

ENCUENTROS



*Hölderlin and the U'wa:
A Reflection on Nature,
Culture and Development*

Lecture by
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HÖLDERLIN AND THE U'WA: A REFLECTION ON NATURE, CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT

William Ospina

Chasing the Dream of Cinnamon

462 years ago, Spanish conquistador Gonzalo Pizarro invested the wealth obtained from plundering Cuzco into outfitting a huge and crazed expedition, to find the 'Land of Cinnamon.' Natives in the mountains had told him that heading eastward beyond the snow-capped peaks of Quito lay a vast land of cinnamon trees. Since at that time, cinnamon was as coveted as gold, Pizarro did not hesitate to go chasing after this wealth. 240 Spaniards, 4000 Indians, 2000 llamas loaded down with weapons and tools, 2000 hunting dogs, and 2000 pigs went up the arid slope of the mountain, skirting snowy peaks (where many Indians met their death) and eventually reached the other side of the range where vegetation is exuberant, and where the waters of streams and torrents join to form ever wider rivers which, after many days of running, become the infinite Amazon.

When they finally reached the region the Indians spoke of, they did find the cinnamon which they indeed used to flavor their beverages, but they discovered that it was a variety of American cinnamon, very different from the luxurious bark from Asia, and that it was so scattered in the forests of the region that it could not be commercially exploited. At that time the adventurers were yearning to find forests of a single species as in Europe. But many people are still unaware, even five centuries later, that in these areas the fruitfulness of the earth is inseparable from its diversity: in every square meter there are many different species, and any extensive cultivation soon exhausts the soil. The expedition resulted in failure, and when Pizarro saw his investment lost, in his criminal madness he had half of the Indians turned over to the voracious hunger of the dogs; many of those remaining he burned alive along with the useless cinnamon trees. Today we know that the Amazon jungle is the greatest trea-

sure on earth, but those soldiers of fortune, who eventually reached the mouth of the Amazon, were only searching for treasures that could be quickly seized and exploited. Hence, although one of the consequences for the Europeans of this 1542 expedition was the discovery of the Amazon River, all they took away from that trip was the bitter sense of failure and cruelty.

A Dazzling ... But Mistaken View

The men of the conquest seemed to be making an effort not to find anything that was radically new in the Americas: they wanted to find the obsessions of the world from which they came. The Americas were first a dream and only then a hemisphere, and many of the fables nourished by Europe for centuries converged in this dream. Columbus sailed along the coast of Venezuela, past the mouth of the Orinoco, and into the Gulf of Paria, certain that he was seeing the shores of Asia. The voyagers saw what they expected to see: sirens and giants, Indians and Amazons. If it is true, as the philosopher said, that “we only see in things what we put into them,” the discovery of America is a perfect example of how memory and hope often do not let us see what is right in front of us. This attitude became habitual, because for centuries our Americas continued to be interpreted in the light of how Europe thought of them. Thus, just as they searched for the fountain of eternal youth in Florida, the city of emeralds in Colombia, and the land of cinnamon in the Amazon, so they searched for the city of gold that would put an end

to the sleepless nights of alchemists. The legend of Eldorado gave birth to many expeditions for hundreds of years; the niche in the apse of Catholic churches became a gilded “Dorado” until it finally settled as a fable in the pages of Voltaire’s *Candide*.

It is strange to seek in one region of the world what only exists in another, but it is also difficult and strange to put names on a region with a language that came from a very distant world. At least in North America, the United States resembles Europe in its climate system, and in much of its fauna and flora. The difference between Spain and the equatorial regions is of course much greater, so when Spanish reached our shores as a language already so mature that it was on the brink of being standardized in *Don Quixote*, there was always a linguistic gap between our reality and their terminology. Spanish did not have words for naming what was specifically Latin American: the trees, birds, climates, native peoples, their customs, their clothes and their mythologies. The conviction that theirs was a superior language made it difficult to pronounce the indigenous names for fruits, animals, objects and persons.

