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The Spectacle of Torture and Death in *A Topography and General History of Algiers*

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While it is true that *A Topography and General History of Algiers* is known to critics primarily through the relationship its author may have had with the life and works of Miguel de Cervantes, the real importance of this 1612 text rests in that it is the most complete and extensive document covering Christian captivity in Algiers in the sixteenth century.¹ Published in Valladolid as *Topographia e historia general de Argel* (henceforth referred to as the “*Topographia*”²), this text offers essential information needed to accurately comprehend the period, the values, and the ideological dynamics of the Spanish empire, at a moment in history in which the complex relationship with Muslims played a fundamental role in its development and challenges.³

The *Topographia* is a complex work, with a totalizing intent, in content as well as in formal structure. It is divided into various parts that explore Spanish captivity in Algiers. The book is composed of five sections that include three distinct literary genres:

- The “topographia” as such, a descriptive treatise of Algiers, which combines information on history, sociology, art, ecology, and ethnography.
- The “Epítome de los reyes de Argel” (“Summary of the Kings of Algiers”), in which the author presents the character, successes, and failures of the different kings of the city, from “Aruch Barbarroja” (1516) to “Mostaphá Bajá” (1596), contextualized within a basic chronicle of Algerian history of those years.

- Three dialogues, “Diálogo de la captividad de Argel” (The Dialogue on Captivity in Algiers), “Diálogo de los mártires de Argel” (The Dialogue on Martyrs from Algiers) and “Diálogo de los morabutos de turcos y moros” (The Dialogue on the Turkish and Moorish Holy Men), with literary pretensions, according to George Camamis (63), in which two characters discuss topics related to captivity, individual cases of Christian captives in Algiers, and other theological issues. “Sosa” is one of the characters in these three dialogues, and he, presumably, offers the point of view of the supposed author, Antonio de Sosa.

From the previous description, the *Topographia* would appear to be a work lacking in unity. However, the distinct parts are connected by narrative technique, both through the presence of Sosa as a participant in the three dialogues, and by internal references made in these dialogues to the first two sections.

The topics that unify the contents of the *Topographia* are the perception of the radical Otherness of the Algerian Muslims, the representation of the Christians’ cruel deaths, and, finally, the need to leave a testimony of all that is happening in Algiers. One of the speakers in the *Topographia* refers to the lives and deaths of Christians in Algiers, stating that

Es esta materia tan larga, que si de todos los que matan cada año hubiésemos de hacer relación y memoria particular sería no acabar; realmente la crueldad desta gente y el gusto con que matan los cristianos, y las invenciones de muertes y martirios que para eso inventaron son de manera que no parecen de hombre, mas de bestias y demonios infernales. (II: 122–23)

(This material is so much that, if we were to relate the individual story of all of those that are killed each year there would be no end; truly the cruelty of these people and the pleasure with which they kill the Christians, and their inventions for death and martyrdom that were made for that purpose appear to be not of man, but of beasts and infernal demons.)

In this essay, I focus specifically on the numerous episodes of the *Topographia* centered on the torture and death of Christian captives, which are found primarily in “Diálogo de la captividad” and “Diálogo de los mártires de Argel.” My objective is to analyze the notions of body, pain, and death as presented in these episodes. To do this, it is necessary to keep in mind that we are dealing with concepts that are subject to cultural mutability, and, thus, are not absolute entities. Rather, such ideas regarding the body and mortality are rooted in culture and history, and have multiple meanings,

which vary according to time and place. Finally, I will pay special attention to how these meanings of body, pain, and death are constituted in the extreme conditions of captivity, a moment of marginalization that forces the subject to reposition itself. This analysis will contribute to revealing the diverse discourses that give life (not always harmoniously) to this complex work, a diversity which is to be expected, since the text intends to present a moment of crisis, both personal and political.

