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**Imagination, Writing, and the Devil: Preliminary Remarks on José de Acosta's  
 "The Natural and Moral History of the Indies"**

**Imagination**

§1. *Lactantius*. "The imagination and conceit which some have had, supposing the heaven to be round, has been the cause to invent these Antipodes hanging in the air." But for Lactantius (c.240 - c.320), the image of men marching with their feet opposite to his was ludicrous. He asks himself in his *Divinarum Institutionum*: "What reason is there for some to affirm that there are Antipodes, whose steps are opposite to ours? Is it possible that any should be so foolish as to believe there were a people or nation marching with their feet upwards, and their heads downwards, and that things which are placed here of one sort, are in that other part hanging topsy-turvy; that trees and wheat grow downwards, and that rain, snow, and hail, fall from the earth upward."<sup>1</sup> However, Lactantius could not find an answer to his question; all he saw was the obstinacy of some Philosophers who, having once erred, were bound to defend their opinions against common sense by means of increasingly nonsensical ideas – having once erred, their imaginations ran amok.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in José de Acosta, *Historia moral y natural de las Indias en que se tratan de las cosas notables del cielo, elementos, metales, plantas y animales dellas, y los ritos, y ceremonias, leyes y gobierno de los indios* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1940), (I, 7).

§2. *On the Antipodes*. Twelve centuries later, standing on Peruvian soil, with his feet opposite to Lactantius' as it were, and finding that he was not hanging in the air with his head downward and his feet on high, José de Acosta (1540-1600) found laughable quite a different image: that of Lactantius' world as a house, whose foundations are in the ground and whose roof is in the air. And unlike Lactantius, Acosta was able to locate with precision the origin of this fallacious image. In a sense, it is the same rationale: human imagination is capable of perceiving connections between things where common sense dictates that none exists. Acosta also believed, following Aristotle, that imagination can play tricks on us and lead us to error – imagination can produce illusions that could be almost undistinguishable from truth. So, the problem is a different one: what has changed in the twelve hundred years that separate Acosta from Lactantius is common sense, or better yet, vernacular knowledge. Europe had arrived to the Indies; the Antipodes had become European territory and now they are part and parcel of Europe's imagination *and* common sense. What was radically new since 1492 was that the Antipodes were a possible experience.

§3. *Methods of Imagination*. Amidst this novel image of the world, Acosta's reading of Lactantius is one example among many of a far-reaching change in the understanding of human societies. According to Anthony Pagden, this change can be characterized as one from "generalized accounts of human behavior in terms of individual psychological dispositions to an ethical sociology grounded in empirical observation." This kind of sociological analysis was articulated around a shift from "a description of cultures in terms of a human nature thought to be constant over both time and space to a wider

anthropological and historical relativism.”<sup>2</sup> In this new epistemic program, the figure of the observer that begins to register, classify and describe difference and discontinuity takes center stage. Indeed, when Acosta set out to write his *Historia moral y natural de las Indias*<sup>3</sup> [The Natural and Moral History of the Indies] he was much aware of the demonstrative value of experience. As the case of Lactantius’ error made all too clear, in any given situation there may exist a variety of different explanations, all of which may *appear* to satisfy the basic criteria for truth. In such a situation, thus, the only means of knowing which hypothesis to select must be personal experience. Therefore, the method of history-writing that informs the whole of the *Historia* is of a very specific kind: “First state the truth as certain experience has revealed it to us and then attempt (although this will be an arduous business) to provide the proper conclusions according to good philosophy.” (II, 3) If read through the lens of the problem of imagination, ‘good philosophy’ is tantamount to a controlled imaginative exercise, in which reason, that “certain light of heaven that resides in our soul,” judges over the “interior images which present themselves unto us.” (I, 7)

§4. *Acosta’s Laugh*. “When I passed to the Indies, I will tell what chanced unto me: having read what Poets and Philosophers write of the burning Zone [*Tórridazona*], I persuaded myself, that coming to the Equinoctial, I should not endure the violent heat,

