

FORTUNA AURI: THE DIALECTICS OF GOLD IN GONZALO FERNÁNDEZ DE OVIEDO'S IMPERIAL DISCOURSE¹

The purpose of this essay is to highlight Oviedo's discursive practice in the *Historia general y natural de las Indias* as it articulates Spain's imperial ideology through the image of gold.² Placed midway between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Oviedo's conception of history is based on the twofold ideas of providence and fortune, a fact that merits special attention if one is to make visible the ideological factors that hide behind the author's discursive practice in the *Historia*. By carefully looking into it, the reader opens the path for the unveiling of Oviedo's differential treatment of New World historical experience as it was dictated both by prevailing ideology, on the one hand, and by the author's moral misgivings, on the other. These two contradictory forces Oviedo reconciled by channeling the doctrine of providence and fortune into two diverging discursive directions. Also, by tracing the path of Oviedo's dual discursive practice back to a diversified conception of history in terms of providence and fortune, a hermeneutic move is deployed that works in two different ways. First, it points out the strategies that historical representation employs as it is constrained to face up to realities that question, and thereby threaten, the legitimacy of the imperial project. Second, it addresses the mystifying effects that such strategies produce in the historical vision, and brings into view the aberrations that historical discourse undergoes in its atrophy as baroque image. In Oviedo's dialectics between imperial ideology and baroque dissolution, gold in the New World plays a central role. At one extreme of this dialectics gold discovered in the Indies polishes the image of empire as the instrument of Divine Providence, and it becomes a powerful ally of official ideology. At the other extreme, at a point where ideology melts into the eschatology of funereal baroque, gold is no longer the shiny dies that evince the fictitious goods promised in official discourse, it is instead the faithful servant of fortune in the ruin

¹ This essay was first presented at the MLA National Convention in Toronto (1993). A shorter version of the same work was presented at the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts & Letters in Grand Rapids, Michigan (1997). I want to express my gratitude to participants in both events for their challenging observations. Special thanks go to Prof. Jerry Williams of West Chester University, in Pennsylvania, for critical comments made in letter to the author on August 22, 1994.

² I quote from the edition of Oviedo's *Historia general y natural de las Indias* (from now on *Historia*), by Juan Pérez de Tudela, Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, vols. 117-121, Madrid, Ediciones Atlas, 1959. References within the essay are to the books and chapters in Tudela's edition.

of man. In Oviedo's view of history the path that gold traces between providence and fortune is the same path that goes from the optimism of ideology at the service of empire to its final dissolution in the baroque image that crowns individual disaster. This much the *Historia* makes clear, and by doing so it becomes a remarkable forerunner of that peculiar *chiaroscuro* that would eventually mark the Spanish baroque as one of its main characteristics.

As an historian who was at the same time witness to the events, Oviedo worked under the influence of a double impulse. On the one hand, he saw the enterprise and historical destiny of Spain as something that approached the unambiguous dignity of a theological given.³ On the other hand, exposed as he was to the clutter of historical events, he was bound to withstand the moral misgivings and the uncertainty that attended the lives and destiny of many of his contemporaries in the Indies. These are the roots of Oviedo's discursive ambiguity in the *Historia*, a duality that finds its outward conceptual articulation in the divergent distribution he makes of the concepts of providence and fortune. The result is the production of two different kinds of discourse, one that applies to the enterprise of Spain in the New World and another one that concerns itself with the actions of individuals not ostensibly sanctioned by the Crown. Moreover, in Oviedo's discursive economy any instance of historical destiny theologically anchored in the notion of providence is granted a sort of theological blessing and moral absolution, while the opposite is true whenever individual destiny is made to depend on the vagaries of fortune. Exemplary cases of both types of discourse are, first, Oviedo's moralistic appraisal of the individual actions of the Spaniards in the New World and, second, the theological glorification that salutes the enterprise of Spain in the Indies and her destiny in world history. What this model makes clear is an odd duality of historical agents, and a not less odd, ambivalent treatment accorded to them in the *Historia*. The duality of historical agents suggests itself whenever a distinction is made between a State-carried national destiny and the clutter and hustle of enterprising individuals who came to the Indies to realize their own dreams and carry out their own personal agendas. What gives this duality of

