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Travel Writing, Religion, and The Invention of the Other: Representing Identity in "The Forest of Marvels"

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Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to analyse how the background knowledge of travellers from the Old World have determined how they would experience American space. Such knowledge is more specifically directed in my study towards religion and politics, as my analysis intends to scrutinise how such realms made – and still make – subjects get to questionable conclusions since both Christianity and capitalism (crucial institutions of Western society) have had the normative tradition of disregarding the possibility of any meanings to deviate from their main epistemes. My specific context, in this sense, concerns the travel book A Journey in Brazil (Agassiz, 1868) and Maria Helena Machado's compilation of William James' diary – Brazil through the Eyes of William James (James, 2006) – both written during the same trip to the Amazon. Main findings are: Louis Agassiz ambitious projects in America – more specifically the Amazon – prevented him from being as challenged by the journey as William James ends up being; there is enough literary evidence to assume that, in overall terms, his Christian bigotry made him immobile and unflappable when facing difference.

Keywords: Travel Writing; America; Amazon.

Resumo:

A proposta deste artigo é analisar como o conhecimento de mundo dos escritores de viagem do Velho Mundo determinou como estes entenderiam o espaço americano. Tal conhecimento é mais especificamente direcionado, em meu estudo, no campo da religião e política, sendo que minha análise visa escrutinar como tais áreas permitiram – e ainda permitem – que se chegasse a conclusões questionáveis já que tanto o cristianismo quanto o capitalismo (instituições cruciais na sociedade ocidental) possuem uma tradição normativa de desconsiderar a possibilidade de que quaisquer significados desviem de sua estrutura. Meu contexto específico, assim, concerne ao livro de viagens A Journey in Brazil (Agassiz, 1868) e a compilação de Maria Helena Machado do diário de William James – Brazil through the Eyes of William James (James, 2006) – ambos escritos durante a mesma viagem para a Amazônia. Os principais resultados da pesquisa são: os projetos ambiciosos de Louis Agassiz na América – mais especificamente na Amazônia – impossibilitaram que ele fosse tão desafiado pela viagem quanto William James; existe evidência literária suficiente para se afirmar que, em termos gerais, seu chauvinismo cristão o deixou imóvel frente à diferença.

Palavras-chave: Literatura de Viagem; América; Amazônia.

Não conhecem acaso os portugueses. Essa pia doutrina que nos pregas? Como, pois contra nós, em guerra assídua, sem medo de seu deus, cruéis se mostraram? Ou, só porque de deus ao filho adoram, lhes foi dado o poder de perseguir-nos? Mas se do céu as leis desobedecem que deus é esse então que os deixa impunes, e vem por tua boca ameaçar-nos? (Aimberê, 1554)

Introduction

At the beginning of the bible readers have a clear glimpse at what might be considered one of the first overt stimuli for the anthropocentric mentality of Christian colonial logic. This occurs when the fictional narrator (I'll be herein dealing with the bible as a fictional piece, for that is what it is) brings the following information when discussing God's creation of Earth and mankind: "Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground'" (Genesis 1:26). The function of human beings within the planet seems, thus, rather obvious: to be the master of all other beings which are more distant to

God than every Christian supposedly is – category wherein, later on, not only animals but even the natives of colonised regions would compulsorily be placed. In a more realistic picture, one could say "[t]he whole achievement of the discourse of Christian imperialism is to represent desires as convertible and in a constant process of exchange […]; the conversion of commodities into gold slides liquidly into the conversion and hence salvation of souls" (Greenblatt, 1991, p. 70).

The colonial enterprise was then gradually blended in the discourse of religious salvation, as it is still dealt with in contemporaneity. It is within this framework that what Greenblatt calls "Christian imperialism" comes into scene: "The rhetorical task of Christian imperialism is to bring together commodity conversion and spiritual conversion" (Greenblatt, 1991, p. 71). The issue of representation arises, for the religious logic is one which gives the observer, the visitor, that who enters a "pristine" land, pre-given tools to assess the unknown as if it was already known. "Western religions have often embraced the idea of a spreading of their representations while resisting the possibility of free movement of alternative symbolic systems within the already-established spheres of their influence" (Greenblatt, 1991, p. 72).

