

The Renaissance Letter and the Encounter with the “New” World

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“Writing exists only in a civilization and a civilization cannot exist without writing.”

– I. J. Gelb (1963).

It is a commonplace to state that the European Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries was intimately related to changes in how textuality was viewed and produced. The broad tenets that we associate with Renaissance art and thought – the discussions regarding the dignity of man (*dignitas hominis*), the ideas regarding the universality of humanity, the concern for a *totius homo*, the debates about the immortality of the soul – are all deeply involved in programs of language study, grammar, philology and textual production. Modern writers on the Renaissance, including Jacob Burkhardt, Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and José Antonio Maravall have not tired of reminding us that *studia humanitatis* “denoted primarily a specific intellectual program and only incidentally suggested a more general set of values which have in recent times come to be called ‘humanistic’” (Kristeller and Randall 2-3). Indeed, the Renaissance can be seen as an “educational revolt” (Kristeller and Randall 16) against the medieval university’s teachings, a revolt that consisted initially in the study of the Classics, from which the idea developed that, because “the classics represent[ed] the highest level of human achievement” (Kristeller and Randall 4), the *studia humanitatis* could lead to the formation of better human beings.

A program of letters led, in other words, to a meditation on humanity. Moreover, this is true, I wish to suggest, not only in the sense of “letters” as “literature,” but also in the more prosaic sense of alphabetic “letters.” Indeed, the Renaissance was deeply occupied in many of its aspects with questions of alphabetic letters. One is inclined to say that at one extreme were debates regarding the relationship between the ABCs and humanity and at the other such practical concerns as the shape of letter scripts. One of the aims of this essay will be to show the deep links between these aspects.

The printing press is of course the most obvious emblem of a new approach to alphabetic letters in the Renaissance,¹ and the invention is doubly important for how it underscored the deep bonds between the philological program that reformed the study of Classical letters and a parallel reform of how antique literature (“letters”) were to be transmitted in alphabetic letters. The antipathy shown by Renaissance humanists toward medieval manuscript writing was part and parcel of their rejection of medieval modes of instruction and thought. I wish in the following to consider how Renaissance attitudes toward the letter related to larger currents of European thinking in the 15th and 16th centuries as well as to speculate on the implications the European conceptualization of letters had for the confrontation with, and assimilation of, New World culture, particularly as it was found in Mexico. I will be concerned with what resulted when the Spanish encountered a textuality – that of Meso-america – that was not based on the letter.²

¹The seminal work remains Eisenstein (1979).

² The broader question of the relationship between language and the conquest has been studied from numerous angles. Some of the essays in Chiappelli, Allen and Benson (1976) are very

What I am working toward in this essay is a transatlantic approach to the encounter between two radically different textualities, European and Meso-american, and the implications of the “alphabetic triumph” that attended the *Conquista*. This essay is therefore in a certain measure a reflection on what Julio Ortega has called “geo-textuality,” especially as it informs transatlantic studies :

- 1) the implications that arose when objects, technologies, etc., began on one side of the Atlantic and were changed after (or because of) their arrival on the other, and
- 2) the significance of texts that crossed the Atlantic and/or spoke of such crossings.

Anticipating my conclusions, let me state the somewhat obvious fact that the geographical conquest of Meso-america was accompanied by a parallel textual conquest. What this implies is that the conquerors and colonizers felt a powerful need to bring indigenous, pictographic textuality under the dominion and control of the European letter. Just as the Spanish expressed both an awe for the culture of the Aztec empire they came upon and also a desire to destroy it, so the impulse at first was to destroy indigenous pictogrammic textuality, this impulse being supplanted in the mid-1500s by a fascination for indigenous culture and a desire to record and even “recreate” indigenous-type codices. To be sure, the programs of re-collection of pre-Columbian culture on the part of Motolonia, Sahagún, and others, were carried out with the official objective of learning about the indigenous world in order better to refute its “heresies” and convert pagans to Christianity (for discussion, see Anthony Pagden 1982). Nevertheless, the fascination with Amerindian culture for its own sake is quite evident; the compendiums of ancient practices as well as the production of simulacra of pre-Columbian texts in the period roughly from 1540 to about 1600 went far beyond what was necessary for purposes of conversion. But although the texts substituted for the burnt pre-Columbian “painted books” (as the Spaniards called them) were visually similar to their pre-Columbian predecessors and despite the fact that they provided repositories for much of the same “content” (records of tribute and feast days, divinatory calendars [*tonalamatl*], yearly counts, etc.), they were nevertheless profoundly different for being subject to the control and authority of the European letter.³ Despite superficial similarities, the so-called *mestizo* codices created by bilingual, indigenous scribes and artists working at the order of Spanish patrons were not at all the holistic

good. In particular Greenblatt (2: 561-80), Malkiel (2: 581-94) and Tuttle (2: 595-611) are useful.

³ The number of such “mestizo” codices is astonishing. For neat summaries of the major codices see Gruzinski 1991, 229-31. It has often been noted that the conquest of America led to an orgy of textual production, much of it in the form of chronicles of the conquest period and histories of the Americas. The so-called *mestizo* manuscripts must be distinguished from the chronicles and histories for their attempt to capture the “look” of indigenous codices as well as for the sumptuous nature of some of the most outstanding productions (such as the *Florentine Codex*, the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, the *Codex Magliabechiano*, the *Mendoza Codex*, and the *Codex Vaticanus Latinus 3738*, to name some of the most important). These books are the products of whole teams of scribes, artists and patrons and thus very different from the writings of individual Europeans who often worked in isolation.

texts of their ancestors. However, rather than arguing for a straightforward repressive process of colonization, as Walter Mignolo has done (1995), I would place the emphasis on a protracted process of negotiation – one that we can see evidenced in a complex series of glosses and translations in the *mestizo* codices of the 16th century.⁴

Renaissance Conceptions of the Letter

The European Renaissance was eminently “lettristic” in terms of both its philological re-evaluation of the written past and its inventions and theorizing regarding the form, importance and meaning of alphabetic letters. I wish to argue that the Renaissance concept of the letter – the letter being understood as both a specific set of graphic forms as well as the body of knowledge and insight transmitted by their means – mitigated against an easy reception of a culture whose textuality was pictographic rather than lettristic.⁵ Moreover, the Renaissance approach to the letter grew out of, and in reaction to, medieval concepts of textuality. The medieval world had “animated” the letter (to use Laura Kendricks’ term [Kendricks 1999]), and as a result the medieval letter was corporeal and even inhabited. Medieval scribes took great pleasure in stretching and shaping human (also animal) bodies into letters; the fourteenth-century Bergamo alphabet by Giovannino de Grassi is one of the most sustained attempts to meld letter forms and the human body (Fig. 1), but there are many others as well. The tens of thousands of instances of animated letters bear witness to an animistic approach to lettricity as they cleverly strain human or animal forms into the letters’ shapes.

Very different are humanist treatments which proceed from an equation of humanity with letters, in both the literal and the extended sense of the word “letter.” The monstrous medieval letter is domesticated and made into a model of cultural order and balance. For the Renaissance, humanity expresses itself in, through and as letters; as a result, lettricity is taken as a direct expression, as

⁴ Writing, alphabetic letters, and the notion of the book occasionally get conflated, perhaps inevitably, despite the fact that each of these elements can exist without the others. Witness the two parts of Walter Mignolo’s 1994 title, “Signs and Their Transmission: The Question of the Book in the New World” (also 1995, ch. 2). Mignolo’s work is admirable for its attempt to understand 16th-century textuality in transatlantic terms. For his ideas on the development of the book in Western culture, however, Mignolo relies heavily on Curtius (1953, originally published 1948) and Diringier (1982, originally published, 1952); the first is still serviceable, but the latter is quite outdated, and both have been superseded by more recent scholarship. In a chronologically ambiguous paragraph, Mignolo seems to imply (1994, 228) that the passage from scroll to paginated codex was a late-medieval or Renaissance development, whereas in fact it took place in the Early Christian period.

⁵ I have argued elsewhere that the familiarity of university-educated 16th-century conquerors and colonizers (in particular, churchmen) with medieval, hand-produced manuscripts may have, nevertheless, helped that subset of Europeans appreciate at least some qualities of indigenous Meso-american textuality.

