proust did in remembering the past. . . . He searches for lost time: he is our first novelist. . . . Bernal, like Proust, has already lived what he is going to tell, but he must give the impression that what he is telling is happening as he writes.]

The elements that, according to Fuentes, make the Historia verdadera akin to a novel include Bernal’s effort to “make the past become present,” his technique of characterization, which makes the figures he represents “concrete individuals, not allegorical warriors,” and a taste for details and for gossip. Certainly one can perceive in Fuentes’s description what Cortínez has called an “act of will,” a willful stretching of traditional categories in order to fit this work into a “literary” tradition. On the one hand, this sort of

17. Ibid., 74–80. Cascardi, in “Chronicle” (199–201), expands on the notion of the Historia verdadera as possessing a novel-like quality, and Cortínez, who summarizes in “Yo, Bernal Díaz” (59–60) the diverse critical efforts to define the genre of the Historia verdadera, specifies that the originality of the work abides in the temporal distance and discordance between the young hero and the aging narrator, a distance that earns the narrative a modern quality.
reading suggests an evident lack of sensibility for conventional expectations of historiography. Leaving aside the terminological imprecisions here (they aim perhaps toward impressionistic rather than technical accuracy), one can only guess whether this reading reflects a skepticism concerning the idea of history as a discipline capable of inquiring into the “truth” about the past, or simply a wish for an account of the discovery and conquest that would grant an experience akin to that of reading fiction.19 After all, if one accepts Martínez Bonati’s formulation, the basic logic of fiction—and that which distinguishes it from other types of narratives, such as those of historiography—is one in which the narrator’s statements of singular detail are taken by the reader as unconditionally true.

On the other hand, Fuentes’s characterization of the Historia verdadera as a “novel”—and he is not alone in his appreciation20—brings up a number of thorny questions. Significantly, some of the aspects that Fuentes highlights as “novelistic” in Bernal Díaz’s text coincide in many ways with the humanist hopes for historical narrative. (And it is precisely to this sort of reading that González Echevarría and Mignolo, as well as Zamora, address their critiques.) As seen in the previous chapters, by the time Bernal Díaz was composing his work, the rhetorical notions of history were under dispute; the methodological self-consciousness of Fernández de Oviedo, in particular, points to an active engagement and critique of the humanist historiographical doctrines, rather than a slavish following of them. And as I hope to show in this chapter, despite Bernal Díaz’s claims that he is an “unstudied idiot” (“un idiota sin letras” (HV, 650, chap. 212)), the Historia verdadera in some paradoxical ways fulfills the humanist precepts. The text, it is true, exhibits in places the sort of epistemological transgressions more

19. For a study of the role of the Historia verdadera within Fuentes’s larger literary project, see Cortínez, Memoria original (esp. chapter 5).

20. “The basic logical structure of fiction can be considered derivative and as emerging, through negation, from real and ordinary narrative, since the narrations of presumed facts that we hear or read every day are limited throughout in credibility, and we project from them an unstable objectivity. In real life, speakers are primarily fallible and never absolutely accurate and truthful. A speech intimating unrestricted truth of singular detail is in reality extremely atypical. In literature, the primary teller is the one who never errs on a point of singular circumstances; the derivative and atypical basic narrator is the one who becomes, in this respect, unreliable.” Martínez Bonati, Fictive Discourse, 118.

21. See also Cascardi, who writes in “Chronicle” that the Historia verdadera has “striking novelistic tendencies” (212) and that Bernal Díaz is “able to superimpose the past on the present as if nothing had ever dissociated the two” (203). Durán, in “Bernal Díaz” (799), suggests that the cronista aims at achieving “una reconstrucción total del pasado, con todos los pormenores necesarios para que el lector pueda volver a vivir los acontecimientos de la conquista como si en ellos estuviera tomando parte.”
common to fiction than to history, but this sort of transgression is not a
consistent feature of Bernal Díaz’s work; in most respects his text follows
the aspects that I have been highlighting as reflecting the logic and charac-
teristics of historical writing.

The Past Made Present

I will start with the temporal question alluded to by Fuentes, that of Bernal
Díaz’s making the past appear to be present as a sign of the “novelistic”
quality of the work. Although a number of critics have highlighted this
feature as a notable one in the Historia verdadera, to my knowledge there
has been no study of the precise ways in which Bernal Díaz uses verbal
tense—and most particularly, the present tense—as one way to achieve
this effect. But first it should be noted that Fuentes’s equation of the effort
to make the past seem present with a “novelistic” quality would seem to
reflect, on the surface, a curious critical oversight, given that to conjure up
an image of the past as present, to narrate in such a way as to re-create for
the reader the impression of a direct perception of events, is the traditional
explanation for the use of the “historical present” as a stylistic device, one
that signals an effort on the part of the narrator to link in a figurative fashion
the time of the writing and the time of events. Lausberg characterizes the
historical present as a conventional rhetorical technique for narrating events
in such a way as to make them appear to be more “manifest” and “cred-
ible” by re-creating the perspective of the eyewitness. 22 One is reminded of
Vives’s notion of representing the past as if a spectacle before the reader’s
eyes. In this regard, it is perhaps important to recall that, despite Bernal
Díaz’s claims to the contrary, he had some awareness of the rhetorical com-
monplaces concerning the writing of history, and of the practical critique of
them popularized by writers such as Fernández de Oviedo. 23 But this critical
consciousness about metahistorical notions echoes but faintly in the Historia
verdadera, and the author often fails to adhere to the norms that he evokes.
Like the notes of style and literary reference recognized by Gilman, the
humanist views on the writing of history are less a direct influence than a

22. Lausberg, in Handbook, § 810–14, cites as sources, among others, Quintilian’s Institutio
oratoria, IV.2.123–24 and IX.2.41–42.
23. For a contrary point of view, see Julio Caillet-Bois, who writes in “Bernal Díaz” that no
other work of the period shows “un desdén más explícito por las conveniencias [sic] del género
histórico, ni hay otra que más desenfadadamente se desentienda de ellas” (228).
sort of “tenuous reminiscence” in the *Historia verdadera*. On the one hand, Bernal Díaz insists, like Oviedo and Las Casas before him, on his authority as eyewitness, on the superiority of things seen directly over secondhand reports, as well as the notion that contradictions are a clear sign of unreliability. On the other, his allusions to norms are often perplexing, even equivocal. He writes, for example, in the prologue:

Digo y afirmo que lo que en este libro se contiene es muy verdadero, que como testigo de vista me hallé en todas las batallas y reencuentros de guerra; y no son cuentos viejos, ni Historias de Romanos de más de setecientos años, porque a manera de decir, ayer pasó lo que verán en mi historia, y cómo y cuándo y de qué manera.

