

Review Article

Eduardo Galeano and the Politics of Style

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ON 11 JULY 1988, two months prior to the plebiscite on General Pinochet's rule, the Uruguayan journalist, writer, and artist, Eduardo Galeano, delivered the opening speech to *Chile Creates*, an international gathering of activists in support of democracy in Chile. The speech, made quite literally in the face of the oppressor, outlines a politics of negation and of opposition that defines the obsessive concern of *We Say No: Chronicles 1963-1991*,¹ Galeano's collection of essays, new journalistic pieces, speeches, interviews, letters, polemics, manifestoes, memories, and chronicles—the literary snapshots that have distinguished Galeano's unique approach to the forgotten and repressed histories of the Americas. The question that overshadows this diverse collection of Galeano's occasional prose written over a period of twenty-eight years, eleven of which were spent in political exile in either Argentina or Spain, is how to articulate a politics of the word that averts and subverts its appropriation by those who seek to neutralize its latent powers—how, in short, to give voice to a politics that re-members and opposes the tortures, degradations, and atrocities that are a product of a conventional colonial politics that silences and elides its unspeakable nature: "We have a right to the echo, not to the voice, and those who rule praise our talent to repeat parrot fashion. We say no: we refuse to accept this mediocrity as our destiny . . . we say no to the neutrality of the human word" (243).

The redemption of the word's potencies in the context of colonial cultures that neutralize or marginalize the forms of textuality inimical to their survival is central to Galeano's project. The dream of "marvelous possessions" has been supplanted by

the realization that “[w]e are no longer in the era of marvels when fact surpassed fable and imagination was shamed by the trophies of conquest” (*Open Veins* 11). The politics of quietism, silence, and imitative complicity have been displaced by the responsibilities of a speech that only provisionally narrates the certainties of its multiple misrepresentations, recognizing all the while that historical revision is always a matter of empowered speech. This book is a convincing demonstration of one of the possible forms that such empowered speech may take.

In the ideological space out of which Galeano writes, the anti-narratives of postcolonial theory and the historical revisions that arise out of that theory must address a culture beset by both the manipulations of the mass media, turning history into collective amnesia through the promise of an eternal electronic presence, and by a politics of (in) difference, neutralizing memory through the lure of the credit card and its promise of an open-ended future firmly cathected on consumerism. Galeano has distinguished himself in the construction of such an anti-narrative as much for his power to render “neutral” words potent, as for his ability to transform vague echoes into vocal singularities, at once passionate and disruptive. *We Say No: Chronicles 1963-1991* is an eloquent testament to almost thirty years of lived experience and the fact that theoretical analysis is no substitute for such experience.

The book includes a wide-ranging number of interviews done in Galeano’s early years as a journalist—from an account of the soccer star Pelé’s bizarre submission to his manager Pepe el Gordo, a convenient trope for the submission of the Americas to the vested business interests of Europe and North America, to interviews with Pu Yi, the last emperor of China, and with Ché Guevara, and a horrifying account of the torture of Argentinian journalist, Jorge Rulli. A brief listing of some of the diverse chapter headings demonstrates the degree to which Galeano has played a crucial role in chronicling and rescripting the figural representation of Latin America: “Guatemala in the Barrels of Guns,” “God and the Devil in the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro,” “Fascism in Latin America: A Letter to a Mexican Editor,” “In Defense of the Word,” “Ten Frequent Lies or Mistakes about

Latin American Literature and Culture," "The Discovery of America Yet to Come," "Democratorship: Latin American Democracy Held Hostage," "In Defense of Nicaragua," and "War of Fallacies." All the chapters in this book are re-produced in the context of an ongoing struggle in the Americas between the narrative of conquest, discovery, and oppression and the narrative of resistance.

"We Say No," the chapter from which the book's title is taken, articulates, for example, a politics of de-idealization dependent on the discovery of the foundational lies that have been perpetuated about the "Discovery" and its aftermath.

