

# The Lost Modernity: 1436-1439 (Alfonso de Cartagena and Leonardo Bruni<sup>1</sup>)

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## Abstract

This work shows the transcendence that had to Modernity the polemic that confronted the Italian Leonardo Bruni and the Castilian Alonso de Cartagena about the translation of Aristotle. That episode was premonitory of two tendencies that found their way into Modernity to the present: a unidirectional Modernity, colonial, and a plural Modernity, mestiza. In this manner, it is revealed the existence of a lost Modernity that was not built from the binary parameters of imperial and colonial power.

## Keywords

Aristotle, Leonardo Bruni, Alonso de Cartagena, philology, converts, antisemitism, humanism.

“...aquéllos dirigen el mundo con la multiplicidad de sus libros”<sup>2</sup>  
Alonso de Cartagena

## 1. Unidirectional Modernity vs. Plural Modernity

Between 1436 and 1439 a dispute took place in Europe that would turn out to be a destiny for Modernity. The character of that inaugural moment was philological, but there was something much more profound at stake than a translation issue. During those three decisive years, an Italian, Leonardo Bruni, and a Castilian, Alonso de Cartagena, argued about the correct way of translating the *Ethics* of Aristotle. Both contestants knew that such a philological problem hid a cosmos of cultural, social, and political decisions which, still to them, were unresolved. Modernity *in nuce* was beginning to unfold on both sides. In that polemic certain lines of action and thought began to function, which in the end would configure the entire Modernity. And it happened, precisely, because the effective history of this polemic shows how Modernity configured its conditions of possibility, reducing and neutralizing the liberating and pluralistic potential from one of the sides, although it never fully erased it from its core. This liberating face, which has Cartagena as its representative, will be the *lost Modernity*, plural, the Modernity of losers, of those condemned by the victorious Modernity, the *unidirectional Modernity*, foreshadowed with radical power by Bruni.

It would be illegitimate in every sense to capture the contestants in both categories, by attributing Cartagena the idea and defense of a plural and lost Modernity, against Bruni, a paladin of the finally victorious imperial/colonial Modernity. The value of their stance resides, rather, in its genealogical character. The theses from both contestants placed on the European game board the fundamental structure for the development of Modernity, in a moment in which, still, all had to be decided, but which—from the perspective of the contemporary reader—clearly offered the effect of their coincidences. Cartagena’s defeat reaches us today. Modernity was configured in Bruni’s imperial spirit. Paradoxically, it will be Castile, and the systemic Hispanism, the ones which will encourage Bruni’s imperial/colonial Modernity. The first place where Cartagena lost the battle was Spain, being himself both witness and victim. This defeat spread to the rest of Europe to the present day. Modernity was thus built over this initial failure; from then on, its most somber gesture was expanded through the “light” of faith, reason, Enlightenment, and technology. But this would take us beyond the space of a text such as this.

In a sense, it could be said that the hidden face of Modernity was the losing side, that is, its luminous part, the one which defended the irreducible plurality of human beings over lineages and nations.<sup>3</sup> There was another germinal Modernity, a lost Modernity. Therefore, Modernity was not constitutively born under the solar attraction of colonialism<sup>4</sup>. The latter became finally its “agenda,”<sup>5</sup> but this does not entail it was its nature. There was a lost Modernity which survived despite defeat, whose origin traces back to the Hispanic converts of the fifteenth century.

Therefore, we should also speak of a lost Europe. Very often, the idea of Europe is considered as if it had always been an evident historical and ontological reality, from which a single Modernity sprang, being hers and indelible<sup>6</sup>. But the idea of Europe also belongs to the creative processes produced by the systemic powers of philosophical-academic invention. Hegel does not invent the idea of the *heart of Europe*; he simply steals it from Italy to deliver it to the Prussian nationalism. Thus, the identification of the historical process of Modernity as the effluence of an evident identity called Europe is due to the logical colonial subjugation which expects to overcome, for it assumes, as an historical and ontological truth, the existence of a continent which is a transmitter of the colonial global process. Well, the idea of such a continent was the result of a coeval creation process, or even subsequent, to that of the invention of America. Therefore, it seems fundamental to put into question the very same idea of Europe as a unitary and evident entity, for it was precisely this, the idea that was driven forward by the Hegelian Nazism of Schmitt,

nurturing every civilizational narcissistic urge.<sup>7</sup> There is no colonial process, no genocidal action committed by the different European Empires over the rest of the world, which had not been performed already in Europe amongst the Europeans. In this sense, if the aim is to elaborate the genealogy and criticism of the global construction of Modernity, it cannot be sustained the notion of a Europe of States, as the emitter core, and the rest of the world, as the receptive periphery, such as it was configured by Hegel and developed by the philosophical-juridical fascism of Carl Schmitt.

The idea of Europe is not so evident, and usually refers to an idea of imperial Europe, which was born (or reborn) during the Italian Renaissance, affirming the existence of a European imperial core of irradiation which conformed the entire Continent. And this already took place around the fourteenth century, in the early Renaissance, long before the considerate Europe of the modern states, erected about the sixteenth century. This imperial idea which had come before any *ratio* of European state, moved to Spain and to the heart of Europe (Hegel). In the debate between Bruni and Cartagena we discover the genealogical roots of the process in significant moments of the debate, such as the one about the eccentricity of Hispania against the centrality of Italy. Italy is for Bruni the heart of Europe. Hegel will steal the Italian heart several centuries later.

We should better speak of *Europes*. To handle the problem of colonialism as the product of Modernity born within a continent would imply forgetting the plurality of modernities and of Europe as continent. In such sense, we would be assuming the very paradigm of the unity between civilization and *ratio* from which the modern colonialism has lived to the present and which began its global course in the Hispanic entrails, as the first great exporter of Europe's heart beats upon the world. However, within the triumphant colonial Modernity and imperial Europe there was always an alternative Modernity and a diverse/marginal Europe, which could not be completely obliterated, despite the expulsions and the Hispanic programs against the Jews and the subsequent genocides.

## 2. The “correct edition”

In the history of the reception of the polemic between Bruni and Cartagena, the philological criticism<sup>8</sup> was inclined to adopt two different standpoints: that of partiality and that of impartiality. The partial trend has interpreted the debate concerning the translation of Aristotle taking the side of one of its constants. As for the impartial critics, these have distributed the trials and errors of each of its litigators. Both interpretations assume the paradigm of the “correct edition.”<sup>9</sup>

Both the partial and the impartial critic adopt what we could describe as a Cartesian standpoint, according to which the reader-editor-critic externally gains access to the texts involved in the debate and, from this exteriorization, begins to deductively weave the correct organization of the real matter, that is, the idea of a correct edition, which serves as a scale for judging the contenders, depending on how close or far they may be from the truth organized by the critic. In this manner, the reader is under the impression that the critic has been able to place himself in a position of privileged objectivity, which allows him to make decisions regarding the contenders.

This double standpoint—which I here name Cartesian—of the modern philological critic (whether partial or impartial) is based, in turn, upon the fundamental Platonic structure of the absolute ideal as the only reliable reality to which the translator-editor must approach through imitation. In such sense, an edition will be better or worse according to its level of approach, of participation, and of imitation to a correct hypothetical ideal translation. Cartesian-Platonic philosophy cannot override this structure, not even considering pragmatically the idea of the “correct edition” as a regulative ideal to which aspire, despite never attaining it. This more flexible, liberal, Kantian perspective, so to speak, will only have influence at the level of flexibility in relation to the ideal: from the perspective of the Cartesian-Platonic philosopher, Bruni or Cartagena would “gain” in the contest according to the level of nearness to the unattainable regulative ideal in the edition of Aristotle’s *Ethics*.

Notwithstanding, other methods of philological reading have been suggested, aimed at overcoming the paradigm of the “correct edition,” which may be useful to this investigation. As critics, the traditional strategy obliges us to make decisions concerning truth, which take us far from the goal of this research: that is, to identify not the truth of a philological-philosophical problem, but its “sense” as genealogical symptom of an effectual history of Modernity highly problematic in the globalized present. In order to attain this goal is paramount to tackle the Bruni/Cartagena episode with a different perspective to the Cartesian-Platonic and its softer derivations, such as the liberal Kantian or the neoliberal.

Bruni as well as Cartagena debated on which was the most correct edition of Aristotle’s *Ethics*. Thus, both could be considered as the pioneers of modern philology. Following their trail, the effectual history of the polemic proper was weaved within the paradigm that both contestants began to create. Therefore, those who have interpreted the polemic from the notion of a “correct edition” have strengthened the conditions of possibility of a paradigm of philological interpretation that was born with them and which

has been assumed as a truth of the philological science up to current times. However, this research aims at understanding the genesis of the emergence of a philological paradigm, that of the “correct edition,” that is, the genealogy of its conditions of possibility, just at the moment of its birth when it was being questioned and relativized. Bruni and Cartagena laid the foundations of the paradigm which, in time, became the paradigm of Modernity and that of European science. Nevertheless, from the standpoint of Cartagena, as we will see, the regulative idea of truth as the goal of the “correct edition” was always sensitive to the idea of a possible co-existence of different “correct editions.” Conversely, Bruni will consider that there is only one direction towards the truth of the ancient word, and that it could only occur in a text which was closer to the truth, but never in the co-existence of coetaneous texts.

