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Abusive Narratives: French Travel Accounts in Latin America

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Pas plus que l'individu n'est seul dans le groupe et que chaque société n'est seule parmi les autres, l'homme n'est seul dans l'univers.

(Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques* 497)

Playing the lead role in the film “The Sheltering Sky”, John Malkovitch explains to his partner, Campbell Scott, the difference between tourists and travelers: “tourists make their trip with a specific date of return in mind while travelers do not know when they will come back.” The nineteenth and the twentieth centuries had many of these travelers who, for different purposes and interests, “covered” the world through their daily journals transformed into published travel accounts.

Travel accounts were very popular among the public in the nineteenth century, particularly in France. The well-known publishing house Hachette even had a *Collection de voyages* series which appeared in the second part of the nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth. Hachette bought rights from various travelers to make their accounts available to the general public. This exploration fever also touched periodicals which regularly printed articles giving the latest facts concerning far away lands. Many of these works appeared in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, reaching their peak in number between 1860 and 1890. This proliferation of writings covered the five continents, taking the reader to places as different as the Egyptian pyramids, the Laponian igloos or the Patagonian toldos.

While travel accounts dealing with Latin America were numerous and extremely successful in this period, very few studies on the topic have been

undertaken. Franklin D. Parker, Ricardo Fernández Guardia, and more recently Martim Afonso Palma de Haro are three of the rare historians who gathered into anthologies excerpts of travels accounts written in the first part of the nineteenth century, although these dealt mostly with English-speaking authors². In addition, while Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* (1992) can be seen as the reference on travel writing, she probably remains as the only scholar to this day who explores in depth the accounts of French travelers who went to Latin America. However, most of Pratt's examples concern travel accounts written in the eighteenth century. In fact, besides the Orient, which is usually the center of interest as far as travel literature is concerned in France, the many French travelers who wrote about their journeys to Central and South America in the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth seem to have been somewhat ignored by scholars since there are no studies (including in France) that introduce and analyze these specific texts.

In this article, I would like to show how some of the French travelers who went to Latin America use their accounts and the illustrations accompanying them to increase their power over the readers. These travelers multiply anecdotes and "extraordinary" adventures, without hesitating to express themselves in abusive narratives that challenge credibility and that convey a feeling of superiority to the populations encountered through their journeys. Mary Louise Pratt uses the terms of navigation, sentimental, and survival's literature (20) to describe the styles used by foreign travelers in their accounts. Pratt proposes that "in travel literature, ... science and sentiment code the imperial frontier in the two eternally clashing and complementary languages of bourgeois subjectivity" (39). Before discussing

the techniques and credibility of the French travel accounts in Latin America, it is important to set their contexts, both historical and literary.

The period of 1825-1900 is extremely rich historically and politically in France. The interval 1830-1848 saw the reign of Louis-Philippe under the July Monarchy. France also faced the industrial revolution which resulted in a pauperization of the proletariat. Critical economic conditions in 1846-1848 provoked the fall of the king and the start of the second republic, which lasted three years. The *coup* of 1851 marked the beginning of the second Empire with Louis Napoléon (III) as Emperor of France. Latin America appeared on the French political agenda with an intervention and the presence of troops in Mexico from 1861 to 1867. This foreign intervention was in the end a disaster and the first serious fiasco faced by the Emperor. A second grave crisis took place in the war of 1870-1871 when France was defeated by Germany. This marked the end of the second Empire and the return to democracy with the start of the third *République*. During the last thirty years of the century, France conducted a policy highly oriented toward foreign affairs by leading armed and/or economic interventions on several continents. The French were involved in China, Indochina, Tunisia, Egypt (the Suez Canal) and Panama (the Panama Canal).

