

# THE MENTAL WORLD OF HERNÁN CORTÉS

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SO many books and articles have been devoted to the life and career of Hernán Cortés that it may well seem presumptuous to add to their number. But there is still no satisfactory biography, and it is only quite recently that his writings—his ‘letters of relation’ to Charles V, his general correspondence, and his military and administrative directives—have been subjected to the close critical scrutiny which they deserve. In particular, Dr. Richard Konezke has drawn attention to the constructive aspects of Cortés’s career as the founder of a colonial society, while an Austrian historian, Dr. Viktor Frankl, has analysed with extraordinary ingenuity Cortés’s idea of empire and his indebtedness to Spanish medieval traditions and ways of thought. Other important contributions have been made by Mexicans: Dr Manuel Alcalá, who has drawn an extended parallel between Caesar and Cortés, without, however, proving any direct influence of one on the other, and Srta. Eulalia Guzmán, whose annotated edition of the first two letters of relation is intended to expose the conqueror of Mexico as a consummate liar and a monster of depravity.<sup>1</sup> Although these four historians approach Cortés from very different standpoints, they have all shown how much can still be learnt about him from an examination of his writings, and how much remains to be discovered before we shall be able to see him in the round—not only as a military leader, but

<sup>1</sup> R. Konezke, ‘Hernán Cortés como poblador de la Nueva España’, *Estudios Cortesianos* (Madrid, 1948), pp. 341–81; V. Frankl, ‘Hernán Cortés y la tradición de las Siete Partidas’, *Revista de Historia de América*, 53–54 (1962) and ‘Imperio particular e imperio universal en las cartas de relación de Hernán Cortés’, *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* (1963); M. Alcalá, *César y Cortés* (Mexico, 1950); Eulalia Guzmán, *Relaciones de Hernán Cortés a Carlos V sobre la invasión de Anáhuac* (Mexico, 1958). The writings of Cortés have now been collected in a single volume by Mario Hernández Sánchez-Barba, *Hernán Cortés. Cartas y Documentos* (Mexico, 1963). All quotations in this article are drawn from this volume, cited as *Cartas*.

also as a colonist and an entrepreneur, and as an unusually astute politician with a remarkable gift for putting old ideas to new uses in the unprecedented situation in which he found himself in Mexico.

Their work has also emphasized the need to set Cortés very firmly into the context of the society from which he sprang, the society of late medieval and early Renaissance Spain, for he at once mirrors the ideals and aspirations of that society, and shares the pattern of its development. Between 1485, the year of his birth, and 1547, the year of his death, Spain passed through a whole cycle of experiences which are strangely reflected in Cortés's personal career. He was born at a time when Ferdinand and Isabella had succeeded in imposing royal justice and royal authority on a society which had threatened to disintegrate under the pressure of conflicting individual ambitions. They had restored the community of the realm, and had helped to imbue it with that sense of confidence and purpose which would enable it to complete the reconquest of its own territory from the Moors and to embark on its career of overseas expansion in Africa, Italy, and the Antilles. The Castile of the Catholic Kings was a country which, while deeply attached to medieval traditions and values, was being stirred by Italian humanist ideals; and stirred, too by those aspirations for spiritual renewal and regeneration which were agitating all Europe in the later Middle Ages. This was the society from which Cortés came, and he retained its imprint to the end of his days.

Cortés left Spain for the West Indies in 1504, the year of Isabella's death, and did not return to it until 1528, when her grandson, Charles V, was firmly established on the Spanish throne. In the intervening period the carefully articulated society built up by the Catholic Kings was subjected to a series of severe strains, culminating in the revolt of the *Comuneros* between 1519 and 1521, the very years in which Cortés committed his own personal act of revolt against lawfully constituted authority, and went on to conquer Mexico for his imperial master.<sup>1</sup> The Spain to which he returned in triumph in 1528 was Erasmian Spain—a country painfully adjusting itself to a new historic role under

<sup>1</sup> See M. Giménez Fernández, *Hernán Cortés y su revolución comunera en la Nueva España* (Seville, 1948), which attempts to draw a parallel between the revolt of Cortés and that of the *Comuneros*.

the leadership of men fired by ambitious ideas of universal empire, and by Erasmian ideals of general reform. But already the universal ambitions of Charles and his advisers were clouded by the threat of heresy, and when Cortés came home for the last time, in 1540, the humanist Spain of his first visit had become deeply tinged by the sombre hues of the Counter-Reformation.

The life of Cortés therefore spans an extraordinarily rich and varied period of Spanish history—a period in which a reorganized and re-articulated medieval society, increasingly exposed to external intellectual influences, turns outwards to acquire an overseas empire, and finds itself endowed with a unique imperial and religious mission. But Cortés, while spanning the transition from Middle Ages to Counter-Reformation, seems also to reflect it in his own mental development. His correspondence, when read in the light of the political and intellectual pre-occupations of contemporary Spain, gives the impression of having been written by a man with exceptionally sensitive mental antennae, alert to detect the most subtle shifts of opinion in a world thousands of miles away.

