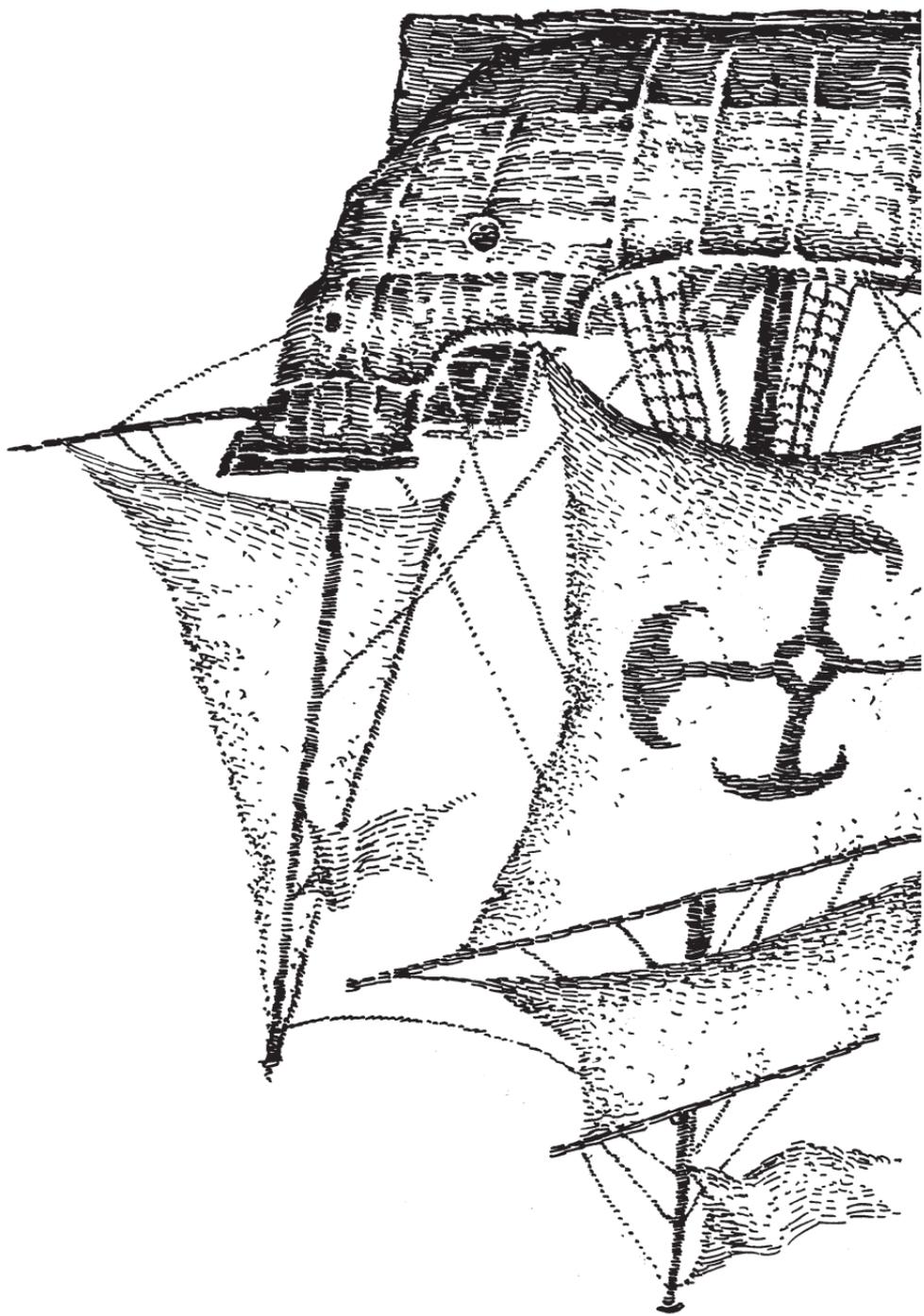
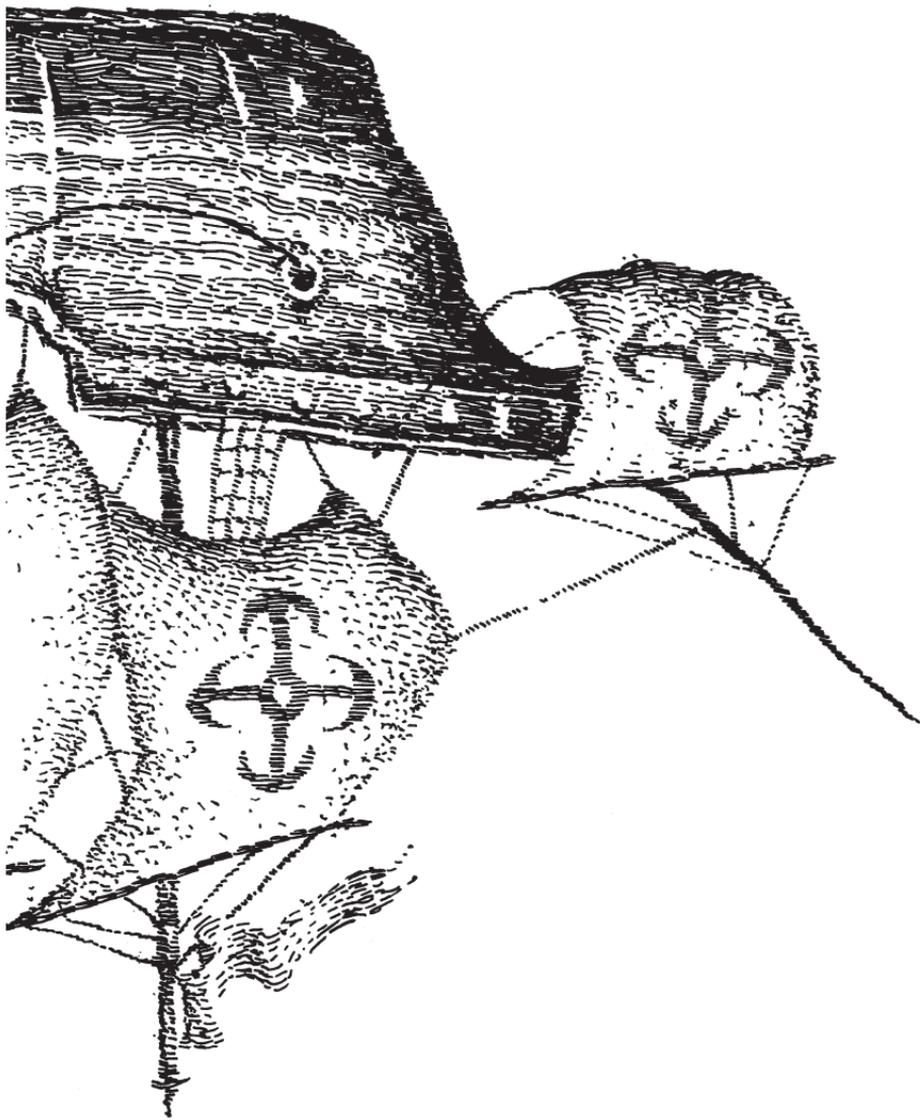