The period between 1870 and 1900 was one of the most remarkable ever in the history of France as far as foreign and imperial affairs are concerned. When dealing with imperialism, France was most interested in civilizing what were regarded as barbaric populations by promoting French ideologies and prestige in those regions than increasing its economical capital (Wright 299). The French were not really a people of immigrants (as were the British or the German) but saw themselves as the founders and teachers of

liberty, democracy, and progress. This policy of intellectual foreign intervention piqued the curiosity of French travelers in regard to these foreign lands which they knew little about. They thought they were the ambassadors of French prestige and ideology in the new developing nations around the world. Consequently, one can consider French foreign policy in these years as a catalyst for the sudden popularity of the travel accounts genre.

Furthermore, France had a strong influence on the new Latin American nations, particularly in Argentina and Brazil. According to James Scobie,

in the literary salons and among the educated classes [in Argentina], strains of Utopian Socialism, the works of Saint-Simon and Fourier, the latest waltzes or styles from Paris, even momentary excitement over phrenology, reflected an acute awareness of French intellectual currents. (103)

In Brazil, the most significant trend that developed in the last thirty years of the nineteenth century was the influence of the French positivist Auguste Comte (1798-1857). Comte's philosophy, based on progress and civilization, was so popular that his disciples founded the Positivist Association of Brazil in 1876. Besides the abolition of slavery,

Brazilian Positivism advocated governmental planning for progress and industrialization, restricting foreign economic influence and penetration, modernizing agriculture, expanding the communications and transport infrastructures, encouraging education, controlling immigration, and enacting social legislation. (Burns 1993: 209)

In fact, according to Burns, France was shaping "Brazil's intellectual and cultural life..." (Burns 1993: 201) throughout the nineteenth century. Various

French art missions, headed by painter Jean-Baptiste Debret, and engineers were invited to Rio de Janeiro and Parisian fashion was *de rigueur* among the Brazilian elite. The success of French artists, philosophers, and fashion resulted in an increase of the exchanges between France and Latin America. Consequently, while many rich Latin Americans went to study in French universities, numerous French artists, scientists, diplomats, and travelers were curious about and had interest to visit this new world.

In addition, toward the end of the nineteenth century, most of the Latin American nations were influenced by European racist theories. These doctrines were the result of the evolutionist ideologies of Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), and of Auguste Comte himself. Bradford Burns indicates that “they viewed the question of civilization versus barbarism in racial terms also and ... ranked the aryan and Anglo at the pinnacle of civilization while regarding the Africans and Indians as real obstacles to progress” (Burns 1980: 29). In his course of positivist ideology, Auguste Comte explains that in opposition to disorder which is represented by antagonism and anarchy, order translates into authority and hierarchy. The “natural order” is what commands our environment (13). According to Stanley and Barbara Stein, “the incipient universalism of the eighteenth century was replaced by concepts of the heterogeneity and hierarchy of man in the late nineteenth” (185).

Finally, the last decades of the nineteenth century see in France the proliferation of pamphlets denouncing the inequality of races and the supposed need for Europeans to educate the so called “savage” populations of far away lands. One can mention authors such as Joseph Arthur de Gobineau and his *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1884) [Essay on

the Inequality of Human Races]. In 1881, Dr. Gustave Le Bon publishes *L'Homme et les sociétés* [Man and societies] in which he ranks the populations in four levels: the “primitive races” (composed of the Australian indigenous tribes which are described as savages close to bestiality); the “inferior races” among which the blacks, (populations only capable of rudiments of civilization and rudiments only, they cannot improve); the “intermediate races” represented mainly by the Asian populations (civilizations which remain incomplete and lack maturity); and the “superior races” way above the others are the only acceptable ones according to Le Bon. They are the white European races (316)³. As it will be shown in this study, racist theories are reflected in most of the French travel accounts dealing with Latin America.

