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'Civilizar' Africa: La herencia de Livingstone en *A Burnt-Out Case*, de Graham Greene y *El sueño del celta*, de Mario Vargas Llosa

(‘Civilizing’ Africa: Livingstone’s Inheritance in *A Burnt-Out Case*, by Graham Greene and *El sueño del celta*, by Mario Vargas Llosa)

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Resumen: En este artículo usamos el concepto de ‘semiosfera’ desarrollado por el estudioso ruso-estonio Juri Lotman para examinar las relaciones entre las comunidades nativas y las europeas en el Congo belga creadas por Graham Greene en *A Burnt-Out Case* y por Mario Vargas Llosa en *El sueño del celta*. Con este análisis tratamos de probar que aunque ambos autores denuncian con sus obras las terribles consecuencias de la colonización europea para los africanos, las comunidades nativas son descritas desde un punto de vista occidental y paternalista.

Palabras clave: Congo. Colonización. Lotman. Semiosfera. Europeos. Africanos. Greene. Vargas Llosa.

Abstract: In this article the concept of ‘semiosphere’, developed by the Russian-Estonian scholar Juri Lotman, is used to examine the relationship between the African and the European communities in the Congo portrayed by Graham Greene in *A Burnt-Out Case* and by Mario Vargas Llosa in *El sueño del celta*. With this analysis I will prove that even though both authors denounce the terrible consequences of the European colonization had for the African people, the native communities in the novels are still depicted from a western paternalistic perspective.

Key words: Congo. Colonization. Lotman. Semiosphere. Europeans. Africans. Greene. Vargas Llosa.

When David Livingstone applied for a missionary post in the London Missionary Society, his answer to the question concerning what were the main duties of a Christian missionary was quite different from the other candidates'. He said that their duty was not only to make the Gospel known among people, but also to try to improve people's standards of living, through the teaching of the arts and sciences of civilization as well as Christianity (Nkomazana 1998: 49). Such a standpoint is the basis of the well-known Livingstone's three Cs: Christianity, Commerce and Civilization (understood mainly as education and good government). From his perspective, Africa required the stimulation of its indigenous spirit; the native people needed to learn the way to develop their own civilization, and in his view, that could only be done by introducing in the continent a combination of good government and legitimate commerce, guided by the Christian doctrine that would replace the slave trade established by his fellow Europeans (Nkomazana 1998: 44). Livingstone's vision of what the mission of the white man should be in the African continent directly opposed the selfish exploitation that the natives suffered at the hands of the Europeans. His way of thinking, however, remained Western-centered, for the solution to all of Africa's problems was assimilation to European culture through education, government structures and religion.

The Russian-Estonian scholar Juri Lotman developed a theory of cultural semiotics in which one of the fundamental concepts is the 'semiosphere', a semiotic continuum "outside of which semiosis¹ itself cannot exist." (Lotman 2005: 208) Each semiosphere contains a conception of the world, a culture that is part of the social group, of which this semiotic continuum is characteristic and at the same time inseparable. One of the main attributes of the concept of the semiosphere is the existence of a boundary that separates and differentiates it from another semiosphere. This boundary or frontier is "represented by the sum of bilingual translatable 'filters', passing through which the text is translated into another language (or languages), situated outside the given semiosphere." (Lotman 2005: 208-9) The frontier of each semiosphere is the area of cultural communication that connects it with another one. Its function is fundamental when defining the semiosphere itself as a differentiated entity.

The border is a bilingual mechanism, translating external communications into the internal language of the semiosphere and vice versa. Thus, only with the help of the boundary is the semiosphere able to establish contact

¹ Semiosis taken as the process of production and transmission of meaning.

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with non-semiotic and extra-semiotic spaces (Lotman 2005: 210).

