Death in Mexico's Pre-Hispanic Poetry

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It is often said that death has become a naturalized Mexican citizen. This is a falsehood, or a baseless commonplace: if anyone is truly cosmopolitan, it is death, this omnipresent visitor in every culture. However, we can say without fear of error that in our country's poetry, the mention of death plays a special role, unparalleled amongst other peoples, oscillating between playfulness and obsession, fascination and fear, resignation and exorcism. In any case it is not at all outlandish to maintain that, with well-known exceptions, the best poems written in Mexico from pre-Columbian times to at least the twentieth century, constantly deal with this theme. I will not argue that in this essay for reasons of space, but instead will focus on an analysis of a few fragments of Nahuatl poetry.

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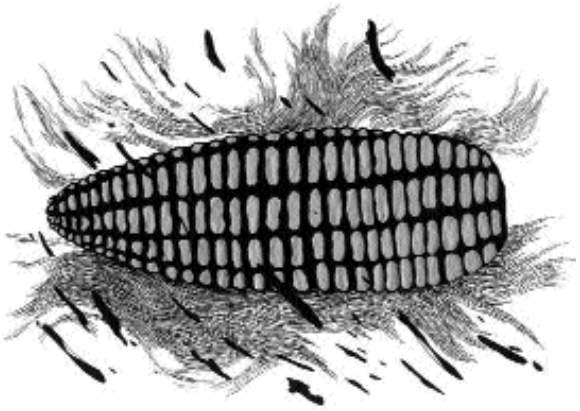
Drawings by Héctor Ponce de León

The Texts

Certain difficult-to-translate and consult documents contain anonymous pre-Hispanic poetry dating to before the fourteenth century. I will begin my journey with Tlaltecatzin de Cuauhchinanco (1357-1409), perhaps the first "face with flesh and color" in our country's literature. Like many other writers of his time in both East and West, he was a "lord," that is, a noble, in this case a Chichimec, who had the rare reputation of being happy. He sings to the frothy cacao drunk by princes, the tobacco flower that he shares with his friends and, above all, to the *ahuiani* (literally, "she who makes happiness"), the woman who lavishes pleasure, in this case, the prostitute. However, while he describes the pleasures of this world in his poem —only one text survives— he is plagued by the theme of death, which at first glance seems contrary to the delights he has been exalting:

Sweet, delectable woman,
Precious flower of toasted maize,
You only loan yourself out,
You shall be abandoned,
You shall have to leave,
You shall be left fleshless.[1]



Is this a moral prejudice alluding to fleeting sex and referring only to the *ahuiani*? Not in the least. A few verses later, the poet stops to think about his own impermanence and faces it bravely, although not without wavering slightly:

I must not go
To the place of the fleshless.
My life is a precious thing…
I will have to abandon it,
I will have to leave,
Some time, it will come…
I abandon myself
Oh, my God!
I say: I go,
Wrapped like the dead.

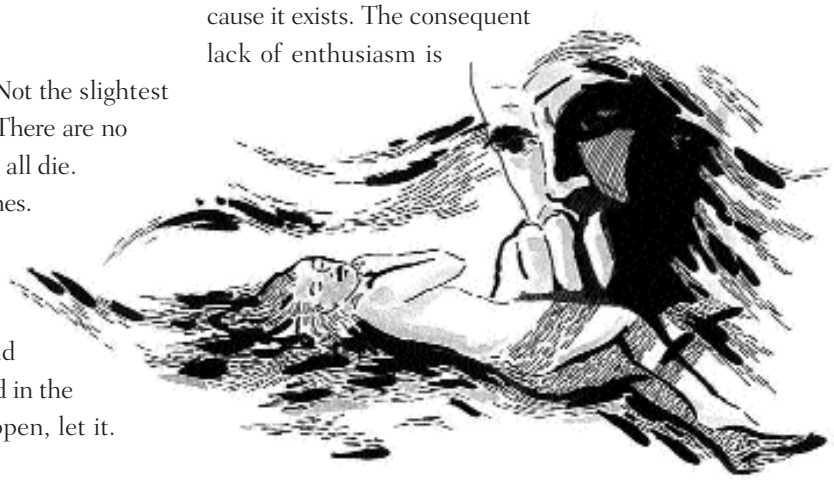
What lucidity! What honesty! Not the slightest allusion to his birth or his merits. There are no pretexts, prologues or excuses: we all die. Neither is there begging or reproaches. "Oh, my God!" is a simple interjection justified masterfully in the following lines, which prefigure fatality in the Mexican fashion and that would seem to be summarized in the following idea: whatever is to happen, let it.

Does the poet not fear death? Of course he does. He says so clearly in the first three lines. However, he does not wallow in anguish because he knows it is inevitable, and as a result takes it on board in full. Between the desire not to die and the understanding of the event, he opts for the latter.

