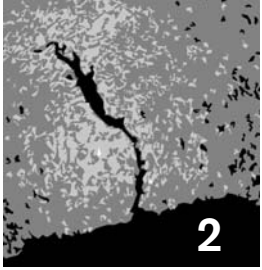

El Dorado and the Golden Legacy

One of many early tales about New World marvels, El Dorado was not exclusively set in the Amazon. Reports of the elusive golden city also centered on the Andes and the Orinoco, as well as California, the Antilles, and Mexico. These varied locations for El Dorado continue into the present. While, for instance, journalist Patrick Tierney titled his account of how U.S. scientists allegedly triggered a 1968 measles epidemic among Amazonian Indians *Darkness in El Dorado,* the Dreamworks film *The Road to El Dorado* situates this marvelous treasure trove somewhere in Mesoamerica.[1] And yet, even while El Dorado retains its fluid geography, there is a special relationship between the Amazon and the dazzling city-kingdom (often conflated with a golden lake and a gilded monarch) that gives the tale an enduring place in succeeding visions of the region. As a result, even accounts of El Dorado that are not about the Amazon help to define what will become a recognizably Amazonian legacy.

Accounts of El Dorado

The specific textual accounts that have come down to us of a chimeric golden city vary. It would be hard to confuse Pedro Cieza de León's sober prose report of how Gonzalo Pizarro set out in search of El Dorado and the Land of Cinnamon with Juan de Castellanos' florid verse description of Sebastián de Benalcázar's march upon a marvelous mountain kingdom.[2] Both stand apart from Sir Walter Ralegh's glowing evocation of "the imperial and golden city of Manoa" in his *Discoverie of the Large, Rich, and Bewtiful Empyre of Guiana*—by far the best-known account in English of the search for El Dorado.[3] Moreover, while some of the authors were would-be conquistadores eager to celebrate

past achievements in order to obtain support for new expeditions, others were skeptics who pieced together conflicting reports about the golden city. A number of the latter were Catholic priests eager to replace with Christianity the native beliefs and customs that they described.

These writers chronicled a series of expeditions that took place at different times in widely separate locations. Unsurprisingly, not just diverse topographies, but also reports of varied native customs and beliefs found their way into the narratives. Often, direct ethnographic observation mingled with snippets of myths and legends, which themselves drew on native practices such as gold mining.[4] And yet, while descriptions of El Dorado varied in content, style, and purpose, the failure of each expedition to reach its destination encouraged authors, when it did not oblige them, to conflate, rework, and augment one another's accounts. (The single golden king, for instance, may be transformed into a whole slew of gleaming warriors as time goes on.) The result was a composite sketch of a wondrously alien collection of natural riches that remained —at least in theory—*temporarily* inaccessible. This collection of spectacular wealth that became synonymous with El Dorado would come to function regularly as a giant. The presentation of the golden city as the epitome of natural wealth, and its carefully bounded (if regularly shifting) geographic location, would become giganticizing devices that functioned through idealization. The emphasis on the city's artifice, the selective use of native narratives to produce an air of mystery, and the insistence on the city's temporary elusiveness would be other such devices.

More grotesque features, such as the golden ruler's obscene wealth and the seemingly bizarre native legends that often swirled about him, would help make El Dorado a convenient focus of false fear. The fear was false because the peculiar challenges surrounding the conquest of El Dorado were readily surmountable, at least in theory. As such, they contained, and gave recognizable form to, more diffuse anxieties.

Stories of a golden kingdom arose at an important juncture in Europeans' thinking about mineral riches. For a number of the first explorers, gold was not just a precious object, but often a living thing. Convinced that the sun-colored metal must "grow" better near the equator, Diego de Ordás, an early participant in the search for what would later become known as El Dorado, applied for a royal patent to explore the region between the Amazon and the Orinoco.[5] Although the sixteenth-century Jesuit writer Father José de Acosta took care to deny gold's animate nature, he nonetheless reiterated its lifelike appearance. "And in a

sense," Acosta wrote, "minerals seem to grow like plants—not because they have a true vegetative force and inner life, which belongs only to real plants, but because they emerge from the bowels of the earth as a result of the virtue and efficiency of the sun and other plants, so that over a long time they continue to grow and almost propagate."[6]

Gold evoked echoes of both medieval alchemy and a classical Golden Race or Golden Age in which humans lived in perfect harmony with each other and with nature. It was also a highly saleable commodity that conjured up cautionary stories of Mammon (the Syrian god of avarice, whose name was a synonym for earthly riches) and King Midas. "This yellow slave," wrote Shakespeare, "Will knit and break religions, bless th'accurs'd / Make the hoar leprosy ador'd, place thieves,/And give them title, knee and approbation with senators on the bench."[7]

Anxieties in Spain and Portugal about the place of these countries in an emerging European cash economy (gold became the international monetary standard in 1445) heightened a long-standing ambiguity surrounding the precious metal. In its systematic magnification of gold's more ideal qualities, El Dorado "tamed" or encapsulated the more disturbing, less Edenic side. As the epitome of mineral wealth, El Dorado stood apart from that far less ambiguous Garden of Delights, or *hortus amoenus,* that served as a primary symbol for much of the Americas (including a number of the more accessible portions of the Amazon) during the sixteenth century.[8]

The presentation of the golden city as a carefully delimited space was a necessary first step in the process of containment intrinsic to giant-making. Regardless of whether its pursuers envisioned a king, a city, or a lake ringed by mountains, El Dorado appeared as a concrete, mappable reality. Both its singularity and its elusive nature, however, separated it from a more readily accessible Edenlike garden, which existed in a series of latter-day approximations of the original paradise.

Gardens, even Edenic ones, could have practical, commercial uses. "There are also trees of a thousand kinds, all with different fruits and all so fragrant that it is a marvel, and I am greatly distressed not to know them, *for I am well assured they are all of great value,*" declared Christopher Columbus upon arriving in the Caribbean islands.[9] As, however, Columbus' use of the word *marvel (maravilla)* suggests, gardens also often inspired aesthetic and even spiritual responses (delectation, reverence). The evocation of these more intangible qualities distinguished New World Edens from an El Dorado whose worth lay overwhelmingly in its identity as the epitome of New World wealth.

Between 1503 and 1520, an astounding thirty thousand pounds of New World gold—not counting those shipments lost to shipwrecks or contraband—entered Spanish ports.[10] In that context, El Dorado appeared as a golden jackpot, the fitting climax to an ever more wondrous tale. Why, its pursuers demanded, if the New World had already yielded such astounding treasures, should the best not have remained for last?

