Periplus: Twenty-Six Peripatetic Musings around 'The Parrot & the Nightingale, a Phantasmagoria'[1]

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A. While on holiday in Cuba in 2005, I visited an impressive botanical garden near the port city of Cienfuegos. Founded in 1899, it is the oldest institution of its kind on the Caribbean island, and it is, perhaps, home to one of the most important collections of plants in Latin America. My first impression was that the park seemed to have run wild, with areas that resembled a jungle more than a garden. All the same, the richness of the collection was obvious. The Jardín Botánico de Cienfuegos covers ninety-seven hectares – a surface area comparable to the National Botanic Garden of Belgium in Meise or the Arnold Arboretum in Boston, both of which are numbered among the world's largest. Over two thousand tropical and subtropical plant varieties grow there, many of them rare, such as the unique collection of four hundred types of orchid. It also has more than two hundred varieties of palm tree, including *Washingtonia robusta*, *Scheelea liebmannii*, *Hyophorbe verschaffeltii* and *Copernicia ekmanii*. In an odd twist, when my photographs of the gardens were developed, they showed nothing more than a series of bleached outlines. Instead of a photographic record, all I was left with was a mental impression, which gradually faded, leaving the ever-present desire to rediscover this Garden of Eden.

B. In 1992, I bought the book *The Four Voyages of Columbus: A History in Eight Documents, Including Five by Christopher Columbus* (1988).[2] Although I didn't read it straight away, I knew I'd pick it up sooner or later.

C. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines 'phantasmagoria' as: 'a confusing or strange scene that is like a dream because it is always changing in an odd way'.[3]
The entry continues:
1: an exhibition of optical effects and illusions.
2a: a constantly shifting complex succession of things seen or imagined.
2b: a scene that constantly changes.
3: a bizarre or fantastic combination, collection, or assemblage.

D. I became fascinated a few years ago with *The* Diario *of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America, 1492–1493*,[4] which describes the newly discovered 'India' as a cornucopia, a paradise of wondrous flowers, with a thousand variety of trees and remarkable fruits, not to mention astonishing fish and birds of the most dazzling colours. The account of the 'Admiral', as Columbus is referred to throughout, reminded me of medieval fantastic tales. It was impossible for Europeans in the fifteenth century to visualize a new world, so they fell back on images of the East from Herodotus's *Histories* (fifth century BCE), but also on Marco Polo's thirteenth-century travel journal and *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, which was immensely popular from the mid-fourteenth century onwards. Mandeville's accounts – which turned out to be largely fictional – not only inspired Columbus, but also Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) when he was writing *Gulliver's Travels* (1726): 'Men and women of that isle have heads like dogs, and they are called Cynocephales. [...] If they capture any man in battle, they eat him'.[5] Columbus, likewise, writes of cannibals with a single eye in their forehead and canine faces. He reports seeing mermaids who, far from being as beautiful as he had expected, were ugly, with male faces. And he claims, like Mandeville, to have seen an island inhabited solely by women.

E. The celebrated French author Jean de La Fontaine (1621–1695) never wrote a fable called *The Parrot and the Nightingale*. But his work does include *The Kite and the Nightingale* and *The Two Parrots, the King and His Son*.

F. The nine-year old Bartolomé de las Casas (1484–1566) was present on Palm Sunday, 31 March 1493, to witness Columbus's triumphal parade through the streets of Seville. The Admiral was accompanied by six Taíno Indians – the first natives of the Americas ever to set foot on the Old Continent – complete with beautiful, red and green feathered parrots, also brought back from the 'New' World. Las Casas's father and three uncles signed on for Columbus's second voyage later that same year, still under the influence perhaps of the spectacular parade. In 1513, Bartolomé de las Casas himself took part in the bloody conquest of Cuba; writing about it years later, in his *Brief Account of the Devastation of the Indies*, he notes that the 'Spaniards immediately behaved like ravening wild beasts, wolves, tigers, or lions that had been starved for many days [...] destroying the native peoples, doing all this with the strangest and most varied new methods of cruelty, never seen or heard of before'.[6] Although Las Casas later presented himself as an ardent protector of the Indians, he saw nothing wrong with the mass importation of African slaves, who were put to work in the silver and goldmines of the Americas, but also on the industrial production of coffee, sugar and tobacco – the first mass consumer goods.

