OTHER BOOKS BY TZVETAN TODOROV

Translated by Richard Howard
The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre
The Poetics of Prose
An Introduction to Poetics

Translated by Catherine Porter:
Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language (with Oswald Ducrot)
Symbolism and Interpretation
Theories of the Symbol

TZVETAN TODOROV

THE CONQUEST OF AMERICA
THE QUESTION OF THE OTHER

Translated from the French by Richard Howard

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The Reasons for the Victory

The encounter between Old World and New made possible by Columbus’s discovery is of a very special type: war, or rather, in the term of the period, conquest. A mystery concerning the very outcome of the combat still hovers over the conquest: why this lightninglike victory, when the inhabitants of America are so superior in number to their adversaries and fighting on their own territory as well? To confine ourselves to the conquest of Mexico—the most spectacular, since the Mexican civilization is the most brilliant of the pre-Columbian world—how are we to account for the fact that Cortés, leading a few hundred men, managed to seize the kingdom of Montezuma, who commanded several hundred thousand? I shall try to find an answer in the abundant literature to which this phase of the conquest gave rise at the time: Cortés’s own reports; the Spanish chronicles, the most remarkable of which is that of Bernal Díaz del Castillo; lastly, the native accounts, transcribed by the Spanish missionaries or written by the Mexicans themselves.

Apropos of the use of this literature, one preliminary question arises which did not have to be considered in the case of Columbus. The latter’s writings may have contained technically speaking, false statements; this in no way diminished their value, for I could interrogate them chiefly as actions, not as descriptions. Here my subject is no longer the experience of one man (who has written) but an event in itself nonverbal, the conquest of Mexico; the documents analyzed are no longer of concern solely (or chiefly) as actions, but as sources of information about a reality of which they do not constitute a part. The
case of the texts expressing the Indians' point of view is especially problematic: as it happens, given the absence of native writings, they are all subsequent to the conquest and therefore influenced by the conquerors; I shall return to this point in the final chapter of this book. In a general way, I have an excuse and a justification to formulate here. The excuse: if we abjure this source of information, we cannot replace it by any other. Our only recourse is not to read these texts as transparent statements, but to try at the same time to take into account the action and circumstances of their appearance. As for the justification, it can be expressed in the language of the classical rhetorician: the questions raised here refer less to a knowledge of the truth than to a knowledge of verisimilitude. That is, an event may not have occurred, despite the allegations of one of the chroniclers. But the fact that the latter could have stated such an event, that he could have counted on its acceptance by the contemporary public, is at least as revealing as the simple occurrence of an event which proceeds, after all, from chance. In a way, the reception of the statements is more revealing for the history of ideologies than their production; and when an author is mistaken, or lying, his text is no less significant than when he is speaking the truth; the important thing is that the text be receivable by contemporary readers, or that it has been regarded as such by its producer. From this point of view, the notion of "false" is irrelevant here.

