N68 IV:2 REMARKS ON A NAHUATL HYMN

Xippe ycuic, totec. Yoallavana.

Yoalli tlavana, yztleican timonenequia, xiyaquimitlatia teucuitlaquemitl, xicmoquentiquetl ovia.

Noteua, chalchimamatlaco apanaytemoaya, ay, quetzalavevetl, ay quetzalxivicoatl. Nechiya, yquinocauhquetl, oviya.

Maniyavia, niavia poliviz, niyoatzin. Achalchiuhtla noyollo; a teucuitlatl noyolcevizqui tlacatl achtoquetl tlaquavaya otlacatqui yautlatoaquetl oviya.

Noteua, ce intlaco xayailivis conoa yyoatzin motepeyocpa mitzalitta moteua, noyolcevizquin tlacatl achtoquetl tlaquavaya, otlacatqui yautlatoaquetl, oviya.

—so runs an ancient Mexican hymn to the god Xipe Totec, preserved in a manuscript of the 1580's when the memory of the old faith had not been far submerged beneath the Christian. It was, however, of a far older date than the generation which saw the Conquest. By even that time the meaning had become so obscure through alteration of the language that it required a marginal gloss, which will aid us in

[1] This study was found among the late R. H. Barlow's unpublished papers, now preserved at the University of the Americas.

The work possibly dates back as early as 1943-44, when he first began to study Náhuatl literature. It seems to be typical of his early style, more imaginative, less reserved, than his later, more scholarly, manner of writing.

It is evident that Barlow had planned to re-write the study in later years. On the first page the following pencil-written words appear: "This would have to be revised some if you're interested. R.H.B."

On the back of the last leaf the following criticism (not in the author's handwriting) may be read: "Was the poem the work of 'a poet'? Should be asked if not answered. The poem is traditional — it gets its power, therefore, not from its structure (complexity, originality, range, etc., as in Shakespeare) but its function. Which makes it like what — same in modern poetry. There is no clear equivalent. You should have . . . a detailed comparison with, say, the *mass*, with the prophets (also . . . .), with prayer, with the psalms (especially early ones), with anything else that would have made clear these relationships. Then what standards of judgment? Those of a high culture, in which poetry is often contemplative, being irrelevant? These questions are worth exploration, but you skimp (?) them with question-begging epithets like wearisome or not wearisome. Such speculation must go along with your studies to guide them." This comment is unsigned. (F.H.)

gaining some insight into the poetic meaning of the piece. (This gloss, in "modern" XVIth Century Nahuatl, is not quoted above).

It might be well to begin will a translation into English, based on the work of Eduard Seler and Angel M. Garibay K. Though the poem was once translated by Daniel Brinton, in his oddly titled *Rigvedus Americanus,* authorities agree that his version is so inexact as to be worthless. Seler's translation was for ethnographic purposes, and Garibay's for literary ones. Seler's German version may be found is his *Gesammelte Abhandlungen,* Vol. II, p. 1071, and Garibay's in *Poesía indígena,* a publication of the Universidad Nacional de México. With these remarks on sources, let us venture on an English version:

OUR LORD THE FLAYED (THE DRINKER BY NIGHT): HIS SONG

Thou, Night-drinker,
Why must we beseech thee?
Put on thy disguise;
Thy golden garment, put it on!

My god, thy jade water (word untranslated) descended.
The cypress (is become) a quetzal-bird;
The fire-snake (is become) a quetzal-snake
And has left me.

It may be, it may be, that I go to destruction;
I the tender maize plant,
My heart is jade,
But I shall yet see gold there.
I shall rejoice if it ripen early.
"The war-chief is born".

My god, let there be abundance of maize-plants
In a few places at least.
Thy worshipper turns his gaze to thy mountain,
Toward thee.
I shall rejoice if it ripen early.
"The war-chief is born".

