THE MEANINGS OF NATURAL DIVERSITY:
MARCO POLO ON THE “DIVISION” OF THE WORLD

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Lords Emperors, and kings, Dukes, and Marquesses, Counts, Knights, and Burgesses, and all people who wish to know the different [deverses] generations of men and the diversities [deversités] of the different [deverses] regions of the world, take then this book and have it read, & here you will find all the greatest marvels and the great diversities [diversités] of the Great Armenie and of Persie, and of the Tartars and Indie and of the many other provinces, just as our book will tell you clearly in order, as Master Marc Pol, wise and noble citizen of Venese, relates because he saw them with his own eyes.¹

With this ringing sentence begins the protean text known variously as the Livre des merveilles dou monde, De mirabilibus mundi, Milione, or, perhaps most authentically (according to what appears to be the oldest known version), the Divisament dou monde. Ostensibly written at Marco Polo’s direction by one Rusticiaus (or Rustichello) of Pisa, with whom he was temporarily imprisoned in 1298, this work, as its proemium makes explicit, took as an overarching theme the diversity of the terrestrial world: its peoples, its flora, its fauna, and its mineral resources. Even the book’s title emphasizes the earth’s heterogeneity: in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, divisament (more commonly, devisement) did not mean simply “division” or “narration,” but also connoted distinction and difference—as principles of order, sources of beauty, and objects of desire.²

As these layered meanings indicate, diversity was a complicated, subtle, and highly charged idea in high and late medieval culture, with strong af-

¹ Marco Polo, The Description of the World, chap. 1, ed. and trans. A. C. Moule and Paul Pelliot (London: George Routledge, 1938), p. 73. Here and throughout, I have used the Franco-Italian version, commonly known as F (MS Paris, Bibl. Nat.: fr. 1116), which is generally agreed to be the earliest surviving text; I have consulted this in the edition of L. F. Benedetto, as revised by Ronchi: Marco Polo, Milione. Le divisament dou monde: Il milione nelle redazioni toscana e franco-italiana, ed. Gabriella Ronchi (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1982), pp. 303–662. The English translations are those of Moule and Pelliot, minus the italicized interpolations from later versions. On the complicated manuscript tradition of this work, which was translated with considerable freedom and numerous interpolations into various languages, see Polo, Milione, pp. 665–74. On French as a literary language in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italy, see John Critchley, Marco Polo’s Book (Aldershot: Variorum, 1992), pp. 19–22.

fective and aesthetic as well as intellectual components. This paper explores the meanings of natural diversity—what it consisted of, whence it arose, and why it was important—in one text. But that text was itself an emblem of diversity in its medieval sense: the ostensible product of a collaboration between a Pisan writer of romances and the scion of a merchant family, who had lived and traveled in Asia for twenty-six years, it provided a place in which the courtly culture that was reflected (however indirectly) in romance came together with the mercantile culture of Venetian traders and the clerical and encyclopedic culture that provided the work's overarching structure and form. The idea of natural diversity had different meanings and associations in each of these contexts, and the interaction of these various meanings and associations is one of the principal sources of the book's coherence and power.

One of the most resonant expressions of the idea of natural diversity appears in the passage in which "Polo" (for so, for convenience, I will call the collaborative literary persona of Marco and Rustichello) described the Indian kingdom of Coilum. After enumerating Coilum's exotic vegetable wealth—brazil wood, pepper, indigo—Polo passed to its climate and its characteristic animals:

There are many strange [deverses] beasts different [devisees] from all the others in the world. For I tell you that there are black lions without any other colour or mark. There are parrots of several kinds, for there are some all white as snow and they have the feet and the beak red, and again there are some red and white, which are the most beautiful thing in the world to see. There are some again very small which are likewise very beautiful. There are also peacocks much more beautiful and larger and of another sort [devisee] than are ours. And what shall I tell you about it? They have all things different [devisee] from ours, and they are more beautiful and better. For they have no fruits like ours, nor any beasts nor any birds; and this comes to pass through the great heat which is there.3

This passage incorporates a number of the elements that gave Polo's idea of diversity its complexity and force. In the first place, it portrays natural diversity as a highly positive and attractive quality, associating it specifically with beauty. This attractiveness functions on two levels. On the one hand, the invocation of difference, here as in the book's proemium, obviously aimed to seduce a reader hungry for novelty and exoticism. Indeed, it formed part of the conventional language of romance that was Rustichello's usual stock in trade. Not only Rustichello's own works, but those of many of his contemporaries used this language with numbing regularity, as in the introductory lines to the Cléomadès of Rustichello's contemporary, Adenet le Roi: "I have begun yet another book, one that is very wonderful [merveilleux] and varied [divers].... The tale is of great worth and most

3 Polo, Description, chap. 180, p. 415.