The two dialogues, “Diálogo de la cautividad” and “Diálogo de los mártires,” which focus on the suffering human body, are located squarely, both physically and symbolically, in the middle of the *Topographia*. The human figure is the focal point around which the author constructs a discursive conglomerate based on an analysis of torture and death, situations that test the limits of the body’s materiality. In these two episodes, the bodies of the Christian captives occupy the narrative center. They are subjected to a brutalized sensorialization process that strives to appeal to the readers through a provocatively graphic presentation. In essence, the narrative attempts to emphasize the effects of violence on the physical person, constructing a complex vision of pain that is attached to the elaboration of a portrait of the Other, perceived as cruel and irrational. That Other exercises a constant violence that causes a sense of threat to pervade the entire text.

In the two following passages, the readers’ attention is drawn to, more than anything else, the minute details of torment, and the recurring presence of blood and of the physical effects of the acts of violence:

[E]s el tormento tan terrible de enganchar un hombre vivo, [. . .] plantan una horca en el campo, de tres palos, y del de arriba cuelgan una polea o garrucha con su soga [. . .] clavan un gran [. . .] gancho de hierro muy agudo y muy firme, y alzando al pobre y mezquino cristiano con la soga de la polea [. . .] le dexan caer sobre el garabato, y como es agudo de punta, por cualquier parte o miembro del cuerpo que toque en él queda traspasado y colgado, o de una pierna, o de un brazo, o de una espalda, o de una lado, o de otra parte, y algunas veces de la barba. Y desta manera le dexan, hasta que al cabo de dos ó tres días acaba, con terribles dolores, miseramente sus días [. . .] no hay palmo de tierra desos campos de Argel, [. . .] que no den testimonio destas sur carnicerías. (II: 123)

(the torment of hooking a living man, [. . .] placing a gallows in the field, with three poles, and from the upper one they hang a pulley with a rope [. . .] they nail a [. . .] sharp and strong iron hook, and raising the poor, miserable Christian with the pulley’s rope [. . .] they let him fall on the hook, and since it is sharp at the point, any part or limb that lands on it is pierced and hanging, whether a leg, or an arm, or the back, or one side, or another part, or sometimes the chin. And in this manner he

is left, until after two or three days he ends, with terrible suffering, his days [. . .] there isn't an inch of land in these fields of Algiers [. . .] that can't give testimony of these butcherings.)

The vivid description of the torment and death of the Christian captives is occasionally completed with an equally compelling report of the unsettling way in which their bodies were disposed of:

[E]stando todos los [. . .] cristianos, maniatados, [. . .] a grandes y fieras cuchilladas, los hicieron pedazos, hendiéndoles las cabezas, cortándoles los brazos, jarretándoles las piernas, y todos los otros miembros del cuerpo. Hecho esto, y que aquellos crueles turcos y renegados, se hartaron en los cuerpos cristianos, mandó [. . .] que [. . .] ninguno fuese osado enterrarles, ni aun echarlos a la mar, mas que allí en aquellos muladares los comiesen perros y las aves del cielo. (III: 35)

([B]eing all of the [. . .] Christians, tied up, [. . .] with great and ferocious stabs, they were cut to pieces, splitting their heads, cutting their arms, amputating their legs, and all of the other limbs of their body. This done, the cruel Turks and renegades, having had their fill upon the Christian bodies, were ordered [. . .] that [. . .] the bodies not be buried, nor even throw them to the sea, rather that there in the dumps they should be eaten by dogs and birds.)

In these descriptions, the text creates a canvas in which the central focus is the tortured body, bloody and deformed, thrust before the eyes of the reader. The tortured and martyred body without proper burial and destroyed by the Muslim is the true protagonist of these scenes. Despite its human and animal tormentors, the body's literary agency is realized through its overwhelming impact on the reader/viewer.

Martyred Christian captives continue a Spanish tradition of sacrifice and devotion,⁵ and they are, thus, set in an historical and religious process that validates and elevates their existence by incorporating their experiences into a larger framework. The "Diálogos" use hagiographic stories as a prime source material in their presentation of the captives as martyrs. This genre was popular during the Middle Ages, and in the sixteenth century was received with great admiration and with a renewed public appreciation. Some of the most popular hagiographic texts were the *Flos Sanctorum* by Rivadeneyra (1599–1601), the *Actas de los mártires* by Gallonio and the *Martirologio jesuita* (1571). It should be noticed that more works were generated in this genre during the sixteenth century than in all of the previous years since the appearance in the fourth century of what is considered the first martyrology, the *Martirologio oriental*.