From one perspective, the New World's golden artifacts were just another source of bullion. Thus, in 1534, when Hernando Pizarro's ship reached Seville with almost a hundred highly detailed works of art in gold and silver from vanquished Inca chieftain Atahualpa, Charles V immediately ordered them to be melted down and recast as coins. Only after royal officials pleaded to see these glittering reflections of a distant civilization did he agree to put them on public display for a few weeks.[11]

From another vantage point, these golden objects were very special transformations of an alien nature. Like Atahualpa, the golden king El Dorado boasted a "pleasure garden" full of gleaming reproductions of each and every plant and animal that existed within his realm. The high degree of artifice evident in these simulacra made the European conquest over the natives a double triumph: as the natives had already managed to convert the world around them into a series of objects with human meaning, their defeat implied a second victory over nature for the Europeans.

This artificial quality further distinguished El Dorado from the Garden of Delights, for in the latter, nature regularly surpassed art. "The hills appear as beautiful gardens and orchards, and I certainly never saw a Flemish tapestry so beautiful, with many animals of many diverse species of which Pliny neither wrote nor knew," the sixteenth-century Jesuit father Manuel da Nóbrega exclaimed about the Brazilian coast. "It has many herbs of diverse fragrance and very different from those of Spain, and certainly the majesty, the beauty, and the wisdom of the Creator shines out well in so many, so diverse and beautiful creatures."[12]

The Garden of Delights was rich in the produce that could be carted off to market and the seeds that could be made to sprout in faraway locations. But while Nóbrega's enchanting garden-forests permitted pruning and grafting, they could not survive an attack upon their roots. Once razed, these originally lush groves could quickly became water-hungry plantations that forced the Europeans to construct extensive irrigation systems, above all in the Caribbean.[13] El Dorado, in contrast, could always be refashioned. If the king got tired of the coins that he had minted

from America's golden treasures, he could melt them down into an enormous lump of precious metal. Theoretically, the coins could even be recast into the very artifacts that he had initially scorned. Thus gold (and, by extension, the golden city) actually transcended both time and materiality by holding out an enduring second chance.

The wonder that the Garden of Delights inspired was a thoroughly Christian mystery. Looking at the gardenlike hills, Father Nóbrega invoked a divinity whose wisdom "shines out well in so many, so diverse and beautiful creatures." The awe that El Dorado triggered was a reflection not just of its riches, but also of a tenacious otherness that owed much to the story's partial roots in native narratives.

The indigenous rites and beliefs surrounding the golden kingdom clearly fascinated a number of European writers. The sixteenth-century explorer Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada, for instance, described how the natives placed their dead in golden coffins, which they then allowed to sink to the bottom of the deepest lakes.[14] Almost a hundred years later, Juan Rodríguez Freyle described his frustrated attempts to fish up one of a pair of golden caimans said to lie at the bottom of Teusacá Lake. "And I confess my sin, that I entered into this long list [of greedy adventurers] with the desire to fish up one of the lake's caimans," he said. "And it so happened that, having well catechized my *jeque* ["old man" or "chief"], who had been a part of this sanctuary, I took him with me, and so when we came upon the lake and then the water, he fell face forward upon the ground, and I couldn't raise him, or get him to speak so much as a word to me."[15]

The systematic fragmentation and distortion of native beliefs within the larger process of giant-making is evident in Freyle's bemused description of the Indian's reaction.[16] This same sort of "folklorization" is particularly clear in the early-seventeenth-century Franciscan friar Pedro Simón's account of the native custom of hurling gold and emeralds into Lake Guatavita.[17] According to Father Simón's oral sources, these offerings began in earnest after the wife of an Indian chieftain threw herself and her infant daughter into the lake. Her desperate act had ample motive, since the chief had responded to reports of an affair between his wife and a member of his entourage by chopping off the man's penis and slipping it, cooked, into her food.

When the chief later sent his head shaman to retrieve his wife and child from the lake bottom, the shaman found the pair happily ensconced "in some houses and an enclosed garden of better quality than

those which she had left in Guatavita." Cradling on her lap the *dragoncillo,* or little dragon, who resided there, the wife informed the envoy that she had no interest in a return to earth.

After hearing the bad news, the chief asked the shaman to retrieve, at least, his infant daughter from the lake bottom. The shaman returned with a tiny corpse whose eyes had been removed. Finally bowing to the will of "the dragoncillo whom he so revered," the chief sorrowfully returned the sightless, soulless child to the water. Shortly afterward, he began to make periodic offerings of precious objects in the center of the lake.

Scoffing at the notion that any human being could take up residence beneath the water, Father Simón in his account reduced the swirling universe of native belief to an *embuste,* or diabolic joke. He described the shaman as a sorcerer *(hechicero),* and his reference to the devil "who was accustomed to appear in those same waters in the figure of a little dragon or a great snake" invited the reader to dismiss the story as the invention of savages who had not yet seen the light of the Christian God.

The work of other colonial writers who insisted on El Dorado's elusive character reveals a similar strategy of circumscription fundamental to giant-making. In contrast to the Garden of Delights, which lay open to the newcomers as a combination living room and pantry, the golden kingdom revealed an inaccessibility that only magnified its promise. Certain that fate had reserved the best for last, the explorers swam up flooded rivers, made their beds in tree branches, and dined on snails, bats, vipers, shoe leather, and even a child or two rather than abandon the search.[18]

The inaccessibility of El Dorado was by no means total. Insistences on its *temporary* elusiveness held out new hope for the future even as they underscored its tantalizing, as yet pristine quality. ("Guiana," Sir Walter Ralegh declared with ill-concealed enthusiasm, "is a Countrey that hath yet her Maydenhead, never sackt, turned, nor wrought, the face of the earth hath not beene torne, nor the vertue and salt of the soyle spent by manurance, the graves have not beene opened for gold, the mines not broken with sledges, nor their Images puld down out of their temples.")[19] Accounts in which the golden king sends an envoy to request aid of the Spaniards likewise suggested that even though the road always ended before they got there, his glittering realm could not remain forever out of reach.

El Dorado's pursuers remained certain that the resistance they encountered stemmed from forces beyond, and not within, the golden city.

The external nature of the obstacles that barred its gates tempered the frustration that accompanied each new failure. If raging rapids, clattering cataracts, and snake-infested forests routinely got the best of the explorers, their retreat was always provisory. If only the natives had been just a touch less dastardly, if only the men had had access to another five or five hundred horses, if only the rains had—or had not—started, the expedition, this very moment, would be before the city's gleaming walls.

