

Demystifying the past: mythical subversion in Herminio Martínez' novel *Diario maldito de Nuño de Guzmán*.

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Abstract. This article offers a myth-critical analysis of the novel *Diario maldito de Nuño de Guzmán* by Herminio Martínez, published in 1990. Firstly, arguments supporting the application of the term «myth» to the narrative of the Spanish Conquest of America, which emerged from early colonial historiography, will be presented. Subsequently, the analysis of the subversive character of Martínez' novel will be provided. In particular, the strategies of demythification on the story level and demythologisation on the discourse level will be examined in detail. The article is intended as a contribution to the myth-critical methodology and praxis.

Keywords: myth, Conquest of America, subversion, demythification, demythologisation.

[es] Desmitificando el pasado: subversión del mito de la Conquista en la novela *Diario maldito de Nuño de Guzmán* de Herminio Martínez.

Resumen. El artículo ofrece un acercamiento desde la perspectiva mitocrítica a la novela *Diario maldito de Nuño de Guzmán* de Herminio Martínez, publicada en 1990. En primer lugar, se presentarán los argumentos que justifican el uso de la palabra «mito» con relación a la macro-narrativa de la Conquista, que surgió de las fuentes historiográficas coloniales. Posteriormente, se examinará el carácter subversivo de la novela. En particular, se analizarán las estrategias de la desmitificación en el nivel de la trama novelesca y de la desmitologización en el nivel discursivo. El artículo constituye una aportación a la metodología y la práctica mitocríticas.

Palabras clave: mito, Conquista de América, subversión, desmitificación, desmitologización.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. The Conquest of America as a myth. 3. The Spanish Conquest mythologised. 4. Demythification and demythologisation of the Conquest in *Diario maldito de Nuño de Guzmán*. 5. Conclusions. Works cited.

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1. Introduction

The objective of this article is a myth-critical analysis of Herminio Martínez' novel *Diario maldito de Nuño de Guzmán* (1990). The arguments presented in this study are intended to support the thesis that the Spanish Conquest of America, as narrated in early colonial sources, possesses sufficient characteristics of a mythical narrative to be considered as such. Consecutively, it will be demonstrated that the novel *Diario maldito de Nuño de Guzmán* can be read and interpreted as a subversion of the myth of the Conquest. Although the novel's intertextual paradigm is situated in the confluence of historiography,

literary fiction and myth, the analysis undertaken in the article will not include the relationship between the myth and the established historical facts. This task has been assumed by historians such as Matthew Restall, and it exceeds the scope of this study.

While Herminio Martínez' novel has already been studied by researchers such as Carolina Pizarro Cortés (2015), Kimberle López (2002) and Diana Sofia Sánchez Hernández (2017), an important aspect of the novel's intertextuality, the relationship between the novel and mythical narratives, has been given relatively little attention. Pizarro Cortés' rigorous study focuses on a subgenre of Latin-American new historical novel, namely *the new chronicle of the Indies*, in the

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context of postmodern criticism. Her publication is an invaluable contribution to scholarly understanding of the polemic nature of the new historical novel with regard to the official historiography, yet it does not fully explore the narrative strategies of demythification and demythologisation, which are the focus of this article.

Intertextuality, consisting of explicit or implicit references to historical, philosophical or literary sources, is one of the salient characteristics of the new historical novel. The principal objective of postmodern intertextuality is not to meticulously recreate the contexts, conceptual background and traditions defining any given historical period, but rather to draw attention to the changeable circumstances which may influence the interpretation of a historical text and the determination of meanings. The multiplicity of temporal perspectives coexisting within a novelistic discourse is often mirrored on the level of language by anachronisms, especially by the usage of both contemporary and antiquated lexica, as in the case of the analysed novel. The central focus of this article, however, is Martínez' polemical view of the mythopoetics of the Conquest and of the projection of European expectations on Latin-American reality.

In order to analyse the novel as a subversion of a mythical narrative, it is necessary to validate the use of the term "myth" in relation to the historiographical narrative of the Spanish Conquest of America. Mythification and mythologisation are two phenomena which are central to the proposed thesis and they call for definition first and foremost. While these two terms are often used interchangeably, it is essential to determine their precise meaning. Drawing from Robert Mielhowski's study (54-56), mythification will be understood either as a phenomenon of conversion of an empirical reality into a myth, or as a process through which narratives of the said reality become entrenched in the collective cultural imagery as mythical. Mythologisation, on the other hand, will be understood as a discursive strategy of evoking, alluding to, or directly referencing elements of an existing mythology in a literary text. To put it simply, a story is mythified when it becomes a myth, when it turns into a recognisable element of the cultural heritage of a particular human society, and when it is perpetuated through generations by repetition and retelling. A story is mythologised when it draws from existing mythical motifs or narrative structures (for example Graeco-Roman, biblical, Celtic mythology, etc.). Subsequent paragraphs of this article will focus on both mythification and mythologisation of the narrative of the Conquest. Further on, subversive characteristics of the novel *Diario maldito de Nuño de Guzmán* in relation to the myth of the Conquest as its hypotext will be examined in detail.