Leonardo Bruni and Alonso de Cartagena represent both communities of readers. If the polemic is thus interpreted, we not only avoid falling into the temptation of valuating it from the unidirectional idea of the “correct edition”—which belongs to the victorious Modernity-, but we understand the debate as the undecidable confrontation between two communities of readers, in which, more than a matter of each possessing a piece of the truth (impartiality) or the total truth (partiality), we observe that each one has its “goals” in the social configuration of the truth. When considering the issue from the idea of a “plurality of intellectual communities” (Gumbrecht 32), we observe that, from an historical point of view, the polemic was resolved by favoring one type of reading as more truthful, and denying the other as being further from the ideal. Due to this, an entire social community started to be neutralized in Europe, and soon prosecuted, as the incarnation of a harmful community. The regulative ideal of the “correct edition” would become the regulative ideal of the truth, and as such, the philological error was the literary copy of the moral defect, of the lie, and of the social defect, the crime against the absolute truth. The fundamental thesis of this work is that Modernity was also born with this aspiration towards plurality, incarnated by Cartagena’s standpoint, but was finally denied at its core. European Modernity acquired a dark side,<sup>10</sup> but this conceptual and historical drift was a moment derived from a rift, in which the plural face of Modernity capitulated in favor of the sinister—colonial—side of it.

There was a gleaming side of Modernity; to reclaim it is to recover the voice of the losers of Modernity: mainly Jews, indigenes, and Muslims. It finally became a colonial agenda, but the plural and luminous stratum never ceased to exist as a fertile marginality. Hispanism was satisfied in denying this light of Modernity: that is the reason why there is

no place for Jews like Cartagena, indigenes like Garcilaso de la Vega the Inca, or Muslims in the history of the systemic Hispanism. This denial of the Hispanism was the epistemic negation which determined the rest of the global Modernity. It had its origin in the Italian Renaissance, but soon it overflowed its continental boundaries with the arrival of the Castilians to America, as bearers of the virus of the unidirectional truth. Therefore, to surpass Hispanism, as the first great global expression of the imperial Modernity, born from the Italian philology, is to surpass the history of the entire European Modernity. Nebrija represents a later philological moment. Before him there were intellectuals such as Cartagena, whose cultural program—defeated—was that of plurality.

### 3. The colonization of time

The idea of a “correct edition” assumes as an elementary stratum the confidence that there is a truth that has already been told, which must be rediscovered and reincorporated to the history of its reception. Truth must be reborn, because it has been covered with the veil of linguistic barbarism. Philology is always and before anything else that which its etymological origin simply states: love for the word. Is in this love for the word where beats the search for the truth which was once unfolded in it. The word, and the love of the philologist for it, depends on its quality of the absolute, of its quality for remaining unchanged through time, as the bearer of a manifest truth once and for all. For this reason, the time of re-discovery of the truth hidden by the historical barbarism is a time of re-birth, is the time of Renaissance as the historical time of the truth, which neutralizes the immediate past as a null time, as barbarism and darkness, and is projected towards the future as a new time which projects, with a new vitality, the absolute truth. This process of rebirth has been called *the colonization of time*,<sup>11</sup> a structure that will be recurrent in history until present times. In the same way that Brunni would take a stand with respect to the immediate past as a time without value, a zero time, against the new time of the Italian Humanism that was erected as a *novum* in order to rebuild the lost truth, the Castilians would colonize the time of America, as a continent without past, as a New World upon which the old European time was going to reconstruct the old truth which had already been said, since always. This colonization of time is the historical structure of the Renaissance utopia, from Brunni’s theory of translation to the petrous irony of Thomas More and Maquiavelo’s new prince. But for all this to occur, so that the unidirectional Modernity of Brunni may colonize time and word, first it was necessary to demolish Cartagena’s opposition to temporality and the converse word. To him, the love for the

word, and the consideration that truth had been said in this written word—discovered by the philologist—could very well lead to a time of coexistence and plurality. The text as emanation of the truth re-discovered by the philologist should not imply the colonization of time, but the construction of a new relationship with itself and its truth. In this manner, every human being remained open to the word and the truth, and to the consideration of his/her life as an incarnation of the truth in a specific time. No human being could be reduced to barbarism, nor his/her word to silence, neither his/her time to nothingness.

We can speak about philological historical periods such as those in which there was an imposition of the belief in the existence of an original golden past which that present period -inferior- had to recover, to revive. Thus, for instance, the Hellenistic period, the Patristic, the Renaissance, and nineteenth-century Romanticism would be the philological periods *par excellence*. In each of these periods, the philological spirit was motivated by the idea of recovering a lost truth. It poses no problem the statement that Hellenism saw in the Greek Classicism of Plato and Aristotle the original time of truth; the Patristic wished to solve the dilemma of installing the absolute and eternal truth of Jesus Christ into an historical time; the Renaissance will desire to save the Greek-Latin eternal word; Romanticism, on the other hand, will dream with the naïve time of the Middle Ages<sup>12</sup>. What makes the Renaissance differ from the other “philological epochs” is its will for a new beginning and the annulment of the immediate past. None of the other philological periods cited denied their immediate past as a null time in order to invoke the ancient truth that was coming to revive the present. It was around the fourteenth century when began to take shape in Italy the idea of a radical rebirth, which considered as a dead time the Medieval past and all its inheritance. In this philologically constructed hole will be thrown as to a dumping site, every people, every culture, and every human being to whom the right for an historical time is denied.

The classical idea of time, insofar as it held a circular notion of temporality, made ontologically impossible the reduction to nothing of any preceding moment. What is more, the logic of its continuity was dependent on the empirical and natural evidence of the eternal necessary continuation of the seasons. In the natural succession of time, no past time can be reduced to nothing, because the fruit is the manifestation of a previous seed. No present is self-sufficient with respect to that which immediately precedes it: the logic of circular time is constructed by an eternal solidarity of each present with the totality of past time. Each seasonal rebirth implies a manifestation of a previous truth. There is neither fruit nor harvest that can engender itself, or have been engendered in a remote past either.

That which sprouts from the present is born from the same temporal womb. There are no seasonal leaps.

Through Christianity, the idea of rebirth acquires a whole different meaning, which depends on the linear notion of time, in which the novel of salvation gradually develops, according to which, each chapter succeeds the following until the Final Judgement. Christianity will inoculate a discriminatory notion in the classical idea of rebirth. With Christianity, to be reborn already implied to deny, to consider something past as a false time, as a sin, and as such, as a nullity, a nothingness, or at the very least, as a time that must be reduced to nothing. This reduction of the sinful past to nothingness was based upon the idea of forgiveness and salvation. The false time counts as null temporality: its existence is not denied but “cleansed,” to make it a time without stain, but insofar as clean, remains divested of its being, of what it was. In the life of the Christian believer each forgotten sin entails a signal of a time which cannot be denied, because is part of the historical time line, but whose nature remains modified to such a point by forgiveness that it becomes a cleansed, immaculate time, and as such, what it was is denied -its deficient being. The whole dynamics of baptism and forgiveness is based upon this. Sin must be obliterated through forgiveness, in the same way that the philological error will be so through linguistic purity, and the barbarian through conversion. On the other hand, the one who is persistent upon sin, who tolerates linguistic plurality, and who shows himself recalcitrant in his being diverse, will not receive mercy and will be condemned, will not be able to be reborn from his previous time of sin, false word, and Judaism.

The *Gospel* of Saint John (3: 3) reads “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again,” and in the *Epistles* Saint Paul gives a canonical shape to the idea that the human being must be reborn, through Christ, to the true life, against the false life, the life which is in reality death to whom lives according to the old law. The divine essence of Christ proper was revealed in his rebirth as resurrection.

The whole time of a human—from its birth—is subjugated to the existential paradox of being born from death, for each human being is born out of the fall, and inherits the sin of its first progenitor. Baptism is the first act of forgiveness, of purification of the time of human life and the rebirth of the human being who, through baptism, recovers the true time to live in front of God. All sacraments, and the structure of Christian forgiveness, are based on the repetition of this process of denial of the nature of the past time, as a time of sin. Moreover, the metaphors of Paul and of Christianity even consider the time of sin and that of the fall as a false time, a time of death, and the time of

forgiveness, as a return to life, a time for rebirth. The political logic of time will apply the genocidal terms to this temporal structure, according to which the denial of sin and of the sinner imply none other than purification, not murder, for that which lives in sin is not really living, instead it is a false time and life, barbarian, whose word does not tell the truth nor its heart, therefore, can feel the saving sting of repentance. To a great extent, the concept of *Judaizaje* was born here, and its consequences known to all.

