

**Silo**

**OBSERVATIONS**

## Reverie and Action

Plaza de Colón, Madrid. Among trees, water and flowers, two protagonists, hieratic and separated, establish their counterpoint. While the Monument to the Discovery of America is centrally situated, the statue of Christopher Columbus is positioned laterally. And at night, when the urban tumult has fallen quiet, a world of calculated labyrinths, of barely sketched contradictions, comes into focus. Illuminated by powerful beams of white light, the Monument imposes its massive bulk while the silhouette of the famous navigator looms distant and ghostly.

In this way, the observer becomes trapped in a dreamlike situation in which the objects appear strange. The statue, in one corner of the plaza, cannot be properly appreciated because its back is to us. Nor can we reach the Monument because it is surrounded by a pond. It is necessary to leave the plaza and, circling around, enter from the street. But from there, one is too close to the forms and, backing up, it is impossible to find the distance needed to observe details and the whole. Finally, when attempting to find another perspective, a small stand of trees blocks the view. And so only one aspect of the complex can be appreciated at a time: only one aspect, step by step. Between the blocks of the Monument, two severe cypresses stand out, while in the gardens, the trees alternate between olive and magnolia. Small lamps shedding yellow light and some stone benches frame the calm, secluded, and disconcerting atmosphere.

The plaza was inaugurated around 1841. Today, in the gardens, a slender, neo-Gothic column rises 20 meters high, upon which stands the figure of the great Genoan<sup>1</sup>. In his right hand, he carries a folded banner with a cross at its apex and appears to be taking a step forward. On the stone scene, no decisive dates can be read. The names of the monarchs of

Spain do not appear embroidered on the flag. No caravels or Native Americans can be seen. The figures of the Pinzón brothers who accompanied the landing in Guanahaní are also absent. This is so because the sculptor did not intend to show the reality of that extraordinary adventure but rather make material the image that the sailor had of himself when he felt that he was embodying the Saint Christopher of legend. The artist made visible the reverie that drove Christopher Columbus to change his civil name for a fictitious one. Thus, we can understand that the inscription found in numerous documents of the time is not a pseudonym but the representation of the author himself<sup>2</sup>; it is his signature that reads “*Cristo ferens*,” meaning “the bearer of Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

The Monument to the Discovery of America<sup>4</sup> stands centrally on a stepped and ramped platform. From that floor rise a few enormous walls of concrete. The Monument consists of four forms, the tallest of which is 17 meters high. Large, incised drawings and massive texts fill the 2000 square meters of decorated mural surfaces. Light plays on the flat and curved surfaces of the walls, composed of red aggregates from Alicante. This grand construction impresses with its striking features.<sup>5</sup>

The two central forms of the Monument are engraved with the key dates, places, and names of the history prior to the discovery. Columbus is depicted with his son Diego, and the interview with the monarchs is also visible. Beyond are the bars, castles and lions of Castile and Aragon, together with the bars and eagles of Sicily. This is the heraldry that was emblazoned on the flag that was carried to the lands of Guanahaní.

On the enormous final form, called “The Discovery,” the names of the crew and the circumstances of the adventure can be read in bas-relief: “...*The Admiral went ashore in the armed boat, with Martin Alonso Pinzon and Vicente Yañez his brother, who was captain of La Niña. The Admiral unfurled the royal flag, and the two captains unfurled their two flags with the green cross, with an ‘F’ and a ‘Y’ and a crown above each letter. Once ashore, they saw very green trees, abundant water, and fruits of various kinds... later many of the islanders gathered around.*” A 7-meter-tall figure of Columbus, with his feet in the water and a great staff in his hand, dominates the ensemble in the style of the Saint Christophers found in cathedrals.

The disturbing first block, which the architect of the work called “The Prophecies,” features several inscriptions. One of them corresponds to the chorus of Seneca’s *Medea* exactly as it was translated from Latin to Spanish by Columbus to support his arguments in the Court. That free translation of the verses of the Roman from Cordoba reads: “*There will come a time in the later years of the world when the Ocean sea will loosen the bonds of things and a great land will be revealed and a new mariner like the one who was Jason’s guide and who was named Tiphys will discover a new world and the island of Thule will no longer be the last of the lands.*” These phrases are quite different from what Seneca actually wrote: “*As the years pass, the time will come in which the ocean will loosen the barriers of the world, and the earth will open up in all its expanse and Tethys will reveal new orbs to us and the end of the earth will no longer be Thule.*”<sup>6</sup>

Another writing, this one by Saint Isidore of Seville, accompanies Seneca’s words on the wall. Eight centuries before the discovery, the author of the “Etymologies” stated: “*Besides the three parts of the world, there exists another continent beyond the ocean.*” This inscription, though suggestive, has little to do with prophecy and, in any case, rather resembles Raymond Lull’s perception, which speaks of the existence of a great land *to the west on which the ocean must lie.*”

On the wall there also appear the words Columbus wrote in the margin of a page of Pierre d’Ailly’s “*Ymago Mundi*”<sup>7</sup>: “*Beyond the Tropic of Capricorn lies the most beautiful dwelling place, for it is the highest and noblest part of the world, that is to say, the Earthly Paradise.*” The theme of the Earthly Paradise is one to which the Navigator devoted special attention during his third voyage, and this creates some problems regarding the reliability of the documents and the language that he used. However, once this obstacle is overcome, what emerges is an extraordinary mythical geography that helps us understand some of the motivations behind the new voyages and discoveries.<sup>8</sup> “*Holy Scripture testifies that Our Lord made the Earthly Paradise in which he placed the Tree of Life, and from it flows a spring from which arise the four main rivers of this world.*” That place is situated at the highest point in the world, and by sea one gradually rises higher as one advances southward. “*And while Aristotle held that the Antarctic Pole or the land beneath it is the highest part of the world*

*and closest to the heavens...*” And later he comments that the world “...is shaped like a pear that is round everywhere except where the stem is, for there it is higher; or like someone who has a very round ball and in one place it is like a woman’s breast has been placed there, and this nipple-shaped part is the highest and closest to the heavens.”<sup>9</sup>