[I say and affirm that what is contained in this book is very true, that as an eyewitness I found myself in the battles and skirmishes of war; and these are not old stories, nor Histories of Romans from seven hundred years ago, because it is as if what you will see in my history happened yesterday, and how and where and in what manner.] (*HV*, 3)

Yet in telling of how he planted the first orange trees in New Spain, the author proceeds to refer to his own account as an “old story” (“cuento viejo”): “Well I know that people will say that these old stories do not fit in my account, and I will leave them” (“Bien sé que dirán que no hace al propósito de mi relación estos cuentos viejos, y dejarlos he” (*HV*, 32, chap. 16). Like Oviedo, Bernal Díaz frequently disparages the artful histories of those such as Gómara, who wrote from hearsay (“de oídas”) (*HV*, 35, chap. 18) and followed the humanistic models, which emphasized the need for a rhetorically elegant presentation of history. And yet he also voices his own wish to leave a sort of written monument to his fellow soldiers in terms that would seem to echo Vives’s hopes for a vivid historiography:

24. Gilman, “Bernal Díaz,” 102. In chapter 18, for example, where Bernal Díaz criticizes Francisco López de Gómara’s “historia de buen estilo,” the old conquistador echoes both the commonplace of the humanists and the sorts of critiques made by Oviedo: “tan grande y santa empresa salió de nuestras manos, pues ella misma da fe muy verdadera; y no son cuentos de naciones extrañas, ni sueños ni porfías, que ayer pasó a manera de decir, si no vean toda la Nueva-España qué cosa es. Y lo que sobre ello escriben, diremos lo que en aquellos tiempos nos hallamos ser verdad, como testigos de vista, e no estaremos hablando la contrariedades y falsas relaciones (como decimos) de los que escribieron de oídas, pues sabemos que la verdad es cosa sagrada.” Bernal Díaz, *HV*, 35.
Y más digo, que, como ahora los tengo en la mente y sentido y memoria, supiera pintar y esculpir sus cuerpos y figuras y talles y meneos, y rostros y facciones, como hacía aquel gran pintor y muy nombrado Apelles, e los pintores de nuestros tiempos Berruguete, e Micael Angel, o el muy afamado burgalés, que dicen que es otro Apelles, dibujara a todos los que dicho tengo al natural, y aun según cada uno entraba en las batallas y el ánimo que mostraba.

[And I say further that, as I now have them in my mind and senses and memory, I wish I knew how to paint and sculpt their bodies and figures and gestures and faces and features, just as that great and very famous painter Apelles used to do, and the painters of our times Berruguete and Michael Angelo, or the very famous man from Burgos, of whom it is said that he is another Apelles, so as to draw all those I have mentioned in a natural fashion, and the way in which each entered into battles and the spirit demonstrated by each.] (HV, 644, chap. 206)

Here, Bernal Díaz unabashedly declares his hope that his own work would seem to bring figures and events to life, thus echoing the humanist ideal of achieving in historical narrative a vividness that might be comparable to the visual illusions of the best of the Renaissance masters. As we shall see, the narrator’s efforts to comply, however vaguely, with the historiographic commonplaces, as well as his frequent falterings in this regard, lend his text some highly idiosyncratic qualities.

Returning now to Fuentes’s observation that the treatment of time in the Historia verdadera points to a “novelistic” quality in the work: it clearly raises important theoretical questions, such as whether verbal tense has the same function in historical as opposed to fictional works. The topic, it turns out, is not a new one. Käte Hamburger, for one, discusses the historical present as an illustration of her argument for a radically different logic in historical versus fictional works, distinguishing between first-person narration, in which the narrator can be said to be telling his tale as if he were reliving it, and third-person narration. The latter, for Hamburger, involves a sort of “dramatic visualization” that points to the “fictionalizing function of the historical present” in a third-person (“objective,” for Hamburger) historical account. Weinrich, who in his study of time in narrative is less concerned with discursive distinctions than is Hamburger, finds the

historical present to embody a “temporal metaphor” that creates a tension in the
narrative by crossing the logical frontier between time of the events and time of
the narration. I will now examine Bernal Díaz’s resourceful use of the present
tense in the Historia verdadera in this light, and the ways in which it points to
crucial questions of narrative perspective in his history.

One finds the sort of first-person “presentification” described by
Hamburger in places where Bernal Díaz discusses the topics of history and
memory, as in “me parece que ahora que lo estoy escribiendo, se me rep-
resenta por estos ojos pecadores toda la guerra, según y de la manera que
allí pasamos” (“it seems to me that now as I am writing, all of the war, and
the manner in which we were there, is represented before my sinful eyes”) (HV,
64, chap. 34); or, “muchas veces, ahora que soy viejo, me paro a con-
siderar las cosas heroicas que en aquel tiempo pasamos, que me parece que
las veo presentes” (“oftentimes, now that I am old, I stop to consider the
heroic things that we did back then, and it seems to me that I see them as
present”) (HV, 205, chap. 95). Clearly, for the author-narrator, the process
of writing is connected, to some extent, to reliving events through memory.
This sort of autobiographical “presentification” is readily understandable,
given the narrative situation of the author, who began to compose his work
in the 1530s, long after the battles that he describes. The Historia verdadera
also exhibits in places a related phenomenon, one like that described by
Weinrich as evoking a “tension” in which the narrator “participates” in the
drama of the events, as in the following: “Y andando en estas batallas, nos
cercan por todas partes” (“And marching in these battles, they surround us
on all sides”) (HV, 120, chap. 63), or: “Así como llegaron a nosotros, como
eran grandes escuadrones, que todas las sabanas cubrían, se vienen como
perros rabiosos e nos cercan por todas partes, e tiran tanta de flecha e vara e
piedra, que de la primera arremetida hirieron más de setenta de los nuestros”
(“Just as they came upon us, since they had large squadrons that covered
all the savannahs, they come upon us like mad dogs and surround us on all
sides, and fire so many arrows and spears and stones that on their first attack
they wounded more than seventy of our men”) (HV, 62, chap. 34). The
reader does not understand the present tense in these examples literally,
but as one way in which the narrator “relives” events to heighten dramatic
effect. (And, in general, the Historia verdadera does display the sort of con-
stant crossing of frontiers between the time of events and that of the nar-
rative that Weinrich finds to be characteristic of historiographic discourse.)

26. Weinrich, Estructura, 162.
However, Bernal Díaz would seem to use the present tense in ways that are not merely temporal, that is, geared toward linking past events and the narrative that captures them. One of the most consistent uses of the present tense in the *Historia verdadera* is to signal a change in narrative distance. In relating the words of others, Bernal Díaz, like Oviedo, privileges the use of indirect over direct representation of speech. But whereas Bernal Díaz usually begins by recounting the speech of others in indirect discourse, introducing the quoted language with a verb such as *decir* and a relative pronoun and transposing it to the imperfect (Genette refers to this as “transposed speech”), he often switches midsentence to the present tense, thus creating an impression, albeit incomplete, of direct discourse. This facet of Bernal Díaz’s prose can be seen in innumerable passages such as the following, wherein Cortés receives gifts of women from the *Cacique Gordo*:

Cortés las recibió con alegre semblante, y les dijo que se lo tenían en merced; mas para tomarlas, como dice que seamos hermanos, que hay necesidad que no tengan aquellos ídolos en que creen y adoran, que los traen engañados y que como él vea aquellas cosas malísimas en el suelo y que no sacrificuen, que luego tendrán con nosotros muy más fija la hermandad; y que aquellas mujeres se volverán cristianas primero que las recibamos; y que también habían de ser limpias de sodomías porque tenían muchachos vestidos en hábito de mujeres.

[Cortés received them with a joyful countenance, and told them that he was grateful, but that before they could take them (the gift of women), as if to say let’s be brothers, it is necessary that they do not have those idols that they believe in and adore, that (the idols) are deceiving them, and that once he sees that those bad things are on the ground, and that they do not sacrifice, then they will have with us a much stronger brotherhood; and that those women must become Christian before we receive them, and that they must also be clean of sodomy because they had boys dressed in women’s clothing.] (HV, 97, chap. 51, my emphasis)

27. Genette, in *Narrative Discourse* (170–72), finds three ways in which speech can be represented in narrative: (1) mimetic, or direct speech; (2) transposed speech, in which the narrator inserts the words of another into his own discourse; and (3) narrativized speech, in which spoken words become another event.
The present tense suggests a hesitation or switch in narrative distance (from indirect to direct recording of speech) that points to a mixing of the perspective of the narrator and that of the character whose words he represents (the verb tense hints at a direct quotation of Cortés’s words, but the personal pronouns maintain the narrator’s indirect stance). The switch in verb tense, as in the example above, would seem to be aimed at making this transposed scene more vivid, at highlighting key points of Cortés’s speech. One sees a similar phenomenon in the following passage, in which the Aztec chief, addressing Cortés, requests a chance to explain to his people the reasons for his “imprisonment”:

Montezuma dijo a Cortés que quería salir e ir a sus templos a hacer sacrificios e cumplir sus devociones, así para lo que a sus dioses era obligado como para que conozcan sus capitanes e principales, especial ciertos sobrinos suyos que cada día le vienen a decir que le quieren soltar y damos guerra, y que él les da por respuesta que él se huelga de estar con nosotros: porque crean que es como se lo han dicho, porque así se lo mandó su dios Huichilobos.