Pierre Senges

---

The Major  
Refutation





The Major  
Refutation

Pierre Seneges

# The Major Refutation

English version  
of *Refutatio major*,  
attributed to Antonio de Guevara  
(1480–1545)

Translated by Jacob Siefring



Contra Mundum Press New York · London · Melbourne

Translation © 2016 Jacob Siefring;  
*La réfutation majeure* © Editions  
GALLIMARD, Paris, 2005.

First Contra Mundum Press  
Edition 2016.

All Rights Reserved under  
International & Pan-American  
Copyright Conventions.  
No part of this book may be  
reproduced in any form or by  
any electronic means, including  
information storage and retrieval  
systems, without permission in  
writing from the publisher,  
except by a reviewer who may  
quote brief passages in a review.

Library of Congress  
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
Senges, Pierre, 1968

[*La réfutation majeure*. English.]  
The Major Refutation / Pierre  
Senges; translated from the  
French by Jacob Siefring

—1<sup>st</sup> Contra Mundum Press  
Edition  
216 pp., 5 × 8 in.

ISBN 9781940625201

- I. Senes, Pierre.
- II. Title.
- III. Siefring, Jacob.
- IV. Translator.

2016959303

*“Cet ouvrage, publié dans le cadre d’un programme d’aide à la publication, bénéficie de la participation de la Mission Culturelle et Universitaire Française aux Etats-Unis, service de l’Ambassade de France aux EU.”*

*This work, published as part of a program of aid for publication, received support from the Mission Culturelle et Universitaire Française aux Etats-Unis, a department of the French Embassy in the United States.”*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Editors' Foreword

### *The Major Refutation (Refutatio major, c. 1517–1525)*

#### 2 The Epistle Dedicatory

#### 4 I: Overture

*The solitude of the speaker — Initial reports at court of a great discovery — The speaker's initial acceptance of the claim — The credulity of the monarchs — The new world as an opportune object, convenient to all — The imposture goes unchallenged — The skepticism of the speaker — His nobility and his skepticism are one — The affinity of the speaker for the native who spurned his executors with a witty curse*

#### 12 II: Awaiting the Lame One

*A new continent, much enlarged — Cartographers involved — The archives ransacked — "Everything that is fomented over there imitates our own fables" — "It could have been a question of more distant voyages and more radical metamorphoses" — "The invention of the new world will be built on that which forms the common bedrock of our conscience, the fear of the devil & the love of what gleams" — Thomas the Apostle, patron saint of skeptics — Thomas as the founder of an island colony*

22 III: Men of Distances and Men of Letters

*The new world a Spanish invention — As the fruit of Enrique IV's imagination — As the work of Isabella — Italy's involvement — France mostly aloof — Ottomans involved — The books of discovery are the works of the alchemists in disguise — Peter Martyr D'Anghiera — The Kabbalists — The new world a haven for the Jews — Apologia for Pope Joan*

52 IV: The Litany of All That Gleams

*The 'Polo brothers — Diverse accounts of travels abroad — The Waldseemüllers' workshops — Their strange methods — The Florentine workshops & their diverse attendance — Romances composed there — Painters and poets — The hermit painter Piero di Cosimo commissioned — Many evidences concocted — The natives exhibited in Spain — Christopher Columbus vilified — Amerigo Vespucci — Hernán Cortés — His philandering leads to a broken leg and a much delayed departure — Perennial disputes over the ownership of imaginary lands — "I have nothing of the colonist about me, Sire"*

80 V: The Catalogue of Spoils

*A great surplus of useless men — A method of population control — Planned shipwrecks — The Order of Alcántara involved — A local feud between Gómez de Solis and Alonso de Monroy — Honorific titles as incentives — Allegedly exotic diseases, namely the grand pox — "As if we had not already enough plagues" — The Jews persecuted — Church attendance in decline — The influence of Martin Luther — Luther an agent of the banks — The captivity and enslavement of the natives — The anti-slavery edict of 1477 and the ordinances of 1500 — The sadness and duplicity of the merchants — Courts of law and magistrates — "The*

*law prevails” — The speaker’s library — Spice wars — The new world as a strategy to defeat Venice — Gold and pepper mutually analogous — Counterfeits — The new world a promise and conjecture — Debts — The new world a promise of reimbursement — “My prince, be wary of gold-diggers”*

112 VI: What Follows, et cetera

*Land alchemy contrasted with seafaring alchemy — Inflation of currency — An ill economy — The speaker’s purse — The new world as the abode of the dead*

124 VII: Epilogue in Counterpoint

*Lorenzo Valla praised — The tenacity of the dupes’ beliefs — The dupes the most difficult to confute — Praise of Joanna the Mad for her skepticism — Certain dupes disillusioned — The speaker’s apprehensions — Dupes and dupers conflated — The example of Diego Álvarez Chanca — Of acephalous men and their diverse characteristics — Prophecies*