The Poet of Excessiveness

Not long ago, I wrote a book, *Las auroras de sangre* [Bloody Dawns], about Juan de Castellanos, the first poet to write in Spanish from the Caribbean, Colombia, and Venezuela. My aim was to show how this 16th century man, who wrote the longest and one of the most original poems in the world, suffered trying to translate the exces-

sive reality of the tropics; he was not recognized as a poet by scholars and critics in Europe because he dared to see what really existed in the Americas, and he used words from the indigenous languages of the Caribbean and the Andes to name whatever did not already have a name in Spanish. The rules for writing poetry at that time were very rigid: reality was symmetrically divided into the poetic and the prosaic, a pantheon of Greek gods acted out a rich collection of metaphors, and a catalogue of tropes were obligatory. That all meant that a poet who wanted to illustrate the raw realism and strangeness of the new lands found his work rejected. Even in the 19th century, the most important Spanish critic, Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo, declared that the work of Juan de Castellanos was not poetry because the poet had filled his verses with barbaric and exotic words that spoiled the classic sonority of the language, and hence he had given birth to a monster unparalleled in any literature. The words that the critic found barbaric were the names of the natives of the Americas who had lost their lives to Spanish lances, and terms such as *hamaca*, *bohío*, *iguana*, *canoa*, *huracán* and *tiburón*.*

This phenomenon in the field of literature was paralleled in the other realms of reality. Europe saw in our America what it wanted to see and stubbornly refused to see what was different from its expectations. Once it was established that the Americas were in fact a new hemisphere, the Catho-

lic Sovereigns wanted our soils to be quickly planted with vineyards and cypresses so that the landscape would no longer be barbarian, and so that the symmetries and harmonies of European landscapes would grace the newfound lands with their beauty. Many European scholars spread the theory that nature was rustic and degenerate in the Americas and they thought the same of the peoples of the Americas as well. Buffon asserted that not only was nature smaller in size than in Europe, but that upon reaching the Americas, European goods were somehow weakened. It was left to Alexander von Humboldt to come in the early 19th century and suggest to Hegel and to all those who superstitiously held on to the superiority of Europe to come test for themselves the weakness of the great crocodiles of the Magdalena River. But even in the 20th century there were professors in Colombia who spoke of the need to import white Europeans to improve the race. That posture spread throughout the hemisphere, and indeed may still exist today.

Of course from the beginning there were great spirits, such as Juan de Castellanos, Bartolomé de las Casas, or Vasco de Quiroga, who valued the Americas, its people and its nature for what they really were. Many chroniclers, starting with Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, looked at the Americas and forced the language to describe it. Many researchers such as the scholar José Celestino Mutis, the director in Colombia of that marvelous adventure both scientific and esthetic, which was the Botanical Expedition, strove to recognize the singularity of nature and to share this knowledge

* hammock, palm-roofed hut, iguana, canoe, hurricane, shark

with the world. But the official attitude, as Germán Arciniegas aptly put it, was not so much to discover but to cover the world of the Americas with all the illustrious clothing of European civilization, and thereby civilize its landscape, customs, and peoples. One would think that that was only the attitude of our colonial era, but the truth is that even after political independence was formally declared in the full flush of enthusiasm for a republic, this custom persisted in our countries. The idea that Europe was superior not only in its culture but even in its humanity and in its nature remained the main obstacle keeping us from really seeing the world to which we belong, and from learning to discover its riches and to project its potentialities for the sake of our community and our own equilibrium.

A Romantic Naturalist

Behind the search for cinnamon and other spices, the colonization of the Americas signified the beginning of the large-scale colonization of the world by the great powers of Europe. That phenomenon fortunately seems to have ended because, as Felipe González recently said in Bogotá, after the first decades of the 20th century no new territories were left to conquer. It is very well known that one of the causes of colonialism was the exhaustion of natural resources in the countries that had taken the route of the Industrial Revolution. Except for an occasional artist like Gauguin or Stevenson, or an intellectual, no European seemed willing to go live in Latin America, Asia, or Africa unless there were

major economic prospects for raw materials and precious goods.

