Afterword

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After feasting on the sumptuous fare offered by this collection of essays, encompassing as they do a great diversity of texts and contexts, how might we characterize the early modern relation's enduring legacy? As Megan Armstrong observes, "The *relazione* mode, as a literary device, invited the narrator to step in and mediate between matters astonishing, portentous, or novel, and a reader who needed not exhorting and moving, but convincing" (p. 128). Thomas Cohen and Germaine Warkentin further suggest that the relation was "a literary bridge between the reader and the world, or, indeed, between the reader and the main subject" (p. 9). This is certainly how early modern relations presented themselves. But the very existence of a gap to be bridged is hardly an incontrovertible fact. Rather, it depends on perspective and on specific semiotic mechanisms that continually redraw the boundary between that which is being related, the "there" and "then" and the "here" and "now" of the presumed *communitas* of narrator and readers. Indeed, the early modern relation was a tale from the "contact zone" par excellence, positioning its narrator as an intermediary between a foreign world and a readership "back home."[1] Take, for example, the case of the Jesuit Jean de Brébeuf as analyzed by Carolyn Podruchny and Kathryn Magee Labelle. The authors suggest that Brébeuf was prompted "to interpose himself as the crucial commentator, interpreter, and mediator" by "the contradictory task of communicating both Wendat otherness and Wendat close kinship with Catholic Frenchmen" (p. 98–99). But what if we were to reverse causality, and consider how Brébeuf (like the authors of other relations, to be sure), in positioning himself as an intermediary, resorted to particular forms of asserting both difference and sameness as organizing principles of his narrative? The following comments reflect — in an inevitably preliminary and cursory fashion — on the implications of the early modern relation's inherent claim to mediation.

The consequences of the narrator's self-fashioning as an intermediary are especially evident in the paradigmatic case of Venetian diplomatic "relations." As both Filippo de Vivo and Andreas Motsch show, the oral features of this genre, whether its actual performance in front of the Senate upon an ambassador's return from mission or its etymological roots in the verb *riferire*, betray the act of "bringing back" — a spatiotemporal relation of circulation, with the narrator as the go-between, a privileged, heroic figure who singularly ventured out and is now in a position to relate that which is distant (in time, space, or both) back to the listeners or readers. Inherent in this enactment of circulation is the tension between localizing, on the one hand, and reinforcing spatiotemporal distance, on the other. In other words, this "dual vision," the effort to "demonstrate both… otherness and… sameness" (Cohen and Warkentin, p. 19) in a single oratorical performance, is also the process by which the other and the self emerge as distinct and clearly delineated. Thus, in making an object accessible, the relation's narrative mode foregrounds its *un*familiarity, its inaccessibility except through the narrator's mediation.

De Vivo fruitfully explores the complexity of the performance, consumption, and circulation of early modern Venetian diplomatic relations. These moments and actions, however, are preceded by several necessary steps, including the collation, distillation, and purification of disparate previous texts, both oral and written ("information"), and their transformation into a "new" text, what linguistic anthropologists call the process of entextualization.[2] In addition, this action constitutes an author who can be named unambiguously. The heterogeneity of relations' "sources" and their complex mechanisms of composition are, throughout this collection, amply attested to — from Wendat orators' speeches to Portuguese mariners' eyewitness accounts. This heterogeneity calls for greater attention to the institutional sites where "sources" were gathered (observed, overheard, elicited, quoted, copied down, transcribed), and where relations were crafted. It also makes evident the need for more detailed analysis of the semiotic devices which helped inscribe the spatiotemporal distance between object and readership, including the use of deictics, the conscious "borrowing" of lexical items from other linguistic codes, the glossing, explication, and commensuration of "foreign terms," and myriad other strategies of translation in its broadest sense.