146 *Afterword*

*On the peregrinations of Vātsyāyana — Elements of bibliography — Myths, emblems, clues — Reconstitution — Major attribution: Antonio de Guevara — First minor attribution: Amerigo Vespucci — Second minor attribution: Joanna — Aphasia as dignity — Joanna the Mad, author of the Refutation — Other candidates considered — Rubrics from Lorenzo Valla — Conjecture as odyssey*

182 *Coda*

# Foreword

In the ship's log of Christopher Columbus (but rewritten almost entirely by Bartholomé de las Casas), at the entry dated Thursday, 11 October 1492, we read: *At two o'clock in the morning the land was discovered, at two leagues' distance. They took in sail and remained under the square-sail lying to till day, which was Friday, when they found themselves near a small island, one of the Lucayos, called in the Indian language Guanahani.*

In 1504, Amerigo Vespucci claims to have completed a fourth journey to the West Indies; in 1507, the name *America* appears for the first time on the Waldseemüller map. In 1512, Juan Ponce de León takes the Taíno Arawaks of the Bahama archipelago under his wing; in 1513, Núñez de Balboa discovers the Pacific.

Charles V is proclaimed king in 1516, at St. Gudula, in Brussels; three years later, he is unanimously elected emperor (but the Brandenburg elector takes care to record in a notarized statement that his vote was cast in fear). He travels widely, from Guadix to Ghent — he is supposed to have slept, by some accounts, in over 3,200 different beds, on land and at sea (moreover, it was his habit to bring his uncomfortable folding camp-bed along with him wherever he went: he was a king who slept in the rough).

It is commonly supposed that Antonio de Guevara, confessor to Charles V, composes his *Refutatio major* sometime between 1517 (the year Luther publishes his ninety-five theses) and 1525 (the year young Charles steps into the ring to fight a bull named Mahomet).

In these years of euphoria linked to the great discoveries, the text openly “challenges the opinions of eminent authors,” to use the expression of Lorenzo Valla. A handful of literati in Seville and some correspondents in Ferrara perhaps have the privilege of reading some excerpts from it; here and there some pages of it turn up in vulgate translation.

In 1558, the historiographer Francisco López de Gómara alludes to a Grande Réfutation without mentioning its subject or revealing its author’s name — he considers it the work of an idiot, yet woven of exactitudes.

In 1529, Antonio de Guevara, then bishop of Guadix, publishes *The Dial of Princes, including the Golden Boke of Marcus Aurelius*: a collection of advice, apologues, formulas, and jibes addressed to rulers, inviting them, as so many others did in the same era, to a more just governance of the world. Guevara attributes the *golden boke* to Marcus Aurelius himself: a literary artifice that fools no one. The English philologist Meric Casaubon saw in that feint a foul imposture; as for Pierre Bayle, he simply called Guevara a forger.

Antonio de Guevara died in 1545, at Mondoñedo, probably from complications of fever. He never bothered to sign his *Refutatio major*, nor was a copy of it found in his archives.

## FOREWORD

The text which follows is the English translation of *La réfutation majeure*, itself a French translation of the *Refutatio major* made from the Latin copy in the collection of the library of Grenoble (C 4853).

# The Major Refutation

## THE EPISTLE DEDICATORY

To Charles I of Ghent, who is as magnificent as I am lowly and disparate, formerly by chance, now by necessity; to Charles of Ghent who is the most extraordinary and by far the most fortuitously placed ruler Europe has ever seen on its soil, from Extremadura to the basins of Flanders to the ships of the Hansa; to Charles who, like a child dropped into the lions' den and brought up alongside his fellow creatures, converts innocence to knowledge and hastens to redress his lack of preparedness through more work and authority; to Charles who has no peer in taking the power held out to him by his ancestors, as if he were accepting no more than a slice of pineapple, and who is peerless as well in relinquishing it, or feigning to do so, within his palaces, where he vows his humble powers to the God he imagines, summons, or dismisses at will; to Charles the Burgundian who knew how to strike fear into the hearts of the Spanish before he subjugated them, giving to eternity the example of a sovereign boldly coming face to face with each of his subjects, because he knew how to appear in their eyes as both a demon and an ordinary man (and to deceive them on both accounts, but with ample guile); to Charles who knew how to trim his family tree, to never subordinate the demands of State to filial love, nor waver in judgement before complaints or appeals, including those of kith and kin — to Charles I of Ghent, the author dedicates the present book.

And if it be an impertinence to offer such a work to such a prince, because he does not spare the Spanish court either, 'tis probably yet another to remain anonymous; but the Anonymous who happens to be aware of his obligations as well as of his rights asks his sovereign to be magnanimous yet once more, as pertinent and parsimonious as a taster of poisoned plates, and to never confuse cowardice with what is just simple prudence. By contradicting a vast imposture, this small work affronts both the living & the dead, noble lords & the multitude; I am not however afraid to offer it to he who, of all the men present upon this earth, is the greatest beneficiary of the frauds that were quietly carried out shortly before he acceded to the throne. Nor am I afraid to see this book fade into darkness, because such is its fate, as it is the fate of us all; neither am I afraid to see Charles curse these pages when he delivers his final will and testament, because the sympathy that men have towards things and sometimes creatures never ceases to wax with age, not until the final minute. For my survival, I rely on the tolerance of a king who has likewise seen through all manner of illusions.

## ONE

### *Overture*

Trumped by so many fables passing for promises, and by that counterfeit coin which they will throw on my tomb after my death in stead of soil, I now have only solitude and the presentation of facts to fall back upon, each so exact. Solitude, that would be this chamber, or the reflection of my face in a mirror, or rather my sole power; the presentation of facts is this present book, which I am abandoning, but which will I hope have an effect like the needle's prick.

