



# *Introduction*

## 1. THE INFERIORITY OF AMERICA ACCORDING TO BUFFON

THIS study of Oviedo and the earliest chroniclers of American nature grew out of my research on the “weakness of America,” in other words the thesis that the American continent is in some way inferior—and, to be more specific, immature—in relation to the Old World, and that animal life in America suffers from degeneration and arrested development. Hegel is the most famous exponent of this thesis, which was first formulated in scientific terms by Buffon.

It is of course true that chroniclers and travelers had referred to relatively weak or inferior aspects of American nature long before Buffon, indeed almost from the time of Europe’s first contacts with the New World, but the criticism and condemnation had remained incidental and episodic and had not been built up into a curse on the whole continent. These sporadic observations were to provide the eighteenth-century critics of America and the Americans with their material but not their arguments, with data but not with physical and geographical theories.

It should also be remembered that the historians of antiquity and the early naturalists of America had no concept of evolution. Following the biblical and Aristotelian tradition, they believed in the fixity of the species, nature as immobility, or as variety fully unfolded in space, unmarked by “the silent and unending march of time.” But when Buffon and his supporters and adversaries spoke of the “immaturity” and “degeneration” of the Americas, they were using concepts that implied an evolutionary system of nature; they were immersing nature in history and implying a development cut off at birth or an exhaustion through old age. Nature is brought to life, made fluid and changeable. The terms applied to America thus assume a new tone and coloring; and—negative as they may be—they leave some hope for the future, or at the very least, in insisting on an irreversible degeneration, cast a ray of light on the continent’s remotest past.

But in another sense—the aspect on which Buffon most prided himself and which some historians count as his greatest achievement—his thesis is less original than he thought. Without referring to the inferiority or superiority of either continent, Buffon on more than one occasion boldly claims to have been

the first person to note the radical difference between the fauna of South America and that of the Old World.<sup>1</sup> And Brunetière (following in the footsteps of Perrier) took Buffon's claim a step further when he stated categorically that between 1757 and 1764, with his study of the animals of the Americas, Buffon founded zoological geography as he went along.<sup>2</sup>

The claim is admissible only in the sense that Buffon was perhaps the first naturalist and biologist to study the animal species in their geographical environment, as phenomena of the physical world and not as unalterable and impassive prototypes that came forth perfect from the hands of the Creator, from Noah's Ark or the feral couplings of their forebears. What Buffon finds, in my opinion—although I am open to contradiction by the competent experts—is geographical zoology.

## 2. PRECURSORS OF ZOOLOGICAL GEOGRAPHY

But zoological geography, which tackles this problem from the other end, setting out from the study of the earth and examining the distribution of the animals throughout its various parts, although it may only have assumed scientific shape toward the middle of the nineteenth century (as late as 1881 Samuel Butler doubted its existence)<sup>3</sup> comes into being as curiosity, necessity, incidental observation, as problem and the dawning of a fragmentary solution, long before Buffon. Aristotle, on the basis of a remark that made a deep impression on Columbus (the presence of elephants in Asia and Africa), had said that the same latitudes had the same fauna,<sup>4</sup> a thesis which is the precise opposite to Buffon's "discovery." And history of science textbooks name as precursors or initiators of zoological geography the historian Poseidonius of Rhodes (130–50 B.C.), Basil the Great, bishop of Caesarea (360 A.D.), and the great Arab geographer al-Idrisi (1153).

Julius Solinus, writing in the third century A.D., can already be found distributing the zoological curiosities and monstrosities among the various countries he describes. In connection with Italy he deals with snakes and wolves (chap.

1. Observing, for instance, that "the most important and most general fact, the fact least known to all naturalists before me . . . is that the animals of the southern parts of the old continent are not found in the new, and that reciprocally those of South America are not found at all in the old continent" (*Histoire naturelle* . . . [Paris, 1749–1804], VII, 129, Suppléments, quoted by P. Flourens, *Histoire des travaux et des idées de Buffon*, 2d ed. [Paris, 1850], p. 143. Elsewhere Buffon repeats that "this general fact, which it seems was not even suspected" is so important that it must be corroborated with all possible proof ("Animaux de l'ancien continent," in *Oeuvres complètes* [Paris, 1826–28], XV, 407–08). And later he was to announce complacently: "I have demonstrated this truth by such a great number of examples that it can no longer be called into question" ("Époques de la nature," 1779, in *Oeuvres complètes*, V, 221). Cf. A. Gerbi, *The Dispute of the New World* (Pittsburgh, 1973), p. 565ff.

2. *Manuel de l'histoire de la littérature française* (Paris, 1898), p. 375. Cf. E. Perrier, *La philosophie zoologique avant Darwin* (Paris, 1884), p. 63: "Buffon deserved to be considered the founder of zoological geography."

3. "The same question arises in respect of the distribution of many plants and animals; the reason of the limits which some of them cannot pass, being, indeed, perfectly clear, but as regards perhaps the greater number of them, undiscoverable" (S. Butler, *Alps and Sanctuaries* [London and Toronto, 1931], p. 135).

4. Samuel Eliot Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea* (Boston, 1942), I, 369.

VIII, pp. 292–94);<sup>5</sup> Pontus gets the beaver (XIX, 333) Hyrcania the tigers and panthers (XXI, 342–43), Scythia the deer (XXII, 346); the bison and aurochs go to Hercynia (XXIII, 348), the elephant to Mauretania (XXVIII, 363), the bear to Numidia (XXIX, 366), the dragons to Ethiopia (XXXII, 384), the phoenix to Arabia (XXXVI, 400), and so on.

### 3. “SIMILAR” AND “DIFFERENT” ANIMALS

But these almost emblematic pairings, like the moralistic allegories of the *Physiologus*, could not be used to deduce any comparison, any distributive criterion. Empirical and picturesque, these semi-legendary sitings fell into no logical category. It is thus a significant step forward—indeed a crucial one for the future application of the thesis to the American species—when Marco Polo, following perhaps in the distant footsteps of Herodotus,<sup>6</sup> introduces the crude, practical, and fruitful categorical distinction between animals *like ours* and *other than ours*.

Marco Polo tells us quite specifically which animals in the kingdoms he visited are *similar* to ours and which altogether *different* and proper to those countries: “Throughout India their birds are different from ours”;<sup>7</sup> in Madagascar too there are “birds very different from ours” (p. 290), and in Choilu “there are beasts that are different from the others . . . peacocks and hens that are bigger and more beautiful than ours, and everything they have is different from ours, and none of their fruits are like ours” (p. 279); in Zanzibar “all their beasts are different from all others in the world” (p. 292), and so on, without the difference being any cause of condemnation or rejection. Indeed in most cases this discovery prompts admiration: the Madagascans “have such different animals and birds that it is quite a marvel” (p. 291). He makes frequent mention of leopards, “leofants,” “leocorns,” and unicorns, featherless and hairy chickens, men with tails and men with dog’s heads; of lions that “are very large and very dangerous,” so that if someone were unwisely “to sleep outside at night, he would be straightaway eaten” (pp. 191–92); and in general of “many very fine wild animals” (p. 161).

