Filoteo Samaniego

NAMING THINGS IN A NEW WORLD

The Unfinished Discovery

The distance, as the crow flies, between the two poles can be covered in twenty hours. Thanks to cartography, telecommunications and the precise measurement of distance, we have exhaustive knowledge of the globe. Nevertheless, we are still so removed from each other that everything, or almost everything, remains to be discovered. Just as the past is not clear to us when it takes the historical route, the present brings us no understanding of human ways. The more we advance in knowledge the more proof we have, as Pascal said, that we know nothing.

Let us go back to our America with its undefinable latitudes and longitudes and its humanity that everyone would like to understand or interpret, in order to realize, in the end, how badly we understand it, how superficially. Columbus himself was surprised to discover a continent he was not looking for and, since he did not know what he had discovered, he was vain enough to want to justify his error by giving it the name of his voyage's destination. This immeasurable continent was first called "India of the west"—certifying the error—or the "New World"—proving the surprise—until fortune willed that the one who counted the least on her, the expert cartographer Amerigo Vespucci, put

Transated by Jeanne Ferguson

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217902710606 Published online by Cambridge University Press

an end to the initial uncertainty regarding the discovery and gave it its definitive form, perpetuating a name that he had not intended to make famous in any other way than by tracing with exactitude the American coastline. That was the beginning of a much more ancient and extraordinary history. All Spanish-Americans continue to drift along in Columbus' galleons, and they have also taken scholars of other continents on board, in order to follow up the discovery four centuries later, to continue to recognize, name and baptize the surprising things that this world unceasingly reserves for them. There are those who turn toward the past —archaeologists and anthropologists, who desperately seek to penetrate the secret of ages-old discoveries; those who go toward the future, distinguishing what is well known from what is little known—intellectuals and politicians; lastly, those who devote themselves to revealing what is to come, the pretentious and impossible undertaking of prophets and seers.

In addition, there are the explorers who persist in the futile and doomed quest for Eldorado, men of letters always lagging behind, who devote themselves to the humble or proud task of simply writing down the facts, taking notes on things, places and people they come across, naturally encountering surprises on the way, unnamed things, trying to construct their own galleons and to invent an American world of their own.

Four hundred years ago the chronicler's office was not institutionalized as it is today. Formerly, the writer limited himself to a simple reporting of what he had seen or to a repetition of the beliefs held by the natives, transmitting to his European readers or to a restricted cohort of curious minds of the Empire, the sounds uttered in their jargon and languages they could not understand. Thus it was that, prey to incomprehension and misunderstanding, they told their readers about a king: Atibaliba for some, Atahuallpa for others, Atabalipa for still others. Small errors of great importance were incorporated into English, Spanish and French spelling and syntax, each one interpreting and pronouncing in its own way: stars received the names of kingdoms, fruits were given the attributes of mountains, men were called by the names of objects; thus was perpetuated the usage of an erroneous sound or word, terms or place names being repeated as they had been heard.

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217902710606 Published online by Cambridge University Press

As a result, America was at first given just any name: one that seemed good to the chroniclers in their haste to be considered trustworthy historians or one that obsequious functionaries decided to give in their eagerness to flatter the vanity of the king and the kingdom, founding New Spains, New Granadas, Venezuelas and New Andalusias.

This is not to mention the devout missionaries who made of the Kingdoms of the Sun, Moon, Pumas and Serpents Santiagos, Santa Marias, San Franciscos or Santa Fés. Each in his own way did his duty, and when the taste for ostentation and the vanity of the conqueror were added, to say nothing of their secret desires, place names found this sources in the vicissitudes and circumstances of the voyage: El Dorado, Gorgon, Terra-firma, Pacific Ocean, Buenos Aires. This reflects a predominating constant: invent America, name it, define it. Names established for thousands of years were relegated to the background, and when there was nothing better to be found, Maya or Quiché, Inca or Aymara words, making up for the deficiencies of the imagination of the Old World, at least remained in use in the New: Mexico, Peru, Quito, Guatemala.

The Centuries of Astonishment

It seems that in spite of everything the matter did not end there. The centuries that followed the discovery saw with the immigrants, voyagers and creoles the prolongation of the habit of seeking, the need to discover, as in the past. Since then, America has always had new scouts and new conquerors, even though the privilege of burning their ships is not granted them. It is a land of surprises, because the mountain has remained almost intact, the virgin forest impenetrable, the *puna* * open but hostile and the islands deserted. It is a land of hope, because the man who inhabits it has not definitively acquired his name and his personality; because although he is endowed with feelings, although he is on fire with passion, he has neither thought nor philosophy nor system: his wealth and future are to be found in this lack. Everything is to do, everything is plain, open horizon, field of action and movement.

