

CHAPTER 7

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Mission and Narrative in the
Early Modern Spanish World

Diego de Ocaña's Desert in Passing

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In the early modern Spanish world, thirst for all manner of information and “news” from abroad appears to have been rivaled only by the enthusiasm of various willing informants to provide it. These participant-tellers delivered in a stunning variety of forms. Amidst the array of communications, there rests a vast range of spiritual reportage by members of religious orders from abroad. Often urgent and dramatic in nature, sometimes quite self-contained, these writings represent a kind of “intelligence” which, while demonstrably vital for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century contemporaries, can be particularly challenging for twenty-first century readers. In the spirit of this volume, concerned with our ways of presenting religion in history, I seek to demonstrate in this chapter that the challenge of such early modern religious narratives is best met by near-immersion—by endeavoring to appreciate the world that people “lived through,” and how and why spiritual reportage not only persuaded but moved them.¹ “Immersion” signals my attempt to enter into the world experienced by a range of contemporary historical subjects. That such entry is always an unreachable aim is signaled by “near.” “Near” immersion is the distance that also allows one to bring more information to bear than a historical subject could have done in interpreting an utterance, an action, or the context surrounding an event. The impossibility of immersing fully in a past thought-world makes

me—and my enthusiasms, priorities, and judgments—an inescapable part of the puzzle.

For this near immersion, I have selected the narrative of a difficult portion of a journey made by the Castilian Hieronymite friar Diego de Ocaña, who traveled throughout the Spanish viceroyalty of Peru between 1599 and 1606. I contend that movement and obstacles experienced by modern churchmen such as Ocaña in the “exterior” world were almost always accompanied by interior spiritual journeys sought and found along the way. These sweet and necessary exiles drew on a deep Christian tradition and were expected by the early modern Spanish imaginary, which is to say, by readers as much as by the travelers themselves. With respect to their encounter with difficulty in the extreme, holy wanderers who became participant-tellers in early modern times needed to emulate exalted predecessors. They needed especially to demonstrate their ability to seek and to reembody the apostolic ideal, “traveling far,” as an early seventeenth-century Franciscan put it, “to come close to God.”² “Those who embark on this enterprise,” asserted another contemporary, the Jesuit Jerónimo Pallas, “undertake something scarcely less than what the apostles themselves embraced in the conversion of the world.” Each *operario* should be thought of as “God’s prized possession,” continued the allusive Pallas, reaching even further back and twisting his Plato toward the description of Paul as “a chosen vessel” in Acts—the missionary body as special instrument passing along trails in which the trials would be many and the trophies few.³

The untitled but so-called “Relación de viaje” of the Hieronymite Diego de Ocaña was many things at once.⁴ In focusing here on one aspect, that of a personal and emulative spiritual journey,⁵ I explore what many early modern missionaries saw themselves as doing, what they conceived their written records to be *about* and, ultimately, *for*. As much as early modern missions in foreign environments justified themselves through empirical results, tales of a mission’s progress, and hard-won lessons about little-known peoples and new corners of the exterior world, the mission abroad also offered the contemporary religious an invaluable opportunity to make and tell of an interior journey. I present these inclinations—outward and inward—as ultimately linked, as part of the author’s broader reckonings about the spiritual potential of peoples and places.

The turn inward, the impulse to write about the spiritual side of experience for the benefit of oneself and other people and, ultimately, to render an account in praise of God was a complex performance, an ideal that not all missionaries were able to reach, much less so successfully. Yet for others it beckoned as the ultimate and most necessary response to the dynamic

challenges and hostilities of the world, a narrative response that hinged on seeing and interpreting real spaces, people, and events through the lens of a vibrant spiritual imagination.

I do not have space here to discuss Diego de Ocaña in relation to his religious contemporaries, much less to his many predecessors. Suffice it to say that, as Ian Wood has observed in the context of early medieval Europe, I proceed conscious of the fact that modern scholars' inclination to apply a single kind of "missionary varnish" and genre label to vastly divergent narratives has led to a yawning and misrepresentative gap between "mission and its portrayal."⁶ Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century missionary accounts, like their medieval (and indeed their late antique and apostolic) predecessors, were notoriously flexible written forms, scripts that still manage to defy easy generic designations. Indeed, noting just two pertinent examples from among Ocaña's contemporaries indicates our Hieronymite's particular and more representative qualities. The *Descripción breve de toda la tierra del Perú, Tucumán, Río de la Plata y Chile* (ca. 1595–1609), composed by the Dominican Reginaldo de Lizárraga, shares with Ocaña's account a remarkable attempt to survey Andean cities, regions, and local histories, yet features little of Ocaña's tendency toward personal reflection. Similarly, the *Viaje* recounted by a Hieronymite successor of Ocaña, Pedro del Puerto (1624), who reports prominently on alms-collection and his inspection of devotional sites, seems tight-lipped and dutiful reportage by comparison, underscoring the variety within and between contemporary missionary accounts, even those which, on the surface, appear to meet similar needs and traverse very similar territories.⁷

