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April 19, 1997

Vision of the Vanquished Texts: The Editorial Project of  
El reverso de la Conquista

Since the beginning of his career in the 1950s, Miguel León-Portilla has been one of the most significant and influential scholars in the development of studies of the indigenous texts and cultures of Latin America. In the preface to Broken Spears, Jorge Klor de Alva summarizes the importance of his work in the following manner: "No researcher, by far, has contributed more to the scholarly foundation and popular dissemination of knowledge about the ancient colonial Nahuas than has León-Portilla" (19).<sup>1</sup> Although the Nahuatl texts and cultures have been the primary focus of León-Portilla's work, Klor de Alva's comment could easily be applied to his studies on other pre-Columbian communities.<sup>2</sup> Along with projects that are not textually based, León-Portilla has produced extensive publications in which he identifies and analyzes the indigenous texts produced by these communities.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, León-Portilla's contributions cannot be understood solely in terms of the distribution and analytical discussion of ancient codices. In many of his publications, he

also argues for a particular and necessary function of these texts in a contemporary context. In other words, not only does he make the indigenous texts more accessible, but he also advocates for a specific interpretation of the value of these texts. In this way, he extends the parameters of his project to include a particular framing of the texts he disseminates.

In El reverso de la Conquista: relaciones aztecas, mayas e incas, León-Portilla includes selections from the texts produced by each of these groups that specifically deal with the Conquest. He also includes prefatory remarks in which he establishes the potential interpretations of these texts and their respective value. A close examination of these projects, reveals however, that they are fundamentally contradictory and mutually irreconcilable. In El reverso de la Conquista, León-Portilla argues that the value of the indigenous texts resides both in their ability to communicate the historical experience of the Conquest as recorded by the pre-Columbian chroniclers and in their capacity to illuminate the legacy of the conquest for present-day Latin American identity. The particular editorial strategies and tools León-Portilla utilizes to transmit each of these functions ultimately lead to irreconcilable differences between the readings they imply.

According to León-Portilla, the texts included in El reverso communicate the identity and experience of those that lived through the Conquest. As Klor de Alva states, León-Portilla

consistently asserts that the texts he compiles "are an adequate and faithful record of the...beliefs they purport to record" (22). Therefore, the codices serve as both historical and cultural record: they document both the events that transpired and the impact of these events on the communities within which they occurred. In the specific case of the documents that deal with the Conquest, the texts reveal how the indigenous sense of self and the various cosmogonies were severely altered by this event. Not only does the Conquest directly produce the defeat of the indigenous empires, but it constitutes the experience through which the indigenous peoples come to conceive of themselves as the vanquished, according to León-Portilla.<sup>4</sup> This approach to the indigenous texts highlights their role as a primary source of information. León-Portilla proposes that the compilation of such documents from the principal pre-Columbian communities constitutes a unique resource for its readers. Through the presentation of the materials included in El reverso, readers can appreciate the impact the Conquest had on the three major pre-Columbian empires.

[E]l público en general y aun algunos estudiosos menos versados en el legado documental indígena, tendrán interés por conocer, así reunidos, varios de los textos en los que quedó refelejado para siempre el concepto y la experiencia trágica de la Conquista, vivida y contemplada por los indios. (7)

Hence, a reader that does not already possess the capacity to access and interpret these texts can become familiar with them and appreciate what they communicate about the experience of the indigenous subjects at the time of their conquest.

In the presentation of the indigenous texts in El reverso, León-Portilla employs specific editorial strategies that are meant to facilitate this access and appreciation of the texts. A predominant and explicit strategic decision is the selection and compilation of the texts that best relate the particular indigenous experience of the Conquest.<sup>5</sup> The included texts focus on the altered sense of self and of the world produced by the experience. This strategic selection is attested to in the introduction to the book and in those written for the individual sections dealing with each of the three pre-Columbian groups. In these separate introductions, León-Portilla provides background information as well as explanations and glosses of the texts that follow, often including quotations from them. In this discussion, he provides an analysis in which he identifies the concept of the Conquest reflected in the selected indigenous texts.

Along with the capacity to relate the indigenous experience of the Conquest, León-Portilla proposes on the other hand that these works also narrate the primary psychological drama through which Latin American identity was initially formed. Because the impact of the Conquest on the indigenous communities is reflected

in the contemporary Latin American self, an examination of the initial formation of this identity can prove valuable to contemporary subjects historically formed by this experience. Therefore, as León-Portilla expressly states, the texts provide the opportunity to confront and comprehend the indigenous view of this foundational drama which, in turn, can foster a cathartic and therapeutic experience for the contemporary reader:

nuestro propósito...es ahondar en el conocimiento de uno de los momentos clave para la comprensión del mundo hispanoamericano que habrá de nacer como consecuencia del encuentro de indígenas y españoles. Porque si es cierto que en muchos de nuestros pueblos el trauma de la Conquista ha dejado honda huella, es también verdad que el estudio consciente de ese hecho imposible de suprimir será labor de catársis y enraizamiento del propio ser.

(8)

Hence, the value of the texts resides not solely in what they communicate about the past but in how they address the legacy of that past as it relates to a contemporary subjectivity. The texts have the potential to foster the healing of a self that was fractured by the Conquest. In this way, contemporary Latin American readers can develop a better sense of themselves by confronting the trauma of the Conquest and dealing with its impact.

