

# TYRANNY, WRITING, AND MEMORY IN ABEL POSSE'S *DAIMÓN*

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It is no surprise that Jean Paulan's seminal essay on the Marquis de Sade, "The Marquis de Sade and His Accomplish," should mention Bartolomé de las Casas's *Breve relación de la destrucción de Indias*. Las Casas's text, which predates Sade by nearly three centuries, describes in lurid detail whippings, tortures, rapes, impalements, burnings, mutilations and murders, not by the dozen as in Sade's novels, but by the millions.<sup>1</sup> In Abel Posse's *Daimón* (1978) the historical figure of sixteenth-century conquistador Lope de Aguirre (1515?-1561) personifies the *locum* of the conquest of the New World, and identifies the survival of the conqueror's name as a product of a perpetual rewriting of his life and crimes as well as his longing to achieve the perpetuation of his name. As *Daimón* links the conquistador's will-to-power with sadism, writing is revealed to be a recreation of and ultimate accessory to the successful commission of the tyrant's atrocities. It is in this future, in the eternal return texts to be written and rewritten, that the conquistador finds his ultimate object of desire.

In *Daimón* Lope de Aguirre rises from the dead and, accompanied by a diabolical alter-ego who urges him to seek infinite power, he proceeds to wander his way through more than four centuries of Latin American history hoping to repeat "todos los crímenes y todos los sufrimientos" (29). Posse's Aguirre suffers from the Faustian frustration and the eternal contradiction of the conquistador's craving for power. At every turn in the many ridiculous and self-destructive episodes of his multi-century *salida* it becomes clear that Aguirre's goal of total control is as absurd as it is impossible. Ultimately the tyrant must seek to escape the limitations of space, time and political reality through erotic fantasy: the same "primario eroticismo que exige una víctima y un torturador" (138). When taken to its logical conclusions the conquistador's unlimited appetite for power inevitably leads to a sadistic impasse. As with the sadist, the conqueror's pursuit of pleasure requires the constant destruction of the object of desire, the perpetual disappearance of the Other-victim that eventually leaves nothing left to possess.

When through an accident of history vast numbers of essentially defenseless people fall into the conqueror's hands, the conquistadors'

sadism is a natural, though normally repressed, trait that comes to the surface whenever a master-slave relationship exists. (Paulan 25-26). The conquistadores want to wipe the slate clean and, as Tzvetan Todorov has written in *The Conquest of America*, it is as if one new rule has been inscribed: Ivan Karamazov's "everything is permitted" (145). The conquistadors, like Aguirre, have the opportunity to become the Sadean sovereign individual, the "Unique One," who follows but one law, the pursuit of one's own pleasure; the sovereign individual's autonomy is derived from the dependence of the less powerful who must remain ciphers or be actively "reduced to nothing" (Blanchot 53). This absolute egoist, through the exercise of tyranny, is in a position to maximize personal gratification and inflict collective pain. In fact he must constantly maintain his singularity by separating himself, he who inflicts pain, from the Others, those who suffer. The Sadean egoist is the great negator, but also the creator of a new order of values that makes his crime the greatest good. His criminal activity must be unrelenting for fear of his falling among the victims, and he derives his greatest satisfaction from his greatest need: the torment and destruction of those who would challenge his uniqueness. From the sadistic perspective no harm can come to the truly sovereign individual; punishment and pain becomes pleasure as the cycle of sadistic power is perpetuated. The sadist master or mistress appears to have found harmony by identifying completely with the destructive forces of nature.

However, the conqueror encounters a second, more problematic sadistic impasse: Nature cannot be defeated or resisted for very long and in *Daimón* it is inevitable that "los vencedores de la naturaleza terminarían encadenados a ella" (198). The conquistador is inextricably part of nature and any revolt against nature is futile because each act of annihilation is submission to nature's own laws of destruction and contradicts the individual's drive for sovereignty. The systolic and diastolic motion of sadistic energy is but a subset or shadow of the natural world. In Posse's novel Aguirre and his cohorts will be swallowed up by an inscrutable, indefatigable world that will playfully and mercilessly entertain itself "en humillar la actividad" (39). This explains *Daimón's* opening description of the New World that echoes *las novelas de la tierra*:<sup>2</sup> "América. Todo es ansia, jugo, sangre, savia, jadeo, sistole y diástole, alimento y estiércol, en el implacable ciclo de leyes cósmicas que parecen recién establecidas" (13).

The protagonist of *Daimón* takes sadism to its logical conclusion.

