Ballads of the Lords of New Spain
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1. Techniques of Ritual

1.1 A glance at the oral literature of Aztec Mexico, preserved in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century manuscripts, will show that the Romances, or “ballads,” belong to one of the three abundantly attested Aztec genres that may be called ritualistic: the conjuros, the huehuetlatolli, and the netotiliztli.

1.2 Of these three, the most rigidly technical and therefore potentially the most obscure are the conjuros, which include agricultural and hunting charms, love charms, sleep charms, spells connected with divination, and incantations calculated to cure specific infirmities. Least obscure, certainly, are the set speeches known as huehuetlatolli ‘words of the elders’, designed to beseech a deity, install a ruler, greet a visiting dignitary, admonish a child, or mark a rite of passage.¹

1.3 Between these extremes stand the netotiliztli ‘dance(s)’,² represented by the songs in the Romances and the closely related Cantares Mexicanos. The “dance” songs, evidently, are less technical than the conjuros and therefore presumably less obscure, though they are by no means as transparent as the huehuetlatolli.

1.4 Unlike the conjuros and the huehuetlatolli, however, the netotiliztli have come down to posterity without a contemporary Spanish translation or commentary. Further, even when they were new, the songs began to be deritualized by native and non-native litterateurs who raided them for vocabulary to dress up their own compositions. Sahagún himself published a book of ersatz netotiliztli; and several examples, probably written by native or part-native scribes, are preserved in the opening folios of the Cantares manuscript—notably Cantares song I, which in turn played a part in inspiring the decidedly nonritualistic “legend” of Juan Diego and the Virgin of Guadalupe.³

1.5 Helpfully, the presence or absence of ritual technique separates the genuine netotiliztli of oral tradition from the written imitations (as does the terse, or paratactical, syntax of the former as opposed to the Europeanized

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¹ The Aztec conjuros are in Ruiz de Alarcón 1953, 1982, or 1984. The largest collection of huehuetlatolli is FC bk. 6; other huehuetlatolli sources are discussed in Sullivan 1974:79–85 and in Karttunen and Lockhart 1987:8–9.

² Song titles listed in Hernández 1945 libro 2, cap. 6 (“Del nitoteliztli”), link the Romances and the Cantares with the term netotiliztli, as discussed in CMSA p. 92.

³ See “After the 1590s” in the Introduction.
Nahuatl of the latter). And comparison with the *conjuros* and the *huehuetlatolli* helps to clarify both the method and the means of expression. Accordingly, it will be seen that the *Romances* texts, even if they strike the modern eye as poetry, are essentially ritualistic, not literary.

1.6 The purpose of ritual, it may be granted, is to bring about a desired result, and its language, even if it may be judged beautiful or interesting, is utilitarian—frankly coercive in its stronger forms, as with the *conjuros*, and at least admonitory in the milder, more decorous *huehuetlatolli*.

1.7 Like both the *conjuros* and the *huehuetlatolli*, the *netotiliztli* use imperative verb forms. Yet the declarative mode is more frequent, and, as in the case of the *conjuros* especially, the statements are short and jaculatory and carry a coercive overtone (necessarily, since the action described by the ritualist is beyond the reach of natural observation). As with the *conjuros* the songs make much use of the verbs ‘to come’, ‘to arrive’, ‘to come forth’, as though the words themselves had the power to summon. Appropriately the *conjuros* that are designed to bring about, or summon, a cure have been called by the native term *zantlatoltica tepatiliztli* ‘remedies by means of words only’. Note the insistent use of the verbs *huitz* ‘come’, *huallauh* ‘come’, *aci* ‘arrive’, *eco* ‘arrive’, *moquetza* ‘appear’, *quizaco* ‘come forth’, *quixtia* ‘bring forth’, *temohuia* ‘bring down’, and *temo* ‘descend’, in *Romances* songs I, II, III, V, VI, VIII, IX, X, etc.

1.8 Like the *conjuros*, the songs use rhetorical questions with implied yes or no answers, setting forth open-and-shut arguments that favor the needed result.

1.9 Even more so than the *conjuros*, the songs are “dramatic,” in the sense that the speaker may assume more than one voice within a single song. Though the texts are monologues, it is often as if two or more speakers are present, their roles played by the same ritualist. (For this reason quotation marks have been added to certain passages in the *Romances* translation to indicate the change in voice.)

4. For examples of the “coercive indicative” (as it replaces the imperative in otherwise duplicate passages in the *Cantares*), see GRAM 6.12. See also Andrews and Hassig in Ruiz de Alarcón 1984:259 (item 7).

5. MOLS folio [55].

6. DICT ahci, ehco.

7. The “dramatic” aspect of the *conjuros* has been pointed out by Andrews and Hassig in Ruiz de Alarcón 1984:27; cf. ibid.:102. Dramatic monologues in the *Cantares* are discussed in CMSA pp. 45–46, 509, 525.
Moreover, in true incantatory style the ritualist addresses figures of power or authority and, often, speaks for them. In the *conjuros* these figures are deities; in the *netotiliztli*, historical kings and military leaders. Thus in the *conjuros* we find the ritualist saying *niiquetzalcoatl* ‘I am Quetzalcoatl’ and *nimictlanecuhtli* ‘I am Mictlanecuhtli [lord of the underworld]’; in the *Romances* (2:16 and 2v:1), *nitemilotzin* ‘I am Temilotzin [a native general during the Conquest]’ and *niyoyotzin* ‘I [am] Yoyontzin [an alternate name for the fifteenth-century king of Texcoco, Nezahualcoyotl]’.

In “dramatic” fashion a single song may refer to the same figure in the first person, the second person, and the third person. Thus *Romances* song II has *niyoyotzin* ‘I am Yoyontzin’; *tiitecpiltziniecahualcoyotletcuitlyoyotzin* ‘you, O prince, O Lord Nezahualcoyotl, O Yoyontzin’; and *necahualcoyotzin* ‘it’s Nezahualcoyotzin’.

If the *netotiliztli* is ritual, then, what is its purpose? What function does it serve? If the songs themselves can be taken at their word—

I have flowers, *Romances* song I  
craving flowers, song II  
pick up your flowers, song III  
flowers are scattering down, song V  
flowers are gold, song VI  
flowers are sprouting, song VII  
flowers descend, song VIII  
he brings them down, these drunken flowers, song IX  
here are your flowers, song X  
let me dress myself in these. These flowers, song XI  
delicious flowers, song XI  
and here they are, your flowers, song XII  
where are the flowers? song XIII  

— it may be conceded that a major preoccupation of *netotiliztli*, if not the purpose, is the production or acquisition of “flowers.” The further question is: What are these flowers?

8. The same technique can be found in the two traditions that the Aztec *conjuros* most closely resemble: the Yucatec Maya medical incantations (Arzápalo Marín 1987 or Roys 1965) and the Cherokee “sacred formulas” (Mooney 1891 and 1932; Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick 1965 and 1967).
9. Ruiz de Alarcón 1982 or 1984, tract 2, ch. 1; tract 5, ch. 1.
2. Companions, Birds, Flowers

2.1 Although the netotiliztli have been preserved without elucidation, various other texts, particularly the huehuetlatolli and the conjuros, help to make sense of the songs—as implied above. Among these other texts is the opening passage of the huehuetlatolli spoken by a midwife as she cuts the umbilical cord of the newborn boy:

Know this, hear this: your home is not here, for you are an eagle, a jaguar; you are a swan, a trouplial; a companion and bird of the Ever Present, the Ever Near. This is merely your nest, you are only hatched here, simply arrived, come forth, issued forth here on earth. Here you burgeon, you blossom, you sprout. Here you make a nick [in the shell], break [out of the shell]. [...] You’ve been sent to the edge of the flood, to the edge of the blaze [i.e., to the battlefield]. Flood and blaze [i.e., war] is your duty, your fate. [...] Your actual home [...] is beyond, the home of the Sun, in the sky: you’ll cry out to Him, you’ll give pleasure to Him, the Shining One. Perchance your lot, your fate, will be knife death [...]. Xicmati, xiccaquj: amo njcan muchan, ca tiquauhtli, ca tocelotl, ca tiquechol, ca tiçaquan in tloeque, naoaque: ca tiicoauh, ca tiitotouh: çan njcan motapaçoltzin ijeian, çan njcan timotlapanaltia, çan njcan taci, teco, çan njcan titlalticpacqujça, njcan tixotla, ticueponj, titzmolinj, njcan titzicueoaj, titlapanj [...] teuatenpan, tlachinoltenpan in tioaalioaloc: teuatl, tlachinolli, molhvil, motequjuh [...] in vel muchan [...] vmpa in tonatiuh ichen in jlhvicac, ticoizviz, ticaviltiz in totonametl in manjc: aço mocnopiltiz, aço momâcoaltiz in jtzimjqujztli [...] . (CF lib. 6, cap. 31, fols. 146v–47).

2.2 Compare the song texts:

Romances song VII (8v:4–13): Cacao flowers, popcorn flowers are sprouting in Mexico. They’re budding, they’re blossoming. Lords, eagles, jaguars [i.e., warriors] are standing as a multitude. They’re forming buds, they blossom. And so these shield flowers [i.e., warriors] are to wither [i.e., die] in Anahuac [i.e., on earth], in the [battle]fields.

omn itzmolitimani oohuaye / yn ca cahuaxochitla / yn izquixochitla / y mesico y / mimilhui oo / cuemputimania / omvaya ohuaya çano y maniya yn tecpilotl / yn cuauhtin oçelo / mimilhui oo / cuemputimaniya /
omhuaya ohuaya a ynca yyce ocuetlahuiçō - çā chimailoxochitli / ya om-
nahuac a yxtlahuaquitecā.

Romances song II (2v:1–7): “I’m coming, I, Yoyontzin, craving flowers, hatching [or breaking open] flowers here on earth, hatching cacao flowers, hatching comrade flowers.” And they’re your flesh, O prince, O Lord Nezahualcoyotl, O Yoyontzin. nihualaciz ye nicā ye niyoyotzin yhuiya çā nixochiyeelehuiya ehuaya nixochtatlapanaco tltiçō nocoyatlapana ycnihuaxochitli ye tehuā mona-
cāyo titepiltzin i necāhuaxochitli tecuitl yoyotzin.

Romances song XXXIII (40v:8): Our good flowers walk abroad [or march along, i.e., of warriors]. nenemeniya yectli ya toxochihuī. 

Cantares song XV (8:3): Where do the flowers go? Where do they go, they that are called eagles and jaguars? Canon yeh yauh xochitl cano ye yauh yeh intoca quahtl ocelotl.

2.3 It may be seen that “flowers” are persons, specifically warriors destined for the other world, where they will become coatl ‘companion(s)’, or icniuhtli ‘comrade(s)’, of the Sun. The same, evidently, may be said for “birds.” And it is seen that their activities give “pleasure,” or “entertain,” or “gladden,” as the songs frequently have it.

2.4 Moreover, a theme of elehuia ‘desire’, or ehelehuia ‘craving’, recurs in the songs. The warrior desires captives (who will be sent to the sun) and desires that he himself may become a captive (to be sent to the sun):

Cantares song LI (32:3–5): Blaze flowers, war flowers! Who doesn’t want them? Who doesn’t crave them, O princes? tlachinolxochitla y yaoxochitl acon anquinequi [read aquinequi], acō anquelehuia o antepilhaun.


2.5 As for the otherworldly location mentioned in the huehuetlatolli, this is known in the netotiliztlī by a variety of names: some suggesting brilliance

10. As stated unambiguously by Garibay (1953–54 1:101): “Las ‘flores que bailan’ no son otros que los guerreros [the flowers that dance are none other than the warriors]” and “‘flores que se ambicionan’ son los cautivos que serán inmolados [the flowers that they (i.e., the warriors), crave are the captives, who will be sacrificed].”
(xochitonalocalitec ‘in the house of sun flowers’, tlahuizcalli ‘dawn’s house’); some suggesting fruitfulness (xoxopan ‘green places’, or tamoanchan [see section 18, below]); some with neutral or even somber connotations (tochan ‘our home [or haven]’, ximohuayan ‘place where all are shorn’, mictlan ‘dead land’); others betraying Christian influence (ilhuicatlitic ‘heaven’). A few of these names may designate ixtlahuatl ‘battlefield’ or simply ‘field’, as well as the (celestial) field(s), or world beyond.11

2.6 In the blissful realm the dead warrior becomes yolqui, defined by Molina as el resucitado de muerte a vida ‘one who is brought back to life from the dead’. As expressed in the Cantares (39:25), onca ye yolque in teteuctini ‘there the princes are brought back from the dead’.