2. The Conquest of America as a myth

The first challenge to overcome in the present analysis is the elusiveness and the ambiguity of the definition

of myth itself. It is impossible to claim that the myth of the Conquest becomes a hypotext for a novel if the concept of a myth is not defined in the first place. Is the Spanish Conquest of America a mythical story, and if so, in what sense?

There seem to be as many definitions of myth as there are scholars attempting to define it. In his monograph dedicated to myth theories (2016), Marcin Klik examines numerous definitions proposed by researchers, mostly from the French schools of myth criticism. To summarise, Klik suggests a generic definition of myth that can be used in literary studies. According to the Polish scholar, myth is a complete narrative scheme, which features specific characters (gods, heroes or anthropomorphic animals), and which recurs in works of fiction (356). Klik's definition is confined to the textual characteristics of myth and it does not include the role or function of myths in human societies. Thus, this definition can certainly be expanded upon, depending on chosen research perspectives. Most scholars would add that myth is a story of either an aetiological nature (pertaining to the origins of cosmos, gods, heroes, the human race, or a particular group of people) or of an eschatological nature. Myths legitimise customs, rituals or a particular social order; they facilitate social cohesion by establishing common cultural or ideological points of reference. José Manuel Losada, a prominent Spanish theorist, additionally points to an important feature of myth: the extraordinary events narrated in a mythical story have a transcendent referent (*Mitocrítica* 9). Another approach to the myth theory is represented by Sorbonne scholar Véronique Gély. Her definition of myth includes stories, images, and narrative schemes of a morally shocking nature, which are recognisable to all culturally competent members of a society and which are retold in the context of collective memory as part of cultural heritage (Klik 103, 344; Gély 19, 22).

Naturally, it is impossible to summarise all contemporary myth theories in this article. However, the quoted definitions underline four major mythical paradigms: structural, functional, transcendent, and recursive. Mythical narratives are composed of constituent elements which are bound together in a fixed syntagmatic relationship. They possess a transcendent dimension (supernatural, sacred, or metaphysical) and are rich in symbolism. They fulfill a particular, foundational function in a society. They lend themselves to repetition, reformulation and reinterpretation in works of art, where they are recognisable as long as their basic structure remains intact (see Losada, *Mitocrítica* 12, *Estructura* 34-36, *Subversive Triad* 6; Gutiérrez 59; Brunel x, xi; Frye 47). Repetition is often seen as essential to myths' longevity and to the maintenance of their social function. As Northrop Frye put it, "a society, even one equipped with writing, cannot keep its central myths of concern constantly in mind unless they are continually being re-presented." (48).

There is no consensus among scholars whether the above definition can be applied to historical narratives. While a majority of theoreticians reject this notion, some scholars, such as Pierre Albouy, Nicole Ferrier-Caverivière and Marie-Catherine Huet-Brichard, seem to endorse it (Klik 161-166). British historian Matthew Restall does not hesitate to apply the term “myth” to the narrative of the Conquest. In fact, he identifies not one but seven myths of the Spanish Conquest. Restall seems to use the word “myth” in the same way it is often used in common parlance: “something fictitious that is commonly taken to be true, partially or absolutely” (xvi). In the process of setting the story straight, perhaps inadvertently, Restall pinpoints these elements of the narrative of the Conquest, which in the light of literary criticism are the constituent elements (themes) of the myth:

The seven myths of the Conquest can all be found in the Cortés legend, in which military genius, his use of superior Spanish technology, and his manipulation of credulous “Indians” and a superstitious Aztec emperor enable him to lead a few hundred Spanish soldiers to a daring conquest of an empire of millions. (xv)

The Spanish Conquest of America can be interpreted as a variant of Campbell’s monomyth of the hero’s journey. Exceptional heroes set off on a quest. They overcome trials, tribulations, and their own fears in order to conquer the new land in the name of the Spanish Crown, with the help of their ingenuity and courage. The themes of journey, quest, heroism, superiority, taking possession, and subjugation thus constitute the backbone of the narrative of the Conquest. If the story of the Conquest was to be analysed by means of Greimas’ actantial model, the King of Spain would fulfill the role of the Sender who entrusts the quest of claiming possession of the newly discovered land (Object) to his loyal servants, the conquistadors (Subject), to the glory and enrichment of the Spanish Empire (Receiver). The conquistadors face their opponents, numerous but inferior “Indians”, and with the help of wit and courage carry the quest to a successful completion.

