

THE PRE-HISPANIC POETICS OF SAHAGÚN'S
PSALMODIA CHRISTIANA

JOHN FREDERICK SCHWALLER

Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún is without question one of the leading figures of Nahuatl studies from the sixteenth century. He served as an interpreter, missionary, and teacher. Among his greater accomplishments was the creation of a veritable storehouse of materials in Nahuatl and dealing with the culture of the Nahuas. Among his works one finds collections of sermons, a collection of native hymns recast to celebrate the saints and feasts of the Christian calendar (the *Psalmody Christiana*), the translation of the Epistle and Gospel readings for the Sunday mass into Nahuatl, and a commentary on these readings. These works, taken as a whole, have been characterized as a “doctrinal encyclopedia.”¹ Scholars have gained much insight into Sahagún’s overall evangelistic plan through investigation of the *Psalmody Christiana* and the editorial history of that work, the only piece to be printed during his lifetime.²

The *Psalmody* pertains to a very prolific period in Sahagún’s life. It was composed sometime around 1564, along with several other pieces of the doctrinal encyclopedia, and some of the major work on the *Florentine Codex*.³ Specifically, Sahagún noted that in 1564 he was working in the Colegio de Santacruz Tlatelolco. There, he realized that the catechisms and doctrinal treatises that had been so popular up until that time had simply not been effective at bringing about a lasting conversion. Rather a new type of approach was required to truly convert the natives. Quite simply the *Psalmody* was that new type of approach.

The *Psalmody Christiana* was the only work of Sahagún to be published in his lifetime (1583). The work consists of songs written in Nahuatl

¹ D’Olwer, *Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, 1499-1590*: 41.

² Arthur J. O. Anderson, “Sahagún’s ‘Doctrinal Encyclopaedia’”, *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl*, 1983, 16, p. 119-122.

³ The *Florentine Codex* is a twelve volume encyclopedia of Nahuatl thought, culture and history compiled by Sahagún in a bi-lingual format, in Nahuatl and Spanish. The work has been translated and edited by Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles Dibble.

to celebrate the feasts of the Church calendar, including those of many important saints, such as St. Francis, St. Dominic, the Evangelists, and many others. In his introduction to the modern edition of the *Psalmodia*, Arthur J. O. Anderson, notes that the songs were probably first composed in 1558-1561 during Sahagún's residence in Tepepulco.⁴ They were later edited and polished in 1564 when he had returned to Tlatelolco, using his four native assistants. For nearly 20 years the songs circulated in manuscript until they were finally published in 1583.

The function of these compositions is of the highest importance. Among the religious orders involved in the evangelization, the Franciscans tended to be the most indulgent regarding the use of pre-Columbian traditions and their adaptation to Christian ends, providing that they had been suitably cleansed of pagan influence. Many of the early chronicles tell of the natives' pleasure in singing and dancing in both their own native religious celebrations and later in a Christian context. What Sahagún did was to take this tradition in general, and perhaps some of the songs in particular, and adapt them to Christian worship.

Sahagún explained his motives in his Prologue to the work. He noted that the natives had customarily sung songs of various types in the worship of their ancient gods. With the arrival of the Spanish many attempts had been made to force the natives to abandon these songs and sing only songs of the Christian faith. Yet in most instances the natives returned to singing their old hymns. In order to facilitate the abandonment of the old songs, Sahagún offered up these songs as replacements for the old.⁵

Although the collection of songs is called *Psalmodia Christiana*, in the "Prologue to the reader" Sahagún described these songs not as psalms but as *Cantares*.⁶ Nevertheless, throughout the work itself, each song carries the heading of "psalm." Everyone involved in the project called the collection a *psalmodia* (psalmody). A psalmody is quite simply a collection of psalms. The psalm as an art form is distinguished by being a song in praise or worship of God. Consequently, while Sahagún had mixed feelings on the issue, nonetheless, he did entitle the whole work as a psalmody. By choosing this path, Sahagún sought, on the one hand, to compare his work in some regards with the best known psalmody, the Biblical book of Psalms. In the sixteenth century the book of Psalms was known variously as the Psalter or

⁴ Bernardino de Sahagún, *Psalmody Christiana (Christian Psalmody)*, XV-XVI.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6-9.

⁶ A *cantar* is a short poetic composition put to music for singing.

Psalmody.⁷ Nevertheless, each individual song could not be compared, per se, with the Biblical psalms. On the other hand the work, taken as a whole, could be considered roughly on a par. As will be seen, some of the poetic structures he employed fit both into the native tradition and into the Biblical Hebrew tradition.

The structure of Sahagún's work served a liturgical end. He organized his psalms around the celebrations of the liturgical calendar; although he chose to follow the calendar year, rather than the liturgical year, by beginning his work with the canonical celebrations of the month of January. Structurally, then, his work differs markedly from the Biblical book of Psalms. Similarly there are far more songs in the collection than in the biblical book. These psalms also differ from their Biblical homologues by praising not only the Lord God but also the saints and various ecclesiastical holidays, such as Septuagesima Sunday. In fact the book opens with "psalms" on the sign of the cross, the Our Father, the Hail Mary, and the *Salve Regina*, followed by songs regarding the Ten Commandments, the five commandments of the Church, the seven sacraments, and the blessings of paradise. In the main part of the work, Sahagún presented several psalms on each topic. For example for the feast of Saints Phillip and James he presents six psalms, each; for Saint Anthony of Padua, five; and for Saint Hippolytus, patron saint of Mexico City, only four. Structurally, and in terms of content, this psalmody differs dramatically from the biblical model.

