Item #4

Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 3-50.

The Discovery of America

MY SUBJECT—the discovery *self* makes of the *other*—is so enormous that any general formulation soon ramifies into countless categories and directions. We can discover the other in ourselves, realize we are not a homogeneous substance, radically alien to whatever is not us: as Rimbaud said, *Je est un autre.* But *others* are also *"I"s:* subjects just as I am, whom only my point of view—according to which all of them are *out there* and I alone am *in here*—separates and authentically distinguishes from myself. I can conceive of these others as an abstraction, as an instance of any individual's psychic configuration, as the Other—other in relation to myself, to *me;* or else as a specific social group to which *we* do not belong. This group in turn can be interior to society: women for men, the rich for the poor, the mad for the "normal"; or it can be exterior to society, i.e., another society which will be near or far away, depending on the case: beings whom everything links to me on the cultural, moral, historical plane; or else unknown quantities, outsiders whose language and customs I do not understand, so foreign that in extreme instances I am reluctant to admit they belong to the same species as my own. It is this problematics of the exterior and remote other that I have chosen—somewhat arbitrarily and because one cannot speak of everything all at once—in order to open an investigation that can never be closed.

But how to speak of such things? In Socrates' time, an orator was accustomed to ask his audience which genre or mode of expression was preferred: myth—i.e., narrative—or logical argumentation? In the age of the book, this decision cannot be left to the audience: the choice

must be made in order for the book to exist, and one merely imagines (or hopes for) an audience that will have given one answer rather than the other; one also tries to listen to the answer suggested or imposed by the subject itself. I have chosen to narrate a history. Closer to myth than to argument, it is nonetheless to be distinguished from myth on two levels: first because it is a true story (which myth could, but need not, be), and second because my main interest is less a historian's than a moralist's; the present is more important to me than the past. The only way I can answer the question, How to deal with the other? is by telling an exemplary story (this will be the genre chosen), i.e., a story that will be as true as possible but in telling which I shall try never to lose sight of what biblical exegesis used to call its tropological or ethical meaning. And in this book, rather as in a novel, summaries or generalized perspectives will alternate with scenes or analyses of detail filled with quotations, and with pauses in which the author comments on what has just occurred, and of course with frequent ellipses or omissions. But is this not the point of departure of all history?

Of the many narratives available to us, I have chosen one: that of the discovery and conquest of America. For decorum's sake I have observed the unities: of time, taking the hundred years after Columbus' first voyage (i.e., the sixteenth century by and large); of place, taking the region of the Caribbean and Mexico (what is sometimes called Mesoamerica); and of action: the Spaniards' perception of the Indians will be my sole subject, with one exception—concerning Montezuma and those close to him.

There are two justifications—which I discerned after the fact—for choosing this theme as a first step into the world of the discovery of the other. First of all, the discovery of America, or of the Americans, is certainly the most astonishing encounter of our history. We do not have the same sense of radical difference in the "discovery" of other continents and of other peoples: Europeans have never been altogether ignorant of the existence of Africa, India, or China; some memory of these places was always there already—from the beginning. The moon is farther away than America from Europe, true enough, but today we know that our encounter with it is no encounter at all, and that this discovery does not occasion surprises of the same kind: for a living being to be photographed on the moon, an astronaut must stand in front of the camera, and in his helmet we see only one reflection, that of another earthling. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Indians of America are certainly present, but nothing is known about them, even if, as we might expect, certain images and ideas concerning other remote populations were projected upon these newly discovered beings (see fig. 1). The encounter will never again achieve such an intensity, if indeed that is the word to use: the sixteenth century perpetrated the greatest genocide in human history.

But the discovery of America is essential for us today not only because it is an extreme, and exemplary, encounter. Alongside this paradigmatic value, it has another as well—the value of direct causality. The history of the globe is of course made up of conquests and defeats, of colonizations and discoveries of others; but, as I shall try to show, it is in fact the conquest of America that heralds and establishes our present identity; even if every date that permits us to separate any two periods is arbitrary, none is more suitable, in order to mark the beginning of the modern era, than the year 1492, the year Columbus crosses the Atlantic Ocean. We are all the direct descendants of Columbus, it is with him that our genealogy begins, insofar as the word *beginning* has a meaning. Since 1492 we are, as Las Casas has said, "in that time so new and like to no other" (*Historia de las Indias*, I, 88*). Since that date, the world has shrunk (even if the universe has become infinite), "the world is small," as Columbus himself will peremptorily declare ("Lettera Rarissima," 7/7/1503; for an image of Columbus that communicates something of this spirit, see fig. 2); men have discovered the totality of which they are a part, whereas hitherto they formed a part without a whole. This book will be an attempt to understand what happened in that year, and during the century that followed, through the reading of several texts, whose authors will be my characters. These will engage in monologues, like Columbus; in the dialogue of actions, like Cortés and Montezuma, or in that of learned discourse, like Las Casas and Sepúlveda; or less obviously, like Durán and Sahagún, in the dialogue with their Indian interlocutors.

But enough preliminaries: let us proceed to the facts.

Columbus's courage is admirable (and has been admired many times over); Vasco da Gama and Magellan may have undertaken more difficult voyages, but they knew where they were going. For all his assurance, Columbus could not be certain that the Abyss—and there-

*Abbreviated references appear in the text; for complete titles, see the Bibliographic Note at the back of the book. The figures in parentheses, unless indicated otherwise, refer to chapters, sections, parts, etc. and not to pages.

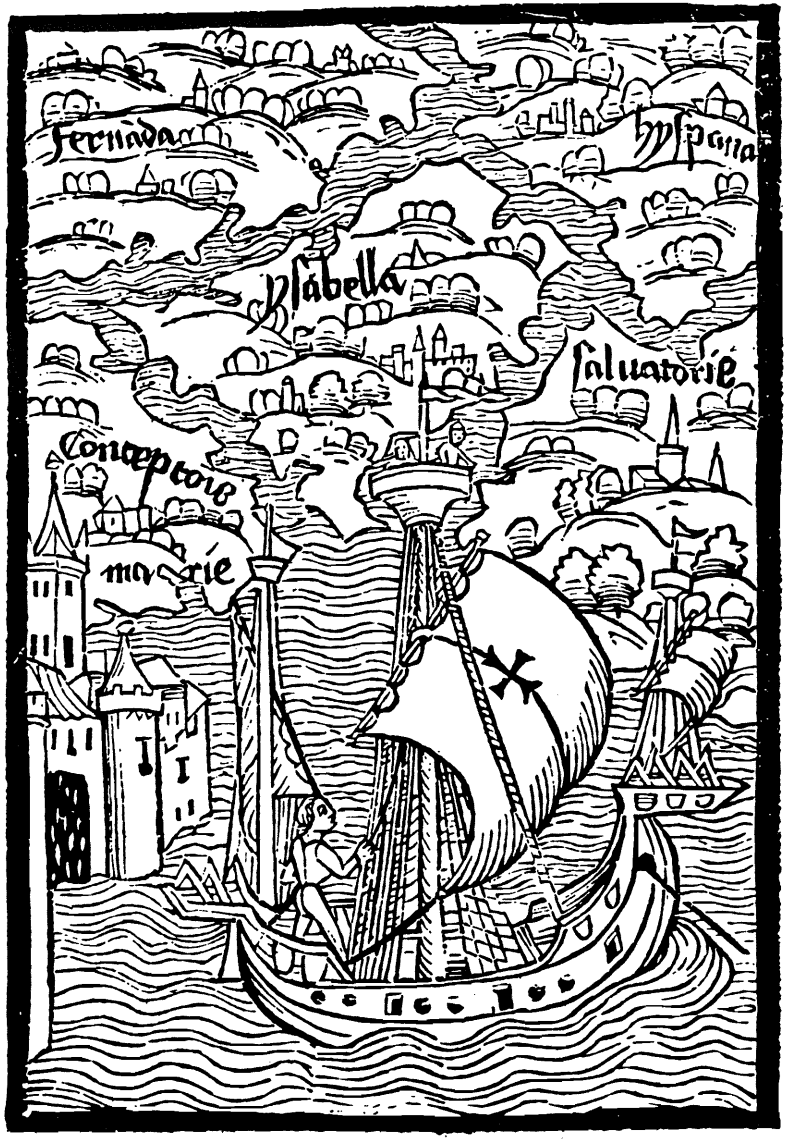

Fig. 1 Ships and castles in the West Indies.

Fig. 2 Don Cristobal Colón.

fore his fall into it—did not lie on the other side of the ocean; or again, that this westward voyage was not the descent of a long downward slope (since we are at the earth's summit), which it would afterwards be impossible to reascend; in short, that his return was at all likely. The first question in our genealogical investigation will therefore be, What impelled him to set out? How could the thing have happened?

One might assume from reading Columbus's writings (diaries, letters, reports) that his essential motive was the desire to get rich (here as subsequently I am saying about Columbus what could be said about others; it happens that he was, frequently, the first, and therefore set the example). Gold—or rather the search for it, for not much is found at the start—is omnipresent in the course of Columbus's first voyage. On the very day following the discovery, October 13, 1492, he already notes in his diary: "I was attentive and worked hard to know if there was any gold," and he returns to this subject unceasingly: "I do not wish to delay but to discover and go to many islands to find gold" (15/10/1492). "The Admiral ordered that nothing should be taken, in order that they might surmise that the Admiral wanted nothing but gold" (1/11/1492). His very prayer has become: "Our Lord in his goodness guide me that I may find this gold" (23/12/1492); and, in a subsequent report ("Memorial for Antonio de Torres," 30/1/1494), he alludes laconically to "our activity, which is to gather gold." The signs he believes he has found of the presence of gold also determine his route: "I decided to go to the southwest to search for gold and precious stones" ("Journal," 13/10/1492). "He wished to go to the island which they call Venegue, where he had news, as ne understood, that there was much gold" (13/11/1492). "The Admiral believed that he was very near to the source, and that Our Lord would show him where the gold was born" (17/12/1492: for gold is "born" in this period). Thus Columbus wanders from island to island, for it is quite possible that the Indians had thereby found a means of getting rid of him. "At break of day, he made sail in order to lay a course in search of the islands that the Indians told him had much gold, and some of which had more gold than earth" (22/12/1492).

Is it, then, no more than greed that sent Columbus on his journey? It suffices to read his writings through to be convinced that this is anything but the case. Quite simply, Columbus knows the lure value of wealth, and of gold in particular. By the promise of gold he reassures others in difficult moments. "This day, they completely lost sight of

land, and many sighed and wept for fear they would not see it again for a long time. The Admiral comforted them with great promises of lands and riches, to sustain their hope and dispel their fears of a long voyage" (F. Columbus, 18). "Here the men could stand it no longer and complained of the long voyage; but the Admiral cheered them as best he could, holding out good hope of the advantages they would have" ("Journal," 10/10/1492).

Not only the sailors hoped to grow rich; the very backers of the expedition, the rulers of Spain, would not have ventured upon the enterprise without the hope of a profit; since the journal Columbus keeps is intended for them, signs of the presence of gold must appear on every page (lacking gold itself). Recalling, on the occasion of the third voyage, the organization of the first, Columbus says quite explicitly that gold was, in some sense, the lure he offered so that the monarchs would agree to finance him: "It was needful also to speak of the temporal gain therein, foreshadowed in the writings of so many wise men, worthy of credence, who wrote histories and related how in these parts there are great riches" ("Letter to the Sovereigns," 31/8/1498). On another occasion he says he has gathered and preserved gold "so that their Highnesses might be pleased and might thus judge this situation on the basis of a number of large stones filled with gold" ("Letter to Doña Juana de Torres," November 1500). Furthermore, Columbus is not mistaken when he imagines the importance of these motives: is his disgrace not due, at least in part, to the fact that there was not more gold in these islands? "Then was born the defaming and disparagement of the undertaking which had been begun before, because I had not immediately sent caravels laden with gold" ("Letter to the Sovereigns," 31/8/1498).

