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“Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty”: Cortés and the Conquest of Mexico

I

THE CONQUEST OF MEXICO matters to us because it poses a painful question: How was it that a motley bunch of Spanish adventurers, never numbering much more than four hundred or so, was able to defeat an Amerindian military power on its home ground in the space of two years? What was it about Spaniards, or about Indians, that made so awesomely implausible a victory possible? The question has not lost its potency through time, and as the consequences of the victory continue to unfold has gained in poignancy.

Answers to that question came easily to the men of the sixteenth century. The conquest mattered to Spaniards and to other Europeans because it provided their first great paradigm for European encounters with an organized native state;¹ a paradigm that quickly took on the potency and the accommodating flexibility of myth. In the early 1540s, a mere twenty years after the fall of Mexico-Tenochtitlan before the forces led by Hernando Cortés, Juan Ginés Sepúlveda, chaplain and chronicler to the Spanish emperor Charles V, wrote a work that has been described as “the most virulent and uncompromising argument for the inferiority of the American Indian ever written.” Sepúlveda had his spokesman recite “the history of Mexico, contrasting a noble, valiant Cortés with a timorous, cowardly Moctezoma, whose people by their iniquitous desertion of their natural leader demonstrated their indifference to the good of the commonwealth.”² By 1585 the Franciscan Fray Bernardino de Sahagún had revised an earlier account of the Conquest, written very much from the native point of view and out of the recollections of native Mexicans, to produce a version in which the role of Cortés was elevated, Spanish actions justified, and the whole conquest presented as providential.³

The Mexican Conquest as model for European-native relations was reanimated for the English-speaking world through the marvelously dramatic *History of the Conquest of Mexico* written by W. H. Prescott in the early 1840s, a bestseller in those glorious days when History still taught lessons.⁴ The lesson that great history taught was that Europeans will triumph over natives, however formidable the apparent odds, because of cultural superiority, manifesting itself visibly in equipment but residing much more powerfully in mental and moral qualities.

Prescott presented Spanish victory as flowing directly out of the contrast and the relationship between the two leaders: the Mexican ruler Moctezoma, despotic, effete, and rendered fatally indecisive by the “withering taint” of an irrational religion, and his infinitely resourceful adversary Cortés. Prescott found in the person of the Spanish commander the model of European man: ruthless, pragmatic, single-minded, and (the unfortunate excesses of Spanish Catholicism aside) superbly rational in his manipulative intelligence, strategic flexibility, and capacity to decide a course of action and to persist in it.⁵

The general contours of the Prescottian fable are still clearly discernible in the most recent and certainly the most intellectually sophisticated account of the Conquest, Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*. Confronted by the European challenge, Todorov’s Mexicans are “other” in ways that doom them. Dominated by a cyclical understanding of time, omen-haunted, they are incapable of improvisation in face of the unprecedented Spanish challenge. Although “masters in the art of ritual discourse,” they cannot produce “appropriate and effective messages”; Moctezoma, for example, pathetically sends gold “to convince his visitors to leave the country.” Todorov is undecided as to Moctezoma’s own view of the Spaniards, acknowledging the mistiness of the sources; he nonetheless presents the “paralyzing belief that the Spaniards were gods” as a fatal error. “The Indians’ mistake did not last long . . . just long enough for the battle to be definitely lost and America subject to Europe,” which would seem to be quite long enough.⁶

By contrast Todorov’s Cortés moves freely and effectively, “not only constantly practicing the art of adaptation and improvisation, but also being aware of it and claiming it as the very principle of his conduct.” A “specialist in human communication,” he ensures his control over the Mexican empire (in a conquest Todorov characterizes as “easy”) through “his mastery of signs.” Note that this is not an idiosyncratic individual talent, but a European cultural capacity grounded in “literacy,” where writing is considered “not as a tool, but as an index of the evolution of mental structures”: it is that evolution which liberates the intelligence, strategic flexibility, and semiotic sophistication through which Cortés and his men triumph.

In what follows I want to review the grounds for these kinds of claims about the nature of the contrast between European and Indian modes of thinking during the Conquest encounter, and to suggest a rather different account of what was going on between the two peoples. First, an overview of the major events. Analysts and participants alike agree that the Conquest falls into two phases. The first began with the Spanish landfall in April of 1519, and Cortés’s assumption of independent command in defiance of the governor of Cuba, patron of Cortés and of the expedition; the Spaniards’ march inland, in the company of coastal Indians recently conquered by the Mexicans, marked first by bloody battles and then by alliance with the independent province of Tlaxcala; their uncontested

entry into the Mexican imperial city of Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco, a magnificent lake-borne city of 200,000 or more inhabitants linked to the land by three great causeways; the Spaniards' seizing of the Mexican ruler Moctezoma, and their uneasy rule through him for six months; the arrival on the coast of another and much larger Spanish force from Cuba under the command of Panfilo Narváez charged with the arrest of Cortés, its defeat and incorporation into Cortés's own force; a native "uprising" in Tenochtitlan, triggered in Cortés's absence by the Spaniards' massacre of unarmed warriors dancing in a temple festival; the expulsion of the Spanish forces, with great losses, at the end of June 1520 on the so-called "Noche Triste," and Moctezoma's death, probably at Spanish hands, immediately before that expulsion. End of the first phase. The second phase is much briefer in the telling, although about the same span in the living: a little over a year. The Spaniards retreated to friendly Tlaxcala to recover health and morale. They then renewed the attack, reducing the lesser lakeside cities, recruiting allies, not all of them voluntary, and placing Tenochtitlan under siege in May of 1521. The city fell to the combined forces of Cortés and an assortment of Indian "allies" in mid August 1521. End of the second phase.

Analysts of the conquest have concentrated on the first phase, drawn by the promising whiff of exoticism in Moctezoma's responses—allowing the Spaniards into his city, his docility in captivity—and by the sense that final outcomes were somehow immanent in that response, despite Moctezoma's removal from the stage in the midst of a Spanish rout a good year before the fall of the city, and despite the Spaniards' miserable situation in the darkest days before that fall, trapped out on the causeways, bereft of shelter and support, with the unreduced Mexicans before and their "allies" potential wolves behind. This dispiriting consensus as to Spanish invincibility and Indian vulnerability springs from the too eager acceptance of key documents, primarily Spanish but also Indian, as directly and adequately descriptive of actuality, rather than as the mythic constructs they largely are. Both the letters of Cortés and the main Indian account of the defeat of their city owe as much to the ordering impulse of imagination as to the devoted inscription of events as they occurred. Conscious manipulation, while it might well be present, is not the most interesting issue here, but rather the subtle, powerful, insidious human desire to craft a dramatically satisfying and coherent story out of fragmentary and ambiguous experience, or (the historian's temptation) out of the fragmentary and ambiguous "evidence" we happen to have to work with.

Against the consensus I place Paul Veyne's bracingly simple test: "Historical criticism has only one function: to answer the question asked of it by the historian: 'I believe that this document teaches me this: may I trust it to do that?'"⁷ The document may tell us most readily about story-making proclivities, and so take us into the cultural world of the story maker. It may also tell us about actions, so holding the promise of establishing the patterns of conduct and from them inferring the conventional assumptions of the people whose interactions we are

seeking to understand. It may tell us about sequences of actions that shed light on impulses and motivations less than acknowledged by the writer, or (when he is recording the actions of others) perhaps not even known to him. The following pages will yield examples of all of these. The challenge is to be at once responsive to the possibilities and yet respectful of the limitations of the material we happen to have.

The story-making predilection is powerfully present in the major Spanish sources. The messy series of events that began with the landfall on the eastern coast has been shaped into an unforgettable success story largely out of the narratives of Cortés and Bernal Díaz, who were part of the action; the superb irresistible forward movement that so captivated Prescott, a selection and sequence imposed by men practiced in the European narrative tradition and writing, for all their artfully concealed knowledge of outcomes, when outcomes were known. The foot soldier Díaz, completing his "True History" of the Conquest in old age, can make our palms sweat with his account of yet another Indian attack, but at eighty-four he knew he was bequeathing to his grandchildren a "true and remarkable story" about the triumph of the brave.⁸ The commander Cortés, writing his reports to the Spanish king in the thick of the events, had repudiated the authority of his patron and superior the governor of Cuba, and so was formally in rebellion against the royal authority. He was therefore desperate to establish his credentials. His letters are splendid fictions, marked by politic elisions, omissions, inventions, and a transparent desire to impress Charles of Spain with his own indispensability. One of the multiple delights in their reading is to watch the creation of something of a Horatio figure, an exemplary soldier and simple-hearted loyalist unreflectively obedient to his king and the letter of the law: all attributes implicitly denied by the beautiful control and calculation of the literary construction itself.⁹

The elegance of Cortés's literary craft is nicely indicated by his handling of a daunting problem of presentation. In his "Second Letter," written in late October 1520 on the eve of the second thrust against Tenochtitlan, he had somehow to inform the king of the Spaniards' first astonishment at the splendor of the imperial city, the early coups, the period of perilous authority, the inflow of gold, the accumulation of magnificent riches—and the spectacular debacle of the expulsion, with the floundering in the water, the panic, the loss of gold, horses, artillery, reputation, and altogether too many Spanish lives. Cortés's solution was a most devoted commitment to a strict narrative unfolding of events, so the city is wondered at; Moctezoma speaks, frowns; the marketplace throbs and hums; laden canoes glide through the canals; and so on to the dark denouement. And throughout he continues the construction of his persona as leader: endlessly flexible, yet unthinkingly loyal; endlessly resourceful, yet fastidious in legal niceties; magnificently daring in strategy and performance, yet imbued with a fine caution in calculating costs.

J. H. Elliott and Anthony Pagden have traced the filaments of Cortés's web of fictions back to particular strands of Spanish political culture, and to his particular and acute predicament within it, explaining the theme of "legitimate inheritors returning" by demonstrating its functional necessity in Cortés's legalistic strategy, which in turn pivoted on Moctezoma's voluntary cession of his empire and his authority to Charles of Spain—a splendidly implausible notion, save that so many have believed it. Given the necessity to demonstrate his own indispensability, it is unsurprising that along the way Cortés should claim "the art of adaptation and improvisation" as "the very principle of his conduct," and that we, like his royal audience, should be impressed by his command of men and events: dominating and duping Moctezoma; neutralizing Spanish disaffection by appeals to duty, law, and faith; managing Indians with kind words, stern justice, and displays of the superiority of Spanish arms and the priority of the Spanish god.

The "returning god-ruler" theory was powerfully reinforced by Sahagún's *Florentine Codex*, an encyclopedic account of native life before contact compiled from the recollections of surviving native informants. Book 12 deals with the Conquest. It introduces a Moctezoma paralyzed by terror, first by omens and then by the conviction that Cortés was the god Quetzalcoatl, Precious-Feather Serpent, returned.¹⁰ We are given vivid descriptions of Moctezoma's vacillations, tremulous decisions, collapses of will, as he awaits the Spaniards' coming, and then of his supine acquiescence in their depredations, while his lords abandon him in disgust. Sahagún's was a very late-dawning story, making its first appearance thirty and more years after the Conquest, and by the Veyne test it conspicuously fails. In the closed politics of traditional Tenochtitlan, where age and rank gave status, few men would have had access to Moctezoma's person, much less his thoughts, and Sahagún's informants, young and inconsequential men in 1520, would not have been among those few. In the first phase they can report on certain events (the entry of the Spaniards into the city, the massacre of the warrior dancers) that were public knowledge, and to which they were perhaps witness, although their reporting, it is worth remembering, will be framed in accordance with Mexican notions of significance. They speak with authority and precision on the fighting, especially of the second phase, in which some at least seem to have been involved. But the dramatic description of the disintegration of Moctezoma, compatible as it is with "official" Spanish accounts, bears the hallmarks of a post-Conquest scapegoating of a leader who had indeed admitted the Spaniards to his city in life, and so was made to bear the weight of the unforeseeable consequences in death. What the informants offer for most of the first phase is unabashed mythic history, a telling of what "ought" to have happened (along with a little of what did) in a satisfying mix of collapsed time, elided episodes, and dramatized encounters as they came to be understood in the bitter years after the Conquest. With the fine economy of myth Moctezoma is represented as being made the Spaniards' prisoner at their initial meeting, thenceforth to be their helpless toy,

leading them to his treasures, “each holding him, each grasping him,” as they looted and pillaged at will.¹¹ In the Dominican Diego Durán’s account, completed sixty years after the Conquest, and built in part from painted native chronicles unknown to us, in part from conquistador recollections, this process of distillation to essential “truth” is carried even further, with Moctezoma pictured in a native account as being carried by his lords from his first meeting with Cortés already a prisoner, his feet shackled.¹² It is likely that Durán made a literal interpretation of a symbolic representation: in retrospective native understanding Moctezoma was indeed captive to the Spaniards, a shackled icon, from the first moments.