Of course, Columbus’ idea (regarding there being a place that is higher than all others on the globe of the world and that the water in that area is also higher) reflects beliefs that had already been discredited some centuries earlier. On this matter we should recall what Dante wrote in 1320: “Water has no hump protruding above its regular circumference,”<sup>10</sup> and also: “This argument springs from a fallacious imagination, for sailors at sea imagine that they cannot see land from the ship because the ship is higher than the land; but this is not so, rather the contrary would follow, for they would see a panorama much wider than the one they see. The reason is that the direct ray of the visible thing between the thing and the eye is broken by the convexity of the water for, as water necessarily has a round shape in every direction around its center, it follows that, at a certain distance, the convexity of the water itself forms an obstacle to vision.”<sup>11</sup> Although Dante refutes ideas about the highest points of the globe’s waters, he maintains that the gigantic mountain on which the Earthly Paradise is located is in the southern hemisphere. These images, combined with Ptolemy’s geocentric conception, will continue firing the imagination of navigators well into the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup>

In this first block, we can read a prophecy that seems to have originated in the land of the Americas before the arrival of Europeans. The inscription reads: “They are a shout away, a day away, oh, father! Welcome your guests, the bearded men, those from the east, those who bear the sign of Ku, the deity.” The quote is attributed to the Maya book, *Chilam Balam of Chumayel*,<sup>13</sup> one of the cornerstones of Indigenous American literature.<sup>14</sup> But the phrase is composed of two different paragraphs; 11 Ahau says: “...They came from the east when they arrived in this land, the bearded ones, the messengers of the sign of divinity, the strangers to this land, the ruddy men.” 12 Ahau says: “Welcome your guests; they are but a day away, a shout away.” All of this is better understood when we read 13 Ahau, which says: “The Ah Kines, Priests of the solar cult, prophesied because they understood how the

*Spanish foreigners would come; they read it in the signs of their writings and so they began to say: 'Truly, we will make them our friends and will not make war on them,' also saying: 'They will be paid tribute.'"* Certainly, these texts are from after the conquest. The matter is already very clear from 1 Ahau in which "prophesizing" occurs only after the event: "...*At the end of katun, from the Heart of the Mountain, Cesar Augustus (Charles V) will receive his alms, his share, in deaths from hunger, in vultures in the houses.*"

Materials from the Maya culture translated to different European languages began to circulate as of 1930. The particular case of the prophecies is still a topic of discussion among philologists and historians, and has served as inspiration for writers and artists, as is made very clear in this first block of the Monument.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, the sequence of forms leads us to reflect on the fantasies that Columbus elaborated, which did not remain solely in his mind but ended up affecting the interpretations of some authors who dedicated themselves to recreating his life. Many of those images influenced people who took the Navigator as the model extraordinary discoverer, a type of adventurer who remains always contemporary, despite the passage of centuries. Even today, we can observe this in certain cinematographic creations in which the director (and producer) hails not from the field of the arts but rather from astronautics.<sup>16</sup>

The Monument of the Plaza de Colón enables us to intuit the universe of images that drove the Navigator throughout his life. His projects were, above all, great flights of the imagination, and the results of his actions were consistent with those raptures. After all, there are cases in which highly unlikely reveries end up guiding the protagonist's life and end up becoming decisive factors in the interplay of historical forces. Something of this sort happened with a number of Christopher Columbus' projects. He himself discarded several plans as being unfeasible,<sup>17</sup> and others, flawed in their basic conception, nevertheless ended up hitting the mark.

Now we begin to understand why a separation, one might even say a clash, has been produced between the statue of Columbus and the Monument to the Discovery. Everything that appears surprising and contradictory in the plaza is, in fact, a reflection of the divided world of that dreamer and man of action.

## NOTES TO REVERIE AND ACTION

- <sup>1</sup> Statues dedicated to Columbus can be found in many plazas and avenues. A particularly grand one can be found in Barcelona. The one we are concerned with is 3 meters high and is the work of A. Melida and J. Suñol, who finished it in 1885. In 1892, it was placed on a 17-meter-high column in the center of Castellana. Once the Monument to the Discovery of America was completed, it was placed in the plaza in its current location. Following a restoration, they added another 3 meters to the column.
- <sup>2</sup> A letter addressed to the Genoese ambassador to Spain, Nicoló Oderigo, is preserved in the Municipal Palace of Genoa. It is dated March 21, 1502, in Seville. Columbus signs it as “Cristoferens.”
- <sup>3</sup> According to a 3<sup>rd</sup> century Syrian legend, a man had the job of helping travelers cross a mighty river. To do this, he put passengers on his shoulders, walked along the riverbed, and deposited them on the other bank. He often leaned on a wooden walking stick as he waded across. One day, a child appeared in need of his services. Halfway across the river, the child became so heavy that the man began to falter. In the midst of this danger, the child revealed he was Jesus Christ. The man, stunned by this wonder, converted to Christianity and took the name Christoforos (*lat. Christus*, Christ, and *gr. Foros*, bearer). Christopher became the patron-saint of travelers. In the Middle Ages, the statuary of colossal Saint Christophers was developed, which are still preserved in numerous cathedrals. In Germany and the Low Countries, in the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, printed images were made which circulated throughout Europe and had the power to protect against misfortune. In Columbus’ time, the legend was very widely known. A little later, in 1584, in the Cathedral of Seville, Mateo Pérez de Alesio painted a Saint Christopher which was more than 9 meters tall. In religious paintings and statues, Saint Christopher appears crossing a river while carrying Jesus on his shoulders. In turn, the child carries in his right hand a globe topped by a cross. Based on this representation, a mocking riddle has circulated throughout Austria for several centuries: “Christopher carried Christ, Christ carried the world, on what did Christopher stand?”
- <sup>4</sup> It was inaugurated by the mayor of Madrid on May 15, 1977, in the presence of the King and 20 mayors of the capitals of American countries.
- <sup>5</sup> The renowned Italian architect A. Sartoris says: “*Vaquero Turcios has made sculpted architecture, divided into sections with concavities and articulations of volumes... On these volumes, on the extremely strong and bold cantilevers launched into the void, figurations have been carved and the texts of the inscriptions graphically embedded, like large drawings and graffiti. Flying forms with a monolithic character. A narrative monument. First work of constructed art carried out at an urban scale.*” In turn, O. Guayasamin commented on the work: “*From the aesthetic point of view, it reaches heights of high poetry. The architectonic masses, which might at first appear too static,*

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*acquire a great lightness and balance. The monument is at once the Andes mountain range and the sails of ships. What I mean by this is that it is as massive as a rock and as light as a ship's sails. It is, in short, the largest monument that has been constructed in Europe in recent times, and the most solid.*" (Vaquero Turcios y el Arte Construido. Monumento al Descubrimiento de América. A. Sartoris, Madrid. Abaco. 1977.)

