

Acosta, Gadamer, and Heidegger

Acosta

Consider José de Acosta's XVIth-century account of his "discovery" of the Americas. Acosta (1539-1600), a Spaniard and a Jesuit, resided in Peru and Mexico from 1570 to 1587. In the entry I quote from his chronicles, an early description of the New World initially published in Spanish in 1590, Acosta purports to describe a llama, an animal he has never seen before. In order to do so, he necessarily makes reference to what he already knows: to sheep, calves, and camels. Observe how the unavoidable intrusion of Acosta's pre-understanding entails that he cannot show fidelity to the llama on its own terms.

"There is nothing richer or more profitable in Peru than the livestock of that land, which our people call Indies sheep and the Indians in their language llama [...]. [...] These sheep or llamas are of two species: of one kind are the alpacas, or woolly sheep, while others are smooth or have little wool and are better for carrying loads. They are larger than large sheep and smaller than yearling calves; they have a very long neck like a camel, and they need it because they are tall animals and high in the body and require a long neck in order to graze" [*"Ninguna cosa tiene el Piru de mayor riqueza y ventaja, que es el ganado de la tierra, que los nuestros llama Carneros de las Indias: y los Indios en lengua general los llaman Llama (...). (...) Son estos Carneros, o Llamas en dos especies: unos son Pacos, o Carneros lanudos: otros son rasos, y de poca lana, y son mejores para carga: son mayores que carneros grandes, y menores que bezerros: tienen el cuello muy largo a semejança de camello, y han lo menester porque como son altos, y leuantados de cuerpo, para pacer requiere tener cuello luengo"*].

José de Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, ed. by Jane E. Mangan, transl. by Frances López-Morillas (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002 [1604]), bk IV, ch. 41, p. 244.

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Gadamer (1900-2002)

“Wanting to avoid one’s own concepts in interpretation is not only impossible, but blatant absurdity (*offenbarer Widersinn*). To interpret means precisely to bring one’s own precepts into play so that the meaning of the text can really be made to speak for us”.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d English ed. (Joel Weinsheimer & Donald G. Marshall transl., Continuum 2004 [1960]), p. 398 [hereinafter *TM*].

Weinsheimer and Marshall refer to the purported avoidance as “manifestly absurd”. For my part, I find that the German noun “*Widersinn*” intimates the English noun “absurdity” rather than “absurd”, which can qualify either as a noun or an adjective. Likewise, the German adjective “*offenbarer*” solicits an English adjective instead of an adverb. Beyond the matter of grammatical corollarization, I choose to apply the translator’s prerogative in favour of “blatant” in preference to “manifest”. Either way, the overarching idea is that of evidence or obviousness.

“If we want to do justice to man’s finite, historical mode of being, it is necessary to fundamentally rehabilitate the concept of prejudice”: *TM*, p. 278.

“*Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition*”: *TM*, p. 291 [emphasis original].

Interpretation retains “a *fundamental* accidentality” (*eine grundsätzliche Akzidentalität*): *TM*, p. 401 [emphasis original].

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Heidegger (1889-1976)

“The interpretation of something as something is essentially grounded in fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception”, since “[i]nterpretation is never a presuppositionless grasping (*ein voraussetzungsloses Erfassen*) of something previously given”.

Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Joan Stambaugh trans., Dennis J. Schmidt rev. trans., SUNY Press 2010 [1927]), p. 141.