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DON PAUL ABBOTT

## The Ancient Word: Rhetoric in Aztec Culture

**B**ernadino de Sahagún, the foremost chronicler of sixteenth-century Mexico, observed that all nations "have looked to the learned and powerful to persuade, and to men eminent in moral virtues." There are examples of such men "among the Greeks and Romans, Spanish, French and Italians." Also among the Aztecs "learned, virtuous, and enterprising rhetoricians were held in high esteem, and they elected high priests, lords, chiefs, and captains from among them, however low their destiny may have been. These ruled over the republic and lead the armies, and presided over the temples."<sup>1</sup>

Sahagún and others diligently recorded the orations of these "learned, virtuous, and enterprising rhetoricians" providing posterity with a remarkable record of pre-literate rhetoric. Historians of Mexico have long recognized that an examination of these speeches provides insights into the thought and culture of the Aztecs unavailable from other sources. To the historian of rhetoric the orations preserved by Sahagún are equally invaluable for they constitute one of the most complete accounts of the rhetoric of an oral culture. Thus an examination of Aztec oratory is instructive of the role of rhetoric in the life of the early Mexicans as well as indica-

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<sup>1</sup> *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, ed. Angel Maria Garibay K., 4 vols. (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1956), 2:53.

tive of the function of rhetoric in pre-literate societies generally. Moreover, the discourse of these ancient Indians offers additional evidence with which to reconstruct the illusive origins of rhetoric in human consciousness.

## I

The discovery and preservation of Aztec rhetoric was a result of the religious conquest of the New World which followed the military subjugation of the Mexicans. The conversion of the Indians, an essential part of the Spanish colonial policy, was the responsibility of the Mendicant Orders: the Franciscans, the Dominicans, and the Augustinians. The Franciscans were the first to arrive in New Spain (1523) and they were to dominate the missionary efforts during the sixteenth century.<sup>2</sup> The early Franciscan friars were remarkably sensitive to the cultural and linguistic accomplishments of the natives of the New World. Thus the Franciscans were able to appreciate the Aztecs as skillful rhetoricians. What the Franciscans recognized as rhetoric the Aztecs themselves called *huehuetlahtolli*. This Nahuatl word is formed by compounding *huehue*, "old man" or "men of old" and *tlahtolli*, "word", "oration" or "language." Thus *huehuetlahtolli* is variously translated as "the ancient word," "the speeches of the ancients" or "the speeches of the elders." Thelma Sullivan argues that the term can have both meanings. That is, *huehuetlahtolli* signifies the speeches of the ancients—orations originally given by the ancestors of the sixteenth-century Aztecs—as well as the speeches of the elders—addresses presented by men of advanced age and high status.<sup>3</sup>

The *huehuetlahtolli* are preserved in many of the chronicles of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Mexico. The most important collection of these speeches and probably the most significant source of information about the preconquest Aztecs is found in the

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<sup>2</sup>The role of the Mendicants in the evangelization of New Spain is detailed by Robert Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico*, trans. Lesley Byrd Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966). See also Pius J. Barth, *Franciscan Education and the Social Order in Spanish North America (1502–1821)* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1945).

<sup>3</sup>"The Rhetorical Orations, or *Huehuetlahtolli*, collected by Sahagún," *Sixteenth-Century Mexico: The Work of Sahagún*, ed. Munro S. Edmundson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), p. 82.

work of the indefatigable Friar Sahagún. Sahagún was born in Spain, probably in 1499. He studied at Salamanca and was, like many of the Franciscan missionaries to Mexico, well-educated in humanistic tradition. He arrived in New Spain in 1529, just eight years after the fall of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. He never returned to Spain and died in Mexico in 1590.

