Critical Models for the Study of Native American Literature: The Case of Nahuatl

Willard Gingerich

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SMOOTHING THE GROUND
ESSAYS ON NATIVE AMERICAN ORAL LITERATURE

edited by
BRIAN SWANN
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix
Introduction xi
Brian Swann

CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW
Native American Literatures 3
Kenneth Lincoln

Native American Oral Narratives: Context and Continuity 39
Kenneth M. Roemer

THE QUESTION OF TRANSLATION AND LITERARY CRITICISM
On the Translation of Style in Oral Narrative 57
Dennis Tedlock

American Indian Verbal Art and the Role of the Literary Critic 78
John Bierhorst

Traditional Native American Literature: the Translation Dilemma 87
Jeffrey F. Huntsman

The Wolf Comes: Indian Poetry and Linguistic Criticism 98
Karl Kroeber

Critical Models for the Study of Indigenous Literature: 112
The Case of Nahuatl
Willard Gingerich

FOCUS ON STORIES
Victoria Howard’s ‘Gitskux and his Older Brother’: 129
A Clackamas Chinook Myth
Dell Hymes

Stone Boy: Persistent Hero 171
Elaine Jakmer

The Vagina Dentata Motif in Nahuatl and Pueblo Mythic Narratives: 187
A Comparative Study
Pat Carr and Willard Gingerich
Some of the essays in this book have appeared in journals.


Willard Gingerich: Critical Models for the Study of Indigenous Literature: The Case of Nahuatl

The study of native American texts as literature has begun to take on features of critical seriousness in North America but is still struggling to discover a critical language which can do justice to the modes of these oral indigenous texts and their derivatives. Nahuatl, the tradition with which redaction of oral indigenous literature begins in the Americas (1520s), is the primary case in point. It is surely the more ironic of the many paradoxes which abound in the history of Mexico, that the Nahuatl language texts of the 16th and 17th centuries, whose overt literary qualities have been so emphatically and continuously remarked, should continue so little analyzed and understood as literature in 1982, four full centuries after many of these texts were first redacted. Even after four centuries of critical scrutiny, some of the most basic characteristics of genre, mode, and function in 16th century Nahuatl texts have yet to be described.

My intention here is to survey, in the briefest possible fashion, the record of serious Nahuatl literary analysis (particularly the contributions of Garibay), note some current contributions, and finally to suggest some promising sources and models for the unique and culture-specific critical language which will be needed to describe adequately the Nahuatl literary legacy. I should add, for the sake of clarity, that when I say “literary texts” I refer to the entire body of 16th and 17th century written codices characterized by the figurative, repetitious, polysynthetic and often occult tecpillatolli style—which is itself still one of the primary mysteries of Nahuatl literature. This includes almost everything, but most particularly I have in mind all the scattered huehueteotlalolli texts (primarily the Sahagún and Olmos collections), the narrative texts of Sahagún in their various manuscripts as well as Books I and II, the Crónica Mexicayotl, most of the Anales de Cuauhtitlan, the Leyenda de los soles, the Anales de Quauhtitlan, the Anales Historicos de la Nación Mexicana, the narrative parts of Chimalpahin, the “Conjuros” of Ruiz de Alarcón, and of course the Cantares mexicanos and the Romances de los Señores collections.

Scarcely a single clerical historian failed to make some passing comment on the metaphorical or convoluted nature of these Nahuatl texts, and the need for some “special attention” to those qualities on the part of the listener, or reader. Durán is most explicit:
All the native lays are interwoven with such obscure metaphors that there is hardly a man who can understand them unless they are studied in a very special way and explained so as to penetrate their meaning. For this reason I have intentionally set myself to listen with much attention to what is sung; and while the words and terms of the metaphors seem nonsense to me, afterward, having discussed and conferred [with the natives, I can see that] they seem to be admirable sentences, both in the divine things composed today and in the worldly songs. [Durán, p. 300]

