4-1-1985

Rediscovering the New World: Columbus and Carpentier

Victoria F. Chase
Columbia University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol12/iss12/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
RE-DISCOVERING THE NEW WORLD: COLUMBUS AND CARPENTIER

VICTORIA F. CHASE

I

Since the 1930s, the narrative of Alejo Carpentier (1904-1980), a founder and principal figure of modern Latin American literature, has investigated the origins and identity of Latin America in the history of the Old World and the New World. In the broadest terms, Carpentier's 1979 novel El Arpa y la Sombra [The Harp and the Shadow] questions Latin America as a European creation. The novel deals with the initial imposition of European civilizations on Latin America, i.e. Columbus' arrival in the New World, as well as with the 19th-century efforts by Pope Pius IX to have Columbus canonized after Latin America has won political independence from Europe. Through an examination and integration of Columbus' Journal of Discovery and other historiography on the discovery of America and its principal figure, El Arpa y la Sombra reflects a critical consciousness of the function of history in present day Latin America and Carpentier's desire that today's Latin American novelist become a "nuevo Cronista de Indias" [new Chronicler of the Indies] (Visperas, 25). The novel reconsiders various aspects of the relationship between Old World and New World civilization by a critical reading of historical discourse written by the dominant civilization and deconstructs several signifiers that have become constant elements of discourse on the New World, e.g. the marvelous, El Dorado, the primitive, civilization vs. barbarism, and the Black Legend. Carpentier combines an Old World perspective, formed by tradition, expectation and necessity, with a decidedly New World sense of its origin and history.

II

El Arpa y la Sombra is divided into three parts. One and three deal with events of the 19th century. In part one Giovanni Mastai, the future Pope Pius IX, travels to the New World in 1823 where he first conceives of the idea to canonize Columbus. In this part of the novel, Carpentier offers a critique of Eurocentrism and western civilization's lack of understanding of Latin America despite, or because of, three centuries of colonialism.
At the same time, New World civilization is faulted for its uncritical imitation of European models. In addition, the proposal for canonization is shown to be motivated exclusively by a political strategy to impose a new colonialism on the independent Latin American nations. Part three of the novel takes place in the last decade of the 19th century and relates a Tribunal's proceedings concerning Columbus' beatification. The issue in question is European historiography that promotes a great man and theological theory of the history of the discovery of America. Carpentier replaces that theory with a modern historical consciousness that emphasizes the relationship between Columbus and the material forces of his age. The novel also challenges the notion of historical "fact" by revealing historiography as often self-interested interpretation and as a series of previous texts as much factual and scientific as fictional, fabulous and legendary. Indeed, part two of the novel integrates lengthy and numerous passages from Columbus' *Journal of Discovery*, a founding text for subsequent study of the New World, to illustrate that the image it projects of the New World and its civilization is, in large part, an invention, a fiction. Carpentier has his fictional Columbus "re-write" his texts, confessing to exaggeration, errors in judgment, deception and outright lies regarding the New World. On the one hand, Columbus' fictions are shown to be motivated by certain modern western civilizational values: the desire for personal fame and success at the expense of truth. On the other hand, Columbus' image of America is also conditioned and determined by the medieval reliance on authority texts.

In his final discourse in the novel, Columbus laments that in the four centuries since the discovery, historiography has been unable to portray him adequately because, he states, "salido del misterio, volvi al misterio" [having come from mystery, I returned to mystery] (202). As part two of the novel maintains, much of the mystery surrounding Columbus' life and deeds is generated by the social, cultural and economic conditions of his time. In order to succeed in 15th-century Spain, Columbus *veils* one history and *creates* another by faking his origins and credentials, by dissembling with imaginary schemes to monarchs and purported experts, and by masking failures and realities in the New World. Furthermore, immediately after Columbus' death, the Crown, sued by the descendants of the Admiral to fulfill its obligations, had its attorney general discredit Columbus in every possible way and, in doing so, contributed additional conflicting materials for future historians (Iglesia, 235). In this way, the unknown and the invented become signifiers marked with historical permanence in the discourse on Columbus and the
New World. *El Arpa y la Sombra* takes the view that when the material conditions of the epoch are revealed, the multiple and often conflicting images of the Admiral and America tell the story of personal and national ambition set in motion by newly emerging European capitalism. Carpentier also imputes to his fictional Columbus a 20th-century historiographical perspective in which, as Elliott explains it (3), the superiority of European civilization gives way to a consciousness of European guilt for imperialism and expansionism.