This very sensitivity, however, makes it extremely difficult to trace the course of Cortés's intellectual development, and the problem is further complicated by the almost total absence of external evidence about his interests and attainments. It is known only that, as the son of *hidalgo* parents in Extremadura, he was sent at the age of fourteen to Salamanca where he remained for two years. There is some dispute about the way in which he was supposed to be spending his time at Salamanca, but it seems probable that he embarked on the study of Latin grammar with the intention of proceeding to the study of law, but then tired of his studies and returned home to Medellín, to the annoyance of his parents, who had hoped to see him equipped for a profitable legal career.<sup>1</sup> But there is no doubt that his two years in Salamanca, followed by a long period of training and experience as a notary, first in Seville and then in Hispaniola, gave him a working knowledge of Latin and a close acquaintance with the methods and the technicalities of Castilian law.<sup>2</sup> There is a story that, as a child, he was an acolyte in the church of Santa María in Medellín,

<sup>1</sup> See Salvador de Madariaga, *Hernán Cortés* (London, 1942), pp. 22–24.

<sup>2</sup> See Alcalá, *César y Cortés*, pp. 134–38, for examples of Latin quotations in Cortés's writings, and for the influence of Latin constructions on his style.

and that here he learnt the Psalms, but the relatively few Biblical allusions in his writings are drawn almost entirely from the New Testament, and his one direct quotation from the Gospels is produced (in Latin) with such a flourish as to induce some scepticism as to whether he was capable of producing many more: 'I even called to mind a passage from the Gospels which runs: "*Omne regnum in se ipsum divisum desolivatur*".'<sup>1</sup>

If his knowledge of the Bible, although very effectively exploited when the occasion demanded, tended to be sketchy, he was obviously well versed in the types of literature with which a late fifteenth-century Castilian *hidalgo* would normally expect to be acquainted. This meant, in particular, the legal codes of Castile, and especially the famous code of Alfonso X, the *Siete Partidas*, compiled between 1256 and 1263, and first printed in Seville in 1491. Dr. Frankl has convincingly shown the extent of Cortés's knowledge of the *Siete Partidas*, and his extraordinary skill in exploiting the *Partidas* to justify and legalize his own very difficult position after breaking with the governor of Cuba, Diego Velázquez, and setting out unauthorised on the conquest of Mexico.<sup>2</sup> Once Cortés's knowledge of the contents of the *Partidas* is accepted, whole areas of his thought are illumined, for the *Partidas*, with their references to Aristotle and antiquity, and their vivid definitions of such concepts as 'fame', 'treason', and 'tyranny', constitute at once an encyclopaedia of law and theology, and a code of military and legal conduct, capable of providing the Castilian *hidalgo* with an admirably coherent framework of ideas.

The other literary companions of a Castilian gentleman, besides the *Partidas*, were histories, chronicles, and romances of chivalry. The *conquistadores*' acquaintance with the romances is vividly attested by Bernal Díaz's account of the conquest of Mexico; and Cortés himself is quick to see the allusion when, on landing at San Juan de Ulúa, Puertocarrero quotes four lines from the ballad of Montesinos—an allusion which has recently been shown to express graphically Cortés's plan for vengeance against his mortal enemy, the governor of Cuba.<sup>3</sup> Equally well attested

<sup>1</sup> *Cartas*, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> 'Cortés y la tradición de las Siete Partidas', *op. cit.* The *Partidas* constitute vols. II–IV of *Los Códigos Españoles concordados y anotados* (Madrid, 1848–51).

<sup>3</sup> Frankl, *op. cit.*, pp. 29–31.

by Bernal Díaz is the tendency of the *conquistadores* to compare their exploits with those of the Romans, as in Cortés's own speech to the troops during the Tlaxcala campaign: 'As for your observation, gentlemen, that the most famous Roman captains never performed deeds equal to ours, you are quite right. If God helps us, far more will be said in future history books about our exploits than has ever been said about those in the past.'<sup>1</sup> Here already was that sense of superiority to the achievements of antiquity which distinguishes the later phases of the Renaissance, and which was one day to be expressed in the dedication of a book to Cortés: 'you displayed so many new strategems in matters of war that it cannot be said that in any of them Your Excellency imitated the Ancients.'<sup>2</sup>

Whether Cortés himself had ever actually read any classical authors is not clear. It has been suggested, on the strength of a reference to 'necessity' in his fourth letter of relation, that he had read Livy, and was therefore acquainted with that idea of necessity which was to be so important to Machiavelli.<sup>3</sup> But it would hardly seem essential to have read Livy to produce the particular aphorism used by Cortés—'there is nothing like necessity for sharpening mens' wits' (*no hay cosa que más los ingenios de los hombres avive que la necesidad*). Almost the same words are in fact used by a character in the famous contemporary novel, the *Celestina*, first published in 1499, when he says that there is no better 'sharpening of wits' (*avivadora de ingenios*) than 'necessity, poverty, and hunger'.<sup>4</sup>

There is indeed some danger that Cortés will be endowed with too elaborate an intellectual ancestry in the search for the origins of his ideas. He reels off a striking phrase such as 'there should be nothing superfluous (*cosa superflua*) in all the earth'—a phrase which can be, and has been, traced back to the Aristotelian formula: *Natura nihil facit frustra*.<sup>5</sup> He uses it very skilfully as a justification for the forcible subjection of the Chichimeca Indians

<sup>1</sup> *Historia Verdadera*, i (Mexico, 1944), p. 260. Translated J. M. Cohen (London, 1963), p. 159.