Sahagún was an accomplished linguist who mastered Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs and the *lingua franca* of Central Mexico. Consistent with Franciscan policy in the New World, Sahagún employed Nahuatl in his efforts to educate and convert the Aztecs. He wrote extensively on his experiences in Mexico, producing numerous works in Spanish, Latin, and Nahuatl on theological, philological, historical and anthropological studies. Many of these treatises exist only in manuscripts or fragments, and some, like his Spanish-Nahuatl dictionary and grammar, are lost.<sup>4</sup>

Sahagún's masterpiece is *The General History of New Spain*.<sup>5</sup> This work is composed of twelve books which detail the history, beliefs, customs, and daily activities of the Aztecs. The *General History* was written by Sahagún with the collaboration of several Indian informants, "prominent old men," chosen for their knowledge of Aztec antiquities as well as some younger Indian "grammarians," who assisted with the necessary composition and translation. The work was researched, written, revised and edited over a period of

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<sup>4</sup>For a bibliography of Sahagún's work, including archival locations, see *Sixteenth-Century Mexico*, pp. 268–71.

<sup>5</sup>Except where otherwise noted I have relied upon the following edition of Sahagún's work: *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles Dibble, 12 pts. (Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research and University of Utah, 1950–69). The *Florentine Codex*, so-called because it is located in the Laurentian Library, Florence, is the most complete of the three manuscripts of the *General History* prepared by Sahagún. The manuscript is written in Nahuatl and Spanish arranged in parallel columns. The translators attempted to render the Nahuatl into English so that "the structure of the translations would resemble as closely as possible that of the original. Since the Spanish text of the *Florentine Codex* was Sahagún's sixteenth-century Spanish, the English translation of the Nahuatl was to parallel, in a sense, the late Renaissance feeling of Sahagún's Spanish through the employment of occasional archaisms which might give it something of the atmosphere of the King James version of the Bible. This procedure, while it precludes a translation which would be word-for-word a precise duplicate (in English), would, it was felt, still preserve sufficient accuracy in its presentation of the meaning of the Aztec version" ("Temporary Forward," pt. 2). Quotations from the *Florentine Codex* will be cited parenthetically in the text.

nearly fifty years. A Nahuatl text was completed in 1569; a bilingual Spanish-Nahuatl version was produced in 1577. Unfortunately, Sahagún did not live to see his manuscript published. Possibly because of royal opposition or perhaps simply due to bureaucratic indifference the work, though complete, never reached the printing press. This unfortunate neglect continued for centuries. The *General History* was finally published in 1929–30.

In 1547 Sahagún collected the *huehuetlahtolli* which ultimately became Book VI of the *General History*, entitled "Of the Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy of the Mexican People." Sahagún made a conscientious attempt to faithfully reproduce, in Nahuatl, the orations recited by his Aztec informants. And while the speeches reveal a certain amount of moralistic editing there is no evidence to indicate that the orations are the result of an imaginative reconstruction. Sahagún was sensitive to the charge that the *huehuetlahtolli* were fictional and he strongly denied such a possibility: "what is written in this book is impossible for the human mind to invent, nor could any man living invent the language it is in. And all educated Indians, if they were asked, would affirm that this is the authentic language of their ancestors and the works they composed."<sup>6</sup>

In addition to these speeches preserved by Sahagún there are two other major collections of *huehuetlahtolli*: the speeches collected by Andres de Olmos and translated into Spanish by Juan Bautista as *Huehuetlahtolli o pláticos de los viejos* (1600) and the addresses probably gathered by Horacio Carochi in the seventeenth century and published in 1892 under the title "Arte de la lengua mexicana."<sup>7</sup> *Huehuetlahtolli* also appear in many of the other chronicles of New Spain written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The orations in these other accounts, however, are almost always derived from the work of Olmos and Sahagún.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>"Prologo," Libro Sexto, *Historia general* (1956), p. 53. The *Florentine Codex* does not include this prologue. However, the Spanish edition quoted here also uses material from the other manuscripts, the "Madrid Codices" of the *Biblioteca del Palacio* and the *Academia de la Historia*, Madrid.

<sup>7</sup>Juan Bautista, *Huehuetlahtolli* (Mexico City, ca. 1600), rpt. in Vol. 3 of *Colección de documentos para la historia Mexicana*, ed. Antonio Peñafiel (Mexico City: Secretaría de Fomento, 1901), and Horacio Carochi, *Arte de la lengua Mexicana con la declaración de los adverbos della* (Mexico City, 1645), rpt. in *Colección de gramaticas de la lengua Mexicana* (Mexico City: Museo Nacional de Mexico, 1904), 1:395–536.