The chief stages of the conquest of Mexico are well known. Cortés's expedition, in 1519, is the third to land on the Mexican coasts; it consists of several hundred men. Cortés is sent by the governor of Cuba; but after the ships leave, this governor changes his mind and attempts to recall Cortés. The latter disembarks in Vera Cruz and declares himself to be under the direct authority of the king of Spain. Having learned of the existence of the Aztec empire, he begins a slow progress toward the interior, attempting to win over to his cause, either by promises or by warfare, the populations whose lands he passes through. The most difficult battle is waged against the Tlaxcaltecs, who will nevertheless become, subsequently, his best allies. Cortés finally reaches Mexico City, where he iscordially received; shortly thereafter, he decides to take the Aztec sovereign prisoner and succeeds in doing so. He then learns of the arrival on the coast of a new Spanish expedition, sent against him by the Cuban governor; the newcomers outnumber his own forces. Cortés sets out with some of these to meet this army, the rest remaining in Mexico to guard Montezuma, under the command of Pedro de Alvarado. Cortés wins the battle against his compatriots, imprisons their leader Panfilo de Narvaez, and convinces the rest to accept his command. But he then learns that during his absence things have gone badly in Mexico City: Alvarado has massed a group of Mexicans in the course of a religious festival, and warfare has broken out. Cortés returns to the capital and joins his troops in their besieged fortress, at this point Montezuma dies. The Aztec attacks are so insistent that Cortés decides to leave the city by night, his departure is discovered, and in the ensuing battle more than half his army is annihilated: this is the Noche Triste. Cortés withdraws to Tlaxcala, reorganizes his forces, and returns to besiege the capital; he cuts off all means of access and orders the construction of swift brigantines (at the time, the city was surrounded by lakes). After several months' siege, Mexico falls; the conquest has lasted about two years. Let us first review the explanations commonly proposed for Cortés's victory. A first reason is the ambiguous, hesitant behavior of Montezuma himself; he offers Cortés virtually no resistance (this will therefore concern the first phase of the conquest, until Montezuma's death); such behavior may have, beyond certain cultural motivations to which I shall return, more personal reasons: in many respects, it differs from that of the other Aztec leaders. Bernal Díaz, reporting the remarks of the Cholula dignitaries, describes it thus: "They said that their lord Montezuma had known we were coming to Cholula, and that every day he was of many minds, unable to decide what to do about it. Sometimes he sent them instructions that if we arrived they were to pay us great honor and guide us on to Mexico, and at other times he said that he did not want us to come to his city and now recently the gods Tescatiltepo and Huírtulcochti, for whom they had great devotion, had proposed to him that we should be killed at Cholula or brought bound to Mexico" (83). One has the impression that there is a genuine ambiguity involved here, and not mere clumsiness, when Montezuma's messengers inform the Spaniards both that the Aztec kingdom is to be given to them as a present and that they are not to enter Mexico but to return whence they had come, but we shall see that Cortés deliberately sustains this equivocation. In certain chronicles, Montezuma is depicted as a melancholy and
resigned man; it is asserted that he is a priest to his bad conscience, expiating in person an inglorious episode of earlier Aztec history: the Aztecs like to represent themselves as the legitimate successors of the Toltecs, the previous dynasty, whereas they are in reality usurpers, newcomers. Has this national guilt complex caused Montezuma to imagine that the Spaniards are direct descendents of the ancient Toltecs, come to reclaim what is rightfully theirs? We shall see that here, too, the idea is in part suggested by the Spaniards; it is impossible to declare with any certainty that Montezuma himself believed it.

Once the Spaniards have arrived in his capital, Montezuma's behavior is even more singular. Not only does he let himself be taken captive by Cortés and his men (this captivity is Cortés's most startling decision, along with that of "burning"—in reality, scuttling—his own ships with the handful of men under his command, he arrests the emperor, whereas he himself is surrounded by the all-powerful Aztec army), but also, once a prisoner, Montezuma's sole concern is to avoid all bloodshed. Contrary, for example, to what the final Aztec emperor, Cuauhtémoc, will do, Montezuma tries by every means in his power to keep war from breaking out in his city: he prefers to abandon his leadership, his privileges, and his wealth. Even during Cortés's brief absence, when the Spaniard has gone to face the punitive expedition sent against him, Montezuma will not attempt to take advantage of the situation in order to get rid of the invaders. "Many of those who had been with Pedro de Alvarado through the critical time said that if the uprising had been desired by Montezuma or started on his advice, or if Montezuma had had any hand in it, they would all have been killed. Montezuma had pacified his people and made them give up the attack" (Bernal Díaz, 125). History or legend (though it matters little which), in this case transcribed by the Jesuit Tovar, goes so far as to describe Montezuma, on the eve of his death, as ready to convert to Christianity, but as a final mockery, the Spanish priest, busy amassing gold, does not find the time. "It is said that he asked for baptism and converted to the truth of the Holy Gospel, and although there was a priest at hand, it is presumed that the latter was much more concerned to collect wealth than to catechize the poor king" (Tovar, p. 83).