Around the fourteenth century, the idea of “rebirth” begins to signify a return to the works of the Greco-Romans, the return to the pure and eloquent language, to the limpid language of the past that had been lost with “the fall” into the Dark Centuries, the fall into scholastic “sin.” The return to the Greco-Roman eloquence implied the immaculate rebirth with respect to the medieval philological sin, a time whose statute had to be denied as a legitimate historical time. Christ and baptism cleansed man from Adam’s sin, allowing him to be reborn. Now were the works of the classics those which cleansed the language of the Ancient truth (Latin and Greek) from the scholastic philological sin and allowed it to be reborn and speak the truth once more, through the proper erudition. Scarcely a decade after the polemic between Brunni and Cartagena converts will be denied the right to be reborn through baptism, in the same manner that Brunni denied scholastics the possibility of cleanly speaking the truth.

But in fact, the very same essence of the convert is his condition of re-born. The Jew who receives baptism is re-born in the sacramental rebirth of the Christian faith. For this reason, the convert’s rebirth is the rebirth of plurality, that is, the person who, beyond nations and empires, beyond any historical identity, considers every human being as equal in terms of dignity. This will be denied to the Jews, for their Jewish nature will be considered as an irreversible fall and sinful. Brunni’s unidirectional Modernity will assert that scholastic language, let us say, Judeo-barbarian, could not be purified, but abhorred at its root, denying even its existence as meaningful language, and denying it as true time. It was necessary to leap over the immediate past to reach the Greco-Roman original sources.

Against the degenerate and corruptive Latin, the Italian Humanism invokes the existence of a Classical Latin, pure in its being. This philological distinction incorporated in its core binary classifications which will have a wide social, political, and cultural scope in the history of Modernity. By invoking the Latin of Rome against the scholastic Latin, the Italian Humanism was launching the idea that the language of civilization was the language of the empire. Italy was claiming its central position within the European cultural context, insofar as the direct inheritor of the Ancient Empire, leaving the rest in a secondary

position, afflicted by barbarism, which the Italian elites could “cleanse” thanks to their power of irradiation. Cartagena will be highly conscious of this assumption from the beginning, as manifested in the *motto* of the following text (“[the Italians] lead the world with the multiplicity of their books”)

What was the origin of that corruption? How could the language of civilization be corrupted? The most obvious answer was to point to the counterpart of the binary structure civilization vs. barbarism. Barbarians had corrupted the Latin of the Empire. But, who were the barbarians? We will see in the answer to this question how the traditional conferring of barbarism to the Germanic people gradually slipped towards the Jew community. In any case, the Germanic barbarians were old Christians by then. Naturally they occupied a secondary place in civilization, whose core had to return to Italy, but in no way any Christian community could be considered as barbarian. Barbarism will be reserved for the Jewish people, whose customs, laws, and culture corrupted the great Greco-Roman classical culture. Towards 1442, two years before his death, Bruni claimed that every man who desires to acquire a refined education and good manners must seek the Latin and Greek classics and run away from the barbarism of the Jews: “si disciplina et moribus imbuendi sunt homines..., multo commodius et plenius latinis et graecis litteris fieri id posse dico, quam Iudeorum barbarie<sup>13</sup>”

This viewpoint will have an internally antagonistic double destiny. Admittedly, this position of Bruni precedes reactions such as that of Machiavelli against the Judeo-Christian moral of the slave which will afterwards be extensively spoken of by Nietzsche. However, besides this liberating element, the binary configuration civilization/barbarism will also serve imperial interests, whose anti-Semitic heart will be indelible. The philological antisemitism already suggests a physiological antisemitism. In the same way that the Jew corrupted the language of civilization, his religion and traditions, he could contaminate the Word of God (Matthew: 15, 1-20)<sup>14</sup> and, even his presence, amongst Christians, corrupted the blood of the Christian (Nirenberg 2007)<sup>15</sup>.

#### **4. Humanism and Barbarism**

The consideration of the polemic between Bruni and Cartagena as a philological debate shows the limits that a good part of the effectual history of the episode has suffered. Bruni was always interested in subjecting the dispute to the technical verdicts of philology; Cartagena always resisted this, because he knew that something of much greater transcendence was involved. For this reason, he recognized and openly confessed

ignorance of the Greek language from the beginning was not such relevant a matter. Granting that the debate was a philological dispute implies taking the side of Bruni. What was being decided in such inaugural discussion was the very statute of reason and power.

Both contenders knew that what was being at play were two different projects for Europe. Cartagena lost the battle in all fronts. In the history of their academic reception, has mainly triumphed the interpretative version made of Bruni by the representative of an educated humanist project (thus, positively modern and progressive) and of Cartagena that of a recalcitrant high priest of scholastics (hence, anti-modern and reactionary) In fact, in a certain sense, this was the manner in which Bruni presented the issue and it has been maintained to a great extent since its first editor.<sup>16</sup> Philological criticism has been motivated on occasions by chauvinist urges. Amongst the Italianists the trend has been to describe Bruni as the incarnation of the great values of Humanism and as the father of modern translation, and Cartagena as an extemporaneous representative of a time of Medieval darkness (Morrás, 2002, 37).<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Hispanism has wished to rehabilitate the figure of Cartagena by focusing on the modern aspects of his standpoint.

Nevertheless, it does not seem legitimate to interpret the episode from historiographic categories such as “scholastic” or “modern,” themselves the product of an ideological process, in a strong sense, of a much later date, which drinks from the spring of one of the contestants. Moreover, Bruni’s standpoint will be the one allowing the subsequent elaboration of binary categories such as modern/Renaissance, scholastics/reaction. The root of the problem cannot be perceived if it is tackled from the categories that one of the contestants put into function even *in nuce*. It is convenient to maintain an eccentric attitude when tackling this polemic, and try not to allow oneself be trapped by the triumphant unidirectional Modernity. In any case, regarding this study, the goal is to disentangle the distinctive elements which confer this episode with a paradigmatic value, whose transcendence and echoes reverberate along the entire Modernity until the present. In both interlocutors we find the potential for two different cultural models -and in rivalry- for Modernity, from which the one represented by Bruni was victorious and indelibly marked the destiny of Europe as a cultural and political power. The linguistic purification already concealed forms of human segregation, based on cultural, social, and political prejudice. The Italian Humanism was represented with the clear conscience of being the custodian of civilization against the surrounding barbarism.

Prejudice and certain xenophobic bias were not the exclusive patrimony of Italy. At the time it was common for each European kingdom to have a specific traditional

“literary” vision about the “natural” mode of being of the rest. Maybe the convert world had a more transversal view, and less “nationalistic,” of the human being, as we will reveal. With respect to the critical view of Spain, there were several comments from Italian humanists that will attain good fortune. Even though Bruni does not reach the level of the paragraphs that we will comment upon, they are proof of the spirit of moral and cultural superiority that insufflated the Italian humanist trend.

Boccaccio, taking into account the Spanish character, wrote the famous saying “hispani semibarbari et efferati homines” (*The Spanish are semi-barbarian men and bandits*) and he also pointed to the “cadaveric color” of its people, against the luster of the Romans<sup>18</sup>. Antonio Beccadelli, the Panormita, asserted the rough character of the Spaniards, not forgetting to praise the efforts of Alfonso V of Aragon to cultivate his people, to whom he served. In *De dictis et factis Alphonsi regis* he wrote: “Hispanos vero quingentis atque eo amplius annis a studiis humanitatis, usque adeo abhorrente, ut qui letteris operam impenderent ignominia propemodum noterentur ad literatum cultum sic revocavit ut rudos propeque efferatos homines doctrina quodam modo reformaverit” (“For five centuries and more the Spanish were severed from the army of the humanities, to the point of almost having as abhorrent and inferior the man who wished to cultivate them. Such was the diligence and will that King Alonso spent to solve it that it opened the door to the remedy against such grave illness and almost attained the reformation with doctrine of the people who were naturally rough and barbaric”) It cannot be forgotten that this disdain was a compensatory expression of the Italian cultural elites, who regarded with humiliation the political prostration of their country, controlled by foreign nations. For this reason, the discredit was not limited to Spain, whose Kingdom of Aragon controlled regions such as Naples, but it reached the whole European barbarism in general, with interests in the Italian peninsula. Campano described the Germans as follows: “Rude people in their mode of living, barbarian, dedicated to hunting and a fierce war, much more inclined to robbery than to a civil cohabitation, not only did not propose the study of humanities, but were not even able to attain them . . . And now I am overcome by nausea. I feel repugnance not only for their customs, but also for the name of Germany.”<sup>19</sup>

The Renaissance emerges in Italy with this clear conscience of moral and cultural superiority, with respect to which the rest of Europe is considered as a group of semi-barbarian and rude nations.<sup>20</sup> The unfading treasure of civilization had a clear line of continuity from Greece and Rome to the Italian republics. Europe did not constitute a unity, in the sense of conforming a meaningful community, beyond Christian religion. But

it was not sufficient, on the contrary, it could be considered as a limit. Europe, for the Italian Renaissance, was a community of religion, which had a civilizational center of gravity, Italy, around which the rest of peoples and semi-barbarian nations of the continent had to gravitate. The words of Campano against Germany are identical to the invectives thrown against the Natives of America, against the Hindus, against the Africans... When the Castilians arrived to America did nothing but replicate the binary dichotomies with which a particular Italian humanism had compartmentalized its European neighbors. If we write “homunculus” where Campano says “German,” we will have a text of Ginés de Sepúlveda describing the Indians.<sup>21</sup>

In 1512, Francesco Guicciardini was commissioned as ambassador to Ferdinand the Catholic, in Spain. After such political experience, he wrote what may be considered as the canonical text against Spain, to the extent that it synthesizes all the elements that will give shape to the prejudice against its “nature” and its naturals. The echoes of the Florentine reach Montesquieu.

