Territories of History
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CONCLUSIONS

THE REFLECTIONS CONCERNING the relationship between language and truth in history in the context of empire neither began nor ended with the early Spanish chroniclers of America. One could trace the intellectual lineage of this topic as far back as Thucydides, who links the imperial power struggles of Athens to a breakdown in language and, ultimately, to a tragic collapse of law and order. Or, in the more immediate Iberian context, one could look to Antonio de Nebrija, who, in his prologue to the first grammar of the Castilian language, Gramática de la lengua, famously wrote that language has always been the “companion” of empire. Great powers begin, grow, and flourish together with their respective languages, he explains, and together they will inevitably become corrupted and fall. At the time Nebrija published his Gramática in 1492, he was unaware of Columbus’s discoveries to the west. Yet, in congratulating the Catholic queen on her recent military successes and consolidation of power in the Iberian Peninsula, he impresses upon her the need to have her own deeds recorded in Castilian, so that the memory of her reign will be preserved in a native “home” and not be left to wander at the mercy of the tongues of foreigners.¹

While the discussions on the writing of history that emerged in the context of the Spanish colonial expansion into New World territories can be understood to a great extent as a response to the pressures of empire on questions of language and discourse in the tradition of Thucydides and Nebrija, they still resonate today on many levels. The humanists were deeply concerned with issues of style in historical writing, in part because of the connection they perceived between narrative and the social or pedagogical functions of history. In the rhetorical treatises of Vives we find a consideration of historical writing in the context of a broader program of teaching aimed at preparing students and citizens for the considerable challenges of his times. At the core of his treatment is the concern for keeping history

alive and meaningful by adopting if necessary the techniques of fiction to present the “truth” about the past as if perceived. Epistemological questions related to the concepts of verisimilitude and probability such as those brought up by Vives were put to the test in the early historiography of the Indies, which was written in an atmosphere of extreme political, moral, and religious controversy. The intellectual challenges posed by the crisis in humanistic thinking on the writing of history, the pressures of representing New World cultures and events according to Old World standards, and the moral controversies spawned by Spain’s imperial expansion brought new exigencies as well as insights into old debates. Charges of what today we might call “spin” abounded on all sides, and in critiquing the humanist rhetorical model for history, Fernández de Oviedo, Las Casas, and Díaz del Castillo all sought ingenious ways of countering opposing views while at the same time arguing for their own credibility.

Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo inscribes his Historia general y natural both within, and in contrast to, the humanist tradition, and undertakes in particular a critique of the notion of the reliable historian as a distant sage. Those who have no experience in the New World employ an unnatural narrative point of view that Oviedo equates with fraudulent invention or superstitious practices. In general, he highlights the limitations of his own vision and, by extension, that of any historian in chronicling events not witnessed. In asserting the importance of experience as well as erudition, he arrives at the insight that reliability in historiography is connected to narrative perspective. His stated refusal to mix his own words or point of view with those of the figures he seeks to represent affects the structure (or lack thereof) in his work, as well as his hesitant portrayal of historical actors and the ambiguous notion of exemplarity in his work. If the historian’s authority is necessarily constrained to his natural range of vision, then he operates under considerable restrictions concerning what he can or cannot know and assert about the individuals and events he represents. At the same time, Oviedo engages different historiographical traditions within his voluminous history, combining multiple styles and also at times adopting imaginative ways of putting forth his own authorial views on events he has not seen directly.

Like Oviedo, Bartolomé de Las Casas takes an adversarial approach toward the existing historiographical tradition and, like the cronista real, arrives at productive insights through his otherwise bitter polemics. Amid the strident criticisms that Las Casas wages at his rivals, one senses an effort to gain lexical precision and to separate the material of “myth” from that of “history.” Unlike merely entertaining “fictions,” he further suggests,
“lies” in history belong to a more insidious sort of deception, and hint at a discrepancy between external utterance and inner belief. Las Casas indeed devotes much of his history to exposing the “heresies” of his rivals, and in this accusatory mode he presents himself as able to detect through textual evidence the inner betrayals of others. In keeping with his goal of writing an orthodox version of New World history, he presents his narrating self as a sort of inquisitor-sage who is able to decipher a divine plan. At the same time, however, his prophetic vision vis-à-vis historical developments and the actions of others coexists with an often restricted view of his own role in events, as evidenced by his curious use of multiple pronouns to refer to himself as a participant. The wildly varying range of what Las Casas as historian and as actor can perceive in the Historia de las Indias lends his work a peculiar shape and indicates that narrative reliability works in different ways in historical as opposed to fictional texts. Were the Historia de las Indias a work of fiction, one might interpret such disparate self-presentation as a sign of narrative unreliability. However, in this case, the multiple versions of the self all refer to the author. As in all historical texts, the credibility of the account is measured not just by internal evidence but also by factors completely external to the text—such as the preexisting historiographical tradition and the way in which the historian’s evidence is proven against subsequent historical events and developments. Thus, while one can wonder at Las Casas’s multiple textual presences, few today would dispute the general validity of his polemical critique of empire and its catastrophic impact on indigenous peoples.