We know that a long dispute will divide Columbus and the sovereigns (and later a trial will be instituted between the heirs of both sides), one that bears precisely on the amount of profits the Admiral is authorized to take from the "Indies." Despite all this, greed is not Columbus's true motive: if wealth matters to him, it is because wealth signifies the acknowledgment of his role as discoverer; but he himself would prefer the rough garment of a monk. Gold is too human a value to interest Columbus to any real degree, and we must believe him when he writes, in the journal of the third voyage: "Our Lord knows well that I do not bear these sufferings to enrich myself, for, certainly I know that everything in this age is vain except what is done for the honor

and service of God" (Las Casas, *Historia,* I, 146). Or at the end of his account of the fourth voyage: "I did not come on this voyage for gain, honor or wealth, this is certain, for then the hope of all such things was dead. I came to Your Highnesses with honest purpose and sincere zeal; and I do not lie" ("Lettera Rarissima," 7/7/1503).

What is this honest purpose? In the journal of the first voyage, Columbus articulates it frequently: he wants to meet the Grand Khan, or the Emperor of China, of whom Marco Polo has left an unforgettable portrait. "I am determined to go to the mainland and to the city of Quisay and to present Your Highnesses' letters to the Grand Khan, and to beg a reply and to come home with it" (21/10/1492). This objective is somewhat lost sight of subsequently, the present discoveries being so distracting in themselves, but it is never actually forgotten. But why this obsession, which seems almost childish? Because, again according to Marco Polo, "the Emperor of Cathay some time since sent for wise men to teach him the religion of Christ" ("Lettera Rarissima," 7/7/1503), and Columbus seeks the route that would permit this desire to be realized. Infinitely more than gold, the spread of Christianity is Columbus's heart's desire, and he has set forth his feelings in the case very explicitly, notably in a letter to the pope. His future voyage will be "to the glory of the Holy Trinity and to that of the holy Christian religion," and for this he "hopes for the victory of God the Eternal, as He has ever granted it to me in the past"; what he does is "great and magnifying for the glory and growth of the Holy Christian religion." This, then, is his goal: "I hope in Our Lord to be able to propagate His holy name and His Gospel throughout the universe" ("Letter to Pope Alexander VI," February 1502).

The universal victory of Christianity—this is the motive that animates Columbus, a profoundly pious man (he never sets sail on Sunday), who for this very reason regards himself as chosen, as charged with a divine mission, and who sees divine intervention everywhere, in the movement of the waves as in the wreck of his ship (on a Christmas night!): "By many signal miracles God has shown Himself on the voyage" ("Journal," 15/3/1493).

Furthermore, the need for money and the desire to impose the true God are not mutually exclusive. There is even a relation of subordination between the two: one is a means, the other an end. In reality, Columbus has a more specific project than the exaltation of the Gospel in the universe, and the existence as well as the permanence of this

project is indicative of his mentality: a kind of Quixote a few centuries behind his times, Columbus aspires to set off on a crusade to liberate Jerusalem! It happens that the notion is preposterous in his era, and since he is penniless as well, no one is willing to listen to him. How can a man without resources who wishes to found a crusade realize his dream in the fifteenth century? All he need do is discover America in order to obtain his funds. Or rather, merely sail to China by the "direct" western route, since Marco Polo and other medieval writers have confirmed the fact that gold is "born" there in abundance.

The reality of this project is amply confirmed. On December 26, 1492, during the first voyage, Columbus reveals in his journal that he hopes to find gold, "and that in so great quantity that the Sovereigns within three years would undertake and prepare to go and conquer the Holy Places," for so, says he, "I declared to Your Highnesses that all the gain of this my enterprise should be spent in the conquest of Jerusalem; and Your Highnesses smiled and said that it pleased you, and that even without this you had that strong desire." He refers again to this episode later on: "At the moment when I undertook to discover the Indies, it was with the intention of beseeching the King and the Queen, our Sovereigns, that they might determine to spend the revenues possibly accruing to them from the Indies for the conquest of Jerusalem; and it is indeed this thing which I have asked of them" ("Deed of Entail," 22/2/1498). This then was the project Columbus had set before the royal court, in order to seek the help necessary for his first expedition; as for Their Highnesses, they did not take it very seriously, and reserved the right to employ the potential profit of the undertaking for other purposes.

But Columbus does not forget his project and brings it up again in a letter to the pope: "This enterprise was undertaken in the intention of employing what would be gained from it in restoring the Holy See to the Holy Church. After having gone thither and having seen the land, I wrote to the King and to the Queen, My Sovereigns, that from that day for seven years I would require fifty thousand foot soldiers and five thousand horsemen for the conquest of the Holy See, and in the following five years fifty thousand more foot soldiers and five thousand more horse, which would come to ten thousand horse and one hundred thousand foot soldiers for the said conquest" (February 1502). Columbus does not surmise that the conquest will involve him continuously, but in an altogether different direction, very close to the lands he has

discovered, and with many fewer soldiers after all. Hence his appeal does not provoke many reactions: "The other most notorious matter, which cries aloud for redress, remains inexplicable to this moment" ("Lettera Rarissima," 7/7/1503). This is why, seeking to confirm his intention even after his own death, he draws up a deed of entail and gives instructions to his son (or to the latter's heirs): to collect as much money as possible so that, if the sovereigns abandon the project, he can "proceed with it alone and with as much might as he can muster" (20/2/1498).

Las Casas has left a famous portrait of Columbus, one that nicely situates his crusading obsession in the context of his profound religiosity: "When gold or other precious objects were brought to him, he entered his chapel and said, 'Let us thank Our Lord who made us worthy of discovering so much wealth.' He was a most jealous keeper of the honor of God; eager to convert the peoples and to see the seed and faith of Jesus Christ spread everywhere, and especially devoted to the hope that God would make him worthy of helping to win back the Holy Sepulchre; and in this devotion and the confidence which he had that God would help him in the discovery of this World which He promised, he begged Queen Isabella to make a vow that she would spend all the wealth gained by the Crown as a result of the discovery in winning back the land and the House of Jerusalem, which the Queen did" (*Historia*, I, 2).

Not only did contacts with God interest Columbus much more than purely human affairs, but even his form of religiosity is quite archaic (for the period): it is no accident that the project of the crusades had been abandoned since the Middle Ages. Paradoxically, it will be a feature of Columbus's medieval mentality that leads him to discover America and inaugurate the modern era. (I must admit, and even assert, that my use of these two adjectives, *medieval* and *modern*, is anything but precise; yet I cannot do without them. Let them be understood first of all in their most ordinary sense, until the pages that follow can give them a more explicit content.) But, as we shall also see, Columbus himself is not a modern man, and this fact is pertinent to the course of the discovery, as though the man who was to give birth to a new world could not yet belong to it.

However, we may also discern in Columbus some features of a mentality closer to us. On one hand, then, he submits everything to an exterior and absolute ideal (the Christian religion), and every terrestrial event is merely a means toward the realization of that ideal. On the other, however, he seems to find in the activity in which he is most successful, the discovery of nature a pleasure that makes this activity self-sufficient; it ceases to have the slightest utility, and instead of a means becomes an end. Just as for modern man a thing, an action, or a being is beautiful only if it finds its justification in itself, for Columbus "to discover" is an intransitive action. "I wish to see and discover the most that I can," he writes on October 19, 1492, and on December 31 of that year: "And he says that he wished not to depart until he had seen all that country which there was to the eastward, and gone along the whole coast"; it is sufficient that he be informed of the existence of a new island for him to be overcome by a craving to visit it. In the journal of the third voyage, we find these powerful sentences: "He says that he would abandon everything to discover more lands and to probe their secrets" (Las Casas, *Historia*, I, 136). "What he most dearly desired, he says, was to discover more" (ibid., I, 146). At another moment he wonders: "I do not write how great will be the benefit to be derived hence. It is certain, Lord Princes, that when there are such lands there should be profitable things without number; but I tarried not in any harbor, because I sought to see the most countries that I could, to give the story of them to Your Highnesses" ("Journal," 27/11/1492). The profits which "should be" found there interest Columbus only secondarily: what counts are the "lands" and their discovery. This discovery seems in truth subject to a goal, which is the narrative of the voyage: one might say that Columbus has undertaken it all in order to be able to tell unheard-of stories, like Ulysses; but is not a travel narrative itself the point of departure, and not only the point of arrival, of a new voyage? Did not Columbus himself set sail because he had read Marco Polo's narrative?

Columbus as Interpreter

In order to prove that the land he sees before him is indeed the continent, and not another island, Columbus engages in the following reasoning (in his journal of the third voyage, transcribed by Las Casas): "I have come to believe that this is a mighty continent which was hitherto unknown. I am greatly supported in this view by reason of this great river, and by this sea which is fresh, and I am also supported by the statements of Esdras in his fourth book, the sixth chapter, which says that six parts of the world consist of dry land and one part of water. This work was approved by Saint Ambrose in his *Hexameron* and by Saint Augustine. . . . Moreover I am supported by the statements of several cannibal Indians whom I captured on other occasions, who declared that there was mainland to the west of them" (*Historia,* I, 138).

Columbus cites three reasons in support of his conviction: the abundance of fresh water; the authority of the sacred books; the opinion of other men he has met with. Now it is clear that these three arguments are not to be set on the same level, but reveal the existence of three spheres that articulate Columbus's world: one is natural, one divine, and the third human. Hence it may not be an accident that we can also find three motives for the conquest: the first human (wealth), the second divine, and the third linked to a delight in nature. And in his communication with the world, Columbus behaves differently depending on whether he is addressing (or being addressed by) nature, God, or men. To return to the example of the mainland, if Columbus

is right it is solely because of the first argument (and we can see, in his journal, that this argument only gradually takes form, on contact with reality): observing that the water is fresh far out at sea, he deduces from this fact, quite perspicaciously, the river's might, and hence the distance it must have flowed; consequently, the land must be a continent. It is very likely, on the other hand, that he understood nothing of what the "cannibal Indians" had told him. Earlier in the same voyage he had reported his conversations as follows: "He [Columbus] says it is certain that it was an island, for that is what the Indians said," and Las Casas adds: "So it seems that he did not understand them" (*Historia,* I, 135). As for God . . .

We cannot, as a matter of fact, put these three realms on the same level, as Columbus did; for us there are only two real exchanges, with nature and with men; the relation to God does not involve communication, although it can influence or even predetermine every form of communication. This is precisely Columbus's case: there is a definite relation between the form of his faith in God and the strategy of his interpretations.