Throughout the first phase of the Conquest we confidently “read” Cortés’s intentions, assuming his perspective and so assuming his effectiveness. The Spanish commander briskly promises his king “to take [Moctezoma] alive in chains or make him subject to Your Majesty’s Royal Crown.” He continues: “With that purpose I set out from the town of Cempoalla, which I renamed Sevilla, on the sixteenth of August with fifteen horsemen and three hundred foot soldiers, as well equipped for war as the conditions permitted me to make them.”¹³ There we have it: warlike intentions clear, native cities renamed as possessions in a new polity, an army on the move. Inured to the duplicitous language of diplomacy, we take Cortés’s persistent swearing of friendship and the innocence of his intentions to Moctezoma’s emissaries as transparent deceptions, and blame Moctezoma for not so recognizing them or, recognizing them, for failing to act.¹⁴ But Cortés declared he came as an ambassador, and as an ambassador he appears to have been received. Even had Moctezoma somehow divined the Spaniards’ hostile intent, to attack without formal warning was not an option for a ruler of his magnificence.¹⁵ We read Moctezoma’s conduct confidently, but here our confidence (like Cortés’s) derives from ignorance. Cortés interpreted Moctezoma’s first “gifts” as gestures of submission or naive attempts at bribery. But Moctezoma, like other Amerindian leaders, communicated at least as much by the splendor and status of his emissaries, their gestures and above all their gifts, as by the nuances of their most conventionalized speech. None of those nonverbal messages could Cortés read, nor is it clear that his chief Nahuatl interpreter, Doña Marina, a woman and a slave, would or could inform him of the protocols in which they were framed: these were the high and public affairs of men. Moctezoma’s gifts were statements of dominance, superb gestures of wealth and liberality made the more glorious by the arrogant humility of their giving: statements to which the Spaniards lacked both the wit and the means to reply. (To the next flourish of gifts, carried by more than a hundred porters and including the famous “cart-wheels” of gold and silver, Cortés’s riposte was a cup of Florentine glass and three holland shirts.)¹⁶ The verbal exchanges for all of the first phase were not much less scrambled. And despite those reassuring inverted commas of direct reportage, all of those so-fluent speeches passed through a daisy chain of interpreters, with each step an abduction into a different meaning system, a struggle for some

approximation of unfamiliar concepts. We cannot know at what point the shift from the Indian notion of “he who pays tribute,” usually under duress so carrying no sense of obligation, to the Spanish one of “vassal,” with its connotations of loyalty, was made, but we know the shift to be momentous. The identifiable confusions, which must be only a fraction of the whole, unsurprisingly ran both ways. For example, Cortés, intent on conveying innocent curiosity, honesty, and flattery, repeatedly informed the Mexican ambassadors that he wished to come to Tenochtitlan “to look upon Moctezoma’s face.” That determination addressed to a man whose mana was such that none could look upon his face save selected blood kin must have seemed marvelously mysterious, and very possibly sinister.

So the examples of miscommunication multiply. In this tangle of missed cues and mistaken messages, “control of communications” seems to have evaded both sides equally. There is also another casualty. Our most earnest interrogations of the surviving documents cannot make them satisfy our curiosity as to the meaning of Moctezoma’s conduct. Historians are the camp followers of the imperialists: as always in this European-and-native kind of history, part of our problem is the disruption of “normal” practice effected by the breach through which we have entered. For Cortés, the acute deference shown Moctezoma’s person established him as the supreme authority of city and empire, and he shaped his strategy accordingly. In fact we know neither the nature and extent of Moctezoma’s authority within and beyond Tenochtitlan, nor even (given the exuberant discrepancies between the Cortés and Díaz accounts) the actual degree of coercion and physical control imposed on him during his captivity. From the fugitive glimpses we have of the attitudes of some of the other valley rulers, and of his own advisers, we can infer something of the complicated politics of the metropolis and the surrounding city-states, but we see too little to be able to decode the range of Moctezoma’s normal authority, much less its particular fluctuations under the stress of foreign intrusion. Against this uncertain ground we cannot hope to catch the flickering indicators of possible individual idiosyncrasy. We may guess, as we watch the pragmatic responses of other Indian groups to the Spanish presence, that as *tlatoani* or “Great Speaker” of the dominant power in Mexico Moctezoma bore a special responsibility for classifying and countering the newcomers. From the time of his captivity we think we glimpse the disaffection of lesser and allied lords, and infer that disaffection sprang from his docility. We see him deposed while he still lived, and denigrated in death: as Cortés probed into Tenochtitlan in his campaign to reduce the city, the defenders would ironically pretend to open a way for him, “saying, ‘Come in, come in and enjoy yourselves!’ or, at other times, ‘Do you think there is now another Moctezoma to do what you wish?’”¹⁷ But I think we must resign ourselves to a heroic act of renunciation, acknowledging that much of Moctezoma’s conduct must remain enigmatic. We cannot know how he categorized the newcomers, or what he intended by his apparently determined and certainly unpopular cooperation with his captors: whether to save his empire,

his city, his position, or merely his own skin.¹⁸ It might be possible, with patience and time, to clear some of the drifting veils of myth and mistake that envelop the encounters of the first phase, or at least to chart our areas of ignorance more narrowly.¹⁹ But the conventional story of returning gods and unmanned autocrats, of an exotic world paralyzed by its encounter with Europe, for all its coherence and its just-so inevitabilities, is in view of the evidence like Eliza's progression across the ice floes: a matter of momentary sinking balances linked by desperate forward leaps.

Of Cortés we know much more. He was unremarkable as a combat leader: personally brave, an indispensable quality in one who would lead Spaniards, he lacked the panache of his captain Alvarado and the solidity and coolness of Sandoval. He preferred talk to force with Spaniards or Indians, a preference no doubt designed to preserve numbers, but also indicative of a personal style. He knew whom to pay in flattery, whom in gold, and the men he bought usually stayed bought. He knew how to stage a theatrical event for maximum effect, as in the plays concocted to terrify Moctezoma's envoys—a stallion, snorting and plunging as he scented a mare in estrus; a cannon fired to blast a tree. When he did use force he had a flair for doing so theatrically, amplifying the effect: cutting off the hands of fifty or more Tlaxcalan emissaries freely admitted into the Spanish camp, then mutilated as “spies”; a mass killing at Cholula; the shackling of Moctezoma while “rebellious” chiefs were burned before his palace in Tenochtitlan. He was careful to count every Spanish life, yet capable of conceiving heroic strategies—to lay siege to a lake-girt city requiring the prefabrication of thirteen brigantines on the far side of the mountains, eight thousand carriers to transport the pieces, their reassembly in Texcoco, the digging of a canal and the deepening of the lake for their successful launching. And he was capable not only of the grand design but of the construction and maintenance of the precarious alliances, intimidations, and promised rewards necessary to implement it. In that extraordinary capacity to sustain a complex vision through the constant scanning and assessment of unstable factors, as in his passion and talent for control of self and others, Cortés was incomparable. (That concern for control might explain his inadequacies in combat: in the radically uncontrolled environment of battle, he had a tendency to lose his head.)

He was also distinguished by a peculiar recklessness in his faith. We know the Spaniards took trouble to maintain the signs of their faith even in the wilderness of Mexico; that bells marked the days with the obligatory prayers as they did in the villages of Spain; that the small supplies of wine and wafers for the Mass were cherished; that through the long nights in times of battle men stood patiently, waiting for the priests to hear their confessions, while the unofficial healer “Juan Catalan” moved softly about, signing the cross and muttering his prayers over

stiffening wounds. We know their faith identified the idols and the dismembered bodies they found in the temples as the pitiless work of a familiar Devil. We know they drew comfort in the worst circumstances of individual and group disaster from the ample space for misfortune in Christian cosmology: while God sits securely in His heaven, all manner of things can be wrong with His world. Those miserable men held for sacrifice in Texcoco after the Spanish expulsion who left their forlorn messages scratched on a white wall (“Here the unhappy Juan Yuste was held prisoner”) would through their misery be elevated to martyrdom.²⁰

Even against that ground Cortés’s faith was notably ardent, especially in his aggressive reaction to public manifestations of the enemy religion. In Cempoalla, with the natives cowed, he destroyed the existing idols, whitewashed the existing shrine, washed the existing attendants and cut their hair, dressed them in white, and taught these hastily refurbished priests to offer flowers and candles before an image of the Virgin. There is an intriguing elision of signs here. While the pagan attendants might have been clad suitably clerically, in long black robes like soutanes, with some hooded “like Dominicans,” they also had waist-long hair clotted with human blood, and stank of decaying human flesh. Nonetheless he assessed them as “priests,” and therefore fit to be entrusted with the Virgin’s shrine.²¹ Then having preached the doctrine “as well as any priest today,” in Díaz’s loyal opinion (filtered though it was through the halting tongues of two interpreters), he left daily supervision of the priests to an old crippled soldier assigned as hermit to the new shrine and Cortés moved on.²²

The Cempoallan assault was less than politic, being achieved at the sword’s point against the town on whose goodwill the little coastal fort of Vera Cruz would be most dependent. Cortés was not to be so reckless again, being restrained from too aggressive action by his chaplain and his captains, but throughout he appears to have been powerfully moved by a concern for the defense of the “honor” of the Christian god. It is worth remembering that for the entire process of the Conquest Cortés had no notion of the Spanish king’s response to any of his actions. Only in September of 1523, more than two years after the fall of Tenochtitlan, and four and a half years after the Spanish landfall, did he finally learn that he had been appointed captain general of New Spain. It is difficult to imagine the effect of that prolonged visceral uncertainty, and (especially for a man of Cortés’s temperament) of his crucial dependence on the machinations of men far away in Spain, quite beyond his control. Throughout the desperate vicissitudes of the campaign, as in the heroic isolation of his equivocal leadership, God was perhaps his least equivocal ally. That alliance required at best the removal of pagan idols and their replacement by Mary and the Cross, and at the least the Spaniards’ public worship of their Christian images, the public statement of the principles of the Christian faith, and the public denunciation of human sacrifice, these statements and denunciations preferably being made in the Indians’ most sacred places. Cortés’s inability to let well alone in matters religious appears to

have effected the final alienation of the Mexican priests, and their demand for the Spaniards' death or expulsion from their uneasy perch in Tenochtitlan.²³ Cortés's claim of his early, total, and unresisted transformation of Mexican religious life through the destruction of their major idols was almost certainly a lie. (He had to suppress any mention of Alvarado's massacre of the warrior dancers in the main temple precinct as the precipitating factor in the Mexican "revolt" as too damaging to his story, for the Mexican celebrants would have been dancing under the serene gaze of the Virgin.) But the lie, like his accommodation to the cannibalism of his Tlaxcalan allies, was a strategic necessity impatiently borne. With victory all obligations would be discharged, and God's honor vindicated.²⁴ That high sense of duty to his divine Lord and his courage in its pursuit must have impressed and comforted his men even as they strove to restrain him.

