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### Heidegger and the Aztecs: The poetics of knowing in pre-Hispanic Nahuatl poetry

Willard Gingerich

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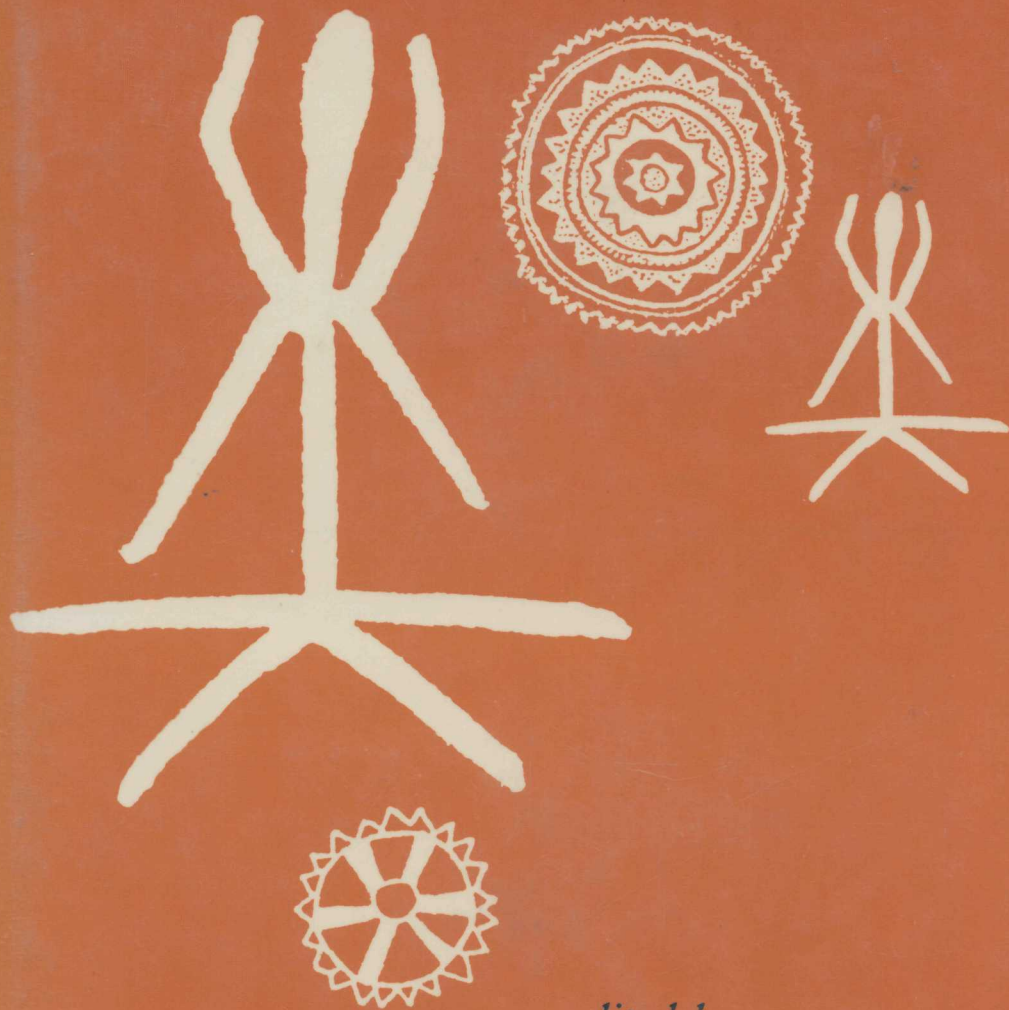


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# RECOVERING THE WORD

ESSAYS ON NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE



*edited by*  
**BRIAN SWANN**  
*and*  
**ARNOLD KRUPAT**

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# Heidegger and the Aztecs: The Poetics of Knowing In Pre-Hispanic Nahuatl Poetry

WILLARD GINGERICH

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For the poet the anguishing question—and it is indeed the subject of the poem—is: how can one not only speak *of* Being, but say Being itself. Poetry is the experience of this question. (De Man 1980:256)

There is much in being that man cannot master. There is but little that comes to be known. What is known remains inexact, what is mastered insecure. What is, is never of our making or even merely the product of our minds, as it might too easily seem. (Martin Heidegger)

O You by Whom we Live and Move, nothing we say here is real. What we say on this earth is like a dream;  
We only mutter like one waking from sleep.  
Here, none of us  
says anything real. (Bierhorst 1985:170)

Look; I have the fire in my hands. I understand and work with it perfectly, but cannot speak of it without creating it. (García Lorca 1966:403)

It was Father A. M. Garibay, whose indefatigable publications did so much to make Mexico and all the Spanish-speaking world aware of the extensive body of literature contained within sixteenth-century Nahuatl language texts, who first pointed out the epistemological faith expressed in that literature: a conviction that poetry is

one of the most, if not the only, reliable modes of human knowledge about reality.<sup>1</sup> It remained, however, for Garibay's student, Dr. Miguel León-Portilla, clearly to set forth the claims for poetry as the primal language of meaning and human knowledge in the fifteenth century, pre-Hispanic Nahua tradition of thought and expression. The Nahua poets, León-Portilla asserts, universally assumed that "the only truths on earth"—*azo tle nelli in tlalticpac*—are accomplished through the language of poetry, whose Nahuatl name was the metonymic diphase, *in xochitl in cuicatl* or "the flower, the song." In the conclusion to his book *Aztec Thought and Culture (La filosofía náhuatl estudiada en sus fuentes*, first published in 1956) he first posited for the Nahuas something he called "an aesthetic vision of the world" founded on the apparent Nahua conviction that only beauty was ultimately real:

To know the truth was for the Nahua wise men [*tlamatinime*] to express with flowers and songs the hidden meaning of things, as their own sanctified hearts permitted them to intuit.<sup>2</sup> The philosophy of metaphors did not pretend to explain the mystery completely, but it did lead men to feel that beauty was perhaps the only reality (1963:322).

He calls further attention to this respect for intuition in Nahua thought, a respect essential to the modes of knowing and expressing which constitute poetic perception.