<sup>2</sup> *Obras que Francisco Cervantes de Salazar a hecho, glosado, y traducido* (Alcalá de Henares, 1546). 'Diálogo de la dignidad del hombre', f. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Frankl, 'Imperio particular', pp. 32–33.

<sup>4</sup> *La Celestina*, ed. M. Criado de Val and G. D. Trotter (Madrid, 1958), p. 165.

<sup>5</sup> Frankl, 'Imperio', p. 19.

to the rule of Charles V, but where did he originally find it? The general cast of his thought, as might be expected, was Aristotelian and Thomist, but this phrase again was apparently one in contemporary use, for it is uttered by no less a person than Celestina herself (*ninguna cosa ay criada al mundo superflua*).<sup>1</sup>

It would seem, on the whole, that Cortés had an extraordinarily quick ear and eye for the arresting phrase, and a genius for putting it to unexpected use. This tends to create an impression both of originality and of erudition, which is not always justified. He is capable, for instance, of beginning a letter to an oriental potentate with a resoundingly Aristotelian sentiment: 'It is a universal condition of mankind to want to know.' But this, too, was probably a commonplace of the times, and appears in the *Siete Partidas* in the form of 'all men naturally want to hear and know and see new things.'<sup>2</sup> His use of such phrases, and in particular the constant insistence in his letters of relation on the importance of 'knowing and inquiring' or of 'finding out the secret of things' (*saber el secreto*) have frequently been taken to display a typically Renaissance attitude to knowledge. Cortés's own intense thirst for knowledge is not in doubt, but it is worth noting that both these expressions appear in the instructions given him by Diego Velázquez when he entrusted him with the command of the expedition to Mexico.<sup>3</sup> It is entirely typical of Cortés that he should have seized on the words and tirelessly reproduced them in his letters to the emperor, in order to display his deep regard for the letter of the instructions which in other respects he was actively defying.

Perhaps only once is there anything approaching a plausible hint of first-hand acquaintance with a classical author. When a *residencia* was held against him in 1529 a witness alleged that he frequently heard him say that "if the laws had to be broken in order to reign, then broken they must be", and he also used to repeat "Caesar or *nihil*." The remark about the breaking of the laws derived originally from Euripides, and was quoted both by Cicero and by Suetonius in his life of Caesar. It would not be surprising if at some stage in his life Cortés had read Suetonius on

<sup>1</sup> *Celestina*, p. 141, and see F. Castro Guisasaola, *Observaciones sobre las fuentes literarias de La Celestina* (Madrid, 1924), p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> *Cartas*, p. 478; *Siete Partidas*, Partida I, tit. 1, ley xix.

<sup>3</sup> *Cedulario Cortesiano* (Mexico, 1949), p. 14.

Caesar; but the evidence remains hearsay, and the fact that the chronicler Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, living in Santo Domingo, himself uses the quotation when describing Cortés's defiance of Velázquez, suggests that it enjoyed some currency among sixteenth-century Spaniards.<sup>1</sup>

These instances suggest something of the extreme difficulty involved in defining with any degree of precision the sources of Cortés's thought. The difficulty is hardly surprising, for Cortés, although an highly intelligent man with an instinctive capacity for literary craftsmanship, cannot be described as learned or well-read; and during his active life his reading was probably largely of a professional character, consisting of the Castilian legal codes and of those notarial and official documents which he taught himself to gloss and interpret with such consummate skill. Susceptible as he was to the influence of his environment, and adept at reproducing ideas and expressions which caught his attention, it is only possible to assess in the most general terms the important formative influences in his life. In particular, regrettably little is still known of local conditions in his native Extremadura during his childhood years,<sup>2</sup> and many of the military and administrative ordinances at present taken as examples of his organizing genius may well prove on closer investigation to be directly inspired by models deriving from Extremaduran conditions and from the circumstances of the war in Granada. The dominant figure in late fifteenth-century Extremadura, Don Alonso de Monroy, the Master of Alcántara, was probably Cortés's cousin, and Cortés's father had fought at his side in the fierce civil wars. Although

<sup>1</sup> 'Sumario de la Residencia tomada a Don Fernando Cortés', *Archivo Mexicano*, i (Mexico, 1852), p. 64; Fernández de Oviedo, *Historia General . . . de las Indias* (Biblioteca de Autores Españoles), vol. 118 (Madrid, 1959), p. 149. The original quotation reads: 'Si violandum est ius, regnandi gratia violandum est' (C. Suetoni Tranquilli, *Divus Iulius*, ed. H. E. Butler and M. Cary, Oxford, 1962, p. 14). That Cortés at least had a good stock of stories from classical history is shown by his apt allusion to the dispute between Marius and Sulla over the captured Jugurtha when his own captains were quarrelling over the captured Cuauhtémoc (Bernal Díaz, *Historia Verdadera*, ii, p. 299).

