

## THE VIOLENCE OF DELIGHT: REIMAGINING THE HISTORY OF AMERICA IN THE NOVELS OF ABEL POSSE<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *It is said that Alexander the Great wept when he heard that there were an infinite number of worlds, for he had yet to become the master of one. Man's quest for conquest and domination goes back as far as human history itself, that is, his pursuit of happiness and pleasure has always been linked to vice and violence, and one place where this has been particularly evident is in the history of the discovery and colonization of the Americas. From here, the Argentinian writer Abel Posse writes The Dogs of Paradise (1983) and Daimon (1978), reimagining essential aspects about figures such as Christopher Columbus and Lope de Aguirre. The aim of this article is to examine Posse's way of rewriting the history of the Americas, while analysing the reasons why the desire of Europeans to destroy and feel superior because they can hurt "the other" was present in all key moments of human evolution. Historical and anthropological research such as the works of Tzvetan Todorov, Serge Gruzinski, Corin Braga, or Hugh Thomas, as well as philosophical concepts by G.W.F. Hegel, René Girard, Friedrich Nietzsche, or Blaise Pascal are drawn upon to show that history in Posse's novels was not only reinvented, but also forever changed by the Europeans' violent conquests in the New World.*

**Keywords:** *historiographic metafiction, Latin American literature, Abel Posse, violence, conquest, alterity.*

**Rezumat:** *Se spune că Alexandru cel Mare a început să plângă atunci când a aflat că există o infinitate de lumi, deoarece încă nu reuşise să cucerească nici măcar una dintre ele. Dorinţa omului de a cuceri şi a domina a fost prezentă în toate etapele istoriei umane; altfel spus, fuga sa continuă după fericire şi plăcere s-a împletit întotdeauna cu viciul şi violenţa, iar un loc în care acest lucru a fost mai mult decât vizibil a fost istoria descoperirii şi cuceririi Americii. Pornind de aici, scriitorul argentinian Abel Posse scrie The Dogs of Paradise (1983) şi Daimon (1978) şi rescrie aspecte esenţiale despre personalităţi ca Cristofor Columb şi Lope de Aguirre. Această lucrare îşi propune să exploreze metodele prin care Posse modifică istoria Americii şi să analizeze, în acelaşi timp, motivele pentru care plăcerea europenilor de a distruge şi de a se simţi superiori deoarece îl pot răni pe „celălalt” a fost prezentă în toate momentele cheie ale evoluţiei umane. Cercetări istorice şi antropologice precum cele scrise de Tzvetan Todorov, Serge Gruzinski, Corin Braga sau Hugh Thomas, precum şi concepte filosofice prezentate de G.W.F. Hegel, René Girard, Friedrich Nietzsche sau Blaise Pascal vor fi folosite cu scopul de a demonstra că istoria nu a fost doar rescrisă în romanele lui Posse, ci şi modificată pentru totdeauna de cuceririle violente ale europenilor în Lumea Nouă.*  
**Cuvinte-cheie:** *metaficţiune istoriografică, literatură latino-americană, Abel Posse, violenţă, cucerire, alteritate.*

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<sup>1</sup> This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitalization, UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P4-PCE-2021-1234.

### **The Earthly Paradise and Humanity's Attempts to Find It**

The history of the earthly paradise and the numerous attempts of people to find and regain it during their lifetime have strongly influenced the collective imagination over the course of human evolution. The earthly paradise, described as the ideal place where Adam and Eve lived happily, in peace, abundance and harmony with nature until the moment of original sin, is the Judeo-Christian version of a long series of sacred gardens and utopian islands prevalent in the Western imagination. In his *Garden of Eden in Myth and Tradition*, which follows his research on people's fears and the ways they protected themselves from the dangers of this world or the other, Jean Delumeau writes a *History of Paradise* and "revives the dreams of happiness" (1997, 5) that has prevailed in the Western culture between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries.

Starting from the very late Antiquity as a pagan myth, then suffering the Christian conversion in the Middle Ages and finally being rationalized more and more until becoming nothing else than a fiction in the Modern Era, this theme has been the guiding reason of many journeys which lead, instead, to the discovery of other new territories. However, for the purpose of this research, the only relevant ones will be those whose destination was the western edge of the world, more specifically those which followed the western route in search of the Indies or the earthly paradise and, as a result, reached Latin America.

"The nostalgia for the Garden of Eden, missionaries' belief that the eschatological times are near, the will of spreading Christianity and the desire of finding more gold, precious stones and other rare products conjugated for pushing travellers, monks, sailors and conquerors towards distant horizons" (Delumeau, 1997, 198).

Travelling west, the explorers believed that they would circumnavigate the earth and thus reach the Far East, where the medieval geographers located the earthly paradise. The New World they discovered between these two extremes confirmed, at least at first sight, their hopes of the existence of this blessed land. A privileged climate, fruits delicious enough to awaken Eve's longing, abundant rivers and exotic birds that had preserved the ability to communicate with humans (the parrots) were only some of the elements due to which the Europeans

believed they had finally reached the place where the grace prior to the original sin has been preserved.

Among the most ardent supporters of this idea was Christopher Columbus, the Genoese explorer who was inspired by the messianic atmosphere that prevailed in Spain at the end of the Reconquista, as well as by his inferiority complex, to believe that he was the bearer of a divine mission: In addition to pragmatic reasons such as discovering new territories and a new direct trade route that would connect Spain with the Far East to facilitate the transport of spices and establish diplomatic relations with the supposedly Christian emperors on the other side of the ocean, Columbus also took upon himself the responsibility of Christianizing the natives he encountered in these territories, thereby also fulfilling the wishes of the Catholic kings of Spain (Braga, 2004, 291–294).

However, the admiral's ambitions did not end there. Being well acquainted with the documents circulating in his time (such as those of Ptolemy, Pierre d'Ailly, Paolo Toscanelli, Marco Polo, Pliny, or Sir John Mandeville) and making no distinction between the empirically proven evidence and those that existed in the collective imagination due to tradition, he also carried with him on his expeditions the desire to find the earthly paradise. His third voyage (1498–1500, associated with reaching the South American coast near the Orinoco River and the Gulf of Paria) is significant in this sense, because Columbus explains some miscalculations regarding the height of the North Star and the pear shape of the Earth by the fact that his ship accidentally began to climb the mountain on whose summit was Paradise. In fact, "as a Don Quixote of his times," Columbus wanted to launch a crusade to liberate Jerusalem, a goal that was easier to achieve and finance by following the western route toward the Orient, taking advantage of the vast amounts of gold believed to be found along the way, and forming an alliance with Prester John and the Mongols. In this way, paradoxically, "it was Columbus' medieval thinking that led him to discover America and inaugurate the modern era" (Todorov, 1982, 10–12).

### **The Spatiotemporal Framework: Spain at the Beginning of the Renaissance**

To complete the analysis of the contextual aspects necessary for discussing Abel Posse's books, we must also present the historical

characteristics of fifteenth-century Spain, namely the period corresponding to the reign of the Catholic Monarchs (Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile, 1474–1504) and their close ties with Columbus. History remembers these two because their reign marked the beginning of the Spanish Golden Age: during this period, the Muslims are defeated and the Reconquista is finished, Spanish power spreads to the south of Italy, the northern coast of Africa and the Atlantic Ocean, the New World is discovered, and so on. In addition, Ferdinand and Isabella set themselves apart from other Western European monarchies by the absence of absolutist rule: the couple renounced many signs of kingship, thaumaturgical power, or pompous rituals, and granted their subordinate kingdoms independence in matters of government, laws, currency, or military affairs (Kamen, 2005, 5-16).