In his translation and analysis of the *Psalmodia*, Arthur J. O. Anderson considers the poetic style of the psalms in terms of the pre-Columbian poetic tradition. Basing himself on the work of Ángel María Garibay, path breaking scholar of Nahuatl literature, Anderson identifies the following characteristics of Nahuatl poetic style:

- Frequent diphrases (paired similes or metaphors: *in atl in tepell*, "the water the hill," meaning a town).
- Frequent paired or repeated parallel terms, phrases, clauses, and statements, producing a specific meaning.
- Use of connector words to bind together a series of possibly differing ideas.
- Use of the refrain.
- Use of particles, sounds, or interjections, possibly nonsense syllables (like "hey nonny nonny" or "fa, la, la, la" in English).

⁷ In Spanish these terms were *psalterio* and *psalmodia*. Modern Spanish writes them as *salterio* and *salmodia*. They come directly from the Latin and Greek equivalents, *psalterion* – *psalterium* and *psalmōidia* and *psalmodia*. The earliest printed definition of *psalmodia* in Spanish, from the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language dictionary in 1734 defines the word as "The collection of the one hundred and fifty Psalms of David."

— Common symbolism: flowers, precious metals, precious stones, birds and butterflies, etcetera.⁸

Frances Karttunen and James Lockhart have elaborated on some of these themes, and looked closely at the structure of pre-Columbian Nahuatl poetry. They have concluded that the unique and irreducible feature of the poetry is the verse. Across various collections and in various formats, the verse remains largely intact. Moreover, one of the most common features is the paired verse, where two lines are inextricably linked. The image they present of Nahuatl poetry is not so much a linear development of a thought or idea, but rather a group of verses all of which elaborate on a theme or idea.⁹ This reinforces the notion of parallelism expressed in the second of Garibay's points.

The two largest collections of Nahua poems date from the period following the conquest, although scholars have assumed that the poetry contained in them reflected the pre-conquest poetic tradition. While some poems obviously reflected Christian intrusions, the vast majority seem to remain faithful to the older tradition. These two collections are known as the *Romances de los señores de la Nueva España* (Poetry of the Lords of New Spain) and the *Cantares Mexicanos* (Songs of the Mexicans).¹⁰ The poetry contained in these two large collections generally dates from before the conquest and were part of an oral tradition. The poems were not copied down into European script until the middle of the sixteenth century, and probably prior to about 1580. There are numerous other sources that contain smaller and larger collections of Nahua poetry, most also dating from before the conquest although generally copied down in the sixteenth century. Lastly, there are also other numerous prose documents written in the sixteenth century that reflect the literary style of the period prior to the conquest. It is this whole corpus of materials upon which scholars can draw to compare works written in the post conquest period with the earlier native paradigms.

A cursory examination of the psalms in the *Psalmodia* demonstrates that the songs written by Sahagún were in fact a hybrid. While

⁸ *Ibid.*, XXVI-XXVII, adapted from Ángel María Garibay, *Historia de la literatura Náhuatl*, v. I, p. 65-73. Anderson describes each of these features in brief in his Introduction to the *Psalmodia*. The discussion presented here goes far beyond the limited material in his work.

⁹ Karttunen and Lockhart, "La estructura...", p. 16-22.

¹⁰ The *Romances* are held at the Benson Latin American Collection of the University of Texas, Austin, item G59, in the García Icazbalceta collection. The *Cantares* are held by the Biblioteca Nacional of Mexico. The *Cantares* are available in a facsimile edition published in 1994.

ostensibly Christian in theme, they clearly retained some of the literary devices of the ancient poetry and song. There are some elements which have a striking similarity to pre-Columbian forms. For example part of the psalm to St. Thomas Aquinas has a striking similarity to Sahagún's version of the creation of the moon. In the song to St. Thomas, Sahagún writes:

<p><i>In oc iouia, in aiama tzinli cemanoc, iuh tlatlilli, iuhca dios ilatoltzi...</i></p>	<p>When all was yet darkness, before the world began, such was the commandment, such was the Word of God...¹¹</p>
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Compare this to the description of the creation of the sun and moon by the gods assembled at Teotihuacan:

<p><i>Mitloa, in oc iooaian, in aiama tona, in aiama tlathui...</i></p>	<p>It is told that when yet it was darkness, when yet no sun has shone, and no dawn has broken...¹²</p>
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Clearly the two passages are strikingly similar, although not exactly parallel. It was, however, this type of elevated discourse in Nahuatl that would resonate with the natives as proper for holy songs of praise. In general, what appears most common is that Sahagún consciously drew upon the older poetic tradition in composing his psalms.