Francisco Rico has argued, of a culture's *dignitas hominis* (Rico 1978), leading to a deep association of *dignitas hominis* and *studia humanitatis*.⁶ Rico adduces Juan Maldonado (1545) who expresses, in his *Oratiuncula*, the view that to live without letters or laws is to not be human. A lettered culture (and let us remember that European "letters" in the sense of writing were what they were because they were written in letters) becomes the defining feature of human culture for Maldonado: "Rogo vos atque obsecro...litteras esse solas...quae homines esse vere convincant" (quoted in Rico 1978, 66: "I ask and insist that letters alone are what truly demonstrate that they are men").⁷ The letter(s) become(s) a quintessential sign of a culture's full humanity, an equation that had especial relevance in the 16th century as scholars, particularly in Spain, debated the degree of humanity inherent in the indigenous peoples of the New World.⁸

⁶ The arguments that follow differ somewhat from those of Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra in his important book, *How to Write the History of the New World* (2001). Cañizares-Esguerra's book constitutes, in many respects, a response to Walter Mignolo's *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* (1995), a factor which may have contributed to the occasional overstatement of his case. The problem I find with both Mignolo and Cañizares-Esguerra, however, is that they tend to reduce the full range of nuance and contradiction in a period in which textuality was in great flux. Despite the breadth of his discussions, Cañizares-Esguerra's argumentation in his chapter 2 (for example) is occasionally reductive. The fact that 16th-century Spaniards relied *faute de mieux* on indigenous accounts of the Pre-Columbian world is not surprising given that the West had no records about a continent of which it had been ignorant, and to put more faith in those historical accounts than in Spanish ones that did not consult indigenous sources hardly implied a view of non-alphabetic textuality as having the same prestige *overall* as alphabetic writing. Similarly, the statement that the "recent medieval past [was] dominated by orally transmitted information," would be news to many medievalists (see Brian Stock 1983 and Jesse Gellrich 1985). The Middle Ages were bookish in the extreme, and Cañizares-Esguerra's extension of Anglo-Saxon-type rituals in Pre-Norman England to "the rest of Europe, including Spain" (2001, 89) over a period of five or six centuries is, unfortunately, an oversimplification. Much the same thing occurs with Cañizares-Esguerra's assumption that the Catholic church's exploitation of images in both "theological debates with iconoclastic Protestants" (2001, 89) and in order to convert Amerindians (2001, 90) would imply anything about their general conceptions regarding alphabetic vs. non-alphabetic writing. There were contradictions and compromises made for the sake of expediency and political advantage, and there were many competing voices. Cañizares-Esguerra shows greater nuance in discussing Samuel Purchas (2001, 95).

⁷ All translations in this essay are my own, except for those from Montaigne for which I have availed myself of M.A. Screech's excellent English versions.

⁸ Rico's commentary is illuminating here: "Al llegar a las islas y al continente americano, los españoles encontraron pueblos bárbaros 'ferino ritu nudi, sine lege' [...] Desde luego, carecían de 'artes et bonae disciplinae'. Porque es hecho constante y universal: donde han faltado las leyes y las letras, los hombres han sido salvajes y totalmente desprovistos de la verdadera condición humana, 'humanitatem penitus exuerant' [...] De hecho, darse a las letras supone seguir la mejor parte de la propia naturaleza...Porque las letras no simplemente ornan, pulan y dan lustre, no simplemente separan de las fieras, antes bien constituyen la verdadera piedra de toque del ser hombres" (906-07 "On arriving at the islands and American continent, the Spanish found barbarous peoples 'naked in a wild condition, without laws' [...] Because of that, they lacked the

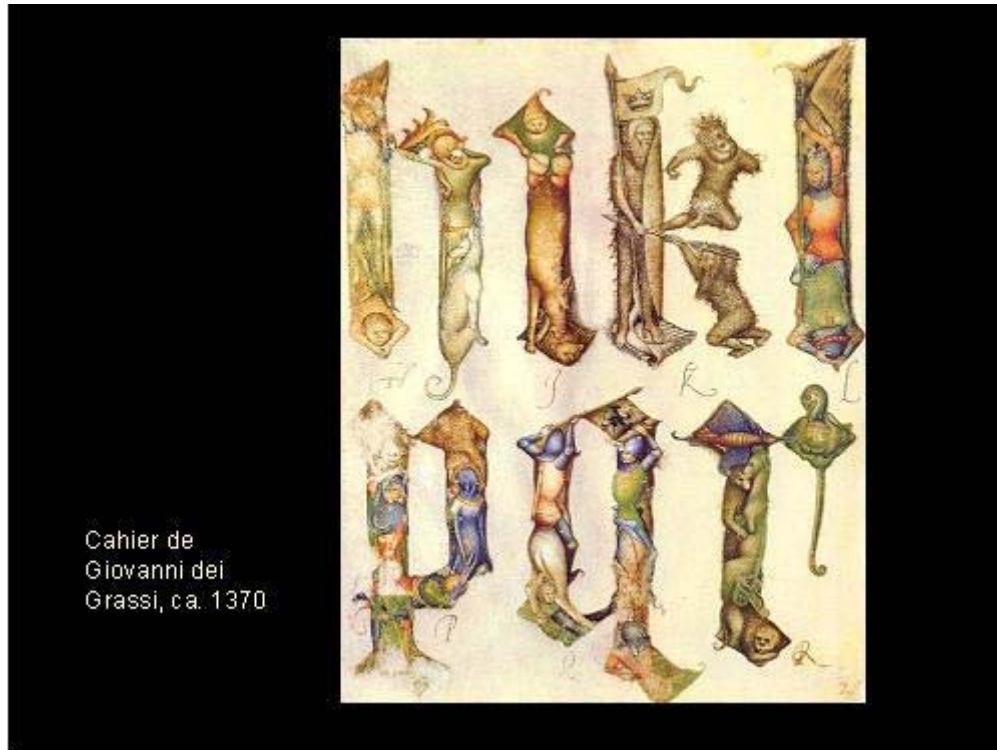


Fig. 1

With the advent of the printing press, the view of letters as expressions emblematic of man's *dignitas* became more pronounced. 16th-century printers gave considerable thought to the shape of letters as they cut new typefaces, especially as print freed itself from Gothic scripts.⁹

Indeed, the development of humanist and italic types forms an important chapter in the history of writing. Perhaps the most concerted Renaissance attempt to conceive letters in not just humanist terms but also as directly analogous to humanity itself is that of the *Champ Fleury* by Geoffroy Tory (1529). One of the foremost printers in France, Tory's great theoretical work constitutes a sustained attempt to harmonize letter forms with the idealized human body as well as with Classical culture. Unlike his medieval predecessors, Tory seeks not to stretch corporeal forms into lettristic shapes; rather he promotes harmony and balance in all of his letters. His arguments go in several directions at once. First, he says, all letters are based on the human body and shaped accordingly, as he

'arts and good disciplines,' because it is an invariable and universal fact that where laws and letters are lacking, people have been savages and, completely lacking the true human condition, 'they lacked humanity entirely' [...] In fact, to give oneself to letters means to follow the best part of nature itself....Because letters not only serve to ornament, decorate and give sheen and they not only separate [men] from beasts, but they indeed constitute the veritable touchstone of the human being").

⁹. On the concurrence of Gothic and Roman scripts, see E.P. Goldschmidt (1966, 20-26). Goldschmidt also discusses the treatises on letter shapes by Fra Luca Pacioli (1497-1509) and Sigismondo de' Fanti (1514). See Goldschmidt 1966, 22.

demonstrates one by one, using – in typical Renaissance fashion – a perfect, nude male form as his model (Fig. 2). Moreover, for Tory every letter corresponds to a part of the human body (Fig. 3).¹⁰ Third, all of the letters are simultaneously mapped onto a 10x10 grid, giving them a mathematical perfection that harmonizes, for Tory, with the perfect human body (the only letter that extends beyond the grid is the Q which, according to Tory, does so in order to embrace the U that always accompanies it [Fig. 4]). Finally, Geoffroy Tory also derives all the letters of the alphabet from combinations of I and O, which he considers to be the basic letter shapes (the two proto-letters are perfectly symmetrical and their shapes complement each other) (Fig. 5).

These two formational letters serve Tory well. The combination of I and O may constitute, for anyone versed in Classical letters, an oblique reference to one of the great instances of the writing of one's "humanity" since, according to the myth popularized by Ovid, Io, having been turned into a heifer and unable to speak, recovered her (human) identity by stamping her name (an "I" and an "O") in the earth with her hoof for her father to read. The lettristic inscription

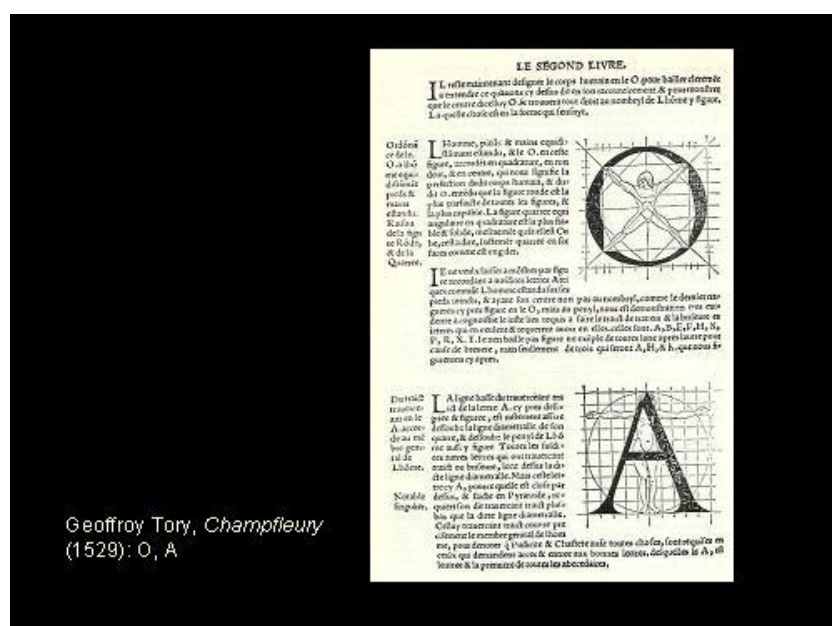


Fig. 2

is her affirmation of a that endures in spite of her monstrous outward form. Tory also specifically relates the I and the O to the classical flute: the I is the flute's form, and the O the holes that correspond to elements of the Classical world (Fig. 6)