Even confirmed skeptics described El Dorado in ideal terms. "I would rather have the sweepings of the chamber of this Prince than the great meltings of gold there have been in Peru," asserted an unbelieving, but still fascinated, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo.[20] Nonetheless, many writers' focus on the almost monstrous wealth of the golden monarch injected an element of the grotesque into their tales, which helped make El Dorado an effective focus of false fear.

Rapidly converted into a synonym for a fabulously rich location, the term *El Dorado* initially applied to a chief or king so rich that his servants routinely anointed the full length of his body with a kind of resin, to which they then applied a fine overlay of golden talc. In some versions of the story, "the Gilded One" assumed this shell as part of a ritual in which he set out on a raft to deposit offerings of gold, pearls, emeralds, and other precious ornaments into the middle of a lake. In other accounts, he donned this gleaming second skin each morning, only to slough it off during a nightly bath.

To the extent that he served as a metaphor for prodigious riches, this king was clearly an idealization. However, as a literal embodiment of these riches, the gold-plated sovereign was a strangely alien, *living* object. Accounts in which the king's allies joined him in a ritual of collective gilding underscore the theme of excess. Ralegh, for instance, described how a good number of the king's allies routinely anointed their bodies with a kind of balsam, after which servants used hollow canes to blow a fine golden powder upon their naked bodies "until they al be shining from the foote to the head." They then went on to drink, continuing "in drunkeness sometimes six or seven days together."[21]

The natives' overindulgence reinforced El Dorado's more grotesque, disturbing side. Even though Ralegh refrained from disinterring a recently deceased chief who had gone to his grave along with a fabulously crafted golden chair, he clearly could imagine better uses for such an enormous chunk of precious metal. In establishing a narrative tradition in which the natives appeared alternately as direct extensions of and obstacles to the exploitation of a fabulously rich land, these instances of

apparent misuse provided a rationale for European intervention. Although Ralegh did not employ terms such as "ineffective resource management," he established a pattern that has endured into the present.

Other grotesque elements simultaneously reinforce and challenge El Dorado's gigantic status. The seeming fiction of the *dragoncillo* projected onto a mythic past present-day anxieties about a nature that remained profoundly "other" by European standards. However, in its implicit challenge to Christian cosmology, tales such as that of the chief's wife who took up residence beneath the lake reveal the sort of seepage, or visible contradictions, common to all giants.

Although European writers treated them as affronts to reason, stories of the underwater city hint at a different vision of the world. The native myth's effective blurring of the boundaries between the earth and water subverted other, normally fixed divisions between human and nonhuman nature, and even life and death. The chief's wife found an end to her earthly sufferings and a happier, immortal home, not in some celestial paradise, but at the muddy bottom of a lake. While Padre Simón followed a time-honored Christian tradition in equating the dragon with chaos, evil, and Satan, the word *dragoncillo* remains, despite his contemptuous gloss, an affectionate diminutive. Instead of expressing fury at the monster cradled in his wife's lap, the chief proceeded to make gifts of gold and jewels to it.

If the legend's rejection of conventional boundaries between the waters and the earth challenges El Dorado's ability to serve as a giant container, so do hints that the city's elusiveness may have sprung from internal, rather than external, causes. Sir Walter Ralegh's retelling of the story of Juan Martínez in *Discoverie* provides another good example of this sort of undercutting.

Munitions master for that same Diego de Ordás who argued that a sun-colored gold must grow near the equator, Martínez incurred the captain's wrath when the expedition's entire supply of gunpowder exploded. Cast adrift in an open canoe, he was rescued by a group of natives who supposedly took him, blindfolded, on a long journey to "the great Citie of Manoa, the seat and residence of Inga the Emperor." There, Martínez met the king, who lodged him in his own palace.[22]

At the end of seven months, his royal host asked Martínez if he wanted to stay on as his guest. When the Spaniard chose instead to return home, the king ordered various servants "al loden with as much gold as they could carrie" to accompany the departing visitor as far as the shores of the Orinoco. Predictably, as soon as the servants left,

thieves pounced upon him, leaving nothing but two gourds or bottles of gold beads.

Ralegh's version of the Martínez story emphasized not just the kingdom's wealth, but also the courtly demeanor that set apart its ruler from those other, more barbaric natives who routinely fell upon the Europeans. Martinez' uncommon success in penetrating the confines of the golden city suggested its accessibility to other Europeans. A closer look at this particular story, however, raises nagging doubts about just how far outsiders can penetrate the city's secrets.

For instance, at the same time that the king directed Martínez to be "well entertained" in Manoa, the Spaniard remained forbidden "to wander into the country anywhere." As a result, the munitions master never got an inkling of what lay beyond the city's gleaming gates. Even though the king was lavish in his hospitality, he did not confide in his guest. Martínez was at liberty to stay, but only on his host's terms. The king did not seek out other Europeans, nor did he appear interested in forging ties with that larger world that Martínez represented. Yet more important, when Martínez decided to leave, the king did not invite him to return. Once beyond the borders of the golden kingdom, the previously honored guest was as much an outsider as he had been seven months before.

The Martínez incident, to be sure, is just one part of a larger story. Ralegh used his account—which a number of the Spaniards' peers were quick to dismiss as sun-dazed ravings—to bolster the existence of the golden kingdom. Martínez, after all, was a mere munitions master; why should a king have had more than a passing interest in him? In the end, the failure of Ralegh's own second expedition to Manoa, and his ensuing execution, makes the contradictions in his retelling of Martínez' story, and the seepage from that giant container that is El Dorado, yet more poignant.[23]

The Amazon as El Dorado

From early on, the doubts that glimmered beneath the surface of texts such as Ralegh's *Discoverie* found direct expression in the work of other writers.[24] And yet, although the ranks of skeptics swelled with new additions, such as Voltaire's description of the ingenuous Candide's arrival in El Dorado, it took almost three centuries to extinguish lingering dreams of an actual golden realm.[25]

In his study of the emergence of a utopian discourse in the Americas, Fernando Ainsa suggests that El Dorado provided an ideal foil for a weary and conflict-ridden Europe.[26] The golden kingdom represented a melding of the Golden Age of the Greeks and Romans with the Land without Evil of the Tupi natives, a group spread throughout much of Brazil, including the Amazon. Like the Land without Evil, which continues to inspire native messianic movements, El Dorado emerged as a this-world paradise during an era of intense and often dramatic change.[27]

Nonetheless, if this metallic Eden had a positive, utopian component, it also had another, darker side. Like any giant, the El Dorado of colonial narratives overshadowed and erased other aspects of that larger whole even as it emphasized the New World's positive attributes. By foregrounding the golden kingdom's riches, its mystery, its elusiveness, and its transformative potential, its pursuers effectively erased or converted its inhabitants into incarnations of a land they saw as "pure nature." The tale of El Dorado thus laid the groundwork for one quite particular sort of gigantic vision of tropical nature in which natural entities regularly overshadow people, who themselves often emerge as commodities. The alternating idealization of the natives as rich beyond measure and denunciation of them as bad stewards continued even after outsiders discarded the notion of a gilded king, and remains with us today.