Such free movement has never been as free as it is discursively deemed; as a matter of fact, if one scrutinises the impact of Christianity in the New World, it could be affirmed that "[t]he whole experience of Europeans in America was shaped by a particularly intense dream of possession, and, though Christians obviously intended to give a great gift, it is difficult to avoid a sense that this gift too was a kind of taking possession" (Greenblatt, 1991, p. 121). Notwithstanding how intense such dream of possession might be, it is nonetheless one that can be revisited – and even problematised – through the literary analysis of travel writing. Travel writing, as a literary genre, operates in this sense not as a mere illustration of Christian Imperialism, but as an evidence that religious preconceived lenses of perception are not as concrete as one may believe

– that is, travellers' experiences often transcend or are incoherent with the discursive practices they advocate. As a matter of fact, "[t]ravel writing is – fittingly – a dynamic genre, often employed for radical aims. It is associated with colonialism and capitalist expansion and with patriarchy, but it can also be oppositional, interrogative, and subversive" (Youngs, 2013, p. 14).

There are thus several directions texts by travellers might take, in many occasions escaping from their purposes, ambitions, or expectations regarding the journey. What might contribute for one direction to be taken is, among other things, "the degree of openness shown by the traveller towards the host culture and the extent to which the visitor is assimilated by it, regardless of length of residence" (Youngs, 2013, p. 7). Nevertheless, it is also true that, even after making a choice rather or not to open him/herself to a given region or people, there can be no guarantee that such decision shall not change during the course of the travel writer's journey. This is why sometimes it is more important to look at how the travel narrator constructs him/herself as a fictional character rather than as "a real person" – for the character is very likely to go beyond the physical desires of that person who has built it: the travel writer.

The overall context of this investigation therefore comprises the impact of Christian Imperialism on subjects' capacity for going beyond preconceived reflections about the context of the "other". Its general objective, following such direction, is to analyse if – and, if so, how – travel writers' background knowledge influence how they experience the spaces they visit through displaced observing rather than effective interactions with these places. Such knowledge is more specifically directed in my study towards religion and politics, as my analysis intends to scrutinise how such realms made – and still make – subjects get to questionable conclusions since both Christianity and capitalism (crucial institutions of Western society) have had the normative tradition of disregarding the possibility of any meanings to deviate from their main epistemes.

My specific context, in this sense, concerns the travel book *A Journey in Brazil* (Agassiz, 1868) and Maria Helena Machado's compilation of William James' diary – *Brazil through the Eyes of William James* (James, 2006). Bearing in mind that both texts were written during the same trip to the Amazon, when Louis Agassiz – a professor at Harvard University – comes with his wife and some students (one of them being William James) to Brazil, my specific purpose is to identify how Agassiz (1807 – 1873) and James (1842 – 1910) experience this very same journey through their accounts of it.

Louis Agassiz was 58 years old when he travelled to South America, and he had two main objectives in coming to the Amazon: to convince Dom Pedro II to open the rivers of the Amazon for tax-exempt international trades (reason why the US decides to provide the necessary funding for his enterprise, which ends up being rather successful) and to refute Darwin's theory on the origin of species by demonstrating in his book how the Amazonian region and peoples' were evidences of God's creationism. William James was, on the other hand, only 23 at that moment and had no religious or political agendas comparable to Agassiz': apparently his intention was only to learn more with his professor – who he gradually stops admiring – and with this seemingly enigmatic environment which slowly loses its mysterious and exotic atmosphere as time goes by – a factor that potentialises my suggestion of his eventual lack of interest in the trip being that he never considered publishing his manuscripts, whereas that was the first thing Agassiz did when getting back to the US. My hypotheses are that: Louis Agassiz ambitious projects in the Amazon prevented him from being as challenged by the journey as William James ends up being; such hypothesis would be, on its turn, an evidence that the main maxims of capitalism and Christianity – both depending on the notion of a supposedly ideal and universal logic of religious and financial behaviour for all human beings – make people cautious and unflappable not only when experiencing difference, but, especially, when keeping such difference from influencing their judgments about the world that sur-

rounds them.

The specific purpose of this study is to analyse how both authors – James and Agassiz – construct themselves as characters of the narratives they propose paying special attention to their voices (at how such voices are either reinforced and/or challenged by the refractory literary material produced). In this sense my aim is to see how James and Agassiz are developed during their two accounts of the journey as to draw a parallel between the similar – but at the same time distinct – experiences they go through. My analysis is designed thus as to scrutinize how the narratives of James and Agassiz end up becoming autonomous entities, since the subjects who take part within the narrated actions are no longer "real people" but a fictional and integral part of the events taking place in the travallers' abstract memoirs. I work here with the premise that lack of coherence, shifting discourses, and ideological amending are key elements of any travel writer (most likely of any person), so that would inevitably also be the case when it goes both to Agassiz and James' books, notwithstanding their idiosyncrasies. Another hypothesis I am then eager to test is that even though Agassiz' Christian imperialism makes his perspectives perhaps less amenable to be modulated – especially when compared to William James, whose development as a dynamic character seems to be rather overt and moving through a very cyclic logic (status quo; peripety; catharsis; return to a renewed status quo) – such religious background (which predetermines conclusions to the detriment of experience) is nonetheless unable to prevent his construction as a character to go beyond his ambitious agendas; hence the sovereignty of the travel writing narrator as a fictional and irrepressible character whose construction might transgress the desires of that person who constructs it: the travel writer.