<sup>8</sup>For other accounts of the *huehuetlahtolli* see, for example, Juan de Torquemada, *Monarquia Indiana* (Seville, 1615; Madrid, 1723), ed. Miguel Leon Portilla

Because Sahagún provides the most extensive collection of *huehuetlahtolli*, this analysis will concentrate upon Book VI of the *General History*, "Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy." In this book, says Sahagún, are told the various words of prayer with which they prayed to those who were their gods; and how they made formal conversation through which they displayed rhetoric and moral philosophy, as is evident in the discourses" (7:1). Sahagún then presents the text of sixty *huehuetlahtolli*; another twenty-six are scattered throughout the other eleven books of the *General History*.

Despite considerable diversity the *huehuetlahtolli* do present certain patterns of discourse. Thelma Sullivan suggests that the speeches compiled by Sahagún may be divided into five categories.<sup>9</sup> The first of these categories is composed of twelve prayers to the gods. These speeches, usually delivered by priests, most often take the form of supplications directed to capricious deities. A second category consists of court orations; addresses given by nobles or kings at a variety of state functions. A third category of *huehuetlahtolli* are those orations given by parents to their offspring on the subject of appropriate behavior in society. The orations of the merchants constitute the fourth category of speeches. These addresses were given by the elders of the commercial community to mark the departure and return of trading expeditions. The final, and most numerous, category consists of orations relative to the life cycle. These speeches were delivered by elders or parents at crucial junctures in human experience: birth, infancy, marriage, death.

Naturally, such a collection of speeches represent a great repository of information regarding the thought and culture of the Aztecs. Indeed, Alfredo López Austin maintains that "for those trying to gain an acquaintance with the people of ancient Mexico, whether in the sphere of ethnohistory or that of literature or of the broadest humanism, no other book among the twelve has the value of the sixth book."<sup>10</sup> Certainly the *huehuetlahtolli* have contributed significantly to the historical understanding of the Aztecs. One feature of this understanding that is rarely emphasized by historians

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(Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1969), 2:492–99 and Alonso de Zurita, *Brief and Summary Relation of the Lords of New Spain (Breve y summaria relación de los señores de la Nueva España)* [ca. 1570], trans. and ed. Benjamin Keen (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1963) pp. 97–102 and 140–51.

<sup>9</sup>"The Rhetorical Orations," pp. 85–107.

<sup>10</sup>"The Research Methods of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún: The Questionnaires," *Sixteenth-Century Mexico*, p. 133.

is the great importance of public discourse in the religious, political and social aspects of Aztec life.<sup>11</sup> The speeches invariably reflect occasions of extreme ritualistic and ceremonial moment.

Not surprisingly, orations of such religious and political import were not the products of spontaneous utterance. The *huehuetlahtolli* were, rather, carefully crafted discourses delivered by men who had been formally trained in the art of public speaking. The sons of Aztec nobility attended the *calmecac*, the institution for the training of religious and civil functionaries. The teaching in the *calmecac* was done by priests who imposed a strict and austere regimen designed to instill in the students the virtue of self-control so admired by the Aztecs. An important portion of the curriculum of the *calmecac* was devoted to the arts of public speaking and civil conversation. "Very carefully," says Sahagún, "were they taught good discourse. If one spoke not well, if one greeted others not well, then they drew blood from him [with *maguey* spines]" (4:64–65).

Although Sahagún does not specify the methods employed by the priests to teach "good discourse" other sources indicate that the students memorized speeches transmitted orally from previous generations. Francisco Javier Clavijero, in his *Historia antigua de Mexico*, maintains that "those who were destined to be orators were instructed from childhood to speak well, and they made them learn from memory the most famous speeches of their ancestors, which had been passed down from fathers to sons."<sup>12</sup> Despite this fidelity to ancestral addresses Aztec orators must also have composed original orations in response to new situations. The most obvious example of such an exigency is Moctezuma's speech welcoming Cortéz to Tenochtitlan (13:41–3). There is, however, little, if any, evidence to indicate that rhetorical composition was taught formally to young Aztec orators. Indeed, the emphasis in the *calmecac*, as in the public ceremonies, was almost certainly upon the careful transmission of previously developed discourse.