<sup>6</sup> *Medea*. Seneca. Madrid. Gredos, 1997. Act Two, par. 375. The text that Columbus used was possibly from Ferrara's *Editio princeps* of 1484 and not, as was assumed until recently, that of the editions of Martinus Herbipolensis of Leipzig or Carolus Fernandus of Paris, for which no year of production is recorded but which were only just known in 1492 and which appear to have the same date of the *Tragoediae Senecae cum duobus commentariis* by Marmita, which was published in Venice in 1493. Regarding the text in question, the translator and commentator of Seneca's works, Jesús Luque Moreno, says: "For centuries, this passage has been interpreted (by Abraham Oertel, for example) as the prophetic announcement of a Spaniard about the discovery of the New World, which would later be carried out by Spain." Hernando Columbus, the son of the discoverer, wrote in the margin of this passage in his copy of the plays of Seneca: "*haec prophetia expleta est per patrem meum Christoforum Colon almirantem anno 1492*" (this prophecy was fulfilled by my father, the admiral Christopher Columbus, in the year 1492.)

<sup>7</sup> Biblioteca Colombina, Sevilla.

<sup>8</sup> *Diario. Relaciones de viajes*. C. Colón. Madrid. Sarpe, 1985. The introductory note to this book states that "relatively few documents of the author's survive, and in any case, a good portion of them have come down to us thanks to copies made by Friar Bartolomé de las Casas, who was a close friend of Diego Columbus. This allowed him to have direct access to the discoverer's archives and books. Thus, thanks to a signed copy by las Casas, the summary of the Journals of the first and third voyages has been preserved. This suggests that the original text of the Journals may have been significantly altered. However, subsequent researchers have refined the copies, removing inaccuracies and alterations, and the current versions are highly reliable. The lack of originals is compounded by another difficulty with the works of Columbus: the much-debated problem of the language used by the author... Columbus was, first and foremost, a man of the sea and, as such, this sailor was accustomed to getting by in a thousand languages without expressing himself well in any. On a daily basis and during his younger years, the Admiral must have communicated with his companions in the jargon that was then called 'levantisca,' that is, from the Levant, the Mediterranean."

<sup>9</sup> "I had always read that the world—land and water—was spherical, according to the authorities and experiences given and demonstrated by Ptolemy and all the others who wrote about this place, by lunar eclipses and by other demonstrations made from East to West, like the elevation of the Pole star from north to south. Now, as I have said, I have seen so many irregularities and for this reason I began to believe this about the world, and found that it is not round as they describe it, but rather that it is shaped like a pear that is round everywhere except where the stem is, for there it is higher;

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or like someone who has a very round ball and in one place it is like a woman's breast has been placed there, and this nipple-shaped part is the highest and closest to the heavens, and it lies below the equinoctial line, in this Ocean sea, at the farthest point of the east (I call the farthest point of the east the place where all the land and islands end). And for this I submit all the reasons written above regarding the line that passes to the west of the islands of the Azores, one hundred leagues from north to south, such that when passing from there westward, the ships begin to rise gently towards the heavens..." Op. cit. *Narrative of the Third Voyage*.

<sup>10</sup> *Disputa sobre el agua y la tierra*. Dante Alighieri. O. C. Madrid. BAC. 1973, par. 8. Dante's *Quaestio de Aqua et Terra* ("A Question of the land and of the water") refutes the theory held by Pliny, Seneca and Saint Basil that the sea occupies a higher point than the land.

<sup>11</sup> Op. cit. Paragraph 82.

<sup>12</sup> What is poetry in Dante ends up being for many of his readers a description of a physical reality that can be found in the southern seas. The poet relates: "*I'mi volsi a man destra, e posi mente a l'altro polo, e vidi quattro stelle non vista mai fuor ch'a la prima gente. Goder pareva il ciel di lor fiammelle: oh settentrional vedovo sito, poi che privato se'di mirar quelle!*" ("I turned to the right, looking at the other pole, and saw four stars never seen since the first humans. The sky seemed to rejoice in their splendor. O, North, what a sad place you are, since you are deprived of seeing them!"). Purgatory, Canto I. *The Divine Comedy*. For Dante, the Earth, according to Ptolemy's system, was immobile. The celestial spheres revolve around it, and with them the sun, the planets and the stars. In the poem, these are the directions of the world: to the north, Jerusalem over the infernal abyss; to the south, at the antipodes of Jerusalem, mount Purgatory; to the east, the Ganges; to the west, the Strait of Gibraltar. Hell and Purgatory are on Earth, one in the form of an abyss, the other in the form of a mountain, on whose summit is the Earthly Paradise. Furthermore, Ptolemy's scheme remained current even after the publication of Copernicus' *Revolutionibus orbium coelestium* in 1543. Since Copernicus denied that the Earth was the center of the universe, his conception was vigorously resisted. In 1609, Galileo introduced the astronomical telescope and confirmed Copernicus' heliocentric theory, but even then, several decades passed before the new vision of reality became established.

