

# The Veiled Goddess



Luis Valera

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The legend of Atlantis is one of the main root texts of secondary world fantasy in Western literatures. Plato's subcreation in the Tolkienian sense used the historiographical discourse — recently invented by Herodotus— for fictional purposes. Plato feigned to tell a true history using the particular rhetoric devices of the new historical writing to convince readers (and listeners) of the veracity of the narrated events, as well as of the geographical location and setting of the Atlantean island-empire. His fiction masquerading as non-fiction did not deceive the Ancients, who were knowledgeable enough about the workings of literature to tell apart fiction from historical truth. In the modern age, however, it deceived less literarily-endowed minds, when historiography progressively turned positivist and “scientific”, instead of remaining a particular genre of literary narrative focusing on the real past (or at least allegedly). For instance, American Ignatius L. Donnelly (in)famously believed that Atlantis had been a real place, and mistook Plato's legend of Atlantis from *Timaeus* and *Critias* for serious testimonies of oral history. His misled pseudo-historical method has been followed by all too many in this contemporary age, where all kinds of crackpots always find at least a few avid listeners. However, his influence on

cultural history was not always misleading. The success of his book *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* (1882) brought about a huge number of purely literary rewritings of Plato's legend, such as C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne's *The Lost Continent* (1899), which is perhaps one of the main forerunners of the high fantasy genre.

Those rewritings usually faithfully followed Plato's outline of events, from the rise to the flooding of evil Atlantis. Other were more original, especially in those countries where Atlantomania never took deep roots. In Spain, for instance, Jacint Verdaguer's Catalan poem *L'Atlàntida* (1877) is really a version of some of Hercules' labors uneasily mixing Classical and Biblical mythology. No less unorthodox is a story set in that mythic isle by Luis Valera<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luis Valera is not as famous as his father, Juan Valera (1825-1905), one of the leading 19th century novelists in Spain. Luis is now being reappraised thanks to his book on the Boxer uprising in China, of which he was an eyewitness, and to his fantasy. He was, indeed, one of the first Spanish writers of high fantasy or depicting secondary worlds, especially known for his long novella “Djusandir y Ganitriya” (Djusandir and Ganitriya), collected in the volume *Visto y soñado* (*Seen and Dreamed*, 1903). It is set in an imaginary Aryan empire in Ancient Asia called Puruna.



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(1870-1927) from his volume of fantasy-like tales and novellas *Del antaño quimérico* (1905), a notoriously difficult title to translate that could be rendered as *From the Fanciful Days of Long Ago*. The Spanish title of his Atlantean story read in the Spanish original “La diosa velada” and, in the English translation that follows, “The Veiled Goddess”.<sup>2</sup>

Valera’s version of the Atlantis legend eschews any idea of hubris and punishment. Atlantis is in the middle of the Atlantic, the Sea of Darkness of the ancients, but it is not a weird place of perversion. It does not have any expansionist or imperial ambitions, either. On the contrary, Valera’s Atlantis is rather suggestive of the Baconian one, although the advancement of arts, morals and the sciences of the mind is given precedence over technological prowess. Both versions seem utopian compared to other lands, but in Valera’s story there is no significant difference between Atlantis and ancient Greece as it is described in its first chapter. Both regions appear as being abodes of art, love, morals and, generally a good place to live according to classical ideals. At least, it was a good life for the main character of the narrative, the rich and handsome Sophanes, who feels nevertheless the urge to understand the enigma of the universe. In order to know the essence of things, he visits many regions of the world to find an answer, navigating even waters unknown, where he discovers Atlantis. He

finally finds an answer there thanks to his courage to unveil the goddess who is the source of all truth and beauty, according to Atlanteans. That answer is a mystical vision that seems, nevertheless, to occur in a physical, concrete way. It is a life-changing event that prepares Sophanes for the final enjoyment in the afterlife of an eternal bliss of beauty and knowledge. This is a paradise that would have pleased many ancient Greek philosophers, including Plato. Although he does not adhere perfectly to the letter of the Atlantis legend, Valera’s “The Veiled Goddess” is nonetheless faithful to Platonic ideals regarding intellectual happiness in an immaterial dimension. In the mystical and philosophical odyssey of Sophanes, Atlantis is at the same time a real isle, albeit in the realm of fiction, and also the allegorical abode of the transcendent Goddess, the only place where she can be reached and “unveiled.” Valera turns the Atlantis legend upside down, going from a hubristic empire finally abandoned by the gods to an idealised land where a supreme state of being on Earth can be attained.