Indeed, as De Vivo notes, many Venetian diplomatic relations were not penned by the ambassadors who read them in front of the Senate, but were "ghost-written by secretaries and others" (p. 32). This important insight reminds us that the very act of textual "composition" is never singular, and that authorial practice always involves perforce the assembling and reordering of previous text fragments, as well as the distribution of responsibility for the textual utterance across a range of persons presumed to have taken part in its composition. This reliance is palpable in relations from the New World, such as Pero Lopes de Sousa's, who in the words of Maria João Dodman depended in his *Diário da Navegação* on "eyewitness accounts of participants willing to please the king, the captain, and themselves" (p. 174). The same reliance is true, with even greater consequences, for Venetian diplomatic relations.

Even a preliminary consideration of the Venetian ambassadorial relation's "discursive footprint" must therefore address the kinds of actors and perspectives at work in forging it, and often juxtaposed as a compositional technique. For in order to produce their relations — indeed, in order to engage in any kind of diplomatic activity — ambassadors relied heavily on a range of collaborators, including secretaries, scribes, spies and informants, interpreters, and elite members of the host society. These multiple diplomatic collaborators brought to the process their own ideas about what was new and noteworthy and, as importantly, about proper ways of reporting and relating, and indeed, of engaging in discourse. Such collaborators' diverse points of view and (thoroughly mediated) perceptions of the relation's presumed audience are inextricably entwined with those of the putative author. To be clear, in recognizing this process, the goal is not to "recover" submerged voices, to "let the subaltern speak" in any simple way. As Podruchny and Magee Labelle caution, "[i]n the end, we remain witnesses less to the Wendats than to Brébeuf's attempts to translate Wendat words […]" (p. 122). But the very attempt to "translate" or "relate" interlocutors' words, I would argue, must already engage to some extent these interlocutors' conceptual frameworks, including investigating how they understand text and circulation. The resultant "cacophony" is therefore not a background noise to be reduced, but an essential aspect of the relation's narrative mode, one that merits careful attention if we are to trace the genre's genealogies and truth claims. For example, we are only beginning to understand the legacies of medieval Islamicate travel literature in its variegated forms — including pilgrimage narratives and personal accounts of travel (*rihla*) — for early modern Ottoman practices of narrating that which is new and foreign.[3] Given Venetian ambassadors' heavy reliance on Ottoman diplomatic collaborators, these practices surely played a role in shaping Venetian relations from the Porte as well, a role not yet fully fleshed out.

All these considerations alert us to the pervasive polyphony of diplomatic discourse, which grafted to one another multiple, sometimes competing perspectives.[4] For truth-effect, early modern relations often relied on extensive direct citation, whether explicitly framed as such or not. For example, as Franco Pierno notes, it is quite significant that the Jesuit Diego de Torres Bollo both heavily incorporated other sources and testimonies (whether indigenous or Jesuit) and effectively silenced their different perspectives by insisting on his own eyewitnessing of the events narrated, thus forging "a single narrative fabric" (p. 92 [translation mine]) that wove history and fable in an effort to establish his own singular authority. It is equally revealing that Margaret Cavendish chose to entitle her text "a true relation." As Margaret Reeves suggests, this device let Cavendish invoke the prestige of a powerful, highly politicized genre. But as we notice, it also allowed her to mediate and authoritatively gloss a foreign object, though here the object reported on is the author herself, objectified.

Such strategies call for further inquiry into the relation's voicing structure and into the discursive mechanisms that sought, at times, to purge the final text of the vestiges of other voices.[5] It may thus well be worth asking how a singular voice was produced out of the variety of voices that served as sources, and how the tension between competing perspectives was suppressed in the forging of a coherent relational narrative. Indeed, to what extent was that a conscious goal, and how well was it achieved?[6]

Interestingly enough, Venetian ambassadors themselves often recognized — if grudgingly — their reliance on other intermediaries and therefore on not-quite-patrician perspectives. Ambassadors' dispatches and missives to the Senate from the Ottoman Empire repeat *ad nauseam* their fears of betrayal by local dragomans (diplomatic interpreters). For these ambassadors, their reliance on local intermediaries necessarily compromised Venetian interests.[7] This anxiety concerned not just local intermediaries' "loyalty" and competence, but also the very process through which knowledge was produced and articulated in diplomatic discourse. Significantly, acknowledgement of reliance on other intermediaries is less explicit in relations, the final, carefully-crafted, *ex post facto* product of embassies, than it is in periodic dispatches. This was not because, once home, returning ambassadors somehow "forgot" their indebtedness to other diplomatic practitioners, but rather because the genre expected well-groomed patrician diplomats to fashion themselves as the sole heroes of their own narratives.