While the narrative of the Conquest shares many themes with myths of the hero’s journey, so do numerous historical accounts of military conquests, movies and novels, which have never become mythified. As Losada points out, themes only become invariable elements of a mythical narrative if they possess a transcendent, supernatural dimension, which enables them to interact with other mythemes in the formation of a myth. (*Estructura* 34). The transcendent dimension of the Conquest story comes from biblical mythology mediated by the Christian doctrine. Divine providence is the supernatural

element which endows all constituent elements of the story with mythical value. The superiority and courage of the Conquistadors comes from their faith in one true God, who actively interferes in the story through alleged miracles and apparitions. According to Stephen Greenblatt, “the sources of [Europe’s] sense of superiority are sometimes difficult to specify, though the Christians’ conviction that they possessed an absolute and exclusive religious truth must have played a major part in virtually all of their cultural encounters.” (9). God’s divine plan legitimises the act of *Requerimiento* and the enterprise of the Conquest. The King of Spain is the Holy Roman Emperor, the executor of God’s will on earth, while the conquistadors are God’s agents. The objective of the Conquest is not only territorial expansion of the Spanish Empire but also the expansion of the Kingdom of the Holy Spirit through christianisation of the native population of America. As a result, the indigenous inhabitants of the conquered territories become the beneficiaries of a superior civilization and true religion. The Conquest is validated by the *Inter caetera* papal bull, issued by Pope Alexander VI in 1493, of which the Spanish historian Francisco López de Gómara writes as follows:

Nueva fue por cierto de que mucho se holgó el Santo Padre, los cardenales, corte y pueblo romano, y maravillándose todos de oír cosas de tierra tan aparte, y que nunca los romanos, señores del mundo, las supieron. Y porque las hallaron españoles, hizo el Papa de su propia voluntad y motivo, y de acuerdo con los cardenales, donación y merced a los reyes de Castilla y León de todas las islas y tierra firme que descubriesen al occidente, con tal de que, conquistándolas, enviasen allá predicadores a convertir los indios que idolatraban. (*Historia* 14).²

Through the process of mythologisation, the historiographical account of the Conquest becomes mythistorical (Mali xii), intrinsically bound to Judeo-Christian mythology. This bond imparts meaning to the narrative.

The narrative scheme discussed above is present in all historiographical accounts considered to be canonical source texts. It constitutes the minimal syntagmatic frame of the myth, the kernels of the story of the Conquest. Needless to say, the veracity and objectivity of Spanish accounts of the Conquest have been put into doubt on numerous occasions. The circumstances of their production and their function as a proof of merit (*probanza de mérito*) undoubtedly predispose them to omissions and hyperbole. Yet, myths are not born from true stories, scientifically proven and factually correct. They are born from transcendent, symbolic stories of beginnings, which

² “There was news in fact that the Holy Father, the cardinals, the court and the Romans rejoiced and marvelled at the things said of the distant land, which the Romans, the rulers of the world, had never heard of. As these things were discovered by the Spanish, the Holy Father, of his own volition and in accordance with the cardinals, bestowed a favour and a donation of all the islands and the dry land discovered in the West upon the kings of Castile and León, on the condition that during the conquest preachers be sent to convert idolatrous Indians.” (translation in footnote my own).

instil a sense of awe and wonder in their readers or listeners. The stories become entrenched in cultural imagery of a human society and recur in artistic production. The myth of the Conquest has become central to both Spanish imperial narrative and Latin-American discourse on identity. It has been repeated, reformulated, reinterpreted, and ultimately questioned in countless works of art in an act of mythical palingenesis.

3. The Spanish Conquest mythologised

It has been demonstrated above that many definitions of myth pertain to its structure. A specific myth is composed of paradigmatic elements (mythemes) bound together in a fixed, complete syntagmatic relationship. These elements possess a transcendental referent which determines the internal cause-and-effect logic of the plot and which contributes to the formation of the myth. Thus, it would appear that mythification is a process which involves the story level of a narrative. However, mythification is not the only phenomenon observed in an analysis of the Spanish accounts of the Conquest. Alongside mythification, the narrative is subject to mythologisation, which involves mostly its discourse level. Mythologisation refers to the strategy of including or alluding to motifs drawn from existing mythologies. Most often, mythologisation happens through descriptions, comparisons or similes. Although these mythological references can often be removed from a narrative without disturbing the plot, they enrich the discourse and inform its interpretation. While the Christian dogma invests the narrative of the Conquest with its transcendent referent and is an essential part of the story, other mythological references in source texts shed light on the circumstances of their production and the mindset from which they were born.