The youth of the *calmecac* would eventually become the orators responsible for the inculcating and perpetuating the accumulated

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<sup>11</sup>The most obvious feature of the *huehuetlahtolli*, that they are, quite simply, speeches, is often overlooked by historians in search of other ethnographic data. Even when the *huehuetlahtolli* are considered as literature their oratorical origin is often obscured. A notable exception to such approaches is Sullivan, "The Rhetorical Orations," who does consider these discourses as oratory.

<sup>12</sup>(Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1958), 2:273.

wisdom of the ages. The oratory thus transmitted is characterized by what Robert T. Oliver calls the "rhetoric of behavior:" language intended to induce individual conformity to traditional values.<sup>13</sup> While appropriate behavior is an essential theme of most *huehuetlahtolli*, such concerns are especially apparent in the speeches of parents addressing their children. In one such speech a father advises his son on the virtues of chastity. The father begins: "Thou who art my son, thou who art my youth, hear the words; place, inscribe in the chambers of thy heart the word or two which our forefathers departed leave: the old men, the old women, the regarded ones, the admired ones, and the advised ones on earth. Here is that which they gave us, entrusted to us as they left, the words of the old men, that which is bound, the well-guarded [words]" (7:113). These "well-guarded words" instruct the boy in appropriate behavior. "Listen to the way in which thou art to live," says the father. "Thou art not to lust for vice, for filth; thou art not to take pleasure in that which defileth one, which corrupteth one, that which, it is said, driveth one to excess, which harmeth, destroyeth one: that which is deadly" (7:116). Moreover, the father cautions, "thou art not to ruin thyself impetuously; thou art not to devour, to gulp down the carnal life as if thou wert a dog" (7:116). Finally, the speech concludes: "And this, O my son: be very careful on earth. Live very calmly, very carefully" (7:119). Admonitions to be chaste, cautious and moderate are the commonplaces of Aztec oratory.

In another parental address a father exhorts his son to behave prudently in public. One must be careful to dress with modesty, to eat and drink in moderation, to walk with dignity and "to speak very slowly, very deliberately; thou art not to speak hurriedly, not to pant, nor to squeak, lest it be said of thee that thou art a groaner,

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<sup>13</sup> *Communication and Culture in Ancient India and China* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1971). Chapter 9, "The Rhetoric of Behavior: Ceremony, Etiquette, and Methodology," pp. 145–60. Although Oliver is not, of course, discussing Aztec culture, the parallels between his subject and the *huehuetlahtolli* are striking: "Rhetoric in Chinese Society thus came to be very much akin to sheer propriety. The utility which rhetoric was to serve was the maintenance of harmony. The way to this goal was through ceremony, etiquette, and methodology. There was a right way of doing things—a way that was established and accepted. When behavior conformed to this pattern of expectation, the individual's relations with his fellows would be predictable and dependable. Accordingly, the community would have a decent and decorous stability" (p. 145).



a growler, a squeaker. Also thou art not to cry out, lest thou be known as an imbecile, a shameless one, a rustic, very much a rustic. Moderately, middlingly art thou to carry, to emit thy spirit, thy words. And thou art to improve, to soften thy words, thy voice" (7:122). The father closes with what is perhaps the quintessential admonition of Aztec morality: "Continue with caution on earth, for thou has heard that moderation is necessary" (7:126).

Despite the recurrent exhortations to moderation, the *huehuetlahtolli* indicate that the Aztecs did sometimes behave immoderately. One of the longest orations Sahagún includes in Book VI is that of a king addressing the nobility on the subject of the evils of *octli*, the fermented sap of the maguey cactus. The king warns that "what is called *octli* is the origin, the root of the evil, or the bad, of perdition. . . . It is like a whirlwind, like a severe wind, for it cometh rolling together the bad, the evil. Behold: one [desireth] another's woman; one committeth adultery; one coveteth, one stealeth, one pilfereth; one becometh a snatcher. Behold: it is one who curseth, who murmureth, who belloweth, who rumbleth when he becometh drunk. [Because of] the pulque he braggeth falsely of his noble lineage; he thinketh himself superior; he vaunteth himself; he esteemeth himself; he is grandiose; he regardeth no one with much consideration" (7:68). "I cry out especially to you," says the king, "ye who are lords, and ye who are our uncles, ye who are noblemen, ye who are the sons of rulers, that we leave alone the jimson weed, which maketh one drunk, confoundeth one; the pulque, which is evil, bad. Those who went leaving you, those from whom ye descended, went hating, went detesting it" (7:70). Thus temperance, another manifestation of moderation, was much admired by the Aztec's ancestors, an attitude which should be emulated by this present generation.