Ainsa presents the golden kingdom as a metaphor for all of the Americas. However, El Dorado evokes some corners of the New World far more vividly than it does others. The Amazon, one of its most common locations in the sixteenth century, has retained especially close links to the golden kingdom over time. As late as the 1770s, for instance, the chief magistrate of Rio Branco complained that stories of Parima lake or river, which "geographers in the fantastic disposition of their maps locate near the sources of our Rio Branco," had inspired some sixty Spanish, Dutch, and English expeditions.[28] Maps that placed the golden lake somewhere between the Amazon and the Orinoco continued to appear well into the nineteenth century.

This golden legacy is readily visible in the explicit links among a number of the texts that have exerted a profound influence on outsiders' conceptions of the region. Although, for instance, Ralegh located his golden city somewhere in the Guianas, his *Discoverie* relied heavily on Spanish sources that described expeditions in various parts of South America, including the Amazon.[29] The appearance of the German natu-

ralist Robert H. Schomburgk's edition of Ralegh's text in 1848, the year of their own departure to the Amazon, may or may not have influenced the great British naturalists Henry Walter Bates, Alfred Russel Wallace, and Richard Spruce.[30] However, these men unquestionably absorbed other, more popular accounts of dubious scientific value, whose authors revealed an El Doradian vision every bit as glowing as that of Ralegh.

Wallace, for instance, began the preface to his *Narrative of Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro* (1853) with a reference to an account by the American writer William H. Edwards, whose florid prose bore out his self-description as "a lover and devout worshipper of Nature." ("My attention was directed to Pará and the Amazon by Mr. Edwards' little book, 'A Voyage up the Amazon,'" wrote Wallace, "and I decided upon going there, both on account of its easiness of access and the little that was known of it compared with most other parts of South America.")[31]

In turn, the British naturalists' descriptions would later have a direct effect on early-nineteenth-century writers such as Theodore Roosevelt and the great Brazilian essayist Euclides da Cunha, who will reappear in chapter 8. Even the salty narrator of H. M. Tomlinson's *The Sea and the Jungle* is quick to cite Bates, Spruce, and Wallace as inspirations for the "noble journey" that turns out to be a nightmare.[32] Still later writers, such as the structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, would incorporate or consciously reject these illustrious forebears. Thus, even though today's readers and writers may be unfamiliar with actual sixteenth-century accounts of El Dorado, the golden city, with its intermingling of native and European sources, remains part of the ongoing story of the Amazon.

This ensuing legacy of giganticism would continue to reinforce a selective vision of Amazonian geography. Although the Amazon reveals a variety of land formations, the genuine immensity of its rivers and its forests, and the dramatic strangeness of its flora and fauna, would encourage the sort of magnification and distortion so evident in accounts of the golden city. The region's vast distances would intensify a sense of insularity. So would the tangled quality of an interior whose rapids and seasonal streams precluded easy passage. While some parts of the Amazon would continue to recall the earthly paradise (the late-nineteenth-century baron Frederico José de Santa-Anna Nery would compare the region to "an immense hot-house"), other writers would conjure up a series of maddeningly elusive treasure troves.[33] At the same time, the drastic effects of European settlement on the Amazonian natives would

fuel El Doradian notions of native peoples as either extensions of a rich land or obstacles blocking its proper use.

The narrative legacy of selective exaggeration has changed over time. However, the ideas of spectacular natural riches, mystery, elusiveness, and vast transformative potential that swirl about the golden city have resurfaced in a plethora of changing forms. Only a few of the countless possibilities, the following examples suggest giant-making's continuing force.

The Amazon as Second Eden

The German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt's relegation of Ralegh's "imperial and golden city of Manoa" to "the poetic imagination of mankind" at the dawn of the nineteenth century signaled the definitive waning of belief in a golden king. However, Humboldt's vision of tropical nature as "an inexhaustible treasure trove" and his definition of El Dorado as a hydrographic—and therefore, scientific—problem was, in many ways, less of a rupture than a metamorphosis.[34]

The emergence of the Amazon as a Second Eden that redefined, even while it ostentatiously rejected, earlier tales of fourteen-karat monarchs is nowhere more evident than in the writing of Henry Walter Bates. Originally published by John Murray in 1863, four years after the author's return from an eleven-year sojourn in the Amazon, his *Naturalist on the River Amazons* was reissued by the Penguin Nature Library in 1989, almost a hundred years after his death.[35]

At first glance, Bates' narrative could not be more different from sixteenth-century tales of El Dorado.[36] His focus on a wealth of species and subspecies, rather than on precious objects such as gold or cinnamon or sarsaparilla, sets him apart from the colonial conquistadores.[37] So does his interest in science for science's sake. And yet, although Bates appears far more interested in the bats and the beetles that are his real passion than he does in social ascent, his investigations propelled him out of his tradesman status (Bates' father was a hosier) into the lower reaches of the British upper middle class.[38] Moreover, the results of his intensive investigations unquestionably furthered European economic exploitation of the Amazon. Though Bates himself remains largely impervious to the connection, the research in which he engaged helped to fuel the Rubber Boom, whose negative effects upon the landscape he decried in the conclusion to his book.

Unlike the would-be conquistadores who approached Amazonian nature as a set of obstacles to be overcome, Bates and his fellows viewed it as both inspiration and object of respectful study. Bates' text, like that of so many others of the period, oscillates between expressions of awe and the sort of meticulous description suggested by his rambling subtitle *(A Record of Adventures, Habits of Animals, Sketches of Brazilian and Indian Life, and Aspects of Nature Under the Equator, during Eleven Years of Travel)*. Although part of the stock vocabulary of Romanticism, terms such as *exuberant, luxuriant, colossal, prodigious, profuse, magnificent, primeval, virgin,* and *perennial* aptly convey Bates' astonishment before a green world from which the mist rose like "the gauze veil before the transformation scene at a pantomime."

At first glance, the single biggest difference between early accounts of El Dorado and Bates' descriptions of a forest distinguished by its "endless variety" lies in his apparent success in confronting the object of his quest. Where his predecessors had perceived a host of obstacles in nature, Bates saw the bee that stung him and the bat that drew blood from his toes as precious sources of information. Unlike the pursuers of the golden kingdom, who expressed frustration with their surroundings, Bates delighted in finding himself in the midst of a "most bewildering diversity of grand and beautiful trees."