Quietude, a state of inner stillness, was sought by many early modern missionaries as the stage from which truly to begin. Somewhat paradoxically to our lights, for many in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this state of mind and spirit was not only to be found in quiet prayerful seclusion with their brothers or sisters at home. Quietude might come most powerfully of all in the rigors of a radical road, when the missionary was battling alone against the elements. St. Paul's epistles, the Acts of the Apostles, portions of Scripture, the teachings of the Church Fathers, and Christian appropriations from classical learning—all drummed on the constant relationship between the harsh tests of the exterior world, on the one hand, and a religious person's spiritual development and understanding of God's will, on the other. Aristotle had taught that difficulty was what most summoned people to heroic acts. The Psalms, for their part, trumpeted just who God's heroes were, singing the praises of the long suffering.⁸ The apostles' frontier labors

in taking the gospel to Gentiles proceeded in similar spirit, leaving the conveyers of the precious message exposed and at risk, tested at many turns.

In early modern times, Ignatius de Loyola (1491–1556), founder of the Society of Jesus, reportedly made no secret of his admiration for movement and experience as a form of knowledge that might surpass all others and, thus, of the pilgrim as “the one who knew the most.”⁹ Articulating the association between difficult travel and interior journeying, between exterior movement and spiritual growth, became a mark of Jesuitness.¹⁰ The aforementioned Jesuit Jerónimo Pallas explained that there was nothing more effective at wrenching God’s possession away than a purposeful voyage to the Indies. A journey so far away “frees the religious of the ties that bind him most tightly,” the ties that distract and “try to keep him within.” The goal was to avoid snares, the various “quarrels and thickets of temporal things.”¹¹ Extremity is what “one finds perfectly in a mission to the Indies,” Pallas enthused, presenting the “enterprise” (*empresa*) of a foreign mission as a “great interval” (*grande intervalo*)—a kind of exile from the life of the world, an orphanhood from which incalculable benefits might be drawn.¹² Despite the fact that early modern Spanish contemporaries such as Santa Teresa de Ávila (1515–82) had managed to free themselves in a heroic manner by entering a convent,¹³ many religious contemporaries contended that one’s monastery was an insufficient barrier against human love. Rather, through suffering and privation abroad they offered themselves up as a protective balm of fellowship and endeavor.

The plotline for finding oneself utterly alone in the New World was well established. It was just as important to do something with these rewards, to reflect on and record one’s experience—for personal spiritual growth, to be sure, but also for others and, ultimately, for God. Saint Francis Xavier (1506–52), one of the earliest and most articulate missionary voices in an expanding early modern world, wrote of living with a sense of indebtedness because of the “dangers” and “difficulties” he had been “granted.” The sense of debt was partly to his predecessors and current brethren; he saw himself and his enterprise in a highly relational manner, attributing his ability to make his way to the similar “battles” that had been, and were being, fought by others.¹⁴ Writing—leaving a personal record of an interior journey—amounted to a reciprocal offering. The missionary who had been inspired to emulate by the writings of others now looked to inspire and be emulated in turn. The companions of the future St. Ignatius were not alone in understanding him—themselves, and missionaries everywhere—as riders whose sense of God’s control over their fate (and even of God dwelling within) was such that, in metaphorical terms, they simply dropped the reins

of their mules, embracing whatever happened next. Missionary accounts of such experiences—of undertaking a mission, dropping one's reins, and enduring the results—were also composed, in part, to fulfill what Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle has called an "epideictic" function—which is to say that their accounts were declarations "invented *from the self about God*."¹⁵

Next to the explicit reflections on these matters of near contemporaries such as the Jesuit Jerónimo Pallas, Ocaña's engagement with apostolic parallels can at first appear nonchalant. Yet he treats them as multiform invitations to his own ends. Indeed, we should not be misled into thinking him less "genealogical" or emulative a narrator than his contemporaries. He possessed an alert and allegorical understanding of himself as a wandering instrument of God, buffeted and tested along an earthly journey. His awareness of apostolic narrative models and of the expectations of his Hieronymite and wider readership are acute. His apparent sense of freedom in adapting the metaphor and literary form is entirely in keeping with the deeper Christian tradition that Scott Fitzgerald Johnson has called the practice of "literary paraphrase." Ocaña works as a vernacular missionary reporter whose relationship to the "shared tools and techniques of Christian story-telling across the centuries," as Johnson succinctly put it, is deducible but often implicit.¹⁶