Boturini pointed out the difficulty of explicating texts which “mystify historical facts with constant allegorizing” (in Brinton, 1887, p. 27). Caroqui makes reference to the “extravagant ... poetic dialect [of] the ancients” (Ibid., p. 29); Clavigero points out the confusing use of interjections, vocables, and meaningless syllables in these texts and called their language “pure, pleasant, brilliant, [and] figurative” (Ibid., p. 28). Brinton was of the opinion that “the Nahuatl language ... lends itself with peculiar facility to ambiguities of expression and obscure figures of speech” (Ibid.), and Garibay who returned to these problems time and again speaks of Nahuatl literature’s “impenetrable obscurity” (Garibay, 1933, p. 73), of the “exorbitant profusion” of its metaphors (Ibid., p. 76), concluding that “it is undeniable that many poems have various meanings. The supremely difficult and tentative thing is trying to determine exactly the meanings they have” (Ibid., p. 74). “A detailed study of the technique of metaphor in these poems,” he notes, “would be useful to their understanding” (Ibid., p. 76)—a study, I must point out, that has still to be published, more than a quarter-century after Garibay’s indication. As late as 1977, in that tour de force of historical analysis, The Toltec, Nigel Davies laments the many episodes in the old texts “to which it is hard to attach a historical significance,” episodes which are the impositions of “ancient legend ... upon the historical record” (Davies, 1977, p. 74). But it is still Sahagún, with his sure eye for the demonic, who most emphatically strikes his own metaphor of the Nahuatl texts, and identifies the origin of their notorious obscurity:

Our Enemy [the Devil] planted in this land a forest or wilderness filled with thick underbrush from which to do his business and in which to hide himself safely, as do the wild beasts and the most dangerous serpents; ... this forest or over-grown hill are the chants. ... They sing to him, and without ability to understand, except for those who are natives well-versed in this language. [Garibay, 1933, p. 73]

Were it not in archaic Spanish, we might guess this was some contemporary culture-commentator lamenting the supposedly inaccessible and invidious nature of modern poetry.

In order to assist the achievement of that “special attention” Durán considered necessary for comprehension of Nahuatl literature, a number of early grammarians added commentaries on the figurative modes of the language to their works. In 1547 Father Olmos dedicated the entire 8th Chapter of the Third Part of his Arte, or “Grammar,” to explication of what he called “The Manner of Speech of the Elders in their Ancient Discourses.” Father Juan Mijangos added a translation of 195
"Phrases and Modes of Elegant Speech among the Ancient Mexicans" to his book of sermons in 1621, and Sahagún listed 83 proverbs (tsiantatlil), 46 conundrums (zasanatli), and 92 metaphors (machiotlatlil), with translations in Chapters 42-43 of his book of rhetorical orations.

Until the emergence of Father Garibay as a commentator on Nahuatl manuscripts around mid-century, all discussions of literary aesthetics, mode, genre, or interpretation in these texts were made by scholars for whom the problems of anthropology or history were vastly more significant than the preoccupations of literary historians or critics, and whose critical vocabulary was minimal.

Seler and his German descendants set rigorous standards for interpretive scrutiny of indigenous texts, contributed immensely to the arts of paleography and translation, and to sorting out the baroque inter-dependencies of the various 16th and 17th century clerical writings; the problems of iconography interpretation and historical veracity of the chronicles, however, greatly overshadowed their concerns for literary structure. Daniel Brinton, a personal friend of Walt Whitman, included three volumes of Nahuatl texts in his 8-volume "Library of American Aboriginal Literature," but his paleographies were distorted and his commentary on poetic structure limited to outlining some of the Nahuatl terminology referent to chant practice and its accompanying instruments (Brinton, 1887, p. 13-30). It is not altogether coincidental that Brinton, a somewhat literary anthropologist, was also emphatic in his attack on the strictly historical method; in an 1882 essay on the Quetzalcoatl-Tezcatlipoca narrative he wrote,

Let it be understood, hereafter that whoever uses these names in an historical sense betrays an ignorance of the subject he handles, which were it in the better known field of Aryan or Egyptian lore, would at once convict him of not meriting the name of scholar. [Brinton, 1882, p. 35]

