

II.

Of the Form of Continents.

WITH regard to the figure of Continents, I shall transcribe a passage from the ingenious author of the Philosophical and Political History of the two Indies:

‘ It is now thought to be certain,’ he remarks, ‘ that the surface of the New Continent is not one half of that of the Old. Besides, in their figure there are some striking analogies.—They seem to form two immense bands of earth, which arise from the Arctic pole, terminate in the South, and separated on the East and West by the ocean that invests them. Independent of the structure of these two bands, and of the counterpoise or symmetry which takes place in their figure; it is apparent, that their equilibrium depends not on their position; it is the fluctuation of the sea which produces the stability of the earth. To fix the globe on its base, it was necessary to have an element which, by floating continually around this planet, should counterbalance, by its weight, the other substances, and restore that equilibrium which the collision of the other elements might have disturbed. Water, by its fluidity and gravity, is well fitted to support that harmony and that balance

‘ balance of the different parts of the globe around its centre.

‘ If the waters which still moisten the bowels of the New Hemisphere had not deluged its surface, man would soon have cut down the woods, drained the marshes, and given consistence to a watery soil.—He would have opened vents to the winds, and confined the rivers within their banks; the climate, of course, would have already been changed. But an uncultivated and thinly inhabited hemisphere announces a recent land, while the waters which environ its coasts still creep silently through its veins.’

On this subject I shall remark, that, although there is more water on the surface of America than on that of other countries, we ought not to conclude from this circumstance, that an internal sea is contained in the bowels of this new land. We should only infer from this number of lakes, marshes, and large rivers, that America has been peopled long after Asia, Africa, and Europe, where the quantity of stagnant waters is much less. Besides, a thousand other circumstances concur in showing, that the Continent of America in general ought to be regarded as new land, in which Nature has not had time to acquire all her powers, nor to exhibit them by a numerous population.