And yet, while the British naturalist celebrated Amazonian nature, on one level it remained as inaccessible to him as El Dorado did to the sixteenth-century explorers. A fragment of a larger whole, the marvelous forest regularly overpowered all else, including the teeming river and the region's big and little cities. To the extent that he dreamed of a yet bigger prize even while he catalogued a myriad of new species, Bates the scientist resembles a long parade of earlier explorers.

The prize Bates sought was nothing less than a future union between European civilization and tropical nature, destined to produce a "glorious new human race under the Equator." The elusiveness of this goal, however, forced him to stress the Amazon's transformative potential. Even while he continued to celebrate the forest's beauty, he saw it as raw material that human beings would have to mold into a yet more perfect form.

The barriers that kept this glorious dream elusive were not primarily physical. Unlike an Ordás or a Benalcázar, Bates rarely railed about the raging torrents or thick forests in his path. In his view, it was not nature that threw up barriers to his vision, but rather his fellow humans when they stubbornly refused to exercise the faculty of reason.

Embracing the hierarchies that were part and parcel of their particular brand of determinist science, the nineteenth-century naturalists took as fact the superiority of white, European civilization. Bates' more socially prominent colleague Charles Darwin, for example, had absolutely nothing good to say about the population of Tierra del Fuego. ("Their attitudes were abject, and the expression of their countenances distrustful, surprised, and startled," Darwin observed by way of introduction.)[39]

Bates' attitude toward the people he encountered in the Amazon was more complex. He expressed admiration for his native oarsman and outright tenderness for the young Indian girl Oria, whom he nursed during a grave illness and then insisted on burying in a Christian cemetery. However, his passionate longing for a Second Eden regularly overshadowed his feelings for particular human beings. Time and again, he judged people in terms of how he thought they related to nature. The contrast between the stately forest and the unkempt humans in weed-ringed huts with which he chose to begin his book is telling in this regard. "It was mere fancy," he remarked, "but I thought the mingled squalor, luxuriance, and beauty of these women were pointedly in harmony with the rest of the scene, so striking, in the view, was the mixture of natural riches and human poverty."[40] The Indians' supposed inability to conceptualize a divine creator posed a similar impediment to human union with an all-abundant nature that Bates and his fellows perceived as demanding reverence.[41] His certainty that only the exercise of reason could bring his dream to fruition made him yet more outraged at "the revolting superstitions of the lower Portuguese." "I have often travelled in the company of these shining examples of the European enlightenment," he sourly declared. "They generally carry with them, wherever they go, a small image of some favourite saint in their trunks; and when a squall or any other danger arises, their first impulse is to rush to the cabin, take out the image and clasp it to their lips, whilst uttering a prayer for protection."[42]

The naturalist's unwavering attachment to the idea of a new and splendid alliance between nature and civilization all but guaranteed a seepage that recalls colonial accounts of El Dorado. He insisted, for instance, that the disappearance of the Passé Indians could be no cause for lament, given their absorption into a supposedly more evolved Brazilian society. Nonetheless, the old Passé chief's tearful lament that his grandchildren would no longer see themselves as a distinctive people clearly distressed Bates. Although he rationalized his dismay as a reaction to the

Indians' premature death from a disease "which seems to arise on their simply breathing the same air as the whites," this explanation would strike most readers as hollow and unconvincing.

Bates experienced a yet greater discomfiture upon returning to his original starting point outside what is today the teeming metropolis of Belém do Pará. Forced to hire a boy to show him the path that led to what was only a decade earlier the outskirts of the city, he observed with consternation that "the noble forest trees" had been cut down, creating a grim scene of naked, half-burnt trunks amid a welter of "ashes, muddy puddles, and heaps of broken branches."

The shaken naturalist denied the permanence of this destruction. "In the course of a few years," he wrote confidently, "a new growth of creepers will cover the naked tree-trunks on the borders of this new road . . . and luxuriant shrubs form a green fringe to the path: it will then become as beautiful a woodland road as the old one was."[43] Not just his sorrowful hindsight, but also his too-hearty protestations of nature's capacities for self-rejuvenation hint at an unbridgeable gulf between the reality of European civilization's impact on nature and Bates' own golden dream. At the same time, his periodic expressions of exasperation with a theoretically magnanimous nature suggest that this nature was considerably more complex than he cared to admit. "Rain, rain, rain, rain," the sodden traveler remarked at one point in his pocket diary with a monosyllabic despair every bit as eloquent as the most self-consciously lyric passages in *Naturalist*.[44]

These contradictions highlight the perceived elusiveness of Amazonian nature. In so doing, they link the naturalists' Second Eden to a much earlier El Dorado. The suggestion that impediments to the dream of glorious union may lie not in exterior obstacles, but rather within the very civilization that spawned his vision makes Bates' *Naturalist* far more than a catalogue of living objects. Moreover, although these doubts and tensions find particularly clear expression in his travelogue, they are in no way exclusive to him. Expressions of desire for a nature that evades the naturalist even as he labors to define and thereby contain it, these nineteenth-century accounts of the Amazon as a future terrestrial paradise attest to the selective magnification common to many varieties of giant-making. Thus, even while the social and political circumstances within which these authors wrote were very different from those of the early conquistadores, they continue to draw on a far older symbolic legacy.

The Amazon as Hostile Wilderness

The early twentieth century saw the resurgence of the chaotic nature that blocked the path to El Dorado in colonial narratives. While accounts of the Amazon as a Green Hell are as different in their own way from narratives of El Dorado as are accounts of the region as a Second Eden, they too reveal a tendency toward fragmentation and distortion.

Moreover, there are direct, textual links between Bates and early-twentieth-century writers such as U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt, who took *The Naturalist on the River Amazons* with him on his own two-month journey in the Amazon in 1914. ("No book since written has in any way supplanted it," he declared.)[45] Initially published as a series of articles in *Scribner's* magazine, Roosevelt's *Through the Brazilian Wilderness* departs from the accounts of the nineteenth-century naturalists in its emphasis on a beautiful and bountiful nature's thorny underside.[46] However, he, like a number of his contemporaries—W. H. Hudson in *Green Mansions,* Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in *The Lost World,* H. M. Tomlinson in *The Sea and the Jungle*—continued to envision Amazonia as a giant.

Roosevelt set out for South America in 1913 after losing a bid for a second elected term as U.S. president.[47] The expedition was thus a sort of consolation prize, which he wistfully described as "my last chance to be a boy."[48] While he referred briefly to the initial, more state-oriented portions of the tour at the book's beginning, he quickly moved on to his journeys through the Amazon.[49] The book is above all an account of Roosevelt and Brazilian colonel Cândido Mariano de Rondon's joint expedition in search of the mouth of the Rio Dúvida, or River of Doubt.[50] (The name reflects the reigning uncertainty regarding the river's course.)