We say no to the lie. The dominant culture, which the mass media irradiates on a universal scale, invites us to confuse the world with a supermarket or a racetrack, where one's fellow man can be merchandise or competition, but never a brother. This culture of lies, which vulgarly speculates with human love in order to extract its appreciation, is in reality a culture of broken bonds: its gods are its winners, the successful masters of money and power, and its heroes are uniformed "Rambos" who use their influence while applying the Doctrine of National Security. By what it says and fails to say, the dominant culture lies when it claims that the poverty of the poor is not a result of the wealth of the wealthy, but rather the daughter of no one, originating in a goat's ear or in the will of God, who created the lazy poor and the donkey. In the same way, the humiliation of some men by others does not necessarily have to motivate shared indignance or scandal, because it belongs to the natural order of things: let us suppose that Latin American dictatorships form part of our exuberant nature and not of the imperialist system of power. (242)

At once cajoling, sarcastic, poetic, this passage is typical of Galeano's project, which in conservative Hispanist circles has been dismissed, not surprisingly, for its Marxist pretensions as much as for its utopian deconstructions of a materialism devoid of humanity, and its radical critique of an America that has attempted unsuccessfully to obliterate the political traditions of communitarianism that antedate the conquest: "By saying no to the devastating empire of greed, whose center lies in North America, we are saying yes to another possible America, which will be born of the most ancient of American traditions, the communitarian tradition that the Chilean Indians have defended, desperately, defeat after defeat, during the last five centuries" (244). Here

ideology is a remembrance of an (un)defeated history as well as a hope for the possibilities that arise out of the historical ambivalence of an ongoing defeat that is a victory of sorts. It is traditionalism without the strait-jacket of victory to distort the visions of the insatiable victors, and it is persistent resistance in the face of the implacable desiring system that defines North American culture.

Such an ideology, positing the resurrection of the pre-colonial in the post-colonial is, of course, subject to attack for its putative naïveté, its dogmatism, its refusal to recognize how the real of today has superimposed itself irrevocably on the imagined possibilities of the future. But such an attack has been anticipated by Galeano, whose mastery of a prose style that accommodates, imitates, and plays to the enemy performs a radical deconstruction at the very heart of the ideology he is attacking. Evidence of this abounds. Consider, for example, the production of Galeano's two most recent books (*The Book of Embraces* and *We Say No: Chronicles 1963-1991*) and their introduction into the mainstream of American academic publishing by Norton, a publisher with vested interests in the production and dissemination of both the old and new literary canons.

Consider also the stylistic inversions that typify Galeano's prose. Everywhere evident are the techniques of the television or radio sound-bite, the abbreviated narrative masking its "true" dimensions in preparation for dissemination to a culture whose attention span has been conditioned by the sixty-second commercial: "[t]he TV set is king. This familiar totem of our time immobilizes its devotees for more hours than any preacher and transmits ideology with an astounding power of diffusion and persuasion" (154). In recognition of the communicative powers of this totem, Galeano has cleverly developed a "postmodern" style that avoids baroque cadences, fustian, and extended periods, thus creating a potent literary style that rehistoricizes using the very tools of historical appropriation he is opposing. But this is most emphatically not MTV for *littérateurs* (and *littérateuses*) primarily because of the highly subversive potencies embodied in the choice of such a style. The prose is marked by its brevity, its journalistic "precision," its quotability, its polyvocality, and its use

of an empirical method. But it is its canny eye for unforgettable tropes and ironic displacements—which verbalize the very doubleness of history as both the event mediated through different agencies and subjectivities *and* the event of the narrative displaced through the serial possibilities offered by language and textuality—that makes this more than a simple parody of the techniques of mass communication.

Furthermore, Galeano's style is composite, the pastiche and collage effect of the wildly dissimilar emerging as a fractured whole, a kind of literary scopophilia in face of the possibilities that emerge when fragments of different narratives are brought together through the calculations of the author's vision. The figural cartographies that develop out of such mutative literary techniques are profoundly disturbing, for they overlay the unclear palimpsest of history—if troping history as “palimpsest” is not in itself a form of the very cultural overdetermination that reduces the word “history” to an empty category—with the agency of a subjectivity that is single-minded in its will to efface blurry vision, single-minded in its accusatives, the demands it makes of both itself and the world in which it lives, yet evasively multiple in its presentation of the “other,” the voices that lie at the periphery of access to dominating discourses.

