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Twentieth-Century Reader**



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Discourses on Colonialism: Bernal Díaz, Las Casas, and the Twentieth-Century Reader



Rolena Adorno

“Y quiero volver con la pluma en la mano, como el buen piloto lleva la sonda por la mar, descubriendo los bajos cuando siente que los hay, así haré yo en caminar, a la verdad de lo que pasó, la historia del cronista Gómara. . . .” Bernal Díaz, *Verdadera historia . . .*, cap. XVIII.

These words of Bernal Díaz del Castillo long have been considered the motto of his historiographic project. Readers have agreed that the somewhat contentious nature of the *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* is owed to Bernal's desire to correct Francisco López de Gómara's *Historia de las Indias y la conquista de México* [1552] and to share a spot in the historical limelight with Hernán Cortés. The most recent editors of Bernal's work (Carmelo Sáenz de Santa María and Miguel León-Portilla), answer the question, “Why did Bernal Díaz write his history?” by emphasizing his polemic against Gómara. When Sáenz (*Historia de una historia: la crónica de Bernal Díaz del Castillo* [Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1984], p. 50) introduces Bernal Díaz and talks of polemics, he refers to Gómara, Illescas y Giovio: “Desde este punto la crónica adquiere cierta vibración de polémica que le va muy bien;” he adds: “Polémica desde luego más aparente que real, pues no se puede negar que ni don Francisco López de Gómara ni mucho menos la pareja Illescas-Giovio merecen los regaños de nuestro escritor.” He mentions Las Casas only incidentally, noting that Bernal was present at the 1550 Valladolid debate

between the Bishop of Chiapas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda on whether just war could be waged in the Indies, and he suggests that the *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* [1552] was in Bernal's library (pp. 97, 122). Choosing to leave polemics aside in his attribution to Bernal of reasons for taking up the pen, León-Portilla in his recent edition of the *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (Madrid: Historia-16, 1984) omits any reference to Las Casas, even as he discusses Sáenz's account. León-Portilla gives as his own explanation of Bernal's literary vocation three factors: the great contributions Bernal and his fellows had made to the conquest, the small compensation he had received for those efforts, and the desire that his deeds be perpetually remembered ("para que su dicho tuviera perenne validez") ("Introducción," p. 47).

Scholars who have looked into Bernal's strident and withering criticism of Gómara on matters of historical content and rhetorical style have discovered Bernal's comments to be either exaggerated or misplaced. The historian Ramón Iglesia's examination of the works of both revealed that on matters of substance Bernal and Gómara often gave virtually identical accounts and, in others, Bernal attributed to Gómara statements that he in fact had not made.¹ Iglesia suggested that Bernal may have used Gómara to challenge Cortés, by criticizing the historian who took down the account which Cortés had given him (p. 28). Iglesia also suggested that Bernal was jealous or contemptuous of Gómara because the latter's social and literary status ("clérigo," "gran retórico") lent him an authority considered false by Bernal because it did not depend on eyewitness participation and yet was capable, thanks to the prestige of the professional historian, of undermining the truer authority of the eyewitness account (p. 29). Of interest in this regard is the literary scholar Robert Lewis's more recent exploration of Bernal's criticism of Gómara's language and style. Here we learn that Gómara did not indulge in the obfuscating rhetorical pyrotechnics of which Bernal accused him, but that Gómara instead adhered to a style of simplicity and clarity that Bernal presumably could have admired.² Gómara's status as a professional

¹ Ramón Iglesia, "Las críticas de Bernal Díaz del Castillo a la "Historia de la Conquista de México" de Francisco López de Gómara," en "Dos estudios sobre el mismo tema," *Revista Tiempo* (México), 1940: p. 30.

² Robert Lewis, "Retórica y verdad: los cargos de Bernal Díaz a López de Gómara," *De la crónica a la nueva narrativa mexicana*, Merlin H. Forster y Julio Ortega, eds. (Oaxaca, México: Oasis, 1986), pp. 37-47.

historian and his evident literary skill made him a hard act to follow, in Bernal's view, but a necessary one. Since some of Bernal's most strident accusations have been revealed to be exaggerated or unfounded, it behooves us to seek the motives behind those accusations, and reflect on why those motives have not been interrogated previously. In the first case, one hopes for a fuller and more accurate account of Bernal's outlook on the memorialization in written histories of the dramatic events in which he had participated; in the second, some insight into the sensibilities (not to say ideologies) of Bernaldian scholarship. Although such reflection and the conclusions to be drawn from it are the object of this study, it is necessary first to enter into Bernal Díaz's world and reconstruct the domain of his real and feigned battles.

Briefly, the discussion that follows will take this course: First, a more important adversary of Bernal than Gómara was Las Casas. The significance of this assertion is that it raises the stakes of Bernal's debate from the issue of "Who is the better historian of the conquest of Mexico?" to "Was the conquest of Mexico justified and do the veterans of its war deserve the reward of encomienda grants in perpetuity?" Secondly, this reading shifts Bernal's concerns from academic problems of historiography and rhetoric *per se* to their immediate and intimate relationship to the social and political problems affecting his own self-interest and personal welfare. My goal is to suggest some considerations that reflect less on Bernal's work as such than on the conditions of its emergence, and others, on the assumptions and biases of colonial literary scholarship.

