

## Peter Martyr, Richard Eden and the New World: Reading, Experience and Translation

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How should we read the early colonial literature of the New World? As Myra Jehlen has pointed out, “The business of reading . . . is not as easy as it looks” and recent critical interpretations of that material have suggested that the question of how to read needs to be at the centre of any investigation into attempts at reconstructing a history of the Americas. Jehlen and Peter Hulme’s recent debate hinged on the question as to whether the term *cannibalism* should be considered with reference to a “material reality” or as a “term within colonial discourse”—no less “real” for that. In examining Captain John Smith’s *Generall Historie of Virginia*—the starting point of Hulme and Jehlen’s disagreement—David Read concluded that “we should be extremely cautious about hypothesizing a single, stable version of colonialism out of the flux that surrounds the early English activity in North America” because “colonists imported a multiplicity of approaches which only sorted themselves out over the *longue durée*.”<sup>1</sup>

In this essay I want to supplement rather than challenge such readings via a consideration of an encounter narrated in one of the most influential early accounts of the Spanish conquest of the Americas, Peter Martyr’s *De Orbe Novo Decades* (Alcala, 1516), which, thanks to Richard Eden’s English translation (London, 1555), came to be the *Decades of the Newe Worlde or West India* and, as such, one of *The First Three English Books on America*.<sup>2</sup> The account of this incident, I would suggest, illustrates two points in line with the recent debates outlined above. First, it demonstrates the diversity of colonial responses to the New World and shows how descriptions of encounters became invested with different meanings in different situations. It is not only ourselves who might read the same texts in importantly divergent ways—as Hulme and Jehlen

do—but so did sixteenth-century readers, who were often unsure what to make of the evidence at their disposal. Second, it reveals the dangers of teleological reading: just because we know what eventually happened we are not entitled to return to the start of a defined historical process—colonialism—and assume that the results we have observed were always an inevitable consequence of the initial actions or the intentions of the original actors, propagandists and historians.

## I.

In the third book of the second decade of Spanish New World exploration and colonisation narrated by the exiled Italian historian, Peter Martyr d'Anghera, in his collected volume, *De Orbe Novo Decades*, read here in Eden's translation, there occurs a strange and fascinating confrontation between the Spanish *conquistadores* led by Vasco Nunez de Balboa and the son of the local king, Comogrus. In the wake of Columbus's voyages and discoveries, numerous disputes took place both between colonists and the crown and amongst the colonists themselves. After a series of incidents culminating in a mutiny, Balboa was elected leader, as much out of fear as respect, because "the best parte was fayne to give place to the greatest" (115). In pursuit of gold, Balboa was attempting to lead his faction across Darien (Panama) from the Gulf of Uraba to the Pacific Ocean.<sup>3</sup> Having sacked the rich village of Poncha, they came across the court of King Comogrus, which Peter Martyr describes in some detail. In many ways it resembles European courts; the palace, despite being made of wood, is said to be as strong as one made of stone; there are civil courtiers who the Spanish have met before under their now deceased commander, Diego de Nicuesa; the king's huge cellar contains a wide range of wines made from dates rather than grapes, in the same way that Germans, Flemings, English, regional Spaniards, Swiss and other Alpine dwellers, make a variety of alcoholic drinks from barley, wheat, hops, and apples, and the *conquistadores* enjoy some of these with King Comogrus.

However, if this has started to make the reader feel more at home for one of the few times in the seemingly endless catalogue of exotic

savagery, Spanish atrocities and generally murderous conflicts, the narrator immediately warns us that we are about to return to that world once again: “nowe yow shall heare of a thyng more monstrous too behoulde.” The Spanish are conducted into the bowels of the palace where they are led into a room which contains corpses hanged with cotton ropes. These, it turns out, are mummies of the ancestors of the king, who are honoured with religious reverence and dressed up with precious stones and gold “accordynge unto theyr estate.” Although obviously appearing “superstitious” to the Spanish, at least this particular religious practice avoids the horrific diabolism of ritual human sacrifice and cannibalism encountered throughout the *Decades of the Newe Worlde or West India*.<sup>4</sup>

It is at this point that the eldest of the king’s seven sons, who had an “excellente naturall wytte,” enters the frame; first he gives the Spanish four thousand ounces of gold, “artificially wrought” and fifty slaves, veterans of Amerindian wars, as a means of flattering and pleasing them and assuaging his fear of the rapacious soldiers who, the narrator tells us, he thinks are a “wanderynge kynde of men . . . luyvng onely by shiftes and spoyle” and may “handle hym as they dyd other whiche sowght noo meanes howe to gratifie them” if he fails to be sufficiently generous. The soldiers try to divide up the booty, leaving a fifth for the crown, but fall to “brabbylyng” and contention, whereupon the king’s son starts to chastise them:

What is the matter with yowe Christen men, that yow soo greatly esteme soo litle a portion of golde more then yowr owne quietnes, whiche neverthesse yow entend to deface from these fayre ouches [necklaces] and to melte the same into a rude masse. If yowre hunger of goulde bee soo insatiable that onely for the desyre yowe have therto, yowe disquiete soo many nations, and yow yowre selves also susteyne soo many calamit[i]es and incommodities, lyving like banished men owte of yowre owne cuntrye, I wyll shewe yowe a Region flowinge with goulde, where yow may satisfie yowr raveninge appetites.