<sup>13</sup> "*The Chilam Balam of Chumayel, from the town of Chumayel, Yucatan, was the property of Bishop Crescencio Carrillo y Ancona. In 1868, while already in his possession, it was copied by hand by Dr. Berendt and, in 1887, it was photographed by Teoberto Maler. George B. Gordon, director of the University of Pennsylvania Museum, photographed it and published it in facsimile form in 1913. It passed to the Biblioteca Cepeda in Mérida in 1915, from where it was stolen, along with other manuscripts, before 1918. In 1938, it appeared for sale in the United States for the sum of seven thousand dollars. Later, it was again offered for sale to Dr. Sylvanus G. Morley for the sum of five thousand dollars. Portions of it have been translated and published since 1882, but the first complete translation was published in Spanish by Antonio Médez Bolio in Costa Rica in 1930. The second, in English, was by Ralph L. Roys who published it in 1933.*" *El Libro de los Libros de Chilam*

<sup>14</sup> *The so-called Books of Chilam Balam are among the most important examples of indigenous American literature. They were written after the Spanish conquest, so their writing and material form are European. That is, their writing is what the Spanish friars adapted to the phonology of the Yucatán Mayan language, and the paper used—at least in the copies now in existence—is also in the style of European notebooks. Some, if not all, had cowhide covers... As is evident, the diversity of their content encompasses all the cultural phases through which the Maya people of Yucatán passed, until they stopped being compiled... There is no doubt that a large part of their purely native religious and historical texts come from the ancient hieroglyphic books... We don't know at what point they came to be called 'Books of Chilam Balam.' This name does not appear as the original title of any of them, although Pío Perez notes in one of his transcriptions: 'This is the end of the book titled Chilambalam that was preserved in the town of Maní... (Pérez codex, Ms., p. 137).' In any case, the name is now an accepted technical designation for this type of Yucatecan book... We surmise this is how the Books of Chilam Balam were organized and spread: A priest (or several priests, simultaneously) would receive instructions from the friars and learn to read and write in their own language. Taking advantage of this new cultural acquisition, they would transcribe religious and historical texts contained in their hieroglyphic books, including those of the predictions of Chilam Balam. From one or more sources, copies would be issued and passed on to native priests in other towns, thus coming to include in their title the name of their place of origin: Chumayel, Maní, Tizimín, etc. Time physically destroyed the books and, as their own cultures changed, destroyed the understanding that their curators should have had of their content. Thus, the copies that exist today are not the underlying texts of the original 16<sup>th</sup> century versions, but copies of much later copies, some from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and others from even this century. A large part of these texts that we call 'foundational' appear repeated one or more times in the Books, but on each occasion the versions are not identical, for the reasons mentioned." Op. cit. p. 9 ff.*

<sup>15</sup> Many scholars, thinkers, and scientists have been inspired by the teachings of history. This is particularly notable among science fiction writers, of which one example is Ray Bradbury. This author, in writing *The Martian Chronicles*, was surely influenced by several fantasy writers. The impact on him of the great maritime and terrestrial discoveries is also very clear. In his book, Bradbury was concerned with showing the pernicious consequences of the encounter between cultures (in his case, between those of Mars and Earth) and drew inspiration from events such as those that occurred in Guatemala after the arrival of the Europeans, when a smallpox epidemic decimated Maya groups across a significant area. Bradbury recreates this situation as a chickenpox plague that, brought by the Earthlings, wipes out the Martians (different from the earthly disease that kills the Martian invaders in H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*). The first edition of *The Martian Chronicles* dates from 1946, thirteen years after the complete English translation of the books of the *Chilam Balam*. The prophetic dream reported by one of the Martians, announcing the arrival of the first human beings, recalls the bickering of the Maya prophecies supposedly recorded before the discovery of America by Europeans. Both the Mayas and the Martians announce in their prophecies that the foreigners are very close, *a day away*, and in both cases the

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physical characteristics of the invaders are also discussed. The strange, voiced books that the Martians “read” are reminiscent of the “painted” or hieroglyphic books of the Mayas. Finally, the masks of which both cultures are so fond confirm the inspiration of Maya literature on Bradbury’s creative imagery.

<sup>16</sup> Reference to the film, “Christopher Columbus: The Discovery,” produced and directed by John Glen in 1992. [*Translators’ note: The filmmaker, John Glen, is not the same person as the astronaut, John Glenn. If this “mix up” is not accidental, then the author’s intention here is unclear.*]

<sup>17</sup> Columbus had imagined it was possible to raise an army of 50,000 foot soldiers and 5,000 cavalry to retake the Holy Sepulchre and even asked the monarchs of Spain for permission to form a crusade to expel the Muslims from Jerusalem. Over time, he abandoned that idea to concentrate on the final stage of his career of discovery. On his fourth and final voyage to America, he departed from Cadiz on May 9, 1502.

# The woods of Bomarzo

## Bomarzo.<sup>1</sup> The Opera.<sup>2</sup>

Before the curtain rises, the voice of the shepherd-boy fills the hall:

*"I would not change places,  
in all my poverty,  
with the Duke of Bomarzo.  
He has a flock of rocks,  
And mine is a flock of sheep.  
What is mine is enough for me,  
this peace of Bomarzo,  
the gentle voice of the stream,  
the song of the cicadas..."*

Act 1, Scene III, is called "The Horoscope." Later, there is the "Alchemy" scene, and finally, the "Park of Monsters" scene in which there appears an enormous and grotesque face carved in stone. Then, a baritone defines the situation with this strophe:

*"It is a night for loving, like no other.  
For dying as well, for all things tremble  
with the mystery of these rare moments  
when the huge monsters sculpted  
at my brother's order in silent stone<sup>3</sup>*

*lie in ambush for anyone who dares  
wander through this tangled wood.”*

### **Information on the Park**

Near Viterbo, 100 kilometers from Rome, there is a forest that is advertised these days as the “Parco dei Mostri” (Park of Monsters). It is visited by tourists of all kinds. Among them are those drawn by the mystique of the place, after having been touched by a rumor spread perhaps by word of mouth, newspaper articles, or television programs. The gist of the idea is roughly: “The sacred woods of Bomarzo was created in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by a Signor Orsini. The conception of the park is clearly esoteric and a person who knows how to walk among its monuments in the proper order undergoes an inner transformation similar to that realized by the alchemists in their laboratories.”