None of this undoubted flair makes Cortés the model of calculation, rationality, and control he is so often taken to be. There can be some doubt as to the efficacy of his acts of terror. It is true that after the "mutilated spies" episode the Tlaxcalans sued for peace and alliance, but as I will argue, routine acts of war in the European style were probably at least as destructive of Indian confidence of their ability to predict Spanish behavior as the most deliberate shock tactics.²⁵ The Spaniards' attack on the people of Cholula, the so-called "Cholula massacre," is a muddier affair. Cortés certainly knew the therapeutic effects of a good massacre on fighting men who have lived too long with fear, their sense of invincibility already badly dented by the Tlaxcalan clashes, and with the legendary warriors of Tenochtitlan, grown huge in imagination, still in prospect. As other leaders have discovered in other times, confidence returns when the invisible enemy is revealed as a screaming, bleeding, fleeing mass of humanity. But here Cortés was probably the unwitting agent of Tlaxcalan interests. Throughout the first phase honors in mutual manipulation between Spaniard and Indian would seem to be about even. The Cempoallan chief Cortés hoaxed into seizing Moctezoma's tax gatherers remained notably more afraid of Moctezoma in his far palace than of the hairy Spaniards at his elbow. Tricked into defiance of Moctezoma, he immediately tricked Cortés into leading four hundred Spaniards on a hot and futile march of fifteen miles in pursuit of phantom Mexican warriors in his own pursuit of a private feud, a deception that has been rather less remarked on.²⁶ There are other indications that hint at extensive native manipulations, guile being admired among Indians as much as it was among Spaniards, and Spanish dependence on Indian informants and translators was total. But they are indications only, given the relative opacity and ignorance of the Spanish sources as to what the Indians were up to. Here I am not concerned to demonstrate the natives to have been as great deceivers as the Spaniards, but simply to suggest we have no serious grounds for claiming they were not.

Cortés's political situation was paradoxically made easier by his status as rebel.

That saved him from the agonizing assessment of different courses of action: once gone from Cuba, in defiance of the governor, he could not turn back, save to certain dishonor and probable death. So we have the gambler's advance, with no secured lines back to the coast, no supplies, no reinforcements, the ships deliberately disabled on the beach to release the sailors for soldiering service and to persuade the faint-hearted against retreat. Beyond the beach lay Cuba, and an implacable enemy. The relentless march on Mexico impresses, until one asks just what Cortés intended once he had got there. We have the drive to the city, the seizing of Moctezoma—and then the agonizing wait by this unlikely Micawber for something to turn up, as the Spaniards, uncertainly tolerated guests, sat in the city, clutching the diminishing resource of Moctezoma's prestige as their only weapon. That "something" proved to be the Spanish punitive expedition, a couple of providential ships carrying gunpowder and a few reinforcements, and so a perilous way out of the impasse. Possibly Cortés had in mind a giant confidence trick: a slow process of securing and fortifying posts along the road to Vera Cruz and, then, with enough gold amassed, sending to the authorities in Hispaniola (bypassing Velázquez and Cuba) for ships, horses, and arms, which is the strategy he in fact followed after the retreat from Tenochtitlan.²⁷ It is nonetheless difficult (save in Cortés's magisterial telling of it) to read the performance as rational.²⁸

It is always tempting to credit people of the past with unnaturally clear and purposeful policies: like Clifford Geertz's peasant, we see the bullet holes in the fence and proceed to draw the bull's-eyes around them. The temptation is maximized with a Cortés, a man of singular energy and decision, intent on projecting a self-image of formidable control of self and circumstance. Yet that control had its abrupt limits. His tense self-mastery, sustained in face of damaging action by others, could collapse into tears or sullen rage when any part of his own controlling analysis was exposed as flawed, as with his fury against Moctezoma for his "refusal" to quell the uprising in the city after Alvarado's attack on the unarmed dancers.²⁹ He had banked all on Moctezoma being the absolute ruler he had taken him to be. He had seized him, threatened him, shackled him to establish his personal domination over him. But whatever its normal grounds and span, Moctezoma's capacity to command, which was his capacity to command deference, had begun to bleed away from his first encounter with Spaniards and their unmannerliness, as they gazed and gabbled at the sacred leader.³⁰ It bled faster as they seized his person. Durán's account of Moctezoma pictured in native chronicles as emerging shackled from his first meeting with Cortés is "objectively" wrong, but from the Indian perspective right: the Great Speaker in the power of outsiders, casually and brutally handled, was the Great Speaker no longer.³¹ Forced to attempt to calm his inflamed people, Moctezoma knew he could effect nothing; that his desacralization had been accomplished, first and unwittingly by

Cortés, then, presumably, by a ritual action concealed from us; and that a new Great Speaker had been chosen while the old still lived: a step unprecedented to my knowledge in Mexican history.

Cortés could not acknowledge Moctezoma's impotence. Retrospectively he was insistent that his policy had been sound and had been brought down only through the accident of the Mexican ruler's final unreliability. Certainly his persistence in its defense after its collapse in debacle points to a high personal investment: intelligence is no bar to self-deception. Nonetheless there must have been some relief at the explosive end to a deeply uncanny situation, where experience had offered no guide to action in a looking-glass world of yielding kings and arrogant underlings; of riddling speech, unreadable glances, opaque silences. The sudden collapse of the waiting game liberated him back into the world of decisions, calculated violence, the energetic practicalities of war—the heady fiction of a world malleable before individual will.

His essential genius lay in the depth of his conviction, and in his capacity to bring others to share it: to coax, bully, and bribe his men, dream-led, dream-fed, into making his own gambler's throw; to participate in his own desperate personal destiny. Bernal Díaz recorded one of Cortés's speeches at a singularly low point on the first march to the city. With numbers already dangerously depleted, the remaining men wounded, cold, frightened, the natives ferocious, Cortés is reported as promising his men not wealth, not salvation, but deathless historical fame.³² Again and again we see Cortés dare to cheat his followers in the distribution of loot and of "good-looking Indian women," but he never discounted the glory of their endeavors. Not the least factor in Cortés's hold over his men was his notary's gift for locating their situation and aspirations in reassuringly sonorous and legalistic terms: terms necessary to please the lawyers at home, who would finally judge their leader's case, but also essential for their own construction of an acceptable narrative out of problematical actions and equivocal experience. But he also lured them to acknowledge their most extreme fantasies; then he persuaded them, by his own enactment of them, that the fantasies were realizable.³³

So Cortés, his men regrouped, his strategies evolved, stood ready for the second phase of the attack. What he was to experience in the struggle to come was to challenge his view of himself and his capacities, of the Mexican Indian, and of his special relationship with his God.

II

Analysts, save for military historians, have overwhelmingly concentrated on the first phase of the Conquest, assuming the consummation of Spanish

victory to be merely a matter of applying a technological superiority: horsemen against pedestrian warriors, steel swords against wooden clubs, muskets and crossbows against bows and arrows and lances, cannon against ferocious courage. I would argue that it is only for the second phase that we have sufficiently solid evidence to allow a close analysis of how Spaniards and Indians made sense of each other, and so to track down issues that must remain will-o'-the-wisps for the first phase. I would also argue that the final conquest was a very close-run thing: a view in which the combatants on both sides, as it happens, would agree. After the Spanish ejection from Tenochtitlan the Mexicans remained heavily favored in things material, most particularly manpower, which more than redressed any imbalance in equipment. Spanish technology had its problems: the miseries of slithering or cold-cramped or foundering horses, wet powder, the brutal weight of the cannon, and always the desperate question of supply. Smallpox, introduced into Mexico by one of Narváez's men, had swept through the native population, but its ravages had presumably affected Spanish "allies" equally with the Mexicans.³⁴ The sides were approximately matched in knowledge: if Cortés was to profit from his familiarity with the fortifications and functioning of the lake city, the Mexicans at last knew the Spaniards as enemies, and were under the direction of a ruler liberated from the ambiguities that appear to have bedeviled them earlier.

We tend to have a *Lord of the Flies* view of battle: that in deadly combat the veils of "culture" are ripped away, and natural man confronts himself. But if combat is not quite as cultural as cricket, its brutalities are nonetheless rule-bound. Like cricket, it requires a sustained act of cooperation, with each side constructing the conditions in which both will operate, and so, where the struggle is between strangers, obliging a mutual "transmission of culture" of the shotgun variety. And because of its high intensities it promises to expose how one's own and other ways of acting and meaning are understood and responded to in crisis conditions, and what lessons about the other and about oneself can be learned in that intimate, involuntary, and most consequential communication.

The sources for the second phase are sufficiently solid. Given it is cultural assumptions we are after, equivocation in recollection and recording matter little. Cortés edits a debacle on the Tacuba causeway, where more than fifty Spaniards were taken alive through his own impetuosity, into a triumph of leadership in crisis; Díaz marvels at Spanish bravery under the tireless onslaughts of savages; both are agreed as to the vocabulary through which they understand, assess, and record battle behavior. Sahagún's informants, able to report only bitter hearsay and received myth on the obscure political struggles of the first phase, move to confident detail in their accounts of the struggle for the city, in which at least some of them appear to have fought, naming precise locations and particular warrior feats; revealing through both the structure and the descriptions of the

accounts their principles of battle. Those glimpses can be matched against admittedly fragmentary chronicles to yield the general contours of Indian battle behavior.

Here the usual caveats of overridealization apply. If all social rules are fictions, made “real” through being contested, denied, evaded, and recast as well as obeyed, “rules of war,” war being what it is, are honored most earnestly in the breach. But in the warrior societies of Central Mexico, where the battlefield held a central place in the imagination, with its protocols rehearsed and trained for in the ordinary routines of life, the gap between principle and practice was narrow. War, at least war as fought among the dominant peoples of Mexico, and at least ideally, was a sacred contest, the outcome unknown but preordained, revealing which city, which local deity, would rightfully dominate another.³⁵ Something like equal terms were therefore required: to prevail by mere numbers or by some piece of treachery would vitiate the significance of the contest. So important was this notion of fair testing that food and weapons were sent to the selected target city as part of the challenge, there being no virtue in defeating a weakened enemy.³⁶

The warriors typically met outside the city of the defenders. Should the attacking side prevail, the defenders abandoned the field and fled, and the victors swept unresisted into the city to fire the temple where the local deity had its place. That action marked victory in occurrence and record; the formal sign for conquest in the painted histories was a burning temple. Free pillage continued until the increasingly frantic pleas of the spokesmen for the defeated were heard, and terms of tribute set. Then the victors withdrew to their home city with their booty and their captives, including not only the warriors taken in the formal battle but “civilians” seized during the period of plunder. Their most significant captive was the image of the tutelary deity of the defeated city, to be held in the “god captive house” in Tenochtitlan. Defeat was bitter because it was a statement and judgment of inferiority of the defeated warriors, who had broken and run; a judgment the victorious warriors were only too ready to reinforce by savage mockery, and which was institutionalized by the imposition of tribute.³⁷

The duration of the decision remained problematic. Defeated towns paid their tribute as a regular decision against further hostilities, but remained independent, and usually notably disaffected, despite the conquering city’s conviction of the legitimacy of their supremacy. Many towns in the valley, whether allied or defeated or intimidated by the Mexicans, paid their token tribute, fought alongside the Mexicans in Mexican campaigns, and shared in the spoils, but they remained mindful of their humiliation and unreconciled to their subordination. Beyond the valley the benefits of empire were commonly smaller, the costs greater, and disaffection chronic. The monolithic “Aztec empire” is a European hallucination: in this atomistic polity, the units were held together by the tension

of mutual repulsion. (Therefore the ease with which Cortés could recruit “allies,” too often taken as a tribute to his silver tongue, and therefore the deep confusion attending his constant use of that meaning-drenched word *vassal* to describe the relationship of subject towns first to Tenochtitlan, and later to the Spanish crown.)

