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THE *Art* OF  
TRANSLATION  
*voices from the field*

EDITED BY ROSANNA WARREN

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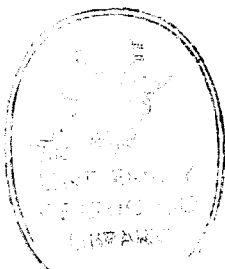
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*This book is affectionately dedicated to  
RODOLFO CARDONA  
Godfather of the Translation Seminars*

*Language, Politics, and Translation:  
Colonial Discourse and  
Classic Nahuatl in New Spain*

 J. JORGE KLOR DE ALVA

AMONG SO MANY OTHER THINGS, language encodes power relations. The translation of literature, always more than a strictly linguistic or interpretive exercise, is no exception. It is subject to power plays and responds to tactical moves that serve the personal and collective interests of the original author, the translator, the audience, or (where relevant) the publisher or reviewer. At another level, the process of translation into the language of the dominant sector can constitute a way of speaking or writing about the project that sustains the power relations of the society (e.g., Christianization, Anglo-American neo-colonialism, Nicaraguan socialism). This latter phenomenon occurs when ideologies and ideas that help to express and shape the socio-political hierarchy are formulated and propagated in the course of translation. For this to take place it is not necessary that personal intentions be the driving force. Instead, the politics of a translation (or interpretation) are more likely to be configured by the unspoken and usually unperceived assumptions making up the reigning ideas and exegetical rules that guide the translator. Indeed, it is because these dominant ideas and rules are conceived as obligatory (not subject to personal choice) that they have the power to determine the truth, relevance, and propriety of a literary decipherment. However, in a situation where one language group is clearly dominant over another, as is generally the case in a colonial context—like the one that existed in sixteenth-century Mexico—the nature of language use and policy is so highly politicized that the hegemonic assumptions prompting the socio-political ends of those in control are generally quite transparent. A post-structuralist form of discursive analysis is particularly useful for studying

these conscious and veiled relations between the effects of colonial power and the translation of Classical Nahuatl.

Following, in part, Michel Foucault (1973), I use the concept of discourse—broadly defined as a bounded register of signs (statements or “serious speech acts” [Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983:48]), codes (rules for ordering the signs and assessing their truth value), and meanings (resulting significations)—in an interpretive manner to help uncover and analyze statements whose truth value is determined by passing a test made up of the rules of combination and argumentation accepted as appropriate to the discourse (e.g., biblical hermeneutics, dialectical reasoning, or the calculus of economic advantage). For the purposes of this essay, one of the central aims of this type of discursive analysis is to find the ideological devices that permit elements from one discursive formation (or register) to become part of another (e.g., the use of claims about salvation [religious discourse] to support arguments on behalf of Spanish claims to sovereignty [political discourse]). Thus, by “colonial discourse” I mean the ways of talking, writing, painting, and communicating that permit ideas to pass from one discourse (say, religion or philology) to another (like politics or economics) in order to authorize and make possible the ends of colonial control (e.g., Fabian 1986:78–84).

### *Classical Nahuatl as Colonial Discourse*

The impositions of control (and acts of resistance) found in the process of translation take place primarily as linguistic moves. Through these a politics of aesthetics, building on the foundation of a pre-existent politics of linguistic assumptions and beliefs about language use, is encoded in the selection of texts, vocabulary, phrasing, style, and form (e.g., Fabian 1986; Rafael 1988). These choices, usually perceived by translators as merely the “natural” result of logical reasoning and aesthetic tastes, have a long history of service in the interest of dominant cultures in multilingual environments.

In the Castilian effort to bring all of the Iberian peninsula and the New World under the dominion of the Crown(s), one of the most important tactics was to appropriate the native languages and to impose their own. A lapidary statement from the fifteenth century summarizes the official Spanish design in pursuing its linguistic concerns at home and abroad: When Antonio de Nebrija, who in 1492 authored the first grammar of a modern European language, was asked by Queen Isabella, “What is it for?” the bishop of Avila

answered for him, “Your Majesty, language is the perfect instrument of empire” (Hanke 1970:8). Though accurate, the bishop was not pretending to be novel or insightful; Nebrija in his introduction to the *Gramática de la lengua castellana* had already stated that “language has always been the partner [*compañera*] of empire” (Hanke 1970:127, n. 31).