When we say that Columbus is a believer, the object is less important than the action: his faith is Christian, but we have the impression that, were it Muslim or Jewish, he would not have acted differently; what matters is the force of the belief itself. "Saint Peter leaped upon the sea and walked upon the water as long as the faith sustained him. He who has faith the size of a grain of corn will be obeyed by the mountains. Let he who has faith ask, for to him shall all be given. Knock, and it shall be opened unto you," he writes in the preface to his *Book of Prophecies* (1501). Further, Columbus believes not only in Christian dogma, but also (and he is not alone at the time) in Cyclopes and mermaids, in Amazons and men with tails, and his belief, as strong as Saint Peter's, therefore permits him to find them. "He understood also that far from there there were men with one eye, and others with dogs' heads" ("Journal," 4/11/1492). "The day before, when the Admiral went to the Rio del Oro, he said that he saw three mermaids who rose very high from the sea, but they were not as beautiful as they are painted, for they had something masculine in the countenance" (9/1/1493). "These women use no feminine exercises, but bows and arrows of cane, like the abovesaid; and they arm and cover themselves with plates of copper, of which they have plenty" ("Letter to Santan-

gel," February–March 1493). "There remain to the westward two provinces where I have not been, one of which they call Avan, and there the people are born with tails" (ibid.).

Columbus's most striking belief is, true enough, of Christian origin: it concerns the earthly Paradise. He has read in Pierre d'Ailly's *Imago Mundi* that the earthly Paradise lies in a temperate region beyond the equator. He finds nothing of the kind in the course of his first visit to the Caribbean, which is hardly surprising; but on his return journey, in the Azores, he declares: "The earthly Paradise is at the end of the Orient, because it is a most temperate place, and so those lands which he had now discovered are, says he, at the end of the Orient" (21/2/1493). The theme becomes obsessive during the third voyage, when Columbus draws closer to the equator. At first he believes there is an irregularity in the earth's curvature: "I have been led to hold this concerning the world, and I find that it is not round as they describe it, but that it is the shape of the pear which is everywhere very round except where the stalk is, for it is very prominent, or that it is like a very round ball, and on one part of it is placed something like a woman's nipple, and that this part, where this protuberance is found, is the highest and nearest to the sky, and it is beneath the equinoxial line in this Ocean sea at the end of the Orient" ("Letter to the Sovereigns," 31/8/1498).

This elevation (a nipple on a pear!) becomes one more argument to assert that the earthly Paradise is there. "I believe that the earthly Paradise is here, and to it, save by the will of God, no man can come. . . . I do not hold that the earthly Paradise is in the form of a rugged mountain, as its description declares it to us, but that it is at the summit, there where I have said that the shape of the stalk of the pear is, and that, going toward it from a distance, there is a gradual ascent to it" (ibid.).

Here we can see how Columbus's beliefs influence his interpretations. He is not concerned to understand more fully the words of those who speak to him, for he knows in advance that he will encounter Cyclopes, men with tails, and Amazons. He sees clearly that the "mermaids" are not, as he has been told, beautiful women; but rather than conclude that mermaids do not exist, he corrects one prejudice by another: the mermaids are not so beautiful as is claimed. At another moment, in the course of the third voyage, Columbus wonders about the origin of the pearls the Indians sometimes bring him. The thing occurs before his eyes; but what he reports in his journal is the explanation given by Pliny, taken from a book: "Close to the sea there were countless oysters adhering to the branches of the trees that go into the sea, with their mouths open to receive the dew which falls from the leaves, until the drop falls, out of which pearls will be formed, as Pliny says, and he cites the dictionary called *Catholicon*" (Las Casas, *Historia,* I, 137). It is the same with the earthly Paradise: the sign that fresh water constitutes (hence a great river, hence a mountain) is interpreted, after a momentary hesitation, "in agreement with the opinion of those holy and wise theologians" (ibid.). "I am much more convinced in my own mind that the earthly Paradise is to be found there where I have said, and I rely upon the arguments and authorities given above" (ibid.). Columbus performs a "finalist" strategy of interpretation, in the same manner in which the Church Fathers interpreted the Bible: the ultimate meaning is given from the start (this is Christian doctrine); what is sought is the path linking the initial meaning (the apparent signification of the words of the biblical text) with this ultimate meaning. There is nothing of the modern empiricist about Columbus: the decisive argument is an argument of authority, not of experience. He knows in advance what he will find; the concrete experience is there to illustrate a truth already possessed, not to be interrogated according to preestablished rules in order to seek the truth.

Even if he was always a finalist, Columbus, as we have seen, was more perspicacious when he was observing nature than when he was trying to understand the natives. His hermeneutic behavior is not precisely the same in the one case as in the other, as we can now determine in some detail.

"From my tenderest years I have lived the life of sailors, as I am doing even today. This occupation leads those who follow it to wish to know the secrets of this world," Columbus writes at the beginning of the *Book of Prophecies* (1501). We shall insist here on the word *world* (in opposition to "men"): he who identifies himself with the sailor's occupation has dealings with nature rather than with his kind; and in his mind, nature has assuredly more affinities with God than men have: he writes in a single impulse, in the margin of Ptolemy's *Geography:* "Admirable are the tumultuous forces of the sea. Admirable is God in the depths." Columbus's writings, and most particularly the journal of the first voyage, reveal a constant attention to all natural phenomena. Fish and birds, plants and animals are the main characters of the

adventures he recounts; he has left us detailed descriptions of them. "They fished also with nets, and caught among many others, one fish that looked like a proper pig not like a porpoise and of which it is said that it was all shell, very hard, and it had no soft place except the neck and eyes, and an opening underneath to discharge its superfluities. He ordered it salted, so that the Sovereigns might see it" (16/11/1492). "More than forty petrels came to the ship at once and with them two boobies; a boy of the caravel hit one with a stone; a frigate-bird came to the ship and a white one like a gull" (4/10/1492). "I saw many trees very unlike ours, and many of them have their branches of different kinds and all on one trunk, and one twig is of one kind and the other of another, and so unlike that it is the greatest wonder of the world. How great is the diversity of one kind from the other! For instance, one branch has leaves like a cane, others like mastic; and thus on one tree five or six kinds, and all so different" (16/10/1492). During the third voyage, he puts in at the Cape Verde islands, which serve the Portuguese at that time as a deportation center for all the lepers of the kingdom. The lepers are supposed to be cured by eating turtles and washing in their blood. Columbus pays no attention to the lepers and to their singular habits, but he immediately launches into a long description of the habits of turtles. The amateur naturalist becomes an experimental ethologist in the famous scene of the duel between a peccary and a monkey, described by Columbus at a moment when his own situation is almost tragic and when we do not expect to find him concentrating on the observation of nature: "There is a great abundance of animals, small and large, and very different from ours. At the time I had two pigs which an Irish hound dared not attack. An archer had wounded an animal which seemed to be a monkey, but much larger and with a man's face. He had pierced it with an arrow from breast to tail, and since the creature was ferocious, he had to cut off one arm and one leg. The pig, upon seeing the monkey, bristled and fled. When I saw that, I ordered the *begare,* as it is called in these parts, to be thrown to where the pig lay. When it was upon the pig, although more dead than alive and still wearing the arrow in its body, it coiled its tail round the hog's snout, took powerful hold, and with its remaining fore-claw grasped the boar round the neck, as if an enemy. This novel and beautiful combat has led me to write you this" ("Lettera Rarissima," 7/7/1503).

Attentive to animals and to plants, Columbus is even more concerned with all that touches navigation, even if this concern relates more to the sailor's practical sense than to any rigorous scientific observation. In conclusion to the preface of his first journal, he offers this injunction to himself: "And above all, it is of great importance that I forget sleep and be a very vigilant navigator, so that all may be properly done; which will require great effort," and we might say that he obeys it to the letter: not one day without notations concerning the stars, the winds, the sea's depth, the coastal relief; here theological principles do not intervene. Whereas Pinzón, commander of the second ship, vanishes in the search for gold, Columbus spends his time taking geographical notes: "All this night he remained hove to, as mariners say—which is bearing to windward without moving forward—and this in order to examine a pass, which is an opening in the sun as a kind of gorge between two peaks, which he had glimpsed at sunset and through which appeared two very high mountains" ("Journal," 13/11/1492).

The result of this vigilant observation is that Columbus performs, with regard to navigation, veritable exploits (despite the wreck of his ship): he always knows how to choose the best winds and the best sails; he initiates sidereal navigation and discovers magnetic variation; one of his companions on the second voyage, Michele de Cuneo, who makes no attempt at flattery, writes: "During navigations, it sufficed for him to glance at a cloud or by night at a star, in order to know what would ensue, and if there were to be heavy weather." In other words, he can interpret the signs of nature in terms of his interests; further, the only really effective communication he establishes with the natives rests on his knowledge of the stars. With a solemnity worthy of the adventures in boys' books, he takes advantage of his knowledge of the date of an imminent lunar eclipse. Stranded on the Jamaican coast for eight months, he can no longer persuade the Indians to bring him provisions without his having to pay for them; he then threatens to steal the moon from them, and on the evening of February 29, 1504, he begins to carry out his threat, before the terrified eyes of the caciques. . . . His success is instantaneous.

But two characters exist (for us) in Columbus, and whenever the navigator's profession is no longer at stake, the finalist strategy prevails in his system of interpretation: the latter no longer consists in seeking the truth but in finding confirmations of a truth known in advance (or, as we say, in wishful thinking). For instance, throughout the first

crossing (Columbus takes a little over a month to sail from the Canaries to Guanahani, the first Caribbean island he sights), he is in search of signs of land; he finds them, of course, only one week after his departure. "They began sighting numerous clumps of green grass which seemed, according to the Admiral, to have been recently separated from the earth" (17/9/1492). "Out of the North appeared a great darkness, which signifies that it covers the earth" (18/9/1492). "There were several rainstorms without wind, which is a certain sign of land's proximity" (19/9/1492). "Two boobies came to the ship, then another, which was a certain sign of land's proximity" (20/9/1492). "They saw a whale, a sign that they were near land, because these creatures always keep near the coasts" (21/9/1492). Every day Columbus sees "signs," and yet we now know that these signs were lying to him (or that there were no signs), since land was touched only on October 12, over twenty days later!

At sea, all the signs indicate land's proximity, since that is Columbus's desire. On land, all the signs reveal the presence of gold: here, too, his conviction is determined far in advance. "He said again that he believes there are enormous riches, precious stones and spiceries" (14/11/1492). "The Admiral believed that there would be good rivers and much gold" (11/1/1493). Sometimes the assertion of this conviction is ingenuously combined with a confession of ignorance. "I believe that there are many plants and trees much esteemed in Spain for dyes and as medicines of spicery; but I do not know them, at which I am much aggrieved" (19/10/1492). "There are also trees of a thousand kinds, all with different fruits and all so fragrant that it is a wonder, and I am greatly distressed not to know them, for I am well assured they are all of great value" (21/10/1492). In the course of the third voyage, he pursues the same program of thought: he believes these lands are rich, for he greatly desires that they be so; his conviction is always anterior to the experience. "And he greatly desired to penetrate the secrets of these lands, for he did not believe it possible they did not contain things of great worth" (Las Casas, *Historia*, I, 136).

What are the "signs" which permit him to confirm his convictions? How does Columbus the interpreter proceed? A river reminds him of the Tagus. "Then he recalled that at the mouth of the river Tagus, near the sea, gold is found, and it appeared certain to him that this river must have gold" ("Journal," 25/11/1492); not only does a vague analogy of this kind prove nothing, but even the point of departure is false:

the Tagus does not carry gold in its course. Or again: "The Admiral said that where there is wax, there must be as well a thousand other good things" (29/11/1492); this inference is not even worth the famous "no smoke without fire"; the same is true of yet another one, in which the island's beauty leads him to believe in its riches.