* *puna*: high and arid country, difficult for the newcomer to support.

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217902710606 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Thus it is that the New World came to fill treasuries with its riches and disturb economies with its emeralds, its silver and gold, enrich empires with land and new markets, enrich Heaven with souls wrenched from paganism, enrich alchemy and medicine with quinine, salsaparilla, cantharis and aphrodisiacs and, finally, enrich language with words borrowed from indigenous, mythological, botanical, zoological, geographical and ethnological terminology, or those merely issuing from the wonderment of the conquistadors who gave the name "bird of paradise" to a dazzling bird they saw, or that of "Tierra del Fuego" to a terrifying land, or naming a tree with bountiful fruit "breadfruit tree."

A brief analysis of the literature of amazement lengthens to infinity the list of writers who indulged in delightful fantasies, as well as chroniclers who dreamed of America. With its spices, its parrots and its precious metals, it invited exoticism. As is true today, the writer of yesteryear who wanted to insert a touch of novelty into his work mentioned our continent and stirred up the constant round of dream-voyagers who filled their emptiness and fed their taste for the unusual with the slightest reference to the American continent.

European baroque was enchanted and enriched by these reserves of inspiration and language which were brought to it from so far away and so opportunely to modify its way of thinking, allowing it in its turn to finish with the "horror of the vacuum" that tormented the artist in the sixteenth century and to have access to the abundant, delirious, full language that Spain knew from the Golden Age until nineteenth-century romanticism: Ercilla, Lope de Vega, Calderón in Spain, Sannazzaro and Tasso in Italy, idealized the newly-discovered continent as well as its remote peoples. The French dissertated on its nature and the Church itself joined them in the controversy over whether the natives belonged to the human race, in spite of the efforts of Las Casas, Gomara, Garcilaso and others, to illustrate and impose the truth. Montaigne and Rousseau worked out political and philosophical theories based on the characteristic traits of the man of the virgin forest. Decorators and artists working in stucco in the baroque and rococo periods made abundant use of allegorical scenes featuring plumed natives in the midst of contorted palm trees, banana trees, papaya trees and imaginary virgin forests

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217902710606 Published online by Cambridge University Press

thousands of kilometers away, symbols that they also imposed on painting which, in its thirst for originality, confused Moors with Araucans, African camels with Andean llamas. Vivaldi composed an opera, *Montezuma*, and Rameau, *Les Indes Galantes*. Marivaux, Marmontel, Voltaire in France; Coward, Keats, Defoe in England; Von Kleist in Germany; and all the romantic nineteenth century surrounded themselves with inevitable American references. Chateaubriand, Victor Hugo, Jules Verne and Mérimée, and numerous philosophers, ministers, politicians and writers produced their versions of the "noble savage of the New World." Naturally, they were accompanied by enormous geographical, historical and natural inexactitudes, in which Mexico is cleverly confused with Peru, Cortez with Pizarro, the Aztecs with the Aymaras and Brazil with Chile. In such circumstances, how could we be surprised to hear that in 1870, at the gates of an overpopulated South American city, authentic "redskins" from some Far West attacked and massacred naive and elegant travelers, anxious to protect their hair or their wigs from the terrible infliction of scalping, a form of dissuasion unknown in South America! All Arcadias, all utopias, belong to the world of invention, as do every name, every place and every man.

Fortunately, some scholars also came and brought their light to the imagination of the Occidentals, at least saving for science what literary men and artists had deformed in their art. La Condamine and French academicians; Baron Humboldt; the Spaniards Jorge Juan and Antonio de Ulloa; the Germans Meiers, Reiss and Stubel; the British Thomas Joyce and Henry Hudson, as well as some scholars born in America, explored, defined and catalogued ethnic groups, natural species, virgin forests and volcanoes, and the artists who accompanied them collaborated in the recovery of objectivity. This serious élite of men of letters and science proved necessary to rectify concepts and dreams and to undertake the task of "destroying the utopian continent" to make of it "the continent of the future," announced by Hegel in his *Lessons in the Philosophy of History*.