As far as the profusion of travel accounts in France and in the rest of Europe is concerned, the literary environment of the nineteenth century remains their best justification. Going back to the beginning of the century, 1805 more precisely, François-René de Chateaubriand published a small book entitled *René*. This work tells the story of a melancholy young man who emigrates to Louisiana. The book, full of *mal de vivre*, exotic noble savages and inoffensive wild forests, is considered to have given Chateaubriand the title of precursor of French Romanticism. Charles Baudelaire, among others, followed the way traced by Chateaubriand. In 1857, Baudelaire published *Les Fleurs du mal* [The Flowers of Evil] in which appear several poems about exotic traveling. Furthermore, Jules Verne reached the top of the best-sellers list in 1872 both in France and South America with *Le Tour du monde en 80 jours* [Around the World in 80 Days]. In his account *Quatre républiques de l'Amérique du Sud* [Four Republics of

South America], Henry Coppin⁴ mentions that Verne was one of the most popular authors in South America and that his books were found everywhere on the continent (123). The adventures depicted by the Romantics and by Verne's fantastic stories set the tone for the travelers who would try to imitate them in their own accounts.

For the public of the nineteenth century which could not watch television or go to the movies, travel accounts were the equivalent of *National Geographic* programs. Indeed, they seemed less fictitious than novels (the author was narrating his own experiences, therefore it had to be true stories), and they gathered all the elements that were so popular in this still romantic era: exotism, danger, remote and savage lands, adventure. Sure to please their readers, the travelers abuse the use of anecdotes in which they represent themselves as the civilized soul in a barbaric and savage world.

Consequently, travelers use a dual narrative technique in their accounts. On the one hand, they concentrate on a prose of story-telling which emphasizes the supposed "savagery" of the new world. On the other hand, they complement their prose with what Gérard Genette calls a "paratexte", or "the accessory signals such as title, sub-title, preface, foreword, postscript, illustration, strip, cover" (10).⁵ That way, the written anecdote is almost always supported by a voluntary shocking and/or sensational visual representation whose title conveys a feeling of terror and/or admiration to the reader. This dual narrative technique is developed through the single main theme of barbarism vs. civilization which is itself divided in two categories.

The first category insists on what is described as pure savagery, a world where Indians are seen as the enemy of civilization, a world where all stereotypes become the norm. The traveler and historian Philippe de La

Renaudière⁶ appears as a good example of the dual abusive narrative. He publishes an history of Mexico and Guatemala in 1843, after having spent several years in these two countries. At one point in his account, he goes back in time and tells the story of a human sacrifice, the way it took place among the Aztecs according to him. The narration of the sacrifice is accompanied by a gory illustration on the opposite page. One notes the explicit paratexte under the drawing: “sacrifice ordinaire” [usual (almost ‘common’) sacrifice]. Then, La Renaudière goes on in the following words:

This noble patron, after having danced, drank and eaten all night long with the patient, and after having danced with him around the burning stake for a long time, pushed and then withdrew him from it immediately so that he could be sacrificed alive in the usual manner. The great sacrificer, dressed in a red outfit, his head decorated with green and yellow feathers showed to the audience the idol he was going to sacrifice, then armed with his knife, he approached the victim, opened his breast, pulled out his heart, presented it to the sun, and then threw it at the feet of the idol. If the unfortunate victim happened to be a prisoner of war, he was decapitated and his body was thrown to the bottom part of the temple. The officer or the soldier to whom he belonged could take the cadaver home for an horrible feast. (28-30)⁷

In this description, La Renaudière portrays Indians as savages and cannibals in lack of a model for civilization. A little further in his account, La Renaudière takes pleasure to show that, according to him, with the arrival of European civilization (and the Jesuits missions in particular) to these remote lands in the nineteenth century, Indians are now purified and have become,

thanks to the European model, a civilized people. The Indians are now presented wearing European clothes in a very peaceful attitude. This is after civilization.

