

FROM THE GOLDEN
AGE TO EL DORADO:
(METAMORPHOSIS OF A MYTH)

The geographical Utopias that present a New World, from classical Antiquity and the Middle Ages to the exploration and conquest of American territories by Spain, give a two-fold vision of the myth of gold. On the one hand, the legendary lands in which were found the wealth and power generated by the coveted metal—El Dorado, El Paititi, the City of the Caesars—establish the direction of a venture toward the unknown, and a geography of the imaginary marked the ubiquitous sign of the mythical gold. But at the same time, America permitted the felicitous re-encounter in its territory of the Golden Age that had been lost in the Old World. The first steps of Western man toward the American adventure wavered contradictorily between these extremes, in that gold was at the same time “booty and marvel.”¹

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson

¹ Ernst Bloch, “Les utopies géographiques,” *Le Principe espérance*, Vol. II, Paris, Gallimard, 1982.

Colombus's enterprise itself is marked by that ambivalence. Does not the discoverer of America write in his copy of *Imago Mundi* indications of the precious stones and treasures of the mythical islands of Antiquity that he hoped to find in the West Indies, while in his diary and in the accounts of his voyages he writes his progressive conviction of being invested with a spiritual mission closely allied with the search for the earthly paradise on American soil?

However, if the myth appears unequivocally under this dual sign, we may ask ourselves: How could such contradictory missions as the recovery of the Golden Age and the conquest of the land of El Dorado be reconciled in a single enterprise?

An accidental find or the discovery of America?

In this essay we propose to find an interpretation of the dual sign of gold in the discovery of America. In order to do so, we will start with some of the most significant literary presentiments of the New World, the famous final verses of Act II of Seneca's tragedy, *Medea*:

The time will come as the years go by in which the ocean will unfasten the barriers of the world, and the earth will be opened up to its full extent, and Thetis will uncover for us new universes and the confines of the earth will no longer be Thule.²

Enclosed in this short text, written at the beginning of the Christian era, is the key to the contradiction that fourteen centuries later will mark the enterprise of discovery. On the one hand, lamentation for the irremediable loss of the Golden Age and on the other the announcement of new universes on the geographical horizon of mankind.

But to understand fully the textual meaning of Seneca's tragedy, we must forget for the moment the retroactive force that the prophecies of the Chorus had in 1492 when they were converted into a

² Seneca, *Medea, Tragedias*, Vol. I, Biblioteca clásica Gredos, No. 26, 1979, p. 308. The quotations which follow are from this edition.

fulfilled prophecy, because from October 12, 1492 on we are faced with the historical verification of a literary predetermination. To the correct guess at the indicated direction—west of Europe, across the *Mar Tenebroso* where throughout the Middle Ages indications of new worlds had been concentrated—could be added the note of an arrogant patriotism. Seneca, a Cordovan, granted to Spain the merit of founding a vast empire, already intuitively felt in the first century of the Christian era.

It is no exaggeration to say that the original meaning of the verses of *Medea* were lost in that moment dominated by the historical consequence that best expressed the condition of the man of the Renaissance. An inquisitive man who, not satisfied with the known world, looked for new spaces beyond his frontiers and to whom the text of *Medea* gave an unexpected endorsement springing from the depths of classical history.

However, not only did the literary presentiment of Seneca give a poetic foundation to discovery: it was also supported scientifically by the maps of cosmographers and navigators. Strabo, and the sages of the 15th century, among whom figure the Florentine Toscanelli and the German Behaim, affirmed that they took the words of the Chorus in *Medea* into account when they worked out their geographical projections of navigation in the direction of the setting sun. Moreover, according to the testimony of Hernando Colón, the son of America's discoverer, this prophecy was a decisive factor in the plans for his father's expedition. In the margin of a page of Seneca's tragedies, a copy of which he owned, he wrote: *Haec propheta expleta est per patrem meum Christoforum Colon almirantem 1492*: in translation, "This prophecy was fulfilled by my father, the admiral Christopher Columbus, in 1492."³

A poetic, philosophical and scientific endorsement that had its political connotations: due to Seneca's prediction, Columbus could again be credited with the intentional discovery of America that history seemed to have deprived him of. In the face of what some called the accidental discovery of America and others called the explicit project of discovering a region whose existence was known beforehand, Columbus was transformed into a navigator who came across the New World by chance, while Amerigo Vespucci was the

³ Quoted by Jesús Luque Moreno in the annotated edition of *Medea*.

one who had the deliberate consciousness of the discovery.

To again credit Columbus as the discoverer of America, Francisco López de Gómara, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, Bartolomé de las Casas and Columbus's own son, Hernando, searched among the names of the authors of Antiquity, those who had announced with their literary or vaguely scientific predictions the purposeful and conscious discovery of a New World. Everything served Christopher Columbus in the recovery of that prediction of America. Aristotle, Averroes, Strabo, Pliny, Marco Polo, Mandeville, Pedro de d'Ailly and Julius Capitolinus were profusely quoted, along with anonymous accounts and legends about island paradises and lands within the limits of the *Mar Tenebroso*.

Actually, from the "Kingdom of the dead" of ancient Egypt to the Greco-Roman and Celtic paradises, and including the mythical geography of legendary lands with an ideal climate and abundant harvests that are registered in the cartography of the unknown, the ideal spaces of the imaginary Occident were generally located to the west of Europe. With these antecedents, it was not difficult to see the reflection of a sort of geographical consensus in the prophecy of the Chorus in *Medea*.

A prophecy that was more fatalist than optimist

The disproportionate historical effect of Seneca's prophecy obscured the internal meaning of the tragedy, because in reality, if we rely exclusively on the tragic function of the announcement of the Chorus, we discover that the message in the prediction of the "new confines" of the world is not optimistic. On the contrary, we see a gloomy interpretation of the story of mankind. If men abandon their homelands in pursuit of new boundaries, it is because they have lost their happiness in their native land, the Cordovan philosopher suggests. The prophecy that Thetis, sister and wife of Oceanus, will one day allow the secrets hidden beyond the limits of the known to be unveiled is a malediction cast at the future rather than the joyful announcement of a discovery.