However, in the fullness of the twentieth century, wherever we live we are still confronted with an unknown continent that daily receives its contingents of settlers determined to discover America with the aid of a compass, a native interpreter, a machete

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217902710606 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to clear the brush and even a tourist guide in four or five languages for the purpose of making the facts known and "telling the news." From this comes the ephemeral travel literature that ceaselessly propagates the most recent truth about America. Some have a sincere faith in the objective they pursue; others turn toward America to immerse themselves in the need for a promised land; still others tell about America while living in Europe, certain that down there neither frontiers, thoughts, the economy nor solutions are frozen. As for literature, since the American language is not yet fixed, how many words, how many novelists, how many poets: Thornton Wilder and *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927); Henri Michaux and *Ecuador* (1929); Joseph Conrad and *Nostromo*. Some have recourse to the myths of America after having exhausted Greek and Egyptian mythology: *Le Livre de Christophe Colombe*, by Claudel; *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, by Peter Schaffer; *The Plumed Serpent*, by D. H. Lawrence; *The Comedians*, by Greene; *Manuel the Mexican*, by Carlo Coccioli; a number of pages on Mexico by Artaud. For Estuardo Nuñez, "America—and Latin America in particuar—has not lost the powers of suggestion and excitement that it has always had."[1]

Nostalgic and Perfumed Memories

Some writers have a double appurtenance, we could say a double nationality: those of the Americas who by chance were born or live in Europe (and vice versa) become uprooted beings, divided by their origins, transhumants, exiles, who express themselves in various forms of thought and action. The French Supervielle never forgot the Uruguayan pampa of his childhood; the Ecuadorian Gangotena introduced Ecuador into French letters. Just as before him José-Maria de Heredia was a Cuban of France, Alejo Carpentier is French and is more Cuban than the Cubans.

Lastly, Saint-John Perse, born French in Guadelupe, never stopped claiming his West Indian origins, not without having often professed his French and European allegiance. "All the childhood of Léger is in the light of the Antilles where he was

[1] Severo Sarduy, *L'Amérique Latine dans sa littérature*, Unesco, 1979, p. 50.

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217902710606 Published online by Cambridge University Press

born, of mixed bloods: French, Spanish and English; American wisdom and antiquity, the old noble blood of the New World," says Valery Larbaud.[2]

Fearing, however, that he might be accused of insularism, of purely West Indian lineage, and that all of that would presuppose a regionalization of his origins, the poet felt obliged to protest against any attempt to place his work in any location whatsoever and wrote of it to Roger Caillois: "My entire work, of re-creation, has always evolved outside of place and time: as allusive and full of memories as it is for me in its incarnations, it chooses to escape all historic and geographic reference."[3] He was terrified at the thought that someone could accuse him of "exoticism." In fact, no one could doubt that his language, so close to his American childhood, was profoundly linked with the spiritual heritage of his European forebears. Ambiguity, the point of convergence to which I have referred, comes from the fact that in the poet's case, an ensemble of elements belonging at the same time to writers of two worlds is endlessly perpetuated. Men belonging to two continents, if they choose one, their eyes contemplate the other, from which comes their gaze fixed on a double horizon. If, in addition, they are later forced to experience the condition of the exile, expatriation, remoteness and frustrations so common to an agitated and controversial life that fate imposes on today's man, from Vallejo to Cortázar, from Casals to Saint-John Perse, from Picasso to Stravinsky, it must be admitted that the human drama leaves these eternal exiles in front of panoramas that, viewed from distinct and contradictory belvederes, in the end enrich their vision of the world.

Writing is the Art of Naming

When we speak of America, when we go back to her, we must, now as before, treat her as an unknown. For four centuries we have been looking for paths, cutting vines, making openings, clearing the thickets, and it is thanks to the machete, weapon and tool at the same time, that life continues on the continent.

[2] Saint-John Perse, *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, p. 1231.
[3] Saint-John Perse, "Lettre à Roger Callois," Paris, Gallimard, p. 562.

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217902710606 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The American does not yet know what he is holding in his hands: he works horizontally, he thinks horizontally. It is impossible for him to measure the depth, because he finds his depth in expansion, in the direction of jungle and well-fed, rounded-out mountain, the fat of the earth where neither bone nor skeleton yet appears; where death is not manifested as an occasion for analysis but as an ineluctable fact by which the dead body feeds other lives yet to be born. We are everything: the mountains, the woods, the jungle, the rivers, but unknown woods, closed, unpenetrated anonymous, unnamed. It remains for us to find words for the things we are discovering and then to name and define them.