One of his correspondents, Mosén Jaume Ferrer, had written him in 1495: "The great part of valuable things come from very hot regions, of which the inhabitants are black, or parrots." Blacks and parrots are therefore considered as the signs (the proofs) of heat, and heat as the sign of wealth. It is hardly surprising then that Columbus never fails to remark the abundance of parrots, the blackness of skins, and the intensity of the heat. "The Indians who came upon the ship had understood that the Admiral wanted a parrot" (13/12/1492); now we know why! During the third voyage, he heads farther south: "Here, the people are extremely black. And when, from this place, I sailed to the West, the heat was excessive" ("Letter to the Sovereigns," 31/8/1498). But the heat is welcome: "From the heat which, the Admiral said, they endured in this place, he argued that, in these Indies, and where they were going, there should be much gold" ("Journal," 21/11/1492). Las Casas remarks with some justice apropos of another such example: "It is a wonder to see how, when a man greatly desires something and strongly attaches himself to it in his imagination, he has the impression at every moment that whatever he hears and sees argues in favor of that thing" (*Historia*, I, 44).

The search for the location of *terra firma* (the mainland) represents another striking example of this behavior. On the first voyage Columbus recorded the pertinent information in his journal: "This island Hispaniola [Haiti] or the other island Yamaya [Jamaica] was only ten days by canoe from the mainland, which would be sixty to seventy leagues, and here the people do not go naked, but are clothed" (6/1/1493). He has his conviction, namely that the island of Cuba is a part of the continent (Asia), and he decides to eliminate all information tending to prove the contrary. The Indians Columbus encounters have told him that this land (Cuba) is an island; since the information does not suit his purposes, he challenges the quality of his informants. "And since these are bestial men who believe that the whole world is an island and who do not know what the mainland is, and have neither letters nor long-standing memories, and since they take pleasure only in eating and being with their women, they said that this was an island"

(Bernaldez transcribing the journal of the second voyage). We may wonder just how the love of women invalidates their assertion that this country is an island. Yet the fact is that toward the end of this second expedition, we are shown a famous and grotesque scene in which Columbus definitively renounces verifying by experience whether or not Cuba is an island, and determines to apply the argument of authority with regard to his companions: all disembark on land, and each one swears an oath asserting that "he had no doubt that this was the mainland and not an island, and that before many leagues, in navigating along the said coast, would be found a country of civilized people with some knowledge of the world. . . . A fine of ten thousand maravedis [Spanish currency] is imposed on anyone who subsequently says the contrary of what he now said, and on each occasion at whatever time this occurred; a punishment also of having the tongue cut off, and for the ship's boys and such people, that in such cases they would be given a hundred lashes of the cat-o'-nine-tails, and their tongue be cut off" ("Oath sworn regarding Cuba," June 1494). A remarkable oath, whereby one swears that one *will* find civilized inhabitants!

The interpretation of nature's signs as practiced by Columbus is determined by the result that must be arrived at. His very exploit, the discovery of America, proceeds from the same behavior: he does not discover it, he finds it where he "knew" it would be (where he thought the eastern coast of Asia was to be found). "He had always thought in his inmost heart," Las Casas reports, "whatever the reasons for this opinion [it was by reading Toscanelli and the prophecies of Esdras], that by crossing the ocean beyond the island of Hierro, after traversing a distance of seven-hundred and fifty leagues more or less, he would end by discovering the land" (*Historia*, I, 139). When seven hundred leagues are covered, he forbids navigating by night, for fear of missing the land, which he *knows* to be very near. This conviction is quite anterior to the voyage itself; Ferdinand and Isabella remind him of this in a letter that follows the discovery: "That which you had announced to us has come true as if you had seen it before having spoken of it to us" (letter of 16/8/1494). Columbus himself, after the fact, attributes his discovery of this a priori knowledge, which he identifies with the divine will and prophecies (actually quite slanted by him in this direction): "I have already said that for the execution of the enterprise of the Indies, reason, mathematics, and the map of the world were of no utility to me. It was a matter rather of the fulfillment of what Isaiah had predicted" (preface to the *Book of Prophecies*, 1501). In the same way, if Columbus discovers (in the course of the third voyage) the American continent strictly speaking, it is because he is seeking in a quite concerted manner what we call South America, as is revealed by his annotations in Pierre d'Ailly's book: for reasons of symmetry, there must be four continents on the globe—two in the north, two in the south; or, considered from another direction, two in the east, two in the west. Europe and Africa ("Ethiopia") form the first north-south pair; Asia is the northern element of the second; there remains to be discovered, no, to be *found* in its rightful place, the fourth continent. In this way the finalist interpretation is not necessarily less effective than the empiricist: other navigators dared not undertake Columbus's voyage because they did not possess his certainty.

This type of interpretation, based on prescience and authority, has nothing "modern" about it. But as we have seen, this attitude is balanced by another, much more familiar to us: the intransitive admiration of nature, experienced with such intensity that it is freed from any interpretation and from any function. Such delight in nature no longer has any finality, and Las Casas reports this fragment of the journal of the third voyage, which shows Columbus preferring beauty to utility: "He said that even if there were no profits to be gained here, if it were only the beauty of these lands . . . they would be no less estimable" (*Historia*, I, 131). There is no end to the enumeration of all of Columbus's admirations. "All this country has very high and beautiful mountains, not dry and rocky, but all accessible and with magnificent valleys. Like the mountains, the valleys are also filled with high and leafy trees, which it is glorious to look upon" ("Journal," 26/11/1492). "Here, the fish are so different from ours, that it is a wonder. There are some which, like dories, are decked out in the brightest colors of the world: blue, yellow, red, and all the colors. Others are painted in a thousand fashions, and the colors are so bright that there is no man who would not marvel and wonder at the sight of them. There are also whales" (16/10/1492). "Here and in all the island, the trees are green and the plants and grasses as well, as in the month of April in Andalusia. The singing of the small birds is such that it would seem that a man would never willingly leave this place. The flocks of parrots darken the sun. Birds great and small are of so many kinds and so different from ours that it is a wonder" (21/10/1492). Even the wind in this place "blows very lovingly" (24/10/1492).

In order to describe his admiration of nature, Columbus cannot leave off the use of the superlative. The green of the trees is so intense that it is no longer green. "The trees were here so luxuriant that their leaves ceased being green and became almost black by their very verdant force" (16/12/1492). "There rises from the earth a fragrance so good and so sweet, from the flowers or the trees, that it was the fairest thing in the world" (19/10/1492). "He said further that this island is the fairest that human eyes have ever seen" (28/10/1492). "He said that never had he seen a lovelier thing than this valley through the midst of which the river flows" (15/12/1492). "It is certain that the beauty of these islands, with their mountains and their sierras, their valleys watered with abundant rivers, is such to behold that no other land under the sun can appear finer, nor more magnificent" ("Memorial for Antonio de Torres," 30/1/1494).

Columbus is quite aware of the unlikeliness of these superlatives, and consequently how unconvincing they may be; but he runs the risk, declaring the impossibility of proceeding otherwise. "Upon seeing this harborage, he declared it such that none of those he had ever seen could equal it. And he seeks to excuse himself, saying that he has so greatly praised the others, that he no longer knows how to praise this one, and that he fears being accused of exaggerating everything beyond measure. But he defends his praises" ("Journal," 21/12/1492). He swears that he is exaggerating nothing: "He says such things of the fertility, the beauty, and the altitude of these islands found in this harborage, that he implores the sovereigns not to wonder at so many praises, for he assures them that he believes he had not spoken the hundredth part of their marvels" (14/11/1492). And he deplores the poverty of his language: "He said to the men who went in his company that, in order to make unto the sovereigns an account of all that they were seeing, a thousand tongues would not suffice to express it, nor his hand to write it, for it appeared that it was enchanted" (27/11/1492).

The conclusion of this uninterrupted admiration is quite logical: it is the desire never to leave this pinnacle of beauty. "He says that there was such great pleasure in seeing all this verdure, these forests, and these birds that he could not bring himself to leave them and return to his ships," we read in the entry for October 28, 1492. And he concludes a few days later: "This was a thing so marvelous for him, to see the trees and the foliage, the crystal water, the birds and the sweetness of the places, that he said he believed he never again wished

to leave the place" (27/11/1492). Trees are Columbus's real Sirens: in their presence he forgets his interpretations and his search for gain, in order to reiterate tirelessly what serves no purpose, leads to nothing, and therefore can only be *repeated:* beauty. "He would tarry more than he wished because of his longing to see and the pleasure he took in gazing at the beauty and the freshness of these lands, wherever he sought to enter" (27/11/1492). Perhaps he thereby rediscovers a motive that has inspired all the great travelers, whether it was unknown to them or not.

The attentive observation of nature leads, then, in three different directions: to the purely pragmatic and effective interpretation concerning matters of navigation; to the finalist interpretation, in which signs confirm the beliefs and hopes entertained in any other regard; and finally, to that rejection of interpretation constituted by intransitive admiration, the absolute submission to beauty, in which one loves a tree because it is lovely, because it *is,* not because one might make use of it as a mast for one's ship or because its presence promises wealth. With regard to human signs, Columbus's behavior will be much simpler.

Between the two, there is a gap. The signs of nature are indices, stable associations between two entities, and it is enough that one be present for the immediate inference of the other to be possible. Human signs, i.e., the words of the language, are not simple associations—they do not directly link a sound to a thing, but pass through the intermediary of meaning, which is an intersubjective reality. Now, and this is the first striking phenomenon, with regard to language Columbus seems to pay attention only to proper names, which in some respects are what is closely related to natural indices. Let us first observe this attention and, to begin with, the concern with which Columbus surrounds his own name, to such a degree that, as we know, he changes its orthography several times during his life. Once more I cite the testimony of Las Casas, a great admirer of the Admiral and a unique source of countless items of information concerning him, who clearly reveals the meaning of these changes (*Historia,* I, 2): "But this illustrious man, renouncing the name established by custom, chose to be called Colón, restoring the ancient form less for this reason [that it was the ancient name] than, it would seem, because he was moved by the divine will which had elected him to achieve what his surname and given name signified. Divine providence habitually intends that the persons designated to serve should receive the given names and surnames corresponding to

the task entrusted to them, as we see in many a place in the Scriptures; and the Philosopher says in chapter IV of his *Metaphysics*, 'Names should accord with the qualities and uses of things.' This is why he was called Cristobal, which is to say *Christum Ferens*, which means the bearer of the Christ, and it was thus that he often signed his name; for in truth he was the first to open the gates of the Ocean sea, in order to bear our Savior Jesus Christ over the waves to those remote lands and those realms hitherto unknown. . . . His surname was Colón, which means *repopulator*, a name befitting the man whose enterprise brought about the discovery of these peoples, these infinite numbers of souls who, thanks to the preaching of the Gospel, . . . have proceeded and will every day proceed to repopulate the glorious city of Heaven. It also befits this man, in that he was the first to bring the people of Spain (albeit not as they should have been) to found *colonies*, or new populations, which, being established amid the original inhabitants . . . should constitute a new . . . Christian Church and a happy republic."