3. Supreme Power and Its Agents

3.1 In addition to resemblances of style and technique, there are procedural similarities between the conjuros and the netotiltzli. In both cases absent figures are summoned in order to enact a drama of conflict. Notice that the traveler’s conjuro against bandits (the third incantation in the great collection compiled by Ruiz de Alarcón) draws upon the power of a supreme deity then summons lesser gods as warrior-agents (and also summons the imagined bandits themselves), setting up a scene of combat between the two sides:

It is I in person. I am Quetzalcoatl. I am Matl. I indeed am Yaotl; I am Moquehqueloatzin. I consider things as nothing [i.e., I am afraid of nothing or I respect nothing]. It will be at this time [i.e., I am ready]. I will give pleasure to my older sisters, my human kinsmen [i.e., I will fight my weak enemies]. In order for me to give pleasure to them, come, Rubber-owners, Iyauhtli-owners, you who strike things in their company, you who pound things in their company [i.e., you gods]. Indeed here come my older sisters, my human kinsmen. We will give them pleasure. They come possessing blood; they come possessing color [i.e., they come being vulnerable]. Nòmatca nèhuatl niquetzalcoatl nimatl ca nèhuatl niyaotl nimoqueholetzin, àtle ipan nitlamati.

11. Romances 1:4 (xochitonalocalitec), 1v:17 (xoxopà), 2:10 (mictlan), 4:10 (tocha), 7v:12 (ximohuaya), 8v:12 (jxtlahuاقتitecà), 39v:5 (ylhuicatliteco). DICT tlahuizcalli, xopan, ilhuicatlitihtic, etc. Further synonyms for the other world are listed in CMSA pp. 39–40.
Ye axcà yez; niquinmàahuiltiz nohueltiuhuan, nitlacaxillohuà, inic niquin-
màahuiltiz tlaxihualhuiau ollóque yaoyòque, in ihuà tlatzòtzona; canicà huitze nohueltiuhuan notlacaxillohuà tiquinmàahuilt-
izque, yèhuantiz ezçothuitze, tlapallòtihuitze.12

3.2 In the netotiliztli various names are used for the supreme power—
including yaotzin ‘Enemy’ (Cantares 6iv:11), moquequeloa ‘Mocker’ (Can-
tares 13:9), and xiuhtotol ‘Turquoise Bird [i.e., the Sun]’ (Cantares 17v:17–
21)13—terms that overlap with the names given in the conjuros and the
huehuetlatolli, the most frequent of which, at least in the netotiliztli, are
ipalnemohuani ‘Life Giver’ and dios ‘God’. The supremacy of Life Giver is
acknowledged repeatedly: the flowers are yxochiuh yn ipalnemoani ‘Life
Giver’s flowers’ (Cantares 18:12), and, as it is said, què huel xoconchihua quen
huel xoconcuil yxochiuh aya ypalnemoani ‘You must produce them! You must
get Life Giver’s flowers!’ (Cantares 21:20).

3.3 Just as the lesser gods arrive in order to “strike” and “pound” (in the con-
jury quoted above), in the netotiliztli Life Giver’s agents arrive as historical
kings, bringing “flowers.” Thus, as the singer announces, nechhualihua dios
nehua nixochhuãtzin nehua nitemilotzin ‘God sends me here. I have flowers,
I am Temilotzin’ (Romances 2:14–16). Or, as nixochhuãtzin might be trans-
lated, “I am flower owner” or “I am flower master.”

3.4 The kings may well be compared to lesser gods. Note that the huehu-
etlatolli ritualist who addresses a newly installed ruler proclaims: yn axcan
ca otiteut […] ca aocmo titotlacapo ‘now you are deified […] no longer are
you human, as are we’ (FC 6:52:31–34), and the point is emphasized by the
sixteenth-century chronicler Diego Durán: “the one who commands there
[i.e., Montezuma I of Mexico] […] is the image of the god Huitzilopoch-
tli”; “Monarchs in this land were adored as gods”; “For the kings were held
to be divine men”; “Motecuhzoma [i.e., Montezuma II of Mexico] called
his palace ‘the house of God.’”14

3.5 As with the traveler’s conjuro, again, the netotiliztli texts summon both
allied and enemy warriors, as may be seen in Romances songs I, X, and XXIX,

12. As transcribed, translated, and glossed (in square brackets) by Andrews and Hassig in
Ruiz de Alarcón 1984:75.
13. Similarly, in prayer, the Sun is xiuhpiltontli, in quauchtlevanjtli ‘the turquoise child, the
soaring eagle’ (FC 2:202:8). In huehuetlatolli the Sun is xippilli ‘turquoise childe [i.e., turquoise
prince]’ (FC 6:12:35).
and in many songs throughout the Cantares. For this purpose the singer may appeal to the ruler—“you, Nezahualcoyotzin” (song XVII)—or speak in the ruler’s own voice—“I am Temilotzin” (song I)—at the same time recognizing that it is the supreme spirit who actually produces the needed warriors—“Life Giver creates them. He, Self Maker, brings them down” (song XVII).

4. Flowers as Weapons

4.1 As he continues reciting his conjuro, the traveler who is worried about bandits summons personified weapons as his further spirit helpers:

I have brought the priest, His-tonal Is One Water [i.e., the staff], [or] the priest, One Death [i.e., the rocks], [or] One Flint [i.e., the knife]. ca onichualhuicac in tlamacazqui çe atl, itonal, intlamacazqui çe miquiz-tli, çe tecpatl.15

4.2 Likewise the netotiliztli singer imagines a delivery of personified weapons, representing warriors armed for battle, calling them mitl ‘arrows’ (Romances 10v:4), matlatl ‘hand slings’ (1v:6), tlacochtli ‘spears’ (9:7), chimalli ‘shields’ (31:10), or, more fully, tlacochtli xocheitl ‘spear flowers’ (30:12), chimalli xocheitl ‘shield flowers’ (18:6–7).

4.3 Weaponlike plant materials may also designate the warrior: tzihuactli ‘spines’ (10v:4), mizquitl ‘mesquites’ (13:17), acatl ‘reeds’ (Cantares pas-sim),16 or, more fully, acaxochitl ‘reed flowers’ (Romances 31v:10). (But miz-quitl may also mean the warrior king specifically, as do pochotl ‘ceiba’ and ahuehuetl ‘cypress’.)

4.4 Heaping metaphor upon metaphor, the singers may call upon chimalmatlatl ‘shield hand-slings’ (1v:6) or tzihuacmitl ‘arrow spines’ (10v:4).

4.5 Metonyms based on the warrior’s weapons have their mirror image in metonyms based on the warrior’s body parts: maiitl ‘hands’, yolli ‘hearts’, cuaitl ‘heads’, and nacaztli ‘ears’.17 Such figures may be combined, as in

15. Ruiz de Alarcón 1984:75. Tlamacazqui ‘priest’, i.e., spirit power, deity (FC 6:35:12; TEZ ch. 11). The names of these “priests” are tonalli, or calendar signs.

16. In addition to acatl ‘reed(s)’ the Florentine Codex describes acaçacatl ‘reed grass’ with leaves that are asperas y cortan ‘sharp and can cut’ (CF lib. 11, cap. 7, para. 7, fols. 183v–84; cf. FC 11:196:3–5 and 11–13).

17. Compare the statue of Coatlicue with its belt of heads and its necklace of hands and hearts, generally interpreted as war trophies (Pasztory 1998:158–59). Less widely known are the ears: “then they went and made conquests in Xochimilco. It was to get clippings that they gave
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nacazmaxochi- ‘ear and hand flowers’ (Romances 17:16). (The terms give rise to ambiguity — especially “hands” and “hearts,” also used in more conventional figures of speech, comparable to the English “all hands on deck” or “from the heart.”)

4.6 These are only a few of the literally hundreds of figurative names by which the warrior is known, including the names of specific flowers (e.g., izquixochtli ‘popcorn flower’, cacahuaxochtli ‘cacao flower’, cacaloxochtli ‘raven flower’, cempohualxochtli ‘marigold’, miyahuatl ‘[maize] tassel’), as well as specific birds and specific butterflies.

4.7 As in Romances XXVII and XXX, the rising ‘smoke’ (pochtli) and descending ‘dust’ (teuhtli) of the battlefield may also designate the warrior.18

5. “Flower” Birds Return to Earth

5.1 In the song texts the warriors’ home in the sky is frequently mentioned, called by such names as zacuancalli ‘House of Troupials’ (Romances 1v:13) or chimalpapalocalli ‘House of Butterfly Shields’ (31v:5); and as set forth in the midwife’s speech quoted above, from the Florentine Codex, the newborn male child is believed to descend directly from this celestial abode. Another passage from the Florentine Codex — the principal source for huehuetlatolli, here quoted in an explanatory passage — describes the warrior’s home as:

[...] the home of the Sun, in the sky: those who go there are the ones who die in battle [...] or are just captured to die later, who, perhaps, are striper[s victims of sacrifice] [...]; all who die in battle or are captured and sacrificed] go to the home of the Sun. It is said that [...] when the Sun appears, when it dawns, then they shout and cry out to it. [...] And after they’ve spent four years, then they’re changed into precious birds, hummingbirds, flower birds [...] chalk butterflies, feather chase.

18. DICT pochtli, teuhtli. For smoke and dust as techniques of warfare, see Hassig 1988:95–96 (smoke signals) and 105–7 (destructive fire); Díaz del Castillo 1956:58 (“the Indians gave great shouts and whistles and threw dust and rubbish into the air so that we should not see the damage done to them”) or 1976:55 (cap. XXXIV) (“daban los indios grandes silbos y gritos y echaban pajaz y tierra en alto, porque no viésemos el daño que les hacíamos”).
butterflies [i.e., potential captives chalked and feathered for sacrifice], calabash-cup butterflies [i.e., sacrificial victims as drinking vessels of the gods], and they sip there where they dwell. And they come here to earth in order to sip [or inhale] all the different flowers: the [flowers of the] *equimitl*, or skull-rack tree; [and] the cornsilk flowers, the spear cornsilk flowers. [...] *ichan tonatiuh ilhujjac*, *iehoantin vmpa vi*, in *iao-miqui* [...] *yn anoço çan calaquilo*, i çatepan miquizque. *Yn aço oaoano* [...] *muchintin vi* in *tonatiuh ican*, *quil* [...] *in iquac in oalmomana in oalquiçaia tonatiuh, nimâ quicaoatza, coiovia* [...] *auh in iquac onauh-xiuhtique, njmâ ic mocuepa, tlaçototome, huitzitzilti, xochitototl* [...] *ticapapalotl, ivipapalotl xicalteconpapalotl*, *tlachichina in vmpa in mo-noian* [read *inoonian*]. *Yoan in njcan tlalticpac oalhui in quioalchichina, in jxquich nepapan xochitl in equimjtl, anoço tzonpanquavitl xilohxochitl, tlacoxilohxochitl*. (CF lib. 3, ap. cap. 3, fols. 28v–29)

5.2 If the careful listener catches an undertone in “sipping flowers,” passages in the *Cantares* may suggest the deeper meaning:

*Cantares* song LII (34:5): Ah, these princes are scattered as eagles, painted as jaguars. Let these incense-flowers of His be sipped! *An quaauhnenelihui oceloihcuiliuhtimanique in tepilhuã ayahue maça yic-xochiuh* [read *yiexochiuh*] onchichinalo.

*Cantares* song LII (35:6–8): Let them be sipped, these plume-incense flowers. They’re scattered. God sets His flowers free, [then] takes these flowers to His home. *In ma onchichinalo in quetzalyiexochitl aya moyahua quitomaya yxochiuh yehuan Dios huiya hui çan ca ye ichan y aya xochity ca cana.*

5.3 Observe the *Cantares*’ allusion to the repeating cycle of descent and ascent (“sets His flowers free, takes these flowers to His home”). As for the dead warriors’ return to earth after “four years,” the songs also use the ritual number four, but with reference to space, not time. The incoming warriors arrive not “after four years,” as above, but “from the four directions”:

*Cantares* song XIV (7v:18–20): Lightning strikes from the four directions. Golden flowers are sprouting. There, the Mexican princes are alive. *Çan ye nauhcampa y ontlapetlantoc, oncan onceliztoc in coçahuiz xochitl onçã nemi in Mexica in tepilhuan.*
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Cantares song XIX (15v: 4–6): Come! Set them free! Do indeed stand up and noose these hearts of mine as flower garlands from the four directions. [And] O my hearts, what would befall you? tlapoel tla xicto-toma xoichimectica nauhcampa ca cenca huel xihtoomilpitaica [read xicxittomonilpitaica] noyollo noyollo quen anqui Chihuazque.

5.4 In the same vein the conjuros ritualist calls for his warrior spirits and spirit helpers: inic nauhcã niquintzatzilia ‘from the four directions I summon them’.19 Subsequently, when they have done their work, ‘the earth will be drunk [with the blood of their victims]’ (tlalli ihuintiz).20 And by the same token, ‘there’s earth-drunkenness’ (tlalihuntihuia) in Cantares song 87 (77v: 3–4).

