

The Account as Literature

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from *The Account: Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's Relación*. Houston: Arte Público Press, 1993. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

The Account's vivid descriptions, personal tone and down-to-earth style appeal to readers. Its drama and novelistic structure give it suspense. In recent years interest has grown in *The Account* as a literary text. Perhaps one of the most readable studies is William T. Pilkington's essay, appended as an epilogue to the reprinting of Cyclone Covey's translation.

Cabeza de Vaca's work, typical of many chronicles, lacks the polish of "literary" texts. Lacking some rhetorical devices and showing grammatical imperfections, its long sentences embody the naturalness of conversational discourse.

The author's narrative structure appears to have been influenced by heroic romances; he presents events in an increasingly novelistic manner as the text progresses (Bost "History"; Hart). *The Account* is easily divided into three sections. The first, relating the events of a seven-year span, goes through Chapter 19 and emphasizes the life of affliction endured by Cabeza de Vaca and his companions, a life filled with hunger, slavery and all kinds of vicissitudes. The second part, encompassing the following two years, tells of the four men's journey to Mexico and of Cabeza de Vaca's return to Spain, all in Chapters 20 to 37. The final Chapter gives a summary of what happened to the members of the expedition who did not remain in Florida (Hart xxvii).

The circular structure of the text is thus evident, with all details tied up at the end. This imaginative arrangement of elements, as Bost points out ("History," 106), reinforces the central motif of the work, that of a journey, a true odyssey that shows the relationship of *The Account* to heroic literature as defined by Northrop Frye. In *The Account*, Cabeza de Vaca goes forth to struggle against the antagonistic forces that so often work against him, overcoming these forces and in the end returning and being recognized as a hero.

The narrative begins in the manner of a chronicle of historical events: "On the seventeenth day of the month of June of 1527, Governor Pánfilo de Narváez departed from the port of San Lúcar de Barrameda by Your Majesty's authority and orders, to conquer and govern the provinces which lie on the mainland from the River of Palms to Cape Florida." Near the beginning of the narrative, when Narváez gives the order to go overland through Florida to the region of Apalachee, Cabeza de Vaca, wishing to exonerate himself, tells Narváez that his orders will lead them to failure and thus presages subsequent events. In the final chapter, he reinforces this foreshadowing device much in the manner of fiction, by telling of a woman on board the ships who said to her shipmates that the men going overland would not survive, indeed, that it would be miraculous for any

them to survive. She claims that a certain Moorish woman from the town of Hornachos in Spain had prophesied the disaster.

Even real events are integrated into the narration in a dramatic and novelistic fashion. The violent storms which occurred in Cuba and on the Gulf of Mexico add notes of excitement and suspense. The reader notices how the number of the Spanish contingent diminishes until only a few pitiful survivors are washed up on the shores of the Isle of Misfortune. Here the narrator relates with realism, intimacy and deep human feeling how the castaways prayed to God for deliverance, shed many tears and took pity on one another. The personal tone of the narrative prevents *The Account* from being simply the chronicle of an expedition.

The writer uses many occasions like this one in the narrative to delve more deeply into his own character and that of his companions, mentioning several times his stoicism in the face of every kind of adversity: cold, weariness, hunger and peril. The men are able to survive countless tribulations because of this attitude and their deep faith in God. As he tells how difficult it was to gather firewood in the thickets, Cabeza de Vaca mentions his bleeding cuts and scratches (ch. 22). At that time he took comfort in the thought that the sufferings of his redeemer, Jesus Christ, were greater than his own. The men's faith is also demonstrated by their unflinching custom of giving thanks to God each time they successfully overcome a difficult situation. The Spaniards attributed to Divine mercy and goodness anything positive that happened. When Indians began to bring them sick people for healing, the men commended themselves to God and prayed for healing for the afflicted persons. Their "patients" invariably felt cured, and the four men eventually gained great renown as shamans. Aside from the novelistic presentation of the healings and of the role of psychological suggestion in Native American folk medicine, a deep religious faith stands out. As Hart indicates, the central characters undergo successive stages of development. Starting out as conquistadors, they subsequently are forced into slavery; later they become shamans and are revered by the Indians (xxxv).

The most frequent interpretive system used by Cabeza de Vaca is that of Christian symbols. Cabeza de Vaca not only considers the healings the result of Divine intervention, and he not only calls to mind the sufferings of Jesus; he also establishes in his text an implicit parallel between the deeds and status of Jesus and his disciples and those of the four survivors, who are also healers, preachers, and peacemakers (Lewis 692-93). Álvar Núñez starts out as a Spanish gentleman, but he and his companions develop such empathy for the indigenous peoples among whom they live that they become completely acculturated, and when the four men finally encounter other Spaniards, both Indians and Europeans refuse to accept them as Spaniards. The great journey of Cabeza de Vaca, narrated with feeling, faith and charity towards the native peoples, thus becomes the story of his own development.

Pilkington observes that Cabeza de Vaca's narrative is a prototype of later American writing for its portrayal of the struggle for accommodation between races, its metaphysical quality and its allegorical framework (146). It is

characteristically American as a text radiating a spiritual quality and as Pilkington notes, one “concerned with ultimates—with a person’s relationships to God, to the universe, and to his own soul” (148). Cabeza de Vaca’s journey is a journey to his inner self, not only the chronicle of his travels and wandering, but the autobiography of his personal and spiritual transformations.

Works cited:

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