I was however one of the first to accept the idea of a new land, westerly situated, even reduced, even poor, even were it no more than a heap of ordure eternally picked at by gulls; my acceptance was a kind of enthusiasm, proof that something of my youthful self still remained inside my old, owlish body. Hardly had the navigators set foot on Spanish soil & doffed their hats before their rulers than I subscribed forthwith to their initial reports. They spoke of islands and of mountains; I heard their testimony pronounced in a mixture of naïveté and solemnity (that is, in a quavering voice) as methinks I would have listened at the repeal of a verdict or, coming from the mouth of a monolithic judge, a commutation of a penalty of death to one of exile. Present in the halls of the palaces at Toledo, I heard what can only be called sighs of lax relief at

the announcement of the great discoveries, though one might have sooner expected reactions of curiosity, of passion, of fear, stirrings of disbelief promptly interrupted by evidence or by envy (no matter that it would be the curiosity of the spice merchant, the passion of soldiers, and the fear of ambassadors obsessed with the Grand Turk or Venice). We were thus privy to that tense calm which holds sway when the most expert burglars do the deed, for as they openly own their hand must never tremble, every thief's success relying on a serenity and an assuredness as false as they are firm.

For the Catholic Kings, the announcement of a new land so far outside their jurisdiction inspired some cheerfulness tempered by pragmatism and, so near to ennui, a simple acceptance of the facts: but an acceptance in proportion to their generosity and to their power. Not to be astonished at the existence of a new continent is, for a sovereign, to demonstrate that their sovereignty lords it over the laws of geography, if need be also those of physics, as it often already lords it over common sense and the simplest rules drawn from the Mosaic commandments. In sum, the credulity of Isabella and Ferdinand, and of a few ministers perched like parrots on either side of the royal couple is a form of contempt on par with their greatness; but each courtier who wishes to appropriate that particular form of credulity to himself just as soon lapses into ridicule, for there is naught great about him, but for his plumed cap and his jabbering tongue. For men of war, the announcement of a new land signifies more missions and a hope of promotion; for priests, a challenge to the texts of the Bible,

but perchance proof of the existence of paradise on earth; for investors, the certainty of a hundredfold return on their investment; for tutors and governesses, topics for conversation; for astrologers, a peripeteia to be seen in the zodiac that very night; for certain plenipotentiaries, something to distract them from tedious European conflicts without end. A situation whereby every individual may choose, with the utmost prudence and precision, the particular form his or her credulity will take, from start to finish.

Thus did every one, in that fusion of intimacy and public gathering proper to the life of the court (the gregariousness of army ants and the solitude of the stillborn, condemned to hang in limbo) machinate in a trice with their particular inclinations and their particular faith, just as in divers circumstances every man reconciles himself to his scruples, his self-love, or strikes a bitter bargain with convictions held from childhood on, in a like attitude of recoil, perhaps even of terror disguised as phlegm. For mine own part, silent except in private converse, attentive as a trained dog, neither less timorous nor avid than my brethren, I have tried hard to discover in the depths of my soul, among sundry recollections, readings, daydreams hardly worthy of an adult, but also true and treacherous intuitions such as are revealed to mystics in visions, the exact measure of credulity which I might enjoy: a credulity which might bring me a lasting peace, with which I would be prepared to live out the rest of my days. This path was certainly the wrong one, for my credulity instantly gave out, and took leave of me, just as my soul will depart my body, through my mouth or nostrils, some years hence from now.

(I spoke of enthusiasm, but now that my credulity has deserted me I wonder if it were not mostly fed on algebra, if it were not connected to mathematics, for after long reflection I believe it comparable to the stupor one feels in the presence of an axiom as obvious as it is indemonstrable.)

My credulity voyages far afield without me, and without me commoners from the cities and towns are embarking on rickety, tumbledown ships in the hopes of going off to make a fortune in other climes. And while an incalculable number of naifs are sailing toward the new world, risking their lives, smaller groups of marquises and men at arms are deliberating over the lands to be conquered, without ever leaving the court. They laud it, they embellish it; they consider it not a simple pastime, nay, they persuade themselves, and in some cases there is nothing more abject than men so persuaded, whether they be knights or no, noble or ignoble. They affect a discriminating air, they pucker their lips a little, but their appetites are plain for all to see, just like their fascination of good little children in the presence of marvels. For mine own part, I consider myself like those Spanish Grandees who would refuse to remove their hats before the king: I do not discover myself in the presence of the new world, which is itself said to have been discovered, indeed so many times, that I have it ever before me, cap-in-hand, a humble courtier heedful of my intransigence, forever a vassal to my skepticism. The hat I keep on my head might be a symbol inherited from those brazen nobles whose impertinence Isabella later brought to heel,

but who were at the time too proud to renounce their elegance, who would be loath to die uncoiffed. When I look with scorn on this new world, this bald-pated world, my incredulity becomes my nobility, not only my right pleasure, but also my royal virtue and the application of that virtue; doubt is to me a kingly principle as well as the chief trait of my aristocracy. Were I to found a dynasty, steadfastly guarding its headgear, I should want for the family trait transmitted to each new generation to be that incredulity which is forged in the workshop of Hephæstus, the lame.

Permit me this one avowal before proceeding any further: among the numberless natives dreamed up by the mythmakers over the years, there is but one whom I admire or whose invention I approve. I have forgotten his name, but what does the name of a bit player matter so long as his imaginary existence on paper suits our purposes, and his manner of death as well, so vivid and apt; after all, only the last words that he spoke need concern us. Impossible not to salute that native chief who refused baptism at death's door, in the flames of the pyre, so as not to have to see (quoth he) his executioners in paradise — an utterance that puts Spain to shame but pays honour to the scribe capable of insinuating so much wicked pride in a single reply. I approve the words of that exotic prince and, if I could, if I were given the choice, I would paraphrase them daily — because I do dread to see in heaven all those who so tormented me, and who never missed a single mass. (The most heroic is not to risk Hell, but to refuse Paradise with the hauteur it takes to refuse a sinecure in the provinces.)

