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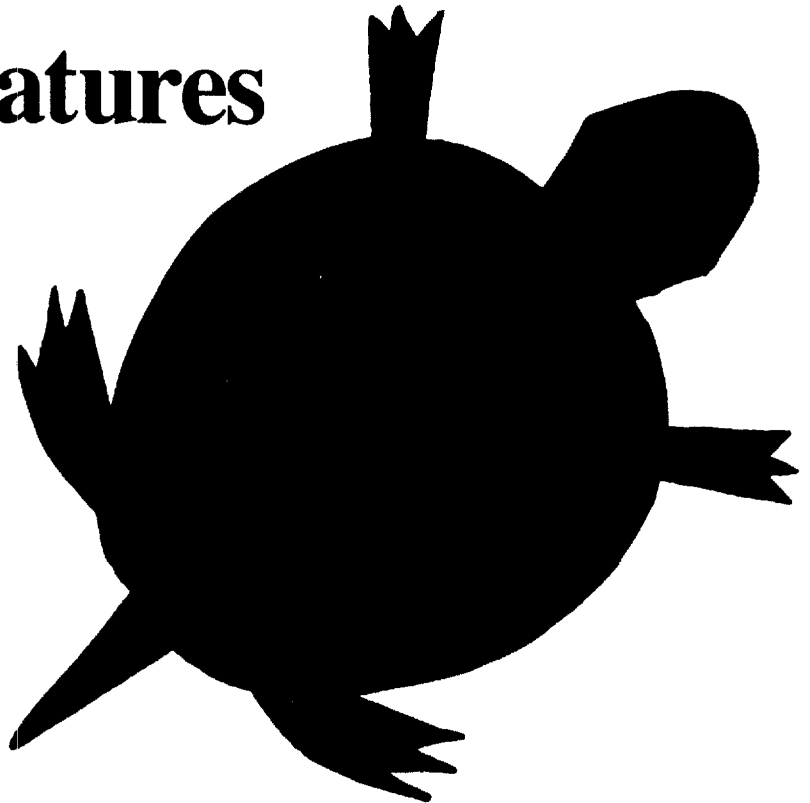
On the Translation of Native American Literatures



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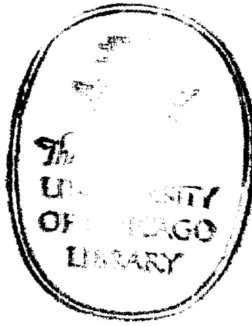

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The turtle figure accompanying the title page and part titles is adapted from a birchbark transparency made by a Woodlands tribe member in the Historic Period, perhaps as a pattern for beading designs. The bird figure accompanying the chapter titles is carrying a speech symbol; this image is from eastern Missouri. The cover image is the interior decoration on a Tusayan food bowl.

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Ten Types of Ambiguity in Nahuatl Poetry, or William Empson among the Aztecs

Willard Gingerich

The diabolical difficulty of translating the Nahuatl language poetry of the Aztec city-states has been notorious ever since Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún first compared its sacred texts to a jungle from which Satan launched his guerrilla sorties against the armies of Christ:

It is a very ancient practice of our adversary the Devil to seek out hiding places from which to conduct his business, as the Sacred Scripture says: "Those whose business is evil abhor the light." Accordingly, this Our Enemy has planted in this land a forest or badlands filled with many dense thickets out of which he can conduct his business and where he can hide so as not to be found out, just as do the savage beasts and venomous serpents. These forests or dense badlands are the songs which in this land he has devised that they use and perform in his service, as his divine cult and as psalms in his praise both within and without the temples—the which contain such artifice that they say whatever they like and broadcast whatever he commands, and only those he has instructed are capable of understanding them. It is a very confirmed fact that the cave, forest and badlands where even today this cursed adversary hides himself are the songs and psalms which have been composed and are sung to him, while none are capable of understanding what is mentioned in them save those who are native speakers and thoroughly familiar with this language, in such fashion that undoubtedly they chant in them everything

he desires, whether peace or war, praises to him and affronts to Jesus Christ, without anyone else being able to understand (1979, 172).