In the first century A.D. the voyage toward the unknown was not an enterprise guided by an optimistic confidence in the progress of humanity or by a curiosity about unexplored space, as it was per-

ceived in the Renaissance; on the contrary, this voyage toward the unknown was the consequence of a fall from a previous paradisiacal state in which man lived, inherent in the Golden Age. At that time, the spirit of geographical exploration was not a virtue but a fatal curse resulting from the natural and divine order of the Golden Age having been broken. Man fled from the territory of the lost paradise, and if he acquired the notion of “change” that led him to “confusion,” it is because he had to confront a world in which “all barriers had been eliminated.”

Far from the repeated (not to say stereotyped) glorification with which the illustrious Cordoban, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, has been exalted since 1492, an interpretation based exclusively on the literary text of *Medea* is necessary. In its light—and not without surprises for the reader—the discovery itself of America is seen in a different light.

Let us see how and why.

I. THE NATURAL ORDER AND THE GOLDEN AGE

For the Greco-Latin authors writing about the Golden Age, from Hesiod to Macrobius and including Democritus, Lucian, Lucretius, Ovid and Virgil, there was a time, under the reign of Saturn, in which the land spontaneously produced the food necessary for man's survival. Men were born and reached old age “in the paternal fields” (Seneca) and “lived like gods with tranquillity far from pain and fatigue” (Hesiod).⁴

In those days,

Spring was eternal, and soft winds caressed with their warm breath flowers that grew without being planted. The untilled earth produced harvests and the uncultivated field was covered with heavy spikes of grain (Ovid).⁵

⁴ Hesiod, *Works and Days*.

⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, I, verses 89-1159. Antonio Antelo in his essay on “*El mito de la Edad de Oro en las letras hispanoamericanas del siglo XV*”, *Thesaurus*, No. 1, January-April, 1975, Bogotá, Instituto Caro y Cuervo, p. 94. He stresses the influence of Ovid's text on poets, humanists and historians of the Middle Ages and how the myth was transmitted to America.

Because in the Golden Age,

There were no doors in the houses and the udders of the gentle sheep were swollen tight with milk. An age without hatred, without anger, without armies, without arms (Albius Tibullus).⁶

Indeed, everything seemed simple at this first stage of mankind. However, as Isaac J. Pardo has recalled, quoting the sacred book of *Dilmun* a thousand years before Greece heard the songs of Homer, the Sumerian civilization already referred to that

Other time in which there was an age that had no serpents nor scorpions, nor hyenas, nor lions, no wild dogs, no wolves, no fear or terror. Man had no rival.⁷

Man did not know what pain and death were, a certainty that the Greeks repeat with conviction when they proclaim that in that Golden Age there was no heavy toil, moral and physical suffering did not exist and there was repose from birth to death. Even to die was like going to sleep “overcome by dreams,” as Hesiod reminds us. The idyllic and primitive life did not require necessities of any kind, so abundant and easily available was the little that was needed to be happy. In the classical perspective, it was evident that desire and necessity are the result of want or scarcity, never of satiation or abundance. Moreover, if there was no conflict or violence, it was because each human being was content with what he had and what he was, the secret of happiness having always consisted in being content with what one had.

This happiness reappears with similar characteristics in the earthly paradises of all religions, a vision of the Garden of Eden that repeats the same notes of the “world as a gift,” given once and for all and with no need to be questioned or exchanged for another. Happiness based on the absence of necessities and on the satisfac-

⁶ Tibullus, *Elegía III*, in *Antología de poesía latina*, Bogotá, Instituto Caro y Cuervo, 1981, p. 89.

⁷ Quoted by Isaac J. Pardo in *Fuegos bajo el agua: la invención de utopía*, Caracas, Fundación La Casa de Bello, 1983, p. 20. Pardo recalls that in the Sumerian epos of Gilgamesh there was also a sumptuous *locus amoenus*, the garden of the gods that was “surrounded by shrubs of precious stones.”

tion of basic desires acquires hyperbolic and popular tones in the land of Cockaigne of the Middle Ages, the Jauja of the Hispanic world and is rationalized in the Utopia of the Renaissance. Myths and all their variations repeat the *sustractum* of a perfect, closed world that appeared in the Golden Age.

This same *sustractum* may be recognized in the myths of contemporary society: the abundance of consumer goods, the possibility to choose freely from a variety of products whose supply must always exceed the demand, the satisfaction of basic needs, the subtle inducements of publicity, the progressive reduction in working hours, idleness converted into a prerogative (vacations, leisure time, the forty-hour or less work week), simplified human relationships for a growing egalitarianism and the projects for new social laws, usually qualified as Utopian.

Nevertheless, although the myth survives today in a reality metamorphosed into signs that recall, almost without our knowledge, its most apparent virtues, we would do well to remember that the principle on which the felicity and harmony of the classical Golden Age was based, that which was lost in *illo tempore*, is that of the immutability of a world that should not change since it was fixed once and for all.