Unfortunately we lack the documents that might have permitted us to penetrate the mortal world of this strange emperor: in the presence of his enemies he is reluctant to make use of his enormous power, as if he were not convinced he wished to conquer; as Comora, Cortés's chaplain and biographer, says: "Our Spaniards were never able to learn the truth, because at the time they did not understand the language, and afterward no one was found alive with whom Montezuma had shared the secret" (107). The Spanish historians of the period vainly sought the answer to these questions, seeing Montezuma sometimes as a madman, sometimes as a philosopher. Peter Martyr, a chronicler who remained in Spain, tends toward this latter solution: "He seemed to obey injunctions much harsher than the rules of grammar imposed upon little children, and with great patience endured everything in order to prevent an uprising of his subjects and his nobles. Any yoke seemed to him lighter than a revolt of his people. It was as if he sought to imitate Diocletian, who preferred to take poison than once more assume the reins of the empire he had abdicated" (V, 3). Comora sometimes shows contempt for him: "Montezuma must have been a weak man of little courage, to let himself be seized and then, while a prisoner, never to attempt flight, even when Cortés offered him his freedom, and his own men begged him to take it" (99). But on other occasions he admits his perplexity, and the impossibility of settling the question: "the cowardice of Montezuma, or the love he bore Cortés and the Spaniards..." (91), or again: "in my opinion he was either very wise in disregarding the things he had to put up with, or very foolish, in not resisting them" (107). We are still subject to the same uncertainties.

The figure of Montezuma certainly counts for something in this nonsensical to evil. Yet such an explanation is valid only for the first part of Cortés's campaign, for Montezuma dies in the middle of events, as mysteriously as he had lived (probably stabbed by his Spanish valets), and his successors at the head of the Aztec state immediately declare a fierce and pitless war on the Spaniards. However, during the war's second phase, another factor begins to play a decisive role: this is Cortés's exploitation of the internal divisions among the various populations occupying Mexican territory. He succeeds very well in this endeavor: throughout the campaign, he manages to take advantage of the struggles between rival factions, and during the final phase he commands an army of Tlaxcalans and other Indian allies numerically comparable to that of the Aztecs, an army of which the Spaniards are now merely, in a sense, the logistical support or command force: their units often seem to be composed of ten Spanish horse and ten thousand Indian foot soldiers. This is already the perception of contemporaries:
according to Motolinia, a Franciscan historian of "New Spain," the conquistadors say that the Tlacuiltecas deserve that His Majesty grant them much favor, and that if it had not been for them, they would all have been dead, when the Aztecs repulsed the Christians from Mexico, and that the Tlacuiltecas offered them a haven" (III, 16). And indeed, for many years the Tlacuiltecas enjoy numerous privileges granted them by the Spanish crown: exempted from taxes, they very often become administrators of the newly conquered lands.

We cannot avoid wondering, when we read the history of Mexico: why did the Indians not offer more resistance? Didn't they realize Cortés's colonizing ambitions? The answer displaces the question: the Indians in the regions Cortés first cleared through are not more impressed by his imperialist intentions because they have already been conquered and colonized-by the Aztecs. Mexico at the time is not a homogeneous state, but a conglomerate of populations, defeated by the Aztecs who occupy the top of the pyramid. So that far from incarnating an absolute evil, Cortés often appears to them as a lesser evil, as a liberator, so to speak, who permits them to throw off the yoke of a tyranny especially detestable because so close at hand.

Sensitized as we are to the misdeeds of European colonialism, it is difficult for us to understand why the Indians do not immediately rebel, when there is still time, against the Spaniards. But the conquistadors merely fall into step with the Aztecs. We may be scandalized to learn that the Spaniards seized only gold, slaves, and women. "They were in fact concerned only to furnish themselves with some fine Indian women and to take a certain amount of booty," writes Bernal Diaz (142), and he tells the following anecdote: after the fall of Mexico, "Guashtemo and all his captains complained to Cortés that some of our leaders who happened to be in the brigantines, as well as several who had fought in the highways, had carried off the wives and daughters of a great number of chieftains. They asked him to show mercy and to order that these women be returned. Cortés replied that he would have great difficulty taking them away from his comrades who already set great store by them, that he had sent for them, furthermore and had them brought before him, that he would see if they had become Christians, declaring further that if they wished to return to their fathers and their husbands, he would make every effort to see that they did so." The result of the investigation is not surprising: "Most of the women chose to follow neither father, nor mother, nor husband, but indeed to remain with the soldiers of which they had become the companions. Others hid themselves; some, moreover, declared that they no longer wished to be idolators. Indeed there were some who were already pregnant, so that only three returned to their people, Cortés having given specific orders to let them go" (157).