Nevertheless, while the greed of Europe was plundering new resources, European intelligence and sensitivity began to discover other things in the world; that is why it is important to know about Humboldt. This German naturalist's journey through the lands of the Americas can be traced on almost any detailed map because the grateful peoples he met named bays, plains, mountains, lakes, species of native flora, and even an ocean current in the Pacific after him. Not only did he make vast territories and huge resources known to science, but this enlightened German scholar helped construct modern geography. In his book *Cosmos*, he lay the foundations for a new sensitivity to nature, he began to develop the theory that our planet is a kind of living organism where everything depends on everything else.

Humboldt was a romantic hero, like Byron and Bolívar, but whereas the latter two drew inspiration primarily from the struggle for freedom and the idea of the republic, Humboldt, a child of both Goethe and Rousseau, sought deeper answers to the enigmas of the world in nature, so much so that he left this declaration of faith: "The traveler who goes around the world, like the historian who goes back over the course of the centuries, has before him the same discouraging picture of the conflicts of the human species. That is why, witnessing the ongoing discord between peoples, anyone who aspires to the serene delights of the spirit revels in contemplating the peaceful life of plants, and in those

mysterious sources the regenerating power of nature; or indeed, abandoning himself to this innate instinct in his heart, possessed by a sacred intuition, raises his eyes to the firmament where the stars eternally revolve in unchanging harmony.”

Thus at the end of the 18th century, a generation of European writers and artists profoundly influenced by the Enlightenment, began to argue for the need of a new kind of relationship with nature, one that would relinquish the obsession for gain and take into account the wealth of meanings that nature holds for us, as provider of well-being and at the same time as object of reflection, source of serenity and beauty for contemplation and gratitude, and even as sacred object. The children of Kant and Rousseau warned that the unquestioned virtues of the industrial, scientific, and technological society, which was beginning to wrest marvelous discoveries from the natural universe, were causing an extraordinary transformation of the world; what was showing itself to be full of promises of well-being and happiness for people, was also full of threats and dangers. Today these threats and dangers are no longer intuitions in the minds of a few sensitive and inspired souls, but rather they are overwhelming certainties projecting their shadow over vegetation, over the health of water sources, and over the climactic equilibrium of the planet.

Hölderlin: A New Mythology

Perhaps no work is so noteworthy in these terms as that of Friedrich Hölderlin, a fel-

low student of Hegel and Schelling who, at the dawn of the 19th century, tried to propose a new mythology for mankind which, by combining reason and inspiration, would protect us from the clouds hovering over civilization. One could say that Hölderlin's poetry was not intended for his contemporaries. What it expressed had to sound strange and incomprehensible to the minds of many because Hölderlin was seeing what was hinted at on the horizon, with the triumph of rationalism and technology, and by the vanity of man marveling at his own achievements and merits. He only had to look at the society of that time to see where the world was going: because of its singular talent for learning certain laws, dominating certain techniques and inventing certain machines, a conceited and tragic humankind would believe itself to be the master of the world, authorized to pillage and plunder; it would make its own comfort the ultimate end of history; it would tend to lose respect for the mysterious and the unknown, lose the memory of its origins, and abandon all sense of the sacred and divine.

Hölderlin warned of how by exalting ourselves as the enemy of other species, human beings were apt to become profaners of nature, and a danger to themselves and their descendants. He seemed to anticipate what Pablo Neruda wrote in a devastating line: “The earth made man its own punishment.” All those things were already written in the heart of civilization and in the signs of the times, but no one else read them so perceptively nor revealed them in a way that was so refined and so beautiful.

When Hölderlin began to transmit it all in the pure language of clairvoyance and song, his music found no echo in the souls of his contemporaries, to the point where not even his closest friends perceived the depth of his warning and outcry. The poems of Hölderlin, virtually without equal, in my opinion, and more than any other poet in recent centuries in the West, are made to recover a sense of dwelling in the world, which our age has been increasingly losing, and to respond to this danger that advances upon civilization, that usurps the place of civilization, and that is turning humans into strangers in our own world.