The most widely recognized poetic device of the Nahuatl was the diphrase (Spanish *difrasismo*). This device was central to Nahuatl discourse. Many very common words were in fact diphrases. The most common example is the word for town or city, *altepetl*, which in fact consists of two independent words, *atl* and *tepetl* (water, hill), which when combined or placed serially created the third meaning of city. The beauty of the device is that the combined word, *altepetl* can be used, as can the two underlying words, with the same meaning. Moreover, when grammatical modifications are made to the word, they can be made either to the composite word or to both of the component words. For example "my town" can be *naltepeuh*¹³ or *nauh notepeuh*.¹⁴

The diphrase is present throughout Nahuatl poetry. Nevertheless, it appears sparingly in the *Psalmody*, although there are dozens of

¹¹ Sahagún, *Psalmody Christiana*, p. 78-79.

¹² Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, Book 7, Chapter 2, p. 4-5.

¹³ *no*[my] + *altepe* [town] + *uh* [special possessed ending for this type of word].

¹⁴ Literally "my water, my hill." *no* [my] + *a* [water] + *uh* [special possessed ending for this type of word] *no*[my] + *tepe* [town] + *uh* [special possessed ending for this type of word].

instances of the use of *altepeltl*, such as in the second psalm for the celebration of St. Augustine. The song talks of the saint and his mother: "They were living in a city named Thagaste."¹⁵ Curiously, a few lines later, speaking of the saint's residence in Carthage and Milan, Sahagún uses the Spanish word in the Nahuatl version of the poetry: "*in umpa uei ciudad, itocaioca Carthago... in uei ciudad, itocaoica Millan*", "in a major city, a place named Carthage... a spacious city, a place called Milan."¹⁶

In the first psalm for the feast of Easter, Sahagún wrote: "softness, warmth arrives", in describing the arrival of spring. The internal structure in Nahuatl is that of the diphase: *oacico in iamaniliztli, in totonillutl*.¹⁷ In this construction the two juxtaposed concepts (softness and warmth) lead to the feeling of spring. This can be compared to a rather opposite allusion made in the *Cantares Mexicanos*. Referring to the brevity of life and the certainty of death, the poet says: "Comes the snow, the ice. Brief is the warmth." The impression of cold, solitude, and abandon is expressed with the diphase *in itztec y ye cecec*,¹⁸ "the snow, the ice." The word for "Brief is the warmth" that follows (*onnetotonilotoca*) has within it one of the particles used to indicate warmth in the *Psalmodia, totonia*.

Sahagún also uses the form of the diphase to create new meanings. One of the obstacles faced by the missionaries in their attempt to Christianize the Nahua was the lack of certain terms such as "sin." In the second psalm for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, Sahagún presents a diphase to use for the notion of sin: "the nitrous water, the dirty water", *in tequisquiattl, in tlaelatl*, which he further defines as "original sin", "pecado original."¹⁹ In general, however, the term most widely used to describe the Christian notion of sin was *tlatlacolli*, a misdeed.²⁰

¹⁵ "*Umpa altepeltl ipan nemia, itocaioca Tangar.*" Anderson, *Psalmodia*, 264-65.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 266-67.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 108-109. There are those who might argue that this does not in fact constitute a diphase. In the generally accepted sense a diphase is a combination of two (or more) nouns, juxtaposed to create a new, unrelated meaning. Just as water and hill combine to create town or city. In these examples of the *Psalmodia* we have diphase-like examples, wherein the two nouns are not that unlike another and combine to signify a third but related meaning. Consequently while perhaps not rising to the level of true diphases, they do represent the broader stylistic process at work in Sahagún's composition of the *Psalmodia*.

¹⁸ Bierhorst, *Cantares Mexicanos*, p. 282-283. The text clearly shows "itztec" which Bierhorst translates as snow. The standard spelling, however, is "itztic." "Totônâ" is a verb meaning to heat something. The non-active form is *totônîlô*. The verb phrase can be analyzed into its parts *on-ne-totonia-lo-t[i]-o-ca*, or "thither to something, heat, was applied", or "there had been heating." My thanks to R. Joe Campbell for this analysis.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 352-353.

²⁰ Louise Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, p. 28-34, 214.

In the Nahuatl poetic tradition the use of water metaphors is quite common, as in the diphrase for city, “the water, the hill.” Another common diphrase was the description of a battle field as “the water, the burned” or as “the divine water; the burned.”²¹ This diphrase appears frequently in the poetic literature, especially in the “Songs of War” (*Yāocuicatl*).²² Extolling the virtues of battle the poet sings: “Rouse yourself where flood and blaze are spreading...” (*ximoyollehuayan manian teoatl tlachinolli*). This could also be translated as “Rouse up your heart to where the battlefield spreads out.”²³ Such is the power of the diphrase in that it allows a double interpretation of the phrase in which it appears, either using the metaphorical meaning or the literal meaning of its parts.

