

Sir Walter Raleigh and Guiana: a mysterious search, a metaphorical discovery

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Contrary to what happens with the majority of the nations of the so-called New World, the historical records do not indicate a name for the discoverer – or discoverers – of Guiana; the documents rather use the vague expression ‘arrival of the Europeans’ to that prosperous land amidst a thriving, luxuriant rain forest, which may lead us to the assumption that the region started to be visited late in the 15th century, soon after Christopher Columbus first voyage. The Spaniards would remain in the region for a rather long period of time but, Raleigh’s text tells us, not fully dominating it; the Dutch East India Company was not to start its commercial exploration before the 17th century; and the British would have to wait until 1815 to take possession of Guiana, making it the only British colony in South America.

What then was Sir Walter Raleigh searching for when, in 1595, he left England, the court and his queen and crossed the Atlantic? Why did he entitle his written report on that voyage *The Discovery of Guiana* when the land of his destiny had already been discovered? And, above all, what did he ultimately mean by ‘discovery’ a century later?

As a matter of fact, in 1595, the accomplished courtier, soldier, statesman and poet was not the queen’s gallant favourite any longer. The wheel of fortune had eventually turned and he was desperately seeking to regain Elizabeth’s good will. The voyage and the written report on it were, so I believe, essential instruments in pursuit of a special search, as I intend to show, although in a brief way.

The text begins with two introductory passages that establish an antithetical relation. The first is the long title that contains the concise version by which the work is known; the second is the dedication that follows it. Both are emblematically meaningful and significantly powerful.

Prior to the beginning of the report, the complete title introduces and implies a sense of abundance: “The discovery of the large, rich, and beautiful Empire of Guiana; with a Relation of the great and golden City of Manoa, which the Spaniards call El Dorado, and the Provinces of Emeria, Aromaia, Amapaia, and other Countries, with their rivers, adjoining” (Raleigh 1).

This sense of abundance is transmitted by the adjectives “large”, “rich”, “beautiful”, “great” and “golden”; by the nouns “Empire” and “El Dorado”, with their subtle connotations; by the sequence of toponyms; and by the noun “rivers”

that metonymically introduces the poignant element of water and, inherent to it, a sense of duality: the sea, which connected Old Europe to New America (and vice versa), always threatening and dangerous; the rain, vital for the thriving of that huge, green New World, an adverse element for the outsiders exploring the rainforest; the rivers, lakes and waterfalls, containers of gold, connectors of territories, dangerous obstacles and natural barriers.

The dedication itself – “*To the Right Honourable my singular good Lord and kinsman Charles Howard, Knight of the Garter, Baron, and Councillor, and of the Admirals of England the most renowned; and to the Right Honourable Sir Robert Cecil, Knight, Councillor in her Highness’ Privy Councils*” (Raleigh 1) – is afterwards expanded into an elaborate, long excerpt that anticipates the report and simultaneously functions as an *exordium*, a *propositio* and an apology.

A clear antithesis arises from both introductory passages: the title is focused on the New World, specifically on one of its microcosms; the dedication is totally centred in the Old World, specifically in the court and the trends of power; the title tells of positiveness and abundance; the dedication refers to negativeness and deprivation, materialized into a myriad of correlative terms which are metaphors for Raleigh’s precarious situation at court – “malice”, “revenge”, “darkest shadow of adversity”, “miseries”, “errors”, “grievous effects”, “the winter of my life”, “these travails”, “misfortunes”, “sorrows”. Raleigh the sailor was moved by practical purposes and aimed specific advantages, having offered Raleigh the writer the raw material to create a rich and intense literary report.

The narrative exhibits his fascination for strange, wonderful and exotic realities, as well as the vitality and potentialities of the vernacular literature. The profile of the learned, versatile Renaissance courtier, within the scope of the new humanist paradigm, is here fully revealed. After arriving in South America and during his attempts to reach Guiana, he becomes the historian, the ethnographer, the philologist, the geographer and the poet, whose miseries, misfortunes and travails are now of a completely different sort because they correspond to the natural difficulties of a bold explorer, looking for glory in the midst of an unknown, mysterious rainforest.