In a chapter entitled “Othercide” Galeano—through strategies of irony and sarcasm and a subversive empirical method that produces historical revision—demonstrates the nature of colonial oppression by exposing its tendency to create narratives that refuse to disrupt their own tendentious blindness. America after the “Discovery” is, after all, the America of disabled curiosity, “the blind eye turning” of a passive historicity, of forgotten chronicles of the community of “we,” and of political resistance transliterated as “no,” all of which constitute the absent presence instantiated in Galeano's discursive strategies. Two examples of the blindnesses constitutive of the contagion of absence that Galeano sees operative in the historicization of the “Conquest” are worth citing:

On October 12, 1492, Christopher Columbus wrote in his diary that he wished to take a few Indians back to Spain *so they could learn to speak* (“*que deprendan hablar*”). Five centuries later, on October 12, 1989, in a

court of justice in the United States, a Mixtec Indian was considered “mentally retarded” because he did not speak proper Castilian. Ladislao Pastrana, a Mexican from Oaxaca, an undocumented bracer in the fields of California, was to be committed for life to a public asylum. Pastrana did not understand the Spanish interpreter, and the psychologist diagnosed “clear intellectual deficiency.” Finally, anthropologists clarified the situation: Pastrana expressed himself perfectly well in his own language, Mixteco, spoken by the inheritors of a complex culture more than two thousand years old. (304)

From the point of view of the victors, which to date has been the only point of view, Indian customs have always confirmed their possession by demons or their biological inferiority. From the earliest days of colonial life:

The Indians of the Caribbean commit suicide rather than work as slaves? Because they're lazy.

They walk around naked, as if their entire bodies were faces? Because savages have no shame.

They know nothing of the right of property, and share everything, and have no desire to accumulate wealth? Because they are closer to monkeys than to man. . . .

They never hit their children and they let them run free? Because they are incapable of punishing or educating.

They believe in dreams and obey their voices? By influence of Satan or pure stupidity. . . .

They make love when they wish? Because the demon induces them to repeat the original sin.

Homosexuality is allowed? Virginity has no importance at all? Because they live on the outskirts of hell. (310-11)

The point is that “othercide” is an act of narrative conspiracy born out of an historically determined duplicity masking as history devoid of fiction. The other is deemed incapable, possessed by demons, or is categorized as inferior, all of which are arbitrary, that is, fictive historical determinations made to service the ends of colonial ideology and its perverse narratives.

A further point is the degree to which literary structures of narrative and ideology are complicit in the process of demonization that ends in the banal untruths of the unthought stereotype. Think of, to cite but one early modern example, Josuah Sylvester's translation of Guillaume de Saluste Sieur Du Bartas's *The Divine Weeks* (1605), an hexaëmeral poem, and thus a poem with delusions of origin and a poem about the creation of myths

central to the culture of appropriation and colonization. In a section entitled "The Colonies," Du Bartas/Sylvester elaborate the commonly held myths associated with distinctions between Northern and Southern cultures, a *locus classicus*, if you will of bigotry and racism told from the point of view of the victor and doubly reinforced by the highly-charged Scriptural contexts of Genesis 1-2:

The Northern-man is faire, the Southern foule;
 That's white, this black; that smiles, and this doth scoule:
 Th'one's blyth and frolike, th'other dull and froward;
 th'one's full of courage, th'other fearefull coward: . . .
 Th'one's plaine and honest, th'other all deceit; . . .
 Th'one's borne for Armes, the other Arts respecteth.

