

The Unacceptable Otherness

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When the Spaniards arrived in Mexico they were astonished and stupefied by the strangeness of this new world, in which beauty and horror merged. It was not by accident that Hernán Cortés spoke of "its grandeur, the strange and marvelous things of this land," and resigned himself to the impossibility of adequately describing these things: "Even badly expressed, I know very well that they will be so amazing that they will not be believed, because even those of us who have seen these things with our own eyes are unable to comprehend them."¹ Travelling the land, Bernal Díaz del Castillo was overwhelmed as he beheld an "enchanted" land that reminded him of Amadís de Gaul. "Some of us asked ourselves whether what we were seeing was a dream."² Everything was strange and "never seen before." Both men praised the great cities, such as Tlaxcala, "so grand and deserving of such admiration that even though much of what I could say about it must be left unsaid, what little I will say is almost incredible . . ."³; or Tenochtitlán, "the most beautiful thing in the world," with its structures and gardens "so marvelous, that it seemed to me almost impossible to describe their perfection and grandeur."⁴ The native works of gold and silver, and of stone and feathers, seemed so extraordinary to the Spaniards "that it is simply impossible to understand how these objects, and with what instruments, were made so perfect."⁵ Cortés as much as Bernal Díaz praised the capabilities of the Indians; their wisdom in peace, their

*A French version of this text was presented in the colloquium "Europe-Amérique: regards réciproques," organized by the Universities of Geneva and Bourgogne, which took place in Geneva in December 1991.

1. Hernan Cortés, *Cartas de relación de la conquista de América* (Letters relating to the conquest of America), ed. Nueva España, Mexico, vol. 2, p. 198.

2. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (The True Story of the Conquest of New Spain), Porrúa, Mexico, vol. 2, p. 87.

3. Cortés, vol. 2, p. 156.

4. Cortés, vol. 2, p. 207.

5. Cortés, vol. 2, p. 206.

courage in war. But most amazing of all was their religion. Its external aspects provoked horror and repugnance: the menacing ugliness of their "idols," their bloody sacrifices, and the anthropophagy – according to the Spaniards, one could imagine nothing more "horrible and abominable."⁶ Despite all this, the Spaniards could not help but marvel at their religious zeal, their devotion and diligence: "If they truly serve God with such faith, fervor, and diligence, they must be able to work many miracles."⁷ Emerging from the ocean like a mirage or a dream, the new world was at once incomprehensible and fascinating, refined and abominable, beautiful and terrible. To the eyes of Western man, it was foreign, strangeness itself, the quintessential "other."

Only one generation after the arrival of Cortés, nothing but ruins was left of this world whose grandeur had prompted both admiration and horror. Its majestic cities were razed; its gardens became deserts; the books that contained its wisdom were burned; its institutions and its laws, the beauty of its dances, the splendor of its rituals were erased forever. The zealous priests, the noble warriors, the keepers of "the red ink and the black ink" (with which they painted their codices), the goldsmiths, the builders of the temples – the entire elite of the Aztec civilization had been annihilated. And upon the headless body of its high culture, the ancient gods stood in silence.

How was this possible? Why did the conquistadors, despite their fascination for this civilization, feel compelled to destroy it? Why was this elevated and complex culture incapable of defending itself against foreign invaders from the West? Perhaps the answer lies in their foreignness itself. Because if the Aztec world represented the quintessential other for the Spaniards, the same was true for the Indians; to the Indians, these powerful and barbarous men belonged to a different order of time and space. Perhaps there exist cultures that simply cannot accept the presence of the other.

The Aztec civilization was profoundly religious. Time and space themselves were determined in terms of the sacred; the sacred pervaded their institutions, their daily lives, their artistic creations, and formed the basis of all their beliefs. But the sacred was not distant and remote. It was present, at hand; one could feel it, smell it, touch it, like an organic material. This connection with the divine, and the