He points out that they will have to contend with the fierce King Tumanama and the “cruell Canybales, a fierce kynde of men, devourers of mans fleshe, lyving withowte lawes, wanderynge, and withowte empire.” These cannibals are also “desyrous of golde” and have

conquered the people who used to own the gold mines in the mountains. They now “use them lyke bondmen” and force them to mine the gold they once owned and make plates and ornaments. The Comogruans have traded these artefacts with the cannibals for prisoners of war, which they buy in order to eat, or household objects like sheets, furniture and food. The risks and rewards of such an encounter will clearly be great: the king’s son informs the Spanish that in such regions all household objects are made of gold which is as common to them as iron is in Europe.

The Spanish marvel at the oration of the young man and carefully consider his words; not, it seems, because of his forthright criticisms of their inordinate greed, but at the prospect of wealth beyond their wildest dreams as they ask how certain he is of what he has just told them. The king’s son continues, having first prepared himself as an orator keen to persuade his audience: “Gyve eare unto me o yowe Chrystians. Albeit that the gredie hunger of golde hathe not yet vexed us naked men, yet doo we destroy one an other by reason of ambition and desyre to rule. Hereof springeth mortall hatred amonge us, and hereof commethe owre destruction.” The Indians cannot control their desires to fight wars and so are no better than the Europeans at heart. The king’s son agrees to guide Balboa’s party so that they can obtain gold and the Comogruans defeat their enemies, but first the Spanish must send for another thousand troops. “After these woordes, this prudent younge *Comogrus* helde his peace. And owre men moved with greate hope and hunger of golde, beganne to swalowe downe theyr spettle.”

Subsequently events unfold as follows: Comogrus is willingly converted and changes his name to Charles after the Spanish king and he appears later on as a notable friend to Christians, even though he considers himself a god when given axes, tools and a soldier’s cloak by the Spanish (148-49); Balboa undertakes the journey without waiting for the thousand relief troops from Spain (137), with considerable success until he is killed by a rival *conquistador*, Pedrarias Davila.

The narration of this encounter is multi-layered and demands some decoding, especially as we do not know exactly how Peter Martyr acquired his information: was it by way of interviews with the returning *conquistadores*, second-hand retelling or imaginative reconstruction? It

is hard to determine who is speaking at which point—the Amerindians, Peter Martyr, the *conquistadores*—or who is being addressed—the original correspondents of Peter Martyr, a general public, influential government figures, colonial Latin America or metropolitan Spain?<sup>5</sup> At certain points the reader is made aware that the text exists at—to say the least—two removes, that the narrator of the book was not present at the scene but is reporting speech: “They say that with *Comogrus*, they droonk wyne of sundry tastes.” At others, the narrator disappears and merges into the group of Spanish *conquistadores*: “this eldest soone of Kyng *Comogrus* beinge presente, whome we praysed for his wisdom.” Put another way, the reader is never sure exactly what is going on and what status the statements given in the text have because of the shifting nature of the pronouns used.<sup>6</sup>

In the same way it is hard to know how to read the description, as a piece of travel literature or as a specifically colonial text: does the example of the Comogruans illustrate the superiority of European powers over the savages of the New World, a cultural clash which displays mutual incomprehension, the use of the New World as an allegory which either represents the problems of the Old World or shows a way of life which is manifestly superior? These early details appear to signify in opposite directions: on the one hand the Comogruans are recognisably similar to Europeans with their sophisticated court where civil social intercourse takes place; on the other, they are superstitious idolators who worship the dead bodies of their ancestors.

The speech of the king’s son spectacularly confirms this ambiguity. The narrator’s interpretation of his motives, in what can only be an interpolation, seems to single out the Spanish as akin to one of the lowest elements of European society, the landless poor.<sup>7</sup> They are dismissed as “thys wanderynge kynde of men”—a detail which has to be reconfirmed, “(our men I mean),” presumably in case the reader mistakes Spaniards for Comogruans—and explicitly separates them from the noble status of the Amerindian prince so that two extremes of social rank confront each other across the cultural and racial divide.<sup>8</sup> This incident in early travel history shadows from afar Aphra Behn’s criticism of black slavery in *Oronoko* where the aristocratic African hero is finally executed by “one Bannister, a wild Irishman, and one of the council, a fellow of

absolute barbarity, and fit to execute any villainy.”<sup>9</sup> Clearly, the Amerindian prince—like Oronooko—is in the morally superior position at this point and his hostile analysis of Spanish greed carries weight. It is not merely that the Spanish are avaricious but that they are indifferent to and destructive of beautiful objects; whereas the Indians make ornaments which are “artificially wrought” and give them to their visitors as presents, the Spanish simply want to melt everything down into a “rude masse.” They value gold as a monetary commodity, not the labour which makes the object an aesthetic pleasure.<sup>10</sup>

The Comogruans, in contrast, according to the king’s son, “no more esteem rude gold unwrought, then we doo cloddes of earthe, before it bee formed by the hande of the workeman to the similitude eyther of sume vessell necessarie for owre use, or sume ouche [necklace] bewetifull to be worne” (117). This is a more subtle critique of European values than that of Thomas More’s ascetic Utopians who laugh at gold chains of state and make chamber pots of gold in order to show their contempt for frivolity, and should be read alongside that more famous account.<sup>11</sup> The Utopians value iron more than gold because it is more necessary for human life; they respect materials only in accordance with their *intrinsic* worth. The Comogruans, in contrast, value the *social* worth of gold and, therefore their society stands as an exact opposite to that of the Spanish adventurers.<sup>12</sup>

