
REVIEWS

James Nicolopoulos. *The Poetics of Empire in the Indies: Prophecy and Imitation in La Araucana and Os Lusíadas*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000. 332p.

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At a time when attempts to make connections—between, for instance, Hegel and Hitchcock, or even between Plato and Patanjali—continue to characterize textual explorations and expeditions sponsored by the Eurocentric protocols of comparative literature, James Nicolopoulos' work *The Poetics of Empire in the Indies* is commendably more than another reading of literary influences and connections. This is not to suggest that tracing influences and making connections are no longer useful. But, if the purpose is to follow the Forsterian injunction of "only connect" without calling attention to unequal power-relations between the texts as well as to the social relations of production that inflect those texts, one is likely to run the risk of evincing *commodity fetishism syndromes* in this era of "globalization"—a euphemism for the latest stage of capitalism. Nicolopoulos' comparative work appropriately serves as a caveat about the danger of the commodity-fetish. Yet his work remains at least partly invested in the kind of traditional literary criticism that tends to underwrite a textual economy of production, reproduction, and circulation at the expense of the political economy of imperialism itself.

Indeed, imperialism—to be specific, Iberian imperialism—as a discursive practice remains at the center of *The Poetics of Empire in the Indies*. This critical work closely and rigorously reads a pair of poetic texts: the Castilian courtier-soldier-poet Alonso de Ercilla's (1533-1594) famous heroic poem in thirty-seven cantos called *La Araucana*, published serially in three parts (1569, 1578, 1589) and the celebrated Portuguese poet Luis de Camoens's (1524-1580) verse epic in ten cantos called *Os Lusíadas*, published in 1572. These two texts were produced at a time that witnessed such interconnected historical phenomena as the gold-and-spices-intoxicated Iberian navigations; an expansionist maritime trade-network leading to the rise of mercantile capitalism in Europe that spelled out an end to the Indian and Arab domination of the sea-lanes on the one hand, and inaugurated the ruthless exploitation and colonization of Amerindians on the other; and the Renaissance itself—a movement that was pressed into the production of an imperial power/knowledge network. It was to this very "rosy dawn of European imperial-

ism”—to invoke Marx’s famous metaphor with a slight twist—that Ercilla and Camoen actively responded. Historically and even empirically textured and structured by the pressures of this particular conjuncture, *La Araucana*—described by Ercilla himself as *hystoria verdadera* or a “true history” of the initial phases of the Spanish conquest of Chile in the mid-sixteenth century—and *Os Lusíadas*, an epic celebration of the early Portuguese maritime expansion, both amply suggest that imperialism does not merely entail a military conquest as such but is itself a sustained cultural enterprise.

Thus Nicolopulos zeroes in on the cultural logic of early imperialism. And he does it by way of carefully studying the devices of “prophecy” and *imitatio*—“a method of composition predicated on the imitation of model texts” (ix)—in the “so-called epics of the Indies” (ix). In his “Preface,” Nicolopulos categorically spells out his central hypothesis thus: “the application of a coherent theory of imitation to the two foremost epics of the Indies reveals long-ignored dimensions of this novel poetics of empire ‘in action,’ as it were. In particular, this approach allows us to recover the general outlines of how aesthetically encoded messages elaborated through imitation strive for interpellative dominance on ideological, dynastic, and even economic fields of contention vital to the imperialist and colonialist enterprises of the age” (ix).

In his beginning chapter, “The Crisis of Imitation in the *Araucana*,” Nicolopulos does not merely map out a genealogy and fashion even a typology of *imitatio* in the context of Greek, Latin, Italian, and Spanish literatures in order to suggest how the *Araucana* is differentially informed and inflected by the complementary traditions of learned epic and Renaissance verse romance, but also points to what Nicolopulos himself calls “an imperialist paradigm of imitation” (59). His point comes out clearly: imitation—which is not to be conflated with a mere mechanical reproduction of certain model texts but is an invocation, mediation, refraction, transformation, subtextualization, and even suppression of those model texts—is not an ideologically innocent rhetorical exercise for Ercilla, but an epic practice that enables the production of power/knowledge in the service of empire itself.

Then, in Chapter 2, Nicolopulos ably demonstrates how Ercilla forges an entire constellation of prophecies out of an inordinately eclectic mosaic of imitations. In all this, however, Ercilla remains bent on a decisive Castilianization of his epic insofar as he dissimulates his debts to Virgil and Ariosto but aggressively advertises and fiercely foregrounds the imitations of his Iberian predecessors, particularly Garcilaso. According to Nicolopulos, this very epic-dialectic of dissimulation and advertisement bespeaks an intense spirit of competition and even po-

etic rivalry. Later in his book, Nicolopoulos convincingly and cleverly reads this poetic rivalry as synecdochic shorthand for the entire range of inter-imperialist rivalries—cultural and commercial—between Spain and Portugal. It is precisely in this context that Nicolopoulos compares at great length the two epics of the Indies to plot *both* transactions and tensions between them from Chapter 3 to 5, rendering the point clear that the advanced epic technologies are not at all politically and ideologically neutral but are actively anchored in power-relations and are integral to a celebratory poetics of empire.

Indeed, Nicolopoulos remains predominantly, if not exclusively, concerned with the interplay between poetic and inter-imperialist rivalries, concealed and revealed as they are through a constellation of well-orchestrated epic devices. But the issue of literary representations of the colonized Other—a crucially constitutive aspect of imperialism's cultural project, whether the Other is either misrepresented or is even rendered a blank—gets short shrift in the book. I think Nicolopoulos could easily pay some attention to Frantz Fanon's famous rewriting of the Hegelian "master/slave" dialectic (the self/other dialectic) so as to underline the imperial calculus that the ontological legitimation of empire is a function of the suppression yet profitable appropriation of the colonized Other. Also, the book's highly audible silence about the exemplary works of such comparatists as Edward Said and E. San Juan is symptomatic of the author's altogether different center of theoretical gravitation that indeed downplays, but does not entirely elide, the question of the Other in the so-called epic of the Indies. Although Nicolopoulos justly alludes to the *topos* of Asia and Africa while mapping out the geography of empire in the two poems, his comparatist lens unfortunately moves in the direction of short-circuiting certain Afro-Asiatic and Arabic roots of Iberian epic discourses themselves, thus blinking the historically stubborn fact that empire cashes in on the use-value and exchange-value of the resources of its Other, both material and discursive.

Yet for its acuity and rigor of reading, for its thorough accounting of the contours and coordinates of the epic traditions and conventions, for its sustained attention to the details and *differentia specifica* of the two texts compared, for its demystification of the discursive logic of imperialism, and for its contestation and reformulation of a theory of *imitatio*, *The Poetics of Empire in the Indies* can justly be reckoned as an impressive and consequential intervention in the areas of comparative literature, Renaissance studies, and colonial discourse analysis all at once.

