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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;<sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

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?'"<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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 flounderings 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; Moctezuma 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.”<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.)<sup>16</sup> 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?'"<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> It is nonetheless difficult (save in Cortés's magisterial telling of it) to read the performance as rational.<sup>28</sup>

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.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup> 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 overidealization 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.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup>

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.<sup>37</sup>

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.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> 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’