Spanish language policy in New Spain (which includes most of the Nahuatl-speaking areas) was always subject to contradictions and dissensions: the officials of the Crown attempted, unsuccessfully for the most part, to force the inhabitants to speak Spanish; the missionaries, who manned the front lines of all language contact encounters, sought to protect the natives from secularizing influences and extreme forms of exploitation by isolating them linguistically from the Spaniards. Both sides employed the control of everyday language use to promote their distinct versions of the same goal: the peaceful colonization of Indian bodies and souls. Nevertheless, because the demographic ratios overwhelmingly favored the natives and a multiplicity of languages confronted the Europeans’ limited number of colonial agents, the Spaniards were forced to establish linguistic order primarily by disregarding certain languages and promoting others. To make up for the lack of official recognition and use of some languages (generally those spoken by peoples with limited demographic and economic resources, in possession of marginal lands, or living a non-sedentary existence), Nahuatl was foisted on a number of native communities throughout Mexico. This was a logical maneuver because at the moment of contact the majority of central Mexican city-states were controlled by Nahuatl speakers, and the use of the language had already been widely diffused among non-Nahua groups because of the Aztecs’ own nation-building efforts.

The transformation of Nahuatl into an official language of colonization (i.e., into a lingua franca) was also determined by the need to maximize the political usefulness of the native nobility. For instance, the training of a cadre of literate noblemen who could mediate between the Spanish officials and the local native rulers and laborers was an absolute necessity. And Spanish-style Nahuatl literacy, though always subject to being appropriated for pro-indianist concerns, contributed to the acculturation process, thereby helping to establish political control over the newly developed sector of native colonial leaders. Furthermore, the need to make the natives intelligible and predictable required that every effort be made to establish a common language throughout central Mexico. Not surprisingly,

most of the native-language documents, books, and manuals from the colonial period are written in Nahuatl.

Beyond the practice of choosing and promoting Indian languages to serve the colony's communication and political needs, the pre-contact hierarchical ordering of Nahuatl was maintained and modified to address new ends. First, after alphabetization was introduced, the Nahuatl spoken by the *macehualtin* ("commoners"), the so-called *macehuallahtolli* or "rustic, common speech," became the vernacular or notarial Nahuatl that was employed by low-ranking notaries in the course of local political administration. Second, the *pillahtolli*, the elegant, affected speech of the *pipiltin* or "nobles," formed the basis for Classical Nahuatl, the literary or "vehicular" language of instruction, Christianization, and ritualized communication. Vernacular Nahuatl, with its straightforward prose that closely adhered to the everyday speech register, was used throughout the colonial period primarily for local record keeping and town (or city) council administrative tasks. Its evolution (except for the periodization of its various linguistic transformations) followed the path expected whenever languages are in contact over long periods of time: phonetic shifts, adoption of loanwords, morphological and syntactic innovations, and semantic modifications (Karttunen and Lockhart 1976; Karttunen 1985).

Given that formal language instruction took place in Classical Nahuatl, the fact that most non-literary colonial documents are written in the vernacular points to both the colonists' incomplete control over the development of the literacy they introduced, and the failure of the missionary schools either to inculcate fully their version of "correct" Nahuatl or to monopolize the instruction of native literacy. Furthermore, the speed and thoroughness with which the natives appropriated Spanish-style literacy in the vernacular to serve local needs, coupled with their general disregard of Classical Nahuatl, especially after the sixteenth century when the native nobility began its precipitous decline, underline the tenuous hold missionary Nahuatl had within the native communities. Lastly, the contrasting uses and ultimate fates of these two forms of Nahuatl help to make evident a telling paradox: Classical Nahuatl, the language modeled after the one used by those who controlled the ideological machinery of pre-contact central Mexico, and which claimed to represent the purest ritual speech of the indigenous secular and religious leaders, functioned within the colony as the most important vehicle for acculturation, while the vernacular of the local communities greatly enhanced their

capacity to pursue their interests in the new socio-political order.

By Classical Nahuatl I mean the ritual and imaginative language used by the elites in the urban centers of central Mexico before and after contact. For two interrelated reasons this was the language that served the friar-grammarians as the exemplar when they adapted Nahuatl to alphabetic writing. First, the earliest efforts to bring the Nahuas under the control of the Europeans rested on the cooptation of the native nobility. The education under Spanish tutelage of the cooperative elite adults and children was one of the many tactics employed to ensure this cooptation, and having been the first to be instructed, it was their speech that came to be represented in alphabetic writing. Second, in order to employ language successfully as an "instrument of empire," the missionaries appropriated the authority already encoded in the discursive practices of the nobility. This they accomplished by translating the literature necessary for the Christianization process using the rhetorical moves and vocabulary of the newly alphabetized Classical Nahuatl. The ritual language, by which the native leaders had long helped to shape the ideology of the masses of commoners, became both the language of instruction about the ways of Europeans, and the language by which the ideological speech of the native leadership was domesticated to serve the ends of colonial discourse.

