My Cocaine Museum

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For Joyce Monges
Right from the start, the great collector is struck by the confusion, by the scatter, in which the things of the world are found.

—Walter Benjamin
You can find it when you face the sun, close your eyes, and watch the colored lines dance. Follow them, follow the heat, and you'll get there like I did, all the way to My Cocaine Museum. Not that there wasn't what you might call a prototype, a most clear and definite and beautiful prototype, spooky in its own way too, the famous, the world-famous, the extraordinary Gold Museum itself. Not that it needs that sort of hype. No way. For this is no vulgar carnival sideshow. This has science behind it and a lot of soft lighting as well, not to mention big money and something even bigger than money: the image of money, which, as you know, was there in gold all along. And still is—as you see when you go downtown Bogotá, Colombia, and climb to the second floor of the Banco de la República off Carrera Séptima and there enter the glittering residues of the time before time when only the Indians were here, happy, so it
seems, happy with their gold and happy with their coca too. Only later did it become cocaine.

Surrounded by slums on three sides, beggars and street performers in the park opposite, the museum provides a closed-off space, dark and solemn, in which pre-Colombian gold artifacts are displayed in spotlit cases. Said to possess 38,500 pieces of gold work, the museum, like gold itself, is an ornament adding dignity and art to the money-grubbing reality of the bank—not just any old bank, of course, but the Banco de la República, the bank of the nation-state, same as the Federal Reserve Bank in the U.S.A.

But what, then, is an ornament?

One block away on the Carrera Séptima stands the beautiful colonial church of San Francisco, which, like the museum, is stuffed full of gold shimmering in the dark. Country people and slum dwellers come and caress the foot of one of the saints, which as a consequence glows even more than the gold behind the altar. Hustlers working their way along the sidewalk outside are likely to be wearing gold chains in imitation of the guys who make it big in the drug trade. Like any book worth writing, My Cocaine Museum belongs to this sense of the ornament as something base like the foot of a saint or a hustler with a golden wrist, something that allows the thingness of things to glow in the dark.

To walk through the Gold Museum is to become vaguely conscious of how for millennia the mystery of gold has through myth and stories sustained the basis of money worldwide. But one story is missing. The museum is silent as to the fact that for more than three centuries of Spanish occupation what the colony stood for and depended upon was the labor of slaves from Africa in the gold mines. Indeed, this gold, along with the silver from Mexico and Peru, was what primed the pump of the capitalist takeoff in Europe, its primitive accumulation. Surely this concerns the bank, its birthright, after all?

It seems so monstrously unjust, this denial, so limited and mean a vision incapable of imagining what it was like diving for gold in the wild coastal rivers, moving boulders with your bare hands, standing barefoot in mud and rain day after day, so unable to even tip your hat to the brutal labor people still perform today alongside the spirits of their parents and grandparents and of all the generations that before them had dug out the country’s wealth. It seemed such a rip-off of my work as an anthropologist too, using anthropology and archaeology to dignify the bank with the bittersweet spoils of genocide and looting.

The Gold Museum is also silent about the fact that if it was gold that determined the political economy of the colony, it is cocaine—or rather the U.S. prohibition of it—that shapes the country today. Not to talk about cocaine, not to display it, is to continue with the same denial of reality that the museum practices in relation to slavery. Like gold, cocaine is imbued with violence and greed, glitter that reeks of transgression. What’s more, cocaine has roots deep in prehistory too.