Although Roosevelt described it as a "wilderness," his depictions of the interior through which he moved will strike most modern readers as more of a hostile jungle.[51] This Amazon had little in common with the lands he had so vigorously lobbied to transform into U.S. national parks.[52] While the rugged, seemingly limitless terrain through which he hacked his way was "a tract or region uncultivated and uninhabited by human beings" (Indians remained, for Roosevelt, a separate, not-quite-human category), it did not invite the repose and recreation of a present-day Yellowstone or Yosemite.[53]

Roosevelt's "wilderness" (a word that has no direct equivalent in either Spanish or Portuguese) was also no nineteenth-century terrestrial

paradise. In striking contrast to Bates, who began his book with a description of the luxuriant forest, Roosevelt devoted the first seventeen pages of his narrative to a discussion of the poisonous snakes whose dangers the British naturalist made a point of downplaying. The similarly sensational descriptions of "blood-crazy" fish, "biting" and "venomous" ants, "blood-sucking" bats, and "vicious" piranha that pop up throughout the text testify to the more grotesque side of Roosevelt's gigantic nature and provide an obvious focus for false fear. It is hard to recognize Bates' intricately festooned creepers in the tangled mass of parasitic fig vines that Roosevelt compared to the tentacles of an immense cuttlefish digging its hooklike claws into the "dead carcass" of a palm tree. "Water stood in black pools at the foot of the murdered trees, and of the trees that had murdered them," the author noted with an almost gleeful grimace. "There was something sinister and evil in the dark stillness of the grove." [54]

And yet, despite this taste for the macabre, which regularly turned his would-be report of a "scientific expedition" into a harrowing adventure tale, Roosevelt joined Bates in celebrating the grand variety of Amazonian nature.[55] Some of the passages in *Through the Brazilian Wilderness* rival the British naturalist in lyricism, as when Roosevelt described a grove of buriti palms as "gorgeous with the brilliant hues of a flock of party-colored macaws." However, it is not simply Roosevelt's more poetic evocations of Amazonian nature that recall the nineteenth-century naturalists and, beyond them, the sixteenth-century chroniclers of El Dorado. Like the British naturalist's bounteous nature, but also like the golden kingdom before it, Roosevelt's tangled interior was the epitome of something he held precious. "The last great wilderness on earth," the Amazon condensed and contained within it not just a staggering array of flora and fauna, but also a particular idea of untrammeled nature.[56]

The overpowering immensity of Roosevelt's Amazon found expression in superlatives. The River of Doubt emerged as "an absolutely unknown river" in "an absolutely unknown wilderness remote in time as well as space." "Every now and then," Roosevelt asserted, "someone says that the 'last frontier' is now to be found in Canada or Africa, and that it has almost vanished. On a far larger scale this frontier is to be found in Brazil—a country as big as Europe or the U.S.—and decades will pass before it vanishes." [57]

Like a Columbus quick to cite the monetary worth of the New

World's "marvels," Roosevelt had a healthy appreciation for the practical uses of the Amazon's flora and fauna. "This fruit is delicious and would make a valuable addition to our orchards," he wrote of the *cajazeira,* or hog-plum. At the same time, however, and unlike his various predecessors, the former president was deeply taken with the primordial quality of Amazonian nature. "The exceedingly rich bird fauna of South America," he declared, "contains many species which seem to be survivals from a very remote geologic past, whose kinsfolk have perished under the changed condition of recent ages; and in the case of many, like the hoatzin and screamer [both birds], their like is not known elsewhere." [58]

Roosevelt's enthusiasm for a primordial past did not keep him from celebrating the region's immense transformative potential. "Such a rich and fertile land cannot be permitted to remain idle, to lie as a tenantless wilderness, while there are such teeming swarms of human beings in the overcrowded, overpeopled countries of the Old World," he remarked, as if stating a self-evident truth.[59] Expressing an enthusiasm for gold mining apt to make many of today's environmentally sensitive readers shudder, he went on to envision "big manufacturing communities, knit by railroads to one another and to the Atlantic coast." What at the time was a vast forest could become an equally vast industrial park in which "the very rapids and waterfalls which now make the navigation of the river so difficult and dangerous would drive electric trolleys up and down its whole length and far out on either side."

This giganticizing vision once more overshadowed people. Like Bates before him, Roosevelt often saw the Amazon's inhabitants as obstacles to "the spirit of the new Brazil." Unlike Bates, however, he openly expressed an attraction to the primitive.[60] "Nowhere in Africa," he remarked with obvious enthusiasm, "did we come across wilder or more absolutely primitive savages." [61] Lacking blankets or hammocks, the Nambikwara Indians, who did no more than lie down in the sand to sleep, exerted a particular fascination on him. "They are not even in the Stone Age," he observed with wonder and a trace of grudging admiration.

If the Brazilian cowhands' throbbing tom-toms evoked "a savage ancestry near by in point of time and otherwise immeasurably remote," the Nambikwaras' wholly unaccompanied melodies conjured up a space yet further back from civilization. "It was a strange and interesting sight to see these utterly wild, friendly savages, circling in their slow dance, and chanting their immemorial melodies, in the brilliant tropical moonlight,

with the river rushing by in the background, through the lonely heart of the wilderness."

The aura of mystery that the "naked Nhambiquaras" evoked in the ex-president recalls a number of early writers' reactions to native legends of El Dorado.[62] While Roosevelt's focus on his hosts' lack of clothing cannot help but suggest a touch of prurient curiosity, nakedness, to him, was the ultimate link to past generations and the original human pair. Following a long line of writers over the centuries, the former president explicitly compared the Indians to Adam and Eve before the fall.[63] However, if the Nambikwara recalled the denizens of Eden, they were also like unruly children in their attempt to steal the expedition's silverware by naively sitting on the forks. Roosevelt's fascination with the monkey seated atop a woman's head further removed the Nambikwara from the august company of the biblical first pair by blurring the boundaries between the animal and the human. So did his descriptions of particular animals as "merry" or "meditative" and his characterization of the Nambikwara as "at ease and unconscious as so many friendly animals."