(ll. 575-92; 458)

The classical binarisms associated with colonial subjugation and the requisite myths necessary to perpetuate such a subjugation are played out with disturbing ease: northerners are fair, southerners foul; the northerner is courageous, the southerner a coward; the northerner is truthful, the southerner duplicitous; and finally, most damning of all, the northerner is born to arms, the southerner to arts. Descriptions of absolute difference justify a perverse ideology based on the demonization of such *false* differences, which is to say that the colonial imperative depends on the articulation of alterities as fixed categories through the use of systemic misrepresentations in language. This latter recipe for the justification of the colonial imperative is as firmly in place here as it is Bartolomé de Las Casas's earlier *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1552), in which Las Casas critically describes the European justifications for enslaving young aboriginal boys, women, and children after a successful battle: "The pretext under which the victims were parcelled out in this way [enslaved] was that their new masters would then be in a position to teach them the truths of the Christian faith; and thus it came about that a host of cruel, grasping and wicked men, almost all of them pig-ignorant, were put in charge of these poor souls" (24).

The remedy Galeano proposes, if remedies are possible when the victors' narratives are so widely disseminated through media control of global popular culture, is a re-examination of the

conditions that produce the colonial subject's gaze. Such a re-examination, also necessarily a self-examination, will produce the recognition that the colonial imperative requires the homogenization of the gaze as well as a monoculture that commodifies its own blinkered strategies of appropriation. If as Galeano ironically says "[t]o civilize is to correct" (315), then civilization is subject to a double-edged image of itself, for it both correctively distorts its vision of the world and allows for the corrective unmasking of that distortion. The question remains, which gesture has more transformational power and is more widely disseminated across the interstices of various cultural borders? The exposition of the doubleness of civilizing "correct[ions]" ultimately leaves Galeano's readership with a choice about the nature of its own vision of the civil state in the context of Galeano's deconstruction of the colonial narrative. In the interstices between ignorance and recognition arises the possibility of the anti-narrative that voids the colonial master-narrative of its force.

The trope of "discovery," as it is used in North America both in reference to colonization and science, is particularly resonant in such a context, as Galeano observes in a brief vignette about the Spanish priest, Ignacio Ellacuría, who

told me that to him the notion of the Discovery of America seemed absurd. The oppressor is incapable of discovery, he told me:

'It is the oppressed who discovers the oppressor.'

He believed that the oppressor couldn't even discover himself. The true reality of the oppressor can only be seen from the point of view of the oppressed.

Ignacio Ellacuría was shot down for believing in that unpardonable capacity of revelation, and for taking the risks implied by his faith in the power of prophecy.

Did the Salvadoran military kill him? Or was it a system that cannot tolerate the gaze that gives it away? (316)

The ironic discovery suspended in such a passage is, of course, that the "Discovery of America" lies beyond the regime of colonial and postcolonial oppression: the discovery is always a function of the vision of the oppressed whose oppression grounds the ideological certainties, and thus failures and blindnesses, of the oppressor. To oppress in this curious logic is to repress the

unknowable elements that determine the agency of the oppressor. It is a profound failure of insight that can only be undone by those who are subject to oppression, that is, subject to the discovery of the "true" nature of the oppressor. The Ellacuría incident, like the Pastrana incident, chronicles the terrible human cost of oppression. Whether it be through racist ignorance or the failure of self-examination, Galeano, in numerous similar narratives, builds a convincing portrait of the Americas crippled by the effects of the colonial imperative.

Throughout it is the power of speech that confirms the possibility of subverting such imperatives. Recognition is a crucial trope for Galeano, a metonymy for the possibilities of the multi-valent human discourses, the cultures of resistance that resist the structures of oppression. Conversely, the "lie" figures in Galeano's structural analyses of oppression as a metonymy for the discourses of power.

