

## **Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *Relación***

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Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación*, later known as "Naufragios," or "shipwrecks, calamities" is the tale of the first Europeans to confront and survive the peopled wilderness of North America. The years were 1528 to 1536, several decades before the English settled Jamestown and landed at Plymouth Rock. Juan Ponce de León and other Spanish explorers and conquerors had chanced upon the Florida Peninsula in their search for gold and slaves (not the Fountain of Youth!). Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and three expeditionary companions, one of whom was the black African slave Estevanico, came to experience the areas of the future United States as no natives of Europe or Africa had previously done. They explored the lands of the Florida Peninsula, coasted the northern rim of the Gulf of Mexico on rafts, lived for six and a half years in eastern coastal Texas, eventually traversed western Texas and northern Mexico on foot, crossing the Rio Grande three times as they trekked westward. And they lived to tell the story.

Cabeza de Vaca wrote his account in Spain between the years of 1537 and 1540. It was published for the first time in 1542, republished in 1555, and read throughout the sixteenth century and afterward by Spanish explorers and missionaries seeking silver and souls-to-save in the lands north of Mexico. In the twentieth century, Cabeza de Vaca's account served as inspiration for lyric (and even some epic-style) poems, novels, "Classics Comics"-style popular youth editions, and, most recently, in 1991, the feature-length film, "Cabeza de Vaca," directed by Mexican cinematographer Nicolás Echevarría and co-produced by the Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía and Televisión Española. In the United States, the state historical societies of Florida, Texas, and the U.S. southwest avidly sought evidence to the effect (or simply claimed) that "Cabeza de Vaca slept here." That was in the 1930s and 1940s. Much more recently, the Mexican-American interest in the Cabeza de Vaca heritage has read the account for its capacity to dramatize the positions of mediation, marginalization, liminality, and multilingualism that so commonly characterize immigrant minority experience today. Such readings do not ignore the fact that Cabeza de Vaca was and forever will be a "gentleman conquistador" from Jerez de la Frontera in southern Spain; rather, they seek to interpret the symbolic values of narrated experience that transcend the historical anecdote.

Departing from the "historical anecdote," about which, in fact, much could be said, there are a great many themes that can be profitably taken up with students. Whether one is interested in developing discussions on the topics of quest and adventure, freedom and bondage, empire and colonialism, miracles and shamanism, sacrifice and survival, transcendental good and evil, or human gain and loss, Cabeza de Vaca's modest account provides a rich bounty of possibilities.

(Here, I should warn, I am going to imitate Cabeza de Vaca and give my personal account of my struggles in dealing with his work as a way of suggesting to you some of the issues and questions that you might have in mind in teaching the *Relación*.) For me, referentiality is a large issue in the reading of Cabeza de Vaca's account, and it is precisely the pull, or tension, between symbolic and literal reference that makes the work so fascinating. This is the theoretical problem that drew my interest to Cabeza de Vaca so many years ago.

To deal with that problem of referentiality to my satisfaction required eleven years (one year longer, mind you, than Cabeza de Vaca was abroad in North America!), the invitation to co-authorship and happy collaboration with a former Princeton student of mine, Patrick Pautz, the need to go back to the first (1542) Spanish-language account and scrutinize and edit and translate it into English, and then to surround the account with a number of related investigations. These included the examination of: (1) the experience of the author himself (Cabeza de Vaca's Mediterranean and Atlantic worlds); (2) the geography of the *Relación* and the consideration of the route followed; (3) temporal flow and narrative complexity in the account; its forms of referentiality (symbolic and literal, as mentioned); (4) the parade of documentary texts that preceded Cabeza de Vaca's writing of his account and his actual doing so, followed by another parade of historical accounts written by historians of the conquest era; and, (5) finally, the readings and rewritings that bring us to the present day. All of these textual and contextual issues lend themselves readily to class dissection and discussion.

To do them up in print resulted in an impossibly long project: The three-volume, Adorno/Pautz *Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca: His Account, His Life, and the Expedition of Pánfilo de Narváez*, which were published in 1999 by the University of Nebraska Press and most generously reviewed in *Early American Literature* [volume 35, 2000] by our host Ralph Bauer. The idea of this immense project—and this is my main pedagogical point here—was not to substitute for the reading of the *Relación* as many commentaries and analyses tend to, but rather to make possible the reading of the account in a more, rather than less, informed manner. The Adorno/Pautz opus is actually intended as a kind of reference work for which, upon teaching Cabeza de Vaca, one might turn profitably (consult the index!) for discussions of any of the matters mentioned above.