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Acosta finished writing the *Historia* in 1588 while in Genoa. He included as first and second books his Spanish translation of his Latin manuscript *De Natura Novi Orbis* (written while he was still living in the Indies) and as the seventh book an excerpt with literal transcriptions of Juan de Tovar’s *Segunda relación*. After submitting the manuscript to the censors and to the Society of Jesus, the first edition of the *Historia* was finally published in Seville in 1590. I use here the edition prepared by Edmundo O’Gorman in 1940, which can be considered definitive. Translations are mine, but I have kept Edward Grimston’s translation in sight. Hereafter I quote parenthetically in the text with the number of the book followed by the chapter’s number.

but it fell out otherwise; for when I passed, which was when the sun was there for Zenith, being entered into Aries, in the month of March, I felt so great cold, as I was forced to go into the sun to warm me. Here I confess that I laughed and mocked at Aristotle's meteors and his philosophy, seeing that in that place and at that season, when all should be scorched with heat, according to his rules, I, and all my companions were cold, because in truth there is no region in the world more pleasant and temperate, that under the Equinoctial." (II, 9)

§5. *History and Philosophy.* Acosta's is a laugh that erodes a fading historical imagination whose truth claims were made in direct reference to the authority of Aristotle, the Holy Scriptures and the doctrines of the Fathers of the Church. Even so, being a Jesuit, Acosta was as far as he could be from radical skepticism or crude empiricism. He was trained in a Jesuit theological humanism that employed both the methods and the sources of humanist theology and of scholasticism as well as ministerial spirituality inspired by Ignatius of Loyola.<sup>4</sup> Even more, he had a very clear purpose when writing the *Historia*: first, "that having knowledge of the works of nature, which the wise Author of all nature made, we may praise and glorify the high God," and second, that "having knowledge of the Indians' customs, we may help them more easily to follow and persevere in the high vocation of the Gospel." (Introduction, 14) Thus, experience alone is not the source of truth – every experience must be ordained according to an eschatological history that tells of how God, using admirable means, "made a passage for the Gospel in those parts." As such, the *Historia* is history that acknowledges "the providence and bounty of the Creator." (VII, 28) Acosta might laugh at Aristotle's

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<sup>4</sup> Claudio Burgaleta, *José de Acosta, S.J. (1540-1600)* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1999), xix.

meteors and at Lactantius' world as a house, but the *Historia* is not a mere collection of facts that would counter the ideas held by tradition. That is not its novelty. Nor is it its concern with the history of the New World. This is how the author describes his book: "As although this New World be not new, but old, in respect of the much which had been written thereof; yet this history may, in some sort, be held for new, for it is partly historical and partly philosophical, as well for that they are the works of nature as of free will, which are the deeds and customs of men." (Introduction, 13) Within this complex historical imagination (and here resides the novelty of the *Historia*) the question is not just what God is capable of doing but what is compatible with reason and with the style and order of human affairs.

§6. *Time, Place, Faith.* Imagination is clearly essential to every form of scientific inquiry because very few areas of knowledge are open to direct empirical observation. This is its strength and its weakness: "Truly it is marvelous to consider that man's understanding cannot perceive and attain truth, without the use of imaginations; and on the other part, it were impossible but he should err and be deceived, if he should wholly follow behind them." (I, 7) This ability of imagining those parts of the world that lay beyond our experiential possibilities expands our inner world incommensurably. And yet, this very power of imagination oftentimes obscures the obvious fact that we are facing inner images of our own fabrication. Images can turn into mirages, vain pictures [*pinturas vanas*] all too easily if we forget that an image is not an abstraction but a representation. In other words, imagination provides us not with concepts but with simulacra of experience. Therefore, of necessity, imagination, as actual experience, must be "grounded