Columbus (or, in the proper orthography, Colón) and after him Las Casas, like many of their contemporaries, believe then that names, or at least the names of exceptional persons, should be in the image of their being; and Columbus had noted in himself two features worthy to figure in his own name: the evangelizer and the colonizer; he was not mistaken, after all. The same attention to his name, which borders on fetishism, is manifest in the concern with which he surrounds his signature; for he does not sign documents, like everyone else, with his name, but with a specially elaborated siglum—so elaborated, indeed, that we have still not managed to solve its mystery; moreover it is an emblem he is not content to use for himself alone, but also imposes on his heirs; hence we read in his deed of entail: "My son Don Diego and any other person who might inherit this entail, from the moment when he will have thus inherited it and will have taken possession of it, will sign always with my own signature, as I use it now, that is with an X with an S above it; an M with a Roman A above it, and above this latter an S; and then a Y, with an S above it, with dashes and commas, as I make them now and as they can be seen in the present instance" (22/2/1498).

Even the commas and periods are determined in advance! This extreme attention to his own name finds a natural extension in his activity as a name-giver in the course of his voyages. Like Adam in the midst of Eden, Columbus is profoundly concerned with the choice of

names for the virgin world before his eyes; and as in his own case, these names must be motivated. The motivation is established in several ways. At the beginning, we observe a kind of diagram: the chronological order of the baptisms corresponds to the order of importance of the objects associated with these names. These will be, successively, God, the Virgin Mary, the King of Spain, the Queen, the Royal Prince. "To the first one I came upon [he is speaking of islands], I gave the name of *San Salvador*, in homage to His Heavenly Majesty who has wondrously given us all this. The Indians call this island Guanahani. I named the second island *Santa María de Concepción*, the third *Fernandina*, the fourth *Isabella*, the fifth *Juana*, and so to each of them I gave a new name" ("Letter to Santangel," February–March 1493).

Hence Columbus knows perfectly well that these islands already have names, natural ones in a sense (but in another acceptation of the term); others' words interest him very little, however, and he seeks to rename places in terms of the rank they occupy in his discovery, to give them the *right* names; moreover nomination is equivalent to taking possession. Later on, having more or less used up the religious and royal hierarchies, he resorts to a more traditional motivation—by direct resemblance—for which he immediately gives us a justification. "I gave this cape the name *Formoso* because indeed it is fair" (19/10/1492). "He called them *Islas de Arena* [islands of sand] owing to the shallowness of the sea for some six leagues about them in their southern part" (27/10/1492). "He saw a cape covered with palm trees, and named it *Cabo de Palmas*" (30/10/1492). "There is a cape which extends far into the sea, sometimes lofty and sometimes low, and that is why he named it *Cabo Alto y Baxo*" (19/12/1492). "Flakes of gold were found in the pans of the casks and in those of the pipe-hoops. The Admiral bestowed upon this river the name *Rio de Oro*" (8/1/1493). "When he saw the land it was a cape which he named *Cabo de Padre y Hijo*, because in its tip it is divided into two rocky spurs, one greater than the other" (12/1/1493, I, 195). "I called this place the *Jardines* because it corresponded to that name . . ." ("Letter to the Sovereigns," 31/8/1498).

Things must have the names that correspond to them. On certain days this obligation plunges Columbus into a veritable naming frenzy. Thus on January 11, 1493: "He sailed four leagues to the East, reaching a cape which he called *Bel Prado*. From there, to the southwest rises the mountain which he called *Monte de Plata*, which he said was eight

leagues away. At eighteen leagues to the East, a quarter southeast of the *Bel Prado,* is found the cape which he called *del Angel.* . . . Four leagues to the East one quarter Southeast, there is a point which the Admiral called *del Hierro.* Four leagues farther, in the same direction, is another point which he named *Punta Seca,* then six leagues farther is the cape which he called *Redondo.* Beyond, to the East is found *Cabo Franses.* . . ." His pleasure seems to be such that on certain days he gives two successive names to the same place (thus on December 6, 1492, a harborage named Maria at dawn becomes Saint Nicholas at vespers); if, on the other hand, someone else seeks to imitate him in his name-giving action, he cancels that decision in order to impose his own names: in the course of his escapade, Pinzón had named a river after himself (which the Admiral never does), but Columbus is quick to rebaptize it "River of Grace." Not even the Indians escape the cascade of names: the first men brought back to Spain are rebaptized Don Juan de Castilla and Don Fernando de Aragón. . . .

The first gesture Columbus makes upon contact with the newly discovered lands (hence the first contact between Europe and what will be America) is an act of extended nomination: this is the declaration according to which these lands are henceforth part of the Kingdom of Spain. Columbus disembarks in a boat decorated with the royal banner, and accompanied by his two captains, as well as by the royal notary armed with his inkwell. Before the eyes of the doubtless perplexed Indians, and without paying them the least attention, Columbus orders a deed of possession to be drawn up. "He called upon them to bear faith and to witness that he, before all men, was taking possession of the said island—as in fact he then took possession of it—in the name of the King and of the Queen, his Sovereigns . . ." (11/10/1492). That this should be the very first action performed by Columbus in America tells us a great deal about the importance the ceremony of naming assumed in his eyes.

Now, as we have said, proper names form a very particular sector of the vocabulary: devoid of meaning, they serve only for denotation, but not directly for human communication; they are addressed to nature (to the referent), not to men; they are, in the fashion of indices, direct associations between aural sequences of sounds and segments of the world. The share of human communication that occupies Columbus's attention is therefore precisely that sector of language which serves, at least in an initial phase, only to designate nature.

On the other hand, Columbus shows little interest in the rest of the vocabulary, revealing still further his naive conception of language, since he always perceives names as identified with things: the entire dimension of intersubjectivity, of the reciprocal value of words (in opposition to their denotative capacity), of the human and therefore arbitrary character of signs, escapes him. Here is a significant episode, a kind of parody of the ethnographic task: having learned the Indian word *cacique,* he is less concerned to know what it signifies in the Indians' conventional and relative hierarchy than to see to just which Spanish word it corresponds, as if it followed of itself that the Indians establish the same distinctions as the Spaniards, as if the Spanish usage were not one convention among others, but rather the natural state of things: "Until then, the Admiral had not been able to understand if this word [cacique] signified king or governor. They also had another name for grandee, which they call *nitayno,* but he did not know if they say this for hidalgo or governor or judge" ("Journal," 30/12/1492). Not for a moment does Columbus doubt that the Indians distinguish, as the Spaniards do, between nobleman, governor, and judge; his curiosity, quite limited moreover, bears only on the exact Indian equivalent for these terms. The entire vocabulary is, for him, in the image of proper names, and these derive from the properties of the objects they designate: the colonizer must be called Colón. Words are, and are only, the image of things.

Hence we shall not be surprised to see how little attention Columbus pays to foreign languages. His spontaneous reaction, which he does not always make explicit but which underlies his behavior, is that, ultimately, linguistic diversity does not exist, since language is natural. Which is all the more astounding in that Columbus himself is polyglot, and at the same time deprived of his mother tongue: he speaks equally well (or badly) Genoese, Latin, Portuguese, Spanish. But ideological certainties can always overcome individual contingencies. His very conviction of Asia's proximity, which gives him the courage to set out, rests on a specific linguistic misunderstanding. The common belief of his time holds that the earth is round; but it is supposed, with reason, that the distance between Europe and Asia by the western route is very great, even impassable. Columbus takes for his authority the Arab astronomer Alfraganus, who quite correctly indicates the earth's circumference, but who expressed himself in Arab nautical miles, which are about a third greater than the Italian nautical miles familiar to

Columbus. Now Columbus cannot imagine that such measurements are conventional, that the same term has different significations according to different traditions (or languages, or contexts); he therefore translates into Italian nautical miles, and so finds the distance within the measure of his powers. And although Asia is not where he believes it to be, he has the consolation of discovering America. . . .

Columbus's failure to recognize the diversity of languages permits him, when he confronts a foreign tongue, only two possible, and complementary, forms of behavior: to acknowledge it as a language but to refuse to believe it is different; or to acknowledge its difference but to refuse to admit it is a language. . . . This latter reaction is provoked by the Indians he encounters at the very beginning, on October 12, 1492; seeing them, he promises himself: "If it please Our Lord, at the moment of my departure I shall take from this place six of them to Your Highnesses, so that they may learn to speak" (these terms seemed so shocking to Columbus's various French translators that all of them corrected the statement to: "so that they may learn our language"). Later on, he is willing to admit that they do have a language, but he cannot bear the notion that it is different, and he persists in hearing familiar words in their remarks, and in speaking to them as if they must understand him, or in censuring their poor pronunciation of the names or words he supposes he recognizes. With this distorted understanding, Columbus engages in some absurd and imaginary dialogues, of which the most sustained example concerns the Grand Khan, the goal of his voyage. The Indians utter the word *Cariba,* designating the (man-eating) inhabitants of the Caribbean islands. Columbus hears *Caniba,* which is to say, the people of the khan. But he also understands that according to the Indians these persons have dogs' heads (from the Spanish *cane,* "dog") with which, precisely, they eat people. Now this seems to him no more than an invention, and he censures them for it: "The Admiral believed they were lying and thought that their captors must be under the signory of the Grand Khan" (26/11/1492).

When Columbus finally acknowledges the foreignness of one language, he insists at least that it be also the foreignness of all the others; on the one side, then, there are the Latin languages, and on the other, all foreign tongues; the resemblances are great within each group, to judge by Columbus's own facility for the former and, by the language specialist he takes with him, for the latter: when he hears mention of a great cacique in the interior, whom he imagines to be the khan, i.e.,

the emperor of China, he sends to him as emissary "a certain Luis de Torres, a converted Jew [who] had served the *adelantado* of Murcia and knew, it is said, Hebrew and Aramaic and also some Arabic" (2/11/1492). We may wonder in what language the negotiations between Columbus's envoy and the Indian cacique, alias the emperor of China, would have occurred; but this latter did not keep the rendezvous.

The result of this failure of attention to the other's language is predictable: indeed, throughout the first voyage, before the Indians taken back to Spain have learned "to speak," the situation is one of total incomprehension; or, as Las Casas says in the margin of Columbus's journal: "They were all groping in darkness, because they did not understand what the Indians were saying" (30/10/1490). This is not shocking, after all, nor even surprising; what is, on the other hand, is that Columbus regularly claims to understand what is said to him, while giving, at the same time, every proof of incomprehension. For instance, on October 24, 1492, he writes: "From what the Indians told me, [the island of Cuba] is of vast extent, great commerce, richly provided with gold and spices, visited by great ships and merchants." But two lines farther, on the same day, he adds: "I do not understand their language." What he "understands," then, is simply a summary of the books of Marco Polo and Pierre d'Ailly. "He believed he understood that here put in ships of great tonnage belonging to the Grand Khan, and that the mainland was ten days' sail distant" (28/10/1492). "I repeat then what I have said on several occasions: that Caniba is no other thing than the people of the Grand Khan who must indeed be near to this place." And he adds this dry commentary: "Each day, the Admiral said, we understand these Indians better, and they the same, although several times they have mistaken one thing said for another" (11/12/1492). We possess another narrative illustrating the way in which his men made themselves understood by the Indians: "The Christians, believing that if they disembarked only by two or three from the barges, the Indians would not fear them, advanced toward them in a party of three, shouting to them not to be afraid in their language, which they know a little from the conversation of those whom they had captured. In the end the Indians all took to their heels, so that not a trace of them remained" (27/11/1492).