[The Spaniards] Are, therefore, very greedy; since they have no occupation, they are always disposed to robbery. In the past, when there was less justice in the realm, the whole country was filled with assassins. The location favored this, for everywhere there are mountains and their inhabitants are few. And since they are clever, they are good thieves. It is said, however, that the French is better lord than the Spanish, because both strip their subjects, but the French spends it quickly, and the Spanish accumulates it. Moreover, the Spanish, by being quick-witted, must know how to steal better.<sup>22</sup>

This kind of description will be a destiny in a double sense. On the first hand, because it establishes a natural correspondence between the people and morality, history, orography, and landscape. This will be the recipe that will serve to mix at will the available ingredients for the “invention”<sup>23</sup> of peoples and human types, from the Jews to the indian, the black, and the oriental. On the second hand, this way of constructing an inferior identity for the Spanish will make fortune paradoxically (or maybe not) on the very core of the Hispanic world, where many of the features that Guicciardini attributed to the Spanish will be distributed by the Spanish themselves amongst their converts and Moorish compatriots. But it will also be successful in the rest of the Western world, for the configuration of the convert and the Moorish developed by the systemic Hispanism suggests elements activated by the modern anti-Semitism and the Orientalism.<sup>24</sup>

Guicciardini noted qualities in the Spanish traditionally attributed to Jews and Muslims. Greed and the hoarding of capital will be an intrinsic condition of the convert, and by extension, of the entire Jewish people. Meanwhile, defects such as indolence and murderous brutality will be characteristics of the Muslim, of the Oriental, who passed with no transition from a lascivious idleness to the most bloodthirsty and despotic violence. These racial descriptions, which configure inferior and barbaric human types, will indelibly be ways of constructing the identity of the Spanish by certain European countries, from Italy to France or England. For these countries, the Spanish was the result of an impure blend of European Christian with Jews and Muslims. The systemic Hispanism, always Castilian-centered, will assume this deprecating description, configuring a cultural history in which the Castilian European element was presented with Christian purity, while around it gravitated the rest of the Peninsular cultures, Catalanian, Galician-Portuguese, and the Muslim and Jewish presence which was excluded as an invader, foreigner, and always external historical reality.

In the construction of a cultural center of power what is decisive is to persuasively attain the imposition of a specific way of “seeing”. The success in the implementation of a network of latent and present authorities is what empowers to forge the basis for moral convictions. Contrary to what intuitively tends to seem, as Nietzsche and Michelstaedter, and the philosophy of the twentieth century permanently reinvented: The good and the truth are power configurations. Moral authority is not attained by doing the good, but because the power that sustains a specific configuration of values, and no other, is exercised. And this is what was premonitoriously at stake in the Bruni/Cartagena debate, in the so-called “*Controversia Alphonsiana*” by the critics.

What throbs in Bruni’s perspective is the desire of the Italian elites to make Italy the great epistemic center, from which the immediate past was contemplated as barbarism. Only Italy could recover the voice of civilization from the Imperial Rome and Classical Greece. All which came afterwards was decadence and barbarism. But beware of “what came afterwards,” that which preceded the Renaissance was the Middle Ages, as common historiography propounds, according to which, following the wake of the Italian Humanism, it was in the dark centuries where the barbarians, still Christianized, had corrupted the culture and language of the Golden centuries. Therefore, the gesture against medieval barbarism was also thrown towards the rest of European communities. In the episode we are currently discussing, Bruni expressed all of this with his despise towards the medieval translation of Aristotle’s *Ethics*, made by the English Grosseteste in the thirteenth

century. Today the critics have demonstrated that the Arentine renewed the old Medieval version, but faithfully followed it and his work was, to a great extent, indebted to the version he loathed.<sup>25</sup> This scientific and technically proven truth by Contemporary philology, however, is only a truth of the specialist which does not reach the bottom of the issue, thought to neutralize the evidence of the expert. In the same way, it is not relevant to morally qualify Bruni's attitude as hypocrisy, vanity, or hubris with respect to his predecessor in the translation. His argument was thought to create and strengthen the epistemic center, and to attain it, it was necessary to elaborate as well the limits themselves of the peering into the facts, until reaching such a persuasion that the philological technical truth would become unnecessary as contrasting evidence.<sup>26</sup> It was a power struggle for prestige, being therefore sufficient to assume as an indisputable truth the word of the Italian Humanists against the preceding barbarism. In any case, nobody could defend the word of the barbarian as authentic word without risks. Cartagena will do so, but the future will make his defense to become excluded as the voice of the losers, being considered a reactionary representative of scholastics against the pre-modern revolutionary Bruni. The Arentine achieved something decisive for every construction of an imperial nucleus: to mark barbarism and deny its existence.

### 5. Bruni vs. Cartagena and the Destiny of Modernity

Leonardo Bruni propounded his work from the start in terms of civilization and barbarism. He expresses a complete despise for the preceding Medieval translation which he reduced to a mere "nothing." In the same way, regards its author with absolute peevishness, for the identity of a barbarian does not require nuances. Barbarism is characterized by its lack of clearly defined lines, of order, of contour. Barbarians do not deserve to be identified, for in the end they are all the same: a more or less shapeless mass in which certain drives of a never entirely constituted blurred identity stick out. Thus begins the prologue to the translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

A Little while ago I resolved to translate into Latin the books of the *Ethics* of Aristotle, not because they had not been translated before, but because they were in such a manner that it seemed more the work of barbarians than Latins; for it is clear that the author of this translation –whoever he may be (is patent, after all, that he belonged to the Ordo Praedicatorum)-, was not sufficiently versed in Greek nor Latin letters. (*Controversia Alphonsina* 179)<sup>27</sup>

It was not paramount to Bruni knowing who the author was. His identity could be easily extrapolated: the contourless identity of the barbarian: a “nobody.”<sup>28</sup> As such, he should not be considered more than a beggar of language, who “babbles” -as etymologically suggested by the exonym—and does not know how to make use of the richness surrounding his hand—for the barbarian is the one who cannot entirely possess the language of civilization, no matter how much he may be subjected to its fertile influence: he always corrupts it and cannot speak it nor make himself understood properly due to the constitutive lack of his natural state, such as Aristotle asserted in the second chapter of the first book of *Politics*. The previous paragraph resumes as follows:

Indeed, in multiple passages he interprets incorrectly the Greek words and turns them into Latin with such inexperience and ignorance that such a grotesque and coarse ineptitude must cause an enormous embarrassment. Moreover, very frequently showing himself ignorant of the words that the Latin language has as excellent and highly corroborated. Begging amidst our richness, for he does not know how to conver. (CA 179-80)

Latin is the language which can express the philosophical truth, the whole truth, and always beautifully. The barbarian is the one who does not know how to express it through Latin, and mixes it with Graecisms and vulgarisms, corrupting it, barbarizing it. The barbarian ruins Latin’s perfection by instilling into it his imprecision in meaning and his lack of expressive and, ultimately, mental elegance. There is, as well, in this corruption of language and of meaning, a hidden moral inability, characteristic of a non-civilized nor entirely civilizable spirit. “That the ignorant [the translator] may charge against it [the Latin language] and attribute his own imperfection [of the translator] to the language is by all means foolish and miserly” (CA 181). Differing from the innocence of a child’s mind, the “inexperience” in the barbarian, his ignorance, is the product of his low moral condition, and indelible. According to Bruni, there would be something like a mean will in the barbarian to incorporate his need into civilization. Against this, he suggests, one should be protected as from the plague. The old translator willingly infected the language of civilization: Latin. We should bear in mind, when dealing with this whole episode, the memory that the Black Death may have left in all Europe, following the devastation suffered by Christendom in the fourteenth century, between the years 1346-1361. Florence suffered a relapse about 1437, a central year for the polemic (1436-1439) The idea of contagion determined the European mentality in every order (health, religion, philosophy, philology...) Latin is a vigorous language, healthy, which can express the whole truth by

itself. The sickly lack of mental and moral clarity which the barbarian transmits impoverishes and, finally, kills the civilized language. Truth, good, health, and civilization versus falseness, evil, illness, and barbarism. “But our translator dithers in the plainest terrains as well as the steep and does not work amidst scarcity, but he begs in wealth . . . Ignorant man! I cannot contain myself . . . all that he has cast aside by ignorance could be said in Latin in an appropriate and elegant manner. . . . is there some deficiency in the language or in himself?” (CA 183, 185)