Like gold, coca was of great interest to the Indians long before the arrival of Europeans. Indeed, among the most significant objects in the Gold Museum are its golden poporos, curvaceous containers shaped like a Coke bottle and used by Indians to contain the lime made from burnt and crushed seashells that, added to toasted coca leaves, facilitates the release of cocaine into the gut and bloodstream. You insert a stick into the spout of the poporo and then withdraw it so as to put gobs of lime in your mouth while chewing coca leaves. I say “your mouth” but I must mean “their mouths,” plural, as with the men seated all night around a fire, like the Indians of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, as I was informed by María del Rosario Ferro just yesterday. Gathered together like this, they are discussing a communal problem—whether to allow her to stay with them, and why the heck is she there, anyway? When they take the end of the stick out of their mouth and reinsert it back into the poporo, they spend several minutes rotating the stick around the lips of the spout, making a soft suffusion of sound that spreads like wind stirring in the forests of time. Actually, they do not so much rotate the end of the stick around the lip of the spout of the poporo as they seem to be writing in curves and dashes punctuated by little stabbings. There are maybe as many as a hundred men doing this simultaneously, each with his own poporo and his own woven cotton shoulder bag containing toasted coca leaves. It is dark.

1. María del Rosario Ferro is a young anthropologist who, in the 1990s, spent five years living with the Indians of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta on the coast of northern Colombia. She spent two years living with Arhuacos and another three years with Kogis. It is she who in 2003 introduced me to the Kogi priest Mamo Luca and to the Wiwa religious leader Ramón Osil, and told me many of the things I relate here about coca and gold.
It is loud, this softer-than-soft sound, she tells me, the sound thus magnified, maybe like the sound of the Caribbean Sea from which the shells come as far as this high mountain.

As I understand this phenomenon, the speed and rhythm of the jerky rotating movement around the spout of the poporo, and hence of the soft suffusing of scratching sounds, correspond to the movement of speech and thought, the Arahuanco word for thinking being the same as breathing in the spirit (kun-samuna). But of course these are not the squeaky-clean golden poporos we see resplendent in the Gold Museum in Bogotá that stand naked and exposed, bereft of any sign of human use, let alone of any sign of this exceedingly strange crust of coca-saturated saliva around the mouth of the poporo. Rightly, the museum is fixated on the object, which puts an end to speaking, let alone the relation between breathing and thinking. Here, gold freezes breath no less than thought as we gaze absently mindedly at the aural glow, completely uninformed as to the wonders of what these poporos might mean. Too bad.

But then would dried spittle last long in the rarified atmosphere of a museum? A museum abhors clutter. There can be little sympathy for Walter Benjamin’s enthusiasm when unpacking his library, that “from the start, the great collector is struck by the confusion, by the scatter, in which the things of the world are found.” For what this scatter implies for him is its fantastic other-worldly character, as when he says: “Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories. More than that: the chance, the fate, that suffuses before my eyes are conspicuously present in the accustomed confusion of these books.” To impose order on such chaos is to render tribute to chance, such that the final arrangement adds up to what he calls a “magic encyclopedia,” which in itself serves to interpret fate. This corresponds nicely with the Indians in the Sierra Nevada, writing their thoughts onto the crust of dried spit around the mouth of their poporos. Something like this also underlies William Burroughs’s attitude to the disorder we call order, as when he notes that the chapters he is writing, of what will become Naked Lunch, “form a mosaic with the cryptic significance of juxtaposition, like objects abandoned in a hotel drawer, a form of still life.”

And the aim of that? To make people aware of what they already know but didn’t know they knew.

For all its nastiness, spit is vulnerable to both time and good taste. Spit is hardly the sort of thing—if thing it be—that would serve the needs of a bank’s claim to culture. Spit is the very opposite of gold in Western economics, such that it lends itself to the evacuation of equations many of us live by, those equations connecting beauty with goodness and goodness with making sense by finding or imposing forms on the welter of experience that is the universe. Spit is anarchic as regards form. What other philosophy might therefore be at stake here, “just around the corner”? A philosophy not of form but of substance and force—such as gold, such as cocaine—transgressive substances, I call them, aswarm with all manner of peril that may not provide much by way of stable form to the world but certainly much by way of exuberance and perturbation. Indeed, spit did find its Western philosopher in 1929 in Georges Bataille, who, for one of his cranky dictionary entries in his magazine, Documents (that lasted only two years but still manages to amaze), wrote this:

A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing has its form. What it designates has no (right) sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.