However, the liberties granted by the Catholic Monarchs in the religious sphere were not so great. Although for a long time Spain represented a world characterized by the coexistence of many cultures, ideologies and religions, the Inquisitions transformed it into a society of persecution whose state wanted to convert Muslims and Jews to Christianity. Faced with the choice of either going into exile or adopting a new religion, these two ethnic groups suffered along with all those whose religious practices did not conform to Catholic dogma and were therefore catalogued as heresies (Kamen, 2005, 58–64).

But another major reason that the Spanish empire grew so large by the mid-seventeenth century that “from its rising to its setting the sun never ceased to shine for one instant on its lands” (Kamen, 2005, 23), was Columbus and his discoveries in this New World. Following a cumulus of factors such as the Spanish Monarchs’ interest of navigation and commerce, Castile’s and Aragon’s geographical position and the Treaty of 1479 which gave Spain the monopoly on discoveries in the unexplored areas of the “Great Western Ocean,” Columbus’ belief that there must be new territories in this part of the world resonated with Spain’s desire to extend its Catholic influence throughout the world (Prescott, 1904, 260–267). As a result, Columbus received official permission to voyage on April 17, 1492, and a few months later, on August 3, 1492, he bid farewell to the Old World and set sail to discover the New.

### ***The Dogs of Paradise: Context and Historical Basis***

After analysing all these documents, which establish a historical, cultural and social context, it is time to turn to the first novel chosen for study. Published in 1983, *The Dogs of Paradise* is the second volume of Abel Posse’s “Trilogy of the Discovery of America,” next to *Daimon* (1978) and *El largo atardecer del caminante* (1992). The writer broadly preserves the coordinates of the historical truth, but the changes he brings reflect his specific style and give the whole story a psychoanalytical touch. The end of the Middle Ages is here characterized as a time when „the world was panting heavily, lacking the air of life” and when an “ill melancholy” seemed to have swallowed up the whole of Spain (Posse, 1995, 11–15), plunging it into a deadly stupor from which only the accession of Isabella and Ferdinand could save it. The previous state of affairs – where people were “contaminated by hatred of life and sick of organized fear, rejection of the body and terror towards their instincts” (Posse, 1995, 59) – was to be replaced by the life drive of the Renaissance spirit. “Now the Empire was born together with an imperial Catholic Church that forswore the ballast of fierce and fanatical Christianity” (Posse, 1995, 79) and from which “that lethargy, that clutter of terrorized underdevelopment that had protected Europe from any heroism for at least six centuries — that is, from Charlemagne – were going to perish” (Posse, 1995, 46). Taking this ideology to the extreme, the Catholic Monarchs will close “the Christian wound” for good by persecuting the Jews and getting rid of the collective medieval fear of the body and its instincts, while also changing their attitude toward death: “Yes, we have to die, but let’s die of too much living!” (Posse, 1995, 16).

As for Columbus’ motivations for the expeditions that made him famous, Posse emphasizes the passion and longing he has felt for the earthly paradise since he learned about it in his childhood. As time goes by, he becomes more and more convinced that this mystical place lies somewhere beyond the Tropic of Capricorn and can be revisited, that the world is a sphere, despite the sailors’ belief that the Earth is flat, and that the edge of the Ocean-Sea (and thus the Indies) can be reached. Moreover, Posse places the explorers’ obsession with the earthly paradise in the larger context of the reasons why Columbus is also accepted by Ferdinand and Isabella, underscoring the importance of this religious phantasm in the

collective mentality of the Renaissance. Along with the end of the Reconquista, in Spain “began the cycle of the sea, although the fire of the pyres was still burning. Once the holy war was over, the salvation of the whole world should have necessarily followed” (Posse, 1995, 102).

Consequently, it is important to note how Columbus distanced himself from the frivolous ambitions of the Crown and the Jews who wanted to be led to the New Israel, and he took a noble goal as the ultimate goal, a goal that corresponds to his status as a descendant of Isaiah:

“the return to Paradise, the place without death. He knew that Jehovah’s siege on the unexperienced Adam could be broken. The wall could be jumped. Jehovah had not said his last word, and anyway, eventually, he would be impressed by man’s courage and skill and he would restrain the Exterminating Angel. In short: Prometheus will come and save the bleeding and sad Christ” (Posse, 1995, 97).

Thus begin the long and controversial expeditions of Columbus in America, represented in the novel in the form of a single voyage that lasts ten years, between 1492 and 1502. We know from several historical sources that his first expedition is extremely successful: what Columbus reports about the temperate climate, the fertility of the soil, the beauty of the landscapes, and the unknown species of plants and animals, as well as the samples he brings home as proof of his claims, astonish the entire Spanish court and convince many adventurers to join the explorer on his further voyages and start a new life in the colonies (Prescott, 1904, 321, 335). In the next sections, I will focus on how Columbus interprets and describes the new world he encounters, thus performing a first act of reductionist assimilation of Indigenous realities, as well as on the contrast between the initially admiring but later brutal attitude of the colonizers and that of the natives, which is respectful and entirely in line with the Christian principles preached by the Catholic invaders.

### **“*Purtroppo c’era il Paradiso...!*” Defiling the Most Sacred Place on Earth**

The linguistic level is the first on which the desecration of the New World takes place. Lacking specific and meaningful terms to describe what he sees, Christopher Columbus is forced to translate the diverse flora and fauna of the

Americas and reduce them to the species already present in Spain. The whole of Europe is slow to come to terms with the new discoveries. Unlike the Portuguese and their conquests in Africa, the Spanish have no information about the existence of America and its inhabitants, so they are suddenly confronted with a discovery that changes even Western society’s perception of itself. The Old World is at an impasse when it receives the revelations about the new world, and man’s need to keep relying on standard images to cope with the shock of the unknown justifies the reshaping of the new territories according to the administrative and social structures of the homeland (Elliott, 1992, 8–15).

At this point, we must mention all four zones where difficulties in assimilating the unknown from America occur, because they all reflect a reason for which the problem eventually turns into the “relocation and reconstruction of a world into another” (Posse, 1995, 182). First, there is a process of observation that inevitably involves comparisons and classifications that are made in relation to the realities in Spain. Second, the unknown must be translated and described in such a way that those who have not personally seen it can access it. A process that, in turn, implies the use of reductionist formulations and an interpretation filtered through the Western belt of world perception. Next comes the process of disseminating all this information and imagery, a step complicated by the fact that the Spanish and European publics were not prepared to understand, assimilate, and accept the idea that such places, beings, or ways of life existed in this newly discovered part of the world. Add to this the prejudices and the specific interests of each social category from the group of colonizers, and ultimately everyone tries to reconstruct the Spanish model according to the characteristics they know (Elliott, 1992, 17–18).

This essential role that tradition and the Spaniards’ previous experiences and expectations played in interpreting the New World to the detriment of scientific and empirical explanations is all the more evident in the case of Columbus, since we must remember how much he relied on medieval documents from the beginning of his voyages. Since his vocabulary is not large enough to describe the full range of colours, sounds, or rituals he sees in the islands, Columbus makes use of medieval cosmographies and views the unknown reality through the symbolic system of a certain “magical thinking,” to transform America into “a materialization of all the phantasms initially projected upon the miraculous lands of

Asia or the fantastic islands from the Western Ocean” (Braga, 2004, 296). Everything that Columbus sees corresponds to the descriptions of the oriental Eden and the way he was already prepared to perceive the new territories, so we can claim that “the expedition of exploration becomes a fulfilled prophecy and a successful quest” and that what the dogma has theoretically forbidden until now becomes possible in empirical reality, because Columbus believes that he is the bearer of the divine will, so he can enter Paradise (Braga, 2004, 300).