The use of parallel or paired words and phrases is also an extremely common device in Nahuatl poetry. The use of these words and phrases allows the author to create an overwhelming sense of what is being described, by multiple metaphors and similes, in essence piled on top of one another. According to Garibay, at least three variants exist in Nahuatl poetry. Drawing upon existing theories of Hebrew poetics, Garibay focuses on the three most commonly identified types of parallelism.²⁴ The synonymous variant presents two parallel phrases or sentences, relying on synonyms. The antithetical variant has the second sentence or phrase in a diametrically opposite form. Lastly the synthetic allows for mere juxtaposition to create the allusion, or through the building up of an image through manifold images.²⁵

The *Psalmodia* has examples of all three types of parallelism. With regard to the synonymous variant, a small example can be found in the last psalm to the Apostles Peter and Paul. In this example the blood of the martyrs, specifically the blood of Peter and Paul is compared to the bright red feathers of two tropical birds, the roseate spoonbill and the red spoonbill:

<i>Inllazoezotzin,</i> <i>in quimonoquilique,</i> <i>in ipampa tlanettoquiliztli,</i> <i>ihquinma teuquechol,</i>	Their precious blood, which for the Faith in Rome they shed, Like the roseate spoonbill,
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²¹ *In atl, in tlachinolli or in teoatl, in tlachimolli.* Alonso de Molina, *Vocabulario*, f. 8v.

²² Leander, *In Xochitl, in cuicatl*, p. 73-76. Garibay, *Historia*, v. 1, p. 210-223.

²³ Bierhorst, *Cantares Mexicanos*, p. 142-43. Second translation by Schwaller.

²⁴ There is a large bibliography on the centrality of parallelism to Hebrew poetics. James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* and Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* both deal with the importance of parallelism.

²⁵ Garibay, *Historia*, v. 1, p. 65.

<i>niccuicailacatzoa cohuayotli</i>	I wrap it in the manner of song.
<i>in tecpan</i>	At the palace
<i>nicquixtiz an ya tonmochin.</i>	I already leave all of ours. ²⁸

The beauty of this selection is quite complex, and highly illustrative of Nahuatl poetics. Obviously the lines all begin with the same syllable *nic-*. This is the first-person subject marker and the third-person object marker. The exceptions are the first two phrases, which are also in the first person. The first phrase involves an intransitive verb (*hualla*, to come), which takes no object. The second, *noconcozcazoya*, involves the assimilation of vowels due to the placement of a directional modifier. In this instance the *nic* became *noc* because of the placement of the *on*. In Nahuatl the placement of *on* implies that the action of the verb occurs in a direction moving away from the speaker; or in this instance that it is highly elevated, as if it were moving beyond us. Simply all the phrases are cast in the first person, which is not all that remarkable. What is remarkable is that the poet has chosen to use a rather elegant construction in which not only is there the object marker, as required by Nahuatl grammar; but he has also inserted an adverbial into verb. Furthermore, the direct object in each instance refers to friendship, that does not explicitly appear until the sixth line. In the third line, there is the verb *nictzimitzcamana*. The *nic-* is the first-person subject marker and the third person object marker; *-tzimitzca-* is the word for a trogon, a type of tropical bird with brilliant lustrous plumage; *mana* is the verb stem which means to spread something out flat, and by extension a metaphorical meaning of making an offering, presumably by spreading it out in front of an altar or image. The word from trogon is used not as an object but as an adverbial describing how the object, in this case friendship found in the sixth line. In each of the following verbs, the poet has included the adverbial within the verb structure. This is an uncommon procedure and heightens the complexity of the discourse and elevates the overall tone. Thus these phrases which on the surface seem to be largely synonymously parallel, in terms of their deeper structure are significantly parallel in that that the verb of each phrase, and in Nahuatl a verb can contain all the elements of a sentence, follows the same rather arcane construction.

This use of synonyms to carry the poetic impact of the poem is also found in the Biblical antecedents upon which Sahagún also based his work. For example in *Genesis* 49:11 one finds:

²⁸ Brigitta Leander; *In xochitl in cuicatl*, p. 106-07. My deep thanks to Frances Karttunen for her assistance in the translation of this song.

He washes his clothes in wine,
his robes in the blood of the grape.

In the second half of the selection, the poet has chosen to use the metaphorical description of wine, “blood of the grape.”²⁹ Thus, Temilotzin in the *Romances* uses a long series of highly complex metaphors for the concept of preciousness, just as the Biblical poet has used a metaphor for wine.

The antithetical parallel is quite common among pre-conquest Nahuatl poetry because it juxtaposes two notions that can be considered antithetical in order to create a new reality. Within the *Psalmodia* it is a bit less common, although the internal structure of the psalms lends itself to the variant, since most lines are divided into two halves, which structurally can be either parallel, antithetical, or merely explanatory.³⁰ In the tenth psalm in celebration of Saint Dominic an example of antithetical parallelism appears. In describing the opening of the saint’s tomb after his death, the miraculous condition of his body caused this response: “The pleasant smell that issued from God’s beloved Saint Dominic’s body was not like earthly pleasant odors; it was heavenly.”³¹ Another example, from the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin, describes her role in preparing the way to heaven for the faithful: “I do not abandon you; I only go to prepare [a place] for you beloved priests.”³² In the original Nahuatl the parallelism is more striking since the same root verb is used in both clauses, *cahua*, here with its applicative / benefactive suffix: *cauilia*: *namechnotlalcauilia* and *namechnotlacauililitiuh*.

A simple example of the antithetical parallel in the pre-Columbian tradition comes from a poem written by Cacamatzin, one of the few poets known by name. This poem is part of the large collection of the *Romances de los señores de la Nueva España*.

Ac zan ninomati.
Mochi conitohua.
Am in anel in tlatohua tlalticpac.