The adoption of Classical Nahuatl as the official language of the colonized also responded to a primary political requirement: the economical and efficient exploitation of native communities on behalf of colonial interests. To begin with, it simplified and thereby made possible language instruction for a large number of religious and secular colonial officials. In doing so, it both multiplied the number of points at which Spanish-dominated language contact could take place and increased the level of intrusion possible on these occasions, all without the need for physical force. In addition, although Classical Nahuatl was not the language of the pragmatic texts of the native notaries (usually the only literate Nahuas in the villages or small towns), it facilitated the Spanish-style organization of the Nahua communities by making language instruction at the local level more accessible and by contributing to the replacement of the native record-keeping apparatus with Spanish-style documentary forms (testamentary, judicial, tributary) that meshed better with the political and economic structure of the new colony. Also, the literacy made possible by the codification of Classical Nahuatl eased the flow of communication from the colonial authorities, which was critical for the efficient dissemination of regulations, the orderly

collection of bureaucratic and tactical information (and tribute), and the adjudication of Spanish-Nahua disputes. Lastly, even if the everyday prose of the notaries served local indigenous needs better than the trope-ridden language of the elite, because it lacked the finesse of Classical Nahuatl the contrast between the two linguistic modes contributed to marking vernacular Nahuatl as a "degraded" or rustic speech, thus helping to legitimate the prejudices and discriminatory acts that generally accompany a people whose language is considered inferior. (To this day in Mexico the "rustic" native languages are considered "dialects" rather than "real" languages.)

For the missionaries who devised the official language of the colonized, the explicit primary goal of language instruction was proselytization. Since this endeavor was their *raison d'être* for coming to the New World, they lost no time in composing a variety of appropriate texts, written with the aid of the native scholars whom they had taught to read and write in Nahuatl (and sometimes in Latin). With their native assistants the priests produced vocabularies and grammars, bilingual catechisms, devotional works, and confessional manuals; and translations of sermons, psalms, parts of the Bible, hagiographies, religious dramas, and secular morality tales like Aesop's fables. These materials provided the local priests with their most important ideological tools for molding native social and cultural practices into the image of those of (exploitable) Spanish peasants. Furthermore, these scholarly teams also redacted ethnographies of pre-contact native customs and institutions, along with indigenous histories, myths, legends, didactic dialogues (*huehuehtlahtolli*), and poetic expressions. Such works were complemented by the pre- and post-contact histories, chronicles, poetry, and mythical tales inscribed by the few literate Nahuas writing independently of the missionaries (but within the European grammatical and lexicographic canons). Together, these two sets of native language texts constitute what modern scholars call Classical Nahuatl literature.

Classical Nahuatl was the centerpiece of New Spain's colonial discourse. Its use permitted the colonists to press into service the language of the native elites so as to secure their assistance in the colonial project. It thereby led to the illusion, at the level of the Indian town, that the social order dominated by the Spaniards differed little, or not at all, from the one that had preceded their arrival. This effect resulted in part from the maintenance of the contrast between the language of the elite and that of the majority. As the vernacular was appropriated by local native authorities, its use established an

asymmetrical form of communication making possible socio-linguistic practices that reinforced the colonial hierarchy. For instance, regulatory statements emanated from Spanish-speaking or pro-Spanish authorities in Classical Nahuatl or Spanish, while petitions and assertions of compliance flowed to the centers of power in the vernacular. At the same time, the continuous subjection of public utility, as determined by ecclesiastical and secular colonial officials, limited the self-serving use by the Nahua elite of *unmonitored* Classical Nahuatl. Furthermore, the overwhelming control exercised by the Spaniards over formal Nahuatl, and the limited use of rustic Nahuatl outside the notarial setting (because of a lack of generalized literacy), functioned to limit the topics, vocabulary, and ritual settings permitted for the enunciation and performance of traditional (non-Christianized) native texts. As a consequence, most of the literature that came to be inscribed either had been purged of its anti-colonial and non-Christian elements or had encoded these in extremely opaque metaphors and rhetorical devices decipherable only by the initiated.

