

On Reading Early Accounts of the New World*

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In an age often given to various dogmatisms, interrogative and skeptical habits of thought can teach us a great deal. For this reason, I was pleased to discover Andrew Hadfield's recent essay on "Peter Martyr, Richard Eden and the New World: Reading, Experience, and Translation." Hadfield opens his piece by asking, quite appropriately, "How should we read the early colonial literature of the New World?" (1), and while he does not discuss this question as thoroughly as he might, he nonetheless offers several cautionary notes that writers on the subject of American colonialism will ignore at their peril. Specifically, he urges us to be attentive to the "diversity of colonial responses to the New World," alleging that descriptions of early cross-cultural encounters could and did become "invested with different meanings in different situations" (1). Moreover, he stresses "the dangers of teleological reading," arguing that we must beware of interpreting any particular New World account solely in terms of the large-scale historical process we have come to call "colonialism" (2). Hadfield concludes by making the substantial claim that what early texts like Martyr's *De Orbe Novo* reveal is "serious confusion regarding the value of their own and other cultures"; consequently, "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" (19). Valuable points, to be sure—and refreshing in their lack of cynicism. What concerns me about Hadfield's conclusions is certainly not their open-endedness, which I admire; what concerns me is the possibility

*Reference: Andrew Hadfield, "Peter Martyr, Richard Eden and the New World: Reading, Experience, and Translation," *Connotations* 5.1 (1995/96): 1-22.

that in the very act of demonstrating how to read New World accounts more sensitively, Hadfield inadvertently falls back into an undue reliance upon models and categories which, according to his essay's own logic, we ought to regard with suspicion.

Before moving to his test case in Martyr's book, Hadfield positions himself comfortably in the recent critical posture that emphasizes openness to multiple textual significations and multiple colonial models. He cites the Myra Jehlen/Peter Hulme debate on the referentiality of "cannibalism" and quotes David Read on the hazards of "hypostatizing a single, stable version of colonialism out of the flux that surrounds the early English activity in North America" (1).¹ He claims, moreover, that he wishes "to supplement rather than challenge" readings of New World accounts composed in this spirit (1). And he does. Selecting an incident narrated by Martyr in the second decade of *De Orbe Novo*—an incident which, to my knowledge, has not been treated in detail before—Hadfield proceeds to offer an admirable précis and analysis of what he terms a "strange and fascinating confrontation" between Spanish *conquistadores* and native Americans during the early sixteenth century in what is now Panama (2).

Only a few relatively minor flaws mar this otherwise impressive analysis. For one thing, Hadfield might stress more emphatically that what principally prompts the second speech of King Comogrus's son (4, 8) is the need to answer convincingly the Spaniards' question regarding the "certeyne knowelege" upon which he bases his claims regarding a nearby region of gold.² Hadfield is right to focus on the interesting social analysis embedded within this speech, but his claim that its discussion of the Comogruans' ambition and aggression amounts to the affirmation of a "universal malaise" (8) seems something of an exaggeration. Yes, the Comogruans do turn out to be "both savage critics and participators within the world of savagery" (9), but to highlight this fact, as Hadfield does, is to suggest that the categories ought somehow to be mutually exclusive—that we should be surprised that they are not. We are thus drawn back within the bounds of what Lewis Hanke once called "the 'dirty dog' and 'noble savage' schools of thought" about the native inhabitants of America.³ And it is not at all clear that this is where Hadfield wishes us to be.

Second, Hadfield claims that we witness an “eccentric misreading” (7) when we see the Spaniards’ reaction to the first speech of King Comogrus’s son, the speech in which he condemns the Spaniards’ “hunger of goulde” (64v). But it is not necessarily true, as Hadfield alleges, that the Spaniards attend to the young man’s words “not, it seems, because of his forthright criticisms of their inordinate greed, but at the prospect of wealth beyond their wildest dreams” (4). It may be that the Spaniards do *both*. In other words, it is possible that they do indeed “ponder in theyr mindes, & earnestly consider his sayinges,” and that their subsequent transformation of his “rasshenes” into “myrth and urbanitie” (65r) signals a partial acknowledgment of the aptness of his censure.⁴ But this can still be followed by a resolve to continue on their obsessive quest for gold. My own view is that the Martyr/Eden text here is sufficiently opaque that we simply cannot know precisely how the Spaniards interpreted the son’s oration. We thus have an instance of one of the default tropes of New World discourse: terminological ambiguity.