[Montezuma told Cortés that he wanted to leave and go to his temples to make sacrifices and fulfill his devotions, as he was obliged to do by his gods and to see his captains and noble leaders, especially some of his nephews who each day come to tell him that they want to free him and make war on us, and that he gives as his answer that he is happy to be with us so that they believe it is as they have been told, because that is what their god Huichilobos ordered.] (HV, 210, chap. 98, my emphasis)

Here too, the present tense signals the inclusion of a character’s spoken words within the narrator’s discourse, in this case emphasizing what will become one of the most dramatic episodes in the work (more on this later). An even more audacious variation—in epistemological terms—can be seen in the following, wherein Bernal Díaz hints at the direct quoting of the warnings of Aztec idols:

Parece ser que los Huichilobos y el Tezcatepuca hablaron con los papas, y les dijeron que se querían ir de sus provincias, pues tan mal tratados eran de los teules, e que adonde están aquellas figuras y cruz que no quieren estar, e que ellos no estarían allí si no nos mataban,
e que aquello les daban por respuesta, e que no curasen de tener otra; e que se lo dijesen a Montezuma y a todos sus capitanes, que luego comenzasen la guerra y nos matasen; y les dijo el ídolo que mirasen que todo el oro que solían tener para honrarles lo había-mos deshecho y hecho ladrillos, e que mirasen que nos íbamos señoreando de la tierra.

[It seems that Huichilobos and the Tezcatepuca spoke with the papas and told them that they wanted to leave their provinces, because they were so badly treated by the teules, and that (the gods) do not want to be near those figures and cross, and that they would not stay unless we were killed, and that that was their answer, and that they should not wait for another; and that they should tell Montezuma and all his captains that they should wage war immediately and kill us. The idol told them to see that all the gold with which they were once honored had been destroyed by us and made into bricks, and to look out that we were taking over the land.] (HV, 231, my emphasis)

Although in most cases this sort of usage of the present tense refers to spoken language, in places it indicates a quoting of written language, as when Bernal Díaz quotes from memory a letter sent from Cortés to the troops accompanying Pánfilo de Návar (HV, 239, chap. 112). The use of the present tense to hint at a direct recording of speech can also be seen where Bernal Díaz refers to it specifically as a “dialogue,” that is, in his well-known exchange with “Fame”:

Y quiero proponer una cuestión a modo de diálogo: y es, que habiendo visto la buena e ilustre fama que suena en el mundo de nuestros muchos y buenos y notables servicios que hemos hecho a Dios y a su majestad y a toda la cristiandad, da grandes voces y dice que fuera justicia y razón que tuviéramos buenas rentas, y más aventajadas que tienen otras personas que no han servido en estas conquistas ni en otras partes a su majestad; y asimismo pregunta que dónde están nuestros palacios y moradas, y qué blasones tenemos en ellas diferenciadas de las demás; y si están en ellas esculpidos y puestos por memoria nuestros heroicos hechos y armas.
This case is somewhat different from the others, however, because Bernal Díaz’s “dialogue” here refers not to a remembered exchange from the time of events, but to a clearly invented one that corresponds to the time of his writing. Nonetheless, this example underlines the present tense as a signal in the Historia verdadera not just of the temporal duality implicit in any narrative rendering of past events, but as a suggestion of the inclusion within the narrator’s discourse of the words of a character, which points to the markedly “oral” quality of his prose.28 This use of the present tense is not really problematic (recent studies suggest that it is a common feature of spoken language)29—but does point to a consistent effort on the part of the narrator to highlight or emphasize certain elements of the quoted discourse, and in places may indicate (as in the quoting of the words of idols) questions concerning the narrator’s sense of distance toward the story he tells.

In this regard, it is interesting to find the specter of the narrative stance of the adivino, so maligned by Oviedo and Las Casas as a sign of unreliable reporting of events not observed, as a notable characteristic of Bernal Díaz’s “eyewitness” account and, perhaps, as an aspect that has justly

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28. A number of critics have pointed to the evident orality in Bernal Díaz’s prose. See, for example, Caillet-Bois, who writes in “Bernal Díaz” (228) that the Historia verdadera is “ese alegato donde parece oírse la voz de todos,” and Cortínez’s discussion in Memoria (125) of the orality in Bernal Díaz’s work as evidenced by his frequent referral to his text in terms that denote spoken language (e.g., plática, a term that suggests “un tipo de discurso donde la belleza formal se supedita no al concepto de la verdad, sino al acto de decirla”).

29. I am indebted to Cohn’s succinct summary of theoretical work on the historical present in “The Deviance of Simultaneous Narration” in Distinction (96–108). A number of recent studies point to the function of tense in terms of narrative perspective: see Martínez Bonati, “El sistema del discurso y la evolución de las formas narrativas,” in La ficción narrativa, as well as Bellos, “The Narrative Absolute Tense,” on literary usage, and Wolfson, “Tense-Switching,” on conversational usage.
earned him literary fame. Indeed, in a crucial part of his narrative—that of the capture of the Aztec lord—Bernal Díaz not only achieves the effect of presenting the past as if in the process of being witnessed, but conjures up a sort of inside view into the thoughts of Montezuma quite uncharacteristic of works—whether fictive or historiographical—of his time. While Cortínez has observed that the author of the *Historia verdadera* is not “loyal” to any one perspective, noting in particular the temporal division in the author’s narrative “I,” to my knowledge, critics have not recognized the old conquistador’s even more problematic narrative shifts when recounting the experiences of others, as he does in the following passage about Montezuma, caught in Cortés’s trap:

Y si antes estaba temeroso, entonces estuvo mucho más; y después de quemados [los prisioneros] fue nuestro Cortés . . . y él mismo le quitó los grillos, y tales palabras le dijo, que no solamente lo tenía por hermano, sino en mucho más, e como es señor y rey de tantos pueblos y provincias, que si él podía, el tiempo andando le haría que fuese señor de más tierras . . . ; y que si quiere ir a sus palacios, que le da licencia para ello; y decíselo Cortés con nuestras lenguas, y cuando se lo estaba diciendo Cortés, parecía que le saltaban las lágrimas de los ojos al Montezuma; y respondió con gran cortesía que se lo tenía en merced. *Porque bien entendió Montezuma que todo eran palabras las de Cortés; e que ahora al presente que convenía estar allí preso, porque por ventura, como sus principales son muchos; y sus sobrinos e parientes le vienen cada día a decir que será bien damos guerra y sacarlo de prisión, que cuando lo vean fuera que le atraerán a ello, e que no quiera ver en su ciudad revueltas, e que si no hace su voluntad, por ventura querrán alzar a otro señor; y que él les quitaba de aquellos pensamientos con decirles que su dios Huichilobos se lo ha enviado a decir que esté preso.*

[If he had been afraid before, then he became even more so; and after (the prisoners) were burned, our Cortés went . . . and himself took off (Montezuma’s) shackles, and said such words to him, that he not only considered him a brother, but much more, and as he is the lord and king over so many towns and provinces, that if he could, later he would make him lord over more lands . . . , and that if he wants to go to his palaces, that he has permission to do so; and