G. The only creature (apart from the humans) that Columbus recorded after his first day

in 'India', Thursday 11 October 1492, was a parrot, a bird famed for its mimicry and repetitive speech. He noted in his journal that same day that the Indians 'should be good and intelligent servants, for I see that they say very quickly everything that is said to them [...] at the time of my departure I will take six of them from here to your Highnesses in order that they may learn to speak'.[7]

H. Isn't it fascinating that in his famous *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) developed his theory – the cornerstone of semiotics – using an emblem with the Latin word for 'tree', *arbor*, and the drawing of a tree?

I. The Spaniards used signs and gestures to communicate with the 'Indians', but it is far from certain that they understood each other. Columbus interpreted everything in whatever way suited him best. The Admiral had a meeting with an Indian king, to whom he offered a series of gifts, as he always did on such occasions. They included a coverlet, red shoes, a string of amber beads and a flask of orange flower water. The King indicated that he was delighted with the presents, but that he was troubled by the fact that neither he nor his counsellors could understand Columbus or vice versa. The Admiral nevertheless deduced from his 'conversation' with the King that the entire island was henceforth under Spanish command.[8]

J. In *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, Umberto Eco writes: 'To use a metaphor devised by Jorge Luis Borges [...] a wood is a garden of forking paths. Even when there are no well-trodden paths in a wood, everyone can trace his or her own path, deciding to go to the left or to the right of a certain tree and making a choice at every tree encountered'. The forest is a metaphor for the narrative text: 'There are woods like Dublin, where instead of Little Red Riding Hood one can meet Molly Bloom, and woods like Casablanca, in which one can meet Ilsa Lund or Rick Blaine'.[9]

K. Tzvetan Todorov states in *The Conquest of America: the Question of the Other*: 'The discovery of America is essential for us today not only because it is an extreme, and exemplary, encounter', but also because 'we are all direct descendants of Columbus, it is with him that our genealogy begins'. I also marked the following passage in the first chapter of this fascinating book: 'One might say that Columbus has undertaken it all in order to be able to tell unheard-of stories, like Ulysses; but is not a travel story itself the point of departure of a new voyage? Did not Columbus himself set sail because he had read Marco Polo's narrative?'[10]

L. The botanical garden near Cienfuegos in Cuba has a turbulent history. On the path leading to the collection there is a 'royal palm', or *Roystonea regia*, as Cuba's national tree is

officially called (the variety owes its scientific name to an American military engineer in 1900). Carved in its bark are the words *Harvard Biological Laboratory*. The botanical garden originally bore the evocative name *Soledad* (Solitude), after the sugar plantation that was already in operation here by 1850. A rich industrialist from Boston, Edwin Atkins (1850–1926), acquired the Soledad plantation in 1883, along with over two hundred slaves of African origin. By 1894, Soledad was one of the largest modern sugar plantations in the world. Harvard University began to collaborate with Atkins in 1899, which led to the creation at Soledad of the Harvard Botanic Station for Tropical Research and Sugar Cane Investigation. At the same time, the Harvard professors assembled a magnificent collection of plants at Soledad. The project was funded by Atkins and, after its benefactor's death, was named the Atkins Institution of the Arnold Arboretum. The then director wrote to a colleague in 1930: 'The Garden is a Garden of Dreams, is a Paradise. Even the oriental trees and palms remind the visitor of the biblical legend'.[11] Harvard lost all control over the botanical garden in Cienfuegos after the Cuban Revolution.