The king’s son—at least in the first part of his oration—is an early representative of a figure quite familiar from later colonial narratives and travel literature, that of the “savage critic” who is able to perceive the excesses of the colonists and show them by word and deed what they have lost, in itself a narcissistic, Eurocentric vision.<sup>13</sup> The verbal echoes and rhetorical patterning in this early section of the speech make a devastating parallel between the Spanish and the cannibals, the lowest form of humanity for Europeans and their worst nightmare.<sup>14</sup> Both are equally “desyrous of golde” so that the Spanish lose their own quietness while disquieting other nations (presumably those they plunder); the cannibals, on the other hand, are alienated from their own environment and from those they conquer and ruthlessly exploit as “bondmen” to mine the gold which they then trade for human flesh. Both are exiles, the Spanish forced to live “like banished men owte of [their] owne

country," "thys wanderinge kinde of men," the cannibals "lyving withowte lawes, wanderinge, and withowte empire." In effect, what the king's son seems to be saying, is that the Spanish are not different to what they would like to think of as their polar opposites; both restless peoples are ruled by an inordinate and destructive greed in contrast to the relative social harmony of the Comogruans; both bring appalling destruction in their wake; both are cruel and blind to what really matters; neither is capable of setting down a workable and settled system of laws; both are dangerous vagabonds who threaten social stability and know no boundaries, the Spanish as colonists cut off from their homeland (which perhaps condemned many of them to a life of bondmen), the cannibals as men without a nation.<sup>15</sup> The text recognises that the reader will be challenged and unsettled at this point. In a crucial sense, the king's son seems to imply that both Spain and the New World work to produce what threatens their very existence, a structural imbalance which is expressed in the second half of the speech.

The reaction of the Spanish to these criticisms is similarly disturbing. They interpret them in a way which can only seem willfully blind and a vindication of the king's son's harsh remarks to the reader:

Owre capitaynes marveylyng at the oration of the naked younge man (for they had for interpretours those three men whiche had byn before a yere and a halfe conversant in the court of kynge *Careta*) pondered in theyr myndes, and earnestly considered his sayinges. Soo that his rashnes in scatteringe the golde owte of the balances, they turned to myrth and urbanitie, commendynge his dooinge and sayinge therein. Then they asked hym frendely, uppon what certeyne knoweledge he spake those thynges (117).

The first sentence sets up expectations that are immediately thwarted in the second. The reader might think the Spaniards would consider the king's son censorious and openly critical of them while in fact they only seem to wonder whether his liberality is genuine. Even Columbus at his most pig-headed and bizarre could scarcely rival this eccentric misreading and a huge gulf opens up between the European readers of the Latin or English text and the European protagonists of its narrative.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the oration does succeed in restoring their good humour and stopping the fight that had started to break out, a clear

irony. The laughter is, however, a false resolution which does not heal the divisions and thus represents a pause in the thrust of the narrative or else a comic fissure because the joke is really on those who are laughing.<sup>17</sup> The way forward for the Spanish is to confront and overcome their *doppelgangers*.

When the king's son speaks again after the Spanish ask how they can get hold of such fabulous wealth, the nature of his discourse changes dramatically and he turns his "naturall wytte" inwards in analysing how and why the Comogruans destroy themselves. They may not be afflicted by the greed of the bad savages, the cannibals, but they are by no means as serenely good as they at first appear.<sup>18</sup> Hate and ambition torment them:

Owre predicessours kepte warres, and soo dyd *Comogrus* my father with princes beinge bortherers abowte hym. In the which warres, as wee have overcoome, so have wee byn overcoome, as dothe appere by the number of bondmen amonge us, which we tooke by the overthrowe of owre enemyes, of the whiche I have gyven yowe fiftie. Lykwyse at an other tyme, owre adversaries havinge th[e]upper hande agenste us, ledde away manye of us captive. For suche is the chance of warre (117).

He then informs them that many of the Comogruans were once the captured slaves of King Tumanama who have presumably either escaped or been rescued in the course of subsequent hostilities, before making the arrangement to lead them onwards.

Just as the opening description of the court of King Comogrus oscillated between an affirmation of a shared European and New World identity—what Anthony Pagden has recently called "the principle of attachment"<sup>19</sup>—and an acknowledgement of the vast difference between the two, so does the speech of the king's son, but in a more complex and sophisticated manner. In the first section the Spanish explorers and the nameless cannibals are pitted against the savage critic and, presumably, the European reader of the text; in the second section, a universal malaise is affirmed, that of human aggression, a characteristic which appears to define the species.

Even though some dwellers of the New World can see through to the "truth" of human actions and expose the false motives and hypocrisy,



they are subject to precisely the same limitations of behaviour and fall into the same traps. Ultimately both Europeans—colonists and readers—and savages—Comogruans, Tumanamans and cannibals—blend as one. The Comogruans turn out to be exactly the sort of naked and aggressive people that they seemed to be defined against; hence the apparent schizophrenia of the savage prince. The Comogruans are both savage critics and participators within the world of savagery, occupying an uneasy position within the series of discourses which represents them. They are at once noble savages (an ambiguous representation in itself, simultaneously reminding Europeans of what they have lost, but also what they should have), ignoble savages and ordinary human beings.