Fr. Diego Durán, who grew up in New Spain, also found this oral poetry mysterious and opaque, while less demonic:

All the songs of these people are composed of such obscure metaphors that scarcely anyone understands them, if he has not very deliberately studied and discussed them in order to understand their meaning. I have set myself deliberately to listen very carefully to what they sing, among the words and terms of the metaphor, and, while they at first seem to me nonsense, after conferral and discussion they are admirable pronouncements (1967, I, 195).

But even Sahagún was unable finally to deny or banish its rhetorical power, and in 1583 he published in 236 folios a volume entitled *Psalmodia christiana y sermonario de los sanctos del año*, which adapted the old "demonic" poetics and language to biblical texts, hymns in praise of the Virgin and saints, antiphons and texts of the Latin mass, a volume still untranslated to either Spanish or English and the only work to see print in the lifetime of that indefatigable founder of modern ethnography.

We no longer attribute the complexity of Native American poetry to diabolical influence, but instead as a literary community do something equally unscientific and ill-informed: in our vast ignorance and historical forgetfulness of the diversity and resilience of Native American languages and their literatures, we have completely forgotten the complexity itself of those literatures, glimpsing them as we do only through snippets and fragments of often inadequately translated and totally decontextualized passages. Consequently, we tend to believe, if we give the work any attention at all, that Native American poets—such as they were—were all imagists of the Amy Lowell variety, and by and large childishly transparent. For those curious enough to dig for themselves, of course, there have been translated sources of major Native American texts, at least since Washington Matthews's late nineteenth-century work with the Navajo Night Chant in the United States and most notably in the pages of the reports of the Bureau of American Ethnology. Then in the past two decades, beginning with the monumental Anderson and Dibble translation of Sahagún's Florentine Codex, a new promise of rediscovery and general access to traditional Native American literatures has been made, following through the Edmonson translations of Quiché and Yucatec classics; Tedlock's work with Zuni texts and the Popol Vuh; the issuing of Kroeber's Yurok and Karok texts; the critical work of Hymes following Jacobs; Sullivan, Lockhart, Karttunen, and Bierhorst's translations of a range of Aztec texts; and now versions of more or less contemporary survivals of oral tradition from the Kuna of the Panamanian coast (Joel Sherzer) to the Cree of Manitoba (Howard Norman).

And now the complexity and ambiguity of the sixteenth-century Nahuatl texts, with which the transcribed record of Native American literature in North America begins, looks more like a challenge to our literary acumen than an affront to our religion. One scholar reported not long ago that he had spent two years working on a translation of the *Cantares Mexicanos* manuscript (Bierhorst 1985a)—which together with the *Romances de los Señores de la Nueva España* manuscript (Garibay 1964) is the primary record of

mid to late sixteenth-century Nahuatl lyrical chant—but decided to give it up because the original was simply too confusing and ambiguous in many parts to ever sustain a clear and unequivocal translation.

To a literary scholar this sounds curiously reminiscent of the objections to the wrangling critical disputation over authoritative, correct, canonical interpretations of English poetry upon which William Empson founded his classic of New Criticism, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, in 1930. By the time Empson published the first American edition of *Seven Types* in 1947, it had already come to stand for a perfection of critical acumen and sustained sensibility in the reading of poetry. In the years following, it did much to extract, enshrine, and privilege from readings of the canonical poets Shakespeare, Pope, Chaucer, Jonson, and Milton a poetic of grammatical ambiguity, figural tension, and paradox as the standard of literary judgment and helped confirm the reputations of Donne, Herrick, Marvell, and their champion, T. S. Eliot. It is a poetic much berated today for its formalist detachment from context, its failure to take sufficiently into account the historical forces of production which the New Historicism now ascendent insists must always set the terms of poetic creation and critical discussion alike. Empson, like Eliot, René Wellek, Robert P. Warren, Van Wyck Brooks, Ivor Winters, and their company of "close readers," is now exposed as insufficiently self-conscious about the determining historical forces of his own process of valuation—though it is unclear how this poetic would or could have been different if he or they had had the proper historical consciousness. There was, moreover, one aspect of analysis in which Empson was scrupulously historical: he spared no pains in historicizing a word (or phrase) in order to restore every possible breath of allusion or range of meaning it would have carried for the readers or listeners in Chaucer's, Shakespeare's or Donne's audiences. The historical life of the English language was a vital, working reality throughout *Seven Types*.