More importantly, however, Tory claims that the I and O embrace the full range of Classical knowledge. The I for Tory includes the nine muses plus Apollo (giving ten), and the O,

¹⁰ Curiously, this page from Tory is reproduced in Mignolo (1995, 51) but not discussed. It is not even clear whether Mignolo realizes that the image comes from Tory (his caption reads, "The alphabet and the human body during the Renaissance"). Mignolo's main interest appears to be in juxtaposing to it an image taken from the *Vaticanus Latinus 3738* ("Rios") manuscript on the following page in which Meso-american glyphs are assigned correspondences with the human body.

sees in the learning of one's alphabet – the necessary preliminary step to the study of Classical letters – a humanizing influence. Alphabetic letters are associated with the indoctrination into both humanity and Christian morality, the latter two being deeply associated since European culture in fact equated humanity with the Christian community.¹¹ It was common in the medieval period for one to make the sign of the cross before saying the alphabet – after all, Jesus was, as he said, both the Alpha and the Omega, encompassing the whole of the alphabet and writing. In France to recite the alphabet was referred to as saying one's "croix de Dieu," and one made the sign of the cross before doing so. This mentality persists into the sixteenth century, as we see in a luxurious manuscript book of hours from the late 15th or early-16th century and in which the alphabet runs around the border of many pages, preceded almost always by a cross (Fig. 7: Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, manuscrits latins 1171, f^o 11v^o-12r^o).¹² Letters were seen as part of a Christian, civilizing program, and the teaching of letters planted a moral seed that could better humanity. We also see this clearly in a 1489/90 woodcut by Geiler von Keyserberg where the alphabet flourishes on a tree as a good teacher instructs his attentive students (Fig. 8).

The same mentality is at work in Antonio Nebrija's famous grammar of Spanish from this period (it was first published in 1492). In a much misquoted and/or misapplied passage, Nebrija presents the Spanish language as a key element in the extension of imperial civilization, on the model of the Romans. Establishing his axiom that empires either grow or retract and that linguistic developments follow the same ebbs and flows as political power, he argues that increased geographical dominion by Spain should go hand in hand with the spreading of the Spanish language.

Cuando bien conmigo pienso, mui esclarecida Reina, I pongo
delantos los ojos el antigüedad de todas las cosas que para nuestra
recordación 7 memoria quedaron escriptas, una cosa hállo 7 sáco por
conclusión mui cierta: que siempre la lengua fue compañera del
imperio: 7 de tal manera lo siguió, que juntamente començaron,
crecieron 7 florecieron, 7 después junta fue la caida de entrambos.
(Nebrija 97).

(When I think about it well, most enlightened Queen, and I put
before my eyes the antiquity of all the things that were written so that

¹¹ Anthony Pagden has shown how the notion of *oikumene*, which for the ancient Greeks was ethnic, became the *congregatio fidelium* for the Christian community, which could potentially include all or humankind. See Pagden 1982, 15-20, and 1995, 25. Pagden argues that it was this extension of the notion of *oikumene* that led to a contradiction in the views of those who argued in the 16th century that the Amerindians were natural slaves, since the possibility of conversion made all people (potentially) human whereas, in the Aristotelian tradition, natural slaves were a race separate from humanity.

¹² This book of hours is known as *Livre d'heures dites d'Henry IV* because it belonged subsequently to the collection of King Henry IV. For this and the following image, I am indebted to the reproductions and discussions in the excellent three-volume and CD-ROM publication, *L'Aventure des écritures* (Zali 1999).

we would recall and remember them, I find one thing and pull it out as a very sure conclusion: that the language always accompanied the empire; and it followed it in such fashion that together they began and grew and flourished, and later together they both collapsed.)

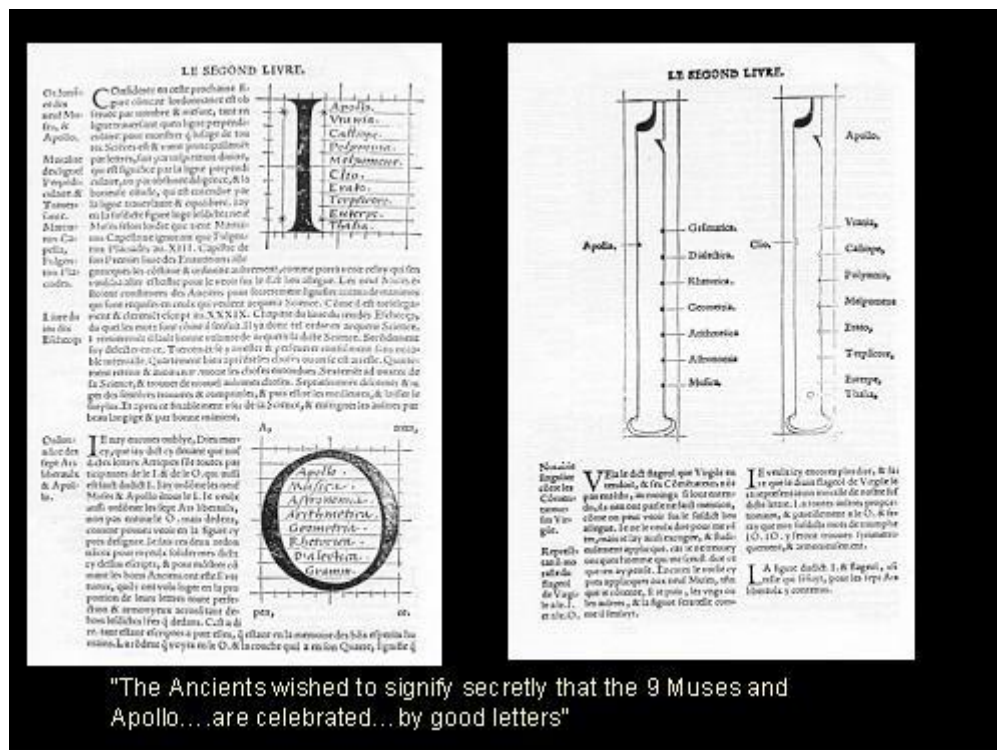


Fig. 6.

Nebrija is thinking here as a Renaissance humanist, as Maravall and others have noted, and he sees the Spanish realm as modeled on Roman Antiquity. Whether right or wrong, Nebrija views the Spanish explorers as bringing civilizing influences to foreign lands as its empire grows. As Ramón Menéndez-Pidal perceptively put it, “La primera gramática de una lengua romance que se escribía en la Europa humanística fue escrita en esperanza cierta del Nuevo Mundo, aunque aún no se había navegado para descubrirlo” (Menéndez-Pidal 50: “The first grammar of a Romance language that was written in humanistic Europe was written in the sure expectation of the New World, even though no one had yet sailed off to discover it”).

European Conceptions of an “Other World” Textuality

Upon the “discovery” of Meso-america in 1520, the possibility of extending both the political dominion of Spain and the Spanish language through grammar and the study of letters became a reality. However, the encounter also presented the Spanish with challenges they had not anticipated. Meso-america was neither a culture without writing – a kind of “blank slate”

which Europeans could overwrite with letters – nor a lettered culture. It had a highly-developed pictogrammic system of writing which allowed it to produce texts that recorded, at one and the same time, historical accounts, tribute accounts, legends and calendars. Indeed, despite an awareness of China, whose writing also was not letteristic, Europeans, when they imagined an “other” world, tended to conceive of a writing system that, while somewhat different, was nevertheless letteristic, as Europe’s was.



Fig. 7.

This projection of alphabetic writing – or perhaps one might better say this inability to conceive of an “other world” textuality that was non-alphabetic – is strikingly exemplified by Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516). More’s *Utopia* was, of course, produced just *after* the first encounters with the New World but *before* Hernán Cortés’ expedition to the mainland of Mexico and thus also prior to the great encounter with Aztec culture. At the beginning of both the first and second editions of *Utopia*, there is a woodcut of the imaginary island of *Utopia* along with a poem written in *utopenses litterae* (Fig. 9). Indeed, the text of the work opens with this poem ostensibly written in the Utopian language and then “translated” into Latin (Naturally, the true order of creation was the opposite: the Latin text was written first and then *Utopian* words were invented to accompany it). At the top of the page, More also sets out the Utopian alphabet, with transliterations of each letter into the Latin alphabet just underneath.

Several points are of note here. First is that there is a perfect, one-to-one correspondence between the two alphabets, such that there is no Utopian letter that cannot be transliterated into Latin, and no Latin letter that does not have its exact equivalent in *Utopensis*. What this suggests

is that even as More conceives of a radically different “new” world, that world, being a highly-developed branch of humanity, is necessarily conceived by him as a culture of the letter. Utopian textuality is presented as an alien writing, but a strictly alphabetical one. Despite the biting satire of European ways one finds in More’s *Utopia*, the equation of humanity with alphabetic writing is not only maintained but made more emphatic: the Utopian letter forms constitute a more perfect alphabet than the European one – more perfect because entirely informed by principles of balance and harmony. In fact, the letters are all derived from combinations of circles, squares,



Fig. 8

and triangles – that is, from perfectly symmetrical geometric forms. In this sense, they are eminent representatives of a longstanding occidental tradition, descended from Plato down through St. Augustine, Boethius and Alain of Lille, that views geometric forms as expressions of a higher order, indeed of divinity. The Utopian alphabet, even more than Geoffroy Tory’s letters, is balanced, symmetrical and “armonyeux,” to use Tory’s term; it does not need to try to accommodate itself to a 10x10 grid, nor is there any letter, such as Tory’s Q, that does not quite fit. According to the humanist conception of letters, this alphabet is quite naturally superior to European letters. Of course, not only did Geoffroy Tory know More’s *Utopia* but he included the Utopian alphabet at the end of his *Champ Fleury* when, in the final pages, he gave examples of different letter types.