"I know. I have seen," proclaims the poet (*Exil*, IV) and ceaselessly possessed by his taste for discovery, he confesses, "All the roads of the world eat from our hands" (*Vents*, IV-V) " because the further a poet advances into the world of mystery, the more he travels these unknown roads... that all tend, through analogies, through association of ideas and through echos, from words to words... towards a very ancient (but still unexplored) continent, and the more he needs, in this flight, his memory and his will."[4]

Naming becomes not only the initial act but also the obligatory road of poetry: "The art of writing, which is the art of naming or more distantly of designating, will never have any other function than the word..."[5]

These words are not always authentic, since they are not known or precise. If, as Octavio Paz says,[6] in the poetic exaltation of the myth and history, the poet calls for an expression that cannot be contained, a "source of words," if he wishes to "unearth the word," it is to *enoncer les beaux pronoms* and so that we may be among those who recognize their names and are faithful to them: a desperate intention that is transfigured in a creative act that is not always complete and that is sometimes the fruit of a simple adaptation of what is seen or found. As when Saint-John Perse, not finding the precise word, speaks of "those-yellow-

[4] Saint-John Perse, "Lettre à Archibald MacLeish," Paris, Gallimard, 1972.
[5] Saint-John Perse, "Lettre à Jacques Rivière," Paris, Gallimard, 1910, p. 675.
[6] Octavio Paz, *The Broken Jar.*

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217902710606 Published online by Cambridge University Press

flowers-spotted-with-black-crimson-at-the-base" (*Eloges*). Carlos Fuentes, referring to "the indestructible Latin-American vitality" sets us the gigantic task of "finding new words for integrating this very ancient past which is ours, for inviting it to sit at the table of a present that, without it, would be empty."[7]

* * *

The majority of Latin-American writers have taken this road to creation that is also re-creation. They are, in a way, similar to Columbus or, closer to us, Darwin, and they devote themselves incessantly to seeing, discovering, appreciating, classifying. At times, the attempt has been made to locate America on the exclusive territory of research and magical expression. Nothing is less true, nothing could be farther from the truth, because in the ignorance of the occult that is, according to Albert Henry, "the source of magic," there is another reality, the only one that is ours, in which myth, occult depths, the unexplored past and the unpredictable future are blended. There is a mystery, an absence of underlying definition, but we are not yet willing to claim our truth, not even in what concerns the simplest beings and things. Just as Lupe Rumazo is correct when he points out, in his essay *Rol Beligerante* (Edime), the admirable and excessive simplicity of García Márquez, who says in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (as Sancho had said before him, "This is a cock") "this is a cow and she must be milked every morning," to observe later that the people of Macondo "continued to live this way, in a slippery reality momentarily captured in words but fleeing away forever when the value of the written word was forgotten." The Latin-American writer says the same in his own words, because that is where his intention and his objective lie: "The only task that seemed opportune to me as it gradually revealed the nature of its values: Adam's task of giving names to things."[8]

However, the Cuban turns the statement of Saint-John Perse around and no longer says "I know. I have seen," but the opposite, because it suits his deep nature better to say "I see,

[7] Carlos Fuentes, *Le Monde*, Sept. 3, 1977.
[8] Alejo Carpentier, *Los pasos perdidos*, VI, p. 74.

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217902710606 Published online by Cambridge University Press

therefore I am." Such is the temperament of the American and his "prodigious capacity for fixing a sustained, sharp and excessive attention on things that appear, that are discovered, that grow, without changing form.[9] Neruda complains that we no longer know how to call certain things that formerly had names, and he laments: "The peasants and fishermen of my country have long forgotten the names of little plants, little flowers that now no longer have any. Little by little they have fallen into oblivion, and slowly the flowers have lost their pride... It is an obscure role, being the hero of unexplored territories; the fact is that in them, in their song glows only the most anonymous blood, and flowers whose names nobody knows."[10]

Carpentier also dwells on this point, and he also sees with sadness that men have lost the usage of pronouncing certain words:

> I know that if I let myself be fascinated by what I see here, prenatal word, of what existed before there were eyes, I would finish by throwing myself, by plunging into the dense thickness of leaves that will disappear from the planet one day without having been named, without having been re-created by the word, the work, perhaps, of gods anterior to our gods put to the test, unfitted to create, unknown, because they were never named, because they were not shaped by the mouth of man.[11]

And Octavio Paz, for his part, repeats the confession:

> Looking into myself, I defend myself, and yet I have not yet finished with myself. But on my left they insist: be the grass for a body, be a body, be the bank that is hollowed out, the attack of a meandering river. Yes, to stretch, to be more each time... On my right there is nothing. Plains, a world to populate, a blank page... so many sleeping names, ready to become the wings of a poem!...