But whatever the current opinions of Empson's book, the mode of close rhetorical analysis he taught is still essential both to deconstructive formalism, which turned upon New Criticism's Romantic assumptions of organic unity with its own weapon of choice, the undulling razor of irony, and to the neo-Marxist readings and discourse analysis of the New Historicism. Empson's "trick" of discovering in ambiguity a constitutive poetic device of enormous complexity and range contributed substantially to the cultivation of an academic climate, at least in the United States, where the work of the "New Rhetoricians" (Krupat's phrase) from de Man to Hillis Miller would flourish, while his practice with that device underwent a variety of critiques and refinements.

Empson was able to plant his poetic of ambiguity on a deep subsoil of philological study which provided him the foundation, the etymologies and textual glosses, he needed to demonstrate readings of remarkable subtlety and effect. Further, he explicitly counted on the assumption of a canon as well as its familiarity and approval among his readers: "I can assume that my readers already understand and enjoy the examples I shall consider, and I am concerned only to conduct a sufficient analysis of their enjoyment to make it seem more understandable" (6). None of these assumptions can be made by critics or translators of Native American literatures, not even of Nahuatl poetry, which has a critical tradition reaching back as far as 1550 and enjoys a serious collection of full-length

grammars (the first published in 1547 and the latest in 1988) and dictionaries (from 1571 to 1985). Only in 1976 (Karttunen and Lockhart) did we get a historical survey of the language. In fact, it remains to be demonstrated to indifferent, skeptical, or outright hostile audiences that there is a real native American, let alone Nahua, poetry at all, able to sustain serious critical scrutiny. "Are you still working on that naugahyde poetry?" one of my best graduate professors used to ask with some regularity.

Obviously, it would be a misapplication of both Empson's accomplishment and his types to attempt their transfer directly to a poetry as non-Western as the Aztec, an oral tradition inheriting by the time of Cortés's arrival (1519) centuries of independent stylistic and iconographic development, a tradition alien to most European genres and their expectations. But the Aztec lyrical performance mode, sung in precolumbian times and through the early colonial period to the accompaniment of hollow log drums (*teponaztli*), large standing drums (*huehuetl*), and gourd rattles of various types (*ayacachtli*), confronts any translator with such a host of ambiguous constructions and unusual agglutinative word formations that Empson's defense and analysis of this primal poetic trope comes easily to mind as model for discovering within an apparent textual chaos of indeterminacy a poetics of sophisticated and compressed emotional density—however distant from the Chaucerian and Shakespearean rhetoric on which Empson honed his critical instruments.

The ambiguities of Nahuatl poetry are of two classes: *textual* and *contextual*. The former are in some instances the consequence of the latter, which are further divided into *constitutive ambiguities*, characteristic of the interface at a given historical juncture between specific oral and literate traditions, conditions, and structural traces the oral performance mode imposes on a text when re-invented into a specific graphemic system (writing), and *historical ambiguities*, the uncertainties constraining (or liberating, if one chooses) Nahuatl poetry interpretation because of our fragmentary and imperfect knowledge of the performance contexts, the uses to which Nahua singers put their performances, or their modes of composition. These historical ambiguities have little to do with Empson's device, but they are unavoidable for the translating interpreter. All contextual ambiguities have repercussions for our ability to read the surviving texts of Nahuatl poetry, but not all textual or linguistic ambiguities have a contextual origin.