But how could someone whose only tools are words reach this good that is more powerful and more dangerous than weapons and wealth? “Stronger than the strong is he who understands them” wrote Hölderlin about his work. Around him were strong and powerful beings; he was timid and frail, he felt impure, almost unworthy of the gifts of water and music. But countless strong and powerful beings have been buried under the moss of time, while Hölderlin, who is now ascending to the heights of history, and who each day is gaining a place in the heart of the living, is just beginning to sing.

I would say that Hölderlin did not write for the people of the 19th century. Rather, he seems to have written more for us, the people of the early 21st century, because his words have just begun to become comprehensible to us. What he warned in his songs is now not simply a hint, like clouds on the horizon of our age, but rather every day is becoming more and more at

the heart and center of history. Slowly and gradually the old gods withdrew their gaze from us; slowly and powerfully the Christian god, the last sign of divinity in the West, has become increasingly blurry in the crisis of values and eruption of uncontrollable chaos of history. We could say that humankind is now alone in a world despoiled of its sacred character. Today anyone can easily perceive that our forests are not those of legend and memory, but merely natural resources viewed and plundered for greed; that rivers long ago ceased being a mirror of time, an image of destiny, and the evocation of pure fountains, and instead are now means of transport and energy resources. For many any difference between the divine and the human has been erased, and the world is irremediably being transformed into a warehouse operated by some inscrutable beings who feel that they have been self-appointed to decide on matters of life and death, on the destiny of species, and on nature itself and the future.

The Wounds of Human Folly

We are constantly disquieted by the possibility that human folly may have harmed the divine principles of the world. During the age of imperial Rome, Propertius wrote in one of his elegies: “Our battles have not wounded any deity.” That verse suggests that we human beings can experience a tragic destiny of rivalry and conflicts, of strivings and profanities; that suffering and killing is sadly customary in human beings, but that something else, something much

darker and more serious is at play, in that our battles can alter the very foundations of the world, by inflicting a wound that can indeed lead us to disaster.

We would not even know how to put a name on such crimes, but the gravitational pull of such dangers is felt throughout all of Hölderlin's work. It can be said that all his poetry is a constant reminder that the world and time are our kingdom, but also our responsibility; that things and symbols have been entrusted into our hands; that we have been given language, "the most dangerous of gifts," as well as memory which is the mother of the arts, and the gift of sensing, of being moved, and of feeling compassion. And that by disdaining these gifts, upon which the meaning of our adventure, a true dwelling on Earth, is built, humankind has become so enamored with its own merits, that it's convinced that it was humans who in fact performed the miracle of creation, invented water and color, fire and love, mountains and storms.

The merits, the conquests, the abilities of human beings are endless; countless their factories and their machines; admirable their sciences and their techniques. But what is most human about our species is remembering and being moved, it is loving and naming, it is imagining and creating, it is warmth and gratitude, the multiform poetry that perceives the beautiful and the terrible, the sacred and the divine of the world, and converts it, as Borges has written, "into a music, a murmur, and a symbol." Hence when Hölderlin wrote these verses: "Full of merits is man, but it is not by them, but by poetry, that he makes this

land his dwelling," he was also warning us against the danger that this worship of modern humankind for its own sake might make us forget the more elemental gifts that we have received, might make us forget that we will only be able to flourish as a species if we admit that our life is subject to another kingdom, if we do not attempt to exalt ourselves as absolute arbiters and masters of the world.