<sup>2</sup> Late fifteenth-century Extremadura, the home of so many *conquistadores*, deserves serious investigation. There is a pioneering article by Mario Góngora, 'Regimen señorial y rural en la Extremadura de la Orden de Santiago', *Jahrbuch für Geschichte von Staat . . . Latein-Amerikas*, ii (1965).

Monroy survived in exile until 1511, he had passed into legend long before his death, and much of the legend, as recounted by a contemporary biographer, reads almost like a preview of the greater career of the conqueror of Mexico.<sup>1</sup> There is the same style of military leadership; the same style of harangue to the troops; and there are even the same omens. Monroy's followers told him to turn back when his horse died under him, but he paid no attention to their warnings, because, in his biographer's words, 'the hour of his ill-fortune was at hand.' Cortés, too, refused to turn back when five of his horses fell as he left the camp one night at Cempoala: 'I held on my course, considering that God is more powerful than nature.' Where Monroy went on to disaster, Cortés came to no harm. His hour of ill fortune was still far away.<sup>2</sup>

The Extremaduran upbringing, the relationship with a legendary figure in Extremaduran life, and the typical *hidalgo* education in the chronicles, the romances, and the code of the *Siete Partidas*, were all, therefore, important formative influences on Cortés's career. So, too, were the Salamanca episode and the period of notarial training, which gave him his knowledge of Latin, his very considerable legal learning, and his skill in the drafting and interpretation of documents. Finally, there were the fifteen years spent in Hispaniola and Cuba as notary, secretary to the governor, municipal official and *encomendero*—years which gave him administrative and political experience, and a first-hand acquaintance with American conditions and the problems of a settler society. All these experiences helped to provide the intellectual equipment of the Cortés who set out in 1519 to conquer Mexico.

In leaving Cuba for Mexico, Cortés carried with him a strong conviction of the influence of *Fortuna* on the affairs of men. In his *Crónica de la Nueva España* Cervantes de Salazar tells how Cortés, while still a public notary in the little town of Azúa, near Santo Domingo, dreamt one night that suddenly his poverty was gone, and that he was dressed in fine clothes and waited on by innumerable retainers who addressed him with high-sounding titles of honour. 'And although', continues Cervantes de Salazar,

<sup>1</sup> Alonso Maldonado, *Hechos del Maestro de Alcántara Don Alonso de Monroy*, ed. A. Rodríguez Moñino (Madrid, 1935). For Cortés family relationships, see F. Gómez de Orozco, 'Cual era el linaje paterno de Cortés?', *Revista de Indias*, ix (1948), pp. 297–306.

<sup>2</sup> Maldonado, p. 106; *Cartas*, p. 43.



he, as a wise man and a good Christian, knew that credit should not be given to dreams, he was none the less very happy, because the dream had been in conformity with his own thoughts. . . . They say that, after the dream, he took paper and ink, and drew a wheel with buckets. He wrote one letter on the full buckets, another on those that were being emptied, another on the empty ones, and another on those that were moving upwards, while on the ones at the top he placed a nail . . . When he had done this, he said to certain of his friends with unusual cheerfulness that either he would dine to the sound of trumpets, or perish on the gallows, and that now he began to know his fortune (*ventura*) and what the stars promised him . . .<sup>1</sup>

The image of Fortune's wheel was well known to late fifteenth and early sixteenth-century Spaniards, and 'adverse fortune suddenly turns her wheel' several times in the course of Bernal Díaz's history of the conquest of Mexico.<sup>2</sup> Cortés's wheel, however, has become the *noria*—the traditional water-wheel with hanging buckets to be found in Extremadura and other parts of Spain. Whether at that time this was a common conception of Fortune's wheel is not clear, although Celestina herself, in Rojas's novel, envisaged it in this form: 'We are like pots in a water-wheel . . . one up, and another down; one full, and another empty; it is fortune's law that nothing can continue any long time in one and the selfsame state of being.'<sup>3</sup> But the most important feature of the wheel for Cortés was that it could be stopped—a point he further emphasized when, tilting at the ring in Coyoacán after Mexico had fallen, he chose as his device a wheel of fortune and a silver figure of a man with a hammer in one hand and a nail in the other. The motto read: 'I shall hammer in the nail when I see that there is nothing more to possess.'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Vol. i (Madrid, 1914), pp. 120–21.

<sup>2</sup> *Historia verdadera*, ii, p. 67. For the idea of Fortune, see H. R. Patch, *The Goddess Fortune in Medieval Literature* (Harvard, 1927); José Antonio Maravall, *El Mundo Social de la Celestina* (Madrid, 1964), c. vii; Florence Street, 'The Allegory of Fortune . . . in . . . Juan de Mena', *Hispanic Review*, xxiii (1955). I am much indebted to Mrs Street for her advice on this subject.