But it is precisely the same thing that the Indians complained of in the other parts of Mexico when they related the Aztecs' misdeeds: "The inhabitants of these villages... offered vigorous protests against Montezuma and especially against his tax collectors, saying that he stole everything they possessed from them and that, if their wives and their daughters appeared to them worthy of attention, they violated them in the presence of the husbands and the fathers, and sometimes carried them off for good; that by their orders they were forced to work as if they were slaves, and to transport in canoes, or even overhead, timber, stones, corn, without on the other hand leaving off the labor of their arms for sowing maize and other services of great number" (Bernal Diaz, 56).

The gold and precious stones that the Spaniards were already taking as taxes by Montezuma's functionaries, it does not seem that we can reject this allegation as a pure invention of the Spaniards seeking to legitimize their conquest, even if this is also a contributing factor: too many testimonies agree in this direction. The Florentine Codex reports the chiefs of the neighboring tribes coming to protest to Cortés the oppression imposed by the Aztecs: "For Montezuma and the Mexicans have caused us great grief and the Mexicans have brought us evil. They have brought poverty under our very noses, for they have imposed upon us all kinds of taxes" (XII, 26). And Diego Durán, a Dominican sympathizer and a cultural half-caste, one might say, discovers the resemblance precisely at the moment he reproaches the Aztecs: "If their hosts were inattentive or indifferent, the Aztecs piled and sacked the villages, depopulated the people of their clothes, beat them, stripped them of all their possessions and dishonored them; they destroyed the harvests and inflicted a thousand injuries and damages upon them. The whole country trembled before them. Wherever they came, they were given all they needed; but even when they were treated well, they behaved in this same fashion. This was the cruellest and most devilish people that can be conceived, on account of the way in which they treated their vassals, which was much worse than the way in which the Spaniards treated them... and treat them still" (III, 19).
"They did all the harm they could, as our Spaniards do today if they are not restrained from doing so" (III, 21).

There are many resemblances between old conquerors and new, as the latter themselves felt, since they described the Aztecs as recent invaders, conquistadors comparable to themselves. More precisely, and in this too the resemblance persists, the relation to the predecessor is that of an implicit and sometimes unconscious continuity, accompanied by a denial concerning this very relation. The Spaniards burn the Mexicans' books in order to wipe out their religion; they destroy their monuments in order to abolish any memory of a former greatness. But a hundred years earlier, during the reign of Itzcoatl, the Aztecs themselves had destroyed all the old books in order to rewrite history in their own fashion. At the same time the Aztecs, as we have seen, like to depict themselves as heirs of the Toltecs; and the Spaniards often choose a certain fidelity to the past, in religion or in politics, they are assimilated at the same time that they assimilate. One symbolic fact among others: the capital of the new state will be the same as that of the conquered Mexico. "Considering that Tenochtitlan had been so great and so famous, we decided to settle in it... If in the past it was the capital and the queen of all these provinces, it will be so, the same, henceforward" (Cortés, 3). Cortés sees, in a sense, to constitute his legitimacy, no longer in the eyes of the king of Spain though this had been one of his great concerns during the campaign but in the eyes of the local population, by assuming a continuity with the kingdom of Montezuma. The viceroy Mendoza will resort to the fiscal records of the Aztec empire.