This constant reference to *our* animal and vegetable species, as if to an unvarying paradigm, contains an implicit and categorical Europeocentrism that is of crucial importance both because of the value judgments which it prompts and dictates and because it leads on to the assimilation and absorption in an undifferentiated exoticism of whatever is *different* from what we know, of a

5. Gaius Julius Solinus, *Collectanea rerum memorabilium*, in *Antiquitatum variarum auctores* (Lyons, 1560), pp. 252–454. Solinus in fact announces in his preface that “keeping the divisions of the globe” he has interlarded the geographical description with items of ethnographical and zoological information: “In among this we have described the characteristics of the men and other animals” (p. 257). Oviedo was familiar with Solinus (*Hist.*, XXXII, 4: III, 238). Cf. M. T. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia, 1971), pp. 41–44.

6. Hodgen, *op. cit.*, pp. 25–26.

7. *I Viaggi* (Florence, 1863), p. 262.

generic “differentness” in which the specific characteristics of each single exotic thing become confused and submerged. But these are the dangers inherent in research: “We have no other guide to truth and reason than the example and idea of the opinions and customs of the country where we are.”<sup>8</sup>

And in fact this basic alternative, so very simple and easily reversible, is extremely fruitful. Saying that a new—generally animal or plant—species is “like in Europe” or “like in Spain,” or like “in our country” (or else, as Columbus does, to comment that some of the native women do up their hair “just the way the women of Castile do”) means accepting it within one’s own mental horizon, appropriating it to the known and familiar world, recognizing that it possesses the normality, traditionality, and rationality of the animals and plants of our own climes. It means, therefore, automatically extending the knowledge that we have of the nature of our own world to the nature of every part of the world—thus to the New World too, and as it were being happily reassured to recognize the species to which we are accustomed, which we can trust, of which we do not need to be wary. The exotic becomes familiar.<sup>9</sup> It is a spontaneous movement, an instinctive reaction. “The first impulse was to rediscover the Old World in the New.”<sup>10</sup> Thus it is not just a matter of the Old World casting itself upon the New: it is the home world taking peaceful possession of the overseas discoveries.

When Fernando Columbus talks of “well-built houses . . . with the tops woven with very fine works of foliage, like the gardens seen in Valencia,” he draws spiritually closer to the natives of Borinquén; and even more so when he describes the ornaments which other primitive peoples “wear on a string around their necks, like we have an Agnus Dei, or other relic.”<sup>11</sup> The European’s religion is fused and confused with the savage’s superstition.

In the same way, when de Thou is talking about Mexico almost a century later (1604) and describes its fabrics, tooled leather, poplars, and vines as being “like” those of China, Flanders, and Castile, he immediately renders these exotic curiosities familiar to the reader: “There is no amazement, no mental upheaval. The known world expands, and it turns out that in the major part of the New World,

8. Montaigne, “Des cannibales,” in *Essais*, I, xxi (Pléiade ed., Paris, 1933), p. 213.

9. J. H. Elliott, *The Old World and the New, 1492-1650* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 19, referring to the reports of Hernán Cortés and Bernal Díaz del Castillo. Magnaghi had already stressed that it had been a good thing for many explorers that they were *not* scientists and were thus less inhibited by current doctrine and more receptive to the newness of the things of America: “It was a blessing if one was not too learned, if one was unencumbered with the sort of medieval learning that Columbus possessed, and could thus feel less bound by traditions to which one had often, and in vain, to subordinate the results of the new discoveries” (*Amerigo Vespucci*, 2d ed. [Rome, 1926], p. 143). On the “assimilationist” approach, cf. Michèle Duchet, “Monde civilisé et monde sauvage . . .” in *Au siècle des lumières* (Paris and Moscow, 1970), p. 9. And on the two methods, positive and negative, of describing and assimilating or rejecting novelties, see Hodgen, *op. cit.*, pp. 196–201. Darwin again was to exploit the convenient and synthetic contrast or analogy; see Nora Barlow, ed., *Charles Darwin and the Voyage of the Beagle* (New York, 1946), pp. 8, 54, 56, 70, etc.

10. G. Gusdorf, *Les principes de la pensée au siècle des lumières* (Paris, 1971), p. 140.

11. Fernando Columbus, *Vita di Cristoforo Colombo* (London, 1867), pp. 144, 298, 318; cf. p. 326 and *passim*.

the level of civilization is already that of the Old World.”<sup>12</sup> Recognition is already an act of conquest and subjugation. Had not the protoplast Adam, by naming the animals, set the seal on man’s superiority over the entire fauna? He had “carried out a sort of exorcism, a first taking of possession.”<sup>13</sup>

Nor did it end there. When the newly discovered peoples began to be discussed, the similarities—whether real or fanciful—with European customs were used as “proof” in support of monogenetic or diffusionist theses and strict temporal and causal links; or rather, as Hodgen puts it, “cultural similarities were clothed with documentary import.”<sup>14</sup> And this process was facilitated by the fact that, as Foucault noted, “the sciences of the sixteenth century were obsessed . . . by the notion of Similitude.”<sup>15</sup> The tacit assumption that Euro-Asiatic civilization was chronologically anterior to American civilization was tantamount to anointing the New World with all the promise of youthfulness.

#### 4. MEANING OF “DIFFERENTNESS”

It is another attitude altogether that prompts a writer to state, “This species is different from those we know.” Such an observation is the first step in a quest that leads beyond the known world, advancing into the unknown and opening the way to ever bolder intuitions and inferences. It postulates another world beyond the known one and thus immediately poses the problem of the possible relationship between the two. It demands a new definition and hence a whole new logic of the things of nature. It opens a breach in the old and unquestioned oneness of nature, but in so doing allows the new species to creep between the cracks and crevices of that shattered unity. It is understandable that in early geographical maps the drawings of the animals typical of each area should stress the differences rather than the similarities, the new rather than the familiar—and hence the bigger animals rather than the insects and snails.<sup>16</sup> To recognize and point out the “differentness” of a species is thus, as we said, not just the first but the decisive step in capturing the new reality, taming it, and bringing it within our own mental framework.

One might mention in passing that such recognition denies and rejects the vision of a closed and fully known world, a nature always and everywhere the same, and suggests new ways—by analogy, subsumption, dependence on a third term—of recovering in some way the lost unity. The nagging question then

12. A. Stegmann, “L’Amérique de Du Bartas et de De Thou,” in *La découverte de l’Amérique* (Paris, 1968), p. 308.

13. Giorgio Vigolo, “Palinuro,” *Corriere della Sera*, 11 December 1972.

14. Hodgen, *op. cit.*, pp. 309–13.

15. H. V. White, “Foucault Decoded: Notes from Underground,” *History and Theory*, 12 (1973), 1, 34; cf. p. 46 (comparisons and metaphors).

16. W. George, *Animals and Maps* (London, 1969), pp. 25, 187.

immediately presents itself: if this species is different from Europe's, is it "better" or "worse"? Is it taller or shorter? Stronger or weaker? More useful or less useful? Thus arise all those further extrapolations and deductions that are to culminate in the "dispute." One innocent little question unleashes an irresistible tide of century upon century of diatribe, calumny, and panegyric.

If we then consider the fact that almost all the travelers avail themselves of both approaches (for Oviedo, see below, chap. XVIII, sec. 17), saying that some aspects of the nature of the Indies are like ours and others are different, we find that the distinction we have sought to analyze (the like is the known, the unlike the new) leads us back to the trite observation that the advancement of knowledge is invariably characterized by an alternating rhythm, reflecting the observation of affinities and peculiarities, uniform and unusual features. Buffon gives it as common knowledge that "we can only judge by comparing" and that "our knowledge is based . . . entirely on the relationships which things bear to those which are like them and those which differ from them."<sup>17</sup> Scientific observation knows no other method than the observation of generic similarities and specific differences.