The “twitching” paratexte takes a new dimension with the advent of photography, later in the twentieth century. With this new medium, travel accounts have probably found their strongest, most critical paratexte. From now on, all borders separating the text from its audience have disappeared. The reader now has a ringside seat, he or she can sit on the altar of sacrifice. In his account, *Haut-Amazone. Trois Français chez les indiens réducteurs de têtes* [High Amazon. Three Frenchmen Among the Head Shrinker Indians] published in 1939, Bertrand Flornoy seems far from the theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss who also traveled to Brazil in the same period and related a much more human and realistic portrayal of the tribes he visited⁸. While giving many details and information on the art of shrinking heads in his account, Bertrand Flornoy could simply use his photographs and the inscriptions accompanying them. One can read, under the photographs the following legends: “with the help of a calabash, the murderers pour hot sand in the bag formed by the head” (Flornoy 196),⁹ “the head-trophies are presented to the sun” (196),¹⁰ and “an old Indian presents the now reduced head, before the washing ceremony” (197).¹¹ Of course, these sentences are meant to be successful in transmitting an impact of terror to the readers. They almost sound like sensational headlines of a cheap daily newspaper. In fact, in the case of Bertrand Flornoy, the paratexte is so powerful that it takes over the main text.

The second aspect of the theme of barbarism vs. civilization used by travelers in their accounts is the image of a brave, superior, romantic hero

who successfully faces the dangers of the jungle while remaining a gentleman. A good example of this category is the French painter François-Auguste Biard¹². His account, *Deux années au Brésil*, was published by Hachette in 1862. It is illustrated by many drawings realized on location by the author. It is in the second part of this book, which relates Biard's stay in the jungle near Santa Cruz, that the French artist develops an exaggerated entertaining and exotic style. He decides to live alone in what he describes as a sort of primitive cabin, in the middle of nowhere. There follows a series of events that recall the most common themes of Romanticism *à la* Chateaubriand: for a while, Biard appears to live among nice *Botocoudos* "savages" (to whom he remains superior, often laughing at what he sees as ignorance) and without any previous experience whatsoever, Biard does not hesitate to write that he quickly adapts to the outdoors. In fact, Biard is probably the best example of the dual abusive entertaining and exaggerated narrative; he is the specialist of the paratexte which he uses constantly to illustrate his prose. At one point in the account, Biard pretends that he fought nothing less than two tigers alone and that he won his life. A full page illustration depicting the author in action is followed by this spectacular text:

I had aimed well, because these two tigers were injured. The biggest of the two stood up on his back paws; it had its two eyes riddled by small shots. I struck it with my grip which made it fall, and when it stood up again, I struck it a second time. Unfortunately, my gun touched a tree, and only the barrel remained in my hands. I was going to start again when I saw the animal running away. The little one, who suffered from an eye injury, was laying down on its back and was mewling, arousing

pity. I had a terrible job putting it out of its misery; nevertheless I managed to break its skull. (276)¹³

By multiplying this type of extraordinary anecdotes and adventures, Biard sends the message of a superior adventurer who, thanks to his *savoir-faire* and good manners acquired through years in the European model, is able to get by in the most dangerous and awkward situations.

As it has already been shown, almost all the French travelers to Latin America took their superiority for granted. The various observations in the accounts reflect this sentiment. The writings commonly emphasize that the civilized European nations have a duty to educate and show the way toward progress to countries not as fortunate as France. Sometimes, the supposed superiority is taken in the first degree, resulting in a racist attitude toward the indigenous. For instance, François Biard looks down on the predominantly black population of Bahia:

negroes, negroes everywhere, shouting, pushing; dirty pants, dirty shirts, muddy feet, and often huge, a sad result of this illness called elephantiasis that is almost always caused by vice. (38)¹⁴

In the same style, Ferdinand Denis¹⁵ makes the following description of the black archetype in Brazil: "... this semi-nudity, because they only wear linen underpants, these robust limbs that evoke the most beautiful antique statuary shapes, ... this tumult that almost always accompanies the least duty entrusted to negroes..." (113).¹⁶ In addition, following the scientific theories of his time, Denis alludes to the variety of races in Brazil, and he devotes a whole section of his account to the classification and hierarchy of the races.¹⁷ Nevertheless, not only these affirmations are racist and exaggerated but they

are also erroneous. For instance, the cause of elephantiasis is not vice, as Biard declares, but filarial worms.