I should also say that the Adorno/Pautz English translation and thumbnail versions of the issues I've mentioned above will be published in a usable classroom paperback by the University of Nebraska Press. I am strongly convinced, as I mention on Panel 10, of the mutually supportive value of editing a text in its original language and only then providing a translation into another. The long companionship with the original text engenders a kind of "not-romantic-but-rather-marital" commitment to that original, and it prevents the kind of lovers' betrayals that occur if one embraces solely the ultimate object of desire, that is, the translation.

Allow me to close by citing a few words from the in-press paperback's introduction and to quote a few of Cabeza de Vaca's most provocative and enduring sentences.

One of the useful ways of introducing the *Relación* to students is to point out the following: "When Cabeza de Vaca and his companions finally arrived in Spanish-held territory in 1536 they faced the enormous challenge of communicating to their countrymen, in an intelligible way, where they had been for the past eight years, what had happened to them, and what was contained in the places they had lived in and traversed. Their task was made more difficult by the fact that they were uncertain about the location of the point along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico from which they had started out, the extensive distance they had traveled, and the length of time they had been gone." That was Cabeza de Vaca's challenge regarding the issue of referentiality.

At the same time, and "within the constraints of formality and decorum imposed in writing to his sovereign, Cabeza de Vaca conveyed sentiments that potentially could have a strong effect on his reader. He could not have been unaware of the high drama he created in portraying the protagonism of events by Pánfilo de Narváez when he abandoned his charge, announcing that "it was no longer time for one man to rule another, that each one should do whatever seemed best to him in order to save his own life." Later, the healing episodes ("the wonders that our Lord was working through us") are created as scenes of solemn, initially tense encounter that eventually tumble over and into one another, carrying the four men forward across northern Mexico and southwestern Texas at a breathtaking pace: "opening roads for us through a land so deserted, bringing us people where many times there were none, and liberating us from so many dangers and not permitting us to be killed."

"Equally dramatically, Cabeza de Vaca portrayed the initial period after the four men's reunion with their countrymen as one of bitter irony. The return to civilization brought not the desired liberty but its loss. The four survivors were moved along under the armed escort of Spanish soldiers to keep them from conversation with the Indians whom they had reassured and sent away in peace, but whom the soldiers now planned to attack. "From which it is evident," Cabeza de Vaca remarked, "how much men's thoughts deceive them, for we went to them seeking liberty and when we thought we had it, it turned out to be so much to the contrary."

"Among the small but suggestive interpretive keys placed in the reader's path are Cabeza de Vaca's exploitation of the miracle of the burning bush when he was lost in the wilderness for five days, his reference to the martyrdom of Jesus Christ to describe his own sufferings, and his framing of the entire narration with an event that he said had occurred before the expedition set out, namely, the prophecy of the Muslim woman from Hornachos that projected doom for many and great wealth for those who survived."

"The reader is prompted to ask: Was the outcome of the Narváez expedition then, in Cabeza de Vaca's view, an ineludible destiny? Was it fate or fortune, or

the inscrutable will of God? Cabeza de Vaca leaves the reader with all these choices at the head and foot of his account. In his proem to the emperor, which can sustain as many readings as the interested reader can give it, he seemed to rely on 'the will and judgment of God.' Yet at the very end of his work, he concluded his account of the Muslim woman's prophecy with the statement, "and the entire voyage had occurred to us in the same manner that she had told us."

"Cabeza de Vaca's relación is thus at one and the same time a documentary account of a lived experience and an attempt to interpret it and give it transcendent meaning. It is the endeavor to come to grips with a seemingly incredible experience (Cabeza de Vaca cautioned his imperial reader that such a reading would be possible but wrong) and to recount extraordinary but natural occurrences. How could they be explained at a higher level? Cabeza de Vaca's alternate, searching references to the will of the Christian God and the superstitious prophecy of the non-Christian Extremaduran woman do not give us his answer to the question, but they do reveal the seriousness of his effort to address it. The earnestness of this effort at interpretation and explanation reveals the Relación for what it is: an account of the vexing paradoxes that characterize human experience. Through it all—for as many times as we read it, as many times as we teach it—the great human mysteries at the heart of the narrative remain undisturbed."

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