Together with a clear intent to update the earlier models used, there are

various reasons for what we could call a “boom” in new volumes of the genre in the second half of the sixteenth century. The persecutions carried out by the Huguenots, by Henry VIII, or by Muslims (primarily Turks) in their Mediterranean domains offer many examples of martyrdom. Martyrologies were favored by the Catholic Reform spirit that arose after the Council of Trent, and were increasingly published inside and outside of Spain (Parreño 13). As such, in 1556, Matiya Vlacic published the *Catalogus Testius Veritatis*, John Fox presented his *Book of Martyrs* in 1554, and the *Histoire des martyrs persécutés et mis à mort pour la verité de l’Evangeli* by Jean Crespin appeared that same year.

The Catholic response came immediately and, as noted by José María Parreño, “La batalla se dará en varios frentes: nace la arqueología paleocristiana (se excavan en 1579 las catacumbas de Santa Priscila), se recogen testimonios de las persecuciones sufridas a su vez por los católicos bajo las distintas iglesias reformadas, se elaboran santorales exóticos” (14) (The battle took place on several fronts: Paleochristian archeology is born [the catacombs of Saint Priscilla are excavated], testimonies are recorded of prosecutions suffered by Catholics under the Reformed churches, exotic saints’ stories are created). The *Topographia*, and in particular the “Diálogo de los mártires de Argel,” could be related to the texts in this last category, as an instrument destined to elevate the captive beyond physical and emotional degradation.

In the *Topographia*, pain is sanctified as an imitation of the Passion and death of Christ; to a certain extent, the tortured captives are founded on such models of faith, as redeemers of Christian suffering. The captive’s body, associated with spiritual perfection, acquires a symbolic nature that transcends personal experience, and becomes permeable and malleable in order to adjust to the broad messages about the Algerian captives’ experience, and its connotations, both religious and, even more so, socio-political. The Algiers captive automatically gains standing in the collective imagination’s perception by being compared to cultural icons whose value as a model (at the time) is indisputable. The captive is no longer just an ordinary individual, but rather a hero whose experience constitutes the natural continuation, updated for the time and circumstances, both as a martyr who died for Christ and also as a Christ figure. The experience of the captive, then, is elevated beyond his or her individual degradation, and the martyr-legend, as well as the story of Christ’s passion, constitute a pre-text that provides canonical authority to the descriptions of suffering captives in the *Topographia*.

The ideological equation of captive into martyr, and substitution for Christ, was particularly important at the end of the sixteenth century, when readers, and even the contemporary authority, saw in the word “Africa” a certain taste of failure. It was already clear at the time that the Mediterranean had begun its political and economic decline, losing its catalyzing role in

European life. When the *Topographia* was written, the Peninsula had already lost much interest in North African politics, especially once Felipe II made a shift in his policy concerns away from the Mediterranean and towards the Atlantic (Braudel II: 42). A text such as the *Topographia* is not just a desperate attempt to remind or alert the readers of the situation of captives in Algiers, but also a reminder of the overall Hispanic interests in North Africa in a broader sense.⁶ The clearest intention of these passages is, then, one of propaganda. However, in order to achieve this there is an urgent need to make the reader think of the necessity of freeing the captives, and of the unending and constantly imminent Turkish threat.

The specific Algerian martyrology of the *Topographia*, then, reaches beyond pious intentions to convert itself into an instrument of dual propaganda: religious and political. Algiers was a threatening place for the collective Peninsular conscience, not only because of the presence of Christian captives in the city, but also because it signified a moving representation of the cultural *mestizaje*, in which men and women of different nations, religions, and cultures lived under rules that were understood with great difficulty by the Spanish mentality of the time. In this cosmopolitan and mixed setting, a sort of “upside-down society” was created, in which the cultural, social, economical, and sexual codes which ruled the life of Christian Europe did not hold true. Through textual representations found in the *Topographia*, which were based on the reiteration of known stereotypes and the recycling of previously “digested” recognized texts, the threat of the unfamiliar is exorcised and it becomes possible to construct a familiar space, stripped of a great deal of its apparent danger. The knowledge of Algiers provided by Sosa (of its history, geographical features, and economy, and also of the living conditions of the captives during his time in the city) acts, then, as an instrument of occidental power that codifies Algiers and domesticates it.

