Ballads of the Lords of New Spain

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Comprising thirty-six song-texts apparently dating from the early fourth quarter of the sixteenth century, the so-called Romances, or “ballads,” stands as one of the two principal sources of Nahuatl song. Unlike its sister compilation, the more voluminous Cantares Mexicanos, the Romances, whether by design or accident, takes the form of an organized anthology—an Aztec cancionero—that may be read with a sense of unity from start to finish.

Although it can be agreed, at least, that Aztec songs are richly figurative and carry an aura of mystery, the underlying question is whether they are inscrutable. Is it profitable to consider them at all? In my view, now as previously, the answer is yes, both for the sake of history and for the sake of art. Yet as early as the 1580s, when the songs were being performed in public, the redoubtable missionary-ethnographer Bernardino de Sahagún seemingly took a stand against translation, warning that “no one knows what [the singers] say except themselves alone,” thus hinting at a position still widely, if tacitly, respected. That is, by cautiously steering away from the topic, many Mexicanists have treated Aztec “poetry” as something akin to what the late Franz Boas—the father of American anthropology and an occasional Mexicanist himself—used to call a Scheinproblem, or sham problem, to be avoided as insoluble.

A second view, developed by antiquaries and latter-day historians in the early 1600s, takes the songs to be poetic ruminations of old kings stationed in flowery gardens—like shepherds stepped out of the Eclogues—interlarded with firsthand reportage from pre-Cortésian battlefields. The method compartmentalizes the two aspects of the genre, the aesthetic and the martial, treating the texts as a mass of fragments to be examined for scraps of history, on one hand, and, on the other, bits of found poetry that seem to touch on classic themes of friendship and mortality. This kind of interpretation, which
 casts a glow of humanism over Mexico’s ancient past, survived through the end of the twentieth century and is not likely to be abandoned.

A third view is suggested by Sahagún’s equally sober but provocative observation that the native leaders were “using” the songs “to persuade the people to do their bidding, whether it’s war or other business that is not good.” My earlier edition of the Cantares—Cantares Mexicanos: Songs of the Aztecs—explored this third approach, presenting Aztec songs as a mid-to late-sixteenth-century testament of nativism and defiance in the face of colonial authority.

The Romances de los Señores de la Nueva España, then, offers another opportunity to consider the matter. More integrated than the Cantares, as mentioned above, and not as overtly ethnographic, the Romances is surely connected to the social fabric of its time, even if transcending it as a perennially fascinating work of ritualistic art.

I am indebted to the many who commented on the Cantares edition in published essays and in private communications. In the work that follows I have addressed the questions they have raised and have accepted various suggestions. I especially thank Louise Burkhart for putting the interpretation of colonial Nahuatl texts on a more secure footing; James Lockhart for a quarter-century’s worth of spirited criticism; James Taggart for his reminder that the native term netotiliztli is sufficient to designate the genre represented by the songs in the Cantares and Romances manuscripts; Jane H. Hill and the late Robert E. MacLaury for their analysis of the role of Montezuma in sixteenth-century mythmaking; Elizabeth R. Wright for her reflections on European and Mexican literatures; and John Ceely, Alan Sandstrom, and, again, James Taggart, generally, for their insights and encouragement.

My overall view of the netotiliztli, emphasizing the passage of native warriors to and from the other world, corresponds to an observation set forth in the 1964 edition of the Romances prepared by Angel M. Garibay K., who may be given credit here. On pages 106–7 of that work, Garibay singles out the xochicuahuitl, or “flower tree,” of Romances songs II, XI, XII, and XXXIII, treating it as a guiding concept:

[...] it puts us on the road of correct investigation. The antecedent of this concept is well documented in the complex of ancient prehispanic codices. For each of the directions of the universe there is a particular tree; and in the center, another. Surrounding the central tree are
the beings who came from this life and will return to it. There exists in the ancient culture, not wholly explored, a doctrine of reversion to the present life ([…] nos lleva por el camino de la indagación recta. El antecedente de este concepto se halla bien documentado en el conjunto de códices de la antigüedad prehispánica. Para cada dirección del universo hay un árbol especial. En el centro hay otro. En torno de éste se hallan agrupados los seres que vinieron de la vida y regresarán a ella. Hay en la antigua cultura, no del todo explorada, una doctrina de la reversión a la vida presente).

Although my readings differ from Garibay’s in significant ways, it will be seen that I have continued to travel the indicated “road.”

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