The same holds true in the realm of faith. Religious conquest often consists in removing from a holy place certain images and establishing others there instead, preserving—and this is essential—the cult sites in which the same aromatic herbs are burned. Cortés tells the story: "the most important of these idols and the ones in which they have most faith I had taken from their places and thrown down the steps; and I ordered those chapels where they had been to be cleaned, for they were full of the blood of sacrifices; and I had images of Our Lady and of other saints put there" (2). And Bernal Díaz bears witness: "an order was given that the incense of their country should be burned before the holy image and the Blessed Cross" (52). "It is only just that what has served the worship of the demons should be transformed into a temple for the service of God," writes Fray Lorenzo de Biénvenida. The Christian priests and friars will occupy exactly the places left empty after the repression of those professing the native religious worship whom the Spaniards, moreover, called by that overdetermined name papas (contamination of the Indian term designating them and the word "pope"); Cortés made the continuity quite explicit: "The respect and welcome that they give to the friars is the result of the commands of the Marqués del Valle, Don Hernando Cortés, for from the beginning he ordered them to be very reverent and respectful to the priests, just as they used to be to the the ministers of their idols" (Motolinia, III, 3).

To Montezuma's hesitations during the first phase of the conquest and the internal divisions among the Mexicans during the second, a third factor is frequently added: the Spanish superiority with regard to weapons. The Aztecs do not know how to work metal, and their swords, like their armor, are less effective; arrows (nonpoisoned arrows) are not as powerful as harquebuses and cannon; in their movements the Spaniards are much swifter: for land operations they have horses, whereas the Aztecs are always on foot, and on water they know how to build belligerent whose superiority over the Indian canoes plays a decisive role in the final phase of the siege of Mexico. Finally, the Spaniards also—unwittingly—inaugurate bacteriological warfare, since they bring smallpox, which ravages the opposing army. Yet these superiorities, in themselves incontrovertible, do not suffice to explain everything, if we take into account, at the same time, the numerical relation between the two camps. And there are in fact very few harquebuses, and even fewer cannon, whose power is not that of a modern bomb; further, the gunpowder is often wet. The effect of firearms and horses cannot be measured directly by the number of victims.

I shall not attempt to deny the importance of these factors, but rather to find a common basis for them which permits us to articulate and understand them, and at the same time to add many others, of which less account appears to have been taken. In doing so, I tend to take literally one reason for the conquest/defeat that we find in the native chronicles and which has hitherto been neglected in the West, doubtless being regarded as a purely poetic formula. The testimony of the Indian accounts, which is a description rather than an explanation, asserts that everything happened because the Mayas and the Aztecs lost control of communication. The language of the gods has become unintelligible, or else these gods fell silent. "Understanding is lost..."
wisdom is lost” (Chilam Balam, 22). “There was no longer any great
teacher, any great orator, any supreme priest, when the change of rulers
occurred upon their arrival” (ibid., 5). The Maya book Chilam Balam
reiterates this piercing question, which can no longer receive an answer.
“Where is the prophet, where is the priest who will give the true
meaning of the language of this book?” (24). As for the Aztecs, they
describe the beginning of their own end as a silence that falls: the gods
no longer speak to them. “They asked the gods to grant them their
favors and the victory against the Spaniards and their other enemies.
But it must have been too late, for they had no further answer from
their oracles; then they regarded the gods as mute or as dead” (Durin,
III, 77).

Did the Spaniards defeat the Indians by means of signs?

Montezuma and Signs

The Indians and Spaniards practice communication differently. But
the discourse of difference is a difficult one. As we have already seen
with Columbus, the postulate of difference readily involves the feeling
of superiority, the postulate of equality that is of indifference, and it is
always hard to resist this double movement, especially since the final
result of this encounter seems to indicate the victor explicitly enough:
are the Spaniards superior, and not merely different? But the truth,
or what we regard as the truth, is not so simple.

Let us start with the assumption that on the linguistic or symbolic
level there is no “natural” inferiority on the Indians’ side; we have seen,
for instance, that in Columbus’s period it was they who learned the
Other’s language; and during the first expeditions to Mexico, it is again
two Indians, called Melchior and Julian by the Spaniards, who serve
as interpreters.