The final dimension of the linguistic destruction of the New World is that of the names Columbus chooses for the islands. The Genoese navigator prefers to ignore the names used by the Native Americans for these territories and employs those that correspond to the new sovereign institutions of the colonies: the Catholic Church and the Spanish monarchy. Among the most important names are San Salvador, Santa Maria de la Concepción, Fernandina, Isabela, etc., each of them referring to a superior authority in whose name Columbus begins his expeditions and representing a symbolic takeover of these islands (Todorov, 1982, 21).

So far we have seen how Columbus discovered America and conquered new territories for Spain, how he believed to have found the earthly paradise and to have been welcomed in the Kingdom of Heaven, how he united the Occident with the Orient, death with life, and offered the possibility of a symbolic and psychological rebirth (Braga, 2004, 301–302). The next section will look at the actual relations between the Spanish and the Native Americans, as well as the violent clashes between the cultures and ways of life of these two populations. In doing so, we will find that the actions of the conquistadors essentially testify to an imperialist colonialism that does not succeed and does not even seek to establish a sign of equality between itself and alterity by portraying “the other” as the forever different and inferior.

### **A Violent Civilizational Clash: The Spanish Meet the Natives**

Posse’s narrative also gives readers a unique opportunity to see the clash of these two cultures from the perspective of the natives, underscoring their moral superiority over the colonizers. They say that “humans are a joke of the gods” (Posse, 1995, 32), which means that there is no point in trying to conquer other peoples, especially when those peoples have a religion that tells them to

hate war and material wealth, to love their neighbour as themselves, and not to kill, steal, or covet other people’s wives. On the other hand, it is worthy to note the Europeans’ duality: they are initially fascinated by the behaviour and appearance of Native Americans, seeing them as inhabitants of the earthly paradise and as “noble savages,” but it soon becomes clear that “they have entered this Eden to either take advantage of Adam’s innocence and transform him into their slave, either exterminate him, if he refuses” (Braga, 2004, 298).

Posse, however, takes a different stance towards Columbus, separating him from the group of sailors who end up desecrating the entire sacred space. This, however, does not stop him from respecting historical truth and emphasizing the cruelty and violence with which Native Americans were killed or forced to adapt to Western culture. Todorov signals here the association made between their physical and spiritual nakedness. The natives are described negatively as people without any cultural traits (customs, traditions, religion) and are thus completely manipulable, although this condition corresponded to the Adamic state and consequently should have positive connotations. Another Eurocentric interpretative grid is applied in the question of systemic values: Spaniards do not realize that gold does not represent an absolute value in itself, but only functions in their exchange system. As a result, they equate any foreign system with total non-existence of a system, proving once again the primitiveness of the natives (Todorov, 1982, 26–28).

But the real violence takes place when the two different types of religious practices clash. According to Gruzinski, it is impossible for Catholics to accept the integration of their Christian images with the pagan rituals and local traditions of the natives, so they end up demonizing the entire New World with this argument. Even if they do not find in the islands the idolatrous population, they expected because of all the interpretations they have projected onto the American space in order to understand, dominate, and acculturate it, the tensions between the dogma they have grown up with and the Indigenous realities are too strong for the Spaniards not to yield to them (1994, 16–22). Indeed, the problem is that “the Catholic Church and the Amerindians do not place the real within the same limits.” Thus, if the latter consider dreams, hallucinations, or drunkenness as sources for reaching higher spiritual states, the former reject them and consider them mortal sins.

According to these considerations, Indigenous cults and rituals are demonized, morally condemned, and aesthetically rejected, and their images are reduced to the level of idols (Gruzinski, 2007, 188–190). Undoubtedly, the rigidity and dualistic structure of the Christian worldview clashes violently with the plurality and uniqueness of Native American thought, an aspect that will contribute decisively to their mass destruction in just a few decades.

We only have to look at some figures to realize how critical the situation was: of the total of about 13.5 million Native Americans living in the Americas in 1492, hundreds of thousands were killed at the very beginning of the Spanish colonization, and the number of victims went into the millions by 1942, when only 5.9% of the Indigenous population was still alive (Rosenblat, 1945). On the other hand, Todorov identifies here three main aspects that caused the mass deaths: the actual killings, the hard labor, the mistreatment and abuses that the natives had to endure, and the European diseases against which they had no antibodies (Todorov, 1982, 86). However, Abel Posse focuses only on the first two in order to highlight the contrast between the “good savage” who is baptized and openly welcomes the newcomers and the men of the “civilized societies” who exploit the naivety of the natives, brutally colonize them and impose their domination, starting from the social level to the religious and cultural level.

But after all these considerations, a question arises: was the conquest of America driven only by the desire of the Spaniards to dominate, to become rich, and to extend the influence of the Catholic Church? At first glance, it would seem so, as Columbus’ crew consisted of adventurers, persecuted Jews, thieves, criminals, and convicts who “were running from the Spanish Hell,” its rules and restrictions, with Columbus being the only one seeking paradise (Posse, 1995, 110). Posse, however, goes further in depth, highlighting another explanation that is directly related to the earthly paradise and the Adamic state that man seems to have definitively lost.

Despite Columbus’s efforts to remove his men from the sphere of *to do* and to reteach them the joy of simply *be*, they cannot break away from the occidental obsession with occupying the environment and subjugating it to their own interests. They forget their original connection to nature and destroy everything because boredom and banality quickly set in in a world where evil and sin no longer exist, while nudity and sexual freedom are the natural state of things. Ultimately,

the characters in the novel admit to their condition and the impossibility of perceiving the world in any other way than Christianity has taught them over so many centuries: “Sinning is our essence, guilt is our sign. Our life has no other purpose than to seek salvation through the sacraments of our Holy Mother, the Church. Stop the adventurers from saying that there is another Paradise than the Celestial one, which awaits us after death, after a life of obedience! [...] We are free, [...] but free will is the cause of sin” (Posse, 1995, 201). Columbus, in turn, understands that “man destroys what he loves the most, he is afraid of returning to the primordial harmony, he chooses the pleasure of pain and he prefers Hell instead of Heaven, like most of Dante’s readers” (Posse, 1995, 221).

Finally, this study also considers the role that fictions and the beliefs to which we attach the value of absolute truth play in the composition of human actions. The questions humanity asks itself about birth and life determine its obsession with sexuality and violence. The projection of inferiority onto their enemies and the identification of occidental values as the only possible values lead Spaniards to “see reality only in black and white and use violence in order to eliminate the black and impose the white,” using for this purpose any action that “attacks, hurts or punishes the other through spoiling their stories” (Huston, 2008, 102–107).

*The Dogs of Paradise* illustrate how “human alterity is both revealed and refused” once Columbus reaches America (Todorov, 1982, 35) and how people return to their basic instincts to seek pleasure through violence once there is no authority to control them. After the Reconquista was rejected from within and the victory of Granada led to the expulsion of the Moors, this alterity becomes more present than ever outside the Spanish borders as the New World is discovered. But if it can be said that the desire to impose the true faith is the reason for both the destruction of Arab culture and the spiritual conversion of Native Americans, it is still important to remember that the first action radically expels the heterogeneous from the Iberian Peninsula, while the second irrevocably reintroduces it, albeit in a dissimulated form (Todorov, 1982, 35).

In the following part of my essay, I will focus on another novel by Abel Posse, *Daimon*, which I will place in the larger context of the expanding Spanish empire and the expeditions of the conquistadors. I will also analyze in detail how the character of the protagonist, Lope de Aguirre,

stands out from all the other seekers of El Dorado and the lands of the Amazonians by approaching the natives and rejecting the dogmatic restrictions of Christianity.