The Sacro Bosco (Sacred Grove) of Vicino Orsini passed to the della Rovere family in 1645. Only a few drawings without commentaries<sup>4</sup> are preserved from that time. After a period of silence that lasted until 1845, the park later reappeared in the hands of the Borghese family. In 1953, a newspaper article<sup>5</sup> drew attention to the woods. In 1954, Giovanni Bettini acquired the property and made significant modifications, removing the perimeter walls, outlining internal paths, and modifying the positions of monuments (the sphinxes, obelisks, and others). After restoring some sculptures, the park was opened to the public.<sup>6</sup> In 1955, several studies were published<sup>7</sup> by a group of professors from the Facoltà di Architettura di Roma who conducted archival research and fieldwork and produced drawings of their survey. In 1958, Mujica Lainez visited the site<sup>8</sup> and in 1962 he published his novel *Bomarzo*, which gave rise to the libretto of the opera of the same name, written in collaboration with Ginastera, which premiered in 1967. From that moment on, numerous articles, books, and films spread a stereotyped image of the Sacro Bosco. Of course, apart from works undertaken in a serious and scientific way, there appeared fantasies that, inspired by the novel and opera *Bomarzo*, pushed interpretations based on a type of depth psychology that was popular in the 1970s.

## The Place

The Sacro Bosco is located at the foot of the town of Bomarzo. Upon entering, one finds a forest preserved in a “wild” state, punctuated by some conifers and a few cultivated species. In Orsini’s time, this forest must have been very similar to the one at Nemi, which is also quite close by, where the sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis, or Diana of the Woods, stood. Like the Nemi forest, it featured numerous oak trees dotted here and there with the sacred mistletoe from which Aeneas cut a golden bough to gain entry to the underworld.<sup>9</sup> But there is more than a variety of trees, streams, fences, buildings, and carved stones here. Above all, there is an atmosphere governed by a Mannerist aesthetic in which the depersonalized Renaissance garden no longer has a place. Here, personal experience is now emphasized.<sup>10</sup> In these woods, visual unity and spatial coherence have vanished. Places that occupied opposite positions in the imagery of the period are given equal importance. In this way, heavens and hells can coexist quite naturally. This is evident in the statuary, which derives from figures sculpted on site using existing rocks. The artist takes the elements at hand and takes advantage of the topographical conditions to design their garden. The result is a continuous allegorization inspired by myths and legends, causing “wonder” and amazement in the viewer. The system of ideation which favored geometric principles, balance, and rationality that a few years earlier reigned over the promenades, gardens, and villas of cultivated Europe has changed.<sup>11</sup>

For anyone interested in understanding the formation and process of the profound mythical images that originate with western Humanism and still survive to this day, these woods will be paradigmatic. To understand the meanings of the sphinxes, ogres, demigods and fabulous animals that populate the place, it will be necessary to revisit the sources of inspiration used by Vicino Orsini and the artists that worked in Bomarzo.

## Bibliographic Antecedents

The earliest bibliographic report notes the letters exchanged between Pier Francesco Orsini and the French alchemist Jean Drouet. The correspondents were familiar with *L'Amadigi* by Bernardo Tasso, and Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. But above all other literature, these men held in highest regard that strange book entitled *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*,<sup>12</sup> which has been one of the most important sources of a prolific literary, pictorial, and sculptural production. Furthermore, its influence was felt in numerous architectural works, and even in the design of gardens.<sup>13</sup> We must take into account the first Venetian edition of 1499, an illustrated folio with 171 woodcuts, in which one can see the visual representation of the descriptions in the text. Taking the first chapter of the *Dream of Poliphilo* (*The Strife of Love in the Dreams of Poliphilo*), we find the first engraving illustrating the figure of the protagonist entering the forest. The text comes to our aid: "...hard wild oaks, mighty oaks, and holly oaks laden with acorns and branches so abundant that the pleasant rays of the sun could not fully reach the dew-covered ground." The relentless descriptions of the book continue, leading to endless encounters (illustrated by the engravings), with abandoned buildings, Egyptian-style pyramids, domes, towers and pantheons, temples and obelisks. Large amphoras and giant vases also appear, along with marvelous trees, machines, and incomprehensible contrivances. Of course, elephants, winged horses, and dragons keep appearing. Processions, ceremonies, and rituals follow one another, depicting maidens and young men keen on the practice of pagan religiosity and amorous adventures. And there are, of course, the transformations of Poliphilo's dream that present his beloved Polia in the opposing aspects of mysticism and criminality.

Hieroglyphics also play an important role, and these are commented on extravagantly. Here is one example: "*When I finally returned to the square, I saw a porphyry pedestal, with these hieroglyphs most worthily carved around it: first a bucranium with two agricultural implements tied to its horns; and an altar supported by two goats' feet and with a burning flame upon it, and on its front an eye and a vulture; then a basin and a ewer ... these were hieroglyphic writings executed in the best sculpture. I meditated on these most ancient and sacred writings and interpreted them thus: EX LABORE DEO NATVRAE SACRIFICA*

*LIBERALITER, PAVLATIM REDVCES ANIMVM DEO SVBIECTUM. FIRMAM CVSTODIAM VITAE TVAE MISERICORDITER GVBERNANDO TENEBIT, INCOLVMENQVE SERVABIT.*"<sup>14</sup>

While the *Dream of Poliphilo* is the immediate bibliographic source that serves as the inspiration for the artisans of the Bomarzo woods, the imagery of the book, in turn, has very distant antecedents. Regarding the hieroglyphics mentioned above, we must highlight that the *Hieroglyphica*<sup>15</sup> had begun to circulate by 1422, and it became fashionable to write, paint, and sculpt in this style overloaded with allegories and signs, which in many cases were undecipherable. Perhaps one of the best expressions of hieroglyphic art can be found in "*The Triumphal Arch of Maximilian*," a wood engraving made by Durer in 1515.<sup>16</sup> Thus, in the *Dream of Poliphilo*, as in so many works even into the 19<sup>th</sup> century (and still today in occult texts), hieroglyphic interpretations based on the *Hieroglyphica* continue to be relied on, falling into total disrepute only when the Egyptian language was effectively deciphered in 1822.<sup>17</sup>

The bibliography that inspired the artisans of the Sacro Bosco is very extensive and, of course, is not limited to the *Dream of Poliphilo* but is inextricably linked to the humanist productions of the 15<sup>th</sup> century that were influenced by Byzantine thought and by the rediscovery of the Alexandrian legacy of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, there is not only an abundant literature here but also an oral tradition passed along by architects, designers, and sculptors.