Bernal Díaz wrote and revised tirelessly. Having begun his work sometime in 1551, he didn't put down his pen until 1568. Thanks to the critical edition prepared by Sáenz de Santa María, (Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, [Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1982]), that decades-long editorial process has been partially reconstructed. The juxtaposition of the earliest version, the Guatemala manuscript, with the one Bernal sent to Spain to be published (the so-called Remón manuscript as reconstructed with the aid of the 1632 published version and the Guatemala manuscript) (I, xxxvii, 1), provides access to Bernal's evolving conception of his work. With respect to Gómara, two observations are pertinent. The first is that Bernal was at work already when he came upon Gómara's *Conquista de México* (I, 33); the second is that, since Gómara's work was ordered withdrawn from circulation and prohib-

ited from further printings in 1553,³ Bernal's persistence in his attack on Gómara suggests either that he was unaware of the prohibition, or that, knowing about the suppression, he had little confidence that it would be effective or that the damage it had caused already was irrevocable. (He suppressed from the later manuscript his statement that the Council of the Indies should expurgate Gómara's history [I, 33]). The question that scholars have not asked or answered regarding Bernal's attack on Gómara is, "What damage and to whom did Gómara's work contribute?" In my view, Bernal's complaint that the indispensable and tireless heroism of the conquistadors was eclipsed by Gómara's overglorification of their captain is necessary but insufficient to explain Bernal's ire. His passion on this point is well articulated; he blamed Gómara and Cortés's son, "el marqués que ahora es," for this emphasis: "toda la honra y prez della [su historia] la dio solo al marqués don Hernando Cortés, e no hizo memoria de ninguno de nuestros valerosos capitanes y fuertes soldados" (I, 36).

I would suggest that Bernal's writings and rewritings were an attempt to keep abreast of the pace of events that profoundly threatened his economic well being. The policies and politicking concerning the institution of *encomienda* in the 1540's and 1550's can further explain his complaints about Gómara and, at the same time, define his rage against another, more threatening adversary who looms larger in his work but is named less, Fray Bartolomé de las Casas.

I. Bernal Díaz reads Gómara

What is behind Bernal's criticism of Gómara? He describes the situation I want to analyze in his famous Chapter 18, the final version of which is entitled "De algunas advertencias acerca de lo que escribe Francisco López de Gómara, mal informado, en su historia." Bernal's principal task, as revealed by the points on which he attacked Gómara, was to refute the information or impression given by Gómara that the conquistadors killed great numbers of Indians and destroyed many cities and temples. He accuses Gómara of sensationalism, in order to appeal to the lowest common denominator of his readership, and of deliberately ignoring the

³ The royal decree of 17 November 1553 is reproduced in José Torre Revello, *El libro, la imprenta y el periodismo en América durante la dominación española* (Buenos Aires: Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, 1940), p. x.

accounts that the “true conquerors” and the discerning readers know to be true:

“Pues de aquellas grandes matanzas que [Gómara] dice que hacíamos, siendo nosotros obra de cuatrocientos soldados los que andábamos en la guerra, que harto teníamos de defendernos que no nos matasen o llevasen de vencida; que aunque estuvieran los indios atados, no hiciéramos tantas muertes y crueldades como dice que hicimos; . . . También dice que derrotamos y abrasamos muchas ciudades y templos, que son sus *cues*, donde tienen sus ídolos, y en aquello le parece a Gómara que place mucho a los oyentes que leen su historia, y no quiso ver ni entender cuando lo escribía que los verdaderos conquistadores y curiosos lectores que saben lo que pasó, claramente le dirán que en su historia en todo lo que escribe se engañó, y si en las demás historias que escribe de otras cosas va del arte del de la Nueva-España, también irá todo errado” (I, 34).

Bernal’s comprehensive assertion that the conquistadors were not as destructive as Gómara claims is the first clue which suggests that the simple correction of factual errors for the sake of history is not the only agenda of the old war veteran; at stake was the personal and collective history of the conquistadors.

Among the specific errors of Gómara that Bernal enumerated was the account of the treachery of Montezuma’s captain Cualpopoca and his execution by burning at the stake: “También dice que cómo Cortés mandó quemar un indio que se decía Quezalpopoca, capitán de Montezuma, sobre la población que se quemó” (I, 34). Nevertheless, Gómara’s account of that episode in Chapters 87 and 88 of the *Historia de la conquista de la Nueva España* (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1979, [pp. 139-140]) is very nearly identical to that of Bernal but for one element: a casual concluding observation by Gómara that raises the issue of the right of conquest. Although Gómara presented the burning of Cualpopoca as the just punishment of a traitor who had confessed his guilt to Cortés, and described in an additional chapter the treachery which Cualpopoca had carried out at Montezuma’s command, Gómara concluded his account by noting that the Aztec captain and his collaborators were executed publicly without native protest or incident: “y así, se quemaron públicamente en la plaza mayor, delante todo el pueblo, sin haber ningún escándalo, sino todo silencio y espanto de la nueva manera de justicia que veían ejecutar en señor tan principal y en reino de Moteczuma, a hombres extranjeros y huéspedes” (p. 140).

