

STEFANO PITTALUGA

THEMES OF LATIN LITERATURE ON THE NEW WORLD

Among the problems that explorers and missionaries, merchants and diplomats are forced to face and solve (travelers who go into unknown lands where natives are all the more fearful the more they are unknown and adopt incomprehensible customs and habits), the difficulties of linguistic communication with local populations are one of the most difficult obstacles. This is a subject on which the travelers insist in the stories contained in their reports (and journals), as well as the historians or the chroniclers who write the story of the explorations and describe the unknown lands, as well as the authors of literary texts whose themes are focused on those adventures and on the description of nature and of the inhabitants of those new worlds. Faced with the difficulty of giving space to new realities and of inserting foreign words into the lexical and formal structures of the Latin text, for the writer two possible solutions are opened, that is to say transcribing the foreign word as such, the first time it is used, giving an approximate meaning and a definition as close as possible to the truth; or "translate" it by analogy of meaning, but losing its specificity, in Latin terms understandable to the reader. Generally, in the travel writings (and not only) both possible solutions are adopted indifferently, but starting from the second Quattrocento the choice of pure transcription (and relative explanation) of the exotic words seems to prevail, according to the great lesson of Lorenzo Valla, who, with the axiom "nova res novum vocabulum flagitat", justified the use of words not attested in the *auctores*, if it was necessary to define realities unknown to antiquity.

And indeed, even for the early authors of Latin literary texts relating to the Discovery and the *Realien* of the New World the problem of the language proves to be decisive not only in a lexical perspective (in the sense of the direct use of the American lexicon in the Latin context), but also in the most committed terms of a reflection on the methods by which the events of the Discovery and of the new American reality were spread: this is especially true in the *Epistolario* and in the eight *Decades de Orbe novo* by Pietro Martire d'Anghiera (comprising 34 years of the history of geographical discoveries, from Cristoforo Colombo to Cortés), texts in which the attention to linguistic phenomena and to the innovative lexicon is well alive: an interest that Pietro Martire undoubtedly inherits from Lorenzo Valla and from Pietro Bembo. On this innovative line are also the reflections of Pietro Martire on the necessary ductility of the Latin expression, a language that reveals itself able to receive in its womb the "inusitata verba" that can descend from the technical and scientific vocabulary, as well as from the expressive and semantics forms belonging to a foreign language. But on his interest in Amerind linguistic phenomena and on the necessity of the use of neologisms Pietro Martire returns several times: I limit myself to mention *Decades* II, 1, 34-35, where, in reference to the events concerning Diego de Nicuesa, governor since 1508 of the Veragua region, between Panama and Costa Rica, Peter expresses himself in these terms: "[34] Find [scil. Nicuesa] that the language is far different from that of Hispaniola and Cartagena: in these regions the languages are different from those of the neighbors: in the Hispaniola, in fact, the king is called 'cacique', while in the province of Coiba [Cuba] is called 'chebí', elsewhere 'tibá'; in the Hispaniola 'the noble man' is called 'taino', in Coiba 'sacco', elsewhere 'iurá'. [35] Nicuesa (...) boarded (...) on that type of merchant ship that the Spaniards call caravel [*caravela*], commands that the cargo ships follow him from the sea; it actually conducts two birems, commonly called brigantines [*bergantinos*], that I, along with other types of boats and many other things, in the course of my story I intend to indicate with their vulgar names, so that one can understand more clearly what I want to say, without taking into account the biting accusations of pedantic men who seek the occasion to argue against the writers, since emerge, every day, many novelties to which antiquity, in its venerable greatness, could not leave real names ". From a linguistic point of view, Pietro Martire's commitment was, on the one hand, to record particular lexical forms (often not univocal)