6. Cortés, vol. 1, p. 123.

7. Cortés, vol. 1, p. 124.

means of communication with it, were the liquid from which all life flows: blood. The fifth sun, the "sun of movement," which rules the era in which we live, was born of the sacrifice of the gods; it was divine blood that gave it the strength to begin its orbit. The people who now inhabit the earth were born of a bony mass over which the god Quetzalcóatl, in order to give them life, spilled the blood of his sexual organ. From that time on, cosmic motion has been nourished on the precious liquid of men. Puncturing their ears and their sex, men offer their blood to the earth, to the four winds and the sun, thus participating in the force that powers the universe. Divine order imposes upon them one destiny: sacrifice. Only the sap of an open heart allows life to continue; without it, the sun would cease to orbit. Everything dies and is reborn by means of sacrifice. In this way man repeats the act of origin and participates in the continuous creation of the universe. The same substance flows throughout the entire world, connecting all things. By means of blood men enter into communion with the sacred, unite with it and become divine. The sacrificed one becomes a god. His body can then be consumed in a ritual ceremony in which the divine meat of the sacrificed is ingested, forming part of the body of other men. What the horrified Spaniards perceived as an act of repulsive anthropophagy was part of the Aztec communion with their god, an act of theophany. At other times, the priests would wrap their bodies in the skin of a god, that is, in the skin of someone sacrificed to the god Xipe Totec. The sacred is close at hand; one can touch it, feel it, swallow it. It is made of the same substance as we humans are made of. The sacred has a carnal aspect.⁸

The gods are a tangible presence in all things: in trees, rivers, mountains, time and space, and in the daily activities of men. Everything is theophany. Although Ometéotl, the dual divinity, the creator, resides in the last heaven, her original strength manifests itself in a multitude of gods. The gods cover heaven and earth.

For the Aztecs, the world was not an object subject to transformation according to human aims. On the contrary, man was at the service of the forces in which he participates. His goals were indicated to him by the cosmic order. Certainly, man had "to be worthy" of god. But this worthiness was not the result of his works, nor of faith. He was considered worthy only by accepting his destiny: com-

8. The expression comes from J. M. G. Le Clézio, *Le rêve mexicain* (The Mexican Dream), Gallimard, Paris, 1988.

muning with the sacred by means of sacrifice.⁹ The cosmic order would not be what it is without the gifts of man, and man's existence would lack sense if he were separated from this order. The actions of man do not transform the world; they are a part of its sacred respiration.

Unlike the notion of the transcendent God in the monotheistic societies of the Bible, the Aztecs lived the sacred as immanent. For them, there was no deep ontological difference between divine forces and those that animate man. God is near us, among us, in us. It was this proximity of the sacred that terrified the Spaniards and made the indigenous religion unbearable for them.

The Catholic religion contains an element of carnality. God made himself into a man, and he communicated in one moment directly with other men; more importantly, by his bloody sacrifice, he "became worthy" for all. From that time on, Catholics have ingested, during Mass, the flesh and the blood of the sacrificed one. But the nucleus of flesh is reduced to one individual, Jesus Christ, and to a single moment in linear time. The body and the blood of Jesus Christ are disguised in the form of substances that correspond to others for which they substitute. Also, the idea of a unique transcendent God, separated infinitely from his creatures – a concept as prevalent in Judaism as it is in neoplatonic theory – caused a spiritual concept to triumph over the carnal nucleus. The polytheistic Romans were not completely off base when they interpreted Christianity as a veiled form of atheism, since the divinity has been removed from the facts of the world. The desacralization of nature and of society began with transcendental monotheism. The alienation of the sacred was accentuated in the Renaissance. Nature began to be seen not as the impression and sign of divinity, but as a manipulable object, destined to be dominated and molded by man. Society and history began to be presented as the result of the free will and actions of men.

The Aztec religion made the Spaniards uncomfortable because of the proximity that was accorded the divine. Where the Aztecs saw communion, the Spaniards could see only bestiality; where the Aztecs saw harmony with the cosmic order, the Spaniards could see only superstition. At the same time, however, this religiosity reminded the Spaniards of the carnal element of Christianity. It was

9. Miguel León Portilla, "Mesoamerica in 1492 and on the Eve of 1992," 1992 Lecture Series, University of Maryland, Department of Spanish and Portuguese, 1988, p. 9.

as if the incarnation of the son of God was amplified to a cosmic level, as if it could be realized in all people and in all things. Thus Aztec religion appeared as a monstrous perversion of Christian religion. The writings of the missionaries abounded with the idea that the indigenous religion undercut and mocked the Christian religion, like a monkey imitating human gestures. It was thus viewed as a kind of antagonistic inversion of true religion.

The indigenous world also appeared opposed to the Western world in the way it conceived of time and history. In native American civilizations, time was perceived as cyclical; the world was periodically destroyed and reborn. According to the Mexicas idea, the universe had passed through five "suns." At the end of each sun, the universe was annihilated; there was a return to chaos before a new order and movement was received from the gods. Our sun was the fifth and would end like its predecessors. According to this conception, all movement is threatened by death, heading inexorably toward its end; it ceases to be in order to be reborn in a new cycle, in a different order. As long as men make themselves worthy, the "sun of movement" follows its course; but at any moment it can return to the immobility of original chaos. Every fifty-two years it renews itself. Having completed this interval, it begins a new "century." But no one can be completely sure that it will happen this way.