But there is much more, of course. We know, thanks to the texts
of the period, that the Indians devote a great part of their time and
their powers to the interpretation of messages, and that this interpreta-
tion takes remarkably elaborate forms, which derive from various kinds
of divination. Chief among these is cyclical divination (of which,
among us, astrology is an example). The Aztecs possess a religious
calendar composed of thirteen months of twenty days; each of these
days possesses its own character, propitious or unlucky, which is trans-
mitted to actions performed on that day and even more to the persons
born on it. To know someone’s birthday is to know his fate; this is why,
as soon as a child is born, the parents seek out a professional interpreters, who is also the priest of the community (see Fig. 4).

"When a boy or girl was born, the father or relatives of the babe immediately went to visit the astrologers, sorcerers, or soothsayers, who were plentiful, begging them to state the destiny of the newborn boy or girl . . . The astrologer and sorcerer-fortune teller brought out the Book of the Horoscope, together with the calendar. Once the character of the day had been seen, prophecies were uttered, lots were cast, and a propitious or evil fate for the babe was determined by the consultation of a paper painted with all the gods they adored, each idol drawn in the square reserved for him. . . . One could learn whether the child was to be rich or poor, brave or cowardly, a priest or a married man, a thief or a drunkard, abstemious or lustful—all these things could be found in those prophetic pictures" (Durán, II, 2).

To this preestablished and systematic interpretation, which derives from the fixed character of each calendar day, is added a second, contextual kind of divination, which takes the form of omens. Every event the least bit out of the ordinary, departing from the established order, will be interpreted as the herald of another event, generally an unlucky one, still to come (which implies that nothing in this world occurs randomly). For instance, that a prisoner should become depressed is an evil omen, for the Aztecs did not expect any such thing. Or that a bird should cry out at a specific moment, or a mouse run through the temple, or that one might make a slip of the tongue, or have a certain dream. Sometimes, it is true, these omens are phenomena that are not only rare but distinctly supernatural. "The dishes of food which had been sold by the Aztec women were served at the banquet and then there occurred a prodigious, fearsome thing, which bewildered everyone. As soon as the people had sat down to eat, the delicacies in the dishes turned into human hands, arms, heads, hearts, and vitals. In their terror the Xochimilca called their soothsayers and asked them what this meant. The soothsayers answered that it was an evil omen, since it meant the destruction of the city and the death of many" (Durán, III, 2). In the everyday realm as well as in the exceptional, then, "they believed in a thousand omens and signs" (Motolinia, II, 8): an overdetermined world will necessarily be an overinterpreted world as well.

Furthermore, when the signs are slow in coming, one does not hesitate to seek them out, and to this end one consults a professional
soothsayer. The latter replies by resorting to one of his habitual techniques of divination: by water, by grains of corn, by cotton threads. This prophecization, which makes it possible to know whether an absent person is living or dead, whether or not a sick person will recover, whether or not an unfaithful husband will return to his wife, continues in the form of actual prophecies, and we find the great Aztec leaders regularly consulting soothsayers before undertaking any important activity. Further still, without their being asked various individuals declare they have been in communication with the gods and proceed to foretell the future. The whole history of the Aztecs, as it is narrated in their own chronicles, consists of realizations of anterior prophecies, as if the event could not occur unless it has been previously announced. Departure from a place of origin, choice of a new settlement, victory or defeat. Here only what has already been Word can become Act.

The Aztecs are convinced that all such divinations come true, and only very rarely attempt to resist the fate declared to them; in Maya, the same word signifies "prophecy" and "law." "That which has been fated cannot be avoided" (Durán, II, 67). "These things shall be accomplished. No one shall cause them to cease" (Chiama Balam, 22). And such things indeed come to pass, since men do their best to bring them about; in other cases the prophecy is all the more accurate in that it will be formulated only in a retrospective fashion, after the event has taken place. In all cases these omens and divinations enjoy the greatest prestige, and if necessary one will risk one's life to obtain them, knowing that the reward is in proportion to the peril: the possessor of the prophecy is a favorite of the gods; the master of interpretation is, indeed, the master.