This strange confrontation with its seemingly confused and conflicting messages demands to be read within the context of the whole work of *De Orbe Novo Decades*, both with and against the grain and also in terms of a Spanish/international Latin reader and an English one. Peter Martyr's own short preface to the expanded edition of 1516 explains that he left Italy for Spain because of a desire to record the important new discoveries in the Americas, fearing that they might be lost for ever: "I myght particularlye collecte, these marvelyous and newe thynges, which shoulde otherwyse perhappes have line drowned in the whirlepoole of oblivion: forasmuch as the Spanyardes (men woorthy [of] greate commendation) had onely care to the generall inventions of these thynges." In other words, the Spanish are good at acting but not at understanding the significance of their own actions and a foreign narrator is required to tell the story of their deeds and interpret the meaning of them. Peter Martyr states that he left his homeland because there was nothing of significance to record: "in Italye, by reason of the dissention among the Princes, I coulde fynde nothyng wherewith I myght feede my wytte, beinge a younge man desyrus of knowleage and experiance of thynges" (63).<sup>20</sup> Despite being tempted to return, he has not partly because of the pleas of the deceased Ferdinand and Isabella, but

also that in maner through out all Italy, by reason of the *discorde of the Christian Princes*, I perceaved all thynges to runne headelong into ruine, the countreys to be destroyed and made fatte with human bludde: The cities sacked, virgines

and matrones with theyr gooddes and possessions caried away as captives and miserable innocentes without offence to be slayne unarmed within theyr owne houses. Of the which calamities, I dyd not onely heare the lamentable owtryes but dyd also feele the same. For even the bludde of mine owne kinfolkes and frendes, was not free from that crueltie [my emphasis] (63-64).

In marked contrast to this heart-felt lament for the fate of his native land, based on a shared sympathy and personal experience, is the extravagant praise for the Spanish monarch, Charles V who not only has a virtually unified realm (“yowr graundefathers by your moothers syde, have subdued all Spayne under yowr dominion except onely one corner of the same”), but has expanded his territories beyond the horizons of any previous rulers:

But not offendynge the reverence due to owre prediccursors, what so ever frome the begynnyng of the worlde hath byn donne or wrytten to this day, to my judgement seemeth but little, if wee consyder what newe landes and countreys, what newe seas, what sundry nations and tounge, what golde mynes, what treasures of perles they have lefte unto yowe hyghnesse, besyde other revenues. The whiche, what they are and howe greate, these three Decades shall declare (64).

The preface sets up a whole series of oppositions, many of which clearly have a bearing upon the narrated incident analysed above. These can be listed—in no particular order—as follows:

Spain/Italy  
 Unity/Fragmentation  
 Expansion/Contraction  
 Christianity/Paganism  
 Knowledge/Ignorance  
 Health/Illness  
 Nation/Regions  
 Centre/Margins  
 Empire/Colony  
 Wealth/Poverty  
 Intact/Violated  
 Home/Exile  
 Self/Other  
 Lack of Awareness/Awareness

Although it is easy to see that these oppositions can be related to Peter Martyr's description of the encounter between the Spanish and the Comogruans, they cannot be mapped on in a straightforward manner. Whilst both the *conquistadores* and the cannibals are classified as wandering exiles, the same can, of course, be said of Peter Martyr, not just in fact, but as he chooses to represent himself. The difference is that they move away from stability, from civilisation to barbarism, and he moves from the chaos of his homeland to become a subject in a more stable, powerful and civilised country. It has frequently been noted that what holds the knowledge gained from accounts of the New World together is the rhetoric of the "I" / eye-witness, forced to abandon all appeals to a canon of authorities and insist on the unclassifiable newness of the data which can only be described by one who has seen the land in person;<sup>21</sup> Peter Martyr, in effect, goes a stage further, suggesting that he alone can truly appreciate the achievements of the Spanish because he comes from a country which is contracting into smaller regions rather than already unified and now expanding. Only those without a nation can come to understand the good fortune of those who have one, in perhaps the same way that the son of King Comogrus can warn the Spanish of what they might lose through their excessive greed and consequent dissension. According to Benedict Anderson, modern forms of national identity were exported back to Europe from the colonial states in the Americas; according to Peter Martyr, the exiled narrator of the colonising voyages was in an analogous position and able to comment on the growth of European national consciousness.<sup>22</sup>

This might help to explain the radical disjunction contained in the odd encounter analysed above. Ostensibly, the purpose of *De Orbe Novo Decades* appears to be to celebrate Spanish success in the New World and the acquisition of territories, wealth and so on; yet it is also clearly a reflection on the desirable form civil society should take. Peter Martyr cannot overlook the dissension among the Spanish without perjuring himself and ignoring the eye-witness accounts which are what constitutes the knowledge of the hitherto unknown New World, but he intervenes in his capacity as narrator to point out a moral so that his narrative depends very much on his own credibility as an interpreter. Like the two great opponents later in the century, Oviedo and Las Casas, Peter

Martyr was not "an impartial neutral observer, nor did he wish to be. . . . His history belonged to a . . . political and moral project."<sup>23</sup> The problem is that this project splits the narrative, pulling its narrator in two directions at once.

We cannot know the original basis of this story and how much it has been altered, whether Peter Martyr's recording of the words of the king's son are at all accurate; nevertheless, the telling bears significant marks of having been transformed to fit in with these dual, almost inevitably contradictory, aims. The incident does serve to tell Charles of the successful acquisition of new wealth and lands as Peter Martyr announces he will do in the preface; but it also warns of the perils of civil dissension, lack of stability and excessive greed. The narrated encounter praises Charles's vast success, but simultaneously urges him to be cautious and think carefully about how he runs his colonial policy and whom he trusts—and, if one thinks that the example of the cannibals' exploitation of neighbouring Amerindians as "bondmen" is a reflection upon Spanish society, about domestic policy as well. King Comogrus's son serves as both type and anti-type of his Spanish opposite. In the preface Peter Martyr explicitly connects the acquisition of knowledge with his moving to the unified Spanish nation; unfortunately, part of the knowledge he gains in his attempt to complete his self-assigned task, to record the history which the native fails to understand, is that exile in the name of expansion all too often leads to the sort of civil discord that he left Italy to escape. It might well seem that what has to be excluded—a defined nation and secure identity—as a precondition of knowledge reappears as an object of knowledge. In other words, as so often in colonial narrations, we are back where we started.