The identity of the old translator is irrelevant to Bruni in order to, precisely, characterize him with the strokes of that which does not deserve an identity. The end of the prologue is impressive. Not only the identity of the barbarian is not that of an individual recognizable in his words and actions, but the identity of a subject already determined as deficient, pathogenic, and morally unable to tell the truth. Therefore, the product of this barbarian subjectivity, the translation, is reduced to nothing. Bruni denies even its existence, or at least, the right to exist or to be considered as a text deserving the minimum of recognition. In Bruni’s text we can see perfectly how in the binary game of the triumphant unidirectional Modernity is civilization, the civilized, who has the power to build the past every time, deciding who existed and who did not, or what has the sufficient dignity to be recognized as civilized existence or proper human action, and what has to be subjected or eliminated as barbaric. From this point of view, the old translation never existed for Bruni. It had to start all over: allowing the voice of Aristotle to be reborn from the ashes of barbarism. “I have assumed the task of making a new translation in which, overlooking everything else, I believe I have been able to turn these books into Latin for the first time, for they were not so before” (CA 193). This will be the strategy of the victorious Modernity, and from here will spring the utopian impulse, above all due to the impact of America on the Europeans, who some found it the adequate land to start again, negating the period of the native barbarism and there reconstructing the best of worlds. There is a structural line of continuity between the idea of a new translation and a new world. Thomas More would not have been possible without Bruni’s victory in the contest against Cartagena. Alonso de Cartagena reacted more against Bruni’s prologue than against his translation. He captured the intentions of the Italian and put on the table the key elements since the beginning of his response.

With some irony, but also honestly, Cartagena began by recognizing the subordinate character of the Spanish culture, compared with the Italian, which governed “the world with the multiplicity of its books” (CA 197) He attributed its preeminence to

the scriptorial mania of the Italians, who started to write before any reflection, whereas, the Spanish preferred an active and courtly life first, and only afterwards they would commit to writing. In truth, Cartagena assumes Bruni's binary structure. Spain would represent the semi-civilized periphery of Europe, against the emitter Italian center. However, we would be misinterpreting the debate if we were to circumscribe it to this framework of national rivalries. Needless to say, Spain is for Bruni, such as the rest of Europe, a culturally subaltern nation. Cartagena, with acute irony, assumes and deactivates this imperial binary structure, when he confers Italy with its preeminent place, but not because its theoretical and creative levels were substantially or qualitatively superior, but for the Italian *pathos*, for their tendency to write almost compulsively, dominating the weak "cultural market" of the epoch.

But here [in Castile] the custom took precedence from Antiquity, so that, in the same way that the Italians write when they begin to know, so our own jump into the royal court; for this reason, the former govern the world with the multiplicity of their books, whereas the latter are content with the reading of others and suppose they have done enough by discussing the fancies of others with an exquisite wit. (CA 197)

The Spanish notices that, despite recognizing the superior cultural level of Italy, its cultural power rests more upon its bulky production, on its propagandistic "apparatus," no auto-critical at all, more than upon an absolute natural superiority inherited from Rome, such as the Italian humanist ideology proclaimed. Cartagena armed his dispute against Bruni upon the certainty that all imperial cultural power was based on a narcissistic unilateral decision devoid of auto-critical irony. And pointed to Bruni indirectly as an example of this arrogance, calling into question the fight for prestige that Italy was discriminatorily undertaking.

Bruni's work depended on the work of Grosseteste/Moerbeke; he dropped anchor on a previous tradition which he intended on denying with the aim of placing Italy at the center and excluding the rest of Europe from the configuration of the reception of the high classical culture. The imperial construction of the periphery always depends on the colonization of time and word. Bruni expected to arrogate for himself and for the Italian culture the right over the classical past, but in order to do so he had to neutralize the immediate past tradition as an alien time, as a foreign barbarism. Cartagena charged from the beginning against what he described as "modern intemperance" ("modernae audaciae ímpetu"), to the extent that this pulse hampered the possibility of maintaining a just

relationship with time and devalued the existence of a common legacy. The Spanish did not negate the need for novelty, in no way—what he raised his voice against was to the belief, later successful, that the present can build itself by the absolute denial of the previous immediate patrimony. All the narratives of the revolutions (political, scientific, social...) that the later historiography has subsequently invented to date have a precedent in this philological prejudice of the Italian humanism. In fact, Modernity will depend upon this gesture, upon the fallacy of the new beginning, which will reach up to Descartes. If Modernity, such as the handbook of historiography asserts, miraculously begins with the *Discourse on the Method*, then the moorings will have to be cut, and it will not be possible to understand that Descartes was only philology without time, such as More was politics without time. Cartagena's lost Modernity was thought to neutralize this colonialist tendency upon memory, time, and peoples proper to the unidirectional and binary Modernity of Italian philology, modern utopia, Castilian imperialism, and French rationalism.

Cartagena denied the possibility of the creation *ex nihilo* or of the absolute translation of the ideal, such as Bruni's philological utopia proclaimed. The Italian humanist promises and claims to have brought to the world the aural language of Rome and the higher spirit of Greece. Bruni charged against his present in such a corrupted world and time as if it were nothing. Without failing to recognize Bruni's elegant work, Cartagena charged against the postulates of the Italian, against the ideology throbbing under his philological utopia, for the Spaniard very soon guessed and noticed that every utopian foundation entailed an apocalypse of the present. To create *ex nihilo* required precisely that: to reduce to nothing that which existed, as the product of an imperial decision which pointed to a subalternity without substance which had to be slanted and re-created by the new creating power. Grosseteste's translation did not exist (Bruni); the natives of America were not human beings (Sepúlveda); all except my ego is error (Descartes). Bruni made the true word to be reborn; the Spanish founded the civilization in America; Descartes founded the truth of reason. The lost, plural Modernity of Cartagena wished to neutralize this process, which already throbbed vigorously in the Italian philology; however, unfortunately, always was and still is confounded with a conservative view of things:

It is not convenient to shape things in such a way that we may destroy the old ones in their roots. In fact, we should be enormously content if we may add something to the ancient achievements; but it seems to be strange to reason the desire to add something in such a way that we may disregard well written things. . . . However . . . [since Bruni] charged against the old

translation *to the point of not only denouncing its imperfection, but even its whole existence*, when he asserted that the books from the *Ethics* were not yet translated into Latin, as if it were not a matter that the translation *was defective but, ultimately, that it did not even exist*, I think that we should rightly be opposed so that the hounds of our version may cease on such modern intemperance. (CA 201, 203) [Emphasis added]

Bruni appeared as the indisputable philological authority. Cartagena assumed the challenge of questioning the idea that truth is on the side of the competent technician. In that sense, the Spanish confronted the Italian without demonstrating more competence than reason, because the latter equally assists every human being. The profound Socratic character of Cartagena has never been remarked elsewhere. He appears “undressed” before us, without taking shelter behind a technical knowledge that would enshroud him in the glow of his indisputable truth. He recognizes from the start his philological ignorance. He had already thrown his irony against the cultures which, allegedly, both contestants apparently represented: Bruni Italy, Cartagena Spain. Now he was throwing an irony against himself, as a poor philological ignorant who will only be able to use that which is common to all, reason. By this, Cartagena places the debate in a very different place than that of Bruni. Cartagena does not erect himself as the representative of a fatherland tradition nor as a paladin of a privative technical knowledge, like Bruni. His cause is neither Spain nor philology nor scholastics. He presents himself to the reader as an ignorant who does not have any other weapon than that of any human being: reason. I think it can be highly useful to read the polemic with the same gaze with which we read a Platonic dialogue. From this philosophical perspective, Cartagena would play the part of Socrates and Bruni that of a Protagoras or any of the Sophists which appear is the work of the Greek. “as for me, honorably divested of the arms of eloquence and the knowledge [of Bruni], with the stone of reason alone, which is common to every rational animal, I throw myself into battle” (CA: 203) Cartagena aimed at destroying Bruni’s defenses, which were held by his recognized philological knowledge. For the Spaniard the issue was not a technical matter, but an entirely human, social, and politically crucial problem. “First and foremost, so that [Leonardo] may not slip away, his own trenches, so to speak, shall be destroyed” (CA 205). Alonso de Cartagena did not know Greek. Bruni, obviously, attacked this flank to weaken the strength of the arguments against his translation of Aristotle. This lack of philological competence has surprised scholars and determined the reception of the polemic. It seems strange the fact that Cartagena may have dared to imprudently create a polemic without

having enough competence to defend himself. He knew the target language, Latin, but not the source, Greek. However, this strangeness would reveal in the reader a technical view, Brunian, which is not the proper one in order to understand the whole episode, or in any case, is not enough, and besides it would unconsciously place the reader within the sphere of one of the contenders.