Cortés says all this to him with our translators, and when Cortés was telling him this, it seemed that tears were jumping from the eyes of Montezuma; and he answered with great courtesy that he was grateful. Because Montezuma well understood that all these were just words on the part of Cortés; and that now it was necessary to remain there as prisoner, because perhaps, since his chiefs are many and his nephews and kin come every day to say that it will be good to wage war on us and take him out of prison, that when they see him outside they will draw him in to (this plan) and that he didn’t want to see any uprisings in his city, and if he does not follow their wishes, perhaps they will want to raise up another lord; and that he tried to keep them from these thoughts by telling them that their god Huichilobos had sent to say that he should remain in prison.\(^{31}\) (HV, 204, my emphasis)

In switching into the present and future tenses, Bernal Díaz appears to shift from the time of his narration to the time of the conquest, even momentarily accessing the Aztec lord’s thoughts. These temporal changes in recounting the inner perceptions of Montezuma are epistemologically more problematic in terms of perspective than either his recording of his own experience or his transposing the words of others, because they seem to represent the immediacy of the events as perceived by another figure.\(^{32}\) In this sense, they disturb the narrative situation, bringing into high relief the instability of Bernal Díaz’s narrative stance, which in places like this one would seem to move from a remembered eyewitness (first-person) perspective to one that is focalized through the consciousness of another, making this section of the narrative quite unnatural or improbable in logical terms.\(^{33}\) This passage recalls Hamburger’s distinction between first- and third-person narration using the historical present, in which the latter

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31. I have slightly modified the punctuation represented in Sáenz’s rendition of the Remón manuscript, so that it more closely follows the sense of the passage in the Guatemala manuscript, *HV*, 204, chap. 95.

32. For the challenges that this type of narrative posture presents for verisimilitude, see Martínez Bonati, *Ficción*, 82.

33. For a differing point of view, see Pellicer: “Como [Bernal Díaz] es testigo de vista no es un narrador omnisciente, de ahí que a menudo alude a la falta de información sobre un suceso determinado, o al olvido. Este tipo de narración, más o menos pura, hace que se recurra en muy pocas ocasiones al diálogo. Dejando a un lado la vigorosa personalidad de nuestro autor, está claro que el texto gana en veracidad y persuasión al ser narrado desde la primera persona.” Pellicer, “La organización narrativa,” 85.
shows signs of “fictionalization.” This sort of disruption in the narrative situation points to a clear transgression in the narrative pact on which Bernal Díaz claims his reliability and would seem to indicate a borderline regarding what is legitimate for historiographic—as opposed to fictive—discourse. It is this sort of transgression, it seems to me, more than the inclusion of seemingly irrelevant details, that points to textual properties more logically attributed to fictive than to historical writing. In works of fiction, Martínez Bonati has written, the fact that the basic narrator has absolute credibility means that types of discourse that would ordinarily be “epistemologically invalid or doubtful” can be taken to be true without restrictions. In a work of history, however, such liberties can be taken only as shortcomings, as a suspension or breach in the author’s promise of an account that does not overstep his own “natural” limitations. Needless to say, Bernal Díaz’s failure (in historiographic terms) here marks a literary achievement, one that contributes to perhaps the most remarkable representation of Montezuma in all of the early Spanish chronicles of the Indies.

In this regard, it is perhaps pertinent to remember that, aside from broad similarities such as the episodic structure (common to both historical and fictional narratives) and the limited literary references, noted by Gilman and others, Bernal Díaz’s narrative acrobatics do not present a consistently articulated (artistic) pattern in his work and, for that matter, have little in common with the fictional works of his day. As Kaiser has noted, characterization in the novel of the period is usually structured around behavior, as described directly by the narrator and as verified through a character’s words and gestures. Martínez Bonati observes that the ability to narrate the immediacy of another’s experience requires an inverisimilar narrative stance more characteristic of modern novels than of major fictional works of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. And the sort of fusion between the words of a narrator and those of a character is also more characteristic

34. Hamburger, in Logic (107), goes so far as to suggest that the historical present has a very different function in historical as opposed to fictional texts. In historical texts, she maintains, the present tense has a truly temporal function and marks an imaginative effort on the part of the author at “presentification”; whereas in fictional works the present tense is “not functionally different” from the past tense.

35. Martínez Bonati, Ficción, 81.

36. For the ways in which Bernal Díaz draws on existing models of descriptive portraits, see Rose-Fuggle, “Era el gran Montezuma.”


38. Martínez Bonani, in Ficción (82): “Porque el narrador no parece pretender estar dando cuenta inmediata de los hechos, la manera de narrar, la epistemología del discurso, del *Amadís* es más verosímil que la del *Quijote* y mucho más verosímil que la de la novela realista moderna.”
of modern works than of those of Bernal Díaz’s time. In this sense, Bernal Díaz’s narrative choices, which create momentary effects like those we have come to associate with modern works of fiction, are quite idiosyncratic in formal terms when compared to the discursive practices of his day.

Narrative Perspective: “Yo, Bernal Díaz”

The sort of “focalization” of the narrative perspective through the consciousness of Montezuma just examined is not a dominant narrative strategy in the Historia verdadera, but, like the mixing of the narrator’s and the characters’ words in the indirect representation of speech, it complicates Bernal Díaz’s repeated claims of maintaining a clear-cut eyewitness point of view. As we shall see, the author engages in other noteworthy narrative audacities as well.

It would seem that for Bernal Díaz, as for Oviedo and Las Casas, the notion of reliability is inextricably bound up in problems of narrative perspective. Bernal Díaz insists repeatedly on the integrity of his point of view, which he defines as limited by his natural range of vision. He professes in the prologue, as we have seen, to have witnessed everything he relates, and frequently evidences an awareness of the epistemological constraints on such an outlook, clarifying, for example, that “porque yo no fui en esta entrada, digo en esta relación que ‘dicen que pasó lo que he dicho’” (“because I did not go on this campaign, I write that ‘they say that it happened as I have said’”) (HV, 303, chap. 132). In deflating Gómara’s report that one of the apostles had appeared to assist the Castilians in a battle in Tabasco, for example, he writes: “Y pudiera ser que los que dice el Gómara fueran los gloriosos apóstoles señor Santiago o señor san Pedro, e yo, como pecador, no fuese digno de verles; lo que entonces vi y conocí fue a Francisco de Morla en un caballo castaño, que venía juntamente con Cortés” (“And it might be that those whom Gómara mentions were the glorious apostles Sir Saint James and Sir Saint Peter, and I, as a sinner, was not worthy of seeing them; what I then saw and recognized was Francisco de Morla on a chestnut horse. He was riding together with Cortés”) (HV, 63–64, chap. 34). In this twist, worthy of Las Casas in its deftness, Bernal evokes Gómara’s earlier version and discredits it with a nonmiraculous (and rather more mundane) narrative image. But in relating a secondhand indigenous report of a

39. On this topic, see Rojas, “Tipología del discurso del personaje.”
supernatural apparition, he adopts a much less critical attitude. Here we find Montezuma interrogating his allies about the battle in Almería:

Montezuma asked why, with so many thousands of warriors, were they unable to vanquish so few teules. And they answered that their spears and arrows and good fighting were useless; that they could not make them go back, because a great telegeguata of Castile came before them and that that lady made the Mexicans afraid, and said words to the teules that gave them strength; and Montezuma then thought that that great lady was Saint Mary. . . . And because I didn’t see this as I was in Mexico at the time, but rather it was told to me by certain conquistadors who were there, and please God that it might be so! (HV, 200–201, chap. 95)

The account of such a miracle, witnessed by anonymous indigenous warriors, interpreted by Montezuma, and later passed on by unnamed conquistadors, points to the rather endearing way in which Bernal Díaz often waffles on his own stated principles. The promise of a direct, unembellished point of view becomes visibly complicated as well in the following passage, in which he endeavors to account for the ingredients in Montezuma’s supper:

Oí decir que le solían guisar carnes de muchachos de poca edad; y como tenía tantas diversidades de guisados y de tantas cosas, no le echábamos de ver si era de carne humana y de otras cosas, porque cotidiamamente le guisaban gallinas, gallos . . . , faisanes, perdices de la tierra . . . y así, no miramos en ello. Lo que yo sé es, que desque
nuestro capitán le reprendió el sacrificio de comer carne humana, que desde entonces mandó que no le guisasen tal manjar.