[9] Alejo Carpentier, *Le Recours de la méthode*, translated into French by René L-F Durand, Paris, Gallimard, 1975.
[10] Pabo Neruda, *Memorias, La poesia es un oficio*, pp. 411-13.
[11] Alejo Carpentier, *Los pasos perdidos*, p. 203.

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217902710606 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> The grass awakes, begins to move and covers the arid earth with a living green; moss reaches the rocks, clouds open. Everything sings, everything is fruitful, everything is preparing to be.[12]

The anguish of Saint-John Perse is not less when he exclaims in *Amers*: "Ah! We had words for you and we did not have enough words." This "need for naming" Roger Caillois attributes to Saint-John Perse[13] becomes excited with an irrepressible vehemence as the definitive expression of his poetry, when he says, "I have seen fish that I am being taught to name" (*Eloges*, VIII) or when he expresses himself in these lines, written in 1907:

> We hailed you, passers-by, and named you! We called you out loud by your eternal names and your names brought from elsewhere. We named you, suddenly! with a new name, truer than the ones the savants gave... Ten names, twenty names, thrown overboard, as if thrown to kennel boys for baptizing a pack of dogs! Why! Will you tell us the truth about your appellation? Living fragments plucked whole from the Unnamed... To name, to create! Who then was creating in us, crying out the new name? Language at the cross-roads of language... risen from the depths, sparkling among the pockets of blue salt... (God's fool be with us!)[14]

The poetic enterprise that consists of looking for a name is the daily function of all writers, since actually no other objective remains for him at the moment and naturally no other noble activity but "naming with words that which does not yet have a word to be named with."[15] Our world, this American world of vegetal and mental virgin forest seems still to be "the world of

[12] Octavio Paz, *Liberté sur parole* (*Libertad bajo palabra*) "L'Assiégé," *Poésie*, Paris, Gallimard. The quotations from Octavio Paz were translated from the Spanish by Jean-Clarence Lambert and reviewed by the present author in *Poésie*.
[13] Roger Caillois, *Poétique de Saint-John Perse*, p. 22.
[14] Saint-John Perse, "Cohorte," Paris, Gallimard, p. 683.
[15] Lupe Rumazo, *Rol Beligerante*, p. 168.

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217902710606 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the lie, of trumpery and false pretences, where everything is disguise, stratagem, appearance, metamorphosis, the world of the cucumber lizard, of the hedge-hog-chestnut, the centipede-chrysalis, the carrot-colored-larva and the electric fish that storms about in the pools-of-slugs" and "of so many varicolored birds that for the lack of a known name were called Indian sunflowers by the armored men" or the "preacher bird who called to you at dusk: 'God sees you.' "[16]

Our patronyms do not satisfy us, even though they evoke ancestors or family continuities; we go looking for more sonorous names. Neftali Reyes was enthusiastic about the name of the Czech Jan Neruda and gave himself that of Pablo Neruda; Félix Rubén García Sarmiento preferred to be called Ruben Dario; and Lucia Godoy y Alcalaya adopted the sonorities of the name Gabriela Mistral. In the same way, a French poet made his life a parade of resounding names: Marie-René Alexis Saint Leger-Leger became with the years Alexis Léger and Saint-John Perse.