Others translate those same verses thus: "Full of merits, but man dwells poetically." And the meaning is the same: although they are our merits, we cannot build our dwelling by reason and by technique alone, that is to say, by knowledge, by dominating and transforming the world, because humankind must inhabit it respectfully; inhabit it in gratitude and wonder, with the ability to be moved emotionally and the willingness to celebrate what exists. Bottled water is a merit, but water is a gift. We are full of merits, of miraculous inventions; however, to state it fully, while the human species can survive without electronic wonders, it cannot survive without water; it can survive without airplanes, but it cannot survive without breathable air. Hence, as great as our merits may be, our greatest responsibility is the world that we have received, the complex and inexplicable reality that we are incapable of manufacturing. And ours is the age in which industry sings only to what humans create and transform, but at the same time disrespects and degrades all that we have received: water and air, forests and feelings. "The sea is subject to another kingdom," wrote the great American poet John Peale Bishop. And at the end of

his life, Hölderlin sang that creatures only persist in what they are and reach their fullness because they take refuge in the powers on which they depend: “The flower is also beautiful because it flourishes under the sun.”

New Cardinal Sins: War, Pollution,
and Consumerism

Many have warned that the pathetic selfishness of our Western culture, and especially of what is now expressively called the “consumer society,” is a danger to the world. Aldous Huxley said it with alarm in his lectures in Santa Barbara a half-century ago. The same has been done eloquently by writers from D. H. Lawrence in his book *Apocalypse*, and Ernesto Sabato in his talks on the technological society, to Frederick Pohl and Isaac Asimov, in their marvelous book *Our Angry Earth*. A horrible trade in loneliness and death is on the rise, but even the will to survive is weakening in the hearts and flesh of men. In a good portion of the world the evils that no one foresaw two centuries ago are now so obvious that Hölderlin’s verses are becoming crystal-clear. In the early 19th century, Goethe and Schiller were unable to understand the meaning of these verses that today any of us can appreciate and delight in, when he told us that the gods, the great powers that nourish the world:

cannot feel anything by themselves,
and so (if I may speak) someone else
must suffer and be moved on behalf
of the gods,

and to this being to whom they
cry out.
But he who would pretend to be equal
to the gods,
and to abolish all differences toward
them,
this is the arrogant blind one whom
their laws condemn
to become the destroyer of his own
dwelling,
to be the enemy of his own deepest
love
and to cast parents and children into
sepulchers of ruins.

In this world besieged by pollution, by the business of war, and by the “throw-away” culture, we would indeed be hard put to find a more precise definition of contemporary humankind.

The U’wa and the
Wisdom of Eagles

It is more than intriguing that these reflections of the most refined of European intelligence and sensitivity should coincide with the attitude toward nature of the indigenous peoples of many places in the Americas. In 1983, the British anthropologist Ann Osborn heard people in the U’wa community in the Sierra Nevada del Cocuy, in Colombia, recite the myth of the flight of *tijeretas*, migratory eagle-like birds. She noted that the mere reciting of some words in a one-chord rhythm gradually induced the community into a kind of ecstasy. *Shishara, Shakira, Karowa, Thakuma, Bekana, Raiayna, O’runa, Beragdrira, Th’thumbria, Yókumbria, Akatra, Barima, Ithkwitira, Okitra, She-*

rina, Botruna, Bukwarina, Barawiya, Sherowiya, Waiyana... She wanted to know what those words meant, and she discovered that they were specific places. She wanted to know whether this sequence corresponded to a route traced over the land, and upon visiting those sites she found fields strewn with old stelae. The long list was indeed a route over the boundaries of the ancestral land of the U'wa, and the myth constituted a kind of detailed map of hills, streams, forests, cliffs, and valleys. But this geographical finding was not enough to explain the community's emotion in the presence of the reciter. Then the natives told her that this route was the same as that made each year by the *tijeret*s. Every year these migratory birds, whose scientific name is *Elanoides forficatus*, fly from the southern United States to northern Argentina, and when they pass over the U'wa territory they come down and fly around it, following precisely the route detailed in the myth. The natives believe that their distant ancestors arrived with the eagles from the north and received from them the sacred land that they now inhabit. They feel that they belong to the land: they are children of the eagles and of the trees; they have myths for their forests, their birds, their rivers and their fishes, and also for the other creatures populating their region. Their poetry displays a high degree of verbal refinement, a poetic civilization rooted in the physical world, not lost or exalted in abstractions. They have minutely surveyed and named their territory, with names that are not mere clues for maintaining their bearings, but that represent a consecration and a bond.