In short, Classical Nahuatl was clearly a device aimed at facilitating the movement of ideas from one set of discursive formations (Christianity, pre-contact ethics) to another (ethnic subordination, political order). And although the exclusions and intrusions that resulted from the regulatory practices of colonial discourse delimited the formation, circulation, and survival possibilities of *traditional* Nahuatl literature, its colonial versions, particularly as modified for the purposes of proselytization, and their translations, especially for priests who were supposed to use them to identify and root out idolatrous rites, played an important role in the colonial project. But none of this would have been possible without the translation of oral speech into alphabetized writing. With Nebrija's *Arte* and *Vocabulario* under one arm, and the *Doctrina cristiana* under the other, the missionary linguists set out to appropriate Nahuatl for use on behalf of the Spaniards. Few exercises of colonial power were to prove as effective and long-lasting as this initiative.

### *The Colonization of Oral Literature and Its Translation*

The pre-contact central Mexican writing system was complex, composed of a combination of ideograms, pictograms, a few syllabic glyphs, color codes, and the symbolic use of pictorial space and image

orientation. It was used by Nahua government officials for recording tasks that relied on the quantitative representation of objects, like censuses or tribute lists; maps; chronologically ordered histories and genealogies, including records of natural phenomena; and administrative memoranda, along with the transmission of military and bureaucratic information. Priests wrote (or had scribes write) calendric/divinatory almanacs, liturgical guides, prayers, descriptions of deeds of the gods, and other accounts concerning the supernatural. However, the interpretability of the more narratological, less quantitative or chronological accounts, was limited not only by knowledge of the meanings of the glyphs but, more importantly, by the reader's previous memorization of the accompanying oral text. Thus, when pre-contact Nahua writings were employed to transmit literary, imaginative texts, as opposed to straightforward accounts or general descriptions, they seem to have served primarily as systemic guides to assist the memory.

This form of literacy required that the narratives associated with the pictorial books, whose hieroglyphs served as mnemonic devices, be taught in the schools of the urban centers or handed down across the generations and social sectors via groups of ritual specialists and creative artists. The independence of writing from orality made possible by alphabetization had the effect of weakening the link between literacy and the authority of the native leaders (the keepers of the correct "reading" of the hieroglyphs). Needless to say, the missionaries quickly rushed into the space created by this rupture.

The invention (or improvisation) of written Classical Nahuatl took place through the registers of the Roman alphabet (adapted in part to Nahuatl phonology), and Spanish grammar, as originally set out by Nebrija. Through these European prototypes the missionary linguists codified the syntax, morphology, phonetics (orthography), and lexicon of oral Nahuatl. In doing so, colonial praxis was served not only in the many ways described above, but in other important forms. First, as just noted, it helped to replace the authority of the native priests and teachers by that of the missionaries. Second, the standardization of the language imposed a canon that contributed to the delegitimation (if not necessarily the abandonment) of regional dialects. The attempt to homogenize the population contributed to colonial control by promoting the breakdown of regional differences (linguistic, cultural, and social), whose presence, for instance, militated against the efficient allocation of labor and made proselytization and acculturation more difficult. Third, the implanting of linguistic uniformity slowed and in some place made impossible the

creation of parochial indigenous writings that reflected local speech patterns, interests, and demands. Lastly, alphabetization had the effect of colonizing native oral literature.

As Dennis Tedlock (1983) and Dell Hymes (1977) have observed, literary texts transmitted orally—like any other oral literature—are most likely versed during their performance to simplify their recounting, to aid in memorization, and for aesthetic reasons. Although the Nahuas distinguished prose (*tlahtolli*) from poetry or song (*cuicatli*) (León-Portilla 1983), the inscription in alphabetic writing of their literature had a standardizing effect, transforming almost all the narratives and much of the poetry into unversed prose. The flattening out of the Nahua literary taxonomy in the process of inscription, although some missionaries made much of the richness of native genres, suggests the extent of control over indigenous aesthetics made possible by alphabetization.

Despite the missionaries' extensive use of chants and Christianized native songs in the colonization process, and quite apart from some very insightful arguments to the contrary (Haly 1986), most of the performative aspects of the traditional works have been lost, making their reconstruction necessarily speculative (e.g., Karttunen and Lockhart 1980). This loss, coupled with the lack of consensus around the type and degree of versification, meter, and stress, has forced modern scholars, until very recently, to translate into narrative prose the Nahuatl literature that is not already versified. Although frequently one cannot know if what is being translated was prose or poetry, much excellent work is being done on native taxonomies to help keep the genres straight (León-Portilla 1983).