Last but not least, the Historia verdadera of Bernal Díaz del Castillo, although written at the margins of the humanist historiographical debates, presents similar narrative dilemmas. To a far greater degree than the histories of Oviedo or Las Casas, the Historia verdadera emits ambiguous signals as to its own discursive character, and here the techniques of narratology make it possible to describe textual codes that have enabled his work to so readily be read as “novelistic.” At the same time, one finds that, for the most part, his treatment of character and his concern for addressing the narrative configurations of the existing historical tradition give evidence of a complex and properly historiographical project.

Given that the greater part of Oviedo’s and Las Casas’s histories were not published until the nineteenth century, one might well ask whether their debates on the writing of history had an impact upon their contemporaries or whether they simply gathered dust in the archives. The dilemma of whether the historian should adopt a limited or far-reaching point of view
reappears in a number of subsequent early modern Spanish works. A notable treatment of the problem can be found in the work of Luis Cabrera de Córdoba (1559–1623), whose treatise *De la historia: Para entenderla y escribirla* (1611) I quoted at the beginning of Chapter 1. His discussion of the writing of history is striking for the way in which it recasts the traditions concerning the chronicler of history as an inspired visionary, while at the same time categorically distinguishing between works of history and fiction. Although Cabrera frames his discussion of history in Aristotelian terms—eschewing any mention of the Spanish historians of the Indies, whose books were for the most part banned during Philip II’s reign—one finds that insights similar to those of Oviedo and Las Casas survive in his work alongside the more traditional humanistic *topoi*. He draws both on Vives’s treatment and on the other major sixteenth-century rhetorical discussion of history in the Spanish context, namely, Sebastián Fox Morcillo’s *De Historiae Institutione Dialogus* (1557), but departs from them by starkly distinguishing historical writing from poetic fiction. He notes that, unlike works of fiction, in which the order or sequence of events is clear because the actions are fulfilled within the text, in historical narratives, very basic questions concerning cause and effect are often in doubt and cannot necessarily be determined by the historian with accuracy. More often than not, disruptions in “natural” temporal order may not be apparent within the text itself, but must be identified through comparative analysis with other texts (in which the actions may lack direct causal connections) or against a horizon (“nature” or “reality”) that is far more vast and elusive. Thus problems of order are far more difficult to resolve in historical than in fictional texts simply because they are less likely to be part of a clearly elaborated artistic design.

Cabrera further argues that, unlike poetic fictions, historiography must stick to real events and to the words and deeds of actual people, and notes that the depiction of individuals in the two kinds of narrative would seem to obey different rules. The historian need not (and, indeed, cannot) comply with Aristotle’s notion that the depiction of fictive characters should be “consistent and the same throughout.” In portraying individuals, Cabrera suggests, the historian lacks the knowledge or understanding possessed by the writer of imaginative works concerning his creations and necessarily must derive his vision of the (real) figures he treats from incomplete or contradictory data: “El historiador, como halla los hombres los establece, o varía, mudables, o constantes, buenos o malos, según los tiempos”

conclusions

("The historian represents men as he finds them, variable or constant, good or bad, according to the times"). The representation of historical figures thus lacks the artistic function within the work as a whole possessed by fictive beings. Furthermore, in commenting on Aristotle’s statement that poetry deals with universal truths, and history with particular ones, Cabrera suggests that the opposite is also true. While poetry may be concerned with the particular (he cites, for example, elegies and love poems), historiography often captures the fortunes of collective groups. Finally, the moral lessons embedded within history grant it a universal quality not envisioned by Aristotle: “Su fin es enseñar universalmente a bien vivir con los exemplos . . . enseña a deierz y hazer . . . con más prudencia que dan los preceptos de los filósofos” (“[History’s] goal is to teach universally how to live well by example . . . it teaches how to speak and act . . . with more prudence than can be gleaned from the precepts of the philosophers). Cabrera emphasizes the social function of history, while echoing the notion of the superior status accorded history within the humanist program. Yet Cabrera amplifies this topos to new heights. The reading of history brings remarkable benefits to just about any reader, whether the prince, the “simply curious,” or even “idiots” in need of instruction. With considerable flourish, Cabrera de Córdoba exalts the discipline over all the other liberal arts: “El que la aborrece no es hombre” (“He who abhors it is not a man”).

