Between Words and Things, Tomatoes and Textiles

Noé Jitrik

Throughout the world, in preparations for the fifth centenary of the discovery of (or lucky find of, or cultural encounter with) the continent of America and the many events planned to mark the date, the European view prevailed. Of course this provoked an outcry from a great many indigenous groups and protesters in both the Americas and Europe. These people maintained that there was no reason to celebrate, given that the Europeans' relationship with the Americas can be seen as one of the greatest historical injustices since history began.

However it should be said that what we usually regard as the European view is not exclusive to Europe, but is found in the American countries as well. The position could be characterised as follows: it is to their discovery that the Americas owe their entry into human history. From a Hegelian point of view it therefore follows that they owe to humanity everything, or almost everything, that now exists after five centuries of turmoil. To deny that the Americas are part of the West, despite the fact that they have some Third World characteristics, would be a stubborn refusal rather than a reasonable starting point.

It is hard to refute this view, which is that of the West itself. It also seems rather pointless to try, despite the demands of political pragmatism. The political domain proper may possibly provide an alternative which does not require the negation of history if it can manage to preserve independent thinking, but that is another debate. When embarking on a comparative analysis that deals not only with basic texts, which influence each other, but also with facts taken from a very broad cultural domain, it is better to investigate movements in the opposite direction. We should consider the ways in which, throughout the five centuries since that happy day when three frail ships touched Caribbean sand, the American continent has given shape, not to mention existence, to certain essential aspects of European culture.

There is nothing resentful or vindictive in this reasoning; it arises from an obvious and apparently natural observation. A serious comparative approach might propose using a critique of the obvious to explore ways of escaping the horizontal descriptivism comparison invites, going beyond the latter's desire always to refine the same approach. With this end in view, and as when one calls on a primordial idea or image, I want to begin with a visit to the museum in the "House of Cortes" in Cuernavaca, Mexico. One glance at the comparative table of basic substances found in the Old and New Worlds reveals that, for example, garlic is not native to the latter, and nor is "literature on garlic" or "still lifes with garlic". By contrast, tomatoes, which, as we shall see, were to be the source of a great many texts, were not native to the former. At a different level of comparison, the arabesque, whose origins lie in a vast and highly diverse area, is characterised by the fact that it does not undermine an all-embracing discourse: certain strategies for

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distorting lines made it possible to give form to figures with no concrete equivalent, such as gods.

Whether or not we look at the comparative table, mention of the arrival of certain American products in Europe has become a commonplace. It brought about changes in food and the visual domain, which had remained fairly primitive until the late-fifteenth century. I propose to examine this proposition in the light of a conjecture which does not seem out of place in this discussion: when the dyestuffs which were plentiful in the Americas were brought to Europe, they enriched the resources available to painters, altering the way that these painters saw to such an extent that resulted in the plenitude of forms known as Renaissance painting.

Certainly there are other areas also worthy of investigation. In my opinion, this approach could make us less modest about the American contribution to the process of global civilisation.

It is undeniably true that Colombus' famous letter, which was disseminated in Latin in 1493 and spread news of his exploits throughout Europe, offered only a very vague image of what the Admiral himself had had difficulty in comprehending. Its effect was certainly not, as some would have it, that the significance of the newly-discovered world was at once accepted and understood. It is easy to imagine the indifference of smallholders and isolated villagers to news that was so hard to grasp; even the intellectuals, keen to create what we now call the Renaissance, let the event's importance pass them by. They were obsessed with Antiquity and their expectations were shaped by dreams of the lost Greece and Rome rather than by the cannibals of the tropics or even the majestic Aztecs. Some would say that the work of Raphael, for example, contains allusions to the newly-discovered world, but this idea seems rather forced. In Luis Antonio de Villena's highly-documented biography of Michaelangelo the word "America" never appears; nor does the concept or the debt I should like to present here. Even the *Encyclopédie*, that most rational of works, does not contain all the information.

Yet, despite general ignorance of what was happening, the news spread, albeit slowly and tortuously, shifting from the material mode to the symbolic. I shall confine myself here to the mention of one fundamental element in the codification of modern Europe, the French Revolution, in its relation to Haïti, one of the world's marginal zones, which is also almost the starting point for contact between the two worlds.

The case of Haïti is a complex one, worthy of mention not only because the country's misfortunes have been ever-present on the international stage, but also because it is a crucible, the site of some of the most dramatic and painful interactions in modern history, and at the same time the laboratory in which the America of the future has never managed to find its definitive shape. In *Toussaint Louverture*, which is much more than a mere biography of the unfortunate liberator, Aimé Césaire describes how and why the Jacobins of the Convention, usually so orthodox when it came to revolutionary purity, went so far as to make a pact with the Girondins to prevent Haïtian independance. Napoleon's later invasion and the tragedy of Pauline Bonaparte merely set the seal on this accord with its many unfortunate consequences.