The effort to develop a critical vocabulary of Nahuatl literature has gone on always in the shadow of historical, anthropological, and more recently, linguistic commentary. Not that this is necessarily detrimental: anthropological linguistics especially offers new tools for developing a critical language for Nahuatl literature, and literary texts themselves, while generated by anti-historical forces, always reflect their historical contexts. But Brinton's comment, his vehemence, reflects the very secondary status of literary commentary in Nahuatl studies at the close of the 19th century, particularly in reference to narrative texts. Even as late as 1974, in his commentary on the Sahagún and Cuauhtitlan narratives of Quetzalcoatl, John Bierhorst finds it necessary to protest the "strong admixture of euhemerism" (the attribution of the origin of myth to historical men and events) which he feels characterize mid-twentieth century Mexican studies (Bierhorst, 1974, p. 77). The trouble with euhemerism for the literary scholar, of course, is that it reduces all problems of myth to questions of historical identity, and worse, directs all attention away from the texts themselves and their imaginative qualities to some vaguely conceived "real events."
Not until the work of Father Garibay do we find a serious scholar who attempts a sustained analysis of Nahuatl texts for literary quality, an attempt embodied primarily in his edition of the Los Romances Manuscript, his partial edition of the Cantares Manuscript, his edition of the 20 Hymns from the Sahagún Manuscripts, and his 2-volume *Historia de la literatura náhuatl*, the first and still only comprehensive attempt to survey all primary Nahuatl texts for their literary structure and identity. His survey of lyrical, religious, and dramatic genres of poetry focused attention on regional style names such as *otonoecaualtli* (Otomi Song) and *huecxotzincoatl* (in the Huexotzinco style), on functional or performance designations such as *teponaztocualtli* (hand drum song), *ahuilteoecaualtli* (pleasure song), and *cuecasoteoecaualtli* (ticklish dance song), and on the three major lyric genres: *cuauehoecaualtli* (eagle songs), *xopecaucaualtli* (green-time songs), and *tocoeoecaualtli* (songs of anguish). He sketched the panorama of lyric imagery and thematics, and identified four basic stylistic procedures: parallelism (in 3 patterns), the diphase (which he claimed was unique to Nahuatl), refrain (in 3 variants), and “clasp” words. He emphasized the oral-musical character of the original text, and their associations with dance and performance, and suggested five types of metre phrasing. He outlined fragments of “epics” and “sagas” in various manuscripts, pointing out the generic terms *xiuhltoacaualtli* (the year-count), *itoloaca* (things said about people), *iapecua* (spoken things); he identified the *tochuetzotl* (discourse of the elders) as a literary genre and found fragments of a dramatic literature. His edition and commentary of the 20 Hymns from the Sahagún manuscripts added another major chapter to the on-going scrutiny of those 329 lines of hieratic, iconographic literature.

There, however, with certain brilliant exceptions, the case still rests for our generally accessible knowledge of Nahuatl literary structure, even though as Garibay himself was the first to point out, he never intended his survey of literary forms and genres to be anything more than “rudimentary” (Garibay, 1953, p. 21).

In matters of stylistics, Munro Edmonson has indicated the present need to expand Garibay’s rudimentary terminology:

_A peculiarity is posed by the stylistic features of the more traditional texts, and particularly by what Garibay baptized disfrazismo: the coupling of two images to suggest a third meaning. 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 disfrazismo as an embellishment, but also polynomial repetition with both semantic and poetic force._

[Edmonson, 1974, p. 12]

Father Garibay’s literary survey is marred in several points by the models and critical language he draws from Classical and Romance Studies. In the attempt to define the genres of “epic” and “drama,” in particular, Garibay suggests some parallels which can only throw the Nahuatl texts into a shadow. Beginning with a Sahagún comparison between Tula and Troy, he touches on the Aristotelian definition of epic, and goes on to mention Homer, the Ramayana and the Mahaparatha. He
tentatively proposes trochaic tetrameter as the Nahuatl "epic meter," but then is
impelled to offer four reasons why no meter at all can be found in many texts of
"epic" material, finally concluding: "the Nahuatl metric had not arrived at a clear
regularity such as we see in Sanscrit or Greek" (Garibay, 1953, p. 283). This cannot
bode well for the Nahuatl, of course, and Garibay finds himself led time and again
to refer to "fragments" and "vestiges" of epic cycles, eventually determining that

A rudimentary epic form has arrived to us, but of sufficient force to merit considera-
tion. It will not sustain comparisons with Homer nor even with the Icelandic Eddas,
but neither can its value, within the limits of its relativity, be denied. [Garibay,
1953, p. 328]

For what might seem apparent reasons, therefore, Father Garibay closes with the
disclaimer that this survey of the "epic" seems to him the least satisfactory chapter of
his entire Historia. Even then he had a sense of the Nahuatl texts betrayed by
inappropriate models and false formal analogies.

A similar conclusion, which I need not document here, is developed in the Historia
for dramatic poetry. In both cases, and in various other segments of his work,
Garibay falls prey to formal literary models taken from Greek, Hindu, Hebrew,
Germanic, or Spanish traditions, models which pose expectations the Nahuatl texts
have no chance of fulfilling and which obscure the real accomplishments of the
Nahuatl artists. To discuss Ce Acatl Quetzalcoatl and Aeneas as cultural heroes or
ancestor figures may make clear sense, but to compare Book III of the Florentine
Codex or the Annals of Cuauhtitlan to the Aeneid is literary folly. Which does not
mean the Nahuatl texts cannot stand on their own merits. They are clearly evolved
from a refined literary tradition whose vocabulary, mythical resources, and textual
subtleties are perhaps as extensive as those of Virgil, but whose modes, intentions,
functions, and formal ideals are generated from a wholly distinct aesthetic and
cultural ethos. Until the unique genius of that Nahuatl tradition has been generally
exposed through a sufficiently extensive, resilient, and independent critical vocabu-
lary, the kind of conclusions which Garibay reluctantly arrives at, abounding in the
terms "rudimentary," "fragmented," and "embryonic," will be inevitable.