It is far to say, therefore, that when dealing with a travel narrative, readers should be attentive towards its most characteristic aspect – which is the presence of this "mediating consciousness that monitors the

journey, judges, thinks, confesses, changes, and even grows" (Blanton, 1997, p. 4) during the events. As evident as it might seem, the presence of this fictional character, the intra and homodiegetic narrator, "so central to what we have come to expect in modern travel writing, is a relatively new ingredient in travel literature, but is one that irrevocably changed the genre". Awareness regarding this new ingredient is pivotal because it is the manner whereby the travel writer constructs him/herself as a character that might give readers the necessary clues to understand the complexity of the journey; it is already known that authors' attitudes and experiences therein influence their accounts on what is being seen and experienced, but, besides, it is also true that "[s]ights and visas may not be as central to the narrative as issues of religion, politics, and social behavior" (Blanton, 1997, p. 5).

It is thus due to the impact that political, religious, and social narratives have already had on the travel writers' lives prior to the trip that such seemingly innocuous aspects might end up being decisive for the development of events in his/her own story during it. Greenblatt's usage of the expression "Christian imperialism" seems to be, in this sense, considerably pertinent, as it is one that takes into account both the religious belief of the travel writer and the political and social stances which inevitably accompany such belief. The entrance of colonisers and neocolonisers into the New World is then one endorsed by capitalist and religious interests, hence the advent of Christian imperialism within their discursive practices. It is also true, nonetheless, that it is because it seems far too cruel to assume that a region or people is being captured solely due to economic issues that religion is called to play a significant role during such processes. This is one of the moments when what Clifford calls "practices of displacement" are articulated. According to the author "practices of displacement might emerge as constitutive of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extension" (Clifford, 1997, p. 3).

Such displacement is responsible for teaching the visitor/observer

how to judge and reinforce the importance of adapting and transforming the space whereto he/she is heading without at the same time overstressing the expansion of global capitalism. This is so because "[t]he cultural effects of European expansionism could no longer be celebrated, or deplored, as a simple diffusion outward – of civilisation, industry, science, or capital" (Clifford, 1997, 4). The experience of travel writers ends up, as a result, gaining complexity; they can no longer take for granted that every region and people need to be assimilated – their task is now to show why they do so. Nevertheless, if "discrete regions and territories do not exist prior to contacts, but are sustained through them, appropriating and disciplining the restless movements of people and things" (Clifford, 1997, p. 5), the same can be implied in the opposite direction.

Nothing exists prior to contact, neither simply after them; everything is constructed through contact, through the experience established between self and other. But it is not only the other – in this case the visited land and population – who is changed, for the self can be, and actually often is, rearticulated during the contact. In this sense, controversially, this unknown other, whose social, economic, and religious practices are incoherent with what Christian imperialism requires, is also an integral part of the colonial experience. If every place and person were inherently Christian and/or capitalist, both systems would never be capable to sustain themselves and one another. This issue is significant because "[w]hile the imperial metropolis tends to understand itself as determining the periphery […] it habitually blinds itself to the ways in which the periphery determines the metropolis" (Pratt, 1992, p. 6). It is a twofold relationship, the periphery depends on the metropolis because the metropolis depends on the periphery – the frontiers separating them are gradually liquefied. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding the fact that "[t]ravel writing, among other institutions, is heavily organised in the service of that imperative" (Pratt, 1992, p. 7), a careful look on the literary construction of travel books' narrators might give readers an opportunity to understand how the travel experience is much more ambiguous than simply binary –

as the colonial logic generally mistakenly assume.

Discussion

As well highlighted by Maria Helena Machado in her article "*A Ciência norte-americana visita a Amazônia*" (2007, p. 72), when Louis Agassiz comes to Brazil, one of his main intentions was to prove creationism and disclaim Darwin's evolutionism. At that moment, less than a decade after the publication of *On the Origin of Species* (Darwin, 1859), the scientist knew the only manner to make creationism more reliable was to bring his religious belief into the scientific field, to offer a technical explanation on how accurate such idea was. This purpose – which might look unfeasible in scientific terms, but which in the discursive realm is rather achievable – was fused with another plan: ensuring the opening of the Amazon's rivers for international trades, especially with the USA. The latter purpose was successful, the former only in Agassiz' book – which was nonetheless disregarded by the academic world, inasmuch as his conclusions were mostly subjective and based on questionable assumptions.