go off without a care in the world to hunt down the Snark or the Hippogriff, especially if they do not exist (because that leads them to formulate still deeper burrows, and uses of camouflage they have yet to master) — dreamful men greedy for gain, yet sensitive to the nuances of a story and of psychology, as the caliph in the *Arabian Nights* was to the uses of ellipses. Wrongfully they will take our continent for an Eldorado or the gates of paradise, and they will be keen to act out their adventure novels on our old world soil, which will have the benefit of enchanting our deserts. Would heaven that their oblique readings nourish the idea they form of us: then will we essay to resemble their imagination, if we find it to our liking and if it figures us as pacifists, ingenious and handsome. I look forward to the day when they will say that we walk about on streets of silver, that we have the heads of birds, that our wives' blouses conceal golden apples; because, to accept to go on living on this continent grown grey and aged in a single night, such strangers, hypothetical but quite alive, would have to vouchsafe to our land and our people all that we have bequeathed to the so-called new world: sundry images, sundry names, sundry fruits, sundry centaurs and unicorns, sundry mountains of gold, sundry diamond mines, sundry navels in the form of emeralds, sundry spectres, sundry forests, sundry palm trees, sundry rejuvenations at the fountain's spout. Now to wait for a ship sailing under the two-tone flag of generosity and avarice to dock on our shores, only to depose at our feet these riches belonging to no one — to no one.

## Afterword

### *On the Peregrinations of Vâtsyâyana*

The facts can be reconstituted as such (it is however impossible to be both concise & thorough): in London, in 1883, 250 copies were published of a 198-page *in-octavo* with the exact title *The Kâma Sutra of Vatsyayana, Translated from the Sanscrit, Complete in Seven Parts, with Preface, Introduction and Concluding Remarks. Benares: Printed for The Hindoo Kâma Shastra Society — to which the editor adds: For Private Circulation Only.* The most interesting thing here, with regard to our present purposes, is certainly not this *For Private Circulation Only*, nor even the fact that the famous Hindoo Kama Shastra Society, absent from all official directories, certainly never existed (no more so than the Cythera where *The Education of Laura* was printed) — the most interesting is how, in the middle of a 19<sup>th</sup> century agog for Orientalist facts and fictions, trinkets and truth conflated, a Brahmin sage aided by some erudite Englishmen succeeded in producing a correct edition — as correct as possible under the circumstances — of the *Kâma Sûtra* of Vâtsyâyana, which was at the time on the brink of being lost to humanity forever. The details of this labour are given in the *Catena Librorum Tacendorum* (“on curious and uncommon books”), edited by Pisanus Fraxi and *privately printed* in London, as well: one article relates the tribulations

of the pandit Bhugwuntlal Indrajī (an honorary member of the verifiably real Royal Asiatic Society) during his attempts to locate a passage of several pages discussing the art of biting.

Just imagine: this famous Indian erotic treatise, henceforth available in every format and in the most various forms, even the worst, was then on the brink of being lost to oblivion, of rotting away in the dark and humid vaults of some library (the Westerners first heard of it by chance: while reading the *Anunga Runga — The Stage of Love* — in which there are recurrent allusions to a certain Vātsyā, about whom nothing more is known, except that his real name was Mallinago or Mrillana). In Bombay, the last remaining copy of the *Kāma Sūtra* was incomplete and in a deplorable state; to put the fragments back together, Bhugwuntlal Indrajī set out to obtain copies from Djaypour, Benares, and Calcutta that were likewise damaged and incomplete (because if pseudo-Vātsyā's treatise is authoritative by its presence in the catalogue of every library worthy of the name, it was hardly possible in the time of Bhugwuntlal the pandit "to obtain the integral text" — I quote from the introduction to the English edition). Thus, a comparative reading & meticulous cross-referencing of the five or six lacunary copies permitted a more or less respectable (at any rate recognized as such) text to be established, and appreciated by erudite Londoners, those of *private circulation*, for whom Sanskrit would remain an eternal enigma.

However, cross-referencing alone would not have sufficed: because, as stated in the *Catena Librorum Tacendorum*,

the original, or rather its various copies, were composed in a Sanskrit that was both obsolete and obscure, "difficult to decipher in certain places," Bhugwuntlal the pandit, spurred on by these Englishmen enamoured of the Orient and the art of engraving, was inspired to make use of a providential *Commentary* on the *Kāma Sūtra*, "copied from the library of the king of kings Vishahdava." An ironic twist of fate well known to philologists: a large part of Vātsyā's treatise thus found asylum in its *Commentary* and remained concealed therein, just as the immense *De Natura* of Heraclitus was incorporated over the centuries into the books of Musonius Rufus and of Pseudo-Plutarch, who cite it in passing, almost with casualness, without realizing how lightly they play with time and with oblivion, & with memory.

### *Elements of Bibliography*

Even if it does not go the way of the Silk Road, the text of the *Refutatio major*, attributed to Antonio de Guevara, is subject to the same desuetude, the same intermittencies, the same periods of dormancy during which its pages are effaced & its language lost — before other accidental rescues, other chance rediscoveries. And like Vātsyā's erotic treatise, the *Refutation* of Anthony would require us to weave together six or seven fraudulent copies, six or seven paraphrases, and several commentaries, even petulant, in order to reestablish the text in its entirety.

In our day, all that we can do is to take out from the Pamplona library three loose pages, in Latin, kept together in a folder (pages probably dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> century). Arezzo is more fortunate, for its library possesses a *Libro di Marco Aurelio con l'horologio de' prencipi: distinto in 4 volumil composto per Antonio di Guevara*, published in Venice in 1575 by Francesco Portonaris: an Italian version containing, after the book of the emperor Aurelius, a *Grande Confutazione*, which is nearly complete. The Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris has a *Refutatio major* in Latin, dating from the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century; but anonymous, fragmentary, and in a piteous state (many pages are missing, including the title page). The library of Lisbon contains a *Libro llamado Menosprecio de corte y Alabança de Alvea*, attributed to *Don Ant. Gevara*, in three languages, Latin, French, Spanish: the final section of the volume contains the text of the *Refutation* in an inspired Spanish translation, often fantastical (but it cuts off two-thirds of the way through). *Horologium Principum, sive de vita M. Aurelii, ab Antonio de Guevara* (Henningus Grosius, 1632) can be found in the Library of Grenoble with the shelf mark C 4853: by far the most reliable extant version, but still imperfect (*Refutatio major* runs from pages 697 to 783; unlike the copies in Arezzo and in Lisbon, this version includes neither the dedicatory epistle, nor the pæan to Pope Joan, among other lacunæ).