Another of the main characteristics that define any semiosphere is its internal heterogeneity, which starts dynamic processes that help create new information within the semiosphere (Lotman 2005: 214). Here the concept of the frontier is again fundamental, since the frontier is the way to get into contact with other semiotic spaces. These links can cause changes in its internal structure when one semiosphere connects with another one through its texts:

The formation of peripheral semiotics may be represented not by fixed structures (languages) but by their fragments or even separate texts. Falling into the category of “foreigners” within a given system, these texts fulfil the function of a catalyst in the whole mechanism of the semiosphere. On the one hand, the border with foreign texts always appears as an area of enhanced meaning generation. (Lotman 2005: 214)

This dialogic process constitutes then one of the most effective ways of making a cultural change within a given semiosphere. A peripheral text is introduced through the frontier. This text has to be understandable for the recipient (that is, it shouldn’t represent a cultural reality which is totally alien to the recipient). But at the same time it inserts new conceptions of the world and new norms of behavior that are necessarily considered by the audience, which later on will reflect on their validity and compare them with the ones culturally acquired just because they are part of a determined semiosphere. Thus, a cultural frontier among different spheres is not a closed and stable organism. On the contrary, it is a structure in continuous movement that helps start a process of cultural change within a given semiosphere.

In all semiospheres, there are individuals who because of a particular talent (Lotman mentions as an example a magician) or because of their employment, get in contact with other semiospheres, settling in that bordering semiotic area (Lotman 2005: 211), and inserting in their native semiosphere new texts coming from different ones. Such people form “a zone of cultural bilingualism, ensuring semiotic contacts between two worlds.” (Lotman 2005: 211) In this article, I will make a comparative analysis of *A Burnt-Out Case*, by Graham Greene and the first part of Mario Vargas Llosa’s *El sueño del celta*, in order to study the dialogic process present in both novels between the semiosphere of the Congolese and the semiosphere of the Europeans living in the territory

during its period as a Belgian colony (1885-1960). I will examine the interactions between the main characters from the different semiospheres, and how their different texts get into contact in both novels thanks to the individuals settled in the bordering semiotic area. Through this analysis, it will be established whether the British and the Peruvian authors' attitude towards the native African semiosphere shows the paternalistic tone that Livingstone had.

The structure of the society depicted in *El sueño del celta* (2010) and *A Burnt-Out Case* (1961) shows the effects that the hegemonic system of European colonialism had over the native people of Africa, concretely, over the Congolese, in two different moments of the country's colonization by Belgium². We can divide the society in both novels in two main semiospheres: the western and the native. The relationship between them is based on the imposition of the first over the second on the one hand, and on a certain attitude of indifference and disdain on the part of the western semiosphere towards the native one, considering it thus as a non-structure.

The domain of the European semiosphere is shown in the novels in two different levels. On the one hand, the level of the Establishment, that is to say, the figure of mainly Leopold II as king of Congo in *El sueño del celta*, and the reduced group of men who, politically speaking, dominate the region from the capital, Luc, in *A Burnt-Out Case*. In both cases, the Establishment is designed so that a reduced group of colonizers exploit the natives, treating them as slaves in order to get the maximum benefit. Even though there is an ample representation of those colonizers in *El sueño del celta*, the main figure is probably Captain Pierre Massard, a living example of the extent to which human cruelty can go. As far as *A Burnt-Out Case* is concerned, the closest figure to Massard is Rycker. Even though it can be argued that Rycker doesn't treat the natives as cruelly, he shows the same disdain towards the indigenous culture as the captain does, considering them not better than animals (Vargas 2011: 88; Greene 1991: 34).

² Graham Greene and Mario Vargas Llosa travelled through Congo before they wrote their novels. Both authors are quite similar from this point of view: they needed to experience a concrete reality in order to fictionalize it (Setti 1987: 59). Despite his attempt at immersion however, Greene concluded in his introduction to the novel that "[t]his Congo is a region of the mind [...]" (Greene 1991). In *Ways of Escape*, the British author explains how he travelled to Congo to be able later to create the setting of the story. However, his visit was not productive, since "the Congo was a geographical term invented by the white colonists" (Greene 1980: 37). That is the reason why Greene said that this country was not going to be found in any map, since the map of Africa was just an invention of the European colonizers.