Before and in the course of his expeditions, Columbus quotes sources as authority for the validity of his claims. For the medieval mentality, the *auctoritas* constituted a discourse of power, the principal criterion for truth and the principal support for opinion, stronger than experience or empirical evidence. Carpentier integrates scores of these extratextual sources into the novel to establish the broad cultural context of western civilization and the more immediate context of Columbus and his epoch, contexts in which the New World was viewed. *El Arpa y la Sombra* parodies the medieval practice of citing authorities and challenges the discourse of power by suggesting that Columbus did not always quote the authority sources in good faith. Knowing that only by citing authorities could he persuade an audience, Columbus repeated the accepted convention of his age in order to gain acceptance of his plans and later to convince the Crown of his success.

In proposing his plan and then in describing America, Columbus' sources include ancient and medieval scientific data, and travel accounts, biblical references, prophecies, classical myths, medieval legends and other literary fictions. The novel calls attention to the combination of factual and fictional texts and the equal validity and credibility they enjoyed; all these antecedent sources, both scientific and fabulous, prefigure the discourse on America and become part of the discourse after the discovery. The first chroniclers of the New World, Chiampi Cortez points out (99), reverted to citing authorities to overcome semantic lacunae created by the European lack of reference for the objects, people and phenomena of America and, in this way, contributed to the inexact and imprecise image of the New World, according to *El Arpa y la Sombra*. In the founding histories of America written by Europeans, historiography's canonical authority is unmasked to reveal that it is formed by a series of previous texts often inadequate and inappropriate for the realities of the New World, often bearing little or no relation to the New World.

Once the Admiral claims success for his first voyage, Queen Isabel,
however, demands empirical proof of the Indies in the form of the promised riches. Conditioned by reading Marco Polo, Columbus (both the historical and fictional figure) is convinced he has reached Asia and sees the presence of gold everywhere. His conviction and his hope take precedence over concrete proof. In the absence of that proof, Columbus continues to quote authorities, eventually to support the claim that he has found the Terrestrial Paradise, a claim supported by the Bible and given a standing in 15th-century geography by Pierre D’Ailly’s *Imago Mundi*. Thus, the discourse of power combines with the discourse of desire, for “the New World, as conceived by late medieval and early Renaissance Europe, proved all too often to be no more than a fragile construct of the mind” (Elliott, 28), but frequently not until those constructs entered into official and public discourse and aided in colonizing a vast territory largely by the impulse of invention and myth.

Carpentier deconstructs several passages from the diary of the first voyage and has his fictional Admiral admit to falsification and distortion in the description of New World phenomena:

... no he de romperme la cabeza ... Digo que la hierba es tan grande como la de Andalucía en abril y mayo, aunque nada se parece, aquí, a nada andaluza. Digo que cantan ruiseñores donde silban unos pajaritos grises ... que más parecen gorriones. Hablo de campos de Castilla, aquí donde nada, pero nada recuerda los campos de Castilla. No he visto árboles de especias, y auguro que aquí debe haber especias. Hablo de minas oro donde no sé de ninguna. Hablo de perlas, muchas perlas, tan sólo porque vi algunas almejas ‘que son señal de ellas’ (116-117)

I’m not going to rack my brains ... I say that the grass is as tall as that of Andalusia in April and May, although nothing here resembles anything Andalusian. I say that nightingales sing when they’re some little gray birds ... more like sparrows who whistle. I speak of the fields of Castile where here nothing, but nothing, resembles the fields of Castile. I haven’t seen spice trees, and I predict that there must be spices here. I speak of mines of gold where I don’t know of a single one. I speak of pearls, many pearls, only because I saw some clams ‘which are a sign of pearls’.

The fictional Columbus finds himself unequal to the task of being “un nuevo Adán” [a new Adam] (115), chosen to name the realities of the New World, unnamed and unknown, we should emphasize, only by the European, not by the Indian. In the act of being re-named, New World reality is Europeanized, reshaped in a European mold through language. The conqueror thus takes possession of the New World in word and in deed.