The text presented here relies essentially on the Grosius edition; it was however necessary to consult the Venetian (Francesco Portonaris) & Lisboner copies in order to fill in several

lacunae and reestablish (confirm where necessary) some of the more doubtful readings (apropos of Luther, it is indeed a question of *lard* — *lardum* — and not *Lares*; as for Peter Martyr d'Anghiera, he is not three feet tall — *tripedalis* — but he trembles or he stamps — *trepido*, *trepide*, *trepidare* — et cetera). In most instances, the versions proposed by those who, over the centuries, cited the *Refutation*, sometimes fecklessly, have not been retained — except in a few exceptional cases (the saying: *so long as the calendar convinces us of the existence of tomorrow, instead of complaining, the lenders tally up their interests*, comes directly from the *Cosmographia Universalis*: in those two lines, Sebastian Münster summarizes what Guevara had developed over fifteen).

Until now, there existed no modern edition of the *Major Refutation*, with or without an author's name, with or without corrections; the most recently available edition is that published in Lisbon (*Libro llamada ...*), dated 1782: if the *Refutatio*, in its early years, elicited the admiration of respectable authors (a form of knighting), it later gave rise only to curiosity, and over the years amusement, becoming a collector's item for Wunderkammer enthusiasts (or specialists of books and of rare quotations: compilers with the airs of stud farmers). On certain occasions, when the clerks feel a sudden craving for the unadulterated truth, it will send them back to the memory of the slayers of received ideas: freethinkers of the Thomasius or John Toland type, so easy to excite.

*Myths, Emblems, Clues*

It is generally agreed that between the Lisbon edition of 1782 and the allusion to the *Refutation* made by Fernando de Alva in 1891 (*Obras Históricas*), just over a century of total silence elapses during which the *Refutation* becomes neither an object of study nor the subject of mockeries, nor a curio to be displayed in a cabinet alongside a chunk of amber: but nothing, truly nothing, the equivalent of all those ghosts printed in minuscule characters which fill our libraries up to the ceiling (and which inspired Thomas De Quincey's sense of vertigo). The amateurs of Oriental erotism had plucked Vâtsyâ's name out of the pages of a treatise on love entitled *Anunga Runga*; today, the curious reader of the *Refutation* may find Guevara's name, his life, and his work in one of the chapters of *Wooden Eyes*, signed Carlo Ginzburg — a historian famous for having attended the witches' sabbath and likening the world to a spoilt cheese. He evokes Antonio, the pseudo Marcus Aurelius, the *Horloge des princes*, and the lousy character of Marcolphe — not a word, however, of the *Refutation*: whoever wishes to go down that road and satisfy a conspiracy theorist's curiosity should consult footnote 67 of the book *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, by the same Ginzburg: it tersely invites researchers to find "all the forms of creative abductions in the *Grande Réfutation* of the pseudo Antoine de Guévaré" (sic).

Still hot on the trail of Guevara (pseudo-Guevara or real Guevara) the honest and curious man will consult the indexes and the libraries (in an ordinary index, *Guignol* is found just

before *Guillaume II*): and this is how he will find a reference to him in the *Christophe Colomb* of Soledad Estorach and Michel Lequenne (1962 — going against what is commonly accepted, the authors affirm that admiral Columbus discovered America “because he was searching for it”). He will also find him in note 4 of the first chapter of volume 2 of Braudel’s *Méditerranée*. He will learn that Marguerite van Berchem, in September 1953, in a text entitled *Sedrata, une ville du Moyen Âge ensevelie sous les sables du Sahara algérien*, cites the *Refutation*, as does Enrique de Gandi, in 1929, in his *Historia critica de los mitos de la conquista americana*, and William Horgaard in 1914 in *The Voyages of the Norsemen to America*, published in New York — and that is just about all.

### *Reconstitution*

According to the most likely scenario, Antonio de Guevara, confessor to Charles but not yet Bishop of Guadix, writes his refutation in absolute secrecy in 1525. At the time it is an open letter destined to a circle of friends, but very soon the text leaks out, passing clandestinely from clerk to clerk, from consul to consul in diplomatic pouches; the bookseller-printers of Italy (they themselves design the fonts, we should recall, with which they will spread the word), the editors and their young assistants speak of the *Refutation*, we can imagine, in hushed tones while shaking their heads, as we in our time might speak of a romance soon to be tried in court.

The rumour reaches the prelates, probably even the pope (it was then Clement VII, and he believes not a word of it); someone translates the Latin text into the vernacular and eventually a small circle of bank brokers finds out about it; soon several printed versions are circulating, the presentation quite variable, the editorial conventions not yet solidified. (Twenty years prior, a copy of Amerigo Vespucci's *Letter to Lorenzo de Medici* is dispatched to Paris from Lisbon, a certain Fra Jocondo takes it upon himself to translate it into the church Latin of the day, and in a short while fourteen Latin editions of this text, henceforth entitled *Mundus Novus*, are brought out all over Europe, along with ten or so versions in vernacular languages; from 1507 onwards, which is to say three years after Amerigo's fourth voyage, his *Mundus Novus* is incorporated into the *Pæsi Novamente ritrovati* printed at Vicenza. The *Letter to Soderini* by the same Vespucci meets an almost identical fate: printed in Florence in 1505 by Piero Paccini, it gets translated into French from a manuscript copy, then translated into Latin and published in 1507 in the *Cosmographiæ Introductio* under the title *Quattuor Navigationes*, before being finally translated into German in 1509, that is to say printed in Gothic: which makes the text formidable and in a way inaccessible, like the idea of a chain-mail vest.)