Matthew Restall notes that the accounts written by early colonial chroniclers and historians “were inescapably framed by the concepts and language of their own culture” (xv). The Spanish culture on the threshold of the Renaissance drew generously from the philosophy and mythology of classical antiquity and from the imagery of the European Middle Ages. It is no surprise, therefore, that numerous references to Greek and Roman mythologies, quasi-mythical ethnocartography and fantastical motifs from the genre of chivalric romance can be found in Spanish accounts of the Conquest. Many mythical or fantastical concepts fused with earlier reports from the exploration of the continent and occasionally also with the indigenous myths and prophecies, such as Eldorado or the return of Quetzalcoatl.

Marvellous stories from the past were an integral part of the imaginative repertoire from which Spanish writers drew analogies to describe what appeared before their astonished eyes. Their heroic enterprise was compared to the accomplishments of Hector in the Trojan War or Roland famous for the Battle of

Roncevaux Pass (Díaz del Castillo 262). The marvels of the New World exceeded even those described in the book of Amadis de Gaula (179). The wondrous quest undertaken by the Conquistadors called for extraordinary references. Thus the narrative of the Conquest is often conflated with the search for the mythical seven cities of Cibola, the Fountain of Youth, the Amazons (see for example Gómara, *Historia* 26), or the terrestrial location of the biblical Paradise.

Paolo Vignolo draws attention to yet another notion which shaped the imagery of the sixteenth-century Europe. It is the concept of the antipodes born from the “cosmological discussions of Greek philosophy” (23, own translation). Vignolo explains that in the fifteenth century the classical concept of the antipodes merged with the “immense repertoire of monstrous races, with origins in various cultural traditions” (25). Pliny the Elder’s *Historia Naturalis* in particular is a rich, encyclopaedic source of description of the fantastical, anthropomorphic races, such as Cynocephali, the Sciapods or the Astomi.

Spanish expeditions to the New World disproved the thesis that the antipodes could not be reached due to the presence of the supposed torrid zone preventing the journey. What is perhaps even more important, the Plinian races, monstrous, deformed creatures, were not found either. The speculative typology of the supposed inhabitants of the antipodes was not confirmed (although not yet dismissed completely) during the sixteenth-century exploration of the New World. Numerous references to the well-formed, handsome bodies of the people encountered in the New Indies, found in Spanish texts, prove that the alleged existence of fantastical, not-quite-human races must have implicitly formed part of the Conquistadors’ imagination. The inhabitants of America were confirmed to be not only human but also completely unaware of the existence of the Christian God. That fact constituted an enormous challenge to the Catholic doctrine of the common ancestry of all human beings and the universality of God’s salvation (see: Vignolo 27). Numerous theological and legal debates ensued in the aftermath of the “discovery” of America. While their intricacies go beyond the scope of the present study, it is worth mentioning that a papal bull issued in 1537 finally established that the native inhabitants of the New World were rational human beings equipped with immortal souls and thus capable of converting to Christian faith. However, this does not mean that they were universally considered equal to the Spanish. Their practices of human sacrifice, ritual cannibalism and idolatrous cult were deemed to be barbaric and provided arguments to many theologians, such as Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, in favour of the justification of the Conquest on the basis of the natives’ alleged spiritual and rational inferiority (see: Vollet 111).

The overview of the mythical and fantastical concepts presented above, although by no means exhaustive, illustrates the phenomenon of mythologisation of the discourse of the Conquest.

It will be helpful in understanding the subversive character of Herminio Martínez' novel not only on the story level, in relation to the myth of the Conquest, but also on the level of discourse, where references to various mythologies are particularly abundant.

4. Demythification and demythologisation of the Conquest in *Diario maldito de Nuño de Guzmán*

Herminio Martínez' novel *Diario maldito de Nuño de Guzmán* was first published in 1990, just two years before the quincentenary of the "discovery" of America. The protagonist and the narrator of the story is Nuño Beltrán de Guzmán, a historical figure, one of the Spanish conquistadors of Mexico, and a once-powerful political and military personage. Historiographical sources portray Guzmán as a particularly cruel and tyrannical conquistador (see: Thomas 558, 599). Guzmán did not leave a personal diary, but several documents authored by him, such as official memoirs of his service to the Crown and letters to the King of Spain, have been preserved for posterity. A powerful account of his deeds, a legal document describing the process, torture and execution of the Tarascan ruler Tzintzincha Tangaxoan II, has been retained in the General Archive of the Indies in Seville (Galván Infante, Guzmán 11).