This tone is generalized among the pre-Hispanic poets, who offer a reflexive vision of death. Everyone has insisted so much on the warlike nature of the pre-Columbian peoples that their exquisite level-headedness often goes unnoticed. Nevertheless, that is their main characteristic, or at least one of them. Let us look at this passage written by Nezahualcóyotl (1402-1472), for example:

We rejoice with song,
We drape ourselves with flowers here.
Does our heart truly understand it?
We must leave that behind when we leave:
That is why I weep. It makes me sad.[2]

It would be difficult to find a more contained and reasonable art. It begins by pointing out the blessings of the world to then reveal them as fleeting. In the third line of the quintain, he asks a question that touches both the intellect and one's sensibility, and with it, disarms the joys of this life without suppressing them. In a certain sense, happiness is a result of a lack of profundity. By contrast, prudence approximates the real, even at the cost of discouragement. That is how things are, and they are unfortunate, without exaggeration or shame. It is only fitting to accept death because it exists. The consequent lack of enthusiasm is



not the child of desperation, but of proper understanding.

Less intellectual, but perhaps more delicate and significant, are these two lines by the same author:

> Like a painting,
> We will fade.[3]

Here, death, far from being an event, is a process. Stopping existing is linked to the physical fact, but also to fading in the world's memory. Our stay here is destined to dissolve in oblivion, whether we are a king of heroic deeds or an ordinary person, as the poem from which these lines were taken emphasizes. No one can survive ("we will all leave/we will all die on the Earth"), but the event is registered without any particular emotional charge surrounding it. In any case, the essential thing is that the magnificent lines we just repeated point with unequaled decorum to a dual death: the corporeal and the spiritual death, understanding the latter as fading in men's memories.

Between the end of the fourteenth and the middle of the fifteenth century, Tochihuitzin Coyolchiuhqui concurs with this concept of death in which, through a kind of ontological leap, the living being dissolves into brutal nothingness:

> We come only to sleep, we come only to dream:
> It is not true, it is not true that we come to live on Earth.
> We turn into spring grass.
> Green again, our hearts open their corollas and flower,
> Our body is a plant: it
> blossoms and wilts.[4]

Naturally, there is something more here than vanity attributed to biological and cultural life. Anticipating Shakespeare's reformulation of the Stoics and the poets of the Spanish Golden Century, the author compares life with an uncertain slumber. Our inevitable wilting rubs out our brief existence and turns it into a phantom. The image of survival enclosed in the third and fourth lines emphasizes its contingency and, like Nezahualcóyotl, resolves it in suppression.

It should be pointed out that the gods play no role whatsoever in the poems cited. In general, fifteenth-century pre-Hispanic writers mention them rhetorically, to lend their song greatness, particularly when they talk of feats of war, but not to allude to a possible unearthly life. It is true that almost all of them mention, with slight variations, *the place where somehow one lives*, but this is never represented as something that comes after life on earth or as a consolation for life's inevitable disappearance. That is why the mid-fifteenth-century "lady of Tula," Macuilxochitzin, can ask in this delicate sestet, whose final line seems to allude to immediate existence:

Are the songs taken
To His house,
The place where somehow one exists?
Or do thy flowers exist only here?
Let the dance begin![5]

Axayácatl (1449-1481), the supreme lord or *tlatoani* of Tenochtitlan, also vacillates before the enigmatic behavior of the deity and even insinuates a reproach, justified by the theme of the poem, which refers to the only sudden defeat the Aztecs suffered at their height, before the arrival of the Spaniards. In any case, he reaffirms the inevitability of death without suggesting any kind of transcendence:

Did fatigue perchance overcome the Owner
of the house,
The Giver of Life?
He makes no one on earth resistant.[6]

Naturally, it is not necessary to cite many more examples to conclude that in Nahuatl poetry, death

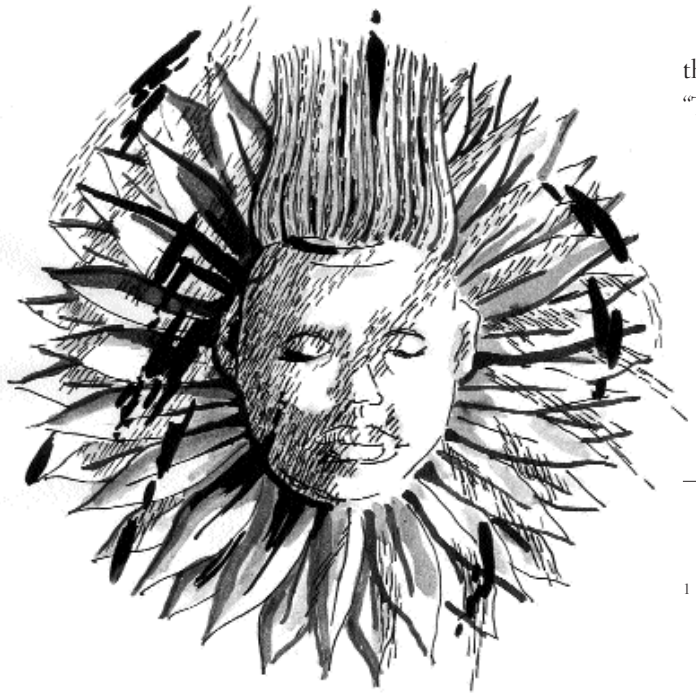
is seen as an irrevocable event. However, if the reader wants to appreciate the originality of this judicious conception, it is necessary to underline the serenity with which contingency is assumed in it. Contrary to the widespread temptation of feeling oneself necessary in the world —the reason behind men's creating myths, religions and certain texts— the ancient Mexican poets look the finite in the eye and turn it into a guideline for life. Not without sorrow, of course, but beyond all social vanity that, in the face of death, becomes nothing. In a curious parallel with the philosophies of Heidegger and Sartre, the emptiness of being cuts across and overflows even the self, which would like to exist even if only as a cobblestone, and which is finally resigned to not being able to even be that. The following lines of Cuacuauhtzin de Tepechpan (mid-fifteenth century) conveniently illustrate this:

Where shall we truly go
To never die?
Even were I a precious stone
Even were I gold,
I would be melted
There in the hearth of the furnace I will be
pierced.
I have only my life.
I, Cuacuauhtzin, am wretched.[7]

A little before the conquest, Náhuatl poetry continued to bear this kind of fruit. This is not a minor fecundity. Ayocuan Cuetzpaltzin, from the second half of the fifteenth-beginning of the sixteenth centuries, somehow summarizes the death-theme of his ancestors' poetry:

In vain we have arrived,
In vain we have blossomed in the earth.
Only thus am I to leave,
Like the flowers that perished
Will nothing remain in my name?
Nothing of my fame here on Earth?
At least flowers, at least song![8]

What we had identified as definite statements appears in this late period as a question. Another



thing: poetry (flowers and song) begins to insinuate itself as a kind of palliative for the inevitable.

Almost immediately after, in the anonymous "Funeral Song to Mixcóatl" (early sixteenth century), we read:

> You shall yet blossom and again flower in the earth!
> And you shall live to the sound of the drums.
> In Huexotzinco you shall delight the princes
> And your friends shall see you.

What a transfiguration! As yet without mentioning the religion of the conquerors —perhaps not even being familiar with it more than as a rumor brought by the troubled times— the poet somehow puts forward his cosmogony: the resurrection of the dead, without going any further. Dominating this quatrain is, in effect, the promise of survival, the certainty, opposed to the previous conception, that the dead can endure even in an individual sense, in such a personalized way that it is even linked to the dead person's friends. It is perhaps appropriate to suppose that it is literary license or a fantasy of the poet, unrelated to the idiosyncrasy that would later be imposed. It does not matter. In any case, it is a different view of death. The times of great poetry about the transience of life were gone. But their depth continues in force, as this fragment of "The Flowers and the Song" shows:

> Here on earth is the region of the fleeting moment.
> Is it also thus in the place
> Where somehow one lives?
> There, does one feel joy?
> Is there friendship there?
> Or have we come to know our faces
> Only here on earth?

Notes

[1] "El poema de Tlaltecatzin" (*Tlaltecatzin icuic*), *Cantares mexicanos* (Mexico City: Biblioteca Nacional de México, n.d.), folios 30r and 30v. In José Luis Martínez's book, *América antigua* (*nahuas/mayas/quechuas/otras culturas*), volume 6 of the Old World Collection (Mexico City: SEP, 1976), the poem is called "Dulce, sabrosa mujer," but this translation and all the others not by Ángel María Garibay are taken from Miguel León-Portilla's book, *Quince poetas del mundo náhuatl* (Mexico City: Diana, 1994).

[2] Nezahualcóyotl, "Los cantos son nuestro atavío," *Romances de los señores de la Nueva España*, Ángel María Garibay, trans., folios 41r-42r.

[3] Nezahualcóyotl, "Como una pintura nos iremos borrando", in op. cit., folios 35r-36r.

[4] Tochihuitzin Coyolchiuhqui, "Venimos a soñar" (*Zan tontemiquico*), *Cantares mexicanos*, Ángel María Garibay, trans. (Mexico City: Biblioteca Nacional de México, n.d.). In the translation reproduced here, the poem is called "Sólo vinimos a sonar." I have used the title of the translation by León-Portilla so that it jibes with the Nahuatl.

[5] Macuilxochitzin, "Canto de Macuilxochitzin" (*Macuilxochitzin icuic*), *Cantares mexicanos* (Mexico City: Biblioteca Nacional de México, n.d.), folio 53v.

[6] Axayácatl, "Canto de Axayácatl, señor de México" (*Ycuic Axayacatzin, Mexico Tltohuani*), *Cantares mexicanos* (Mexico City: Bibloteca Nacional de México, n.d.), folios 29v-30r.

[7] Cuacuauhtzin de Tepechpan, "Canto triste de Cuacuauhtzin" (*Cuacuauhtzin icnocuicatl*), *Romances de los señores de la Nueva España*, folios 26r-27v.

[8] Ayocuan Cuetzpaltzin, "Las flores y los cantos" (*In xochitl incuicatl*), *Cantares mexicanos* (Mexico City: Biblioteca Nacional de México, n.d.), folio 10r.

Further Reading

English speakers can consult the following translation direct from the Nahuatl:

Bierhorst, John, *Cantares mexicanos, Songs of the Aztecs* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1985).