Possibly, I just know myself.
Everyone goes about saying it.
But on earth no one speaks
truthfully.³³

²⁹ Example from Alter, *The Art*, p. 16. Selection from the *New Jerusalem Bible*.

³⁰ This corresponds closely to Hebrew poetics as described by Kugel, *The Idea*, p. 2-12.

³¹ *In auiaiazlitzli, in itech quizaia in inacaiotzi in Itlazo in Dios in sancto Domingo, amo iuhqui in tlalticpac auiaiazlitzli, ca illhuicacaiuitl.* Sahagún, *Psalmodia Christiana*, p. 228-229.

³² *Ano namechnotlalcauilia, ca zan namechnotlacauililitiuh, tlazoleupisque.* Sahagún, *Psalmodia Christiana*, p. 250-251.

³³ Brigitta Leander, *In xochitl in cuicatl*, p. 150-151. Translation by Schwaller.

The antithetic parallel of this fragment consists in the juxtaposition of the word for speaking or saying, *itohua*. In the middle phrase everyone is saying it, and in the last phrase the veracity of the statement is called into doubt. But the beauty of the poem is that even the truthfulness of the initial concept, "I only know myself", is called into question, especially since the poet introduces the phrase with two mildly contradictory words, *ac*, meaning possibly or simply implying doubt, and *zan*, meaning "just" and being a word that emphasizes the uniqueness of the statement.

Antithetical parallelism is found most commonly in the book of Proverbs. There the examples abound, in that one line introduces a concept, while the second frequently turns it on to its head while not necessarily in a contradictory manner but destined to illuminate the first statement. The combination of the two lines, then gives a moral or teaching, full of wit, that is characteristic of the book. For example, Proverbs 11:1, from the collection attributed to Solomon:

A false balance is abhorrent to Yahweh,
a just weight is pleasing to him.

In this case the two lines closely parallel each other. One describes the error filled path of deceit and trickery, the second the virtuous path of fairness and justice.³⁴

The synthetic variant of parallelism is much more difficult to document, since it involves a parallel statement that slightly modifies, expands, or changes the initial statement. On the other hand, much of Nahuatl poetic discourse involves the repetition with slight variation of a theme or image, and thus taken broadly, this variant could be considered the most common of all. Take for example this sentence from the fourth psalm for Saint Martin of Tours. According to the psalm by Sahagún, after St. Martin's popular acclamation as bishop, the local clergy deprecated him saying, "He is small. He is very poor. He is unworthy of being honored." While in English it looks like a synonymous parallelism, in the original Nahuatl it is synthetic: *Ca tepiton, ca cenca motolinia, camo mauiztililoni*.³⁵ Rather than being strictly parallel, each phrase is slightly different in its structure. It is not based on synonyms but rather the repetition of simple statements, varied each time. Perhaps a better translation, to demonstrate this effect, would be, "Indeed he is small. Indeed he goes about very much being

³⁴ Example from Alter, *The Art*, p. 168. Selection from the *New Jerusalem Bible*.

³⁵ Sahagún, *Psalmody Christiana*, p. 330-331.

poor. He indeed is not someone to be honored.”³⁶ In the Nahuatl, each phrase has different grammatical structure from the one before, although each is introduced by *ca* or its negative equivalent *camo*, each one builds on the central theme of the unsuitability of the saint. *Ca* is normally translated as “indeed.” Nevertheless, “indeed” in English probably carries more force than *ca* in Nahuatl where it can serve as a marker of the beginning of a phrase.

The first psalm to St. Sebastian exhibits a similar use of the synthetic parallelism. In describing the saint, Sahagún stated: “This saint was a very noted nobleman, an exalted nobleman, a highborn nobleman, and he was very good of heart.” Again in the Nahuatl the internal structure is more visible: *Inin sancto, cenca uei pilli, tecpilli, tlazopilli, auh cenca qualli in iollo*.³⁷ The Nahuatl word *pilli* means a noble person. Here Sebastian is thrice described as noble: “a great nobleman, a lordly nobleman, a beloved nobleman, very good of heart.”³⁸ In this manner, each description builds on the previous to create the overarching impression of high nobility, not just by birth, but to his “very good heart”, *cenca qualli in iollo*.

Examples of synthetic parallelism are not infrequent in the pre-conquest poetic tradition. A very beautiful example, not unlike those seen in the *Psalmodia*, comes from within a historical account of the city-state of Cuauhtitlan, located to the immediate northwest of modern-day Mexico City. In the history of the city a song from the cycle of myths surrounding the great culture hero-god Quetzalcoatl appears. The song was one taught to him by Ihuimecatl, a legendary magician:

<i>Quetzal nocalli</i>	My house is of quetzal feathers
<i>Zacuan nocallin</i>	My house is of yellow birds
<i>Tapach nocallin</i>	My house is of coral
<i>Nicyacahuaz.</i>	I must leave it. ³⁹

Again, while the English translation makes it appear to be strictly synonymously parallel, in Nahuatl the variations of the words and grammatical structure tend to make it synthetic. The images, almost intimate, of the house, create a sense of preciousness. The tag line of the stanza then breaks with this feeling and creates a tone of remorse.