Another discursive device for filling the lacunae produced by new and
unknown phenomena was to identify the New World as a land of marvels. Both the historical and fictional texts establish that Columbus viewed America conditioned by tales of marvels found in ancient legend and contemporary travel accounts, and by the need to impress the Crown with the success of his venture, our text adds. Chiampi Cortez notes that naming the realities “marvels” became the solution for giving form to the New World (101). In the historical text, “maravilla” [marvel] is applied without differentiation to the most disparate and unrelated objects. For example, a marvel is a canoe, a deformed branch, entrances to ports, islands, the Indians’ reception of the Spaniards, wind and gold. In El Arpa y la Sombra this repertory of marvels is finally reduced to and finds its maximum expression in the Retablo de las Maravillas [The Panel of Marvels], a performance of New World phenomena orchestrated at the Spanish court by Carpentier’s Columbus, the magician, the charlatan whose art of invention and illusion regarding America is thus exposed. The fictional Columbus explains that with his desperate need for gold and a slave trade disappointed, he replaces them with words, discourse. The reader is made to understand that in the Journal of Discovery where fool’s gold is not gold, neither are words reality. Lacking the riches demanded by the Crown, Columbus makes a desperate attempt to justify his voyages and himself by inventing an image of the New World as a land of marvels, a paradise on earth. To a certain extent, this image responded to 15th-century Christendom’s own sense of dissatisfaction—the discontent of the civilized with civilization—and to a longing for a return to the imagined worlds of a Christian paradise or a Golden Age for which the New World at first provided substantial evidence (Elliott, 25).

The pressure of economic forces, however, made El Dorado a more pertinent image for America. Indeed, Carpentier re-writes Columbus’ journal under the sign of “oro” [gold], and stresses the economic reasons for European expansionism motivated by individual, national and civilizational values that sought success, fame and power in the acquisition of material wealth. Columbus’ documents provide Carpentier with rich materials for transformation as the word “oro” appears nearly two hundred times in the Journal of Discovery. As the historical figure’s expectations and desperation for gold intensify, so does his manner of referring to it. For example, Columbus begins by mentioning “gold,” then “much gold,” then “very much gold,” a “goodly sample of gold,” “mines of gold,” “many mines,” and finally “infinite gold.” With the renewed gold fever of the fourth and last voyage, the word “oro” appears twelve times on one page of the letter to the Crown (200). The effect is
that of a paen to gold, an incantation, a last, desperate effort to conjure it up, to make it present, with words. Both the historical and fictional Admiral pray with the same words that God may grant “un buen golpe de oro” [a good strike of gold] (Journal 167, Arpa 147). Carpentier, however, makes Columbus judge this obsession and its consequences for the New World. He laments that he opened up the virginal and innocent New World to greed, lust and violence. Ironically, barbaric force is used to bring European civilization to America. Counterbalancing the sense of superiority and pride in its achievement of the discovery, Europe is seen as a civilization that corrupted America to get its material wealth. This view challenges Europe’s first notion that the discovery strengthened the Christian providentialist interpretation of history as a progressive movement toward the evangelization of all mankind and the secular interpretation of history as a progressive movement which would end in the civilization of all mankind (Elliott, 52). Gold, El Dorado, in El Arpa y la Sombra, then takes on a constellation of possible meanings: gold as sin, punishment; as idol, icon and religion; as violation and corruption of a New World Golden Age; as the material basis for the Spanish enterprise; as Columbus’ justification and salvation and finally gold as an optical illusion or mirage that both conditions and blinds Columbus’ image of New World civilization.