M. The first thing that strikes you when reading Columbus's journal is the constant repetition of phrases and words like 'tree', 'cross', 'believe', 'nightingale', 'trade', 'parrot', 'danger', 'wonder', 'naked' and 'weapon'. The word that occurs most often – after 'gold' – is 'sign': signs that have to be deciphered and translated. Columbus as interpreter. At sea, every piece of driftwood, bird or fish is a sign that land is near, and when they do eventually land in 'India', they see signs everywhere of the presence of gold and silver. In reality, they probably landed at an island in the Bahamas, called *Guanahani* in the language of the natives, but which Columbus immediately dubbed San Salvador. 'And they are very meek, and they brought us [...] cotton, and parrots, and javelins, and other little things. And they gave everything for anything that was given to them. I was attentive and laboured to find out if there was any gold. I saw that some of them wore a little piece that hung in a hole that they have in their noses. And by signs I was able to understand that, going to the south, there was a king who had very much gold and I decided to depart for the southwest, in search of gold and precious stones'.[12]

N. Sign languages were perhaps the first real languages: *The Gestural Origin of Language*.[13]

O. In 1492, Columbus's 'discovery' was merely an event from a European point of view. In 1493, by contrast, it became a collection of words, a verbal construction, an artefact, through the Admiral's various letters to his patrons, the King and Queen of Spain, and through his journal. It is a coloured collection of words. While Columbus and his crew were crossing the Atlantic, he noted that the only thing missing was the song of the nightingale, the traditional metaphor for the poet. He later made countless references to nightingales, even though that

species is not to be found in the Caribbean, the archipelago in which he ended up during his first expedition. Columbus compares the climate to that of Andalusia in May; they catch salmon and sardines, just like in Spain; and the native leaders are described as 'kings', as in Europe. The Admiral looks, but he doesn't see. He listens, but he doesn't hear the other.

P. The film or camera sensor used in infrared photography is sensitive to a part of the spectrum that is invisible to the eye. In a sense, infrared images make the 'invisible' visible. They have a very unusual and artificial appearance, and a strange kind of beauty: the sky becomes darker and vegetation white. This is known as the 'Wood effect', not because it is particularly in evidence when photographing woods and vegetation, but because the process was invented by the American physicist Robert W. Wood (1868–1955).

Q. When he returned to Europe, the Admiral presented the manuscript of his journal to Ferdinand and Isabella, the Spanish royal couple. A copy of it was made before Columbus embarked on his second overseas expedition to 'India'. Both the original and the copy are lost. The only surviving manuscript is a summary of Columbus's copy made and annotated by Bartolomé de las Casas around 1530. This manuscript also disappeared, but it turned up again around 1790 in the library of the Spanish Duke of Infantado. As far as we know, this is the only 'original' still extant, making it the most important source of information about Columbus's first voyage. Las Casas's manuscript is written in Spanish, in a kind of shorthand, and the challenge facing every translator is to interpret the text consistently. Las Casas also mixes the 'I' and 'he' forms, giving the impression that Columbus himself is speaking in some fragments, while others seem to be recounted by an anonymous narrator or observer. Many of the journal entries begin or end with: 'These are the words of the Admiral; 'these are the exact words of the Admiral'; or 'this is what the Admiral says at this point'.

R. An unusual collaboration arose in 1964 between the Cuban and Russian film industries, resulting in the cinematographic tour de force *Soy Cuba* ('I Am Cuba'). The film was forgotten for many years until 1995 when – partly at the initiative of Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola – it was given a new public release. The director was Mikhaïl Kalatozov (1903–1973), best known for *The Cranes Are Flying* (1957). Raúl Rodriguez, the assistant cameraman, stated in a documentary about *Soy Cuba*: 'We wanted the film images to be a synthesis of Cuba. Each individual frame should shine like a sugar crystal, transforming the green of palm trees and sugarcane into tones of silver'. To capture the beautiful Cuban light, the crew used infrared film stock previously available only to the Red Army. 'It was made in a factory that produced military material, the same factory that produced the negatives for filming the other side of the moon'.[14]

S. After months at sea, when Columbus finally spotted dry land and put to shore in an armed sloop, what struck him first and foremost was the presence of naked people. He took the royal banner, summoned his two captains, along with a notary and the fleet inspector, and announced that they were to witness him taking possession of the island for the King and Queen of Spain. The necessary declarations were duly made and recorded. The act of taking possession is reduced here to a series of linguistic acts, such as announcing, witnessing and writing down.