If war was a sacred duel between peoples, and so between the “tribal” gods of those peoples, battle was ideally a sacred duel between matched warriors: a contest in which the taking of a fitting captive for presentation to one’s own deity was a precise measure of one’s own valor, and one’s own fate. One prepared for this individual combat by song, paint, and adornment with the sacred war regalia. (To go “always prepared for battle” in the Spanish style was unintelligible: a man carrying arms was only potentially a warrior.) The great warrior, scarred, painted, plumed, wearing the record of his victories in his regalia, erupting from concealment or looming suddenly through the rising dust, then screaming his war cry, could make lesser men flee by the pure terror of his presence: warriors were practiced in projecting ferocity. His rightful, destined opponent was he who could master panic to stand and fight. There were maneuverings to “surprise” the enemy, and a fascination with ambush, but only as a device to confront more dramatically; to strike from hiding was unthinkable. At the outset of battle Indian arrows and darts flew thickly, but to weaken and draw blood, not to pierce fatally.³⁸ The obsidian-studded war club signaled warrior combat aims: the subduing of prestigious individual captives in single combat for presentation before the home deity.

In the desperation of the last stages of the battle for Tenochtitlan, the Mexican inhibition against battleground killing was somewhat reduced: Indian “allies” died, and Spaniards who could not be quickly subdued were killed, most often, as the Mexicans were careful to specify, and for reasons that will become clear, by having the backs of their heads beaten in. But the priority on the capture of significant antagonists remained. In other regards the Mexicans responded with flexibility to the challenges of siege warfare. They “read” Spanish tactics reasonably accurately: a Spanish assault on the freshwater aqueduct at Chapultepec was foreseen, and furiously, if fruitlessly, resisted. The brigantines, irresistible for their first appearance of the lake, were later lured into a carefully conceived ambush in which two were trapped. The horses’ vulnerability to uneven ground, to attack from below, their panic under hails of missiles, were all exploited effectively. The Mexicans borrowed Spanish weapons: Spanish swords lashed to poles or Spanish lances to disable the horses; even Spanish crossbows, after captive crossbowmen had been forced to show them how the machines worked.³⁹ It was their invention and tenacity that forced Cortés to the desperate remedy of leveling structures along the causeways and into the city to provide the Spaniards with the secure ground they needed to be effective. And they were alert to the possibilities of psychological warfare, capitalizing on the Spaniards’

peculiar dread of death by sacrifice and of the cannibalizing of the corpse.⁴⁰ On much they could be innovative. But on the most basic measure of man's worth, the taking alive of prestigious captives, they could not compromise.

That passion for captives meant that the moment when the opponent's nerve broke was helplessly compelling, an enemy in flight an irresistible lure. This pursuit reflex was sometimes exploited by native opponents as a slightly shabby trick. It provided Cortés with a standard tactic for a quick and sure crop of kills. Incurious as to the reason, he nonetheless noted and exploited Mexican unteachability: "Sometimes, as we were thus withdrawing and they pursued us so eagerly, the horsemen would pretend to be fleeing, and then suddenly would turn on them; we always took a dozen or so of the boldest. By these means and by the ambushes which we set for them, they were always much hurt; and certainly it was a remarkable sight for even when they well knew the harm they would receive from us as we withdrew, they still pursued us until we had left the city."⁴¹ That commitment bore heavily on outcomes. Had Indians been as uninhibited as Spaniards in their killing, the small Spanish group, with no secured source of replenishment, would soon have been whittled away. In battle after battle the Spaniards report the deaths of many Indians, with their own men suffering not fatalities but wounds, and fast-healing wounds at that: those flint and obsidian blades sliced clean. It preserved the life of Cortés: time and again the Spanish leader struggled in Indian hands, the prize in a disorderly tug of war, with men dying on each side in the furious struggle for possession, and each time the Spaniards prevailing. Were Cortés in our hands, we would knife him. Mexican warriors could not kill the enemy leader so casually: were he to die, it would be in the temple of Huitzilopochtli, and before his shrine.⁴²

If the measurable consequences of that insistence were obvious and damaging, there were others less obvious, but perhaps more significant. We have already noted the Spanish predilection for ambush as part of a wider preference for killing at least risk. Spaniards valued their crossbows and muskets for their capacity to pick off selected enemies well behind the line of engagement: as snipers, as we would say. The psychological demoralization attending those sudden, trivializing deaths of great men painted for war, but not yet engaged in combat, must have been formidable. (Were the victim actively engaged in battle, the matter was different. Then he died nobly; although pierced by a bolt or a ball from a distance, his blood flowed forth to feed the earth as a warrior's should.) But more than Indian deaths and demoralization were effected through these transactions. To inflict such deaths—at a distance, without putting one's own life in play—developed a Mexican reading of the character of the Spanish warrior.⁴³

Consider this episode, told by a one-time conquistador. Two Indian champions, stepping out from the mass of warriors, offered their formal challenge before a Spanish force. Cortés responded by ordering two horsemen to charge, their lances poised. One of the warriors, against all odds, contrived to sever a

horse's hooves, and then, as it crashed to the ground, slashed its neck. Cortés, seeing the risk to the unhorsed rider, had a cannon fired so that "all the Indians in the front ranks were killed and the others scattered." The two Spaniards recovered themselves and scuttled back to safety under the covering fire of muskets, crossbows, and the cannon.⁴⁴

For Cortés the individual challenge had been a histrionic preliminary flourish: he then proceeded to the serious work of using firepower to kill warriors, and to control more territory, which was what he took war to be about. Throughout, Spaniards measured success in terms of body counts, territory controlled, and evidence of decay in the morale of the "enemy," which included all warriors, actively engaged in battle or not, and all "civilians" too. Cortés casually informed the king of his dawn raids into sleeping villages and the slaughter of the inhabitants, men, women, and children, as they stumbled into the streets: these were necessary and conventional steps in the progressive control of terrain, and the progressive demoralization of opposition. To an Indian warrior, Cortés's riposte to the Indian champions' challenge was shameful, with only the horses, putting themselves within reach of the opponents' weapons, emerging with any credit. Cortés's descents on villages are reported in tones of breathless incredulity.⁴⁵

There is in the *Florentine Codex* an exquisitely painful, detailed description of the Spaniards' attack on the unarmed warrior dancers at the temple festival, the slaughter that triggered the Mexican "uprising" of May 1520. The first victim was a drummer: his hands were severed, then his neck. The account continues: "Of some they slashed open their backs: then their entrails gushed out. Of some they cut their heads to pieces. . . . Some they struck on the shoulder; they split openings. They broke openings in their bodies."⁴⁶ And so it goes on. How ought we interpret this? It was not, I think, recorded as a horror story, or only as a horror story. The account is sufficiently careful as to precise detail and sequence to suggest its construction close after the event, in an attempt to identify the pattern, and so to discover the sense, in the Spaniards' cuttings and slashings. (This was the first view the Mexicans had of Spanish swords at work.) The Mexicans had very precise rules about violent assaults on the body, as the range of their sacrificial rituals makes clear, but the notion of a "preemptive massacre" of warriors was not in their vocabulary.

Such baffling actions, much more than any deliberately riddling policy, worked to keep Indians off balance. To return to an early celebrated moment of mystification by Cortés, the display of the cannon to impress the Mexican envoys on the coast with the killing power of Spanish weapons: the men who carried the tale back reported the thunderous sound, the smoke, the fire, the foul smell—and that the shot had "dissolved" a mountain, and "pulverised" a tree.⁴⁷ It is highly doubtful that the native watchers took the intended point of the display, that this was a weapon of war for use against human flesh. It was not a conceivable

weapon for warriors. So it must have appeared (as it is in fact reported) as a gratuitous assault upon nature: a scrambled lesson indeed. Mexican warriors learned, with experience, not to leap and shout and display when faced with cannon fire and crossbows, but to weave and duck, as the shield canoes learned to zigzag to avoid the cannon shot from the brigantines, so that with time the carnage was less.⁴⁸ But they also learned contempt for men who were prepared to kill indiscriminately, combatants and noncombatants alike, and at a secure distance, without putting their own lives in play.

What of Spanish horses, that other key element in Cortés's mystification program? We have early evidence of swift and effective warrior response to these exotics, and of a fine experimental attitude to verifying their nature. A small group of Tlaxcalan warriors having their first sight of horses and horsemen managed to kill two horses and to wound three others before the Spaniards got the upper hand.⁴⁹ In the next engagement a squad of Indians made a concerted and clearly deliberate attack on a horse, allowing the rider, although badly wounded, to escape, while they killed his mount and carted the body from the field. Bernal Díaz later recorded that the carcass was cut into pieces and distributed through the towns of Tlaxcala, presumably to demonstrate the horse's carnal nature. (They reserved the horseshoes, as he sourly recalled, to offer to their idols, along with "the Flemish hat, and the two letters we had sent them offering peace.")⁵⁰

The distribution of the pieces of the horse's flesh possibly held further implications. Indians were in no doubt that horses were animals. But that did not reduce them, as it did for Spaniards, to brute beasts, unwitting, unthinking servants of the lords of creation. Indians had a different understanding of how animals signified. It was no vague aesthetic inclination that led the greatest warrior orders to mimic the eagle and the jaguar in their dress and conduct: those were creatures of power, exemplary of the purest warrior spirit. The eagle, slowly turning close to the sun; then the scream, the stoop, the strike; the jaguar, announcing its presence with the coughing rumble of thunder, erupting from the dappled darkness to make its kill: these provided unmatched models for human emulation. That horses should appear ready to kill men was unremarkable. The ferocity and courage of these creatures, who raced into the close zone of combat, facing the clubs and swords; who plunged and screamed, whose eyes rolled, whose saliva flew (for the Mexicans saliva signified anger) marked them as agents in the battle action, as had the charge of the two horses against their Indian challengers. In the Mexican lexicon of battle, the horses excelled their masters. They were not equal in value as offerings—captured Spanish swords lashed to long poles were typically used against horses to disembowel or hamstring them, but not against their riders, judged too valuable to damage so deeply—but their valor was recognized. When the besieged Mexicans won a major victory over Cortés's men on the Tacuba causeway, they displayed the heads of the sacrificed

Spaniards on the skull rack in the usual way, and below them they skewered the heads of the four horses taken in the same melee.⁵¹

There is one small moment in which we see these contrary understandings held in counterpoise. During a skirmish in the city some Spanish horsemen emerging from an unsprung ambush collided, a Spaniard falling from his mare. Panicky, the riderless horse “rushed straight at the enemy, who shot at and wounded her with arrows; whereupon, seeing how badly she was being treated, she returned to us,” Cortés reported, but “so badly wounded that she died that night.” He continued: “Although we were much grieved by her loss, for our lives were dependent on the horses, we were pleased she had not perished at the hands of the enemy, for their joy at having captured her would have exceeded the grief caused by the death of their companions.”⁵²

For Cortés the mare was an animal, responding as an animal: disoriented, then fleeing from pain. Her fate had symbolic importance only through her association with the Spaniards. For the Indians the mare breaking out from the knot of Spaniards, rushing directly and alone toward enemy warriors—white-eyed, ferocity incarnate—was accorded the warrior’s reception of a flight of arrows. Her reversal, her flight back to her friends probably signaled a small Indian victory, as her capture and death among enemies would have signaled to the Spaniards, at a more remote level, a small Spanish defeat. That doomed mare wheeling and turning in the desperate margin between different armies and different systems of understanding provides a sufficiently poignant metaphor for the themes I have been pursuing.

Spanish “difference” found its clearest expression in their final strategy for the reduction of the imperial city. Cortés had hoped to intimidate the Mexicans sufficiently by his steady reduction of the towns around the lake, by his histrionic acts of violence, and by the exemplary cruelty with which resistance was punished, to bring them to treat.⁵³ Example-at-a-distance in that mosaic of rival cities could have no relevance for the Mexicans—if all others quailed, they would not—so the Spaniards resorted, as Díaz put it, to “a new kind of warfare.” Siege was the quintessential European strategy: an economical design to exert maximum pressure on whole populations without active engagement, delivering control over people and place at least cost. If Cortés’s own precarious position led him to increase that pressure by military sorties, his crucial weapon was want.

For the Mexicans, siege was the antithesis of war. They knew of encircling cities to persuade unwilling warriors to come out, and of destroying them too, when insult required it. They had sought to burn the Spaniards out of their quarters in Tenochtitlan, to force them to fight after their massacre of the warrior dancers.⁵⁴ But the deliberate and systematic weakening of opposition before engagement, and the deliberate implication of noncombatants in the contest, had no part in their experience.