³⁶ Translation by Schwaller.

³⁷ Sahagún, *Psalmodia Christiana*, p. 46-47.

³⁸ Translation by Schwaller.

³⁹ Brigitta Leander, *In xochitl in cuicatl*, 238-39. Translation by Schwaller.

In the following selection from a poem of war, the synthetic parallelism makes reference to the two orders of Nahuatl knights, the order of the jaguars (*ocelot*) and of the eagles:

<i>Cuauhtli oncan tlacati</i>	There the eagle becomes a man
<i>Ocelotl ya tlatoa ye oncan Mexico.</i>	There the ocelot already speaks in Mexico. ⁴⁰

As in so many other cases, the English translation sets up a much closer parallelism than in the original Nahuatl. The poetic device used here allows the animals that represent the two orders of knights to be personified. The implication is that the warriors take on the attributes of the patron animals, while the poem itself speaks to the animals taking on the attributes of men. The end result is a beautiful image of the Nahuatl warrior as identified through the patron animals.

Biblical scholars continue to debate the different types of parallelism used in the Psalms. One type frequently mentioned, but not included in Garibay's study of Nahuatl poetry, is the stair-like parallelism, whereby a theme is repeated, changing slightly each time to build a complex image. An example can be found in the first psalm for the feast of Saint James, the Apostle, each line begins with a command:

<i>Ma onquiza, ma oncaoani...</i>	Let the fame, ...be diffused, be remembered..
<i>Ma iximacho, ma mocaqui...</i>	Let the works, ...be known, be heard...
<i>Ma onmotta, ma teispán tlalilo...</i>	Let it be seen, let it be shown...
<i>Ma iecteneualo in itlazoEspada...</i>	Let his precious sword be praised... ⁴¹

Numerous other examples can be cited, but this one serves well, since in nearly every line it is actually a double exhortation, "Let it be known, be heard..." And each line is exactly parallel in construction with the others. Unfortunately it is very difficult to make the English translation manifest the same parallelism. A comparable example of stair-like parallelism will be considered later with examples of the use of the refrain.

The use of connector words to bind together different ideas or concepts is present in the *Psalmódia* as a standard feature of the language. The most common, and nearly ubiquitous, connector word was

⁴⁰ Brigitta Leander, *In xochitl in cuicatl*, p. 186-187. Translation by Schwaller.

⁴¹ Sahagún, *Psalmódia Christiana*, p. 200-201.

auh, which can mean “and” or “but”, depending on the context. Its central function in Nahuatl is to introduce a statement, and then subsequent related statements. Consequently its exact translation into English can vary depending on whether the succeeding statement agrees with or contradicts the initial statement. As a result, it is used with great frequency at the beginning of a metrical / poetic line in many series in the *Psalmodia*. One such series comes from the fifth psalm to Saint Mark, the Evangelist:

<i>Auh in iquac oquimonequilti totecuio Dios...</i>	And when God our Lord required...
<i>Auh ca intencopa oilpiloc...</i>	And at their word he was arrested...
<i>Auh in iquac teilpiloia oquicalaquique...</i>	And when they put him into prison
<i>Auh in imuztlaioc, iquechtle oquilpilique...</i>	And the next day they bound him...
<i>Auh in iehoanti tlautocanime...</i>	And the worshippers of idols... ⁴²

The Feast of St. Mary Magdalene provides another example of the use of connector words to link parallel descriptors. This example describes a series of events related to the life of the saint and her place in the communion of saints. What is interesting about this series is that each line begins with “When” (*In iquac*) and ends with the name of the saint:

When our Jesus Christ our Lord was risen, He first showed Himself to His beloved Saint Mary Magdalene.
 When Jesus Christ our Lord ascended into Heaven, it happened in the presence of His beloved Saint Mary Magdalene.
 When the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles, He descended also upon Saint Mary Magdalene.⁴³

In the *corpus* of pre-conquest poetry, there are many examples of the use of connector words in creating extended meanings. From the collection of the *Romances de los señores de la Nueva España* comes this example:

<i>In zan ticlazotzetzelohua in motechpa ye huitz in monecuiltonol ipalnemohua</i>	Only you lovingly shake it [make it rain] from you already comes our prosperity, he through whom all things live,
--	--

⁴² Sahagún, *Psalmodia Christiana*, p. 126-129.

⁴³ Sahagún, *Psalmodia Christiana*, p. 200-201.

in izquioxochitli cacahuaxochitli the popcorn flowers, the cacao flowers.
zan noconnelehuiya I only went along desiring it
zan ninentlamatia I only despaired of knowing where
to go.⁴⁴

The connector word *in* is extremely common in Nahuatl. On the one hand it can function like a definite article and can be translated as “the.” On the other hand, it can also be used to introduce dependent clauses. In some contexts, as the introductory particle to dependent clauses, it can be translated as “that.” But in most other environments it simply does not correspond to a word in English. Nevertheless, through its use as a clause initiator, it provides for a sense of continuity, linking the disparate parts of this poem to create the overall sense of the search for destiny. The last two lines are introduced by *zan*, which Dibble translates as “only.” This word too is frequently difficult to translate, since as a conjunction it creates the sense of uniqueness in the clause that follows it.⁴⁵ As a result, in English, the “only” would tend to define the action of the clause. A good alternative would be the word “just:” “I just went along desiring it.”