Not so much My Cocaine Museum as My Spit Museum?

As for the Indians of the sierra, this dried crust of spit around the mouth of the poporo grows over time and is shaped carefully to form a cylinder, says Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff in his celebrated study of the Kogi, among whom he lived between 1946 and 1950. It is absolutely forbidden for Kogi women to chew coca, and Reichel-Dolmatoff sees the poporo as in fact a sexual rival of the women. When a young man is initiated, he is given his first poporo filled with lime. He thus “marries” his “woman” in this ceremony and perforates the poporo at this time in imitation of a ritual defloration. “All the necessities of life,” concludes Reichel-Dolmatoff, “are concentrated in this small instrument that for the Kogi comes to mean food, woman, and memory. No wonder the Kogi man and his poporo are inseparable."

Pettet and patted over time by incessant scribbling with the tip of the stick, the crust of dried coca-and-lime-thickened saliva is as likely to be a flat disc as a cylinder, an object of beauty far exceeding any gold work in the museum. It is perfectly symmetrical. Faint greenish lines like a spider’s web wander around its sides; while viewed from above, the disc contains faint rings like that of a cut tree trunk. In his nine months camped out in the mountains of Boyacá, the crust, or kalamata (in Kogi speech), thus created by Mamo Luca, a Kogi priest I met in 2003, was roughly three-quarters of an inch thick and two and half inches in diameter. When asked, he referred to his obsessive petting and patting as “writing thoughts,” the crust itself being his “document.” More like a magic encyclopedia, I thought, it being the Mamo’s task to continuously exert his thoughts while chewing coca to figuring out for the sake of his community what costs Mother Earth has incurred due to the wrongdoings of human beings. “Pretty much what I aspire to do with My Cocaine Museum,” I said to myself.

The ruddy brown body of his poporo was only six inches high, fitting snugly in his left hand, which it never once seemed to leave, night or day. Indeed, the poporo is more like a living extension of the body, or should I say of the mind, than it is a mechanical artifact. The crust of the poporo of Ramón Gil, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada near Santa Marta, was even more impressive, being about six inches wide, like a pie, and two and half inches thick.

Invited for a consultation in 2003 to the Gold Museum in Bogotá, and then asked as to the possibility of his carrying out a “cleansing” of the museum’s 38,500 gold artifacts, Ramón Gil said he would need the menstrual blood of the museum’s female staff, plus the semen of the men, including that of the board of directors of the Banco de la República. Needless to say, his demand was not met and the gold work remains in its polluted state. According to Mamo Luca—who dares not enter the museum on account of that pollution—gold is valuable because it is the menstrual blood of Mother Earth in which is concentrated all her power and that can only be extracted through appropriate ritual ensuring that all is in harmony at the site of extraction—e.g., “that the river is good, the animals are good, the plants and the woods are good.” Essential to such purifying ritual, paying Mother Earth for the defilement of gold extraction, is thinking—yes! thinking—and such thought is achieved through imbibing coca and “writing thoughts” onto the previous thoughts embodied in the yellow crust of dried spittle around the mouth of the poporo. And according to Mamo Luca, before the birth of the sun, people used gold instead of crushed seashells in their poporos.

The centerpiece of the museum’s display is a poporo with four golden balls around its orifice. In a darkened room, placed against black felt without the slightest hint of irony or self-consciousness, this spotlight poporo has the following text beneath it:

This poporo from Quimbaya, which began the collection of the Gold Museum in 1939, identifies Colombians with their nationality and history.

Another poporo, thinner than most, is shaped like an erect penis. Others take the form of a jaguar, full-bellied fruit, or a person that is half-alligator. There is one poporo shaped as a golden woman, naked, with birds hanging from her

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wrists, and we are informed that burnt human bones were the source of the lime it contained. Gold and cocaine are firmly connected since ancient times, before even the birth of the sun, by art, sex, magic, and mythology, no less than by chemistry.