### **Discovery vs. Conquest. Disputes About the (II)legitimacy of Using Violence Against the Natives**

Once the second wave of conquistadors reached the New World, in the sixteenth century, the unknown territories from beyond the Ocean-Sea became lands destined for agricultural use. We can mention Vasco Núñez de Balboa in Colombia, Pedro Arias de Ávila in Panama, Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar in Cuba, Juan Ponce de León in Florida, Francisco Pizarro González in Peru or Hernán Cortés in Mexico, but all these names and historical episodes underline one and the same thing: The focus shifted from discovery to conquest and colonization, while the paradise projected by Columbus on the islands turned into an inferno from which the natives could not escape for a long time. Against the religious background in which the Inquisition considers the idea of searching for Eden and the Adamic state on earth as heresy, the desire to discover and know the *terra incognita* becomes a desire to conquer, colonize and exploit it, while the Spaniards begin to give the natives all kinds of monstrous characteristics to justify their cruelty (Braga, 2004, 326, 338). If Columbus travelled to India with medieval religious fantasies and a desire for geographic expansion, his followers continued his efforts with economic and political projections.

However, there was also the opposite attitude, and that belonged to the priests, whose mission of evangelization presupposed peaceful coexistence with the natives and economic and political cooperation with them, a concept that was in complete contrast to the practice of the conquistadors, who resorted to any kind of violence to quickly enrich themselves and impose their system of power or values. Bartolomé de las Casas, the bishop who was most active in protecting the natives at this time, mentions the long series of laws enacted in Spain to limit the power of Europeans over the natives, but it took a long period of constant effort before some of them took effect. For example, there were the Burgos Laws (1512), which attempted to regulate the number of maximum work hours for Native Americans and provide them with the food they needed, both materially and spiritually (Las Casas, 2004, 24). Then there were the New Laws

(1542), which proclaimed the absolute freedom of the king's vassals, prohibited slavery and forced labour, and demanded clear rules for the operation of the *encomienda*, namely the labour system on which "collaboration" between the Europeans and the natives was based (Thomas, 2011, 479–480). However, the colonies were still too far away for these laws to be fully respected, so polemics continued to be heated throughout the sixteenth century.

A notable case is the Franciscan missionary Toribio de Benavente, also called Motolinía, who arrived in Mexico in 1524 and justified the forcible conversion of the natives with the biblical episode of the ten plagues that God sent to punish Egypt. Similarly, the Catholic God punished the pagan natives by sending the Spaniards, who brought smallpox, massacres, famine, the obligation to work and pay taxes in terrible conditions, the construction of modern cities, the destruction of existing customs, slavery, and so on (Todorov, 1982, 87-89). But probably the most famous dispute was the one that took place in Valladolid in 1550–1551 between the humanist Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and the bishop Bartolomé de las Casas.

The former divided his discourse into several parts: He spoke about the barbarism of the natives and their implicit inferior state, drawing on Aristotle and his theory of inequality as the natural state of humanity, on the basis of which he created a series of opposing terms to describe the relationship between the Spaniards and the natives: good-evil, reason-instinct, soul-body, humans-animals, men-women, adults-children, perfection-imperfection, strength-weakness, virtue-vice. Then Sepúlveda argued for the absolute necessity to stop the monstrous and bloody rituals that the pagans performed in their religious practices, thus saving the future innocent victims from death. Finally, he justified the wars to conquer the non-believers by saying that this was necessary to pave the way for the missionaries to evangelize. Thus, the Spaniards had the right to impose their own version of the "good" on "the other" (Todorov, 1982, 98-100).

Continuing with our analysis, it becomes increasingly clear that Renaissance man knew how to view the world only through his own interpretive grid and felt the need to correct reality with the sword and the gun in those places where it did not agree with what his subconscious had recognized as the absolute truth. From a broader perspective, it can also be observed that man turned into a demigod and began to create new worlds even before Nietzsche proclaimed the

murder of God at the hands of the modern world. During the years of maximum expansion of the Spanish Empire, these new worlds were created by colonizing (and implicitly destroying) the existing ones or those that were so different that they were not understood or accepted by the Europeans. Creation, then, is doubled by destruction; as Walter Benjamin says, “there is no document of culture that is not, at the same time, a document of barbarity” (2002, 197) and it invalidates the illuminist ideal in which nature spontaneously evolves into civilization. But then another question arises, which Bishop Las Casas also addresses in the sixteenth century: Is it our duty to civilize “the savages” or not?

Las Casas’ speech proves to be much more tolerant of the problems Sepúlveda points out. He argues that the barbarism of the natives is only true in relation to the lack of revelation of Christ. Other elements that might lead them to be characterized in this way (such as being cruel and inhumane, not being able to write, and being guided by primary instincts) might be more applicable to the Spaniards. Las Casas also acknowledged the idolatry of the natives, but he denied the right of Catholic kings to punish the sacrileges of a non-Christian population or to forcibly attempt to Christianize them, as this was a clear violation of free will. Finally, the bishop acknowledged the fact that native rituals claimed numerous innocent victims, but he did not want to replace something bad with something worse: Since the Catholics’ attempts to stop the sacrifices neither brought peace nor stopped these practices, they should indeed be stopped, since they were a vice rather than a virtue, and therefore their punishment only increased the injustice that already existed (Braga, 2004, 335-336). Furthermore, murder was not considered a crime in Native American religion, so their rituals only demonstrated their deep respect and devotion to their gods (Thomas, 2011, 500).

Although this debate was extensive and well-constructed, it did not solve the problems of the colonies and even in the nineteenth century the issue was not exhausted, as G.W.F. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* shows. The philosopher speaks of the impossibility of defining ourselves without a clear idea of who “the other” is, so that “the self-consciousness must proceed to supersede the *other* independent being in order thereby to become certain of *itself* as the essential being” (1977, 111–118). In other words, man will tend to repress that which is alien to him and perceive otherness as an inessential object or as an absolute negation precisely because his consciousness, in a

life-and-death struggle, must be able to place the consciousness of the other on a lower level and at the same time elevate his own certainty “of being for himself, in relation to others and in relation to himself” to the rank of absolute truth.

This whole dialectic is very well applied by Hegel to the relationship between master and slave, which can easily explain the endless amount of violence in the colonies. The Spaniards, feeling the need to subjugate the natives in order to impose their own subjectivity on them, use all those methods of takeover that we have already discussed, and their self-consciousness reaches an independence and a level of truth precisely because they deprive the natives of freedom and make them dependent on the will and power of decision of their absolute master, the white man.

### **South America: The Land of Cannibals, Amazonians and Mountains of Gold**

The violence of contact between Europeans and Native Americans was not the only aspect that was reinforced with the arrival of the second wave of explorers and conquerors in the Americas. Something similar happened with the myths and stereotypes they projected onto the territories or people they encountered, and the direction in which the collective imagery took these images in the sixteenth century reflects not only the continuity of medieval fears of monstrous species and an inverted world order, but also the political and economic interests of Renaissance man.

One of these legends is that of the cannibals, which has persisted since the expeditions of Columbus due to his frequent misinterpretations: Expecting to find such creatures on the islands, he unthinkingly conflates the terms used by the natives of the Caribbean islands to describe themselves (“*caníbales*, *animas*, *caribes*”) with the idea of “consumer of human flesh” (Taylor, 2007, 49). With Ferdinand de Saussure’s terms, the original relationship between signifier and signified is broken and brutally replaced by European concepts, and the original meanings of “inhabitants of the Caribbean” or “the brave ones” are completely lost in the acculturation process. When the stories about the cannibals reached the ears of the Spanish authorities, there was also one of the first decrees on the problem in 1503. The “Cannibal Law” gave the colonizers the right to capture and sell any Native American cannibal, which in a way also legalized slavery and aroused



the interest of the conquistadores to mark the natives in this way.