Clearing the Language

Consequently, the invention of the language is far from finished. After the fashion of primitive peoples, we speak first of the bird-fly which later will be baptized " humming-bird." We still live in the initial period, the moment of sonority, the elaboration of the sentence. What counts in the word is its rhythm, the harmony of its tonality: it is the drums that hammer out the sentences, and it is the sentences that strive to be drums, as is the case with Miguel Angel Asturias. No more than we are able to do in politics or in economy is our literature able to give itself the luxury of analysis: solutions must be immediate, echos or answers in echo, signs, markers on the paths, paths recently opened by which it is not always possible to return. As in the virgin forest, we must use the machete to clear out the language, with each stroke, with each attempt, running the risk of releasing sometimes serpents, sometimes orchids. We have oriented all our literature toward sonority to the detriment of precision and logic. There

[16] Alejo Carpentier, *Los pasos perdidos.*

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217902710606 Published online by Cambridge University Press

were in the past American writers whose intentions were the same: Andrés Bello, Juan Léon Mera, Leopoldo Lugones, Rómulo Gallegos, Eustaquio Rivera. Things are the same today and the poet still adheres to the word, rejoicing in it: Miguel Angel Asturias, Güimaraes Rosa, Octavio Paz, Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Juan Rulfo, Lezema Lima, Carlos Fuentes, Jorge Carrera Andrade, Pablo Neruda or Alejo Carpentier.

These observations lead us to think that American esthetic tendency goes in the direction of panorama and verbal expression. For this reason, it is indispensable, in dealing with one of the most eminent French poets, who is characterized by the sonorous, harmonious and strict exaltation of the language, Saint-John Perse, to consider him among the explorers of his own language. What others did for Spanish when they examined and delved into the past to give it back its autochtonous character; renew the inventory of terms and forgotten objects; exalt nature, not to take it into the realm of erudition but to make it indispensable to poetic language: such have been and are the merits common to American poetry, such is the influence that it indubitably dispenses. The America of his childhood became the lifelong companion of the poet.

Thus a praise of the word, of the creator language and enthusiasm for the intrinsic musicality of words, a taste for enumeration, the accumulation of verbal elements, the very ones that, offering themselves by chance as in front of a simple shop or exposed in a shop window, belong to the humble vocabulary of the chronicler or the traveler. Such a bounty is not the fruit of a display of deliberated erudition: rather, we must see in it a way of making secure the reserves of wealth, the abundance of sources and the variety of poetic modes. With his usual spontaneity, Pablo Neruda confides his method to his readers:

> The materials with which I work are what I am and what I have. I am omnivorous of feelings, beings, books, events and battles. I would be capable of eating the entire earth, drinking the whole sea...[17]

There is no doubt that "for all contemporary poetry—veritable poetry—language has been more and more promoted to the qual-

[17] Pablo Neruda, *op. cit.*, p. 370.

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217902710606 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ity of material for poetry."[18] This is not at all a matter of turning to the encyclopedia or to erudition but quite simply of increasing reserves and rendering poetic material inexhaustible.

> Not, certainly, that I had disdain for known words, but I have always felt that there is in us, equal to the taste for going back to ages and races in their semi-anonymity, an instinctive horror for naming too specifically, according to science or custom. I have never liked to name except for the joy, very infantile or archaic, of believing myself the creator of the name. Think with me of all the extreme difference there is between the "word" and the "name." I remember a long poem about sea birds... which would have seemed to me the work of a maniac or a pedant in ornithology, if most of those birds had not received from me, without presumption, baptism with their names. And yet I knew them all very well, in their reality as in their appellation and their scientific classification.[19]

If it is certain that in the difficult undertaking of restoring and renewing his own language, Saint-John Perse sought and found his he did it, as Jean Paulhan states,[20] "by chance," which did not prevent him from giving himself up to continuous research to be sure of the exactitude of terms. He did not hesitate to go through texts to obtain "the impeccable execution of an undertaking that does not suffer from inexactitude."[21]

Such is the collection of sources by the consular agent, "at times dancing, at times static or totemic or sexual, between the animal and the theorem, puzzles, games of asymmetry," described by Alejo Carpentier in *Le Recours de la méthode*, an inexhaustible song of a vegetal world that from being immobile, takes on life in the language of the Cuban!

How close Borges, the man *par exellence* for enumerations, would feel to these delightful nomenclatures!

[18] Albert Henry, *Amers, de Saint-John Perse: une poésie du mouvement*, p. 114.
[19] Saint-John Perse, "Lettre à Valery Larbaud," Paris, Gallimard, pp. 793-4.
[20] Jean Paulhan, *Saint-John Perse*, Paris, Gallimard, p. 1307.
[21] Roger Caillois, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217902710606 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Sentence "of a visceral nature"

It should again be noted that American poetry and literature have come from the constant, dynamic and tireless poetic art of which we have just spoken, that clearing out does not sanction inaction, that a surprise—word or serpent—falls from every vine, that we must go ahead without respite, without permitting the chopped-down grass to grow up again and obliterate the path.

