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Álvar Núñez and Mala Cosa

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It is said that after the discovery of America there was a wave of bandits, errand boys, scoundrels, and ex-convicts who crossed the sea with the sole purpose of enriching themselves. These sayings are part of what is known as The Spanish Black Legend. This was not the case with Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, great-grandson of Martín Alhaja, whose noble title came from having guided Don Sancho de Navarra in the mountains, pointing the way with an ox skull. This is where the coats of arms of that tireless nobleman who became a magician to survive in American lands come from.

In these pages, a special emphasis is given to his participation as a *chamán*, an activity in which he had to incur under threat, as he himself tells in his book *Naufragios*. Here also retails how he walked thousands of kilometers without clothes, food, or water, among mysterious inhabitants, to then remember his steps and write that legendary volume whose plot begins and ends in the sea. To achieve this, he had to draw on a good sense of intrigue, which led him to invite the reader to use the imagination: "I stop telling this here because everyone can think about what would happen to them in such a strange and terrible land and without any remedy for anything either to be or to get out of it." Like most of the Chroniclers of the Indies, Álvar Núñez should not be asked for too many rhetorical ornaments, but pure narration, as Juan Gil points out in his edition of *Naufragios y Comentarios*, although on many occasions he knows how to use construction figures, such as the anaphora: "Tantos trabajos habíamos pasado, tantas tormentas, tantas pérdidas de navíos", the paradox: "reposé un poco muy sin reposo", and on other occasions the parallelism, for example in the phrase "muy pobre de gente y muy mala de andar".

The strength of the materials leads to a successful conclusion for the prose of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, who achieves a very remarkable expressiveness. Having walked for several years, having traveled thousands of kilometers through desert lands, among hostile warriors, would lead him to write these confessions that can be seen as a circular narrative that begins and ends in the port where it began.

Another technical success of *Naufragios* is to make very short chapters, as narrative summaries, which maintain the suspense and trace the suffering character. In this way, the interest of the reader is revived, who seeks to know the circumstances that impelled him to become a sorcerer, to walk in a superhuman way only to return to the place where he was born and had a fairly comfortable life because although Álvar Núñez grew up orphaned,

he was protected by a rich and powerful relative, Fernando Ruiz Cabeza de Vaca, who put him under the protection of the Duke of Medina Sidonia. With it, he earned 15,000 *maravedís* annually on the payroll of the Knights of Jerez, according to the data provided by the editor of the volume, Juan Gil, several times mentioned in these pages. By 1519 he ceased to be a page and was appointed palace waiter. He had a house of his own, good social prestige, and worked near the palace where he served, although this position forced him to take charge of very thankless tasks, such as when he had to testify before a court about the intimate life of his protector. His wife initiated a process in which she accused him of being a bad husband and questioned the poor duke, which is why she requested the annulment of the marriage: "According to Juan Manuel de Lando, he and Álvar Núñez witnessed that Don Alfonso failed in his attempt to have a sexual relationship, even though two or three women were called for that purpose."

The expeditionary sailed from Sanlúcar de Barrameda on the Andalusian coast on July 17, 1527. He received the position of Treasurer from King Charles V; Pánfilo de Narváez was at the front, with 600 men aboard five ships. Misfortune appeared to them as soon as they crossed the Atlantic Sea and arrived at Hispaniola, where 140 men deserted; a hurricane killed 60 and destroyed two of the ships. At that time, Narváez persisted in going inland, to look for provisions – and gold, if possible – but in the attempt, he found nothing but death – and that of most of the group that accompanied him. One of the women on the expedition had warned him not to do so, that if he went, none would return. This woman was something of a witch and a fortune-teller; she also advised the ten married women to say goodbye to their husbands at once and assume that they would not see them again, so that at once they would choose a man to replace them and follow her example, for she was going to do so – and they all listened to her, for the ten "started to live together with those who remained on the ships".

Of those who continued the journey, only Cabeza de Vaca and three other collaborators escaped ending their days in the womb of the Indians. On a feverish and insane walk, they reached the mainland; they fled the captivity in which they were on the island of Mal Hado, today Galveston, Texas, touched the other ocean, and went down the Nueva Galicia, today Jalisco, to continue walking, without knowing that they had traveled the immense land that separates the two oceans, that is, the geography of what is now the United States to the fullest extent, and then go down the Pacific coast, go inland and finally reach the capital of New Spain. In 1636 Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca returned to Seville, precisely the year in which it was ten years since he had set sail.