The plot of Martínez' novel in general adheres to the facts known from historical sources. In 1525, Guzmán, a loyal bodyguard of Charles V, is appointed by the Crown as governor of Pánuco. His appointment is partially motivated by the King's desire to offset the influence of Hernán Cortés in Mexico. Having encountered setbacks en route, Guzmán does not arrive in Mexico until 1527. He is known for his cruelty and brutality against the native inhabitants of Mexico, and for his vehement opposition towards Cortés' supporters. During his office as governor of Pánuco, Guzmán engages in the trade of thousands of indigenous Mexicans, who were enslaved, branded with iron and shipped off to the Antilles. In 1528, Guzmán receives from the King the title of the President of Real Audiencia de México, a judiciary institution and the highest tribunal in New Spain, intended to curb the excesses perpetrated by the conquistadors in Mexico (especially by Hernán Cortés), to limit their power and to regulate the gains due to the royal treasury. Guzmán leads military expeditions to the west of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, with the aim of subjugating the peoples who had until then resisted the Conquest. His expeditions are violent and involve pillage, rape, torture and executions.

Guzmán's cruelty and abuse of power eventually lead to his arrest and involuntary repatriation to Spain in shackles in 1537.

Nuño de Guzmán is the autodiegetic narrator of Martínez' novel. The conquistador's fictional diary, free from the constraints of legal documentation written as his proof of merit and allegiance to the Crown, provide an insight into Guzmán's motivations and character. Martínez does not offer an alternative version of historical facts, but instead fills the gap in the official historiography by means of literary fiction.

In Martínez' novel, Nuño de Guzmán emerges as an unquestionably megalomaniac, tyrannical and cruel conquistador. His excessive feelings of self-importance and characteristics suggestive of paranoia, as well as his final delirium in prison, make Guzmán an unreliable narrator. There is no doubt that the narrator's account is entirely subjective and presented through the lens of his obsessive character. Like the majority of the new chronicles of the Conquest, *Diario maldito de Nuño de Guzmán* questions the circumstances behind the production of the official accounts of the Conquest, which undoubtedly differed from the personal, intimate narratives of their authors. This aspect of the subgenre of the new historical novel, however, has already been studied in depth by Carolina Pizarro Cortés (130-132).

Upon his own admission, the narrator-protagonist is driven into his quest by his ambition and the desire to obtain material profit from gold and precious stones. His ultimate goal is to establish a wealthy, territorial dominion under his absolute rule:

Inmediatamente haré aherrojar a los indios principales para que me cuenten sobre el gran oro y la gran plata que arden en mis deseos, semejantes a esta pluma en mi mano, con la que ahora manuscibo y anoto las ideas que me han de servir para la realización del proyecto que desde el principio he venido moldeando en los salones de mi intimidad, es decir la sin par Guzmanía, capital que ha de ser de todos mis dominios y lindes, [...] la de mi soberana autoridad que, a las veras, es de fierro, y así será entonces, sin misericordia alguna ni piadosos sentires, que en mí no se da ni se dará la compasión. (Martínez 17).

La urbe del oro y de la plata. Sí. La que he pensado erigir allá donde el sol se ponga tinto en sangre [...]. La ciudad prodigiosa de mi nombre y mi estirpe. (33).³

The official appointment by the King serves as a pretext to fulfill Guzmán's private objectives. Driven by his megalomaniac obsession with power, the

³ "I shall immediately have the principal Indians restrained to make them talk about the glorious gold and the glorious silver of my desire, burning like the quill in my hand, with which I pen and note down the ideas that will lead to the fulfilment of the project I have been shaping in the intimacy of my mind from the very beginning. I mean the unparalleled Guzmanía, the capital of all my domains and territories [...] under my sovereign authority, ruled with my iron hand. That is how it shall be, without mercy, without clemency, because I am no good at compassion. A city of gold and silver. Yes. I am going to raise the city where the sun is stained red with blood. [...] A prodigious city bearing my name and the name of my lineage." (translation in footnote my own).

conquistador is prepared to commit any unscrupulous act of cruelty in order to achieve his goals. There is never any question of religious zeal that could motivate the protagonist. Even the motives of the King, the supposed executor of the divine will, do not appear entirely irreproachable. As Guzmán remarks during the lavish appointment ceremony at the royal court, King Charles' objectives in the Conquests are not only the territorial and spiritual dominion over the New World, but material gains from the Conquest also add to the ostentatious furnishings of his own palace (29).