<sup>3</sup> *Celestina*, p. 175 (translated James Mabbe, ed. H. Warner Allen, London, n.d., p. 150).

<sup>4</sup> 'Clavaré quando me vea do no aya más que posea'. 'Residencia', i. p. 64.

This belief that the wheel could be stopped in its revolution by hammering in a nail, suggests an attitude to Fortune not unlike that of Machiavelli. Fortune could, after all, be mastered by man; but this task needed divine help, for, as in Machiavelli's Florence,<sup>1</sup> Fortune was integrated as far as possible into a Christian world. Throughout Cortés's correspondence divine Providence is at hand to guide and govern. Nothing, he reminds the emperor, is impossible to God.<sup>2</sup> Battles are won, with God's help, against hopeless odds,<sup>3</sup> and on many occasions God 'mysteriously' comes to the aid of Cortés and his men.<sup>4</sup> But there exists in Cortés's mind a special relationship between God and Charles V. 'Since Your Majesty's childhood', he writes in his second letter, 'God has always taken care to direct your affairs.'<sup>5</sup> This divine favour reserved for the emperor is a matter of great moment to Cortés, for, as the loyal servant of the emperor, he could expect to share in the blessings that Providence showered upon his master. 'The royal good fortune (*real ventura*) of Your Majesty' is therefore a recurring theme in Cortés's letters, and he sees his own victories won 'with the help of God and the royal *ventura*.'<sup>6</sup>

But if Cortés looked on the divine and royal favour as a talisman for success, he knew that the man who aspired to master Fortune must possess innate qualities of resourcefulness and guile—those qualities which for Machiavelli helped to constitute *virtù*. The idea was familiar enough to Renaissance Spaniards, and nothing could be more Machiavellian than the remark of one of the characters in the *Celestina*: 'It is knowing the times and seizing the opportunity which makes men prosperous'.<sup>7</sup> Cortés, like the underworld figures of the *Celestina*, longs for the wealth that will enable him to crash the barriers of the social hierarchy, and bask in the pleasures enjoyed by the titled and the rich; and his chosen weapons for achieving this ambition were the same as theirs. He too must know the times and seize the opportunity, and this required not only native wit but also the wisdom that came of experience. There is in Cortés's correspondence a constant insistence on the importance of *experiencia*—that personal

<sup>1</sup> Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini* (Princeton, 1965), p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> *Cartas*, p. 44.

<sup>3</sup> *Cartas*, pp. 18, 41.

<sup>4</sup> *Cartas*, p. 97.

<sup>5</sup> *Cartas*, p. 52.

<sup>6</sup> *Cartas*, p. 104. Cf. Frankl, 'Cortés y la Tradición', p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> *Celestina*, p. 39.

and individual knowledge of men and of things which an increasing number of early sixteenth-century Spaniards were coming to regard as superior to the knowledge derived from traditional authority.<sup>1</sup>

There was no lack of resourcefulness in Cortés's approach to the conquest of Mexico, which was as much a political as a military operation, and one conducted simultaneously against the Aztec emperor and the governor of Cuba. The contemporary chronicler Fernández de Oviedo refers at one point to Cortés's capacity to 'construct romances (*novelar*) and devise schemes appropriate to a resourceful, astute, and cunning captain.'<sup>2</sup> Recent work on Cortés, particularly by Dr. Frankl and Srta. Guzmán, has helped to confirm his extraordinary skill in the constructing of romances and the devising of schemes. The first letter of relation, as Dr. Frankl has shown,<sup>3</sup> is a brilliant fictional reconstruction of the course of events leading up to the defiance of the governor of Cuba and the founding of Vera Cruz—a reconstruction which draws heavily on the political and juridical ideas embedded in the *Siete Partidas*. The governor, Velázquez, is painted in the darkest colours as a man consumed by greed and personal interest, whereas Cortés himself emerges as the faithful servant of the Spanish Crown and a staunch upholder of the common weal.<sup>4</sup>

But it is in his account of the confrontation with Montezuma that Cortés's powers of imagination and invention are revealed at their best. Although the whole episode remains deeply mysterious, it at least seems clear that Cortés's account of what passed between the two men should not be taken, as it has long been taken, at face value. In all probability, two distinctive layers of legend now surround the relationship between Cortés and Montezuma. The outer layer, which forms the basis of modern interpretations of the conquest of Mexico,<sup>5</sup> holds that Cortés was the unwitting beneficiary of an Aztec tradition that the priest-king

<sup>1</sup> See J. A. Maravall, *Los Factores de la Idea del Progreso en el Renacimiento Español* (Madrid, 1963), pp. 109–31. Cf. the Florentine 'experientia, quae rerum est magistra' (Gilbert, *Machiavelli*, p. 39).

<sup>2</sup> Fernández de Oviedo, *op. cit.*, vol. 120, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> 'Cortés y la Tradición'.