For a long time, the *Refutatio* circulates without an author's name, and this is how many booksellers, humanists, cardinals and retired navigators first hear of it and come to refer to it: it crops up in a letter of Antonio Pigafetta, in the *Description of Africa* of Leo Africanus, published in 1550 but

composed around 1526, in the *Tratado sobre las justas causas de la guerra contra los indios* (1541) of Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda. After the publication of *The Dial of Princes*, the tongues seems to loosen up a bit & authors are less hesitant to attribute the hard-to-obtain refutation to Antonio de Guevara, henceforth raised to the rank of bishop: for example Rui Faleiro does so, in 1535, in the *Tratado de la Esphera y del arte del marear*. From roughly the 1550s onwards, a little before or after, the uncritical & seemingly undisparaging attribution to Guevara starts to take on the weight of evidence for some authors, or rather of custom, in the same way that the *Song of Songs* is without fail ascribed to Solomon and *The Book of Revelation* to John. Guevara's identity acquires its solidity and triumphs from this fixation, but by the same token it is reduced to so little: a household name, subject to the strange apotheosis of antonomasia (sic). Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, as well as Francisco Ávila, in *Tratado y relación de los errores, falsos dioses y otras supersticiones*, in 1598, & José de Acosta in his *Historia natural y moral de las Indias*, and many years later John Eliot (1647) in the *Essay to Bring the Indian languages into Rules*, finally Robert Burton himself will speak without hesitation, but also without reflection, of the *Refutation-of-Guevara*.

*Major Attribution: Antonio de Guevara*

We are naturally distrustful of evidence, especially when it reaches unanimity, or nearly does, which is a form of beatitude, prior to canonization (because in his testament Christopher

Columbus claims to have first seen the light of day in the sweet city of Genoa, many historians are inclined to disbelieve his every word: they seek to join, how humanly, that club of scoffers and idlers who can never be fooled). The bores will bicker amongst themselves, the sly ones will keep at their embellishments, a great many names will be cited: nevertheless, the most serious candidate, not the most picturesque one I admit, remains Guevara, such that the best will be saved for last, to wit, two serious contenders for the title, proposed by Bartholomæus Keckermann and Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda: respectively, Amerigo Vespucci himself, and Joanna, the Queen of Spain, called *La Loca*, The Mad, who died in captivity in her convent at Tordesillas.

Let us consider our Guevara first: although he is not sulphurous like Pomponazzi the atheist, nor Luciferian like Pietro Bembo, the church satyr, he proves himself elsewhere capable of facetiæ & even of imposture: capable for example of composing a manuscript (full of adages and anecdotes), attributing it to the emperor Marcus Aurelius, claiming to be its translator or simple depositary, then divulging some choice excerpts under that inoffensive conceit to a certain number of friends. We know how scornfully the English philologist Meric Casaubon regarded Guevara's imposture, as we also know the lapidary judgement expressed by Pierre Bayle in his *Dictionnaire* (usually more nuanced: but this good old Bayle could not resist the pleasure of turning down a bishop at so cheap a cost): neither of which prevented pseudo-Marcus's pseudo-book from enjoying an immense success.

Among the evidence incriminating Anthony de Guevara: that natural or artificial skill of counterfeiting in the era of *l'arte del disegno*, the vogue for heteronymy and the inevitably transparent masks of the written word, to which we should add, the numerous similarities between the figure of Goat-Hair-Miles (present in *The Dial of Princes*) and that of Esau (in the Lisboner version of the *Refutation*). Miles is a barbarian, *as hairy as a bear, his spear in hand*, who travels from the far side of the Danube to the Senate in Rome to give a speech to the waxy and manicured Romans in the style of Tacitus (*Agricola*: the diatribe of Calgacus, chief of the Caledonians, before the imperial troops: *you made a desert, and you call that peace*). In the Lisbon *Refutation*, Esau is invoked as the patron saint of the countless poor commoners who are taken advantage of by clever cadets. The one and the other have *a small face, intense eyes, a tanned complexion, coarse hair*, they wear shoes of porcupine leather: we might call that a coincidence, but the author of the *Refutation* himself preferred relations of causality to simple coincidences by far. (Specialists require just seventeen similarities between fingerprints to root out a suspect.)

To establish a connexion between the *Refutatio major* and *The Dial of Princes*, graphologists would have to compare the curves of the s's and the crosses of the t's; Lorenzo Valla for his part would have compared the respective styles & spoken of syntax: but it is difficult to compare a fantastical Latin, a Latin of the church or of the court, warped by idioms, to the Spanish of a native speaker translated into sixteenth-century French or English. The fact remains, though, that the Guevara

of *The Dial* (the Guevara of the *Book of Marcus*) shows a great facility in the pamphlet style, not least by preterition, a glibness one would hardly expect in a confessor, even if he was raised on prebaroque Spanish (which is to say schooled in immoderation, in the folly of faith and of cape-and-sword combats, in barking contests that pit scholastic Latin against mystical Latin, the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard against *romanceros* — contests which later, much later, would culminate in Quevedo's torrents of obscenity and the great feats of valour accomplished by Quixote). Obviously one has to hear Guevara's voice to have an informed and thus an accurate opinion of it; for want of anything better, here is the translated version (Miles, the peasant who has come from the newly conquered territories, is addressing the members of the Senate in an ambience of togas and scrolls): *Look closely at what you have done, for the gods have no duty towards it, nor men to finish it, nor the world to complete it, or the world would not be the world, or fortune would drive in the nail, or what has never before been seen would be seen, and what you have gained in eight hundred years, you would lose in eight days, for nothing could be more just, since you have made tyrants of yourselves by force, than for the gods to make slaves of you in return. Or this: Would that you know, if you do not, that when the poor people go before the triumphant chariots, saying, Live, Long live invincible Rome, elsewhere the poor captives are saying in their hearts, Justice, Justice. Or again: I do not know what folly betook Rome to go off and conquer Germany, because if lust for its treasures was the cause, without comparison more money was spent on its conquest and presently*

is being spent to defend it, than all our rents from Germany combined [...], and it may perhaps be that we will lose it before we will have recouped what it cost to conquer it. And lastly: I have seen things being done in this Senate that if the least of them were done on the banks of the Danube, the gallows would be more thick with thieves than the vines with grapes.