Immobility as a guarantee of paradise

The foundation of the Golden Age is one of an unquestioned order, because it is inherent in the nature of things. An order that basically is one of natural cycles marking the seasons of the year and the rhythm of crops repeating each other monotonously following divine laws. Seneca himself mentioned it in the letter to Lucilius: "The first mortals, and those born to them, followed nature without corruption."⁸

But that natural order was also guaranteed by the division of the

⁸ Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius*, XC. Seneca locates the Golden Age in Greece, following the opinion of Posidonius, that epoch in which "power was in the hands of the sages." Solon, who "established Athens in the equality of the law was one of the famous seven sages," the ideal model to which Pithagoras gave order and which would pass on to Sicily and Magna Grecia.

world into continents with no inter-communication because of vast seas and oceans. The previous chaos had been that of an undifferentiated and formless mass. The fragile equilibrium of the established Golden Age was guaranteed by the principle of the division of the world, a constant that reappears in the cosmogonies of almost all religions. Cronus, the god of time, ordered and fixed the Greek world in the center of three continents distributed around the *omphalos* of the Mediterranean, *Mare Nostrum* as the Romans would later call it. On the shores of that sea were disposed "like frogs on the bank of a pond" (Plato) the three continents: Asia (Asú, where the sun rises); Europe (Ereb, where the sun sets); and Africa (Afar, the arid, over which the sun passes), that the Greeks called Libia.⁹ The known world had fixed limits: Sidon in Phoenicia and the Euxine in the Black Sea in the east; the pillars of Hercules and the *Mar Tenebroso* in the west; Thrace to the north and Abyssinia to the south. In all, simplified in geometric terms, it was a flat disk whose boundaries were formed by the river Oceanus that encircled the three parts.

For this view of the world to survive in time, it had to remain immobile, as the Chorus in *Medea* explains:

Pure were the centuries in which our fathers lived, completely free of malice. Each one peacefully in contact with his own shore and reaching old age in the paternal fields, rich with little, without knowing other benefits than those which his native soil gave him.¹⁰

Tibullus recalls that the Golden Age was:

An epoch without equal, when the earth did not have wide roads, when the hollowed-out pine tree did not defy the seas and the merchant did not entrust himself to the dangers of unknown lands.¹¹

⁹ These three regions are somewhat more than purely geographical at the coming of Christianity. They are consecrated by religious allusions and mystical significations, among which are the Holy Trinity, the three sons of Noah from whom descend the three human races—the descendents of Shem, Ham and Japheth—, the three Magi, the pontifical crown and even the cabalist significance of the number three.

¹⁰ *Medea*, *op. cit.* p. 306.

¹¹ *Elegia III*, *op. cit.*

It was simply a matter of being born and dying within the narrow limits of "one's own shores," of being satisfied throughout one's life with the products of one's native soil and, above all, of not knowing about or having the curiosity to know about what was outside the precincts of daily life.

The felicity of the Golden Age was guaranteed by isolation and self-sufficiency but also by that lack of curiosity toward what might exist beyond the limits of one's own immediate world. The rationalization is simple. If primary needs were satisfied on one's own shore there was no reason to look for new worlds outside the native plot of ground.

The aura mediocritas and the sin of navigating

Nevertheless, an existence in which there are no preoccupations inevitably leads to boredom and mediocrity. The very Latin poets who sang praises to the Golden Age spoke of the *aura mediocritas*, that golden mediocrity that is the phantom threatening the contented of the world.

As in the earthly paradise of Genesis, from which Adam and Eve were expelled, while everything had been given to them by the divine and natural order of creation, we suspect that the man living in the Golden Age must have been tempted by a forbidden fruit: a temptation induced by the dissatisfaction that comes with full satisfaction, paradoxically.

Only by starting from this idea can we understand why man would let such a blessed time as the Golden Age escape him. To break the golden circle that surrounded Paradise, he had to venture outside its limits, although by yielding to the seduction of the new, man consciously lost his golden condition and degenerated into the silver, bronze and iron races, as Hesiod precisely explained in a text that was a classic even during Greek Antiquity. Democritus—in the *Dialogue* of Plato explaining the origin of culture through the myth of Protagoras—as well as Poseidonius in which the mythological references to the poets Orpheus (son of Apollo and Calliope) and Linus (son of Apollo and Urania) dwells upon that progressive degradation of the Ages in humanity's history.¹²

¹² Authors studied by Antonio Antelo in the quoted article.

But what is the fruit that tempts man with such intensity that it leads him to conclude with such a happy age? Beginning with Seneca, the classic authors are unanimous in pointing out that the evil fruit is “the wicked ship” with which man abandoned for the first time the shores of his “own coast.” “A pine from Thessy carried them from the perfect laws of the division of the world to chaos,” he explains in *Medea*, recalling how the Argo was built from the pines of Mount Pelion in Thessaly to go beyond the limits of the known, the Euxine. Navigation reintroduced chaos into the world by permitting communication between those parts of it that had been separated by natural order, as the Chorus laments:

Nothing has remained in its place in the universe, since it has become navigable. Any little boat is rowed on the high seas. All barriers have fallen.¹³

And Ovid, speaking of the Golden Age, limits it chronologically to the time when

the pines of its mountains were not cut down and there was no descent to the watery plain to visit a foreign world and mortals knew no other shores than those of their own country.¹⁴

Tibullus also established the end of the Golden Age at the moment when “the hollowed-out pine” floated “defying the waves”.¹⁵ The conclusion is decisive and clear: the equilibrium of the world based on the isolation of its parts was destroyed because of navigation that put them into contact with each other.

To understand the real significance of this rupture, we must remember that if until that moment Greece saw itself as the center of the universe, it was because of the immobility of the observer and the privileged point of view that such immobility seemed to grant. With navigation appeared a variable and thus relative point of view. There were no privileged places. In the same way, therefore, that the world was ordered around the Mediterranean in the golden and paradisiacal view, once its exclusive central point had

¹³ *Medea*, *op. cit.*, p. 308, pp 367-370.

¹⁴ Ovid, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Tibullus, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

disappeared “other inhabited lands could refer to the Atlantic,” as Aristotle had already intuitively felt. The “inhabited lands,” that is, the men who lived in them, related to seas that were not necessarily the Mediterranean which, for the first time in Western history, had ceased to be the only possible center of the universe. A step had been taken in the justification of maritime ventures that were being prepared, far beyond the Pillars of Hercules in the Straits of Gibraltar.