Since they touched American lands, in the Port of the Trinity of Cuba, they were received by cyclones and hurricanes; the water and the wind

grew so much, he writes: "that there was no less storm in the village than in the sea." Houses and churches collapsed, as well as the roots of larger trees were uprooted. At least seven men had to gather and hug each other so that the wind would not drag them away. In addition to the rigors of the climate, "we were mute and without a tongue, where we could not understand each other badly with the Indians"; in addition, there were very few supplies left and each man could not be given more than one pound of bread and another pound of bacon; moreover:

> A horseman, who was said to be Juan Velázquez, a native of Cuéllar, not wanting to wait, entered the river on his horse, and the current, as it was strong, knocked him off the horse, and he clung to the reins and drowned himself and the horse, and those Indians of that lord, who was called Dulchanchellin, found the horse and told us where we would find him down the river; and so they went for him, and his death gave us great sorrow because until then none had been missing. The horse was the dinner to many that night.

Álvar Núñez relates how food became the supreme good: in a small reconnaissance expedition, in which he went with the commissioner, Captain Castillo, Andrés Dorantes, and seven others on horseback and fifty laborers, they walked until sunset. In an entrance of the sea, there was a bank of oysters, before which they knelt and gave many thanks to God, with as much fervor as if they had found a gold mine. It also refers to how they craved venison. One night some Indians went to see Castillo, who was already healing by then, as well as Álvar Núñez and told him that their heads were hurting, asking him to cure them. He sanctified them and entrusted them to God. He was later told that the pain had been taken away; then "they went to their houses and cut a lot of prickly pears and a piece of venison, which for a long time we did not know what it was."

As in almost all the Chronicles of the Indies, in *Naufragios* anthropophagy is mentioned; Álvar Núñez also talks about the issue of cannibalism, not of the Indians, but the one practiced by the Spaniards. He writes that there were five Christians on a small ranch on the coast; for some reason, they began to die, one by one; there was so much need and hunger that "they ate each other, until there was only one left, that, being alone, there was no one to eat him..." A few pages later he relates that an expeditionary named Pantoja, by then appointed lieutenant, abused and mistreated others. The time came when one, named Sotomayor, brother of Vasco Porcallo, the one from the island of Cuba, who in the navy had come as a field master, angrily claimed him, scrambled with him, and hit him with a stick, which is how Pantoja died. This is how these Christians ended: "Those remained alive ate

those who died. The last one who died was Sotomayor, and Esquivel cut him open, and fed from him until the first of March."

With an effective naturalistic sense, Cabeza de Vaca writes with objectivity so that its pages serve as a reference to Christians who venture to go through those lands. Thus, he offers many data that are the fruit of observation:

> We saw many Indians from Florida who are archers; and, since they are so grown in body and walk naked, from afar they look like giants. They are wonderful people well disposed of, very wiry, and of very great strength and lightness. The bows they use are thick as the arm, eleven or twelve palms long, which arrow two hundred steps with such great trellis, that nothing errs.

After knowing what they were capable of, he says that they once saw about a hundred Indians in the distance and found them very large. It is not that they were so tall, clarifies the chronicler, but it is that "our fear made them look like giants". Other Indians, on the other hand, do not hunt, lie a lot, and are great drunkards: "they drink a certain thing. They run from morning to night; and they follow a deer, and, in this way, they kill many of them because they follow them until they tire them out and sometimes take them alive."

All the inhabitants they met on this earth get drunk with a cloud of smoke and give everything they have for it. They also drink a kind of tea that they take from the leaves of the trees, and put them in some boats on the fire, "they swell the water pot and so they have it on the fire and when it has boiled twice, throw it in a pot and they are cooling it with half a pumpkin; and, when it has a lot of foam, drink it as hot as you can suffer." Others "use among them sin against nature," says Álvar Núñez; "they are powerless men who dress and exercise the office of women: they do not throw bow and carry a very great load; and, among these, we saw many of them so bitter as I say, and they are more muscular than the other men and taller and suffer very great burdens."

The Indians of those inhospitable regions cured diseases by blowing the sick and then kneading their meats with their hands, with which they threw out the disease. On the aforementioned island of Mal Hado, Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca began his fame as a white sorcerer. He says he and his colleagues were made physical (doctors) "without examining us or asking us for titles." They sent them to settle down, to be of use. "We laughed [...] saying that we did not know how to heal and, for this, they took away our food", so to eat, the Sevillian had to blow the sick, make them clefts with a sharp flint where they pointed out that it hurt and suck the blood out, cauterize with fire and blow again at the end of the healing, begging God to restore their health to give them some food and to inspire them so "they get a good treatment."

At first, only he and Alonso del Castillo were encouraged to heal. One who accompanied them, a black Arabic man whom they called Estebanico, and another named Dorantes, had never healed, "but because of the much importunity we had, coming from many parts to look for, we all came to be doctors, although in daring to undertake any cure I was [the] most chosen among them." Shortly after, Álvar Núñez devised the healing procedure he had learned with them and mixed it with an act that came from the Catholic liturgy: he began by healing himself and the sick, praying a *Paternoster* and a Hail Mary; then, he prayed to God for his health and until then he set to work. He says that once they took him to a sick man who had stopped breathing. Since he could not refuse to cure him, he proceeded as he had been doing with the living, following the same steps. There were witnesses who say that he managed to revive the corpse and that the one who everyone had seen dead was now alive and healed: he had stood up, walked, eaten, and talked to them. In addition to a bow, he received as fees some flint knives that measured a span and a half.