³ For Oviedo's imperial ideology in the *Historia*, O'Gorman quotes the following passages in José Amador de los Ríos' edition for the Real Academia de la Historia (1851): "No faltará reino ni secta, ni género de falsa creencia que no sea humillada y puesta debajo del yugo y obediencia [of the emperor]" (*Historia*, Libro VI, c. 8, tomo I, p. 180). "¿Puede ser cosa más clara y visible para verificación de lo que digo [Spain's destiny of universal dominion] de su potencia y tesoros que haberle dado sus capitanes y gentes en la mar austral destas Indias—en un día sólo—...cuatrocientos mil pesos de oro...?" (*Historia*, Libro VI, c. 8, tomo I, p. 180). "Así como la tierra es una sola, plega a JesuCristo que así mismo sea una sola religión e fe e creencia de todos los hombres de bajo del gremio e obediencia de la Iglesia Apostólica de Roma e del Summo Pontífice e vicario e sucesor del Apostol Sanct Pedro e debajo de la monarquía del Emperador Rey don Carlos, nuestro Señor, en cuya ventura e mérito lo veamos presto efectuado" (*Historia*, Libro XXXVIII, tomo III, p. 640). "...lo que está por adquirir y venir al colmo de la monarquía universal de nuestro César, lo veremos en breve tiempo debajo de su cetro" (*Historia*, Libro XXXVIII, c. 54, tomo III, p. 546). Edmundo O'Gorman, *Cuatro historiadores de Indias*, México, Sep/Diana, 1979; p. 67-69.

historical agents its odd character is the artificiality of abstraction that underlies it, something that can be seen as soon as one takes into account the institutional basis that gives legitimacy to actions that otherwise seem to be the result of mere individual enterprise. In other words, *conquistadores*, *adelantados* and *capitanes* in the Indies act as rightful subjects of the Spanish Crown, officially sanctioned and not as privateers, self-fashioned adventurers flaunting their individual interests. From this perspective, individual action and destiny in the Indies should be seen to be identical to Spain's national destiny. In the Indies, the Imperial Majesty occupies the space of history, a fact not lacking in irony given the strange mix of interest and indifference that characterized Spain's relation to her ultramarine colonies, at least in the times of Charles V.⁴ When it comes to the legitimacy of profiteering ventures in the New World, everything falls within the sanctioning domain of the Royal Crown, the exceptions to this rule being those that each individual might carve out for himself through sheer manipulation of official regulations and State policy. As it is, the duality of historical agents implied in Oviedo's historical discourse lacks both political basis and juridical justification. However, as used by the official historian of the Spanish Crown it encourages a convenient distribution of discourses whereby interpretation of early New World history is made to agree with Oviedo's ideological commitment at the same time that it soothes his moral sensibilities. Oviedo splits into a duality of historical agents what would otherwise be a more complex historical phenomenon. Each agent in Oviedo's duality is assigned divergent destinies and is ruled by different moral codes. The result of this is a duality of discourses that gather and articulate a corresponding diversity of historical material. One of these discourses focuses on individual biography while the other expresses Oviedo's grand view of universal empire. What matters here most is the purpose that this duality of historical agents, with its corresponding dual discourse, is meant to fulfill, since it is at this level that one can identify the root of Oviedo's historical antinomy. Oviedo's uncertainties and moral anxieties in face of the excesses and crimes committed in the Indies, together with the ideology of empire that commits him to an optimistic view of history, are the two powerful forces behind Oviedo's discursive strategy. Oviedo's text operates with the implicit fiction of a dual historical agent, and the strategy of a dual historical discourse because it is unable to gather the historical events in the Indies into one single view of imperial policy. Each one of these discourses differs from the other in virtue of the double historical principle of fortune and providence that governs

⁴ An ongoing debate involves what some scholars suspect was the Emperor's lack of interest in his American possessions. Enrique Otte, "El joven Carlos y América", in *Homenaje a D. Ramón Carande*, (Madrid, 1963), vol. I, p. 162-163; Marcel Bataillon, "Charles-Quint, Las Casas et Victoria", in *Charles-Quint et son temps*, p. 77-92. These and other authors are cited in Antonello Gerbi, *La naturaleza de las Indias Nuevas*, translation to the Spanish by Antonio Alatorre, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1978; p. 452, Note 15.