While many *huehuetlahtolli*, then, advocate specific behavior, other speeches are designed to inculcate beliefs advantageous to the ruling elite of Aztec society. One such address delivered, according to Sahagún, by "a great priest, or a great nobleman, or some great dignitary" upon the selection of a new ruler seeks to reinforce the legitimacy of the accession. The speaker tells the new leader: "It is thou: he pointeth the finger at thee; he indicateth thee. Our lord hath recorded thee, indicated thee, marked thee, entered thee in the books. Now verily it was declared, it was determined above us, in the heavens, in the land of the dead, that our lord place thee on the reed mat, on the reed seat, on his place of honor" (7:

48). This fundamental message is repeated throughout the speech. Once again the speaker says "It is thou. Upon thee it hath fallen. Upon thee hath gone the spirit, the word of our lord, the lord of the near, of the nigh; he hath pointed his finger at thee. Verily, wilt thou hide thyself? Wilt thou take refuge? Wilt thou be absent?: Wilt thou flee? And wilt thou already steel thyself" (7:49)? Of course, the ruler will accept his responsibility to lead, just as the common people will accept their responsibility to follow. After all, the accession has been determined by the gods and endorsed by the elders; there is no choice.

## II

Virtually all the *huehuetlahtolli*, whatever the specific occasion, function to transmit traditional values and ensure harmony in a hierarchical society. These values are transmitted in a rather characteristic and distinctive style. Sahagún was struck, as are modern readers, by the highly metaphorical nature of the *huehuetlahtolli*. In his headnotes to the speeches Sahagún observes, in one instance, that the "words are very admirable and the metaphors are very difficult." In describing another speech he notes that "many similes and examples are given expression" (7:47, 113). The highly figurative quality of these speeches leads Charles E. Dibble to conclude that "the Aztecs conceived of their orations and prayers as the stringing of a strand of beads and the *huehuetlahtolli* is just that—a series of metaphors one after another."<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, metaphoric abundance appears to be a fundamental feature of the Nahuatl language. In the *huehuetlahtolli*, as in most Aztec literature, the metaphors are almost invariably paired—that is, two similar and consecutive metaphors appear in the same sentence to convey the same thought. In his *Historia de la literatura Nahuatl* Angel Maria Garibay K. identifies this metaphoric pairing as *difrasismo*.<sup>15</sup> Examples of "diphra-sis" are provided in the speech Sahagún identifies as containing many "very difficult" metaphors: A speech delivered at the inauguration of a new leader. Before the

<sup>14</sup>"The Nahuatlization of Christianity," *Sixteenth-Century Mexico*, p. 228.

<sup>15</sup>(Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1953) 1:19–20. See also the same author's *Llave del Nahuatl* (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1961), pp. 115–16. In both these works Garibay K. identifies *difrasismo* as a fundamental feature of the Nahuatl language.

leader can be honored, however, the death of the previous ruler must be dealt with. The orator wonders if the departed ancestors have forgotten those who remain on earth. "Do they," he asks, "still know of their city, which already lieth abandoned, which already lieth darkened, which our lord hath already made his place of desolation? Do they still frequent that which is already completely forest, which is already completely desert, where the governed go? And the vassals no longer possess a mother, no longer possess a father" (7:47). In three sentences the speaker has presented three paired metaphors. The ruler's death has left the city "darkened" and "abandoned;" a "forest" and a "desert." Moreover, his death has deprived the commoners of both a "mother" and a "father." Here, then, is a "strand of beads," an accumulation of metaphors to express and symbolize, to repeat and reinforce, an essential ideal.