## **The Woods**

We have in our hands a catalog, almost an inventory, that lists the "marvelous" objects of the woods. It mentions a few sphinxes, the monument to the Triple Light, the Gigantomachy, the harpies, the giant tortoise, the dog Cerberus, the elephant topped by a tower, Pegasus, and the dragon confronting a beast. Sacred sites are also mentioned: the fountain of Neptune, the leaning tower of meditation, the cavern of nymphs, the fountain of life. This material, written to guide the order of photographs that tourists should take, also discusses the light of the place, the vegetation, the streams, the ascending and descending planes, the stairways, the artificial grottoes, the promenades of the aligned amphoras... It is

well worth spending a morning carefully examining this effort carried out more than four hundred years ago. It is also interesting to follow a group of visitors while they listen to a guide discussing the magical ceremonies performed there and the alchemists who, following an initiatory journey, ended up acquiring ineffable knowledge.

We reach the woods by following a stream. A river appears, a bridge, and a crenellated gate bearing the Orsini coat of arms. We enter the space that Pier Francesco called, the “Sacro Bosco” in several of his letters.

Two “gynocephalic sphinxes” facing each other greet the visitor. The fabulous creatures, resting on their pedestals, present their riddles written in stone. And here is our first surprise. These are not classical riddles that the monsters present us with. They are not paragons of profundity but rather something like ad copy written in the style and taste of the era. One sphinx invites us to respond to its demanding call: “TU CH’ENTRI QUI CON MENTE PARTE A PARTE ET DIMMI POI SE TANTE MARAVIGLIE SIEN FATTE PER INGANNO O PUR PER ARTE”.<sup>19</sup> The inscription of the other sphinx says: “CHI CON CIGLIA INARCATE ET LABRA STRETTE NON VA PER QUESTO LOCO MANCO AMMIRA LE FAMOSE DEL MONDO MOLI SETTE.”<sup>20</sup> This is a rebuke and a plea for “seriousness.” In passing, the Seven Wonders of the World are mentioned, leaving us to make an association with the eighth. We breathe a sigh of relief when we realize that there is a clumsy humor at play here that is not without petulance but far from heavy solemnity. Seeing this, there is nothing better than to continue searching for the messages given to us, directly and unmediated by interpretive theories, by the craftsman of the woods.<sup>21</sup>

Encountering the “fight of the giants,” we read in a rock stele placed to the left of the statue: “SE RODI ALTIER GIA FU DEL SUO COLOSSO PUR DE QUEST IL MIO BOSCO ANCO SI GLORIA E PER PIU NON POTER FO QUANTO POSSO.”<sup>22</sup>

In the so-called “nymphaeum,” we find an inscription which has unfortunately become very faded with the passing of time. We can read only these words: “L’ANTRO LA FONTE IL LI... D’OGNI OSCUR PENSIER....”<sup>23</sup>

And in search of new inscriptions, we arrive at the “theater” which, as in every important Roman garden, had to be here. On the proscenium, we can read with difficulty:

“PER SIMIL VANITA MI SON AC...(CORDA)...TO D’ONORARE....”<sup>24</sup> At the foot of this stage, parts of two recently unearthed obelisks have been placed. One of them reads: “VICINO ORSINO NEL MDLII.”<sup>25</sup> The other announces, “SOL PER SFOGARE IL CORE.”<sup>26</sup>

On an urn near “the fountain of Neptune,” an inscription reads: “NOTTE ET GIORNO NOI SIAM VIGILI ET PRONTE A GUARDAR DOGNI INGIURIA QUESTA FONTE.”<sup>27</sup> And in another: “FONTE NON FU TRA CHINGUARDIA SIA DELLE PIU STRANE BELVE.”<sup>28</sup>

Reaching the “Orc,” the ogre, we see on the upper lip of the monster, this caption: “OGNI PENSIERO VOLA.”<sup>29</sup>

There is an “Etruscan bench” there that has written on its back: “VOI CHE PEL MONDO GITE ERRANDO, VAGHI DI VEDER MARAVIGLIE ALTE ED STUPENDE VENITE QUA, DOVE SON FACCIE HORRENDE ELEFANTI, LEONI, ORSI, ORCHI ET DRAGHI.”<sup>30</sup> It is an invitation to see an amusement park.

An inscription on the “rotunda” reiterates the blatant publicity of the woods: “CEDAN ET MEMPHI E OGNI ALTRA MARAVIGLIA CH EBBE GIAL MONDO IN PREGIO AL SACRO BOSCO CHE SOL SE STESSO ET NULL ALTRO SOMIGLIA.”<sup>31</sup>

The inscriptions have allowed us to understand the intentions of the artisans of Bomarzo. At least, we have understood the direct messages of Pier Francesco Orsini. But when the interest of a visit is expressed like this, we are left with an absence of meaning...

We have not delved into the imagery of the woods because it is not its exclusive heritage but rather the common landscape in which the mysticism of the Renaissance was expressed; a mysticism at times scarcely outlined and at times, as in this case, presented emphatically. Whether the architects, designers, and sculptors drew on subjects like alchemy, astrology, and the mystery religions out of the needs of their era, or to highlight the ingenious personality of the lord of the place, we cannot pretend that those craftsmen fully knew what meanings they were dealing with. In any case, the expressions of that mysticism are there before our eyes, and among numerous absurdities, valuable materials accumulate, as can happen in some abandoned attics. Surely, information (or rather, misinformation) about the woods of Bomarzo will grow. We can consult virtual libraries, we can flip through the pages of books that haphazardly discuss the stars, the philosopher’s

stone, and even the collective unconscious, but none of that will facilitate access to the complex cultural atmosphere that began to take shape in the Hellenistic syncretism of ancient Alexandria.

## NOTES TO THE WOODS OF BOMARZO

<sup>1</sup> The Sacro Bosco, created by the duke Pier Francesco Orsini, nicknamed Vicino (1523-1584), is located at the foot of the town of Bomarzo. “Bomarzo” means, roughly, “Good Mars.” The denomination of “Sacro Bosco” was coined after the death of Orsini.