upon time and place, which she cannot comprehend nor conceive in general, but in particular. It follows that when we shall raise it to the consideration of things which exceed the time and place which are known unto her, she cannot stand, if reason does not support her.” (I, 7) Acosta illustrates his argument with the problem of the creation of the world. Even though reason shows us that there was no time before there were any movement (whose very measure is time), and that there was no place outside the universe (which contains every place), our imagination nevertheless keeps on looking for a time previous to the creation of the world and for a place in which the universe would have been created. And yet we know it is not that simple. In that odd last chapter of the last book Acosta returns to his idea of a history of the Gospel in which the existence of the Indies finds its true meaning. Yes, reason tames and makes sense out of our imaginations hence securing the advancement of knowledge. But this is no secular reason; it is that heavenly light that participates in God’s supreme, pure, and first light. Reason makes us truly human for it is a faculty for knowledge, but also for believing – it grants us with the awareness of the divine plan for earthly life. That is why the *Historia* opens *and* closes with a leap of faith that overdetermines history throughout. It is through this leap of faith that the New World can be incorporated into the historical, teleological order of the world. Further, it is faith that makes the writing of the *Historia* possible, and as we will see, it is through writing that this faith conquers for her a new time and place: the New World – the Indies.

## Writing

§7. *Acosta's Astonishment*. In the course of the sixteenth century, Europeans investigating the history and ethnography of the Indies had regularly commented on the difficulties of gathering information because the Indians had no writing. Hence it is no surprise that the *Historia* opens with a notice of astonishment as to the “no small industry” of the Indians for having preserved “their antiquities without the use of letters.” In his astonishment Acosta aligns himself with a common premise of European imagination: language was the prime indicator of rationality: that what a man spoke was, to a considerable degree, what a man was. In this context, for Acosta and his contemporaries, America’s peoples, as peoples without writing, offered an example of the earliest stages of human existence, and thus, as ‘primitives,’ became part of the European discourse about language and the development of civilization. This, however, is a problem that far exceeds the intention of these pages. What interests me is the relation between writing and (historical) imagination. So, let’s stay close to Acosta’s astonishment – it reveals that what is at stake here is the idea that “those who do not speak like us do not conceptualize like us, and those who do not conceptualize like us, are *not* like us.”<sup>5</sup>

§8. *Letters and Knowledge*. The fourth chapter of the sixth book is devoted to the absence of letters among the Indians. As said before, this is not simply one more difference among the many between Europe and the New World; on the contrary, it is a crucial difference for, in European historical imagination, the invention of writing represents the

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<sup>5</sup> Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993), 120.

transition into an ordered and civilized world: “A literate world is one which does not require that each generation re-invent the discoveries of the previous, and it is the only world in which cultural and scientific progress is at all possible.”<sup>6</sup> It can be inferred then that writing allows societies to have history instead of just myth because it makes possible the production of an archive in which memory gets stabilized and knowledge is secured from fancy.<sup>7</sup> This is not merely a cultural or social (i.e. contingent) achievement; rather, letters are the means of producing knowledge that best fits the work of human imagination. That is why, for Acosta, the presence or absence of letters indicates the degree of rationality of any given society: writing is in accord with human nature. Yet, the absence of writing in Amerindian societies is not absolute; Acosta found certain kinds of ‘written record’ among them (in the form of painted images or convoluted codes) that begged for a satisfying explanation given the importance of the issue. If writing is indeed an expression of human knowledge at its most rational and civilized, it becomes urgent to explain how it is that writing allows for more trustworthy knowledge and why it is absent from Indian life. For Acosta this is a matter of the difference between letters, images, and ciphers.

§9. *Letters, Images, Ciphers.* “Letters were invented to refer and signify immediately the words that we pronounce, just as the same words and voices [*palabras y vocablos*] are immediately signals of the concepts and thoughts of men. And both letters and voices were ordained to make things known: the voices to those present; the letters to those

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<sup>6</sup> Pagden, *European*, 135.