This metaphoric abundance appears again and again in the texts preserved by Sahagún. Thus despite the diversity of subject matter these speeches share essential stylistic and situational elements. The *huehuetlahtolli* are invariably exhortative and admonitive; poetic and metaphoric. Above all, however, they are "the ancient word"—the orators inevitably invoke the authority of the dead to assure the accord of the living.

These, then, are the characteristics of the discourse which Sahagún recognized as rhetoric. Certainly, the *huehuetlahtolli* do, in many ways, resemble rhetoric as a sixteenth-century European would have understood the term. Both Aztecs and Europeans share a belief in the efficacy of the spoken word and an appreciation of the artistry of its expression. More specifically, the *huehuetlahtolli* are strikingly similar to epideictic oratory—the classical genus which is probably most typical of Renaissance rhetoric.<sup>16</sup> John W. O'Malley explains that epideictic oratory was, in general, "intended for a ceremonial occasion, and its purpose was to arouse the sentiments of appreciation or disgust appropriate for some given person, event, or institution. Its characteristic technique was the distribution of praise or blame as circumstances required. It

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<sup>16</sup>For the importance of the epideictic genre in the Renaissance see O. B. Hardison, Jr., *The Enduring Monument: A Study of the Idea of Praise in Renaissance Literary Theory and Practice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962) and Brian Vickers, "Epideictic and Epic in the Renaissance," *New Literary History* 14 (1982): 497–537.

was the *ars laudandi et vituperandi*, the rhetoric of congratulation and the rhetoric of reproach."<sup>17</sup> This type of oratory, according to Chaim Perelman, is "practised by those who, in a society, defend the traditional and accepted values, those which are the object of education, not the new and revolutionary values which stir up controversy and polemics. Being in no fear of contradiction, the speaker readily converts into universal values, if not eternal truth, that which has acquired a certain standing through social unanimity. Epideictic speeches are most prone to appeal to a universal order, to a nature, or a god that would vouch for the unquestioned, and supposedly unquestionable, values. In epideictic oratory, the speaker turns educator."<sup>18</sup>

Virtually all the speeches presented by Sahagún were delivered on ceremonial occasions—moments that were of great importance to the Aztecs, "an inordinately ritualistic and ceremonial people."<sup>19</sup> The ceremonial and occasional nature of "the speeches of the ancients" together with the appeals to traditional wisdom and the didacticism of the speakers cause the *huehuetlahtolli* to mirror, in important ways, the requirements of epideictic oratory.

Despite the apparent parallels between the *huehuetlahtolli* and the epideictic genre, the Aztec speeches are not fully-developed orations in the Graeco-Roman tradition. The "speeches of the ancients" do not exhibit either the complexity of structure or the intricacy of argument that characterize European oratory. In other words, the *huehuetlahtolli* lack the "linearity" of literate discourse. Rather, the Aztec oratory is brief, aphoristic and repetitive. Indeed, the dominant form of "the ancient word" might be described as constant repetition made palatable by metaphoric variety. In short, the *huehuetlahtolli* possess many of the characteristics that comprise what Walter Ong calls the "psycho-dynamics orality." In particular, Aztec oratory is structurally additive rather than subordinative, stylistically copious and redundant and thematically conservative.<sup>20</sup> Sahagún's collection demonstrates that the *huehuetlahtolli*, while

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<sup>17</sup> *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1979), p. 39.

<sup>18</sup> *The New Rhetoric*, trans. John Wilkenson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), p. 51.

<sup>19</sup> Sullivan, p. 109.

<sup>20</sup> *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), pp. 31–77.

still resembling European oratory in many ways, also differ from it in significant respects. These two forms of discourse, the European and the Nahuatl, are ultimately separated by the gap between orality and literacy.