The Gold Museum is already My Cocaine Museum. But it is only when we know of these connections that we can, as Antonin Artaud put it, “awaken the gods that sleep in museums,” not to mention the ghosts of African slaves, who with their bare hands dug out the gold that kept the colony and Spain itself afloat for more than three hundred years. However, unlike the Indians, destroyed by Europe and centuries later “awakened” by the aesthetic and stupendous monetary values accorded pre-Colombian gold work, these other ghosts are truly invisible and their polluting power—their miasma—all the more disturbing.

And that is why I have undertaken to create this, My Cocaine Museum.

Unlike the Gold Museum located plumb in the center of the nation’s capital, my museum lies at the furthest extremity of the nation where the Pacific Ocean seeps into four hundred miles of mangrove swamps and trackless forest, where the air barely moves and the rain never stops. This is where slaves from Africa were brought to mine gold in the headwaters of the rivers flowing fast down the Andes, which run north to south but a few miles from the sea. This is where I have visited a few weeks at a time every summer in the 1990s through to 2002, and before that in 1971 and in 1976, intending to write a book about the gold-mining village of Santa María located at the headwaters of the Río Timbiquí.

During those years, as gold dwindled to little more than memories, cocaine appeared on the horizon. It had spread west over the Andes from the Amazon basin, where U.S. government–enforced spraying with defoliants drove coca cultivation into these forests of the Pacific Coast. By 1999 cocaine traffickers were coming to Guapi, the largest river port in the region and merely one river south of the Timbiquí, buying cocaine tons at a time several rivers south. Living it up in the Hotel del Río Guapi, these traffickers would take off in fast launches in the morning and return at nightfall to carouse with the local police. The excitement was palpable, and along the middle reaches of the Sajá, but one river north of the Timbiquí, the largest guerrilla army in Latin America—the FARC—had coca fields as well.8

In other areas of Colombia, cocaine draws not only the guerrilla but behind them come the paramilitaries with the thinly concealed support of the state’s military apparatus. Dependent on cocaine trafficking, the paramilitaries torture and kill peasants they claim are collaborating with the guerrilla. Other than in the north near Panamá in the Chocó region, the Pacific Coast knew none of this spectacular paramilitary violence till the massacre of peasants in April 2001 in coca-growing areas at the headwaters of the Río Naya, several rivers north of the Timbiquí. To the south of the Timbiquí in that same year, paramilitaries had assassinated human rights workers in the port of Tumaco, on the border with Ecuador, and were edging in on coca fields in the Patía drainage. In October they took up temporary residence in the lower Timbiquí too, causing waves of anxiety if not a general hysteria. Since then, fears have abated but the nightmare of imminent paramilitary bloodshed can never, ever be discounted. It is in this sense that My Cocaine Museum stands with its door ajar on the impending apocalypse.

Is the danger proportionate to the value of these gorgeous “flowers of evil,” gold and cocaine? With gold we see perhaps the irony more than the danger, the irony of poverty-stricken miners at the end of the world up to their waists in water and mud, searching, at times for years, for the stuff of dreams and legends, before throwing in the towel. Likewise with cocaine, the drama is intense, so intense that what this drama opens your eyes and heart to is a weird but invigorating place where words and elemental forces of nature form hybrid entities, neither natural nor human, more like the foot of a saint or the golden wrist of a hustler that glows in the dark. It is here, philosophically speaking, where My

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Author’s Note
Cocaine Museum begins, where transgressive substances make you want to reach out for a new language of nature, lost to memories of prehistorical time that the present state of emergency recalls.