Notwithstanding his personal religious failure, though, and as Machado later observes, an evidence that Agassiz' political mission – and for which his trip was funded by the US – to "friendly pressurise" the Brazilian government to welcome foreign ships in the Port of Manaus had been accomplished was the emperor's promise to do so, as he would eventually in 1866. His Christian agenda is nonetheless the main line of his travel book; according to Lorelai Kury in "*Zoologia e Racismo na Viagem ao Brasil*" (2001, p. 165), Agassiz's belief that human "races" did not come from a common ancestor (as Darwin had suggested) was based on his theory that God had created specific species to inhabit distinct regions of the globe, and that, probably, they should not get mixed for that would be detrimental for the welfare of the species. Coming to the Amazon gave him a chance for trying to attest this inane idea.

Permeating such discourse there was the idea that more developed

regions were likewise because they relied on more evolved “races” of human beings, and vice versa; but, bearing in mind that such preposterous arguments were a rather common ingredient in travel books of that period, what is most interesting in this sense is to see how Agassiz’ construction of himself as a character of his tale sometimes transcends and even contradicts his political positioning as a person. Besides that, and as already suggested in my introduction, the presence of Agassiz’ student William James in the journey makes it even more remarkable, and the fact that he wrote letters and diaries during it allows readers to get to some compelling reflections. Machado suggests that, different from Agassiz, and “[i]n spite of being part of a naturalist’s journey, organised according to well-established patters, James seemed to establish himself in a position of intellectual independence” (2005, p. 13). The idea of an intellectual independence is appealing not only due to his minor condition as a mere student during the journey, but also because he is gradually constructed as a character who has a “voice different from those which only sought to produce a rationalising and dissociative understanding” of the experiences lived in the Amazon.

Nevertheless, she also raises readers’ awareness to the fact that “James’s Brazilian writings are not always illuminated by an empathetic and relativistic approach” (Machado, 2005, p. 14). But that, in my view, is not necessarily inconsistent with his discursive practice, but another evidence that there can be no Manichean assumptions regarding both his and his tutor’s experience within the Amazon; in both cases one must be eager to read their narratives as literary channels for ambivalences to be deconstructed, for Agassiz and James’ fictional selves to be allowed to transcend whatever purpose they had when writing – in the end what matters is not what an author wants to write, but what he/she has effectively written.

Mostly, in Agassiz’ book, it seems that all his described experiences are but a clear illustration of his theory. By ridiculing the rites of Amerindians or the habits of African slaves in the Amazon, not only does

Agassiz “prove” his notion of the Caucasian as more biologically developed in evolutionary terms – that is, as a “race” – but also demonstrates how getting genetically mixed with such less evolved creatures, which supposedly descend from other origins, could only bring disadvantages for the future of human species. In most villages whereto he and his students’ head, it is not the colonial mentality and extractive methods occurring therein that he sees as the reason for the problems faced by its population, but actually the existence of so many “half-breeds”: “The natural result of an uninterrupted contact of half-breeds with one another is a class of men in which pure type fades away as do all good qualities, physical and moral, engendering a mongrel crowd as repulsive as the mongrel dogs” (Agassiz, 1868, p. 296).

Intermingling species, especially with such a supposedly primitive “race” as that of Amerindians, was a threat for human inherent character. Comparing such class of men with mongrel dogs is quite curious, for Agassiz conclusion is that, among mongrel dogs, it is actually “impossible to pick out a single specimen retaining the intelligence, the nobility, or the affectionateness of nature which makes the dog of pure type the favorite companion of civilized man” (Agassiz, 1868, p. 298). Today we know such assumptions have no biological bases at all – as a matter of fact, studies only demonstrate how beneficial hybrid species end up being, since genetic multiplicity generally contribute to the strengthening of any living form; that is, the “purer” a species is, the weakest it gets. It is important in this sense to observe how eager Agassiz is to demonstrate the inferiority of these people he is getting in touch with; “knowing” that God created everyone at the same time and to inhabit distinct regions, he concluded all their problems were caused by themselves, due to the inner weaknesses and limitations of their “race”.