However, the abuse shown in the *Topographia* acquires more complex connotations if we take into account that the primary function of the practice of torture is, as suggested by Elaine Scarry, to strip the victim of an authentic voice and to suppress language, and with that, to deny humanity (20). Torture serves functions that are on the one hand political (eliminating movements and individuals opposed to the dominant ideology) and, on the other hand, linguistic (appropriating the voices of opposition and suppressing language by means of pain). By equating the infliction of pain with the suppression of language, Scarry arrives at the conclusion that the expression of this pain through language leads to a lessening of the pain and, I would add, also leads to a lessening of the power that employs pain to its own ends. Pain inflicted by authority constitutes a negating element of humanity, as it is used to establish authority by ceding its incontestability. The expression of this pain contributes, simultaneously, to the recuperation of the humanity of the victims, and to the destabilization of the oppressor’s

power. The representation of pain and death also destabilizes the system from within, as well as the values that the victims embody officially. The values that they carry are under constant threat of suppression, just as their tortured and disappeared bodies are. The mistreatment and death of captives in Muslim lands eliminates the illusion of Spanish/Christian superiority, and reveals the weaknesses of an Empire that cannot prevent the elimination of its subjects for political or religious motivations by the enemy.

On a symbolic level, each account of torture and elimination transcends the individual anecdote and brings to the foreground the instability of the imperial Spanish power. The expression of pain and death is two-fold, since it questions Muslim power while at the same time, however, reveals the crisis of the Spanish political and social system where these writings are born.

In the middle of the sixteenth century, the time of the greatest Inquisitorial activity, torture was an institutionalized practice with a normalized function within the social and legal framework, at a time when the society had not yet reached, for example, the rejection of human suffering as a way of learning. This public normalization and, at times, even sanctification of pain, is validated in the *Topographia* in passages in which Moors or Turks are subjected to Inquisitorial treatment, as is the case of Alicax; in Valencia in 1576, he was burned in public for his crimes, after obstinately declaring that “era moro y que moro quería morir” (III: 143) (he was a Moor and as a Moor he wanted to die).

But the spatial transfer of the Other and the shifting power dynamics also bring the problematization of the concept of institutionalized violence. The act of inflicting pain is directly related to the dynamics of the exercise of power, and appears as an acceptable practice when it does not alter the understood “natural order” based on religious and racial parameters, which grant Christians the dominant position in their relations with Muslims. In Algiers, this supposed “natural order” was inverted, and the Christian captive lost the privileged position. In this new context, pain loses its legalized and ordering role, and is rejected in the text, because it is perceived as the result of acts of gratuitous violence. Pain itself is not questioned; rather it is the arbitrariness that is seen as the focus of the attacks against the Turks’ cruelty, in an act of resistance through which they are not accepted as legitimate sources of authority:

Y en la verdad, como la principal causa que mueve a estos bárbaros infieles para matar cristianos y hartarse en su sangre, sea el odio inmortal que tienen al nombre y fe de nuestro Señor Jesucristo no se han de mirar en tales casos y muertes, los achaques que ellos toman, ni las razones que dan y inventan, porque o es en sí la causa y ocasión muy pequeña, o siempre injusta de parte dellos. (III: 137)

(And in truth, as the principal reason that moves these barbarian infidels to kill Christians and to rejoice in their blood, is the immortal hate that they have for the name and faith of Our Lord Jesus Christ we should not look in such cases and deaths the blame that they place, nor the reasons that they give and invent, because the cause and occasion is either very minor, or unjust on their part.)

The text arises from the inability to comprehend and adapt to the Algerian universe, and the changes in the order of reality that take place in this space inhabited by the Other. Faced with the confusion that the incomprehensibility of this new reality brings, the representation of the suffering body and the emphasis on its materiality are the tools used to regain control over it. The *Topographia* seeks ownership of the representation of the captive body in order to repossess it and (re)appropriate the pain it has been subjected to, and, with that operation, it assumes agency over the entire captive experience.