<sup>2</sup> The opera *Bomarzo*, by Alberto Ginastera, with libretto by Manuel Mujica Lainez, premiered on May 19, 1967 in the Lisner Auditorium in Washington. Consequently, on July 18, 1967, the Municipality of the city of Buenos Aires issued a decree that excluded the work from the repertory of the Colón Theatre, where it was to open in a few days. The terms of the decree were as follows: “This Municipal Government has only recently gained a thorough understanding of the characteristic aspects of this show, in whose fifteen scenes can be noted a permanent and obsessive reference to sex, violence and hallucination, accentuated by the staging, the choral mass, the sets, the choreography, and all other concurrent elements. The plot of the piece and its staging reveal themselves at odds with basic moral principles regarding sexual modesty.” This decree was celebrated by humorists from various latitudes and contributed to spreading the work’s fame. These communal initiatives, such as the Municipality of Florence’s 1910 resolution to outfit Michelangelo’s David with a fig leaf, are often widely celebrated. In 1970, the opera was presented at the opera houses of Kiel and Zurich, directed by the eminent Ferdinand Leitner. From that time on, interest in Bomarzo Park began to grow.

<sup>3</sup> This is sung by Girolamo, elder brother of Pier Francesco Orsini. As for the “huge monsters sculpted at my brother’s order,” it is known who took part in the two phases of the sculptural work – the first began in 1552 and was later interrupted; the second began in 1564 and was completed in 1573. However, the identity of the general designer of the Park is still not clear. In any case, a commission was given to the architect Pirro Ligorio (remembered for his 1550 project of the gardens of the Villa d’Este in Tivoli).

<sup>4</sup> Two ink drawings have been preserved: one, known as “Buon Martio” (Vienna. Graphische Albertina. Portale e Urna. Cat. n. 27) and the other as “Vue du Jardin de Bomarzo” (attributed to Breenburg. Louvre. Inventory number 23373). These constitute the earliest references.

<sup>5</sup> Mario Praz, *I Mostri di Bomarzo*, L’Illustrazione Italiana n° 8, 1953.

<sup>6</sup> Significant modifications to the monuments can be noted when comparing the photographs of the first edition of the *Bomarzo Parco dei Mostri* brochure in black-and-white to the second one, in color. See, for example, “The Pegasus,” completely restored. These undated brochures are for sale at the entrance to the Park.

<sup>7</sup> Quaderni dell’ Istituto di Storia dell’Architettura (April, 1955, special issue dedicated to the Villa Orsini). Contains among its various contributions: Arnaldo Bruschi, *L’Abitato di Bomarzo e la Villa*

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Orsini; Giuseppe Zander, *Gli Elementi Documentari del Sacro Bosco* and Leonardo Benevolo, *Saggio d'Interpretazione del Sacro Bosco*.

<sup>8</sup> According to what can be read in the dedication to *Bomarzo*. Ed. Sudamericana. Buenos Aires 1962.

<sup>9</sup> See J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*. The relationship of oak and mistletoe with sacred woods is studied in Chapter LVX (Balder and the mistletoe). To understand the mythical significance of this tree and its parasite, see Book VI of *The Aeneid*, Virgil: "...A tree's deep shade hides a bough whose leaves and pliant stem are golden and sacred to Juno of the underworld; the whole grove conceals it, and the shadows enclose it within dark valleys. No one may enter the depths of the earth unless he plucks the golden bough from the tree; Proserpina has decreed this the offering to be brought to her..."

<sup>10</sup> "By spiritualizing the human figure, the Gothic took the first great step in the development of modern expressionism, and now mannerism takes the second by breaking up the objectivism of the Renaissance, emphasizing the personal attitude of the artist and appealing to the personal experience of the onlooker." *The Social History of Art*. A. Hauser. Routledge. London, 1999. Vol. II, page 96.

<sup>11</sup> See *El Sacro Bosco de Bomarzo. Un jardín alquímico*. L. Roquero. Ed. Celeste. Madrid 1999. Page 22.

<sup>12</sup> *Sueño de Polifilo* (The Dream of Poliphilo). F. Colonna. Barcelona. El Acantillado, 1999. In the introduction to the book, it is noted: "The *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Venice, 1499) is one of the most curious and enigmatic books ever to emerge from the printing press. Gnolli refers to it as "the 15<sup>th</sup> century's unique poem and greatest fantasy," while Croce condemns it in these words: "Had that book not been so serious, long, and ponderous, it might be interpreted as a caricature of Humanism."

<sup>13</sup> In the introduction cited above, P. Pedraza comments that *The Dream of Poliphilo* made its mark in a wide range of fields: the literature of *Préciosité*, satire, and alchemy, architectural theory, emblematics, and garden design. It influenced French *Préciosité*, Romanticism, the Pre-Raphaelites, and Symbolism. From Francis I and Rudolf I on, it was held in high regard in courts and palaces. It is even cited as a book of interest in Rabelais' *Gargantua*.

<sup>14</sup> Op. Cit. Chapter IV. "Generously sacrifice to God the gifts of nature obtained through your labor. Thus, little by little, you will conform your spirit to His. He will firmly guard your life, governing it with mercy, and preserve you unharmed." The hieroglyph is composed ideographically, with each object in the drawing corresponding to one or more Latin words: bucranium = "ex labore," eye = "deo," bird = "naturae," altar = "sacrifice," etc.

<sup>15</sup> "By Horus, Ficino meant Horus Apollo or Horapollo, the author of the *Hieroglyphica*, alleged to be the Greek translation of an Egyptian work which was discovered in 1419 by a Florentine monk,

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Cristoforo Buondelmonti, on the Greek island of Andros. Purchased by Buondelmonti on behalf of Cosimo de' Medici, the manuscript reached Florence in 1422, where it caused a sensation. For there, at last, was a work explaining the hidden meaning of the mysterious Egyptian hieroglyphs. Its text was widely circulated and eagerly commented upon, despite its many shortcomings; and it is responsible for the Renaissance view of hieroglyphs." *The Golden Game*. S. Klossowsky de Rola. Thames and Hudson. London, 1988. Page 9.