individual action and national destiny, respectively. With this duality of historical principle, Oviedo's discursive strategy reaches a new point of relevancy, it makes possible a new kind of distribution, one that now directly affects the author's vision of world history and individual destiny as the outcome of Spain's presence in the Indies. What comes here into view is Oviedo's pessimistic appraisal of individual life in the New World (something that unfailingly elicits the author's sermonizing intonations so characteristic at this level), and the ideological optimism that portends the historical destiny of empire for Spain.⁵ Antonello Gerbi describes such bifurcated view as an *aporia*, one that Oviedo tried to solve, although admittedly with no success.⁶ However, one wonders if there is here a real case of genuine *aporia*. It rather seems that Oviedo compensates a lack of critical examination of the realities of empire with amounts of moral sermonizing. Thus, in a picture where ideology suppresses reality, Oviedo's historical experience in the Indies is borne as moral conscience in distress. At this point, a characteristic distortion takes place, since a reality that is left unexamined and hiding beneath the gloss of ideological optimism soon harkens back as image that dislodges rational discourse. Here, the baroque comes into existence as disorder of the spirit when, in the absence of a critical faculty that constrictions cuts through the barrier of ideological, historical experience takes shape in the eschatological proclivities of imagination. In Oviedo's *Historia* the baroque makes its appearance in the wake of moral loathing, and there it is revealed as a form of expression that prevails whenever real historical agency is no longer the object of historical discourse. In other words, thought that is rendered unfit by ideology leaves discourse open to the vagaries of imagination, and historical discourse abdicates its hermeneutic function only to become reproductive of the author's mental states. In this case, genuine historical interpretation is displaced by the expressive needs of the author.

Since in Oviedo's view gold and New World wealth is what brings a dimension of destiny to the historical process, the reality that best lends itself to the distorted movements of baroque imagination is to be found in the world of American gold and wealth. This is what Antonello Gerbi suggests by stating that Oviedo made gold the central figure in what he conceives as Oviedo's epic of the Devil in the New World. Thus, historical discourse in Oviedo's New World always borders on theological discourse.

Although enthralled in the guiles of gold, Oviedo, nevertheless, always played the least illustrious and, one should say, contradictory roles in the epics

⁵ One should count the *conquistadores'* frenzied pursuit of wealth among Oviedo's favorite targets in his moralizing tirades. "¡Maldita sea la riqueza que por tales pasos se ha de buscar e adquirir y con tantos peligros para la vida y con tanta aventura para el ánima, desviados de todo lo que deben buscar y procurar los fieles cristianos para bien morir y acabar en estado que se salven!" (In Pérez de Tudela, *op. cit.*, p. cxlvii)

⁶ Antonello Gerbi, *op. cit.*, p. 433, 441.

and mythology of gold, namely, overseer of the royal interests in the foundries of Castilla del Oro and, more importantly, a relentless instigator of doubt. Thus, a not minor aspect in Oviedo's association with gold in the Indies is that it developed in the obscurity of bureaucratic service and the shadowy chambers of the moral analyst. For the reader of the *Historia* biographical details of this kind should be of great interest, since Oviedo's suspicion wedged its way like a shadow into the glowing world of El Dorado, and the history of Spain in the Indies would remain unexplained without his moral uncertainties. However, ambiguity is what best defines Oviedo's discourse on gold, and, notwithstanding the moral suspicion that shapes his view of American gold, his enthusiasm for this metal remains unchanged from beginning to end of his life in America. One might even suspect that such care and protocolary accuracy as Oviedo displays in the treatment of a number of gold related episodes in the *Historia*, is but one way of giving the lie to his moralizing intonations. A discursive fault such as this is what rescues for Oviedo's reader the evidence of an obsession that his sermons against gold might otherwise successfully conceal. An example of this would be the gold nugget lost at the shipwreck of Bobadilla's armada near La Beata Island. Oviedo had already written about this episode in his *Sumario* (1526). On that occasion he had calculated the nugget's weight at 3200 castellanos. Years later, and much in character with his fastidious treatment of historical accuracy, he would return to the same episode and correct his previous estimate. Reviewing his memorials and taking up the matter with people who actually saw the amazing nugget, this time he established the weight at 3600 castellanos:

Y porque dije en la memoria que escribí en Toledo [in *Sumario*], año de mill e quinientos e veinte y cinco años, que este grano pesaba tres mill e doscientos pesos, e aquello se escribió sin ver mis memoriales, e teniendome atrás de lo que pudiera decir en muchas cosas, ahora digo (pues estoy donde hay muchos testigos vivos que vieron aquel grano), que pesaba algo más de tres mil e seiscientos pesos... (*Historia*, Libro III, c. 7)

In addition to the protocolary accuracy in the treatment of the nugget's weight, a far more persuasive indication of the authority that gold commands in the eyes of Oviedo announces itself in what comes close to a mythical founding power ascribed to gold. This Oviedo makes clear when he writes that discovery of the famous nugget is what brought Santo Domingo into existence, an occasion of great celebration:

El cual ["grano de oro"] halló una india de Miguel Díaz, del cual se dijo que fue causa que esta cibdad [Santo Domingo] se poblase aquí, de la otra parte deste río...Y era tan grande, que así como la india que le halló lo enseñó a los cristianos mineros, ellos, muy alegres, acordaron de almorzar o comer un lechón bueno e gordo, e dijo uno dellos: "Mucho tiempo ha que yo he tenido esperanza que he de comer en platos de oro, e pues deste grano se pueden hacer muchos platos, quiero cortar este lechón sobre

él." E así lo hizo; e sobre aquel rico plato lo comieron, e cabía el lechón entero en él, porque era tan grande como he dicho. (*Historia*, Libro III, c. 7)⁷

By dint of repeated rehearsal in the historical document, as well as by virtue of its physical weight, Oviedo's nugget may aptly be counted among the best emblematic devices of wealth in the New World, *pace* El Potosí. However, the figure that first begins to suggest the close association between the discovery of wealth in the New World and Spain's historical destiny, as one should expect in Oviedo's contentious ranking of heroes and villains, is the Discoverer himself. For Oviedo two things are clear in regard to the historical significance of Columbus: he brought the Christian faith to the New World, and he opened up the gates of wealth for Spain: "Y que además desto [the fact that he brought the Christian faith to the New World], se hayan llevado y llevarán tantos tesoros de oro, e plata e perlas, e otras muchas riquezas e mercaderías a España." Oviedo's most detailed and extensive treatment of gold comes in chapter 8 of his famous "Libro de los depósitos" (*Historia*, Libro VI, c. 8). In this chapter, Oviedo's rhetoric is flaunted in a way that it betrays the author's intention to underscore the worthiness and noble character of his subject. In a chapter unusually long for the standards of length in the *Historia*, he cannot but express some sort of embarrassment, but then he writes:

Ha habido allí [in the Hispaniola] y hay mucho ejercicio en sacar oro; pero porque deste se dirá adelante más particularmente cómo se saca, diré primero de los otros metales que hay en esta isla, allende del oro; porque en lo que es de menos estimación, más breves sean las palabras, y en lo que tan deseado es en el mundo, se diga algo, y no tanto cuanto la materia es cobdiciosa a los hombres. (*Historia*, Libro VI, c. 8)

An array of *exordia* follows the previous prefatory remarks, a fact that suggests Oviedo's attempt to rhetorically empower his discourse in a way that it proves itself worthy of the matter at hand. One such empowering device is exhibited when he sketches the history and use of gold and other metals, an attempt to endow American gold with a lineage. Thus, he writes: "Muy antigua cosa es el uso de los metales e del oro a los hombres en el mundo, segund los historiales en conformidad escriben." Following the brief *exordia*, an abrupt exclamation brings Oviedo to the prophetic modulations that inexorably make him the courier of imperial ideology:

Pues por cualquier fin que el lector me quiera escuchar, quiero que oigan y sepan de mí, en todo el mundo cuán riquísimo imperio es aqueste destas Indias, que tenía Dios guardado a tan bienaventurado Emperador como tenemos, e a tan largo e liberal distribuidor de las riquezas temporales, e que tan sabia e sanctamente son por su mano

⁷ For a fuller account of this Miguel Díaz and the foundation of Santo Domingo, see Oviedo's *Historia*, Libro II, c. 13.

despendidas y empleadas en tan católicos y sanctos ejercicios y ejércitos, para que con más oportunidad e abundancia de tesoros, hayan efeto sus altos pensamientos e armas contra los infieles y heréticos enemigos de la religión cristiana. (*Historia*, Libro VI, c. 8)

As it is wont to happen in the *Historia*, here too Oviedo's discursive turns are haphazard and unexpected as he shifts from the prophetic rhetoric of ideology to the more mundane tasks of mapping out the geology of gold in Hispaniola. But even here it is easy to detect a similar exaltation whenever gold of the Indies occupies his attention. The following paragraph traces the path of gold in the entrails of the earth. It is worth noting Oviedo's acuity in tracking its course, his calibrations of the living vein awakening him to some of his most sensuous language in the *Historia*. As it is, the description lingers in its morbidity as the author follows the path of the precious metal:

Un notable grande se me ofrece, que muchas veces me han dicho hombres muy expertos en sacar oro; y es que ha acaescido ir siguiendo la veta o vena del oro por la vía que él camina en las interiores de la tierra o peña, e tan delgado como un hilo, o un alfiler, e donde halla alguna oquedad, para e hincha todo aquello hueco o concavidad, e allí se hace el grano grueso, e pasa adelante por los poros de la tierra o peña por donde natura le guía; e acaesce tomarle el minero en aquel viaje que lleva (o por donde corre el tal oro debajo de tierra), e hallarle tan blando como cera blanda, e torcerle tan amorosa e fácilmente entre los dedos, como cera cuasi líquida, y en el punto que le da el aire, se endurece. (*Historia*, Libro VI, c. 8)

Oviedo's vision of gold in the Indies and the power it had on him are so discernible in his work, that merely raising the issue runs the risk of becoming a trivial exercise. The truth is that Oviedo is no different from most of his contemporaries, those who in his own words crossed the Ocean to find their good fortune in the New World. On the other hand, it is fair to say that Oviedo is not in the group of those who truly experienced the rigors of the *sacra fames*, the proverbial sacred lust for gold. Oviedo is a world apart from the Quezadas, the Berrios, father and son, the Raleighs, and all those who, since the 1530s, plodded and pounded on the routes of Eldorado. Early on in his career in the Indies, Oviedo's gold frenzy is shrouded in a veil of suspicion. A discourse that glorifies gold in Oviedo always stays one breath away from the sermon that deplores the evils behind the façade of wealth. It is true that Oviedo saw in the discovery of wealth in the Indies the providential sign of Spain's historical destiny. However, the same history that so graciously furnished him with the theological script for his doctrine of empire led him to embrace what might be called the negative theology that underlies life in the Indies. As early as 1526, in the *Sumario*, there is a laconic formulation of what would become an emblematic *topos* of the misery and ruin that gold would bring for Spain and her colonies. These are Oviedo's words in the *Sumario*: "...estos ducados dobles que V.M. por el mundo desparce, y que de estos reinos salen y nunca a ellos