They have made language an instrument for establishing order and sanctifying their world. That was just what Hölderlin and Novalis—both misunderstood and forlorn—demanded from poetry.

Fidelity to Origins

In Germany a great deal has been said of the originality of Hölderlin's voice. Let us say that in Hölderlin, originality consists of fidelity to origins, that is, not to the newest, but to the oldest, the timeless, and perhaps the eternal. That purity of his voice is like the purity of a spring; it enables us to assume that his song springs from a crystalline source. Perhaps Hölderlin sees the world in its original purity; that is why he can warn more easily than any other that something is perverting this purity and write: "What rises from a pure spring is a mystery. And not even a song can reveal it."

I think Hölderlin saw the world as the people of antiquity saw it. This is common among native peoples everywhere, who have not enrolled in the order of Western civilization; but it is quite unusual in a young 18th century German. Born in 1770, in the midst of the century of rationalism, when he was a child he perceived the sacredness of the world, its power to cause joy and dread. What was it that enabled Hölderlin to safeguard this treasure of his childhood and reach adulthood without having lost the capacity to perceive and value the purity of the world? In one poem he says of himself that he was not educated by classroom instruction but by the rustling of the forest; that he understood the wa-

ters and the winds, but that by contrast, he never understood the words of human beings. He learned to appreciate gifts before merits, and he felt that it was better for people to be faithful to a destiny suggested by nature than to choose a direction out of arrogance and knowledge.

Early on, he felt that the primary human duty is gratitude, because it entails being subject to the powers that provide and sustain. In one of his poems he tells us that before his mother took him in her arms and nourished him at her breast, the air was already softly surrounding him, and in particular, there poured a heavenly wine, a sacred breath, in his heart being born. Thus, ether was his father. And because no one can live from earthly foods alone, there is this light-filled space, this warm being providing constant, transparent, and subtle food without which life would be impossible. He almost makes us feel that the air, the ether, makes our spirit subtle and transparent, thanks to this continuing gift of subtlety and transparency.

A Union Bearing Fruit

It is astonishing that even today the knowledge people have of their environment continues to be ignored if not scorned. The myths of the U'wa of the Sierra Nevada del Cocuy and of the Koguis of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, which are not ways of interpreting nature but ways of living within it with a deep sense of responsibility, recognize the wealth of meanings of the natural world and celebrate complex ceremonies of alliance and exchange. It is

crucial that they be taken into account today when the attitude of industrial society, which is mindlessly utilitarian and profit-oriented, threatens to usher in the collapse of the natural world in so many regions. That is why we urgently need to ask how, despite the wisdom of the native peoples all over the world, of their mythologies and their wealth of knowledge acquired by observation over the centuries, do we find ourselves with an idea of development based on imitation of acclaimed models and the subordination of some regions to the priorities of others. Wallace Stevens wrote: "A red garment from the Lhasa region is an invisible element of the Lhasa region made visible."

Perhaps only the native peoples of the different regions of the world can fully understand these words, which speak with subtlety of this deep reality which makes trees in one region become junks for sailing, and those of another into fans for coping with the heat; which in one region causes the making of certain liquors, and textiles somewhere else; which in short cause human labor to be a dialogue with climates, with materials, and with the spirits of the place. In any reflection on the relationship between nature and culture, what must primarily be taken into account is this wisdom accumulated by centuries of experience: the Eskimos to have twenty words for describing whiteness, while the Tauregs employ a like number to denote the shades of sand in the heart of the Sahara. Arabs have set up a whole architecture to divine scarce and precious water, and shamans in the Amazon have refined methods for dis-

covering the healing powers of the plants, so that in their orders of perception, plants teach knowledge of plants. To see with the loving eyes of familiarity, rather than eyes eager for profits, is how to live in the world; countless human beings are very often pushed aside and driven away, because they are too slow for the trains of commerce, too contemplative for the cycles of industry, too passive for the blind purveyors of accumulation.