The universal system of the lie practices amnesia. The North behaves as if it had won the lottery. Its wealth, however, is not the result of good fortune, but of a long, very long historical process of usurpation, which goes back to colonial times and has been greatly intensified by today's modern and sophisticated techniques of pillage. The more resonant the speeches in international forums extolling justice and equality, the more prices of Southern products fall on the world market, and the higher the interest climbs on Northern money, which loans with one hand and steals with the other. (211)

Even maps lie. We learn world geography on a map that doesn't show the world as it is, but rather as its owners would have it. In the conventional projection, the one used in schools and virtually everywhere, the equator is not located in the middle: the Northern Hemisphere takes up two-thirds and the Southern Hemisphere one-third. Scandinavia appears to be larger than India when in reality it is less than a third the size; the Soviet Union seems twice the size of Africa, when in reality it is considerably smaller. Latin America encompasses less area on the world map than Europe and much less than the United States and Canada put together, when in reality Latin America is twice as large as Europe and substantially larger than the United States and Canada.

The map that makes us small is symbolic of everything else. Stolen geography, plundered economy, falsified history, daily usurpation of reality: the so-called Third World, inhabited by third-class peoples, encompasses less, eats less, remembers less, lives less, says less. (209)

The “lie” founds the perpetuation of colonialist oppression by virtue of its rejection of any form of alternative history as much as by its rejection of differing imaginable futures or its alteration of cartographic realities. The writer exposes this fundamental condition of the colonial imperative by challenging the perpetuation of the lie, imagining different futures and recuperating lost voices: “I am not a historian; I am a writer challenged by enigmas and lies, who would like the present to stop being a painful atonement for the past, who would like to imagine the future rather than accept it: a hunter of scattered voices, lost and true” (256). Similarly, the exposition of “usurpation” is, in typically Galeanesque manner, a means of subverting systemic distortions in the representation of reality: “[t]he map that makes us small is symbolic of everything else.” This is why words and textualities are constantly invoked for their potencies, their transformational energies, their crucial role in the reform of the North American colonial socius: “I think that a primordial function of Latin American literature today is the rescue of the word, frequently used and abused with impunity for the purpose of hampering and betraying communication. . . . By writing it is possible to offer, in spite of persecution and censorship, the testimony of our time and people—for now and for later” (142).

Galeano’s *We Say No: Chronicles 1963-1991*, along with his earlier books *Open Veins of Latin America*, the three-volume revisionary history of the Americas, *Memory of Fire*, and the autobiographical *The Book of Embraces*, place him in the select company of a number of contemporary writers, cultural historians, and social theorists, who seek to undermine and rescript the conventional images of postcolonial America. Along with Noam Chomsky, Ronald Wright, Thomas R. Berger, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Richard Rodriguez, to name only a few, Galeano’s writings contribute to the dissolution of the empowered fantasies and impotencies of the colonialist condition and especially its disregard for the failures buried in its own chronicles. What Galeano proposes is the vision of a world in which to speak is to re-member the potencies that emerge from a vision of the dis-membered “lie,” which is to say, to write the potency of recognizing the misrepre-

sentations by which “we” are defined and then to “say no” to such a vision. Ultimately, the theoretical implications of such a vision include a skepticism about the postcolonial, a word conspicuously absent from Galeano’s vocabulary. Thus, from such a perspective, to put the “post” in “postcolonial” is to imply a kind of historical fantasy, one in which Occidental culture obscures and absolves itself from the various and ongoing modes of colonization and acculturation by which it defines its relation to the alien other.

At the end of his account of Ché Guevara’s death, Galeano says of Ché, *pace* Paul Nizan, that his “life . . . so perfectly affirmed by his death, is, like every great work, an accusation of our world” (53). Such accusations lie at the heart of Galeano’s significance as a chronicler of the nested memories that the Americas continue to repress in the persistent longing to create both the nation as subject and the national subject. As I finish writing this review I notice, buried in the back pages of *The Montreal Gazette*, appropriately sandwiched between “Births and Deaths,” a small headline “Pinochet casts shadow on Chile’s democracy.” It is Monday, 19 July 1993, and the accusation is clear enough.

NOTE

- ¹ Eduardo Galeano. *We Say No: Chronicles 1963-1991*. Trans. Mark Fried et al. New York: Norton, 1992. \$11.50.

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