Raleigh the historian relates events, policies, occurrences, frequently commenting and relying on contemporary historiographic texts on the New World that he sometimes quotes in the original and immediately translates:

... Lopez in his General History of the Indies, wherin he describeth the court and magnificence of Guayna Capac, ancestor to the emperor of Guiana, whose very words are these: ‘ (...) Tenia en su recamara estatuas huecas de oro, que parecian gigantes (...) That is, ‘ (...) He had in his wardrobe hollow statues of gold which seemed giants ...’ (Raleigh 9)

Raleigh the ethnographer portrays the many native tribes he met and saw,

accurately referring to their customs, their physiognomy, their diet and housing:

These Tivitivas are a very goodly people and very valiant ... in the winter they dwell upon the trees (...) those that dwell upon the branches of Orenoque, called Capuri, and Macureo, are for the most part carpenters of canoas (...) The religion of the Epuremei is the same which the Ingas, emperors of Peru, used ... they believe in the immortality of the soul, worship the sun, and bury with them alive their best beloved wives and treasure ... (Raleigh 37)

Raleigh the philologist tries to register all the names of the tribes (Orenoqueponi, Iwarawaqueri, Cassipagotos, Arwacas), places (Putyma, Amariocapana, Curaa, Oiana, Toparimaca), rivers (Orenoque, Amana, Arraroopana), plants and animals:

On the banks of these rivers were divers sorts of fruits good to eat, flowers and trees of such variety as were sufficient to make ten volumes of Herbals ... (Raleigh 31)

Among the animals, the armadillo was surely one of the most admired, as the rhynoceros had been when the Europeans arrived in Africa:

... a beast ..., which they call cassacam, which seemeth to be all barred over with small plates ... with a white horn growing in his hinder parts as big as a great hunting-horn ... (Raleigh 27)

Raleigh the geographer meticulously describes the characteristics of the places he visits:

... the river [Orenoque] lieth for the most part east and west, even from the sea unto Quito, in Peru ... [it] is navigable with barks little less than 1000 miles ... (Raleigh 25)

... a great town called Macureguarai at the said mountain foot, at the beginning of the great plains ... (Raleigh 27)

In this branch called Cararoopana were also many goodly islands, some of six miles long, some of ten, some of twenty ... (Raleigh 34)

Raleigh the poet develops a dynamic literary narrative with (and I dare to quote Sir Philip Sidney) “the vigour of his own invention” (100):

... birds of all colours, some carnation, some crimson, orange-tawny, purple, watchet [...] I never saw a more beautiful country, nor more lively prospects; hills so raised here and there over the valley; (...) the birds towards the evening singing on every tree with a thousand several tunes; cranes and herons ... perching the river’s side; the air fresh with a gentle easterly wind ... (Raleigh 21, 29)

Excluding the cannibals, Raleigh admires the other Indian communities, many of them still prosperous and powerful, despite the Spanish presence almost everywhere, and puts into evidence their hospitality and wisdom:

In his [the Indian pilot's] house we had good store of bread, fish, hens, and Indian drink, and so rested that night ... (Raleigh 22)

Those medicines which ... serve for the ordinary poison, are made of the juice of a root called tupara; the same also quencheth marvellously the heat of burning fevers, and healeth inward wounds and broken veins that bleed within the body. (Raleigh 26)

In a beautiful but hostile territory, Raleigh and his crew could not have survived without the Indians; they are their guides, their hosts and a precious source of information for his written work. The fascination for the Other, the one who is different, was mutual:

... having not at any time seen any Christian nor any man of that colour, they carried [him] into the land to be wondered at, and so from town to town ... (Raleigh 10)

Sometimes Raleigh does not even dismiss phantastic tales of a legendary origin:

[The Ewaipanoma] are reported to have their eyes in their shoulders, and their mouths in the middle of their breasts, and that a long train of hair groweth backward between their shoulders. (Raleigh 29)



Raleigh's relationship (and his companions', I presume) with the tribes is peculiar, if we take into account the parameters of the age and the Spaniards' behaviour in the nations they were already dominating. It does not result in subjugation – at least at the time of the report, or on Raleigh's part – but in a double meaning alliance against a common enemy:

They also wondered at us, after they heard that we had slain the Spaniards at Trinidad, ... and they wondered more when I had made them know of the great overthrow that her Majesty's army and fleet had given them ...
(Raleigh 23)

Concomitantly, the Indians reports on the atrocities that many of them were enduring reinforce Raleigh's negative impressions on the Spanish colonizing actions in the region, stated right at the beginning of his work. The conflict between England and Spain is thus transferred to the New World, assuming new angles, when the narrator constantly emphasizes the Spaniards' extreme cruelty and rapacity.