The first two types of ambiguity in Nahuatl poetry, then, are contextual historical uncertainties—unresolvable on the basis of known materials—concerning the literary sources of the performances redacted in the *Romances* and *Cantares* manuscripts and the actual circumstances of the accompanied singing, *huehuetitlan*, "beside the standing drum." I have elsewhere (1984) sketched the general picture we have of Nahua performance poetics; León-Portilla (1969, 1972) has discussed performance briefly and Bierhorst (1985a) includes a survey discussion in his Introduction to the *Cantares* Chapter 8. This performance ambiguity has textual repercussions. Bierhorst's controversial theory of the ghost song, a theory that the *Cantares* record the mystical texts of a secret nativist movement which sang down the spirits of the dead from another world, is essentially a theory of performance, drawn out of the ambiguities of the text itself: "The *Cantares Mexicanos* and its congeners comprise a closed system, unintelligible to those who have not been initiated, even if they are fluent speakers of Nahuatl. Neither the standard dic-

tionaries of Molina and Siméon nor the voluminous Florentine Codex can provide the lexical information needed to comprehend this highly figurative and complex idiom" (16). The best defense of Bierhorst's theory is the "admirable pronouncements" he is sometimes able to extract from the figurative jungle of the text, but it remains to be seen if a strictly formalist analysis can successfully defend itself as an historical interpretation.

How Nahua singers composed their songs—or just who composed them—is an even more mysterious historical ambiguity. Study of the two lyric manuscripts, however, reveals several nearly literal repetitions between them, suggesting that singers worked to preserve the integrity of memorized song texts (Karttunen and Lockhart 1980). While numerous apparent attributions to compositors can be found in the *Cantares* texts and elsewhere (León-Portilla 1967) including a group supposedly composed by King Nezahualcoyotl, it is more likely that most songs were composed by professional court singers in the employ of city-state rulers, perhaps in the name of their patrons.

Constitutive contextual ambiguities are also of two types and have even closer textual ramifications on the one hand, while emerging from the implications of oral performance on the other; these two ambiguities are the use and meaning of vocables or nonsense syllables, and our lack of any clear knowledge of Nahuatl metrical canons. Apparently meaningless vocables, both freestanding and attached, are scattered liberally through every song of the *Cantares*; Bierhorst, in his concordance to the *Cantares* (1985b), lists some one hundred forty such untranslatable pure sound representations (729–36). Among the most common are *aya, ohuaya, ohuiya, ya, yao, yahue, ye*, and *yehua*. Whether or not any of these had a stanza marking function such as Hymes has suggested for initial vocables in Chinook narrative, or any other specific structural function is not clear from the redacted texts. The fact that they are repeated with exact regularity in those songs that appear in both manuscripts suggests that they may have been as important as words to the original singers. Bierhorst chose not to repeat them in his translation, which only suppresses their mysterious and certainly autochthonous beauty.

How Nahua singers measured their lines, stanzas, or structural prosodic units of any type is still quite unclear. While the *Cantares* manuscript displays clear paragraph-like units of redaction, it is not at all certain how those units releated to the musical units of a performance. The still undeciphered *teponaztle* (hand-held log drum) notations supplied at the head of several texts are made of four syllables and their combinations—*ti, to, qui*, and *co*; *tocotico tocoti, tocotico tiqui tiqui*, etc.—and if ever understood will certainly tell us more than we know now about how to measure out a line of Nahuatl poetry in English. The equally mysterious "explanation" of *huehuetl* (standing kettle drum) drumming technique on folio 7r of the *Cantares* manuscript would also help identify metrical structure if we knew 1) what it describes as actual hand technique, and 2) what its relationship is to the stanza paragraphs of the written text.

And the drum is beaten thus: when a stanza ends and another stanza is to follow, it's three-beat. And when it actually begins, it's one-beat. But as it comes back in, then the drum falls beneath it, and the hand just keeps on going. But when it is in the middle, again the voice of the drum emerges. This, however, must be seen from the hand of the singer who knows how it is beaten (Bierhorst, 152–53; I have given my own translation and impressions in 1984).

In the absence of any clear understanding of Nahuatl metrical/musical structure in song chant, Bierhorst has wisely chosen to simply reproduce in his translation the visual units as they appear in the Nahuatl text.