5.5 As the warriors arrive, they are “flower birds,” according to the huehuetlatolli passage quoted above. But in the netotiliztli they may be various species, including tzinitzcan ‘trogon’, zacuan ‘troupial’, toztli ‘parrot’, aztatl ‘egret’, xiuh totol ‘cotinga’, queztaltotol ‘quetzal’, and especially quechol ‘swan’, frequently amplified as teoquechol ‘spirit swan’ or tlauhquechol ‘roseate swan’. A roseate swan in everyday diction is indeed the roseate spoonbill (Ajaia ajaja), but the Linnean designation is unsuitable for translating the term as it appears in the netotiliztli, where we also find such forms as ayopalquechol ‘auburn swan’, chalchiuhquechol ‘jade swan’, and cuauhquechol ‘eagle swan’ among yet others, and even the verb quecholti ‘to become a swan’. (The translational solution ‘swan’ is not meant to denote Cygnus but ‘swan’ in the sense of such English expressions as ‘sweet swan of Avon’ or ‘swan knight’, connoting musicianship or transport to the other world.)

5.6 The return of dead souls, it should be mentioned, was not an idea peculiar to the war cult. According to the mid-sixteenth-century Codex Telleriano-Remensis, the dead in general were summoned to earth during the annual huei miccailhuitl ‘great feast of the dead’, when people climbed up to their roof terraces and “each one made long prayers to the dead, to those who were their ancestors, crying out, ‘Come quickly, for we await you.’”21

21. Hazian grádes oraciones a los muertos cada uno a los que [e]rá de su linage y dádo vozés dezian: Venid presto que [ue] os esperamos (Códice Telleriano-Remensis 1964, pt. 1, plate 4; 1995: 8 [folio 2v]).
6. Flowers as Fish

6.1 Metaphorically the warrior, especially a warrior en route to or from the dead land, is a michin ‘fish’:

*Cantares* song 60 (43v:19): O hummingbird fish, O picture of gold! In the net alone are you pleased. *Yn huitztitzili michini teocuitlaamox *çan i matlatitec timahuilia.

6.2 The usage accords with the recurring image of the other world as a watery paradise, seemingly in conflict with the idea of the sun’s home. By now, however, it should be clear that there is no rule against mixed metaphors.

6.3 In the *Cantares*, the resistance hero Temilotzin appears prominently in a ‘fish song’, where it is made clear that the metaphor is particularly apt since Temilotzin, as the records show, jumped overboard during an enforced voyage to Spain — and disappeared in the ocean.22

7. “Companions” and “Pleasure”

7.1 It may be asked why a captured warrior, or “fish,” would be “pleasured” in the net, as put forth in the *Cantares* passage quoted above. Here again the *conjuros* are helpful.

7.2 It will be recalled that in the traveler’s incantation against bandits, the verb *ahuiltia* ‘to give pleasure’ is used sarcastically, meaning ‘to engage in combat’. Similarly the ritualist in *Romances* song X throws out the taunt, ‘So let yourselves be pleased, you princes of Huexotzinco’ (*y ma ye xonahuiyácan atepilhuán i huexotzinco*).

7.3 Compare song I: ‘[…]’ in Huexotzinco, where the dying is, there’s Dancer. It’s Tlacahuepan. His eagle flower princes find their pleasure in that house of green places’ (*huexotzinco yn omcán i tlamihuacá yn mącèuhcátzin yni tlacáhuapan a nimás ocán on ahuiya ynxochicuapilhuá xopácalayntec*), i.e., Tlacahuepan of Mexico is engaging the enemy Huexotzincans in combat on the battlefield in Huexotzinco, which, with its opportunity for a glorious death, is a celestial “green places” on earth.

7.4 Another of the ubiquitous terms that may be used with a double edge is *coatl* ‘companion’, along with its approximate synonym *icniuhlî* ‘comrade

22. CMSA pp. 463–64.
[or friend]’. The terms often express mundane solidarity. But not always. ‘Companion’ coatl may mean ‘companion [of the sun, i.e., warrior destined for death in battle]’, as in the midwife’s huehuetlatolli quoted above. In any event it must be understood that icniuhltli ‘friend’ is not used in the Western, sentimental sense of ‘soul mate’ or ‘second self’. It means ‘ally’ in the military sense, as demonstrated in the Codex Chimalpopoca; for example, yn Mexitin ca yeppa ynicnihuan catca yn chichimeca yn quauhtitlancalque ‘the Mexica had long been friends [i.e., allies] of the Cuauhtitlan Chichimecs’ (CC 13:32–33); ca monequi aocmo ynicnihuan yezque yn xaltocameca aoquic mocniuhtlazque yhuan ca monequi aoquic yntlan huallazque ‘the Xaltocameca were no longer to be their allies; they must never again be allies with them, must never again come to their side’ (CC 14:20–22). Reading hastily, jumping from “flowers” to “friends,” one is led to see lyricisms on the joys of friendship—imagining Catullus’ Verani ominibus e meis amicis . . . ‘Is it you, my friend of friends, who come, / Dearer to me than a million others, / Veranius . . .’ when it would be better to stand a few thousand miles closer to home, keeping in mind the Lakota warriors’ songs Kolapila (Friends): “Friends, I have said in common life the customs are many; friends, those do not interest me,” “Friends, you go on; even that younger brother is coming on the warpath.”

8. Songs as Flowers

8.1 Of all the figurative locutions in the netotiliztli the one that is immediately grasped by even a casual observer is the ubiquitous xochitl/cuicatl ‘flower/song’, setting up an equivalency between the two terms. It is also readily apparent that song is a means of perpetuating a warrior’s fame (Cantares 29:10–11: noxochiteyo nocuicatoca nictlalitehuaz ‘I’ll make my flower fame, my song renown before I go’). In a sense, therefore, the song, alternately designated tlatolli ‘word’,24 is the warrior—all that is left of him here on earth. The various locutions alluding to this idea are double-edged, however, because in native lore the theory of sacrifice, or war death, closely parallels the theory of music. Both involve the transfer of persons from the sky world to the earth: songs (or celestial musicians who embody the songs), like war-

24. DICT tlahtolli.
riors, descend from the house of the sun, and both songs and warriors exist in order to serve the gods. These essential points, in the case of sacrifice, are revealed in the passages from the sixteenth-century Florentine Codex quoted above and, in the case of songs, in the myth of the origin of music, preserved in two sixteenth-century sources.25 In the netotiliztli:

flowers are shrilling [warbling (of birds) or shrieking (of warriors in battle)]. *ca ycahuaca xochitl.* (Cantares 69:2, DICT ihcahuaca)

songs are shrilling. *ycahuaca cuicatl.* (Romances 38v:1)

God has formed you, has given you birth as a flower, paints you as a song. *Dios mitzyoco xya xochtla ya mitztlacatili yan cuicatl mitzicuiloa.* (Cantares 27:24)

*I come created as a song, come fashioned as a song. cuicã [read cuicatl] nopictihuiz cuicã noyocoxtihuiz.* (Romances 2:13–14)

As a song you’ve been born, O Montezuma: as a flower you’ve come to bloom on earth. *Cuicatl ye tiyol tiMoteucçomatzin xochitl ticueponico in tlécul.* (Cantares 63:7)

As songs you’ve come alive, as flowers you’ve blossomed, O princes, O Zacatimaltzin, O Tochihuitzin. *Cuicatl ayolque xochitl ancueponque antepilhuâN i çacatimaltzin in tochihuitzin.* (Cantares 15:17–18)

8.2 Yet in many passages that speak of songs, or songs and flowers, there is no immediate allusion to warfare or to warrior kings coming to life, and the audience may imagine, at least for a moment, that only music is the topic. It should be clear, however, that music is the subtext of war, and vice versa (see below, sections 9.1, 9.9). The constant coupling of *xochitl* ‘flower’ and *cuicatl* ‘song’ does not indicate ‘song(s)’ or ‘music’ alone, nor simply ‘warrior(s)’ or ‘war’. The ‘flower and song’ of the *netotiliztli*, if it needs to be freely interpreted, might best be rendered ‘war and music’. The fundamental notion is a dichotomy, not an amalgam.26

25. For the full texts of these myths, see Appendix I. For further discussion, see CMSA p. 21.

26. Metaphorically the two terms can be synonyms—a song can be a flower—but the two do not blend into a third term, as in English “cloak” + “dagger” = “intrigue.” Thus the well-known formulation set forth by Garibay (1961:116), *xochitl + cuicatl = poema,* is here regarded as incorrect. Garibay’s discussion (1953–54 1:260, 383) (“[… el poeta […] con la imagen
Another way of looking at these “flowers” that have been brought to life is to consider that they are metaphorically, not literally, reborn on earth. The ambiguous *cuicatl ye tiyol* ‘as a song you’ve been born’ can also be translated ‘in [or by means of] a song you’ve been born’. Yet in either case the meaning is that you, the soul being addressed, have returned to life through the power of music. To say whether it is the mere essence or the flesh that is making an appearance would be beyond the scope of textual analysis; and the same query might be raised in connection with the *conjuros*. No one who witnesses the recitation of any of these texts will see Montezuma himself, let alone the combative spirits of the *conjuros*, suddenly materializing. At least in the song performances, Montezuma may be impersonated by a dancer.

The act of “descending,” expressed in the verb *temo* ‘descend’, or by implication in the verb *temohuia* ‘bring down’, characterizes the diction. Often the “flowers,” or “songs,” are a “mist” (*ayahuitl*), said to rain or drizzle down (*pixahuil*), to pour down (as rain) ([*mo]teca*), to be shaken down (*tzezte-loa*), to be set free ([*mo]toma*), or to be scattered as they come (*moyahuatihtiuizt*). Occasionally it is said that they are brought down in a ‘pack basket’ (*matlahuacalli*). Observe that songs are ‘lifted’ or ‘raised’ ([*m*ehua] by the earthly singer but ‘brought down’ by supernatural power. Arriving on earth, they are *nepapan* ‘divers [or various, many, a multitude]’. It may be said that they are (out)spread’ (*maní*), meaning that they stand as a group over a sizable area (not that they are recumbent). They are active: they ‘stir’ ([*huí]molihui).

As noted above (section 2), the dead warriors are *yolque* ‘live ones [or trivial en la poesía náhuatl, metafóricamente llama ‘flor’ al canto”; “flores = cantos”), by contrast, may be judged correct.

27. The Florentine Codex, quoting a brief passage from a song of the *netotiliztli*, interprets the phrase *cuicatl ye tiyol […] in tlíçqui in this very way (toconiamaceoa, cuicatl tiioliz tlalticpac, aaiave: vevetitlan tineiz ‘bien mereces ser loado, con câtares, y bien mereces que tu fama, viua en el mundo, y que los que haylan en los areytos, de [read te] traygan en la boca enrededor de los atabales’ [you deserve to be praised with songs and you deserve that your fame will live in the world and that those who dance in the dances will bring you forth in their mouths beside the drums]) (CF lib. 6, cap. 21, fol. 95).

28. As in fact he was, in a *mitote* witnessed in 1645 by the Jesuit historian Andrés Pérez de Ribas (“[…] at the head of [the dais] [was] placed the seat of the emperor Motezuma. […] There were […] fourteen in the dance, or *sarao*, not including the emperor, who came in at the end”). Translated from the Spanish in Pérez de Ribas 1944, 3:325–27 (bk. 12, ch. 11). See also CMSA pp. 88–91.

29. For synonymy see DICT temo 1, moyahua 1.

30. DICT nepapan 2; CMSA p. 26 (“The legion of the dead”).
revived ones], and they are fittingly said to be *huetzcani* ‘laughing ones’. As the text has it, ‘I come shaking down these laughing ones’ (*nictzetzelotihuitzy o huetzcani*).\(^{31}\)

### 9. Vocables as War Cries

#### 9.1 Even outside the *netotiliztli*, music and warfare are in some sense interchangeable. As set forth by the *huehuetlatolli* orator in his lengthy admonition to the newly installed king:

Agitate and bring to life the pleasure things [i.e., the musical instruments], the drum and the rattle. That’s how flood and blaze [i.e., war] is brought to life, brought to mind, forged and drilled [i.e., crafted].

\[\textit{xicolinj xiciocoia in avillotl in vevetl, in aiacachtli: in vncan moiocoia, in vncan molnamjquj, in vncan mopitza, momamali in teuatl in tlachinolli.} \]

(CF lib. 6, cap. 10, fol. 45)

#### 9.2 In the words of the mysterious Conquistador Anónimo (1971:374):

It is one of the world’s most beautiful sights to see their squadrons in battle, because they proceed with marvelous order and with great style […] While they fight, they sing and dance, giving out with the world’s most ferocious cries and whistling sounds […] \[\textit{è una delle belle cose del mondo vederli à la guerra in compagnia, per che vanno maravigliosamente in ordine e galanti […] Nel tempo che combattono cantano e ballano e tal volta danno i più fieri gridi e fischi del mondo […]}.\]

#### 9.3 Similarly, the conquistador Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1956:58 and 1976:55) writes:

I remember that when we fired shots the Indians […] sounded their trumpets and drums and shouted and whistled and cried “Alala! Alala!”

\[\textit{Acuér dame, que cuando soltábamos los tiros […] los indios […] tañían atambores y trompetillas y silbos, y voces, y decían: Alala, Alala.}\]

#### 9.4 Compare the untranslatable vocables in the *netotiliztli*:

\[\textit{ala (Cantares 19:16) chitalalala (Cantares 67v:8 and 10)}\]

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papa (Cantares 12:14, 63v:18, 66v:13)
yapapa (Cantares 19:11)
yapa-yatañ-tilililin (Cantares 17v:24)
ylilili (Romances 34:13)

9.5 The whistling (Nahuatl mapipitzoa) mentioned by Bernal Díaz is heard on the dance floor as well as the battlefield. Likewise, verbs based on the cry “papa” refer to sounds heard in either locale:

*papauia:nitla* ‘dar alaridos có boces los que baylan en el mitote [for dancers to give noisy cries when they do the mitote]’ (MOL), lit., to use “papa” on people or things.