tornan.”⁸ Again in the *Sumario*, he complains of the unpredictable and wayward fortunes of gold; it hides from those who eagerly search it out while others get it, unawares, as heavenly dispensation. As soon as Oviedo enters his suspicion about gold into the historical record, his discourse takes a shift from strict historical thought to what might be called the eschatology of gold in the Indies. It is at this point, too, that Oviedo’s task as a historian becomes mediated, not to say interfered, by Oviedo the moralist. Here, too, the association of gold to death shows a turn to the baroque, a funereal baroque that later on, in 17th Century Spain, would find a most favorable spiritual environment. Funereal baroque image thrives in the presence of death, and this much happens in Oviedo whenever the victim is one that falls prey to the curse of Eldorado. Following the opinion of those who see a sign of the *sacra fames* of the ancients in the yellow skin of mine laborers, Oviedo, the epic singer of imperial gold, writes about Joan de Quicedo, another overseer of the royal mines: “Este, después que volvía de la corte, allegado a Sevilla, murió hinchado, y tan amarillo como aquel oro que vino a buscar.” (*Historia*, Libro XXIV, c. 1) Prior to this, the motif had already surfaced in the *Historia*. On that occasion, Oviedo was referring to those who, being the earliest to arrive in the New World, had by then returned to Spain after Columbus’ second trip. More specifically, Oviedo had in mind those who had suffered famine in “la ciudad de Isabella”, in Hispaniola, during the second trip of Columbus before the foundation of Santo Domingo. What follows is Oviedo’s description as he envisions them on their return to Spain:

Y desta causa, aquellos primeros españoles que por acá vinieron, cuando tornaban a España algunos de los que venían en esta demanda del oro, si allá volvían, era con la misma color dél; pero no con aquel lustre, sino hechos azamboas e de color de azafrán o tericia; e tan enfermos, que luego, o desde a poco que allí tornaban, se morían...De manera que, aunque volvían a Castilla, presto daban fin a sus vidas... (*Historia*, Libro II, c. 13)

With the passing of time, the image of disillusionment becomes ghastlier. Thus, in Book XXIII, chapter 3 of the *Historia*:

...los hombres (o los más dellos) a escuras y embebescidos en estas malas e terrenas ganancias, o mejor diciendo, notorias pérdidas, con sus propias manos e flacos entendimientos abrazan e toman sin entenderse, hasta que ni el daño tiene remedio, ni el arrepentimiento es en tiempo que les aproveche, ni excuse las muertes palpables que, por estas partes, están engastadas en este oro y esmeraldas que los más buscan e los menos gozan! (*Historia*, Libro XXXII, c. 3)

⁸ Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, *De la natural historia de las Indias* (more commonly known as *Sumario*), edited by Enrique Álvarez López, Madrid, Editorial Summa, 1942; capítulo LXXXVI.

There is, also, the well known episode of Captain Martín de Murga, who died by the hand of cacique Bea in El Darién. On that occasion Oviedo writes, “Por donde le llevaron rastreando, iban muchos indios e indias e muchachos, con mucho placer e risa, cantando su areito; e el cacique, de cuando en cuando, con una macana guarnescida de oro, le daba un golpe en la boca, e decía: ‘Chica oro, chica oro, chica oro’, que quiere decir: ‘Come oro, come oro, come oro’.” (*Historia*, Libro XXIX, c. 15) Again, Oviedo suggests an eschatology of gold by linking the propagation in Europe of *the French disease*, a term that he himself derides, to the gold of the New World. The routes of American gold, marked out along the roads of the imperial armies, leave in their wake the devastating effects of the serpentine disease. Oviedo’s resentment that New World wealth should leave Spain and benefit other countries, is here conveyed in a perverse *quid pro quo*:

Pues que tanta parte del oro destas Indias ha pasado a Italia e Francia, y aun a poder asimesmo de los moros y enemigos de España,...bien es que, como han gozado de nuestros sudores, les alcance parte de nuestros dolores e fatigas... (*Historia*, Libro II, c. 14)

Occasionally, gold’s glorious exaltation and eschatology intertwine, as when he envisions a miser’s death in the image of a bursting belly that lays bare a wealth greedily retained:

E así como esta Tierra (nuestra madre universal) se rompe y abre por diversas partes, e aciertan a topar en sus entrañas e interiores las venas de oro los hombres, así, cuando las hijadas de la persona del guardador avariento comienzan a se deteriorar e romper, acabándose el curso de su vida, aciertan a salir las monedas ocultas de que nunca osó aprovecharse el miserable que las ayuntó. (*Historia*, Libro VI, c. 8)

Exhilaration and glow, together with a sense of bafflement, seem to be the balance in Oviedo’s encounters with gold in the Indies. A psychological fact that attests to the alchemic and contradictory capabilities of gold, it is in this contrasting psychology that one should detect an early intimation of the luminous and dark vision of baroque life in the Indies. It must be observed, though, that the eschatology of gold and its baroque expression are characteristics of gold’s image as it affects individual destiny; the same image never arises in Oviedo’s conception of gold as a God given instrument of universal empire. This falls in line with Oviedo’s strategic device of dual discourse in the *Historia*. Already here, what defines gold’s destiny as it finds its way either through imperial project or individual venture is the conceptual duality of favorable providence and ill fortune, respectively.