So where are the post-Garibayian studies in modes, intentions, functions, and
formal ideals of the Nahuatl literary artists and their texts coming from? As I've
suggested above, with notable exceptions, they're not. But before looking at those
exceptions and then at some suggested resources that might be useful in development
of a Nahuatl critical vocabulary, perhaps it would be helpful to step back for a
moment and identify what exactly we mean by "literary concerns," what the basic
objectives of literary scholarship are in themselves, so we can see more clearly what
we still don't know about Nahuatl literature as literature.

Literary study is the analysis of any given text according to one of two foci,
depending on the immediate purpose of the study. The first is to examine and
describe as accurately as possible the ontology of the text itself. Since a literary text is
a mental or linguistic object and does not conform in any physical sense to the shape of the oral or print medium in which it is embodied, this means apprehending fully and then describing the complete mental structure or form of a particular occasion of an extended use of language. Translated, that means literary study is an extended linguistics, the analysis and description of a large linguistic object called, for example, *Moby-Dick* rather than single words, or phrases, or sentences. When there have accumulated among us several linguistic objects of the general mental form of *Moby-Dick*, say *Lord Jim*, *Farewell to Arms*, and *Los de abajo*, we may advance to description of some abstract, general thing called the novel, whose formal characteristics and cultural ideals as an aesthetic mental experience we might then codify and use in turn as a basis for judgment of such new linguistic objects of that general shape as might appear among us, for example, *Cien años de soledad*. The focus of this analysis stays strictly on the text or texts in question, describing its “behavioral” features as it were, its “gestures” to use an anthropological analogy. The investigator looks carefully at all the linguistic devices by which meaning is encoded into an aesthetic artifact, into a particular, individual, and unique mental object which gives pleasure to its reader or listener and performs some social or personal function necessary to him; how its particular uses of image, metaphor, accent, tone, semantic reference and all their extended forms interact and work together to produce the style or the actuality of that particular text. The other focus of literary study—and it goes without saying that these are complementary, almost inseparable activities—is the description of meaning. What is the unique, particular, and individual knowledge or vision of things that this particular conglomeration of linguistic signs has embodied? Having carefully and precisely observed the tracks, what can we say about the animal that made them? The immediate object of this focus of study is the author’s mind, whether considered as an individual system or emblematic of a socio-historical process. Both conscious and unconscious intentions and assumptions fall within the scholar’s sustained attempt to determine as accurately as possible what the given text in question, as representative of the mind of its creator, actually says about reality. Questions of agreement or disagreement are extraneous, of course, to the study itself. And in the search for meaning, each reader brings his own pattern of reference to the text; in this regard literary scholars are no different from anthropologists, historians, philosophers, in their uses of Freudian, Marxist, Jungian, structuralist, millennialist, or other frames of reference.

There is a third activity that literary scholars often engage in which looks like literary analysis: the discovery of sources, the discussion of the author’s biography, the exploration of social conditions in which the work was composed, all may contribute to the discovery of further subtleties of form in a work, but are in themselves more properly historical than literary investigations.

While these two foci of literary study *per se*, the description of form and the translation of that form into meaning, are always complementary, they are not reversible. The interpretation of meaning in literature is always subservient to and dependent on the identification of the text’s formal elements. We cannot talk about the meaning of animalism in *King Lear* until we have discovered the chains of images
that suggest it. It is precisely for this reason that the analysis of formal qualities in
the Nahuatl texts must proceed if we are to deliniate further those subtleties and
refinements whose presence in the Nahuatl mind we can now only infer.

There are three sources from which a critical terminology of sufficient resiliency and
precision to describe Nahuatl literature justly and fairly might be generated: first
and most importantly is the embedded terminology of the texts themselves; next is
the growing body of performance-oriented and "ethnography of speaking" studies
by U.S. anthropological linguists and ethnomusicologists; and finally the testimony
of contemporary indigenous poets still in touch with whatever survives of their
traditional oral modes.