These four contextual ambiguities, however, have little or nothing to do with the complexities that inspired Sahagún's demonic-origins theory or drive the modern translator to distraction. Nor are they relevant to the formal ambiguities which Empson outlined in his tour of English tradition. Nahuatl poetry, however, is rife with the first of Empson's textual types of ambiguity:[1] "a word or a grammatical structure [that] is effective in several ways at once" (2) which emerges strongest where thickets of metaphor crowd closest. In Empson's still-echoing judgment, this type is "clearly . . . involved in . . . [poetic] richness and heightening of effect, and the machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry" (3). Empson affirms, with Shelly, Emerson, Herbert Read, and Heidegger, that "metaphor . . . more or less taken for granted (so as to be unconscious), is the normal mode of development of a language" (2), and that "all languages are composed of dead metaphors as the soil of corpses" (25). The "deliberate study and discussion" that Fr. Durán warns must be undertaken to understand Nahuatl metaphor is evident in lines such as *Xochinquahuitl malinticac huiconticac ya pixahuiinticcaco ye moquiapan a ycelteotl ymapan y tonnemi quetzalli coxcox ha toncuicatinemi hiyao hamao hama hohohiyaya* (Cantares, f. 67v, 16–18): "The flowering tree, twisted and entwined, already stands drizzling in your Place of Rains, O One God, and upon its branches you live, a quetzal pheasant, you live filled with a life of song, 'hiyao, hamao, hama, hohohiyaya.'" The flowering tree that "drizzles" (not "drips"), the Place of Rains, the One God who is a singing quetzal pheasant (itself a bird more mythic than actual) full of "hi's," "ha's" and "hohoya's" each occur repeatedly in the text of the *Cantares* and require more discussion than I have space for here to expose the "admirable pronouncements" masked in this heavily iconic imagery. Suffice it to say that the rain which certainly has a fertility component may also be a water of Christian salvation, but perhaps not, and is also a figure of poetic inspiration. This stanza appears in a *Xochicuicatl Cuecuechtli* or "Obscene Flower Song" in which the muse or the bird-god was probably represented by transvestites; it was a dance, Durán assures us, almost as bad as the Spanish zaraband, "and obviously a dance of dishonest women and lascivious men. . . . In it appear men dressed as women" (I, 193). It is not likely, therefore, that the "One God" could be thought of as Jehovah of the Israelites.

The second type of textual ambiguity (type six) follows close on the heels of the first and emerges from the theory of metaphor as a key to etymological consciousness, or, perhaps more accurately, to a poetic consciousness of etymology. The Nahuatl word for centipede is *petlazolcoatl* which combines *coatl*, "serpent," with *petlazolli*, "an old worn-out woven reed mat." Did the normal Nahuatl speaker "see" the obvious metaphorical construction "snake like a frayed-edge reed mat" whenever s/he said, "There goes a *petlazolcoatl*!"? Or was it part of a singer's extensive training to come to this consciousness and even compositional mastery of it? While there are numerous compound words like *petlazolcoatl* in Nahuatl, the urge to etymologize in Nahuatl linguistic analysis is now usually frowned upon, especially if it leads to the statements that the Nahuas

thought this or that on the basis of such analysis alone. The fact is, there is no evidence to suggest the normal speaker thought anything but "centipede" when s/he said *petlazolcoatl*; we cannot tell, for the most part, where the Aristotelian tension between "ordinary usage" and "figurative swerving" begins. On the other hand, there are word constructions in the manuscripts which cannot represent anything other than the intentional work of poet-singers. "Luxuriantly descriptive nouns of three or more terms are characteristic of the *Cantares* but virtually nonexistent in other manuscripts" (Bierhorst 1985b, 720): *yxiuhquecholcacahuaxochicalitec*, "within his house of green-swan cacao flowers," or *teocuitlaxochicoyolayacachuitzilin*, "golden flower-bell-rattle hummingbird" (both on f. 11). What figurative houses and birds are evoked or described by such one-of-a-kind word-phrases is a further ambiguity of extensive sublety and elegance—and obviously intended; such words could not be generated by anything but a conscious linguistic playfulness in the service of poetic license.