II. THE TRANSGRESSION OF THE MYTH

Nevertheless, instead of joyfully assuming the possibilities opened up by navigation, classical man only lamented for the lost Golden Age. It is interesting to recall that when Virgil in his fourth Eclogue of the *Bucolics* announces a new Golden Age for Rome, he does so on the basis that the sailor “will abandon the sea” and there will be no more merchandise “exchanged by the floating pine.” It is only possible to envisage the future beginning with the disappearance of every “trace of the ancient deceit that sent ships to Thetis.” The “time to come” is a simple regression to the primitive and idyllic past before navigation. Isolation and the end of inter-communication are once more the guarantees of Paradise.

“The great order of new centuries is born,” prophesied the poet, inverting the chronological sign that the Golden Age is no longer irremediably lost in *illo tempore*. None the less, this “great order” is no more than a past recovered by force. In the vision of the approaching end of the Iron Age that was announced during the reign of Octavius, the significant note is given for the return to earth of Astrea, the daughter of Zeus and Themis who was forced to take refuge in the heavens at the end of the Golden Age.

The recovery of the past in the future

“See how everything rejoices for the coming century” insists Virgil to the Consul Pollio to whom he dedicates his Eclogue. “Everything will return to the way it was.” There will be an end to “a people of iron, and a people of gold will arise throughout the world,” evil will

disappear and the earth will be freed from “eternal fear,” the serpent will die and “the flocks will not be afraid of the lions.” The future Golden Age will permit mankind to enter into a new era of abundance:

The earth will freely scatter its first fruits (...) the young goats themselves willingly bring to the house their udders distended with milk (...) and the golden grape will be picked from the wild brambles and the sturdy oaks will exude honeydew...”¹⁶

Virgil does no more than project the nostalgia of a lost past, the idealization inherent in the *laudator temporis acti* which would be transformed into a topic for literature: “The ages of the past were always better.” It suffices to recall the memories of Cacciaguida in Canto XV of Dante’s *Paradise* on the golden epoch of Florence when “in the midst of so much calm, and such a beautiful life for everyone and amid such proud citizens,” the city

Within the old walls where could be heard even tierce and nones,
he was in peace, sober and modest.¹⁷

Or the quip of Verdi, when he exclaimed, “Let us go back to the old days, and it will be progress,” or the propositions of William Blake in *Songs of Innocence*:

We must restore the Golden Age, eliminating Progress that is none other than a punishment from God that was brought about by the Iron Age.¹⁸

The past is in the future, even in the most revolutionary and progressive Utopias. Is it by chance that a Utopian socialist like Saint Simon wrote in *Le Producteur*: “The age of gold that a blind tradition has placed in the past is before us”?¹⁹

This same ambiguity between past and future is seen in the myth

¹⁶ Virgil, *Eclogue IV*.

¹⁷ Dante Alighieri, *Il Paradiso, Canto XV*.

¹⁸ William Blake, *Poemas proféticas y prosas*, Barcelona, Barral Editores, 1971, p. 98

¹⁹ Quoted by E.M. Cioran in *Histoire et utopie*, Paris, Gallimard, 1977, p. 133.

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of Paradise, with which that of the Golden Age shares many aspects, because the simultaneous vision of the two paradises is the mark of almost all religions. If the Garden of Eden is at the origin of Mankind, the *post mortem* Paradise of the Blessed is in the future, because hardly was man expelled from the earthly paradise than he looked for the Promised Land of Canaan. Due to the power of the happy past, the hope for the future may be legitimately nourished.

Although the myth of Paradise deserves a separate study, it is interesting to recall that its range of influence in the first vision of America was fundamental. The analysis of the *topos* of the Promised Land as a primary stimulus for emigration, especially in the countries where groups of colonists were moved by religious motives (the United States, Paraguay and Argentina) proves its importance, as stands out in the profuse bibliography that has been devoted to it.

However, let us return to the Golden Age.

Subversion through the festival

Until now we have spoken of the myth of the Golden Age as an exclusively temporal idea, as a nostalgic expression of the human being attempting to transcend the limits of history, establishing the prestige of origins in a moment that he wished to be preserved uncontaminated through eternity or that he wished to recover in identical form to project into the future. Nevertheless, it is also possible to recover the golden past and compare it with the present, thus making more evident the evils of the society of the Iron Age. One may then propose a revolutionary change of the present by the artifice of remembering the past.

In the *Dialogue* of the *Saturnalia*, Lucian dramatizes the annual Roman festival in which slaves dressed in purple told their masters what they wanted and received gifts in exchange. In memory of the happiness during Saturn's reign, every December 6 and for six days of festival, the Romans relived the lost times of the Golden Age

through a representation that allowed the inversion of the traditional roles of master-slave.

At the beginning of the *Dialogue*, the god Saturn nostalgically recalls the epoch of his reign:

In that age everything sprouted without sowing or plowing; the earth did not produce ears of wheat but bread and prepared meats; wine flowed in streams and springs abounded in milk and honey; all men were virtuous and golden.

For this reason, during the celebrations of that epoch:

All is noise, songs, games and equality between free men and slaves, because in my reign there were no servants, nor did I, the master, have them.²⁰

Nevertheless, Lucian's tone is satirical, and obviously his purpose was not so much to recall "the ephemeral empire of Saturn" as it was to criticize the reality of the present through accusations made by Chronosolon, "priest and prophet of Saturn," in the letter of protest directed to his god.

"What is wrong, Chronosolon?" Saturn asks. "You seem troubled."

"Not without reason," he answers. "I see the wicked and perverse loaded with wealth and living delightfully, while I and many other cultivated people are in poverty and without resources. My lord, would you not like to put an end to this injustice and reestablish equality?"²¹

For the first time, the memory of the Golden Age allows a critical vision of the present through the narrative process of comparing the two ages. Iniquities and injustices are made evident by the simple confrontation between the image and counter-image of actuality. The reverse of the reality—the World in Reverse that reappears in other myths and allegories of the Middle Ages, such as the Feast of Fools, the Child Bishop, the Lord of Misrule—is always

²⁰ *Las Saturnales*, I, quoted by Isaac J. Pardo in *Fuegos bajo el agua: la invención de utopía*, p.p 115-117.