[I heard tell that they used to stew the flesh of young boys; and since he had so many kinds of stews and so many things, we didn’t look to see if it was human flesh or something else, because daily they cooked up hens, roosters…, pheasants, local partridges…, and so we didn’t look carefully. What I know is that, after our captain admonished him for sacrificing and eating human flesh, (Montezuma) ordered that such a delicacy no longer be prepared for him.](HV, 184, chap. 91)

In practice, even for the eyewitness, the difficulty of separating “things heard” from “things seen” is one that is dramatized over and over again in his history, and as the narrative progresses, he increasingly claims credibility based both on his own (unique) eyewitness experience and on his ability to speak for his fellow soldiers who have no voice:

Por esto digo yo en mi relación: “Fueron y esto hicieron y tal les acaeció,” y no digo: “Hicimos ni hice, ni en ello me hallé,” mas todo lo que escribo acerca dello pasó al pie de la letra; porque luego se sabe en el real de la manera que en las entradas acaece; y ansí, no se puede quitar ni alargar más de lo que pasó.

[That’s why I say in my account: “They went and they did this and such and such happened to them,” and I don’t say “we did nor I did, nor I was there,” but all that I write about happened just so, because one always finds out later at camp what happened on the battlefield, and so it is not possible to take away or to add to what happened.] (HV, 339–40, chap. 142)

He emphasizes this aspect of his account again in relating his efforts to defend his work against the criticisms of the two licenciados who review his manuscript and question how anyone could remember so many names and events in such great detail:

A esto respondo y digo que no es mucho que se me acuerde ahora sus nombres: pues éramos quinientos y cincuenta compañeros que siempre conversábamos juntos, así en las entradas como en las velas,
y en las batallas y encuentros de guerras, e los que mataban de nosotros en las tales peleas e cómo los unos con los otros, en especial cuando salíamos de algunas muy sangrientas e dudosas batallas, echábamos menos los que allá quedaban muertos, e a esta causa los pongo en esta relación.

[To this I answer and say that it’s not surprising that I should remember their names now: we were five hundred and fifty companions who always conversed with one another, whether we were attacking or standing watch, or in the battles and encounters of war. And, in talking to each other we would miss those who had died on the field, especially when we got out of some very difficult and bloody fights, which is why I mention them in my account.] (HV, 644, chap. 206).

The notion of the Historia verdadera as both a firsthand view and a collective register of the base-camp accounts of others fits in with Bernal Díaz’s tendency to mix his own words with the speech of the historical actors he represents, and points to the complex scope of his project.

As it happens, one finds remarkable variations in what the narrator is able to perceive in the Historia verdadera. In places, as we have seen, Bernal Díaz as narrator betrays a fantastic ability to decipher the thoughts of Montezuma. However, elsewhere in the account of the dramatic triumphs and reversals of the Castilians in Tenochtitlán, he maintains a steadfastly limited view, one that appears restricted even when compared to that of other historical figures portrayed. Indeed, aside from the momentary inside views, Bernal Díaz’s account of the encirclement and ultimate defeat of the Aztec prince is notable for the backseat role taken by the teller, who highlights the amusements provided for the imprisoned leader, the gifts and pleasantries exchanged between the great Montezuma and his captors, and the (often deficient) manners of those charged with guarding him. Bernal Díaz at first presents Montezuma as happily integrated within the Castilian company: we find him enjoying a boating trip to his hunting grounds in the company of his captors and ordering his hunters to capture a hawk that has caught the fancy of one of the Spanish captains. The progressive entanglement of Montezuma in Cortés’s snare is achieved with considerable distance. As tensions mount among Montezuma’s allies, Bernal Díaz portrays the lord of Tenochtitlán’s increasing submission to Cortés through his interactions with the Spaniards and his conflicts with his upstart nephew,
Cacamatzin. The gravity of the situation is clear from the way in which Montezuma is seen as lying to his own allies (he explains his imprisonment as voluntary and sanctioned by his idols), and yet Bernal Díaz limits his own comments to statements such as: “Montezuma era cuerdo y no quería ver su ciudad puesta en armas” (“Montezuma was wise and did not want to see an uprising in his city”) (HV, 214, chap. 100). In noting the contrast between the Aztec prince’s fragility at the hands of Cortés and his continued ability to command obedience from his own subjects, Bernal Díaz writes: “Miren qué gran señor era, que estando preso así era tan obedecido” (“See what a great lord he was, that though a prisoner he was still obeyed in this way”) (HV, 217, chap. 100). Indeed, the most accurate insight on the situation—that which most faithfully reflects the developments as recounted from beginning to end—is voiced not by the narrator, but by Cacamatzin, Montezuma’s nephew,40 who threatens impending disaster, calls his uncle a “hen” (“gallina”), and sorely chastises him for handing over his empire to the Castilians. The sort of suppression of the narrator’s explicit vision and commentary on events here, and the presentation of a more exact evaluation in the words of the “enemy” suggests an element of perspectivism in this scene and highlights the range of narrative techniques that Bernal Díaz employs in endeavoring to capture in finest detail the enigmatic figure of Montezuma.

Narrative Voice and the Portrayal of Historical Figures

Bernal Díaz’s liberties in narrative perspective, however, coexist within the vast sweep of the Historia verdadera with techniques of portraying characters that are consistent with what Rigney has described as characteristically historiographic, which I have discussed in Chapter 1. The figures that Bernal Díaz preserves for memory, himself included, are often sketched in broad and contradictory lines, recorded in many cases with a succinct epithet aimed more, it would seem, at identification than characterization. In describing his own role as a young soldier—as critics have often noted—Bernal Díaz emphasizes on the one hand that he was a figure of some importance in the conquest, frequently consulted by Cortés, conversant with Montezuma and privy both to his captain’s strategies and even

40. Bernal Díaz writes that Cacamatzin “entendió que había muchos días que estaba preso su tío Montezuma, e que en todo lo que nosotros podíamos nos íbamos señoreando.” HV, 213, chap. 100.
to “secret” communications between indigenous leaders. On the other, he recognizes that he, like the vast bulk of the soldiers taking part in the conquest, is unlikely to be remembered by history. Posternity might easily find someone such as himself to be indistinguishable from others in his company: “En la capitanía de Sandoval había tres soldados que tenían por renombre Castillos: el uno dellos era muy galán, y preciábase dello en aquel sazón, que era yo, y a esta su causa me llamaban Castillo, el galán” (“Under Sandoval’s captainship there were three soldiers who went by the name Castillo: one of them was a very fine-looking fellow, and knew so himself at the time; and that was me, and because of this I was called Castillo, the gallant”) (HIV, 435, chap. 160). The reference to himself here in the third person—in addition to being a moment of vanity—hints at an awareness that the role that Bernal Díaz highlights for himself in his own work cannot be taken for granted by the reader, and that outside of his own Historia verdadera, he is likely, if remembered at all, to be indistinguishable from others with the same family name. While this effort at clarifying the who’s who among the soldiers may well be related to the old soldier’s subsequent aspirations to hidalgo status, it also alludes to a problem common to the representation of historical figures.