Given the scrupulous care that Gómara took in showing that this sentence was executed for just cause (Gómara tells how Cualpopoca's treachery was confirmed by letters sent from Pedro de Hircio to Cortés at Cholula [p. 140]), there is only the slightest cause for Bernal's uneasiness upon reading this passage; it is found in the last line of Gómara's account, cited above: those responsible for killing a captain of the Mexican lord in his own kingdom were foreigners and outsiders.

The comment is an answer to one of the many questions posed in the just war debate, "Did the Spanish have the right to invade the dominion of a sovereign lord who has not offended any Christian prince?" Bernal, like Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and Gómara, would say yes. Las Casas would say no, pointing to the authority of natural law. According to Las Casas, it was unlawful to war against the princes of kingdoms who had never attacked one's own.⁴ In his most strident condemnations to the wars of conquest, Las Casas challenged the legal prerogative of the Spanish monarch by seeking theoretical support in the Thomist theory of natural law, as exemplified in this conclusion: "Tienen todas éstas sus reinos, sus señoríos, sus reyes, sus jurisdicciones, altas y bajas, sus jueces y magistrados y sus territorios, dentro de los cuales usan legítimamente y pueden libremente usar de su potestad, y dentro dellos a ningún rey del mundo, sin quebrantar el Derecho natural, es lícito sin licencia de sus reyes y de sus repúblicas entrar, y menos usar ni ejercitar jurisdicción ni potestad alguna" (p. 489).

By implicitly answering a just-war question, Gómara had implicitly and effectively raised it. Reading Gómara's tendentious narration, Bernal Díaz smarted from the addition of insult to injury. At the same time as he felt the need to provide a corrective to the view that the war of conquest was won by Cortés alone, and thereby secure his own place in history—and on the encomienda—, Bernal was confronted by increasing criticism about the justice of the conquest which was being translated into legislation limiting the prerogatives of encomenderos. Thanks now to Gómara's history, Bernal was not given his historical due as a conquistador and, at the same time, the integrity of the conquest itself was inadvertently but effectively undermined.

On the first point, Bernal worked hard to enlarge history's pur-

⁴ Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, "Tratado de las doce dudas," *Obras escogidas de Fray Bartolomé de las Casas*, t. V, ed. Juan Pérez de Tudela Bueso, Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, t. CX, Madrid: Atlas, 1958, pp. 486ff.

view to include himself. A decisive experience in this regard had occurred during his 1540 trip to Spain with Cortés. At one of the sessions of the Council of the Indies which Bernal attended, the *fiscal* Villalobos objected to the privileges requested by Bernal because “el dicho Bernal Díaz no había sido tal conquistador, como decía, ni le habían sido encomendados los dichos pueblos por servicios que hubiese fecho.”⁵ Bernal did not dignify the accusation with so much as a reference to Villalobos when he described his 1540 visit to Spain (Chapter 201). Nevertheless, the accusations of Villalobos, compounded by the silences of Gómara, no doubt gave particular urgency to his literary project. Thus, in one of the last chapters of the *Historia verdadera* (I, 661-662), Bernal listed all the battles in which he claimed to have fought, and after railing against Gómara, he declared: “Así que parte me cabe desta loa de Cortés;” “así, que de todas sus hazañas me cabe a mí parte dellas, pues yo fui en le ayudar;” “mas aún no me alabo tanto como yo puedo y debo” (I, 660). Apart from creating a dialogue with allegorical Fame (Ch. 210) and responding to charges that he had praised himself too much, he replied that the viceroy Antonio de Mendoza and Cortés had written to the emperor in his praise and that he, not unlike Julius Caesar, was duty-bound to write his war memoirs (I, 659-660).

Yet, correcting his self-portrait was much easier than controlling the damage being done to the historical project of the conquest. Bernal's very real, very deep ire against Gómara was in part a product of the conquistador's frustration at the harm that the written histories did the conquistador/encomendero's cause. Thus, when Bernal harangued against Gómara and others for not having been present at the conquest, his real complaint was not that they could not “get their facts straight,” but that they could not share the conquistadors' point of view nor write about them in an appropriately sympathetic manner. That is why, in Bernal's view, they presented accounts—be they accurate or inaccurate in detail—which missed the mark (“no aciertan”) because their narratives did not capture the perspective, or therefore reflect the interests, of the veterans who had fought the war. Examining Las Casas's activism, we can better understand additional dimensions of Bernal's criticism of Gómara and, at the same time, raise the issue of the

⁵ Carmelo Sáenz de Santa María, “Introducción crítica a la “Historia verdadera” de Bernal Díaz del Castillo” (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1967), p. 85.

generally overlooked importance of Las Casas—indeed of the whole conquest debates of the 1540's and 1550's—to Bernal's literary vocation and production.

II. Bernal Díaz reads Las Casas

As I hope to show, the just war debate was not a generalized and self-evident background to Bernal's literary activity but rather the very platform on which it unfolded. Shifting the emphasis on Bernal as soldier and historian to that of encomendero and polemicist, we will examine the few but crucial points in Bernal's narrative where Las Casas himself is brought into the discussion. The first is the episode of the military encounter at Cholula (Ch. 53); the second, the account of the killings that Alvarado incited during the fiesta of Toxcoatl when Cortés (and Bernal) were on the coast confronting Pánfilo de Narváez (Chs. 125-126); the third is Bernal's recreation of the Las Casas-Sepúlveda debate in 1550 (Ch. 211).