²¹ *Idem*.

subversive. It suffices to read the final complaint that Chronosolon makes to Saturn:

The poor can support everything better if they do not see the felicity of the rich. They have so much gold and silver locked up (...) This is what suffocates us, Saturn, and makes our lot unbearable (...) Then change our condition and reestablish the early equality.²²

The principle of Lucian's satire, one that reappears in other negative Utopias of literature, especially in *Gulliver's Travels*, by Swift, gives a meaning of social demands to the myth of the Golden Age, not only located in the past as it had been traditionally or in the future announced by Virgil, but in a present that would have to be radically changed.

The change can also be brought about by authoritarian means. The model of the past is imperatively installed in the present, as Plato claims in the *Laws*. More than well-being, leisure and rich food within one's reach, Plato proposes to recover the essential of the Golden Age by moral and political laws that establish a model that is inspired in its principles but applied due to the force of the law. He thus recommends to his contemporaries:

Imitate with all possible means the legendary life of the age of Cronus and obey all there is in us of immortal principles.²³

That "legendary" life is not only

The life of those times, with abundant harvests that had no need of cultivation, a permanently pleasant climate that made clothing and houses unnecessary, or a soft bed in the thick grass.²⁴

as he described it in *Politics*; it also supposes an active and deliberate intervention of man, following the principle of good government.

"Well then, what if with our imagination we invent a State,"

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ Plato, *Laws IV*, 713e.

²⁴ Plato, *Politics*, 272 a.

proposes Socrate as a challenge. Plato accepts it in *The Republic* and writes: "Let us build an ideal city as if we founded it on a principle."²⁵ This foundation of a world newly perfect in agreement with a model that would be theoretically proposed announced the passage from the myth of the Golden Age to the rationalized construction of Utopia, made explicit with the publication of Thomas More's work in 1516.

To emigrate to the lands where the Golden Age has survived

To the variants of the classical literature on the Golden Age remembered nostalgically and to the active intervention of the lawmaker to reestablish it morally, Horace proposes an alternative that is decisive in the American perspective of the myth. The Roman poet tells us: if the Age of Gold no longer exists here (in Europe) we must emigrate to the lands beyond (a New World) where it may still survive.

A contemporary of Virgil, Horace does not believe it is possible to return to a past before navigation. Given that Rome is engaged in its own ruin through internal quarrels and civil wars, there is no recourse left for true patriots but to emigrate. If the Golden Age no longer exists or can return in the continental world of Iron, the new country must be constructed in a "different place," where the Golden Age reigns supreme.

It is enough, then, to abandon the present, not for the artifice of nostalgically remembering the past or projecting it into the future, but by the simple act of sailing across the seas to lands where a man can still live in the present as he lived in the past. Curiously, the navigation that had submerged continental Europe in the evils of the Iron Age can help man recover his lost happiness.

The certainty that in those unknown lands the Golden Age still reigned is given by the fact that "the Argo did not take that route." History can only begin again, freed from its fatal errors, in an undiscovered land, in a protected land because the sacrilegious ships had not landed there, "a provident god had separated the lands of the unsociable Ocean".

²⁵ *The Republic II*, 368c-e, 369a.

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Thus, the poet proposes in his epodes:

The ocean, surrounder of the world, is waiting for us: let us look for the fortunate countries, let us look for the rich islands where the earth gives grain without plowing every year and the unpruned vine is in bloom and without fail the olive shoots germinate and the black fig is the ornament of its tree, and honey flows from the hollow oaks and from the high mountains the slender stream of water slides with its cool and sonorous verse.

In these islands, located beyond the ocean, the climate is pleasant. There are no torrential rains nor droughts:

Nor does the watery Eurus crack the earth with its floods nor the arid clods parch the fat seed, because the heavenly king tempers all extremes.²⁶

The poetic intimation of classical Greek literature is concretized in the Latin expression of Horace: the Golden Age, banished by the Iron Age from the continental lands, survives preserved in far-off and inaccessible islands. Ulysses, the great navigator of Homer's poem, had thought it opportune to land in the island of Syros "where no hateful illness happens to unfortunate mortals" and where cattle, fields of grain and vineyards favor a long life and a peaceful death. The historian Hesiod had assured in *Works and Days* that: "A divine race of men-heroes, called demigods" had been settled by "Zeus's father, Cronus, at the ends of the earth," where they live:

With their hearts at peace, the islands of the Blest, near the Ocean, with deep vortexes, happy heroes! to whom the earth, giver of harvests of fruit sweet as honey, produced three times a year, far from the immortals, and Cronus reigns over them".²⁷

Horace explains the origin of these distant and unknown lands where the Golden Age has survived, affirming that "Jupiter segregated these shores from the world and reserved them for a pious race, when the Golden Age was tarnished by bronze: first by

²⁶ Horace, *Epode XVI*.

²⁷ Hesiod, *op. cit.* vv. 169-174.

bronze, then by iron were the centuries hardened from which, according to my prediction, men escaped with a timely flight.”²⁸

The mythical voyage and the difference from the other

The “timely flight” toward lands segregated by the Creator from the origin of the world and “reserved for a pious race” that Horace spoke of can be no other than those of the American continent. The times of longing transformed into the spaces of longing, due to his vision, announce the sign under which fifteen centuries later they will be geographically discovered. America, the scene of *eu-topos*, a happy place, will be waiting in that location which from Antiquity was intuitively perceived as the last refuge of the Golden Age.

From then on, it could be said that a certain harmony of the lost Golden Age was exchanged for other possible forms of happiness, because in the end it is thanks to travel favored by navigation that the unknown was explored and those other lands were found where an identical Golden Age survived.