Nevertheless, it is also surprising to realise that, while he attempts to construct himself as this omniscient and extradiegetic character, that only proves what he already knew, there are some occasions when his literary self provides us with more ambitions reflections. Previously on the

book, when discussing how the villages in the Amazon were organised, Agassiz admits that "[t]he open character of the houses and the personal cleanliness of the Indians make the atmosphere fresher and purer in their houses than in those of our poor" (Agassiz, 1868, p. 265). This is not a romanticised or prejudiced image of Amazonian Amerindians any longer, as here Agassiz acknowledges their superiority when it goes to hygiene, and actually realises that their disorganised, impure, and non-developed villages were nonetheless less injurious than the developed US was to its marginalised population. This might come as a surprise to readers, but it also came as a surprise to Agassiz himself. "However untidy Indians may be in other respects, they always bathe once or twice a day, if not oftener, and wash their clothes frequently; we have never yet entered an Indian house where there was any disagreeable odor" (Agassiz, 1868, p. 265). It seems, here, that Agassiz expected to find a disagreeable odor, an evidence of everything he believed about Amerindians dirtiness.

As a matter of fact, "however untidy" they were in other respects (most likely religious), the idea that Amerindians and their descendents lacked "good qualities, physical and moral" is almost abandoned during his reflection here, especially as he concludes that "here were people of gentle condition, although of Indian blood, living in comfort and […] from whom, in any other society, you might certainly expect a knowledge of the common rules of morality" (Agassiz, 1868, p. 266). His affirmation that Amerindians were clean and gentle, "although of Indian blood", makes it clear that his discursive practice still obstructs his capacity to let his reflections, at this point almost subversive, go completely beyond his preconceived judgments about such people.

It is also interesting to notice, moreover, Agassiz preoccupation towards the religious orientation of Amazonian peoples; when he comes to the Amazon almost all villages he visits have already been Christianised, but of course such christianisation does not occur in the way one would expect, for the religion has adapted to the region as have anything else. At first he feels hopeless about Amerindians; Christianity for them, in

this sense, would have innocuous effects. But after realising their "religious sensibility" concerning their own rituals and traditions he gradually changes his opinion: "[I]t is sad that these people, with so much religious sensibility are not provided with any regular service" (Agassiz, 1868, p. 307). This would become ubiquitous in Agassiz' discourse, inasmuch as every difficulty faced within such villages would be seen by him as the result of either "race" hybridisation or lack of Christian orientation. "At long intervals a priest, on his round of visitations, makes his way to them, but, except on such rare occasions, they have no one to administer the rites of burial or baptism, or to give religious instruction to them or to their children" (Agassiz, 1868, p. 308).

It is this religious instruction, lacking in the Amazon, which would in his view save at least partially the soul of such people. There should be someone administering the Christian rites, in order to show Amerindians how to become real Christians. The fact that, when he gets to the Amazon, most natives' religions had been effaced, destroyed by colonial efforts, is never considered; what natives believed in before the advent of Christianity had no relevance at all. This feeling of compassion Agassiz seems to feel towards Amerindians, when he poses that he feels sorry they lack so many artifacts to live as Christians, is thus a rather problematic one; he is unable to realise that preventing such people to have their own beliefs and replace such beliefs with Christianity is not the solution, but has actually been an integral part of the problem of colonial and neocolonial assimilations.

It is at the end of his travel book, though, that Agassiz shares with his readers his feeling that the journey has been successful in many terms. Probably bearing in mind that a vast part of his writings were filled with prejudiced comments and consecutive complaints about Brazil, the scientist defends himself: "I should do myself great wrong did I give the impression that I part from Brazil with any feeling but that of warm sympathy, a deep-rooted belief in her future progress and prosperity, and sincere personal gratitude toward her" (Agassiz, 1868, p. 517). There is,

indeed, some sympathy popping up from Agassiz's statements; but, at this point, readers can easily notice how displaced he positions himself as the narrator of the journey events. Agassiz is an observer, a sympathetic one, who tries to convince his readers of his goodwill by sharing his expectations – he believes in the future progress and prosperity of Brazil, notwithstanding everything he had previously implied would make such future impossible.

Even though they lacked an effective Christian environment, despite the weaknesses of the human "races" present within Brazilian borders, Agassiz wants readers to believe he admires these people: "I recognise in the Brazilians as a nation their susceptibility to lofty impulses and emotions, their love of theoretical liberty, their natural generosity, their aptness to learn, their ready eloquence" (Agassiz, 1868, p. 518). Romantic as it may seem, I do not believe that at the beginning of his journey Agassiz was aware those feelings could emerge, in this sense even though his fictional self remains detached from the events narrated, even though he does not construct himself as an active character within the book, to some extent the journey changes the course of his reflections a little bit. Generally when that happens, though, he concludes his compassionate comments with a criticism or objection, as if he remembered he was there to prove Amazonians were inferior and to show why capitalist expansionism would be a good idea in the region – preventing his mind from being expanded. Thus, after commending many aspects of Amerindians, he nonetheless poses the following: "I miss among them something of the stronger and more persistent qualities of the Northern races" (Agassiz, 1868, p. 519). They lacked what Agassiz believed made people like him so special: strength and persistence.