Cartagena refused to assume the philologocentric perspective. He did not recognize in his incompetence any obstacle for settling the matter, and in his opinion, the issue was a problem of reason, of rationality, and this was common to any human being, with absolutely regardless of the language in which it is expressed and of his linguistic competence. The use of reason alone was a sufficient instrument to denounce that the translation of the Arentine did not cover the universal philosophical sense of Aristotle's theory. Anyone familiar with the theoretical content of the Aristotelian work could capture the lack of conceptual accuracy in Bruni's elegant Latin translation.

Cartagena's argument rests upon the certainty of the universality of reason. This can be expressed in any language. Therefore, no language has the patrimony of truth, and no philosopher can claim for himself the custody of the Self. There is no imperial language; only human reason. Cartagena placed the polemic on a universalistic and plural plane, because he wanted to defend a specific social and political ideology which denied from the beginning the right of any power to raise itself as the civilizing systemic center, as was the pretension of the humanist philological imperial utopianism.

Bruni considered Romance languages as the linguistic rotten fruit of the mixture between Latin and barbarian human beings. Even if racial purity could not be recovered, philology was held as bulwark for recovering the linguistic purity, where it eternally nested the pure, elegant, and truthful word of civilization. The philological utopia stated the existence of a Latin which was pure, limpid, and devoid of the barbarian excrescence which had stained the language of truth. The custodian in charge of bringing this pure language back to life was the humanist, and Italy the geographical location. In this longing for language purity there were perhaps reverberations of the desire of the civilized man to purify himself from barbarism. Bruni stated the following, as if it were only a matter of a purely philological and aesthetical desire: “[Alfonso de Cartagena] praises the mixture of all languages, whereas I deem that we should *ensure the purity* of Latin language so that it *shall not be stained* with Greek or barbarian expressions.” (CA 327) [emphasis added] To Alfonso de Cartagena this was not merely a technical matter, as Bruni intended. What the Arentine had put with his proposal on the European board was, in truth, a human issue, even

anthropological, about the power or not of every human being to capture and express the truth in some manner, despite lacking any specific technical knowledge. Ultimately, it was being considered the right to the word and to freedom. Socrates argued with anyone at the agora, not only with the wise, for in the debate with any other human being there was a reflection of a spoken truth, of an open truth and always to be decided. The word about the truth could not be settled and granted to a language alone and its philological custodians. And here is where, concerning technical ignorance, Cartagena expressed his strongest thesis: “Reason is, in fact, common to all peoples, although expressed in different languages” (CA 205). Here, the Socratic expresses a convert’s truth, as José Luis Villacañas<sup>29</sup> has pointed out. The truth is not the patrimony of a single people nor is it expressed by means of a language alone. Is the reason of every human being—whatever language he or she may speak—what guards the truth. There is no barbarism, is ontologically impossible. All truth will always be so even though expressed in a “barbarian” language, that is, in a language strange to the Greco-Latin ear. For this reason, nothing is stranger to the polemic than the perspective which has interpreted it as the clash between Humanism (Bruni) and Scholastics (Cartagena) The Spaniard always appeals to the plural authority of the reason of every human being; he never invokes the authority of the Church. Contrariwise, Bruni continues the scholastic tradition of the authority criterion, only that he places it somewhere else. The Italian represents the struggle of the modern elites to supersede the ecclesiastic ones, but in order to do so he does not renounce the notion of scholastic authority, but he simply invokes it for himself and philology, against the ecclesial tradition. To Cartagena the sole authority is reason –and therefore, any human being (expert or not) could attain the truth and/or recognize it in any language in which it may be expressed. What Aristotle had said, according to the Spaniard, was true because it was in accord with reason, not because it was said by Aristotle. “Aristotle himself did not follow reason because of authority, but authority because of reason” (CA 207). Reason was the only authority in the philosophical field, suffice it to say in this context: in the area of truth—neither theology nor philology. It was not a matter of transposing the place of authority from theology to philology, but of entrusting it to all human beings. In Bruni’s intention was the desire to make of the philologist and of his science a new profane church, whose dictates become the truth. In such sense, Cartagena refused to enter the battle for technical superiority. He was not going to follow reason through the philological authority of the Arentine, contrariwise, he would freely follow the authority of reason in order to put into question any proof of technical authority.

Cartagena proposed against the myth of the philological utopia, whose hegemonic aspiration he detected, a cosmopolitan and “mestiza” view of language. For the Spaniard one of Latin’s grandeurs was precisely its impurity, its openness to the other. In the same way, the best law system was the one which justly recognized the rights of peoples, that is, of the other. A narrow law practice implied a hostile law, internally xenophobic, and therefore, contrary to law. Cartagena charged against Leonardo Bruni’s philological xenophobia. The richness of Latin, according to Alphonso, was precisely found in its ability to gather loans from the civilized Greece as well as from the barbarians. It is worth to transcribe this magnificent paragraph from Cartagena:

Latin language . . . constantly attracts Greek expressions even through other foreign cultures, as a sort of alluvium; moreover, this is its main excellence, this its limitless grandeur: which, as if it were at the mercy of enemies, assimilates to its own domain foreign expressions and names by a kind of law of nations; it would be verily poor and peevish if it were to close itself with strict limits. Contrariwise, its ability is enormous and almost infinite and it can take from the Greeks, the barbarians, and from all the nations of the world whatever may be suitable.

Do you believe that, because we use the “Latin” expression, the language has only adopted the words from the Latins from whom it took its name, who reigned in Italy in yonder times? Even though we see the opposite when recognizing amongst the Latin terms many from our language and that of the Gallic, the German, and other nations. (CA 213)

Bruni replied with a highbrow sarcasm and certain disdain, always attached to his superior philological aptitude. Cartagena had considered the debate in a more respectful tone, in which he made a display of what we could call the refined irony of the convert. The literary styles reveal two very different personalities, which, nonetheless, did not prevent them from cordially overcoming their intellectual differences until reaching a mutual recognition after the polemic. But before all that, the texts reveal irreconcilable frames of mind and theoretical positions. Such educated and refined men could have attained the formation of an intellectual friendship, but their theses expanded along history as two parallel lines, which could never be integrated, but which advanced in unison along their respective planes: that of the victors and that of the defeated. This is the reason why the polemic has the character of an archetype of Modernity, because in it there is a confrontation between the unidirectional, victorious, and imperial Modernity of the white man, the European, and

the plural, defeated, and cosmopolitan Modernity of the mestizo, the European convert. Both destinies will become the precedent of the two fundamental poles which will shape the dialectic of Modernity. The tension will appear since the first paragraph of Bruni's reply, whose laugh already has an anti-Semitic grimace:

Just when I began reading it, I could not contain my laughter since the preface. Just as, as in yonder times Stephen, when he preached the new truth, was attacked with stones by the followers of the Jews, that is, by the defenders, not of an ancient translation, but of a misdirection, [Cartagena and his followers] threaten with attacking me with stones for making known the new and authentic translation. (CA 267)

Bruni presented himself as a new Saint Stephen, the deacon who was martyred for defending the Hellenistic Jews, that is, the Christian Jews who did not speak Hebrew; while he describes Cartagena, whose familiar language was Hebrew, as a direct descendent of the Jews who murdered the saint. There is an anti-convert and anti-Semitic character in the philology of the Renaissance. This linguistic connector of the imperial power will design the truth in each moment that Modernity may need to configure a new victim.

Alfonso de Cartagena had established the bases for neutralizing this victimizing dynamic. There is in his texts a clear distinction between the language of the truth and the language of power. The first one, in his opinion, was universal, it was seen "with the eyes of the soul," that is, through reason, and it could be expressed in any language. Latin was the *lingua franca*, that of the empire, and it was universal in its case as the result of an historical circumstance of power, not for its essential purity, and therefore, did not guard the human truth in an exclusive manner. The converts had renounced Hebrew for centuries, the language in which God's mandate had been written. From this renunciation they could not assume the old imperial thesis that identified the language of power as the language of truth and, ultimately, of God.