A still more exemplary instance of the association of fortune to individual failure should be found, in Oviedo’s view, in the life and destiny of the

adelantados.⁹ Their story adds up to the textual evidence in a thesis that argues for a duality of discourse in the *Historia*. What this particular instance highlights is the dimension of the individual in history, and the pessimistic outlook the author betrays whenever he addresses individual historical experience in the Indies. As it is so often the case in 16th Century New World chronicles and *relaciones*, Oviedo, too, finds in minimalist portrait and inventory a vigorous, albeit expeditious surrogate to biography. In one such inventory Oviedo reviews the names of twenty one *adelantados*, including not few of the most prominent *conquistadores*. A name missing in the list is that of Cortés, (the very fortunate Cortés, one should add), an absence so conspicuous that it confirms Oviedo's general law of adverse fortune that rules the destiny of the *adelantado de Indias*. Oviedo's list reads like a funereal psalmody, a roll call of calamitous destinies. He prefaces it with the following warning: "...me desplace el titulo de adelantado, porque, a la verdad, es mal augurio en Indias tal honor e nombre, e muchos de tal titulo han habido lastimado fin." A passage that accounts for the unfortunate end of Pedro de Alvarado and his family rings with similar fatalistic intonations:

A mi ver, este título de adelantamiento en estas Indias aciago es, pues vemos en muchos adelantados que, con tal dignidad, se ha mostrado claramente la mesma desventura de sus malos fines, unos ahogados en la mar, otros muertos a traición, e otros de diversas e crudas muertes, andando tras estas riquezas que por tantos siglos estovieron escondidas a los cristianos, e por su mal de los más que las han buscado, se hallaron. (*Historia*), Libro XLI, c. 3)

Baffling as he might be in his contradictory assessment of gold and wealth in the Indies, the real problem in Oviedo's historical thought is the lack of a theory that integrates both the private ends of the individual as carried out by individual agents, and the needs of the State as expressed in the imperial project. A theoretical vacuum of this kind would only be filled with the advent of modern political philosophy. Although he was much impressed by the ideological service that New World wealth rendered the Spanish Empire in the form of theological legitimation, Oviedo was also distressed by the evils that this same wealth brought to many individual lives in the Indies. However, all he was able to do about it as a historian was but shift from one to another perspective, from the extreme of preservation that ideological commitment

⁹ One must notice here the contrast between Oviedo's superstitious views on the *adelantados* and Hernán Cortés' sanguine optimism. Peter Martyr quotes a Cristobal Pérez Hernán in regard to Cortés' avowed preference for the title of *adelantado* over that of *gobernador*. The same author points out a letter by Cortés in which he extols the blessed destiny that awaits those making the trip to the Indies (Peter Martyr D'Anghera, *De orbe novo*, translation by Francis Augustus McNutt, New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1912; Decade VIII, 3). On the other hand, one can register Oviedo's pessimism concerning the destiny of those who venture their lives and fortune in the New World (*Historia*, Libro XVII, c. 27; Libro XXXVII, c. 3).

commands to the extreme of baroque decomposition that a strained moral conscience instigates. What all this amounts to is thought in a state of disarray, an atrophy of thought that develops whenever ideology falters, inadequate as it is an account of real historical agency. As a means of reconciling ideology to history, Oviedo's *Historia* deploys a strategy in the form of a textual device, the artificial fashioning of a dual historical subject. A duality of historical subject further endorses a duality of narrative discourse in a move that steers a convenient distribution of historical destinies. Here, the fictitious goods announced by ideology are attributed to the agency of providence while the real calamities that befall individuals in the Indies are credited to the vagaries of fortune. And it is fortune which turns Oviedo's vision of gold into a vision of dissolution and funereal baroque.

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