Of course, for envoys, to acknowledge the multiple layers of mediation and diverse perspectives underwriting their relations would have undermined the testimonial "authority of experience" and the relation's clear anchoring in a singular timespace on which the authorial voice rested. Furthermore, such an acknowledgement might have cast doubt on the uniqueness (and hence value) of the "privy information" that the relation's author purported to divulge. To position oneself as an "information broker" is to deny, or at least belittle, the claims of others to provide this vital service, and to imply that the information offered is not only unique, but coherent and fungible.

As a corollary, let us consider the early modern "spilling around the planet" of European politics and commerce. Beyond doubt, European relation-writers encountered on unprecedented scale what we may call, in retrospect, cultural difference. At the same time, as the articles in this volume so carefully document and analyze, early modern relation writers reporting from virtually all corners of the earth struggled to fit new encounters into familiar narrative frames. These frames were shaped by centuries of sustained engagement, indeed, by a metaphorical rubbing shoulders, with proximate societies, including the Byzantines, the Mamluks, and their eventual Ottoman successors. These societies were so close geographically, and, I would argue, socio-culturally as to require significant discursive elaboration of their foreignness, not of their familiarity.

This mediation leaves us with more questions than answers: were there prototypical early modern discursive strategies for foregrounding spatiotemporal distance across relations' widely disparate sites of production, performance, and circulation? More generally, what does the consolidation of the relation as a paradigmatic and immensely popular genre tell us about early modern Europe? What role might it have played in constituting European self-consciousness through multiple encounters abroad? And could we turn Ranke's assertion on its head and suggest not simply that within early modern relations "sleeps a still unknown history of Europe," but that an emergent Europe was shaped in part by the relation's purifying, Occidentalizing discursive strategies? Might such a perspective also challenge a periodization that casts the Enlightenment encyclopaedia as the "nemesis of the relation," as suggested by Cohen and Warkentin following Motsch (p. 16)? If an essential element of the relation's discursive mode is the erasure of perspective and polyphony, how different, after all, is the "scientific article" which, in claiming its truth to be universal and disembodied, denies its own positionality? Clearly, the relational mode has now largely been subsumed by other modalities of claiming truth, but at the very least, we should recognize the ways in which it has endured as a foundation for a range of disciplinary epistemological procedures, in, for instance, ethnography, philology, and orientalism.

Notes

1. On contact zones, see Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
2. On entextualization, see Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban, ed. *Natural Histories of Discourse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
3. The term Islamicate, modelled after Italianate, was coined by Marshall Hodgson to refer to "the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims." Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 59. On early modern Islamicate travel genres, see, for example, Nabil Matar, ed., *In the Lands of the Christians: Arabic Travel Writing in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Roxanne L. Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400–1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
4. On polyphony as a compositional principle, see Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259–422.
5. That this was by no means a universal strategy is suggested, for example, by Podruchny and Magee Labelle's discussion of how Brébeuf used "many direct quotations from villagers, some nameless, some named, to illustrate and punctuate his observations about them" (p. 103). In this case, rather than purification, we may more appropriately speak of appropriation and cooptation.

6. This process of strategic suppression of difference has been thematized, albeit in very different contexts, by Kathryn A. Woolard, "Simultaneity and Bivalency as Strategies in Bilingualism," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 8.1 (1998), pp. 3–29.
7. See E. Natalie Rothman, "Interpreting Dragomans: Boundaries and Crossings in the Early Modern Mediterranean," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51.4 (2009), pp. 771–800.