It goes like this: gold and cocaine are fetishes, which is to say substances that seem to be a good deal more than mineral or vegetable matter. They come across more like people than things, spiritual entities that are neither, and this is what gives them their strange beauty. As fetishes, gold and cocaine play subtle tricks upon human understanding. For it is precisely as mineral or as vegetable matter that they appear to speak for themselves and carry the weight of human history in the guise of natural history. And this is how I want My Cocaine Museum to speak as well—as a fetish.

This is the language I want, a substantial language, aroused through prolonged engagement with gold and cocaine, reeking in its stammering intensity of delirium and failure. Why failure? Because unwinding the fetish is not yet given on the horizon of human possibility. Would that we could strip these fetishes of their mythology and thus expose the true and real substances themselves, naked and alone in their primal state of natural being. Yet even if we could, we would thereby destroy that which animates us, those subtle tricks played on human understanding by substances that appear to speak for themselves. The language I want is just that language that runs along the seam where matter and myth connect and disconnect continuously. Thus, My Cocaine Museum does not—I repeat, does not—try to tease apart nature from culture, real stuff from the made-up stuff, but instead accepts the life-and-death play of nature with second nature as an irreducible reality so as to let that curious play express itself all the more eloquently.

As a museum dedicated to natural history, My Cocaine Museum follows the flow of the river from the headwater village of Santa Maria deep in the forest, past the provincial capital of Santa Bárbara lying downstream just above salt water, across the still waters of the river mouth to the swamps that form the puffy edges of the coast itself. Some ten miles out at sea as its terminal exhibit, My Cocaine Museum disappears into itself on an ex-prison island that is now a national park, a museum island of natural history that early on in the Spanish conquest of the New World was given the name of Gorgona after she whose face turned those who looked at her to stone. The Gorgon haunts My Cocaine Museum. No doubt about it. She comes before the gods, before nature was separated out from culture. She comes before time, they said, living at the end of the known world near the night where time is space. She petrifies. She is the patron saint of museums. Yet my site moves. There is more to the Gorgon than at first appears.

But I am not that interested in museums. I find them dead and even hostile places, created for a bored bourgeoisie bereft of life and experience. What I am interested in is the life of gold and the life of cocaine where one is dying and the other taking off, although cocaine has more than its fair share of death too. What interests me and I hope you, too, about the end of the earth where the rain never stops and the trees reach the sky is an ambition as old as the hills, namely, to combine a history of things with a history of people forced by slavery to find their way through these things. What sort of things? Heat and rain, forests and rivers, stones and swamps, color and islands—those sort of things—and especially the miasma emanating from the swamp. And why? So that along with the ghosts of slavery haunting the museum, nature itself is released along with the rush of the time-compactened magic of gold and cocaine.
Barbacoas was the first town I knew on the coast. It was 1971. The bus zigzagged down the cliffs of the Andes along the border with Ecuador and arrived as night was falling. The main street ran in a curve down a slight hill to the fast-moving Rio Telembi, green and wide. On either side of the street were tall houses of rough-cut planks, smoke from kitchen fires folding over them like mist. At ground level I could see a man in golden light making gold jewelry with hammer and pliers. The church had a Virgen, he told me, but the last batch of priests, from Italy, had little by little stripped her of her golden clothes until all she had left was a miniskirt.

Barbacoas is a word like buccaneer, meaning barbecue, derived from an Indian language, and it was once the name that the Spaniards gave to the entire southern half of the Pacific Coast. As the Indians disappeared, so the name
shrunk, like the Virgen's skirt, and today it is no more than the name of this town famous in the nineteenth century for its gold and for serving as a port for small craft connecting the ocean to the road coming down the high Andes from the interior. In Codazzi's day, seventy Indian porters arrived there every day from the highlands carrying loads on their backs.