The encounter of the Spaniards and the Cholulans was the subject of many diverse opinions and much controversy. Opinions ranged from the Dominican Aguilar's accusation that Cortés had killed innocent Cholulans carrying water and wood, to Muñoz Camargo's praise for the triumph of his compatriot Tlascalans, allies of Cortés. Bernardo Vázquez de Tapia had been the first to accuse Cortés of wrongdoing in the case (Sáenz 1967: pp. 57-58) and Las Casas published a scathing account of the episode in his *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (in *Obras escogidas de Fray Bartolomé de las Casas*, V [Madrid: Atlas, 1958], pp. 134-181).

Bernal defended the Spanish cause at Cholula and in Chapter 52, he prepared the reader to interpret those events according to his point of view by conveying, through the lords of Cempoal, that the Cholulans were known as traitors, as friends of Montezuma (I, 116). His title to Chapter 53, in which he narrates the event, makes the point: "Cómo tenían concertado en esta ciudad de Cholula de nos matar por mandado de Montezuma, y lo que sobre ellos pasó." Bernal recreated the events that came to be known as the massacre of Cholula but to which he referred as "el peligro de lo de Cholula" (I, 661) in great detail. Even including the detail that Cortés warned the treacherous Cholulan enemies before attacking them, all the narrative elements added up to exemplary conditions and causes by which a war could be waged justly, according to the

viewpoint on the just war offered by Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (*Democrates segundo o de las justas causas de la guerra contra los indios*, ed. Angel Losada [Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1951]) and obviously approved by Bernal. The Spaniards defeated the Cholulans, stopped the ally Tlascalans from their excessive looting, made peace with the Cholulans and established a lasting friendship with them (I, 158-166). The war produced the desired result not only in Cholula but throughout New Spain, for word of the Spanish triumph spread throughout the country: “desde allí adelante, nos tenían por adivinos, y decían que no se nos podría encubrir cosa ninguna mala que contra nosotros tratasen, que no lo supiésemos, y a esta causa nos mostraban buena voluntad” (I, 166). Clearly, Bernal sought to communicate here that the triumph at Cholula was a major moral victory as well as a crucial turning point in the entire conquest; henceforth, the bearded white strangers would be more respected and feared than ever before.

In addition to telling how and why this attack on the Cholulans was carried out, Bernal adds a “footnote” to this chapter which confirms his position that this conquest was just. After having told how the Spaniards were to have become sacrificial victims (their thighs and arms and legs to become sacrifices and their entrails and carcasses to be eaten by caged snakes, serpents, and tigers), Bernal closed the case of Cholula by telling how the conquistadors broke open the cages containing potential sacrificial victims and how Cortés ordered the Mexican captives to return to their homelands and exhorted the Cholulans to cease the barbaric practice of human sacrifice. According to Sepúlveda’s point of view both in his *Democrates segundo* (p. 62) and in his oral intervention in the Valladolid debate, crimes against the innocent constituted one of four principal causes by which a just war could be waged against those found guilty of such acts. Bernal’s exploitation of Cholulan savagery, and his emphasis on their incorrigible barbarism (after Cortés’s exhortation that they cease the practice of human sacrifice, Bernal comments: “Mas ¿qué aprovechaban aquellos prometimientos que no lo cumplían?” [I, 166]), underscores neatly the narration of the episode with an argument for its justification.

Before Bernal concludes this chapter, however, he brings Las Casas to center stage and attacks him for being one of those who reports what he has not seen. Bernal cites a Franciscan panel of inquiry and the opinion of Las Casas’s old enemy, Fray Toribio

Motolinía, to refute the account of the Cholula encounter which the influential Dominican bishop offered in the *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*. Significantly, the Cholula and Toxcoatl episodes were the ones that Las Casas singled out to characterize and condemn the entire conquest of Mexico. Not coincidentally, Bernal openly disputed Las Casas's accounts in his own narration of them.

Bernal claimed that Las Casas attributed the Cholulan killings to the conquistadores' lust for violence: "porque afirma y dice que sin causa ninguna, sino por nuestro pasatiempo y porque se nos antojó, se hizo aquel castigo . . ." (I, 166). Interestingly, Bernal's accusations against the Dominican sound remarkably like one he made against Gómara: "Pues desde que tornamos a conquistar la gran ciudad de México e la ganamos, tampoco dice [Gómara] los soldados que nos mataron e hirieron en las conquistas, sino que todo lo hallábamos como quien va a bodas y regocijos" (I, 35). What galled Bernal was the accusation, made by a defender of the conquest and its principal antagonist (both of whom obviously were unable to sympathize with the soldiers' hardships), that the soldiers acted frivolously, as if enjoying easy times, and wantonly, as if unaffected by pangs of Christian conscience.