Although Sophanes’ adventures include travels in faraway lands, his quest is spiritual in nature; the fantasy in “The Veiled Goddess” is interior rather than exterior. As such, it might not satisfy those seeking action and melodrama in modern Atlantean fiction, although Valera’s story is properly paced to secure readers’ interest in Sophanes’ spiritual growth through his travels. Descriptions are rich and varied, but not obtrusive. They contribute instead to the poetic atmosphere of the story, which culminates in the last episode of the tale describing the final revelation of the goddess using simple but sublime language. Valera’s style is, indeed,

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<sup>2</sup> The Spanish text used for this translation is the following: Luis Valera, “La diosa velada,” *Del antaño quimérico*, edited by Mariano Martín Rodríguez, Valencia, Gaspar & Rimbau, 2021, pp. 59-69. We thank Jonathan Deroo for his revising both the introductory note and the translation.



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masterful, at least in the framework of the contemporary Aesthetic Movement in Europe. Further literary features could also be mentioned to underpin the status of “The Veiled Goddess” as a significant piece of modern speculative fiction on Atlantis in Europe or, at least, in Spain. However, suffice it to say Valera introduces a radically original variation in the Platonic legend. This proves at least that he felt original enough to withstand the pressure of the popularity of its theme and propose a utopian Atlantis with few parallels in literature.

His liberty in re-writing Plato’s fiction could only be compared with Paul Valéry’s “L’île de Xiphos,” written in 1896 and only posthumously published in 1950. Valera’s story is, however, a finished work, whereas Valéry’s sketch remains a promising torso. Both works probably deserve to be better known and appreciated by historians and fans of fantasy. Valéry’s Atlantean text has already been translated into English with the title of *The Island of Xiphos*. Now it is Valera’s turn.

Luis Valera

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### I

Sophanes of Miletus was the city's richest merchant. In town, he owned a spacious house replete with paintings, statues and sundry exquisite things, and countless slaves. Not far from Miletus, in the countryside, Sophanes had a villa, for recreational purposes; from its veranda, one could see the blue sea. An orchard of many delights encircled the villa, awash with flowers in spring. Fruits it gave aplenty in autumn: crispy walnuts, treacly figs and scented apples. One score or more of large ships would frequently enter Miletus' harbour, returning from the edges of the known world brimming with freight, all of them belonging to Sophanes the Rich. He had many close friends, artistic and wise alike. They indulged in his company and his conversation, for Sophanes, besides being rich, was witty and had studied the liberal arts in his youth, and continued to study and was devoted to them with all the keenness of his age. He caught the eyes of women too; not only was Sophanes rich and sensible, his was a virile beauty and was known for his largesse. And yet, he kept himself aloof from the ladies and matrons of Miletus. Ciprina's son had him bound to the arms of fair Tione, a hetaira from Jonia who, enthralled by Sophanes' charms, lived with him and hosted most gracefully his feasts and banquets.

Despite having so many troves and good fortunes, Sophanes was unhappy. His spirit was restless. He craved knowing more than he already knew, elucidating the mystery of things and discovering the supreme truth and beauty. To Sophanes's mind, nowhere in the philosophers' disquisitions could he

find the key to the universal enigma. As for his own works of art or those of his friends the painters and sculptors, as much as Sophanes rejoiced in creating or contemplating them, he also could not help but thinking to himself of the manifold faults he found in them; they were indeed far from the archetype of beauty he could descry, if only vaguely, in his wildest fantasies. Not even in Tione's arms could Sophanes find contentment. In the act of loving Tione, Sophanes envisioned another woman, a Venus of supreme fairness – an ideal creature whom he longed for inanely.

Sophanes thought the orb broad and large; what could not be found in Miletus he would perhaps find in faraway lands. Why should not there be in the world a people superior to the Hellenes, a people who have fathomed the secret of things and comprehended clearly the sovereign beauty, achieving it to perfection? Spurred by such higher thoughts, Sophanes decided to take upon himself the long journey he had so long yearned for. He bade his friends and the sorrowful Tione farewell and one day set sail aboard the largest of his ships from Miletus' harbour.

### II

Five years did Sophanes spend traversing the world, be it on foot, by horse or boat.

He visited Asia, due east, until he reached the regions inhabited by the Gangaridai and the Seres. He then proceeded to the frozen plains of Scythia and the regions where the strange Arimaspi and the cultivated Hyperboreans dwell. He returned to



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Europe and travelled through Germania, the Gauls, the Etruscan land and Magna Graecia.

Thence he went on to Egypt, to the sizzling Nubia and the wild lands washed by the Eritrean Sea. He then crossed on foot Libya towards the west. He passed by Cyrene, left Mauritania behind and boarded a ship to reach Hesperia.

Forever following the sun's course, Sophanes came at last to the land of the Cinesians, not far from the promontory of Finisterre, shore of the Sea of Darkness, end of the known world.

Many bizarre and beautiful a thing had Sophanes seen in his pilgrimage. In the end, after having conversed with the wisest men from all nations upon the Earth, he had not acquired any knowledge that was in essence new.

As for the ideal beauty, its likeness was nowhere to be found, yet Sophanes, despite his gloomy disposition, did not waver in his endeavour.