An author engaging in literary paraphrase—as much in early modern times as in late antiquity—mobilizes the narrative patterns and guiding metaphors of a revered apostolic past to illuminate the present. "To bring the apostolic past" into another present involves, as Johnson points out, a process of "reiterating and claiming [what amounts to a] foundation myth." Idiosyncrasy and even significant changes are permitted, so long as intended readers of the retellings recognize and feel persuaded by the author's analogies and appropriations. While no case is precisely the same, a generalizing principle gains force for both authors and readers: the apostolic storyline and metaphors in question grow more and more symbolic, even atmospheric. A familiar story-shape is created also by establishing a mood and texture, by playing on a cultural code that the author feels utterly comfortable appropriating toward his own vision and ends. The relationship to an original metaphor or story is not about accuracy but, rather, about "elasticity" and broader consistency.¹⁷

For early modern readers, tales of terrible storms and shipwrecks, of droughts and plagues, captured in dramatic fashion that the God of the Bible, of the Acts of the Apostles, and of saints' lives commonly expressed himself as *the* force of nature. The natural world is a setting for divine action. Ocaña

would have been additionally familiar with the equation of God and his mother Mary with natural forces from the corpus of miracles attributed to the Virgin of Guadalupe de Estremadura from the fourteenth century forward, and recorded in a series of volumes begun in the early fifteenth century.¹⁸ For example, working with this close metaphorical association, the anonymous Hieronymite author of the early sixteenth-century prologue to the third Guadalupan miracle volume presented the world as a massive ocean within which humans could scarcely help losing their way and going under, “swallowed up by the storm of desperation.” Terrible winds and waves would threaten—winds of arrogance, ambition, slander, envy, avarice, and lust—blowing people off course, and in all directions. The only hope of rescue in such circumstances, the only fixed point for navigation amidst these worldly predicaments, was the fabled Guadalupan advocacy of the Virgin Mary, a true “port of salvation,” the prologue’s author assures.¹⁹

Like the unruly ocean, the desert landscape was depicted as a vast and treacherous domain in which demons and temptations lurked, and in which a human could so easily become lost. And yet the desert’s very barrenness and featurelessness, the primal nature of the isolation it made possible, simultaneously made it a place of considerable spiritual opportunity. In a desert, the religious would be truly tested, purified, and there he might grow closer to God. The desert—where God communicated with Moses, where John the Baptist preached, where Christ himself retreated to pray and where he was tested before triumphing over the Devil—nurtured what Bernard McGinn has called a “spirituality of Exodus” well in place even before the faith’s first monks set out into the deserts of Egypt and Judaea, making the desert the emblematic landscape for their spiritual journeys. From the Greek *eremos* and *eremia* comes our “eremetical,” and the associations of “inexpressible height” and a wilderness space “removed from all things,” where a soul might be fed and new understandings found.²⁰

Accordingly, early modern missionary authors and their readers thought often in terms of the desert. Like the original desert solitaries in fourth-century Egypt such as Antony and Pachomius, who came to welcome the company of visitors and even gathered fellow monks into regulated communities, early modern missionaries invoked the desert landscape because it helped make sense of themselves, their communities, and their enterprises. Suffering “desert places” which, by the time of the monastic articulations of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, had become as metaphorical as literal, bolstered the self-image of religious as spiritual ascetics and persuaded informed and sympathetic readers.²¹ In paraphrasing their own experiences

of wilderness, the early modern missionaries mobilized the radical isolation of the desert to appeal to a readerly community.

Ocaña's equations of forbidding American surroundings with the desert, and of himself with an instrument, are thus powerful keys to his sense of how adversity becomes a religious act and expression. In what he perceives to be depopulated wastelands, among those whom he judges to be abject peoples, and as he is suffering what feels like rejection and apathy in others, Ocaña experiences a desert. In these passages of his manuscript, the emotional arc of his narrative is heightened. In remembering the experience in ink on paper, the suffering, itinerant "stranger" (*peregrino*) turns inward. The exterior world becomes God's testing ground, where his true instruments would be marshaled to reflect on their service, their mission, and look within. For the Hieronymite Ocaña, the memory of what happened in such desert places merges with the need to represent an understanding of what happened. Diego de Ocaña's physical body and his state of mind converge and become the page from which we learn.

Ocaña's "deserts" punctuate his experiences of more straightforward hope, the latter being predominantly in urban Hispanicizing centers where this agent of the Extremaduran image and shrine might create or correct American "Guadalupes," and establish devotional communities and schemes for alms collection that were securely linked back to the image and home sanctuary. All else was in-between, earthly experiences to endure.²² By punctuating his narrative with episodes suffered in the apostolic spirit, Ocaña set hopeful zones in greater relief, while simultaneously positing that it was the *demandador's* place to travel, be jarred, and suffer privations in the name of the Virgin Mary and in the interest of her guardians, his Hieronymite brethren.