In both novels, however, one notes that the group of Europeans treated is not homogeneous at all. Within this group, we first find the semiosphere of those Europeans who with their behaviour maintain that the standard Western ideology is superior to the natives’ belief system. An example would be the members of the *Force Publique*, including Captain Massard, Lieutenant Francqui or Captain Marcel Junieux, and some members of religious missions that Roger Casement mentions in his journey through Congo. In this sense, the case of Captain Junieux is quite enlightening, since he tries to evade his responsibility for mistreatment of the natives, explaining to Casement that “[n]osotros no exigimos nada a nadie. Recibimos órdenes y las hacemos cumplir, eso es todo. [...] Nosotros somos los ejecutores de una política en la que no hemos intervenido para nada.” (Vargas 2011: 101) In Greene’s novel, the most important characters would be the Ryckers again, Father Thomas and the journalist Parkinson. All of them, rooted in the Western way of life, have failed to adapt to the semiosphere in which they live, which makes them feel totally alienated from native culture. Parkinson pushes the case to the limits, since he does not only refuse to see the true Africa, but he also re-invents it for his readers, adapting the situation to the romantic cliché that the British still had of the continent since the Victorian age.

On the other hand, there are tensions within the European semiosphere: we find a different group of characters who understand that both cultures (theirs and the native one) are different but both of great worth. These characters constitute a hybrid system of thinking that gets the two cultures closer³. This new semiosphere is formed, in Vargas Llosa’s novel, by the Bentleys, reverend Horte, father Hutot and also by doctor Hailes; in Greene’s novel, by the majority of the priests in the leper colony and doctor Colin⁴. They constitute the most positive representation of the European semiosphere in Africa, since “[t]hese characters take Africa as given, striking an attitude of acceptance, charity and even resignation, placing service over gain in an attempt to undo or mitigate the harm done in the name of country.” (Dobozy 2002: 435) The different attitude towards the native culture of these two semiospheres will result in a deep untranslatability of cultural and symbolic meaning that is almost

³ This group of Europeans who accept and value the native semiosphere are, according to Lotman, border characters.

⁴ Tomas Dobozy supports this classification of western characters in Greene’s novel: on the one hand we find characters with an anglo-saxon background who cannot recognize that their culture is as hybrid as any other. On the other hand, we see those who do not only recognize this fact but who accept it in a natural way, supporting Edward Said’s standpoint, that hybridism is indispensable in the formation of any culture (2002: 443)

impossible to overcome. It is reflected in the numerous arguments that Casement has with different authorities of the *Force Publique* about the working conditions of the natives and, on the other hand, in the tense relationship between Rycker and characters like doctor Colin or the Superior of the congregation.

The critical attitude that both Greene and Vargas Llosa show regarding the effects of the European colonization on the Congolese people focuses on their negative vision of the characters from the European semiosphere who support that hegemony, and not so much on the display of the values and customs of the native semiosphere. This does not mean that the native semiosphere is not present in the novels, even though they have a quite limited voice in the texts. In *El sueño del celta*, actually, it is the narrator and Casement who always transmit the feelings and complaints of the native people: “Aquí también, en Walla, se sorprendió [Casement] de que ninguno de esos pobres seres se quejara de lo principal: ¿con qué derecho habían venido esos forasteros a invadirlos, explotarlos y maltratarlos?” (Vargas 201: 98) We only find one individuality, the case of Charlie, a child Roger saves from death when he was being whipped by a lieutenant of the Belgian army. When the child recovers from his injuries, Roger decides to keep him as a member of his domestic service, giving him the name of Charlie, as he could never say what his name was (Vargas 2011: 59).