The wealth of the Girondins, who had unleashed the French Revolution, was based on the processing of raw materials from Haïti. They had set up a perfect trading arrangement: ships were loaded with manufactured products (canvas, sugar, etc.) in Bordeaux. Their owners, the bourgeois merchants of Bordeaux, then sold these products in the

African trading-posts. So that time and money should not be lost once the holds had been emptied, they were filled with cheaply-bought black slaves destined for Haïti. On arrival in the island the holds were once more emptied and filled with cargoes of sugar cane, tobacco, dyes, and wood, which were then taken for processing in the owners' home city. Like the other cities on the western coast of France, Bordeaux flourished as a result of this thriving trade. It was an ingenious circuit, enriching those who were soon to rise up against the monarchy in the name of human rights. These same rights were simultaneously being refused to the Haïtians, whose independence would have meant the end of the highly lucrative arrangement.

All in all, and for all its global impact, the material origins of the French Revolution are to be found in the sugar cane and tobacco of Haïti and the other Carribean islands. This proves once again that there is no such thing as "ideas in the air", as these are always grounded in economic movements. If we want to compare texts, we should look at Césaire's work alongside the writings of Robespierre, then *The Kingdom of This World* by Alejo Carpentier and *Revolution and International Conflicts in the Caribbean* by José Luciano Franco.

We could also compare the outward and return journeys: poor Colombus did not find the gold he had been so desperately seeking; yet gold and silver flowed in throughout the sixteenth century, accumulating large deposits in the state treasuries and creating the illusion that the countries had at last become rich. In practice this wealth went to the monarchs and lords who, as we know in the context of the Italian courts, were of bourgeois origins. Now they had become princes of Church and State who used precious metals for decoration. The abundance of these materials underlies the development of the craft of the gold- and silversmiths, whose practices gave rise in turn to a complicated style, known since as the "baroque". In his *Life*, Benvenuto Cellini describes the capricious decoration that abundance produced in the residences of these lords, not to mention the crimes that were committed by those wishing to possess examples of the finest quality.

Thus the baroque was born of this flow, independently of arguments in its favour and the concepts that gave it its aesthetic validation. It transcended its origins, spilling over into literature, which brought it back to the same Americas that had originally provided it with the elements necessary for its consolidation. Still on the question of the interaction between entreprises which made it possible to create aesthetic objects, I should mention the syncretism which produced superb artefacts in Mexico and Peru: the *genius loci* is revealed and affirmed in the movement back and forth, unpredictable yet comprehensible in the light of a comparative analysis which can be seen as "genetic".

I accept that these observations may seem summary and arbitrary. They reflect a poetic vision of the mutual reinforcement of the currents that have developed modern culture and the reciprocal nature of debts that have existed for more than five centuries. When Toussaint Louverture unleashed the movement for Haitian independence and the liberation of the slaves, his starting point was Enlightenment thought, which had also motivated and inspired the ardent French advocates of human rights. The latter, or their heirs, siezed him and took him to France, where he was imprisoned in a dark chateau. Mirabeau, a great name associated with the newly-won freedoms, was a fellow prisoner. In Toussaint Louverture's cell, where he died, there is a plaque inscribed with words which say little or, more precisely, nothing at all. To regain some meaning this plaque, with its garland of a few faded flowers, should be placed next to Delacroix's moving painting "Liberty

guiding the People". The resulting comparison might be useful, even if it could not be restorative.

We could wander far in this direction; the question of what each took from the other and what each side made of it is full of fertile contradictions. The colonial history of the Americas, which is more than what Sarmiento describes in his *Provincial Memories (Recuerdos de Provincia)*, also reveals a durable system of relations which reshaped everything and passed through now-forgetten moments of transformation. The Spanish neoclassical ten-line poem became an instrument of popular culture in places as far apart as Cuba and Chile. A hundred years of occupation by the North Americans in Puerto Rico (as described by José Luis González in *El país de los cuatro pisos (The Four-Storey Country)* introduced not only an attitude of deliberate domination but also the idea that women might have some rights, which was totally lacking in the Spanish colonies. The list of such situations is endless and almost impossible to draw up: everything that prevents discussion is a form of manicheism and unidirectional interpretation. Thus inverting the terms might enable a new way of reading, which some would see as simply poetic and lyrical, but which, for others, might open up the possibility of new relations. This is the case even in the field of subjectivity, which may remain in the same colonial state it was in at the time when the only perspective possible was that of the colony.