Another famous myth was the one about the Amazonians. The most important expedition in this sense was that of Francisco de Orellana (1541–1542), the first explorer to cross the Amazon from one end to the other. Since on this journey he was attacked several times by tribes of warriors, Orellana gave to this river the name of the famous figures from the classical tradition, realizing another linguistic falsification of the realities from the New World. What is interesting about this act of assimilation, however, are the numerous cultural implications that accompany it: On the one hand, it reflects Europeans' deep fear of an inverted social order in which women take the lead (which also justifies the problem of perceiving such communities as savage and uncivilized); on the other hand, the story feeds the enriching dream of the conquistadors who set out to explore the Americas, since some versions of the myth associated the land of the Amazonians with territories full of riches of all kinds (Taylor, 2007, 50).

And finally, to push "rush for gold" even further, the third most sought-after legend in the islands was El Dorado. Here the novelty was that the myth did not belong to the Western imagination, nor was it associated with similar realities from Europe, but was based on rumours that the Spaniards began to hear from the natives around 1520–1530. The ritual

"was practiced for a long time near the sacred lake Guatavita, near Bogota. A local king, in a certain day of the year, anointed his body with resin and then rolled himself in gold dust. He would climb up gilded and shining in a boat and throw offerings of gold, emeralds and other precious things into the middle of the water, after which he would bathe himself in the waters of the lake. All the while, the crowd on the banks cheered, sang and danced. Between 1531 and 1617, the Europeans searched hard for the land of "*El Dorado*" - the golden king - who, like that of Prester John, migrated over the years from one region to another, namely from today's Colombia to the Orinoco and Guyana" (Delumeau, 1997, 51).

The initial meaning of the El Dorado myth thus referred to this specific ceremony, but as the sixteenth century progressed, the story became more general, describing a wondrous area full of riches and vast amounts of gold. Thus, one can

see how a simple local legend was the reason for the dozens of expeditions launched by the conquistadors to find the area in question (Taylor, 2007, 51), and how the words of a few locals caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands more people because the Spaniards spared no one who could not give them information about the exact location of this miracle.

Among the adventurers who set out for the Amazon in search of the mysterious El Dorado was Pedro de Ursúa, whose subordinate, Lope de Aguirre, is also the protagonist of the novel that Abel Posse wrote at the beginning of his trilogy about the discovery of America: *Daimon*. However, before proceeding to the actual analysis of the volume, it is important to look at the real life of Aguirre, highlighting both the unique elements that distinguish his journey across the American continent from all others, and the historical, cultural and biographical background on which the Argentine writer builds his fiction, giving Aguirre the role of a controversial hero even after his death.

### **Lope de Aguirre, America's First Revolutionary and Liberator**

As one of his most interesting biographies states, Lope de Aguirre was the first conquistador to impose local government in South America and negate the authority of Spanish institutions overseas. However, due to his insanity, mass murders, and far too violent approach, he failed in his revolutionary attempts and history has only preserved the name of Simón Bolívar as the liberator of the American colonies (Balkan, 2011, 15). Born in 1510, Aguirre was surrounded from the beginning by the fervor of the new century and the waves of adventurers who set out for the New World, driven by the fever of gold, conquest and wealth that they believed would guarantee them the prosperity of a new life. Lope arrives in America in 1534 and begins to make a living like thousands of other Spaniards: He tames horses and robs Native American graves in hopes of finding gold. However, both "trades" will play a very important role in the later development of the conquistador, because "turning turbulent behaviour into energy he can control will be a skill that will also serve him in subjugating the people around him," and the riches he will never be able to fully enjoy, since he will be forced to cede part of them to the Spanish Crown, will fuel his hatred for their unjust rule in the colonies (Balkan, 2011, 23).

Meanwhile, expeditions in search of El Dorado managed to find the famous Lake Guatavita in 1545, but the quantities of gold found at the bottom of the lake, although large (3,000–4,000 pieces), were far from meeting Spanish expectations. Ironically, the Native Americans from whom the whole legend came had already been wiped out by another tribe by the time the Europeans reached the place, so all that remained of El Dorado was a chimera projected onto an unknown territory, like all the other collective fantasies that had led the explorers through the New World until then. However, despite repeated failures and terrible conditions in the Amazon jungle, the Spaniards did not give up turning their attention to new and unknown territories with the same goal, and in 1559 it was Aguirre's turn to embark on such a voyage under the command of Pedro de Ursúa (Balkan, 2011, 27).

Disillusioned by the endless years in which men like him did all the work of colonizing and organizing the territories while the rewards went exclusively to a handful of governors, nobles, and priests, he, like many others, was outraged by their abuse of power and was ready at any moment to participate in a revolutionary movement, Aguirre easily found his place among the groups of traitors, thieves, and criminals that the authorities could hardly wait to get rid of and who were themselves still under the fascination of the riches of El Dorado (Balkan, 2011, 30–33). It was not long, however, before the adventurers' impatience came into conflict with Ursúa's insistence on continuing their advance through the jungle, despite the small amounts of gold they had found and the growing hostility of the Native Americans. If we add to this Ursúa's increasingly pliant attitude toward his military duties and the true purpose of the expedition, it is easy to understand why the spirit of rebellion in the camps and the group's hostility toward their leader began to grow. And when the character traits of Lope are considered, it becomes even clearer why he became the leader of the insurgency (Balkan, 2011, 45–54).

Aguirre, who was ugly and already old by 1560, had made a habit as a young man of covering up his physical inferiority with a flamboyant behaviour, an always high and persuasive tone of voice, and an iron will that did not allow him to leave any matter undone. Although he was uneducated, Aguirre was a highly intelligent, strong and energetic man who never shied away from his work and had no problem manipulating others. On the other hand, because of his frequent physical and verbal

violence and his lack of respect for God and religion, he was soon perceived as a devil, monster, and madman that no one could resist (Balkan, 2011, 42, 55). This is evident in Aguirre's stirring speech to his people. Weighing the hardships, hunger, diseases, and disappointments of the last few weeks against Ursúa's empty promises, Aguirre convinces more and more people that El Dorado is a mere myth and that the true riches lie in Peru, where they should return as soon as possible. Thus, Ursúa is killed on the first day of 1561, and in the new year Fernando de Guzmán (in theory) and Lope de Aguirre (behind the scenes) take over the leadership of the rebel group (Balkan, 2011, 55–61).

The seeds of revolution had already begun to germinate: Lope was determined to stop targeting territories that would be taken by the crown anyway, and instead go to Peru, depose the governor there, and establish his own system of government under the leadership of Guzmán. To this end, Aguirre uses his authority and powers of persuasion to build a growing team of loyal men (including black slaves, whom he frees in exchange for supporting his cause), while cold-bloodedly murdering anyone he believes is working against him. Moreover, he also renounces all legal, juridical, and national ties to Spain by disgracing King Philip II and choosing his own king in Guzmán (Balkan, 2011, 65–79). However, this façade was not to be maintained for long, as Aguirre's growing distrust also led to Guzmán's assassination, and the former's elevation to supreme leader of the expedition ushered in a new stage in its history. The revolutionary group henceforth bore the name *Marañones* (a derivation of the local name of the river on which they sailed, the Amazon), and the intention of its members was to wrest the territories that rightfully belonged to them – and especially Peru, because “God created Heaven for the deserving, but the earth - for the powerful, and Peru - for Aguirre” (Balkan, 2011, 145) – from the corruption that had ruled them until then. Indeed, the superiority complex that characterizes Lope comes into play again here, but in this case, it takes a darker turn than in Columbus.