Las Casas did not in fact attribute the massacre at Cholula to the soldiers' wanton lust for violence, as Bernal had stated of him. Rather, the Dominican criticized the Spanish decision to carry out an exemplary punishment: "acordaron los españoles de hacer allí una matanza o castigo (como ellos dicen) para poner y sembrar su temor e braveza en todos los rincones de aquellas tierras. Porque siempre fue ésta su determinación en todas las tierras que los españoles han entrado, conviene a saber: hacer una cruel e señalada matanza porque tiemblen dellos aquellas ovejas mansas" (Las Casas 1958: t. V, p. 148). As we have seen, Bernal subsequently defended this tactic as necessary and extraordinarily successful. His refutation of Las Casas consisted in an eloquent and dramatic defense of the exemplary punishment argument while refusing to acknowledge that this was the precise source of Las Casas' criticism.

Sáenz (1967: p. 58) observed that this was one of the very few chapters that Bernal did not submit to extensive rewriting, unlike his usual practice, although Fray Alonso Remón, the Mercedarian editor of the work as published in 1632, suppressed lines he considered too bluntly critical of Las Casas, such as the following: "Y

[Las Casas] aun dícelo de arte en su libro [la *Brevíssima*] a quien no lo vio ni lo sabe, que les hará creer que es así aquello e otras crueldades que escribe, siendo todo al revés e no pasó como lo escribe" (I, 166). According to Sáenz's comparison of various versions of the text, Bernal himself excised statements which emphasized his ire against the Bishop of Chiapas.

Although Bernal and his first editor did not wish to seem too contentious with respect to Las Casas, it is clear that, for Bernal, refuting the arguments that the Dominican represented achieved great importance. When Bernal refuted Gómara, it was by his own testimony alone, pitting the word of the participant and eyewitness against that of someone who was not present during those events. When he refuted Las Casas, the stakes shifted from the eyewitness/outsider opposition to include as well that of secular versus religious authority, and Bernal made sure to bring religious authority to his side. Relying on the authority of the Franciscans and Motolinía, Bernal shared the conviction that if the Spaniards had been killed at Cholula, New Spain would have been a long time in conquering, with the result that the natives would still persist in their idolatries. To Las Casas' old enemy Motolinía he attributes similar sentiments: It would have been good if the killing could have been avoided, but since it could not, at least the goal of the evangelization and salvation of the native populations was served (I, 167).

Refuting Las Casas' account of the massacre that took place during the fiesta of Toxcoatl was more difficult because Bernal did not have his own authority as an eyewitness on which to rely. In Las Casas' account, the Spaniards attacked this gathering of "toda la flor y nata de la nobleza de todo el imperio de Montezuma" without provocation: ". . . dicen "¡Santiago y a ellos!" e comienzan con las espadas desnudas a abrir aquellos cuerpos desnudos y delicados e a derramar aquella generosa sangre, que uno no dejaron a vida: lo mesmo hicieron los otros en las otras plazas" (V, 149). Las Casas summarized his account, calling it an event that filled the people of those kingdoms with anguish and mourning from now till the end of the world: "y de aquí a que se acabe el mundo, o ellos del todo se acaben, no dejarán de lamentar y cantar en sus areítos y bailes, como en romances (que acá decimos), aquella calamidad e pérdida de la sucesión de toda su nobleza, de que se preciaban de tantos años atrás" (V, 149).

Bernal's account is interesting because it includes an internal cri-

tique of Alvarado's instigation of the killings by a stern and outraged Cortés. Alvarado defended himself by arguing that he had simply made a preemptive strike against the planned treachery. Bernal made two subsequent additions to this chapter, obviously in response to the polemic surrounding this episode, to assure the providential character of the outcome. He claimed that miraculous visions of Santiago and the Virgin Mary had appeared to the Mexica, causing them to cease their resistance; thus, he asserted, many lives were spared (I, 272). The other is Bernal's refutation of Las Casas' interpretation of the event. As in the previous case, Bernal attributed to Las Casas an accusation he did not in fact make. In the *Brevíssima* (V, 149), Las Casas condemned the Spaniards for using the opportunity of the fiesta to impose an exemplary punishment to frighten the Mexicans. Bernal said that Las Casas attacked Alvarado for greed; the old soldier refuted this as being untrue (I, 272). Without reference to Las Casas' position on the preemptive strike and exemplary punishment, he went on to cite that precise tactic as essential (I, 272).

Bernal no doubt declined to confront Las Casas head-on on this issue because, as we have noted, it was central to the just war debate. While Las Casas was Bernal's most threatening and formidable opponent in the real debate (the one centered on the justice of the conquest), his refutation of Las Casas consisted in acknowledging and simultaneously belittling his opposition, referencing him only a few times and attributing to him accusations which Bernal found most easy to refute.

The sheer weight of Bernal's concerns for Las Casas and the Lascasian point of view can be demonstrated and understood by the fact that Bernal, back in Spain and at court, was present at the official debate organized by the Council of the Indies to determine the just means of conquest and colonization. Bernal devoted the penultimate chapter of his book, in its final version, to the historic meeting devoted to the determination, as the theologian Domingo de Soto (in Las Casas, V, 295) summarized the dispute, "si es lícito a Su Magestad hacer guerra a aquellos indios antes que se les predique la fe, para subjectallos a su Imperio, y que después de subjectados puedan más fácil y cómodamente ser enseñados y alumbrados por la doctrina evangélica del conocimiento de sus errores y de la verdad cristiana." Bernal, interested not in wars of conquest to be carried out in the future but in the rewards rightfully earned

by those who participated in conquests of the past, referred to the topic under debate as grants in perpetuity: “el repartimiento perpetuo” (I, 655).