The pull that the Nambikwara exerted on Roosevelt lay in the same precariousness that led him to value the hoatzin and the screamer. Strikingly unlike Bates, who a mere half-century earlier had confidently declared that the razed forest would reclaim its past luxuriance, Roosevelt had no illusions about the irreversibility of such destruction. "There is every reason," he declared, "why the good people of South America should waken, as we of North America, very late in the day, are beginning to waken, and as the peoples of northern Europe—not southern Europe—have already partially wakened, to the duty of preserving from impoverishment and extinction the wild life which is an asset of such interest and value in our several lands."[64]

Yet the same author who hailed the value of preservation was engaged in a fact-finding mission that could not help but hasten the eventual disappearance of the wilderness that he so needed and loved. While he himself saw no contradiction in his position, today's readers may find his book a prime example of "imperialist nostalgia" for or regret about something one has helped to destroy.[65]

The competing impulses in Roosevelt and the resulting seepage in his wilderness container are nowhere clearer than in his own anticlimactic treatment of the discovery of the mouth of the River of Doubt. Though he was quick to pronounce the expedition's identification of the river's final outlet a "great feat," what most excited the big game hunter was

the chase, and the chase was over. A source of deep pride, the rebaptism of this nine-hundred-mile-long river as the "Roosevelt" or "Teodoro" nonetheless signaled an end to his great escapade.

Roosevelt's ambivalent reaction to his own success calls to mind Frederick Jackson Turner's celebrated thesis that the frontier transforms the would-be transformer.[66] For Roosevelt, this transformation had a high price. The real challenge to the apparent triumph of progress and civilization lay less in anything that the "true wilderness explorer" said than in what he could not bring himself to admit. The expedition took a terrible toll on an overweight and out-of-shape man who had already battled malaria during his Rough Rider days in Cuba. At one point in the journey, having lost faith in his own endurance, a gravely ill and emotionally exhausted Roosevelt urged his companions to go on without him. The ex-president duly noted this terrible moment, as he did the near death of his son Kermit in a rash attempt to ford perilous rapids. However, he minimized the effects of both by inserting them into an account of various other trials and tribulations that incited false fear. Only a shadow of what must have been a soul-shaking anguish made its way into his travelogue and the buoyant accounts of his voyage that appeared in U.S. newspapers when he finally emerged from the wilds. (Roosevelt was "in excellent spirits," reported the *New York Times* upon the expedition's jubilant arrival in Manaus.)[67]

The stakes were too high for Roosevelt to acknowledge the price of conquest to others, let alone to himself. Not just a personal adventure, *Through the Brazilian Wilderness* is the tale of a United States intent upon asserting its control over both nature and other nations within the Americas.[68] Many of Roosevelt's readers were thoroughly caught up in this "can-do" tale, in which doubt was literally banished, and progress rewrote the landscape abroad and at home. No wonder they were shocked when, five years later, Roosevelt, his health broken by the seemingly victorious journey, died before he could make one more run at the U.S. presidency.[69]

Unlike El Dorado, Roosevelt's hostile wilderness yielded to the march of progress. And yet, like Bates' Second Eden, it still proved elusive. Perched on a log overlooking "an unknown river in the Amazonian forest," bundled in sturdy gauntlets, heavy boots, and a helmet with a veil of mosquito netting, Roosevelt savored "the delightful La Fontaine, the delightful but appalling Villon." The Amazon, however, continued to envelop the self-styled "wilderness explorer" even as he sat immersed in his books.

A Disappearing World

Roosevelt's jungle of a wilderness lives on today in any number of adventure movies, glossy brochures advertising "thrilling, good-for-the-earth, sensibly-priced eco-expeditions," and newspaper accounts of enormous snakes and dread diseases. Over time, however, it has come to coexist with a series of new giants, for example the fragile Rain Forest that replaced the clawing, biting wilds as the predominant image of the Amazon in the latter part of the twentieth century. The Rain Forest had another important predecessor, however: the primeval refuge that emerged with particular force after World War II.

This wondrous but increasingly imperiled world, of which early hints appeared in the writings of Roosevelt and various of his contemporaries, found one of its first and most eloquent expressions in Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes tropiques,* first published in 1955.[70] In this famous meditation upon travel and the postwar world, which includes an extensive account of his fieldwork among five groups of Brazilian natives in 1938–39, the French anthropologist described a doomed quest for the keys to an increasingly remote, elemental past.[71]

Lévi-Strauss began his book (itself a sort of travelogue) by openly rejecting the travel genre of which both Bates' *Naturalist* and Roosevelt's *Through the Brazilian Wilderness* are prime examples.[72] "Adventure," he declared with an almost audible harrumph in the first paragraph, "has no place in the anthropologist's profession; it is merely one of those unavoidable drawbacks which detract from his effective work through the incidental loss of weeks or months." His preoccupation with the previously isolated native groups who found themselves forced into contact with a larger world signaled a more generalized rejection of the faith in a glowing future that Bates and Roosevelt so passionately embraced. The tropics of his title were "sad" precisely because progress had become a problem rather than a panacea, not just for him, but for many of his generation. And yet, despite its striking differences from Bates and Roosevelt, *Tristes tropiques* reveals its own brand of giant-making and its own resemblances to El Dorado.

Lévi-Strauss devoted a good portion of his book to a description of Amazonian Indian cultures, including the Nambikwara who had so fascinated Roosevelt almost exactly a half-century earlier. Once again, these natives were presented as the epitome of something. In this case, they were the living embodiments of "proportionality," or that equilibrium between land and people in which Lévi-Strauss saw a gleam of

redemptive hope for humanity—and, thus, himself. Convinced that true liberty resided not in legal rights but in the access to sufficient space, he proclaimed the Indians to be freer than the great majority of modern Europeans, with all of their proud juridical traditions.

Unlike most of the earlier authors who described the Amazon, Lévi-Strauss did not conceal, but rather called attention to the particular giant-making impulse that lay behind his forays into the interior.[73] He was the first to scoff at his own hope of finding a human society reduced to its simplest expression ("that state which—as Rousseau also says—no longer exists, has perhaps never existed, and probably will never exist, and of which it is nevertheless essential to form a correct notion in order rightly to judge our present state"). Nonetheless, despite his acknowledgment of the probable futility of his endeavor, he persisted in the quest for primordial secrets, a quest that would become increasingly common in the 1950s and 1960s.

This search had a dramatic urgency. The Amazonian Indians, Lévi-Strauss suggested, contained within them a sorely needed antidote to a civilization that he described in terms of its "blight," "corruption," "destruction," "tarnish," "mortification," "contamination," "noxiousness," and simple "dirt." "Our great Western civilization, which has created the marvels we now enjoy, has only succeeded in producing them at the cost of corresponding ills," he said in a lament foreshadowing the neo-Romantic back-to-nature movement of a counterculture that would emerge in the 1960s.[74] As a result of the "prodigious mass of noxious by-products which now contaminate the globe," the first thing the traveler encountered was "our own filth, thrown into the face of mankind."