Refrains were common poetic devices in Nahuatl poetry in the pre-conquest tradition. Much of the poetry that has persisted to the present day from before the conquest came from a song tradition, in which one might expect refrains, which also assisted as memory devices for the singer. There is, however, a relative lack of refrains in the *Psalmodia*. The closest approximation can be found in the eighth psalm celebrating Saint Dominic. In this example the refrain serves to introduce each line of the psalm, rather than come at the end of each line or stanza. The refrain is “God’s beloved Saint Dominic, in all the time he lived on earth”, *Yn iehoatzi in illaço in Dios in sancto Domingo, in isquich cauill tlalticpac omonemiti*. Then each line has a separate conclusion: “changed the lives of many sinners”, or “stopped the mouths of many heretics and he taught them that they should accept the true Faith.”⁴⁶

In the pre-conquest tradition, there are numerous poems with refrains. The one which follows is one of the most haunting, the “Sad Song” attributed to Nezahualcoyotl. Nezahualcoyotl was perhaps the most famous, and perhaps most prolific, poet of the pre-conquest era,

⁴⁴ Brigitta Leander, *In xochitl in cuicatl*, p. 100-101. Translation by Schwaller.

⁴⁵ Karttunen and Lockhart consider that while *zan* and *ya* are certainly Nahuatl words, “parecen emplearse unas veces casi como los elementos intrusivos propiamente dichos, otras, más frecuentes, como ornamentos o elementos rítmicos en lugar de como palabras con significación semántica”, “La estructura...”, p. 26.

⁴⁶ Sahagún, *Psalmodia Christiana*, p. 226-227.

and king of the city state of Texcoco. His name means “Fasted Coyote” although popularly known as “Hungry Coyote.”

<i>Cuicalli quicaqui</i>	My heart hears a song,
<i>In noyol nichoca:</i>	I cry.
<i>Ye nicnotlamati</i>	Already I know myself.
<i>Tiya xochitica</i>	We go among flowers.
<i>Ticcautehuazque tlalticpac</i>	We will leave the earth here.
<i>ye nican</i>	
<i>Titotlanehuia</i>	We are loaned to one another.
<i>O tiyazque ichan.</i>	We go to His house.
<i>Ma nicnocozcati nepapan</i>	Let it be that I put on a
<i>xochitl</i>	necklace of varied flowers.
<i>Ma nomac on mani</i>	Let it be that it lies in my hands
<i>Ma nocpacxochihui.</i>	Let it be that garlands flower
	on me.
<i>Ticcautehuazque tlalticpac</i>	We will leave the earth here.
<i>ye nican</i>	
<i>Zan titotlanehuia</i>	We are loaned to one another.
<i>O tiyazque ichan.</i>	We go to His house. ⁴⁷

The refrain here, “We are loaned to one another. We go to His house,” is the theme of the poem, that earthly life is transitory and that we are not given to one another but only loaned to one another through friendship. The first three lines of the second stanza also demonstrate the use of the stair-like parallelism in that each sentence is a command beginning with the word *ma*. Taken as a whole they develop a picture of the poet in contact with the delicate and precious items of earthly existence.

Pre-conquest poetry, as noted, was an oral tradition. Most of the poems were set to music or had rhythm accompaniment. One of the features of the pre-conquest poems is the use of nonsense syllables and what seem to be either cries or shouts to accompany the songs or perhaps a type of rhythmic notation. Some of these nonsense syllables are like the “fa, la, la, la” in traditional English song. Nevertheless, this feature is entirely missing from the *Psalmodia*, possibly because Sahagún did not conceive of the songs being accompanied in the old

⁴⁷ Leander, *In xochitl in cuicall*, 138-139. Translation by Schwaller. This is in fact but a very small fragment of a much longer poem. Ángel María Garibay in his initial work with the *Romances* chose to divide up the long songs into smaller, more easily accessible, units.

manner, and possibly because he himself did not understand the notation system. Nearly every poem from the *Romances* collections includes these notations. Some times they are freestanding, sometimes literally imbedded in the line. Here is another verse from a long work attributed to Nezahualcoyotl:

Xochipeltatipan
*Toconya*icuilohua**
in mocuic in matlatol
nopiltzin oo
tiNezahualcoyotzin
 Ahuayya yahui yya yye
Ohuayya ya Ohuaya Ohuaya

On a mat of flowers
 There you paint it
 Your song, your speech
 My honored prince
 You Nezahualcoyotl

A icuiluh moyollo tlapapal xochitica
*Toconya*icuilohua**
in mocuic in mottlatol
nopiltzin oo
tiNezahualcoyotzin
Ahuayya yahui yya yye
Ohuayya ya Ohuaya Ohuaya

Your heart goes painting,
 it goes as multicolored flowers
 You go painting it
 Your song, your speech
 My honored prince
 You are Nezahualcoyotl⁴⁸

In this example the rhythmic words (marked in bold, italic, underline) both stand alone, as in the last two lines of the poem, but are also embedded into the words of the poem. In some instances they are simple intrusions, as in the second line when the *ya* is inserted in the middle of the verb. In other instances while being intrusive, they also change the word, based on the rules of Nahuatl phonetics. In the third line, the second word, “your speech”, would normally be *mottlatol*. Here an intrusive *a* has been inserted. Being a stronger vowel it replaces the “o” completely.⁴⁹

The last of the other common figures of pre-Columbian poetry to be considered was the use of metaphors of flowers, birds, and precious stones to indicate divinity and preciousness. While the total repertoire of these in the *Psalmody* is extensive, especially images of flowers. Generally it is on a par with the song cycles documented in the *Cantares* or the *Romances*. Some clear examples can be found in the use of flowers. The first selection is a part of the Psalms for the celebration of Easter:

⁴⁸ Garibay, *Poesía Náhuatl*, v. 1, p. 49.