On the other hand, to Bruni, the language of power is already the language of truth, of the "new truth," according to the suggestion that the Italian establishes between new translation and "new truth" (Christianism) and the old translation-straying (Judaism) Bruni's first paragraph is a direct attack against Cartagena to whom he marks in a veiled manner as a Jew and/or heretic, presenting himself with the hypocrite image of a philological Stephen squandered for his Hellenism. At the same time, the Arentine is offered to Europe as the new messiah of the language of power and truth, almost as a philological Christ, as a poor imperial martyr in the hands of the Jews. Bruni does not even

grant Cartagena the benefit of being the representative of an ancient truth, as that of the Old Testament, but that of a straying, of a heresy, of a path that goes astray with respect to the sole path of truth, for the old translation was lacking, in his opinion, of any truth. The converts, a few years after this polemic, will be murdered for this very reason, because they did not even represent the old truth of the ancient Jews, but the deplorable disgrace of the truth, for, as converts, neither professed the old faith of their fathers nor the new and only faith of Christianity, but the Judaizer false faith.

The language of power configures the truth because it guards it as an exclusive grace. There is no possible contradiction in it, for its truth proceeds from each decision emanated by the power. Where the Castilian convert saw a linguistic enrichment, thanks to the incorporation of Romance terms, Bruni saw barbarism and chaos. The Arentine made of Latin the absolute language, whereas Cartagena relativized it as another tool for the communication between human beings, who needed other languages in order to survive. In this sense, the language of the empire could not be revealed as the language of truth, but as a fertile human tool, plural, diverse, and in permanent miscegenation. Ultimately, to Cartagena, every human language contains the truth since it is the rational expression of human beings. Only reason is universal and aspires towards the truth; never its vehicle of its transmission, whose preeminence is and will always be the result of an unnecessary historical circumstance. In Cartagena there are no pure languages and reason is the patrimony of every human being. Bruni reacts in the following manner to this thesis: “about the Latin [language] . . . he believes completely nonsensical things. In fact, he believes it have been added to the Latin expression not only Greek terms, but, as he calls them, some from Gaul, Germany, or Hispania; moreover, *he believes that the Latin language is poor and imperfect*. I would thoroughly advice the expert in Law to focus on his endeavor; the considerations he makes on the Latin language are so untimely and abominable, according to all those who write decently, that nothing could seem more nonsensical. What else could be to *mix* into the same umbrella the barbarian<sup>30</sup>, the Latin, and the Greek terms and produce, so to speak, a chaos of words? . . . *monstrous words*” (CA: 281, 283) [Emphasis added].

The series of qualifiers that the Italian uses configures a network of concomitances between language and social configuration that will burst in Castile, with the same qualifiers, a few years later, in the anti-convert attacks of Toledo. Meanwhile, it all seemed to be settled in a linguistic debate, according to which barbarism would be nothing else but monstrosity. The language of the monsters is chaotic and fills with litter the tidiness of the

civilized superior language. The barbarian speaks with rubbish in his lips, even when he tries to speak the language of civilization.

Certainly, if someone were to throw litter on a Giotto's canvas, I could not bear it; what do you think it happens to me when I see staining with so much litter the translation of the books of Aristotle...?

. . . [Cartagena] considers that words, whatever they may be, taken by chance from any place, the barbarian as well as the Greek, can be incorporated to the Latin discourse, and is not aware that Cicero, Livius, Sallust, and others credited have always avoided such mixtures, as if it were a *damage* and a *degrading* of the Latin expression.

. . . Alfonso approves and praises the mixture of all languages, whereas I consider that we have to *ensure the purity of the Latin discourse* and that it should not be stained with Greek or barbarian expressions. (CA: 285, 291, 327) [Emphasis added]

But as with all rubbish, it must be eliminated, for the sake of cleanliness, hygiene, good style, and truth. Bruni mistakenly attributed to the Latin classics (Cicero particularly) his own purism and resistance to incorporate Greek or barbarian terms. This philological purism hides a philological racism whose consequences will not take long to be seen, insofar as the symptom of the epoch's state of mind of some part of Europe against the Jews, whether convert or not. The unidirectional Modernity will progressively be configured through binary exclusions, from the human to the geographic. The victorious Modernity will launch at the same time its fundamental structure: only a human group incarnates civilization against the rest, and expands it from a sacred ground which irradiates towards the periphery.

The Italian added to this *ad hominem* argument, with a veil of anti-Semitism, an *ad patriam* argument. Not only a particular elite made the decisions concerning language, but they also did so from a specific place, central, and not from another. To Bruni there was no doubt that Italy had to be recognized as the systemic center, from which the light was irradiated over the rest of the continental satellites. However, a marginal subject, a Jewish convert, from a marginal position, Spain, had dared to question a "central" cultural product, which had already passed every filter of the epistemic power. Bruni establishes with absolute neutrality the relationship between geography and imperialism. He starts from the myth of the Roman Empire—as a standard—in order to measure, compose, and "invent" the European geography. A country is central or marginal according to its

relationship with the empire, which is represented as an objective nuclear space. Bruni's Italocentrism is already the antecedent for all the imperial centers that have existed in the world. Hispania was a marginal point of the empire, as Castile was then for Europe, compared to Italy, which was the center, the direct inheritor of Rome:

Who does not notice that this one [Alfonso de Cartagena] has acted foolishly and clumsily? He criticizes me because I have written about Hispania that is not logical that there is more human action at an extreme angle of the world than at the center; he assures that the world does not have angles and reproaches me as if I were ignorant of geometry. He is completely barking mad in this respect. The world, in fact, has many angles.  
(CA 305)

Here we have a real antecedent of the subsequent imperial inventions over the physical and human geography, which will have its legacy in Sepúlveda, its culmination in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, and its apotheosis in *The Nomos of the Earth* and the doctrine of Monroe. Ten years after the *Controversia Alphonsiana*, in 1449, a terrible slaughter of Jews took place in Toledo. The spirit of the times was emerging. It was then when Cartagena wrote his *Defensorium unitatis christianae*, in order to confront the unstoppable anti-Semitism. His arguments, at heart, were the same that were argued against Bruni. But Cartagena had already lost the battle. Binary Modernity had already taken power over the souls and over the bodies.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article belongs to the Research Project “Ideas que cruzan el Atlántico: La creación del espacio intelectual hispanoamericano,” sponsored by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness of Spain.

<sup>2</sup> “...those govern the world with the multiplicity of their books.” Reference by Alonso de Cartagena about the Italian culture. See the so-called *Controversia alphonisiana* in González Rolán, T; Moreno Hernández, A; Saquero, P. (Eds.) (2000). *Humanismo y teoría de la traducción en España e Italia en la primera mitad del siglo XV. Edición y Estudio de la “Controversia Alphonisiana” (Alfonso de Cartagena vs. L. Bruni y P. Candido Decembrio)* Madrid: Ediciones Clásicas, p. 197. The complete text from which the excerpt belongs is the following: “Pero aquí [en Castilla] la costumbre se impuso ya desde la antigüedad misma, de forma que, del mismo modo que los italianos se ponen a escribir cuando empiezan a saber, así los nuestros se lanzan a la corte real; de ahí que aquéllos dirigen el mundo con la multiplicidad de sus libros, mientras éstos se conforman con la lectura de los libros ajenos y se figuran que han hecho bastante con discutir ocurrencias de los demás con exquisito ingenio.” [“But here [in Castile] the custom was already imposed from antiquity, in such manner that, in the same way that the Italians start writing as soon as they begin to know, so our people jump into the royal court; that is the reason why the former govern the world with the multiplicity of their books, whereas the latter are content with reading alien books and suppose they have done enough when discussing the occurrences of others with an exquisite wit.”] Cartagena’s irony is intended towards both cultural elites. Through the whole debate we can appreciate a refined irony and, on occasions, as the present, the self-irony of Cartagena, against the arrogant and mordant tone of Bruni.

<sup>3</sup> “Dios fizo omnes e no fizo linajes” had complained the covert writer Fernando del Pulgar. In *Letras. Glosa a las Coplas de Mingo Revulgo* (XIV). In Espasa Calpe “Clásicos Castellanos,” 99, 1929. Edición de Jesús Domínguez Bordona, p. 67. I edited the text for the Biblioteca Saavedra Fajardo, in 2005 <http://www.saavedrafajardo.org/Archivos/LIBROS/Libro0175.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> “The basic thesis is the following: “modernity” is a European narrative that hides its darker side, “coloniality”. Coloniality, in other words, is constitutive of modernity — there is no modernity without coloniality.” Mignolo, Walter (2009). “Coloniality: the darker side of Modernity” 39-49, in *Modernologies*. Contemporary Artists Researching Modernity and Modernism Catalog of the Exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, Barcelona, Spain, edited by curator Sabine Breitwischer (Fall, 2009), pp. 39-49, MACBA, Barcelona Spain (Catalog of the exhibit *Modernologia/Modernologies/Modernology*), p. 39.

The bibliography surrounding the thesis of the colonial essence of Modernity is immense and covers, practically, the entire trend of Postcoloniality was one of its pragmatic axioms, in the Anglo-Saxon as well as in the Latin American milieu.