More’s *Utopia* is an island world, and while it is “new” it is deeply expressive of a European mentality. Not only is Utopia’s writing a projection, with improvements, of European alphabetic forms, as we have seen; it is also a projection of the lettristic European world. An island “other world” is of course a stock-in-trade of the medieval chivalric romances. The island of Gorre, in Chrétien de Troyes’ twelfth-century *Lancelot du Lac* – perhaps the greatest (and certainly one of the



Fig. 9

earliest) of all medieval chivalric romances – was a strange and marvelous world, completely bounded by water. Similarly, in the fourth book of *Amadís de Gaula*, the most popular romance among the Spanish both before and after the Conquest, Amadís triumphs in an island world touchingly called *Isla Firma* and proves (as if it were needed) that he is a loyal lover.

In an extraordinary instance of the real world rising to meet literature, the city of Tenochtitlán upon which Cortés and his men came in 1520 in Mexico was also entirely bound by water. This great floating city, believed by modern scholars to have been the sixth largest in the world at the time, was described in detail by more than one chronicler. Most famous are Cortés' own description, in which he says that it was more extensive and more beautiful than Sevilla, and that of the chronicle written by one of his own soldiers, Bernal Díaz del Castillo. Díaz's description is justly celebrated precisely because he associates Tenochtitlán with the magical worlds of *Amadís de Gaula*. The passage is famous: "nos quedamos admirados, y decíamos que parecía a las cosas de encantamiento que cuenta en el libro de Amadís [de Gaula]" (Díaz del Castillo, 176: "we stood there amazed, and said that it looked like the kind of enchantments that are told about in the book of Amadís [of Gaul]"). Bernal Díaz was probably correct to associate the Aztec capital with the magical "other" worlds of romance,¹³ for Aztec culture was to prove profoundly and radically

¹³ For consideration of the enormous influence late-medieval knightly literature – above all, *Amadís de Gaula* – had on the conquerors and settlers of Mexico in the 16th-century, Irving Leonard's *Books of the Brave* is still the best overall discussion. Leonard rightly points out the importance of the "we" in the cited passage; the experience of Amadís was a shared one on the part of the conquerors.

“other” to the European mentality. As Pagden has noted, that “which fell right through [the] conceptual ‘grid’ [of Europeans] could only ever be relegated to the ‘marvelous’ or the ‘wondrous’ (1992, 10).

Despite the fact that the Americas would be labeled a “new” world, there was of course nothing new about it.¹⁴ The imperial civilizations of Mexico and Peru had long histories; they were therefore only “new” to the European mentality. This desire to recast a longstanding “other” world as a “new” world was of course to be satirized by François Rabelais in his *Pantagruel* (1552/1994) when, in the final chapter, Alcofribas, the European writer, spends six months in the giant Pantagruel’s mouth. The first thing Alcofribas discovers is that there is a whole “new” world there. But no sooner does he label it as such than one of the inhabitants, busy planting cabbages (the typical activity of any Touraine peasant), informs him that it is older than the European world.¹⁵ “New” proves to be a relative term and a matter entirely of reception; it indicates above all that a horizon has been provoked. The observer must try to catalogue the “new” world within the things already known to him (what Anthony Pagden has called “the principle of attachment”).¹⁶ In a humorous twist, the most astonishing feature of Rabelais’ “other world” is that it is so similar to the Île de France – right down to the planting of cabbages.¹⁷

The Encounter with the Americas

What the Spanish could not anticipate was that they would come across not just a “new world” but a highly-developed imperial civilization whose textuality was complex and sophisticated, but not based at all on the letter. The Spanish were clearly astonished by what they found, and they quickly formulated two different, and seemingly contradictory, responses: awe and admiration, on the one hand, and a desire to destroy what was there, on the other. These two extremes of response

¹⁴ The eighteenth-century Spanish explorer Antonio de Ulloa suggested that because of the strangeness of the Americas to the European observer, it was considered “new” (See Pagden 1993, 3). Jean de Léry had already pointed out the same thing: “je n’auray point honte de confesser ici, que depuis que j’ay esté en ce pays de l’Amerique, auquel, comme je deduiray, tout ce qui s’y voit....estant dissemblable de ce que nous avons en Europe, Asie et Afrique, peut bien estre appelé monde nouveau, à nostre esgard” (Jean de Léry 1994, 95 “I am not ashamed to confess here that since I was in the land of America in which, as I will display, everything that is seen there, being so different from what we have in Europe, Asia and Africa, can, in my consideration, be called a new world.”).

¹⁵ Gérard Defaux comments that the encounter “démontre toutes les vertus du relativisme. Ce qui est *nouveau* pour le narrateur est *ancien* pour le planteur, et réciproquement” (Rabelais 408: “demonstrates all the virtues of relativism. What is *new* for the narrator is *old* for the planter, and vice-versa”).

¹⁶ It should be noted nevertheless that there was considerable scholarly debate in the 16th century regarding how old the Americas were and whether they were perhaps a more recent creation than other parts of the world.

¹⁷ It must be remembered that the supposed narrator and implied-author Alcofribas Nasier is an anagram of François Rabelais’ own name. Erich Auerbach’s chapter “The World in Pantagruel’s Mouth” in *Mimesis* (1953) remains an excellent point of departure for considerations of this scene.

characterized their attitudes to the physical monuments and political organization of the Aztec empire as well as to the indigenous textuality. Impressed by the exotic, indigenous “painted books,”¹⁸ Cortés immediately dispatched two of them to Emperor Charles V as prized gifts. The Codex Nuttall was almost certainly one of these, and it probably owes its survival to this awe on the part of the Spanish conquistadores. The same is true for the *Codex Vindobonensis*. At the same time, the indigenous texts, because pagan, were zealously burnt by the Spanish, especially by missionaries, such that when the subsequent generation wished to recover lost information they had to approach indigenous *tlacuiloque* to create simulacra *mestizo* codices to replace what had been destroyed.

I have already suggested a parallel between the topographical and the textual domination as the Spanish consolidated their power in the New World. Just as Meso-america was to be brought under the political control of Spain, the textuality of the Aztec empire needed to be brought under the dominion of lettered European textuality. This resulted in the creation of the *mestizo* codices that reproduced many elements of Pre-Columbian pictographic texts but organized them according to the exigencies of the European paginated book. What is more, these codices were designed to explain indigenous information to a European audience. The technologies of European lettricity were thus brought to bear in an effort, occasionally surprisingly well-intentioned, to import this information, in part for practical gain but also as the result of a kind of nascent ethnological interest (see Pagden 1982). Although it makes no attempt to reproduce the “look” of pre-Columbian texts, Bernardino de Sahagún’s three volume compendium is probably the most complete account of indigenous practices, and in its bilingual approach it attempts to serve both the Spanish-speaking and Nahuatl communities.

Of interest to me here are the codices that, unlike Sahagún’s book, were designed not only to house indigenous information but to imitate the “look” of pre-Columbian texts. It behooves us to ask why it mattered to imitate *visually* the destroyed indigenous codices. After all, the *mestizo* manuscripts all used European paper, they reformatted indigenous material as needed to make it conform to a bi-folio, paginated text, and they left blank spaces no indigenous “painted book” would have allowed (the spaces were used by European glossators for their commentaries). Moreover, these codices often rolled together in a single volume types of texts that indigenous culture kept distinct. Both the *Telleriano-Remensis* and the *Vaticanus 3738*, for instance, bind together a divinatory calendar (*tonalamatl*) with a calendar of feast days and an account of years going back several centuries; these types of texts were never collated in pre-Columbian Meso-american culture. As I have commented elsewhere, both the sender and the receiver of the *mestizo* codices were, to put it in structuralist terms, European. Why, given all this, was there such concern to reproduce with

¹⁸ There has been much discussion of the terms used in both Nahuatl and Spanish to describe the indigenous texts and their producers. The Spanish of the 16th century, beginning with Cortés, consistently referred to indigenous “painted” books, since the lack of alphabetic script was equated in their minds with a lack of writing. For a nuanced study, see Marc Touvenot’s analysis of the Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Florentine Codex*. For Sahagún, as for other Europeans, “Esta gente no tenía letras, ni caracteres algunos, ni sabían leer ni escribir, comunicábanse por imágenes y pinturas” (quoted in Thouvenot 1995, 393: “These people had neither letters nor any characters, nor did they know how to read or write, [rather] they communicated with each other by means of images and pictures.” Such comments are legion in the 16th century.

fidelity many of the visual aspects of indigenous textuality if these features were unlike European visual programs, were previously unknown to Europeans, and were quite unintelligible to them?