... [their] lamentable complaints of his [Berreo's] cruelty: ... he had divided the island and given every soldier a part; ... he made the ancient caciques, which were lords of the country, to be their slaves; ... he kept them in chains, and dropped their naked bodies with burning bacon, and such other torments ... (Raleigh 7)

We always see him on good terms with the Indian leaders – the caciques – of the various tribes: he acknowledges their status and power, praises the wonders of their lands and subjects, and stands before them as the diplomat who is representing his sovereign. Raleigh makes her apology, praises her virtue, magnanimity and royalty, and shows them at least one of her impressive portraits. The cult of the queen is thus also transferred to the New World:

... I made them understand that I was the servant of a queen who was the great cacique of the north, and a virgin, and had more caciqui under her than there were trees in that island; that she was an enemy to the Castellani in respect of their tyranny and oppression ... I showed them her Majesty's picture, which they so admired and honoured ... (Raleigh 8)

Raleigh is a privileged witness and attentive observer who tells what he sees and endures. Curiously, however, he never hides, or masquerades, the purpose of his voyage: he was, after all, looking for gold, the ancestral source of both magnificence and decay. The Western hunger for it has been the end of other societies, as we so well know, and it was specifically the end of the societies mentioned in the text, whose people were guided by completely different world visions. Nevertheless, according to Raleigh's report, the finding and exploration of gold would be carried out on a basis of cooperation and alliance, opposite to the Spaniards' attitude.

As I have tried to show, the text is long, munificent in accurate information and extremely detailed; it constitutes a verbal map and a verbal portfolio of colourful, lively pictures, with permanent references to the author's destination, metaphorically called El Dorado in the title, as we have seen. For pages and pages, he mentions what he knows about it and reports what he hears about it. Strangely enough, however, after so long a voyage and after having endured so many difficulties amidst the rainforest, he never really enters the Empire he so much praises and searches; furthermore, he never tells the reason why he never reached it. This constitutes, in my opinion, a rather mysterious and odd textual element, especially because of the title. What then did Raleigh mean by 'discovery' in 1595?

A possible answer is that by 'discovery' he meant his becoming aware of the incalculable resources of the land, the prospect of commercial exploration and of an English settlement in a virgin territory (as he had tried before, in Virginia), which would have implied an alliance with the Indians against the Spaniards.

I strongly believe that his mission paradoxically resulted both in deep failure and auspicious success. In spite of all his efforts and commitment, Walter Raleigh the explorer failed his self-imposed mission, i.e. to bring his nation and his queen the riches that meant more power, status and authority; to give England access to the coveted "El Madre del Oro" (the Mother of Gold), as well as to valuable diamond sources, which up to the present day remain largely unexplored. Walter Raleigh the writer did, however, fully and eventually succeed in speech because the mission gave origin to a dynamic, inventive literary report of many exotic and mysterious wonders, the greatest of all his poetic idea of the territory.

The Guiana in the text has no definite location and ends up by being a metaphor and a mirage; moreover, its metaphoric El Dorado seems to signify an ancestral aspiration, a sort of utopia and dream. For the author, in particular, it meant a personal quest that would rescue him from the shadow of his queen's disfavour and could restore his former position at court. Hence the *exordium*, the *propositio* and the apology of the dedicatory lines, built upon the sense of hope, commitment and persuasion and ultimately addressed to the sovereign herself.

Almost at the end of the text, 'with the vigour of his own invention', that poetic and utopic idea appears wittily and subtly encapsulated in a powerful apologetic passage that simultaneously – and above all – constitutes an ingenious metonymy of Elizabeth Tudor the Virgin Queen:

... Guiana is a country that hath yet her maidenhead, never sacked, turned, nor wrought; (...) The graves have not been opened for gold, the mines not broken (...) It hath never been entered by any army of strength, and never conquered or possessed by any Christian prince. (...) the whole empire is guarded ... (Raleigh 38, 39)

Works Cited

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