## II.

The situation of Peter Martyr's English translator, Richard Eden, was in many ways analogous to that of the exiled Milanese historian. Eden had been active under the protectorate of Northumberland (1549-53) in translating and promoting colonial literature in order to encourage

English voyages to the New World. Northumberland had gathered a formidable team, including John Dee, William Buckley, a mathematician, Clement Adams, a cartographer, Leonard and Thomas Digges, both interested in surveying, and Robert Recorde, a physician who had supervised an earlier attempt to exploit silver mines in Ireland (1551); Eden had translated part of Sebastian Muenster's *Cosmographia Universalis* as *Of the Newe India* (1553) and Ralph Robinson had produced his more famous translation of *Utopia* (1551) (again, suggesting that in England *Utopia* was read alongside non-fictional accounts of colonial voyages).<sup>24</sup> Northumberland was undoubtedly keen to counteract the economic depression which gripped England and looked enviously across to the boom enjoyed in Spain fuelled by the import of gold and silver from its colonies which resulted in relative prosperity.<sup>25</sup>

However, when Edward VI died in 1553, many of this intellectual circle, including Richard's uncle, Thomas, took part in the attempt to put Lady Jane Grey on the throne and understandably fell foul of Mary. Thomas and Richard's father, George, were strongly linked to English Protestant exiles in Europe and Thomas eventually left for Strasbourg in 1554, helping in the extensive propaganda campaign against the Spanish presence in England. One of the most prominent of these exiled Protestants, John Ponet, cited Peter Martyr's *De Orbe Novo Decades* in his justification of tyrannicide, *A Shorte Treatise of Politicke Power* (1556), to condemn Spanish atrocities there and predict that soon the English would be shipped over as slaves (suggesting that Peter Martyr's work could be read in different ways in different contexts, for his work was by no means as obvious a source for the Black Legend, which sought to emphasise the cruelties of the Spanish in their empire, as Las Casas's extensive condemnations of Spanish policy in the New World).<sup>26</sup>

Eden's career trajectory moved in the opposite direction for he appears to have "decided to throw in his lot with the new regime" and produced his translation of *De Orbe Novo Decades* in 1555, a work which also contained extracts from Oviedo's *History of the West Indies* and writings by others connected with Spanish ventures in the Americas such as Amerigo Vespucci, Antonio Pigafetta and Lopez de Gomara. This "lengthy and badly-organised book," which was nonetheless "readable and informative" did not fail to prevent suspicions of Eden's loyalty.

In the same year he was accused of heresy and lost his job at the Treasury.<sup>27</sup>

Eden appended a long preface addressed to the reader to his translation, 29 pages compared with the 3 of Peter Martyr's original and like that document it is an essay beset with anxiety. Eden lavishes his praise on the *conquistadores* in a manner that is alien to both Peter Martyr's preface and his actual text:

And surely if great Alexander and the Romans which have rather obteyned then deserved immortall fame amonge men for theyr bluddye victories onely for theyr owne glory and amplifyinge theyr empire obteyned by slawghter of innocentes and kepte by violence, have byn magnified for theyr doinges, howe much more then shal we thynke these men woorthy just commendations which in theyr mercyfull warres ageynst these naked people have so used them selves towarde them in exchaungynge of benefites for victorie, that greater commoditie hath therof ensewed to the vanquished then to the victourers (50).

Eden does acknowledge alternative narratives—"But sum wyll say, they possesse and inhabyte theyr regions and use theym as bondemen and tributaries, where before they were free"—only to dismiss them as partial interpretations which refuse to recognise that now the Indians are truly free as Christians not pagans and enjoy the benefits of land properly used. The Spanish have only killed "suche as coulde by no meanes be brought to civilitie" and so are exonerated of any blame and charges of excessive use of violence, as in, for example, Ponet's text.<sup>28</sup> Rather, the modern Spanish heroes go beyond those of the ancient world, who are here portrayed as vicious butchers. For Eden, the discovery of the Americas is the key event which illustrates that the moderns have supplanted the ancients and established their own time through a break with the past. Once again, the discovery of the Americas is shown to be the crucial moment which defines the experience of modernity, enabling the development of a self-reflexive consciousness which does not have to refer back to previous authorities.<sup>29</sup>

The passage also makes play with the notion of "exchange," suggesting that victory has been won through trade; an impressively benevolent one as the vanquished gain more than the victors. Again, such language

signals a clean break with the past; whereas before victory had to be won through brutal warfare and conspicuous cruelty, as in the establishment of the Greek and Roman Empires, now the peaceful bartering of commodities and spreading of true religion are all that is required. The propagandist implications of Eden's words are obvious: the conquest of the Americas will be easy, will bring untold benefits and involves no moral dilemmas (whatever others might say . . .). The English have every reason to copy their great European rivals.