There appeared finally and consciously what became the characteristic response of the *tlamatinime* to the problem of metaphysical knowledge: it has to do with a sort of salvational intuition. There is only one means to stutter from day to day "the truth" in this world—the road of poetic inspiration, "flower and song." On a foundation of metaphors, conceived in the deepest reaches of his being, or perhaps "proceeding from the interior of the heavens," with flowers and songs, man is able to sketch out in some fashion the truth (1963:319).

Then in a later work, *Los antiguos mexicanos através de sus crónicas y cantares*, León-Portilla begins to speak of an epistemology inherent in the Nahua poetry, still emphasizing the role of imaginative intuition, while tempering somewhat its claim for access to "truth":

The *tlamatinime* did not believe it was possible to achieve an understanding rationally clear and precise, beyond all objection. As one of their poems suggests, "it may be that no one finally



speaks truth on the earth." Nevertheless, they implicitly approached the formulation of something which, anachronistically, we could call "a sort of theory of knowledge." Making use of a metaphor, one of the many in the rich Nahuatl tongue, they affirmed on countless occasions that perhaps the only possible way to speak words of truth on earth was the way of poetry and art, which are "flower and song." . . . Poetry, and art in general, are for the *tlamatinime* a veiled and occult expression which nevertheless is able, with the wings of the symbol and the metaphor, to raise man in a stuttering power, projecting him beyond himself, which in a mysterious way brings him perhaps near to his own roots of being. They seem to affirm that genuine poetry implies a unique mode of knowledge, fruit of an authentic inner experience or, if you prefer, product of an intuition (1961:128).

These theories of León-Portilla concerning the self-conscious respect of the late fifteenth-century Nahuas for poetic, metaphoric, intuitional techniques of thought and knowledge remain substantially unexplored and unevaluated to date. With the exception of a brief study by Domingo Miliani, "Notas para una poética entre los nahuas," which does little more than systematize the observations of León-Portilla; a short book by Rafael Osuña Ruiz, *Introducción a la lírica prehispánica*, which repeats Miliani; and a brief article by Rafael González, "Symbol and Metaphor in Nahuatl Poetry," which does not address León-Portilla's claims directly but provides a useful statement about the relation between linguistic metaphor and truth in Nahua tradition, there has been no evaluation or development of this claim for Nahua poetics. The question then remains: How valid are these observations of León-Portilla as an approach to the poetry and/or philosophy of Nahua oral tradition? What is their basis in the texts of the poems themselves? And if they do appear to have substance, in what terms are we, *tlamatinime* far removed from fifteenth-century Anahuac, Central Mexico, to understand these Nahua notions of authentic inner experience, intuition, the divinization of things, and finally, truth, poetry, and knowledge themselves?

León-Portilla founds his observations on several poetic texts from the *Cantares mexicanos* (Mexican Cantos) manuscript. The first fragment is taken from a lengthy poem of folios 12 and 13. It reads (Bierhorst 1985:170):

Ye antle nel o tic ytohua nican ypalnemohua  
 can iuhqui temictli can toncochitlehua in tiquittoa tl[alticpac].  
 Ayac nellin tiquilhuilya nican.

O You by Whom we live and move, nothing we say here  
 is real. What we say on this earth is like a dream;  
 We only mutter like one waking from sleep.  
 Here, none of us says anything real.<sup>3</sup>

His primary evidence rests in a sequence of texts from the region of Huexotzinco, particularly a section in folios 9–12 of the manuscript entitled “*xochicuicatl*,” or “Songs of Spring.” It has been suggested, mostly based on internal evidence, that these folios are the record of a sort of “poets’ conference” held about 1490 at the court of Tecayehuatzin, ruler of Huexotzinco. At least nine passages of the “Songs of Spring” seem attributed to him, and several appear to cast him in the role of host to numerous other singers. León-Portilla believes this convocation was called for the specific purpose of clarifying these questions of poetry and reality. So what clarification is offered?

The entire text of 160 undivided lines in manuscript (which Garibay breaks into twenty-four separate, short poems, León-Portilla into eleven distinct statements by diverse poets, and Bierhorst renders as a single song) is too long to quote in its entirety, but the key passages for our consideration are the following. For those unfamiliar with this poetry, I would call attention to the pervasive imagery of flowers and singing.

*11. 13–18*

The jade, the plumes of quetzal  
 rain down; they are your words  
 and so also spoke Ayocuan  
 and Cuetzpaltzin, who knew in truth  
 the God by Whom we live and move.  
 To do likewise the grand lord  
 comes now, with handfuls of perfumes and plumes  
 to delight the One God.  
 How else could he accept, the One by Whom we live and move?  
 How else could there be any true thing on the earth?

11. 28-31

From within the heavens come  
 these measured songs, these measured flowers.  
 They ravage our bitterness, ravage our melancholy  
 especially those of Tecayehuatzin, Chichimec Lord:  
 with those take your pleasure!

11. 42-47

Reach, O Heart, for flowers of the shield,  
 the flowers of the God by Whom we live.  
 What should the heart do?  
 Have we come, have we sprouted for nothing  
 on this earth? I'll go off  
 abolished like a flower.  
 Will my fame be nothing one day  
 my name without meaning in the earth?  
 At least flowers! At least songs!  
 What should the heart do?  
 Have we come, have we sprouted for nothing  
 on this earth?

11. 51-55

No one here can extinguish the flower and the song,  
 spread abroad in the house of Him by Whom we live.  
 This earth is the place of brevity;  
 Is Quenonamican, Place of Mystery, the same?  
 Perhaps there we dance and grow in friendship?  
 No, only here do we come to know  
 one another's faces.

11. 60-64

Where do you exist, My God  
 by Whom I live and move?  
 Continually I search you out;  
 for you, I am the suffering singer  
 wishing only to give you joy.  
 Here, in the House of Spring, the House  
 of the Painted Word, it rains  
 white flowers, white quetzal flowers;  
 I wish only to bring you joy.

1. 68

In flowers is the word  
 of the One God held secure

## 11. 69-70

So, your House is everywhere,  
 God by Whom we live; there  
 on the mats woven and surrounded  
 with flowers, where the princes  
 call upon you.