Type seven textual ambiguities arise in Nahuatl because "transitive sentences involving only third-person singular or third-person plural referents are ambiguous if the meaning of the verb stem permits an animate entity in both the subject role and the object role" (Andrews 195). Nahuatl does not make gender or human-animal distinctions corresponding to he/she/it; *-c-* or *-qui-* may mean any of these, so that *oquittac* may say "He saw her," "She saw him," "He saw him," "She saw her," "He saw it (a dog, or anything animate)," "She saw it," "It saw her," or "It saw him." Obviously, only context can tell. The textual consequences of this grammatical ambiguity, which may well have been eliminated in an oral context, are illustrated by the sequence of translations of a crucial Chichimec myth text in the *Leyenda de los soles* manuscript (Lehmann 358–62). The story tells how two brothers, Xiuhnel and Mimich, go into the desert hunting together. A were-deer woman with two heads appears and they pursue her; at night she calls them away from the fire with a seductive human voice, and Xiuhnel goes out into the darkness to meet her. What happens then is grammatically ambiguous if taken out of narrative context: *Auh in oquitecac niman ipan hualmixtlapachcuep niman ye quicua quelcoyonia*, "And when he/she laid him/her down, then he/she turned him/herself face down upon him/her, then he/she devoured him/her, tore open his/her breast." Only the context can determine whether she devours him or he devours her, obviously a question of some importance for any interpretive discussion of the narrative, not to mention an accurate rendition of Chichimec mythology. The two original Spanish translations of this text (Velázquez 1975; Garibay 1964a) read the line similarly. Velázquez translates: *Después que se echó con ella, se volvió bocabajo sobre ella, la mordió y la agujeró*, "Then he threw himself down with her, turned face-down over her, bit her and opened her" (123). Garibay renders the line rather more interpretively: *Luego con ella se tiende, la oprime, la mordisquea, y al fin la desflora*, "Then he lies down with her, presses upon her, bites her, and finally deflowers her." In short, both Spanish versions read the original Nahuatl as an attack on the female were-deer by Xiuhnel. The subject-object pronoun ambiguity continues through the narrative in such a way that both Velázquez and Garibay are able to follow this rendering through the passage, both interpreting the weeping survivor as the sister of the devoured or deflowered one. But such a translation leaves completely nonsen-

sical two subsequent narrative facts: Mimich flees in apparent terror through his own campfire, and Xiuhnel disappears completely from the story. The correct translation had been supplied by the text's first editor, Walter Lehmann, in 1938: *Und nachdem sie ihn auf den Boden gelegt hat, da wandte sie sich mit dem Gesicht nach unten über ihn, Da frist sie ihn . . . macht sie ihm ein Loch in die Brust*, "And after she has laid him on the ground she turns herself face-down on him. Then she devours him, makes a hole in his breast."[2]

Type eight is the linguistic ambiguity of long and short vowels; there are four basic vowels in Nahuatl and each has a constrasting long and short form. This ambiguity is strictly an artifact of inadequate transcription—only Antonio de Rincón (1595) and Horacio Carochi (1645) of the early grammarians made consistent efforts to record and distinguish vowel length and glottal-stop phonemes in Nahuatl and vowel length is unmarked in any lyrical text. Therefore, while a Nahua poet may be rhyming *xihuitl*, "grass" or "turquoise," with *xīhuitl*, "comet," we may miss his meaning entirely and translate "turquoise" twice.

Type-nine textual ambiguities occur in combinations of sentences and are functions of the fact that order of sentence elements do not, as a rule, indicate syntactical function in Nahuatl (Andrews 197): *Yehhuatl notahtzin*, "He is my beloved father," or "My beloved father is that one." Which is the matrix, and which is the supplementary subject? This kind of choice can be common in poetic texts and may offer highly divergent readings. *Ach tleon aiuh quimati in tocnihuan y cocoya yiollo qualani* (Cantares, f.35, 29) might say "Perhaps our friends take it badly, his heart sickens, enraged" or maybe "Perhaps he takes it badly, our friends' hearts sicken, enraged" or even, as Bierhorst renders it, "Our friends are ill at ease? Sick, His hearts are vexed" (247).