The world is from the start posed as overdetermined, men handle this situation by scrupulously regulating their social life. Everything is foreseeable, hence everything is foreseen, and the key word of Mesoamerican society is order. We read in the Chilam Balam: "They knew the measure of their days. Complete was the month; complete the year; complete the day; complete the night; complete the breath of life as it passed also; complete, the blood, when they arrived at their beds, their meals, their thrones. In due measure did they recite the good prayers; in due measure they sought the lucky days, until they saw the lucky stars enter into their reign, then they kept watch while the reign of the good stars began. Then everything was good" (5). Durán, one of the best observers of Aztec society, tells the following anecdote:

"One day I asked an old man why he was sowing a certain type of small bean so late in the year, considering that they are usually frosted over at that time. He answered that everything has a count, a reason, and a special day." (II, 2). This regulation impregnates even the minutest details of life, which we might have supposed were left to the individual's free decision; ritual itself is the most salient point of a society that is ritualized through and through; yet the religious rites are in themselves so numerous and so complex that they mobilize a veritable army of functionaries. "The number of rites was so great that it was not possible for a single minister to attend to all" (Durán, I, 19).

Hence, it is society as a whole—by the intermediary of the priests, who are merely the repository of social knowledge—that decides the fate of the individual, who is thereby not an individual in the sense we usually give this word. In Indian society of the period, the individual himself does not represent a social totality but is merely the constitutive element of that other totality, the collectivity. Durán also says, in a passage in which we feel his admiration tinged with nostalgia, for he no longer finds in his own society the values to which he aspires: "The priest held a special official for each activity, small though it were. Everything was so well recorded that no detail was left out of the account. There were even officials in charge of sweeping. The good order was such that no one dared to interfere with another's job or express an opinion, since 'we would be rebuffed immediately'" (III, 41).

Certainly personal opinion and individual initiative are not what the Aztecs most prize. We have an additional proof of this preeminence of the social over the individual in the role taken by the family: parents are cherished, children adored, and the attention devoted to each absorbs much social energy. Reciprocally, the father and mother are held responsible for any misdeeds their son might commit; among the Tarascans, solidarity is responsibility extends even to the servants: "the tutors and nurses who had raised the son are killed, as are his servants, because they had taught him those bad customs" (Relación de Michoacán, III, 8. See III, 12).

But family solidarity is not a supreme value, for although transindivudual the family cell is not yet the society; family links shift to the background, in fact, compared with the obligations toward the group. No personal quality makes one invulnerable with regard to the social law, and parents willingly accept penalties and punishments when these are applied to their children's misdeeds. "Even though the parents
were distressed because of the ill treatment of their sons, whom those people loved dearly, they did not dare complain but acknowledged that the punishment had been just and good" (Durán, I, 21). Another account tells of King Nezahualpilli of Texcoco, famous for his wisdom, putting his own daughter to death because she permitted herself to be spoken to by a young man, to those attempting to intervene in his daughter’s favor, he replies “that he must not break the law in anyone’s behalf, for thereby he would be setting a bad example to other lords, and dishonoring himself” (Zotzúa, 9).

Indeed, death is a catastrophe only in a narrowly individual perspective, whereas, from the social point of view, the benefit derived from submission to group rules counts for more than the loss of an individual. This is why we see the intended sacrificial victims accepting their lot, if not with joy, in any case without despair, and the same is true of soldiers on the battlefield: their blood will help keep the society alive. Or more precisely, this is the image the Aztec people want to have of itself, though it is not certain that all the persons constituting that people accept the arrangement in order to keep prisoners from despairing on the eve of their sacrifice (a bad omen, as we have seen), they are given drugs; and Montezuma will need to rehearse the law to his fearful soldiers devastated by the death of their comrades: “That is why we were born! That is why we go to battle! That is the blessed death which our ancestors estolled” (Durán, III, 62).