##### 5. THE NEW WORLD AND THE OLD

Thus one must reject not only the claims of Perrier and Brunetière but those other theses—much repeated in our own times—maintaining that the discovery of America presented Europe with a problem of truly tremendous implications: "whether or not American reality shares the same nature as all other things and creatures,"<sup>18</sup> a problem supposedly amounting to nothing less than "the greatest threat that has ever darkened the horizon of the European mind"<sup>19</sup> and which Europe answered by postulating *a priori* the identity of Europe and America and then seeking to confirm the same identity *a posteriori* through descriptions and travel journals.

This whole construction is somewhat artificial. The discovery of America unquestionably acted as a powerful stimulus to naturalistic and anthropological enquiries. The effect on European philosophical thought was felt more slowly, beginning only toward the end of the sixteenth century, with Montaigne and Bruno.<sup>20</sup> The philosophy of humanism was in fact already perfectly capable of accommodating the new geographical discoveries, which, in their inmost essence, belonged to the same spiritual current: the enlargement of the physical

17. "Discours sur la nature des animaux" in *Oeuvres*, X, 115, quoted by F. Tinland, *L'homme sauvage* (Paris, 1968), p. 23.

18. Edmundo O'Gorman, "Trayectoria de América," in *Fundamentos de la historia de América* (Mexico, 1942), p. 86.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

20. Elliott has rightly commented on "the apparent slowness of Europe in making the mental adjustments required to incorporate America into its field of vision" (*op. cit.*, p. 81) and on the fact that "the European reading public displayed no overwhelming interest in the newly-discovered world of America" (*ibid.*, p. 12; see also p. 14).

world beyond the Ocean was immediately paralleled with the expansion of the historical horizon resulting from the rediscovery of classical antiquity. The ingenious O’Gorman, who refers to the “profound fundamental cowardice”<sup>21</sup> of Renaissance thinkers and would like to put humanism—as a “negative” era for philosophy—in brackets, inserting America and its discovery in a presumed “underground” stream running from the scholastics to Descartes,<sup>22</sup> paradoxically robs himself of the basic concept for understanding the assimilation of America in the European conscience—what he is pleased to call the “Philosophical Conquest of America.”<sup>23</sup>

The truth of the matter is that the first questions posed by the New World, far from being “so many more threats to the convictions and systems of the Old World,”<sup>24</sup> repeated doubts and queries that were already fully familiar to Europe’s tormented conscience.

#### 6. THE INDIAN AND THE SALVATION OF THE HEATHEN

The greatest problem, the problem of the nature and quality of the Indian, emerged spontaneously in the shape of the problem of his “soul” and possible salvation, his dutiful and perhaps obligatory baptism—in other words, as a recent and specific instance of the age-old question of the “salvation of the heathen.”<sup>25</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas had conceded that if the pagan had never heard of the Christian faith, his paganism was not a sin (while the aggressive heathenness of the Saracen *was* a sin). And Dante, after touching on the problem in the *Inferno* (IV, 40–42) and *Purgatorio* (III, 40–45), tackled this formidable question once again in the third and culminating section of the *Divine Comedy*, with trembling conscience and holy dread, with supreme precision and verbal splendor:

“For ‘Here’s a man,’ thou saidst, ‘born of some breed  
 On Indus’ bank, where there is none to tell  
 Of Christ, and none to write, and none to read;  
 He lives, so far as we can see, quite well,  
 Rightly disposed, in conduct not amiss,  
 Blameless in word and deed; yet infidel  
 And unbaptized he dies; come, tell me this:  
 Where is the justice that condemns the man  
 For unbelief? What fault is it of his?”  
 (*Paradiso*, XIX, 70–78, tr. Dorothy L. Sayers)

21. O’Gorman, *Fundamentos*, p. 21.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 27–28.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 81, 105.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 26; cf. *ibid.*, p. 86.

25. On whom see L. Capéran, *Le problème du salut des infidèles* (Paris, 1912), and, for the most conspicuous specific instance, A.-H. Chroust, “Utrum Aristoteles sit salvatus,” *JHI*, 6 (1945), 231–38. On Virgil, see the classic work by D. Comparetti, *Virgilio nel Medio Evo* (Livorno, 1872), esp. I, 290–92.

Dante's contemporary, Marco Polo, wrote ingenuously of one of the incarnations of Buddha: "If he had been baptized a Christian, he would have been a great saint with God" (p. 274).

And barely ten years before Columbus set sail from Palos, Pulci's Astarotte, "the new spirit of the age" (*De Sanctis*), answered Dante's question—as repeated to him by Rinaldo—asserting that the salvation of the antipodeans was a certainty, an absolute certainty, indeed so certain that only an "ignoramus" would doubt it. "If that had been the case your Redeemer would have shown a preference for this part, and Adam would have been shaped up here for you, and He Himself crucified for love of you. You should know that everyone is saved by the cross" (*Morgante Maggiore*, XXV, 233 et seq.).

Once the Americas had been discovered, the problem of the salvation of their natives was debated in Valladolid and by the Council of Trent, with greater or lesser indulgence but without any of the solutions proffered casting doubt on their potential for salvation.<sup>26</sup> Later this same problem instigated Father Lafitau's original and fruitful idea of comparing the American natives to the pagans of antiquity.<sup>27</sup>

#### 7. THE PHYSICAL NATURE OF THE AMERICAS

The problem of nature in the Americas was tackled and debated with equal candor and good sense. The first descriptions are impressively sincere and circumspect, revealing a marked concern for objective accuracy. Humboldt already noted that if one looked carefully at the original works of the early historians of the conquest one could not but be amazed at finding the seeds of so many physical truths in a Spanish author of the sixteenth century.<sup>28</sup> The exaggerations which fed the twofold legend of America the *weak* and America the *strong* were almost without exception later developments. Nor is there any justification—either in respect of the earliest reporters, the Columbuses and the Oviedos, or the later ones—for O'Gorman's statement that all the chroniclers do their best to confirm that nature is identical in the Americas and the Old World. "They can be summed up," writes the Mexican, "in a single phrase: 'nothing to report.'"<sup>29</sup> And, even more outrageously, "The sum of the arguments of the chroniclers on this problem comes down to a stubborn insistence on the fact that, although it may be a question of a 'New World,' it is not a world that is new."<sup>30</sup> According

26. Copious details in F. Mateos, "Ecos de América en Trento," *RI*, 22 (1945), 581–600. On the problem in the Council of Trent and in the seventeenth century see H. Busson, *La pensée religieuse française de Charron à Pascal* (Paris, 1933), pp. 414–17. Cf. also R. Romeo, *Le scoperte americane nella coscienza italiana del Cinquecento*, 2d ed. (Milan and Naples, 1971), pp. 35–37.

27. See S. Zavala, *América en el espíritu francés del siglo XVIII* (Mexico, 1949), pp. 176–77.

28. *Kosmos*, cited by Elliott, op. cit., pp. 5–6.