Aguirre's self-chosen titles may illustrate this idea: In addition to being “Prince of Liberty” and ruler of the “Continental Kingdom” (“*Reyno de Tierra Firme*”) and the Province of Chile, “King of all South America from the Isthmus of Panama to the Strait of Magellan,” he also takes the name “Wrath of God.” Behind this is Aguirre's idea that he must lead his people by all means to a just

world, where merit stands above paternalism imposed from above and where bloodshed is absolutely necessary. Moreover, his god was not a gentle god who showered the Spanish kingdom with his goodness, but an angry god who would purify the corrupt world and establish a new order through Aguirre. Again, it is perhaps not entirely appropriate to ascribe a messianic complex to the conquistador, but it is certain that if not divine will, then his iron will mandate him to fight to the death for what he believed was the right thing to do.

Finally, Aguirre's relationship with God was thoroughly complicated, reflecting the deceptions through which life had led the Spaniard for half a century. Like the King of Spain, God had abandoned him in his most difficult moments, leaving him with only the alternative of turning to the devil (Balkan, 2011, 92–94), an aspect that Abel Posse will explore at length in his novel. And since theft, murder, and destruction were the only means by which Aguirre could get closer to his goal, the devil emerges as a vivid term both for the way Lope is perceived in the story and for that supernatural force that seems to take possession of all conquerors who set foot in the Americas.

Aguirre's band's forced march through the jungle ends when the group reaches the point where the Amazon flows into the sea. But the chain of violence and the murders of those who do not seem to obey him fully - or who do not recognize his right to conquer the natives - continue (and even escalate) on the remaining part of the way to Peru. And despite the riches they gradually find outside the jungle, which they associate with the true El Dorado (because they had already been collected and prepared for transport to Spain), there are also ominous signs of the success of the revolution sparked by the "wrath of God." when the conquistadors on Margarita Island failed to demolish the wooden column (*el rollo*) that had been erected by the Spanish authorities in all the conquered territories as a symbol of power and justice (Balkan, 2011, 109–110). Moreover, rumours of Lope's plans and atrocities continued to spread and eventually reached the king, who mobilized and dispatched troops against the revolution that threatened the stability of the colonies.

Toward the end of his adventure and his life, Lope de Aguirre becomes increasingly bitter against the beings he sees as a threat to his authority: "God, the saints, the King of Castile and all of his vassals" (Balkan, 2011, 141) appear in blood letters on the list of his future victims.

This religious association, which makes the king the bearer of divine will through Catholicism (something also seen earlier in the discourse of Columbus' men), explains even better the total rejection of that gentle and benevolent God of whom the missionaries preach. Later, Aguirre's letter to Philip II reflects his controversial views in detail, and the fact that it represents America's first declaration of independence is important enough for Abel Posse to include it in his narrative.

By explaining the reasons for the revolution, a series of ugly realities in the colonies that he could not have known from faraway Spain, and details about the steps his expedition had taken so far, Aguirre once again shows that his goal was to remake the New World on the model of ancient Spain (full of heroes and warriors who were not corrupted by greedy priests and judges), and that his violence was not only inferior to that of the Crown, but also necessary and justified because he was dealing with a power far more powerful than himself. He also dispels the myth of the riches of the Amazon and describes in detail the dangers and terrible conditions that applied to all journeys to the legendary El Dorado. In doing so, he attempts to lift the veil from the eyes of the king and all those who saw no fault in the way the colonies were run (Balkan, 2011, 148–153).

However, the end of this extravagant spirit was to be as violent and full of despair and rebellion as his entire life. Surrounded by enemy troops and betrayed by all his men, Aguirre ceases to believe in anything other than birth and death, even killing his own daughter Elvira to "free" her from the miserable life that would have awaited her, and finally dies on October 27, 1561, killed by the king's troops and symbolically by those who did not understand how corrupt the patronage system was in the New World. Thus, although he did not achieve his revolutionary goal and only Simón Bolívar gained recognition for a similar goal, Lope de Aguirre still enjoyed undeniable fame that gave him the heroic immortality he had always desired (Balkan, 2011, 157–171).

On the one hand, this is the point where the true story of Lope de Aguirre ends. On the other hand, this is also the point where Abel Posse's fiction begins, as he imagines a great story that continues the Spaniard's life and makes him the protagonist of an "Eternal Return of the Same Thing," a spatiotemporal spiral that makes him witness over four hundred years of Spanish history. The next section, however, will focus on fragments that illustrate Aguirre's attitude toward the New World, the differences in mentality he

perceives between Europeans and natives, and the way in which the Christian God becomes the promoter of a compulsive “doing,” while the pagan demon frees the conscience from guilt and teaches it to simply “be.” Thus, Pose’s novel brings to light the same polemic between the death instinct and the life instinct as *The Dogs of Paradise*, but the main character is at a different stage than Columbus in his relationship with the Spanish authorities and the deity, which underscores a certain evolution in the story of the conquest of unknown territories.

### ***Daimon and the “Wrath of God”: “Doing” Because You Cannot “be” and Challenging the Limits Imposed by Western Reason***

“America. Everything is spleen, sap, blood, panting, systolic and diastolic, food and dung, in the unforgiving cycle of cosmic laws that seem to be newly established” (Posse, 2008, 11). The opening words of the novel reflect the same atmosphere described in *The Dogs of Paradise*: a revitalized time filled with the zeal of discovery, beginning with the Renaissance and the end of the Dark Ages. The age of “resurrection, with a hunger for life that can only come from the grave” (Posse, 2008, 19), provides the perfect setting for someone like Aguirre – who “believed only in the will of doing, in the fiesta of war and the fervour of delirium” (Posse, 2008, 7) – to achieve his goals. Similarly, in Evan L. Balkan’s biography, Aguirre is portrayed as a charismatic leader who acts on laws that reflect the natural laws of survival in the jungle for thousands of years, as well as a historical figure with an interesting combination of traits-paranoia, megalomania, resistance, audacity, insanity (Balkan, 2011, 118, 124). In Pose’s version and in a later life, Aguirre manages to find all the places he could not discover in his historical existence on Earth.

The reasons and the coordinates of the new journey are communicated to Philip II (who, in reality, had not answered Aguirre directly either) through a second letter that underlines the definitive rupture that had taken place in the meantime between the world of the ruler and that of the “rebel madman” in the Americas. The latter urges the king “to stay with his God, for I prefer my Demon. And if, after fifteen centuries of so much Christ, we are as we are, I invite him to try the demon’s side and see what happens”! (Posse, 2008, 26). However, this was not a simple pact with the devil, in which Lope denied his God and chose the path of the demon because it could offer him defiance, the luxury of rebellion, a certain

way to bring heaven to earth, and a true existence in which only the body, the present, and the adventures matter (Posse, 2008, 36), but a broad gallery of aspects that underscore the bitter irony that some of the bloodiest massacres in human history were carried out with the cross in hand.

To the natives, Europe appears as “a frightening but dangerous assembly of outcasts from heaven and the original unity, from which neither man nor beast have any reason to leave,” a group of angry, petty people who are always unhappy because they cannot comprehend the balance and order of things. “Their god, the symbol of sacredness, seemed to be made of two crossed woods on which bodies were nailed: an instrument of torture,” and “the white ones inclined to spread a preventive and general death.” They were not able to bring peace or tolerance, because “someone, once, in their constructive and unhappy lands, has told them that it was not possible *to be* without *doing*: for we were not born to be, but to make our being” (Posse, 2008, 32–34). And this mentality will become increasingly evident as Aguirre’s group moves deeper into the heart of the South American continent, where it repeatedly encounters realities that seem to make a mockery of Europeans’ attempts to rationalize them.