<sup>4</sup> *Cartas*, pp. 26–27; P. Mariano Cuevas, *Cartas y otros documentos de Hernán Cortés* (Seville, 1915), p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Madariaga, *Hernán Cortés*.

Quetzalcóatl would one day return from out of the east and reclaim his own. No evidence has apparently been found, however, to prove the existence of any pre-conquest tradition of Quetzalcóatl leading his followers to the land of Anáhuac. It is possible that the stories of a return from the east, like those of the omens which paralysed Montezuma's powers of decision, sprang up only *after* the conquest; and the identification of Cortés with Quetzalcóatl (who is never mentioned in the writings of Cortés), may first have been made in the 1540's by the Franciscans Motolinía and Sahagún.<sup>1</sup>

But wrapped within this legend lies another, for which Cortés himself may have been largely responsible—a legend similar in theme but less specific in its details. Cortés retails two speeches by Montezuma,<sup>2</sup> both of them so improbable in content and tenor as to suggest that they were founded more on fantasy than facts. The two speeches are couched in tones quite alien to an Aztec but familiar enough to a Christian Spaniard; for they subtly combine the themes of the coming of a Messiah and the return of a natural lord to his vassals, in order to lead up to the grand climax of Montezuma's renunciation of his imperial heritage into the hands of Charles V. 'We give thanks to our gods', says Montezuma, 'that in our time that which was long expected has come to pass.' Srta. Guzmán has shrewdly pointed out how this whole passage echoes the strains of the *Nunc Dimittis*.<sup>3</sup> But the New Testament analogies do not end here. Montezuma ends his first speech of welcome with the dramatic gesture of lifting his clothes to show Cortés his body, saying: 'you see that I am of flesh and bones like yourself and everyone else, mortal and tangible.' Does not this contain overtones of Jesus's words to the disciples ('a spirit hath not flesh and bones as ye see me have') and of Paul and Barnabas at Lystra ('we also are men of like passions with you')?

It is hard to avoid the impression that Cortés was drawing on all his very considerable reserves of imagination in order to paint for Charles V a solemn and spectacular picture of a scene that may never have occurred. If the scene had a faintly Biblical set-

<sup>1</sup> Eulalia Guzmán, *Relaciones*, p. 223; Henry R. Wagner, *The Rise of Fernando Cortés* (Berkeley, 1944), pp. 187–98.

<sup>2</sup> *Cartas*, pp. 59–60, 68–69; Guzmán, pp. 221–30, 276–81.

<sup>3</sup> Guzmán, p. 279.

ting, it would be all the more impressive, especially as Montezuma's forefathers were now in the process of being endowed with distant Christian origins; and, with a nice irony, Cortés introduces his account of Tenochtitlan with words that themselves have a Biblical ring: 'I know that [these things] will seem so remarkable that they cannot be believed, for what we behold with our own eyes, we cannot with our understanding comprehend.'<sup>1</sup> But if Cortés drew on the Bible for his general setting, and on Castilian legal codes for the ideas of suzerainty and vassalage which he put into Montezuma's mouth, there still remains a third crucial element in the story—the myth of the ruler returning from the east. It has been suggested that Cortés heard some such story from the Indians in the Antilles,<sup>2</sup> but it seems equally possible that he heard it on his march to Mexico, and stored it up for future use. According to Bernal Díaz, two *caciques* at Tlaxcala told Cortés of a prophecy that men would come from the region where the sun rises and would subjugate the land.<sup>3</sup> If so, the prophecy may have related not to Quetzacóatl but to Huitzilopochtli, the god of war, who appears in the writings both of Cortés and Bernal Díaz, under the guise of 'Ochilobos'. In a letter written by Don Antonio de Mendoza, the first viceroy of New Spain, to his brother, it is specifically stated that the Aztecs welcomed Cortés thinking that he was 'Orchilobos'—not Quetzacóatl.<sup>4</sup> Fernández de Oviedo, commenting on the letter, disbelieves the stories both of Orchilobos coming from the north-east, and of Cortés being mistaken for him; but this does not affect the possibility that Cortés picked up some local legend, which he then proceeded to embellish and turn to account with his customary skill.

Whatever the exact origins of the myth of the returning ruler, the whole Montezuma episode, as related to Charles V, bears witness to Cortés's remarkable fertility of invention. This creative ability, the capacity to build on a grand scale, often starting from the most slender foundations, is perhaps the most striking of all the characteristics of Cortés. It carried him through the delicate problems involved in the defiance of Velázquez; it carried him

<sup>1</sup> *Cartas*, p. 71. Cf. Matthew 13:14 ('Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive').

<sup>2</sup> Guzmán, pp. 223–25.

<sup>3</sup> *Historia Verdadera*, i, p. 288.

<sup>4</sup> *op. cit.*, vol. 120, pp. 245–47.

through the conquest of Mexico itself; and it inspired his approach to the work of reconstruction when the Aztec empire had fallen.

