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Miguel León Portilla. *Aztec Thought and Culture*

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recur to archaeological knowledge or documentary traces); his passion to extricate from every possible bit of archaeological or documentary trace about Mesoamerican civilizations not only whatever amplifies our knowledge of those areas of study but, as well, our sense of what a developing human science is.

The case in point: when we are before a text that suggests an analogy between the ritual interments by posterior Mesoamerican cultures of "dug-up" pottery and effigies of previous cultures unknown to them, yet found by them in their habitat, with the possibility of something like a dawn of "archaeological inquiry" in pre-hispanic Mesoamerican minds, to the modern purpose of archaeological science; when we read a text that utilizes the texts of Spanish "cronistas" not as a pretext for just another flurry of "Spaniard-bashing" because the chroniclers did not possess an archaeological science as we do now, but, instead, strives to understand why the finding of saurian bones in the Mexican plateau by sixteenth century "archaeologists," such as Diego de Landa, led them to speculate about the possibility of the existence of races of "giants," we are before a text that brings a refreshing view of what modern archaeological knowledge is all about, its historicity and its development. It brings a realization to the question of why we know more today, than they did then ... and how much we owe to them.

The Postscript of Bernal's book ends by his stating that in his presentation and inquiry he has tried to bring in the history of Mesoamerican archaeology at a pace with the contributions of other human sciences to the common field of study but, he points out, "to study archaeology on its own becomes a virtual impossibility from about 1950 on; it so reduces the scale of the subject as to make even the whys and wherefors of the research incomprehensible." A statement that any civilizationalist can readily understand, specially in these, our "transdisciplinary" times. On a closing remark, I can only agree with the assessment of this book pronounced by a scholar who is no stranger to civilizational studies, Ashley Montagu, "the book once started is unputdownable—utterly absorbing," and, I may add, absolutely current and stimulating.

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Miguel León Portilla, besides being an internationally known scholar on Nahua culture and Mesoamerican civilizations, is a pioneer in the field of research on pre-hispanic worldvisions and philosophical conceptions by means of the study of extant documentary sources. A cultural anthropologist, linguist and thinker, he helped to bring the inquiry into Mesoamerican civilizations and post-encounter developments into the perspective of the human sciences as distinct from (but not unrelated to) contemporary, traditional interpretations. He pioneered, along
with some of his teachers at the Universidad Autónoma de México of the late 1940's and 1950's, the effort to diffuse the notion that without bringing in the Amerindians' perception of their world and of the disruption of that world into the consideration of scholarly inquiry, no real progress could be made in our understanding of said processes.

What today we have generalized as the perspective of the criticism of "eurocentric" interpretations as "dominant" and "oppressive," León Portilla understood in the 1950's as simply scientifically insufficient to grasp the magnitude of human processes that challenged disciplinary classifications. On his own, he was the first scholar to publish an anthology of texts that portrayed and popularized the "vision of the vanquished" as a weighty and necessary element in the study of processes that demanded the preconceptions of historiographic and cultural anthropology research (as practiced until then) to accommodate themselves to (rather than prescribe for) the complexity of their objects of study.

His studies into Aztec and Mayan thought, needless to say, are founded on a solid training in linguistic, anthropological, historical and philosophical methodologies. In a way, León Portilla's intellectual preparation and expertise supports a structure of critical analysis and proposed conclusions (that he is the first to acknowledge as putatively modifiable) that stands as more wholesome, compared to other projects of interpretation which base themselves upon more restrictive transdisciplinary grounds. The present edition of his work, published in 1990, incorporates, within the text and in its Preface, the discussion of current research and interpretations that either confirm or challenge the book's conclusions since its first edition. This adds to this edition the benefit of being an updated text by the author.

Interestingly enough, León Portilla defends his previous tenets on "Aztec thought" by re-stating the work's original scope and perspective and comparing it against the objections and criticisms levelled against it from different disciplines in the past decade.

With characteristic sobriety, León Portilla points out that the objections to his presentation of Aztec thought, rather than challenging his proposed conclusions, address the validity of his sources. So, the Preface to this edition is, in his words, "a sort of apologia fontium, a critical defense of the questioned sources," that can only be considered as "indigenous sources." In this remark he reminds actual and prospective critics that the sources for criticism and for the proposal of conclusive statements about Aztec thought are common to himself and to his critics.

The criticism leveled against his text is, in fact, a criticism against the reliability of indigenous sources and, although he does not identify his critics by disciplinary labels, he alludes to them through the kind of criticism that has been made: 1) "it is argued—he states—that the testimonies available in Nahuatl are at best late-alphabetical renditions of texts composed to be chanted or solemnly pronounced, or in some circumstances recited, following the contents of the ancient pictoglyphic books. Those texts, deprived from their original form of transmission,
are felt to lose much of their meaning;" 2) "the fact that many of the texts were collected by Spanish missionaries or their catechized native assistants makes them even more suspicious, as these collectors were likely subject to various kinds of Euro-Christian influence." León Portilla’s indication that for him as well as for his critics the sources remain the same, brings his further arguments (interspersed throughout the book) to the arena of comparative analytical methodologies rather than into, and away from, a futile discussion of the “authenticity” of texts that actually either supports or questions any conclusions based on them for modern scholarship, whether they come from linguistics, textual analysis or colonial discourse analysis. If the sources can be questioned because they are mediated by (European) alphabetically inscribed codes or by “Euro-Christian (ideological) influence," implying that no true rendition of Aztec thought and culture can be extricated from them, then, no sensible claim can be laid that an alternate critical analysis will have access to the thought and worldvision of a purportedly “pure," pre-inscribed informer, who will be surmised as unmediated in his delivery of information by the experience of the conquest and his internalization of the modes of inscription and ideology of the interrogant.

But León Portilla, again, in his characteristic a-polemical attitude, does not claim this common problem as a legitimization for his conclusions or the well-earned “authority” of his work. Throughout the book he re-evaluates his sources, brings into this re-evaluation the concerns and criticisms of fellow scholars (even in the addition of two updated Appendices), incorporates valid contributions formulated by his critics, and offers us, once again, a challenging and honest view of Aztec thought and culture.

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One would expect that this book would be seriously affected by León Portilla’s involvement in the past twelve years with the toils of being a representative of his country and a diplomat in other countries. Fortunately for everyone, it is not so. Besides the revised and updated original text, this edition is physically (and qualitatively) doubled by Appendix A, “The concepts of space and time among the contemporary Maya” by Alfonso Villas Rojas, and Appendix B, “Recent contributions to the theme of this book” by the author himself.

Villas Rojas’s contribution projects the text, and the scholarship, to afford the reader a healthily “presentist” perspective from the realm of cultural anthropology, without falling into the snares of collusive judgments due to imprecisions of socio-historical appreciations. There is no