A first shock occurs on a temporal level, because the expedition through the jungle seems to be a return to the origin of the world, thanks to the fossils from other geological eras that the adventurers find there. Then, America radiates a vitality far too great for the Europeans, who feel repelled by the overgrown vegetation of the jungle, which gives them “a fearful dread, the anguish of impotence.”

“The intense life from here gave a sense of frustration to the Europeans, who worked orderly, intoxicated by the biblical vocation to assert themselves on Earth [...]. In America, everything was existence, so that human work – condemned, Adamic, post-paradisiacal – ran up against the wall of free existence, which seemed to them unnatural, subversive” (Posse, 2008, 45–46).

Third, on a spiritual level, the excessive beauty and novelty of the places discovered sometimes had the effect of making the Spaniards forget themselves and fall into a “numinous ambience” that was not approved by the clergy of the group, who knew that “beauty is the working residence of the unholy.” When he is asked to urgently approve liturgies to break the spell and restore the

pervasive guilt of the Christians, Aguirre sees the gap between the two worlds widening. And this is also observed by the natives, who discreetly observe their progress and conclude that the whites “were the victims of a playful god, who amused himself by punishing them through giving them precisely what they wanted.” On the other hand, in addition to this idea appearing in exactly the same words in *The Dogs of Paradise* (Posse, 1995, 35, 141), Posse also emphasizes here the utterly corrupt nature of the Europeans who came to America only to do what no law would allow them to do at home:

“they said they had come to bring institutions and customs like those of their own kingdom, but in reality they had come to get rid of them: they abused women, killed, indulged in all sorts of vices. It was obvious that they could not perceive liberty without crime” (Posse, 2008, 58–59).

Since the novel is divided into chapters bearing the name of a particular tarot card, it is also important to remember that this stage of the journey falls precisely in the sign of the Devil, the card of war and debauchery, of the earth and resistance to the order that men have attributed to the will of God. For two years, the expedition leads the adventurers through a whole series of lands populated by so-called “monstrous races,” which they add with relative ease to the territories incorporated into the Marañon Empire. But then comes the encounter with the much desired (yet feared) land of the Amazonians, where the balance of power is reversed, at least initially, and the Spaniards become prisoners of princesses waiting to be impregnated. For the Christians’ fascination with this mystical realm was deeply rooted in their “bodily desires, atrociously delayed by their own implacable beliefs. Many of them had defied the abysmal monsters of the Ocean-Sea, like St. Brendan’s whale, with the unutterable ambition to see a woman naked and to be able to open, to bite and to taste her, as you do with a ripe pear” (Posse, 2008, 69).

Sin, unapologetically associated with bodily pleasures, is thus exposed in the territory of the Amazons, where the female god is worshipped by means of a giant stone phallus and “men who had always galloped silently and with a slightly vengeful rage over women’s bodies [...] now discovered a new time, destined for bodies” (Posse, 2008, 78), while at the same time being initiated into the slow art of kissing. At the same time, the Spaniards’ long stay makes the Amazon

queen realize that “men feared valiantly for their own happiness,” that they did not know why they needed so much gold – they could have never understood that “gold was the artifice with which the civilised bought the satisfactions to which the primitives constantly and foolishly arrived” (Posse, 2008, 80–81), as Todorov had indicated in his book, and that they were in a constant frenzy for land, weapons, and material wealth that never gave them enough satisfaction anyway.

Here an excerpt from Blaise Pascal’s *Thoughts* would be relevant, as it states:

“when it sometimes occurs to me to think of the chase of men, of the dangers and troubles to which they are exposed, at court, in war, from which so many quarrels, passions, reckless and often wicked actions are born, I discover that all the unhappiness of people comes from one thing, namely because they don’t know how to stay alone in a room” (Pascal, 1998, 208).

What the French philosopher proposes coincides with Nancy Huston’s later ideas and can be translated to mean that, for the same reason that lies behind the impossibility of simply “being,” Western man will always invent fictions to propel him forward and through which he can fill the emptiness of existence with meaning. These can begin with the small habits that are part of the individual routine and extend to the traditions and religions that control the functioning of the whole world. At the same time, throughout history, some of the narratives of this kind that have left the deepest impression in human development have been precisely those that became visible in the case of the conquistadors: the illusion that gold brings happiness, that glory is won through violent conquest, and that the European is superior to the native in every way.

Following the same logic, Aguirre’s men (like Columbus’ men) grow weary of the serenity, peace, and harmony of the paradise they had stumbled upon in the middle of the jungle and turn to the cruelty, violence, rudeness, and conceit that characterized them deep down. The free and peaceful love to which the natives invited the Europeans is replaced by rape, and the main objective of the stay – the impregnation of the princesses – disappears completely from the list of interests of the Europeans. Angry and disappointed, Aguirre also notes the tragedy of Western man, doomed to run endlessly in search of happiness and never realize when he finds it:

“When you have everything, you want nothing! When you can look, you don’t see! When you have it within your reach, you do not touch!” (Posse, 2008, 87).

The protagonist thus leaves the Amazon and continues his expedition to the supposed golden heart of the American continent. In the process, he also discovers that the colonizers have a terribly pernicious and desecrating influence on the territories and populations they have taken over. “The power of the Crown lies in trade,” and so the bewitched plants of the sorcerers of Mexico “were no longer to bring sacred visions, but to enrich the sad subsistent pharmacopoeia of the Europeans,” the Native Americans were used as specimens for experiments in the Spanish universities, and the ill-will that had always been typical of the conquistadors now seemed to combine with science to exploit, torture, and further oppress “the inferior.” The culmination of Posse’s criticism lies in a quote from Voltaire: “It is Christianly forbidden to kill. We can only kill in masses, under the national flag and to the sound of trumpets” (Posse, 2008, 109–115).

Having reached this point of analysis, we cannot continue without introducing the French philosopher René Girard, who explains in detail in *The Scapegoat* the ideological reasons for collective persecution and why society always resorts to violence when its hierarchical system is threatened. As a rule, “during crises which weaken natural institutions and encourage the formation of crowds, i.e. spontaneous popular agglomerations, capable of replacing weakened institutions entirely or exerting decisive pressure on them,” what actually happens is “the complete destruction of the social itself, the end of the norms and differences which define cultural rules.” A first aspect that leads to persecution is that the cultural factor “is eclipsed through non-differentiation.” People’s reaction to this crisis is not to blame themselves, but either society as a whole (an action that does not concern them at all) or other individuals who, despite their weakness, seem to them to be particularly harmful (Girard, 2000, 19–22). In other words, a well-organized hierarchical structure is so deeply ingrained in the collective subconscious of Western man that any destabilization of this order produces a terror that he can only control by finding victims to blame for the crimes that cause this destabilization by eliminating hierarchical differences (Girard, 2000, 30).

Thus, the violent clash between Spanish and Native American cultures can also be explained by a contrary theory, which asserts that it is not

the differences that prevent peaceful relations between the two populations, but the very absence of those differences. It turns out that alterity is far less different than the Europeans needed it to be to justify their massacres and violent conquests, especially when the natives are so receptive to Christian principles that they become even more devout Catholics than the missionaries. This invalidates their system for structuring the world, and through its cracks one begins to see the horror of the one who can no longer project his self onto the “other” and be superior to him because the “other” is no longer different from him as an individual and is not inferior to him.