As the siege continued the signs of Mexican contempt multiplied. Mexican warriors continued to seek face-to-face combat with these most unsatisfactory opponents, who skulked and refused battle, who clung together in tight bands behind their cannon, who fled without shame. When elite warriors, swept in by canoe, at last had the chance to engage the Spaniards closely, the Spaniards “turned their backs, they fled,” with the Mexicans in pursuit. They abandoned a cannon in one of their pell-mell flights, positioned with unconscious irony on the gladiatorial stone on which the greatest enemy warriors had given their final display of fighting prowess; the Mexicans worried and dragged it along to the canal and dropped it into the water.⁵⁵ Indian warriors were careful, when they had to kill rather than capture Spaniards in battle, to deny them an honorable warrior’s death, dispatching them by beating in the back of their heads, the death reserved for criminals in Tenochtitlan.⁵⁶ And the Spaniards captured after the debacle on the Tacuba causeway were stripped of all their battle equipment, their armor, their clothing: only then, when they were naked, and reduced to “slaves,” did the Mexicans kill them.⁵⁷

What does it matter, in the long run, that Mexican warriors admired Spanish horses and despised Spanish warriors? To discover how it bore on events we need to look briefly at Indian notions of “fate” and time. We can compare the structure of the Indian and Spanish accounts of the final battles, to discover the explanatory strategies implied in that structuring. The Spanish versions present the struggles along the causeways, the narrow victories, the coups, the strokes of luck, the acts of daring on each side. Through the tracing of an intricate sequence of action we follow the movement of the advantage, first one way, then the other. God is at the Spaniards’ shoulders, but only to lend power to their strong arms, or to tip an already tilting balance. Through selection and sequence of significant events we have the familiar, powerful, cumulative explanation through the narrative form.

The Indian accounts look superficially similar. There are episodes, and they are offered serially: descriptions of group or individual feats, of contemptible Spanish actions. But these are discrete events, moments to be memorialized, with time no more than the thread on which they are strung: there is no cumulative effect, no significance in sequence. Nor is there any implication that the human actions described bore on outcomes. The fact that defeat was suffered declares it to have been inevitable.

The Mexicans, like Mesoamericans generally, conceptualized time as multi-dimensional and eternally recurrent, and men attempted to comprehend its complex movement through the use of intermeshing time counts, which completed their complex permutations over fifty-two years, a *Xiuhmolpilli* or “Bundle of Years.” (Note how that word *bundle* denies any significance to mere adjacency.) Under such a system, each “day” was not the outcome of the days preceding it: it had its own character, indicated by its complex name derived from the time counts, and was unique within its Bundle of Years. It also was more closely

connected with the similarly named days that had occurred in every preceding Bundle of Years than with those clustered about it in its own bundle. Thus the particular contingent event was to be understood as unfolding in a dynamic process modeled by some past situation. But just as those anomalous events presumably noted before the Spanish advent could be categorized as “omens” and their portent identified only retrospectively, the identification of the recurrent in the apparently contingent was very much an after-the-event diagnosis, not an anterior paralyzing certitude. The essential character of the controlling time manifested itself in subtle ways, largely masked from human eyes. Events remained problematical in their experiencing, with innovation and desperate effort neither precluded nor inhibited. In human experience outcomes remained contingent until manifested.⁵⁸

Nonetheless, some few events were accorded special status, being recognized as signs of the foretold. At a place called Otumba the Spaniards, limping away from Tenochtitlan after the expulsion of the Noche Triste, were confronted by a sea of Mexican warriors: a sea that evaporated when Cortés and his horsemen drove through to strike down the battle leader, and to seize his fallen banner. The “battle of Otumba” mattered, being the best chance from our perspective for the Mexicans to finish off the Spaniards at their most vulnerable. The Spanish accounts identify the striking down of the commander as decisive, but while the fall of a leader was ominous (and an attack on a leader not actively engaged in combat disreputable) it was the taking of the banner that signified. Our initial temptation is to elide this with the familiar emotional attachment of a body of fighting men to its colors: to recall the desperate struggles over shreds of silk at Waterloo; the dour passion of a Roman legion in pursuit of its lost Eagle and honor.⁵⁹ There might have been some of this in the Indian case. But the taking of a banner was to Indians less a blow to collective pride than a statement: a sign that the battle was to go, indeed had gone, against them.

Cortés reported his determined attack on “the great cue,” the pyramid of Huitzilopochtli, during the first struggle in Tenochtitlan, claiming that after three hours of struggle he cleared the temple of Indians and put it to the torch. He also noted that the capture of the pyramid “so much damaged their confidence that they began to weaken greatly on all sides”: the sign noted.⁶⁰ Had the capture been as decisive as Cortés claims, we could expect more than “weakening,” but just how complete it was remains problematical: in Díaz’s account the Spaniards, having fired the shrine, were then tumbled back down the steps. The event clearly mattered to the Indians, Díaz remarking how often he had seen that particular battle pictured in later Indian accounts. He thought this was because the Indians took the Spanish assault as a very heroic thing, as they were represented as “much wounded and running with blood with many dead in the pictures they made of the setting afire of the temple, with the many warriors guarding it.”⁶¹ My thought is that what the representations sought to make clear was that despite the firing

of the shrine the Spaniards had not achieved the uncontested mastery which would indeed have constituted and marked "victory." The vigor of the attack must have made even more urgent the putting of the temple to rights after the Spaniards' expulsion—that period when we, with our notions of strategy, wait in vain for the Mexicans to pursue the weakened Spaniards and finish them off, while they prepared instead for the set-piece battle at Otumba, "read" the message of the taking of the banner, and yielded the day.

Deep into the second phase of the conquest, Spanish banner carriers remained special targets, being subjected to such ferocious attack that "a new one was needed every day."⁶² But the Mexicans had come to pay less heed to signs, because they had discovered that Spaniards ignored them. In the course of the causeway victory a major Spanish banner had actually been taken: "The warriors from Tlatelolco captured it in the place known today as San Martín." But while the warrior who had seized the banner was carefully memorialized, "They were scornful of their prize and considered it of little importance." Sahagún's informants flatly record that the Spaniards "just kept on fighting."⁶³ Ignoring signs of defeat, the Spaniards were equally careless of signs of victory. When a Spanish contingent penetrated the marketplace of Tlatelolco, where the Mexicans had taken their last refuge, they managed to fight their way to the top of the main pyramid, to set the shrines on fire and plant their banners before they were forced to withdraw. ("The common people began to wail, expecting the looting to begin," but the warriors, seasoned in Spanish ways, had no such expectation. They knew the fighting would go on: these enemies were as blind to signs as they were deaf to decency.) Next day from his own encampment Cortés was puzzled to see the fires still burning unquenched, the banners still in place. The Mexicans would respect the signs and leave them to stand, even if the barbarians did not, even if the signs had lost efficacy, even if the rules of war were in abeyance.

John Keegan has characterized battle as "essentially a moral conflict [requiring] a mutual and sustained act of will between two contending parties, and, if it is to result in a decision, the moral collapse of one of them."⁶⁴ Paradoxically, that mutuality is most essential at the point of disengagement. To "surrender," to acquiesce in defeat and concede victory, is a complex business, at once a redefinition of self and one's range of effective action, and a redefinition of one's relationship with the erstwhile enemy. Those redefinitions have somehow to be acknowledged by the opponent. Where the indicators that mark defeat and so allow "moral collapse" to occur are not acknowledged, neither victory nor defeat is possible, and we approach a sinister zone in which there can be no resolution save death.⁶⁵

That, I think, came to be the case in Mexico. "Signs" are equivocal things, especially when they point not to a temporary submission of uncertain duration, but to the end of a people's imperial domination. The precarious edifice of "empire" had not survived the introduction of the wild card of the Spaniards—

men without a city, and so outside the central plays of power and punishment. Its collapse had been proclaimed by Quauhtemoc, "He Who Falls Like an Eagle," who had replaced the dead Cuitlahuac as Great Speaker, when he offered a general "remission" of tribute for a year in return for aid against the Spaniards: tribute is a product of the power to exact it. In the final battles the Mexicans were fighting for the integrity of their city, as so many others had fought before. They knew the settled hatred of the Tlaxcalans and the envy of other peoples. Perhaps even against indigenous enemies they might have fought on, in face of the signs of defeat. Against the Spaniards, cowardly opportunists impossible to trust, who disdained the signs of victory and defeat, they lacked any alternative.⁶⁶ The Mexicans continued to resist.

The chronicles record the stories of heroic deeds: of warriors scattering the Spaniards before them, of the great victory over Cortés's troop, with terrified Spaniards reeling "like drunken men," and fifty-three taken for sacrifice.⁶⁷ Spanish accounts tell us that the victory that had given so many captives to the Mexican war god was taken at the time to indicate the likelihood of a final Mexican victory, hopefully prophesied by the priests as coming within eight days. (The Indian records do not waste time on false inferences, misunderstood omens.) Cortés's allies, respectful of signs, accordingly removed themselves for the duration. But the days passed, the decisive victory did not come, and the macabre dance continued.⁶⁸

And all the while, as individual warriors found their individual glory, the city was dying: starving, thirsting, choking on its own dead. This slow strangling is referred to as if quite separate from the battle, as in the Mexican mind it presumably was. Another brief glory occurred, when Eagle and Ocelot warriors, men from the two highest military orders, were silently poled in disguised canoes to where they could leap among looting native allies, spreading lethal panic among them. But still the remorseless pressure went on: "They indeed wound all around us, they were wrapped around us, no one could go anywhere. . . . Indeed many died in the press."⁶⁹

The Mexicans made their endgame play. Here the augury component, always present in combat, is manifest. Quauhtemoc and his leading advisers selected a great warrior, clad him in the array of Quetzal Owl, the combat regalia of the great Ahuitzotl, who had ruled before the despised Moctezoma, and armed him with the flint-tipped darts of Huitzilopochtli; thus he became, as they said, "one of the number of the Mexicans' rulers." He was sent forth to cast his darts against the enemy: should the darts twice strike their mark, the Mexicans would prevail. Magnificent in his spreading quetzal plumes, with his four attendants, Quetzal Owl entered the battle. For a time they could follow his movements among the enemy: reclaiming stolen gold and quetzal plumes, taking three captives, or so they thought. Then he dropped from a terrace, and out of sight. The Spaniards record nothing of this exemplary combat.

After that ambiguous sign another day passed with no action: the Spaniards, disreputable to the end, “only lay still; they lay looking at the common folk.”⁷⁰ On the next evening a great “bloodstone,” a blazing coal of light, flared through the heavens, to whirl around the devastated city, then to vanish in the middle of the lake. No Spaniard saw the comet of fire that marked the end of imperial Tenochtitlan. Perhaps no Indian saw it either. But they knew great events must be attended by signs, and that there must have been a sign. In the morning Quauhtemoc, having taken counsel with his lords, abandoned the city. He was captured in the course of his escape, to be brought before Cortés. Only then did his people leave their ruined city.⁷¹

So the Mexicans submitted to their fate, when that fate was manifest. A certain arrangement of things had been declared terminated: the period of Mexican domination and the primacy of Tenochtitlan was over.

A particular section of the *Anales de Tlatelolco* is often cited to demonstrate the completeness of the obliteration of a way of life and a way of thought. It runs:

Broken spears lie in the roads;
we have torn our hair in our grief.
The houses are roofless now, and their walls
are red with blood.

Worms are swarming in the streets and plazas,
and the walls are splattered with gore.
The water has turned red, as if it were dyed,
and when we drink it,
it has the taste of brine.