*teñpapauia:nino* ‘alaridos dar en la guerra [to give out war whoops]’ (MOLS), lit., to apply “papa” to oneself at the lips.

9.6 Note that the Spanish (and American English) term ‘mitote’, designating certain Aztec and modern Mexican dances, derives from the same Nahuatl verb, *itotia:nin* ‘bailar o dançar [to dance]’, as the noun *netotiliztli* (MOL).

9.7 In the *netotiliztli*, accoutrements of the dance (*ecacehuaztli* ‘fans’, *pantli* ‘banners’, *xochicuahuitl* ‘flower trees’), as well as musical instruments (*huehuetl* ‘drums’, *teponaztli* ‘log drums’, *ayacachtli* ‘rattles’, *tetzilacatl* ‘gongs’, *qui-quiztli* ‘conch horns’, *oyohualli* ‘[leg] bells [worn by warriors]’, *coyolli* ‘[warriors’ jingle] bells’), are regularly mentioned. These items, metonymically, may signify the dancer or warrior.

9.8 By the same token the dance floor, *petlatl* ‘mat’, or its location, *tecpan* ‘palace’, or *ithualli* ‘court [or patio]’, may be thought of as a field of combat. The characteristic yelling of the warrior, *icahuaca* ‘to shrill [or scream]’, is interchangeable with the musical shrilling *icahuaca* ‘to shrill [or sing (of birds)]’.

9.9 As previously suggested (section 8.2), it follows that war itself, or action on the battlefield, is in some sense the same as *cuica* ‘to sing’, *tlatoa* ‘to speak’, *notza* ‘to pray’, which “entertains,” or “serves,” the supreme spirit.

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32. DICT mapipichtli, mapipitzoa.
35. DICT ihcahuaca.
36. DICT tlahotao.
For warriors the reward is a life of bliss in the celestial paradise, as shown above; and, on earth, *tleyotl mahuiztli* ‘fame’ and glory’. As the text states, “Prayers and services to him are everywhere. His fame and glory are sought on earth” (*Romances* song IV).

10. Vocables as Weeping

10.1 Although some of the many vocables in the *netotiliztli* may be interpreted as war cries, by far the majority are related to interjections that express anguish. Compare, for example, the ubiquitous vocables *aya, hue, hui, huiya, iyo, o, ohuaya, ohuaye, ohuiya, yahue* with the interjections *ay, hue, hui, iyo, iyoyahue, o, oh, yahue, yoyahue*, any of which may be translated ‘ah!’ or ‘woe!’ or ‘alas!’ Most frequent of all is the characteristic *ohuaya*, evidently related to the interjections.

10.2 The expressions of lament reflect a widespread technique for coercing pity from the gods, strongly recommended in the *huehuetlatolli* and carried out in both the *conjuros* and the *netotiliztli*. As advised by the *huehuetlatolli* orator:

Call out, cry out to the master, our lord […] and then he will take pity on you, he will give you what you deserve, what you ought to have. *xicnotza, xictzatzili in tlacatl, in totecujo […] auh vncan mjtzicnoittaz, vncan mjtzmacaz, in tlein molhvil momaceoal.* (CF lib. 6, cap. 18, fols. 76v-77)

10.3 As if heeding this advice, the *conjuro* ritualist repeatedly speaks with the voice of *icnopiltzintli, centeotl* ‘Pitiable Little Child, Corn Spirit’ (i.e., the child of the gods who was buried alive so that crops could grow from the earth). The myth of this corn spirit is recorded in a sixteenth-century Aztec version and is still current in Mesoamerica. In a modern Nahuatl variant from northern Veracruz State the child corn-god continues to be called *pilsintsij*, and in one version it is said that the little boy “began to weep at being so badly treated.” Among Huichol and other native groups of the Western Sierra Madre, where the analogous Corn Woman myth is preserved, it is reported that the story is told with much weeping.37

Accordingly, in one of the Aztec conjuros the ritualist breaks into actual lamentation, using the vocables of netotilizti:

Aya ohuiya oh ayaye ohua aye ohua! I am poor! I am Pitiable Little Child, I am Corn Spirit! ayahuia oh, ayaye, oa, aye oa. Ninotolina, niycnopiltzintli, niceteotl.38

Similar strings of vocables may be seen throughout the Romances, for example:

\[
\begin{align*}
\delta \text{ aye ohuâya ohuaya } & (iv:10) \\
oayye yyayye ayya yyohuia & (4:1–2) \\
\text{õhuayyayye } / \text{ohuayyayye yye ahuayya } & \text{ahuaya ohuaya ohuaya ayee} \\
\text{huaya} & \ (4v:4–5) \\
\text{aye oaye } \delta \text{ aya } & \ (4v:9–10) \\
\text{haya o ooo yayye a ooo aya o aya o ay} & \ (11:1) \\
\text{huiya yyayya } & \ (25:12)
\end{align*}
\]

The expression ninotolinia ‘I am poor’, moreover, is one of the staples of netotilizti phraseology. The idea, evidently, is that the pitiableness of the singer will bring forth the “remembered” warriors:

\[
\text{I remember them all, I who am not pleased, not happy on earth. I am poor. çã moch niquilnamiqui ſn anahuiya hanihuelamati tlalticpã oo } \\
\text{çã ninotoliniya oyahue ya yliya yye ohuaya ohuaya } (\text{leaving untranslated the mournful oo that precedes ‘I am poor’ and the final oyahue, etc.}).
\]

(Romances 38:6–10)

Or, more explicitly (and note the vocables):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Romances song XXIX-A (36:3–4): Let’s have weeping for eagles, for jaguars. ma nechoquilo ſ cuauhtla oçêotl · ohuaya } & \ (\text{leaving untranslated the final ohuaya}).
\end{align*}
\]

Romances song V (6v:6–12): This I say, I Cacamatl: I recall the kings Nezahualpilli and Nezahualcoyotl, are they summoned? Are they seen? Here beside the drum I recall them (more literally, I just say it, yehuaya! I am Cacamatzi’! huiya! I recall the kings. Nezahualpil’ ah! Are they seen, are they summoned? Nezahualcoyotl huiya! Beside the drum I recall them, ohuaya ohuaya). çã niquitohuã yeehuaya çã nicacamati’ i huiya çã niquimilnamiqui yn tlatohuanime netzâhualpila ayyahue cuix ömotã cuix ommotzã [read cuix ommotta cuix ommonotza] yn netzahualcoyotl huiya huchuetitla niquimilnaqui [read niquimilnamiqui] ohuaya ohuaya.

10.8 As the huehuetlatoll orator recommends:

Attend to the drum and the rattle, which are a means of awakening the city [to war] and, so, of giving pleasure to the Ever Present, the Ever Near [i.e., the supreme power], beseeching him, seeking his aid, calling out to him in sadness. xicmocujtlavi in vevetl, in aiacachtli yn ijxitiloca in atl, in tepetl: auh in javiltiloca in tloque, naaque, in jtlaltlanjiloca, in jtlatoltemoloca inje tlaoculnonotzalo. (CF lib. 6, cap. 14, fols. 60v–61)

10.9 So the singer, grieving, in obvious sadness, cries:

Romances song XXXI (37v:12–13): “Let me weep, let me sing.” ma ya nixoca y ma ya nicuica y (leaving the vocables ya and i untranslated).

10.10 And in the singers’ words the incoming warriors and warrior kings themselves, ritually brought to earth, are ixayotl ‘tears’, ixayauhtli ‘eye mist’, choquiztli ‘sobs’, choquizxochitl ‘sob flowers’—and cococ ‘miseries’, tlaocolli ‘sorrows’, ellelli ‘agonies’:39

Romances song XIV (15:13–15): May your agonies be off to war. tlaoc a melel i ço yazqui yaoyotl a ohuaya ohuaya (leaving the vocables a, i, and ohuaya untranslated).

10.11 Since the vocables occur not only as free-standing interjections but as prefixes, suffixes, and infixes, all translations of Aztec songs have omitted these persistent intrusions, or most of them, for the sake of clarity. This prac-
tice, for better or for worse, has helped to strengthen the impression that Aztec songs are “poetry” rather than ritual.

11. Concrete and Abstract Nouns

11.1 As the basic elements of the netotilitzli idiom emerge, it becomes apparent that the singer is making a distinction, though not always clear-cut, between the incoming warriors and his fellow ritualists on the dance floor (who are also regarded as warriors)—that is, between the imagined and the real, the ghosts (so to speak) and the mortals.

11.2 The concrete nouns icniuhtli ‘comrade [or friend]’ and icuitl ‘brother’ can designate a member of either group. Thus the term of address antocnihuan ‘you who are our friends [concrete form]’ may refer to either the singer’s fellow ritualists or the imagined warriors arriving from the sky world, while the abstract icniuhoitl ‘comradeship(s)’ and coayotl ‘companionship(s)’ always mean ghost warriors.\(^{40}\)

11.3 The awkward ‘-ship(s)’, of very limited use in English—compare the obsolescent “your lordship(s)”—is better omitted in translation.\(^{41}\) Hence ‘comrades’, ‘companions’, rather than ‘comradeships’, ‘companionships’, as in icniuhoitl aya tocœncenixtia tlalticpac ye nican ohuaya ohuaya ‘you assemble comrades [abstract form] here on earth’ (leaving the vocables untranslated) (Cantares 69:29).

11.4 The abstract forms cuicayotl ‘songs’, xochiyotl ‘flowers’, hueyotl ‘braves [i.e., outstanding warriors]’, cuauhyotl ‘eagles’, oceloyotl ‘jaguars’, and others as well, may be included in this category.\(^{42}\) Possessive forms often occur, but the standard distinction between “alien” and “organic” possession does not seem to apply. In other words, the rule that abstract xochiyotl ‘flower’, for example, can only be possessed by a plant, while the flower that a person holds or owns must be designated by concrete xochitl, is disregarded in the

\(^{40}\) On the translation of abstract nouns see GRAM 8.9. Garibay’s definition (1964:105) icniuhoitl = “brotherhood or guild (of poets)” is not preferred here. As applied to the netotilitzli, Molina’s definition compañía = icniuhoitl (MOLS folio 28) may be better understood as “company” in the military sense.

\(^{41}\) As noted in Karttunen and Lockhart 1987:101, 111 (totecuio ‘our lordship’ to be understood as ‘our lord’, i.e., God).

\(^{42}\) For Cantares occurrences, see DICT.
idiom here under consideration, as shown by the forms noxochio ‘my flowers [abstract form]’, moxchiyatzin ‘your precious flowers [abstract form]’.13

12. The War Ethic

12.1 The ambiguous expression ninotolinia ‘I am poor’, alternately translated ‘I am suffering’, may simply be used by the singer to elicit divine pity,14 as indicated above. But in certain contexts it means ‘poor [in deeds]’ (i.e., cowardly, not warlike); and in still other contexts, ‘suffering [in this life]’ (i.e., miserable on earth and eager for blissful reunion with the supreme power). By contrast the accomplished warrior is “rich,” especially the captured warrior who wins the “riches” of “knife death,” or sacrifice.

12.2 The midwife, it is reported, advises a newborn boy ‘of all the suffering and torment that will befall him on earth’ (in ca muchi tetolinj, tecoco, in jpan muchioaz tlalticpac), promising him that ‘he will die on the battlefield, or be sacrificed [as a captive]’ (iaoc momjqujliz, anoçe teomjqujz) (CF lib. 6, cap. 31, fol. 146).