As is the case of Aguirre and Sade, the megalomaniacal rebel who denies heavenly and earthly authority has no choice but to embrace his everlasting lust for omnipotence or fall into a state of endless ennui that can only be mitigated by finding new crimes to commit ad infinitum. The dynamics of his desire force the tyrant to create an El Dorado of evil. The state of perpetual criminality becomes a vicious circle, a social centrifuge that produces the only thing that is truly real for the sadist: his universal hatred. In Posse's novel Aguirre's diabolical inner voice reduces the conqueror to his essence, the never-ending, angry rebellion against the self and the world: "¡Mientras odies nadie podrá decir que han logrado quebrar al hombre que hay detrás de tus harapos! El hombre es sólo su rebeldía, Lope, su furia . . ." (214).

In *Daimón Aguirre's* rebellion against God and King is not that of a "Príncipe de la Libertad,"<sup>3</sup> but rather that of an individual who believes godly and kingly authority naturally belongs to him and to him alone. Like Sade, Aguirre rebels against the notions of God, morality and legal authority, not because they may oppress his fellow human beings--as they often do--and most certainly not to free the poor and oppressed from the violence of the powerful, but because they contradict his own will-to-power. As far as the tyrant is concerned all other beings are interchangeable--equal in the sense that they are equally nothing--forming an infinite set of ciphers.

The Dionysian energy of the conquistador-sadist strives for form and continuity. All tyrants must have their monument. Ultimately the conquistador's impulse survives, not merely by naming (or by having the power to impose new names or even to destroy the old ones) but rather through the will to make a name for himself: to achieve enduring fame, or eternal infamy through the medium of writing. In *Daimón* the text, not the Devil, becomes Aguirre's true double, the shadow, the immortal self that points to one's mortality while having the potential to survive the individual's physical destruction. Aguirre's rebellion (which springs from his ambition to personalize the conquest, not to conquer in the name of the King, but in the name of Aguirre) is recorded in the letter he dictated and intended to have sent to King Philip II declaring his independence from Spain and the establishment of his own Imperio Marañón. More significantly, Aguirre's enduring fame or infamy is the product of *Las crónicas de Omagua y de El Dorado*, written by six of his soldiers after his death.<sup>4</sup> These rebellious *cronistas*, motivated by the hope of avoiding a harsh prison sentence,

exile, or even execution, felt compelled to depict Aguirre in the worst light and to paint the best possible picture of themselves under the circumstances. Little did they know that this "graphic" betrayal of their dead commander was the best service they could ever render him.

Posse underscores this return of the text by inserting recreated fragments of these chronicles as well as a selection of his version of Aguirre's letter (originally recorded in the *crónicas*) to his distant, indifferent, silent monarch: "Vuelvo a firmar esta carta con mi título de traidor, que no es fácil conquistar. Porque debo traicionarlos para poder ser el Rebelde (así, con mayúscula)" (23). Like Sade's arch libertine, Madame Clairwil, the historical as well as Posse's fictional Aguirre wants to commit a crime whose everlasting effect would continue to operate even if the conqueror himself is no longer acting. He seeks to create so profound a disruption that the impact of his crimes would be prolonged beyond the limit of his individual life.<sup>5</sup> This is the perfect, self-perpetuating crime made possible by writing, by that which is inscribed in historical texts and documents. Since, as Todorov has noted, writing (as opposed to ritual) facilitates improvisation, change, dislocation, and indeterminacy, it is a potentially a diabolical code that gives one the infinite capacity to multiply or transform signifiers. Murderers can be endlessly rewritten into heroes, victims can be continually murdered as they are constantly erased from the page.

Felipe II may never have read Aguirre's letter, but the text is certainly available to us and will be accessible to those who follow us. While the tens of millions of anonymous victims of the conquest are forgotten, the name, the signifier, Lope de Aguirre eternally returns in the true vehicle of the return--that which will be written and rewritten in the past and will be read and reread in the future--in the chronicles, history books, biographies, novels, films, and scholarly monographs.<sup>6</sup> Aguirre's name is still with us but not because he himself is particularly worthy of remembrance. Granted, he was arguably the first European rebel in the Americas, and his brief moment on the stage of New World history makes him a tempting profile or synthesis of the conquistador. However, he was, after all, a comparatively minor villain. He was responsible for the deaths of relatively few people and his actions hardly changed the "course of history." The reason that Aguirre's name survives is because his impulse controls the discourse of our time as well as his own. In the realm of memory and writing, crime pays. It is no surprise that, like the Devil of Goethe's *Faust*,

Aguirre, the conquistador in the *crónicas* or Aguirre the protagonist of *Daimón* wants everything in writing. Nor is it any wonder that Posse's Aguirre should command: "Que se folien los folios, que nadie ose usar un folio que no esté foliado y con mi firma! ¡Que se declare toda existencia de papel!" (67). Aguirre knows that the medium is more than the message; it ensures the very survival of the tyrant's name. Writing is the solution to the sadist impasse and provides the continuity for which the tyrannical egoist is lusting.