T. Italo Calvino (1923–1985), author of works like the magisterial *The Baron in the Trees*, was born in Santiago de las Vegas, not far from Havana. His parents, Eva Mameli and Mario Calvino, both had a scientific background and had been working in Latin America since 1909. They named their son Italo to remind him of his Italian roots. Mario Calvino was director in 1919 of the Estación Experimental Agronómica, where the couple were researching disease-resistant sugar varieties and tropical food crops like soy. The family left Cuba in 1925 and returned to Italy, where Mario Calvino went on to pioneer the cultivation and marketing of exotic crops such as avocado and grapefruit. Italo Calvino initially studied at the Faculty of Agriculture at the universities of Turin and Rome, before devoting himself entirely to writing. When his first novel, *The Path to the Spiders's Nests*, appeared in 1947, Cesare Pavese (1908–1950) praised the young author as 'a squirrel of the pen who climbed into the trees, more for fun than fear, to observe partisan life as a fable of the forest'.[15]

U. When Hernán Cortés (1485–1547) heard about the empire of the Mexican ruler Montezuma, he began his expedition by seeking out an interpreter. According to Todorov, Cortés heard some natives using Spanish words, and this led him to infer that there were Spaniards living among them – perhaps some had been left behind from earlier expeditions.[16] Cortés sent messages to these potential interpreters and a week later a certain Gerónimo de Aguilar presented himself. The second essential figure in what Todorov describes as a 'conquest of information' is a woman the Indians called Malintzin, and the Spaniards Doña Marina, or La Malinche. The introduction to the Dutch translation (1780) of *Letters from Hernán Cortés to Emperor Charles V on the Conquest of Mexico* includes the words: 'This slave is the same who [...] under the name Doña Marina became so famous, and who played such a large role in the conquest of the New World. She was the daughter of a Mexican cacique, and through a series of accidents [...] came into Cortés's possession. Although she had lived a long time in Tabasco, she had not forgotten her mother tongue and translated it for De Aguilar into the Yucatan language, which he then translated into Spanish for Cortés. This double translation made it more difficult at first to converse with the Mexicans, but Marina's natural quickness of mind, encouraged even more by love, prompted her to learn the Spanish language in a very short time, so that she no longer required De Aguilar's intervention. Cortés loved her [...] and

the fruit of that love was a son …'.[17] Stephen Greenblatt, who shares Todorov's fascination for La Malinche, writes in his *Marvellous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*: 'In 1492, in the introduction to his *Gramática (de la lengua castellana)*, the first grammar of a modern European tongue, Antonio de Nebrija wrote that language has always been the partner (*compañera*) of empire. Cortés had found in Doña Marina his *compañera*'.[18]

V. The German explorer and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) came across an ancient parrot in South America, the words of which nobody could understand. The bird turned out to be speaking the language of the Atures, an extinct people. Humboldt – who had made a thorough study of Columbus's voyages – was often referred to, incidentally, as the 'second Columbus', and the scientific 'discoverer' of America. His *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba* (1826), in which he is fiercely critical of slavery, was censored and deliberately mistranslated in English. Meanwhile, just as the account of Marco Polo's voyages inspired Columbus, Charles Darwin was galvanized by Humboldt's travel journal, as he wrote in a letter of 1845: 'I shall never forget that my whole course of life is due to having read & reread as a youth his *Personal Narrative [of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent During the Years 1799 to 1804]*'.[19]

W. The main character in Javier Marías's baroque novel *A Heart So White* is an interpreter, and he knows that as such he has a certain power: 'In fact, no one can be sure that what the translator translates from his isolated cabin is correct or true and I hardly need say that, on many occasions, it's neither one nor the other, due to ignorance, laziness, distraction or malice on the part of the interpreter doing the interpreting, or a bad hangover'.[20]