There one understands, more than anywhere else, the difference between discoverers and conquerors, the eternal difficulty the conquerors of times past and those of the present have in really seeing the world of the Americas, in order to project its possibilities based on its true wealth and its true fragility, to better understand the relations between nature and society in our complex *mestizo* world. Curiously, the application for decades of an urbanizing and industrializing development model, perhaps full of good intentions but profoundly indifferent to what the communities know of their surroundings and to the delicate natural balances, has deepened poverty and dependence in many corners of the world, and promoted deforestation and degradation of the environment.

An Example Not To Be Imitated

The material prosperity of some peoples has created the illusion, consented to by them and docilely accepted by others, that there is a single path to take to reach political equilibrium, social peace, and material prosperity, which is to blindly imitate

the prosperous countries, follow their models, and try to adhere to the steps of their development. Latin America is a perfect example of a wealthy world, rich in terms of nature and culture, whose fundamental limitation lies in the paradigms and objectives that it has adopted. By now everyone realizes that excessive veneration for Europe has been not only our pride but also our misfortune. In Colombia, my own country, this veneration became so unhealthy that Miguel Antonio Caro, the humanist and poet who wrote the Constitution that governed Colombia for a hundred years up until 1991, tried to speak only in Latin under the flowering caper bushes of the savannah of Bogotá. He did not translate the words of Latin poets into modern languages like other scholars, but the works of the poets of modern languages into Latin. How could a man like that understand an equator country, with rivers full of crocodiles and splendid forests whose exotic trees had to be named with indigenous words? How could the importance of the native peoples and their cultures be understood by someone who, even in the 19th century, continued to think like the conquerors, that the indigenous communities were backward and barbaric, and must be entrusted to the pious but destructive care of the church?

The 20th century, with its scientific disciplines, its curiosity, its mental expansiveness, and its esthetic daring, has very much changed how we look at ourselves. Since the Spanish conquest, we had learned to look at our natural surroundings as an untamed and unyielding reality, lacking all those beauties and virtues that ennoble the Euro-

pean soil. Not even the revealing journey of Baron von Humboldt—who went through our countries seeing what everyone had looked at but nobody had seen, measuring, admiring, discovering— or the journeys of the astonished 19th century travelers, or the flights into myth of Gauguin, Stevenson and Rimbaud toward the promise of paradise in virgin lands, helped us look at our nature with less misgiving. We had learned to see the indigenous and African component as a constraint, and in government ministries racist theoreticians developed pathetic theories about the blemishes of our *mestizaje*.

Yet, *mestizaje* was the key word for our necessary rediscovery of America. Filled with admiration for the social, industrial, and technical feats of the United States, Latin America frequently turned this great nation into the unquestionable model to be imitated in the pursuit of development, forgetting the vast differences between the two cultures of the hemisphere. For if there is one thing that did not take place here in the United States, it was a *mestizaje* or a mixing of the European with the native American; nor was there any visible mixing of Anglo-Saxon and African blood to form a mulatto culture, Faulkner's hapless Joe Christmas notwithstanding. Here the indigenous element was ignored in the process of institution building, and was left solely to the nostalgia of the scholars, to the inspiration of poets like Longfellow, or to a suggestive paragraph in the novels of Sinclair Lewis. Rather, what happened was a kind of sublimation of the indigenous stance toward life in the worship of nature

that characterized the great 19th century American poets, Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. In Whitman's veneration for nature and blithe mistrust of science and technology; in his naked personal religion and in his rather pagan adoration of the body; in his cult of simple camaraderie and his exaltation of the nomad life and austerity, Whitman speaks as though he were the last Indian in North America. And the way the land was occupied here made it possible from the outset to claim the universal equality of free beings, basically immigrants from Europe.