12.3 In one of the lengthier, more elaborate huehuetlatolli texts, addressed to the god Tezcatlipoca in time of war, the orator pays tribute to:

[...] our bereaved eagles, our bereaved jaguars, who have no pleasure, who are discontent, who live in torment, who live in pain on this earth. [...] in tocnocuauh, in tocnocelouh, in aiavia, in avellamati, in toneoatinemj, in chichinacatinemj in tlalticpac. (CF lib. 6, cap. 3, fol. 11v; cf. FC 6:14:30–32)

12.4 And offers the prediction:

[...] may they in peace, in repose attain the sun, which endures, shines. [...] manoçu ivian, iocuxca itech onaciz in tonatiuh in manjc in tlanexti. (FC 6:12:32–33)

12.5 These unmistakable postulates, instilling the worthlessness of life and the value of death, find repeated echoes in the netotiliztli in Cantares:

44. Similarly, in the conjuros, Andrews and Hassig find “admissions of poverty as a ploy for compassion” (Ruiz de Alarcón 1984:259).
I’m suffering bereavement […] on earth. *ninotolinia icnopilotl* […] in tlāc. (69v:11–12)

We’re to leave the enduring earth. *ticyoncahuazque in tlalli manic*. (35v:19)

Let bereavement be destroyed! *maoc ompolihui ycnopillotl*. (13v:21–22)

No one’s home is earth. *ayac huel ichan in tlāc*. (69v:2–3)

Not forever on earth! *annochipa tlāc*. (17v:17)

We only come to dream; it is not true, not true that we come to live on earth. *ça tontemiquico ahnelli ahnelli tinemico in tlāc*. (14v:3–4)

Nothing we say here is real […] it is a dream […]. *ye antle nel o tic ytöhua nican […] temictli […]*. (13:4)

Evidently the Aztec theory reflects a general Native American war ethic, emphasizing the impermanence of earthly life, as revealed in warriors’ songs from the North American plains and upper midwest:

Is this real, this life I am living? (Pawnee)⁴⁵

I cast it away, my body. (Ojibwe)⁴⁶

the earth only endures. *makaʹ kiŋ lećeʹla tehaŋʹ yunkeʹlo*. (Lakota)⁴⁷

I live but I cannot live forever, only the great Earth lives forever, the great sun is the only living thing. *háw 'ahgáw 'al 'ah 'óhboy gōongtdaw, 'oy dóhm deyl kgée 'óhboy k'aw, 'oy pbáhee deyl kgée 'óhboy daw*. (Kiowa)⁴⁸

And in warriors’ prayers, for example:

I do not want to live long. Were I to live long, my sorrows would be overabundant, I do not want it! *bi·wirəxba·ʹk'e ci·ʹərək' bariʹatsisək*. ¹².⁶

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⁴⁵. Brinton 1890:292. The song belongs to one of the Pawnee war societies, or “lance” societies, whose members, according to native testimony, “held their lives in such light esteem as to be called unreal” (Densmore 1929:53). In the words of another song, “You see them but they are not real, / They are the Lance dancers” (ibid.: 54).

⁴⁶. Schoolcraft 1845:347.

⁴⁷. Densmore 1918:357.

But voices like the following, which are not rare in either the *Cantares* or the *Romances*, carry an undercurrent of reluctance even if they basically accept the doctrine:

*Cantares* song XVIII (20v:13–21:7): Alas, I have no pleasure here, no happiness on earth. Is this my lot? Is this my fate? Ah, bereavement is all I’ve come to know in this company here. Let there be borrowing [of incoming warriors], O friends. And only here. On earth! What will Life Giver’s heart be requiring one of these days? We must travel to his home, O friends. Then let us be pleased! yyoya-huee - / oyahui xahue / anahuiya o / - anihuelamatin / tlalticpac o ye nicã - / / ohuaya ohuaya aca yuhcã ye niyol / yuhcan nitlacat / a ycnopilotli · / çã nicmatico ye nican y tenahuãc a - / ohuaya ohuaya maoc netlatlanco [read maoc netlatlanhuilo] nicã - / y yatocnihuãn i - / çâniyo nican - / ay tlalticpac a ohuaya ohuaya ya moztla huipita / que conequiz yyolo / ypalnemohuã / toyazã ye yncha/-n atocnihuã maoc tonahaahuiyacan / / ohuaya ohuaya.

Note the term “borrowing,” indicating that the warrior’s life on earth is intended to be “brief,” lasting no more than a “moment,” soon to “wither” (like a flower), as the texts often say. Other passages are more plainspoken:

No one can be Life Giver’s friend. ayac huel icniuh [i]n ipalnemohuã. (*Romances* 5:3–4)

“Let’s have no more lordly marching. Let’s forget war and conflict.” macãçõ ayac yn teconenemi [read teucnehemi] cualayotl cocolotl maçõ ylcahui. (5v:11‒13)

The weight of the *netotiliztli*, nevertheless, falls squarely on the side of sacrifice, with occasional reminders aimed at cowards, doubters, and dissenters, as in *Romances* song I: ‘[…] who will seek them, who will meet them here beside the drum? […] Who among us will fail to entertain, to gladden God Self Maker?’ Or, more pointedly, as in *Cantares* song XII:

Clever with a song, I beat my drum to wake our comrades, rousing them to arrow deeds, whose never Dawning hearts know nothing, whose hearts lie dead asleep in war, who praise themselves in shadows, in darkness. Not in vain do I say, “They are poor.” Nictzotzonan nohuehueuh nicuicatlamatquetl ic niquimonixitia ic niquimitlehua in toc-nihuan yn ahtle ynyollo quimati yn aic tlathui, ypan in inyollo yaaccohmictoque in inpan motimaloa in mixtecomatlayohualli ahnen niquitohuay motoliniay.

12.10 The “human,” the “sane” attitude is to embrace the “flood and blaze” that represents war (see especially Romances song V). And if shame fails, there’s praise. As stated in Romances 36v:10, “Only for fame and renown does one die in war.” And the dying is squarely faced: warriors are ‘forsaken’ (cahua); they ‘splinter’ (poztequi), ‘shatter’ (teini), ‘ruin’ (po[h]polihui), ‘wither’ (cuetlahui), and are ‘gathered up’ (pe[h]pena).

12.11 Ultimately the authority for military action comes from the supreme spirit. As the songs repeatedly ask, “What does God say?” (i.e., “What does God decree?” or “What does God want [or require]?”), demanding the answer, “War.”50 The right pursuit is cualanyotl cocollotl ‘war and conflict’ (Romances 5v:12); the warrior should ‘foam [i.e., seethe with anger]’ pozoni (Romances 7:11, Cantares passim). The warrior’s mandate is clear; and yet, doubts must be resolved, calling for argument.

12.12 The argumentative strain that runs through the repertory has an apparently pre-Cortésian component in the old native attitude toward a faithless and untrustworthy supreme spirit. As the saying went, aiac vel icnjuh, aiac nellin qujlhuja Tezcatlipuca ‘no one can be Tezcatlipoca’s friend, to no one does he tell the truth’ (FC 4:35:23). The adage crops up in Romances song IV (as noted above): aycic huel icnjuh [i]n ipalnemohuã ‘no one can be Life Giver’s friend’. And again in song XVIII: ¿quéquice i ye neli quilhuia · / yn · amo nello ‘to how many does he tell the truth, does he not tell the truth! [freely, how many does he “yes” and “no”!]. But in Cantares song VII the querulous tone takes on an unmistakable Christian coloration, as noted in “Dating the Songs” in the Introduction. Establishing the precise boundary between an older native attitude and the newer nativistic way of thinking, which incorporates Christianity, is by no means a simple task.

50. See the final stanza of Romances song IX and CM 4:18 teoatl tlachinolli qitoa ‘he decrees war’ (cf. 17v:1, 17v:28, 32v:1, etc., and DICT ihtoa:tla 1).
It should be remembered when confronting a song that appears to be entirely negative, such as Romances song XIX, that the text may not mean what it seems to mean. A warrior’s song of the Pawnee Lance Society may be compared in this connection:

It has been said, / a woman did say it: / “The dance [of the Lance Society], no! / It is not the true thing for you, [my newborn son,] / the lance [of the dancers] that is walking around [in their ceremony].” nari-ru-rit riwaka / tzapat tiwaku / Taku kaki / nariksha / Kitzicha ra huriwi.\textsuperscript{51}

This is apparently an admonition against war, exactly the opposite of the midwife’s word of encouragement quoted above in section 2.1. But the collector of the text writes that “the inner meaning of the song is the reply”—that the newborn boy, when grown, should in fact join the war party, because (according to native exegesis), “Where will the woman send her son that he will not meet death?”\textsuperscript{52} An essential point is that the Pawnee dances, like the earlier Aztec dances, were public performances sponsored by an established native order (warily permitted in later times, in New Spain, by a colonial authority ill equipped to analyze content). To suppose that negativity under such circumstances could be given a hearing for any purpose other than to receive scorn would be unrealistic. Similarly, to fantasize, as some have done, that Aztec songs represent private musings would be to ignore ethnography and historical evidence.

13. Drunkenness

Intoxication is mentioned or implied throughout the netotiliztli, often in connection with octli ‘wine [i.e., pulque]’; the unidentified hallucinogen poyomaltli, or poyon, variously given in English as ‘poyon’ or ‘narcotic’; and the milder stimulants iyetl ‘incense [refers to tobacco]’ and cacahuatl ‘cacao’.\textsuperscript{53} The warriors are said to i ‘drink’, cua ‘eat’, or chichina ‘inhale’ these substances.

With reference to ritualists playing the part of warriors in a calendrical ceremony, the Florentine Codex describes those ‘who had become drunk,
unruly [like] warriors, daring, foolhardy, full of spirit, lively, proud of their valor, playing the part of men’ (yn aqujque, mihivintia iautlaueliloque, mixtlapaloanj, acan ixmahuque, iollotlapaltique, iollochicaoaque, quipopoanj yn jntia-caucho moquichnenequj).

13.3 Drunkenness may also describe the joyful condition of deceased warriors in the sky world, where they ‘sip the various flowers’ (qujchichina in nepapan xuchitl) ‘in such a way that they seem intoxicated’ (injc iuhquijma ivintitinemj).

13.4 Or, it may describe the hoped-for predicament of one’s enemies on the battlefield, allowing them to be more easily captured — allowing them to “lie in our hands,” as the songs frequently say. In time of war the huehuetlatolli orator prays to Tezcatlipoca:

Intoxicate our foes; inebriate them, make them drunk. May they cast themselves into the hands of, may they deliver themselves to, may they come unaware upon our pitiable eagle warriors, our pitiable jaguar warriors, who rejoice not, who are discontent, who live in torment, who live in pain on earth. ma xicmotlaaoantili, ma xicmjvintili, maxicmoxocomjtili yn toiaouh, ma imac oalmotlaça, ma qujoalmomaca, ma ica oalmomota in tocnocauh, in tocnocelouh, in aiavia, in avellamati, in toneoatinemj, in chichinacatinemj in tlalticpac.

13.5 Or, finally, captives taken in battle may be given octli ‘wine’, or teooctli ‘sacred wine’, immediately before being sacrificed. The practice is repeatedly mentioned by Durán, whose modern translators Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden find that the “sacred” version of the beverage “gave valor to those who were about to die” and may have contained narcotic additives.


14.1 To bring forth the agents of supernatural power, the conjuros ritualist — rather than merely summoning the spirits — may claim to have “made” them, as in the medical incantation addressed to the personified powers of tobacco and water that will be needed in the cure:

54. As transcribed and translated by Anderson and Dibble in FC 2:49:3–6.
55. FC 6:13:8–11.
Indeed, right here, I’ve come to set up the Yellow Priest [i.e., the tobacco], the White Priest [i.e., the water]! The one who comes is I, the Priest, Sorcerer Lord! I’ve made you, I’ve given birth to you! Ca ye nican oniquizaco [read onicquetzcaco] coçauhqui tlamacazqui, iztac tlamacazqui; nehuatl onihualla nitlamacazqui, ninahualtecutili: ye onimitz-chichiuh, onimitzyolliti.57

14.2 In the same vein the netotiliztli singer announces:

As a flower you’ve been created, you’ve been brought to life, O prince. You’ve been summoned from the Place of Duality [i.e., the other world where human life is created]. xochitla yyhuiya / y toyoooloc [read toyocoloc] haya toniyatlacati titepilçin yn i tinahuatiloc yn omeyocana. (Romances 10v:12–14)

14.3 The same idea, with variations, is stated and restated throughout the netotiliztli, as the incoming “princes,” or warriors, are said to be made, given birth, created, or brought to life.58 Occasionally, as in Romances song II, they are said to be the nacayotl ‘flesh’ of the creative power or its agent; and in general they are ilhuizolli ‘marvels’ (as in song XIV).

15. Acts of Craftsmanship

15.1 Although the incoming warriors—as “songs” or “flowers”—may be simply “created,” they are often crafted, so to speak, after the manner of the jeweler, the featherworker, the painter, or the florist.

15.2 Just as the jeweler creates by pitza ‘smelting’ and mamali ‘drilling’, then zo or zozo ‘stringing’, his acatic ‘tubiform beads’ and ololihuic ‘round beads’;59 using gold, jade, and turquoise, so the ritualist can claim:

I drill my songs as though they were jades, I smelt them as gold. Nicchalchiuhnamali teocuitlatl nicpitza ye nocuic. (Cantares 23:26)

In beauty I compose these songs of mine, I, a Cempohualtec, and these are my braves [lit., great ones]60 round beads, tubiform beads.