<sup>5</sup> Toulmin, Stephen (1992). *Cosmopolis. The hidden agenda of Modernity*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; Reprinted edition.

<sup>6</sup> Jameson, Fredric (2002). *A Singular Modernity. Essays on the Ontology of the Present*. London: Verso. From a very different perspective, but nonetheless following the thesis of a Modernity and a unidirectional Europe. Koselleck, Reinhart. *Futuro pasado. Para una semántica de los tiempos históricos*. The indirect interlocutor of the debate to whom this book intends to surpass is Hegel, but in truth it does not wish to surpass Hegelianism, in view of the perspective that the author adopts from “the heart of Europe”. About the idea of an Hispanic *Sattelzeit* and the plurality of “modern” times, see *author*.

<sup>7</sup> Dainotto, Roberto (2007). *Europe (in Theory)*. Duke: Duke University Press Books.

<sup>8</sup> It could be of some usefulness here the concept of *Philology* proposed by H. U. Gumbrecht: “the word philology will always be used according to its second meaning, that is, as referring to a configuration of scholarly skills that are geared toward historical text curatorship.” Gumbrecht. H.U. (2003). *The powers of Philology. Dynamics of Textual Scholarship*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Gumbrecht. H.U. (2003). 31-32: “philological practice could abandon the idea of the one “correct” edition as its ultimate *telos* and begin to conquer an intellectual space of plurality, argument, and contention. This philological conception of plurality, however, is different from the liberal (or “neoliberal”?) ideal of an open infinity of individual opinions. I am definitely not advocating a situation in which each editor will strive to elaborate his or her “personal” version of the text to be edited. Rather, I imagine that different author roles, used as heuristic devices, produce different types of reading and different communities of readers. Within such communities of readers and in reference to identical author roles, it should be possible to distinguish between more or less adequate editions and interpretations. One could then claim, for example, that a romantic and an idealistic approach to reading Goethe’s *Faust I* are largely incommensurable, whereas different editions and interpretations within each of these two “schools” could be compared and evaluated by rational criteria. Alasdair MacIntyre’s reflections on the structure of the academic space, from which I am taking this idea of a plurality of intellectual communities produced by relations of incommensurability, are also helpful in discovering yet another important difference between a situation of plurality in the philological practice and a type of intellectual pluralism that is open for infinity.”

<sup>10</sup> Mignolo, Walter (1995). *Coloniality: The darker side of Modernity pdf y The Darker side of the Renaissance. Literacy, Territoriality, and Coloniality*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.

<sup>11</sup> Dagenais, John. "The Postcolonial Laura". En *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* vol. 65. 3 September (2004) 365–89.

<sup>12</sup> Gumbrecht, H. U. (2003) 2, 3: "philological practice has an affinity with those historical periods that see themselves as following a greater cultural moment, a moment whose culture they deem to be more important than the cultural present. Not by coincidence, Hellenistic culture of the third and the second centuries B.C. appears quite regularly as the historical origin of philology as a scholarly practice (Plato, in contrast, used the same word in the sense of "loquaciousness"). Other important moments in the history of philology were, by the same logic, the age of the church fathers; the European Renaissance, when the humanists desired to return to the learning and texts of classical antiquity; and nineteenth-century romanticism, with its nostalgia for the Middle Ages. Second, because of its emergence from a desire for the textual past, philology's two-part core task is the identification and restoration of texts from each cultural past in question. Based on conjecture, this includes the identification of those texts that have come down to us as fragments; the full documentation of texts for which we have several not completely identical versions, to be presented in their plurality or condensed into the proposal of one original or most valuable version; and commentary providing information to help bridge the gap between the knowledge a text presupposes among its historical readers and the knowledge typical for readers of a later age. Identifying fragments, editing texts, and writing historical commentary are the three basic practices of philology. (...) the identification and restoration of texts from the past - that is, philology as understood in this book."

<sup>13</sup> Cit. by Francisco Rico in "Humanismo y ética," p. 522. In Camps, Victoria (Ed.) (1988). *Historia de la ética*. Vol. 1. De los griegos al Renacimiento. Barcelona: Crítica.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew, 15, 17-20: "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them."

<sup>15</sup> Nirenberg, David (2007) "Race and the Middle Ages. The case of Spain and its Jews," en Greer, M; Mignolo, W.; Quilligan, M. (Eds.) (2007) *Rereading the Black Legend. The Discourses of religious and racial deference in the Renaissance Empires*. Chicago/London: University Chicago Press.

<sup>16</sup> The polemic was published by Birkenmajer, A. (1922). «Der Streit des Alonso von Cartagena mit Leonardo Bruni Aretino». *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalterl.* 20, 5, Münster, p. 128-211.

<sup>17</sup> Morrás, María (2002). "El debate entre Leonardo Bruni y Alonso de Cartagena: las razones de una polémica" *Quaderns. Revista de Traducció*, 7, 33-57.

<sup>18</sup> Cit by Croce, Benedetto (2007). *España en la vida italiana del Renacimiento*. Sevilla: Renacimiento, p. 65.

<sup>19</sup> Cit. in González Rolán, T; Moreno Hernández, A; Saquero, P. (Eds.) (2000) p. 48.

<sup>20</sup> "la perspectiva humanista, según la cual los no italianos debían considerarse "bárbaros": una perspectiva que influyó decisivamente en la tajante periodización y contraposición entre la Edad Media y Renacimiento, y en la idea de que el Renacimiento era obra casi imprevista y exclusiva de los italianos. . . . Los humanistas italianos continuaban teniendo en poca consideración la cultura de todos los demás pueblos de Europa; [...] Esta posición de los italianos implicaba un sentimiento de superioridad que, a mi modo de ver, fue una actitud intrínsecamente estéril" [*"the humanist perspective, according to which the non-Italian should be considered "barbarians": a perspective which had a decisive influence on the emphatic periodization and contraposition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and in the idea that the Renaissance was the almost unexpected and exclusive work of the Italians. . . . The Italian humanists continued to have in low esteem the culture of the all other European nations; . . . This stand of the Italians entailed a superiority feeling that, from my point of view, was an intrinsically sterile attitude.*] Merigalli, Franco (1962). "Las relaciones literarias entre España e Italia en el Renacimiento". *Asociación Internacional de Hispanistas (AIH) Actas I*, pp. 127, 129 y 130. [http://cvc.cervantes.es/literatura/aih/pdf/01/aih\\_01\\_1\\_010.pdf](http://cvc.cervantes.es/literatura/aih/pdf/01/aih_01_1_010.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> "La verdad es que, aunque los italianos estaban, por ciertos aspectos, a la cabeza de la civilización europea, de Petrarca en adelante, las premisas del Renacimiento existían en todo el mundo europeo, y especialmente, aparte de Italia, en Francia, en Flandes, en el valle del Rhin." [*The truth is that, even though the Italians were, in some respects, at the head of the European civilization, from Petrarch onwards, the premises of the Renaissance existed in the entire European world, and specially, besides Italy, in France, Flanders, and the Rhine valley.*] Merigalli, Franco (1962: 128)

<sup>22</sup> In González Rolán, T... (2000: 49-50).

<sup>23</sup> In the sense of O'Gorman in *La invención de América*.

<sup>24</sup> In the sense of Edward Said in *Orientalism*.

<sup>25</sup> "il Bruni tiene costantemente innanzi a sè la versione del suo predecessore, lo segue fedelmente nella struttura, limitandosi a qualche abbellimento formale, e a qualche variazione, non sempre del tutto felice, di termini. A volte, piú che di una traduzione veramente nuova, si ha l'impressione di avere dinanzi una revisione sistematica della versione medievale" Darin, Eugenio. "Le traduzioni umanistiche di Aristotele nel secolo XV". In *Atti e Memorie dell'Accademia Fiorentina di Scienza Morali, La Colombaria*, XVI, Florencia, 64-65. González Rolán, T... (Eds.) (2000, 82).

<sup>26</sup> The confirmation of the correlation between both texts in González Rolán, T (2000, 81),

<sup>27</sup> From now on CA. In González Rolán, T. (2000).

<sup>28</sup> The author of the Medieval translation was the English Franciscan Robert Grosseteste (c. 1116-1253). His versión was later revised by the Flemish Willem van Moerbeke (1215-1286), Dominican, and supporter of Thomas of Aquinas.

<sup>29</sup> José Luis Villacañas. ““El programa de traducción de Alfonso de Cartagena y la fundación de la mentalidad castellana,”” in Alfonso de Cartagena. *Los Cinco Libros de Séneca*. Ed. de José Luis Villacañas (Murcia: Tres fronteras ediciones, 2010) 11-65.

<sup>30</sup> The Spanish translators pour “foreign terms” where Bruni writes “barbarians”. The original Latin text is the following: “Quid enim est aliud, quam *barbara* simul et Latina et...”