We join Diego de Ocaña en route from Cusco to Lima in late November 1603, during the Hieronymite's final crossing of the Andes. He has just left the warm abundance of Jauja and the Mantaro River Valley, and has passed into the upper reaches of the province of Yauyos, climbing the rugged, westernmost mountain range of the high Andes from the east. He knew the name of an infamous pass ahead, and what the place had come to signify for Spanish and Hispanicizing minds in Peru. If he had learnt anything of the place's far older meanings and transformations for indigenous and mixed-race peoples, such knowledge does not show.

The pass of Pariacaca and its range of snowy peaks refers to one of most illustrious ancestral beings of the region (*huaca*), a divinity who once shook the earth with his beneficent presence and raucous adventures, and, after

lithomorphosis was revived in sacred histories, once danced and sung. His resting body was itself a twin-peaked snowcap in the cordillera, whose other selves or children had multiplied across the land. Pariacaca's seat and craggy likeness could be seen from great distances on either side. By the end of the sixteenth century, melting snows and the sacred songs and dances from his heights had long explained the social as well as the geographical landscape, and gave vital if transforming meaning to people in the surrounding regions who made regular festive commemorations and pilgrimages to his shrine.²³ Diego de Ocaña passed through the territory of the Andean divine Pariacaca without knowing it, immersed in his alternate ontology, marveling at first over how the melting snows and rushing waters fed deep lakes and the seasonally raging rivers that flowed down sloping valleys to the west and the South Sea (the Pacific Ocean) and east into what he knows as the Jauja River (today, the Mantaro). The experience of the pass of Pariacaca demanded further engagement, too, but as other Spaniards had done for over the half-century already, Diego de Ocaña created his own meanings from an admixture of what he experienced and what he had read from others.

Sixteenth-century Spanish officials, chroniclers, and traveler-commentators expressed astonishment at just how it was that they managed to move through places such as the pass of Pariacaca at all. Even without the force of their Christian metaphors in play, such mountain passes connoted wilderness and danger to human existence, the antithesis of the valleys and plains as places for human order and civilization, with their ports the gateways to oceans leading home. The arrangement between indigenous people and this vertical environment of the Andean interior was disorienting to most Spanish eyes. How was one to master such a place, let alone grow as prosperous as the Inkas and their Andean subjects evidently had been? How was one to move about?²⁴

As was the case with so much of what the Spanish were eventually able to do in Peru, the means to move about had been created by native Andeans, and by the Spaniards' imperial predecessors the Inkas in particular. A network of about forty thousand kilometers of roads had been engineered and maintained by Inka rulers to join some eighty provinces of their vast, four-part realm. The two principal highways running north-south—a first artery through the mountains and a second hugging the western foothills and following the coastline—had facilitated long-distance movement of armies, messages, and supplies, and were achievement enough. But the lateral roads over the high mountain passes of the central Andes, such as the stretch of “royal highway” along which Ocaña moved, were still more overwhelming to behold. These constructions did not so much defy the seemingly harsh

natural environment of high winds, snowy peaks, and *puna*, as resign themselves to its nature.

Native Andean molding of the terrain went well beyond the practical needs of soldiers and llama caravans, let alone messengers and small bands of travelers on foot. Surfaces of roadways—generally between one and four meters wide—were paved with cobbles and flagstone whenever possible, and there were drainage canals, retention walls, causeways and bridges.²⁵ Staircases had been carved into the rock faces, many early colonial travelers marveled, easing the climb over the steepest portions of passes such as that of Pariacaca. Spaniards in the immediate postconquest years guessed that their descriptions of the lateral roads through the central Andes would be difficult to believe for anyone who had not seen them with their own eyes. Such roads seemed like ostentatious exhibitions of power over the environment and the native Andean subjects who built and maintained them as part of their turn (*m'ita*) of labor on the Inka state highways.

When Pedro de Cieza de León told of his crossing of the Pariacaca range in the 1550s he felt the need to canvas specialized readers in search of a little support for his assertions. “Let those who read this book and have been to Peru recall the road that goes from Lima to Jauja,” he wrote, “through the rugged peaks of Huarochirí and the range of Pariacaca, and those who hear them will understand whether what they saw is even more than what I describe.”²⁶ For Spanish and Hispanicizing travelers in the last third of the sixteenth century, the notorious pass still stood out, drawing its visitors and their commentary. But its meaning was shifting. It was becoming not so much a marvelous example of the Inkas’ taming of Andean space as a route along which different kinds of difficulties for Spaniards appeared, questions might be posed, and opportunities seized.²⁷

When the Jesuit José de Acosta crossed the range in both directions in the 1570s, the pass of Pariacaca seems to have offered principally an opportunity to research the natural world around him, to collect empirical information, and articulate his findings. Yet it was also an ideal moment for dramatic story-telling, for luring his expectant readers toward the meanings he most wished to convey. He climbs up the rolling slopes through a succession of microclimates, across the bleak high tablelands, and into the thin air of the snow-covered mountain passes. Acosta’s account becomes an opportunity to describe carefully the cruel test of this place on not just *the*, but *his* human constitution. His body in transit becomes the laboratory for natural history. His account turns on his firsthand experience of altitude sickness embedded in a chapter of the *Natural and Moral History* in which he extrapolates on the

active powers of different kinds of air, the “wondrous effects of winds” at sea and on land in various parts of the Indies.