of the different Native American languages and to indicate their meaning and translation in his Latin; and on the other hand, that of accepting directly into his own text, latinizing them, vulgarisms (mostly Iberianisms) and technicalities, such as *scoppetarius*, *canon*, *colubrina*, *caravela*, *bergantinus*, which for the "Ciceronian" purists ("qui se latinissimos they profitentur": *Dec.* VII 9) should have been expressed only through difficult and imprecise forms of paraphrastic interpretations. Having landed in Spain in 1487, where he remained until his death in 1526, Pietro Martire easily entered the Spanish cultural circles, coming into contact with both Italian humanists who had moved there, such as Lucio Marineo Siculo and the brothers Alessandro and Antonio Geraldini (that he knew well thanks to the common relations with the Roman humanist Pomponius Leto, and who were the preceptors of the sons of Isabella of Castile), and with the representatives of Spanish humanism. Among these, the most important exponent was certainly Antonio de Nebrija, with whom Pietro Martire entertained relations of friendship and intellectual closeness, as demonstrated, for example, the elegy of 1488 *Ad amicum Nebrissensem*, while Nebrija wrote for him the Preface to the 1516 edition of the first three *Decades*. The philological imprint and the strong lexicographical interest that characterize the production of Antonio de Nebrija, author of the *Dictionarium ex hispaniensi in latinum sermonem*, published in 1492, as well as a Latin grammar and a Castilian grammar, contributed to enriching culturally the young Pietro Martire, who, already permeated by the *studia humanitatis* in Italy, maintained regular contacts with Pomponio Leto and with the other main representatives of Italian Humanism. The attention that Pietro Martire dedicates to the aspects of the language and lexicon of Amerindian culture probably owes much to the influence of Nebrija's grammatical and lexicographical production, although he admits in his Latin neologisms of Castilian and Amerindian origin certainly to a greater extent than Nebrija. There are numerous *Decades'* passages in which this interest is conjugated with a strong naturalistic curiosity, as happens in the numerous lists of plants (for example the different varieties of *ages*, ie potatoes) that in the classifying structure are affected by the Plinian model. Faced with this attention to the lexical aspects of the Amerindian idioms, Peter does not hide the obstacles that made communication between Spaniards and Native Americans difficult: an example is the story of an episode through which he clarifies with etiological intent the meaning of the name of the Yucatan peninsula. Having disembarked in a vast and unknown land and welcomed with great hospitality, the Spaniards led by Francisco Hernández de Córdoba asked the inhabitants with signs and gestures what the name of that region was, and they replied (IV 1, 20-21): "' Yucatán ', which in their language means: ' I do not understand you '. Our people thought that Yucatán was the name of the region: therefore from this unimaginable fact it remained and will remain forever this denomination to the Yucatán ". Well, all this linguistic material, made up of the technical and scientific vocabulary borrowed from the Castilian vernacular and the Amerindian idioms, finds its place (in the *Decades*, but also in the *Epistolary*) in a ductile expressive and effective Latin form, in which archaisms and classical elements derived from the *auctores* are juxtaposed with postclassical and mediolatin lexical and morphological forms: but certainly his style is influenced by Sallustius and Livius for the narrative historiographic modules, while for the descriptions linked to the naturalistic sciences or medical, military and nautical techniques the predominant model is Pliny the Elder; but the landing of Columbus in the New World seemed to Pietro Martire a reduplication of the landing of Aeneas in primitive Latium (*Decades* I 2, 58): "They discover that here there are many kings, the ones more powerful of the others, as we read that the mythical Aeneas found Latium divided between various leaders, namely Latinus, Mezentius, Turnus and Tarchon, who were separated by narrow borders, and the remaining territories divided between tyrants. But I feel that our natives of Hispaniola are happier than those, as long as they embrace religion, because they are naked, without weights, without measures, without finally the money that brings death, living in the golden age, without laws, without fraudulent judges, without books and happy of their natural state they spend their life, not worried at all for the future ". This is a passage from which two themes destined to find great literary fortune and important developments in European thought emerge. Although barely hinted at, the idea of the identification of Christopher Columbus as a new Aeneas emerges