"There is a beyond," he said to himself and, by way of gifts, he convinced the oarsmen of his boat to take him towards the unknown through the vast and dark expanse of the ocean.

For fifty days did Sophanes sail.

Only sea and sky were in sight. Victuals and fresh water were becoming scarce, and the rowers, turned into mutineers, were intent on killing Sophanes and returning to the coasts of Cinesia. Then a storm pushed the boat west until it ran aground on the beach of an unknown territory.

He found himself on a large and bountiful island. The climate was delectable and there lived a breed of men and women of great beauty and much ingenuity. They dwelled in magnificent cities, ripe with all sorts of handicrafts that rendered life easy and pleasant. The

island was called Atlantis and Atlantis was its capital also.

The Atlanteans aided Sophanes and were utterly solicitous with him. Sophanes was indeed almost content. He studied the language of the land, which he spoke when he conversed with the knowledgeable Atlanteans. A thousand unheard-of things he learned shortly about the course of the stars, the laws governing the phenomena of the world and the obscure forces of nature, which the Atlanteans put to use for beautiful and practical purposes.

All of this amazed Sophanes. He also revelled immensely in his contemplation of the marvellous works of art that adorned the temples and palaces of the island.

Still Sophanes was not content. With every new thing he learnt, so the mystery of creation became larger to him. The Atlanteans admitted there could be something more beautiful than what they could attain in their statues and paintings, albeit it was beyond their reach, and admitted their ignorance regarding the origin, purpose and essence of things.

Of philosophy, they knew little more than Sophanes.

"What you are asking after," the wise men replied to the Greek almost every time, "only the Veiled Goddess knows, the one of ineffable name, source of all truth and beauty, whom we worship in the temple in our capital. No man is allowed to know it and no man alive ever will, and yet the worship to the goddess demands that we seek after this knowledge and comprehend it."

And Sophanes, struck by awe, decided to meet the unnamed goddess.

He visited her temple, which was indeed magnificent. Upon the altar was something resembling the bulk of a



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statue, with a thousand overlaying veils draped, which gave off a diffuse and aglow radiance.

The temple's majesty, the solemn appearance of the priests, the mystery by the many veils concealed and the inexplicable brilliance emanating from them, they all impressed Sophanes mightily, who kneeled before the goddess and worshipped reverently for hours on end.

### III

Many were the days Sophanes returned to the Veiled Goddess' temple. It grew within him, from mere whim to strong desire, the will to lift the veils and partake of the view of the goddess, source of truth and beauty.

"Thus," thought Sophanes "shall I know everything, even if my sacrilegious daring will cost me my life."

Sophanes made up his mind at last. He entered as a thief the empty and quiet temple one evening. Nobody stalled him. Nobody guarded the goddess.

He gathered up courage and advanced until the base of the altar. With a tremulous hand, he lifted the lower crease of one of the concealing veils.

However, lo and behold, spite and sorrow, there was no figure upon the altar!

From the altar, a luminous cloud went up spiralling mysteriously. Sophanes kneeled down consumed by sobs.

"Oh, you deity, who keep yourself out of my sight," the Greek exclaimed vehemently, "forgive my daring! Show yourself; quench my appetite for wisdom and knowing you. In return, I proffer what little I own and am worth. I renounce my riches, Tione's love and even

life, if it is forbidden for a man alive to contemplate you."

Then Sophanes heard a soft and harmonious voice:

"Renounce not anything that is beautiful and good. Beyond death you will get to know me, if only ahead you have created."

Pondering upon the divine message, Sophanes stood for long hours, spellbound and still, by the altar.

When he left the temple, he did so transfigured; his gait was nobler, his gaze more serene.

He kept to himself what had occurred. He remained in Atlantis yet for some months invested in the study of sciences and arts. He then made a successful journey on his boat back to Miletus, where his friends and Tione, beautiful and faithful, welcomed him crying out of happiness.

Sophanes lived then many a happy year, forever in his homeland.

He took good heed of the ineffable goddess' oracle: he increased his riches by means of prudent agency and used his wealth for the greater good and the noble enjoyment of all. He cultivated and promoted the arts and spread among the Milesians what he had learnt in Atlantis.

His creations, being human, were all imperfect, but Sophanes smiled grateful staring at them, because he had committed his entire will and his wish for good and beauty, but also because the goddess, in turn and as reward, gave them a touch of the sublime truth and beauty.

Sophanes awaited patiently the ultimate accolade for his endeavours.

He received it, already elderly, at the end of one shiny day, by the veranda of his villa, contemplating the blue sea.

He closed his eyes and all became darkness. As he exhaled his soul, the cusp



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of his mind was overwhelmed with intense, bright light. The goddess revealed herself to him in all the splendour of her beauty.

Then, Sophanes' spirit was fulfilled, forever content within the beautiful and omniscient deity's bosom.