57. Ruiz de Alarcón 1953:139 (trat. 6, cap. 3). Cf. Ruiz de Alarcón 1982:225 and 1984:164. Comparable passages are in ibid., trat. 2, caps. 4, 5, 8; trat. 4, cap. 3; trat. 6, caps. 1, 3.
58. DICT chihuah, tlacati, yocoya, yoli. See also section 8, above (“Songs as Flowers”).
59. The jeweler’s craft is described in FC 9:75:16 (pitza), 9:80:19 (mamali), 11:223:8 (ololtic, acatic). Cf. DICT.
60. Over a dozen attestations are found in the Cantares (see DICT hueyotl 1).
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The featherworker, crafting a mosaic, zaloa ‘mounts’ the ihuitl ‘feathers [or plumes],’ and, thus inspired, the ritualist can say:

As trogon feathers I mount, I recall, the root songs. nictzinitzcanihuiçaloaya [read nictzinitzcanihuiçaloaya] niquilnamiquia nelhuayocuicatla. (Cantares 3:5–6)

The painter of pictographic screenfolds or amoxtli ‘books’ —freely, ‘pictures’— gives his images tlilli tlapalli ‘outline and color,’ prompting the ritualist to say:

And so you’re giving outline to these comrades, these companions, these nobles. In colors you recite the ones who’ll live on earth, and so you’re hatching eagles, jaguars, in your painting place. yc tictlilania cohuayotl / a yn icniuhyotl a y tecpilotl huiya tocotlapalpuhua y nemiz / [read nemiz i] y tlalticpaco yc tictlatlapana cuayotl · oçeloyotl · y motlacuilolpani. (Romances 35:9–13)

The craft of the florist supplies the icpacxochitl ‘crown of flowers’, the xochicozcatl ‘flower necklace’ — and, more elaborate still, the xochimecatl ‘flower rope [or garland]’, requiring a close look at the various verbs that express twisting or turning. These, the verbs that activate the xochimecatl, are one of the distinguishing features of the netotiliztli.

16. Verbs of Rotation (and “Garlands”)

The Nahuatl verbs cueyahua, huicoma, ihcuiya, ilacatzoa, malacachoa, malina, and tzahua (including the reduplicatives cuecueyahua, huihuicoma, and mamalina), which as a group may be translated by the English verb ‘twist’, broadly defined, appear throughout the Romances and the Cantares, often in context with “flowers.” Of such verbs the two most commonly found in the songs are ilacatzoa and malina. These may be either transitive or intransitive; and ilacatzoa, in addition, has the special intransitive form ilacatzihui. Used in tandem, as attested in the Florentine Codex, they describe the crafting of...
a decorative floral item called *mecatl* ‘garland’, or *xochimecatl* ‘flower garland’ (more precisely ‘rope of flowers’). In the *netotiltlizti*, as would be expected, the *mecatl* are warriors, especially incoming warriors and warrior kings produced by the ritualist or the ritualist’s imagined agents:

*Romances* song XIII (13v:14–16): Flower garlands have been twirled [or twisted, i.e., created], and these are your flowers, your good words [i.e., songs], O princes. *xochimecatl oo / yhuã momamali / yn amo-xochihui / y yectlin ámotlatol antepihuãno* (leaving untranslated the vocables oo *yhuã*).

*Cantares* song XXIX (20v:7–11): Eagles are spun [or twisted], jaguars are recognized. / With eagle flower garlands the city goes hunting [i.e., for captives]: what’s spun [or twisted] are jaguar flowers, the princes Montezuma and Cahualtzin. *onmomamalina in quauhyotl ye ômixinimati oceloyotl a ohuaya etc / Quauhuixochimacatica oye a’antoc y in atlon yan tepetl oceloxochitla in onmomalintoque in tépilhuan y Moteuçu-matzin oa in cahualtzin.*

*Romances* song XXXIII (40v:9–11): He starts to sing: flower garlands are whirled [or twisted, i.e., created], these hearts of yours [i.e., your warriors], O singer! *pehua cuica xochinmecatlã momamalinã · moyoliyo · ticuicanitli.*

*Cantares* song LXVIII (58v:30): These garlands roar, these fish are flying. *ỹ mecatl yhcoyocaya cã michin patlania.*

*Cantares* song LXX (63v:1–2): O Holy Spirit, you arrive! You come bringing your swans, these angels, these flower garlands. *spilito xanto çan tihualacico can tiquhuicatihuitz in Moquecholhuan a yn ageloti xochimecatlo.*

16.2 In the last example the incoming warriors are called *angelotin* ‘angels’, a usage that also has—in the *Cantares* at least—the synonyms *centzonxi-*

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64. *Auh yn omoçococ, suchitl, mec momamalina, mijlacatzoa, vel viujac viujitlatzic, totomaoac, vel tomactic* ’and when the flowers had been threaded, then [mec, a variant of nec] they were twisted, turned [to make garlands] —long, very long, thick, very thick’. Or, as freely translated by Sahagún: *flores […] las ensartauan, en sus hilos, o mecatejos: tenjendolas ensartadas, hazian sogas torcidas dellas gruesas, y largas* ‘flowers […] they threaded them [to make] their strings, or strange mecates; after having threaded them, they twisted [these strings of flowers] into [heavier strings, or] ropes that were thick and long’. CF lib. 2, cap. 28, fol. 59; cf. FC 2:101:17–18.
quipilli ‘innumerable ones’ and ilhuicac chane ‘heaven dwellers’. In other songs, emphasizing their status as progenitors, they may be called nonan nota ‘my mother, my father’, tecic tecol ‘grandmother, grandfather’, or simply nelhuatl ‘root’ or nelhuayotl ‘rootstock’.

17. Verbs of Rotation (and Pastoral)

17.1 Since the Nahuatl verbs of rotation, or some of them, can mean ‘to twist around something in a helical fashion’, it is tempting to search the syntax to see if such a meaning can be accommodated in translations of the netotiliztli. The lure is especially strong in passages that have hunting or fishing imagery, as in Romances song I, where we find the hero Temilotzin using a snare (ilpia ‘to tie, snare, or capture’). One asks whether the accompanying rotational verbs, icuiya and ilacatzoa, could mean ‘twist up’, or ‘ensnare’, in this case.

17.2 The possibility is even more compelling in the various passages that mention “flowers”—or “songs” as though they were flowers. Couldn’t the syntax be read in such a way that the principals are ‘enlaced’, ‘wreathed’, or ‘entwined’ with flowers, or the song itself is a kind of flowery wreath wrapped around one’s waist or shoulders, especially in passages where the warrior is said to be “arrayed” or “adorned”? 67

17.3 The image of untrammeled nature conjured up by “twining” or “wreathing” plant materials, with its tacit suggestion of rural innocence, is one of the staples of European pastoral tradition — by the late 1500s already absorbed, creatively, into the intellectual life of New Spain. Developed by Latin poets of the Augustan age, drawing on Greek models, pastoral diction and pastoral attitudes were revived by the Italian Renaissance and promptly disseminated in Europe — with a vigorous branch in sixteenth- and seventeenth—

65. Comparing a text from the Psalmodia christiana (Sahagún 1583:171v) with a passage from the Florentine Codex (FC 3:47:1–19), Burkhart (1989:85) writes, “The angels are implicitly identified with dead Aztec heroes, who in the sun’s heaven took the form of birds.” For angels as centzonxiquipilli ‘lit., 400 × 8000’, see MS 1628-bis, new folio 273, line 12. For angels as ilhuicac chane, see Doctrina cristiana 1944:74v. For Cantares occurrences, see DICT.

66. DICT tahtli/nantli, cihtli/colli, nelhuatl, nelhuayotl 2.

67. The “adornment” is figurative, as can be seen in passages where the adorning “flowers” are “sighing” (CM 5:19), are “swans” (CM 46v:29–30), are “war flowers” (CM 72:8–10), etc., suggesting that the warrior as captor is “dressed,” “arrayed,” or “adorned” with captives, or wears them as a “flower crown,” or holds them as a bouquet (macxochitl ‘hand flowers [lit., flowers in or at the hand]’).
century Mexico, where the countryside took on a New World flavor and the innocent shepherds became Indians.  

Inasmuch as pastoral, or its special phraseology, survived in English poetry well into the nineteenth century, writers of English have ready-made “clasping ivy twined” (Alexander Pope) and “twined flowers” (John Keats) at their disposal, without harking back to the Augustan “let the garlands wave and blow” (Catullus), “vagrant stems of ivy, foxglove, and gay briar” (Virgil), or “would you with ivy wreath your flowing hair” (Ovid). It is not without interest, moreover, that the works of Virgil, Catullus, Ovid, and other Latin poets were well known in New Spain during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—imported in editions published in Spain, anthologized in local publications, translated into Spanish, and intensively studied in institutions of learning. Turning to the homegrown product, in lyrics variously known as romances ‘ballads’ or italianillas ‘little Italian ones’, we find among the—astonishingly numerous—poets of New Spain:

[a native chieftainess] encircled with flowers and foliage. rodeada de flores y arboleda. (don Antonio de Saavedra Guzmán, 1599)

[And] here [beside the laguna de México ‘Lake of Mexico’] the shepherds play their games, / Here the shepherdesses dance their dances. Aquí sus juegos juegan los pastores, / aquí sus bailes bailan las pastoras. (Doctor Eugenio de Salazar, 1530?–1605?)

O shepherd […] happy flowers […] wreathed in flowers. Pastor […] alegres flores […] envuelto en flores. (Bernardo de Balbuena, 1561?-1627)

68. Pope 1956:24; Keats 1951:383; Davenport 1951:272 (Catullus), 292 (Virgil), 470 (Ovid). 69. Osorio Romero 1980:58–59 and passim. 70. Méndez Plancarte 1964:88–172 passim (romances); 95n (italianillas). 71. The historian of Mexican literature Carlos González Peña (1968:56) writes, “The superabundant production of poetry—which has always been characteristic of Mexico—began to show itself even in the sixteenth century. […] In the literary contest held in 1585 during the third provincial Mexican Council, three hundred poets took part.” In a quotable line of the day it was said that at the court of the viceroy “there are more poets than dung” (Dowling 1994:43). 72. Méndez Plancarte 1964:98. 73. Ibid.:72. 74. Ibid.:116, 122.
[A shepherd who imagines his deceased friend] wreathed in assorted flowers. *enbuelto en uarias flores.* (Francisco de Figueroa, before 1577)⁷⁵

[A heartsick shepherd addressing his cruel love as] the vine I adore, entwined in the embrace of another elm. *entretexida mi amada vid, y en otro olmo abraçada.* (Damasio Frías, before 1677)⁷⁶

[And:] Dance, ye [native] Mexicans […] for Mary is triumphant […] make garlands for her. *Bailad, Mexicanos […] pues triunfa María […] hacedle guirnaldas.* (Francisco Bramón, 1620)⁷⁷

17.5 By the time the *romances* ‘ballads’, or *cantares* ‘songs’, of the native *mexicanos* became a subject of study, the phraseology of pastoral, along with the attitudes that informed it, came readily to mind as a key to interpretation.⁷⁸

As an exercise, one might take the following passage:

Here come the Colhuan nobles, spinning [lit., here the Colhuan nobles become spun or twisted]. Here the Colhuan Chichimecs, our lords, are whirling [or turning]. *Nican momalinaco in colcahuahcatec-pilotl huiya nican milacatzoa in colhuahcachichimecayotl in toteuchua.* *(Cantares song XV 7v:24–25)*

— and ask: What precisely does this mean? It may be granted that the verbs can be read differently (or at least an alternate reading is remotely feasible even if unsupported by sixteenth-century textual attestations):

Here the Colhuan nobles become entwined [with flowers?], here the Colhuan Chichimecs, our lords, are wreathed [with flowers?].

17.6 The problem with the “entwined” or “wreathed” translation is that these verbs are being used without the near proximity of flowers or any other botanical materials to serve an adverbial function — as also in this stanza:

⁷⁵ Peña 2004:226. Although the poets Figueroa and Frías (see the following quotations) did not reside in Mexico, the verses in question were compiled in Mexico as part of the anthology *Flores de baria poesía* (1577).


⁷⁷ Méndez Plancarte 1964:164.

⁷⁸ Thus Carochi in his *Arte* of 1645 gives *ilacatzihui* ‘to be twisted’ and in the same breath, translating a phrase from “the songs of the Indians,” has *ilacatzihui* ‘to be entwined’ (CARO 76–76v, Carochi 2001:284–85).
It’s the Commander [i.e., Temilozin]! O Temilozin, you summon your comrades! You recall them, and in this way they’re whirled [or twisted] by dint of misery, these, your tears. Çan tlacateccatl titemilozini tiquiyanotza mochihua tiquelnamiqui yeic malintoc cococ ycaya mochoquiz aya. (Cantares 43v:27–28)

17.7 Far removed from pastoral, the historical Temilozin (tlacateccatl ‘commander’ of Mexican troops during the Conquest) now serves as the agent of supreme power (as in section 3), bringing forth warrior comrades, using several of the ritual techniques that have been mentioned above: summoning (section 1), recalling (sections 10 and 14), creating by twisting (section 15), and eliciting pity (section 10).