Indeed, because El Arpa y la Sombra emphasizes Columbus’ obsession with gold and success, less attention is given to his contact with the inhabitants of the New World. This same balance is present in the Journal of Discovery as well. A significant new element in the Carpentier novel is the voice given to the Indians who express their disdain for the European and his civilization and thus controvert Columbus’ claim that the New World inhabitants regarded the Spaniards as gods. The Indians whom Columbus takes to Spain after the first voyage criticize the conquerors as mendacious and violent; they comment on the Spaniards’ poor hygiene, the artificial and excessive trappings of dress and perfumes and the unequal distribution of material wealth. These criticisms highlight the essential differences between the two civilizations and are meant to re-inforce the contrast between European decadence and the Utopian nature of New World civilization. The latter is, of course, an image first projected by Columbus himself. As one of the many marvels of America, the Indian, by tradition, expectation and necessity, is at first the noble savage, living in a Golden Age. And as with the natural marvels of America, the Indian is also seen as an object to be exploited for profit. In El Arpa y la Sombra, Columbus’ encounters with the Indians add a New
World critique to the European point of view in order to reveal how the dominant civilization created the first and in many cases enduring and duplicitous image of the American.

While the nakedness of the Indians shocks the European and Catholic sensibilities, it also attests to the innocence and naïveté of the natives. The fictional Columbus adds to those impressions notes of self-criticism: the ridiculous pose and contrast struck by the disembarking Spaniards dressed in full battle array and his crew’s lustful desire to corrupt that innocence and naïveté. In both the historical and fictional texts, physical nakedness implies, as Todorov points out (41), a civilization that is equally naked of customs, rites, religion and law, and so is ready to be dressed in European civilization, as we will observe further below. The docile and peaceful innocents, however, will, by necessity, become cannibals and an exploitable commodity. Carpentier’s Columbus explains the transformation in the portrayal of the Indian:

... dejo de verlos como los seres inocentes, bondadosos . . . que idilicamente pinté a mis amos al regreso del primer viaje. Ahora les voy dando, cada vez más a menudo, el nombre de canibales—aunque jamás los haya visto alimentarse de carne humana. La India de las Especias se me va transformando en la India de los Canibales. . . . la solución de este grave problema está en trasladarlos a España, en calidad de esclavos. He dicho: de esclavos. . . . Ya que no doy con el oro . . . puede el oro ser substituido por la irremplazable energía de la carne humana, . . . dando mejores beneficios, en fin de cuentas, que el metal engañoso que te entra por una mano y te sale por la otra. (144-145)

I no longer see them as the innocent, generous beings . . . that I idyllically painted to my patrons upon returning from the first voyage. Now, more and more often, I am giving them the name cannibals—although I have never seen them feed off human flesh. I’m transforming the Indies of the Spices to the Indies of the Cannibals. . . . The solution to this grave problem . . . rests in shipping them to Spain, as slaves, I said; as slaves . . . Since I’m not finding any gold . . . gold can be replaced by the irreplaceable energy of human flesh, . . . giving better benefits, after all, than a deceptive metal that slips through your fingers.

*El Arpa y la Sombra* elaborates on additional incidents from the *Journal of Discovery* to critique the European prism through which Columbus views the Indians. The Admiral first boasts of and then laments what he perceives as having short-changed the Indians in their exchange of gifts, bells and colored beads for gold. His regret stems from the belief that he has taken advantage of their ignorance and generosity, for, to Columbus, a system of exchange different from the European is no system at all. Conventions of European values are also applied to Indian
hierarchy. After presenting himself to the caciques [chiefs], Columbus remarks:

¡Cortes de monarcas en pelotas! Inconcebible idea para quien la palabra "corte" sugiere, de inmediato, una visión de alcázares, heraldos, mitras y terciopelos . . . tales reyes, si es que rey se puede llamar . . . (121-122)

Courts of monarchs in their birthday suits! Inconceivable for someone to whom the word "court" immediately suggests a vision of palaces, heralds, miters and velvets . . . such kings, if you can call them kings . . .

Carpentier illustrates Todorov's observation (35) that Columbus is hardly interested in learning what cacique means in the conventional hierarchy of the Indians and assumes that they make the same distinctions as the Spaniards whose usage is accepted as "l'était naturel des choses" [the natural state of things].