In *A Burnt-Out Case*, the presence of the natives is depicted mainly by the group of lepers who live in the colony. They speak Mongo and a few speak some French. The description of native culture, however, is quite superficial: there are frequent mentions of the way the natives dress (Greene 1991: 15, 79) and the accessories women wear, like rings in their legs (Greene 1991: 79). The costumes and values regarding the relationship between men and women in the Congo are quite different from Western ones, and are in fact much more practical given their situation. A perfect example of this is how an abandoned woman naturally finds another mate in the community after a break-up (Greene 1991: 120)⁵. Concerning the religion that the natives practise, it is a syncretic mixture of worship of Nzambe and Jesus. Doctor Colin summarizes it

⁵ Again the attitude towards these customs on the part of the Europeans is quite different depending on the group they belong to: the ones who center their lives on Western ideology, like Father Thomas, show repulsion towards many of these customs. The ones who are more hybrid, culturally speaking, accept them in a natural way. An example is the Superior of the congregation, who says to Father Thomas: “[...] autres pays autres moeurs” (Greene 1991: 86). Communication between them is thus impossible due to their opposite views.

perfectly: “It is a strange Christianity we have here⁶”. (Greene 1991: 58) The majority of the religious missionaries show an ecumenical attitude, accepting in a natural way this situation. Both the fathers and the natives in the colony are settled in the border between the semiospheres of Christianity and paganism, and they translate texts from one to the other, thus transforming the core of each semiosphere. An enlightening example of this is the sermon that the Superior directs to the community in one of the Masses (Greene 1991: 80-1), which reminds readers of Karl Rhaner’s theory of the ‘anonymous Christian’. Additionally, there is a similar figure to Charlie from *El sueño del celta*. In Greene’s novel, the protagonist, Querry, also takes a native as a servant, *Deo Gratias*, who will become, as we will see, an important figure in the development of the architect. Unlike Charlie, *Deo Gratias* has his own voice in the novel, even though it is quite limited. His main wish is to find *Pendélé*, a place in the interior of the jungle, a metaphor for the Edenic site and the spiritually enlightened life that the natives used to have before European colonization (Dobozy 2002: 432). *Deo Gratias* almost dies in his attempt to find it, but he tells Querry that it was worth trying because, in that place, “*nous étions hereux*” (Greene 1991: 78).

Even though the depictions of native culture in the novels are not very profound, both Greene and Vargas Llosa avoid the portrait of the ‘noble savage’. The faults of the native people are shown in the novels, since they are not different from any other human being in this sense. In *El sueño del celta*, the narrator and Casement mention in several moments the primitive and barbaric customs of the native people, such as the sacrifice of twins when they are born, the murder of servants when the chief dies, or the practice of cannibalism. (Vargas 2011: 61) In *A Burnt-Out Case*, on the other hand, the most common sin is envy, such as the episode of the stolen bicycle of Henry Okapa (Greene 1991: 81) or the refusal of the Superior to accept the clothes that Rycker had got for the lepers because there were not enough for everyone and that would cause fights (Greene 1991: 64-5).

In order to finish my analysis of the European and the native semiospheres as well as their frontier and the characters settled in them, I will examine the two main protagonists: Roger Casement in *El sueño del celta* and Querry in *A Burnt-Out Case*. In both cases, the novels follow the outline of the traditional

⁶ Nordlof afirma en este sentido que Greene “sense[s] that the Christianity that has taken hold in Africa can in no simple way be considered a mere replica of the missionary faith brought by Europeans. Greene himself saw Christianity in some ways as *more* African than European, as when he commented that it is not ‘the European who has brought God to Africa; too often he has driven Him out.’ (2002: 475; énfasis en el original)

Victorian novel set in Africa, in which the character follows a physical but also an interior journey of self-discovery. Such a journey reminds one immediately of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad himself is a character in *El sueño del celta*, since he met the real Casement in the Congo when Conrad had just arrived to the territory in 1890. This is a coincidence that Vargas Llosa uses to introduce a reflection on how Conrad's novel is different from his own one, as will be seen later.