Nuño de Guzmán's principal adversaries in his overseas quest for power are not the numerous, bellicose Indians but rather his fellow conquistadors, Guzmán's competitors in the pursuit of profits and titles. The conquistador's paranoia makes him distrustful even of his own crew. He is particularly vigilant about any rumours which might undermine his authority or any perceived signs of insubordination. To prevent mutiny or usurpation of his authority, alleged offences against Guzmán are promptly punished by death by hanging (68). However, the protagonist's chief opponents are Hernán Cortés and the clergy, in particular bishop Juan de Zumárraga. Cortés is a powerful political figure, likely to challenge and contest Guzmán's mandate. Zumárraga, a Franciscan prelate and bishop of Mexico, is one of the most influential clergymen among those who accuse Guzmán of mistreatment of the Indians and abuse of power. The conquistador expresses his discontent with the clergy:

¡Cuánto me joroban estos oradores caras de sapo con las porfias y diferencias que hacen de mí! Hablan de las ceguedades de mis actos en que he introducido el demonio. ¡Bah! Y que la vanidad y enorme arrogancia que ven en ellos viene de mí, dizque porque vanidad y pasatiempo es lo que me sobra para el uno y el otro ocio y delito. (149).⁴

In order to undermine his opponents' authority, Guzmán questions their motives and characters. For example, he accuses the Franciscans and the Dominicans, under the command of Zumárraga, of siding with Cortés in dishonest stratagems for their own material gain, including the fabrication of the miraculous apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe:

Lo que pasa es que – como todo el pueblo se dio cuenta – ellos no quieren que la honra de su marqués

– al que todos tienen íntimo – ande rodando por los suelos. Claro, no les conviene, pues entre ellos ha habido siempre alianzas vergonzosas, como la de ocultar el real quinto y culminar, solidariamente, la empresa Guadalupana, que en lo futuro va a dar mucho qué decir y sus ingresos superarán a los de cualquier otra nación súbdita de la Corona. [...] Franciscanos y dominicos andan en este secreto. Y es que negocio que emprende Juanito, es éxito rotundo. (136).⁵

It is obvious that Guzmán does not believe in religious zeal of his compatriots. With respect to Cortés, he writes down in his diary:

¡ Que no me salga a mí con el rollo de la Fe Christiana! Conmigo no van esos arranques. A mí no me la pega la tráfuga. Yo tengo otro concepto del hideputa que comulga, no por deleitarse en el amor del Cordero Inmolado, sino antes bien para solazarse con el portapaz de oro, las navetas de oro, las patenas, los copones y las custodias también de oro. (87).⁶

The narrator-protagonist questions the system of values underlying the Conquest, substituting religious fervour with the pursuit of power and profit. What is more significant, he dispenses with divine providence in the entire narrative of his deeds. There is not a single mention of him erecting a cross or commanding a priest to say a mass. There is no reference to any religious act legitimising the action of taking possession of a given territory in the name of God. Guzmán ascribes the outcome of military encounters not to the divine intervention, but to discipline and luck (44). He explicitly states that his journey from México to Vera Cruz was not a work of God or of the Virgin of Guadalupe, but his own achievement, which he owes to his determination (224).

Guzmán thus presents his own version of the story of the Conquest, a subversion of the myth which emerged from early colonial historiography. In the eyes of the narrator, the Conquest is a private enterprise, which serves the conquistadors' individual interests under the pretext of loyal service to the Crown. Therefore, Guzmán subverts the actantial model of the myth. The King of Spain is the Sender only nominally, as the true drivers of the Conquests are greed and ambition. Taking possession of the coveted territories of the New World is a quest undertaken not

⁴ "How annoyed I am at these toad-faced preachers with their disagreements and disputes against me! They talk of the blindness of my deeds, into which I introduced the devil. Huh! And that the vanity and the enormous arrogance they see in my actions is of my own doing, as I apparently possess vanity and idleness aplenty for this and that act of indolence or misdemeanor." (translation in footnote my own).

⁵ "What is happening is that, as the entire town knows, they do not want the honour of their marquis, to whom they are very close, to be dragged through the mud. Of course, it is not in their interest, as there have always been disgraceful alliances between them, such as the concealment of the royal tax or the solidary completion of the Virgin of Guadalupe enterprise, which will be much talked about in the future and whose revenue will exceed that of any other nation subject to the Crown. [...] The Franciscans and the Dominicans are privy to this secret. Juanito's business is a resounding success." (translation in footnote my own).

⁶ "I don't buy his waffle about Christian faith! I am not fooled by his outbursts. I do not believe in his change of heart. I see the bastard differently as he receives communion not in order to delight in the love of the Sacrificial Lamb, but rather to take pleasure in the golden pax, the golden incense burner, the patens, the pyx, and the custodia, also made of gold." (translation in footnote my own).

so much for the glory of the Spanish Crown and of the Kingdom of God, but with a view to satisfying the conquistadors' own obsessions with power and gold. The main opponents in this enterprise are neither the Indians nor the trickery of Satan, but fellow conquistadors and the clergy. Heroism is substituted with tenacity and implacable cruelty. The themes of journey, quest, taking possession, and subjugation are stripped of their transcendent referent in an act of complete demythification.