> Now, toward the land of marshes with its purple lagoons perpetually bursting with bubbles and a rumbling of animals and reptiles hidden in the deceptive quiet of the *victorias-regias*.

> It was a world of sweating hibiscus, false carnations—insect traps—frothy waters that from dawn to dusk tangled their spirals, mushrooms that smelled like vinegar, fat florescences on rotten trunks.

This is how Alejo Carpentier sees the perfidious virgin forest in *Le Recours de la méthode*.

A sensation of being clutched, vegetal obstacles, anguishing absence of horizon, a desire to let the light in through "luxuriant, intermingled vegetation, clogged with treacherous vines, bouquets of trees, entangled hooks of the rubber tree;" Saint-John Perse feels the same dread mixed with admiration for "this nocturnal universe of tropical splendor and disquieting streaming of this restituted glory"[22] in which shadows and uncertainties become blurred, plants whose forms suggest a world of unknown phantoms, reptiles and insects of doubtful aggressivity: in a word, virgin forests that represent nature in all its vigor, in all its terror:

> ...Guide, oh fates! toward the green water of the great alluvial islands wrenched from their mire! They are full of herbiage, of gluten; woven of rattlesnake vines and flower reptiles.

[22] Saint-Jean Perse, "Lettre à Roger Callois," 1953, Paris, Gallimard, p. 967.

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217902710606 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> They foster on their limed twigs the pitch of a singular idiom.
>
> Coiffed with owls of omen, magnetized by the black eye of the Serpent, may they go away, to the movement of the things of this world, ah! toward the populations of palms, toward the mangroves, the silt and splaying out of estuaries into the open water...[23]

Before the dazzle, but also the terror, of the unknown where each step is difficult, are mixed the real or imaginary humanized and aggressive roots of the men who people the inexhaustible world of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, to the point of making us doubt which path to follow, doubt ourselves and ask ourselves with the Ecuadorian Jorge Carrera Andrade: "In the American night, under the constellations that look at me with their puma eyes, who am I, after all?"[24] or enter into dream and expectation:

> ...foliage, transparencies, bare feet in the water, somnolence under the plane-trees and a swarm of images whirling before my half-closed eyes. The sea of leaves sings, the sun hums. Someone is waiting for me in the hot vegetation; someone is laughing among the greens and the yellows.[25]

We will no doubt find "verbal alchemy" in all these examples, but we must also understand that to the nature in question, interior soul and exterior soul, must correspond the fundamental dignity of the word, its fullness, a weaving of the idiom that allows neither holes nor interstices. We exist, from a beginning to an exhaustion, and for that we have had to find the word, or rather the sentence, "of a respiratory or visceral nature" (Roger Caillois) that forms the body of the poem.

> ... let words put down their weapons and let the poem be one woven word, of an implacable splendor, that advances...[26]

[23] Saint-Jean Perse, "Vents" II, Paris, Gallimard, p. 207.
[24] Jorge Carrera Andrade, *Oeuvres poétiques complètes*, "Yo soy el bosque," C.C.E., p. 491.
[25] Octavio Paz, *op. cit.*
[26] Octavio Paz, *The River.*

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217902710606 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Words, profits of a quarter of an hour snatched from the burnt tree of language, between the good days and the good nights, doors of entry and exit, entry into a corridor that goes from nowhere to nowhere.[27]
>
> We never stop turning around in the stomach of a beast, in a stomach of stone, in the stomach of time. To find a way out: 'the poem.'[28]

Sentence and form, finished, complete, obtained thanks to a language that stirs, living, like an organism at the height of its growth which, however, renouncing diversity and variety, attains a patent unity, an authentic "equilibrium of sonorous masses," such as Albert Henry asks for. It is not at all a matter of a simple verbal experience but of a classic language "completely regenerated through lyric savagery," and, in the present case—American poetry and the voice of Saint-John Perse—of a "poetic structure that serves as a sound-box for linguistic structure."[29] Saint-John Perse says:

> Ah! let broader meter bind us to this greater recital of things by the world, behind every thing of this world... (*Amers*)

A Sensual and Pantheistic Baroque

Permanent characteristics clearly exist in this literary form of language: sensuality, the presence of nature, the fullness of vegetation and the populous ocean, the absence of emptiness, not because it has been filled but because of a natural superabundance in which rain and humidity, fog and water vapor complete each other. "Rain appears as a necessity," says Lupe Rumazo, "word and dogma mixed—as are thickets and virgin forests—creating a vegetation so dense that rain becomes its natural, daily and indispensable element; rain that falls on the earth itself, on the word itself, to efface the greater part of it."[30] A coinciding of

[27] Octavio Paz, *Toward the Poem.*
[28] *Ibid.*
[29] Lupe Rumazo, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
[30] *Ibid.*, p. 135.