*First Minor Attribution: Amerigo Vespucci*

Whoever apprehends Guevara would as soon think he had his culprit — but in the last years of the sixteenth century Bartholomæus Keckermann (in *Systema theologiae* he affirms: “Hell is certainly somewhere, though to give its precise location may be impossible” — and in *Apparatus Practicus* he voices the idea that one only travels abroad in order to boast about it) claims to have proved contrary to common sense that the author of the *Refutation* is Amerigo Vespucci, the adventurer-for-hire of the Medicis. (Contrary to common sense: death having suddenly swept Vespucci away in 1512, with the haste with which blunders are swept over. In Keckermann’s view, a shrewd bank calculator, capable of usurping the great explorers, of securing the title of *pilote major de la casa de contratación* for himself, of hiring an office of scribes to write a letter to Lorenzo di Medici, of antedating his discoveries, and of adding his first name to the freshest of world maps, Vespucci would not have had any scruples about choosing, to best suit his gallantry and his needs, the date of his death,



## COLOPHON

THE MAJOR REFUTATION

was handset in InDesign CC.

The text & page numbers are set in *Adobe Jenson Pro*.

The titles are set in *Fell Duple Pica Pro*.

Book design & typesetting: Alessandro Segalini

Cover design: Sergio Aquindo & Alessandro Segalini

THE MAJOR REFUTATION

is published by Contra Mundum Press.

Its printer has received Chain of Custody certification from:

The Forest Stewardship Council,

The Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification,

& The Sustainable Forestry Initiative.



Contra Mundum Press New York · London · Melbourne

## CONTRA MUNDUM PRESS

*Dedicated to the value & the indispensable importance of the individual voice, to works that test the boundaries of thought & experience.*

The primary aim of Contra Mundum is to publish translations of writers who in their use of form and style are *à rebours*, or who deviate significantly from more programmatic & spurious forms of experimentation. Such writing attests to the volatile nature of modernism. Our preference is for works that have not yet been translated into English, are out of print, or are poorly translated, for writers whose thinking & aesthetics are in opposition to timely or mainstream currents of thought, value systems, or moralities. We also reprint obscure and out-of-print works we consider significant but which have been forgotten, neglected, or overshadowed.

There are many works of fundamental significance to *Weltliteratur* (& *Weltkultur*) that still remain in relative oblivion, works that alter and disrupt standard circuits of thought — these warrant being encountered by the world at large. It is our aim to render them more visible.

For the complete list of forthcoming publications, please visit our website. To be added to our mailing list, send your name and email address to: [info@contramundum.net](mailto:info@contramundum.net)



Contra Mundum Press

P.O. Box 1326

New York, NY 10276

USA

## OTHER CONTRA MUNDUM PRESS TITLES

### *Gilgamesh*

- Gh erasim Luca, *Self-Shadowing Prey*  
Rainer J. Hanshe, *The Abdication*  
Walter Jackson Bate, *Negative Capability*  
Mikl os Szentkuthy, *Marginalia on Casanova*  
Fernando Pessoa, *Philosophical Essays*  
Elio Petri, *'Writings on Cinema & Life'*  
Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Greek Music Drama*  
Richard Foreman, *Plays with Films*  
Louis-Auguste Blanqui, *Eternity by the Stars*  
Mikl os Szentkuthy, *Towards the One & Only Metaphor*  
Josef Winkler, *When the Time Comes*  
William Wordsworth, *Fragments*  
Josef Winkler, *Natura Morta*  
Fernando Pessoa, *The Transformation Book*  
Emilio Villa, *The Selected Poetry of Emilio Villa*  
Robert Kelly, *A Voice Full of Cities*  
Pier Paolo Pasolini, *The Divine Mimesis*  
Mikl os Szentkuthy, *Prae, Vol. 1*  
Federico Fellini, *Making a Film*  
Robert Musil, *Thought Flights*  
S ndor Tar, *Our Street*  
Lorand Gaspar, *Earth Absolute*  
Josef Winkler, *The Graveyard of Bitter Oranges*  
Ferit Edg , *Noone*  
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Narcissus*  
Ahmad Shamlu, *Born Upon the Dark Spear*  
Jean-Luc Godard, *Phrases*  
Otto Dix, *Letters, Vol. 1*  
Maura Del Serra, *Ladder of Oaths*

## SOME FORTHCOMING TITLES

- Hugo Ball, *Letters*  
Carmelo Bene, *Our Lady of the Turks & Other Texts*

## ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Jacob Siefring, MLIS, MA, studied French literature at the Université de Nantes & at McGill University.

*Translated by Jacob Siefring*

“Few or none of them heard of a book entitled *Refutatio major*, falsely attributed to don Antonio de Guevara, in which the aforementioned Guevara avers that a New World does not exist, but only chimæras, malevolent rumors, and inventions spread by schemers. These same persons affirm that the reasons set forth by the aforementioned Guevara are highly disconcerting.”

— Bonaventura d’Arezzo, *Treatise on Shadows* (1531)

“If this new world actually existed, if its measure could be had in hectares and in tons, or more maliciously in carats to reflect the value of its diamond mines, or in nautical miles because it is seemingly capable of devouring an entire hemisphere as a crab would, going from north to south and from east to west — if this were the case, then adventurers would have set foot there long ago, smugglers failing to find a better use for their discovery would have taken it as their refuge, and instead of traffickers by nature mute about their rallying points, we would have heard the cries of one thousand boasters, one thousand returning voyagers.”

— *The Major Refutation*

Here is a book that unites all books: the adventure book, historical panorama, satirical tale, philosophical summa, polemical mockery, geographical treatise, political analysis.

This edition of *The Major Refutation* is followed by a scholarly afterword discussing the conditions of the text’s genesis.

Pierre Senges is the author of fifteen books. His long novel, *Fragments of Lichtenberg*, is forthcoming in English from Dalkey Archive Press in 2017.

 Contra Mundum Press
ISBN 978-1-9406252-0-1

9 781940 625201
WWW.CONTRAMUNDUM.NET