Moreover, thanks to navigation man perceived other realities and understood the differences between people and lands. His confrontation with the other gave him a sense of relativity which was lacking in the autarchic and closed world in which he lived. The voyages of the *Odyssey* had given an indication of their fantastic variety. Each island visited by Ulysses is different and has a distinct order, at times paradisiacal, at times infernal. Even reduced to the scale of the Mediterranean that he traveled over, the diversity of the world became evident to Ulysses and to classical man. The *Odyssey* is no other than the chronicle of that voyage, where the differences are accumulated within the inventory of realities, but where the existence of idyllic and paradisiacal islands is discovered, such as the island of Syros or the grotto of the nymphs, the palace of Alcinoüs in the land of the Phaeacians, the origin of the *locus amoenus* of Western literature. While more was discovered and explored, more was the right to difference, and the more new horizons appeared. Curiosity was not satisfied; on the contrary, it was awakened in the same degree in which reasons for the impulse

²⁸ Final words of *Epode XVI*.

that inclined it to adventure were verified.

In reality, from the moment in which man took to the sea the story of humanity embarked, in the literal and metaphorical sense of the word, on an expedition that had no limits. The broken natural order and the lost Golden Age of his own land had, as an inevitable consequence, the voyage of the navigator over more and more distant seas.

At this point, a question may arise. Why were the Greco-Latin authors who had set forth the merits of the Golden Age so cutting in their condemnation of navigation? Although the natural order that provided isolation and self-sufficiency had been replaced by the relativity of the multiple points of view provided by maritime expeditions, it was evident in Homer and Hesiod in Greece and more clearly with Horace in Rome that it was precisely due to the possibility of navigation that the Golden Age could be recovered in another world.

III. THE METAMORPHOSIS OF THE GOLDEN MYTH

Why then continue to deprecate the explorers when they announced new spaces for lost hope?

To understand the reasons underlying this apparent contradiction, we must go back and recall what the true purpose of Jason was when he built the Argo with the pines of Thessaly. In fact, if navigating was the original sin for which men renounced the Golden Age in order to acquire the right to the venture of launching themselves toward the unknown, even when they were driven by a curiosity born of the boredom of the *aura mediocritas* in which they lived, after Jason's transgression the sought-for gold took on a distinct nature. The gold sought by the Argonauts was not that of a place of peace and harmony beyond the seas, but the golden fleece that incorporated a dimension of booty and treasure into the egalitarian society of the time.

The myth is metamorphosized. Behind the world of "houses without doors" appears the coveted objective of a treasure that would justify the new risks undertaken. To navigate, yes, not for a simple curiosity to explore but driven by a new emerging myth: the fleece that was waiting for the daring navigator who would be capa-

ble of winning it at the end of a voyage plagued by obstacles and adventures.

Merchant seamen burst into history

Symbolic gold, but a valuable metal in the end, erupts into history to banish the Golden Age of humanity. So that no doubt remains, its ambivalent significance reappears in other paradisiacal scenarios, such as the golden apples of the fertile gardens of the Hesperides or in the ubiquitous El Dorado of the American mirage in whose name, during the 16th and 17th centuries, numerous expeditions were organized. We need only recall Columbus himself and his obsessive search for gold in the Antilles to understand the reach of the change that had come about.

The question is not rooted, then, in the fact of navigating but in the mercantile motivation of that navigation. The venture toward the unknown was planned with the hope of obtaining a golden prize. Only for that—and for no other reason—it deserved repudiation and scorn.

In their condemnation of navigation, the Greek authors keep clearly in mind the active presence of the Phoenicians in the Mediterranean. It was the sons of Tyre and Sidon who committed the sacrilege of uniting parts of the world that were “naturally separated,” in the pursuit of precious metals such as tin, copper and gold, founding colonies and trading posts on the coasts of a sea whose peoples had to remain unknown to each other if they were to continue to be happy.

If the Greeks despised the Phoenicians, the Romans felt the same contempt for their heirs, the Carthaginians. In Rome, everything that was commerce and lust for gain was associated with the city of Carthage, a pejorative connotation that has come down to our own day.

The legend still survived in the mid-nineteenth century when Domingo Faustino Sarmiento spoke of the dangers of the “Carthaginian epoch” that threatened Argentina. A little later, Miguel Cané wrote scornfully that the immigrants who disembarked in the ports of Rio de la Plata were “storekeepers and peddlers.”

And José Enrique Rodó in *Ariel* (1900) feared that because of the influence of Caliban, Spanish-American cities “will end as Sidon, Tyre and Carthage.”

The example of Rodó is very significant. In the openly opposed worlds incarnated by the spirits of Ariel and Caliban the civilizations that gave them birth meet face to face. On one hand we have Greece, to whom the “gods gave the secret of eternal youth,” the qualities of youth being “enthusiasm and hope” that “in the harmonies of history and nature correspond to movement and light,” virtues that incarnate the spirit of Ariel. On the other is the “utilitarianism” and “poorly-understood democracy” of the Phoenician and Carthaginian civilization, represented in contemporary times by the United States. The spirit of Caliban in Spanish America is translated by a “*nordomania*” and an “Americanism,” neologisms with which Rodó defined the evils that threatened it.

Speaking of the origin of navigation, Rodó refers to “the prosaic and self-interested activity of the merchant who for the first time puts one people into relationship with others,” and notes how once destroyed, “of the stones that made up Carthage, not one particle transfigured in spirit and light has endured.”