Acosta claimed that he would never forget that first crossing in 1573, an ascent from sea level, up the so-called “Steps of Pariacaca” and across the watershed at an altitude of nearly five thousand meters. He had arrived in the foothills scientifically primed, having consulted the best local advice on what would lie ahead, on what “alterations” (*mudanza*) he was likely to experience, and on how best to keep his senses in order to observe, record, and analyze data. Yet no amount of local consultation and advance reading could prepare him for the physical effects of this first leg of the journey. “When I climbed the Steps, as they are called, the highest part of that range,” he writes, “almost immediately I felt such mortal distress that I thought of throwing myself off my mount onto the ground. “Indeed, Acosta saw one man do just that, “cast himself to the earth, screaming, in [reaction to] the enormous pain that the crossing of Pariacaca had caused him.”

Yet, steadied by a more reliable companion, the Jesuit stayed on his horse, bearing the personal burden, he notes, of the some “three or four hours of suffering” it took to reach a “more moderate altitude.” Acosta’s readers are invited along: he remembered for them the panic, confusion, and helplessness spreading through his traveling party, with some people even seeking to confess their sins, perhaps for the last time. Given the similar narrative of suffering and abandonment Ocaña would later spin, Acosta’s description of the physical chaos sown by the place is worth our attention:

Although many of us were making the journey together, each one fell about hurrying for himself and not waiting for the others in order to escape that evil place. I was left with only one Indian, whom I begged to help me grip my mount. I gave myself over to such bouts of retching and vomiting that I thought I was done for and that my soul would depart. For after vomiting up my food and phlegm there came bile and more bile, some yellow and some green, and I soon even brought up blood from the violence stirred in my stomach.²⁸

Whereas, in roughly the same spot a few decades earlier, Pedro de Cieza de León had worried that readers might not trust his account of the mastery of Inka roadworks over the environment, Acosta wonders if readers will ever credit his descriptions of the dramatic physical effects of altitude on the human body experienced by him, his Indian servant, and their fellow travelers. The crossing of the Pariacaca pass is, for the Jesuit, principally a site of improved knowledge, a marvel in the natural and medical sense. Yet it is also a personal experience and test to report on as carefully and memorably as possible.

Some three decades later, Diego de Ocaña ascended the same pass, but more gradually and from the east. He had been living at altitudes of greater than three thousand meters for the better part of three years, thus the shock of existing at nearly five thousand meters was lessened.²⁹ His narrative priorities are different from those of Cieza and Acosta; both the Inkas' taming of fierce Andean spaces and the opportunity to observe bodily effects fade into the background or, rather, become foundation and fodder for what he wishes to express. Although he does not make reference to his commentating predecessors, Ocaña doubtless knew of them, especially the account left by Acosta, as we shall see. The practice of active paraphrase—of elaborating from firsthand experience and from the records of others—emerges in full. The inspiring source, Acosta, had bolstered his disquisition on the biting nature and killing capacity of high-altitude winds and air by relaying the vivid near-death experience of one of his informants, a friar, in those same “uninhabited zones.” When this unnamed “Dominican, and a prelate in his order,” had negotiated the pass of Pariacaca, he had very nearly died along with the other less fortunate members of his traveling party. According to Acosta, the Dominican had survived a night alone in the bitter cold only by gathering a number of his companion's dead bodies as shelter from the wind. He “made a kind of wall of them, a head for his bed,” Acosta recorded, “and there he slept, the dead giving him life.”³⁰

In November 1603, the Hieronymite Diego de Ocaña is just as clear as Acosta had been that the range of Pariacaca was a *despoblado*, an “uninhabited zone”—a punishing stretch of some eighteen leagues of royal road between the Jauja Valley and a road-side travelers' inn (*tambo*) at Huarochirí. Here was one of a number of regions in the vast Indies designated as such by Spanish and Hispanicizing observers was viewed as essentially empty and signifying danger. *Despoblado* was, and still is, a subjective and highly connotative term. It is someone's idea, a designation, a summary judgment about civilization deemed wanting or missing. Writing in 1586, some seventeen years before Ocaña's transit of the pass of Pariacaca, the long-serving *corregidor* and the administrative author of many of the resettlements of Huarochirí's indigenous peoples into “ordered” towns, Diego Dávila Brizeño, reported to King Philip II that the traffic of passengers on horses and mules along this royal road was brisk—too brisk, in fact, for its people to be able to endure.³¹ The travelers were abusive and the area through which they moved was becoming lawless. Among other things, Dávila Brizeño objected to the lure and corruption of the *tambos* in between, and more generally to the service and provisions all these Spanish and Hispanicizing travelers demanded.