Alphabetization, which greatly facilitated the deployment of the Spanish mechanisms of control, did not come about easily. The linguistic difficulties encountered by the missionaries and their native colleagues during the early stages of the inscribing process were legion, and their solutions, or lack of them, affect how Nahuatl is translated and understood today. One critical problem was how to represent Nahuatl phonology with the Roman alphabet, using primarily Spanish phonetic values. The pioneering work of Frances Karttunen and James Lockhart (1976:64–74) on orthography and diacritics has helped to clarify the way the missionaries met this difficulty. In brief, Nahuatl phonemes were left firmly framed within the still polemical phonemic structure of the sixteenth-century Spanish alphabet, notwithstanding the fact that during the early stages of language contact Spanish orthography was itself undergoing profound transformations. When the friars employed the Spanish

alphabet to encode in script a set of alien phonemes (like unfamiliar consonants and a broad range of vowel contrasts) that were found, for instance, among the Mayas and Tagalogs, they employed several diacritical marks or invented non-Roman characters (Karttunen 1985:79–80; Rafael 1988:39–54). For reasons that are not clear, however, when dealing with Nahuatl they generally resorted to undifferentiated spellings of distinct sounds. Since it seems that only the native speakers discriminated among these subtle variations (and they had no need for diacritical markings), the less than adequate orthography served the colonial ends for which it was developed.

Nonetheless, the lack of distinction in Nahuatl between some consonants, like *p/b*, *t/d*, *c/g*, and the absence of *f*, *r*, *s*, and *j* means that some texts have words that to the unsuspecting translator cannot be identified easily as Spanish, Nahuatl, errors, or previously unencountered attestations. Even more problematical is the fact that while every Nahuatl consonant is spelled with either one or two letters (e.g., *tç*, or *tz*, the geminate *ll*, or *tl*), the glottal stop was generally left unmarked, except for an occasional representative *h*. Furthermore, the Spanish-based Nahuatl orthographies rarely distinguish the difference between long and short vowels. Until the publication of the grammars of Nahuatl by J. Richard Andrews (1975) and Michel Launey (1978), and the dictionary by Karttunen (1983), little attention was paid to the need for diacritics to distinguish vowel length and the glottal stop. Yet diacritics or, more precisely, knowledge of the distinctions they could represent if present, is sometimes critical to resolving the semantic problems that result when words that are similarly spelled but have totally different meanings are encountered, as the following examples suggest (where, <sup>˘</sup> = short, <sup>ˆ</sup> = long, <sup>˘</sup> = glottal stop):

*âchtli* (elder brother of younger sister), *âchtli* (seed)  
*âhuic* (toward the water), *˘ahuic* (from here to there)  
<sup>˘</sup>*atlâcâtl* (inhuman, reasonless man), *âtl* <sup>˘</sup>*acâtl* (sailor, fisherman)  
*mêtztli* (moon, month), *mêtztli* (muscle, leg)  
*t* <sup>˘</sup>*atli* (father), *tâtli* (you drink [from *âtli*])  
*tlâtía nic* (to hide), *tlâtía* (to burn)  
*tôca* (plant, bury), *tóca* (to follow someone)

Carochi 1983, 126v-128v

Beyond translation puzzles resulting from words spelled without diacritics, there are those caused by the tensions between an oral literature that follows the pronunciation dictated by the rules of Nahuatl morphology, and its inscription in Spanish-based orthog-

raphy, with the latter in turn reflecting the tension of having been “caught in a tug of war between representing pronunciation and writing things in a predictive manner that [left] the fine points of pronunciation to the speaker” (Karttunen and Lockhart 1987:94). When phonetic representation predominates, as is frequently the case when the author was a native, the same word pronounced in different ways leads to significant confusion for the translator; however, a reliance on the canonical orthography might distance the inscribed word from its pronunciation so as to make its decipherment difficult.

This difficulty arises because Nahuatl is an agglutinative and polysynthetic language. As morphemes in the nature of affixes and roots combine to make up words, phrases, and even whole sentences, consonants and vowels are juxtaposed, causing one of the two to assimilate (to approximate fully or partially the sound of the other). In the absence of a consistent application of the rules of assimilation (or the erratic use of optional assimilations) by the author, the identity of the morphemes may become enigmatic, making their translation speculative (though the translator may not be aware of this). For instance, native speakers writing somewhat removed from the influence of Spanish overseers tended to disregard the latter’s standard spellings (which were more or less consistent regardless of context). Instead, their reliance on a more phonetic orthography made their texts more sensitive to the assimilation, gemination, reduction, and intrusion of consonants. However, scholars today who rely primarily on the canonical forms of missionary grammarians and their native students have difficulties recognizing the equivalences between the two orthographies. Thus a Spaniard might write *oacico* (*ôahcico*) “he arrived,” where a native writer may spell it *ohuacico*, introducing what might be construed as an additional morpheme (Andrews 1975:9–12; Karttunen and Lockhart 1987:94–100). Needless to say, this problem, common to the translation of all agglutinative and many polysynthetic languages, is the most ubiquitous of all for translators.