## 11. 82-86

I was in despair, I, Cuauhtencoz,  
 and decorated my flowering drum in pain;  
 Is man true? Is anything true  
 in our songs? Will anything remain standing?  
 What will come out in the end?  
 Where do we live? Where are we?  
 O my friend, we are miserable creatures.

## 11. 134-137

Who am I? I live on the wing,  
 I compose things, I sing flowers,  
 butterflies of song.  
 Let them come out, let my heart be known.  
 I come down out of the sky,  
 a flamingo of spring, I touch the earth.  
 I spread out my wings beside the flowering drums;  
 My song rises, goes out over the earth.

## 11. 156-159

O friends, please listen  
 to the word of a dream:  
 Every spring the golden corn  
 brings us again to life,  
 the red-plumed ears refresh;  
 we wear a jeweled chain  
 in knowing the hearts of friends  
 continue true.

We might say, that's all very nice, but where are the statements about truth and reality and knowledge and poetry and all that? A few lines are, of course, obvious reflections on these matters, but there is precious little we could feel comfortable calling a "statement" in this continual panorama of birds, flowers, drums, singing, and lamenting. Are there perhaps other manuscripts where the

poetics of reality are addressed more directly? There are a few other relevant passages in the Cantares manuscript beyond the Huexotzinco cycle. On folio 24r, among the *icnocuicatl* or "songs of anguish" of the Triple Alliance cities, we read:

Is it true that we have come here  
to live?  
.....  
We have come to the earth  
only to make songs, to learn  
one another's faces, there by the drums.

On folio 34r, from Chalco, we find an oft-repeated inquiry about the origin of poetry:

Priests, I ask you:  
from where do the intoxicating flowers  
the intoxicating songs fall?  
They fall from within the heavens,  
from his house; the One God,  
He by Whom we live, sends them down.<sup>4</sup>

The fullest treatment of the origin of poetry, however, comes in a long passage supposedly of Otomí origin, near the beginning of the manuscript. The anonymous poet interrupts a gathering of birds to ask where he can go to find the fragrant flowers of song. The birds, who are said to be like nobles and princes, conduct him "within the mountains," to "Tonacatlalpan, xochitlalpan" or "The Land of Our Sustenance, the Land of Flowers," a place where the "the dew is not dried by radiant sun":

There I saw at last the flowers  
varied and precious, flowers  
of delightful scents, wrapped in dew  
under the fog of a brilliant rainbow.  
There I was told, "cut whatever you want  
poet, as you desire, and carry them  
to our friends, the princes, those who  
provide the pleasure of the Lord of the World."

Numerous lines in the same manuscript insist, however, that poetry comes equally from within the poet himself. From folio 33:

From within you the flowers of song  
 emerge; you scatter them  
 and cast them out over us.  
 You are the singer!

Some of the most intriguing lines referring to truth and poetry occur in the one other major Nahuatl lyrical manuscript, entitled *Romances of the Lords of New Spain*; especially among the texts attributed to the fifteenth-century poet-king Nezahualcoyotl of Tetzaco. From folio 18 of that manuscript:

Only our flowers leave us contented  
 only with our songs is our melancholy  
 dissipated, O princes. Before them  
 your ennui flees away.  
 They are the work of Him by Whom we live,  
 the creation of Him Who invents Himself.

Or folios 19 and 20—and this appears to be a single, complete poem, addressed to supreme deity:

Is there any truth in you?  
 You whose speech is law,  
 O Lord by Whom we live.  
 Is this true?  
 Is this not true?  
 Whatever way it is decreed  
 Would that our hearts  
 were not left in desolation.

Whatever is true  
 He says is no longer true.  
 The Lord by Whom we live  
 is nothing but capricious.  
 If only our hearts  
 were not left in desolation.

In addition to the Nezahualcoyotl passages, the *Romances* manuscript offers these comments:

*f. 41*

It is a true thing, our song;  
 it is a true thing, our flowers,  
 the well-measured song.

*f. 27*

When we will have gone  
 into His house, our words  
 will live on in the earth.

*f. 28*

Flowers are not carried  
 there to His house;  
 songs are not carried  
 but they live on here  
 in the earth.

Again, a number of passages suggest that the inspiring, creative divinity occurs within man the poet.

*f. 34*

Within you he lives, he paints  
 he creates all things,  
 The Lord by Whom we live.

Others assert that he lives beyond human reality as a sort of Coleridgean super-poet who creates and maintains the world, with all its warriors and poets, only as a figment of his primary imagination:

*f. 35*

Through flowers you paint all things,  
 O Lord by Whom we live;  
 through song you trace and shade  
 all that will on earth come to be.  
 Even the Orders of Jaguar and Eagle Knights  
 will someday dissolve.  
 Only in your painted book  
 do we live here on the earth.

Those are the highlights of the texts which provide the foundation for the poetic and aesthetic doctrines León-Portilla claims to find. Certainly we find here ample evidence of a questing, questioning vision of human reality and human expression, and a solid tradition of literary modes, symbols, and poetic stance; but a "theory of knowledge"? It might appear to be an exercise of considerable interpretation to find something that most of us could feel comfortable calling an epistemology in these passages, though an

aesthetic vision of the world is clearly implied, especially in that last passage.

Perhaps, we may suggest, there are native commentators who explicate in prose the nature of poetry and reality? The answer is no, there are no Aristotles or Horaces anywhere in indigenous Mesoamerican traditions. The best we might find are a few scant passages comparing the true and the inauthentic artist. However, in spite of this small body of direct evidence, every reader who becomes at all exposed to the Nahuatl language and acquainted with even small sections of the Florentine or Madrid manuscripts will come to feel that Dr. León-Portilla's statements about the primacy of art and the foundation of truth in poetry are somehow unerringly right. But if the evidence put forward is as scant as I have demonstrated, then where are we to look for the origins of this general conviction? I would propose that León-Portilla's claims for the Nahuatl poetic are, in fact, substantially correct and do inform the poetry, but their real evidence is to be found, beyond the statements of the poetry, in the modes and style of the literary idiom itself, in the *tecpillatolli* or "speech of noblemen," a language whose "poetic" qualities have been the bane of translators since 1520.