Eden's comments are also notable for their partiality. He is clearly reacting to Protestant anti-Spanish sentiment and, whilst an alternative narrative of the history of the colonisation of the Americas is dismissed, it is nonetheless acknowledged and shadows his not overly persuasive attempt to exonerate the Spanish and transform the *conquistadores* into role models. But Eden also protests too much in his reading of the text he is translating, for what is also obvious to any scrupulous reader of his translation of *De Orbe Novo Decades*, is that Peter Martyr's narrative does not support Eden's claims for it. As the encounter with King Comogrus illustrates, the natives of the New World are not always represented as straightforwardly grateful "naked people" who will be delighted with whatever they are given and the *conquistadores* are hardly portrayed as saintly heroes eager to give away more than they get. The ending of the episode with the Spanish slaving over the prospect of more gold is perhaps not quite as shocking a rhetorical construction as Montaigne's conclusion to his essay "Of The Cannibals"—"They weare no kinde of breeches nor hosen"—but it is just as graphic an image.<sup>30</sup>

Eden's text contains a series of marginal glosses, a mixture of shorthand pointers for the aid of readers, with a few interpretative comments.<sup>31</sup> Often these serve the purpose of attempting to lead the reader away from construing the incident as a criticism of European values. For example, alongside the second half of the speech of the son of King Comogrus (see above, p. 3), there are three notes: at the start is "Naked people tormented with ambition"; against the exhortation of the prince that he will lead the Spanish to the gold is printed, "A vehement persuasion"; and at the end, as the Spanish start to drool, is "A token of hunger." Such comments affirm the self-confessed inability of the

Comogruans to confront their defective wills,<sup>32</sup> linking their defects to the greed of the Spanish.

The gloss, "Naked people tormented with ambition," can be read as a contradiction of his earlier use of "naked" in "The Preface to the Reader" (see above, p. 14), a bad "nature" to place beside a good, innocent one, a reading affirmed by the drooling for gold of the Spanish.<sup>33</sup> The point is that all people are ultimately the same and are spurred on by their desires, and, by implication, so will the English in their search for empire. This is confirmed by the gloss, "A vehement persuasion," placed beside the promise of the prince to lead the Spanish on in their less than admirable quest. Eden's text has started to resemble later more overtly colonial propaganda such as Thomas Harriot's *A Briefe and True Reporte of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1588).<sup>34</sup> It is as if Eden is reconstructing the original conversation between the Amerindians and the Spanish for his English audience, hoping that they will choose to be inspired by the hope for gold and empire, even if the motives for gain are transparently base.

Given Eden's biography, his anxiety is perhaps understandable and his desire to homogenize Peter Martyr's contradictory text, unsurprising. Three pages further on in the preface, a marginal note alerts the reader to an "Apostrophe to England," following a condemnation of criticisms of Philip II who was now married to Mary and, therefore, king of both Spain and England. Eden urges his fellow-countrymen to acknowledge their "infirmities and deformities" by rereading the book they have mangled so badly, the Bible: "If the greefes of them bee to thee unsensible by reason of thy feeblenesse and longe sicknes, take unto thee that glasse wherein thou gloryest with the Jewe and thynkest that thou seest al thynges and canst judge all mysteries: Looke I say in that pure glasse and beholde thy owne deformities, which thou canst not or wylle not feele" (53). The traditional appeal to the reading of a text as a mirror in which all vices can be seen contains a certain irony:<sup>35</sup> Eden's claim that the Bible ought to be read in a spirit of self-criticism, rather than directed at a Catholic monarchy ruling a Protestant people, sits uneasily with his own attempts to limit the range of meanings of *De Orbe Novo Decades*. His attempt to argue that English expansion into the New World will lead to an overall unity at home and in the newly



acquired colonies is not borne out by Peter Martyr's original text where, all too often, the opposite is shown to occur (as in the tensions revealed in the encounter with the Comogruans).

For Eden, England has become a perverse and unnatural motherland: "There is even now great talke of thee [i.e. England] in the mouthes of all men that thou hast of late yeares brought furthe many monsters and straunge byrthes." The rhetorical manoeuvre here is an astute one: America was thought to be the land of monsters and human deformities, but in Eden's judgement they are already inside the realm.<sup>36</sup> He proceeds to read them for his audience and so silence the "dyvers interpretacions more monstrous then the monsters them selves":

One hath well interpreted that such monstrous byrthes signifie the monstrous and deformed myndes of the people mysshapened with phantastical, dissolute opinions, dissolute lyvynge, licentious talke, and such other vicious behavoures which monstrously deforme the myndes of men in the syght of god . . . What deformed beastes are more monstrous than lyinge, rebellion, strife, contention, privie malice, slaundyng, muttering, conspiracies, and such other devillisse imaginations. But O Englande whyle time is gyven thee, circumcise thy harte (53).

Eden is clearly referring to Protestant resistance to the Marian regime, notably the Wyatt rebellion of the previous year (1554), and in the process envisages a "correct" reading of his translation as a means of helping to foster unity.<sup>37</sup>

Ultimately, despite attempts to homogenize and simplify the text, Eden's English translation of *De Orbe Novo Decades* is as double and contradictory as Peter Martyr's Latin original. In one sense Eden is glorifying the Spanish in the New World and recommending them as heroic exemplars for the fragmented and "monstrous" body politic of England. Their actions provide a recipe for unity and expansion and will provide both internal and external cohesion illustrating that the forces of nationalism and colonialism cannot be easily separated. In another, there is an uncomfortable link between Peter Martyr's descriptions of the rebellious acts of the *conquistadores* in the Americas and Eden's castigations of his fellow citizens' crimes. Either way, the speech of the son of King Comogrus addresses at least two audiences: those who recognise his criticisms as legitimate and an affirmation that

the “other” of the New World is, in fact, identical to the sceptical, anti-colonial reader; and those who use his speech also to affirm an identity, but with the universal human desire for gold and glorious colonial conquest to which all are helpless subjects even if they can recognise the syndrome.