Our *mestizaje* seemed to take inequality for granted, when combined with the great accumulation of wealth and privileges of those of European stock throughout colonial times, and those arrogant *Creoles* who sought to differentiate and distance themselves from their fellow humans. It was Humboldt himself who said that given this entrenched colonial stratification, it would be very difficult for all of us in the southern nations of the Americas to one day see ourselves as fellow citizens. Bolivar spoke of the need to have paternal governments that would be concerned about overcoming the stratifications inherited from the colonial age and seek basic equality before the law; that is the basis of democracy. But all of that could be achieved only if we did not lose sight of what is unique and specific about our makeup, if we did not pretend to be like those peoples that do not have mixed blood, and are not weighed down by castes from colonial times. There is nothing more harmful than being blind to nature when defining our priorities, and

culpably neglecting to confront our own challenges while vainly striving to imitate the dynamism of other peoples. But for a long time our development patterns were reduced to that very thing.

We became producers of gold and pearls, sugar and cattle, petroleum and bananas, coffee and illegal drugs, governed by the need to satisfy the metropolitan centers rather than our own communities; we allowed more illustrious realities to map out our priorities; we put off the urgent task of building a community in solidarity, starting from our fragmented identities. Today the stratification of our peoples is still alarming, and governments prefer to assume that this pyramid of privileges and exclusions is unchangeable; they even take advantage of it to define tax and law enforcement strategies, not realizing that this blindness to injustice is the leaven of disparity and the seed of social violence.

Globalization, a Dialogue between Traditions

Today there is endless talk of globalization, and that idea has engendered in many the illusion of a global art, freed from the bonds of local traditions. Nevertheless, it should be said that until now every culture was local, that art has only been able to find the universal in the local. How does Homer manage to move people in all cultures of all ages by telling them stories of the wrath and cleverness of Bronze-Age Greeks? His theme could not be more local, but there is no human being who does not feel represented there. Don Quixote's

adventure over the fields of La Mancha is local; likewise is Dante's journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, as he encounters great figures from Florence and Pistoia, and looks for a girl from his own town. Marcel Proust's search for lost time is also local; and even the novel that exalts the physical and mental labyrinths of the great modern metropolis, Joyce's *Ulysses*, is a journey in search of the universe through tiny Dublin at the outset of the 20th century. What we have in common, despite all our diversity, is expressed more vigorously from a perspective situated in certain precise landscapes, in certain customs, and in living relationships with the world. And a great cosmopolitan work, such as Borges' *The Aleph*, is simply a dialogue of traditions, the convergences of all sources in a prism where they try to exist "with no overlap and no transparency." Globalization cannot be understood as a rejection of tradition, but as a dialogue between and fusion of traditions: the dialogue between African musical traditions and Western instruments that characterized jazz at the outset; the dialogue of 19th century English painters with the techniques of painters of the Middle Ages, which was the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood; the dialogue of European abstraction with African ceremonial art that led to Cubism; the dialogue between French Surrealism, Russian Socialist ideas, and the American indigenous tradition that produced Mexican muralism.

We now know why the indigenous peoples clung so stubbornly to their interpretation of nature as the source of life, as a dwelling, as a sanctuary of thought,

and as a stimulus to the imagination; we now know why the heights of European thought and sensitivity after the Enlightenment went back to invoking nature, with its wealth of meanings, as the source of all lucidity, and all survival. The disappearance of nature in the discourse of theoreticians and technicians is being overwhelmingly replaced by the omnipresent discourse on the environment and the planetary storehouse of resources. But the philosophers know that we will not survive if we do not reserve in nature a space for action, for desire, and a space for imagination. That is also common knowledge among poets, ar-

tists, and the native peoples of all regions of the world. Who knows how long it will take for it to be discovered by industry which, as Estanislao Zuleta said, always shows the greatest rationality in the details, and the greatest irrationality in the whole. And how long will it take for politicians to remember that the greatest moments of history were not the result of seeking power for a few groups, but rather the pursuit of happiness for multitudes of human beings.

WILL·AMOSPINA — .

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