The sixteenth-century missionary-grammarians encoded unexpected and dissimilar Nahuatl grammatical details within the canons of the traditional Latin and Spanish grammars familiar to them. But they were aware that the European models did not fully represent Nahuatl. In his 1571 Nahuatl-Spanish dictionary Fray Alonso de Molina (1970: *Epistola nuncupatoria*), sensitive to the particular nuances of native grammar, stated, “the language and phrasing of these [natives], especially the Nahuas and Mexicans, is very different



from the language and phrasing of Latin, Greek and Spanish." By "phrasing" Molina meant the morphology and syntax of Nahuatl (León-Portilla 1980:11-14). Fray Andres de Olmos was no less cognizant of the problem when he noted that

In the art of the Latin language I believe the best manner and order that can be found is the one followed by Antonio de Nebrija in his [text], but because in [Nahuatl] the order he used would not fit, because many things are missing that in the grammar are very important, such as declensions, supines, and the types of verbs used to note the diversity among them . . . , I will not be subject to reprimand if I do not follow in everything the *Arte* of Antonio.

Olmos 1885,9

The reference to Nebrija is to his Spanish grammar, the *Gramática [Arte] de la lengua castellana* (1926 [1492]). As noted above, this work and the *Vocabulario de Romance en Latin* (1973 [1516]) made possible the earliest Nahuatl grammars and vocabularies that, subject to necessary modifications, were modeled after them (Karttunen 1988). A careful reading of the pioneer Nahuatl grammars (e.g., by Molina, Olmos, or Carochi) makes it possible to articulate the linguistic idiosyncrasies of Nahuatl despite their forced labels and sometimes stilted structure. Without these prototypes it is difficult to imagine how the missionaries would have been able, in a matter of decades, to fix in script a language that, with the exception of the use of ideograms, pictograms, numerical symbols, and a limited number of phonograms, existed almost exclusively in oral form.

### *Otherness and Colonial Discourse*

The otherness experienced when confronting a text recognized as Classical Nahuatl literature is not only the result of its being an inadequate representation of the oral original. The non-linear structure of Nahuatl poetics, where verses focus on a common theme rather than following each other in a logical narrative (Karttunen and Lockhart 1980:16-17), and the seemingly inescapable labyrinths of its figurative language differ strikingly from Western aesthetics. While the apparently straightforward and pragmatic vernacular Nahuatl documents like wills, notary records, letters, and petitions present even more complications than those identified by their interpreters, the elite texts that span from narrative

historical accounts to esoteric poetry are far more opaque.

In the sixteenth century (as is sometimes the case today, e.g., Bierhorst 1985a:16-41), the desire to make the meaning of these texts transparent could conflict with the need to maintain or increase their surplus meaning. Space for interpretation was needed to locate in the natives' own words support for the Europeans' assumptions about the origin and nature of the inhabitants and cultures of the New World. A common topos of missionary hermeneutics that served this end was the observation that translation without the assistance of native interpreters was impossible. Assertions of this sort were used as arguments to advocate the maintenance of schools for Indians, to gain political and financial support on behalf of ethnographic research into native life, and, ironically, to permit the missionary-teachers to claim for themselves a monopoly on the authentic comprehension of indigenous ideas, motives, and needs. Therefore, the desire to dominate the lives of natives (paternalism) and personal and collective self-interest, as much as genuine ignorance of Nahuatl tropes, led sixteenth-century missionaries, like Fray Diego Durán, to summarize the problem of interpretability and its solution as follows:

All of their chants are composed of such obscure metaphors that there is hardly a person who can understand them, unless they are very deliberately studied and discussed so as to understand their meaning. I have intentionally set myself to listen with much attention to what they sing. And between the words and terms of the metaphor it seems nonsense to me; but, afterward, having been discussed and conferred, they are admirable sentences, both in the divine things they compose today and in the worldly songs.