Regardless of the outcome of the tyrant's efforts, writing (the original chronicles) or rewriting (Posse's novel) effaces the individual subject, the *advocatus diaboli*, but preserves a trace of the impersonal power that drives the conqueror. At the end of the novel Posse's Aguirre dies or at least appears to die "again" choking on a wishbone--opposing the triviality of this fictional death to his violent demise in the *crónicas*. This manner of "finishing off" Aguirre underscores the banality of his evil. Yet Posse does not put Aguirre completely out of his (or our) misery. In fact the whole novel is a torturing of the torturer. *Daimón* prolongs the murderer's agony. Aguirre needs to die if his name is to live forever. The longer he lives, the more likely it is that he will be trivialized and then forgotten. As readers and writers we too are implicated. We also become contractual agents of the perpetuation of the tyrant's sadistic imagination. And Aguirre's diabolical alter-ego, his *daimón* lives on. After Aguirre's "death" this *daimón* is venerally transferred through the conqueror's former lover, la Mora, to revolutionary liberation theologian, Diego Torres. In the last pages of the novel the full meaning of the narrator's description of writing as "El mal francés" (92) becomes clear.

There will always be those who, for one reason or another, will oblige the tyrant. They too will want to create the illusion of identity and closure by forever freezing the constant movement of the natural world and human events. They will write things down, record them, film them or store them in computers. However, as in the texts of Sade, in *Daimón's* world flux and energy are everything, and their temporary vehicle, their latest *porta voz*, is destined to become an evanescent nothing. However, its diabolical energy is bound to find a home in new incarnations and different texts.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Paulhan is quick to note that this "sadism" is not something particularly Spanish nor is it unique to the sixteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> In the "pre-boom" *novelas de la tierra*, Latin American novelists continued the tradition of the sixteenth-century *cronistas* by describing how the human element was constantly defeated by *América's* implacable geography. See Carlos Fuentes's *La nueva novela hispanoamericana*. México: Mortiz, 1969. 9-10.

<sup>3</sup> Miguel Otero Silva's novel *Lope de Aguirre, príncipe de la libertad* (1962) echoes Simón Bolívar's appraisal of Lope de Aguirre by representing him as a champion of Latin American liberty and independence. See *Lope de Aguirre, príncipe de la libertad*. Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1980.

<sup>4</sup> There are six known chronicles of Pedro de Ursula's expedition and Lope de Aguirre's rebellion. These documents were written between 1561 and 1562 by actual participants of the Ursula's ill-fated expedition. See Elena Mampel González and Neus Escandall Tur: *Lope de Aguirre: Crónicas 1559-1561*. Barcelona: Editorial 7 1/2, 1981.

<sup>5</sup> In Sade's novel *Histoire de Juliette ou les prospérités du vice* Madam Clairwil tells her companion Juliette: "--Je voudrais, dit Clairwil, trouver un crime dont l'effet perpétuel agît, même quand je n'agirais plus, en sorte qu'il n'y eût pas un seul instant de ma vie, ou même en dormant, où je ne fusse cause d'un désordre quelconque, et que ce désordre pût s'étendre au point qu'il entraînaît une corruption générale, ou un dérangement si formel, qu'au-delà même de ma vie l'effet s'en prolongeât encore" (Sade 8: 503). Clairwill's fellow libertine Juliette recommends writing as one of the best means to achieve her end: "--Je ne vois guère, mon ange, répondis-je, pour remplir tes idées sur cela, que ce qu'on peut appeler le meurtre moral, auquel on parvient par conseil, par écrit ou par action" (Sade 8: 503).

<sup>6</sup> Some prominent examples of works about Aguirre are the following novels: Arturo Uslar-Pietri's *El camino de El Dorado* (1947); Ramón Sender's *La aventura equinocial de Lope de Aguirre*

(1962); Miguel Otera Silva's *Lope de Aguirre, Principe de la Libertad* (1962) and two feature length films: Werner Herzog's *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (1972) and Carlos Saura's *El Dorado* (1988).

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