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217902710606 Published online by Cambridge University Press

foliage, expression of the vegetal world, with natural and initial fertility! However, the denuded forest leaves its foliage to accumulate on the ground, and in rotting it nourishes the earth, while the latter struggles to keep alive the plant that has been sown, protecting the new vegetation from asphyxiation and rot caused by excessive humidity. Language can only be abundant and unlimited. Poetic and literary language becomes a "language-language" obtained "through the prodigal conjuction of words with still other words," through "full necessity for filling space."[31]

May we not think that this profusion of nature invites a pantheistic view of the world?

Must we not consider, on the other hand, this contact with, this intimate use of nature in its vegetal and vital totality as a form of the baroque in literature?

Although we have already sufficiently discussed this point, I think that the word baroque is understood differently in Europe and in America. Europe has known certain vacuums: on the intellectual level, thought was subjected to precise ways of reasoning; architecture to an exact division of lines and spaces; music to unchanging formulas. The baroque in Europe is an animistic and spiritual reaction: it was born of the need to fill vacuums, to enlarge traditional dimensions, to escape from conformity and to fill a solitude of the senses that was no longer satisfied with the rigidity of classic rules. But in America this vacuum does not exist: nature is not yet stripped and constantly invites us to unclothe her, to open horizons, to clear paths.

> Baroque space is that of superabundance and waste. Contrary to communicative, economic, austere language, reduced to its functionality, baroque language delights in supplement, excess and the partial loss of its objective.[32]

A feeling of perpetual movement, vital energy and vegetal fervor animates the baroque in America, in which we can see an accumulation of natural elements, particular sounds, verbal formulas, "elementary energy" and "vital or spiritual potential that

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 68.
[32] Severo Sarduy, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217902710606 Published online by Cambridge University Press

insists on being spent."[33] "The baroque as an immersion in pantheism," says the Cuban Sarduy. "Pan, the nature god, presides over all authentic baroque work." And baroque exuberance, he adds, referring to *Gran Serton-Veredas* by Güimares, "is precisely an excess of profusion, a horn of plenty, prodigality and waste;" "from this comes the moral resistance that certain cultures of economy and measure, such as the French, have opposed to it."

Let us quote Alejo Carpentier in *Recours de la Méthode*:

> ... a long shed closed with iron doors that looked out on the bay: the sea pushed as far as the end of a pier that smelled of winkles, cockles plunged in shadow, stranded jelly fish, mildewed algae; a penetrating odor of fermentation and sour juices, sex and moss, lifeless scales, amber and water-soaked wood, the odor itself of the ocean in its work of death, an odor so close to that of the sleeping wine-press after the pressing of the grape in the nocturnal exhalations of must that has just been pressed.

Here is the origin and the result. Here is the splendid patrimony: to possess a good and never stop conquering it, to seize it in fullness, to name it, to know it. To love the unknown for what it offers us of novelty, for what it keeps for us as a surprise. To count on an Eldorado that never ceases to astonish us, "a table of abundance," a land of utopias, a barely-traveled road. Here is the great American reserve, from which writers draw their profit and their good fortune. A fortune translated into verbal richness, at times even in spontaneous and unrestrainable outburst, source of a language that is "singular" for its flowering, for the relish of repetition, for the pleasure of saying, with all the elements that bring about the words of man. "Foliage... a sea of leaves," that fills a thick, full tree. Anything may be permitted without sparing anything: it is the baroque adventure, it is the explosion of the senses, it is the mystique of the unknown that is always showing itself and which, when it shows itself, wants to be named, let us even say, baptized: the New Continent, a new half-nude body, which offers itself to the universe, which always demands to be discovered, to have its own language and

[33] Albert Henry, *op. cit.*

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217902710606 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to be named and described as a different and exclusive land.

So that one day the poet will rejoice in his work and say to us, without humility:

"Irreproachable, o land, your chronicle."

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217902710606 Published online by Cambridge University Press