Moreover, Columbus is not always the dupe of his illusions, and he admits that there is no communication (which makes all the more

problematic the "information" he believes he derives from his conversations): "I do not know the language of the men here, they do not understand me, nor do I nor any of my men understand them" (27/11/1492). He did not understand their language, he says again, "save by conjecture" (15/1/1493); we realize, moreover, how untrustworthy this method is.

Nonverbal communication is scarcely more successful than the exchange of speech. Columbus prepares to land with his men on the shore. "One of the Indians [whom he sees facing him] advanced into the river near the prow of the barge, and delivered a long speech which the Admiral failed to understand [at which we are not surprised]. But he observed that the other Indians from time to time raised their hands toward the sky and uttered a great shout. The Admiral surmised that they were assuring him that his coming was a welcome event [typical example of wishful thinking], but he saw the face of the Indian whom he had taken with him (and who understands the language) change color, turn yellow as wax, and tremble mightily while saying by signs that the Admiral should leave the river because they sought to kill him" (3/12/1492). Again we may wonder if Columbus has realized what the second Indian was telling him "by signs." And here is another example of symbolic communication about as successful as the rest: "I greatly desired to hold converse with them, and yet I had nothing with me which I might show them to make them come near, except for a tambourine which I had brought upon the foredeck and which I ordered beaten so that several young men could dance to it, thinking that they would come to see the festivity. But as soon as they saw the tambourine beaten and the men dancing, all dropped the oars, took up their bows, stretched them, each man covering himself with his shield, and they began raining arrows upon us" ("Letter to the Sovereigns," 31/8/1498).

These failures are not due only to incomprehension of the language, to ignorance of the Indians' ways (though Columbus might have sought to overcome such obstacles): the exchanges with Europeans are not much more successful. Thus, on the return leg of the first voyage, in the Azores, we find Columbus making one mistake after the other in his communications with a Portuguese captain who is hostile to him: too credulous at first, Columbus sees his men arrested, whereas he had hoped for the most favorable reception; crudely dissembling thereafter, he fails to lure this captain onto his ship in order to imprison him in

his turn. His perception of the very men who surround him is not very clear-sighted: those to whom he grants his entire confidence (such as Roldán, or Hojeda) immediately turn against him, whereas he neglects those who are genuinely devoted to him, such as Diego Mendez.

Columbus does not succeed in his human communications because he is not interested in them. We read in his journal for December 6, 1492, that the Indians he has taken on board his ship try to escape and are distressed to find themselves far from their island. "Moreover he did not understand them any better than they understood him, and they were greatly afraid of the people on this new island. Therefore, in order to make converse with its people, he would have had to tarry there for several days. But he did not do so, in order to see further lands and from doubt that the weather would hold." Everything is in the sequence of these few sentences: Columbus's summary perception of the Indians, a mixture of authoritarianism and condescension; the incomprehension of their language and of their signs; the readiness with which he alienates the other's goodwill with a view to a better knowledge of the islands he is discovering; the preference for land over men. In Columbus's hermeneutics human beings have no particular place.

Columbus and the Indians

COLUMBUS speaks about the men he sees only because they too, after all, constitute a part of the landscape. His allusions to the inhabitants of the islands always occur amid his notations concerning nature, somewhere between birds and trees. "In the interior of the lands, there are many mines of metal and countless inhabitants" ("Letter to Santangel," February–March 1493). "Hitherto, things had gone better and better for him, in that he had discovered so many lands as well as woods, plants, fruits and flowers as well as the people" ("Journal," 25/11/1492). "The roots of this place are as thick as a man's legs, and all the people, he says, were strong and brave" (16/18/1492): we readily see how the inhabitants are introduced, by means of a comparison necessary to describe the roots. "Here, they observed that the married women wore clouts of cotton, but the wenches nothing, save for a few who were already eighteen years old. There were also dogs, mastiffs and terriers. They found as well a man who had in his nose a gold stud the size of half a *castellano*" (17/19/1492): this allusion to the dogs among the remarks on the women and the men indicates nicely the scale on which the latter will be assessed.

The first mention of the Indians is significant: "Presently they saw naked people" (11/10/1492). The event is true enough; it is nonetheless revealing that the first characteristic of these people to strike Columbus is the absence of clothes—which in their turn symbolize culture (whence Columbus's interest in people wearing clothes, who might relate more closely to what is known of the Grand Khan; he is somewhat disappointed to have found nothing but savages). And the

observation recurs: "They all go naked, men and women, as the day they were born" (6/11/1492). "This king and all his people went naked as their mothers bore them, and their women the same, without any shame" (16/12/1492): the women, at least, might have made an effort. Thereupon his remarks are frequently limited to the physical aspect of the people, to their stature, to the color of their skin (the more favored if it is lighter—i.e., more like his own). "They are of the color of the Canary Islanders, neither black nor white" (11/10/1492). "They are whiter than those of the other islands. Among others, he had seen two wenches as white as they might be in Spain" (13/12/1492). "And the women have very pretty bodies" (21/12/1492). And he concludes with astonishment that, although naked, the Indians seem closer to men than to animals. "All these people of the islands and of the mainland beyond, even if they seem bestial and go naked, . . . seem to him to be quite rational and of acute intelligence" (Bernaldez).

Physically naked, the Indians are also, to Columbus's eyes, deprived of all cultural property: they are characterized, in a sense, by the absence of customs, rites, religion (which has a certain logic, since for a man like Columbus, human beings wear clothes following their expulsion from Paradise, itself at the source of their cultural identity). Here there is also his habit of seeing things as it suits him; but it is significant that it leads him to the image of spiritual nudity: "It seemed to me that all these people were very poor in everything," he writes upon his first encounter, and again: "It has seemed to me that they belonged to no religion" (11/10/1492). "These people are very gentle and fearful, naked as I have already said, without weapons and without laws" (4/11/1492). "They have no religion, nor are they idolators" (27/11/1492). Already deprived of language, the Indians reveal themselves to be without law or religion; and if they have a material culture, it attracts Columbus's attention no more than their spiritual culture: "They brought skeins of spun cotton, parrots, darts and other trifles which it would be wearisome to describe" (13/10/1492). The important thing, of course, is the presence of the parrots. His attitude with regard to this other culture is, in the best of cases, that of the collector of curiosities, and it is never accompanied by any attempt at comprehension: observing for the first time certain masonry constructions (during the fourth voyage, on the coast of Honduras), he contents himself with ordering a piece of it to be broken off to keep as a souvenir.

He finds nothing astonishing in the fact that all these Indians,

culturally virgin, a blank page awaiting the Spanish and Christian inscription, resemble each other. "The people were all like those of whom I have already spoken, of the same condition, as naked and of the same stature" (17/10/1492). "There came many of these people, like those of the other islands, as naked and likewise painted" (22/10/1492). "These people have the same natures and the same customs as those whom we have encountered hitherto" (1/11/1492). "These are, the Admiral said, people similar to the Indians I have already spoken of, of the same credulity" (3/12/1492). The Indians resemble each other in that they are all naked, deprived of distinctive characteristics.

Given this ignorance of the Indians' culture and their consequent identification with nature, we cannot expect to find in Columbus's writings a detailed portrait of the population. His initial image of them obeys the same rules as the description of nature: Columbus has decided to admire everything, and therefore first of all their physical beauty. "They were all very well made, stout in body and very comely of countenance" (11/10/1492). "All of splendid appearance. They are very handsome people" (13/10/1492). "These were the handsomest men and the most beautiful women whom he had hitherto encountered" (16/12/1492).

An author like Peter Martyr, who faithfully reflects the impressions (or the fantasies) of Columbus and of his first companions, delights in painting idyllic scenes. Here is how the Indians come to salute Columbus: "All the women were lovely. One might have supposed one was seeing those splendid naiads or those nymphs of the springs so celebrated by Antiquity. Holding up palm fronds, which they carried while performing their dances, accompanied by songs, they knelt and presented them to the *adelantado* [governor]" (I, 5; see fig. 3).

This admiration determined in advance also extends to morality. These people are good, Columbus declares at the start, without any concern to ground his affirmation. "They are the best people in the world and the most peaceable" (16/12/1492). "The Admiral said that he cannot believe that a man has ever seen people so good-hearted" (21/12/1492). "I do not believe that in all the world there are better men, any more than there are better lands" (25/12/1492): the ready enchantment with men and lands suggests the spirit in which Columbus writes, and the little confidence we can grant to the descriptive qualities of his remarks. Further, when he knows the Indians better, he

Fig. 3 Columbus lands in Haiti.

will leap to the other extreme, which is not thereby a source of information worthier of belief: shipwrecked on Jamaica, he sees himself "surrounded by a million savages filled with cruelty and inimical to us" ("Lettera Rarissima," 7/7/1503). Of course, what is striking here is the fact that Columbus finds, to characterize the Indians, only by adjectives of the *good/wicked* type, which in reality teach us nothing: not only because these qualities depend on the point of view adopted, but also because they correspond to specific states and not to stable characteristics, because they derive from the pragmatic estimate of a situation and not from the desire to know.

Two features of the Indians seem, at first sight, less predictable than the rest: their "generosity" and their "cowardice"; but as we read on in Columbus's descriptions, we perceive that these assertions tell us more about Columbus than about the Indians. Lacking words, Indians and Spaniards exchange, at the first meeting, various small objects; and Columbus unceasingly praises the generosity of the Indians, who give everything for nothing; it sometimes borders, he decides, on stupidity: why do they value a piece of glass quite as much as a coin, and a worthless piece of small change as much as a gold piece? "I have given," he writes, "many other things of slight value from which they took great pleasure" ("Journal," 11/10/1492). "All that they have they give for any trifle we offer them, so that they take in exchange pieces of crockery and fragments of glass goblets" (13/10/1492). "For anything at all we give them, without ever saying it is too little, they immediately give whatever they possess" (13/12/1492). "Whether it is a thing of value or a thing of little cost, whatever the object then given them in exchange and whatever it is worth, they are pleased" ("Letter to Santangel," February–March 1493). Nor more than in the case of languages does Columbus understand that values are conventional, that gold is not more precious than glass "in itself," but only in the European system of exchange. Hence, when he concludes this description of the exchanges by saying: "Even bits of broken cask-hoops they took in exchange for whatever they had, like beasts!" ("Letter to Santangel," February–March 1493), we have the impression that in this case it is Columbus who is worthy of the comparison: a different system of exchange is for him equivalent to the absence of system, from which he infers the bestial character of the Indians.

The feeling of superiority engenders a protectionist behavior: Columbus tells us that he forbids his sailors to make a swap he regards as

scandalous. Yet we see Columbus himself offering preposterous presents, which are associated in our mind today with "savages," but which Columbus is the first to have taught them to admire and demand. "I sent for him and gave him a red cap, some little green glass beads which I attached to his arm, and two hawk's bells which I hung from his ears" ("Journal," 15/10/1492). "I gave him a very fine amber necklace which I was wearing round my neck, a pair of red slippers and a bottle of orange-flower water. He was so pleased with this that it was a wonder" (18/12/1492). "The lord now wore a shirt and gloves which the Admiral had given him" (26/12/1492). We understand that Columbus is shocked by the other's nakedness, but are the gloves, the red hat, and the slippers, in these circumstances, presents really more useful than the broken glass goblets? The Indian chiefs, in any case, can henceforth pay him a visit dressed. Subsequently we see that the Indians find other uses for the Spanish gifts, without their utility being demonstrated for all that. "Since they had no clothes, the people wondered what the needles could be used for, but the Spaniards satisfied their ingenuous curiosity, for they showed by signs that the needles serve to remove the thorns and splinters which often penetrate their skin, or else to pick their teeth; hence they began to prize them highly" (Peter Martyr, I, 8).