29. *Fundamentos*, p. 98.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 104.



to O’Gorman, Father Acosta was the first to insist on the autonomous individuality of America, as something new and unprecedented.<sup>31</sup>

Leaving aside the vagueness of the terms used and the resulting ambiguity of O’Gorman’s thesis, which at one point denies that the chroniclers recognize America as a world that is new (which is obviously absurd) and elsewhere denies that they consider its nature to be essentially different from nature in Europe (which is obvious and banal: none of the chroniclers doubts that America was created by God, like the Old World, and that nature is *one* throughout the world), the important point is that the reports always stress what is *new* about the New World, not what is the same as the Old World. From Mellin de Saint-Gelais (1556) to Fray Tomás de Mercado (1571), it is endlessly repeated that in the Indies *everything* is different from the Old World.<sup>32</sup> Marmontel was to observe wittily that “the old world . . . was so astonished at the discovery of the new that it could not be persuaded that the latter resembled it.”<sup>33</sup>

It was only natural that it should be so, and it takes no more than a glance at the texts to discover that if one really wants to sum them up in a single phrase it would tend rather to be a very reasonable and sensible “here we have something new.” And they contain absolutely no “stubborn insistence,” but if anything a patient and careful enquiry into the characteristics proper to the newly discovered regions.

Oviedo is for a number of reasons the greatest of the early historians of nature in America. For a clearer understanding of his originality, let us consider the intellectual perspective of those who preceded him as describers and interpreters of the physical reality of the New World.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 100–01. P. R. Cutright, in *The Great Naturalists Explore South America* (New York, 1940), asserts with even more remarkable naivety and ignorance that “in the accounts of these and other expeditions made by the conquerors there is little mention of the fauna and flora of the regions they explored, and such descriptions as were written are, for the most part, fantastical [Raleigh is given as an example!]. It was not until the close of the eighteenth century that a naturalist, in the true sense of the word, visited South America.”

32. On the former (and others), see Gerbi, *Dispute*, pp. 565–66; on the latter see Elliott, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

33. J. F. Marmontel, *Les Incas* (Paris, 1777), p. 3.



# Christopher Columbus

## I. FIRST REACTIONS TO AMERICAN NATURE

CHRISTOPHER Columbus had things other than nature to occupy his mind. His indifference to some of the most astonishing aspects of the Americas, such as the new constellations to be seen in the American heavens, has been remarked on more than once.<sup>1</sup> The flora and fauna of America do, however, immediately attract his attention and even manage to distract him momentarily from the search for gold, producing reactions in him that already contain in microcosm all the later attitudes of the European in America.

It is now more than a century since Humboldt congratulated Columbus on being as shrewd an observer of nature as he was intrepid a sailor;<sup>2</sup> in the Admiral's *Journal* and reports he found already "formulated all the problems that occupied the attention of the scientists in the second half of the fifteenth century and throughout the sixteenth century."<sup>3</sup> Thus it seems all the more curious that Alfonso Reyes should complain that Columbus left us "no real impression of American nature and life,"<sup>4</sup> and that Iglesia likewise should insist that "in

1. For example by Samuel Eliot Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, I, 353, and throughout the article by L. Olschki, "What Columbus Saw on Landing in the West Indies," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 84, no. 5 (July 1941), 653. J. Wasserman, in his *Christoph Columbus, der Don Quichote des Ozeans* (Berlin, 1930), p. 102, also criticizes Columbus's descriptions as generic and flat, prosaic and commercial. But Hugues gets closer to the truth when he writes that "although ignorant of botany . . . Columbus is led solely by his feeling for nature to pay careful attention to anything that presents a novel aspect" (*L'opera scientifica di Cristoforo Colombo* [Turin, 1892], p. 102). See also G. E. Nunn, *The Geographical Conceptions of Columbus* (New York, 1924); C. Verlinden, *Kolumbus: Vision und Ausdauer* (Göttingen, 1962), and *Origines de la civilisation atlantique* (Neuchâtel, 1966), p. 450.

2. Alexander von Humboldt, *Examen critique de l'histoire de la géographie du Nouveau Monde* (Paris, 1836–39), III, 21–25, 148n, 228–30; *Cosmos* (Madrid, 1874), II, 52–54. C. Jane too recognizes Columbus's "keen appreciation of natural beauty" (*The Voyages of Christopher Columbus* [London, 1930], Introduction, p. 11). Morison actually finds that "Columbus's appreciation of the beauties of nature was equal to that of eighteenth-century romancers" (*The European Discovery of America: The Southern Voyages* [New York, 1974], p. 128). But Elliott, with more balanced judgment, comments that "Columbus . . . shows at times a remarkable gift for realistic observation, although at other times the idealised landscape of the European imagination interposes itself between him and the American scene" (op. cit., p. 19).

3. *Cosmos*, II, p. 260. Fernando had already gone to great lengths to praise the way his father diligently "set down day by day in minute detail whatever happened on the voyage," the winds, the distances covered, the sails and currents used, the birds and fish seen on the way, etc. (*Vita di Cristoforo Colombo*, pp. 58–59).

4. A. Reyes, "El presagio de América," in *Ultima Tule* (Mexico, 1942), p. 62.

Columbus there is never any disinterested description," and only an "alleged feeling for nature."<sup>5</sup>

The important point, in actual fact, is to remember Columbus's expectations, the disappointments he suffered, and the precise aims with which he was writing. His reactions to American nature are never coldly scientific observations, but genuine "reactions," sometimes emotional and enthusiastic, sometimes full of repressed and disguised disappointment. On the one hand, having failed to find in the Antilles the dreamed-of paradise gleaming with gold, he is overcome with doubts and misgivings that will later provide support for numerous denigrators of the continent. On the other hand, and more importantly, he feels joyfully at one with nature in the tropics, revels in the eternally springlike climate, experiences a sensation of perfect happiness and exhilaration, finds himself at peace with his tormented spirit and the dumbly hostile world, and gives vent to an enthusiasm that will echo down through the centuries, all the way to Humboldt and Jacquemont.<sup>6</sup> The weather is always like May. The beauty of one area persuades him to baptize it *Jardines*, "the gardens." Not only nightingales sing, but a thousand other little birds, and innumerable species of palms sway gently in the breeze. The natives are possibly exempt from Original Sin, pure as Adam. If pearls, as Pliny says, are born from the dew falling into oysters, there must certainly be vast numbers of pearls in the Indies, since the dew is abundant!

Small wonder that subsequent observers, failing to rediscover all these paradisaical virtues in the Indies, realistically underlined other shortcomings, which were then used to back up the thesis of the inferiority of the American continent.

## 2. THE JOURNAL OF THE FIRST VOYAGE

As a record of Columbus's first voyage, and hence of his earliest impressions, we have an unparalleled document: his diary or *Journal*, possibly the oldest "diary" in literary history, that by virtue of its very nature (although probably kept for purposes of nautical calculation) unfolds the miracle of the discovery with the steady rhythm of each passing day.

The authenticity of the *Journal*—"one of the most extraordinary monuments of the human mind"<sup>7</sup>—can no longer be seriously doubted. But the form in

5. R. Iglesia, *El hombre Colón* (Mexico, 1944), pp. 34, 41. For Iglesia, Columbus is merely a Genoese "businessman" with an overlay of Castilian mysticism. In some curious way he fails to grasp the actual historical novelty of Columbus, his tenacity as an explorer, his longing for greatness and discovery that make him typically modern and quite different in thought, action, and results from so many other medieval merchants and mystics.