In the scene at the Spanish court, El Arpa y la Sombra introduces and problematizes what the Columbian and other chronicles of the period fail to point out: Columbus must modify, alter, i.e., falsify the Indians' physical appearance and indirectly that of the New World as well. Their appearance must be more in line with the sensibilities of European civilization without eliminating altogether their exotic nature, thus reducing the novelty and singular aspects of the discovery. Therefore, Columbus cannot show the Indians naked, but neither can he dress them as Europeans for they would resemble "ciertos andaluces de tez soleada" [certain sun-tanned Andalusians] (132). In this instance, we have "la invención de América" [the invention of America], according to O'Gorman (88). European man fashions his own image of Latin American man, not European, but no longer entirely Indian either, instead a first mestizaje which, for Carpentier, expresses both the unique character of America and the underlying unity between the Old World and the New, a duality, however, that continues to aspire to its own unity in a synthesis. The unraveling, deciphering and apprehension of the discrete elements of this first mestizaje is the task Carpentier assigns himself in El Arpa y la Sombra.

III

The journey of Giovanni Mastai, the future Pope Pius IX, to South America in 1823 draws several parallels with Columbus' voyages and illustrates the perpetuation of attitudes formed by a dominant civilization in evaluating what it considers to be an inferior one.

From a New World perspective, the moment of Mastai's visit is a
critical one: the turmoil of post-Independence gives signs of the creation of a new civilization (Burns, 58). As for Mastai, he turns to the New World at what he perceives to be a critical moment of European decadence and loss of centrality in the post-Enlightenment and French Revolution era of dangerous new ideas. The New World becomes the site for arresting the spread of 18th-century European thought and events if only the future Pope can re-establish Vatican dominance over the New World, that is to say, establish a new dependency situation for the recent, politically independent Latin America. Mastai’s 1823 visit also shows that three centuries after the discovery there is hardly a deeper understanding or expanding ability to incorporate aspects of New World civilization into the European consciousness. In fact, as we have mentioned, part one of the novel is a critique of 19th-century Eurocentrism.

What is Mastai’s image of the New World before his trip and how is that image altered as a result? Before his departure, the future Pope has an image of America based on the same New World, “cuyo solo nombre pone en su oíflato un estupendo olor de aventuras” [whose mere name had a stupendous smell of adventure] (22). The novel directs our attention to the name “New World,” signifiers which, since the 16th century, have had multiple, conflicting, shifting and for these same reasons ever imprecise significations in European discourse. Taking the Old World as the paradigm, “new” can be organized into the following semantic groupings: “different, unfamiliar, alien, strange, foreign, other, inferior”; another grouping would include “curious, exotic, modern, novel, a first”; and in still another set, “new” = “youthful, fresh innocent.” Add to this the designation “world,” which suggests that because of its “new” and unique character, the New World constituted another and entire world unto itself, in need of assimilation into the known world or forever to be considered a world apart. The word “adventure,” in addition to suggesting the daring nature of the trip, also points to the idea of America as a land of promised marvels and exotica, an image promoted by Columbus and other early Spanish chroniclers and returning adventurers. Mastai is thus presented as another European about to set out on a voyage of adventure to a different and exotic New World; he is a European whose perception of America as a historical, social and cultural entity is contained in the single, vague and undifferentiated notion of “a stupendous smell of adventure.” And like Columbus, Mastai brings Eurocentric values to his judgments of the New World.

Mastai departs for America from Genoa, the European city that serves as the implied model against which the cities of the New World are
compared. It is in Genoa where the future Pope makes "descubrimien-
tos" [discoveries] that leave him "maravillado" [astonished, amazed, filled with admiration] (27), signifiers more commonly applied to the New World. Unlike America, we are made to understand, Genoa dates back to Antiquity; it is a city with a history, a glorious tradition in the European mainstream, a civilized city of grandeur and prosperity. That Genoa is Mastai's model, and European tradition and expectation his conditioning for America, are borne out in his disappointment with Montevideo and Buenos Aires. The former is "un enorme establo . . . todo era rustico, como de cortijo, y los caballos y reses recobraban en la vida cotidiana, una importancia olvidada en Europa desde los tiempos merovingios" [an enormous stable . . . everything was rustic, like a farm, and horses and cows had an importance in daily life not seen in Europe since Merovingian times] (28). Montevideo is, in short, primitive, backward, hardly a city at all. In Montevideo the European encounters no evidence of what he considers civilization: "no hubo edificio importante ni hermoso" [there was no important or beautiful building] (22). Instead, barbarism, usually associated with the country, invades the city, indeed, is the city in which, presumably, a rough farmhand population and animals cohabitate. To Mastai, the importance of horses and cattle is also indicative of a primitive economy and pastoral existence far removed from modern civilization. Indeed, by his reference to Merovingian times, Mastai places Montevideo in the 6th, 7th and 8th centuries.