The final, type-ten ambiguity is the ambiguity of the referent in honorific and reverential constructions with multiple objects: Is the honor directed to the actor, the agent, or the action itself (Andrews 115)? *Nechtlacelilia* is the non-honorific form saying "He/She receives something from me." *Nechmotlacelililia* is the honorific form which says literally (as Andrews explains it), "He receives something from me for his own benefit," which is construed as respectful formulation in Nahuatl. It is uncertain, however, if the object of respect is "he" (subject), the "something" (object), or the action of receiving itself. Translating is a trick in any case: "His Honor receives something from me"; "He receives an honored something from me"; "He receives honorably something from me"—none of which has a clean and clear English value.

It remains a dilemma of Nahuatl translation to English that no scholar has yet appeared who has both the requisite grasp of the full sophistication and subtlety of Nahuatl rhetorical style and at the same time a sufficient background in English stylistic usage to find the corresponding natural context for translation. The fact is that Nahuatl oratorical style, an elegantly evolved and polished example of the oral-formulaic style which characterizes pre- or semi-literate civilizations everywhere, favors a highly repetitious, often circular, incremental, and subtly varying mode of expression which is long out of vogue in contemporary English. Even the nineteenth-century record of the Bureau of Indian Affairs has numerous examples of American impatience with "the prolix and endless oratory of which the Indians are so fond." Anderson and Dibble were right in reaching back for a

neo-King Jamesian biblical style in their translation of the Florentine Codex—"The first word is to enter near to, nigh unto our lord, the lord of the near, of the nigh, the master, the night, the wind. Give him all thy heart, thy body. Let not thy feet go astray." (Book VI, p. 91)—and for my taste these are still some of the most successful renditions of the dignity and rhythm of the original, which makes sense if we remember that large sections of the Old Testament derive from oral traditions. The final impression, however, is too much like sustained Quakerese than biblical stateliness and periodic rhythm—something to be expected, of course, since no one can write Jamesian English in 1965, and as John Barth has pointed out, it would only be embarrassing if someone did.

The idiom Bierhorst evolves for his bold translation is often too colloquial and occasionally too cheery to carry over the ritualized angst of the original: "I cry, I grieve, knowing we're to go away and leave these good flowers, these good songs. Let's be pleasured, let's sing. We're off to our destruction" (Song 53, p. 247). In their recent translation of the much shorter *Bancroft Dialogues* manuscript (*The Art of Nahuatl Speech: The Bancroft Dialogues*), a seventeenth-century transcription of a late sixteenth-century text, Karttunen and Lockhart have provided two versions, one fully translated into idiomatic English and a second which "sacrifices English idiom and ready intelligibility in favor of following the original more closely in original meaning." It is the latter, "intermediary" translation, in spite of its impossible clots of adverbs and adverbials and the translators' parenthetical asides marking untranslatable points of the original grammar, which comes closer to carrying off the extraordinarily belabored and figurative qualities of Nahuatl oral art (from the funeral oration for a dead ruler):

> Perhaps still you will come back hither? Perhaps still five, still ten (days) your water, your mountain will await you? And your nails, your hair? No longer at all. (It is) already everything, (it is) already thus, already forever you have carried yourself (away), the pine torch, the light has already disappeared, has already been extinguished, already the water, the mountain of the Possessor of the close, Possessor of the near, spreads in silence, spreads in night. Let the tail, the wing weep, let it sorrow, and the hair of people, the nails of people, the children of people, let their tears sprinkle, scatter down. Let it call in sadness Him through whom there is life, the Possessor of the close, the Possessor of the near, let it say, "Alas, we have become unfortunate, we have been left orphans" (182).

Compare the pathos and imagery of that with:

> Will you return? Are your city and your offspring to expect you in the future (to be awaiting you for a time)? No, never again. For that is all, that is enough; you have gone once and for all, the torch and light have gone out and been snuffed, the city of the All-pervasive lies silent and dark. Let the commoners weep and sorrow, and let the tears of the well-born, the nobles, sprinkle and scatter down. Let them cry in sorrow to the Giver of life, the All-pervasive; let them say, "Alas, woe to us who have been left orphans" (131, 133).