6. See Gerbi, *Dispute*. "It might be expected that the natural beauty of the West Indian islands, seen for the first time in such ideal conditions, would make an exceptionally strong appeal to a man with the poetic temper of Columbus" (Jane, *op. cit.*, pp. 68–69). Cf. J. Pérez de Tudela's comment: "Columbus was, once again, its [the Indian adventure's] inspired inventor; it was he who first described, in terms of poetic rapture, the bewitching and perfumed beauty of the tropics" ("Vision de la découverte du Nouveau Monde chez les chroniqueurs espagnols," in *La découverte de l'Amérique*, p. 275).

7. J. H. Mariéjol, *Pierre Martyr d'Anghera* (Paris, 1887), p. 203. On the various versions of the *Journal*, see E. Jos, "El libro del primer viaje," *RI*, 10 (1950), 719–51 (see esp. pp. 723–25; on Jane's version, pp. 732–41). It subsequently

which it has come down to us, Las Casas's transcription-cum-summary, adds another posthumous layer to the veils drawn spontaneously by the Admiral himself. Columbus, in fact, far from having any scientific objective in drafting the *Journal*, is predominantly concerned with justifying his enterprise in the eyes of Queen Isabella, with his elation at his first success, and his commitment to proving geographical and cosmographical theses that will justify a new and better-equipped expedition to the rich lands of far eastern Asia.

The descriptive limitations imposed on him by the fact that he was addressing himself to Her Sovereign Majesty (which also account, according to some scholars, for his idealization of the sexual customs of the natives and his insistence on the possibility of their conversion to Christianity) play a minor part in comparison with the limitations resulting from his own passion and illusions and rapturous longing, completely inimical to detached observation of such a singular nature. Columbus *wants* to show that the islands discovered are delightful of climate and bursting with prodigious riches, so that the Spaniards will be able to live as well as they did in Spain, and better: they are overflowing with gold, or at least near to the places where the gold comes from and the spices grow, and the natives are so artless in bartering and so cowardly in battle that with the wiles of honest trading or the violence of arms, they can easily be persuaded to part with whatever one wants from them.<sup>8</sup>

The cowardice and weakness of the Indians, which were to form the refrain of so many diatribes right through to de Pauw and beyond, can be traced back to Columbus's well-meaning propaganda. To stir up the ambitions of the Catholic Kings without frightening them into their all too familiar prudence, the Admiral generalizes the legitimate terror of the natives of the Antilles—already the persistent target of the ferocious Caribs—at finding themselves invaded by this new breed of creatures coming from the sea, men or demons or whatever they may be, armour-plated, bearded, thundering and smoking, pale of countenance, and holding out fistfuls of multicolored glass beads, flashing and glowing in the sunlight. (But when, barely eight years later, Columbus wants to assert his claims and exalt his services to the crown he is to boast of having conquered the Indies “from a *warlike* and numerous people,” from a “*savage and warlike* people, that make their home in mountain and forest.”)<sup>9</sup>

This theme of the unwarlike weakness of the natives fitted in so perfectly with Las Casas's humanitarian thesis that he in turn, when transcribing Columbus's

became quite usual for sailors to keep journals. And Bacon would marvel that people kept diaries for sea journeys, where there was nothing to see but the sea and the sky, whereas generally speaking they were not kept for land journeys “wherein so much is to be observed” (“Of travel,” *Essays Civil and Moral*, XVIII [1597]. In point of fact Columbus's journal describes events on both land and sea.

8. They give away everything they have for a few glass beads or tortoiseshell fragments “and I think they would do the same with spices and gold if they had any” (3 December). Time and again, in fact, Columbus emphasizes the natives' readiness to indulge in barter.

9. Letter of 1500, in *Relaciones y Cartas* (Madrid, 1892), pp. 320, 325.

diary, certainly omitted nothing that would enfeeble the Indian. It is likely, if anything, that he left out or summarized passages that did not suit his book, or that he found secondary to his chosen twofold purpose, to exalt the memory of Columbus and protect the Indian population.<sup>10</sup>

Let us now—with the due reservation called for by the prejudices on the part of author and editor of the text, bearing in mind that Columbus seems to have been an assiduous reader of and firm believer in Marco Polo, whose book, as Morison so imaginatively put it, he had “in his head, if not in his hand,”<sup>11</sup> and not forgetting that the Journal remained unpublished until 1825, and that of the early historians only Andrés Bernaldez, Fernando Columbus, and Las Casas seem to have been acquainted with it, and of recent historians only Muñoz,<sup>12</sup>—let us now turn again to this little book that enshrines the earliest observations made by a European on nature in America.

### 3. MEAGER FAUNA, EXUBERANT FLORA

On the first island he touched on that fateful day, 12 October 1492, Columbus found “no beast of any sort . . . save parrots.” At first sight, America’s fauna seems meager in the extreme. Two days later, noting the splendor of the fresh green vegetation, like Castile in April or May (14 October), Columbus settles on the contrast—meager fauna, exuberant flora—that is to be repeated down through the centuries. The comparative formula is then reiterated, with few variations, time and again: the new islands, even in the winter months, are as luxuriant and fruitful as the lands of Europe in the best season.

This initial amazement is followed by a vague feeling that such a climate and such a land must produce creatures and plants of extraordinary powers. Terrestrial creatures may be said to be entirely absent. “I saw no animals on land of

10. Humboldt found changes in Columbus’s journal made by Las Casas (see for example *Examen critique*, II, 47, 340–41) and lacunae (*ibid.*, III, 103*n*), but he is exaggerating when he calls it a “cold and laconic extract,” a paraphrase in the friar’s “insipid” and “boring” style (*ibid.*, and III, 227–30). On the text of the Journal, see also Jane, *op. cit.*, pp. 59–60.

11. “Texts and Translations of the Journal of Columbus’s First Voyage,” *HAHR*, 19 (1939), 239. It is of course true that Humboldt always remained skeptical about Columbus’s knowledge of Marco Polo, as he never mentions him by name (see *Examen critique*, I, 63–64*n*, II, 350, III, 200–01, IV, 245; and *Cosmos*, II, 250). But more recent scholars tend to think that Columbus not only read Marco Polo’s *Viaggi* shortly before 1492 (Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, pp. 64–69, 315; Olschki, “What Columbus Saw,” p. 653; E. Jos, “La génesis colombina del descubrimiento,” *RHA*, 14 [1942], esp. 32–33, 43*n*, 45*n*) but that it, in conjunction with the Toscanelli map, had a considerable effect on his thinking (G. H. Blanke, *Amerika im englischen Schrifttum des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts* [Bochum, 1962], pp. 14, 16; Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, pp. 64–65). See also D. B. Quinn, *England and the Discovery of America, 1481–1620* (New York, 1974), pp. 106–07.

12. For Bernaldez, see B. Sánchez Alonso, *Historia de la historiografía española* (Madrid, 1941), I, 401. It is uncertain whether Herrera was acquainted with the Journal. Justin Winsor, *Narrative and Critical History of America* (Boston and New York, 1866–89), II, 46 (citing “portions in German in *Das Ausland*, 1867, I”) and H. Vignaud, *Histoire critique de la grande entreprise de Christophe Colomb* (Paris, 1911), I, 18–20, and II, 259–61, assert that he was. Morison, “Texts and Translations,” p. 236, disagrees. Despite some instances of similar phraseology, that could easily be due to affinities of theme and background and to the tenacious idiomatic usages of the period and setting, Oviedo seems to have been unacquainted with the Journal. This adds considerable significance to certain coincidences of attitude to which we shall be referring later.

any sort, save parrots and lizards. A boy told me that he saw a large snake. I saw no sheep or goats or any other animals. . . . if there had been any I could not have failed to see some" (16 October). The insistent repetition contains a note of wonder: though he looks everywhere about him and listens carefully to the crew's stories, the Admiral can find barely a trace of any animal on land.