Although there are no summary accounts of the discussion on granting *repartimientos* in perpetuity on which Bernal was called in to testify, he did leave Spain with a series of royal decrees granting him favors and apparently leaving his desire and need for compensation satisfied (Sáenz 1967: pp. 88-90). Having met face to face the power of Las Casas and his arguments against the justice of the conquest and therefore against those who would be its principal benefactors, Bernal discovered that his own interests needed to be protected in every way possible. The fact that Bernal took up the writing of his *Historia verdadera* the year after his return from Spain and the Valladolid debate is suggestive circumstantial evidence of what we find in the work: the need to refute any interpretation of the conquest of Mexico that would undermine—deliberately or unwittingly—the justice of the victory.

Here again, Gómara was guilty of having assumed that the interpretation of that war as just did not have to be defended. He so stated in his *Historia de la conquista de México*, recommending to his readers on the subject Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, “the Emperor’s Chronicler, who wrote most elegantly in Latin on this topic, and thus you will be completely satisfied on this matter.”⁶ Having assumed that Sepúlveda’s views did and would prevail, Gómara left the good names of Cortés, whom he would exalt, and those of all his soldiers, open to the charges that were increasingly made against them.

In recounting the 1550 Valladolid meeting, Bernal recalled how his testimony had no effect, either on Las Casas’s and his supporters, or upon the representatives of the Council of the Indies: “. . . y no aprovechó cosa ninguna con los señores del real consejo de Indias y con el obispo fray Bartolomé de las Casas, y fray Rodrigo, su compañero, y con el obispo de las Charcas” (I, 657). Nothing was resolved at court, and subsequently, Bernal complained: “. . . de esta manera andamos de mula coja, y de mal en peor, y de un visorrey en otro, y de gobernador en gobernador” (I, 658).

⁶ Cited in Lewis Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America* [1949] (Boston: Little, Brown, 1965), p. 129.

III. Other encomenderos and Las Casas

As an encomendero, Bernal's concerns were typical of those men who, "proud of their achievements and unbothered by moral doubt, were nonetheless greatly perturbed in their old age by a growing governmental reluctance to allow them to pass on their status and wealth undisturbed to the next generation."⁷ Encomienda,⁸ the official consignment of groups of Indians to privileged Spanish colonists who were entitled to receive tribute and labor from them, was already established in New Spain by 1523; the legal distinction between encomienda and slavery was that the Indians were not regarded as property by their encomenderos. The wealth and size of Aztec populations facilitated large-scale exploitation of the natives, and gave rise to a group of individuals determined to become a hereditary colonial aristocracy. The encomenderos faced a monarch who was determined to reduce their pretensions; throughout the sixteenth century, as encomiendas reverted to the crown, a progressively greater share of Indian tribute was directed to the royal treasury, and encomienda was weakened, as the mid-century approached, not so much by Indian resistance as by the intensified application of royal law (Gibson pp. 61-62).

In the face of this decline, encomenderos commonly made their complaints known through that common forum of political action in the age of the absolutist monarchy, the "letter to the king." One such case is the letter of Ruy González, *conquistador viejo*, encomendero and *regidor* of the city of Mexico. I shall cite his 1553 letter to Charles V at length as a way of placing Bernal's laments in their most familiar setting. Several points are noteworthy: The first is that, as in Bernal, Las Casas is the chief target of González's considerable aggravation. Second, his arguments in favor of his interests as a conquistador/encomendero sum up in miniature the arguments presented in narrative form by Bernal; third, his complaints against the colonial administration mirror the *quejas* of Bernal. The colonial historians who collected this letter consider it "an excellent example of the genre of correspondence sent by the conquerors and early settlers of the colonies back to Spain"

⁷ Arthur P. Stabler and John E. Kicza, "Ruy González's 1553 Letter to Emperor Charles V: an annotated translation," *The Americas*, 42, No. 4 (April, 1986), 473.

⁸ The source of this summary is Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs under Spanish Rule: A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico, 1519-1810* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University, 1964), pp. 58-59.

(Stabler and Kicza, p. 473), and I too shall consider it exemplary of the discourse of the conquistador/colonizer.