As was the case with the argument for the historical value of the texts, León-Portilla implements certain editorial strategies that both establish and reinforce the psychological value of the works he presents. In the construction of El reverso, he invokes a model derived from psychoanalytic treatment: he suggests that the implied reader suffers from a damaged psyche that may be treated through the exploration of traumatic memories. This underlying structure is reflected in the titles León-Portilla gives to his work and its individual sections. By entitling the book "El reverso de la Conquista", the author suggests that the indigenous accounts included will complete a previously fragmented entity. Since "reverso" is a term used in conjunction with "anverso" to refer to the opposing faces of a two-sided object such as a medallion or a page, these accounts constitute the "back" of an object whose "front" already exists, thereby forming a complete and integral whole. Furthermore, the separate accounts of the Conquest are referred to as "memoria azteca, maya and quechua" respectively. By identifying these accounts as memories, León-Portilla emphasizes their role in post-Conquest subjectivity: their significance lies here in their subsequent impact rather than in what they reveal about the Conquest as it was experienced at the time it occurred.

In addition to these structural elements, the characterization of the indigenous texts offered in the

introductory sections further emphasizes this psychological function. León-Portilla repeatedly insists that these texts present the Conquest as a traumatic event: "[L]a experiencia de la Conquista significó algo más que una tragedia, quedó clavada en el alma y su recuerdo pasó a ser un trauma" (22). León-Portilla argues that it is precisely because the Conquest constitutes a trauma that the conscious study of the event may lead to a catharsis and a rooting of the self. (8)

The implementation of the psychoanalytic model and the traumatic discharge that according to León-Portilla can be achieved through the examination of these texts implies, of course, a reader conceived as patient. León-Portilla establishes the similar psychological experience of the Conquest among the three empires examined in his work, thereby extending the applicability of the trauma he identifies beyond the specific regions occupied by each group. Therefore, the therapeutic potential of the texts is not limited to the descendants of Aztecs, Mayas or Incas but includes those connected to any of the Latin American identities forged by the encounter between indigenous communities and Spaniards. This is reflected in León-Portilla's use of the first person plural--language such as "nuestros pueblos", "nuestra fisonomía cultural"--in his discussion of a traumatized subjectivity. The readership implied by this second function of the texts is one for which the legacy

of indigenous subjectivity is historically, if not ethnically, relevant.

I would argue that in the end, the two projects advanced by León-Portilla prove incompatible. Each approach to the texts assumes a different implied reader: an outsider interested in having access to the indigenous vision of the Conquest, and a Latin American reader psychologically impacted by the Conquest. Not only do the implied readers prove distinct, but specific editorial components necessary to advance either interpretative project ultimately interfere with one another. The prefatory explanations of the indigenous texts that underscore their historical value become problematic when the texts are presented in terms of their stated psychological usefulness. If these texts are viewed as historical record, then they contain information that can be discussed a priori and the purpose of the reading is to gather this information and comprehend it. When viewed as material for a recovery from trauma, it is the reading process itself and the experience it produces that constitute what matters. Within the therapeutic model, the cure is achieved through the interaction between the reader and the indigenous text. Therefore, the relevant content of the texts cannot be explained a priori, since the cathartic experience relies on a process of self-discovery that cannot be prescribed or predetermined. Therefore, the concept of the Conquest offered in the first project detailed by León-Portilla potentially threatens



the cathartic discovery of self necessary to the realization of the second psychoanalytically inspired interpretation of their presumed value.

This conflict between distinct readings that León-Portilla ascribes to the texts can also be seen in his use of the category of trauma in that the characterization of the Conquest as a trauma that has been recorded in these texts supports the psychological project but dislodges the historical one. As Cathy Caruth explains in her work, a traumatic event, by definition, constitutes something that cannot be experienced at the time it occurs. In a case of trauma, "the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (4). This definition of trauma and its consequent implications de-authorize the capacity of the texts to communicate directly the experience of the Conquest, for if indeed the Conquest constituted a traumatic event, it could not have been fully experienced at the time. Therefore, the texts can transmit the existence of a disturbance in subjectivity but cannot speak of it directly in the manner in which León-Portilla also suggests they do.

I do not mean to suggest that these difficulties destroy the importance of the texts themselves. I merely wish to underscore that the interpretation of the value of these works is necessarily bound to the overarching critical discourse in which they are inserted. The circumstances of contemporary colonial

studies often necessitate the reconstitution of indigenous texts within a framework that lies outside the original production and publication of these texts. The difficulties engendered by the framework implemented in El reverso demonstrate the need to interrogate rigorously whichever interpretative scheme is chosen to address these works, so that this reconstitution does not undermine the recuperative project it purports to advance.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Broken Spears is the English translation of León-Portilla's text, Visión de los vencidos.

<sup>2</sup> Klor de Alva's preface specifically focuses on the relationship between León-Portilla's work and Nahua Studies. However, at no point does he suggest that León-Portilla's contributions are limited to this area.

<sup>3</sup> Although most of his curriculum is comprised of publications and teaching that deal with indigenous texts, León-Portilla is also responsible for the realization of workshops that foster a greater connection between contemporary and ancient indigenous literary production.

Regarding León-Portilla's more traditional textual research, it should be noted that this work was inspired by the scholarship of León-Portilla's mentor, Angel María Garibay Kintana, with whom León-Portilla collaborated extensively before producing his own studies.

<sup>4</sup> This thesis was first developed by León-Portilla in his earlier work, Visión de los vencidos. In El reverso he makes specific reference to this thesis, restating it and extending its scope to include the Peruvian context. (See El reverso, 7)

<sup>5</sup> At no point does he suggest that the indigenous materials compiled in this work comprise a complete collection of those available on the subject. In fact, in the introduction to the individual Aztec, Maya and Quechua sections of the book, he

offers an annotated overview of the existing codices--many of which are not represented by the selected texts that follow. Therefore, the strategy of selectivity does not point to a covert suppression of alternative sources but rather an overt desire to highlight particular components of the Conquest experience.

## Works Cited

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