But the fish are a constant surprise, "fish so *different* from ours, that it is truly wonderful," multicolored and speckled like cockerels, and of such beautiful colors "that everyone marvels at them and takes great delight in them." Myriads of birds warble overhead and flocks of parrots hide the sun, "birds big and small of so many sorts and so different from ours, that one is left marveling" (21 October).<sup>13</sup>

As for the trees, they are startling in their variety and *newness*. "Many trees very *different* from ours . . . and with branches so varied in shape that it is the most astonishing thing in the world, how great a difference there is between one kind and another" (16 October). Their beauty rivals their novelty; they are as green as Andalusia in May, but "the trees are all as *different* from ours as day is from night: and likewise the fruit and the herbs and the stones and everything else." Even if some trees were "similar in nature to others existing in Castile, yet there was a very great difference, and there were so many other sorts of trees that nobody could enumerate them nor compare them with those of Castile" (17 October).<sup>14</sup>

Faced with such exuberance, Columbus is overcome with three separate emotions: enthusiasm for the *newness* of the flora of the Antilles, admiration for its exceptional beauty, and annoyance at being prevented by lack of time and botanical knowledge from appraising its medicinal powers and nutritional value. From the purely cognitive point of view, American nature is different and surprising, "unlike." From the aesthetic-hedonistic viewpoint, it is beautiful and pleasing, euphoric. From the practical point of view, it *must be* very useful and very good, but Columbus does not know. Before all else, he is in a hurry to find gold: "There may be a lot of things of which I know nothing, because I am reluctant to linger here, being anxious to explore numerous islands with a view to finding gold" (15 October).<sup>15</sup> Moreover he cannot even distinguish among these various generic "trees" and candidly confesses and regrets it. "I believe the islands contain many herbs and many trees which will be worth a great amount in Spain for dyes and as medicinal spices, but I do not recognize them and I much regret that" (19 October). "There are trees of a thousand sorts, all with their

13. More "birds of many kinds *different* from those in Spain, except partridges and nightingales that sang, and geese" are mentioned on 6 November.

14. The Admiral mentions his amazement at trees "different from ours" again on 28 October.

15. Again on 27 November he says: "I do not linger in any port because I would like to see as many lands as possible"; and in the letter to D. Luis de Santángel, of 15 February 1493, he states picturesquely that "this voyage was taken at such a dash."

various fruits, and all marvelously scented. It makes me the saddest man in the world not to know them, because I am quite certain that all are valuable” (21 October).<sup>16</sup>

Firmly convinced that he has reached the eastern tip of Asia, Columbus—still under the influence of Toscanelli’s indiscriminating and glowing prophecies<sup>17</sup>—never doubts that all those trees could be identified with precious plants of the Indies and Moluccas if one had the expert knowledge; but he himself does not dare to state as much—and rightly, because one would search vainly for Asiatic prototypes for many American herbs and plants.<sup>18</sup>

But his glance dwells lovingly on every detail of the islands, whose mere existence is sufficient to realize his lifetime’s dream and guarantee his immortal glory, quite apart from the splendor of high offices for himself and his descendants. His pen, at times so dry and energetic, now becomes a brush whose delicate strokes caress the tiny islands, on which fortune would subsequently smile so little. With a sort of lover’s awkwardness he seeks to wax poetic, and produces a flood of warbling nightingales, blossoming springtimes, May meadows, and Andalusian nights.

#### 4. CUBA: DIFFERENCES FROM AND AFFINITIES WITH EUROPE

The wonder and surprise continue in the broad and beautiful island of Cuba. There Columbus runs into an absurd natural prodigy, “dogs that never barked,” and—the antiphrasis renders the extraordinary contrast very well—“tame wild birds” in the natives’ houses, and even “large snails, but tasteless, and *not like those of Spain*” (29 October).<sup>19</sup> A whole fauna completely different from Europe’s. The flora too is distinctive: there is much cotton, there are “mames,” which “are like carrots, and taste like chestnuts” (but which are, according to Las Casas, actually potatoes) and green beans and kidney beans “*very different from ours.*”

As the days pass, however, the eye becomes accustomed, nature becomes more familiar, and the first impression of violent contrast with the animals and plants of Europe gives way to a vague but significant awareness of the affinities and similarities. The sailors find “an animal that looked like a badger” and catch a fish, among many others, “which looked just like a pig” (16 November). The Admiral notices “large mice . . . and huge crabs,” and in the sky he sees lots of birds and detects a heady scent of spices (17 November). Instead of the exotic

16. Columbus mentions similar regrets on 23 October.

17. C. De Lollis, *Colombo nella leggenda e nella storia* (Lanciano, 1931), pp. 110–11.

18. Thus Humboldt is exaggerating when he stresses Columbus’s “naive credulity” in rediscovering “in the New World everything his memory can recall of East Asia” (*Examen critique*, IV, 245n). The feature that best supports Humboldt’s thesis is Columbus’s insistence on recognizing all sorts of spices in the Caribbean islands.

19. More “huge snails” were found on 16 November, and on the same day pearl-bearing oysters were brought up, though without pearls in them.

and ill-defined trees, he recognizes “oaks and strawberry trees” and a multitude of noble pines straight as spindles, which he can already see sawn up into planks for caravels or raised as masts “for the largest ships in Spain.” The forest becomes a fleet. The virgin timber of the American woods is already raw material, merchandise for the mother country, a source of incalculable riches and naval might. The sovereigns will be able to “build as many vessels as might be wished there” (25 November).<sup>20</sup> Two days later, the vision takes more concrete and specific shape: the king and queen will very easily be able to subjugate the new islands, convert the inhabitants, and build cities and fortresses there; and to ensure their lasting dominion over the islands they would be well advised not to allow “any foreigner, except Catholic Christians, to trade or set foot here” (27 November). The foreigner Columbus had only set foot in America six weeks earlier and he was already jealous—in Spain’s interest—of any other “immigrant.” The barely discovered paradise is immediately annexed in spirit to the crown of Castile.<sup>21</sup>

Columbus’s attitude to nature, which, as we have seen, is strictly subordinated to his ambitions and his political dream, is now about to be reversed. Nature in the West Indies is no longer radically different from Spain’s. It is now similar, now almost identical, and more beautiful.<sup>22</sup>

##### 5. HAITI: THE “SPANISH” ISLAND

By the time the source of the precious metal is eventually located in Haiti—the Admiral having abandoned Cuba after a fruitless quest for the mines—the change is finally complete. Haiti is the *isla Española*, the “Spanish Island.”<sup>23</sup> It is Spain, it belongs to Spain and resembles Spain in every way. There is no further need to glorify the newness of the plants and animals: the nuggets and the gold-bearing sands are as beautiful a novelty as one could wish. It now becomes preferable to depict the island as a welcoming and familiar dwelling-place, where acclimatization is no problem and where one can live as in the mother country. Columbus reaches the coast of Haiti on 5 December, and on 6 December he immediately notes that the trees are smaller than in the other islands (less wild

20. This *topos*—trees being turned into ships—is little more than a metaphor. There are instances of ships being transformed into nymphs in Virgil (*Aeneid*, IX, 77ff) and Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, XIV, 530ff). In Ariosto (*Orlando Furioso*, XXXIX, 26–28) we have the miracle of “branches” cast into the water “all of a sudden becoming ships.” And need one mention the “firs” driven into the sea by Jason? (V. Monti, *Al signor di Montgolfier*). See also the letter from John Day to Columbus (1497–98) on Cabot’s expedition: “they found big trees from which masts of ships are made” (Samuel Eliot Morison, *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages* [New York, 1971], p. 207; cf. *ibid.*, p. 215).