17.8 It is true that the verbs of rotation are used in sixteenth-century Nahuatl writings on plant morphology to describe the helical form of certain roots and tendrils. But the helical or tapestry-like figures in which nature imitates art, or art imitates nature (as in the pastoral diction of European poetry), do not seem to be part of the semantic baggage of these Nahuatl verbs until the 1640s.79

18. Verbs of Rotation (and the Creation Myth)

18.1 Just as the conjuros ritualist invokes the myth of human creation in the hope of making an injured patient whole again,80 the netotiliztli singer alludes to the same myth (the myth of human creation) as a means of bringing sky warriors to life—in incorporating the term ilacatzoa, semantically the most flexible of the several verbs of rotation:

The flower tree stands in Tamoanchan, God’s home. There! You’re created! “We’ve been summoned. Our Spirit, Life Giver, whirls us as lord songs.” What I’m smelting is as gold: I’m carving our good songs as jades. “Four times and as turquoise! Tamo, God, Life Giver whirls us

79. See note 78. Another example: Bartolomé de Alva’s Nahuatl adaptation of Calderón’s comedia El gran teatro del mundo, about the same date as Carochi’s Arte or a little earlier, has momamalin yn huitzitzilxochitl. Though untranslated, this can plausibly be understood, in context, as ‘hummingbird flowers have been intertwined’ (Alva ca. 1640:2v). For sixteenth-century usages applied to roots and tendrils, see FC 11:206:13, 206:29, 207:17, 209:12, 210:21.

80. To mend a broken bone, the ritualist identifies with the god Quetzalcoatl, who created a new race of humans in the paradisal Tamoanchan, using bones retrieved from the underworld (Ruiz de Alarcón 1984:190–92, 295–96, 371 [trat. 6, cap. 22]).
four times in Tamoanchan!” Xochinquahuitl onicac in tamoan ychan 
dios yecha [read ye ichan], oncan tiyocoloc tinahuatiiloque teuctlatoltica 
techylacatzoa in ça yehuan toteouh yn ipaltinemi. Yhui yn teocuitlatl in 
nicpitza nicchalchiuhtequi yectli tocuihc yhuin teoxihuitl icni [read inic] 
nappa, techilacatzohua nappa tamo, tamoa ychan yehuá Dios ypalnemo-
huani. (Cantares 15:1–6)

18.2 The myth varies considerably over its range (which seems to be confined 
to the southwest quarter of the North American continent). But a look at 
some of the variants should show that the verb ilacatzoa has been plausibly 
translated in the passage quoted above. The essential idea is that a circular 
motion, repeated four times, duplicates the twisting of winds, thereby im-
parting the breath of life in a process of imitative magic. For convenience, 
references to the circular motion, the wind, and the number four are here 
italicized:

One day Coyote wanted to make people. […] Coyote said to his 
wife, “Make a big round basketry water bottle.” She made it. Coyote 
[…] took the basket and filled it half full of seeds. Then he stopped 
up the opening. He took a pipe, filled it with Indian tobacco, took one 
whiff of smoke, and blew it into the basket. […] The basket was full of 
something. Coyote picked it up and four times danced round in a circle 
with it. […] He put the basket down. Already there were plenty of 
people inside […]. He poured the people out, saying, “[…] Well, I 
have made plenty […]”. (Washo)

[…] we must see what can be done to make human beings […]. 
[…] They went to the good land of day. In four revolutions or gyrations 
of the upper worlds, we became human beings. (Osage)

81. The translation follows Garibay 1965:139 (techilatzozoa nappa ‘nos hace girar cuatro veces 
[i.e., spins us four times’], disagrees with Schultze-Jena 1957:72–73 techilatzohua nappa 
‘wickelt uns […] viermal [i.e., wraps us four times’]. However, a Zuni prayer describing the 
procedure that ritualists have followed in making prayersticks, or “plume wands,” representing 
human beings to be sacrificed to the gods, states, “[…] four times clothing their plume wands /
They made the plume wands into living beings” (Bunzel 1932:710) — suggesting that Schultze 
Jena’s idea of “wrapping” or “swaddling” (see SIM 164 and Olmos 1972:226, MOLS emboluer 
niño = niquilacatzoa) should not be dismissed out of hand.

82. Lowie 1939:333.
[...] after the fourth call, the gods appeared... [carrying] two ears of corn [...]. The gods laid one buckskin on the ground [...]; on this they placed the two ears of corn [...]. Then they told the [spirit] people to stand at a distance and allow the wind to enter. [...] While the wind was blowing, eight of the Mirage People came and walked around the objects on the ground four times [...]. When the Mirage people had finished their walk [...] the ears of corn had disappeared; a man and a woman lay there in their stead. [...] It was the wind that gave them life. It is the wind that comes out of our mouths now that gives us life. When this ceases to blow we die. In the skin at the tips of our fingers we see the trail of the wind; it shows us where the wind blew when our ancestors were created. (Navajo) 84

The gods said, “Who will there be?” [...] Then Quetzalcoatl went to the dead land, to the dead land lord [...]. He said to him, “I’ve come for the precious bones that you are keeping.” [...] The dead land lord replied, “Very well. Blow my conch horn and circle four times round my precious realm.” [...] Then he blew on it, and the dead land lord heard him, and again the dead land lord spoke to him: “Very well, take them!” [...] Then [Quetzalcoatl] carried them to Tamoanchan. And when he had brought them, the one named Quilaztli, Cihuacoatl, ground them up. Then she put them into a jade bowl, and Quetzalcoatl bled his penis on them. Then all the gods did penance [...] then they said, “Holy ones, humans, have been born.” in teteo quitoque aqui in onoz [...] auh niman ye yauh in quetzalcohuatl in mictlan itech açito in mictlanteuctli [...] quihui ca yehuatl ic nihualla in chalchiuhomitl in ticmopiellia [...] quito in mictlanteuctli ca ye qualli tla xoconpitza in notecçiz, auh nauhpa xictlayahualochti in nochalchiuhteyahualco [...] nima ye quipitza quihualcac in mictlanteuctli = auh ye no çepa quilhuia in mictlanteuctli ca ye qualli xoconcui [...] niman ic quitquic in tamoanchan = auh in oconaxiti niman ye quiteci itoca quilachtli yehuatl iz çihuacohuatl nima ye ic quitema in chalchiuhapazco = auh niman ye ipan motepoliço in quetzalcoatl niman mochintin tlamaçehua in teteo [...] auh niman quitoque otlacatque in teteo in maçehualtin. (CC 76:18–77:2)

As the site or proximate site of human creation, the otherworldly Tamoan-chan lends added meaning to such passages from the netotiliztli as:

Romances song XI (11:18–11v:7): “I come as a flower tree from Tamoan-chan, the flower seat, come whirling these, these laughing ones, these flowers, burgeoned flowers, [song-root flowers]. […] “I am created in Tamoanchan.” nicmalitihuiz xochicahuitlo huehuezcani xo-chitl a y tamohuãchã / xochipetlapana ayyahue / mimilihuic xo-chitla yeehuaya a nelhuayoxochitli […] nin•yecoya [read ninoyocoya] a / tamohuãnichani.

Cantares song XXII (17v:22–23): From Tamoanchan, where flowers stand, from there beyond, you come, O lords, O Montezuma, O Toto-quitihuaztli. You’ve arrived […]. Yn tamoan icha xochitl ye icaca ompa ye yahuitze yantoteuchua huiya timoteucçomatzin, in totoquihuatzin yn âme’coque.

In the second of these two passages there is no verb of rotation, but if there were it might be ilacatzoa, malina—or any one of the others, since they appear to be interchangeable, at least in the netotiliztli, as indicated in the following section.

19. Verbs of Rotation (and “Whirling”)

The interchangeability of malina and ilacatzoa, and of ilacatzoa and icuiya, can be seen in passages quoted above (17.5, 17.1), where the paired verbs are treated as approximate synonyms. The first of these two pairs may even be used imperatively in a single command:


In the indicative mode, though no less coercively, malina and huicoma are coupled:

85. Even in prosaic contexts Molina allows these verbs to take human subjects. See MOL malintiuetzti. ‘caer dos enel suelo asidos’; MOLS emboluer niño ‘niquilacatzoa’.
Cantares song LXXX (67v:16–17): The flower tree is whirling, twisting, drizzling down in this rainy house of yours. xochinquahuitl malinticac huiconticac ya pixahuinticcaco ye moquiapan.

19.3 Malacachoa and malina, also, may replace one another, as can be seen by comparing formulaic phrases in which ‘flowers’ (potential captives that the warrior imagines as already lying in his hand) are produced, i.e., ‘blossom’ or ‘come forth’, as though a flower garland were being crafted, or twisted, into existence:

Romances song VII (8v:14–16): Shield flowers are spinning [or twisting (malacachoa)]. Plume popcorn flowers lie in our hands. çà momalacachohuaya / chimali ya xochitl - yn quetzalyzquixochitl - tomac onmania.

Cantares song XXX (21:15): War flowers are blossoming. Shield popcorn flowers lie in my hand. Ý yaoxochitl oncuepontimani chimalizquixochitl aya nomac in mania.

Romances song XII (12v:2–3): Whirling [or twisting (malina)], blossoming. malinticac oo - vaye omcueputicaqui [read malinticac oo huaye oncueponticac i].

Cantares song LXIV (53:13–15): Let these holy flowers come forth. Let them lie in your hand. These songs, these words of yours, are whirled [malina] as flowers [lit., twisted flowerwise]. ma quíça om a yectli xochitl ma momac onmania onxochimalintoc amocuic amotlatol.

19.4 And note that ilacatzoa can replace cuecueyahua:

Cantares song XXXVI (23v:1–6): As though they were plumes he twists them, he, Totoquihuaztli. Let the singer come. Let the singer come. / Life Giver! As a trogon, as a swan, a cotinga, you seem. Your heart is pleasured, it imbibes the painted flowers. Songs are painted! / You’ve opened out your plumelike wings. You’re whirled as trogon feathers, O Auburn Swan. quetzalte huehuelin quicuecueyahua in totoquihuatzi ma cuíca huitz ma cuíca huitz etc / Tzintoshcan quechol xiuhtotl ypan timomatia ypalnemoa moyol ahuia i yeihuaya coyachichinaya tlayoxtzochil ihcuilihuin cuicatl a eta / Çan moquetzalatlalap o çan timoçozoatzoa tzintoshcanyhuítica timilacatzoa in tayopalquechol.
Any of the several verbs under consideration may be correctly given in English as ‘twist’ (Spanish ‘torcer’), with the understanding that the meaning ranges through various kinds and degrees of torsion with or without rearrangement of the entity being revolved or rotated. Because the English ‘twist’ carries a heavier connotation of rearrangement, or distortion, than the corresponding Nahuatl verbs, and is therefore potentially misleading, English ‘twirl’, ‘turn’, ‘spin’, or ‘whirl’ has been given preference in these translations.

20. The Payment

Whether by cajoling, insisting, dancing, singing, metaphorical “twisting,” or other ritualistic means, the summoning of dead warriors, or “lords,” from the house of the sun does not come without cost. There must be a process of ixtlahua ‘to pay’ or patiuhtli ‘payment’. In other words, lives must be given in exchange. Here, then, is the philosophical basis for the practice known in Nahuatl as tlacatica moxtlahua ‘to make the human payment’. As expressed in the Cantares (23v:16–18):

You are feathered; as chalk you’re thrashed, O Tlacahuepan, you that will have thus departed for the Place Unknown. It seems that you’re a payment for the lords, O Tlacahuepan. timopotonia tiçatica in ye timoxconoa ha in tlacahuepa huiya yca toyao quenonamica huiya ahua yhua ya ohuaya aye ahua yio yahui / O anca ye tinpatiuh in teteuctin a in tlacahuepa huiya.

Although the term patiuhtli appears in the Romances only in song VI, the concept is helpful to an understanding of the manuscript as a whole. In number V, for example, the resistance hero Cacamatl, murdered by Spaniards in 1520, is impersonated by the latter-day ritualist, who has him summoning deceased lords from the more distant past, at the same time asking whose deaths, perhaps including his own, will serve as payment:

This I say, I Cacamatl: I recall the kings Nezahualpilli and Nezahualcoyotl, are they summoned? Are they seen? Here beside the drum I re-

call them. / And who will pass away? Jades? Gold? Will someone pass away? Am I a turquoise shield? Never again will I be put together? I am arrayed in plumes here on earth. Here beside the drum I recall them.

Throughout the netotiliztli the exchange, or payment, may be signaled by a perturbation of the universe:

this earth is shaking. tlalli olini. (Cantares 31:2)

the earth is rolling over. tlalli mocuepa. (Cantares 9:5–6)

the earth rolls over, the sky shakes. tlalli mocuepaya ilhuicatl olinia. (Cantares 33:23–24)

this jaguar earth is shaking and the screaming skies begin to rip. Ocelotlíc olini yehuaya oyohualli yilhuicatlin nanatzcatimomana. (Cantares 63:19)

the skies are roaring. tetecuica yn ilhuicatl. (Romances 6v:2–3)

In a broader context the matter is discussed by the anthropologist Bruce Trigger in terms of an exchange, or flow, of energy between sky and earth:

While it is important to understand Aztec prisoner sacrifice in ecological and functional terms, it is no less important to recognize it as being one specific elaboration of a set of beliefs that extended from the Tupinamba of the Amazonian forests as far north as the Iroquoians of the northeastern woodlands of North America. This cult, or network of cults, involved sacrificing prisoners to the sun in the belief that this was necessary to maintain the cosmic energy flows upon which all life on earth depends.87

Those who have believed that the Cantares and the Romances contain metaphysics may turn out to be right after all.