By force of blowing and inflicted wounds, of sucking blood and imploring God, something mysterious happened. Álvar Núñez learned that the gift of healing depends on faith and the success of the trust that the patient places in the doctor or sorcerer. In addition to intuition, boldness is required. His career was on the rise; the greatest success he had as a surgeon is recounted in the following scene:

> They brought me a man and told me that he had been wounded with an arrow on his right back a long time ago, and he had the tip of the arrow over his heart; he said that he was very sorry and that, for that reason, he was always sick. I touched him and felt the tip of the arrow and saw that he had it crossed by the rod and, with a knife that I had, I opened his chest on that place; and I saw that he had the tip pierced, and it was not in a good place to take out; I went back to cut more and put the tip of the knife and, with great work, [at] last, I took it out; it was very long. And with a deer bone, using my trade, [...] I gave him some stitches and, given, he bled, and with a scrap of leather I stagnated his blood; and, when I had taken out the tip, they asked me for it, and I gave it to them, and everyone came to see it [and] they did many dances and parties, as they usually do.

Álvar Núñez seems to have taken as inspiration and model a doctor of the supernatural known as Mala Cosa, whom the Indians feared like no one else; they told him never to get too close or see him in the face ever because, if he came to see him in the face, his hair would stand on end, and he would start crying and shaking. Mala Cosa took the sick man and, first of all, made three wounds on his side, with a sharp flint knife. He would reach in and

pull out his guts. That is what they told him. He would then cut a piece and throw it into the fathoms; then he cut three times in the arm, put his hands on all the wounds, and, after doing this, the sick man healed. He appeared in an untimely way in his rituals when they were dancing; sometimes he was dressed as a woman and other times as a man. He would raise a house in suspense, put it up, and fall with it with a great blow. When he was offered to eat, he never ate; when asked where he came from and where his house was, he replied that his house was from down there.

Álvar Núñez became a doctor full of faith, intuitive and courageous, but he only healed when asked; to survive he also had to do merchant work, as he had once done in Seville. From the coast, he carried inland a sack full of snails and seashells. He returned with "leathers and almagra, with which they smear and dye their faces and hair, flints for arrowheads, paste and hard reeds to make them and tassels that are made of deer hairs, which they dye red". So he went back and forth for years, alone and naked, just as everyone walked in that region. One morning he ran into four Christians on horseback, who were surprised to see him in the company of Indians and so assimilated to them as if he were one of them: "They were looking at me for a long time, so stunned, that they didn't talk to me or ask me anything." Álvar Núñez had already acquired the appearance of someone who has survived malnutrition, storms and shipwrecks, huge walks, punishment, and the ampoules left on the skin by sea salt and the sun.

As the nobleman he was, Álvar Núñez had been fond of horses. He loved them so much that even though he was starving in Florida he could not eat the flesh of the steeds that fed his companions. Another very remarkable feature of the character of this gentleman is that he put in writing his failures and humiliations, his captivity, slavery, and mistreatment when honor in the Christian society of that time had the highest social value. In the ports of Andalusia, when setting sail for the West Indies, each expeditionary had in mind to gain wealth, power, and fame. Álvar Núñez thought that too, but he found the opposite: frustration, panic attacks, shipwrecks, wounds, weakness, hallucinations, and illnesses. He and his companions became so skinny that if anyone wanted to they could count their bones, one by one –so close to death they were, so devastated and naked. Some friendly Indians found them after one of their shipwrecks, during disaster and misery. When they asked where the others were, they had to say that they had all drowned. They sat next to them, their eyes full of tears. Little by little their crying increased and they became so "strong and so true, that far from there you could hear their sobs, and this lasted more than half an hour. Seeing that they hurt so much from us, made me and the others in the company grow more [self]compassion and consideration of our misery."

Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca ends his relationship by listing the three castaways who escaped from dying with him and where they came from: "The first is Alonso del Castillo Maldonado, a native of Salamanca, son of Dr. Castillo and Mrs. Aldonza Maldonado. The second is Andrés Dorantes, son of Pablo Dorantes, a native of Béjar and a neighbor of Gibraleón. The third is Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, son of Francisco de Vera and grandson of Pedro de Vera, who won the Canaria, and his mother was called Doña Teresa Cabeza de Vaca, a native of Jerez de la Frontera. The fourth was called Estebanico; he is black arabic, a native of Azamor."

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