21. Such promptitude had already struck Humboldt, *Examen critique*, III, 259–60.

22. The climate is so healthy that not a single member of the expedition suffered so much as a headache or had to spend a day in bed, save one old man, who suffered from “the stone”—but this was an infirmity “that had afflicted him all his life,” for which the local climate cannot be blamed, Columbus implies, going on to add triumphantly, “and he straightaway got better within two days” (27 November 1492: was the Cuban climate really so good for the kidneys?).

23. Andrés Bernaldez was to repeat that Haiti was to the other islands as gold was to silver. On the later but no less fervent enthusiasm of Alonso de Zuazo (1518) see Elliott, *op. cit.*, p. 20.



exuberance) “and many of them are similar in nature to those in Spain, such as holm-oaks and strawberry trees and others, and this is also true of the plants.” He sails further along the coast and confirms his finding “that the whole of that land is very hilly, but has no large trees, only holm-oaks and strawberry trees, *just like the land of Castile*” (7 December). He sees crops “like barley” growing in the fields and broad valleys and countryside and very high mountains, “all resembling Castile.” He tries fishing with nets, “and before he reached the shore a skate, *like those of Spain*, jumped right into the boat. Up until then he had seen no fish which resembled those of Castile.” The passage goes on and concludes with a sort of hymn of joy exulting in the refrain “Castile”. “The sailors went fishing and caught some more skate, and sole and other fish *like those of Castile*. He went a little way into that country, which is all cultivated, and heard a nightingale sing, and other birds *like those of Castile*. . . . He found myrtle and other trees and plants *like those of Castile*, and the land and the mountains resemble Castile too” (7 December). Even the rain and the cold are “*like October in Castile*”; and near the port of San Nicolas there are two very beautiful plateaux “almost *resembling the lands of Castile*, and indeed these are superior, wherefore he named this island Hispaniola, the Spanish Island” (9 December).

And so it goes on. Once the enthusiasm of a headstrong visionary like Columbus is aroused the rhapsodies fall thick and fast, unrestrained by any formula, and the equation, already bold enough, becomes a mere stepping-stone to hyperbole. Haiti is like Castile? No, Haiti is better than Castile. Its waters contain fish like those of Spain (11 and 13 December) and mastic like that which makes Chios rich—although the Haitian mastic stubbornly refuses to set, which the sailors ascribe to the inopportune season or the waters (10 and 11 December)—and “young women as fair of skin as any that could be found in Spain.” But there are also lands of such beauty “that the fairest and best lands in Castile could not compare with these,”<sup>24</sup> and orchards groaning with fruit, rich meadows and broad good roads, nocturnal melodies of nightingales, fragrant breezes and choruses of crickets and frogs and sweet-smelling spices and cotton; and the as yet

24. And a few days later: “In all Castile there is no land that can stand comparison with it for beauty and goodness. All this island and the island of Tortuga are as cultivated as the plain of Cordova” (16 December). There are further comparisons, of climate and vegetation, on 19 and 21 December. The crews are equally enthusiastic: “All affirmed that it was quite impossible for any other region to be more beautiful” (F. Columbus, *Vita di Cristoforo Colombo*, pp. 91–92).

Filson Young (*Christopher Columbus and the New World of His Discovery* [London, 1911], cited by Iglesia, *El hombre Colón*, p. 32), noted that “Columbus . . . has but two methods of comparison: either a thing is like Spain, or it is not like Spain,” but he did not explore the far-reaching implications of those conventional abbreviations. In fact he considers them puerile defects and pictures Columbus, the shrewd and wary Genoese, like Alice in Wonderland, “wandering, still a child at heart, in the wonders of the enchanted world to which he had come” (cited in *El hombre Colón*, p. 33). Enrique Rioja goes too far the other way, extolling the accuracy, exactitude, perspicacity, and clarity of Columbus’s observations of nature, noting however that he is led by his “preconceived notion that the same species exist here as in Spain” to apply “names known and currently used in the peninsula to species that were previously totally unknown,” thus committing some “obvious errors” (“Apostillas de un naturalista a la relación del primer viaje del Almirante de la Mar Océana,” *CA*, 6 [1945], 137–48, esp. p. 144).

unfound gold will be found: "They found no gold but it is not surprising that it was not found in such a short time" (13 December).<sup>25</sup>

The potatoes there are as thick as a man's leg, and the trees "so heavily leaved that their foliage is no longer green, but a verdant dark color." The fields are just waiting to be sown with corn, the pastures to be grazed by any sort of cattle and then "everything in the world that man could desire" will flourish in these gardens, fields, and pastures (16 December). Even the natives are more Spanish than the Spanish, in the Admiral's eyes, and he insists that they be treated absolutely fairly, because "he considers them already Christians and subjects of the sovereigns of Castile, *more than the peoples of Castile*" (21 December). They are gentle and softly spoken and always laugh when they speak (25 December), "not like the others who seem to be threatening when they speak"; and they give away gold and parrots and cotton cloth without a second thought.

When the *Santa Maria* goes aground they help to salvage the cargo and "not a leather thong or a plank or a nail was missing"—something which would not have happened "anywhere in Castile"—and indeed they do their best to console the Admiral, offering him everything they have (25 and 26 December). True, they daub their bodies black, red, and other colors, but the Admiral learns that "they do this to protect themselves in some degree against the sun" (24 December and see also 13 January 1493—a first attempt to provide a rationalistic explanation of the rites and customs of the primitives and the first hint of the savages' delicate constitution, which would later be one of Las Casas's most frequent arguments). In short, there is no comparison with Cuba and the Cubans: "There is as great a difference between them and between that island and this in everything, as there is between night and day" (24 December).<sup>26</sup> Gold itself finally arrives in abundance, indeed is "infinite." The Admiral, smothering his exaltation with impatience, was already on 27 December "thinking to make haste for the return to Castile with all possible dispatch."

25. Humboldt points out that Columbus lays greater emphasis on the beauty of nature than on precious metals, which would have increased the importance of the lands discovered, and draws the conclusion that the Admiral was first and foremost a lover of the beauties of nature (cf. Fernando Columbus's comment on "the Admiral being enamored of its [Cuba's] beauty," *Vita de Cristoforo Colombo*, p. 83) and sentimentally enthusiastic about the landscape (*Examen critique*, III, 230n). R. Bacchelli, in a more balanced and cautious judgment, sees Columbus as "a refined and delicate observer and lover of the beauties of nature," etc. ("L' Ammiraglio dell' Oceano," in *Nel fiume della storia* [Milan, 1945], p. 26). Columbus is described as a "landscape painter" by P. Henriquez Ureña in his article "Paisajes y retratos," *La Nacion* (Buenos Aires), 31 May 1936. "Columbus was a poet, a great poet of nature," according to C. Pereyra, *Historia de la América española* (Madrid, 1920), I, 19, 151. Olschki, "What Columbus Saw," pp. 634–40ff, stresses somewhat more accurately that Columbus is much more interested in the natives than in physical nature and nautical or geographical questions. On the nightingale "hallucination," see Olschki, *Storia letteraria delle scoperte geografiche* (Florence, 1937), pp. 11–21.