I have suggested elsewhere that for Europeans part of the importance of the *mestizo* manuscripts, like the few pre-Columbian texts that were spared, was due to the way they “entered the economy of gift-giving that had long circulated luxurious medieval manuscripts among the most powerful of Europe's rulers” (de Looze 2005, 118). Indigenous-looking, hand-produced manuscripts took their place alongside handsomely illustrated medieval manuscripts that depicted the “other worlds” of chivalric romances, ancient Biblical tales, or classical history. In my earlier publication I review the history of two such codices in Europe, the *Mendoza Codex* (1540-41) and the *Telleriano-Remensis* (1561-62). In both cases, these books, like other *mestizo* creations, followed “[t]he circuitous routes of elegant gift-giving and bibliophile fetishizing” (118) as they were passed back and forth between royalty, powerful families (such as the Medici), and popes. The *Mendoza*, which was stolen by pirates after it was sent by the Viceroy in Mexico, Antonio de Mendoza, to Emperor Charles V, is particularly telling in that it came to be presented to the King of France. As a record of the tribute owing to the emperor as the successor of Moctezuma, the codex was obviously of no practical value to the French king. But a luxurious textual possession compensated for territorial possession here. France had missed out on the great waves of conquest (indeed, a succession of French writers including Henri Lancelot de la Popeliniere and Jean de Léry encouraged the French crown to make up for lost time by exploring North America or the Southern Hemisphere), and the piracy of the *Mendoza Codex* permitted a symbolic trumping of the French king's rival. It would be an overstatement to say that the pilfered codex indicates that the New World simply represented in the European mentality the exotic and the unknown and that, as a result, territorial and textual possession were interchangeable. But, as Michel Jeanneret has argued, because the New World was utterly unknown, as exploration and knowledge about it advanced, what was learned was translated into constantly changing texts, maps above all, but also reports and accounts of voyages (Jeanneret 1998, 84).

I must then re-pose the question of why the *mestizo* manuscripts were in general so concerned to recreate visual programs that imitated indigenous ones. To begin to sketch an answer, let us first remember that for Europeans the texts and objects that came from the New World were, quite literally, the representatives of a distant, indigenous culture that the great majority of influential people would never actually see. The need to *represent* that world to Europeans was therefore great. We can see this early on in Cortés' letters as well as in the astuteness of his decision to send back two indigenous pre-Columbian books to the Emperor. Indeed, one of the features obscured by discussions of the non-representative indigenous artistic codes that some of the greatest *mestizo* manuscripts so faithfully reproduce is that the production that *frames* the creation of the non-mimetic codices is born of a European desire to represent the “look” of indigenous objects. The codices are in a sense surprisingly European for being *representations* (or *re-presentations*) of what lost pre-Columbian indigenous codices looked like.¹⁹ In the absence of genuinely pre-Columbian texts (and given the high degree of visual fidelity in codices such as the *Telleriano-remensis*, the *Mendoza*, and the *Vaticanus 3738*), even modern scholars have often been forced to fall back on the *mestizo* codices as objects of study for understanding Meso-american art, and in general the codices' artwork is considered quite reliable. But we should not lose sight of the fact that the Meso-american qualities in

¹⁹ I say “represent” and not “reproduce” precisely because the Meso-american material is painted into the pages of a European codex. I know of no attempt to reproduce anything like a pre-Columbian folded screen.

fact lie at one remove, framed within the world of the European book that, literally and metaphorically, opens on a new and strange world.

The neatness of the sort of transliteration/translation that Thomas More imagined taking place between the Utopian culture and European writing turned out to be impossible in the encounter with the real “New” World. During the first years of contact Europeans vacillated as to whether the New World was a kind of sinless paradise or the devil’s realm, but they quite quickly set aside the first possibility. Many practices, especially the religious rites with which, in fact, much indigenous textuality was associated, were demonized, a characterization that suggests the degree to which Aztec culture was felt as being profoundly “other.”

One might speculate that one way of understanding the double reaction toward the New World – awe combined with destruction – is to view it as an evolving process by which Europeans tried to convert the profoundly “other” they came across in America into something that could in fact be labeled “new.” For what was “new” could be assimilated relatively easily into the already known; it would be seen as an addition to the known, whereas what was profoundly “other” or alien could not be assimilated and would be, as a result, far more menacing. For Meso-american culture to be imported across the Atlantic, its profound otherness had to be transformed into novelty – into the “new.” What entered the European realm with the conquest was indeed, as Juan Luis Suarez suggests in a forthcoming book, “radically new” but not “radically other” – but only, I would argue, because this “other world” was purged of its radical otherness. Novelty became a strategy for assimilation.

For this reason the Spanish both destroyed and collected what they found in the Aztec capital, then re-presented it according to European modes and priorities. The Aztec religion, with its human sacrifice, had to be smashed, but individual objects from the temples, including sacrificial scalpels, could nevertheless be imported as exotic elements for nascent *Kunstammer* collections.²⁰ Similarly, the sacred texts of the priests were burnt, but individual “painted books” could sent back to Europe to be passed among the aristocratic elite as exotic, unique gifts. A list of the recipients of such codices reveals that as novelties they delighted the most powerful of Pan-European aristocracy: Emperor Charles V, King Henry II of France, the de Medici family, as well as popes, cardinals and archbishops.

New World Texts as Sites of Negotiation between Two Cultures

European letters – in every sense of the word – were integral to this process of turning the radically “other” into the much more palatable (radically) “new.”²¹ The burst of writing that followed upon the “discovery” of America is but part of the project of explaining it through (and according to) European letters, though it is certainly important that European writing immediately

²⁰ See Detlef Heikamp 1972.

²¹ Walter Mignolo has rightly suggested that “[t]he Spanish erased the differences between the two cultures by using their description of themselves as a universal frame for understanding different cultural traditions” (1994, 243). I agree, but would suggest that in so doing there was a supplement left that the European “frame of understanding” could not cover, and that supplement was seen as dangerous and profoundly “other”; it is this *supplément dangereux*, as Jacques Derrida following Jean-Jacques Rousseau has called it, that then had to be destroyed

sought to make up for a glaring oversight in the conception of the world.²² Writers quickly created a literary space for numerous tomes on the history of the “new” world, and between these histories and the chronicles about the conquest of the Americas, they rushed to plug the gaping hole in European knowledge from Pliny until 1492.²³

Perhaps even more importantly, if, as the Europeans quickly decided, the New World had devolved from diabolical machinations that had led astray a part of humanity which, like Judeo-Christian culture, had originated in Eden, then the civilizing influence of European letters could go a long way toward bringing these fallen peoples back into the fold. Debates of course raged among Europeans in the 16th century as to whether indigenous peoples were fully human, and letters figured as a defining characteristic of humanity. The passages Rico cites (1978, 905-07) from Juan

²²In a subsequent essay I wish to consider what the implications were for European thinking of the discovery (concurrent with the discovery of the New World) that the very bases of European thinking, in which so much faith had been put, were deeply flawed. The skeptical stance of a thinker such as Michel de Montaigne can be traced in part directly to this loss of faith in Occidental authority/authorities: “Les Geographes de ce temps ne faillent pas de s’asseurer que meshuy tout est trouvé...Sçavoir mon, si Ptolomée s’y est trompé autrefois sur les fondemens de sa raison, si ce ne seroit pas sottise de me fier maintenant à ce que ceux cy en disent; et s’il n’est pas plus vray semblable que ce grand corps que nous appellons le monde, est chose bien autre que nous ne jugeons (II 12: 572: “The Geographers of our times do not fail to assure us that everything has now been found....But it remains to be seen whether, if Ptolemy was mistaken in the past about the foundations of his thinking, it would not be foolish for me to put faith now in what they say and whether it isn’t more likely that this great body that we call the world is something very different from what we think”).

²³ The reactions to what the implications were for the stability of the European intellectual tradition were varied. But if the Renaissance was predicated on the recovery and exaltation of Antiquity, then the discovery that antique thinkers were profoundly mistaken was disturbing indeed. The Latin (*Stultifera Navis*, 1497), French (1497), and English adaptations of Sébastien Brant’s 1494 moralizing poem *Das Narrenschiff* all add passages that reveal the gradual assimilation of and reaction to the discovery of the New World (both the French and the English versions are based on the Latin translation). The German original contained none of the following: “Consideres les faitz de Pline, combien qu’il fust grant et spectable aucteur, tu trouveras qu’il erra. Et Ptolemée aussi en ses faitz et ditz a terribles et diverses erreurs. Et veritablement en vain labourent les cuers de plusieurs que sueur demaine tellement qu’ilz se arrestent aux choses incertaines, et par tels fols est maintenant exposee aux yeux et manifeste la terre qui paravant estoit incogneue si que le roy Ferdinand en la Hauste mer d’Espagne a trouvé gens innumerables” (cited in Chinard 1911, 4-5: “Consider the works of Pliny and what a great and esteemed authority he was, and you will find that he erred. And Ptolemy also in his works and writings has terrible and various errors. And truly the hearts of many toil in vain until they get in such a great sweat that they arrive at uncertain things, and that land that formerly was unknown has exposed [them] as fools and made it manifest to [people’s] eyes, as King Ferdinand has discovered in the high sea of Spain innumerable peoples.” For the Latin and English versions, see Brant 1970; for the German text Brant, 1994 (facsimile edition) and Brant 1964 (modern edition).

Maldonado in 1545 could not, as we have seen, be more explicit: to have letters is to be human, and vice-versa.