It is precisely this idea of America as a historical entity which should first be examined. Mastai sees and judges America divorced from a past history; its history begins for him at the moment of his arrival (as was the case for Columbus). Mastai's observations and subsequent conclusions regarding the New World do not take into account certain historical conditions. For example, in pointing to America's underdevelopment, no allowances are made for the relative historical youth of the continent nor for the even more recent settlement and organization of Montevideo and Buenos Aires. Mastai also fails to refer to America's colonial history, colonial administration in general and the particular neglect of the very region he visits in favor of the more economically profitable mining centers of the viceroyalties of New Spain and Peru.

The view of the New World as barbaric is further elaborated in the future Pope's comments on Buenos Aires. Here the novel develops with more detail the antithesis civilization vs. barbarism, introduced in the early Spanish chronicles, amplified and applied by Argentines specifically to 19th-century Argentina and repeatedly re-elaborated and re-
formulated with the result that it has become a permanent yet protean element of the discourse on America. In Mastai's conception of the antithesis, civilization is the European spirit, the diffusion of its culture, the minority and conservative absolutist ideas whereas barbarism is the American, the indigenous, the uncultured, the majority and liberal progressive ideas.

The slaughterhouse is the central metaphor for Buenos Aires and its barbarism. That barbarism is further emphasized by a reference to the now "obsesionante presencia del caballo" [the obsessive presence of the horse] (28), alluded to in a common formula of European literature suggesting the horses of Attila (Barrenechea, 82). Mastai concludes that not only the slaughterhouse but the entire city of Buenos Aires "demasiado olía a talabartería, a curtido de pieles . . . a sudor de ijares y sudor de jinetes" [smelled too much of saddlery, tanned hides and sweat of flanks and sweat of horsemen] (29). The measure of "too much" is determined by the European viewpoint. Evidently, this is not the "stupendous smell of adventure" which Mastai expected to find in the New World.

With regard to society and culture, Mastai is disdainful of American creations and admiring of European borrowings and imitations in America. For example, the refalosa is danced in "conventillos, pulperías y quilombos" [tenement houses, bars and brothels] (29). The tango, danced by people of brown and black skin, is a "bárbara algarabía" [barbarous racket] (29). With apparent relief, Mastai finds that alongside the indigenous American creations, "florecía una auténtica aristocracia" [there flourished an authentic aristocracy] (29) who dressed in the latest European styles and at whose brilliant soirees the latest in European music was heard. Latin American aristocracy is, in short, a model of European "civilidad" [civility] (30). It is evident that Mastai has not moved away from a narrow definition of "civility" to a broader concept of "civilization." In summary, up to this point in his visit, Mastai prefers that the New World be a copy of the Old, for his civilizational judgments are based on the degree of visible Europeanization. What distinguishes America from Europe and what constitutes the New World is considered negative, barbaric, primitive and inferior. The novel's critique of Mastai's Eurocentrism also carries with it a critique of the New World's admiration for and, as Burns puts it (8), practice of adopting but not adapting the latest models, ideas, values and styles of Europe. This moment of the 19th century appeared to offer a unique opportunity for indigenous elements to exert broad influence. Instead, the result was a
renewed Europeanization on an unprecedented level as the power elites of America saw Europeanization as the means, once again, to civilize America.

Where America exceeds Europe is in geography, i.e. natural marvels. The civilized European is overwhelmed by the dimensions and proportions of the Pampas and the Andes. Mastai now evaluates the primitive positively, based on two principles of 19th-century Romanticism: the natural and the virgin in opposition to the artificial, and the infinite in opposition to the measured. By extension, Mastai’s encounter with American geography suggests the conflict between the indigenous (natural) vs. the European (artificial) brought on by the imposition and importation of European civilization. Nevertheless, Mastai’s remarks on the relationship between American man and nature emphasize 19th-century scientific determinism of environmental influences: American nature is a barbarizing force producing men who are “incultos, brutales y apocados” [uncouth, brutal and diminished] (32). Nature becomes yet another symbol of barbarism, to be tamed, it is hinted, by European know-how.