here, that is to say a mythological motif that would have covered all the literary production solicited by the Discovery (and in particular the epic poetry); and at the same time the interpretative line in a classical key of the oceanic voyage and of the American reality is affirmed. The other significant theme concerns the myth of the golden age, of the *aurea saecula* of the reign of Saturn, which Pietro Martire projected on the simple and mild society of the natives: this is a theme that he deduces from the first observations of the *Diary* with whom Columbus, fascinated by the encounter with the indigenous peoples and by the extraordinary beauty and novelty of a luxuriant nature, said to have reached the hearthly Paradise, which is placed, as theologians and philosophers affirm, "en end of the East ". On the other hand, in the eyes of an intellectual nourished by classical studies like Pietro Martire, the spontaneous vegetation, the simplicity and naturalness of life appeared rather like the return and the realization of the mythical *aurea aetas*, of life according to nature of which the classical philosophers and the ancient tales spoke. The application of the topical motif of the golden age to the state of nature of the indigenous people of the New Indies acquired in Pietro Martire the double meaning of a confirmation of the myth and of an explanation of a new reality: in his Eurocentric vision, in fact, the new world was a mirror image of the ancient world, in which classical myths were reflected, and at the same time assumed the same functions as an unknown manuscript, an unknown text that needed to be read and glossed with the proper tools of the humanist philologist. It was a bookish culture, of course, but if it is true that Pietro Martire never set foot in America, the historiographical method he used in the *Decades* (and which is also reflected in the *Epistles*) was founded, however, on finding, analysis and discussion. of the sources, so much that his works contributed in a decisive way not only to spread the knowledge of the new discoveries, but also to create new spatio-temporal coordinates that the European culture, with a process of reduction from the unknown to the known, tended to superpose to the space and time of myth (the location of the Earthly Paradise and the source of eternal youth, Atlantis, the golden age). Born in Verona in 1476 (or 1478), scholar, physician, philosopher, Girolamo Fracastoro wrote in 1421 the three books of the poem *Syphilis, sive de morbo Gallico*, which he published in 1430. Argument of the poem, composed in Latin hexameters, were the etiology, the symptoms and the therapy of that "mal franzese" (*morbus Gallicus*) that raged at that time in Europe since the time of the descent of Charles VIII in Italy (and therefore called by the French "mal di Napoli"). A topic that on the medical-scientific level had already been studied, among others, by Nicolò Scillacio (*De morbo qui nuper in Gallia defluxit in alias nationes* and *De novo morbo*) and by Ulrico di Hutten (follower of Luther and friend of Erasmus) , who in his *De Guaiaci medicina et morbo Gallico* (1519), the main scientific source of Fracastoro, had recommended the use of guaiac wood for the treatment of the disease. Moreover Fracastoro also knew the chapter of the *Sumario* of Oviedo that presented as certain the hypothesis that it was an endemic American disease, imported into Europe by the companions of Columbus; but in his poem Fracastoro reunites the hypothesis of environmental origin (endemic), with that of the inter-human contagion (later, in the treatise *De contagione et contagiosis morbis et eorum curatione*, he first elaborated the idea of the illness caused by living beings microscopic (seminal) that pass by infection from a sick person to a healthy one). In the poem he poetically masked the origin of the disease by resorting to the myth (he himself devised) of the young American shepherd Sifilo, who, unfaithful to Apollo Helios (ie to the sun), was punished with the horrible wounds that corroded his flesh; but the gods, placated by the repentance of Sifilo, taught him to cure himself with the guaiac, the holy wood that was found only in the New World. Even the reasons for the spread of the disease in Europe appear poetically transfigured: not the contagion with Indian women, but the divine curse is the cause of everything. In fact, having come to Haiti (the *Hispaniola* island identified with the biblical Ophyr), Columbus's companions kill a flock of parrots, birds sacred to Apollo; but a parrot escaped from the massacre prophesies to them that, by divine revenge, the conquest of those lands would have cost wars, shipwrecks, suffering and illnesses: above all the "infanda labes", which for the ancient sin of Sisyphus already affected the natives it would soon spread to the Old World. And it is the "cacique" himself of the "Indios" that indicates to the Spaniards the holy tree that, transported to Europe,