Now as to the *meaning* of this, one may observe that the god addressed is one of very many gods, of an infinity of gods, many of whom are connected with agriculture. His epithet (it is scarcely a

name) is Our Lord the Flayed (Xipe Totec), for in his honor the renewal of vegetation was represented by the priests' clothing themselves in a human skin taken from a sacrificial victim, which skin was worn some twenty days (a month in the Aztec calendar). Xipe was a spring god whose chief festival was held prior to the sowing; and a special patron of the goldsmiths, whose work also involved a covering with a "skin" of gold. (It may be seen that this *dressing in a new skin* is a central element in the Aztec conception). The "Drinker by Night" epithet is a more sacred name. (He had many —the calendaric names 3.Eagle (Yey Cuauhtli) 4.Earthquake (Nahui Olin) and the first date of the month he ruled over, 1.Dog (Ce Itzcuintli) among them.) Drinker by Night (Yoallavana) probably means "He Who Drinks *Pulque* (more properly, *octli*) by Night", *pulque* being a semi-divine beverage, an ambrosia, like the *chicha* beer of the Incas. This name seems to be especially sacred and used only on special occasions. Why it is *by night* is less clear. At night penitential sacrifices were made by the priesthood; though perhaps other nocturnal activities are more fitting to a god of fertility.

So much for the identity of the figure addressed: it is clear that this was a strictly utilitarian poem, written for a definite place and time and purpose: it was sung at the Yopico temple, which stood where the western tower of the Cathedral of Mexico now stands, in the heart of Mexico-Tenochtitlan. It was sung at the Tlacaxipehualiztli festival before sowing-time (the Feast of the Flaying of Men), and it was an invocation to a major deity. In view of the highly composite nature of late Aztec religion, it is not easy to say just how important Xipe was. The major gods were becoming rapidly cross-identified, and linked with Tezcatlipoca, whose "aspects" they were said to be. Xipe was one of the four Tezcatlipocas, the Red Tezcatlipoca — and the others were such figures as Quetzalcoatl and the Mexican tribal war-god, Huitzilopochtli. We may be confident of his being among the very highest of the gods. He was however only one god; monotheistic ideas must be discarded in approaching the poem. We might call him a very great saint, in Christian terminology, so as to admit the existence of confrères. (Saint only in rank, not in deed).

The first stanza is, as remarked, invocative. The god is reluctant: he must be urged along. The Aztecs constantly had to help nature out; that was the sole end of their constant sacrificing, which involved offering one's own blood as frequently as it did that of the victim

taken in war. That was the motivation of their warfare, to take prisoners to offer to the gods so as to keep the latter fed and operating the universe. Nature could not be relied upon, and never can be, by such a culture — the fact that the sun came up yesterday is no guarantee that it will come up tomorrow. Each new day, each new spring, is looked upon with relief, and surprise. Each morning Huitzilopochtli must defeat his evil sister the Moon (Coyolxauhqui) and the Four Hundred Southerners, the Centzon Huitznahuac, who sought to slay the earth. He as the Sun god must slay them wih his first ray of light, his *xiuhcoatl*. That the spring must be likewise battled for, is the theme of this poem. And the century (a 52 year cycle) is most unreliable of all. At the end of the old century, the priests wait anxiously atop the hill Huixachtepetl, the Cerro de la Estrella, a little way out of Iztapalapa on the peninsula between the Lakes of Chalco and Texcoco or Mexico beholding the slow ascent of Taurus, whose advent at the zenith is a symbol that the world will not end for another century, that the man-devouring spirits of the night sky, the *tzitzimi*, the tiger-creatures, will not destroy mankind and his fifth Age in which he lives. The cataclysm will come inevitably; it is only a question of *when*. Hence when the singer cries to Xipe, to "put on his golden garment" there is a real fear that he will not put it on. The commentator of 1580 shows that this is so; he explains the stanza as "why art thou *angered*, why dost thou *hide thyself*?" And what does the coming of Xipe mean, what does his donning of his golden garment imply? The coming of rain, to fertilize the maize fields, the almost unique crop of the natives. There is no rain at all in the Valley of Mexico from October to May; there is no suggestion that there will ever be rain again. (The streets are choked with dust — though in the age of the poet, this was not so, because of the canals and the now-drained lake which surrounded it). Then, when it comes, it mounts visibly before the eyes of people standing in doorways. (It comes up in the gutters and outside the city in the fields, an inch, three inches, furiously, vehemently, so that where it has no outlet along the city streets automobiles cannot pass through it.) The gloss confirms in a further synthesis: "May the ran come; may the water come". The singer, then, was at once talking in a purely literal fashion: addressing a priest or an idol representing the god, urging him to dress himself in the human skin but newly taken from the sacrificed offering, while fully conscious that they were talking and acting out a symbol of rainfall.

