Chapter 2 ～

Columbus and the Natives

In Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, after his journey to Brobdingnag, Gulliver reports on how Captain Thomas Wilcocks, who has rescued him, receives Gulliver’s report of the land of the giants:

> The Captain was very well satisfied with this plain Relation I had given him; and said, he hoped when we returned to England, I would oblige the World by putting it in Paper, and making it publick. My Answer was, that I thought we were already overstocked with Books of Travels: That nothing could now pass which was not extraordinary; wherein I doubted, some Authors less consulted Truth than their own Vanity or Interest, or the Diversion of ignorant Readers. That my Story could contain little besides common Events, without those ornamental Descriptions of strange Plants, Trees, Birds, and other Animals; or the barbarous Customs and Idolatry of savage People, with which most Writers abound. However, I thanked him for his good Opinion, and promised to take the Matter into my Thoughts.1

The relation that Swift gives to Gulliver in the 1720s is anything but plain. If by the early eighteenth century Swift could satirize the proliferation of travel literature, by the 1990s, especially in the wake of the commemoration of Columbus’ first voyage, and in light of a new millennium, people often felt even more saturation, perhaps in particular regard to commentary about the European voyages and their records and narratives. Caution, skepticism and humility are therefore advisable in facing this topic, realizing that, like Gulliver, it is easy to deny vanity vainly. The events that Gulliver represents are anything but common.

Nor have we caught Swift and Gulliver when we read the jarring phrase, “the barbarous Customs and Idolatry of savage People,” because in the 1735 edition Swift attaches the prefatory “Letter from Capt. Gulliver to His Cousin Symson,” in which Gulliver admits, even before the reader witnesses the four voyages, that he has given up on reforming humanity or the Yahoos, as they are so corrupt as to make such a project absurd.2 In facing his Yahoo critics Gulliver criticizes them:

> Do these miserable Animals presume to think that I am so far degenerated as to defend my Veracity; *Yahoo* as I am, it is well known through all *Houyhnhnmland*, that by the Instructions and Example of my illustrious Master, I was able in the Compass of two Years (although I confess with the utmost Difficulty) to remove that Infernal Habit of Lying, Shuffling, Deceiving, and Equivocating, so deeply rooted in the very Souls of all my Species; especially the *Europeans*.3
It is a commonplace that Swift uses irony and shifts in perspective in service of his satire, so that his reader is off-balance and cannot assume a position for Gulliver and his creator. While Gulliver has called the Amerindians barbarians, he has turned his savage indignation against all of humanity but especially the Europeans. As in *A Modest Proposal*, here Swift is satirizing the blindness of the imperial center. Nor is this an isolated critique of Europe. The King of Brobdingnag, at least in Gulliver’s report, hopes that owing to his life of travels Gulliver has escaped the vices of England, which he extols chauvinistically. Nonetheless, the king does not mince words about the English: “But, by what I have gathered from your own Relation, and the Answers I have with much pains wringed and extorted from you; I cannot but conclude the bulk of your Natives, to be the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth.”

Nor is Swift the first to offer resistance, ambivalence and indignation in the face of European imperialism. In light of the Spanish contact with the Amerindians, Thomas More made his Utopians disdain the gold that the Spaniards so valued and so motivated them to make war on and enslave the Natives. Bartolomé de Las Casas described the Spanish abuse of the Natives and sides with the Indians, saying that the Spaniards dashed the heads of Native babies against the rocks and burned Indians alive for the greater glory of Christ and the twelve apostles. Very soon after Columbus’ landfall in 1492, ambivalence over the American enterprise and horror over its excesses occurred within Europe itself. It was difficult for Columbus to convince others to launch his project, but, ever since, the results of the encounter with America have been contested.

As we do not as yet have nearly as many records of what Natives of the Americas thought about Europeans in their encounter during the Renaissance than European views of aboriginal inhabitants (although an increasing number are coming to light), it is difficult to find a balanced view of the Natives. With such an imbalance in evidence, it is important to be as skeptical as possible about European representations of the indigenous peoples. It is also a historical and logical problem to speak about pure indigenous and European cultures and about originary reactions to their first encounters. First indigenous reactions were most often retrospective and involved translation into European languages or Christian idioms. First European reactions to the encounters with Amerindians, though more plentiful, relied on rumor, reports and ex post facto reconstructions of Columbus’ first contact, which itself is reconstructed. We do not have “pure,” unmediated accounts of the encounter. By definition, any account of the other culture on either side before the encounter would be speculation and legend. This chapter will provide an attempt to find ambivalence and resistance within the European encounter narratives, concentrating on the “Letter of Columbus.”

The question of the European representation of the Native also relates to the Amerindian representation of the European arrival in, and colonization of, America. One of the difficulties for pre-conquest Native documents, as James Lockhart mentions in relation to the Nahua of central Mexico, is that even the most informative among them were mostly redone under Spanish influence during the 1540s and after. The Europeans and their American settlers frequently wrote about the Natives from the vantage of conquest and triumph. Gordon Brotherston has attempted to examine the European