To prevent the cities of the New World from ending up as Sidon, Tyre and Carthage is the task of American youth to whom the message of *Ariel* is directed: Do not lose your courage in preaching the gospel of fineness to the Scythians, the gospel of intelligence to the Beotians, the gospel of disinterest to the Phoenicians.²⁹

Paradoxically, it was the Carthaginians who best foresaw America in classical Antiquity. In the *Mirabilis Auscultationes*, the book of unheard-of marvels that is attributed to Aristotle, is narrated an amazing voyage of some Carthaginian merchants to the lands of the setting sun where the American continent was situated:

“They say that in the sea that extends beyond the pillars of Hercules the Carthaginians discovered an island, today deserted, that abounded in forests and in navigable rivers and beautified with all sorts of fruit, which is a voyage of many days from the continent.”³⁰

²⁹ José Enrique Rodó, *Ariel*, Montevideo, Edic. del Nuevo Mundo, 1967, p. 157.

³⁰ Quoted by Rafael Pineda Yañez in *La isla y Colón*, Buenos Aires, Emecé, 1955, p. 17. He does not point out the apocryphal nature of the book attributed to Aristotle.

This same legendary land already discovered in Antiquity according to testimony attributed to Aristotle is mentioned centuries later in a famous essay by Montaigne, *Des Cannibales*. Certain Carthaginians who had ventured beyond the Straits of Gibraltar had discovered a large fertile island, covered with forests and with great and deep rivers, far from the mainland. There they had emigrated with their wives and children, enticed by the bounty and fertility of the land, and had become accustomed to this new life, to the point of forgetting their European origin.

In the famous book by Diodorus Siculus in which fantastic and real voyages are inextricably mixed, the Phoenicians are also credited with the discovery of the world in which "it could be said that it is more the habitation of the gods than of men,"³¹ words that reappear significantly repeated in many Chronicles and reports on the discovery of the New World. Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, for example, alludes to the merchants who while navigating found a very rich and "large island that had not been discovered or inhabited by anyone."³² In support of Oviedo's thesis, Teófilo de Ferraris confirms in his *Vitae regularis sacri ordinis predicatorum* what was imputed to Aristotle in the *Mirabilis Auscultationes*, that is, the knowledge and not the simple presentiment that man had held from Antiquity of the existence of a fourth region that should be added to the sacred trilogy of the classical world.

But that the credit for that discovery belonged to merchants and not to poets or philosophers must have filled the spirit of classical man with embarrassment and confusion. It seems that we have not yet recovered from that, as we shall see as we continue.

The pre-Columbian Golden Age

This same contradiction reappears in the first steps of Western man toward the American certainty. On the one hand, America

³¹ The story of the Ciudad del Sol, an extraordinary country that would be situated in the "great Ocean Sea toward the meridian" was compiled by Diodorus Siculus in his *Biblioteca Historica, Liber Tercius*, II, 55s, Oxford University Press, 1968.

³² Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, *Historia general y natural de las Indias, islas y tierra firme del mar Océano*, Book II, Ch. 3 Madrid, 1851.

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offered itself as the land in which the Golden Age, lost in Europe, still survived. On the other hand, however, the ambition of the new Argonauts increased with each unequivocal sign of the golden fleece grasped in the lands of that recently discovered world.

It is strange that the enterprise of Columbus and the succeeding ones of the conquistadors were marked by that same ambiguity. If the erudite considerations gathered from the indications and sentiments of classical and medieval literature as to the existence of legendary territories guided them in their adventurous search for the Promised Land, Jauja, the Fountain of Youth and the Paradise that Columbus believed to have discovered at the mouth of the Orinoco, America simultaneously promised the gold with which to buy power. The Golden Age cannot be dissociated from El Dorado. One and the other only reflect the different attitudes with which Western man confronted the reality of the New World.

Each one saw or thought he saw what he wanted to see.

For some, the signs of the survival in America of the Golden Age increased. The Indians of the Antilles where Columbus landed rarely worked: they had their crops in common and found all they needed in the very place in which they lived. In the pre-Columbian myths and legends that missionaries and chroniclers collected references also appear to the epoch in which humanity lived in a "fortunate condition," an age in which "there was no price put on food supplies, our sustenance" as the Nahuatl songs tell about the days of the ancient Toltec heroes:

"And those Toltecs were very rich, very happy, no one was poor or unhappy. Nothing was lacking in their houses, no one among them was hungry."³³

The Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún in *Historia de las cosas de la Nueva España* gives the Toltec version of this age in which fruit and metals were extraordinarily abundant and in which all "were very rich and lacked nothing, nor were hungry."³⁴

³³ Roberto Godoy and Angel Olmo in *Textos de Cronistas de Indias y poemas precolombinos*, Madrid, Editora Nacional, 1979. A collection of some of the Nahuatl songs that Manuel Leon Portilla compiled.

³⁴ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia de las cosas de la Nueva España*, Mexico City, Editorial Porrúa, 1979, Book III, ch. 3.

Probably influenced by European references to the classical Greco-Roman Age of Gold, the Inca Garcilaso in *Comentarios reales* also gives a picture of ancient Peru as an idyllic world lost through the Spanish conquest. The Indios also lived in nostalgia for the peace and equality of the Golden Age destroyed by the Iron Age brought by the Spaniards, according to Felipe Huamán Poma de Ayala in *Nueva crónica y buen gobierno*.

Pedro Martin in his *Décadas del Orbe Novo* marvels at the Aztecs' use of cocoa for money to acquire things and proclaims it a "happy money" because it could not be hoarded like gold and because it was simultaneously used to prepare beverages:

"Oh happy money that provides the human race with such a delicious and useful potion and keeps its owners free of the infernal plague of avarice, since it cannot be buried nor preserved for long."³⁵

These affirmations should not surprise us, because at the time of the conquest of America the medieval mentality of scholastic theology still prevailed in Spain that preached against money and lending it at interest. There was an ostensible disdain for commerce, considered to be the occupation of Ligurians, Lombards, Flemish, Genoese and Jews. It is no exaggeration to say, along with Mariano Picón Salas, that "the Spaniard prefers the adventure of looking for wealth to economic speculation" and that "the economy of the conqueror is that of an adventurer, with small concern for organization, acting merely as a predator"³⁶ not alien to which was a secret bad conscience.