Hadfield writes that the confrontation between the Spaniards and the Comogruans contains “seemingly confused and conflicting messages” (9), but it might be more accurate to say that the prevailing discursive models within which we tend to situate and interpret this confrontation predispose us to see it as confused and conflicted. Similarly, Hadfield wonders whether we should read Martyr’s description of the confrontation “as a piece of travel literature or as a specifically colonial text” (5)—as though these are the only two options, and as though it is self-evident exactly what these categorical terms mean. Thus, while Hadfield’s large point about the uncertain significance of many New World accounts is salutary and, in my view, accurate, his operating procedures nonetheless occasionally undermine this point by exhibiting a reversion to easily assimilable schematic oppositions and reified categories. Not that such oppositions and categories are readily avoided—far from it. But it seems incumbent upon Hadfield, given his opening and closing remarks, to attempt to eschew theoretical templates and conceptual patterning as much as possible, and certainly during the initial phases of textual analysis. I am tempted to wonder if even the celebrated “politics of identity and difference” (19) may not be too confining an overlay through which to grapple with narratives of cultural encounter.

As I said earlier, however, these concerns strike me as relatively minor. On the whole, Hadfield's study is admirably perceptive, as well as remarkably persuasive given its reliance upon a single illustrative example. Hadfield asks excellent questions throughout, and makes many valuable observations in passing, such as those regarding the semantic instability in Martyr's text consequent upon shifting pronoun usage (5), the interesting deployment of *De Orbe Novo* by John Ponet in 1556 as a tool for the cultivation of anti-Hispanism and anti-Marian sentiment (13), and the various ways in which Eden's translation and marginal glossing of Martyr's book inflect its narratives with propagandistic innuendoes and soften the outlines of its internal contradictions (14-17). He also explores the political positionings of both Martyr and Eden with an eye toward demonstrating their potential connections to the modes of discursive representation in *De Orbe Novo* (compilation) and *The Decades of the Newe Worlde* (translation); and while some of my earlier reservations about schematic thinking apply here as well, in general I believe this is a laudable project, and one well suited to Hadfield's skill as a careful respondent to complicated texts.

How, then, should we read the early colonial literature of the New World? Perhaps, first of all, by not invariably designating it "colonial" from the outset. This idea seems implicit in Hadfield's concluding comments regarding the ways in which early accounts of America often "register profound disquiet with colonial expansion and, perhaps more importantly, hopes of a sympathetic *rapprochement* with the New World" (19), but it never moves into the realm of explicit pronouncement. Indeed, Hadfield seems overly dependent upon "colonial literature" as an interpretive category, and might do well to employ blander, more neutral terms such as "encounter narratives" or "exploration accounts." Certainly the idea of "colonial discourse" stands in no immediate danger of losing its currency.

But what else? Hadfield stresses that we should read with caution, with care not to impose teleological structures upon the texts, with attentiveness to biographical and political contexts and to potential confusions and uncertainties, and with a willingness to go beyond simply moving "with or against the grain" (9, 19). But there is still more that we can do. As Hadfield and many others have recognized, early modern

writers on the Americas often insist on the “unclassifiable newness of the data” (11) they present to their readers; Jean de Léry, for instance, claims that he will “speak of things that very likely no one before me has ever seen, much less written about.”⁵ And though we can be sure that assimilative habits of thought and powerful cultural predispositions often condition the nature of the perception, representation, and interpretation embedded within these voyaging accounts, we should always also keep open the possibility that the early writers, in some places and at some times, find ways of challenging the confines of their particular spheres of thought. Perhaps, at least in the cases of Martyr and Eden (who never travelled to the New World and therefore could not claim eye-witness authority), expectations of thoughtful confrontation with inherited models and biases are misplaced or unrealistic. Perhaps not. But it does seem a corollary of Hadfield’s fine and open-minded investigation that we read early modern accounts of the New World with a willingness to suspend—if only temporarily—our overt critical presuppositions, and with a disposition to accept any invitations to consider, imagine, and respond to that world in all its unclassifiable newness.

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NOTES

¹The Jehlen/Hulme debate may be found in *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1993-94): 179-91. Hadfield quotes from Read, “Colonialism and Coherence: The Case of Captain John Smith’s *Generall Historie of Virginia*,” *Modern Philology* 91 (1994): 446.

²I quote from Pietro Martire d’Anghiera, *The Decades of the Newe Worlde or West India*, trans. Richard Eden (London, 1555; facsimile rpt. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1966) 65v. Hereafter I will use in-text citations.

³Hanke, *All Mankind Is One: A Study of the Disputation Between Bartolomé de Las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda in 1550 on the Intellectual and Religious Capacity of the American Indians* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois UP, 1974) 9.

⁴I have altered past to present tense in the quoted passage.

⁵Léry, *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil* (Geneva, 1578), trans. Janet Whatley (Berkeley: U California P, 1990) lxi.