The sort of disjunction between the portrayal of himself as an important actor at decisive moments and at the same time as rather unremarkable has parallels in other ambiguities of his self-representation. Bernal Díaz’s construction of a narrative “I” has been the subject of much critical study, although perhaps never so succinctly stated as by one of his earliest readers, Antonio de Solís, who wrote, somewhat unkindly, in his own Historia de la conquista de México (1684), that Bernal Díaz’s “particular” (private) history, as he calls it,

pasa hoy por historia verdadera ayudándose del mismo desaliño y poco adornó de su estilo para parecerse a la verdad y acreditar con algunos la sinceridad del escritor: pero aunque le asiste la circunstancia de haber visto lo que escribió, se conoce de su misma obra que no tuvo la vista libre de pasiones, para que fuese bien gobernada la pluma: muéstrase tan satisfecho de su ingenuidad como queexo de su fortuna: andan entre sus renglones muy descubiertas la envidia y la ambición.

Wagner, in “Bernal Díaz,” notes that the cronista’s name rarely appears in other accounts of the period; Sáenz de Santa María observes that for most of his life, the author went by the name “Bernal Díaz,” and suggests that he probably adopted the “del Castillo” in the 1560s. See his Introducción crítica, 44, and his “Suplemento” to the critical edition, 61.
[passes today as a true history. The very same carelessness and lack of adornment of his style helps create the appearance of truth and convinces some of the writer’s sincerity. But though he is assisted by the circumstance of having witnessed what he wrote, his work itself reveals that the author’s vision was not free from passion so as to govern well his pen. He shows himself to be as satisfied with his own cleverness as he is dissatisfied with his fortune. Envy and ambition wrangle openly between his lines.]42

Modern critics have delineated in greater detail the protagonism of his “I,” as well as the author’s petulance, egotism, and the undeniable simpatía of his narrative persona, not to mention his likely pragmatic and legal aims in writing the work.43 Many have commented on the strong presence of Bernal Díaz’s “I,” the best-known passage being that included in another part of his “dialogue” with Fame:

Y entre los fuertes conquistadores mis compañeros, puesto que los hubo muy esforzados, a mí me tenían en la cuenta de ellos, y el más antiguo de todos; y digo otra vez que yo, yo, yo lo digo tantas veces, que yo soy el más antiguo y he servido como muy buen soldado a su majestad y digolo con tristeza de mi corazón, porque me veo pobre y muy viejo, una hija por casar, y los hijos varones ya grandes y con barbas.

[And among my companions the strong conquistadors—for some of them were very valiant—I was counted as one of them, and as the one who had been there first. And I repeat that I, I, I say it so many times that I am the first to have gone and I have served his majesty as a good soldier and I say it with sorrow in my heart, because I am poor and very old, with a daughter to be married and my sons already grown and bearded.] (HV, 652, chap. 210)

42. Solís, Historia, 1:2, 27.
43. The most thorough studies of Bernal Díaz’s narrative “I” are by Rose de Fuggle, “El narrador fidedigno,” and Cortínez, whose book comprises the most complete description to date of Bernal Díaz as narrator. See Cortínez, Memoria, chapter 2, and also “Yo, Bernal Díaz.” On legal battles, see Iglesia, “Introducción al estudio,” which also addresses questions of Bernal’s self-presentation, and Adorno, “Discursive Encounter.” Others who have studied Bernal as a narrator include González Echevarría, “Humanismo,” and Loesberg, “Narratives of Authority.”
Yet while readers have invariably noted the forcefulness with which this “I” demands to be heard, they have not agreed on what sort of a “character” his self-portrait might add up to. Cortínez has described the complexity of Bernal Díaz’s construction of himself in his work, wherein he takes on the roles of author, character, and reader.44 One finds hints as to Bernal Díaz’s historical being, but no real answers within the text; one can only guess at the measure of sincerity or accurate self-representation in his discourse about himself, particularly in the final chapters, in which lofty providential overtones coexist with (and are eroded by) the narrator’s incessant complaints. He suggests, for example, that his history has been divinely inspired to preserve the memory of all of the glorious foot soldiers who took part in the conquest: “Gracias a Dios y a su bendita madre nuestra señora, que me escapó de no ser sacrificado a los ídolos, e me libró de otros muchos peligros y trances, para que haga ahora esta memoria” (“Thank God and his blessed mother our lady, that I escaped being sacrificed to the idols, and was freed from many other dangers and bad situations so that I now may write this memory”) (HV, 644, chap. 206). But this sort of note often mingles with a more petulant one, as when he writes:

Mas, si bien se quiere notar, después de Dios, a nosotros los verdaderos conquistadores [sic] que los descubrimos y conquistamos, y desde el principio les quitamos sus ídolos y les dimos a entender la santa doctrina, se nos debe el premio y galardón de todo ello, primero que a otras personas, aunque sean religiosos; porque cuando el principio es bueno, el medio y el cabo todo es digno de policía y cristianidad y justicia que les mostramos en la Nueva-España.

[After God it is to us, the true conquerors who discovered and conquered (the natives), and from the beginning we took away their idols and we gave them to understand the sacred doctrine—it is to us before any others that the prize and reward is due, even before the clergy, because when the beginning is good, the middle and the end are all worthy of the order and Christianity and justice that we showed them in New Spain.] (HV, 647, chap. 208)

In places, he drops all claims to piety, arguing that the long-hoped-for royal recognition and rewards “se me deben bien debidas” (“are very much owed

44. Cortínez, Memoria, 135.
to me”) (*HV*, 652, chap. 210). As in the case of Las Casas’s portrayal of himself, this mixing of registers suggests problems of narratorial reliability, but here, too, one has no choice but to attribute these conflicting signals to the author himself. It is quite impossible to unravel a precise image of the “character” of the author from the narrative persona that he creates, which provides many clues, but few answers, as to his true motivations.

In his treatment of other historical actors, Bernal Díaz employs a range of techniques, some involving extensive descriptive and narrative portrayal, and others consisting of quick, formulaic descriptions and even lists. In the latter, there seems to be an abyss between Bernal Díaz’s stated aim of “sculpting” the figures of his fellow soldiers and his actual practice. The multiplicity of experiences of a large collective body of soldiers does not conform to a coherent narrative, but spills over and must be accommodated into catalog-like chapters, such as the sections on Montezuma’s palace and the market of Tlatelolco. The more rhetorically elaborate portraits of chapter 206 are, as María Luisa Fischer has noted, less lifelike representations than “undifferentiated portraits, indistinguishable if not for the name or the written inscription,” and would appear to be based on the models of Pérez de Guzmán and Fernando del Pulgar, while the lists in chapters 205, 211, and 212 appear to aim at creating a sense of documentary exactitude. Cortínez has discussed the ways in which Bernal Díaz makes constant and recurring reference to figures of all social rank, and I would add that this aspect of his history, together with the litany of “my dead companions,” points to the “social” character (to borrow Rigney’s phrase) of his history, which endeavors in a typically historiographic fashion to record traces of a vast number of figures, many of whom reappear erratically, if at all, in the work. Amid the vast sweep of his prodigious memory, which claims to record the masses of fallen soldiers, a few characters, such as Cortés and Montezuma, and a number of others, stand out.

In what follows, I will contrast briefly the different approaches Bernal Díaz takes in sketching the two most important figures of his history. Cortínez has written the most complete description of the ways in which Bernal Díaz portrays Cortés, emphasizing the fairness with which the old soldier seems to both celebrate his captain’s talents and to criticize his shortcomings. Indeed, in Bernal Díaz’s account, Cortés’s astuteness throughout the

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47. Ibid., 39–58.
Aztec campaign is matched only by his disastrous blunderings in all of his subsequent dealings with the Castilian imperial bureaucracy. The narrator refrains from presenting us the sort of inside vision we see of Montezuma, insisting instead on the restricted objectivity of his own point of view. In recalling the captain’s brilliant leadership, he highlights his own changing perception of events over time:

Una cosa que he pensado despúes acá, que jamás nos dijo tengo tal concierto en el real hecho, ni fulano ni zutano es en nuestro favor, ni cosa ninguna destas, sino que peleásemos como varones; y esto de no decírnos que tenia amigos en el real de Narváez fue muy deuerdo capitán, que por aquel efecto no dejásemos de batallar como esforzados, y no tuviésemos esperanza en ellos, sino, después de Dios, en nuestros grandes ánimos.