Durán 1971, 299-300

Even more than in Europe, irony was the master trope of sixteenth-century colonial Mexico. As the dominant modality of figuration, ironic troping was the soul of colonial discourse; without it the identity of Christian morals with the colonial ethos would have been impossible. It characterized the rhetoric of priests like Durán when they sought to monopolize control over the interpretation of Nahua reality by admitting to the inadequacy of their own comprehension of their discourse. Irony also appears as a basic fact of colonial praxis in that the desire to make Indians confess themselves so that they might be understood, and thereby "saved," was ultimately an intelligence gesture whose object was submission and control. Furthermore, Durán, who like other early students of indig-

enous customs believed it was his duty to tell on Indians, claimed that he was moved to write about the Nahuas "by the zeal of informing and illuminating [the] ministers so that their task may not be in vain" (Durán 1971:386). But if the supplement that completes the signification of the Nahuatl chants (verses/songs/poems—presumably the core of Nahua religious beliefs) can be provided only by indigenous hermeneutics, then the real object of missionary research was persuasion or subterfuge, rather than exegesis.

Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, writing at the same time but from a more informed perspective (having spent many years studying the language and culture), was even more transparent when it came to explaining the political function of the space between the meanings of the words and the sense intended by the tropes:

Our adversary the Devil . . . planted in this land a forest or mountainous thicket full of scrubby undergrowth in order to perform his business from it and to hide in it as the wild beasts do. . . . This forest or thicket are the chants that in this land he plotted to have sung in his service . . . without their being able to be understood except by those . . . who are native and fluent in the language.

Sahagún 1975 II:172-73

Sahagún clearly recognized that between (let us say) lexical or linguistic competence (knowing what the words mean) and a comprehension of the semantic code (knowing what they signify) lies a strategic terrain. Given the tropological mode of figuring colonial experience that reigned in his day, by a transposition of intentions the field of contestation is characterized as where the Devil (read Indians), rather than the missionaries, creates surplus and/or no meanings to counter the initiatives of the opposition. Like Durán, Sahagún insists that in this battlefield only those Indians adept at deploying semantic ruses can overcome their damage. With this maneuver Sahagún conflates, in a colonial discourse context, the politics of interpretation and the problems of translation.

Fray Bernardino was so sensitive to Nahuatl's political dimensions and actual and potential linguistic complexities that he refused to try his hand at translating the twenty religious hymns that followed the quotation cited above. Even when the topic to be translated was Christian doctrine, he argued that only those works "written with [the Indians] . . . can appear and may be free of all heresy . . . , [adding that] whatever is to be rendered in their language, if

it is not examined by them . . . cannot be free of defect" (Sahagún 1950-82:10:83-84). From what we know today about the language (its syntax, morphology, and figurative lexicon), it is easy to appreciate the otherness experienced by the friars when confronting Nahuatl, but our concern here has been mainly with the intentional (religiously and socio-politically motivated) otherness of Nahuatl, for the uninitiated *and* the native speakers.

With regard to the deliberate projection of otherness by the Indians, it was well known in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that Nahuas who engaged in traditional religious, curing, and divinatory practices shared an esoteric language, *nahuallahtolli*, that was ostensibly used to communicate with supernatural beings. The opaqueness of this language, which is used to articulate a significant part of the Nahuatl literary corpus, had at least four practical functions. First, it constituted a magical discourse that, like the language of Roman Catholic sacramental speech, operated *ex opere operato* in order to effect specific results as a consequence of its mere utterance. Logically, this instrumental language was considered powerful and dangerous; its tropes were obstacles helping to confine its circulation so that witchcraft and unintended effects could be minimized. Second, the restrictions placed on the communication of this discourse contributed to maintaining the boundary between the professionals who used it and the uninitiated who were the recipients of its effects. Thus, like the jargons of lawyers or doctors, which by restricting the dissemination and/or intelligibility of the code keep the initiated in power and in possession of prestige or wealth, *nahuallahtolli* and cognate literary discourses were meant to keep the specialists employed and the social/ethnic boundaries firm, before and after the arrival of the Spaniards. Third, the tropological richness of Nahuatl poetics served as a discursive form of resistance to the advances of colonial and Christianizing forces. As was well known by local priests, it made possible a secret communication system whose proper use distinguished the conspirators who employed it from the collaborators who denounced it. Lastly, because Classical Nahuatl literature is composed primarily of the affected speech of the native elite, it was a mark of breeding that also contributed to the maintenance of a border between those who labored to pay tribute and those who collected it. In effect, there were many reasons for the Nahuas to conspire with the missionaries in promoting the latter's claim that only the indigenous could understand the thicket of tropes that hid the satanic motives.