<sup>7</sup> For the European mind writing also marks the division between history and prehistory, or in other words, between having culture in the humanistic sense or having culture in the anthropological sense. See Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797* (London and New York: Methuen & Co., 1986), 55-56.



absent or to come.” (VI, 4) Those signs and marks that do not signify immediately words but things cannot be true letters, even though they may be written, that is, inscribed in some material medium. Therefore it is *alphabetic* writing that is the true marker of rationality. Indians did have written records of some kind, yet they are not composed of letters, but of ciphers, pictures or mnemonic keys. This prior stage in the development of writing remains attached to the materiality of the signified: the sign mimics the object that it represents. As in the case of the images fabricated by the imagination, non-alphabetic writing is composed of simulacra of the objects about which it speaks. And since these simulacra are as numerous as possible objects of reference exist in the world, they can only become meaningful through an arduous process of interpretation and memory-work that requires intense and special training. In fact, this process had reached such level of complexity in Indian societies of Peru and Mexico (as is the case also, Acosta argues, of the Chinese and Japanese) that all their knowledge [*ciencia*] “tends only to read and write, and no farther.” (VI, 6) In contradistinction, the alphabet detaches the whole process of recording “from its prior dependence upon the senses.”<sup>8</sup> Thanks to this independence, an alphabetic script records abstractions and universals more adequately than any other kind of inscription, thus allowing for the furthering of cultural and scientific progress. Its simplicity, its disembodiment from the facticity of recording is its advantage over pictures and ciphers: “the Indian, with twenty four letters which he had learned to write and put together, will write and read all the words that there are in the world.” Perhaps more importantly: these twenty four letters will allow him to “write the names of things he knows not.” (VI, 6)

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<sup>8</sup> Padgen, *European*, 136.

§10. *Writing and Memory*. The difference between alphabetic and non-alphabetic writing signifies that “the memory of histories and antiquities may be preserved by one of these three means: either by letters and writings, as had been used amongst the Latin, Greeks, Hebrews, and many other nations; or by paintings, as had been used almost throughout all the world, for it is said in the second Nicene Counsel, painting is a book for fools who cannot read; or by ciphers and characters, as the cipher signifies the number of a hundred, a thousand, and others, without noting the word of a hundred or a thousand.” (VI, 4)

Evidently, the first means of record-keeping is the one more reliable, thereby making a matter of “no small industry” for the Indians to preserve “their antiquities without the use of letters,” given the immense task of interpretation and memorization that non-alphabetic recording entails. Now we better understand the reason for Acosta’s astonishment: even though the absence of writing among Indian societies was a clear indication of their primitive stage of development, their capacity for recording an incipient historical account spoke against “that false opinion many do commonly hold of them, that they are gross and brutish people, or that they have so little understanding that is scarcely deserves that name.” (VI, 1) At this point we return to the importance of the demonstrative value of experience. Imagination by herself, taking notice of the absence of writing in the New World, had led to numerous excesses and outrages upon the Indians, “using them like brute beasts, and reputed them unworthy of any respect.” In order to confound this pernicious opinion, Acosta made his purpose to write and relate “their order and manner, when as they lived under their own laws.” (VI, 1) By writing, Acosta thought it possible to record the true memory and history of those peoples that lacked the proper tools to do so, and in doing so, to provide the means for those who have

not experienced the Indies to imagine them truthfully. The writing of the *Historia* aimed to incorporate the Indies into European historical imagination, and into the eschatological order of the world through the authority of first-hand experience.

§11. *Written Absences*. In between the second and third books Acosta sees it fit to insert an advertisement to the reader: “The reader must understand, that I wrote the first two books in Latin, when I was at Peru, and therefore they speak of matters of the Indies, as of things present ... But in the five following books, for that I made them in Europe, I have been forced to change my mode of speaking, and therein to treat of matters of the Indies, as Countries and things absent.” Writing has the power to speak about things absent and to speak to those who are not yet there. Writing erases the distance between European imagination and that world that lays just the other side of the oceanic divide. This erasure, however, is not a simple process. For if letters truly refer and signify immediately the words that we pronounce, then what is invoked is a world of words, a world of concepts, not of things. Furthermore, if, as Acosta himself recognizes, letters signify things only mediately by means of words, then “they which know not the tongue, understand them not.” (VI, 4) And, of course, among those who do not understand Acosta’s tongue are the Indians which are the very object of his writing. Thus, the *Historia*, as written text, reinstates the distance which it aims to overcome. The immediacy of the letter replaces the immediacy of experience so that things only gain a shadowy, unstable presence. Concepts get fixed while things withdraw into the specificities of every particular language. Alphabetic writing brings about a paradox: the transparency of the relation between letters and concepts produces opacity in the relation