Like his *corregidor* predecessor, Diego de Ocaña thought in terms of a Christian Renaissance humanist dichotomy in which ordered urban concentrations of people existed in contrast to their boundless and threatening negations. If a *despoblado* could not be changed, it had to be endured. What meanings such a zone is allowed to contain are of negative value, a set of indications about what is found wanting, impossible or “not present.” In passing through, there is a cold colonizer’s assumption from Ocaña that people such as him would require not just assistance and service, but empathy and divine protection.

And yet, the idea of so deserted a place is also inviting. Here was a blank page that a person might fill. Its very uncrowdedness—in terms of modes of habitation one can understand, and more broadly in terms of subjectively valuable meaning—is an invitation to fear, reflection, and commentary. Because nothing of exterior value is thought to exist in the *despoblado* (outside of its testing nature), the commentator of ascetic spiritual bent is stirred and turns inward. If making writerly meaning of the experience, he is liable to reveal something of himself. Indeed, as even my brief excursus on the serial nature of commentary on the pass of Pariacaca suggests, it would not be an exaggeration to observe that something of a narrative competition was developing among literate travelers negotiating these heights—with this or that strand of emphasis in an earlier description of the experience of the pass of Pariacaca being picked up, examined, perhaps reshaped or rejected for new emphases and paraphrase by a later participant-teller.

Diego de Ocaña sets up his narration of experience on the pass in two ways. First, he pointedly contrasted his experience of earthly bounty in the Jauja Valley, where he spent two days gathering supplies and commissioning assistance, with what lay ahead: the “uninhabited zone called Pariacaca, the most severe *puna* [high-altitude plateau] of them all in Peru.” Second, he characterized his experience as a stern test from which his survival is a deliverance that was nothing short of miraculous. “What happened to me [on the pass of Pariacaca] was the worst misfortune to befall me in five years of continuous traveling,” wrote Ocaña, referring especially to “a night from which I miraculously emerged with my life.”³²

Ocaña signals the experience of suffering from the very first moments he describes, as he climbs out of a rustic shelter in the *tambo* on the morning in which his small party is to begin its crossing of the pass. The entire doorway of his hut was obscured by snow that had fallen in the night, and it had to be dug away in order for the Hieronymite to emerge. From that moment on, the portents grew even worse. Animals were missing. Not far away, members of Ocaña’s traveling party discovered one of its strongest horses—the one

that had been transporting the friar's effects—dead on a frozen riverbank. Ocaña's theory is that the beast had been parched and taken in the icy water too quickly, shocking itself to death.

Much of the experience of traveling over the high puna and mountain pass is, by Ocaña's own characterization, too painful to recall. "I will want to pass over [all this] in silence so as not to restart the tears I shed in that desert, a place I will remember for the rest of my life."³³ But this pretense of silence about experiences too painful and plentiful to recall is highly performative. For—as in description of other painful "deserts" in his manuscript—Ocaña does write on, and his readers in mind, with considerable care. The sense of a bitter outer expanse triggering an "inner desert" in which the soul, deprived of the world, begins to concentrate and rejoice in silence, begins what Alain Saint-Saëns has characterized memorably as a nostalgic, "sublimated eremiticism," would have appealed not only not only to the Hieronymite Ocaña, but also an entire religious culture in early modern Spain.³⁴ Ocaña calls out a desert. His intended readers are to understand the pass of Pariacaca to be an unbounded wilderness that is as much the subject of eremetical longing as dread. In so arduous a space, a divine instrument would be severely tested, but there, too, the mobile soul might learn things of infinite value.

The snow continued to fall, Ocaña recorded later, and in such quantities "that it seemed to me as if the sky was falling to pieces from its celestial sphere."³⁵ Loads were abandoned one by one in desperation. Ocaña and his fellow travelers trudged single file, and soon began to lose track of each other. The group was spreading out along a trail that was becoming impossible to follow. One of the two native Andean guides whom Ocaña had commissioned in the Jauja Valley had already abandoned them, fleeing without his pay and leaving only a blanket. As night descended, they crossed a high, flat plain where the wind cut through them. The Hieronymite presented himself, a remaining native Andean guide, and a single mule as, increasingly, alone before God and all the snow falling from the heavens.³⁶ At a certain desperate point, unsure of how many in their traveling party were still following, they decided that the guide would return in the direction from which they were ascending to see to it that any others did not lose their way. Ocaña claims that he promised to get the native man a drink once they were safe, trying to ensure his return—coldly commenting on his page "that to give an Indian a drink is to offer a thing he esteems more than a hundred ducats."³⁷

Diego de Ocaña was not writing to impress the likes of us with his sensitivity. Indeed, right down to his careful recollection of reliance on a mule—

long the animal of choice for the Christian religious traveler³⁸—Ocaña is setting the stage, once more, for a purposeful meditation on himself and on the torments he endured. The indigenous guide, turning back and possibly never to return, heightens the drama and is part of the suffering Ocaña means to convey. “So there I remained, out in the open,” he writes, “crying out from time to time, as the snow continued to fall.”³⁹ Two hours passed and no one returned.