The main topic of González's several-page epistle was the hardship and aggravation caused him by Las Casas' merciless antagonism of the encomenderos. He decried Las Casas' accusations that the conquistadors were tyrants and robbers and that the encomenderos should reject encomienda in perpetuity and provide immediate restitution of lands and goods to their Indian owners in order to save their own souls (p. 476). Particularly vexatious was the *confesionario* which Las Casas had prepared for confessing encomenderos and merchants and which demanded full restitution of all lands and properties that were acquired (Las Casas, *Obras*, V, pp. 235-249). González accused Las Casas of overlooking the great good the conquistadores had done in making possible the salvation of the Indians while he apparently condemned them to hell for having done so. Having spent little or no time in New Spain, Las Casas himself neither understood nor knew what the conquistadores suffered, what they had achieved, nor anything about the conditions of the land and its peoples with which they had to deal (p. 476). In any case, in order to establish "los principios y fundamentos de nuestra desculpa e ynocencia," González reminded the king that the conquest had a legal basis, thanks to the capitulations granted to Diego Velázquez in 1518, among other royal decrees. Second, he asserted that the illegal rule of Montezuma over Mexico ("no era legítimo señor") justified the conquest; third, he reminded the king of the collaboration of "all the lords of Mexico," who gave their obedience willingly to Cortés and joined in liberating the Mexicans from tyranny. As a result Cortés honored their titles and jurisdictions as he had promised (p. 479). Fourth, he asserted, as we heard Bernal do implicitly at the end of the account of the massacre at Cholula, the sins of the native peoples justified the conquest: "esta gente era barbara [,] ydolatraca [,] sacrificadora, matadora de ynocentes, Comedora de carne humana, expurcissima y nefanda sodomia"); if cannibalism and other crimes against nature commonly practiced were not sufficient cause for them to lose their kingdom, the abuses and atrocities they committed during the war of conquest were (p. 478). Thus, royal titles of conquest, the just treatment of the natives, the destruction of an illegitimate and tyrannical rule, the suppression of many sins and the destruction of Satan's hegemony, and the preparation for the natives' conversion to Christianity rounded out González's list of just

causes for war and the just reward of encomienda. How, then, he asked rhetorically, could the conquistadores be vilified and the emperor's rights challenged by an activist pro-indigenous clergy?: "V. magd no tiene menos titulo que al patrimonio de los rreyes Vros antepasados de glorisa memoria y no quiera Dios que V. magd. sea el mas engañado ni se de oydo a los que ynorantemente en los pulpitos diziendo con bozes desentonadas lo que ny saben ni entienden" (p. 479). González's lament brings into sharp relief the animosity the encomenderos held for those who "ignorantly in the pulpit talk in strident voices of that which they neither know nor understand." González ended his letter with the kind of concern we heard from Bernal: Royal officials make and repeal laws at their whim; the friars arrange Indian affairs with no regard to the encomenderos' needs, and administrative and bureaucratic confusion reigns (p. 479).

Behind González's assessment were several years of legislation negatively affecting encomienda. Due to a major epidemic in 1545 which reduced the native population and labor supply by about one-third in New Spain, a substantial portion of all encomienda income was eliminated (Gibson, p. 62). In 1549, a number of royal decrees aimed at protecting Indians under encomienda were passed. The crown ruled that encomenderos could continue to receive tribute, but could no longer demand the personal services of the natives under their jurisdiction; with personal service in encomienda eliminated, the institution lost much of its economic power, which would be substituted by a system of forced labor.⁹ Indians were prohibited from being sent by encomenderos to work in the mines; they were no longer to be used as *tamemes*, or carriers. A further blow to the encomenderos was a 1550 decree ordering that encomiendas would automatically revert to the crown when the present encomendero left no heirs (Zavala, p. 101). In this setting, Las Casas made himself the greatest enemy of the encomenderos, declaring that there were two types of tyranny imposed by the Spanish over "those so innumerable republics." The first was the war of conquest; the second was encomienda, a "government of tyranny much more unjust than that to which the Hebrews were subjected by the Egyptian Pharaoh" (Cited by Zavala, p. 145).

⁹ Silvio Zavala, *La encomienda indiana* [1935], 2nd. ed. (México: Porrúa, 1973), p. 97; Gibson, p. 62.

Putting Bernal's work in relief against the writings of other encomenderos illustrates the kind of relations in which he was involved. The portrait that emerges responds to the final transformation of the old chivalric formula of the valorous vassal ever loyal to his king; his most dreaded enemies are no longer barbarous princes but bureaucrats. Royal vacillation and bureaucratic chaos meant only insecurity and hardship for the veteran of the conquest who expected to live out his life being served and supported by the heathens whose souls through a just war of conquest he had helped to save. This portrait is not a pretty one but with it in mind we come full circle to consider the question posed at the outset. Why has scholarship so readily taken Bernal's expressed motives—of correcting Gómara's accounts—at face value without giving more than lip service to the issue of Las Casas and the key debate of the sixteenth century in which he was not only implicated but also personally involved? For all the scholarly interest in Bernal Díaz, who is one of the most popular of all the chroniclers of the conquests, the oversight of so readily accessible a topic is striking.

IV. Critical Sensibilities

The answer to the question above implicates the way we as literary scholars have come to domesticate the concept of "the conquest of America." Through a process of atomization, we have bracketed off certain authors and certain works, isolating them somewhat arbitrarily from one another as well as from the negative moral judgments that we make so easily of some. Separating Bernal Díaz from his ideological compatriots Cortés and Ginés de Sepúlveda, instead of placing him alongside them, is but a single example of the effort to find heroes among the colonizers. At the same time, we have ignored until very recently the presence of the indigenous American voice in the discourses of colonialism; as a result, we are barely accustomed to seeking in our canonical texts the ubiquitous colonized native American, who is implicitly present in every colonialist discourse even when he is not mentioned.