We are fortunate in our evidence from the 16th century in that we have texts that crossed the Atlantic in both directions, throwing up a bridge between two radically different orders. *Mestizo* codices made their way from Mexico back to Spain, while European books were sent in huge numbers to the New World. Beginning in 1537 the famous Cromberger family of printers in Seville set up shop in Mexico City, their printing licence specifically instructing them to print theological and morally didactic works. For my purposes, the value of the *mestizo* codices lies less in whether they prove that the Europeans understood the indigenous textuality or not (in any case, there were going to be many errors in interpretation) than in their role as contemporary witnesses to the difficult process of interpretation and negotiation. Even a quick glance at the calendar of years in the *Telleriano-Remensis* shows that the European glossators had to revise the correspondences to the Christian calendar, and even then the years that held most importance for indigenous history (as designated by a connecting line between the year and the events represented pictographically) were not the same as the ones most important to Europeans (indicated by the medieval manuscript practice of a pointing hand) (Fig.10).

The *Telleriano-Remensis* is in many ways a choice codex for studying the process of interpretation, given that there are as many as five different scribal hands involved in the process of glossating. If we take a page at random from the *tonalamatl* section of the manuscript (Fig. 11 and Appendices 1 and 2) we can observe this process as it takes place. This folio, half of a *treceña*, presents the god Navecatl, whose image is then glossed and reglossed. We are presented with a variety of scribal hands (gothic, notarial, humanist, etc.), and the glosses of the first commentator are occasionally scratched out, corrected, or re-interpreted. Eloise Quiñones Keber has proposed, undoubtedly rightly, that the first glossator of the codex is the one who writes in a gothic script and who composes the large, initial gloss at the bottom of the page; glossator #2, according to Quiñones Keber, is the commentator who writes in the cramped gothic notarial hand (best observed on the left side of the page). Furthermore, we have a combination of known persons (the humanist hand [#3 in Quiñones Keber's numbering] is almost certainly that of Pedro de los Ríos) and unknown ones. What we observe here is an ongoing *process* of interpretation, though it is impossible to know whether the glosses represent a process of weeks, months or years. To take simply the glosses along the right side (Keber's glossators #2 and #3), they seem to have been carried out at at least three different times. Quiñones Keber believes as well that the two instances of notarial writing on the right side of the folio are from the same hand, as well they may be. But even if this is so, the relationship between scribe #2's glosses and those by glossator #3, Pedro de los Ríos, written in humanist cursive ("en estos 4 dias....") is complex. For most probably, glossator #2 extends and corrects Pedro de los Ríos' commentary ("por que en tal día...") which means he returns to the manuscript *after* Ríos has glossed it at least once. Then, subsequent to #2's extension and correction of the number 4 to 5, Ríos *returns* to the folio to extend his gloss still further. The fact that multiple glossators come back over the manuscript several times indicates a complex and ongoing process of interpretation: at the very least in this short passage we have the following chronological series: #2 glosses (but only on the left side), #3 (Ríos) glosses on the right side, #2 extends and corrects Ríos' gloss, and then #3 extends #2's extension. Naturally, if any of the writing attributed to #2 is the product of another person, the process is made even more complex.

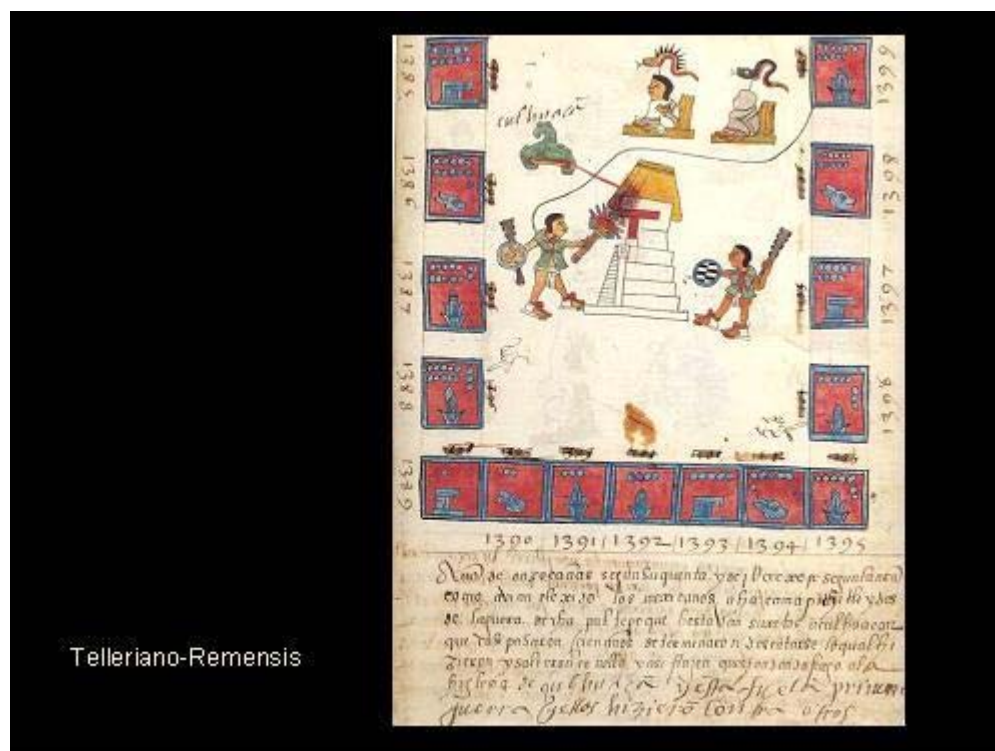


Fig. 10

We should regard, then, the *mestizo* codices as so many maps of European approaches that varied in their understanding and sympathy as indigenous culture was brought under the reign of the European letter. Certainly, indigenous culture as imported by Europeans necessarily differed greatly from indigenous culture itself, though these differences were not apparent to European eyes, and even the best intentioned efforts could not possibly understand Meso-american textuality except as refracted through European modes of presentation and interpretation. The codex most closely associated with the *Telleriano-Remensis* provides an excellent example of an attempt to appreciate the alterity of indigenous textuality while it nevertheless falls prey at the same time to the limitations of a necessarily European outlook. The *Vaticanus 3738* (also known as the “Ríos” codex because of the participation of Pedro de los Ríos in its articulation) is very similar to the *Telleriano-Remensis*, and these similarities, particularly in the *tonalamatl* section, make clear that the *Vaticanus 3738* is either a copy of the *Telleriano-Remensis* or else both codices were copied from the same model. The details of exactly where and when the *Vaticanus 3738* was made and/or glossed are complex, due to the fact that although much of its iconographical program is similar to that of the *Telleriano-Remensis*, it contains material not found in the *Telleriano-Remensis*, and its glosses, which are in Italian not Spanish, often differ from those of the *Telleriano-Remensis*. It may be that the whole codex was produced in Europe, or that it was “painted” in Mexico but not glossed until it arrived on the other side of the Atlantic; but even if the latter is the case, where/how was the Italian gloss produced? In Spain by an Italian? In Italy after the artwork had been produced in Mexico or Spain? And was the glossing done with knowledge of the glosses in the *Telleriano-Remensis*?



Fig. 11

These are just a portion of the unanswered (and probably unanswerable) questions surrounding the manuscript now located in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana. Fortunately they are largely tangential to the folio I wish to consider. Folio 61 verso of the *Vaticanus 3738* has no corresponding page in the *Telleriano-Remensis* (Fig. 12). The half-page image in question superimposes three human figures, drawn in an European style, on the generalized Meso-american pictogram for a place (the green mound). Naturally, no pre-Columbian *lienzo* would ever have presented a place-mound of such extraordinary size. The accompanying text in Italian is a notification to European readers regarding cultural difference both in terms of artistic codes and in terms of modes of interpretation. I quote it in part:

Era et e tutta questa gente tanto amica di metafore tanto nelle parole quanto nelle opere, che per dare ad intendere l'era de gli huomini depingeuano questa montagna, et poneuano un putto al pie come che incominciasse à salire; perche cosi diceuano ch'era l'huomo fin a gli xx anni, sicome uno che monta una collina alta et va cogliendo de fiori et allegrandosi nè suoi vitii....et che da i xx fino ai xxxx è come quello che sta encima del monte, gia à riposo, cosi in quella età sta habile per combattere et andava dove uuole et offendere et defendere, pero da i xxxx fino a i lx incomincia à scendere del monte et incomincia à devenir chinato, finche è necessita cercare un bastone con il quale sigostensi, ritornando como quasi alla prima età. (fo. 61 v° 1-6)

(And all these people were so familiar with metaphors, both in their speech and in their acts, that to suggest the ages of men, they depicted a mountain and put a youth at the foot like one who was starting to ascend; because they said that man was like that until the age of twenty – like one who ascends a high hill and goes about picking flowers and taking pleasure in his lives....And that from 20 to 40 he is like one who is on top of a mountain, having already arrived, so in that period one is fit to fight and could go where he wanted to attack or defend; but from 40 to 60 one starts to go down the mountain and one begins to be bent over until one has to go about with a stick for balance, returning more or less to how one was in the first age.)

The glossator is acutely aware of the need to alert the European reader to the radical alterity of the indigenous ways of thinking and codes of representation. But the only concept he can fall back on is a quintessentially European one, namely metaphor. The attempt to appreciate the alterity of the New World is tripped up by the appropriation of that very alterity by the oldest strategy of European letters.