At the same time, Cabrera is reluctant to relinquish the notion of the humanist historian as inspired authority. The author of a “legitimate and perfect” history must be a sage able both to glean the truth of important matters and to deliver it in a narrative package appropriate for royalty and “idiots” alike. Cabrera’s portrait of the ideal writer nearly crumbles under the weight of its own hyperbole: the historian must be “erudito, elocuente, grave, entero, severo, urbano, diligente, medido, estudioso, de gran seso, bondad y justicia” (“erudite, eloquent, grave, having integrity, severe, urbane, diligent, balanced, studious, and of great intelligence, goodness, and justice”). Further, there is a perceptible shift from Vives’s idea of objectivity as a self-evident textual property in narrative (congruent with the perceivable order in reality and with Christian values) to a focus on the figure of the historian as guarantor of the truth. There are, of course, echoes

4. Ibid., 25.
5. Ibid., 35.
6. Ibid., 40.
of Vives’s humanist sage here, but Cabrera (who envisions a court historian, chosen by and dependent upon the prince) aspires less to a self-evidently objective record of the facts than to a clear conscience on the part of the author regarding his account. Cabrera again marks an important distinction from Vives’s treatment: historical discourse represents not a mirror image of reality, but rather the historian’s view of events.

Despite his praise for history as the supreme discipline, Cabrera nonetheless recognizes that a “perfect” and “legitimate” work is difficult to capture in practice, simply because the author must rely on the narratives of others. The historian faces a dilemma in terms of defining the scope of his work: the eyewitness’s limited vision, for Cabrera, jeopardizes history’s unique claim to truth. The distant stance of the sabio is a measure of his independence from partial views and, thus, of his reliability. And yet, by treating a subject beyond his experience, the historian faces challenges in terms of epistemology because he must rely on the works of others and often guess at the credibility in differing accounts on the basis of probability. Where Vives’s ideal of history breaks down on the slippery slope of language, in Cabrera’s treatise it is the irreductibility of compelling and contradictory accounts that stumps even the best-trained sage.

One suspects that the debates over the range of the historian’s vision that appear in the early historiography of the Indies and are resurrected in Cabrera’s treatise were not lost on Miguel de Cervantes. The figure of the fictional historian in part 2 of the Quijote as a “sabio encantador” (wise enchanter) in many ways reflects a playful and ironic rendering of the humanist discussions of the writing of history I have been outlining here. The specter of the historian as wise sage also survives in the treatise of Jerónimo de San José, Genio de la historia (1651). San José reconstructs the inquirer as a prophet, who like a latter-day Ezequiel, gathers together scattered and forgotten fragments, conjuring up and molding them into a narrative “body” before finally “breathing” life into the text with vivid detail.  

If—as San José’s discussion of the writing of history suggests—the insights of Oviedo and Las Casas had already become obscured by the mid-seventeenth century in Spain, they are surprisingly relevant to recent theoretical discussions. For theorists such as Martínez Bonati, Rigney, Cohn, and Genette, the concepts of narrative voice and perspective are critical for distinguishing between historical and fictive narrative. The fact that the historian narrates in a voice assumed to be his or her own

8. San José, Genio de la historia, 360.
has important logical consequences, making the phenomenon of narrative perspective in history much less flexible than in works of fiction. As a textual analog of the author, the historical narrator tells his tale under notable restrictions and is limited to the sorts of perceptions that mortal minds are able to see and understand about those around them. At the same time, one is struck by the often multifaceted quality of the historical narrator, whose voice frequently reflects a variety of (at times incompatible) roles (participant, retrospective commentator, judge of the testimonies of others). When adopting the narrative perspective of another “character” or agent in the events he or she recounts, the writer of history faces epistemological questions that would be largely irrelevant in a work of fiction. The necessarily restricted stance of the narrator of history brings up distinctive challenges in the portrayal of individual figures and groups in history. Further, the social function of historical narrative may explain its tendency to exploit commonplaces as a way of both manipulating the historical tradition and of establishing a competing claim to credibility.

Finally, recent events remind us that the inquiry into problems of language and truth in history remains pertinent in our own times. As one ponders the consequences of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, one is reminded that questions of evidence and truth in public discourse are far from settled in the context of twenty-first-century imperialism. In this regard, it might be well to recall the link that sixteenth-century Spanish humanists made in their discussions of history between issues of style and pedagogy. Although one suspects that the proposals for a return to the “rhetorical” study of history of the 1970s put forth by cultural critics such as Hayden White may well have been intended to signal the dangers of ideological misuses of history, one might question the premises of an approach that teaches that the narrative or ideological aspects of history are just like those of “fiction.” Perhaps a better way to guard against the excesses of ideology and “spin” in public discourse is to not to ignore boundaries between historical and fictional discourse, but rather to attempt to better understand, distinguish, and qualify the sorts of imagination that legitimately can go into the writing of history.