In a lighter but still racist mode, Denis depicts the inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro, the Cariocas, as lazy individuals who lack of hygiene, and for whom speaking is as tiring as thinking (128). Denis is outraged by the outfit of a Carioca gentleman who received him at his home:

He shows up with a beard of several days, badly combed greasy hair, and wearing only a cotton shirt, with his legs entirely naked, and clogs on his feet; all this is neither very fancy nor very clean, particularly since the Brazilians are very hairy, and they have their chest and legs tanned by the sun. (127)¹⁸

In his complaint, Denis reacts as a French person, thinking only about his own culture. He does not consider that another culture could have a civilization based on a different weather and a different people, and could exist on its own, without automatically following the European model.

Another tendency of most of the French travel accounts to Latin America is to describe the people encountered more as types (or *clichés*) than as individuals. This is particularly obvious in the representations of Indians. They are always seen as a tribe. The rituals, ceremonies, fights, states of mind, and physical aspects of the Indians are constantly shown as common to the whole tribe, while white people are regularly described singly. For example, when François Biard depicts the inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro, he introduces various social classes and specific characteristics of the varied population. He enumerates the nationalities and origins of the Cariocas, their different jobs and occupations, and their social organization. In contrast, when Biard deals with the Botocoudos Indians, he often talks about *l'Indien*

in general, having him star in some farfetched, often ridiculous anecdotes. Travelers do not make any distinctions between the Indian people, and they do not mention specific occupations and/or professions inside the tribes. They only develop the basic contrasts men/women, chiefs/warriors.

Although they present many extravagant, not very credible and even sometimes disgraceful anecdotes, French travel accounts in Latin America that were published in the nineteenth century and the first part of twentieth century deserve the full attention of scholars. It is understood that they do not carry the literary weight of the accounts published by more renowned French writers on the Orient¹⁹. They are still, however, a fascinating source of research and discovery concerning the power of narratives, the shaping of new nations, and the ideologies that influenced and/or resulted from these accounts and that continue to nourish the debate of barbarism vs. civilization today.

Notes

¹ Paper translated from the French by the author.

² Ricardo Fernández Guardia, *Costa Rica en el siglo XIX* (1970); Martim Afonso Palma de Haro, *Ilha de Santa Catarina. Relatos de viajantes estrangeiros nos séculos XVIII e XIX* (1990); Franklin Dallas Parker, *Travels in Central America, 1821-1840* (1970).

³ For further reading concerning Le Bon and his theory of a hierarchy of races, see Tzvetan Todorov's *Nous et les autres* [We and the Others] (1989). In that book, Todorov defines racism as "a term which designates behaviors" and racialism as "a term specific to doctrines." According to Todorov, two of the most important characteristics distinguishing the racialist are his/her belief in the inequality and hierarchy of races (Todorov 154-55).

⁴ Whenever possible, brief biographical information on the travelers will be given. Almost nothing is known about Henry Coppin. He was a member of the French *Société de Géographie* and visited South America in the 1880s (Kirchheimer 54).

⁵ All the translations throughout the article are mine. "signaux accessoires tels titre, sous-titre, intertitres; préfaces, postfaces, avertissements, avant-propos, ... illustrations; prière d'insérer, bande, jaquette" (Genette 10).

⁶ Philippe de La Renaudière remains a mystery to the critic. He seems to have been a prominent historian in the first part of the nineteenth century.