Returning now to our initial observations on the substances that the Europeans discovered and appropriated, it is tempting to state that for an Italian to think that the tomato was not always present in his country, with its wealth of sauces, would be madness. The same might be said of a German remembering that the potato is not indigenous to the Saxon earth, or of a Swiss person who was persuaded that chocolate does not come from an Alpine flower.

Europeans, as we know, regard some substances as having been theirs for a very long time because of the great use they have made of them and the value they have ascribed to them. Tobacco, rightly or wrongly, is the pride of the French with their Gauloises and Gitanes cigarettes, of the British with their elegant pipes, and even the Russians and Turks. Nevertheless, though it has taken root everywhere, this plant is not indigenous to the places where, having formerly been worshipped, it is now the subject of extreme disapproval. The Italians know that the traveller, Marco Polo, a hero who never won a battle, went to China, returning with armfulls of pasta. Yet they carry on as though this had never happened and pasta is unassailably regarded as a national dish, perhaps because Marco Polo was Italian.

The tomato in particular swept all of cooking before it, so much so that its shape was appropriated by art. I have not been able to undertake the necessary research, but it is a safe bet that this fruit was represented many times by the still life painters. In the cinema it has at least once been given exceptional status as a significant object, in *La Marseillaise* by Jean Renoir, son of the painter Auguste. In this film we see King Louis XVI in his chamber at Versailles, to which he has retired to eat. An emissary of the Convention arrives to convey to him that he has been taken prisoner and to inform him of his fate. The king remains unmoved and invites his austere visitor (the actor is the magnificent Louis Jouvet), whose Calvinist dress contrasts with the monarch's splendour to share his meal with the words, "These are tomatoes, an exquisite dish". Jouvet thanks him for the sake of politeness, even though he bears the death sentence, and refuses. The king is taken away and we know how the story ended. In another scene the elements are

reversed: a young man from Marseille decides to enlist in the Revolutionary army, which was responsible for beheading the king. We witness his touching farewells with his mother, in the course of which he says, between sobs, "I'm only sorry that I won't be able to eat tomatoes in Paris". He did not know that someone else in that city had already been feasting on tomatoes.

Other products have similar significance (this is no longer a matter of debate). Examples would include mustard, which the French of the Middle Ages consumed in greater quantities than sugar, herrings for the people of the North, olives for the Greeks, and beetroot for the Russains; these are all indigenous, ancestral products whose use dates from the dawn of time and has been bound up with the identity of the different communities since the days when they were nomads who lived by hunting. On the other hand, things that have come from elsewhere, and have become a basic, irreplacable part of daily life since the mid-sixteenth century, have left no trace of their origins in the collective memory. It may be that the same phenomenon has occurred in the Americas with wheat, cattle, and literature: although our continent was founded on cows and literature, we do not remember.

The items on display in the above-mentioned House of Cortes in Cuernavaca give us material for thought beyond their directly educational purpose: we might wonder why the tomato was taken up and its use generalised, rather than that of the agave, why American recipes for maize – maize pancakes (*tortilla* and *arepa*), stew with maize (*locro* and *pozole*), and green corn cob (*elote*) with peppers – have found as little favour as manioc, whereas the pineapple was adopted.

It is said that the Europeans ventured first into the steppes and then on to the seas in search of the spices they knew: pepper, nutmeg, and cinnamon. In the journal of his first voyage Colombus obsessively notes the slightest trace of gold that might be found in the new, unknown lands. At one point, as though remembering one of the goals of his voyage, he shows the indigenous people some peppercorns and cinammon leaves so that they can tell him if such things are present there. At the same time he continually notes the great quantity of aloe wood (*lignum aloe*), whose use he does not mention, but which we recognise as aloe vera, with its medicinal properties. In passing he also notices the way that the indigenous people paint themselves. His hurried notes lead me to what I believe to be a subject of vital importance: that of the dyestuffs which, even more than spices, were to become the main goal of these highly dangerous voyages.

The discovery of these substances would have met the undeniable needs of the textile industry which, from the late-fifteenth century right through the sixteenth century, faced a twofold demand for dyes for both ordinary fabrics and tapestries. Where ordinary fabrics were concerned, the industry was in the delicate early stages of development and certainly could not compete with merchandise from the Far East. As always in this sector of the bourgeoisie, the modest yet energetic Flemish and Italian entrepreneurs wanted to provide a wider range of more interesting products. If, as I would suggest, the industry was in the midst of a dyeing crisis, the substances just starting to arrive would have opened up new, exciting alternatives: we need only consider the wealth of themes and the sumptuous clothing depicted in Renaissance painting, which to a large extent reflects everyday life.