*The Translation of Nahuatl Literature Today*

If Durán and Sahagún were correct, and only natives privy to the esoteric discourse could provide supplement needed for its rendition in another language, the modern translator is in a difficult position. Without informants to do the explaining (cf. Tedlock 1983:124-47), the challenges surrounding any move to unravel the metaphorical tangles found throughout Nahuatl literature are overwhelming. Consequently, the clearing of the semantic underbrush has been the single most important and challenging task for contemporary scholars who, following the practices of their sixteenth- and seventeenth-century counterparts (Gingerich 1983:112-14), are making use of and contributing to the development of lists of metaphors (Karttunen and Lockhart 1987:51-63), building concordances to assist in the identification of particular uses in differing contexts (Bierhorst 1985b), and creating indexes of morphemes to help uncover the nuances of the language (Campbell 1985). In addition, literary critics working on deciphering the creative works of the Nahuas have combined the interpretive tools of folklorists, structuralists, post-structuralists, and others with those of the ethnohistorians to come up with strikingly nuanced readings of heretofore formidable texts (Gingerich 1977, 1986, 1987; Bierhorst 1983; Carr and Gingerich 1983).

However, the tropological exuberance of Nahuatl is far from being the only obstacle to the decoding of its meaning. After all, solutions to the complications entailed by the use of metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche are limited by our knowledge of how the sculptural, pictographic, and alphabetic texts, upon which our representations of Nahua culture are based, permit us to understand the ways in which the natives assigned signification to their idiomatic and figurative words and phrases. Some of the semantic matrices of the culture have been uncovered by art historians applying stylistic and iconographic tools to decipher the carved images and painted codices (e.g., Pasztor 1983). Their work and that of some of the more interpretive archaeologists make possible the testing of translations of inscribed works against cognate symbolic representations. However, our understanding of Nahua literature is still at an early stage of development and continues to be subject to the kinds of polemical interpretations that result from overly focused speculations and isolated research. Despite a lack of consensus on the possible meaning of key ideological issues or on the interpretation of various aspects of the culture and its myths, real

progress has been made on the linguistic and literary fronts.

After the "golden age" of missionary ethnography, little attention was paid to the imaginative labors of the Nahuas (beyond that of a few colonial grammarians and collectors) until the study of Classical Nahuatl texts as literature resumed at the end of the last century. At that time scholars like Daniel G. Brinton (1969 [1887]) and Eduard Seler (1902-23) transcribed, translated, and published commentaries on the style, content, and meaning of a number of Nahuatl masterworks. However, work on the subject stopped in the United States after Brinton's nineteenth-century studies and resumed only with the appearance in 1963 of Miguel León-Portilla's *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind*, followed in 1969 by his *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico*. In contrast, beginning in 1934 León-Portilla's teacher, Angel Maria Garibay K., published in Mexico a series of volumes on the topic that established the literary production of the Nahuas as a legitimate scholarly field of inquiry (Garibay 1971). In turn, the Garibay-León-Portilla precedents inspired a host of translators (particularly into English and French), poetic innovators, and genuine critics working in Europe, the United States, and Mexico (Bierhorst 1985a:121-33; Gingerich 1987:87).

Since the 1970s the number of scholars who can translate Nahuatl texts has grown substantially, and the new students of the language and culture have brought with them significantly different perspectives and more diversified tool boxes than those common among the scholars who initiated the field. Not surprisingly, a quantum leap has taken place in our understanding of the language (including its transformations at contact and in the centuries that followed) and the material and ideational characteristics of Nahua culture (e.g., Klor de Alva, Nicholson, and Quiñones Keber 1988). This flourishing of Nahuatl scholarship and the widespread dissemination of its results make evident that a discussion of the translation of Classical Nahuatl and its attendant problems is no longer only an esoteric exercise for linguists or solely a matter of chauvinist, nation-building romanticism on the part of Mexicans or Chicanos.

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## *The Translator; or, Why the Crocodile Was Not Disillusioned*

*a play in one act*



DENNIS TEDLOCK

### *Characters*

PALEOGRAPHER  
MANUSCRIPT  
DICTIONARY  
ETYMOLOGIST  
EPIGRAPHER  
TRANSLATOR  
LITERALIST  
NATIVE

### *Scene*

*Center is a desk with a swivel chair that faces downstage; stage right, barely in reach from the chair, is a bookcase the same height as the desk, facing stage left. Between bookends on the downstage edge of the desk top and in the bookcase are various volumes, many of folio size and some about to fall over or fall apart. Stage left is a window, the only source of light; otherwise, the stage left, stage right, and upstage walls are completely covered with overstuffed bookshelves. Suspended above the swivel chair is a giant cut-out cartoon balloon with a cloud outline, bearing these words:*

POPOL VUH:  
THE MAYAN BOOK  
OF THE DAWN OF LIFE

*Seated in the chair is TRANSLATOR, reaching around for books in fits and starts, sometimes finding them at his feet. Most of them*