According to Aztec thought, life on earth exists pending its final destruction. The end of the world can occur at the end of any cycle of time. Perhaps no civilization has lived with a more profound consciousness of the possibility of its end; in no other has life been presented as having a character so impermanent and insecure. Life is fleeting and constantly threatened with extinction in the perpetual renewal of time. Unstable, and in continuous danger of death, its destiny to be erased forever at any moment, how is it possible, then, not to feel as if life were made of the evanescent material of dreams? The Aztecs thought of the world as perpetual movement or an unstable equilibrium, in which the principles of life and death were counterposed. Life could not be thought of without death, nor could one think of creation without destruction. Everything that is will end, and everything that perishes will be renewed. A large part of Náhuatl poetry is composed of a long and sensual melancholy song to the fleeting nature of life, to the vanity of man's brief stay upon the earth, and to life's flashing beauty.

Transitory, destined to final destruction, all earthly power has been granted as a loan. No governments are permanent. The *tlatoani*

who ruled the Aztec empire received his mandate from the god Quetzalcóatl and governed in his name. He was the representative of the god, "whom [the god] uses like a flute, through whom he speaks, and with whose ears he hears."¹⁰ This god can reclaim his power at any turning point in time.

The invading civilization's conception of the world is opposed to the indigenous conception. The conquistadors already embodied the attitude of modern man, with his individualism and eagerness for domination. For them, nature and history were a stage on which the individual was compelled to exercise his transformative action; both nature and history were seen as instruments, means for the ends conceived by man. Man creates a "second nature" over nature, in his image and likeness; against the blind forces of "fortune" that rule history, man determines its course by his daring. The action of individuals is imposed on nature and on history. This last is a feat, the victory of individual liberty and capacity over the obstacles that oppose him. The goals of the Aztec civilization were different: the harmony of life with cosmic forces and historical rhythms, the integration of the individual into the community and the universal order. Spain was a culture of domination; the Aztec culture was one of harmony.

This opposition can be seen in their different conceptions of violence. Both cultures manifested terrible cruelty. The Renaissance Spanish culture had a divided attitude toward violence. One of its faces, that of the religious orders, extolled and practiced mercy and Christian charity to the point of self-abnegation; the other face, that of the conquistadors and functionaries, in contrast, carried out the most brutal violence against the Indians. Among the Aztecs, barbaric and cruel violence was part of daily life: acts of self-mortification were common, human bloodbaths were carried out in order to offer living hearts to the gods, and death was a constant presence in the bosom of life. However, the meaning of this cruelty was completely different between the two worlds. Among the Aztecs, cruelty was part of a ritual, a deflected and different form of prayer, in which the individual submitted to divine order in order to gain his redemption. This ritual was not for the benefit of the person who exercised the violence, but, on the contrary, it sought to eliminate the covetousness of the individual self, enabling the person to enter into communion with the totality of the sacred. In the case of the

10. Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (A general history of the things of New Spain), ed. Nueva España, Mexico, vol. 1, p. 494.

conquistadors, by contrast, violence was done in order to gain domination over the other; its extreme cruelty affirmed the power of the conquerors and the annihilation of the conquered. In the indigenous culture, cruelty was born of an act of offering, from a communion with a superior order; in the West it was the result of the affirmation of the self as dominant and the reduction of the other to a mere instrument.

Equally opposed are the two civilizations' vision of history. The Spaniards had a linear concept of time, inherent in the Judeo-Christian conception of human fate. History is viewed here as a series of connected, unrepeatable events, whose meaning is a function of the ultimate end toward which they tend. In the supernatural order, the final stage is the preaching of the gospel to all the nations and the universal victory of the Church of Christ; in the temporal, it is the realization of the global empire of the Catholic king. The two ends complement each other, as the second is the instrument of the first. This final stage can last for a long time, and at its end will come the apparition of the Lord, the Parousia. But even though it is directed toward a determined end by divine economy, human history is nevertheless profane, constituted by the actions of men who struggle to transform society in accordance with their goals. Some Franciscan friars incorporated the expectation of the end of history into their daily lives, but for the majority of Spaniards the conquest of America derived its meaning from a more immediate goal: the triumph of Christianity among the heathens. All means were legitimate in the realization of this goal. The indigenous American civilizations were seen exclusively in this light, and it was this goal that gave meaning to the encounter. The discovery of so many lost "souls" was perceived as an invitation to proselytize as well as a promise of the future universal dominion of the Catholic king. The Indians were present to fulfill an end foreign to them; they were to be proof of the universal applicability of the gospel and a guarantee of the universal domination of Catholic power.