This ambivalent feeling about the Amazonian population – one that acknowledges their qualities, but also emphasises inner flaws – is shared to some extent by William James in the diary and letters that he writes during the same journey. Concerning the behaviour of natives, James unburdens his heart, like Agassiz also does so many times: "I am begin-

ning to get impatient with the Brazilian sleepiness & ignorance. These Indians are particularly exasperating by their laziness & stolidity; it would be amusing if it were not so infuriating" (2006, p. 79). Here his line of reasoning seems to be very close to that of Agassiz, and there would be many other occasions when he dealt with Amerindians as if they suffered from an inherent inability to be as clever as supposedly more superior human species (although he never mentions that overtly, as does Agassiz). Just like it happens in Agassiz travel book, James also describes natives as diligent and possessing some level of goodwill; it is nonetheless their mental inferiority that prevents them from being more intellectually oriented when compared to his professor and colleagues.

James explains how his colleagues and himself "slept on the beaches every night and fraternized with the Indians who are socially very agreeable, but mentally a most barren people. I suppose they are the most exclusively practical race in the world" (James, 2006, p. 80). These people who Agassiz had described as having a gentle condition are here taken by James as socially very agreeable; that is, they are again not seen as completely lost cases, not simply owners of deplorable and contemptible features. It is then clear that, at moments like this, the discourses of tutour and pupil seem to dialogue in rather balanced terms, as James' criticisms are but an extension of what Agassiz would publish after the journey. It is also true nonetheless that being so close to his professor made most of James' admiration towards him gradually vanish; this is so because he physically realises what readers can only imply when reading Agassiz' travel book: that his professor was guided by selfish and problematic ambitions when studying the Amazonian region and peoples. This acknowledgment would serve for James not only to realise how questionable his professor's assertions were, but also to reposition himself within the journey's experience.

In one of the letters he sends to his mother, James says that "seeing more of Agassiz, my desire to be with him, so as to learn from him has much diminished" (James, 2006, p. 58). If this comes as a surprise for the

contemporary reader, it must have been much more shocking in the temporal context when such comment was articulated. One should not forget that the experience of travelling to the New World, the opportunity to get in touch with this "pristine" environment, was by that time regarded as an occasion that could only bring benefits for the intellectual and psychological growth for a youngster. In James' case this must have been an even more pervasive idea since he was accompanying his professor, a source of unending knowledge – at least that was how he saw him before accompanying the group in the trip to Brazil; such prospect, nevertheless, is not turned into reality, at least not as James expected. Gradually, James' construction of himself as a narrator starts to shift, he starts experiencing the trip in a less displaced fashion, allowing that space and time which surrounds him to inform his narrative, instead of simply doing the opposite – which would mean controlling such surroundings, as his professor is repetitively trying to do.

Everything becomes questionable, even the goals and methods of his professor, who James describes as being "doubtless a man of some wonderful mental faculties, but such a politician & so self-seeking & illiberal to others that it sadly diminishes one's respect for him" (James, 2006, p. 59). The man James admired so much, and whose company he believed only advantages could be pinpointed, is now described as self-seeking and illiberal, guided only by political ambitions. The master discourse of selfless assimilation is thus subverted in some occasions of James' writing; his active interpretation of Agassiz' actions, which move through an original course, evince his experiencing of the trip as one that changes rather than reinforces values. James knew nonetheless how dangerous his affirmations about his professor were, and, given that, he would ultimately warn his mother: "Don't say anything about this outside, for heaven's sake, as my judgment is a very hasty one" (James, 2006, p. 60). Hasty or not, James' judgments demonstrate how he becomes a much more round character when compared to the fictional flat self of Louis Agassiz.

In this sense, instead of reinforcing his previous values – as it seems to have been the case of Agassiz – the journey through the Amazon makes William James begin to question the whole purpose of the trip. His feeling of sympathy towards the region and its people is not one like that of Agassiz, even though their romanticising of Amerindians is something that makes their discourses dialogue, the consequence of such feeling is not the same for both narrators. If everything Agassiz sees is a clear demonstration of how right his hypotheses are, James understands the journey as a symptom that such hypotheses are not relevant at all; and if he learns from the environment and people he meets in the Amazon, the scientific discoveries of Agassiz have nothing to teach him whatsoever. Such scientific breakthroughs were nonetheless the main purpose of James' coming, reason why he starts feeling guilty for having asked to do so. In another letter to his mother he declares: "My coming was a mistake, and a pretty expensive one both for & on dear old Father & for the dear generous old aunt Kate" (James, 2006, p. 61).