All natural languages, Heidegger has said, echoing Hölderlin, Shelley, and Emerson, are decayed poetry. Everyday speech he called "a forgotten and therefore used-up poem" (1971:208).<sup>5</sup> Ernest Fenollosa or Ezra Pound, in that brilliant but misguided little essay on "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry"—a treatise, by the way, that curiously prefigures a number of Heidegger's notions on language and poetry—writes that "a late stage of the decay [from the original metaphoric language of the ancients to modern speech] is arrested and embalmed in the dictionary" (Fenollosa 1936:24). Of the few languages with which I am acquainted, none more obviously justifies this conception of language as a vastly evolving but degenerated poem than does the elaborate, stylized idiom of the Nahuatl *tecpillatolli*. Few languages have evoked so insistently their poetic, metaphorical foundations as does this Nahuatl of the sixteenth-century texts. Mastery of this highly baroque style was the mark of civilized men throughout pre-Columbian Mexico. So highly metaphoric and associative is this language that in 1966 a strange little grammar was published with the title



*Los mil elementos del mexicano clásico* (The 1000 Elements of Classical Mexican). It was based on the premise that the entire linguistic system of Nahuatl could be reduced to some 1,000 primitive roots and inflections from which the language's entire complexity could then be generated. Since earliest times grammarians have spent much effort attempting to explain these imagistic and tropological phenomena of Nahuatl *tecpillatolli*. In 1547 Andrés de Olmos took the entire eighth chapter in Part III of his *Arte para aprender la lengua mexicana* to record what he called "Manners of Speech Which the Old Ones Used in Their Ancient Discourses" (1885:114-125). Fr. Juan Mijangos added a translation of 195 "Elegant and Metaphoric phrases and modes of speech of the ancient Mexicans" to his 1621 book of sermons ([1623] 1966). Most valuable of all, however, are Chapters 41-43 at the end of Book VI in Sahagún's Florentine Codex, entitled respectively "Proverbs," "Riddles," and "Metaphors" (Anderson and Dibble, VI, 219-260; Sullivan 1963: 93-177). Under the latter heading we find ninety-two different image clusters with elaborate explanation. Almost without exception these are cast in some form of that binary style so characteristic of Nahuatl expression at all levels, a process dubbed the *difrasismo* or "diphase" by Fr. Garibay. He defined it as "a procedure which consists of expressing a single idea by means of two words which complement one another somehow in meaning, either as synonyms or by association. . . . Almost all of these phrases are metaphoric and their application must be understood, since to take them literally would often be to twist the sense, or find it ill-fitting to the case" (1961:115). The following are a few examples, with literal translation, from the Sahagún manuscript:

pochtli, ayauitl: tenyotl, mauizyotl  
Smoke and mist, fame and glory

teoatl, tlachinolli  
divine liquid, fire

cuitlapilli, atlapalli  
the tail, the wing

tzopelic, ahuiyac  
sweet and fragrant

toptli, petlacalli  
a basket, a coffer

in popocatiuh, in chichinauhtiu  
He is smoking, he is sizzling

pollocotli, zacaqualli  
chaff and straw

And, of course, there is *xochitl*, *cuicatl*, "flower and song," which we have seen repeated endlessly in the poetry fragments above. The expression "smoke and mist," Sahagún's explanation tells us, "was said about a king not long dead whose smoke and mist, meaning his fame and glory, had not yet vanished; or, about someone who had gone far away and whose fame and glory had not faded," an image of added poignancy in an oral tradition (Sullivan 1963:145). "Divine liquid, fire" "was said when a great war or a great pestilence occurred. They said: Divine liquid and fire have overcome us, have swept over us. This means pestilence or war itself." The "divine liquid," of course, is blood, that endlessly symbolic commodity of Aztec theology and politics. "Tail and wing," we are told, "means the common people. For this reason the subjects are called tails and wings, and the King, lord of the tails and wings" (Sullivan 1963: 147). Another passage elsewhere in the Florentine Codex notes that the full statement of this image is "tail and wing of the sun," thereby filling out the idea of a general populace whose transcendent mission is to feed and support the cosmos itself. And we could go on and on for all the formulaic diphrases so essential to this literary language, each one generated as either metaphor, metonym, or synecdoche. But the diphrase is only the most basic form of the stylistic dualism which permeates all levels of Nahuatl expression, a function, it has been suggested, of the essential dualism and balance figured in Nahuatl cosmology. Garibay said it almost seems "as if the Nahuatl language could not conceive of things except in binary form" (1971:117). It has more recently been pointed out, however, that the implications of Nahuatl stylistics are considerably more complex than this:

It is becoming clear that the poetic features of Nahuatl style are even more complex than Garibay believed, including not only couplet parallelism as a general feature and Garibay's binominal

*difrasismo* as an embellishment, but also a polynominal repetition with both semantic and poetic force (Edmonson 1974:12).

The binominal style of the diphrase often blossoms out into quartets, quadruplets, and necklaces of multiple images, all hovering luminously about the neck of a concept or thing. Close to the diphrase we find a repetition like

Uel chalchiuhtic, uel teuxiuhtic,  
uel acatic, uel ololihqui

like fine jade, like fine turquoise  
like fine green reeds, like a fine, round sphere

The commentator notes that this was "said of a royal orator who counselled the people very well. They said: 'He spoke magnificently—like jades, like turquoises—and his words sounded like precious stones, long as reeds and very round'" (Sullivan 1963:154). More elaborately we find

atitlanonotzalli, atitlazcaltli,  
atitlauapaoalli, atimuzcalia,  
atitlachia.

You are undisciplined, you are coarse and uncouth,  
you are unseemly, you are senseless.

The commentator tells us that this was "said of the person who had no upbringing and no sense. He was stupid and understood nothing. They said to him, 'Assuredly your mother and father did not instruct you and teach you how to live'" (Sullivan 1963:167).

Almost any passage from any longer manuscript would serve to illustrate the totality of these stylistic qualities. The following is excerpted from one of the "Discourses of Admonition" in Book VI of the Florentine Codex and will, I hope, give a clearer holistic impression of the textual realities I am trying to identify in the *tepillatolli* speech.