We have pounded our hands in despair
against the adobe walls,
for our inheritance, our city, is lost and dead.
The shields of our warriors were its defense,
but they could not save it.⁷²

And so it continues. But what is notable here (apart from the poetic power) is that the “lament” was a traditional form, maintaining itself after the defeat, and so locating that defeat and rendering it intelligible by assaying it in the traditional mode. If the Mexican vision of empire was finished, the people, and their sense of distinctiveness as a people, were not. The great idols in the temples had been smuggled out of the city by their traditional custodians before its fall, and sent toward Tula, a retracing of their earlier migration route. A cyclical view of time has its comforts. And if the “Quetzalcoatl returned” story as presented in the *Florentine Codex* is a post-Conquest imposition, as is likely, and if indeed it does move away from traditional native ways of accounting for human action in the world, with Moctezoma’s conduct described not merely to memorialize his shame but in order to explain the outcome of defeat, as I believe it does—then its fab-

rication points to a concern for the construction of a viable and satisfying public history for the conquered, an emollient myth, generated in part from within the European epistemological system to encompass the catastrophe of Mexican defeat.

III

Now, at last, for the consequences.

There is something appealing to our sense of irony in the notion that the Spaniards' heroic deeds, as they saw them, were judged shameful by the Mexican warriors. But attitudes of losers have little historical resonance. Attitudes of victors do. Here I want to pursue an impression. Anyone who has worked on the history of Mexico—I suspect the case is the same for much of Latin America, but I cannot speak for that—is painfully impressed by the apparent incorrigibility of the division between the aboriginal inhabitants and the incomers, despite the domestic proximity of their lives, and by the chronic durability, whatever the form of government, whatever its public rhetoric, of systemic social injustice grounded in that division. In Mexico I am persuaded the terms of the relationship between the incoming and the indigenous peoples were set very early. A line of reforming sixteenth-century missionaries and upright judges were baffled as much as outraged by what they saw as the wantonness of Spanish maltreatment of Indians: cruelties indulged in the face of self-interest. Spaniards had been notoriously brutal in the Caribbean islands, where the indigenes were at too simple a level of social organization to survive Spanish endeavors to exploit them. Yet in their first encounters with the peoples of Mexico the Spaniards had declared themselves profoundly impressed. Cortés's co-venture with the Tlaxcalans seems to have involved genuine cooperation, a reasonably developed notion of mutuality, and (not to be sentimental) some affection between individuals.⁷³

Then something happened, a crucial break of sympathy. It is always difficult to argue that things could have been other than they turn out to be, especially in the political maelstrom of post-Conquest Mexico.⁷⁴ But despite the continuing deftness of his political maneuverings in the aftermath of the Conquest, I have a sense of Cortés relinquishing both his control over the shaping of Spanish-Indian relations and his naturally conservationist policies—a conservationism based in pragmatism rather than humanity, but effective for all that—earlier and more easily than his previous conduct would have us expect. His removal to Honduras in October 1524 was an extraordinary abdication of the official authority he had sought so long and had worn only for a year, and marked the end of his effective role in “New Spain.” We tend to like our heroes, whether villains or saints or Machiavels, to be all of a piece: unchanging, untinged emblems of whatever qualities we assign them, impervious to experience. But there are indicators in

his writings as in his actions that Cortés was changed by his experience in Mexico, and that the change had to do with the obstinate, and to Spanish eyes profoundly “irrational,” refusal or incapacity of the Mexicans to submit.

Cortés was sensitive to the physical beauty and social complexity of the great city of Tenochtitlan. It was the dream of the city that had fired his ambition, and provided the focus for all his actions. We must remember that Tenochtitlan was a marvel, eclipsing all other cities in Mesoamerica (and Europe) in size, elegance, order, and magnificence of spectacle. Cortés had contrived the complex, difficult strategy of the blockade, and pursued the mammoth task of implementing it, in order to preserve the city by demonstrating the futility of resistance. Then he watched the slow struggle back and forth along the causeways, as the defenders, careless of their own lives, took back by night what had been so painfully won by day. He moved his men onto the causeways, into physical misery and constant danger, and then was forced to undertake the systematic destruction of the structures along the causeways to secure the yards won, a perilous prolongation of a task already long enough.

So, with patience, access to the city was gained, and the noose of famine tightened. From that point victory was in Spanish (and our) terms inevitable. Yet still the resistance continued, taking advantage of every corner and rooftop. So the work of demolition went on. At last, from the top of a great pyramid Cortés could see that the Spaniards had won seven-eighths of what had once been the city, with the remaining people crammed into a corner where the houses were built out over the water. Starvation was so extreme that even roots and bark had been gnawed, with the survivors tottering shadows, but shadows who still resisted.⁷⁵

Cortés’s frustration in being forced to destroy the city he had so much wanted to capture intact is manifest, as is his bewilderment at the tenacity of so futile a resistance: “As we had entered the city from our camp two or three days in succession, besides the three or four previous attacks, and had always been victorious, killing with crossbow, arquebus and field gun an infinite number of the enemy, we each day expected them to sue for peace, which we desired as much as our own salvation; but nothing we could do could induce them to it.” After another largely unresisted thrust into the city, “We could not but be saddened by their determination to die.”⁷⁶

He had no stomach to attack again. Instead he made a final resort to terror. Not to the terror of mass killings: that weapon had long lost its efficacy. He constructed a war-engine, an intimidatory piece of European technology that had the advantage of not requiring gunpowder: the marvelous catapult. It was a matter of some labor over three or four days, of lime and stone and wood, then the great cords, and the stones big as demijohns. It was aimed, as a native account bleakly recorded, to “stone the common folk.” It failed to work, the stone dribbling feebly from the sling, so still the labor of forcing surrender remained.⁷⁷

Four days patient waiting, four days further into starvation, and the Span-

iards entered the city again. Again they encountered ghostly figures, of women and gaunt children, and saw the warriors still stationed on the rooftops, but silent now, and unarmed, close-wrapped in their cloaks. And still the fruitless pretense at negotiation, the dumb, obdurate resistance.

Cortés attacked, killing “more than twelve thousand,” as he estimated. Another meeting with some of the lords, and again they refused any terms save a swift death. Cortés exhausted his famous eloquence: “I said many things to persuade them to surrender but all to no avail, although we showed them more signs of peace than have ever been shown to a vanquished people for we, by the grace of our Lord, were now the victors.”⁷⁸ He released a captured noble, charging him to urge surrender: the only response was a sudden, desperate attack, and more Indians dead. He had a platform set up in the market square of Tlatelolco, ready for the ceremony of submission, with food prepared for the feast that should mark such a moment: still he clung to the European fiction of two rulers meeting in shared understanding for the transference of an empire. There was no response.

Two days more, and Cortés unleashed the allies. There followed a massacre, of men who no longer had arrows, javelins, or stones; of women and children stumbling and falling on the bodies of their own dead. Cortés thought forty thousand might have died or been taken on that day. The next day he had three heavy guns taken into the city. As he explained to his distant king, the enemy, being now “so massed together that they had no room to turn around, might crush us as we attacked, without actually fighting. I wished, therefore, to do them some harm with the guns, and so induce them to come out to meet us.”⁷⁹ He had also posted the brigantines to penetrate between the houses to the interior lake where the last of the Mexican canoes were clustered. With the firing of the guns the final action began. The city was now a stinking desolation of heaped and rotting bodies, of starving men, women, and children crawling among them or struggling in the water. Quauhtemoc was taken in his canoe, and at last brought before Cortés, to make his request for death, and the survivors began to file out, these once immaculate people “so thin, sallow, dirty and stinking that it was pitiful to see them.”⁸⁰

Cortés had invoked one pragmatic reason for holding his hand in the taking of Tenochtitlan: if the Spaniards attempted to storm the city the Mexicans would throw all their riches into the water, or would be plundered by the allies, so some of the profit would be lost. His perturbation went, I think, very much deeper. His earlier battle narratives exemplify those splendid Caesarian simplicities identified by John Keegan: disjunctive movement, uniformity of behavior, simplified characterization, and simplified motivation.⁸¹ That style of high control, of magisterial grasp, falters when he must justify his own defeat on the causeway, which cost so many Spanish lives. It then recovers itself briefly, to fracture, finally and permanently, for the last stages of his account of the battle for Tenochtitlan. The sol-

dierly narrative loses its fine onward drive as he deploys more and more detail to demonstrate the purposefulness of his own action, and frets more and more over native mood and intentions.⁸²

Cortés's strategy in the world had been to treat all men, Indians and Spaniards alike, as manipulable. That sturdy denial of the problem of otherness, usually so profitable, had here been proved bankrupt. He had also been forced into parodying his earlier and once successful strategies. His use of European equipment to terrify had produced the elaborate threat of the catapult, then its farcical failure. "Standard" battle procedures—terror-raiding of villages, exemplary massacres—took on an unfamiliar aspect when the end those means were designed to effect proved phantasmal, when killing did not lead to panic and pleas for terms, but a silent pressing on to death. Even the matter of firing a cannon must have taken on a new significance: to use cannon to clear a contended street or causeway or to disperse massed warriors was one thing; to use cannon to break up a huddled mass of exhausted human misery was very much another. It is possible that as he ran through his degraded routine of stratagems in those last days Cortés was brought to glimpse something of the Indian view of the nature and quality of the Spanish warrior.

His privilege as victor was to survey the surreal devastation of the city that had been the glittering prize and magnificent justification for his insubordination, and for the desperate struggles and sufferings over two long years, now reduced by perverse, obdurate resistance to befouled rubble, its once magnificent lords, its whole splendid hierarchy, to undifferentiated human wreckage. That resistance had been at once "irrational," yet chillingly deliberate.

He had seen, too, the phobic cruelty of the "allies," most especially the Tlaxcalans. He had known that cruelty before, and had used and profited from it. But on that last day of killing they had killed and killed amid a wailing of women and children so terrible "that there was not one man amongst us whose heart did not bleed at the sound."⁸³

Those luxurious killings are at odds with what I have claimed to be the protocols of Indian combat. Tlaxcalan warrior-to-warrior performance had been conventional enough: we glimpse them exchanging insults and dueling with Mexican warriors; quarreling over the place of danger while escorting the brigantines over the mountains. It is possible that they came to judge the inadequacies of Spanish battle performance with the leniency of increased knowledge, or (more plausibly) that they thought Spanish delicts none of their concern. During the conquest process they performed as co-venturers with the Spaniards, associates in no way subordinate and, given their greater investment, probably defining themselves as the senior partners in the association.⁸⁴ It is in their attitude to Tenochtitlan and its inhabitants that their behavior appears anomalous. Cortés recalled that when he took the decision to raze the buildings of the city, a dauntingly laborious project, the Tlaxcalans were jubilant. All non-Mexicans would

have longed to plunder Tenochtitlan, had they dared, and all had scores to settle against Mexican arrogance. No victor would have left the city intact, built as it was as the testament of the Mexican right to rule. Nonetheless the Tlaxcalan taste for destruction was extravagant. Only the Tlaxcalans were relentless in their hatred of the Mexicans: other cities waited and watched through the long struggle for the causeways, “reading the signs” in the ebb and flow of what we would call the fortunes of battle, moving, deft as dancers, in and out of alliance. Only the Tlaxcalans sought neither loot nor captives as they surged into Tenochtitlan, but to kill. Where is the exemption of nonwarriors, the passion for personal captures, for the limited aims of tribute exaction, in those killings? Is this a liberation into ecstatic violence after a painfully protracted and frustrating struggle?