Both Casement and Querry experience a deep change throughout the narrative and their spiritual evolution is used in different ways by Vargas Llosa and Greene to criticize in greater depth the European colonization of Africa. When the young and idealistic Casement decides to go to Africa in 1884 he considers himself like a second Livingstone, totally convinced of the necessity of bringing the three Cs to the natives (Christianity, Commerce and Civilization), enabling them to abandon primitivism (Vargas 2011: 35). His attitude when he is about to leave England is defined by his uncle "como esos cruzados que en la Edad Media partían al Oriente a liberar Jerusalén." (Vargas 2011: 27) His experiences in two expeditions from 1884-1889, especially the one under the leadership of Henry Morton Stanley, make him realize that his philanthropic way of thinking that European civilization could help the native semiosphere develop on his own, is not shared by the majority of the colonizers. Casement, who is really interested in indigenous cultures, learns some of the languages that the natives speak so he can communicate better with them⁷. He becomes familiar with their customs and traditions, settling in the bordering area of the two semiospheres and translating texts from the native culture into his own one. However, nobody shares his interests and those new texts do not work as a catalyst of change in the European semiosphere. As a consequence, Casement stops believing in his personal sacred trinity that justified Colonialism in his vision: Civilization, Christianity and Trade.

In 1888, in his conversation with Theodore Horte, a member of the Baptist Church Mission, Roger questions the supposed benefits that 'civilization' was bringing to the African continent. In both men's experience, most of the colonizers considered the natives to be animals without a soul, whom they could exploit and even kill without any remorse. But still, on the other hand, that same 'civilization' that Europe was offering "tenía mucho que aportarles

⁷ In cultural semiotic terms this is an example of how Casement considered that he could talk *with* African culture (that is, an example of anti-culture) and so it was worth the effort of learning their languages, whereas other Europeans considered that they could only—at the most— talk *about* Africa, since they saw it as a non-culture.

para que salieran del primitivismo.” (Vargas 2011: 63) Both of them still believe that the real problem was not the imposition of European civilization on the lives of the natives, but the way it was being done, and the kind of people who had been chosen to carry out that function. From their point of view, “[e]ra imprescindible que vinieran las buenas cosas del Viejo Continente. No la codicia de los mercaderes de alma sucia, sino la ciencia, las leyes, la educación, los derechos innatos del ser humano, la ética cristiana.” (Vargas 2011: 63) Given that standpoint, Roger is quite happy during his stay working at the Baptist Mission together with Mr and Mrs Bentley, where the native community living there “parecía ir dejando atrás la vida de la tribu y comenzando una vida moderna y cristiana.” (Vargas 2011: 65)

His second journey towards the interior of the territory is in 1903, as the British Consul this time; and his mission is to write a report on the supposed mistreatment that natives were suffering, according to Edmund D. Morel's and some missionaries' accusations. During that trip, Roger rejects his former idea of how colonization could improve African standards of living: “Lo creía antes, sí. De todo corazón. Lo creí muchos años, con toda la ingenuidad del muchacho idealista que fui. Que Europa venía al África a salvar vidas y almas, a civilizar a los salvajes. Ahora sé que me equivoqué⁸.” (Vargas 2011: 101) He finally rejects all kind of colonialism and finds his true self (Vargas 2011: 109): he realizes that Ireland has been another colony of the British Empire and that he has to fight against that situation, which eventually sends him to prison and death.

Similarly, Greene uses Querry to deepen his fierce attack of colonialism and its harmful consequences for the native semiosphere. During his first days in the country, all European constructions seem unsuitable to Querry (compared to the magnificent nature Greene 1991: 15), or even useless, like the “hot cement benches” (Greene 1991: 32). Second, through his conversations with Doctor Colin, in which they reflect upon those consequences: “These people here are all dying –oh, I don't mean of leprosy, I mean of us.” (Greene 1991: 59) For Querry, ultimately, Africa, exemplified in the leper colony, means a turning point in his life. The spiritual evolution from the passenger without any actual roots (Greene 1991: 19-20) to the man who has to fight for the new life he has been able to build (Greene 1991: 135), would have not been possible