His plans for the New Spain to be established on the ruins of the old Mexico were deeply influenced by his experiences in the Antilles where he had seen the Indian population destroyed.<sup>1</sup> A repetition of the Antilles experience must at all costs be avoided, and he wrote, like the great Renaissance builder he was, of the conservation of the Indians as being 'the cement on which all this work has to be built'.<sup>2</sup> But behind his schemes for the creation of an ordered society of Spaniards and Indians lay a vision which he had borrowed from the friars. It was in August 1523 that the first three Franciscan missionaries (all Flemings) arrived in Mexico, to be followed in May 1524 by the famous 'twelve apostles' headed by Fray Martín de Valencia. In the fourth and fifth letters of relation, dated October 1524 and September 1526, there are clear signs of Franciscan influence on Cortés's thought. The Franciscans, the majority of whom seem to have been less influenced by Erasmus than by Italian apocalyptic traditions and the doctrines of Savonarola,<sup>3</sup> arrived with a burning desire to establish, in a Mexico still uncorrupted by European vices, a replica of the church of the apostles. Cortés, in the first of his letters, had emphasized the importance of informing the pope of his discoveries, so that measures could be taken for the conversion of the natives.<sup>4</sup> But now, in his fourth letter, he couples his pleas for assistance in the work of conversion, with an attack on the worldliness of the church and the pomp and avarice of ecclesiastical dignitaries. His diatribe, so typical of contemporary European protests against the wealth and corruption of the church, is clearly inspired by the friars, for whom he requests exclusive rights in the conversion of Mexico. It is the Franciscans, too, who inspire the prophecy in the fifth letter that there would

<sup>1</sup> *Cartas*, p. 351 (*Ordenanzas de buen gobierno*, 1524).

<sup>2</sup> *Cartas*, p. 397 (*Memorial de servicios*, 1528).

<sup>3</sup> J. A. Maravall, 'La Utopía político-religiosa de los Franciscanos en Nueva España', *Estudios Americanos*, i (1949), pp. 199–227. For Cortés and the Franciscans, see Fidel de Lejarza, 'Franciscanismo de Cortés y Cortesianismo de los Franciscanos', *Misionalia Hispánica*, v (1948), pp. 43–136.

<sup>4</sup> *Cartas*, p. 25.

arise in Mexico a 'new church, where God will be served and honoured more than in any other region of the earth.'<sup>1</sup>

The Franciscans provided Cortés with an enlarged vision, not only of the new church and the new society to be built in Mexico, but also of his own special role in the providential order. He had already, in his first letter, been careful to insist that God had arranged the discovery of Mexico in order that Queen Juana and Charles V should obtain special merit by the conversion of its pagan inhabitants.<sup>2</sup> It followed from this that he himself, as the conqueror of Mexico, enjoyed a special place in the divine plan. The attitude of the Franciscans was bound to encourage him in this belief, for to them he inevitably appeared as God's chosen agent at a vital moment in the ordering of world history—the moment at which the sudden possibility of converting untold millions to the Faith brought the long-awaited millenium almost within sight. It was, therefore, with the concurrence of the Franciscans that Cortés could now designate himself as the 'agency' (*medio*) by which God had been pleased to bring the Indians to an understanding of Him.<sup>3</sup>

Since the Franciscan vision was a world-wide vision, it is not surprising that Cortés received from the Franciscans a fresh encouragement to look beyond the confines of Mexico, once its conquest was achieved. On his ill-fated Hibueras expedition of 1524–26 he was accompanied by two Flemish Franciscans, one of whom was Juan de Tecto, a distinguished theologian and a former confessor of Charles V.<sup>4</sup> It was perhaps Tecto's first-hand acquaintance with the imperial ideology of the Emperor's advisers and with Erasmian currents of thought in his native country, which furnished Cortés with his new vision of a world empire subject to a Charles V who would become 'monarch of the universe'—an empire which he himself would help to found by pressing on from Mexico, across the Pacific to the East.<sup>5</sup> The vision was a complex one, compounded as it was of Cortés's own dreams of the conquest of Cathay, Erasmian and Imperial dreams of a universal empire, and Franciscan dreams of the conversion

<sup>1</sup> *Cartas*, pp. 238–39, 318.

<sup>2</sup> *Cartas*, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Cartas*, p. 241.

<sup>4</sup> Gerónimo de Mendieta, *Historia Eclesiástica Indiana* (ed. Mexico, 1870), p. 606.

<sup>5</sup> *Cartas*, pp. 320 and 482. For the evolution of Cortés's idea of empire, see Frankl, 'Imperio'.

of mankind as the essential prelude to the ending of the world. He pursued it for year after year, but, like some will-of-the-wisp, it persistently eluded him, for already by 1526 it seemed that his luck was gone.