<sup>16</sup> "The giant *Triumphal Arch of Maximilian*, which is the largest woodcut in history, is a set of images measuring 350 x 279 cm. Right in the upper part of the monument there is a panel (described by Stabius, Maximilian's historian, as a 'mystery in sacred Egyptian letters'), in which the Emperor appears on his throne, surrounded by symbols gleaned from Durer's illustrations for Horapollo's book. Following R. Wittkower, I now turn to Erwin Panofsky's translation of the German texts by Stabius and the Latin texts by Pirckheimer, a translation that allows us to decipher the image (the interpolations are Panofsky's): 'Maximilian (the Emperor himself) —prince (dog covered with a stole) of great piety (the star above the Emperor's crown), magnanimity, strength, and courage (lion), made noble by eternal and imperishable glory (basilisk above the Emperor's crown), descendant of an ancient lineage (the bundle of papyri on which he sits)... etc.'" Op. Cit. Page 13.

<sup>17</sup> "The Rosetta Stone is a stele found by a French official in 1799 in Rosetta, an Egyptian town near the Mediterranean coast, and is currently housed in the British Museum in London. The text, written in two languages and three scripts (hieroglyphic, demotic, and Greek) served Jean-François Champollion as the basis for deciphering hieroglyphics in 1822. The decree it contains reproduces the decisions adopted by a synod of Egyptian priests held in 196 BCE regarding the honors due to Ptolemy V and Cleopatra I." *Egipto El Mundo de los Faraones*. R. Schulz, M. Seidel. Könemann. Colonia. 1997. Page 519.

<sup>18</sup> "In 1439, under Turkish pressure on Constantinople (seat of the Orthodox Patriarchate), a Council was convened in Florence. The presence in the city of the Eastern legations represented for Florentine intellectual circles the rediscovery of the Greek culture of the Hellenistic period. The fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 led to a massive influx of Byzantines into the Italian peninsula. With the help of Byzantine scholars, Greek texts of the Classical and Hellenistic periods were translated. These translations, along with the publication of numerous epitomes and commentaries, brought the Florentine Academy unprecedented prestige. This Academy was founded by the multifaceted *Philosophus platonicus, Theologus et Medicus*, Marsilio Ficino... The recovery of Hellenistic culture through the Byzantines caused a stir in the Italy of the *Quattrocento*. Cosimo de Medici mobilized agents to locate manuscripts and in 1460, a copy of the *Corpus Hermeticum* arrived from Macedonia. Marsilio Ficino, in charge of its translation, was ordered to postpone the translation of Plato's texts and give priority to the great Hermes as he was considered more venerable and more ancient. An error of historical perspective arose: what was in fact the late fruit of a Platonism contaminated by the eclectic interference of other cultures was considered the original doctrine that, so long ago, spread from Egypt throughout the ancient world, influencing Plato himself... These translations revitalized the Hermetic-chemical tradition and stimulated a renewed

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interest in astrology. A Hermetic craze took hold in the Italian courts. There was no Renaissance court that did not have resident astrologers and alchemists, nor a library that did not collect the works of traditional alchemy.” *El Sacro Bosco de Bomarzo. Un jardín alquímico*. L Roquero. Ed. Celeste. Madrid 1999. Page 11.

<sup>19</sup> “You who enter with the intention of observing everything carefully, tell me afterward whether these many marvels were wrought by deception or by art.”

<sup>20</sup> “Whoever does not walk around here with arched eyebrows and lips sealed tight will not know how to admire the famed Seven Wonders of the World.”

<sup>21</sup> The shameful scattering of interpretations has obscured the reality of the Bomarzo woods. For example, see *Los Jardines Del Sueño*, E. Kretzulesco-Quaranta. Ed. Siruela. Madrid. 1996, in the chapter on *Bomarzo: “El Bosque Sagrado.”* However, the quality research in this book on the mysticism of the Renaissance must be recognized.

<sup>22</sup> “If Rhodes was famous for its Colossus, my woods also are a source of glory—indeed, all the more so because I could do no more than what I have done.”

<sup>23</sup> “The cavern, the fountain, the li... of all dark thought.” Perhaps it could be completed thus: “*L’antro, la fonte, il lieto cielo. Libero l’animo d’ogni oscur pensiero.*” That is to say, “The cave, the fountain, the happy sky. Free the soul from all dark thoughts,” bearing in mind that the nymphaeum includes the urns of the nymphs who inspire the five senses, namely: a mirror for sight (Horasia); a musical instrument for hearing (Aloe); the perfume container for smell (Ofrasia); a bunch of grapes for taste (Gusia); the hand resting on it for touch (Afaé). See *The Dream of Poliphilo*, chapter VII: “Poliphilo speaks of how pleasant the region is where he ended up, strolling through which he found an exquisite and very remarkable fountain, and how he saw five enchanting damsels coming towards him...” The nymphs, before giving their names and stating their attributes, point out to Poliphilo: “...Our appearance and presence should not frighten you; do not be afraid because there is no custom here of doing evil, nor will you find anything unpleasant.” The situation described in *The Dream of Poliphilo* (the inspiration for many allegories in Bomarzo) justifies why the faded inscription of the nymphaeum has been completed as we have written above (“The cave, the fountain, the happy sky. Free the soul from all dark thoughts.”)

<sup>24</sup> Which could be conveyed in a dubious way: “In the face of such vanity I am willing to honor...”

<sup>25</sup> “Vicino Orsini in 1552.” This is interpreted to mean that the entire work was finished in 1552.

<sup>26</sup> “Only to unburden my heart.” He explains that his intention was to “unburden his heart” and not, for example, “to create an alchemical woods where one can undertake an initiatory journey” as has been advertised by some travel agencies and certain esotericists keen on the psychology of the collective unconscious.

<sup>27</sup> “Night and day we are on guard and ready to save the fountain from any harm.”

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<sup>28</sup> “The fountain is not for those who are on guard against the strangest beasts.”

<sup>29</sup> “All thought takes flight.”

<sup>30</sup> “You who wander the world in search of noble and splendid wonders, come here where there are hideous faces, elephants, lions, ogres, and dragons.”

<sup>31</sup> “Memphis and any other wonder that exists in the world are inferior in appreciation to the Sacro Bosco, which resembles only itself and no other.”

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