At the same time that the *mestizo* codices are transporting indigenous pictograms from the New World to the Old under the uneasy surveillance of lettered glosses, printed works of Europe are

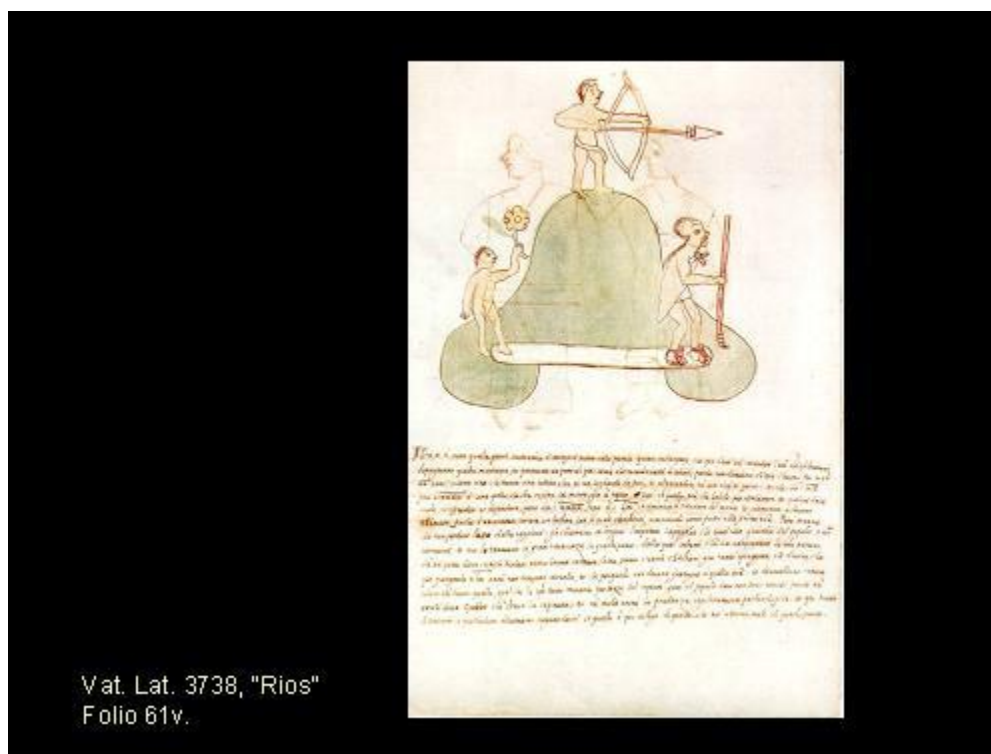


Fig. 12

making their way across to the New World. Some years ago, John Leonard proposed in his *Books of the Brave* (1964, 270) that the greater part of the first edition of *Don Quixote* was shipped out of Spain, and it is well known that the first generations of Spaniards who went to the New World were avid readers of chivalric romances. One of the most powerful instances of the coalescence of marvelous worlds with New World topography is of course the well known mapping of the fictional “California” from the *Sergas de Esplandian*, the closing portion of the *Amadís* series printed in Seville in 1510, onto the very real New World.

I have already mentioned that the printing press makes its way to New Spain so that after 1537 the Cromberger family was turning out books on both sides of the Atlantic. As printed books overtook indigenous, hand-produced textuality in Mexico, the New World was also transformed into literary terrain for European literature. The list of authors in the sixteenth and early-seventeenth century who referred or alluded to the New World was long: Shakespeare, Rabelais, Thomas More, Cervantes, Ariosto, Marguerite de Navarre, and so forth. Slowly the European literary genres also crossed the ocean and adapted the New World to their literary traditions. In 1585 Julius Cesar Stellar adapted Tasso and Virgil in the epic poem he wrote about the *Conquista: Columbeidos Libri priores duo*. In his work, Satan tries to thwart Columbus’ journey just as Juno did in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and the beautiful Anacaona tries to prevent Columbus’ leaving just as Dido did with Aeneas. At the end of the century, Giovanni Giordini wrote *Il Mondo Nuovo* (1585), an epic in which King Fernando actually *accompanies* Columbus on his second voyage to the New World and then conquers Mexico with Cortés. The conquest of the New World by the Spanish rulers becomes literalized in this instance in which European letters accomplish in the space of a book a regal voyage that never took place, the *Conquista* having effected a *translatio* of royal Spanish power but not of the king’s actual person. Moreover, Giordini insists that ancient authors (Plato, Aristotle, Seneca...) knew of the existence of the New World and explains that as a result “il Colombo habbe notitia demonstratua di quel Mondo” (“Columbus had incontrovertible notice of that World”). Just as the indigenous pictograms were assimilated to metaphors for the glossator of the *Vaticanus Latinus 3738*, depriving them of their profound Alterity even as the glossator made a genuine attempt to appreciate the radical nature of that Alterity, so this imaginary Atlantic crossing appropriates the New World in order to nourish the oldest European literary genre, the epic. Cortés’ encounter with the radically Other has become grist for *bellas letras*. Perhaps it is therefore not all that surprising that the commentary which rounds out the *Nuovo Mondo* volume and interprets the epic praises the fittingness of the genre to the “nature” of the material treated.²⁴ Could this “naturalizing” possibly express more eloquently the consolidation of the New World under the dominion of European lettered textuality?

By the end of the sixteenth century the conquest of the New World in terms of geography and textual topography was largely complete. The indigenous languages were being written alphabetically, the printing press dominated textual production, and what we might call “letter-atura” had overtaken the pictogram. If a people without “letters” might be seen as not fully human, this endowment of letters had, by the beginning of the 17th century, largely accomplished its “civilizing”

²⁴ The “Discorso breve e generale sobre il Mondo Nuovo” begins on folio 154 recto. On 154 verso, the author praises the work as follows: “Non è troppo lungo, ne troppo breue, ne la sua breuità induce oscurrezza, ne troppo in alto uola, ne men rade la terra, ma appropria il dire alla natura delle cose” (f^o 154 v^o 1-3).

mission, at least in the eyes of the Spanish. With Mateo Alemán Mexico now became a new centre for the *diffusion* of alphabetic culture. In Alemán's decision to publish in Mexico his *Ortografía Castellana* (1609) Serge Gruzinski (2004 72) has seen proof of the rise of a culture of "mondialisation" or what others might call "globalisation." We might carry his reflexions further and see in Alemán's proud proclamation that "...de tierra nueva de ayer conquistada sale nueva y verdadera manera de bien escribir para todas las naciones" (José Toribio Medina 1989 2: 40: "...from the newly conquered land comes a new and true mode of writing for all nations") the full entry of New Spain into the alphabetic order.²⁵ Mexico not only participates as New Spain in the alphabetic world of Spanish letters, it is proposed as a centre for diffusion of the same. From Mexico Alemán now proposes modifications to the Spanish alphabet: a reversed "c" shall stand for the Spanish "ch," and the "R fuerte" of Spanish, for which the usual graphie was either a double "r" ("rr") or a capital, will now be designated by a new letter. In this volume, the pre-Conquest vision of Antonio de Nebrija is fully realized: Spanish orthography is being enriched by new lands as the Spanish Empire grows.

In Guise of Conclusion

One might well ask whether there was any other option open to European culture. Did not the necessarily "lettred" cast of European culture ensure that major aspects of indigenous textuality would be missed or misinterpreted? And was the final result not that the cultures of both sides of the Atlantic were modified as a result of the encounter, despite the clear victory of the Europeans? Eloise Quiñones Keber has noted in her essay on "Collecting Cultures" (1995) that the outcome of the meeting of two great empires was the relativization of both cultures.

To my knowledge, the only thinker in the 16th century to have considered a radically different approach to interpreting the New World was the great French philosopher of the end of the 16th century, Michel de Montaigne. He is undoubtedly one of the first to have both realized and embraced the new relativism of European culture, and he is unique for having proposed to cast off the yoke of letters in order to understand better the New World. In his celebrated essay "Des Cannibales" Montaigne suggests that Europeans are just as barbarous as any indigenous peoples, and that what determines "civilized" or "barbarous" is a matter of one's point of view: "chacun appelle barbarie ce qui n'est pas de son usage" (Villey I: 31, 205: "Each person calls barbarous what departs from his own habits").²⁶ What is more, Montaigne makes an innovative suggestion; he proposes that to know something of the New World it would be better to send an uneducated person than an educated one. In saying this he breaks with a long tradition of sending learned scribes as witnesses to record events. Montaigne explains himself as follows:

²⁵ For Gruzinski the salient point here is the international ("mondial") horizon; for me, the idea that the letter is seen as a civilizing influence. Our slightly different stances meet in the idea that letters could be seen by Europeans as the proof that Mexico has joined the world culture of "civilized" nations.

²⁶ See also I: 23 "De la Coustume" in which he again invokes the New World and the very different customs there, and then comments with aplomb, "Ces exemples estrangers ne sont pas estranges" (Ed. Villey, I: 109: "These strangers' examples are not strange," my trans.). For Montaigne what is "strange" and what is "habitual" is entirely a matter of one's familiarity with conventions of interpretation.