The text takes over the representation of individual torture to cause a collective effect that transcends the specific experiences, and it offers a totalizing solution to the fact that the frames of reference have failed, in what we could characterize, as Shoshana Felman states, as a crisis of truth/reality (5). Recovering the voice, the pain, and, symbolically, also the lost power, is one of the primordial mechanisms that moves the narrative threads of the *Topographia*. In this way, the pain derived from the captives' torture follows a process of recreation through discourse that gives back to the debased subject not only humanity, but also the ability to interpret reality, and, with that, to (re)appropriate one's own voice. The text functions as a means of infiltration into the situation, and transmission of the reality experienced, when all of the other forms of knowledge and expression have been blocked. The final objective of the text is not only to record the events, but, rather, and above all, to contemplate them, and, eventually, transform them. The reader will be the one who, in the end, grants testimonial validity to the experiences of cruelty recorded in the narration. In the text, there is a clear consciousness of the effect that the narration has on these events:

Y siendo cualquiera destes tormentos de que usan tan terribles, y el espectáculo de tan grandes crueldades tan horrendas, que solamente oírlo decir y la representación imaginaria dello hace temblar las carnes y erizar los cabellos con espanto. (II: 124)

(And being so terrible any one of these torments that they use, and so horrendous the spectacle of such great cruelties, that just to hear it told, and the imaginary recreation of it makes the body tremble and one's hairs stand on end out of shock.)

In order to give more weight to this effect, the narrator repeatedly delights in the presentation (in great detail) of the processes of torture and death that the captives are subjected to, with descriptions of a ferocious naturalism. One example is a passage in which the Moor, Caxetta, avenges the death of his brother, Alicax, who was condemned by the Holy Office in Valencia (mentioned earlier), through the torture of the priest fray Miguel de Aranda:

Llevaba el santo varón vestido una camisa [. . .] que era el mismo vestido con que le habían cautivado [. . .] El moro Caxetta [. . .] echándole mano a las barbas [. . .] le arrancó un gran número de cabellos, [. . .] echó mano a un gran manojo de brusca o ramos de leña seca [. . .] y pegándole fuego [. . .] con él le quemó lo que de las barbas quedara y juntamente los ojos y toda la cara [. . .] truxeron [. . .] mucha de aquella leña y brusca que estaba por allí, y cubriendo con ella todo el cuerpo ya muerto, le pusieron fuego, el cual luego se encendió en grandes llamas, las cuales, aun los que estábamos por la ciudad [. . .] víamos que subían al cielo. (III: 152–54)

(The holy man wore a shirt [. . .] which was the same clothing they had captured him in [. . .] Caxetta the Moor [. . .] pulling his beard [. . .] pulled out a great number of hairs, [. . .] took a large handful of kindling or dry firewood [. . .] and setting fire [. . .] with it burned what was left of the beard and also his eyes and all of the face [. . .] they brought [. . .] much of that wood and kindling that was nearby, and covering with it the entire dead body, they set fire to him, a fire which later blazed with great flames, which even those of us that were in the city [. . .] could see rising to the sky.)

Voice, which was previously denied to the victims, is recovered through the powerful descriptions and the level of violence they transmit, and through the cruel materiality they are based on, in an act of repossession that (re)creates the suffering of torture and the emptiness of death, granting them an opening towards new meaning. At the same time, the text reveals another primordial mechanism: an appeal, a hope for compassion. But this also has the effect of overwhelming the reader, who is forced to confront this material instability, and the reality of a destabilized world, at an historic moment marked by the start of the profound crisis that will have an impact on the Spanish empire as of the sixteenth century, and which, from the perspective of an abandoned captive, will give greater urgency to the central, irresolvable problem that Algiers had become. The destabilization that Algiers represents, and that the narration reinforces, gains a wider meaning in the context of imperial crisis, and applies not only to the characters, but expands also towards the reality of the readers. The abandonment felt by the captives is not so different from the disorientation and instability lived by

those who would receive the text in the Iberian Peninsula, who were also beginning to lose the ideological pillars that supported their existence. The text, and the reality it represents, transcend its localized, concrete origin, and evoke a wider sentiment that will have an impact on the cultural development of early modern Spain.