There is a small chain of hills separating the town from the mangroves by the sea, and it was these hills, according to Codazzi, that saved Barbacoas from the miasma. Being heavier than air, he writes, the particles emitted by the mangroves smashed against the peaks to become absorbed by the thick vegetation covering them.¹

Everything comes down to particles. And what wonderful particles, Enlightenment's defense against miasma. But when you atomize reality like this, the uncanny may snake back stronger than ever. Take René Descartes, who said water was composed of long, smooth, eel-shaped particles, separated by different particles composing what he called the subtle matter. Vapor was caused by these two types of particles, the eel-shaped ones and the subtle-matter ones, reacting differently to heat. What's more, water's eel-shaped particles were unique. No other substance had particles so easily separable. Descartes expounded on these ideas in 1637 in a book entitled Meteors.² You may well check yourself at this point, reflecting on your own habits of mind, and ask, Why this urge of the intellect to dissolve matter's materiality into smaller and smaller parts? Why this urge to understand understanding as dividing and subdividing like this until one decides to call it quits when the parts become particles? And given the undoubted power of this style of thought in modern forms of reckoning, how come miasma still haunts us? But Descartes can help us here if we take to heart his subtle matter and eel-shaped particles, for they remind us of the crazy wild thought and subtle poetry swarming around the aggressive methodology of divide and rule. For this same poetry has the merit of estranging vapor, of making it a puzzle and a wonder, whereby the human intellect and the intelligence of nature can start talking to one another.

¹ Codazzi, Geografía física, pp. 334–35.
³ Middleton, A History of the Theories of Rain, p. 15.
⁴ Middleton, A History of the Theories of Rain, p. 127.
⁵ Middleton, A History of the Theories of Rain, p. 18.
the cosmos, namely, vapor and wind, seems now to have disappeared as a source of wonder. We no longer connect with the cosmos via weather or via earth, fire, air, and water—or, to put it differently, reading these ideas about the mundane play of rain and fog, we now see the roundness of the raindrop with new, estranged eyes.

In his lettere al dottore G. B. Capponi in Bologna in 1666, Father Urbano d’Aviso said vapor was little bubbles of water filled with fire.⁶

Bubbles filled with fire brings us back to electricity in this miasmic sky. Maybe we should think of this as a swamp sky, as if God had picked up the swamp and suspended it upside down in the air to make a sky of mud with red crabs running frightened, mangrove trees pointing downward from a canopy of cloud. The editor of Codazzi’s papers, Felipe Pérez, reported that this coastal sky was “constantly raining and charged with electricity.” There was barely an interval between thunderclaps, and the lightning struck five or six flashes at a time.⁷ And from the first written records in the sixteenth century onward, one finds alarming comments concerning electrical storms. The pirate scribe Basil Ringrose described the lightning in 1679 in the Bay of Panamá as a power he had never experienced in his life. Forty years later, the British privateer Woodes Rogers records his first sighting of the island of Gorgona, June 10, 1709: “In the Night we have much Rain with Lightning and Squalls of Wind, by which the Havre de Grace lost her main Top-mast.” So strong were these electrical storms that they impeded the careening of his vessels, despite the need to get the job done in double-quick time.⁸

Nature becomes a wizard’s workshop of special effects. In 1809 Colombia’s most famous scientist and a keen geographer, Francisco José de Caldas, portrayed the Chocó as the site of a continual apocalypse:

The wind blows in hard from the Pacific pushing clouds up against the cordillera which appears somber and threatening. Darkness reigns and wherever you look there are clouds weighing down on every living thing. A suffocating calm prevails. This is the most terrible moment. Gusts of wind uproot enormous trees. There are electrical explosions and terrifying rolls of thunder. Rivers leap from their beds and the sea becomes a boiling mass with huge waves smashing along the coast. Sky fuses with earth as the end of the world is proclaimed.⁹

Felipe Pérez understood these awesome fireworks as due to the noxious vapors laden with maleficent particles rising from the swamps. The drumrolls of thunder and the lightning in the sky were divine counterpoint to the pestilence below. It seems truly fabulous, that is to say, of fable, this maleficence guarding the gold hoard that nature, in its prehistoric turmoil, bequeathed this lost region.