between letters and things. Hence things are present in the *Historia* only insofar as they are absent. Those things can only be imagined through letters that immediately refer to concepts that are thoroughly European. Of course, this was not a real problem for Acosta. He believed that words were interchangeable between tongues, that is, that the word ‘sun,’ for example, refers to exactly the same thing as the words ‘sol,’ ‘soleil,’ ‘Sonne,’ or ‘antü.’ The absence of a word for a thing simply indicated to Acosta the absence of an understanding of that thing.<sup>9</sup> This belief in the interchangeability of words and the perfect correspondence between words and things accounts for the unproblematic fashion in which Acosta pretends to record the Indian world. He thinks that the matters of which he writes are absent only because they are far away (which is a contingent, rectifiable state of affairs), even though it is his writing, as expression of rationality, that makes their presence altogether irretrievable.<sup>10</sup>

§12. *Scriptural Inscription.* The *Historia* is an attempt to correct the defectiveness of oral transmission by preserving ‘real history’ in a textual form. Acosta sincerely believed that the history of the Indian world could illuminate the historical process itself and that by studying such a seemingly alien society his European readers might come to understand something about the natural behavior of all human communities including their own. In order to achieve this, he needs first to hold fast the historical facts (so to take distance from hearsay and mere fables) and second to make them commensurable to European

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<sup>9</sup> For example, the fact that Indian tongues lack a proper name for God is clear indication that Indians have little notice of Him: “it has caused great admiration in me that although they had this knowledge [of God], yet had they no proper name for God.” (V, 3)

<sup>10</sup> In the words of Peter Hulme, “the object of the investigation lies always just the *other* side of that great divide: the prehistoric tribe *before* the moment of the colonial encounter, when it was still in its pure and unadulterated state, entirely different.” Hulme, *Colonial Encounters*, 56.

reality (so that his words may signify the same thing for each and every possible reader). Both conditions are fulfilled by the operation of writing – it inscribes Indian history into the fold of European (and Christian) history: “I will only content myself to plant this history or relation at the doors of the Gospel.” Acosta’s *Historia*, as distinct from Indian fables and myths, truly is history for it is a written text: “In combining the power to keep the past (while the primitive ‘fable’ forgets its origin) with that of indefinitely conquering distance (while the primitive ‘voice’ is limited to the vanishing circle of its auditors), writing *produces history*.”<sup>11</sup> Through writing our relation with the other and the past is formed, but only if the difference between that other and the same and between the past and the present is preserved. In this new kind of writing whose ethnological thrust gives form to the text, “difference is simultaneously the generative principle and the object to be made credible.”<sup>12</sup> With a keen eye and an acute sense for the differences between natural forms in the new world and the old, Acosta struggled to make of novelty, especially novelty as it concerned human behavior, *cultural difference* instead of mere aberration, that is, absolute difference. Hence, driven by the belief in the essential sameness of all human minds, the *Historia* is an essentially historical project that aims to account for cultural differences by means of their scriptural inscription in the historical record of humankind.

### The Devil

§13. *Evil Mimicry*. Let’s return to the issue of images and simulacra for it is in the logic of mimicry where Acosta finds the means to begin to explain cultural difference.

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<sup>11</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 215.

<sup>12</sup> Certeau, *Writing*, 218.