### III.

What can be learnt from this strange and complex cultural encounter? The most obvious point involves placing stress upon the difficulty of reconstructing either the original event or how the text was read by its early readers, especially given the contradictory aims stated by compiler and translator, both of whom lived in trying political circumstances and depended on various forms of patronage and whose texts clearly relate to their own situations within two different European societies. Perhaps this ambiguity is in itself surprising given the monolithic models of power which have all too often characterised New Historicist readings of early modern cultural encounters.<sup>38</sup> In Eden’s text we are not made simply to choose between what is orthodox and what is subversive, but, given the unstable nature of European political society, and the uncertain forms of representing the Americas as a conspicuously “new” site of knowledge, find it difficult to decide what actually belongs in either category. The incident with the Comogruans might have left its first readers with the conclusion that the Spanish were successful, but ultimately, morally wrong. Should they therefore be condemned or celebrated? Does their greed for gold serve as a condemnation of colonial enterprises, a recognition of a universal human desire necessary despite its unappealing nature, or something which ought to be—and can be—corrected in the future? In the end, perhaps, we simply do not know, just as Peter Martyr and Richard Eden seem not to have known exactly what to make of the abundance of new information coming back from the New World. European encounters with the Americas were undeniably disastrous in the short and long term,<sup>39</sup> but early colonial writings do not necessarily illustrate the inevitability of this destruction and many, despite the obvious restraints of patrons and political

expediency, register profound disquiet with colonial expansion and, perhaps more importantly, hopes of a sympathetic *rapprochement* with the New World, albeit alongside other more predictable sentiments. What early colonial/travel literature texts like *De Orbe Novo Decades* reveal is serious confusion regarding the value of their own and other cultures; it is vital that we recognise their unease with as well as their complicity in European expansion and do not dismiss them as simply monolithic apologies to be read with or against the grain. The politics of identity and difference cannot be solved by straightforward celebration or condemnation, either in their time or ours.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Myra Jehlen, "Response to Peter Hulme," *CI* 20 (1993-94): 187-91, at p. 187; Peter Hulme, "Making No Bones: A Response to Myra Jehlen," *CI* 20 (1993-94): 179-86, at p. 184; David Read, "Colonialism and Coherence: The Case of Captain John Smith's General Historie of Virginia," *MP* 91 (1994): 428-48, at pp. 446, 445; Myra Jehlen, "History Before the Fact: or, Captain John Smith's Unfinished Symphony," *CI* 19 (1992-93): 677-92. See also Andrew Hadfield, "Writing the New World: More 'Invisible Bullets,'" *Literature and History*, second series, 2.2 (1991): 3-19. Jehlen's original conclusions correspond to Read's: "The current scholarship of colonization has focussed on the way the empire builders acquired control. But in the acquiring, in the process of acquisition, control is not yet at work . . . As we look back to the seventeenth century, seeing the interaction in the course of empire building makes it seem less destined and the empire builders less entitled" ("History before the Fact" 691-92).—My thanks to Daniel Carey and Paul Harvey for commenting on an earlier draft of this essay.

<sup>2</sup>Edward Arber, ed., *The First Three English Books on America* (Birmingham, 1885). All subsequent references to this edition in parentheses. I have slightly modernised "u" to "v" and "i" to "j" where appropriate. The first three books (decades) of *De Orbe Novo Decades* were collected together in an edition in 1516, having been published separately in Venice (1504), Seville (1511) and Alcalá (1511). See John Parker, *Books to Build an Empire: A Bibliography of English Overseas Interests to 1630* (Amsterdam: N. Israel, 1965) 51n22. I have used the collected edition, *De Rebus Oceanicis et Novo Orbe, Decades Tres, Petri Martyris Ab Angleria Mediolanensis (Coloniae, 1574)*.

<sup>3</sup>J. H. Elliott, "The Spanish Conquest and Settlement of America," *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, ed. Leslie Bethell (Cambridge: CUP, 1984) 1: 149-206, at p. 169; Samuel Eliot Morison, *The European Discovery of America: The Southern Voyages, AD 1492-1616* (New York: OUP, 1974) 200-04.

<sup>4</sup>See Arber, ed., *First Three English Books on America*, 50, 66, 69, 107, 110, 120, 130, 157, 187-89, *et passim*, for further references. See also Bernal Diaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, trans. J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963) 21, 37-38, 65, 98, 104-06, 122, *et passim*. More positive encounters between the Spanish and the Amerindians did occur in *De Orbe Novo Decades*: see Arber, ed., 87-88, 95, 98, 150-52, 166 *et passim*.

<sup>5</sup>"If speaking for someone else seems to be a mysterious process," Stanley Cavell has remarked, "that may be because speaking to someone does not seem mysterious enough"; Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 3-30, at p. 13. *De Orbe Novo Decades* started as a series of letters to influential figures in Italy, principally ecclesiastical dignitaries, and was eventually published as a collected whole in 1530. On Richard Eden see David Gwyn, "Richard Eden: Cosmographer and Alchemist," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 15 (1984): 13-34.

<sup>6</sup>Eden's translation does not differ significantly from the original Latin of Peter Martyr; the passage analysed here exists in *De Rebus Oceanicis et Novo Orbe, Decades Tres* 146-52. There is a modern translation by Francis Augustus MacNutt, *De Orbe Novo: The Eight Decades of Peter Martyr D'Anghera* (1912; rpt. New York: B. Franklin, 1970) 213-23. For example, the indented quotation cited above is rendered as "What thing then is this, Christians? Is it possible that you set a high value upon such a small quantity of gold? You nevertheless destroy the artistic beauty of these necklaces, melting them into ingots. If your thirst of gold is such that in order to satisfy it you disturb peaceable people and bring misfortune and calamity among them, if you exile yourselves from your country in search of gold, I will show you a country where it abounds and where you can satisfy the thirst that torments you" (220).