X. Sign language is a visual and manual means of communication, in which concepts are represented using gestures, mouthing and mime. It serves the linguistic needs of a large group of – mainly deaf – people. American Sign Language is one of the most widely used variations, since it is frequently learned as a second language, a kind of *lingua franca* that can also be useful at international meetings and conferences. French Sign Language is totally different from German, and British Sign Language has little in common with its counterparts in the United States and Australia, to mention just three predominantly English-speaking countries.

Y. A list or inventory can tell a story. Georges Perec (1936–1982), whose books I like to keep close at hand, wrote in his essay 'Notes on the Objects to Be Found on my Desk': 'Nothing seems simpler than making a list, but in fact it's much more complicated than it seems: you always leave something out, you're tempted to write etc., but the whole point of an inventory is not to write etc. Contemporary writers (with a few exceptions, such as Michel

Butor) have forgotten the art of enumeration: Rabelais's list, the Linnaean enumeration of fish in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, the listing of geographers who explored Australia in *The Children of Captain Grant*...'.[21]

Z. Don't human beings, like parrots, live on borrowed words?

(Translated from the Dutch by Ted Alkins)

1. The word periplus, derived from Latin, stands for 'sailing around' or 'circumnavigation'. It can also refer to the written report of such a roundabout voyage. An essential part of a periplus was an ordered list of ports, setting out the respective distances between them, to help mariners navigate unfamiliar waters.
2. Christopher Columbus, *The Four Voyages of Columbus: A History in Eight Documents Including Five by Christopher Columbus*, ed. Cecil Jane (New York: Dover Publications, 1988).
3. Merriam-Webster Online: http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/phantasmagoria
4. Christopher Columbus, *The* Diario *of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America, 1492–1493*, eds Oliver Dunn and James E. Kelley, Jr. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989).
5. John Mandeville, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, trans. C. Moseley (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 134.
6. Bartolomé de las Casas, *Brief Account of the Devastation of the Indies* [1552], http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/bdorsey1/41docs/02-las.html.
7. Christopher Columbus, *The* Diario..., *op. cit.*, 11 October 1492, pp. 67–68.
8. Ibid., 18 December 1492, p. 243.
9. Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 6.
10. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), p. 5 ff.
11. Marion D. Cahan, 'The Harvard Garden in Cuba – A Brief History', in: *Arnoldia*, vol. 51, no. 3, 1991, p. 37.
12. Christopher Columbus, *The* Diario..., *op. cit.*, 13 October 1492, p. 71.
13. David F. Armstrong and Sherman E. Wilcox, *The Gestural Origin of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
14. Vicente Ferraz, *I Am Cuba: The Siberian Mammoth*, 2005.
15. Beno Weiss, *Understanding Italo Calvino* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), p. 13.
16. Tzvetan Todorov, *op. cit.*, 1984, pp. 90–100.
17. Hernán Cortés, *Brieven van Ferdinand Cortes aan Keizer Karel V wegens de verovering van Mexico* (Amsterdam: Yntema en Tieboel, 1780), pp. 21–22.
18. Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 145. Stephen Greenblatt provides a brilliant analysis in this work of how language and power are interconnected.
19. Petra Werner, 'Zum Verhältnis Charles Darwins zu Alexander v. Humboldt und Christian Gottfried Ehrenberg', *HiN*, vol. 10, no. 18, 2009, last modified 4 June 2009, http://www.uni-potsdam.de/u/romanistik/humboldt/hin/hin18/werner.htm.
20. Javier Marías, *A Heart So White*, trans. Margaret Jull Costa (London: Vintage, 2013), p. 51.
21. Georges Perec, 'Notes on the Objects to Be Found on my Desk', in: *Thoughts of Sorts*, trans. David Mellos (Boston, MA: David R. Godine, 2009), p. 14.