Understandably, he held religion to be the highest of man's cultural achievements, and an integral part of every social activity as much for the idolatrous pagan as for the Indian, but since Christianity depends on revelation, religious expressions in the pagan world cannot be but imperfect. It follows that no society before the coming of Christ, nor any which has not heard the Gospel, can be fully civilized. However, it is no secret that Acosta greatly admired the social complexity and cultural richness of the Indian communities he found in his peregrinations across Mexico and Peru. So, Acosta faces yet another paradox: if only a highly structured social order could conceive of and maintain a highly complex religious order, then the most complex societies in the Indies had to be also the most idolatrous. In other words, whereas Indian paganism is due to the lack of notice of the Gospel, the highly complex expressions of pagan faith are still in need of explanation. For Acosta the only satisfactory explanation was satanic intervention. More precisely, it is the Devil's ability to mimic the works of God that sets Indian imagination astray. Therefore, a detailed account of Indian religious practices may serve "to discover the pride, envy, deceits, and ambushes of the Devil, which he practiced against those he holds captives, seeing on the one side he seeks to imitate God, and make comparison with him and his holy Law; and on the other side, he does mingle with his actions so many vanities, filthiness, and cruelties, as he that has no other practice but to sophisticate and corrupt all that is good." (V, 31) Even the strange similarities that Acosta saw between Christian sacraments of confession and baptism and Indian rites could only be understood as satanic inversions of divine truth, testimony to the Devil's low cunning and treason in imitating God. By mimicking God, the Devil manages to invert and pollute the natural

order of things, diverting man's imagination into wrong paths where it creates evil out of potential good.

§14. *Idoltrous Imagination*. Acosta divides idolatry into three distinct categories: In the first category is the worship of natural phenomena such as stones, streams, trees, mountains, etc., in the second, the worship of animals and in the third, the worship of anthropomorphic idols.<sup>13</sup> What is common to all these kinds of idolatrous worship is an uncontrolled use of imagination that mistakes false for true images. As said above, a true image is an image of something which exists, or existed, in the world of the senses, or an image of something that is beyond our experiential possibilities, and yet does not conflict with reason and common sense. Thereby, images of Christ, the Virgin, or the saints are undoubtedly true images. A false image, in turn, is simply an image that represents things unavailable for sensory or rational examination. In establishing this distinction, Acosta is adhering to the common belief among missionaries that for the Indians the image *was* the god, which is why “the Spaniards were so keen to cast down idols, believing that they could not be manufactured anew and that the obvious inability of the Indian gods to rise up and defend themselves would be sufficient proof of their vanity.”<sup>14</sup> If the image was the god indeed, then it cannot represent any actual or potentially existing object; therefore with the destruction of the image its lack of referent would be apparent and its spurious divine qualities unmasked. According to Acosta's view, in the case of idolatry imagination is trapped in the conflation of the image with the creature it supposedly

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<sup>13</sup> It is worthy of notice that this classification corresponds to the hierarchy of the natural world as Acosta understood it, that is, arranged from simple to more complex elements – perhaps natural history begs for a devilish hermeneutics in which complexity invites the promiscuous use of imagination and the lecherous ravishment of knowledge.

<sup>14</sup> Pagden, *The Fall*, 173.

represents. If non-alphabetic writing led to error because its mediated relation to concepts opened the space for difficult and dubious practices of interpretation, in the case of the idolatrous image, error comes from absence of such a space. There is no possible detachment from the image – it becomes the very thing it intends to represent. This devilish logic turns images into idols that deserve worship, thereby trapping the imagination in idolatrous practices.

§15. *The Devil in the Historia*. In the Indian world, ignorant of the Gospel, the Devil had been able to reign more freely than anywhere else, and his treachery had reached such power that it holds captive Amerindian societies as cruel inversions of hallowed norms. Even though the forms of religion practiced by the societies described by Acosta may in many respects display high levels of complexity in accordance to a certain degree of civility, they were also monstrously tainted by inversion and perversion – they simply were a mockery of true religion. The Devil’s government over the Indian mind is what explains the history of these societies and the place they occupy in eschatological history. For example, in the case of Mexico, the Devil’s inversion of Christian rites “may suffice to conceive the Devil’s pride and the misery of this wretched nation, who with so great expense of their goods, their labor, and their lives, did thus serve their capital enemy, who pretended nothing more than the destruction of their souls and consumption of their bodies.” (V, 13) Hence, the Devil’s mimicry of true religion and the idolatrous uses of imagination that it engenders do not only account for the high complexity of Indian religious practices; it also helps us understand God’s design to have this New World freed from the Devil’s empire. Acosta believed that once liberated from their idolatrous