In the search to uncover an indigenous Nahuatl terminology of literary form, major
advances since Garibay have been made by Dr. Miguel León-Portilla, most notably
in the description of a native aesthetic. Often following up suggestions Garibay left
dangling, León-Portilla also has advanced our knowledge of the biographies of
actual individual poets, of the roles literary artists fulfilled in Nahua society, and has
refined Garibay's outlines of the philosophical dialogues suggested by the lyrical
texts. His key studies for these concerns are La filosofía náhuatl estudiada en sus
fuentes, Trecen poetas del mundo asteca, and Los antiguos mexicanos a través de sus crónicas
y cantares. In spite of its promising title, Las literaturas precolombinas de México, is
only a compendium of introductory remarks and adds nothing to the critical
terminology of the other works. Taking off from an appendix to Garibay's Historia,
Trecen poetas is an anthology of the historical sleuthing León-Portilla does so well: he
identifies thirteen documented poets (and poetesses) of the pre-Cortesian period,
summarizes the attested biographical facts and supplies a sample of their attributed
work. In 1972, some before the death of the poet-King's death, León-Portilla expanded
his section on Nezahualcóyotl in a separate publication, including all the poems he
felt could be reliably attributed to the King. Recently he has demonstrated, from
the manuscripts of Chimalpahin, that the erotic Chalcó Chihuacuicuitl (Song of the
Chalcan Women) was composed by Aquiauhztzin of Amecameca, probably about
1479. But the key León-Portilla discussions for literary students are those on
aesthetics, found in Los antiguos mexicanos and the ever-expanding Filosofía náhuatl.
In these books Dr. León-Portilla analyzes the indigenous terms of what he believes
is the old, high Toltec tradition of artistic ideal and practice. At the center of that
tradition he identifies the concept of the self as in tli, in yolotl (the face, the heart),
a concept of dynamic interchange and balance between the inner forces and the
exterior appearances of the individual. Closely implicated in this concept is an
educational ideal identified as yolotl yahuatl ("the rectification of the heart") and
ixtlatemachili ("the action of teaching wisdom to the face"). The supreme goal of
the artist he identifies as the yolotl ("the defined heart") and the artist's task as
ayotolteooni "continually putting a divine heart within things"). The true artist
is he who becomes moxtlahuioti ("one who continually converses with his own
heart"), (León-Portilla, 1961, pp. 149-50, 169-70). In fact, so essential does León-
Portilla feel these concepts are for Nahuahtl ethnohistory that he speaks at last of "an
aesthetic conception of the universe and life," according to which beauty and truth
are literally one and the same (León-Portilla, 1974, p. 322). Here León-Portilla makes
his most radical and exciting contribution to the tradition of Nahuatl critical literature, a contribution which pulls literary considerations off the periphery of Nahuatl studies and plucks them down in the middle of an entire theory of Nahuatl ethnology and metaphysics. What he proposes is nothing less than that the entire Nahuatl epistemology, its basic truth-concept, rests on this aesthetic vision of reality, in which poetry is the fundamental index of man’s ability to speak the truth of his existence. “There is only one way to stutter from day to day ‘the truth’ on this earth,” says León-Portilla in his paraphrase of the Nahuatl epistemology: “It is the road of poetic inspiration: ‘flower and song’. On a foundation of metaphors conceived in the deepest element of the self, or perhaps ‘sent from within the heavens,’ with flowers and songs [with poetry], the truth can perhaps in some form be indicated” (León-Portilla, 1974, p. 319). Confronted with such a theory it becomes absolutely imperative to have the study of Nahuatl metaphor Garibay called for thirty years ago. If León-Portilla is right, or even close to right, then the literary modes, structures, and aesthetics of the Nahuatl texts become not curious ornaments and interesting devices of relaxation and diversion, but primary indices to the most basic assumptions and patterns of Nahuatl culture itself. Art, and literary art in particular, must become central subjects of investigation in Nahuatl studies.

Another post-Garibayan investigator who has directly assisted the development of an indigenous terminology and formal description is Thelma Sullivan, English translator of numerous texts, including portions of the Cronica mexicaoyol and a fine version of that Mesoamerican masterpiece, “The Prayer to Tlaloc,” from the Sahagún manuscripts. For our present interests, Sullivan’s most direct contribution is in her study of those supreme expressions of the tozalalli style, the so-called huehuetlatolli discourses, an on-going study most accessibly summarized in her article “The Rhetorical Orations, or Huehuetlatoli, Collected by Sahagún,” included in the Edmonson anthology on the Sahagún manuscripts titled 16th Century Mexico. After surveying all the available descriptions of huehuetlatolli and the ethnohistorical data on their collection and redaction by Sahagún, she classifies them according to five functional categories: prayers, court orations, orations of parents, orations of the merchants, orations relative to the life cycle—this latter with five thematic sub-categories. An extensive list of six tables classifies the eighty-nine orations that Sullivan identifies as huehuetlatolli in the Sahagún manuscripts. While reserving full commentary on the rhetorical style for another study, she indicates is “characterized by the extensive use of metaphor, complementary phrasing, synonyms, and redundancy” (Sullivan, 1974, p. 98). “While these orations appear to be set in an established framework,” she notes, “within that framework they move and flow with a high degree of freedom and imagination.” Based on her functional analysis, Sullivan defines the genre of huehuetlatolli as “enculturistic ... orations handed down from generation to generation and delivered on key occasions, both religious and secular, for the purpose of perpetuating and preserving the religious, social, moral and even historical traditions” (Ibid., p. 99).