Guzmán's narrative therefore exemplifies all three modes of mythical subversion identified by José Manuel Losada (*Subversive Triad* 4). The narrative mode is carried out by reconfiguring the actantial model of the myth, the structural mode by suppressing the theme of heroism, and the transcendent mode by removing from the narrative the supernatural referent validating the kernels of the myth. In this case, the annihilation of mythical transcendence in particular threatens the integrity of the myth (see Losada, *Myth and Subversion* 6). Mythemes are reduced to the role of mere thematic components of the story, which in consequence loses its mythical dimension. Demythification on the story level is one of the most salient characteristic of Martínez' novel. However, the strategy of demythologisation on the discourse level is equally as worthy of analysis.

The discourse of the novel contains a multitude of references to mythical and quasi-mythical narratives. As a general rule, these references can be grouped into two categories, depending on whether they allude to myths whose sources date back to classical antiquity, the Bible and medieval literature; or whether they introduce entirely fictitious concepts, invented for the purpose of the novel. Both categories possess equal status within the discourse, as they represent the conquistador's cultural baggage and the horizon of his expectations. Even the myths and fantastical stories invented by the author are on occasions supported by citing (equally fictitious) sources or by being ascribed apocryphally to real historical figures, especially to Christopher Columbus. The first category of references includes mentions of Colchis and the Argonauts (Martínez 16), Ophir and King Solomon (16), Circe (30), as well as basilisks (48), dragons and sirens, to name just a few. Although not strictly mythical, references to the protagonists of medieval books of chivalric romance, such as Percival, Galahad, Palmerín de Olivia, Amadis de Gaula (149) or Queen Calafia (151), could also be included in this category. The second group of references alludes mostly to imaginary anthropomorphic races, monstrous animals, fantastical flora or wondrous natural phenomena. Among them, there are women without eyes but with breasts filled with poisonous

juices (19), trees with female genitals instead of leaves (35), women with question marks in lieu of faces (39), young men with golden penises (39), gold-giving clouds (81), and a plethora of other marvels.

While Pizarro Cortés characterises the narrator's stance towards these fantastical stories as ambiguous (432), this claim is difficult to sustain. Guzmán compares himself to the biblical Thomas, who refuses to believe without a proof (Martínez 81), and he admits to having had his own contribution in the invention of some of the legends (43). He ascribes the creation of the fantastical tales to the overactive imagination of idle sailors (21). He speculates that the stories were contrived by Columbus as a plot to dissuade competitors from following into his footsteps (38) or that they were born out of fear of the unknown:

Todas estas eventualidades, escritas y relatadas por toda Europa, se deben, creo yo, no a otra cosa que no sea el miedo; o sea a ese horror espontáneo que nos anebla los interiores al andar por los parajes de lo ignoto y de lo insondable, que para el caso es lo mismo. (35)⁷

It is possible that at the beginning of the journey, in spite of his scepticism, Guzmán harboured some illusions of finding fantastical places rich in gold and other marvels, especially those supposedly reported by Columbus. However, the conquistador's disillusion becomes obvious overtime. In relation to the stories attributed to Columbus, Guzmán writes:

Ensueños, desatinos, despropósitos, chifladuras, insensateces, no más. (54) Una sarta de tonterías nos trajo él del descubrimiento. Runfla de patrañas, ya lo dije. Algunas más descabelladas que su cabeza redonda, pero muy bien tejidas para creerse y admirarse [...]. ¡Paparruchas! ¡Paparruchas y nada más que paparruchas! (199).⁸

The protagonist's discourse displays in many places the irreverent, tongue-in-cheek irony typical of the carnivalesque aesthetics mentioned by Pizarro Cortés and Sánchez Hernández. The objective of this literary device is to question the authority of the sources and the impact of classical and medieval mythology. For example, when comparing himself to Palinurus, the coxswain of Aeneas's ship, the narrator uses a witty word play based on the similarity between the words denoting the mythical hero's name and the action of urinating twice (25). Curiously enough, the same humorous etymology of the terms can be found in one of the epigrams written by Roman poet Marcus Valerius Martialis (see: Moreno Soldevila 442). When

⁷ "All these goings-on, written down and related all over Europe, stem from, I think, nothing more than fear, that is from this spontaneous horror that casts a cloud over our inner selves when we walk through the expanse of the unknown and the unfathomable, which in this case is one and the same." (translation in footnote my own).