21. “Not Twice”

At various points in the repertory the ritualist finds it necessary to deal with the harsh reality that death may be permanent. If it is, this contradicts the doctrine of return and exchange. As the texts have it, “we die forever” (song

XIX), or, in a phrase characteristic of the *netotiliztli*, “not twice does one live” (song XVI).

21.2 The singer confronts the “not twice” objection in a variety of ways. He may simply state it, then drown it out in a virtuosic display of “crafting,” “creating,” or “bringing down” the required ghost warriors. The fullest example is the 55-stanza *Cantares* song XVIII, which rehearses all aspects of the “die forever” argument, then swamps it in a triumphant coda ending with “everyone alive,” “flower garlands coming from beyond,” in a glorious “war of flowers.”

21.3 Or he may turn the objection to advantage, illogically it would seem, suggesting that permanent death is the just desert of enemy warriors or, alternately, that since the warrior does not live “twice,” he may as well enjoy the “flowers” of combat while he can.

21.4 Or the singer may wallow in the objection, becoming morose. In this way he inspires the divine pity that releases warriors from the sky world, allowing them to return to earth.

21.5 More decisively and in true ritualistic fashion, the singer may simply decree that the objection be removed, using the phrase *tlaca ayoppatihua* or its variant *tlaca hayopâ* ‘Let there be no “never twice”!’ (*Cantares* 71v:3, Romances 34:1).

22. Mexico

22.1 Unlike the *conjuros*, which are based on religion exclusively, the *netotiliztli* draw upon history and politics; and evidently for this reason they were called “profane” by nonnative observers, who distinguished them from another native song-genre, the *macehualiztli*, recognized as “sacred.”

22.2 While the battles waged in the *conjuros* are between the agents of personal harm and the spirits of succor, the warfare imagined in the *netotiliztli* favors Mexico against its mundane enemies. With Mexico (that is, the twin boroughs of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco) stand its partners in the so-called Triple Alliance: Acolhuacan (with the city of Texcoco as its seat) and Tepanecapan (seated at Azcapotzalco until the Tepanec War ca. 1430, thereafter at Tlacopan). Mexico’s traditional antagonists are Chalco, a confederation to the south, and, especially, Huexotzinco and Tlaxcala, a pair of

88. The distinction is made in Motolinía 1971b:386–87 (parte 2, cap. [27]) and in Cervantes de Salazar 1985:463 (lib. 4, cap. 102); see also CMSA p. 92 and the Introduction, above.
confederacies on the other side of the mountains some distance to the east. These longtime enemies of the imperial power at Tenochtitlan, not incidentally, became the allies of Cortés in the siege of Mexico, 1521.\(^{89}\) In the songs, blame for the Conquest is shifted from the *conquistadores* to the native enemies, notably Huexotzinco-Tlaxcala, while the city of Mexico, tragically destroyed, fondly remembered, becomes an object of cult.

The entire situation is easier to grasp in the *Cantares*, with its many songs commemorating actual battles,\(^{90}\) than in the more generalized songs of the *Romances*.

In the *Cantares*, Mexico is named sixty times, Tenochtitlan twenty times, Tlatelolco six (here omitting various figurative names for Mexico that would add another twenty).\(^{91}\) The Eagle Gate at the south side of the main square in Tenochtitlan is named three times; Coyonacazo ‘coyote’s nose’, the neighborhood at the northern tip of Tlatelolco, where Mexicans made their last stand against Cortés, appears four times; and Chapolco (or Chapoltepec or Chapoltepetitlan), the location of Mexico’s water supply, weighs in with no less than seven mentions (as it reminds the singers that Mexico, in defeat, has been elevated to the paradisal waters of the sky world). Several songs openly treat the Conquest; and Mexico itself, not merely its warriors, is portrayed in otherworldly terms, suggesting an apotheosis:

Brilliant flowers stand blooming [as a group]. [And] where these pictures stand, this Mexico lies shining. / Indeed [O God] within your pictures, these paintings, lies the city Tenochtitlan. *Tlahuilli xochitl oncuepontimani amoxtl manca Mexico* *ion ahuaya tonatimania ahuaya & / Cenca ye mamox hi cenca y tlaquilotlitic onmania in atlo yan tepetl in tenochtitan.* (Cantares 53:18–21)

Montezuma, you creature of heaven, you sing in Mexico, in Tenochtitlan. / Here where eagle multitudes were ruined, your bracelet house stands shining. *Ylhi*t*yiqui tiyocolloc timoteuc*omatzin Mexico *ontlato-

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89. The events of 1521 are synopsized, with references, in Brundage 1972:282–90, 331–32. Ultimately even Mexico’s Triple Alliance partners, Acolhuacan and Tepanecapan, came to the aid of Cortés.

90. The Conquest of Mexico is rehearsed or lamented especially in CM songs 13, 60, 66, 68, and 91 and in what Gordon Brotherston (1997:15) has called the “invasion” sequence, CM songs 69–72.

91. DICT acapechochcan, amochco, atlan 3, atlihtic 3, atlixco 2, atl/tzacualli, chalchihuatl 1, chalchiuhtepetl, huexotzinco 2, tilapan 2, matlalcueyeh 2, xictli 3.
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huay in tenochtitlan ahuaya ahuaya ohuaya. / Nican in nepapan quauhtli ypolihuiyan momaquizcal i tonaticac. (65:2–4)

These uttered words [or songs] of theirs, it seems, are stirring as a blaze and from the four directions, giving Tenochtitlan City its place within the dawn. They are Montezuma and Acolhuacan’s Nezahualpilli. O anca tlachinolmilini intlatol ye coyaitoa y nauhcampa yyaoo quitalhuizcallotia in atlo yan tepetl ÿ tenochtitlan y Moteuçomatzin Nezahualpillin acolihuacã. (23:9–11)

Ah, this Mexico arrives in that Chapolco yonder, aya! ahanahaya nican in Mexico oncã chapolco yeco ayan. (56v:2)

22.5 In the Romances, Mexico or Tenochtitlan is mentioned only eight times, with the Eagle Gate appearing just once (at 10:19). But note veiled allusions to the siege of Mexico throughout the Romances (e.g., in songs I, V, VII, X, XII, XIV, XVIII; see the Commentary).

22.6 The question arises whether any of the songs in the Romances could be non-Mexica, particularly Texcocan, since the manuscript has been preserved with a Texcocan document and the Romances glossator has an apparent interest in Texcoco. Arguably song XXXIII, which speaks of the Acolhuans (i.e., Texcocans), could be singled out. But the fact remains that the Cantares and Romances texts as a whole overwhelmingly brand the surviving netotilitzli as a Mexica phenomenon.

23. Montezuma and Nezahualcoyotl

23.1 For reasons that are not fully clear, Montezuma and Nezahualcoyotl receive more space in the old native and early colonial literature than any of the other Aztec kings. In his compendious Diccionario biográfico de historia antigua de Méjico, incorporating all the significant references throughout the chronicles, Rafael García Granados needed 126 pages for Montezuma (23 for Montezuma I, 103 for Montezuma II) and 34 for Nezahualcoyotl. The nearest competitors are Nezahualpilli with 13 and Axayacatl and Tezozomoc with 11 each.

23.2 Since most of this sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature is

Mexica-oriented, why so much attention to Nezahualcoyotl, ruler of Texcoco (1431–72)?

A partial answer is that Nezahualcoyotl, though a Texcocan, was related to the royal house of Tenochtitlan and, as troop commander and strategist, served as the architect of Mexico’s victory in the Tepanec War, ca. 1430. Without this turn of events, the great age of imperial Mexico would not have been possible. Durán embroiders on the theme:

[Nezahualcoyotl, by throwing in his lot with the Mexica,] simply shows the love he had for the [Mexica] Aztecs, who were his kinsmen. In all the histories, in all that can be read about him, he is shown to be a valorous and spirited man. He performed great feats in wars, which he often attended in person. He was especially brave in the long wars waged against the Tepanecs […] [and he even pretended that the Mexica had waged war against Texcoco and that he had surrendered to them] in order to live in peace with the [Mexica] Aztecs, to respect their authority, to honor them and extol their name. In this way the entire country would fear them and be subject to them because of their fame as conquerors of such a great kingdom.

The netotilitzli, likewise, give more space to Montezuma and Nezahualcoyotl than to any of the other kings. In the Cantares and Romances combined, Montezuma (I and II) and Nezahualcoyotl (often called Yoyontzin) receive about 60 mentions apiece. The Romances mentions Montezuma 6 times and Nezahualcoyotl/Yoyontzin 23 times. That the Romances tilts so heavily toward Nezahualcoyotl probably indicates conscious selection on the part of the pro-Texcoco compiler—or the pro-Texcoco singer(s) who served as the source.

The various references to Nezahualcoyotl, as suggested above, do not necessarily mean that the songs in the Romances are non-Mexica, even if the manuscript is a Texcocan compilation. Further, it should be noted that “Texcoco” never appears in any of the songs in either the Romances or the Cantares and the name “Acolhuacan” only rarely (and never in the transfiguring phraseology reserved for Mexico/Tenochtitlan).

As a postscript it may be pointed out that Nezahualcoyotl, though beloved of modern, nonnative historians and even biographers, dropped out of oral tradition after about 1600. Montezuma, however, remained alive (or, better, returned to life), joining the ranks of perennial Indian kings and messianic figures. Of these the most recent, apparently, is the Quiché Maya hero Tecun Uman, who had met the Spanish conquerors of Guatemala in 1523—and, it was said, returned during the Guatemalan civil war of the 1980s, bringing with him an army of 2 million warriors for the Indian cause. (Most recent, that is, if the return of the Tzeltalan hero Votan in the State of Chiapas in the 1990s can be discounted as a non-Indian blandishment.)

The most powerful, perhaps, was the Montezuma whose cult flourished in the pueblos of New Mexico from the 1600s to the early twentieth century, for whom sacred fires were kept burning against the day when he would return as the native people’s deliverer from Spanish oppression. Among the most poignant is the Moctezuma of the twentieth-century Popoluca of Oaxaca State, where the Aztec king who had greeted Cortés had come to be regarded as a culture hero—still being kept prisoner in Mexico City. Finally, as a linguistic note, it may be added that by the twentieth century the term montezuma had become integrated into the Guaymí language of western Panama as the word for ‘king’ or ‘tribal leader’.

24. Ritual as Poetry

When all is said and done there will still be the reader who approaches Aztec songs as poetry, who hopes and believes that they are precolumbian, and who is willing to see them as “universal statements about an unchanging and essential human nature.” Can these expectations be met?

The answer perhaps is yes. First, because the songs in performance, with

98. Parmentier 1979: 617–20. The “Montezuma” of the New Mexico pueblos has been compared to the “Montezuma” who led the Yucatec Maya uprising of 1761 (Patch 1998: 73–74, 76, 81–82).
their abundant entertainment aspects, were obviously intended to refresh the spirit, as poetry must, even to the point of satirizing the underlying ritual (as several of the irreverent, even ribald, texts in the Cantares manuscript can demonstrate). Second, because there is every reason to believe that the rhetorical apparatus, even whole stanzas, and probably whole songs in some cases, was imported into the mid-sixteenth century from a pre-Cortésian past. And third, because the idiom is rich in the metaphorical content that makes universal truths — better to say realities — if not acceptable, at least easier to endure.

24.3 Basically the netotilitzli functions as a single guiding metaphor connecting two articles of belief, each independently attested: (1) the dogma that slain warriors, residing in the sky world, are returned to earth; and (2) the idea that song, originating in the sky world, is brought to earth by the singer (see secs. 5 and 8.1, above). Playing on the similarity between the two ideas, the metaphor calls for the warrior to be regarded as a song — the warrior is the song — and it is this equation, counterintuitive for the unattuned listener, that provides the central mystery of the netotilitzli. To grasp it is to grasp the “poetry” of the entire genre.

24.4 Yet comparisons with the poetry of far-removed traditions need not be ruled out, even if songs in the European pastoral mode (discussed above) offer only a false echo. The singer’s subservience to an agent, or muse, suggests a parallel with the Homeric epics; the pro- and anti-war voices recall the dialogue between the god Krishna and the reluctant war chief Arjuna in the Vedantic poem Bhagavad Gita; and, in form, the brief stanzas bear a resemblance to the “links” of Japanese renga, or linked verse, in that the sequencing from one link to the next may thoroughly, perhaps intentionally, baffle the uninitiated. Thus the netotilitzli, however ritualistic, culture-specific, even obscurantist, can be said to operate in the company of world literature.