Another scholar who has contributed to the debate over rhetorical terminology is Joséfina García Quinterana, who in the introduction to her translation of the primary Olmos discourse, suggests the more widely attested native term for these orations is
tenamatlatolli or "Discourses of Admonition" rather than huetlatolli. Obviously, only an analysis of the use of both terms in the original documents will clarify the issue.

A final project which must be mentioned in this category, though it has not yet emerged in publication, is the complete English edition of the Cantares manuscript now being prepared by John Bierhorst. When completed it will offer paleograph, translation, and possibly a concordance of the entire 85 folios. Presumably there will be extensive commentary on the text's formal qualities as well.

Midway between the contributions of those who have examined directly the generic and aesthetic terminology of the Nahuatl texts and the studies of anthropological linguists which offer scattered models only, stands one book which must be mentioned as the most coherent example available of the thorough taxonomy of native, oral literary practice that Nahuatl studies still needs. Taking "a holistic, contextual approach to traditional verbal behavior" of the Chamulas, Gary Gossen, in his Chamulas in the World of the Sun, sets forth the formal and genre classifications of their oral traditions based on terms obtained from the Chamulas themselves. "Folk taxonomies ... consistently demonstrate," he points out, "that Western genre labels do not correspond precisely to folk genre labels" (Gossen, 1974, p. ix). Out of this native classification Gossen identifies, describes, and relates to specific acts of performance four levels of oral genres incorporating seven major forms—such as "true recent narrative," "true ancient narrative," "language for rendering holy," "prayer," and "song"—with twenty-seven sub-genres, and five other "marginal genres." "Oral traditions," Gossens asserts, "are as diverse as cultures. Herein lies the need for a model that allows a specific oral tradition to speak for itself; in its own categories of meaning" (Ibid., p. x). No single study better exemplifies the systematic formal survey, swept clean of Western, latinate vocabulary, of which Nahuatl literary analysis presently stands in need.

Gossen's study is partially a product of a movement which has oscillated for some years between North American anthropologists and linguists, particularly among students of native American cultures and languages, under the rubric "ethnology of speaking" taken from the Dell Hymes essay of 1962, which identified the field of inquiry. In 1974, with the publication of a bulky six-part anthology titled Explorations in the Ethnology of Speaking, the discussions achieved that dubious intellectual status of a "school." Judging by the sample studies of this group that I have seen, probably no other body of scholars currently working outside the Nahuatl texts themselves offers more in the way of analytic models and terminology. In contrast to Freudian, Marxist, and Lévi-Straussian analysis, all of which seek to decipher from the verbal text an unconscious, "true" significance which is lost to the native mind or to history, ethnography of speaking looks at "communicative competence" on the part of the speaker or artist and puts primary value on his conscious intent and control of the speech or "performance" event. The notion of oral literature as individual, discrete performances in specific social contexts is intrinsic to this mode of analysis, not necessarily to cast light on the social order, but to understand the
particular behavior and textual choices of the oral artist in performance. Section V in *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking* is addressed to “The Shaping of Artistic Structures in Performance” and includes another Gossen analysis of Charnula aesthetic canons, developed from a metaphor of heat, used in native judgment of a given oral performance. There is also a taxonomy of Tzotzil oral genres.

The attention of these speech ethnographers to literary artistry as a central subject is nowhere better illustrated than in the fine analysis by Keith Basso of the use of metaphor in a speech genre of the Western Apache known as “Wise Words,” a genre which has remarkable similarities to the Nahuatl *machitlatoll* (metaphors) recorded in Sahagún’s Book VI. Nor is Basso satisfied only to develop a scheme of lexical hierarchies demonstrating the semantic categories of Apache metaphoric thinking; he goes on to develop a theory of metaphor itself, a theory which assumes the linguistic competency model of Chomsky, but insists that Chomsky’s model cannot account for figurative speech; it must be broadened, Basso suggests, to include “appropriately ill-formed,” ungrammatical utterances such as the Apache “Wise Words,” if generative grammatical theory is also to encompass the obviously creative ability of metaphor to generate “novel semantic categories” in a language, if it is to account for the total “command” of a linguistic system that oral artisans display in the creation of metaphoric artifacts such as the “Wise Words.”