On the basis of these observations and these exchanges Columbus will declare the Indians the most generous people in the world, thereby making an important contribution to the myth of the noble savage. "They are without covetousness of another man's goods" (26/12/1492). "They are to such a degree lacking in artifice and so generous with what they possess, that no man would believe it unless he had seen such a thing" ("Letter to Santangel," February–March 1493). "And let it not be said, the Admiral said, that they give liberally only because what they gave was of little worth, for those who gave pieces of gold and those who gave a water calabash acted in the same way and just as liberally. And it is an easy thing," he adds, "to know, when a thing is given, that it is given with a free heart" ("Journal," 21/12/1492).

The thing is in fact less easy than it appears. Columbus has a presentiment of this when, in his letter to Santangel, he recapitulates his experience: "I could not learn if they possess private property, but I seemed to discern that all owned a share of what one of them owned, and particularly with regard to victuals" (February–March 1493).

Would a different relation to private property provide an explanation of this "generous" behavior? His son Fernando testifies as much, in relating an episode of the second voyage. "Certain Indies which the Admiral had brought from Isabella went into those cabins [which belonged to the local Indians] and made use of whatever they pleased; the owners gave no sign of displeasure, as if everything they owned were common property. The people, believing that we had the same custom, went at first among the Christians and took whatever they pleased; but they swiftly discovered their mistake" (51). Columbus thus forgets his own perception, and soon after declares that the Indians, far from being generous, are all thieves (a reversal parallel to the one that transforms them from the best men in the world into violent savages); thereby he imposes cruel punishments upon them, the same then in effect in Spain: "As on that voyage I made to Cibao, when it happened that some Indian stole something or other, if you discover that some among them steal, you must punish them by cutting off nose and ears, for those are the parts of the body which cannot be concealed" ("Instructions to Mosén Pedro Margarite," 9/4/1494).

The discourse concerning cowardice follows exactly the same course. First comes amused condescension: "They have no weapons, and are so fearful that one of our men suffices to chase away a hundred of them, even in jest" ("Journal," 10/11/1492). "The Admiral declares to the Sovereigns that with ten men one can chase away ten thousand of theirs, so timid are they, and cowardly" (3/12/1492). "They have neither iron, nor steel, nor weapons, and they are not made for such things; not that they are not strong and of fine stature, but because they are wondrously timid" ("Letter to Santangel," February–March 1493). The pursuit of the Indians by dogs, another of Columbus's "discoveries," rests on a similar observation: "For, against the Indians, one dog is the equal of ten men" (Bernáldez). Columbus therefore confidently leaves a troop of his men, at the end of the first voyage, on the island of Hispaniola; but, returning a year later, he is obliged to admit that they have all been killed by these same timid Indians who are so ignorant of weapons; has it taken a thousand of them to overcome each of the Spaniards? He then shifts to the other extreme, deducing in a sense their courage from their cowardice. "There are no people so wicked as the cowardly who never risk their life face to face, and you shall know that if the Indians find one or two men separated from the rest, it will not be surprising if they should kill them" ("Instructions to Mosén Pedro Margarite," 9/4/1494); their king Caonabo is "a man as wicked as he is bold" ("Memorial for Antonio de Torres," 30/1/1494). We do not have the impression that Columbus has thereby understood the Indians better afterwards than before: he never in fact escapes from himself.

At one moment of his career, it is true, Columbus makes a further effort. This occurs during the second voyage, when he asks a religious, Friar Ramón Pane, to describe in detail the Indians' manners and beliefs; and he himself provides, in a preface to this description, a page of "ethnographic" observations. He begins by a declaration of principle: "I have found among them neither idolatry nor any other religion," a thesis maintained despite the examples that immediately follow, under his own pen. For he describes, in effect, several "idolatrous" practices, adding however: "None of our men could understand the words which they uttered." His attention then turns to the revelation of a fraud: a talking idol was really a hollow object connected by a pipe to another room of the house in which the magician's assistant was sitting. The little treatise by Ramón Pane (preserved in the biography of Ferdinand Columbus, chapter 62) is much more interesting, but rather in spite of its author, who tirelessly repeats: "Since the Indians have neither alphabet nor writing, they do not speak their myths clearly, and it is impossible for me to transcribe them correctly; I am afraid I shall put the end at the beginning, and the other way around" (6). "Since I was writing in haste and without enough paper, I could not put everything in its place" (8). "I could learn nothing more on this matter, and what I write is of little worth" (11).

Can we guess, reading Columbus's notes, how the Indians, for their part, perceive the Spaniards? Hardly. Here again, all information is vitiated by the fact that Columbus has decided everything in advance: and since the tone, in the course of the first voyage, is one of admiration, the Indians too must admire. "They spoke many things among themselves which I could not understand, but I saw clearly that everything about us was a wonder to them" ("Journal," 18/12/1492): even without understanding, Columbus knows that the Indian "king" is in ecstasies in his presence. It is possible, as Columbus says, that the Indians wonder if the Spaniards are not beings of divine origin, which would certainly explain their initial fear and its disappearance before the Spaniards' altogether human behavior. "They are credulous; they know that there is a God in the heavens, and remain convinced that

that is where we have come from" (12/11/1492). "All of them believed that the Christians came from the heavens, and that the realms of the Sovereigns of Castile were to be found there and not in this world" (16/12/1492). "Today, long as they have been with me and despite numerous conversations, they remain convinced that I come from the heavens" ("Letter to Santangel," February–March 1493). We shall return to this belief when we can observe it in greater detail; we may note, nonetheless, that the ocean might well appear to Caribbean Indians quite as abstract as the space separating the sky from the earth.

The human side of the Spaniards is their thirst for earthly possessions: gold, from the beginning, as we have seen; and, soon after, women. There is a striking example of this in the remarks of one Indian, reported by Columbus: "One of the Indians taken by the Admiral spoke with their king, telling him how the Christians came from the sky and that they were seeking gold" ("Journal," 16/12/1492). This remark was true in more than one sense. We can say, in fact, simplifying to the point of caricature, that the Spanish conquistadors belong, historically, to that transitional period between a Middle Ages dominated by religion and a modern period that places material goods at the top of its scale of values. In practice, too, the conquest will have these two essential aspects: the Christians are generous with their religion, which they bring to the New World; from it they take, in exchange, gold and wealth.

Columbus's attitude with regard to the Indians is based on his perception of them. We can distinguish here two component parts, which we shall find again in the following century and, in practice, down to our own day in every colonist in his relations to the colonized; we have already observed these two attitudes in germ in Columbus's report concerning the other's language. Either he conceives the Indians (though without using these words) as human beings altogether, having the same rights as himself; but then he sees them not only as equals but also as identical, and this behavior leads to assimilationism, the projection of his own values on the others. Or else he starts from the difference, but the latter is immediately translated into terms of superiority and inferiority (in his case, obviously, it is the Indians who are inferior). What is denied is the existence of a human substance truly other, something capable of being not merely an imperfect state of oneself. These two elementary figures of the experience of alterity are both grounded in egocentrism, in the identification of our own values

with values in general, of our *I* with the universe—in the conviction that the world is one.

On one hand, then, Columbus wants the Indians to be like himself, and like the Spaniards. He is an assimilationist in an unconscious and naive fashion; his sympathy for the Indians is "naturally" translated into the desire to see them adopt his own customs. He decides to take several Indians back to Spain in order that "upon their return they might be the interpreters of the Christians and might adopt our customs and our faith" (12/11/1492). They are disposed, he also says, "to be made to build cities, to be taught to wear clothes, and to adopt our customs" (16/12/1492). "Your Highnesses may have great joy of them, for soon you will have made them into Christians and will have instructed them in the good manners of your kingdoms" (24/12/1492). There is never a justification of this desire to make the Indians adopt the Spanish customs; its rightness is self-evident.

In general, this project of assimilation is identified with the desire to convert the Indians, to propagate the Gospel. We know that this intention is fundamental to Columbus's initial project, even if the idea is somewhat abstract at the start (no priest accompanies the first expedition). But as soon as he sees the Indians, the intention begins to grow more concrete. Immediately after having taken possession of the new lands by a formally established notarial action, Columbus declares: "I have known that they were people disposed to submit themselves and to convert to our Holy Faith much more readily by love than by force . . ." (11/10/1492). Columbus's "knowledge" is obviously a decision made in advance; further it concerns only the means to be used, not the end to be achieved, which he has no need to assert: it is, once again, self-evident. And he constantly returns to the notion that conversion is the principal goal of this expedition, and to his hope that the rulers of Spain will accept the Indians as their subjects altogether. "And I say that Your Highnesses must not permit any foreigner to conduct business with this country or to set foot in it if he is not a Catholic Christian, for the end and the beginning of this enterprise was the propagation and the glory of the Christian religion, and not to admit into these regions any man who may not be a good Christian" (27/11/1492). Such an attitude implies, among other things, a respect for the individual will of the Indians, since they are from the start placed on the same level as other Christians. "Since he already held these people for the Sovereigns of Castile and since there was no reason

to work any harm upon them, he decided to release him [an old Indian man]" (18/12/1492).

Columbus's vision in this respect is facilitated by his capacity to see things as it suits him. In this case, the Indians seem to him already bearers of Christian qualities, already animated by the desire to convert. We have seen that, for Columbus, they belong to no "sect," are virgin of any religion; but more than this, they are already predisposed to Christianity. As though by accident, the virtues he imagines them to possess are Christian virtues: "These people have no religion, nor are they idolators, but very gentle and ignorant of evil, and do not even know how to kill one another. . . . They are very ready to say the prayers that we teach them and to make the sign of the Cross. Hence Your Highnesses must be persuaded to make Christians of them" (12/11/1492). This image can be arrived at, of course, only at the price of the suppression of every feature of the Indians that contradicts it—a suppression in the discourse concerning them, but also, if need be, in reality. In the course of the second expedition, the priests accompanying Columbus begin converting the Indians; but it is far from the truth that all of them submit and consent to venerate the holy images. "After having left the chapel, these men flung the images to the ground, covered them with a heap of earth, and pissed upon it"; seeing which, Bartholomé, Columbus's brother, decides to punish them in quite Christian fashion. "As lieutenant of the Viceroy and governor of the islands, he brought these wretched men to justice and, their crimes being duly attested to, he caused them to be burned alive in public" (Ramón Pane, in F. Columbus, 62, 26).

Whatever the case, spiritual expansion, as we now know, is indissolubly linked to material conquest (money is necessary to conduct a crusade); and thus a first flaw appears in a program that implied the equality of the partners: material conquest (and all that it implies) will be both the result and the condition of spiritual expansion. Columbus writes: "I believe that, if we begin, in a very short time Your Highnesses will succeed in converting to our Holy Faith a multitude of peoples while gaining great domains and wealth as well for all the peoples of Spain, because without any doubt there are in these lands great quantities of gold" (12/11/1492). This linkage becomes almost automatic for Columbus: "Your Highnesses have here another world in which our Holy Faith may be so propagated and whence may be taken so much wealth" ("Letter to the Sovereigns," 31/8/1498). The profit Spain takes from the enterprise is incontestable: "By the Divine will, I have thus placed another world under the authority of the King and of the Queen, our Sovereigns, and thereby Spain, which was reckoned poor, has become the richest realm of all" ("Letter to Doña Juana de Torres," November 1500).