[One thing I have since thought is that he never told us I have such an agreement in (Narváez’s) camp, nor that so and so is in our favor, nor anything like that, but just that we should fight like men: and not to tell us that he had friends in Narváez’s camp was a sign that he was a very prudent captain, so that we would fight harder because we had no hope in anyone except, after God, our own great valor.] (HV, 262, chap. 122)

In his summary description following the account of Cortés’s death, for example, Bernal Díaz emphasizes what could be observed or inferred from Cortés’s conduct: “No era nada regalado ni se le daba nada por comer manjares delicados” (“He was not at all fancy nor used to eating elaborate dishes”), “Era muy afable con todos nuestros capitanes y compañeros” (“He was very affable with all of our captains and companions”), “Cuando estaba muy enojado se le hinchaba una vena de la garganta y otra de la frente” (“When he was very angry one vein would swell on his throat and another on his forehead”); and he is careful to distinguish this sort of direct observation from others he has heard secondhand: “Oí decir que cuando mancebo . . . fue algo travieso con las mujeres” (“I heard tell that in his youth . . . he was a bit dissolute with women”), “Oí decir que era bachiller en leyes” (“I heard tell that he had a bachelor’s degree in law”) (HV, 622, chap. 204). In commenting on Cortés’s testament, for example, he writes: “No lo sé bien, mas tengo en mí que, como sabio, lo haría bien, . . . y como era viejo, que lo haría con mucha cordura y mandaría descargar su conciencia” (“I am
not sure, but for myself think that, as a wise man, he would do it well, and because he was old, that he would do it with prudence and to have a clear conscience”\(^{\text{HV, 621}}\). In general, he limits himself to the sort of observations that can reasonably be inferred about those one spends time with, that is, the sorts of observations that a historian can legitimately record about real people. In places, however, he does hint at psychological insights in other ways. An important passage in this regard appears in chapter 54, where he describes how, at the time Cortés sent his first relación to the emperor, the cabildo of soldiers who supported the renegade captain sent a separate letter to the king. Bernal Díaz describes the encounter that followed:

Nos rogó que se la mostrásemos, y como vio la relación tan verdadera y los grandes loores que dél dábanos, hubo mucho placer y dijo que nos lo tenía en merced, con grandes ofrecimientos que nos hizo; empero no quisiéramos que diéramos en ella ni mentáramos del quinto del oro que le prometimos, ni que declaráramos quiénes fueron los primeros descubridores; porque, según entendimos, no hacía en su carta relación de Francisco Hernández de Córdoba ni del Grijalva, sino a él sólo se atribuía el descubrimiento y la honra y honor de todo . . . y no faltó quien le dijo que a nuestro rey y señor no se le ha dejar de decir todo lo que pasa.

[He begged us that we show it to him, and when he saw the account to be so true and full of the praise that we gave him, he was very pleased and said that he was grateful to us and offered us great gifts. But he did not want us to tell about the fifth of the gold that we promised him, nor that we should declare who were the first conquistadors, because, as we understood, he did not mention Francisco Hernández de Córdoba or Grijalva in his letter, but instead attributed to himself alone the discovery and the honor and the glory. . . . And there were those who told him that one must not refrain from telling our king and lord everything that happens.]\(^{\text{HV, 103–4, chap. 54}}\)

Bernal Díaz returns to the topic of Cortés’s apparent omissions and distortions in chapter 205, in which he lists the “valorous” captains and soldiers who participated in the conquest whom, he writes, received only belated recognition by the marqués, recognition that came far too late to be translated into tangible rewards from the emperor: “E quedábamos en blanco
hasta ya a la postre” (“And we were left empty-handed until the very end”) (HV, 626, chap. 205). As in the lies of Montezuma to his followers, which Bernal Díaz portrays as a self-interested attempt on the part of the prince to survive the political upheaval brought on by the Castilians in Mexico—one that would cost him the sovereignty of an empire—Cortés’s failure to fully disclose the “truth” here likewise reveals a weakness in character, an evident gap between the remarkable qualities that enable him to both manipulate and lead and the personal ambition that induces him to forget those who helped him succeed.

Treatment of the Historical Tradition

The element of perspectivism, or the use of multiple perspectives, that Bernal Díaz achieves in parts of the Historia verdadera is perhaps related to other divide-and-conquer techniques in his work, most specifically to his stance vis-à-vis the historical tradition. Indeed, one point on which both Fernández de Oviedo and Las Casas largely concur has to do with their representation of the vast majority of foot soldiers of the conquest as a brutal, greedy lot, driven by their desire for gold. Even Francisco López de Gómara, whose Historia de la Conquista de México (Zaragoza, 1552) is generally more favorable to the conquest project, depicts the illusions of the common conquerors with biting irony. While Bernal Díaz’s direct criticisms of López de Gómara are a patent and often-commented-upon aspect of his work, one topic that has received less attention is the indirect manner in which he addresses the historical tradition as it reveals itself in the account of Cortés’s chaplain. In this regard, it is worthwhile to briefly compare a few key passages so as to point to one aspect in which the old encomendero takes issue, not so much with his rival’s failure to fairly apportion the “glory” of the conquest, but with his clear suggestions that many of the soldiers in Cortés’s company bordered on the witless. In a passage that merits quoting at length, from “El recibimiento que hicieron a Cortés en Cempoallán” (chapter 32), for example, Gómara emphasizes the meeting of Old- and New-World peoples as one of profound misperceptions:

Salieron de la ciudad muchos hombres y mujeres, como en recibimiento, a ver aquellos nuevos y más que hombres. Y dábanles con alegre semblante muchas flores y muchas frutas muy diversas de las que los nuestros conocían; y aun entraban sin miedo entre la ordenanza del escuadrón; y de esta manera, y con regocijo y fiesta,
entraron en la ciudad, que todo era un vergel, y con tan grandes y altos árboles, que apenas se parecían las casas. A la puerta salieron muchas personas de lustre, a manera de cabildo, a los recibir, hablar y ofrecer. Seis españoles de caballo, que iban adelante un buen pedazo, como descubridores, tornaron atrás muy maravillados, ya que el escuadrón entraba por la puerta de la ciudad, y dijeron a Cortés que habían visto un patio de una gran casa chapado todo de plata. El les mandó volver, y que no hiciesen muestra ni milagros por ello, ni de cosa que viesen. Toda la calle por donde iban estaba llena de gente, abobada de ver caballos, tiros y hombres tan extraños. Pasando por una muy gran plaza, vieron a mano derecha un gran cercado de cal y canto, con sus almenas, y muy blanqueado de yeso de espejuela y muy bien bruñido; que con el sol relucía mucho y parecía plata; y esto era lo que aquellos españoles pensaron que era plata chapada por las paredes. Creo que con la imaginación que llevaban y buenos deseos, todo se les antojaba plata y oro lo que relucía.