Of course they are related. Intimately. Lightning & Miasma. How low it hangs, this swamp sky charged with lightning! What troubled thoughts our geographers had concerning the noxiousness of its unseemly particles! Something has gone seriously wrong with the sliding movement between eels and subtle matter. Lightning signals the miasmic mix of invisibility and materiality that is so striking here, a secular equivalent, we could say, to spirits, which is to say breath, which is to say what lightning illumines at one stroke

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\begin{align*}
pneuma &= \\
spirit &= \\
breath &= \\
song &= \\
God &= \\
wind &= \\
Discourse of Winds \ (\text{William Dampier, the pirate, cruising off the island of Gorgona})
\end{align*}
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⁹. Francisco José de Caldas, Seminario de la Nueva Granada (1809), cited in Geografía económica de Colombia: Chocó (Bogotá: Litografía Colombia, 1941), p. 46.
because, and for this we should be grateful, the pneuma of the miasma is heavy with particulate matter emanating from the swamp. All eel, we could say, with the subtle matter gone soggy on us.

If this sounds like metaphysics, it is also physics, the sort of metaphysics needed by people in the path of El Niño and sailors and weatherwomen the world over. For centuries in the Western world before the birth of Christ, the being of Being was understood as composed of the interconvertibility of

Water—Earth—Air—Fire.

In the sixth century B.C., philosophers living in Ionia on the Anatolian shore got to work on this formula. Thales of Miletus said all the elements came from one element, namely, water. This makes a lot of sense on the Pacific Coast of Colombia. Benjamin Farrington, to whom I am indebted for this understanding of early Greek philosophy, locates Thales in the context of the swamp world of ancient Egypt and Babylonia, whose economies and hence (!) cosmogonies were wrought through the labor of drainage as expressed by the Babylonian creator, Marduk: "Let the dry land appear!"

Similar to accounts of the origin of the world among Native Americans in North America, in which the creator sends an animal down to the bottom of the sea to bring up mud or sand, the world was all ocean and what Marduk did was make dirt and pile it on a rush mat on the surface of the sea, and in this way began land as we know it. Thales disagreed. In the inimitable words of the Enlightenment via Farrington, he "let Marduk out" (i.e., Thales drained the swamp, the religious swamp). The prime force was discerned as in matter itself and not in a god. Matter is alive and power lies within things themselves. Immanence, not transcendence. According to Farrington, Thales held that the earth was a flat disc floating on water. There is water above our heads as well as all around us, and the sun and the moon are water vapor in a state of incandescence. Sun and moon "sail over our heads on the watery firmament above and then sail round, on the sea, on which the earth itself is afloat, to their appointed stations for rising in the east."

I quote this as a form of encouragement—through estrangement, surrealism and dada in equal mix—the sun sailing on water above our heads. Can't stop. In a hurry. Tighten the sails. Got to get to the east by sunrise. Water, water, everywhere. True, we ascended from the sea and the slimy shore to become men, but it is still the same old thing: water, water, everywhere.

Then there was Anaximenes of Ionia for whom not water but mist was the first principle. He suggested that air might condense to cloud, then water, then earth, and finally stone, which makes us mindful of the prison island of Gorgona, it being the glance of the Gorgon Medusa that turned men to stone, which makes us mindful of those minerals, men and women, cutting their way through stone in search of fossils and gold up the Timbiqui, where water and stone construe all being, all fire and all earth too. Stone, stone, everywhere . . . And pursuing these clever Ionians further, one sees how the four elements become elemental in a different way. They become poetic figures for a being that undoes itself: Being-as-indeterminacy, as with Heraclitus, "everything flows," for whom fire was the first principle.