Vncan mjtoa in tlatolli: in qujtoaia tlatoanj, in jquac omotlatocatlali ynic qujtlatlauhtiaia Tezcatlipuca: in jpampa in oqujtlatocatlalli, ioan injc qujtlanjliaia in jtepaleviliz ioan in jtetlanextiliz injc vel qujchioaz in jtequjuh: cenca miec in jnecnomachiliztlatol

Tlacatle totecoe, tloquee, naoaquee iooalle ehecatle: otlacauhquj in moiollo, aço tinechmotlanevilia in njmaceoalli in



takest me from the excrement, from the filth, that thou placest me on the reed mat, on the reed seat?

"Who am I? Who do I think I am that thou movest me among, thou bringest me among, thou countest me with thy acquaintances, thy friends, thy chosen ones, those who have desert, those who have merit? Just so were they by nature; so were they born to rule; thou hast opened their eyes, thou hast opened their ears. And thou hast taken possession of them, thou hast inspired them. Just so were they created, so were they sent here. They were born at a time, they were bathed at a time, their day signs were such that they would become lords, would become rulers. It is said that they will become thy backrests, thy flutes. Thou wilt have them replace thee, thou wilt have them substitute for thee, thou wilt hide thyself in them; from within them thou wilt speak; they will pronounce for thee—those who will help, those who will place on the left, who will place in obsidian sandals, and who will pronounce for thy progenitor, the mother of the gods, the father of the gods, Ueueoteotl, who is set in the center of the hearth, in the turquoise enclosure, Xiuhtecutli, who batheth the people, washeth the people, and who determineth, who concedeth the destruction, the exaltation of the vassals, of the common folk.

"O master, O lord of the near, of the nigh, thou hast inclined thy heart, thou hast shown me mercy. Perhaps it is [because of] the weeping, the sorrowing, of the old men, the old women, those who have gone beyond to reside; perhaps it is [because of] their spines, their maguery which they left planted deep.

"May I not regard myself. May I not consider myself worthy of the favor, may I not consider myself deserving of that of which I dream, which I see in dreams. It is the load, the burden on the back, heavy, intolerable, insupportable; the large bundle, the large carrying frame which those who already have gone to reside beyond went assuming when they came to guard for thee, when they came to reign" (Anderson and Dibble 1969: 41–42)

In light of this intensely self-conscious, metaphorical, dualistic, and repetitious style of the *tecpillatolli* it would not, I think, be an exaggeration to speak of an inherent theory of human knowing, a poetics of epistemology which Nahuatl lyrical poetry assumes and enacts, but only indirectly states. This intrinsic style, which I have so fleetingly danced, so hastily herded and driven, so lightly skimmed, so inadequately brushed and blown and breathed before

your eyes, has clear implications for certain notions of semantic and epistemological force.

How are we to describe this force which we now identify in the very character of the *tecpillatolli* style itself? What is the relationship between human speech and reality which this language and its poetry—or the poetry of this language—enact? In approaching an answer it is first necessary, I think, to emphasize the obvious in order to set our minds in the proper frame, to pass over to the other side of translation, as it were.

The diphrase so typical of Nahuatl does not “mean” one thing or another. The *tecpillatolli* speaker did not translate *xochitl cuicatl* into some single-word equivalent of the word “poetry”; there was no concept called “poetry.” There is instead an ambiance of stylized reference that clustered about the twin images of flowers and singing, offering a fluidity of signification within the clear visual and sensory boundaries of the images themselves. Nor does *atl, tepetl*—“water, mountain”—“mean” city, though that is how it must be translated. These diphrases are not ornamental figures elaborately pirouetting about the real thing or the thing itself. We must put ourselves into a linguistic ambiance where the single signifiers “city” and “poetry” simply do not exist. We must enter the non-referential assumption behind the diphrase, which is that no linguistic act can have the power to obtain directly the reality which it indicates, to capture absolutely the very being of that thing we call its reference. Instead, *tecpillatolli* Nahuatl assumes that a language act, and therefore the human knowledge which can only emerge through such acts, approaches, encircles, or triangulates reality, but may never actually touch or obtain it.

The Nahuas, it would seem, never believed in the myth of primordial referentiality of linguistic signs, the “common sense” faith that words bear an originating, primal, and ostensive one-to-one relation to reality—this word is that object—or some part of their tradition, at least, was acutely aware of the illusory and simplified quality of this everyday view of language as signifier/signified. *Tecpillatolli* Nahuatl assumes there will always be an ironic or metaphoric distance between reality and what man knows of it. What you know, the language reminds its speakers continually, for you is always *like* something or *associated with* something or *part of* something and never actually something itself; or, as the poet said,

*ayac nelli in tiquilhuia nican*, "No one among us truly and finally speaks here."

A Western literary scholar might be at first inclined to discount these special claims for a Nahua epistemology founded on aesthetics by invoking the Vician paradigm, suggesting that the poems and fragments quoted above are simply fine specimens of a preliterate tradition caught in its prerational adolescence. Vico, after all, had pointed out already in the eighteenth century how the intellectual life of the "gentile" nations had grown from an infancy of poetic credulity, literalism, and fable to a philosophical maturity of abstract reasoning and "science," the history of human thought as a progress "from sense to intellect":

Hence poetic wisdom, the first wisdom of the gentile world, must have begun with a metaphysic not rational and abstract like that of learned men now, but felt and imagined as that of these first men must have been, who, without power of ratiocination, were all robust sense and vigorous imagination. This metaphysics was their poetry, a faculty born with them . . . ; born of their ignorance of causes, for ignorance, the mother of wonder, made everything wonderful to men who were ignorant of everything. Their poetry was at first divine, because . . . they imagined the causes of the things they felt and wondered at to be gods. (This is now confirmed by the American Indians, who call gods all the things that surpass their small understanding.) (1971 [1725]:296)

The implicit conclusion in reference to the Nahuatl texts is that here we find the expression of a people arrested by historical circumstance at a pre-Socratic stage; nothing could be more obvious. This conclusion, however, is not only unfair to Nahua tradition but also simply wrong, if seen from the perspective provided by Heidegger. Heidegger's persistent effort to think back in the history of Western philosophy beyond the origins of reason and "representational thinking," to think of Being as presence itself, not as a series of propositional statements about Being, to think back to the pre-Socratics and begin again from there, gives his work a special utility for students of Native American literatures. Beyond his concern to teach a "shepherding" approach to man's existence (the "poetic dwelling" of man) against the utilitarian arrogance of technology and the obvious relation of this approach to the stewardship philosophies of various indigenous peoples, his specific concepts of *das*

*Geviert* “the four-fold” (earth, heavens, the mortal, the divine); saying versus speaking; truth as *aletheia* “unconcealedness” or “dis-closure”; Being as *Anwesen* “presence”; language as *das Ereignis* “appropriation” or “en-ownment”; reflective versus propositional thinking—all contribute to the revelation of an alternative history within Native American traditions where the old positivist and Vician terms could only see underdevelopment.