Yet having been so alone does not, of course, mean that in recording the experience afterward, Acosta’s sparse account of the Dominican’s terrible night on the pass of Pariacaca would not come to mind. Indeed, it appears to have spurred Ocaña’s own remembering and telling, providing a frame into which his own experiences on the pass could be tipped. The Hieronymite is comfortable inventing interior monologues, his own, as well as those of others.⁴⁰ He imagined, for instance, what the others would have been thinking as darkness descended, and they could not see the trail: “The friar has gone ahead with the Indian; by now they will have reached the little inns; as for ourselves, we can’t even see where we are going and our beasts can’t take another step; let’s take shelter here beneath these rocks.” The passage is a retrospective teller’s artifice, in that Ocaña later learned that this is indeed what happened. He went on to explain that the Indian guide had come on the stragglers in their refuge, but not until about eleven in the evening. The party judged it futile to go out in search of Ocaña at that hour, since they might not even reach him before dawn. Ocaña imagined their desperately hopeful guesswork starting up again: “The friar will have made his way, little by little,” they will have thought, “and by now he will already have made it [to shelter].”⁴¹

With the night growing colder and hope of rescuers fading, with Acosta’s unadorned account of the Dominican shielding himself beneath the dead bodies to ponder alongside the even more deeply internalized storylines of Scripture, saints’ lives, and miracle narratives, Diego de Ocaña presents himself as having approached a tipping point, presuming all was lost. The predicament was coming into view—the moment of utter desperation, the climax for which readers yearned. But he was not quite there, not yet; for now came the crucial moment when God’s human instrument would truly struggle.

Alone in a trackless void of frigid desert, a man whose purpose depended on making starts, on leaving traces, grew contemplative. Diego de Ocaña was thinking over what he was doing in the Indies as a messenger, alms-collector, and image-maker in the service of a famous avocation of the Virgin, thinking over God’s will, and struggling along in thought, word, and deed.

His attention turns to the mule that, at this point, could scarcely keep her feet. “I took a covering and threw it over the mule’s head, then wrapped

myself into its reins, close up to the mule's neck, my face next to the animal's, and with my hands tucked for warmth within the folds of her neck. Tied in and covered thus, with her in my company and she in mine, God allowed that we would spend the night." The resemblance to Acosta's account of the Dominican religious taking shelter in the same howling expanse, making his macabre bed and drawing life (if not quite warmth) from his dead companions' bodies, is striking. With this search for warmth from his mule, Ocaña's interior dialogue with his readers continues, picking up pace.

There were just so many reasons, Ocaña reflected, why he and his four-legged companion should have died. Mules were accustomed to nights in the bitter cold, it was true. But they could usually walk about, take in water, and enjoy some food. Ocaña's mule—like him—enjoyed no such luxuries or sustenance. Surely, he remembers thinking, they would soon both drop dead in the snow. "From time to time," he wrote, "I took out my hands to shake off the snow that was rising like a tower above my hat." He chronicles the gradual process of losing hope, of weeping into the mule's neck in that blizzard. At his moment of least resistance, in time-honored narrative fashion, he made his "pious entreaties" to Our Lady, saying:

How can it be, Señora, that my fortune is so twisted or my sins so great that I would die in this desert, buried in snow, while the monks of Guadalupe are well-fed and tucked up in their cells? [And how can it be that I am] unable to go about my business, which is in fact your business, gathering alms to feed the pilgrims who turn to your house, [and that, instead,] I must starve and freeze to death tonight in this desert?⁴²

The explanatory Ocaña continues, underscoring the extent of the test in the desert:

I could not even form these words without shedding copious tears, and I now tell and confess that in full truth, with all that snow and the cold tapping my strength, I felt that it would have been best to die that night, for it seemed impossible that I would wake up alive, but rather frozen right through.⁴³