"Take the thing we now call water," says Plato in terms that evoke the Pacific Coast and are breathtaking on account of the flow he perceives connecting water to stone, via fire. It's as if he is flowing himself, straight down that river into which Heraclitus told us you can't step twice. Not into the same place, that is, because by that time the water has become fire. When water is compacted, affirms Plato (and I want you to think back to cement, although he is thinking of chora), we see the water becoming earth and stones, and this same thing, when it is dissolved and dispersed, becoming wind and air; air becoming fire by being inflamed; and by a reverse process, fire, when condensed and extinguished, returning once more to the form of air, and air coming together again and condensing as mist and cloud; and from these, as they are yet more closely compacted, flowing water; and from water once more earth and stones: and thus, as it appears, they transmit in a cycle the process of passing into one another."


His point is that it is the *chora*, meaning the womb or the nursemaid of becoming, that provides for this flow of one element into the other. Fair enough. But from this point on we may lose him, as this function of this womb to match and mix, to transform and dissolve, is in his opinion at the same time a copying process in certain respects like a photographic camera: “The things that pass in and out are to be called copies of the eternal things,” he says, “impressions taken from them in a strange manner, that is hard to express.” What is fascinating about such a camera-as-chora is that it “translates” ideas, or should we say images, into material substances (just as the famous double helix of genetic imagery is translated into living creatures and materials, to invoke the womb once more).

This belief—or should we say conviction—concerning the conversion of form into substance resurfaces with the enthusiasm for Plato’s ideas in the Renaissance magic elaborated by Marsilio Ficino, according to whom it was the magician’s task to locate images that would mediate divine forms with the material world. Ficino drew on the earlier work of Plotinus, who says:

> I think . . . that those ancient sages, who sought to secure the presence of divine beings by the erection of shrines and statues, showed insight into the nature of the All; they perceived that, although this Soul (of the world) is everywhere tractable, its presence will be secured all the more readily when an appropriate receptacle is elaborated, a place especially capable of receiving some portion or phase of it, something reproducing and serving like a mirror to catch an image of it.

We trap the soul of the world through laying cunning images. All such images resemble *chora*, translating form into substance and vice versa. Poetry and matter become one.

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ory” as joined to Karl Marx’s theory of revolution and history. For he felt moved to quote his philosopher friend the redoubtable T. W. Adorno, quoting Benjamin with respect to the dialectical image, adding a strong image of his own, namely, that dialectical images are like “antediluvian fossils.”

Why fossils? I don’t know exactly what Adorno had in mind with this bewildering attempt to understand human history and natural history as one, but the Pacific Coast certainly has a response. Fossils sleep the sleep of millennia consequent to untold planetary trauma. They are frozen images of the crash whose petrified being signals the enormity of that convulsion. Adorno couldn’t for a minute forget the image Benjamin seized upon in his study of the baroque, namely, the death’s head, the smiling absence of life, that winks from the horrors of the past frozen through time in a petrified, primordial landscape. Yet we know from the miners who cruise underground in search of primordial rivers of liquid gold that the fossils they find there at the doorway to the gold crumble to the touch. Petrification transmutes into the ash of time, gold itself. Voilà! The dialectical image!

This image that is also fact and trauma, the trauma that courses through facts, is the image of subterranean riverbeds of gold and fossil objects. The fossils are petrified memories like prehistoric cave drawings memorializing the event of a convulsed nature driven underground, what our chorographers called the upheaval that in prehistoric times shaped the land, throwing up the three mountain chains we know today as the Andes running north and south along the western rim of South America. And if we look further, we discern something no less mysterious: a fourth chain of the Andes hidden under the warm waters of the Pacific itself. The founding violence that tore nature apart in its prehistoric turmoil laid out a mountain range parallel to the Andes, ten to twenty miles beyond the coast but under the surface of the ocean. Wonder of wonders, the island of Gorgona is the peak of that oceanic underwater range. The island upthrust from the ocean floor thus represents an inversion of the same founding violence that on the mainland drove rivers down into the earth, filling them with gold.

17. Pérez, Geografía física, p. 123.