James believed then that he had acted recklessly and that his family was investing its money rather inadequately when funding his coming to Brazil. He decides to return earlier and explains: "I find that by staying I shall learn next to nothing of Natural History as I care about learning it; I am now certain that my forte is not to go on exploring expeditions" (James, 2006, p. 62). Indeed, after returning to the USA, James would never be cured from what he called his "soul-sickness", acquired during the journey to Brazil; he would never work with Natural History, moving on to a more relativistic field and being regarded today as the main idealiser of modern psychology. Paradoxically, if at that moment James' condition was one that made him nothing compared to Louis Agassiz – an acknowledged and respected scientist – in the long run the contributions of the former to the scientific arena would become relevant and memorable, whereas the latter would be completely forgotten by academia.

However, the fact that James' intellectual line of reasoning changed so much during the trip to the Amazon only manifests the importance of

the trip as a formative one, as an experience which changed the traveller to an uncontrollable extent (probably much more than it changed Agassiz, from what we learn about him). If the literary narrator constructed by Agassiz is one successively worried about not letting his comments be detrimental to his research, one that emphasises his agenda in the first place and try to keep his contradictory literary reveries from hindering such agenda, James seems to be eager to do the very opposite. Both are strong and both are weak at distinct circumstances, but if the professor tries to hide such weakness and highlight the strength of his theory, James generally recurs to writing for dealing with his fears and desperation. If one takes into account the authors' distinct writing conditions – the fact that Agassiz wanted to publish his texts while James only wanted to deal with the trip more smoothly by writing in his diary and to his mother – it seems rather obvious that the latter is about to open himself less cautiously than the former. That the Amazon has transformed James, there seems to be no doubt, as he starts questioning not only the ideas of his professor and the purpose of the trip, but even his own existence prior to it.

"You have no idea, my dearest mother, how strange that home life seems to me from the depths of this world" (James, 2006, p. 84). The habits of Amerindians and the social and financial functioning of the Amazon were a source not for James' simple evaluation of such issues, his perspective becomes not only judgmental but also judicious; if the journey gives Agassiz an opportunity to judge life whereto he goes, it actually gives James an opportunity to judge life in the places whence he came. James questions "the idea of the people swarming about as they do at home, killing themselves with thinking about things that have no connection with their merely external circumstances" (James, 2006, p. 85); apparently, and due to his coming to the Amazon, he becomes aware about the futility and superficiality of US society. He suggests that his memory of all those people "studying themselves into fevers, going mad about religion, breathing perpetual heated gas & excitement, turning night into day, seems almost incredible and imaginary, and yet I only left it

eight months ago". Eight months ago, when he arrived in Brazil, it felt as if James had been "rocked into a kind of sleep – but strange to say, it is the old existence that has already begun to feel like a dream" (James, 2006, p. 86). Not so strange, though; if the journey gives Agassiz a chance to live his pushy dream, it provides James with an opportunity to wake up.

Final Remarks

According to Patrick Holland "[t]ravel narratives strive to express the unfamiliar, but also to contain it" (1998, p. 25); one could infer thus from the previous discussion that the development of narrators in the books *A Journey in Brazil* (Agassiz, 1868) and *Brazil through the Eyes of William James* (James, 2006) demonstrate how political and religious agendas might be detrimental for an unbiased understanding of such unfamiliar physical experiences. Notwithstanding the fact that both books deal with the very same journey, and even though there are occasions when the perspectives designed by William James and Louis Agassiz seem rather close to one another, what makes them different is perhaps the tendency of the former to invoke relativistic understandings of his surroundings whereas the latter is only worried about making his point, about proving his social hypotheses by containing the unfamiliar. Such fact demonstrates how religion is all but innocuous, and the emergence and growth of Christianity is there for everyone to check out how harmful it has been – and still is – in terms of tendentious perspectives within and outside Western societies.

Agassiz' narration, what he sees and reflects upon when discussing the Amazon and its peoples, problematise the misguided idea that one's religious orientation does not affect anyone else besides the one "who believes". As a matter of fact "[r]eligious worldviews influence cultural values, which in turn shape both political policies and social behaviors" (Harlow, 2008, p. 163). Bearing in mind that religious worldviews might shape one's social behaviours, it is very likely that James' lack of a religious agenda in Brazil – as far as we know – made him more prone to

transgress his previous expectations when compared to Agassiz. I affirm that based on the fact that, while the time and space of the Amazon gave the former a chance to revisit his own existence, there was nothing for the latter to reconsider inasmuch as "theological truths are both timeless and vital, both normative and eminently useful" (Harlow, 2008, p. 164) – knowing the bible, therefore, meant knowing everything. Agassiz' narrator proves to be omniscient and wise, whereas James' one is miserable and confused; and the publication of the former's narrative is an evidence of what Holland calls the "pseudoscience of observation" (1998, p. 24) – a scientific method so fake that, in this case, even allows the scientist to prove Creationism.