would have shown its miraculous healing properties. The first two books by Syphilis are explicitly didactic, as indicated by the very beginning of the poem (verses 1-12: "Qui casus rerum varii, quae semina morbum / insuetum ... / attulerint ... / ... / hinc canere ... / ... / incipiam ..."), which refers to the proemium of the *Georgics* of Virgil (verses 1-5: "Quid faciat laetas segetes, quo sidere terram / vertere, ... / conveniat, ... / ... / hinc canere incipiam ...") not only in the ad verbum quotation of "hinc canere incipiam", but also in the parallelism of the structures with the double incipient interrogative pronoun ("Qui ... quae ~ Quid ... quo"), and even in the refined enjambment between the first two verses. Next to Lucretius (the "semina" - a frequent word in Fracastoro - of v. 1 are, for example, of obvious Lucretian derivation), the linguistic and stylistic model to which Fracastoro refers is undoubtedly Virgil: from the epizootic death of the III book of *Georgics* (vv. 440 ss.) and from that of the bees of the fourth book derives the description of the ruinous effects of the disease in the book I of the *Syphilis*; and even here the reference is signaled by the recovery of the introductory verse of the didascallic tone of *Georg.* 3, 440 ("Morborum quoque te causas et signa docebo") in *Syph.* 1, 307 (Nunc ego te affectus omnes et signa docebo / contagis miserae ...). Didactic in the first two books, the poem takes on an epic tone, in the third and last book, where the model is definitely the *Aeneid*. Fracastoro never names Columbus and puts together episodes of the first and second voyages, which he probably knew from Pietro Martire and the *Sumario* of Oviedo, but the adoption of the epic code through the virgilian imitation allows him to realize the identification of Colombo as new Aeneas according to the direction already indicated by Pietro Martire. Thus the virgilian nocturne of *Aen.* 3, 147: ("Nox erat et terris animalia somnus habebat") introduces the prayer of the *dux* Columbus addressed to the moon of *Syph.* 3, 102 ("Nox erat et pura fulgebat ab aethere Luna"); and so the outline of the hills in the light of dawn makes the sailors of Columbus raise the double cry "earth, earth!" in *Syph.* 3, 123-127 ("... et iam clarus ab undis / surgebat Titan, humiles quum surgere colles / umbrosi procul, et propior iam terra videri / incipit. Acclamant nautae, terramque salutant, / terram exoptatam ..."), likewise the comrades of Aeneas had repeated at dawn the cry of greeting to Italy in *Aen.* 3, 521-524 ("Iamque rubescebat stellis Aurora fugatis, / cum procul obscuros collis humilemque videmus / Italiam. Italiam primus conclamat Achates, / Italiam laeto socii clamore salutant"). The recovery of virgilian themes and narrative and linguistic structures responded not so much to the need to embellish the form, but to a precise intellectual purpose: the use of the high register of the epic (in the third book) ennobled the enterprise of Columbus and projected into that rarefied atmosphere of the myth to which the great maritime enterprises of antiquity belonged: the journey of the Argonauts, the wanderings (and the "folle volo") of Ulysses, the wandering of Aeneas. On the contrary, the mythical transfiguration and the ease of poetic invention that characterize Book III of *Syphilis* are absent in the *De navigatione Christophori Columbi* by Lorenzo Gambara (1494-1586), published in Rome in 1581, which is the first Latin poem entirely dedicated to Colombo enterprise; the four books that compose it correspond respectively to the four voyages and respect as much as possible the historical verisimilitude. In fact, in the dedication to the cardinal Antoine Perrenot of Granvelle he explicitly affirms that he wanted to give to posterity, composing it in hexameters, the admirable and absolutely veridical history of Columbus's enterprises. The *De navigatione* therefore has in common with the epic genre the language, the versification and the rhetorical *ornatus*, but belongs to the historiographic genre as regards content: under this aspect it is a lucanian rather than a virgilian epic: it is versified historiography with didactic intentions, for which Gambara gathered informations from the different sources that followed one another in almost one hundred years of Colombian historiography: from Pietro Martire to Oviedo, from the *Mondo Nuovo* of Girolamo Benzoni to the *Historie* of Fernando Colombo and the *Historia general de las Indias* of López de Gómara. Yet, the beginning of *De navigatione*, in the allusion to the *Proemium* of the *Aeneid*, seems to provide an indication in the direction of the epic genre: I quote (1, 1-6): "Granvellane, virum referam, qui littora primus / ingentis tetigit Cubae novaque astra retexit / et freta tot quondam nostris incognita nautis, / nuper and inventas Cancri sub sidere terras. / Antoni Perenotte, sacri pars magna senatus, / accipe quae quondam iussisti carmina ...": "O Lord of Granvelle, I will tell of the