In *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard discusses the ritual of religious sacrifice, the only one in which the two concepts are inseparable in the title and which functions within religious communities because it is used as a means to protect the whole society from its own violence (Girard, 1995, 7). At the same time, “sacrifice is violence without the risk of revenge” because the social law that does not allow the use of violence against an individual without exposing oneself to the reprisals of others is overridden, once again emphasizing the sacredness of the victim (Girard, 1995, 19). Finally, the reasons for these sacrifices also have much to do with the fact that in primitive societies, “the misfortunes that violence is likely to unleash are so great and the remedies so random that the emphasis is on prevention” (Girard, 1995, 25), and that religion is the preferred domain for these practices. All of this is in sharp contrast to the kind of violence that secular societies like Europeans resort to, but the problem will be even more pronounced in the case of the colonies, where the devastation they will wreak will outweigh the cruelty of any bloody ritual practiced by the natives.

Tzvetan Todorov speaks of “societies of sacrifice” and “societies of massacre,” thus placing Native Americans in the first category and the European colonizers in the second (Todorov, 1982, 93–94). On the one hand, sacrifice is a religious crime that takes place in the name of official ideology, in the public square, and with the participation of all, a ritual that illustrates the power of society over the individual and the cohesion that exists within it thanks to religious practices that have survived for so many millennia. The identity of the sacrificed is determined by strict rules, because the victim must not be a stranger or a member of the same society; they are usually inhabitants of neighbouring countries who speak the same language as the “executioners,” but have an

independent leadership. In addition, the personal qualities of the victim also count, so that the death of a warrior is valued more highly than that of a common man.

The massacre, on the other hand, is just the opposite, revealing the weaknesses of a society and the disappearance of the moral principles that held the group together. It takes place far from the centre of the community (in the case of the Spaniards, preferably in the American territories, where no laws are observed) and is therefore closely linked to colonial wars waged far from the metropolises. This great distance between cultures makes it easy to associate victims with beasts, and the lack of concern for their individual identity also allows them to be killed without remorse.

“If sacrifice is a religious crime, then slaughter is an atheistic one,” and here Todorov draws a thoughtful parallel with Ivan Karamazov, who believes that everything is permitted when God is dead. In the same way, away from royal power and Spanish or Catholic laws, all prohibitions fall away, and man takes off his social, civilized mask and reveals his savage nature, which is nevertheless woven into a modern fabric. There is nothing primitive in the barbarism of the colonizer, but a supposed lack of morality that allows him to kill whenever he wants and because he is far away from the metropolis, in the colonies where any legal, moral or juridical restriction is removed.

Against the backdrop of all these ideological polemics, Lope de Aguirre continues his journey through time and through the jungles of America as he describes the increasingly harmful effects of the expansion of the Spanish Empire on the colonies. The revolution started by the protagonist continues under King Philip V (1700–1724), whose troops manage to conquer the coasts of the continent and the seas surrounding it, exploiting and trading everything they find there, but they fail to win the people to their side (as Aguirre did), nor to reach the heart of the New World, the essence that lies in the eternal rebellion against the conquerors. The American territories belonged “rather to the Devil than to the Lord” because the emissaries of the Catholic God had abused them, but the excessive bureaucratization that monopolized even the realm of conquering expeditions (“assassinations and tortures now fit within the sober framework of the law”) shows the change in value system, the way in which “the progress of the times had pushed aside the world of the Marañon Empire with a nudge” and the fact that, by the eighteenth century, there was “nothing

left of Man, of Manhood, of the Conquistador” (Posse, 2008, 120–127).

In the end, however, Posse grants Aguirre the chance to fulfil the dream of all explorers and find the mythical land of the El Dorado prince. In response to the reports of the natives who told the conquistadors about this place, the land was built with huge dunes of golden sand, in which the Spaniards bathed as if spellbound for about a month. Afterwards, however, just as after the first weeks in the “Terrestrial Paradise,” they “get tired of all the splendour” and realize that they cannot possibly transport all the gold to Europe, “the only place where such wealth made sense” (Posse, 2008, 154–157). The mirage of El Dorado is thus shattered, once again confirming the idea that Western man is always chasing fantasies that he projects onto the undiscovered territories, only to soon become bored with what he has been longing for and turn his attention elsewhere. At the end of this vicious circle and the first part of the novel (entitled “The Warrior’s Epic”), Lope de Aguirre once again becomes a traitor and abandons his men to the Incas. He abandons all the material wealth he has accumulated so far and returns to Europe to seek fulfilment in love.

The rest of the volume is no longer of interest to the research direction of this thesis, but there are several other points Posse notes that fit well into a conclusion of this essay. At the same time, they are also useful in a sequence that traces the evolution of New World realities over the next several centuries (with an emphasis on the role that the myths in whose name so many expeditions were undertaken still play in the modern and postmodern era) and that makes the transition to the post-humanist current and to the times when technology enables the creation of another “New World” when the whole world is already mapped. In this context, it is important to note that gold is gradually losing its value, is being converted into banknotes and is less in demand for export than sugar, livestock, timber or other commodities. The “degrading reality of the inferno of exploitation” is also becoming more apparent, and “the desire for gain substantially alters the original divine harmony” (Posse, 2008, 286), as economic and political interests in the colonies erase any vitality, mythic faith, or sacred practices that had characterized America’s attempt to abolish Western reason.

As imperialism stretches its arms even further and discovers, conquers, and controls more and more Indigenous cultures, victory begins to come at an ever-increasing price for Europeans as natural landscapes disappear. Nonetheless, the

“American dream” of success continues to motivate emigrants from around the world to venture to this continent and “like the Conquistadors of old, to do what they could neither do nor be” (Posse, 2008, 293) back home. And if the problem with Renaissance man was that he “invented his own misfortunes” (Posse, 2008, 253) and wasted his life preparing for the future rather than truly living in the present, in the postmodern era it is easy to anticipate how “man of the future” will continue to act as if there were no God to restrain his instinctual urges, thus perpetuating the same violent behaviour toward the “other” and using technology this time to create a world where anything goes.

### Conclusions

“Take a circle, caress it and it will turn vicious,” said Mr. Smith in one of Eugène Ionesco’s most famous plays, *The Bald Soprano*. Just like him, at the end of this journey through American colonial history, we can say that humanity was not (and probably never will be) a peaceful species. Wavering between the desire for rational progress and the inability to overcome his primal instincts of conquest and the violent imposition of superiority over “the other,” man has been trapped for millennia in a vicious cycle perpetuated precisely by his own actions. In this essay, I have attempted to trace the contours of this circle, the edges of this downward spiral that

regularly self-destructs, while at the same time connecting it to Abel Pose’s historical metafiction and to his comments on Europeans’ habit of destroying the culture and histories of antiquity and thus forever rewriting its history.

The steps I took to support my thesis began with an analysis of the ways in which collective fantasies such as the earthly paradise were projected onto newly discovered spaces, helping to justify their adoption by those who constructed the projection in the first place. Subsequently, the second part will show how these religious fantasies gave way to economic and political fantasies, the vice of material enrichment and the accumulation of territories for commercial purposes, thus justifying even more than before the violent conquest of people who stood in the way of Western development. To conclude this study, I would like to reiterate the importance of addressing such issues in today’s world, where more and more people seem to act every day as if there were no higher authority watching or condemning them. When we consider all the political conflicts and wars of today, it becomes clear that whether man lived in the 1500s or in the twentieth century, he still could not stop listening to the part of him that drove him to the violence of delight.

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