images, the very nature of some of their rites and institutions would enable the Indians to embrace Christian faith more easily: “The Indians were so wearied with the heavy and insupportable yoke of Satan’s laws, his sacrifices and ceremonies ... that they consulted among themselves to seek out a new law, and another God to serve ... And that which is difficult in our law, to believe so high and sovereign mysteries, has been easy among them, for that the Devil had made them comprehend things of greater difficulty.” (VII, 28) What is crucial, if ironic, is that the Devil has not sown in barren soil: “his lies are always sacramental, ritualistic. He cannot teach men what to think or to believe; he can only deceive them into reading the book of nature incorrectly, into doing the right things in the wrong way.”<sup>15</sup> The Indians are not radically different from the European; they only have been misled by the Devil’s ways. This is why the role of the Devil in the *Historia* is fundamental: it makes difference credible and relative. By writing the true history of the Devil’s empire of the Indies, the *Historia* aims to liberate this new land from its capital enemy, thereby bringing it into the fold of the Christian Church and the providentialist course of History. In a word, it is through the figure of the Devil, of the anti-Christ that the Indians are inscribed into European historical imagination, which is in this fashion always already overdetermined as an evangelizing, colonial imagination.

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§16. *Afterword: Colonial Images.* The image of the Devil, as the foreign and altogether familiar organizing figure of the *Historia*’s narrative speaks of a different realm of images that lurks on the margins of the text. As Michael Taussig so perceptively puts it, “In their remorseless extirpation of idolatry ... the Spanish bestowed a strange power on their subjects. In conquering the Indians they granted them the power of their

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<sup>15</sup> Pagden, *The Fall*, 178.

supernatural foe, the devil.”<sup>16</sup> The images that the *Historia* cannot invoke are those of Spaniards fearful, not scornful, of Indian deities; Europeans entranced by the power of the Indian’s demons. The repression of this species of troubling images subdues the violence of the colonial encounter by means of an almost hallucinatory exacerbation of the figure of the Devil as if it were an entirely foreign image, absolutely extrinsic to Acosta’s (and to his contemporaries’) historical imagination. This is not, by any means, a mere rhetoric question: “Who would not wonder to see the Devil so curious to seek to be worshiped and revered in the same manner that Jesus Christ our God has appointed and also taught, and as the Holy Church has accustomed?” (V, 24) Acosta is dead serious about the puzzle that these resemblances suppose for the coherence of the divine design and its eschatological orientation. How to account for the great similarities between pagan religious practices and Christian faith if not by means of the figure of the Devil? And, furthermore, how to make sense of the unrelenting violence of colonization if not as an assault against the Devil’s wrongdoing in this otherwise religious land?

To my mind, the disturbing images of European ravishment in the face of demonic deities so alike to Christian ones pertain to that realm of images described by Alan Klima as one that “cannot be really seen at all, that circulate almost godlike beyond even the material signifiers of image and word that are dispatched toward it like offerings, gifts, always in exchange with an ineffable next world.”<sup>17</sup> In the case of the *Historia* this realm of images is populated by the death and terror that sustained the colonial enterprise. The deadly and horrifying images of the colonized bodies torn apart

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 170.

<sup>17</sup> Alan Klima, *The Funeral Casino: Meditation, Massacre, and Exchange with the Dead in Thailand* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 47.

by the colonizer might and the disturbing images of the colonizer bodies subdued to the pagan lure of the colonized world, circulate in the colonial historical imagination without need for material signifiers or inscriptions. These images, in their uncanny absence from the official, written, historiographic record are dispatched toward that realm that cannot really be seen if only to divert our gaze in disbelief. That ineffable next world is a very distinct one in the case of Acosta's narrative: it is the world of colonialism – precisely that world of by now ubiquitous images that allows me, four hundred years after, to unearth and congeal some of the images that haunt the *Historia* by means of writing, and thus to make them commensurable with the historical imagination of the fleeing present.

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