I take it as axiomatic that we—Western, neo-Platonic, Judeo-Christian rationalists—cannot simply by an act of will and intention “open our minds” to the *weltanschauung* of the Nahua traditions, or of any genuinely indigenous American tradition. The very significance of the word “Native” delineates a radical difference from just those things which make us “other” in the traditional American context. I also, however, assume that communication, understanding, valid hermeneutical activity are possible, once we have found within ourselves and our own traditions the sets of terms or instrumentalities needed to enact the self-revelations which are the precondition for discovering vital correspondences between our own history, our own ontology, and those of the Nahuas. My thesis here is that Heidegger serves as such an instrumentality, opening our minds toward the modalities of Nahua aesthetics and thought. Our goal is not to explicate Heidegger but to see more clearly through his terms the poetics and epistemology of the Nahuatl texts. Of course, a concerted respectful effort to enter the language itself—given Heidegger’s theory that a language already, or still, contains all the potential saying of its speakers—is fundamental. Heidegger turns the Vician paradigm against itself by asserting that human wisdom, right thinking about Being, not only begins but also ends in poetry, because poetry already encompasses all the epistemological resources of which language is capable. We cannot, therefore, assume that the Nahua poets are blind, ignorant, superstitious, unsophisticated, or philosophically naive simply because their ancestors never passed through the great rationalist circle of representational thought.

The Nahuatl substantive commonly translated as “truth” is *neltiliztli*, more often found in its adverbial form *nelli*, “truly” or “with truth.” The stem *nel-* connotes, León-Portilla demonstrates, firm rootedness. Truth for the Nahuas, he says, was therefore “the quality of being firm, well founded or rooted” (1961:124). A specific



verification of this etymology is found among the "elegant sentences" collected by Fr. Mijangos, who tells us that *nitlanelhuayotocac uel ynelhuayocan onacic* is translated as "I discovered the truth of something," and is taken from the image of a tree whose roots have been dug up and revealed. (Literally, the sentence says, "I sought out the root of the matter; I reached completely down to the place where the roots were" [Mijangos 1966 (1623):18].) The tecpillatolli assumes and the poetry insists that statements of absolute validity, of permanent rootedness, are intrinsically impossible within the flux of the human condition. There is, therefore, simply no foundation on which to base a logical dialectic, since no statement may be admitted as a syllogistic premise. It is poetry, however, as the essence of the activity of language, that comes closest to such rootedness, precisely because the speaker of "flower and song" never loses sight of the impassable and tragic distance between his own mind and reality; an ironic distance into which language echoes but from which it never returns.

It is a true thing, our song;  
it is a true thing, our flowers,  
the well-measured song.

(Romances, f. 41)

In flowers is the word  
of the One God held secure.

(Cantares mexicanos, f. 10)

Is man true? Is anything true  
in our songs? Will anything remain standing?

(Cantares mexicanos, f. 11)

The intuitional leap of association which creates the metaphor invalidates any claim to pure rootedness language might make. The only deep-rooted truth, the Nahua said, is that everything moves, and at the root of the word "heart," *yollo*, is *ollin*, "motion," the name of this present cosmos *nahui ollin*, "4 Motion."

If we are convinced of the validity of Heidegger's "poetic view of being" as set forth in *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens* "The Thinker as Poet," *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* "The Origin of the Work of Art," "Das Ding" "The Thing," "Die Sprache" "Language," "...dichterisch wohnt der Mensch" "...Poetically Man

Dwells,” and other late essays, and if our translations from the Nahuatl are responsibly accurate, we find that several Heideggerian concepts work well to elucidate the epistemic choices implicit in the assumptions and modalities of the *tecpillatolli* style. Particularly I have in mind truth as non-referential *aletheia*—“disclosure,” “clearing and lighting”; language as appropriation; ontic “nearness” versus ontological “remoteness”; Being as lingering presence; speaking as the coming-forth of silent saying; and poetic language as the modality of original and originating speech.

To think of all language as poetry, as Heidegger suggests, to privilege poetic discourse as the prototype of language itself, is to examine the ways in which language itself, not man, speaks. And “language speaks as the peal of stillness,” as the evocation of absence. Ernst Cassirer, in *Language and Myth*, maintains that the origins of language and myth are historically and ontologically simultaneous. The work of naming, which he calls a primordial linguistic concept, is the “process which transforms the world of sense impression, which animals also possess, into a mental world, a world of ideas and meanings” (1946:28). This process, he says, is one of emotional intensification and condensation of some datum of experience that is marked off from all other experience by a verbal symbol, a name, which discharges the emotional energy of the concentrated attention, the “noticing” (34). Heidegger, decidedly not a “symbolist,” calls attention to the evocative quality of this naming. The naming which speech enacts, says Heidegger, is not ostensive or referential in its originating nature, because what is named need not ever be physically “here”; naming “does not hand out titles, it does not apply terms, but it calls into the word. The naming calls. Calling brings closer what it calls.” But where does the call go? “Into the distance in which what is called remains, still absent” (1971:198). If I say, “The woman sitting in the pale blue Toyota with her bare arm hanging languidly out the window,” I invoke “a presence sheltered in absence” (since you cannot “see” the woman), which the naming language—and please note that the whole phrase including its syntax is a name, not simply the nouns within it—calls an image forth from your mind to create. How consciously evocative of that simultaneous absence and imaginary presence it is to say “woman” as *tecpillatolli* Nahuatl says it in the

metonymic diphrase *in cueitl in huipil*, “the shirt, the blouse”; or even better to say “centipede” with the metaphor *petlazolcoatl*, “worn-out mat snake,” which factors out to “snake like a frayed-edged mat.”