Licensed massacres are unhappily unremarkable, but there are more particular explanations. The Tlaxcalans had signaled their peculiar hatred of the Mexicans early: on the Spaniards’ first departure for the Mexican city the Tlaxcalans, warning of chronic Mexican treachery, offered chillingly explicit advice: “In fighting the Mexicans, they said, we should kill all we could, leaving no one alive: neither the young, lest they should bear arms again, nor the old, lest they give counsel.”⁸⁵ Their long-term exclusion from the play of Mexican alliance politics, coupled with the massive power of the Mexicans, liberated them as underdogs from “normal” constraints. While other formidable Nahuá-speaking cities and provinces were recruited into the empire, the Tlaxcalans were kept out. I have come to see their exclusion, their role as outsiders, not as an unfortunate quirk but a structural requirement, a necessary corollary, of the kind of empire it was. Asked whether he could defeat the Tlaxcalans if he so chose, Moctezoma was said to have replied that he could, but preferred to have an enemy against whom to test his warriors and to secure high-quality victims. I believe him.⁸⁶ How else, with campaigns increasingly fought far afield, to make real the rhetoric, the high glamor, the authenticity of risk of warriorhood? The overriding metaphor of Mexican life was contest, and the political fantasy of destined dominance required a plausible antagonist/victim. That essential role had devolved onto the Tlaxcalans. They made absolutely no obeisance to the Mexican view of themselves, and they were proximate enemies, penned like gamecocks in a coop—until the Spaniards came. Those wandering men without a city could not be pursued, subdued, or incorporated: they could only be destroyed, and that Cortés’s conservationist talents and the Mexican cultural predilection for capturing significant enemies alive combined to preclude. The house of cards structure of the wider empire had been rendered unstable by their mere presence. Then they challenged the mutuality of interest bonding the valley city states, so opening Tenochtitlan to assault, and the Tlaxcalans took their chance to destroy people and city together.⁸⁷

Writing later of that day of killing, and what he saw his Indian “friends” do there, Cortés was brought to make one of his very rare general statements: “No

race, however savage, has ever practiced such fierce and unnatural cruelty as the natives of these parts.”⁸⁸ “Unnatural” cruelty. Against nature. A heavily freighted term in early sixteenth-century Spain. He had described Moctezoma as a “barbarian lord” in his earlier letter, but he had done so in the course of an elaborate description of the Mexican city and its complex workings that demonstrated the Mexican ruler was a “barbarian” of a most rare and civilized kind. I think his view was changed by the experience of the siege. There he saw “fierce and unnatural cruelty,” an unnatural indifference to suffering, an unnatural indifference to death: a terrifying, terminal demonstration of “otherness,” and of its practical and cognitive unmanageability. Todorov has called Cortés a master in human communication. Here the master had found his limits.⁸⁹

In the aftermath of the fall of the city the Spaniards expressed their own cruelties. There was a phobic edge in some of the things done, especially against those men most obviously the custodians of the indigenous culture. There was a special death for priests like the Keeper of the Black House in Tenochtitlan, and other wise men who came from Texcoco of their own free will, bearing their painted books. They were torn apart by dogs.⁹⁰

I do not suggest that any special explanation is required for Spanish or any other conquerors’ brutalities. All I would claim at the end is that in the long and terrible conversation of war, despite the apparent mutual intelligibility of move and counter-move, as in the trap and ambush game built around the brigantines, that final nontranslatability of the vocabulary of battle and its modes of termination divided Spaniard from Indian in new and decisive ways. If for Indian warriors the lesson that their opponents were barbarians was learned early, for Spaniards, and for Cortés, that lesson was learned most deeply only in the final stages, where the Mexicans revealed themselves as unamenable to “natural” reason, and so unamenable to the routines of management of one’s fellow men. Once that sense of unassuageable otherness has been established, the outlook is bleak indeed.

Notes

An earlier version of this paper, “Cortés, Signs and the Conquest of Mexico,” has been published in Anthony Grafton, ed., *Culture and Communication in Early Modern Europe* (Philadelphia, 1990). It was first presented before the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Research, Princeton University.

1. Anthony Padgen notes several editions of Hernando Cortés’s letters to his emperor in five languages between 1522 and 1525; *The Fall of Natural Man* (Cambridge, 1982), 58.
2. *Ibid.*, 117, referring to Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda’s “Democrates secundus sive de justis causis belli apud Indos.”

3. S. L. Cline, "Revisionist Conquest History: Sahagún's Revised Book XII," in J. Jorge Klor de Alva, H. B. Nicholson, and Eloise Quiñones Keber, eds., *The Work of Bernardino de Sahagún, Pioneer Ethnographer of Sixteenth-Century Aztec Mexico* (Albany, N.Y., 1988). The claim as to the providential, indeed miraculous character of the Spanish achievement was not novel, having been made earlier by Fray Toribio de Motolinía in his *History of the Indians of New Spain* (1541), trans. Elizabeth Andros Foster (New York, 1950). It infuses Franciscan attitudes as described by John Leddy Phelan, *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, 1970).
4. W. H. Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico and the History of the Conquest of Peru* (New York, n.d.).
5. For Prescott see the fine study by David Levin, *History as Romantic Art* (Harbinger, N.Y., 1963); and more succinctly in his "History as Romantic Art: Structure, Characterization, and Style in *The Conquest of Mexico*," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 39, no. 1 (February 1959): 20–45.
6. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1984), part 2, passim but esp. 63–67, 80–81, 86–89. For Todorov's rather metaphysical notion of the defeat enclosed within the Spanish victory, see p. 97.
7. Veyne continues: "Other than the techniques of handling and checking documents, there is no more a method of history than one of ethnography or of the art of travelling," which might just possibly be true if the notion of "checking" is sufficiently expanded; Paul Veyne, *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology* (Middletown, Conn., 1984), 12.
8. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España*, introduction and notes by Joaquín Ramírez Cabañas (Mexico City, 1966), 40, 45. For information on Spanish and native Conquest-related materials, see Robert Wauchope, ed., *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, (Austin, Tex., 1964–76), vols. 12–15, *Guide to Ethnohistorical Sources*, ed. Howard F. Cline.
9. *Hernán Cortés: Letters from Mexico*, trans. and ed. Anthony Pagden, with an introduction by J. H. Elliott (New Haven, 1986), "Second Letter," 88. See also J. H. Elliott, "The Mental World of Hernán Cortés," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 17 (1967): 41–58.
10. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, trans. Charles E. Dibble and Arthur J. O. Anderson (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1950–82); hereafter cited as *Florentine Codex*, with book, chapter, and page. Quetzalcoatl-Topiltzin, ruler of the mythic "Tollan," or Tula, the previous great imperial power in the valley, before he withdrew to the east in some shadowy former time, was ambiguously associated with Quetzalcoatl-Ehecatl, the Wind God. For the confusions clustering around the stories to do with the self-exiled Quetzalcoatl-Topiltzin, legendary ruler of Tollan, see H. B. Nicholson, "Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl of Tollan: A Problem in Mesoamerican Ethnohistory" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1957).
11. *Florentine Codex*, 12.16.17–18, 45, 48–49.
12. "This I saw in a painting that belonged to an ancient chieftain from the province of Texcoco. Moctezoma was depicted in irons, wrapped in a mantle and carried on the shoulders of his chieftains"; Fray Diego Durán, *Historia de las indias de Nueva España y islas de Tierra Firma*, ed. José F. Ramírez, 2 vols. plus atlas (Mexico City, 1967), chap. 74, pp. 541–42.
13. Cortés, "Second Letter," 50.

14. Cortés's own confusion deepens our confidence in our reading, as he aggressively seeks to collect what he called "vassals" along the way, with no demur from Moctezoma. For example, the lord "Pánuco" sent gifts, and freely offered to supply certain Spaniards in his region whom he took to be members of Cortés's party with food; "Second Letter," 54. See also the reception offered by "Sienchimalen," *ibid.* These were almost certainly not gestures of political subordination but the normal courtesies—the provision of supplies, and if necessary fuel and shelter—extended to official travelers within the more effectively subdued Mexican territories. Where Cortés made the condition of "vassal" more explicit by requesting not food or carriers but gold, the request was denied.
15. The lodging of the Spaniards in a royal palace is not especially remarkable, visiting rulers and ranking ambassadors being routinely luxuriously housed and feted, in the not unfamiliar determination to impress potentially troublesome visitors while keeping an eye on them; Durán, *Historia*, chap. 43; *Florentine Codex*, 12.15.41. Despite the intense traditional hostility between Tlaxcala and the Mexicans, a Mexican embassy numbering more than two hundred people sought out Cortés during his first stay in Tlaxcala, its members being permitted to come and go without hindrance; "Second Letter," 69. The phrasing of the *Florentine Codex* on the Spanish assault on the warrior dancers affords a dizzying perspective on Spanish-Mexican relations, the Spaniards being described as "friends" to that point, and then as having "risen up against us [the Mexicans]" to become "enemies"; 12.29.81.
16. Díaz, *Historia*, chap. 39.
17. Cortés, "Third Letter," 188.
18. Unsurprisingly few commentators are prepared to be so austere. For an attractive display of indulgence, see R. C. Padden, *The Hummingbird and the Hawk* (Columbus, Ohio), 1967.
19. Possible, but difficult: e.g., for art historians' divisions on the meanings of a pleasantly substantial and certainly pre-contact artifact, the "Hamburg Box," a superb lidded greenstone box carved on both inner and outer surfaces, compare Esther Pasztory, *Aztec Art* (New York, 1983), 255–56; and her "El arte Mexica y la Conquista Española," *Estudios de cultura Nahuatl* 17 (1983): 101–24; with H. B. Nicholson and Eloise Quiñones Keber, *The Art of Ancient Mexico: Treasures of Tenochtitlan* (Washington, D.C., 1983), 64–66.
20. Cortés, "Third Letter," 184.
21. Díaz, *Historia*, chap. 52. For a discussion see Richard C. Trexler, "Aztec Priests for Christian Altars: The Theory and Practice of Reverence in New Spain," in Paola Zambelli, ed., *Scienze credenze occulte livelli di cultura* (Florence, 1982), 175–96.
22. Díaz, *Historia*, chaps. 51, 52. 23. *Ibid.*, chap. 107.
24. In the ordinances he proclaimed in Tlaxcala in December 1520, preparatory to the great campaign against the lake cities, Cortés emphasized the necessary disciplines of war (no private booty, no gambling of weapons, no breakaway attacks, no insults or brawling in the ranks). But he prefaced it with the declaration that justified all: that the Spaniards' principal motive was to destroy idolatry and to bring the natives to the knowledge of God and of the Holy Catholic Faith. Without that primary justification, the war to come would be unjust, and everything taken in it liable to restitution; "Ordenanzas militares dadas por Hernando Cortés in Tlaxcallan," in Mario Hernández Sánchez Barba, ed., *Hernán Cortés: Cartas y documentos* (Mexico City, 1963), 336–41.
25. Cortés, "Second Letter," 60–62.