⁸ "Fantasies, blunders, nonsense, obsessions, folly, nothing else. He brought back a load of drivel from his discovery quest. Like I said, a heap of lies, some more hare-brained than his round head, but told well enough to amaze and to be believed. It's all a hoax, nothing more than a hoax!" (translation in footnote my own).

speculating on the origin of the legends allegedly invented by Columbus, Guzmán undermines the prestige of their author in a particularly humiliating way, by suggesting that the stories are as numerous as the acts of masturbation Columbus engaged in during his journey (Martínez 199).

Not all instances of demythologisation in the novel, however, are satirical or humorous. Some have a much more sinister and disconcerting dimension. The legendary cities of gold have not been found during Guzmán's journey. The marvellous stories of pearly beaches and easily accessible wealth are discredited. As the narration progresses, the allusions to fantastical tales diminish in number, to be replaced by graphic descriptions of the atrocities committed by the conquistador. The dreams of marvellous lands of plenty are supplanted by Guzmán's accounts of inhumane acts of violence against the natives: torture, rape, castration, impalement, burning alive and public executions. In Guzmán's own words, his enterprise will be known by posterity as "Colchis of punishment" (216, own translation).

The Plinian races of anthropomorphic creatures or other monstrous, deformed beings are not found in the New World, either:

Quiero decir que aquí no hemos topado con niños que nacen con los ojos en las rodillas ni con otros engendros con los dedos de espalda y dientes negros, sino únicamente indios y más indios; pueblos y más pueblos alineados en pie de lucha. Multitudes que van quedando por doquier con la G de mi fierro muy enseñoreada en sus flancos. (200-201).⁹

While in the sixteenth-century Spain the demythologisation of the native inhabitants of America gave rise to theological and legal debates on human rights, Guzmán in Martínez' novel dehumanises the Indians by comparing them to animals (111, 112). He uses demythologisation to justify the exploitation, enslavement and violence. The natives in Guzmán's eyes are not mythical creatures, but they are not human either. They are beasts that can be unscrupulously used as a work force or to satisfy the conquistador's sexual appetite.

5. Conclusions

The early colonial Spanish accounts of the Conquest differ in details, but they can all be broadly summarised in one simple narrative based on clear dichotomies:

heroic Christian conquistadors set off on a journey to take possession of the newly discovered territories in the name of the Spanish Crown and in the name of God. Guided by divine providence, they overcome numerous obstacles to bring glory to the King and superior civilization to the American natives. Their quest is justified by their faith and legitimised by temporal and spiritual authorities of the Christian world. Whether it is Gómara's account of the just war leading to the conversion of countless natives with minimal damage and bloodshed (*Conquista* 5, 18), Cortéz' reports of the conquest of populous territories and subjugation of their inhabitants in the name of the Spanish Crown (7) or Díaz del Castillo's "true story" of the discovery, conquest and pacification of New Spain (53), the same myth emerges from all of the sources. This myth should be understood not only as the "Pink Legend" (*la leyenda rosa*) of the Conquest, but also as a narrative with characteristics of a myth. While its origin does not date back to prehistoric times of gods and divine heroes, its transcendent referent is rooted in the Bible and in the Christian doctrine, endowing the story with mythistorical dimension. Along with "medieval jurisprudence" and "recycled Roman notions of universal empire" (Restall 68), the myth of the Conquest was used to legitimise Spanish colonial rule in America. The story is widely regarded both as a foundational narrative of the modern Latin-American society, and as the eschatological account of the destruction of the indigenous civilisation, with all its tragic implications. The story has recurred in innumerable works of art and has been retold, reinterpreted, questioned, and contested throughout the five centuries following its creation.

Herminio Martínez' novel *Diario maldito de Nuño de Guzmán* provides a subversive interpretation of the myth of the Conquest. The strategies of demythification and demythologisation, which exemplify what Carolina Pizarro Cortés calls a tendency of the new historical novel to "demystify the past" (82), have been analysed in this paper in detail. The study of the novel presented in the article is not exhaustive, but neither does it intend to be. The intertextual relationship between the novel and historiographical sources has already been elaborated by other researchers. The judgement on the historical truthfulness of either the mythical hypotext of the novel or Martínez' reinterpretation of a real-life figure of Nuño Beltrán de Guzmán is best left to professional historians. Only myth-critical approach to the novel has been implemented throughout this study, which should be read as an invitation to further discussion and as a contribution to the methodology in the fields of myth theory and literary myth criticism.

⁹ "I want to say that we have not come across any children born with eyes in their knees, nor mutants with blackened teeth and with their fingers backwards, but only across Indians and more Indians, villages upon villages ready to fight. There are multitudes left everywhere with the letter G firmly embedded in their sides with my iron." (translation in footnote my own).

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