“The sheer naming of things,” says Hannah Arendt, one of Heidegger’s finest interpreters, “the creation of words, is the human way of *appropriating* and, as it were, disalienating the world into which, after all, each of us is born as a newcomer and a stranger” (1978:100). This appropriating, Heidegger’s *das Ereignis*, which Hofstadter also translates as “enownment,” occurs only through the instrumentality of language and is the consequence or activity of truth understood as *aletheia*, that “thing that is unthought in the whole history of [Western] thought” since Heraclitus and Parmenides (Spanos 1976:421).

Unhiddenness is called *aletheia*—truth, as we translate it, is primordial, and this means that it is essentially not a character of human knowledge and statement. Truth, also is not mere value or an “idea” toward whose realization man—the reason is not very clear—ought to strive. Truth, rather, as self-deconcealing, belongs to Being itself: *physis* [Being] is *aletheia*, deconcealment (Spanos 1976:373).

The self-deconcealment of any thing or being within the universal household of Being is dependent upon the invention of its name, or its image, a cognitive act which opens “a clearing, a lighting” in which the thing stands forth unconcealed (Heidegger 1971:53). But this unconcealing is simultaneously a concealing:

The open place in the midst of beings, the clearing, is never a rigid stage with a permanently raised curtain on which the play of beings runs its course. Rather, the clearing happens only as this double concealment. The unconcealedness of beings—this is never a merely existent state, but a happening. Unconcealedness (truth) is neither an attribute of factual things in the sense of beings, nor one of propositions.

We believe we are at home in the immediate circle of beings. That which is, is familiar, reliable, ordinary. Nevertheless, the clearing is pervaded by a constant concealment in the double form of refusal and dissembling. . . . The nature of truth, that is, of unconcealedness, is dominated throughout by a denial (Heidegger 1971:54).

It is the function of art, then, as Heidegger explains in "The Origin of the Work of Art," from which this definition of *aletheia* also comes, to provide the "becoming and happening of truth" which "happens in being composed, as the poet composes a poem" (1971:72). "All art," Heidegger finally asserts, "as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, essentially poetry," whether it is naming the daisy ("day's eye"), painting the old shoes of a French peasant, or designing a shopping mall (1971:71-72). The concealment within "daisy" is the actual flower-ness of the flower which is ignored, hidden, yet startlingly revealed, in its metaphoric association with an eye in the imaginary face of a personified day, a truth further lost in the collapsed tension of our everyday speech, in which "daisy" has become a used-up, strictly referential non-metaphor.

The "becoming or happening of truth" then depends ultimately on processes that are essentially poetic because "language itself is poetry in the essential sense," and it is language that, "by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance. Only this naming nominates beings *to* their being *from out of* their being. Such saying is a projecting of the clearing, in which announcement is made of what it is that beings come into the *Open as*" (1971:74). This "projective saying," which is the act of language discovery, Heidegger calls "poetry." The sum total of this projective saying in any given historical culture, Heidegger calls "the world," meaning the relative collective consciousness of Self and Being which any given language has composed for its speakers throughout its history. All the remaining unknown-ness of simple presence, the unapprehended Being which that culture's "projective saying" does not, cannot, include, Heidegger calls "the earth," the dark foundation of the unknown upon which the world of knowing must stand. Poetry, and therefore all art, is the primal saying of the unconcealed-ness of what is, and "actual language at any given moment is the happening of this saying, in which a people's world historically rises for it and the earth is preserved as that which remains closed" (Heidegger 1971:74).

Truth as *aletheia*, then, is the erection of a continuing tension, Heidegger calls it a "rift," by means of language in a process that is by definition poetry, between beings and Being, between consciousness and unconsciousness, between the perceivable and the

invisible, a tension by which being reaches into Being, consciousness into unconsciousness, and perception into the invisible. What Heidegger offers is an image of all art and of knowledge itself as metaphor, if we inflate that term to include synecdoche and metonym (Jakobson notwithstanding). Pound/Fenollosa point out that metaphor is the process by which the unseen passes over into the seen, "the use of material images to suggest immaterial relations." Metaphor is claimed to be "the revealer of nature," the very substance of both poetry and language. "The whole delicate substance of speech is built upon substrata of metaphor" (Fenollosa 1936:22). Arendt, citing Kant, points out the utter dependence of thought on the image-making faculty of mind and the metaphysical language of poetry:

No language has a ready-made vocabulary for the needs of mental activity; they all borrow their vocabulary from words meant to correspond either to sense experience or to other experiences of ordinary life. . . . Speaking in analogies, in metaphorical language, according to Kant, is the only way through which speculative reason, which we here call thinking, can manifest itself. . . . All philosophical terms are metaphors, frozen analogies (1978:102-104).

"Poetry," Pound or Fenollosa continues, "does consciously what the primitive races did unconsciously," and the chief work of poets "lies in feeling back along the ancient lines of advance" (1936:23). Back, we might add in Heidegger's terms, to the place where the metaphor, now a deadened lump of everyday speech, first encircled a space of being and gave some truth a place in which to occur. And Arendt demonstrates that the true meaning of a philosophical term is disclosed only when it is dissolved into the original context of its metaphoric origins, into the world of sensory experience which was vivid to the mind of the thinker who coined it. In its inception, metaphor is a sort of triangulation process by which two images strike a line of relation between each other, and in so doing drop lines of indication to a third previously unseen object or mental quality, which then stands out between those images for apprehension. In other words the speaker, who in this act of primal "projective saying" becomes "poet," says something along the lines of, "This reality which I am coming to perceive about X is somewhat

like Y." Take King Lear's "When we are born, we cry that we are come / to this great stage of fools" (4.6). We have long since learned from I. A. Richards a binary terminology of the metaphor, to call the stage in this example the "vehicle," and human life—Shakespeare's primary reference according to Richards—the "tenor." But Heidegger's concepts make it inevitable to see a third term of the metaphoric process, beyond this binary terminology, in the words "something like," in the "rift" of mental tension itself between the X and the Y, between tenor and vehicle, and in the darker rift between life-as-a-stage and the necessary back-ground (earth) of life-as-not-a-stage-but-as-life. There is after all the "meaning," as we say, of the whole thing, the great luminous field of force which the apprehension of "all the world's a stage" awakens in the mind, and which Shakespeare did so much to plant in the deeper soil of Anglo knowledge and convictions about society. In lines like "the woman in the ambulance / whose red heart blooms through her coat so astoundingly" from Sylvia Plath's "Poppies in October," we feel the calling of the images "flower" and "blood," feel them call off from each other to a third thing, a new emotional complex concerning terror, death, and beauty (1965:19).