The theme is repeated in the feverish search for El Dorado in the 16th and 17th centuries. Expeditions such as those of Jiménez de Quesada, Gonzalo Pizarro, or the better-known one of Lope de Aguirre end in the sublimation of the initial absurdity at grips with

³⁵ "It seems to me that our islanders of Hispaniola living in the Golden Age, naked, without laws, without slandering judges, without books, live without care for the future," adds Pedro Martir de Angleria. *Decadas del Orbe Nova*, José, Porrúa, Mexico City, 1965, Decade I, Book III, ch. 8, recalling the times in which mortals did not care about "give me and I won't give you." The American Indians did not have a "mine and yours."

³⁶ Mariano Picón Salas, *De la conquista a la Independencia*, Mexico City, Fondo Cultura Económica, 1967, p 59.

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a harsh reality. It was as though gold itself had been metamorphosized. It was not only a question of its material value, as it might be evaluated today, which was at stake but the symbol in which that gold was becoming incarnated as the voyage progressed. Gold was an objective and not a quantifiable object.

America, between booty and marvel

We would do well to remember that the golden fleece itself was an example of metal transformed by the very fact that it was searched for. For Jason and the Argonauts, the precious metal that led them to go beyond the limits of the Euxine was transformed into the trophy that crowns an effort and into the symbol of the prize that they received for having ventured into the unknown.

The metamorphosis of gold occurred even more clearly in the search for the Holy Grail that medieval Christian tradition borrowed from a Germanic legend. From the material value of the precious object sought by successive knights that incarnate the enterprise in literature, we pass to the miraculous symbol in whose contents man believed to find immortality. In the best-known version of the adventures of Parsifal, the *Conte du Graal*, by Chrétien de Troyes, the obstacles that must be overcome—the desert (*Gasta forest*), the infernal river, the garden of Eden (the country of Galvoie), are not only the successive initiating trials of the personal valor of the knight but also stages in the transformation of the essence of this golden chalice. Without that golden objective the voyage has no motive.

In the projects of the American conquest the same result is hoped for: the expectation of booty justifies the risk and appears to rationalize the pure marvel of discovery. The golden kingdoms of classical Antiquity reappear in America under other names. The biblical kingdom of Ophir, mentioned in the Book of Kings, where Solomon sent his ships to look for gold, is the territory that the Portuguese navigator Albuquerque believed to have discovered when he spoke of the “Kingdom of Monomotapa.” To the value of gold as metal is added the ambition of the conquest of a territory imagined as a sort of pagan paradise where a “happy state” has been enjoyed from time immemorial.

It is useless to juggle the facts about the double meaning that gold had in the conquest of America. In the perspective of the synthesis of an ambition that goes far beyond the simple bank quotation of the metal to which the conquest has been limited by an economist and reductivist view of history, one must read in the *Cronicas de Indias* the relations of the expeditions that were launched following the indications in the legends about treasures and golden cities, variously called El Dorado, City of the Caesars, El Paititi, Cerro de Plata or the Treasure of the White King. It is what Ernst Bloch calls the “geographical Utopias” in *Le principe espérance*, that ambiguous mixture of the search for gold as a metal and the Golden Age as a lost paradise. Expeditions were organized in the name of those geographical Utopias “at the end of which were found both booty and wonder.”³⁷

Gold as booty and gold as marvel are the motivation of the most daring enterprises, thanks to which the process of discovery and conquest of the most isolated territories of America was accelerated. Peru, which Pizarro and Almagro had heard of, the Meta Range in Guiana, Lake Parimé, give rise to expeditions at the end of which an empire might be discovered, as happened with the Incas on the part of Pizarro, but also open the way to the megalomaniac delirium of Lope de Aguirre in the Amazon jungle or the fantastic decrees by which Pedro de Orsúa was named Governor and Captain General of El Dorado.

But as a curious trick of fate, when in 1527 the Spanish heard for the first time the indigenous legend of “the golden man” pre-Columbian America history had already blotted out his traces. In fact, when the Spanish arrived in Velez in Nueva Granada (Colombia) the Guatavita Indians, who it seems inducted their chiefs during a ceremony in the center of a mountain lake into which they threw golden objects and bathed their chief covered from head to foot in gold dust, had already been exterminated by the Muysca Indians of Bogotá. The kingdom of El Dorado had already vanished when it entered into the history of collective Spanish imagination. It is a paradise that was lost before it was found.

The conquistador also arrived late in America and could not

³⁷ Ernst Bloch, *op. cit.*

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believe it, even less accept it. From that arises the reappearance of the myth as a wandering spirit in the most diverse territories, under different names but always revelatory of the same desire to seize the prize hidden behind the repeated legend, if not the lies of the natives who deliberately disoriented the white men. From that also arises the increase in rash expeditions, not only Spanish but also German, like those of Ambrose Delfinger and Bartholomew Seyler; English like that of Sir Walter Raleigh; the diplomatic reports of European consulates such as those of France and Holland; and the border conflicts in territories that one or the other occupied in the name of the ubiquitous kingdom of gold. Historical tradition was fed by geographical fable, native legends and old European myths. They all conformed to that ambiguous mixture defined by Bloch: gold as booty, gold as a marvel; the metal and the lost Golden Age, the dream and reality always confused.

Nothing more opportune than these words to define the symbol of the discovery and conquest of America: the duality in which mythical gold is expressed, El Dorado and the Golden Age that survived in the Promised Land. A duality that has marked with its contradictions the almost five hundred years of the history of the continent and that today allows us to understand better the meaning of the prophecy of Seneca in *Medea*: the simultaneous lament for the irremediable loss of happiness and the exciting announcement of new worlds, sadness and happiness that indissolubly mark the destiny of a region that still has not resolved which facet of the golden myth better defines it to itself and when confronted with the others.

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