This sense of impending doom distinguished Lévi-Strauss' Disappearing World from the first explorers' El Dorado, the nineteenth-century Second Eden, and the Rooseveltian Hostile Wilderness. However, it too revealed an enormous transformative potential. The most minute details of indigenous culture acquired a magnified importance as clues with which he hoped to solve a far more universal puzzle. "Nothing is settled; everything can still be altered," the author declared in one of the most pivotal passages in the book. "What was done, but turned out wrong, can be done again. The Golden Age, which blind superstition had placed behind us, is in us. The brotherhood of man acquires a concrete experience, the lessons of which we can assimilate, along with so many others."[75]

Immense in its possibilities, Lévi-Strauss' Amazon subsumed within

it the larger mystery of creation. Despite his seemingly anti-Romantic stance, the landscape that he described was a thoroughly marvelous "Genesis-like" world. Living fruits that seemed to dance on the tree branches brought him and his readers back to the very beginning of the world. "The birds did not flee at our approach," the bedazzled traveler declared with undisguised enthusiasm. "Like live jewels wandering among the dripping creepers and overgrown torrents, they were part of the living reconstitution, before my astonished eyes, of those pictures by the Brueghels in which Paradise is marked by a tender intimacy between plants, beasts and men, and takes us back to the time when there was as yet no division among God's creatures."[76]

Although this paradise remained elusive, the external quality of the obstacles that surrounded it provided a familiar glimmer of hope. Eventually, Lévi-Strauss did encounter a group of never-before-contacted Indians, who appeared quite capable of guiding him back toward Rousseau's "unshakable basis of human society." However, he explained, because the Tupi-Kawahib became known to him only at the last moment, he had no time to undertake a serious study. Not only were the material resources at his disposal severely limited, but he and his companions were physically exhausted. Worst of all, the rainy season, with its threat of malarial fevers, loomed, giving him no choice but to turn back in the face of triumph. "There they were, all ready to teach me their customs and beliefs, and I did not know their language," he ruefully observed. "They were as close to me as a reflection in a mirror; I could touch them, but I could not understand them. I had been given, at one and the same time, my reward and my punishment."[77]

The wealth of ethnographic detail in *Tristes tropiques* makes it impossible to confuse the Bororo with the Caduveo, the Nambikwara with the Tupi-Kawahib. Lévi-Strauss' clear-eyed, generally positive descriptions of individual humans—the chief who tried to bolster his own standing with the members of his tribe by pretending to write, for instance—contrast with the often sweeping generalizations about Indians ("they do not believe in a Supreme Being") that appear in the work of many earlier writers.[78] Nonetheless, at the same time that Lévi-Strauss' study underscores the cultural diversity of Amazonia, his obsession with a common denominator that would allow an ailing civilization to rethink its own past and future undercut his insistence on each group's distinctive traits. Like all giants, his carefully delimited, still-primeval refuge crowded out other features of a larger, at once more complex and amorphous entity.

If, for instance, Lévi-Strauss' overriding concern for a cure to the ills of his own epoch led him to search out the most isolated natives, it also prompted him to ignore other human groups in the Amazon. The non-Indian residents of the region made only a brief and thoroughly unflattering appearance in his book. Unlike the "naturally robust" Indians, the mixed-blood women of the rubber camps had to apply a thick layer of rouge to create the illusion of well-being. Fresh from their baths in filthy streams, these sickly specimens suggested the "staggering contrast between the flimsy appearances of civilization and the monstrous reality which lay just outside the door."

Furthermore, the author's preoccupation with the Rousseauian secret periodically nudged him toward caricature. Itself a reformulation of ideas that go back to the sixteenth century, his celebration of the Indians' direct relationship to their surroundings would reappear in any number of other, less self-conscious representations of Amazonian natives as extensions of the land. Thus, even while *Tristes tropiques* rejected Roosevelt's vision of the Nambikwara as a childlike and uncomplicated people, Lévi-Strauss indulged in his own version of giant-making when he invoked a harmonious and still-virgin world.

The postwar portraits of the Amazon as a primordial island in an increasingly dirty sea of civilization reveal a seepage characteristic of earlier portrayals of the region as an El Dorado, a Hostile Wilderness, and a Second Eden. In the case of *Tristes tropiques,* this seepage is immediately evident in Lévi-Strauss' excuses about his failure to pursue the Tupi-Kawahib. In the end, the Indians were elusive less because the anthropologist lacked the time to ferret out their secrets than because he did not want to discover that they did not possess the key he sought. Convinced of the necessity of retaining "the illusion of something which no longer exists but still could exist, if we were to have any hope of avoiding the overwhelming conclusion that the history of the past twenty thousand years is irrevocable," Lévi-Strauss walked away from the so-near-and-yet-so-far natives.

In turning his back on the solution to Rousseau's mystery, the man of science recalls those much earlier explorers who abruptly halted their march on a golden city whose spires rose before them.[79] By blaming the failure of his quest on such externalities as rain, lack of supplies, and the threat of fevers, Lévi-Strauss held out the possibility of victory for another day. Perhaps some other explorer, perhaps he himself on some more felicitous occasion, would succeed in plumbing the psychic depths of these "charming Indians whom no other white man had ever seen be-

fore and who might never be seen again." Perhaps too, the earth that continued to enchant him with its fabulous abundance would yet answer his prayer and let him in on "the secret of its virginity."

The writer's focus on himself and his own civilization constituted another sort of seepage. Despite his meticulous and often brilliant analysis of indigenous beliefs and customs, Lévi-Strauss' ultimate interest was less the Amazon or Amazonian peoples than it was Western society and its discontents. He regularly turned the magnifying glass back upon himself. When, for instance, he finally encountered the previously uncontacted Indians, he wrote of his emotions, not theirs. Thrilled to relive the experience of the first European explorers in which "a human community which believed itself to be complete and in its final form suddenly learned, as if through the effect of a counter-revelation, that it was not alone, that it was part of a greater whole," he gazed at a people who contemplated their own, unfamiliar image in the mirror of which "a fragment, forgotten by the centuries, was now about to cast, *for me alone,* its first and last reflection." [80]

Approaching the Rain Forest

Although they are only a few of the many giants that have come to represent the Amazon, the examples that appear here confirm the enduring ties between the past and present. The process of selective magnification and ensuing containment in which these writers engaged had different motives and took different forms at different historical moments. Nonetheless, the legacy of El Dorado remains clear in an ongoing string of portrayals of Amazonia. A peculiarly postwar heir to the sixteenth-century golden city, Lévi-Strauss' Disappearing World set the stage for that splendidly rich and yet elusive Rain Forest that would emerge in the early 1970s.