There would appear to be one great obstacle, however, to the appropriation of these ethnography of speech models for use in the study of Nahuatl texts. Every one of these linguists works with a living language and culture, usually spending time in the field with his informants, observing and tape-recording their oral performances, checking and re-checking his taxonomic lexicon, and questioning, often with the aid of prepared questionnaires, every relevant detail of the social context of the performance. How are we to observe a performance of poetic or narrative texts redacted into print medium four centuries ago? How are we to question the singer on his canons of style when his voice is long gone to dust? How, in other words, are we to extract the components of performance which these ethnographers are demonstrating provide essential formal concerns in every oral literary tradition? Dennis Tedlock in his work with Zuni story-tellers has developed a basic orthographic system, employed in his collection *Finding the Center*, of heavy and light print, raised letters, line endings, spacing, italics and parentheses in order to fix in print the “paralinguistic” style features of loudness, pausing, tonal quality, and rate of delivery present in the aural experience of a literary performance. How can Nahuatl scholars ever hope to find a transcription system that elaborate in any 16th century text? The Latin orthography of the time was not even capable of transcribing the very essential Nahuatl phonemic contrasts of vowel length or the glottal stop.

The first answer to this problem is that we, in fact, do know a great deal from the ethnohistorical record about oral performance in Mesoamerica and especially among the Nahua. From accounts of Durán, Pomar, Mendiera, Chimalpahin, Tezozómoc, and Ixtlixochitl we can reliably reconstruct the social milieu of performance for *machitlatoll*, lyric songs, and some sacred ritual texts in considerable
detail. We know the instruments which often accompanied performance and in some cases how they were played. We have scattered, in great profusion and with surprising consistency, through the lyric texts the transcription of vocables, the non-lexical elements of pure sound. We have the still undeciphered drum notations in the Cantares manuscript. And finally we know the educational system of the schools in which the pictographic texts were performance-read. All this adds up to a potentially vast store of information about Nahuatl oral performance, were it once assembled, surveyed, and analyzed. Secondly, and perhaps even more significantly, some of the very linguists who cultivate performance analysis most intensely have indicated the tape recorder is not indispensable to it. Donald M. Bahr, in a study based entirely on printed texts with practically no performance notations, is able to identify two distinct genres, “prose myth narrative” and “chant,” in four cognate narratives of the emergence myth from the Zuni and the Pima. But more explicitly, Dell Hymes himself, in a re-study of some Chinook narratives that is fundamental for understanding how all this discourse and performance analysis can apply to the Nahuatl texts, concludes that

... to lack tape recordings would be to miss something, the realization in performance to which Tedlock so rightly and creatively calls attention; but it would not be to lose everything. Poetic structure could still be found. The indispensable tool would not be a tape recorder, but a hypothesis. [Hymes, 1977, p. 454]

Hymes describes in this study how he discovered, in the print text of some narratives he had previously examined, a complex “poetic and rhetorical form” of lines, verses, stanzas, and scenes delineated by a set of discourse features in the printed text itself. He found the markers of these lines and verses not in phonological patterns of stress, syllable counts, or pauses, but in recurrent initial particles like “Now” and “Now then” and in the distribution of verbs between the particles. This discovery led him to believe Tedlock had exaggerated the need for recorded performance in order to adequately analyze the oral poetic:

In short, one can accept a minimal definition of poetry as discourse organized in lines. ... One does not fully face the issue posed by the claim that a body of oral narrative is poetic, in the sense of organization into lines, until one goes beyond the existence of lines to principles governing lines and relates such principles to the organization of texts in other respects as well. Older texts make us face the issue directly. If they are manifestations of a tradition of organization into lines, that organization can be discovered only in the lines themselves, and in their relations to one another, for that is the evidence available. [Ibid.]

In other words, the basic structural and formal features of an oral performance text are likely to be found in the linguistic record itself, even if the stylistic refinements of the performance have been lost.