In addressing the “nuevas ideas” [new ideas] (36) of Voltaire, Rousseau and the French Revolution which Mastai sees finding expression in the New World, he deliberately exploits the idea of America’s passive role, her dependency on European models for direction and leadership and the lack of originality in American thinking. When the future Pope tries to persuade American liberals that Voltaire, Rousseau and the French Revolution are already outdated failures (“La Revolución Francesa . . . nadie la recordaba ya en Europa” [Nobody in Europe remembered the French Revolution anymore]37), he also exploits the Latin American’s fear of backwardness and inferiority.

Yet Mastai concludes that America is the land of promise, the land of the future, which “según pensaba Mastai sería preciso aparear con el de Europa” [according to Mastai it would be necessary to mate with that of Europe] (41). Here we have a kind of renewal of Golden Age thinking: the comfort of a continuing futurity and America as the land of Europe’s future (Levin, 160). And the renewal of the discourse of promise applied to America once again places that promise in the future, as an illusive, changing horizon of expectation and realization. For Mastai, however, his expectations are politically motivated; Latin America’s future and promise can only be realized through continued dependency on Europe. The New World will continue to serve European purposes, the Vatican’s in this case.
IV

To reunify the Old World and the New and thereby bolster a threatened Church, Mastai conceives of the plan to canonize Columbus. To that end, in 1851, Mastai, now Pope Pius IX, commissions Count Roselly de Lorgues, a French Catholic historian, to write a history of Columbus to be used in support of the proposal for beatification. That history, Christophe Colomb: Histoire de Sa Vie et de Ses Voyages (1956), and its exegetic version, Le Révélateur du Globe (1883) by the Count’s compatriot Leon Bloy, are integrated into part three of El Arpa y la Sombra. Both French historians practice a great man theory of history with an additional Catholic, providentialist and mystical view of the historical events surrounding the discovery. That this perspective is very much like that of many 16th-century chronicles indicates the permanence and perpetuation of attitude and ideas. Just as Mastai represents little advancement in Europe’s understanding of the New World, neither has European historiography advanced in an unbroken line. Roselly de Lorgues and Bloy write meta-history in which events are seen a manifestations of God’s will and in which historical information is made to fit the preconceived interpretation of Columbus as saint, in accordance with the wishes of the Pope. In order to persuade the reader of Columbus’ saintliness, Roselly de Lorgues must show him to be innocent of any association with the Black Legend of the Conquest. Thus historical information is “rearanged” and a White Legend of the Conquest emerges: the once innocent and docile Indians are transformed into cannibals so their slaughter and enslavement are defended and justified. Columbus’ avid search for gold is explained as a gathering of funds for the recapture of Jerusalem.

It is the 16th-century Spanish chronicler Bartolomé de Las Casas, the Apostle of the Indians and originator of the Black Legend, whose testimony at the beatification Tribunal ultimately defeats the French historians’ claims. In El Arpa y la Sombra, Carpentier revives and redefines the Black Legend of the Conquest. In his re-definition, the target of criticism extends beyond Columbus, the individual, to include Western civilization’s emphasis on success and material wealth. Indeed, when the Tribunal decides that Columbus is not a saint, but “un simple ser humano, sujeto a todas las flaquezas de su condición” [a simple human being, subject to all the weaknesses of his condition] (171), Carpentier’s modern historical consciousness defines “his condition” in the fullest sense of the term to include the material, the socio-economic conditions of his age.