26. Díaz, *Historia*, chaps. 46, 47, 51. 27. *Ibid.*, chap. 95.
28. As John Elliott puts it: "It would be hard to think of a crazier strategy"; J. H. Elliott, *New York Review of Books*, 19 July 1984.
29. Díaz, *Historia*, chap. 126.
30. Sahagún's informants emphasize physical contact far beyond Spanish reports, "recalling" Moctezoma as being prodded and pawed by any and all of the newcomers, with the disgrace of the unabashed glance marked equally keenly: "They caressed Moctezoma with their hands"; they "looked at him; they each looked at him thoroughly. They were continually active on their feet; they continually dismounted in order to look at him"; *Florentine Codex*, 12.16.43–46; Díaz, *Historia*, chap. 88.
31. See note 30 above.
32. "Recorded" is putting it rather too high: here we have to take the "captain's speech" for the literary convention it is. But it is, at best, close to what Cortés claims he said: at worst, the gist of what Díaz thought a man like Cortés ought to have said on such an occasion; Díaz, *Historia*, chap. 61, e.g., "Now and from henceforth, through God, the history books will make much more of this than of anything done in the past. . . . The most famous Roman captain has not achieved such great things as we have." Cf. "Second Letter," 63.
33. For a contrary view of the whole conquest phenomenon as very much more pragmatic and routinized, see James Lockhart, *The Men of Cajamarca* (Austin, Tex., 1972). On the importance of the model of the Mexican Conquest for later conquerors: "[The Conquest of] Mexico had no major impact on Peru merely by virtue of some years' precedence. . . . Pizarro was certainly not thinking of Cortés and Moctezoma when he seized Atahualpa; he had been capturing *caciques* [chiefs] in Tierra Firme long before Mexico was heard of"; James Lockhart and Stuart B. Schwartz, *Early Latin America* (Cambridge, 1983), 84.
34. Skin afflictions were commonly understood as coming from Tezcatlipoca, the Mexican interventionist deity, but we do not know if the Mexicans identified smallpox pustules with more familiar lesions. As always, they noted the month of the epidemic's coming and of its diminishing (a span of sixty day signs), but smallpox does not appear in the *Florentine Codex* list of Spanish-related events (12.27–29.81–83).
35. Wars of conquest waged against distant "barbarians" were a rather different matter. For an exhaustive description from a steadfastly pragmatic perspective, see Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control* (Norman, Okla., 1988). Dr. Hassig is persuaded that "in fact, Aztec [warrior] practices were shaped by political realities and practical necessities" (10). The question is to discover what the Aztec/Mexican understood those "realities and practical necessities" to be.
36. Durán, *Historia*, chap. 34.
37. Cf. the deliberate humiliation of the Tlatelolcan warriors, discovered hiding in the rushes after the Mexican victory, and ordered to quack. "Even today," Durán noted, decades after the debacle, "the Tlatelolca are called 'quackers' and imitators of water fowl. They are much offended by this name and when they fight the name is always recalled"; *Historia*, chap. 34, p. 264.
38. Contrast the fate of Spaniards when faced with the arrows projected from the short powerful bows of the Chichimeca, the Indians of the northern steppes whose territory lay athwart the road to the silver mines; Philip Wayne Powell, *Soldiers, Indians and Silver* (Tempe, Ariz., 1975).
39. Díaz, *Historia*, chap. 153; Durán, *Historia*, chap. 77.
40. Indian cannibalism is a vexed question. In very brief, insult displays pivoted on the

threat of eating and being eaten. While the eating of the flesh of a warrior's sacrificed captive was hedged by ritual, more casual references suggest its debasing function, and it is possible that battlefield behavior was more relaxed. For ritual cannibalism, see *Florentine Codex*, 2.25.49–54; and Inga Clendinnen, "The Cost of Courage in Aztec Society," *Past and Present* 107 (May 1985): 44–89, esp. 56–60 and 69; for the debasing function, see Durán, *Historia*, chap. 9.

41. Cortés, "Third Letter," 230.
42. E.g., the attack on Cortés in the Xochimilco battle, and the desperate rescue, Cortés sustaining a "bad wound in the head"; Díaz, *Historia*, chap. 145.
43. Spaniards valued muskets equally with crossbows, a musketeer being allocated the same share of the spoils as a crossbowman, yet oddly muskets are mentioned infrequently in Indian accounts, perhaps because the ball could not be followed in flight, while crossbow bolts whirred and sang as they came; *Florentine Codex*, 12.22.62. For a succinct and accessible account of sixteenth-century cannon, in their enormous variety, see Pagden, *Cortés*, 507–8. Most of the small guns used in America could fire a ball of twenty pounds over some four hundred meters (*ibid.*, n. 59). For a more extended account, see Alberto Mario Salas, *Las armas de la Conquista* (Buenos Aires, 1950).
44. Durán, *Historia*, chap. 72, pp. 529–30.
45. E.g., on the Spanish retreat from Tenochtitlan they "quickly slew the people of Calacoaya . . . [they] did not provoke them; without notice were they slain. [The Spaniards] vented their wrath upon them, they took their pleasure with them"; *Florentine Codex*, 12:25:73.
46. *Florentine Codex*, 2.20.55. It appears from the funerary rites accorded the fragmented corpses of the warrior dancers that the Mexicans somehow decided that the victims had found death in a mode appropriate to warriors.
47. *Ibid.*, 12.7.19. 48. *Ibid.*, 12.30.86.
49. Cortés, "Second Letter," 58.
50. Díaz, *Historia*, chap. 63.
51. Note also the offering of the entire skins of five horses, "sewn up and as well tanned as anywhere in the world," in Texcoco. These captives had been taken in a situation where they were riderless at the time of engagement. Cortés, "Third Letter," 184.
52. *Ibid.*, 252. 53. *Ibid.*, 192.
54. Díaz recalls them yelling, whistling, and calling the Spaniards "rogues and cowards who did not dare to meet them through a day's battle, and retreated before them"; *Historia*, chap. 126.
55. *Florentine Codex*, 12.31.89. For an account of those exemplary battles, see Clendinnen, "Cost of Courage."
56. E.g., *Florentine Codex*, 12.35.87.
57. *Ibid.*, 12.33.96; 12.34.99 (*tlacotli*, a secular slave performing lowly tasks, not *tlaltilli*, those selected captives ritually purified to be especially acceptable to the gods).
58. Rather too much has been made of the Mexican concern for "day signs," the determining authority of the auguries associated with one's day of birth over the individual's *tonalli*, or destiny. It is true that in some passages of the *Florentine Codex*—the only source with the kind of "spread" to make this sort of concept mapping viable—the individual is presented as quite mastered by his or her "fate." That clarity blurs on broader acquaintance, emerging as part of the characteristic stylistic movement of much of the codex between firm statements of the ideal and the tempering qualifications necessary to catch the messiness of actuality. Day signs had about as much deter-

mining power as horoscopes hold today for the moderate believer. They mattered, but more as intimations or as post-hoc diagnoses (and even then, one suspects, most readily invoked by others, not the individuals concerned) than as iron determinants of fate. Cf. Todorov: "To know someone's birthday is to know his fate"; *Conquest of America*, 64.

59. John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York, 1977), 184–86.
60. Cortés, "Second Letter," 134–35.
61. Díaz, *Historia*, chap. 126. 62. *Ibid.*, chap. 151.
63. Miguel Leon-Portilla, *The Broken Spears* (Boston, 1962), 107. The captor was the *Tlapanecatl* Hecatzin—see *Florentine Codex*, 12.35.103, n. 2. For an earlier exploit of the Otomí warrior, see *Florentine Codex*, 101.
64. Keegan, *Face of Battle*, 296.
65. As in the interspecies mayhem described by Konrad Z. Lorenz, where signs of submission are not "understood" in the battle between the turkey and the peacock; *King Solomon's Ring* (London, 1961), 194–95.
66. Cortés was desperate to treat with Quauhtemoc in the last days of the siege, but Díaz reports that the ruler would not show himself, despite all reassurances, because he feared he would be killed by guns or crossbows, Cortés having behaved too dishonorably to be trusted; *Historia*, chap. 155.
67. *Florentine Codex*, 12.35.104.
68. Díaz, *Historia*, chap. 153; Cortés, "Third Letter," 242. Cortés for his part deletes any reference to the withdrawal of his Indian "vassals," the admission of such a withdrawal casting altogether too much light on the nature of their commitment to the Spanish cause.
69. *Florentine Codex*, 12.38.117. 70. *Ibid.*, 12.38.118. 71. *Ibid.*, 12.40.123.
72. I offer Miguel Leon-Portilla's translation as the version most likely to be familiar; *Broken Spears*, 137–38. Cf. Leon-Portilla, *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico* (Norman, Okla., 1969), 150–51; and Gordon Brotherston and Ed Dorn, *Image of the New World* (London, 1979), 34–35. For other songs in traditional form to do with the Conquest, see John Bierhorst, *Cantares Mexicanos* (Stanford, Calif., 1985), esp. no. 13, pp. 151–53; no. 60, p. 279 (obscurely); no. 66, pp. 319–23; no. 68, for its early stanzas, pp. 327–41; no. 91, pp. 419–25.
73. For example, Cortés approvingly noted the courage of the chief Chichimecatecle, who "having always gone with his warriors in the vanguard," took it as an affront when put to the rear in the transport for the brigantines: "When he finally agreed to this, he asked that no Spaniards should remain accompanying him, for he is a most valiant man and wished to keep all the glory for himself"; "Third Letter," 185.
74. For the multiple demands on Cortés in this period see J. H. Elliott, "The Spanish Conquest and the Settlement of America," in Leslie Bethell, ed., *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1984), 149–206.
75. Cortés, "Third Letter," 256. 76. *Ibid.*, 232–33.
77. *Ibid.*, 257; Díaz, *Historia*, chap. 155; *Florentine Codex*, 12.38.113.
78. Cortés, "Third Letter," 258. 79. *Ibid.*, 262.
80. Díaz, *Historia*, chap. 156.
81. Keegan, *Face of Battle*, 65–66. This is not to claim any direct classical influence; see Pagden, *Cortés*, xlvii; and Elliott, "Mental World of Cortés," for Cortés's slight acquaintance with classical authors. Caesar's *Commentaries* had been published in Spanish by 1498, and it is possible that Cortés had read them, although perhaps unlikely.
82. For the control: "While the alguacil-mayor was at Matalcingo, the people of [Tenoch-

titlan] decided to attack Alvarado's camp by night, and struck shortly before dawn. When the sentries on foot and on horseback heard them they shouted, 'to arms!' Those who were in that place flung themselves upon the enemy, who leapt into the water as soon as they saw the horsemen. . . . Fearing our men might be defeated I ordered my own company to arm themselves and march into the city to weaken the offensive against Alvarado"—and so on; Cortés, "Third Letter," 247. For the dislocation:

When we came within sight of the enemy we did not attack but marched through the city thinking that at any moment they would come out to meet us [to surrender]. And to induce it I galloped up to a very strong barricade which they had set up and called out to certain chieftains who were behind and whom I knew, that as they saw how lost they were and knew that if I so desired within an hour not one of them would remain alive why did not Guatimucin [Quauhtemoc], their lord, come and speak with me. . . . I then used other arguments which moved them to tears, and weeping they replied they well knew their error and their fate, and would go and speak to their lord. . . . They went, and returned after a while and told me their lord had not come because it was late, but that he would come on the following day at noon to the marketplace; and so we returned to our camp. . . . On the following day we went to the city and I warned my men to be on the alert lest the enemy betray us and we be taken unawares.

And so to more worried guesses and second guesses; *ibid.*, 259–60.

83. *Ibid.*, 261.
84. The Tlaxcalans refused to participate in any expedition (like the sortie against Narváez) not in their direct interest; they withdrew at will, taking their loot with them; they required payment for aid given the Spaniards after the expulsion from Tenochtitlan, having considered the utility of killing them; Díaz, *Historia*, chap. 98. Their self-representation as faithful friends and willing servants to the Spaniards, as pictured in the Lienzo de Tlaxcala, came a generation or more after the Conquest as part of a campaign for privileges.
85. *Ibid.*, chap. 79.
86. Andrés de Tápia, "Relación hecha por el señor Andrés de Tápia sobre la Conquista de México," in Joaquín García Icazbalceta, ed., *Colección de documentos para la historia de México*, 2 vols. (Mexico City, 1858–66), 2:343–438.
87. It was possibly in the decimation of native leaders who had learned how to deal with each other that the smallpox epidemic had its most immediate political effect.
88. Cortés, "Third Letter," 262.
89. Those limits were to be drawn more narrowly through the shaking experience of the Honduran expedition. The Cortés who early in the Mexican campaign could dismiss "omens" in the confidence that "God is more powerful than Nature" learned in Honduras how helpless men are when Nature, not men, opposes them, and where God seems far away. There he discovered that God is bound by no contract, and that he, like all men, must wait upon His will. The "Fifth Letter" reads like a mournful anti-phon to the sanguine assurance of Cortés's early Conquest accounts.
90. *Anales de Tlatelolco: Unos anales históricos de la Nación Mexicana*, prepared by Heinrich Berlin (Mexico City, 1948), 371–89, 74–76.

“Fierce and unnatural cruelty” and the conquest of Mexico part II. Analysts, save for military historians, have overwhelmingly concentrated on the first phase of the Conquest, assuming the consummation of Spanish victory to be merely a matter of applying a technological superiority: horsemen against pedestrian warriors, steel swords against wooden clubs, muskets and crossbows against bows and arrows and lances, cannon against ferocious courage. I would also argue that the final conquest was a very close-run thing: the Spanish ejection from Tenochtitlan the Mexican remained heavily favoured in things material, most particularly manpower, which more than redressed any imbalance in equipment.