The rudiments of profane history already existed in the indigenous culture, in the form of a chronicle of the succession of governments, wars, conquests, and migrations. Most of these narrations mix real and mythical events, although the closer we come to the time of the Spanish conquest the more the narratives are composed of real facts of a secular nature. However, true secular historiography had not yet replaced mythical history. In mythical history, the meaning of an event is determined by its place within a structure

corresponding to a sacred order. Historical facts incarnate this pre-determined structure that myths reveal; it is up to men to decipher them. Any event can be understood when conceived as a particular instance of a mythical structure that gives the event its overall meaning. To understand a historical event requires identifying its place within its myth of origin.¹¹ For the modern Westerner, the meaning of a historical event is to be found in its place within a series of facts that lead to the accomplishment of a conscious goal; for the Aztec, the meaning of a historical event is to be found in the actualization of a narrative structure (myth) derived from the cosmic order. For the one, man projects and makes his own history; it is feat, exploit, prowess. For the other, history embodies an order into which man must integrate himself; history is destiny.

All cultures incorporate certain fundamental beliefs that underpin all other beliefs and that cannot be called into question without undermining the overall image that the culture has of its world. These include ontological structures, which decide what orders of reality reason can admit the existence of; and epistemological structures, which allow for the justification of the truth-value of any particular statement. Both imply judgments regarding the essential principles charged with giving meaning to the situation of man in the world. These basic beliefs, imprecise and occasionally unconscious, manifest themselves in many kinds of attitudes and behaviors. These beliefs can be expressed in concepts, but they also can be expressed in images and in shared sentiments. They constitute the nucleus of the "representation" that given a culture forms of its world and of humanity, the way in which it frames its beliefs and attitudes. To comprehend a new fact, a culture must be able to frame it in this way, integrating it into its representation of the world. Thus, the encounter between the West and the indigenous American civilizations provides one of the best examples of the enormous difficulty that a culture has in reworking its framework of basic beliefs. Confronted by extreme otherness, each of the two civilizations tried to understand the other from its own cultural framework, integrating it into its own image of the world. But this attempt proved futile. The other culture remained foreign, and its otherness became unacceptable.

11. See Enrique Florescano, *Memoria mexicana* (Mexican Memory), J. Mortiz, Mexico, 1987.

Let us first examine how the Aztecs tried to understand the invaders. The arrival of the foreigners was an extraordinary occurrence that seemed to disrupt the established order. The invaders were different from anything known by the Indians, and their actions seemed unpredictable. The first descriptions of the invaders by indigenous people presented them as strange beings from another world: their bodies were covered with hair, they were strangely dressed, they rode mysterious animals similar to deer, and they lived in tall towers that moved on the sea. The surprise of the Aztecs was even greater when they saw them up close; they listened to a strange discourse about a faraway land and an unknown god; they listened to the clanging of their iron pipes and the roars of their beasts. They came from the other side of the immense sea, where the sun is born; perhaps they were, then, from the world of the gods – which would not contradict their human behavior, because according to the categories of the Aztecs, the gods were close to men and the distinction between the two was fluid. There was, apart from this, an ancient myth that could be applied to the concrete fact of their arrival. A long time before, a high priest and the god Quetzalcóatl departed for the East; before crossing the ocean, Quetzalcóatl announced that he would return some day to take possession of his kingdom. From that time on, the Mexican *tlatoni* had governed in his name. Moctezuma's words upon receiving Cortés illustrate that, to understand what was happening, he was obliged to have recourse to this myth. Moctezuma thought that Cortés might be Quetzalcóatl, or an envoy of his, and Moctezuma invited him into the palace. In order to understand the meaning of this historical novelty, it was necessary to contextualize it within the known order. By seeing the encounter as a meaningful occurrence within the structure of a myth, it ceased to be incomprehensible and arbitrary. It also ceased to be a strictly singular or unrepeatable event, but became, rather, an element in an ordered narrative, connected with others in the cycle of time – an event that had been predetermined long before by this mythical order. Many terrifying omens presaged the arrival of the strangers. All were ominous, heralding the imminent end of an era. By being presaged, the event could take its place in a predetermined order and was no longer absurd. It is possible that the announcements of the arrival of the strangers and of the imminence of the destruction of Aztec civilization were invented after the fact. But this would show precisely that in order to avoid the incomprehensible, the Aztecs had to incorporate it into