Cet homme que j'avoy, estoit homme simple et grossier, qui est une condition propre à rendre veritable tesmoignage: car les fines gens remarquent bien plus curieusement et plus de choses, mais ils les glosent; et, pour faire valoir leur interpretation et la persuader, ils ne se peuvent garder d'alterer un peu l'Histoire: ils ne vous representent jamais les choses pures, ils les inclinent et masquent selon le visage qu'ils leur ont veu; et pour donner credit à leur jugement et vous y attirer, prestant volontiers de ce costé là à la matiere, l'alongent et l'amplifient. Ou il faut un homme tres-fidelle, ou si simple qu'il n'ait pas dequoy bastir et donner de la vray-semblance, à des inventions fauces; et qui n'ai rien espousé. (Montaigne, ed. Pierre Villey (Paris: PUF, 1988). I 31: 205).

(That man of mine was a simple, rough fellow – qualities that make for a good witness: those clever chaps notice more things more carefully but are always adding glosses; they cannot help changing their story a little in order to make their views triumph and be more persuasive; they never show you anything purely as it is: they bend it and disguise it to fit in with their own views. To make their judgements more credible and to win you over they emphasize their own side, amplify it and extend it. So you need either a very trustworthy man or else a man so simple that he has nothing in him on which to build such false discoveries or make them plausible: and he must be wedded to no cause.) (Tr. M.A. Screech, *Montaigne, The Complete Essays* (New York: Penguin, 1991. 231)

Despite Montaigne's perhaps naive belief that an uneducated fellow might be exempt from occidental codes of interpretation, we can observe in this passage the *prise de conscience* that the "lettrés" will fail to grasp the profound alterity of indigenous culture precisely because of the conditioning that comes from their education. The force of European training in the literary arts – especially rhetoric – will simply be too powerful, Montaigne argues, and *vraisemblance* will trump the *vrai*. More accurate, even if less complete, will be the vision of the simpleton.

This preference for an "homme...si simple" speaks Montaigne's desire for a zero-degree of lettricity: for a wishing away of all (relative) cultural codes. The desire is impossible to realize, of course, but Montaigne's astuteness is certainly ahead of his time. He also reflects on the dangers of bookish learning in Essay XXVI "Du Pedantisme" in which he amusingly comments that:

Mon vulgaire Perigordin appelle fort plaisamment "Lettreferits" ces sçavanteaux, comme si vous disiez "lettre-ferus" auxquels les lettres ont donné un coup de marteau, comme on dict. De vray, le plus souvent ils semblent estre ravalez, mesmes du sens commun. (Ed. Villey, I: 139)

(In my local Perigord dialect these stripling *savants* are amusingly called *Lettreférés* (“lettre struck”), as though their reading has given them, so to speak, a whack with a hammer. In truth, as often as not they appear to have been knocked below common-sense itself” (Tr. Screech 156, with slight modification).

In a more sober vein his appreciation of cultural relativism returns at the end of the essay on cannibals when, in the final paragraphs, he remarks that what seemed most incomprehensible to the indigenous natives from the New World that he met in Rouen were that fully-grown men bowed down to a boy (King Charles IX was still a youth at the time) and that some people in France had a multitude of riches while others lacked even the basic necessities for life. Only an insider to European codes and culture would see these habits as entirely normal.

Montaigne’s approach here, as in many other moments of his essays, is eminently commonsensical. As his perceptive comments on the song of the same indigenous natives suggest, Montaigne would probably take issue with the epigraph from I.J. Gelb at the beginning of this article (“Writing exists only in a civilization and a civilization cannot exist without writing”). Certainly Montaigne would not have considered that lettristic writing could do service as a determinant of either the worth of a civilization or the level of humanity of its inhabitants. Perhaps Montaigne would have been willing to entertain the arguments of recent scholars working on the *mestizo* codices who would argue that the Meso-american pictogrammic textuality is writing even though it is not lettristic.²⁷ Elizabeth Hill Boone, in particular, has forcefully made this argument in recent years (Boone 2000, 29-38). However, the fact that the debate is current in our times (and still not definitively decided) is yet more evidence of how the European concept of the letter still dogs our interpretations of other cultures.²⁸

²⁷ In a well-argued piece of scholarship in *Writing without Words* (1994), Tom Cummins has considered the difference in the reception and re-presentation of the Aztec vs. the Inca worlds. At the risk of oversimplifying, I would characterize his essay as demonstrating that Meso-American iconic representations could be appropriated and assimilated by Europeans relatively easily, whereas the geometric signs and *quipu* knots of the Incas could not, for the simple reason that the former could be made to correspond to elements of European visual culture whereas no analogs could be found for the latter. It is worth noting that the title “Writing without Words” is in some ways a misnomer, as the subsequent scholarship of one of the editors, Elizabeth Hill Boone, would suggest. Indeed it would seem that the power of alliteration was determinant, since “Writing without Letters” would be more apt. Boone (2000) gives numerous examples in which Meso-American pictograms stood for specific words, sometimes through the use of rebus (Boone 2000 35-38). What Meso-American culture didn’t use was letters to recreate the phonetic sound of the words.

²⁸ To this day much study of textuality continues to assume that alphabetic letters are inherently superior to other forms of writing. Recent writers – as, for example, Joanna Drucker (1995) – have argued against this persistent prejudice. Moreover, scholars working on Meso-American pictographic or semasiographic texts have insisted on their status as written documents. Elizabeth Hill Boone notes that in the 21st century iconic systems of writing are in fact on the rise, given the global nature of visual culture (2000, 31)

In any event, Montaigne understood that the radical alterity of the New World could not be fully “captured” by the traditions of lettered Europeans. The only source of authority for the New World was in the lived and seen of personal experience, and experience, as Montaigne was to articulate in one of his most celebrated essays, had greater authority than all the writings of *soi-disant* authorities. Montaigne’s arguments were echoed by Jean de Léry, who, as Frank Lestringant has put it, accorded great value to the “autopsie” or “the seen by oneself” (Léry 1994, 98, n.1). Indeed, Léry’s insistence on the authority of what he had “veu et sceu” (Léry 1994, 95) could not be more pronounced. But then, the *conquistadores*’ association of Meso-america with the geography of fantastical literature was a sign of the degree to which what they had seen was in-credible within the European frame of reference. Juan de Cárdenas mused that no one would be able to believe what he had seen (“Y bien sé que algunos o muchos no creerán lo que aquí digo...”). Léry, like Cárdenas, insisted on the incredible nature of what he had experienced, referring to these “choses si esmerveillables et non jamais cognues, moins écrites des Anciens, qu’à peine l’expérience les peut-elle engraver en l’entendement de ceux qui les ont veuës” (Léry 1994, 95: “things so marvelous and never before known, much less written by the Ancients, so that even the experience of them hardly suffices to engrave them in the understanding of those who have seen them”). The only response he could offer to the incredulity of Europeans, Léry said, was that “Je vis, je me trouvay, cela m’advint, et choses semblables” (Léry 1994, 98: “I saw, I found myself, this happened to me, and similar things”).

Enrique Tierno Galván, in a little-read article from 1949, turned his attention to this “angustia” or anguish of this incommunicability (Tierno Galván 1949). The radical otherness of time and geography, he has argued, helps to account for the peculiar reaction of the Spanish conquerors in the New World. In five of the most perceptive pages ever written about the *Conquista*, Tierno Galván suggests that the Spaniards who first went to the New World were severed, spatially and temporally, from everything known to them. He movingly evokes this anguish in the case of Juan Yuste, a follower of Cortés who was captured and sacrificed by the Aztecs and who scrawled his name on his cell wall, but failed, even though confronted with certain death, to invoke God (The incident is recounted in Cortés’ Third Letter). Tierno Galván is probably correct that Yuste’s failure to remember the divinity or hope for the salvation of his soul suggests the degree to which he was entirely isolated within his personal experience, unable to recover even the most basic points of contact with world and culture he knew, unable even to understand his own experience any more. Tierno Galván is right as well to quote Cortés’ comment that “las cosas de acá, aunque con nuestros propios ojos las vemos, no las podemos con el entendimiento comprender” (Tierno Galván 1949, 156: “even though we see the things here with our own eyes, we cannot comprehend them with our understanding”).

In this comment, Cortés is face to face with the utter Alterity of the New World. He will also prove to be the first to begin to chisel that otherness down into the “new”: he is the first to write of the great civilizations of Meso-america and to send back artifacts. He is also the one to smash Aztec power and have Moctezuma killed. As such, he embodies the violence inherent in the commutation of otherness into newness. But more poignant than Cortés’ acts, as Tierno Galván has realized, is the inscription by Juan Yuste. To Tierno Galván’s comments I would simply add that Juan Yuste evidently felt that the only way to reaffirm his sense of self was to inscribe his identity in letters. His attempt to recover his self, amidst the bewilderment of such radically different circumstances, was linked to the act of writing. For we must ask: for whom did he make this inscription? For Cortés in

the hopes that the Spaniards would ultimately triumph? After all, he surely was not writing for the indigenous peoples for whom his textuality and culture were as alien to them as theirs were to him. Or was he perhaps writing only for himself? Was it that he needed to see himself written one last time – see the eight letters of his name set out before him – in order to remind himself of his existence as a European and a human being?

If the radical otherness of Meso-america was perceived as a threat to the very givens of European culture, the reaction of Europeans was to turn that sense of threat into violence against Meso-america even as the Aztec empire appeared wondrous to them. In this sense they reasserted their sense of the known, by seizing control and dominating – and finally destroying – the unknown.

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