26. The difference between Cuba and Hispaniola ("Hispaniola is a marvel") is also underlined in the two letters to D. Luis de Santángel (15 February 1493) and Rafael Sánchez (4 March 1493), in which Columbus summarizes his report (see especially *Relaciones y cartas*, pp. 187, 198). In these letters he repeats some of the comments we have noted, but in the absence of any strict chronological order they fail to show how his wonderment developed and grew with each passing day.

## 6. THE RETURN: HALLUCINATIONS AND MYSTICISM

The return journey and the subsequent expeditions, from which nothing has survived in the way of original reports barring a few letters, produce no new observations in the field of science or natural philosophy. From the ship they see the usual frigate birds and petrels and in the sea tuna fish, a shark, and sargasso, almost always mentioned at the end of the daily observations, as a normal occurrence. In the so-called *lettera rarissima* of 7 July 1503, relating to the fourth voyage, Columbus mentions numerous species of animals seen on the mainland, many “and very different from ours”: two fierce “pigs,” a wild beast “that resembles a marsh cat, except that it is much bigger and has a face like a man’s,” big woolly chickens, “lions, stags, roebuck,” and so forth.<sup>27</sup> But there is no recurrence of that lucid balance between dream and greed, that alternation of enquiry and exploitation which had given free reign to the Admiral’s contemplative spirit and tender curiosity when he visited the first islands.

The reality of gold, the alchemist’s image of the sun,<sup>28</sup> steals the scene, its dazzling glow overshadowing the charming landscape, the leafy plants, the meek natives. Legend and greed combine to prevent the study of nature. The temperature of the mental climate rises and rapidly approaches a state of delirium. In Jamaica gold is gathered in lumps as big as beans, not like in Haiti where there were only grains as big as seeds of corn. . . . In the province of Avan there are men born with tails. Another island to the east is populated solely by women, the unfailing Amazons (6 and 13 January). . . . Three mermaids rise up out of the ocean, “clear out of the sea,” but they are not so beautiful as they are painted, as “somehow [the reader is left to imagine how] their faces looked like men’s.” Creatures from the ancient myths invade the newly discovered lands and seas. Reality is already being transformed into a confused, hallucinatory vision. And the Admiral is impatient, tremendously impatient, to return and tell his sovereigns and the world—in the formula of exaggerated pride that was later to prove modest—that “he had found what he was looking for” (9 January 1493).<sup>29</sup>

The storm makes him repent of this excess of conceit. He fears that his immense longing to bring back such great news is itself a sin and that God will

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 375–76. Slightly exaggerated, but elegant as always, are the comments of Alfonso Reyes on Columbus’s visions and hallucinations (“El presagio de América,” pp. 62–64). De Lollis underlines Columbus’s concern with exalting his enterprise, but concludes that “his verbosity is so great [in the journal, albeit *summarized* by Las Casas!] and so little imprinted with the reality of the things that passed before his eyes as to render it impossible for the Catholic Kings then or the reader of today to gain even an approximate idea of what Columbus was describing and what impression it made on him” (op. cit., p. 109).

28. Michel Mollat, “Soleil et navigation au temps des découvertes,” in *Le soleil à la Renaissance* (Brussels, 1965), p. 93.

29. His wild and fanciful hope of liberating the Holy Sepulcher with the gold from the Indies also eventually found partial and unexpected fulfilment. The American metals strengthened Spain’s empire and thus weakened the Muslims’ pride and the expansion of Islam (Elliott, op. cit., p. 88).

punish him, not allowing him to reach Europe: "Any little gnat could interrupt and prevent it." He makes vows of pilgrimages and candles and masses and fasts, orders the crew to do the same, and promises a sailor that he will personally pay his expenses when he makes the pious pilgrimage to the Holy Virgin of Loreto (14 February 1493 and 3 March 1493). He is no longer the man who claimed (22 December 1492) that he did not like to weigh anchor on a Sunday "solely out of piety and not on account of any superstition." Meanwhile, he lets the sailors believe that it is "some act of devotion," that is, some sort of spell, when he has a barrel thrown into the sea with an account of his expedition sealed inside (14 February 1493). The mystical streak in his complex character comes to the fore, pompous and overweening.<sup>30</sup> His system for measuring the ship's speed by counting his heartbeats<sup>31</sup> takes on an almost symbolic trueness. The ship's course follows the throbbing pulse of his trembling organism. Its speed through the salt waters of the ocean matches the even tempo of the pulses of blood pumped into his arteries by the life-giving muscle. The "heart" prevails over the "head." And already the religious solemnity of his adoration of nature begins to degenerate into the "melancholic and chimerical exaltation" of his later years.<sup>32</sup>

By the time of the second voyage the candor and surprise of that initial revelation are in conflict with his stubborn determination to prove a desperate geographical thesis: that the Antilles are identical with the extreme part of Asia. The early enthusiasm is stifled by ridiculous efforts to patch up his shattered dream—the dream dissolved by an irrepressible and immense reality—with the aid of legal documents and sworn statements, and finally submerged by a regurgitation of biblical memories and Christian mythologies, casting over the land of a new continent the childishly inadequate image of the ancient Garden of Eden.

30. For a possible justification of Columbus's mystical enthusiasm, to be found in the "shift" from geographical to metaphysical "next world," cf. the comment by M. Mahn-Lot: "Seen from the standpoint of his contemporaries, the rapture of a person like Columbus, self-styled revealer of the 'new earth and the new heavens' foretold by Isaiah and then by the Apocalypse, no longer seems so extraordinary" (review, in *Annales*, 19, no. 6 [Nov.–Dec. 1964], of W. G. L. Randles's "Le nouveau monde, l'autre monde et la pluralité des mondes," in *Actas do Congresso Internacional de História dos Descobrimentos* [Lisbon, 1961]). On American nature as seen by Columbus, see also the book by the photographer Bradley Smith (*Columbus in the New World* [New York, 1962]), who photographed the scenery and the peoples of the four voyages.

31. Frederick J. Pohl, *Amerigo Vespucci, Pilot Major* (New York, 1944), p. 62.

32. Humboldt, *Cosmos*, II, 51. Already in the closing lines of the *Journal*, at once so proud and so humble, Columbus feels himself an instrument of Divine Providence; everyone said his enterprise "was a joke," but he trusts in God "that it will be the greatest honor of Christianity." (The word "joke" crops up several more times in his writings, for example in the letter of 7 July 1503, *Relaciones y Cartas*, p. 380, to describe how his project was viewed.) Terán finds Columbus "Italian," i.e., clearheaded and practical *before* the discovery, "Spanish," i.e., mystical and inspired, *after* the discovery (*La nascita dell'America spagnola* [Bari, 1931], pp. 18–19). But Jos, "La génesis colombina," p. 24, is forced to the conclusion "that already on [Columbus's] first voyage his brain had ceased functioning normally." On his religiosity and mysticism, see also Iglesia, *El hombre Colón*, p. 40f, and Pedro de Leturia, "Ideales político-religiosos de Colón en su carta institucional del mayorazgo," *RI*, 11 (1951), 679–704.