The next stanza, in which the phrase *co apana* remains obscure, answers the first. The rain has come, the "jade water", and the arrival of the summer is symbolized by the transformation of the cypress into a thing of new greenery; "a quetzal bird" as it is figuratively put. Both the *greenness* and the *value* enter into this metaphor: the exotic quetzal bird, found only in the low, steamy regions of Tehuantepec and Guatemala, was prized for its two long green tail feathers, which came into use as a type of money as well as ornament at the end of the fifteenth century, when the region was overrun by the Mexicans. They were rarities when the south lay open to plundering and before then came only by trade from a region scarcely known in the Mexican capital. Since our hymn is much older than 1500, we must presume that their sacred character (they were acceptable offerings, along with quail and one's own blood spread on flowering branches, to all the gods) — sacred especially in connection with the culture hero, the ever-mourned Quetzalcoatl (the quetzal-feather-serpent) — made this comparison of the *New leaves* with the *quetzal feathers* even more potent than their worldy value might; almost a resurrection symbol, or a return symbol, to be more precise, of the lost Golden Age and its ruler. That this is not too extreme a view is substantiated by the next line, "The Fire Snake is become a quetzal snake" (quetzal-xihuicoatl), for here the quetzal snake is mentioned by name — a clear reference to the old god and his homonomous tenth century priest. But what does this mean — "the Fire Snake is become a quetzal snake"? The solar fire snake here seems to be an emblem of famine through drought ("misery has left us" says the gloss) averted by the arrival of the rain. The fact that all these things are represented by the singer as *having happened,* does not mean more than that he wishes they would happen. He is stating a wish as an accomplished fact, as children do, and (as Ericcson points out in his essay on the Yurok) certain primitive tribes do. This is a mechanism which we see at work in dreams constantly.

With the third stanza the stance changes. It is now the maize plant which speaks. Possibly this poem is a dialogue. The fear is expressed that some injury will come to the crop, followed by the assurance that it will ripen under the god's care. The language is less figurative, the maize plant is named, and the ripening process is expressed fairly directly. "My heart is jade" (a chalchiuhtla noyollo) is a rather routine epithet — jade (*chalchihuite* in modern Spanish -really jadeite) is used

like quetzal feathers to express a thing of great value, as well as the color of the unripened ear. "I shall yet see gold" (a teucuitlatl nocoyaitaz) involves a term which has ceased to be metaphor, that is *teocuitlatl*, which means "excrement of the gods" but is the universal word for gold. The phrase, apparently to be understood as a direct utterance, "The war chief is born" brings in an allusion to the god of maize himself; for Xipe, to whom the poem is addressed, is a mentor or sponsor of this god, and not the maize god himself. This "war chief" is Cinteotl, whose name is linked closely to "teocintli", that is "the Sacred Maize" — which name was given to maize by the people who lived on it. Cinteotl, the Maize God, is born symbolically of the Earth Goddess, Tlazolteotl, at the Ochpaniztli festival of harvest time. The connection between Xipe and Cinteotl has not been preserved in the incomplete mythology of the Aztecs which we possess, but it is suggested here. The further implication is that the god as well as the worshipper will be satisfied with the harvest.