Nevertheless, to have recognized the Amerindian as the absent term of the opposition is in itself insufficient as a means to better understand the dynamics of colonial discourse. It is, in fact, the dichotomous model (European/American, victor/vanquished, master/slave) that has petrified our understanding of the phenomena in question. With this statement, I hope it will be clear that

my objective in the case of Bernal Díaz is not to place him among the “villains” of conquest history as an exploitative encomendero but rather to add an essential and missing dimension to the overall portrait. The adventurous young soldier mesmerized by the fabulous sight of Tenochtitlan, the disgruntled, unappreciated old veteran, the conquistador who recalls with considerable eloquence and sympathy the person of Montezuma, and the aging colonial settler who wants to insure that the grants of Indian labor will be passed on to his descendents, are all facets of the same persona. Bernal Díaz, like most Europeans of those first postcolumbian decades who journeyed into the never-before-seen lands and colonized its peoples, can be characterized by a clear idea of what he hoped to gain and, at the same time, by a set of attitudes and series of insights that seem to confound and conflict with that simple and laudatory (or blameworthy) goal.

To have placed the site of Bernal’s polemics in his diatribe against Gómara has been to cast Bernal in the glow of a light very attractive to the twentieth-century mentality: the ordinary fellow (the common soldier and eye-witness reporter Bernal) pitting himself against the Goliath of the political and scholarly elite (Cortés and Gómara, respectively). Ramón Iglesia (pp. 25-26) acknowledged this contemporary sensibility of ours in his exploration of the question of why Bernal Díaz has been so favored in scholarship, Gómara so much maligned. Furthermore, we allow ourselves to think of Bernal Díaz, but never think of Hernán Cortés, as the hero of a marvelous adventure, thanks in good measure to that commonplace about Bernal’s alleged inspiration in the novels of chivalry.¹⁰

To make of Bernal a hero of the conquest and a hero of conquest historiography, to allow him to “win” by general acclamation over Gómara a battle of the pen and over Cortés a battle for fame is, in fact, to be seduced by Bernal’s own efforts at rhetorical persuasion—a rhetorical persuasion which is one of his truest—and obviously, most far-reaching—achievements. But there is more than innocence or ignorance in this figuration of historical char-

¹⁰ Particularly, Ida Rodríguez de Prampolini, *Amadises de América: la hazaña de Indias como empresa caballeresca* (México: Junta Mexicana de Investigaciones Históricas, 1948) and Irving Leonard, *Books of the Brave* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1949). See my critique of this literary commonplace in “Literary Production and Suppression: Reading and Writing about Amerindians in Colonial Spanish America,” *Dispositio*, vol. 10, nos. 28-29 (1985), pp. 1-25.

acters. Pitting Bernal directly against Gómara and indirectly against Cortés is the glue that holds in place this popular figuration of a popular hero.

What happens when we place the site of Bernal's literary and rhetorical battle at Las Casas's doorstep is quite another matter; our hero who excelled in arms and in letters is transformed into a self-serving contestant in the battle over other people's lands and lives. To call into play Bernal's concerns as an encomendero in effect removes the rose-colored glasses through which we have gazed at this charming old curmudgeon of a conquistador. The encomendero theme turns our preferred view of Bernal as a well-meaning but under-compensated and aging military veteran into that of a self-righteous encomendero who assumes that the crown's interest and his own are identical and whose concern for justice fails to include the rights of the vanquished. This figure, the enslaving *encomendero*, also plays a role in our contemporary sensibilities. Since it is an entirely negative one, it is suppressed. Worthy of note is the fact that Bernal removed a chapter from his original manuscript in which he had defended his participation in the taking and branding of Mexicans as slaves in New Spain (I, 668-675). The failure to interrogate and acknowledge Bernal's contentiousness against Las Casas is to silence the disagreeable nature of the polemics in which the author of the *Verdadera historia* was actually engaged.

Yet, as I indicated above, my goal here is not to relabel Bernal as a villain instead of a hero; it is to transcend the dichotomous characterizations of the captain versus the soldier and the professional historian versus the testimony of the participant by adding another opposition, that of encomendero versus the *indio tributario*. This additional opposition does not erase the others, but it successfully blurs their distinctions because in this case Bernal is not the underdog but the overlord. We should not be embarrassed to add this category, for we have transcended (although it does not always seem so) the rancors of the Valladolid debate. We can no more enrich our treatment of the cultural productions that originated out of the colonialist expansion of early modern Europe by overlooking patterns of experience that are repugnant to our sensibilities, any more than we can do so by raising such issues only for the sake of sending one more volley onto the battlefield of the sixteenth-century debate. The consideration of Bernal Díaz vis-à-vis Las Casas brings up directly and explicitly the problem of the rela-

tionship of the European conquistador and encomendero to the native inhabitant of Mexico. A close reading of Bernal demonstrates that he never forgot it, just as readily as a close reading of contemporary scholarship shows that we always have. In this respect, our view has been distorted, untrue to the problematics of the literary and discursive domain we have sought to know better. Restoring this aspect is not designed to undermine the old heroes as such, but rather to give a "truer account" of the dynamics at stake, to shift the grounds of investigation from a somewhat empty panegyric to a richer and fuller understanding of the discourses of colonialism.

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