Columbus behaves as if a certain equilibrium were established between the two actions: the Spaniards give religion and take gold. But, aside from the fact that the exchange is rather asymmetrical and does not necessarily benefit the other party, the implications of these two actions are contrary to each other. To propagate the faith presupposes that the Indians are considered his equals (before God). But what if they are unwilling to give their wealth? Then they must be subdued, in military and political terms, so that it may be taken from them by force; in other words, they are to be placed, from the human perspective this time, in a position of inequality (inferiority). Now, it is without the slightest hesitation that Columbus speaks of the necessity of subduing the Indians, not perceiving any contradiction between what each of his actions involves, or at least any discontinuity he thereby established between the divine and the human. This is why he remarks that the Indians were timid and did not know how to use weapons. "With fifty men Your Highnesses would hold them all in subjection and do with them all that you could wish" ("Journal," 14/10/1492): is it still the Christian speaking here? Is it still a matter of equality? Embarking for the third time for America, he asks permission to take with him criminals who would volunteer for the enterprise and thereby be pardoned: is this still the project of an evangelist?

"My desire," Columbus writes during the first voyage, "was to pass by no single island without taking possession of it" (15/10/1492); on occasion, he even offers an island here and there to one of his companions. At the beginning, the Indians must not have understood much about the ceremonies Columbus and his notaries were performing. But when it became apparent what they were doing, the Indians did not seem to be especially enthusiastic. In the course of the fourth voyage, the following episode occurs: "I built here a village and gave many presents to the *quibian*—for so they call the lord of this land—[gloves? a red hat? Columbus does not tell us] but I knew well that this peace would not last. These are, indeed, very wild people [we may translate: unwilling to submit to the Spaniards], and my men are very importunate; finally I took possession of lands belonging to this *quibian* [second

half of the exchange: one gives gloves, one takes lands]. As soon as he saw the houses we had built and a lively trade going on, he determined to burn everything and to kill us all" ("Lettera Rarissima," 7/7/1503). The sequel of this story is even more sinister. The Spaniards manage to capture the *quibian*'s family as hostages; several of the Indians succeed in escaping nonetheless. "The remaining prisoners were seized with despair, for they had not escaped with their comrades, and it was discovered the next morning that they had hanged themselves from the bridge-poles, with some ropes they had managed to find there, bending their knees to do so, for otherwise there was not enough room for them to hang themselves properly." Ferdinand, Columbus's son, who reports this episode, was present at it; he was only fourteen years old at the time, and we may imagine that the reaction which follows was at least as much his father's as his own: "For those of us who were on board our ship, their death was not a great loss, but it seriously aggravated the situation of our men on land; the *quibian* would have been delighted to make peace in exchange for his children, but now that we had no hostages remaining, there was every reason to fear that he would wage war even more cruelly against our village" (99).

Whereupon war replaces peace; but we may assume that Columbus had never entirely overlooked this means of expansion, since from the first voyage he nurses a special project: "I set out this morning," he notes on October 14, 1492, "in search of a place where a fortress might be built." "Because there is a rocky cape on rather high ground, one might well build a fortress here" (5/11/1492). We know that he will fulfill this dream after his ship is wrecked, and that he will leave his men here. But is not the fortress, even if it proves rather ineffectual, already one step toward war, hence toward submission and inequality?

Thus, by gradual stages, Columbus will shift from assimilationism, which implied an equality of principle, to an ideology of enslavement, and hence to the assertion of the Indians' inferiority. We could already guess this from several summary judgments appearing in the first contacts. "They would make good and industrious servants" (11/10/1492). "They are fit to be ruled" (16/12/1492). In order to remain consistent, Columbus establishes subtle distinctions between innocent, potentially Christian Indians and idolatrous Indians, practicing cannibalism; and between pacific Indians (submitting to his power) and bellicose Indians who thereby deserve to be punished; but the important thing is that those who are not already Christians can only

be slaves: there is no middle path. Hence he foresees that the ships that transport herds of cattle from Europe to America will be loaded with slaves on the return journey, in order to keep them from remaining empty and until gold is found in sufficient quantities, the equivalence implicitly established between beasts and men not being gratuitous, of course. "The conveyors could be paid in cannibal slaves, fierce but well-made fellows of good understanding, which men, wrested from their inhumanity, will be, we believe, the best slaves that ever were" ("Memorial for Antonio de Torres," 30/1/1494).

The Spanish sovereigns do not accept this suggestion of Columbus's they prefer to have vassals, not slaves—subjects capable of paying taxes rather than belonging to a third party; but Columbus nonetheless does not abandon his project, and writes again in September 1498: "From here one might send, in the name of the Holy Trinity, as many slaves as could be sold, as well as a quantity of Brazil [timber]. If the information I have is correct, it appears that we could sell four thousand slaves, who might be worth twenty millions and more" ("Letter to the Sovereigns," September 1498). The displacements might raise some problems at the beginning, but these will quickly be solved. "It is true that many of them die now; but this will not always be so. The Negroes and the Canarians had begun in the same fashion" (ibid.). This is indeed the meaning of his government of the island of Hispaniola, and another letter to the sovereigns, dated October 1498, is summarized thus by Las Casas: "In all that he says, there seems to emerge the fact that the profit he sought to bestow upon the Spaniards who were to be left in the place consisted in the slaves he would give them to be sold in Castile" (*Historia*, I, 155). In Columbus's mind, the propagation of the faith and the submission to slavery are indissolubly linked.

Michele de Cuneo, a member of the second expedition, has left one of the rare accounts describing in detail how the slave trade functioned at its inception; his narrative permits us no illusions as to how the Indians were perceived. "When our caravels . . . were to leave for Spain, we gathered in our settlement one thousand six hundred male and female persons of these Indians, and of these we embarked in our caravels on February 17, 1495, five hundred fifty souls among the healthiest males and females. For those who remained, we let it be known in the vicinity that anyone who wanted to take some of them could do so, to the amount desired; which was done. And when each man was thus provided with slaves, there still remained about four

hundred, to whom permission was granted to go where they wished. Among them were many women with children still at suck. Since they were afraid that we might return to capture them once again, and in order to escape us the better, they left their children anywhere on the ground and began to flee like desperate creatures; and some fled so far that they found themselves at seven or eight days' distance from our community at Isabella, beyond the mountains and across enormous rivers; consequently they will henceforth be captured only with great difficulty." Such is the beginning of the operation; here now is the conclusion: "But when we reached the waters off Spain, around two hundred of these Indians died, I believe because of the unaccustomed air, which is colder than theirs. We cast them into the sea. . . . We disembarked all the slaves, half of whom were sick."

Even when there is no question of slavery, Columbus's behavior implies that he does not grant the Indians the right to have their own will, that he judges them, in short, as living objects. It is as such that, in his naturalist's enthusiasm, he always wants to take specimens of all kinds back to Spain: trees, birds, animals, and Indians; the notion of asking their opinion is foreign to him. "He says that he would capture some half dozen Indians in order to take them with him; but he says that he could not catch them because they had all left before nightfall. But the following day, Tuesday August 8, twelve men came in a canoe to the caravel: all were taken and brought to the Admiral's ship, and he selected six and sent the six others back to land" (Las Casas, *Historia*, I, 134). The figure is set in advance: a half dozen; the individuals do not count, but they are counted. On another occasion he wants women (not for lustful purposes, but in order to have a sampling of everything). "I have sent men to a house on the west bank of the river. They have brought me back seven head of women, girls and adults, and three infants" ("Journal," 12/11/1492). To be an Indian, and a woman to boot, immediately puts you on the same level as cattle.

Women: if Columbus is interested in them exclusively as a naturalist, such is not the case, need we remark, for the other members of the expedition. Let us read this account which the same Michele de Cuneo, a nobleman of Savona, provides of an episode occurring in the course of the second voyage—one story out of a thousand, but one that has the advantage of being told by its protagonist. "While I was in the boat, I captured a very beautiful Carib woman, whom the aforesaid Lord Admiral gave to me, and with whom, having brought her into my

cabin, and she being naked as is their custom, I conceived the desire to take my pleasure. I wanted to put my desire to execution, but she was unwilling for me to do so, and treated me with her nails in such wise that I would have preferred never to have begun. But seeing this (in order to tell you the whole even to the end), I took a rope-end and thrashed her well, following which she produced such screaming and wailing as would cause you not to believe your ears. Finally we reached an agreement such that, I can tell you, she seemed to have been raised in a veritable school of harlots."

This account is revealing in more than one respect. The European finds the Indian women beautiful; obviously it does not occur to him to ask their consent to "put his desire to execution." Rather, he addresses this request to the Admiral, who is a man and a European like himself, and who seems to give women to his compatriots as readily as he distributed little bells to the native chiefs. Michele de Cuneo is writing of course to another man, and he masterfully adjusts the pleasure of the reading to his correspondent, since what is involved, in his eyes at least, is a story of pure pleasure. At first he assumes the absurd role of the humiliated male; but this is only to make his reader's satisfaction all the greater upon finding order reestablished and the white man triumphant. A last wink of complicity: our nobleman omits the description of the "execution," but lets it be deduced by its effects, apparently beyond his hopes. These effects also permit, in a striking example, the identification of the Indian woman with a whore: striking, for the woman who violently rejected sexual solicitation finds herself identified with the woman who makes this solicitation her profession. But is this not the true nature of every woman, which can be revealed by a certain number of lashes? Refusal can only be hypocritical; scratch resistance and reveal the whore. Indian women are women, or Indians to the second power; hence, they become the object of a double rape.

How can Columbus be associated with these two apparently contradictory myths, one whereby the Other is a "noble savage" (when perceived at a distance) and one whereby he is a "dirty dog," a potential slave? It is because both rest on a common basis, which is the failure to recognize the Indians, and the refusal to admit them as a subject having the same rights as oneself, but different. Columbus has discovered America but not the Americans.

The entire history of the discovery of America, the first episode of the conquest, is marked by this ambiguity: human alterity is at once

revealed and rejected. The year 1492 already symbolizes, in the history of Spain, this double movement: in this same year the country repudiates its interior Other by triumphing over the Moors in the final battle of Granada and by forcing the Jews to leave its territory; and it discovers the exterior Other, that whole America which will become Latin. We know that Columbus himself constantly links the two events. "In this present year 1492, after Your Highnesses have brought to an end the war against the Moors . . . in this very month . . . Your Highnesses . . . determined to send me, Cristobal Colón, to the said regions of India. . . . Thus, after having driven all the Jews out of your realms and dominions, Your Highnesses in this same month of January commanded me to set out with a sufficient armada to the said countries of India," he writes at the head of the journal of the first voyage. The unity of the two endeavors, in which Columbus is prepared to see divine intervention, resides in the propagation of the Christian faith. "I hope in Our Lord that Your Highnesses will determine to send [priests] in great diligence in order to unite to the Church such great populations and to convert them, just as Your Highnesses have destroyed those who were unwilling to confess the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost" (6/11/1492). But we can also see the two actions as directed in opposite, and complementary, directions: one expels heterogeneity from the body of Spain, the other irremediably introduces it there.

In his way, Columbus himself participates in this double movement. He does not perceive alterity, as we have seen, and he imposes his own values upon it; yet the term by which he most often refers to himself and which his contemporaries also employ is *extranjero*, "outsider"; and if so many countries have sought the honor of being his fatherland, it is because he himself had none.