[Many men and women went out from the city as if in welcome, to see those new and larger-than-life men. And with happy countenance they gave them many flowers and many fruits that were different from the ones known by our men: and at this time they still mixed with the squadron without fear. And in this way, with rejoicing and festivity, they entered the city, which was all a garden, and with such great and tall trees that the houses could barely be seen. At the gate, many illustrious persons came out, in the manner of a council, to receive them, speak, and make offerings. Six Spaniards on horseback, who had gone a bit ahead, like discoverers, turned back astonished, now that the squadron was entering through the city gate, and told Cortés that they had seen the patio of a great house that was all covered with silver. He ordered them to go back and not to make a fuss over that or anything else they saw. The whole street through which they passed was full of people, who were dumbfounded at the sight of such strange horses, weapons, and men. As they passed by a very grand plaza, they saw to their right a strong fenced-in area with parapets, and very white from plaster, and very well finished, that, with the sun, shined very much and looked like silver; and this is what those Spaniards thought was silver plate on the walls. I think that with the
imagination and good wishes that they had, they fancied everything
that shone to be silver and gold.] 48

This grandiose entry into Cempoal, in which López de Gómara accentuates
the superior strength of the conquering force (and the naive welcoming
of a pacific people), is undercut in his account by the Castilian vanguard’s
mistaking of whitewash on the walls of a house for silver. The mistaken
impression has a parallel in what Gómara describes as the bewildered gaze
of the natives. Bernal Díaz, while preserving some descriptive elements
(the town was “hecho un verjel” and crowded with onlookers), decisively
counteracts the notion of the Spanish soldiers as somehow suffering from
collective delusion:

Nuestros corredores del campo, que iban a caballo, parece ser llega-
ron a la gran plaza y patios donde estaban los aposentos, y de pocos
días, según pareció, teníanlos muy encalados y relucientes, que lo
saben muy bien hacer, y pareció al uno de los que iba a caballo
que era aquello blanco que relucía plata, y vuelve a rienda suelta a
decir a Cortés cómo tenían las paredes de plata. Y doña Marina e
Aguilar dijeron que sería yeso o cal, y tuvimos bien que reír de su
plata y frenesí.

[Our scouts, who were on horseback, seem to have arrived at the
great plaza and patios where the rooms were, and which had appar-
ently been whitewashed recently, which they know how to do
well, and it seemed to one of these horsemen that the white color
shined like silver, and he turned around swiftly to tell Cortés that
the walls were of silver. And Doña Marina and Aguilar said that
that must be plaster or whitewash, and we had a good laugh about
their silver and frenzy.] (HV, 85–86, chap. 45)

As in his deflation of Gómara’s report of the appearance of Saints James and
Peter on the battlefield, Bernal Díaz carefully counters the image of the
conquerors as blinded by the frenzy for riches. The joke, here, is on a single
soldier, and the mistaken judgment corrected by the interpreters as soon as
it is uttered.

Gómara develops the theme of misplaced illusions in chapter 110, “How Cortés Fled Mexico,” where he expands on some of the tragic consequences of the Castilians’ stubborn preoccupation with riches. In recounting the panicked flight of Cortés’s troops from the Aztec capital, Gómara writes:

[Had this happened in daylight, perhaps not so many would have died nor would there have been so much noise; but since it happened in the dark of a foggy night, there was great shouting, cries, howls, and fear. The Indians, as winners, shouted victory, invoked their gods, committed outrages on the fallen, and killed those who still defended themselves on foot. Our soldiers, as the defeated, cursed their disastrous luck, the hour, and he who had brought them there. Some called to God, others to Saint Mary, others said: “Help, help; I am drowning.” I could not say whether as many died on land as in the water, for trying to swim away or to jump over the streams and bays of the causeways. Unable to bring them down any other way, the Indians threw them into the water, and]
they say that in falling into the water, the Spaniard went down with the Indian, and since the latter are good swimmers, they took the Spaniards to the boats or wherever they wanted, or they ripped open their bellies. Many acalles were also walking close to the causeway and they knocked each other down both on land and in the water, and so, they did more damage to themselves than our men did to them, and if they had not stopped to despoil the fallen, few or none of the Spaniards would have been left. In terms of our men, the more they were loaded down with clothing and jewels, the more of them died. The only ones who saved themselves were those who carried the least gold and those who went ahead or without fear, so that one could say that they were killed by gold and died rich.] 49

Within Gómara’s masterful representation of this terrifying scene, with its cacophony of voices, I would like just to emphasize a particularly vivid instance of his ironic depiction of the Castilian soldiers as not just deluded but ultimately destroyed by their blind greed for riches.

Bernal Díaz chips away, constantly, if indirectly, at this negative image common to the other accounts, freely admitting that the desire for wealth was a powerful motivation, while at the same time quoting the resentment of foot soldiers at the barely concealed looting of Montezuma’s treasure by Cortés and others. 50 At the same time, he also highlights moments when his own modest concern for holding on to a bit of treasure was crucial to his survival. After the flight from Tenochtitlán, for example, he tells us that his own small store of gold saved him from death and starvation by enabling him to purchase assistance from the indigenous allies: “Si no se lo pagábamos con algunas piecezuelas de oro y chalchihuites que llevábamos algunos de nosotros, no nos lo daban de balde” (“If we had not paid for it with a few tiny pieces of gold and chalchihuites that a few of us carried, they would not have given it for free”) (HV, 290, chap. 128). Later, it is Cortés’s gifts of money, jewels, and lavish entertainment that finally obtain royal payment and recognition for the captain. Once again, his account does not refute Gómara’s version outright, but incorporates the negative image of conquistadors by attributing it instead to Narváez’s men. Indeed, within the collective homage that Bernal Díaz pays to the common soldiers

49. Ibid., 174.
50. See in particular the discourse of Cárdenas to this effect, HV, 226–27, chap. 105.
who made possible the conquest, and in his view, subsequent benefits for the social fabric of New Spain, Narváez’s men are initially singled out to be as ignominious and destructive as those portrayed by, say, Las Casas. They are greedy and violent, stealing from Cortés’s camp and alienating the hard-won alliances. Narváez’s crew carries the smallpox infection that would decimate the indigenous population, and much like Gómara’s deluded riders, they are at a loss to decipher the realities of this new land, mistaking, for example, fireflies for the tinder (mechas) of firearms. Bernal Díaz’s tacit refutation of the larger picture contrasts with his direct criticisms of Gómara, which, as Iglesia and Lewis have shown, are often either unfair or focus on seemingly irrelevant details in the narrative.\footnote{See Iglesia, who suggests in “Las críticas de Bernal Díaz del Castillo” (35) that, contrary to the old encomendero’s claims, “Gómara no sólo estimuló a Bernal Díaz sino que le sirvió de pauta en su relato”; and Lewis, “Retórica y verdad” (47), who finds Bernal Díaz’s criticisms and characterization of Gómara’s account to be unfair.}

The careful consideration of the historical record that one senses in these passages is similar to that one finds in episodes such as that of Cholula,\footnote{On this episode, see Marcus, “La conquête de Cholula”; Adorno, “Discourses”; and Beckjord, “Con sal y ají.”} wherein there are clear signs that Bernal Díaz’s work is in many ways conditioned by the texts on which he bases his history and to which he responds.

Enrique Pupo-Walker once observed that the Historia verdadera is a complex work that is “nutrida de otras lecturas y en [la] que se destacan episodios de singular amplitud imaginativa” (“nourished by other readings and in which a few episodes of particularly imaginative amplitude stand out”).\footnote{Pupo-Walker, “Creatividad,” 33.} On the one hand, one finds in parts of the Historia verdadera what appears to be a careful consideration of the historical record, that is, not just an imaginative reconstruction or an effort to address pragmatic concerns or legal battles, but clear signs of a mindful exploitation of the narrative configurations contained in prior historical accounts, and a narrative that in many ways exhibits traits that adhere to the logic of writing history. On the other, one finds the sort of fascinating (and problematic, for historiographical discourse) audacities that Bernal Díaz takes in narrative perspective and the treatment of some of his historical actors. Although parts of the Historia verdadera can be read as constructing a world that seems imaginary at times because of Bernal Díaz’s re-creation of past events as present, the importance of the work lies in that it captures the author’s lived experience. While the reader does not
grant the author absolute credibility concerning his version of the conquest, the historicity of the events broadly defined is essential to the significance of his text. The Historia verdadera is truly a work of historiographical art, one that exhibits properties of history as well as the telltale transgressions of memory.