"The War Chief is born" brings to mind the high esteem in which warriors were held. There is no straighter path to glory, and few other paths anywhere. One might be a merchant who traded down into Guatemala, patriotically spying all the way, or a priest — these were numberless — but if he sought real distinction he would take prisoners or be taken prisoner for sacrifice. Either was equally honorable. At the time this poem was composed bellicosity was not linked, probably, with aristocracy as it was later. The Indian ideal of physical courage, of warfare as a ritual game (not unlike the Plains Indians, where to touch an enemy was more important than to kill him) made "War Chief" a word of praise which our recently pacifistic culture does not understand. To go and burn a village and bring back all its people with ropes around their necks, and then cut their hearts out in passionate ritual was a fine deed. It was like killing Saracens to the medieval Christian. There was no identification of oneself (as the agent of the gods) with the victim. Cruelty was not stressed or even recognized — it was just a by-product of essential religious functions in order to keep the universe wound up. If one tied a man to a ladder and shot him full of arrows, it was to make rain by sympathetic magic. It did not imply any prejudice against the victim.

The last stanza "Let there be abundance of maize plants in a few places at least" means, according to the gloss, that a part of the crop *has* become ripe, and "Thy worshipper turns his gaze to thy mountain"

means that "everyone" brings the first fruits to the god. "Mountain" has a special sacred quality, being even accorded a plural form, which technically only animate objects rereive in the Nahuatl tongue — hence were regarded as the homes of gods, or even gods themselves (cf. the mountain Matlacueye, wife of the rain god, now called Malinche, near the city of Puebla; and Mount Tlaloc, which has preserved the name of the rain god himself to the present day). Thy mountain means, then, thy residence. The poem concludes with a repetition of the phrase "I shall rejoice, etc". though the commentator adds that Xipe will receive both the first fruits and a share of the whole crop when it is ready, for the sustenance of the god. Xipe is thus regarded as dependant on the crop in addition to being its guardian, a new concept.

The foregoing remarks should afford a reasonably clear idea of the poem and its more obvious content. Though only approximate, it *is* approximate, and not an interpretation born of the "le sauvage" approach. The poem is fairly typical and the translations were not hopelessly in disagreement, which was the case with other matter tentatively chosen. It has been remarked that the importance of the maize crop was primary. This poem is a cry in behalf of a people whose civilization was based on *one crop*. The necklaces of little gold eagles, the feather tapestries, the books filled with paintings of contorted gods — all the wonders that chronicles and museum cases hold of ancient Mexico came in the beginning from the maize crop which distinguished the central and southern peoples from the lean rabble milling beyond the marches of Guanajuato as far as Saskatchewan. All these things were produced economically by the maize crop and spiritually in honor of the maize gods. Today the picture is not greatly changed. The Indian is practically a vegetarian, and his vegetable is an old one. Wheat is all right for women, but one must have maize if he is to do real work. Women dressed in Paris gowns who live in the capital today know when the maize is ripening, how it is doing; because the prices of even Paris gowns follow Cinteotl still. Does the poem live up to this?

It is rash to attempt a complete answer, or perhaps anything beyond the amplification above set forth. It does not seem as strong as the Psalms, say — but is that not because different things were expected of the god? It is not maudlin at any rate — full of wearisome praise for a deity whose actions are sometimes doubtfully praiseworthy. There is no slavering in it at all, nor any extensive begging of favor. "Let

there be abundance of maize plants in a few places at least" is a request modest enough to please any over-importuned deity.

The devices of the poem are few. It is straightforward as that sort of thing goes. The figures are standard figures, not devised by the poet. Quetzal feathers, chalchihuites are always precious and sacred things. The golden garment is no metaphor, but a description of a physical act, when the priest clad himself in the skin of the victim. Little has been concocted by the poet. Likewise a product of the language, rather than of the individual poet, is the abundance of specific noun images. A Nahuatl text is hardly more than a series of nouns, to the exasperated translator. Consideration of the metrical and rhyming aspects fall quite beyond the scope of this paper — though it may be observed that these do exist . . . in poems of the present type, most probably linked to dance and music; so what we have is more a libretto for an opera, or a fragment of an opera, than a poem.

R. H. Barlow