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## **TZVETAN TODOROV**

# **THE CONQUEST OF AMERICA**

## **THE QUESTION OF THE OTHER**

Translated from the French by Richard Howard

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## *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 Indi-

ans 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 he 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 reards 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 mante ri 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 terres-

trial 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?