⁸ About Casement's evolution, Juan Felipe Villar states: “Defensor primero de los valores de un colonialismo utópico, eurocéntricos o, mejor aún, anglocéntricos, sus demoledores informes posteriores le convierten en un acérrimo anticolonialista, al menos con las prácticas al uso.” (Villar 2011: 54)

without his contact with the authenticity of the native semiosphere, represented by the *Pendélé* of *Deo Gratias*. *A Burnt-Out Case* emphasizes its criticism of colonialism by means of Querry's overcoming his crisis of faith. He, similar to Doctor Colin and the fathers, becomes a border character; and he is able to translate and interiorize some of the texts from the native semiosphere that help him find his way in life. The architect has to leave behind his paternalistic attitude towards the natives (especially, with *Deo Gratias*, Greene 1991: 58). He begins to open himself to the peace and the simplicity of the life (represented by *Pendélé*) that the native semiosphere has to offer him, discerning the possibility of a new beginning.

To conclude, both *El sueño del celta* and *A Burnt-Out Case*, have as a reference the tradition of the Victorian novel set in Africa, and concretely Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Years after his first encounter with Conrad and after his novel has been published (1988), Roger describes *Heart of Darkness* as the most extraordinary depiction of the horrors that happened in Congo (Vargas 2011: 73-4). According to Conrad himself, the book represents "[...] la corrupción del alma que lo invade todo en este país [...]" (Vargas 2011: 75) Roger wonders what had affected him so much: the primitive practices of the tribes (such as cannibalism) or the oppression suffered by the natives on the part of the supposed European liberators. Once in jail in 1916, Roger and Alice share another reflection about the book. Alice defines it as a parable in which Africa turns the civilized Europeans into barbarians, and compares the novel with Roger's report to the British Government about Congo, which demonstrates exactly the opposite: Europeans were the ones who took the worst savagery to Africa. Vargas Llosa clearly agrees with Alice here and by means of this comparison he is telling the reader that *El sueño del celta* insists on the conclusion of Roger's report. On the other hand, in *A Burnt-Out Case* the native semiosphere is fundamental in the development of the protagonist, as has been explained before; and its criticism of the hegemony of European civilization is also profound. So Greene's novel intends to distance itself from the traditional paternalistic and relatively guilt-free treatment of Africa: "Unlike Conrad, Greene [...] retains the burden of guilt for the effects of colonialism upon the West. In Conrad, Western civilization succumbs to the heart's (i.e. essential) darkness; in Greene Western Civilization succumbs to itself." (Dobozy 2002: 432)

Yet, in both novels the spirit of Livingstone is still present in some way. Even though Roger's naivety concerning colonization evolves towards a much clearer awareness of the negative consequences of it for the Africans, he still wants to believe in the necessity of changing the way of life of the natives. He

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just wants to turn them into good ‘civilized citizens’ (according to the European conception), including the way they dress or their religious beliefs. What has to be done is to improve the process of colonization, to make it more human. In an interview when presenting the novel, Vargas Llosa said that colonialism was an atrocious form of barbarity; but that at least in some countries “dejó una elite educada, formada, que cuando vino la independencia pudo asumir el gobierno, crear instituciones o mantener las que se habían creado, pero nada de eso pasó en el Congo.” (Vargas 2010). In his novel, as well as in *A Burnt-Out Case*, the characters that embrace native culture get the authors’ top honors, even though they try, consciously or not, to assimilate the existence of the natives to the European way of understanding how life should be. Thus, even though Vargas Llosa and Greene are definitely settled in the frontier between the European and the native semiospheres, valuing positively both cultures’ customs and traditions, the Spanish-Peruvian and the British writer cannot avoid sharing some of Livingstone’s paternalistic attitude towards the Africans, which feel that improving the life standards of the native population meant bringing them closer to the European semiosphere.

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