⁷ "Ce noble patron, après avoir dansé, bu et mangé toute la nuit avec le patient, et longtemps dansé avec lui autour du bûcher allumé, l'y précipitait et le retirait promptement pour qu'il pût être sacrifié vivant à la manière ordinaire. ... Le grand sacrificateur, revêtu d'un habit rouge ..., la tête ornée de plumes vertes et jaunes ... montrait aux assistants l'idole à laquelle il allait sacrifier, ... puis armé de son couteau d'obsidienne, il s'approchait de la victime, il lui ouvrait le sein, il lui arrachait le coeur, il le présentait au soleil, il le jetait ensuite aux pieds de l'idole... . Si la malheureuse victime était un prisonnier de guerre, on lui coupait la tête, et on jetait son corps au bas du temple. L'officier ou le soldat auquel il appartenait s'emparait du cadavre et le portait chez lui pour en faire un horrible festin" (La Renaudière 28-30).

⁸ *Tristes tropiques* (1955) for the text and *Saudades do Brasil* (1994) for a selection of pictures taken during the visit.

⁹ "à l'aide d'une calebasse les meurtriers versent le sable chaud dans la poche que forme la tête" (Flornoy 196).

¹⁰ "présentation au soleil des têtes trophées" (Flornoy 196).

¹¹ "un vieil indien présente la tête une fois réduite, avant la cérémonie du lavage" (Flornoy 197).

¹² François-Auguste Biard (1798-1882). Portraitist at the court of king Louis-Philippe (*Dictionnaire de biographie française* VI, 388-89).

¹³ “J’avais bien visé, car deux ocelots étaient blessés. Le plus gros se leva sur ses pattes de derrière; il avait les deux yeux criblés de petit plomb. Je lui assenai un coup de crosse qui le fit tomber, et quand il se releva, je redoublai. Malheureusement mon fusil toucha également l’arbre, et le canon seul me resta dans les mains. J’allais recommencer, quand je vis l’animal se perdre dans les broussailles. Le petit, qui était également blessé aux yeux, était couché sur le dos et miaulait à faire pitié. J’eus beaucoup de peine à l’achever; cependant je parvins à lui briser le crâne” (Biard 276).

¹⁴ “des nègres, toujours des nègres, criant, poussant; ..., des pantalons sales, des pieds crottés, souvent énormes, triste résultat de cette maladie qu’on nomme éléphantiasis, et qui est presque toujours causée par la débauche” (Biard 38).

¹⁵ Ferdinand Denis (1798-1890), historian and man of letters. He was put in charge of the Ministry of Education Library in 1838, and later was nominated Director of the Paris public library. He publishes his account *Brésil* in 1838 (*Dictionnaire de biographie française* X, 1032).

¹⁶ “cette demi-nudité, car ils ne portent guère qu’un caleçon de toile, ces membres robustes qui rappellent les plus belles formes de la statuaire antique, [...] ce tumulte qui accompagne presque toujours la moindre opération confiée à des nègres...” (Denis 113).

¹⁷ Here is the classification and hierarchy (from highest to lowest) of races according to Denis (112): - Pure Portuguese (Filho do reino), - Portuguese born in Brazil (Brasileiro), - Whites and Blacks (Mulatos), - Whites and Indians (Mamelucos), - Blacks from Africa (Negros muleccos), - Blacks born in Brazil (Crioulos), - Pure Indians (Indios), - Coastal Indians (Caboclos), - Indians from the forests (Gentios, Tapuyas, Bugres), - Blacks and Indians (Cariboços).

¹⁸ “Il se présente avec une barbe de plusieurs jours, des cheveux mal peignés, et tout luisant de graisse, et sans aucun autre habillement que sa chemise de coton ... tandis que les jambes sont entièrement nues, et les pieds couverts avec des *tomanças*; tout cela n’est ni très élégant, ni très propre, d’autant plus que les Brésiliens sont très velus, et qu’ils ont la poitrine et les jambes hâlées par le soleil” (Denis 127).

¹⁹ Such as Gustave Flaubert and Théophile Gautier, for instance.

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