No one has better demonstrated this possibility for the Nahuatl texts than the linguist-historian team of F. Karttunen and J. Lockhart, whose study “Structure of
Nahuatl Poetry as seen in its Variants" provides without question the most serious advance in our knowledge of Nahuatl lyrical form since the surveys of Garibay. Through a lengthy comparison of the structural features of three song-texts which are repeated in the Cantares and Romances manuscripts, Karttunen and Lockhart isolate what they call "the basic unit of Nahuatl poetry... the verse," a unit they define as a relatively self-contained statement of varying length which practically always ends with a coda of non-lexical or exclamatory material (MS, p. 2). These verses, they find, link together in what they identify as "verse pairs" which can be "strong" or "weak" according to the amount of shared material which manifests the pairing. Further, they find most poems "tend to consist of 8 or 10 verses with a strong predilection for 8." So strong, in fact, do they find that predilection, that they claim: "The 8-verse sequence must be granted a place in Nahuatl poetry at least as prominent as that of the sonnet in European tradition" (MS, p. 5). The structure of verse pairs into whole poems is done, they find, according to no hierarchical or narrative order."Rather, it is as though the verses were arranged about a center—a theme, mood, character—to which they relate directly in a comparable way. ... The order of the verses is far less important than their relevance to the common theme and their pleasing symmetrical arrangement" (MS, p. 2). This verse, verse-pair, 8-verse pattern of structure extends through the entire corpus of the lyric, they claim, with no distinction between inconuicatl, sopoconuicatl, yucuicatl, melahuaxicuicatl or any other generic denominations—terms which these investigators assert are semantic rather than phonological categories.

At the verse-internal level, the level corresponding to the line in Hymes's discussion, Karttunen and Lockhart admit to some foundering in their search for a more basic unit of structure. "No suprafoot unit within the verse, comparable to the line in European poetry has yet emerged," they report. So, they add, "not finding a line, one looks for a foot." Employing the traditional latinate metrical vocabulary, they locate several occasions "in which it appears that the intention is to achieve a [dactylic] foot," but are forced to conclude that "as with other apparent metrical regularities, this one applies only to a small portion of the corpus in any straightforward way." Recently, Dr. Karttunen informed us that they have still to survey possible phonetic patterns of vowel length and glottal stops in the continuing search for an intra-verse meter. I might suggest, based on the revelations of the ethnographers of speech, first that no latinate metrical taxonomy can ever be made to stick on native American texts (it has been largely abandoned, at least since Pound, by contemporary poets), and second that some more basic unit, corresponding to the line Hymes located in the Chinook texts, might yet be found within the Nahuatl verse, if we can only come to see the particular principles of relationship which Hymes points out must govern their manifestation. The use of non-lexical vocables, the abuiya, abuaya's—which Karttunen and Lockhart discover, incidentally, are copied with remarkable accuracy from variant to variant—may play some part in that manifestation.

Let me close off this survey of models and achievements in Nahuatl literary study with one final suggested resource. There are presently among us writers who
straddle the void between Western, Euro-American history and indigenous tradition in the reality of their own being. Writers like N. Scott Momaday, Simon Ortiz, and Leslie Silko whose education in and experience of the Euro-American modes of self-hood, behavior, and aesthetics have not destroyed the vestiges of native knowledge to which they find themselves heir, but has brought that knowledge to sharp relief in their individual minds. As these writers become increasingly conscious of themselves as artists, they make critical or autobiographical statements of various sorts about the nature and origins of their art and their aesthetic ideal. Through these voices, sensitized to both our academic literary jargon and their own oral traditions, we have a unique occasion to see into those oral traditions from an intuitive, visceral perspective that no anthropologist, including Carlos Castañeda, can ever afford us.

I'm thinking of passages like the sermon by the half-Christian Sun Priest Tosahmah in Momaday's House Made of Dawn, and of Simon Ortiz's meditation on art in language titled Song, Poetry, and Language—Expression and Perception. In the latter Ortiz examines what a song is for his Acoma people, specifically for his father. He finds a complete indifference to breaking the song into parts: "It doesn't break down into anything," he is told; "It is complete." He speaks also of the "context" of the song-performance, but he means something more than the physical details of context the anthropologists speak of: "The emotional, cultural, spiritual context in which we thrive," he says, "in that, the song is meaningful. The context has to do not only with your being physically present, but it has to do with the context of the mind. . . . The context of a song can be anything or can focus through a specific event or act but it includes all things." I would suggest that observations such as these have direct implication for what we can or cannot say about structure, meaning, and function of indigenous texts.

While these personal self-explorations will seldom provide terminology to directly explicate oral texts, and while they are far removed from 16th century Mexico, certainly Acoma is closer to Anahuac than Rome is, and Kiowa thinking about language should be no less relevant to Nahuatl thinking than are the theories of Noam Chomsky.

Bibliography