After the beatification proposal is defeated, the fictional Columbus
observes that the exaggerated claims of his panegyrists, in which Columbus admits to not recognizing himself, occasion a response from his critics in which any notion of greatness in Columbus is severely diminished. As with the dispute of the New World in general, Gerbi comments that a stinging attack (the case of de Pauw, for example) is in many ways a polemical retort to the fantastic claims and reporting of the defenders of the New World (56). The historical figure of Columbus, like the New World Indian and other objects of impassioned attack or defense, is made to vary according to the demands of the polemic. In El Arpa y la Sombra, Carpentier reveals the mechanisms at work in the historiographical images of Columbus and the New World. In the end, Carpentier "de-beatifies" Columbian historiography in the sense that he no longer ascribes to it extraordinary excellence or virtue. Instead, he analyzes the discourse on the New World as an instrument with which the historical fact is constructed, revealing conflicting and changing images and questioning who has written the history and why. Carpentier proposes the same to his readers, a reexamination of Latin America from a new critical perspective. For some critics, Carpentier's critical perspective and the essence of his Latin Americanism are Europeanized; that is to say, he approaches Latin American reality as an outsider, a foreigner. The fact that others consider his narrative and essays to be expressions of the originality of Latin America points up the continuing dilemma of the Old World-New World duality. In his narrative, Carpentier's search for Latin American origins and identity leads back to Europe as much as it does to the indigenous American past. The choice of Columbus and the discovery as subjects for El Arpa y la Sombra acknowledges that American life, without being European, is historically still a mode of life partially actualized in Europe (O'Gorman, 94).

The realization of Latin America's future and promise depends on the ability to understand the complex images of its past. The critical re-reading of 15th- and 19th-century texts practiced in El Arpa y la Sombra contributes to that understanding, all the more necessary today, according to Carpentier, because of invading technology and foreign cultural penetration which threaten to destroy Latin America's sense of its own history (Visperas, 30). Necessary also, we might add, with the approach of the Quincentennial of the discovery of America. That event has already occasioned the announcement in Spain of a journalism prize for the best work related to the Quincentennial, one of what promises to be a large number of new studies on the subject.

Columbia University
NOTES

1. Oviedo (1478-1557), first official chronicler of America, states that one of the reasons Columbus’ proposals to the Crown were long rejected was because “como traía la capa rayda (o pobre), teníanle por fabuloso y soñador” [since his cloak was threadbare (or poor), they took him for a fabulist and a dreamer] (1:19).

2. In Oviedo and Las Casas, for example, the arrival of the Indians in Spain causes great excitement and the repeated use of the word “marvel.” However, few specific details are provided, reflecting European man’s early inability to assimilate America. Both chroniclers refer to the Indians’ docility at court, which El Arpa y la Sombra attributes to their weakened state brought on by the rigors of the long sea voyage. As befits their individual perspective, Las Casas, a Dominican friar, makes reference to the Indians’ baptism and religious instruction in Spain; and Oviedo, the royal chronicler, is more interested in praising the Catholic Kings and describing in copious detail the coat of arms granted to Columbus for his achievement.

3. More than a few details on the civilization vs. barbarism polemic are beyond the scope of the present paper. In El Arpa y la Sombra, Carpentier dialogues directly with two 19th-century Argentine writers, Esteban Echeverría, El Matadero (1838?), and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Civilización y Barbarie: Vida de Juan Facundo Quiroga (1845). Sarmiento is commonly credited with the earliest and fullest elaboration of the antithesis in which, in brief, civilization equals Buenos Aires and Europe, and barbarism equals the Argentine countryside and its inhabitants. In a recent elaboration of the antithesis, Jacobo Timerman, Prisoner Without a Name . . . (1981), describes the current political situation in Argentina as a struggle between the forces of civilization and barbarism.

4. In response to Sarmiento’s (and Mastai’s) ideas, the 19th-century Argentine Juan Bautista Alberdi defines Argentine civilization in diametrically opposed terms:

*If there is a part of Argentina which by its geographical and natural conditions represents civilization, it is that region composed of green . . . fresh fields on which millions of animals roam . . . The horse is another instrument and natural symbol of Argentine civilization, as worthy as the river, canal or railroad. But the horse is a useless machine without a skilled mechanic . . ., the gaucho who in this sense represents civilization in Argentina . . . Our fields and our farms cannot be classified as barbaric except in books written by someone who does not know what civilization is* (Cited in Burns, 54, from Alberdi’s Obras Completas, v. 4, 7, 8.).

WORKS CITED


Columbus, Christopher. *Los cuatro viajes del Almirante y su testamento* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1977). Referred to in this paper as *Journal of Discovery*.


Fernández de Oviedo, Gonzalo. *Historia general y natural de Las Indias*, vol. 1 (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 1851).