### III

George Kennedy writes that "one of the objectives of the historical study of rhetoric is to come to an understanding of the common ground of rhetorics and to see what may be universal and what may be historical accident." Kennedy further observes that "in an attempt to define the nature of rhetoric and its historical manifestations we are fortunate in having on record descriptions of the circumstances and contents of speeches that were composed before the conceptualization of rhetoric. Such records exist in India and China, and in the West are represented in their most remarkable form by the Homeric poems in Greece and by the Old Testament."<sup>21</sup> Historians of rhetoric are also fortunate to have the *huehuetlahtolli* collected and preserved by Sahagún and his collaborators. These "speeches of the ancients" suggest that the art of rhetoric originated in the earliest rituals of humankind. Such an inference about the origins of rhetoric is not altogether inconsistent with the experience of the early Greeks. Although ancient theory was preoccupied with the forensic oratory necessitated by the Athenian popular jury, ancient practice was also greatly concerned with ceremonial oratory. Certainly Athens provided ample opportunity for the exercise of epideictic with its funerals, festivals and games. And many of the great early practitioners of rhetoric were masters of epideictic; Pericles, Georgias and Isocrates all excelled in this genre. After the demise of Athenian democracy epideictic displayed a remarkable durability and adaptability. This persistence is no doubt due, in part to the relative independence of epideictic, in contrast to forensic and deliberative, from the institutional requirements imposed by the courtroom and the assembly chamber. But the persistence of epideictic must also be a product of its fundamental association with human behavior. Brian Vickers argues that epideictic dominated the Renaissance because of this alliance with ethics:

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<sup>21</sup> *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), pp. 8–9.

"rhetoric had aligned itself with philosophy, especially with ethics, so that the poet, like the orator, became the propagator of accepted moral systems."<sup>22</sup>

Despite this link between ethics and epideictic the genus has often been deprecated because of the propensity of skillful orators to employ its conventions for ostentatious display. This criticism of epideictic as display is perhaps only partially justified. The performance element of such rhetoric, says Kenneth Burke, "was merely an extreme expression of a "tendency present in epideictic at the start. For this kind contained the most essential motive of all: persuasion by words, rather than by force, on the part of those who loved eloquence for itself alone. Critics must have epideictic in mind who say that eloquence begins in the love of words for their own sake."<sup>23</sup>

The Aztecs, despite their undeniable barbarity, were also lovers of words—men who were compelled to speak out at times of public and private significance. The Aztec penchant for ceremonial oratory serves as a reminder of the fundamental necessity, shared by oral and literate cultures, of exhorting and admonishing, of praising and blaming, of moralizing through language.

Sahagún clearly recognized the ethical element present in the *huehuetlahtolli*. In the beginning of Book 6 of the *General History* he observes that it is through these speeches that the Aztecs displayed their "moral philosophy." Of even greater significance is Sahagún's recognition of the imperative of recording and preserving these speeches. Historians have long valued his collection of speeches for the ethnographic data they provide about Aztec thought and culture. The *huehuetlahtolli* are also important for the information they impart about the role of rhetoric in not only the Aztec world but in pre-literate societies generally. The "speeches of the ancients" were delivered by a complex people on the threshold of literacy and these discourses represent one of the most extensive collections of the oratory of an ancient oral culture. When recorded by Sahagún, the Aztecs had been in contact with Europeans for barely three decades. Thus Sahagún's texts make possible the observation of the rhetoric of a sophisticated oral culture in a form relatively unaltered by the intervention of a literate, colonial culture. Sahagún seized an opportunity that would never present itself again. It is probable

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<sup>22</sup>"Epideictic and Epic in the Renaissance," p. 502.

<sup>23</sup>*A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 72.

that Aztec discourse, both practically and conceptually, would have continued to evolve as the culture itself developed. Such a development was, of course, irrevocably interrupted by Cortéz. The *huehuetlahtolli* are, therefore, not only "the words of the ancients," but virtually the last words of the Aztecs.

The ethical awareness of "the speeches of the ancients" argues that rhetoric is fundamentally and universally epideictic in nature. Indeed, the *huehuetlahtolli* offer eloquent evidence of the primeval role of rhetoric as an agent of morality in oral and literate cultures alike. Bernardino de Sahagún preserved these speeches because the "Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy" of the Aztecs demonstrates, with great clarity, the inherent humanity of that people. After all, to Renaissance Europeans, educated in the traditions of Greece and Rome, rhetoric was, in large measure, what it was to the Aztecs of Mexico—"the ancient word."