⁴⁹ On the other hand, it could simply be a transcription error in which an “o” was mistaken for an “a.” For as fuller discussion of the non-lexical rhythmic material inserted in traditional Nahuatl poetry see Karttunen and Lockhart, “La estructura...”, p. 22-29.

In teiuitica in tijollosuchitl, in ticalosuchitl, in telosuchitl, in titlapaltecomasuchitl, in tipiltzi sancta Iglesia, in ticiuatl xipapaqui, ximotlamachti Divinely you talauma, popcorn flower, magnolia, red solandra flower, you daughter of the holy Church, you woman: be happy, be joyous.

In teiuitica tisuchitototl, in telotototl, in ticensontlatole, in tiuitziltzi, in ie amuchinti in amipilhoa in dios, in amangeloti xioalmouicaca, xiciaalotimaniqui in toteuitoal You divine orioles, you grosbeaks, you mockingbirds, you hummingbirds, all you sons of God, you angels; come, circle around the courtyard of our church.⁵⁰

This compares rather closely to songs from the Pre-Columbian tradition. By way of direct comparison, the following is a stanza from a song performed before the great prince Nezahualcoyotl of Texcoco:

Ma xicyahuelintzotzona moxochihuehueuh ticuicanitl ma izquixochitli man cacahuaxochitli ma ma onmoyahua ontzetzelihui ye nica huehuetitlano man [sic.] tahujiacani Beat your flower drum beautifully, singer. Let there be popcorn flowers, cacao flowers. Let them scatter, let them sprinkle down beside the drummer. Let us have joy.

ya çan ca xiuhquechool tzimitzcan tlahquechol oncan oncuican tlatohuaya y xochitl ai paqui There! The turquoise swan, the trogon, the roseate swan is singing, warbling, happy with these flowers.⁵¹

The repertoire of flower images in the *Psalmodia* is significant, not unlike the pre-Columbian song cycles. Images of birds and feathers are less common in the *Psalmodia* than in the pre-Columbian repertoire. Taken as a whole, the use of these images and metaphors clearly would have struck a chord in the listeners to Sahagún's psalms, making them recall the older poetic tradition.

Within the *Psalmodia*, Sahagún's purpose is clear: he wished to use traditional song forms with a heavily revised and Christianized vocabulary, and thereby modify them to further the work of evangelization. He chose to accomplish this through a hybrid poetic form. He called the works psalms, but on the surface the works he composed seem to have more in common with traditional Nahua song than with the Biblical tradition. Nevertheless, in the use of parallelism Sahagún clearly

⁵⁰ Sahagún, *Psalmodia Christiana*, p. 112-113.

⁵¹ John Bierhorst, *Cantares Mexicanos*, p. 190-191. Translation is by Bierhorst.

drew upon some Biblical examples. One scholar has posited that the title *Psalmodia* was chosen to gain publication for a project which if it had carried another title might be rejected.⁵² This confusion is clearly seen in the letters that introduce the original work. One of the consultants who read the work prior to its receiving permission to be published, refers to it as a "*psalmodia de cantares*", a psalmody of songs. Sahagún, himself, as noted earlier, refers to them as *cantares*, or songs. It is quite possible, then, that Sahagún might not have received permission to publish a simple collection of songs in Nahuatl, but when characterized as psalms, they took on a legitimacy otherwise lacked.

Song and dance were important features of pre-conquest religious expression. By ignoring or suppressing these forms of expression, the early missionaries could well have hindered the ultimate acceptance of Christianity. Sahagún recognized the incomplete nature of the conversion up until his time. He also understood, better than most, the more intricate nature of Nahua beliefs. Moreover, he enjoyed a fluency in their language. As a result he was able to combine pre-conquest poetic forms with Christian didactic works to create a hybrid, the *Psalmodia*, that would bridge the cultural gap between the Europeans and the Nahua.

Sahagún sought to approach the conversion of the Nahua from what scholars today might characterize as cross cultural perspective. While he recognized the utility of works such as catechisms and confessional guides, he sought to achieve a deeper and more lasting change among the natives by adapting their traditions to Christianity. He inserted Christian doctrine and beliefs into traditional art forms, such as song, in order to more completely convert the native to Christianity. In the *Psalmodia* one can see the vestiges of the pre-Columbian verse forms upon which the new Christian songs were built. Yet one can also appreciate the Christian models upon which Sahagún also drew in creating his work.

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⁵² Louise Burkhart, "Sahagún's *Psalmodia*...", p. 105.

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