One is tempted to say that the art of the original rescues the translators from their own language, but that is only to say that contemporary English is hardly adequate to the challenge since it is unlikely that anyone now in the Nahuatl-translating business could do it much better.

No one, for example, has found a way to naturally and consistently translate the honorific and reverential inflections attached frequently to Nahuatl verbs, but that is certainly because no one now, if they ever did, naturally adopts in English the social relationships that these inflections require. Sullivan, for example, in the *Compendium* translates *In ye motlacatilitzinoa in ipiltzin tlatoani*, in which the verb *tlacati-*, "to be born," carries the reverential prefix and suffixes, as "The very revered son of the king is born." But in this case the verb is not transitive, it is the verb that unambiguously expresses the reverence, not the adjective, which doesn't exist in the original; the reverence is toward the action of the birth, and could only be translated by some ponderous circumlocution like "The noble son of the king is most reverently born." Andrews points out that since the honorific is generally formed from the causative form of the verb (someone causes himself or someone to do the action) it could be translated as an elaborate fiction in which the agent is represented as solely responsible for his action, so that the above sentence would be translated, "The noble son of the king causes himself to be born." But that, of course, carries no weight of honor or reverence whatever in English, and Andrews resorts to simply adding an untranslatable (H) or (R) after the verb. No English reader familiar with the current standard Nahuatl translations would have any idea how common the honorific form is in Nahuatl, nor how complex the sentence becomes when the verb is transitive and the honor or reverence may be invoked, ambiguously, by either or both the agent and the object.

In this, contemporary Spanish, with its still available wealth of florid and pettifogging (to American English tastes) rhetorical devices, is probably a superior vehicle for Nahuatl translation. Certainly, I would argue, Sahagún's sixteenth-century translations, however incomplete they might be, are better than anything since, not only because he was one of the most dedicated and gifted nahuatlatos ever, but because the viceregal Spanish idiom natural and available to him included a repertoire of forms closer to the Nahuatl usages. Consider, from Book VI of the *Historia General* (Garibay's 4th edition, 309), a passage very much parallel to the Bancroft passage above:

> ¿Por ventura fue a alguna parte de donde otra vez pueda volver acá, para que otra vez sus vasallos puedan ver su cara? ¿Por ventura vendrános a decir hágase esto, o aquello? ¿Vendrá por ventura otra vez a ver a los cónsules y regidores de la república? ¿Verle han por ventura más? ¿Conocerle han más? ¿Oirán por ventura más su mandamiento y decreto? ¿Vendrá algún tiempo a dar consuelo y refrigerio a sus principales y cónsules? ¡Ay dolor, que del todo se nos acabó su presencia y para siempre se nos fue! ¡Ay dolor, que ya se nos acabó nuestra candela y nuestra lumbre, el hacha que nos alumbraba del todo la perdimos!; dejó (en) perpetua orfandad y perpetuo desamparo a todos sus súditos e inferiores. . . . ¡Oh señor nuestro humanísimo! . . . Peligro es grande que este vuestro pueblo, señorío y reino, no corra gran riesgo si no se elige otro, con brevedad, que le ampare. Pues, ¿qué es lo que V(uestro) M(ajestad) determina de hacer? ¿es bien que esté a obscuras este vuestro pueblo, señorío y reino? ¿Es bien que esté sin cabeza y sin abrigo? ¿Queréisle por ventura asolar y destruir?

Thelma Sullivan was especially sensitive to these stylistic matters as a translator and her version of the "Prayer to Tlaloc" from Book VI of the Florentine Codex sets a standard for bringing the range of Nahuatl oral chant style into English.

Notes

1. I will not attempt here either to summarize or exemplify Empson's seven types, except those found directly in the Nahuatl texts. It is not assumed in the present discussion that the reader is familiar with Empson's book.

2. I have discussed this text elsewhere (1983).

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