Extremity in the pass of Pariacaca offered solitude for thought, which had fortified his memory of the home sanctuary and his connection to the community of Hieronymite brethren who would be (he imagines) his principal readers. Further, the near-death experience has focused his mind on the purpose of his journey and such sufferings: the "business" of collecting alms to sustain the beloved pilgrims arriving, year in and year out, at the Extremaduran shrine. Perceiving this "American desert" as "severely

dislocated space... uninhabited by God," Ocaña retreats in mind to the Christian ideal of the desert, reacting to the exterior world by effectively elevating the isolated place into a position of interior exemplarity, a place for penitence, suffering, and the contemplation of one's purpose before God.⁴⁴ In the terms of reference employed by far-flung missionaries in his time, the snowy desert becomes the test he needs. It is true that he had almost died in the snow, but in more important emulative terms, Ocaña drew comfort from the fact that his crossing of the pass of Pariacaca had gone according to God's plan. His prayerful beseeching of the Mary of Guadalupe and the unlikely survival suggest a miraculous deliverance, but it is unseemly—unapostolic—to claim miracles for oneself. Characteristically, Ocaña chooses a suggestive, roundabout route that will allow his readers to draw their own conclusions. He compares his sufferings that night to Job's travails, then builds further on the drama of a survival that would not have been possible without the Virgin's miraculous intercession and God's attentive mercy and will—worked through the sustaining warmth of the mule. But he records this understanding with a characteristically lighter emotional touch. "It is certain that the warmth of my mount sustained me," he wrote, "so much so that, later, I cared for [and treasured] that mule, and never wanted to sell her or to be served by another."⁴⁵

Ocaña leaves no doubt about the point of telling of his crossing of the pass of Pariacaca. The pass is a desert in which his purpose has come into focus, a "lens" through which he and his readers are able to examine the obstacles and opportunities of his mission.⁴⁶ "I shall always have the memory... of being as if newly returned to life," Ocaña insists, of feeling "like a resurrected body... half of me inside the tomb and half without, because, in truth, as dawn broke, the mule and I awoke to find ourselves half-covered in snow."⁴⁷ With that—with the evocation of a "rebirth" in the desert, an entering into a life in which meanings are clearer—his point has been made, and the meaning which the experience had for him is inscribed. Moving about, clad in the covering he had thrown over them, there was no sign or track of anything in the total white of the snow, a desert of "divine Nothingness" for which a long Christian tradition of spiritual expression has conditioned him and his reader to long.⁴⁸

Diego de Ocaña comes to earth again, returning to the mundane. He writes of finding a few pieces of *ichu* grass to feed to the trusty mule. He first told of his passing of a night in the desert of Pariacaca a few hours later, when, at about ten in the morning, his Indian guide—in whom he had held such scarce hope—returned with wine and a sandwich for the freezing monk.⁴⁹

Diego de Ocaña's firsthand reflections of personal travails and spiritual focus such as the crossing of the pass of Pariacaca in late November 1603 characterize significant portions of the manuscript that treats his six-year journey through Spanish South America. I believe that Ocaña fears he will lose his mental and spiritual footing entirely if he proceeds in any other way. Several of his turns inward, and his most pointed emulations of apostolic suffering, occur when the missionary sees the least chance for tangible fruits from his enterprise—in Ocaña's case, when prospects for alms and devotional foundations are at their lowest. As Ocaña moves, experiences, and records in his most personal and spiritual ways, it bears noting that the spiritual prospects of entire peoples and regions of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Spanish South America are being surveyed, put at issue, avoided and pronounced on by this vernacular reporter. What is a *despoblado*? In whose eyes? What vast expanses of human experience—in this case those of indigenous and mixed-race persons in processes of religious and cultural change in the wake of the consolidation of Spanish Catholic rule—are neglected or treated as obstacles? What is this passage through such a purported desert *about* and *for*?

I have contended that at such points, Ocaña's record represents a cumulative kind of missionary knowledge. While purportedly descriptive, it is most powerfully "genealogical" and universalizing. He draws on a wide and rich sacred narrative tradition of apostolic movement and suffering and of miraculous deliverance to narrate the interior journey of an instrument of the Guadalupan Virgin and of God. His purpose at such times and in such places is to persevere, to open himself to the ordeal, and to reflect on what he is doing and thus why his miraculous survival might matter—preparing himself for a time when material and spiritual prospects improve. The turns inward might be fruitfully described as performative responses to extreme difficulty, the function of Ocaña's realization that as a timeless ascetic traveler refuge and meaning must ultimately be sought elsewhere, in rekindled devotion and within himself. His beloved narrative *exempla* were there, within reach—elastic enough to ensure that, in a spiritual sense at least, he was always headed home. Exploring Ocaña's pattern of personalizing sorrow, pain, and torment is to take seriously his self-conception and authorial attempt to draw in his prospective contemporary readers, to draw them inside the kind of interior journey they will feel and with which they will readily identify. The personal spiritual journey of passing through and chronicling the experience of an American desert is what, for Ocaña the instrument of the Guadalupan Mary and of God, matters most.

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FAITHFUL NARRATIVES

Historians, Religion, and the Challenge of Objectivity

~~THE CHALLENGE OF
RELIGION IN HISTORY~~

ANDREA STERK AND
NINA CAPUTO, EDITORS

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