Notice, however, that the complex of terror, death, and beauty which comes to us so clearly in the Plath metaphor is never, for all its clarity and immediacy, actually touched or named in itself. We as readers, speakers, critics, must each experience these lines as the "name" for that complex. In this way, to return to Heidegger's terms, truth "becomes" or "happens" in the rift of the true metaphor. Truth occurs, as it were, in the interstices of the terms of the metaphor, and the "naming" of which Heidegger speaks is never a one-to-one reference process but a "projecting of the clearing," a clearing set off, defined, encircled by the terms of the metaphor.

It should now be evident that I mean to say that the Nahuatl *tecpillatolli* style throughout its history maintained an unusually intense awareness of just these evocative and metaphoric processes on which thinking itself and the appropriation of language seem to depend, according to Heidegger and Arendt. The endlessly incremental and densely tropological style which I described briefly is, I suggest, a direct consequence of this awareness and its implications for the finite and movable character of truth accessible through human speech.

The Nahuas had their burdens to bear, but a rationalist dialectic of logical truth was not among them. They never lost touch with the poetic foundation of all human statements about reality and never fell into the delusion that those statements could actually touch the final, indivisible presence of Being itself.<sup>6</sup> Of course, they made no treatises like Heidegger's because they began by believing what Heidegger's densely rationalistic prose strove more and more to enact: poetic ambiguity is already the most rigorous of statements, and "the metaphoric sign records a mode of thinking more rigorous than the conceptual" (Spanos 1976:624). In a tradition of thought that begins with such an assumption rather than coming to it after two thousand years of faith in syllogistic logos and the primordial referentiality of names, there is no incentive to ground a tradition of rationalistic description. Why should anyone undertake to describe representationally what language or poetry is or does if poetry itself, the best vehicle of being and knowing, is flawed and uncertain? The Nahuas are simply "silent about silence," which Heidegger claims is the only "authentic saying." They seem aware of the immanent and unspeakable presence of the unspoken in their traditional, formulaic utterances; their elaborate, convoluted, encircling stylistic devices can be seen as an enactment of this awareness.

The Nahuas were not pursuing a unique and arcane stance toward reality. I would cite the novelistic vision and style of Faulkner as outgrowth of a very similar poetics of Being. Consider Addie's speech about words in *As I Lay Dying*; the telling in *The Sound and the Fury* of the same story from four points of view; and most luminous of all, consider that supreme exercise in the sheer relativity of historical documentation, *Absalom, Absalom*, at whose center stands the simultaneous presence and absence of Thomas Sutpen himself. The Nahuas were unique, however, in their passionate and centuries-long devotion to the awareness of the poetic act as the foundation of human knowing. Before the mystery of this intuitional power they stood in continual awe and celebration, never faltering in their recognition of the limited and derivative nature of rational discourse. They preferred, with García Lorca, to remain in touch with the source of the fire, and would have applauded Lorca's response when asked to describe his poetics: "Here it is," he said, "Look: I have the fire in my hands. I understand and work with it perfectly, but I cannot speak of it without creating it" (1966:403).<sup>7</sup>

## NOTES

1. Of course, there is no recorded "pre-Hispanic" poetry in America, as it was entirely contained within performance traditions without benefit of phonetic transcription. Except for the few surviving pictographic codices, of which none contains a visual text corresponding directly to the written songs which are the matter of my discussion, all extant Nahuatl literature comes to us in post-Conquest, colonial redactions. Since only Christian priests operated schools in early New Spain, the p-factor (priestly interpolation) must be assumed to be pervasive throughout all the written documents. I follow, nevertheless, the time-honored if somewhat suspect practice of Nahuatl students in treating certain manuscripts, including the *Cantares mexicanos* and *Romances* manuscripts from which the poems under discussion are taken, as substantially representative of the actual pre-Conquest, orally transmitted stylistic and philosophical traditions. Bierhorst's introductory essay (1985) to his edition of the *Cantares* manuscript adds a new reservation concerning this practice.

2. León-Portilla's description of an intuited truth dependent on a "sanctified heart," *corazón endiosado*, is curiously reminiscent of Jonathan Edwards's appeal to aesthetics for verification of the truth of revealed scripture by means of a "due sense of the heart." We know the Bible is true, Edwards said in "A Divine and Supernatural Light," because we feel its statements to be so overwhelmingly beautiful.

3. The translations of all *Cantares* and *Romances* excerpts, while often reminiscent of León-Portilla's Spanish readings, are my own. Unless otherwise noted, paleographs of the Nahuatl are taken from Bierhorst 1985; some of my phrases are also taken directly from Bierhorst's English versions. The Bierhorst volumes, the most authoritative transcription and translation of the *Cantares* manuscript now available, came into print only as I was completing the present discussion, too late for me to make full use of its detailed language notes.

4. Remember Aristotle's point that the gift for metaphor is "the mark of genius" in poetic composition, and that no one can teach it to another.

5. "Poetry proper is never merely a higher mode (*melos*) of everyday language. It is rather the reverse: everyday language is a forgotten and therefore used-up poem from which there hardly resounds a call any longer" (Heidegger 1971:208).

6. Even Heidegger seems to have succumbed to this delusion in his reverence for the poetry of Hölderlin, who he felt was a pure witness to Being, one poet who had stated the *parousia*, the absolute presence of Being itself. No Nahua poet—nor any other authentic poet—could ever presume so greatly. The experience of the question which de Man identifies as how



to "say Being itself" remains unanswered, as by Heidegger's own distinction between saying and speaking (the latter never adequate to the former) it must (De Man 1983).

7. An earlier version of this essay, in Spanish, was published in *Semana de Bellas Artes* 70 (April 4, 1979).

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