There seems no reason to doubt that his harrowing experiences on the Hibueras expedition permanently changed Cortés, giving him a new awareness of the inscrutability of Providence and the impotence of man. The fifth letter of relation, which describes the expedition, is very different in spirit from those that preceded it. The phraseology is that of a man who has passed through a deep spiritual ordeal, which has left him at once with a sense of his own unworthiness and of the infinite power of God. Gone is the confidence which, seven years earlier, had enabled him to press on at Cempoala in spite of the misfortune to the horses. Now, when his ship is forced back to port three times, he sees this as a signal from heaven, and abandons his plans for return.<sup>1</sup> Gone, too, is the earlier confidence in the unbounded powers of man. In a language very different from that of his earlier letters, he writes: 'no wit of man could ever have found the remedy, if God, who is the true remedy and succour of those in affliction or want, had not provided it.'<sup>2</sup>

Fortune, after all, was not so easily to be commanded, and, from the time of the Hibueras expedition, it became clear that the wheel had begun its inexorable downward turn. Thwarted by royal officials and dogged by royal ingratitude, he wrote bitterly to his father in 1526: 'I had rather be rich in fame than in wealth.'<sup>3</sup> Although his fame was anyhow assured, he soon found a group of men both ready and able to cultivate it for him, for on his return to Madrid in 1528 he struck up a friendship with the Polish ambassador to the Imperial court, John Dantiscus, a friend of Copernicus and the centre of a wide humanist circle which included Erasmus and Valdés. The friendship was duly celebrated by Dantiscus in a Latin poem written after Cortés had gone back to Mexico: 'Great Cortés is far away, the man who discovered all these huge kingdoms of the New World. He rules beyond the equator as far as the star of Capricorn, and though so far away, he does not forget me.'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Cartas*, pp. 304, 460.

<sup>2</sup> *Cartas*, p. 257.

<sup>3</sup> *Cartas*, p. 468.

<sup>4</sup> *Ioannis Dantisci poetae laureati carmina*, ed. Stanislas Skimina (Cracow, 1950), carmen xlix, lines 85–90. For Dantiscus, see A. Paz y Méliá, 'El



This flattering interest of the humanists in the conqueror of Mexico was fully reciprocated by Cortés in the last years of his life when, in retirement in Madrid, his house became the centre for an 'academy' holding regular discussions on matters of humanist and religious concern.<sup>1</sup> The circle of intellectuals who sought the company of Cortés did much to perpetuate both his fame and his ideas. There was Sepúlveda, whose discussion of the Indian question may well owe much to conversations with him.<sup>2</sup> There was Gómara, his first biographer, who transformed him into a typical hero of Renaissance historiography.<sup>3</sup> There was, too, that minor but interesting figure in the Spanish literary world, Cervantes de Salazar, who in 1546 dedicated to Cortés a dialogue on the dignity of man.<sup>4</sup> The dedication, couched in suitably fulsome terms, presents Cortés to the world exactly as he must have wished. It contains the obligatory reference to his distinction both in arms and letters, and the inevitable comparison with Alexander and Caesar; and it manages incidentally to propagate a new Cortés legend—that he burnt his ships instead of beaching them after landing at Vera Cruz.<sup>5</sup> But it also includes a comparison even more flattering than that with the heroes of antiquity, for the

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embajador polaco Juan Dantisco en la corte de Carlos V', *Boletín de la Academia Española*, xi and xii (1924–25). Dantiscus's diplomatic correspondence was published in *Acta Tomisiana* (12 vols., ed. S. Gorski, Posnan, 1855–1901), but there is no trace of the letters to or from Cortés.

<sup>1</sup> Madariaga, *Cortés*, p. 482; Pedro de Navarra, *Diálogos de la preparación de la muerte* (Tolosa, 1565), f. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Angel Losada, 'Hernán Cortés en la obra del cronista Sepúlveda', *Revista de Indias*, ix (1948), pp. 127–69.

<sup>3</sup> Ramón Iglesia, *Cronistas e Historiadores de la Conquista de México* (Mexico, 1942), pp. 100–103; H. R. Wagner, 'Francisco López de Gómara and his works', *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 58 (1948), pp. 263–82.

<sup>4</sup> See above p. 45 n. 2.

<sup>5</sup> For the legend of the burning of the ships, see especially F. Soler Jardón, 'Notas sobre la leyenda del incendio de las naves', *Revista de Indias*, ix (1948), pp. 537–59. Soler Jardón suspected that the legend of the burning originated in the desire to compare Cortés with classical heroes, but failed to find any reference earlier than the 1560s. If, as seems possible, Cervantes de Salazar originated the legend, at least in its written form, he reverted to fact and described the ships as being beached in his *Crónica de la Nueva España*, which he began writing some thirteen years after the publication of the dedication to Cortés.

role of Cortés among the pagans of Mexico is compared with that of St Paul in the primitive church.

At this point the humanists made common cause with Cortés's other band of admirers, the friars. The Franciscans, as they were well aware, owed him much, and they repaid the debt by representing him in their histories of the conquest as the man chosen of God to prepare the way for the evangelization of mankind. But the debt of Cortés to the Franciscans—a debt generously acknowledged in his last will and testament—was no less great, for, at a time when humanist Spain was only just embarking on its subtle transmutation into the more complex Spain of the Counter-Reformation, they had done much to add a new religious dimension to his world. And no world was so rich in imagination and so infinitely adaptable as the mental world of Hernán Cortés.

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