In a moment of cultural, political, and religious confrontation, in which values have entered into a process of dissolution, the *Topographia* presents a renewed concept of corporality. The notion of the body reaches beyond the merely physical, as the victims' voices are recovered after experiencing an extreme situation of torture and violent death. Based on the genre of martyrologies that the Counter-Reformation brought back to the center of the socio-cultural discourse, and through a discourse of cruelty born of the observation of violence, the *Topographia* verbally develops a spectacle for the senses that features the suffering human body as protagonist, and subverts the official stance by introducing the concepts of crisis, violence, and instability at its core.

Notes

1. The relationship between Cervantes and the author of the *Topographia*, Antonio de Sosa, is not only biographical, but textual. Both lived in Algiers between 1577 and 1580, during their respective captivities. In addition, in the twenty-fifth story of the "Diálogo de los mártires de Argel," the story of Cervantes' second escape attempt is told, and after the discovery of this information by Fray Martín Sarmiento in 1752, it became possible to track down the baptismal record (in Alcalá de Henares) of the author of *Quijote*. Additionally, Sosa is the most important witness in *Información de Argel*, which is composed of different testimonies compiled by Cervantes in 1580. See Juan Antonio Pellicer, *Noticias literarias para la vida de Cervantes* (1778), I: 217–223, and also *Información de Miguel de Cervantes de lo que ha servido á S.M. y de lo que ha hecho estando captivo en Argel . . .*
2. The complete title that appears in the *princeps* edition is *Topographia e historia general de Argel, repartida en cinco tratados, do se veran casos estraños, muertes espantosas, y tormentos exquisitos, que conviene se entiendan en la Christiandad: con mucha doctrina, y elegancia curiosa*. It was published in Valladolid, "por Diego Fernandez de Cordoua y Ouiedo [. . .], a costa de Antonio Coello [. . .], 1612." There is a copy of this *princeps* edition in various Spanish libraries. For this essay I have consulted one of the copies kept in the National Library of Madrid (R/3439).
3. Surprisingly, the *Topographia* has not been much studied until relatively recently. George Camamis gave this text a prominent place in his general study of captivity in the Golden Age (1977), a fundamental starting point for all of the later analyses, and also a rich source for Emilio Sola and José María Parreño in their edition of the *Diálogo de los mártires de Argel* (1990), and most especially for the magnificent pages that María Antonia Garcés dedicates to the *Topographia* in *Cervantes in Algiers: A Captive's Tale* (2002) and in the revised Spanish edition in 2005.
4. The only modern edition of the complete work was realized in three volumes between 1927 and 1929, with the Prologue written by Ignacio Bauer y Landauer,

published by the Sociedad de Bibliófilos Españoles. The quotations used in the present study correspond to this modern edition. Bauer divided the work into three volumes, which I refer to respectively as I, II, and III, and in my quotations I remit to the specific page numbers in each of those volumes. In volume I Bauer included “Topografía o descripción de Argel . . .” and the “Epítome . . .”; in volume II is found the “Diálogo de la captividad,” while volume III is made up of “Diálogo de los mártires” and “Diálogo de los morabutos.” In 1990, Emilio Sola and José María Parreño reedited the *Diálogo de los mártires*. Also, the *Topographia* has generated great historical interest in France, where Dr. Monnereau and A. Berbrugger translated some chapters from the first treatise and H.D. de Grammont translated the “Epítome” in its entirety. See the *Works Cited* section for complete reference information for these partial editions.

5. For a study of the textual anti-Muslim propaganda, see in particular Daniel, who frames this problematic in a European context and studies in depth its medieval roots, and Bunes Ibarra, who specifically analyzes texts centered on the representation of Muslims in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Spanish texts.
6. Luis del Mármol Carvajal found many difficulties publishing the Second part of his *Descripción General de África* in 1599, and possibly this helps to explain the delay in the publication of the *Topographia* from its writing, around 1580, to its publication, in 1612.

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