man who first touched the coasts of the vast Cuba and saw new stars, many seas once unknown and the lands just discoveries placed under the constellation of Cancer. O Antonio Perrenot, authoritative member of the sacred senate, deign to accept the poem you once ordered to write ... "[trad. Cristina Gagliardi]. And in fact the *Proemium* of the *De navigation* is all played on the reference to the first three verses of the *Aeneid* (*Aen.*1, 1-3: "Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris / Italiam fato profugus Laviniaque venit / litora, multum ille et terris iactatus et alto"), from which the motif originates of the "vir ... qui primus", of the landing at new "litora" and new "terrae". And at v. 6 ("... quae quondam ... carmen") also seems to hint at one of the four verses which, according to Donatus and Servius, would have been the real *incipit* of the *Aeneid* and which were expunged by Varius and Tucca (1 ab: "Ille ego, qui quondam gracili modulatus avena / carmen ..."). And yet, the virgilian "imitatio", although frequent and explicit throughout the poem, is rather a rhetorical and linguistic function, without recovering the structure and the modules of the epic: instead it is a text in which the theme of nudity devoid of malice, of simplicity, of the desire for peace of the natives is continually returned: a life according to nature that generates in the author a sort of nostalgia for a primitive and lost innocence, of an "aurea aetas" that the civilized man, made restless and proud from too much knowing, harassed by the uncertain future, tormented by the passing of time, envies to the "good savage". Because here the myth of the "good savage" seems to be present with all the philosophical and ideological implications that others would later develop. There is no doubt that the anxiety that transpires from the poem of Lorenzo Gambara is strongly connected with the crisis experienced by the second half of the sixteenth century following the great doctrinal and political controversies of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. To this anxiety of the eighty-year-old poet, to his desire for absolute certainties, is linked the strong providential sense of history, and therefore of the conquest of the Indies, which also emerges from Columbus's conviction (documented by his writings, but here repeated continuously) to be an instrument of divine Providence.

Virgilian inspiration and providential themes are also present in the *Columbeis* by Giulio Cesare Stella (1546-1616), printed for the first time in London in 1585, and then re-edited in Rome in 1589 with a good number of modifications and a "theological revision" by the Jesuit Francesco Benci, professor of rhetoric at the Collegio Romano. The *Columbeis*, which also in the title recalls the *Aeneis*, fully realizes that identification between Columbus and Aeneas that had been present in the intellectual consciousness of the Renaissance, but which had never been so explicitly declared. An epic poem in which the events of Columbus' first voyage (with some anticipation concerning the second voyage) are read in light of a continuous allusive game to the *Aeneid*, not only from the linguistic and rhetorical point of view, but also from that of the functions of the characters, of the narrative structure, of the internal logic of the story. I limit myself to citing the incipient line: "Bella ducemque cano, terris qui primus Iberis", which is not only a perfect cast of the first verse of the *Aeneid*, but presents the reuse of the motif of "qui primus", already used by Gambara too about Christopher Columbus. In this example of bembesco classicism, of "imitatio" that tends to the "aemulatio" of the great ancient model, in the continuous confrontation between the new and the ancient hero, Columbus tends to lose his historical outline and to assume the mythical meanings of Aeneas: as Aeneas also Columbus is guided by fate, or by Providence, to fulfill his great mission; like Aeneas, in medieval allegorical interpretation, Columbus also represents humanity in its continuous wandering; like Aeneas who is hindered by Juno, Columbus too has a supernatural enemy, Satan, the "monstrum Erebi", who intends to oppose his mission to evangelize the New World; like Aeneas with Dido, Columbus too falls in love with Queen Anacaona and finds the strength to start again, to complete the task to which he is called. While for a detailed analysis of the virgilian language, themes and structures in *Columbeis* it is appropriate to refer to the researches of Heinz Hofmann, I would like briefly to reflect on the spiritualistic intentions of the poem, which, especially in the second edition reviewed by Francesco Benci, respond to the missionary perspectives of the Society of Jesus. The name of the Order and that of its founder, Ignatius of Loyola, appear in Book II (verses 116-124 of the II edition): it is clear that *Columbeis* was

configured not only as a literary text , but also had a propaganda function for the missionary activity that the Jesuits led in the Indies starting from 1566. In this perspective, we need to consider the presence and meaning of Satan in the poem also in the light of Jesuitical thought. The discovery of America thus became the triumph of man over the Evil One, the triumph that allowed the militant Church to conquer to Christ the pagan souls of the natives, while the military expeditions conquered their lands.

And it is with *Columbeis*, and with the end of Humanistic and Renaissance thought, that a chapter of the literary fortune of the Discovery closes, wich goes from the attention to the historical events of the navigators and the political implications of their travels, to the classical coating of the Columbus enterprise, from the interest for the linguistic, naturalistic and social aspects of the New Indies, to the refined and complex literary and ideological meanings that characterize the epic poems of Colombian subject.