Where tapestries were concerned, these were increasingly required to decorate the court, yet were hindered by the limited possibilities of a range of dyes which was insufficient to

allow the desire for magnificence and identification with mythological situations to find expression. I would see nothing fortuitous in the great changes that become apparent in tapestry, particularly after the conquest of Mexico and the complex trade in goods which followed.

One does not have to be a specialist to note that carpets grew in size, becoming enormous. The reasons for this were both technical and economic, but above all carpets now drew on a wider range of themes. The Renaissance desire to return to the worlds of Ancient Greece and Rome was given expression by craftsmen who were capable of designing and making such carpets. One could portray the great kings and ambitious lords as reincarnations of the old, forgotten gods, who were now returned to their former status. Representation lost its imprecision to become a subject to be worked, an ornamental object intended to impress and amaze courtiers, servants, the nobility, and the bourgeoisie alike. The new colours take us from the narrowness of mediaeval life, reflected in its confining alleyways and dark convents, to the splendour of the salons, whose walls were clothed in sophisticated Gobelins tapestries and other wonders. These surroundings nurtured feverish dreams of grandeur, punctuated by furious ambition or the total loss of moral sense, as described by Shakespeare and the other great writers of the time.

The image of Queen Elizabeth I of England smoking a cigar as she arms an empire, and the magnificence of the tapestries that we can admire in the world's finest museums, have in common the discovery of America and what that continent had begun to provide. American perfumes, foodstuffs, and dyestuffs gave new force to cultures that were preparing to conquer the world, providing them with the tools to change the nature of their representations and thus the sphere of influence of their actions.

Particularly after the discovery of Mexico there was a sudden influx (still in process today) of unknown substances. I shall give only a few examples. The names, which are familiar to specialists, have great resonance. For me they act as a springboard, sending me on to another, still more exciting idea, a kind of poetry of the accumulation of strange echoes and rare expressions. Thus the snail gives us violet, the cochineal carmine, the annatto orange, the indigo plant blue, the red oak a coffee colour, the *sacatinta* grey, the *zacatlaxcalli* ("the house that owns the forage" in Nahuatl) yellow, brazil wood bright red, logwood crimson, cinnabar vermillon, clay ochre and ferric oxide black and russet.

The least we can say of these colours is that they acted as stimulants to powerful imaginations that had never before been able to express themselves. Like any artists discovering new materials, those who worked with fibres, the anonymous and the famous alike, must have felt that the world was opening up and that everything was starting to change: their minds, hands, and looms were feeling the effects of a real cultural upheaval. The same must also have been felt in painting, with even greater force. Until the late-fifteenth century blue and gold tones had predominated, while painting had remained essentially religious. Of course there had been geniuses such as Fra Angelico, Giotto, and Cimabue, but, condemned to ritualised themes and with limited means available, painters' imaginations could have become repetitive and impoverished. The new colours offered new freedom, which must inevitably have had consequences for themes and design. It is certainly true that their arrival coincides with the emergence of a new social structure in which the bourgeoisie became powerful, but art follows a different, less direct logic. It is possible to imagine other trajectories and other atmospheres. To sum up, we should say that the great art of the Renaissance on the one hand and, on the other, the

supporting transition from the sacred to the profane, could well be due to the colours that had newly come from America, creating a new history. This is a more secret and at the same time more fertile history than that of the exploits of warriors and colonisers.

I lack the documentation to prove not just the existence of the trade, but its accompanying ferment. However, we need only refer to Antonello Gerbi's work on eighteenth-century arguments about America to get an idea of the impact that the latter had had on Europe in the preceding centuries, particularly in terms of its flora and fauna. This could provide an explanation of the conflict experienced by painters such as Leonardo da Vinci, Botticelli, and Buonarroti, in artistic rather than psychological terms, between the stifling protection of the patron and the silent demands of line and mass of colour. These artists distanced themselves from working to the greater glory of wealth and power, putting forward worlds of a different kind that continue to provoke our wonder as we explore them today.

I would suggest that these wonders are due, in part, to the role of the Americas. This may appear a rather childish statement, but without the continent of America there would have been no "Venus on the rocks", no *sauce Millet*, no *gratin dauphinois*, no *Indes galantes*. As a result our lives today would be even less interesting.

Noé Jitrik
University of Buenos Aires
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