In this study I am dealing specifically with a neocolonial moment, but one should not forget that "[f]rom its first appearance in the New World, the Church was an integral part of the colonizing venture" (Prior, 1997, p. 52). Furthermore, and for those who like to state Christianity was responsible for making colonialism "smoother" – that it was beneficial for Amazonian natives and worked against the advent of colonialism – it is also important to bear in mind that "[t]he evangelization practised by the Church underpinned the rapacious power of the state and gave it a control over the indigenous culture" (Prior, 1997, p. 53). Therefore, and whatever "positive ethics of care and stewardship arise from such beliefs, there exists an equal catalogue of war and violence against humanity and atrocities against the earth in the name of that deity" (Merchant, 34). Agassiz' religion, in this sense, was supposedly brought to the Amazon in order to save natives, but, in practice, it has actually sealed their condemnation. "Evangelization provided the ideological basis for subjugation, just as gunpowder and horse provided the military one, both in the service of the real goal of the conquest, the economic subjugation of the region" (Prior, 1997, p. 54).

Looking at natives as spiritually empty, emphasising the importance of properly christianising them, is not only part of Agassiz' logic, but actually a symptom of colonial and neocolonial processes which have articu-

lated “a mythically pristine Amazonia, de-historicised and recreated as a field for the play of new kinds of knowledge”. This would be a notion thoroughly applied as to erase “both the native population of Amazonia and the evidence of its past”. Curiously, the contradiction of what Carolyn Merchant names “Christian doctrine of redemption” (Merchant, 2003, p. 19) is that it means proposing to save those who cannot be saved, as “[n]ative peoples are relegated to the status of an evanescent curiosity, among whom a few final determinations as to the riddles of local culture might be made, but whose destiny is now extinction” (Whitehead, 2002, p. 130). This is the advantage of colonising with and through Christianity, for it gives one the opportunity to predetermine which regions and peoples are to prosper and which ones are to be extinct. This is why Agassiz believes he was capable of proving Creationism; religious theories do not need to make any sense, they are not amenable to scientific examination because there is no need to test them, whereas “[a]ny scientific explanation has to be testable” (Montgomery, 2012, p. 10).

In this sense it is rather curious – not to say pathetic – to realise how paradoxical Agassiz religious agenda in the Amazon seems to be. His attempt at scientifically proving his religious beliefs could never – fortunately for us – be taken seriously because “[s]uch beliefs are based on acts of faith rather than credible evidence” (Merchant, 2003, p. 20). Coming to Brazil and studying natives and the Amazon as if they were an opportunity for a religious and nonscientific narrative to be taken from the fictional realm into the technical world of academic research, as Agassiz has endeavoured to do, consists in one of the several “acts of metaphysical aggression” (Sayers, 2003, p. 107) committed by religious fundamentalists. The ubiquitous confusion of William James’ narrator, his questioning of the events he described and the ones he had lived before coming to the Amazon, are opportunities for him to articulate more ambitious ideas towards his experience; letting himself be physically affected by his experience with the “other” is what grants him the chance to rethink the “self”. This is the most effective manner whereby the other might be

experienced in fruitful terms, as a reflective, but imperfect mirror – one wherefrom an image of the self emerges, an image which has been altered, reshaped, rearticulated through the space between that person who sees and the one who is seen. Religion covers such mirror, preventing the self from gazing upon the other; it blinds the image by explaining it before it is even seen.

It is by allowing the other not only to influence but actually also to distress the self that James' life takes another course due to his coming to the Amazon; if Agassiz' perspectives only become more concrete with the journey, everything James believed in was liquefied during it. Religion, I dare say, prevents us from experiencing experience; it hinders one's capacity to learn from the physical world, to look around and accept there is still much to be known – it provides us the answers without asking any questions. There is no evil in envisaging a historical moment – which I eagerly expect to live through – when such sort of thinking might be surpassed, as a matter of fact "[t]he priests who fill men's minds with obscurities, to the point where they are no longer able to see the world of nature as it really is, are the real creators of evil". Perhaps worse than applauding ignorance is trying to make the ignorant look wise; in this sense the disdain James starts to feel towards his professor, which is surprising given their hierarchical unevenness at that moment, only informs us about how sometimes the less wise are the ones who receive most acknowledgment. If it is true that "the deepest, most insidious form of ignorance, is the false claim of knowledge" (Pagden, 1994, p. 123), it is high time we started looking for real knowledge, and stopped praising ignorance – ops, I meant religion.

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