a narrative structure in which this event could be predicted.¹²

But their conception of the strangers underwent a change. Quite soon the strangers showed themselves to be greedy for gold, to be cruel and mendacious. Above all, the foreigners proved to be mortals, just like themselves. The strange character of the strangers could no longer be interpreted as divine; they were merely greedy men. Far from having come to serve the gods, as Quetzalcóatl would have done, they wanted to destroy them. Once the Aztecs understood this, perplexity and anguish followed: if these strange beings had not been sent by god, they could be nothing more than an unknown and evil power seeking to destroy the Aztec world. Might this then, then, be the beginning of the end of this temporal cycle, as had been predicted? The otherness could not be integrated into the known cosmic order, because it came from outside this temporal cycle; it did not belong perhaps to this "sun" but came from far off, perhaps to end this cycle. After all, the Aztecs had anticipated final destruction. And now it was here. The behavior of the strangers confirmed this premonition of the end of the world: the invaders' thirst for destruction, their obsession with humiliating the gods, their refusal to share our world; above all it was the silence of the divinity in the face of this sacrilege that proved it. The Aztecs attempted to understand the other from within their own cultural framework; they tried to welcome the other into their world, but the other turned out to be a force that would destroy their world. All that was left for the Aztecs was to accept their fate with dignity.

The Spanish reaction was analogous, but from the opposite direction. The strange culture had to be understood within categories familiar to Western Christian civilization, and it had to take its appropriate place in the universal economy. But the indigenous culture presented a dimension that could neither be integrated into these categories nor add anything to the overall plan. Imbued with an immanent religiosity, the indigenous culture indeed appeared to negate the Western "representation" of the world, to invert its image. And in the Christian world the symbol of negation had a name: Satan. It is Satan who enjoys imitating the divine in order to deceive us. The only way to understand otherness within this cultural framework was to conceive of it as purely negative, that is, as demonic. It was from this line of thought that the interpretation of

12. See Tzvetan Todorov, *La découverte de l'Amérique* (The Discovery of America), Seuil, Paris, 1983.

the indigenous religion as Satanic was born. The Indians, who believed that they were worshipping the divine, were, according to Spanish reality, in fact paying homage to the devil. Thanks to the Scriptures, Western man was able to uncover the deceit. Once the other was categorized as Satanic, only two choices were possible: the other had either to renounce his sacred world or be destroyed.

Of course, many missionaries saw the Indians as brothers to be saved. They protected the Indians from the despoilers, tried to inculcate in them the highest Christian values; on occasion, they even attempted – as in the case of Vasco de Quiroga or of Sahagún – to create new forms of community adapted to their mentality and customs. Still more, some missionaries tried to save the memory of the Indian culture, to convey the image of their earlier grandeur to future generations. This was the other face of the Conquest. But they could not allow the indigenous culture to live, because within it lurked a dimension that was unacceptable to the missionaries: the “other” religion. Thus, they devoted themselves zealously to destroying the Aztec gods, prohibiting their dances and rituals, burning their sacred books. And the Aztec culture could not survive the death of its gods, because communion with them was the essence of their culture.

In order to have understood the other, each culture would have had to overcome its own framework of basic beliefs and then transform it. This certainly was within the capacity of the Aztec culture. After all, the initial attitude of the Aztecs was to invite the other to occupy a privileged place in their own world. The Christian god could have been integrated into the Aztec belief in the universality of the sacred; in addition, the Christian religion presented features that the Indian wisemen were able to understand by analogy with ideas in their own religion. A culture like theirs, based on a desire for integration and harmony, was disposed to yield to the destiny that the gods had predetermined for it; and their image of time prepared them to be reborn in a new historical era. Rather it was Western man who imposed himself as a destructive force, who could not integrate himself into the categories of the indigenous culture because he rejected it in its entirety. It was he who offered the choice between submission and death.

In the conceptual framework of Western modernity there was no place for real pluralism; reason is identical for all and is universal, and reality cannot be legitimately judged from different perspectives. Only one path leads to the good and true; all others lead to

of reality and knowledge coincide. This "monism" of knowledge becomes even more rigid in the field of religion. The god of one culture *is* the only and universal God. Indeed in Western Catholicism, monotheism is understood to mean that the sacred has only one true form of manifestation, and that its revelation occurs only in one form of culture. Polytheism could allow for foreign gods and, as a consequence, for diverse cultures, because the sacred could be present everywhere and in many different forms. For transcendent monotheism, however, the universal character of God dooms all other forms of the sacred to illusion or deceit.

The annihilation of the great American cultures was the inevitable result of the impossibility of one culture to accept otherness. It was the achievement of a modern mentality.

Translated from the Spanish by Katherine Hagedorn