<sup>7</sup>On vagrancy in Europe see A. L. Beier, *Masterless Men: The vagrancy problem in England, 1560-1640* (London: Methuen, 1985); John Pound, *Poverty and Vagrancy in Tudor England* (Harlow: Longman, 1971); Penry Williams, *The Tudor Regime* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979) 196-206; Angus Calder, *Revolutionary Empire: The Rise of English-Speaking Empires from the Fifteenth Century to the 1780s* (London: Cape, 1981) 22-25; J. H. Elliott, *Europe Divided, 1559-1598* (London: Collins, 1968) 67-68. On the connection between the representation of landlessness in Europe and the Americas, see Stephen J. Greenblatt, "Invisible Bullets," *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988) 21-65, at pp. 49-50.

<sup>8</sup>See Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797* (London: Methuen, 1986) 144.

<sup>9</sup>Aphra Behn, *Oronooko, The Rover and Other Works*, ed. Janet Todd (Harmondsworth, 1992) 139-40. On the cultural stereotyping of the Irish see Joseph T. Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fionn-Ghael: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, Its Development and Literary Expression Prior to the Nineteenth Century* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1986).

<sup>10</sup>For a related discussion see Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) 279-400, at p. 377. Marx discusses speeches from Goethe's *Faust* and Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* specifically about the greed for gold.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Paul Turner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 86-87.

<sup>12</sup>For comment see Marx 377.

<sup>13</sup>Anthony Pagden, "The Savage Critic: Some European Images of the Primitive," *YES* 13 (1983): 32-45; Bernard Sheehan, *Savagism and Civility: Indians and Englishmen in Colonial Virginia* (Cambridge: CUP, 1980) 34.

<sup>14</sup>Sheehan 60-61.

<sup>15</sup>For analysis of a similar incident described in related terms see Hadfield 13-15; Samuel Eliot Morison, *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages, AD 500-1600* (New York: OUP, 1971) 237-38.

<sup>16</sup>See Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993) 17-24.

<sup>17</sup>For further analysis of types of laughter see Susan Purdie, *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) chs. 1, 3.

<sup>18</sup>On this distinction see Hulme, ch. 2.

<sup>19</sup>Pagden, *European Encounters* 21. See also Stephen J. Greenblatt, "Learning to Curse: Aspects of Linguistic Colonialism in the Sixteenth Century," Fredi Chiappelli, ed., *First Images of America: The Impact of the New World on the Old* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1976) 561-80.

<sup>20</sup>For details of Peter Martyr's life see MacNutt, trans., *De Orbe Novo*, "Introduction," 1-48.

<sup>21</sup>See Pagden, *European Encounters*, ch. 2; Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991) 31, 128-30.

<sup>22</sup>Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983) ch. 4. See also "Exodus," *CI* 20 (1993-94): 314-27.

<sup>23</sup>Pagden, *European Encounters* 69. I have altered plurals to singulars.

<sup>24</sup>Gwyn, "Richard Eden," 23-24. See also John Parker, *Books to Build an Empire*, ch. 4, for further details on Eden.

<sup>25</sup>Gwyn 21. On Northumberland's economic problems see C. S. L. Davies, *Peace, Print and Protestantism, 1450-1558* (St. Albans: Paladin, 1977) 284-87.

<sup>26</sup>Gwyn 27-28; John Ponet, *A Shorte Treatise of Politicke Power* (Strasbourg, 1556), sig. F7. On the "Black Legend" see William Maltby, *The Black Legend in England: The Development of Anti-Spanish Sentiment, 1558-1660* (Durham, N. C.: Duke UP, 1971).

<sup>27</sup>Gwyn 29-31.

<sup>28</sup>See n26 above. Compare Edmund Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, ed. W. L. Renwick (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970) 95 for similar sentiments.

<sup>29</sup>Pagden, *European Encounters*, ch. 3.

<sup>30</sup>*The Essayes of Michael Lord of Montaigne*, trans. John Florio (1603), 3 vols. (London: Everyman, 1910) 1: 229.

<sup>31</sup>The Latin text contains only three marginal glosses. One beside the description of the corpses in the temple; another when the king's son begins his speech; and another near his concluding remarks.

<sup>32</sup>See Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), for an analysis of European discussions of the human status of the Amerindians in the Sixteenth century and the reasons for their "defective" nature.

<sup>33</sup>On "good" and "bad" nature see Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man*, chs. 3-4.

<sup>34</sup>Reprinted in Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, vol. 8 (Glasgow: James MacLehose, 1904) 348-86. For analysis see Greenblatt, "Invisible Bullets" 21-39; Hadfield 6-10.

<sup>35</sup>L. K. Born, "The Perfect Prince: A Study in Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century Ideals," *Speculum* 3 (1928): 470-504; A. M. Kinghorn, *The Chorus of History: Literary-Historical Relations in Renaissance Britain, 1485-1558* (London: Blandford P, 1971) 268.

<sup>36</sup>Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man* 10-11.

<sup>37</sup>On Wyatt's rebellion see Anthony Fletcher, *Tudor Rebellions* (1968; rpt. Harlow: Longman, 1983) ch. 7.

<sup>38</sup>See, for example, Greenblatt, "Invisible Bullets"; Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne and Their Contemporaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983); Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* (London: Methuen, 1986).

<sup>39</sup>J. H. Elliott writes that "If the pre-conquest population of central Mexico fell from 25 million in 1519 to 2.65 million in 1568, and that of Peru fell from nine million in 1532 to 1.3 million in 1570, the demographic impact of European conquest was shattering both in its scale and speed," 202.