In this overstructured society, one individual cannot be the equal of another, and hierarchical distinctions acquire a primordial importance. It is remarkable to find that, in the middle of the fifteenth century, Montezuma I decides to codify the laws of his own society, he formulates fourteen prescriptions, of which only the last two suggest our own laws (punishment of adultery and of theft), whereas ten regulate what in our eyes would refer only to etiquette (I shall return to the two remaining laws): insignia, garments, the ornaments one is or is not entitled to wear, the type of house appropriate for each level of the population. Durán, ever nostalgic for a hierarchical society and disgusted by the nascent egalitarianism he perceives among the Spaniards, writes: “In the royal palaces and in the temples there were rooms and chambers which accommodated or received different qualities of persons, so that the first would not mingle with the second, so that those of good blood would not be on the same level with the lower class... In good and orderly republics and communities, great attention was paid to these things, unlike the disorder which prevails in our modern republics, where one can barely tell who is the knight, who the muleteer, who the squire, who the sailor... Therefore, in order to avoid this confusion and turmoil so that each one would keep his place, the natives possessed important laws, decrees and ordinances” (Durán, I, 11).

As a consequence of this powerful integration, no one’s life is ever an open and indeterminate field, to be shaped by an individual free will, but rather the realization of an order always preordained (even if the possibility of inflecting one’s own fate is not altogether excluded). The individual’s future is ruled by the collective past, the individual does not construct his future, rather the future is revealed, whence the role of the calendar, of omens, of auguries. The characteristic interrogation of this world is not, as among the Spanish conquistadors (or the Russian revolutionaries), of a praeological type: “what is to be done?”, but epistemological: “how are we to know?” And the interpretation of the event occurs less in terms of its concrete, individual, and unique content than of the preestablished order of universal harmony, which is to be reestablished.

Would it be forcing the meaning of “communication” to say, starting from this point, that there exist two major forms of communication, one between man and man, the other between man and the world, and then to observe that the Indians cultivate chiefly the latter, the Spaniards the former? We are accustomed to conceiving of communication as only interpersonal, for since the "world" is not a subject, our dialogue with it is quite asymmetrical (if there is any such dialogue at all). But this is perhaps a narrow view of the matter, one responsible moreover for our feeling of superiority in this regard. The notion would be more productive if it were extended to include, alongside the interaction of individual with individual, the interaction that occurs between the person and his social group, the person and the natural world, the person and the religious universe. And it is this second type of communication that plays a predominant part in the life of Aztec man, who interprets the divine, the natural, and the social through indices and omens, and with the help of that professional, the prophet-priest.

We must not suppose that this predominance excludes the knowledge of phenomena, what we might call more narrowly the collecting of information; on the contrary. It is the action of others by the intermediary of signs which here remains in the embryonic state, in
return, one never fails to be informed as to the state of things, even living things: man is important here as an object of discourse, rather than its recipient. A war, we read in the Relación de Michoacán, will always be preceded by the sending of spies. After a careful reconnoissance, these spies return to account for their mission: "The spies know where the rivers are, as well as all the entrances, exits and dangerous parts of the village. When camp is made, the spies draw a clear map on the ground, tracing all these features for the captain-general, who shows it to the people" (III, 4). During the Spanish invasion, Montezuma never fails to send spies into the enemy camp, and he is thoroughly informed of the state of affairs: thus he learns of the arrival of the first expeditions while the Spaniards are still utterly unaware of his existence; see him sending his instructions to the local governors: "Montezuma therefore commanded . . . and said to them: 'You shall order that guard be kept everywhere on the shores . . . whereas the strangers would come to land"' (Florentine Codex, XII, 3). Just as later on, when Cortés is in Mexico, Montezuma is immediately informed of Narváez's arrival, which his guest is ignorant of. "By words, pictures and these memorials, they were often informed of that which passed. For this cause there were men of great agility who served as couriers to go and come, whom they did nourish in this exercise of running from their youth, laboring to have them well-breathed, that they might run to the top of a high hill without weariiness" (Florentine Codex, History, V, 10). Unlike the Tarascans of Michoacán, the Aztecs drew their maps and their messages on paper, and hence can transmit them over long distances.

But constant success in collecting information does not proceed in tandem here, as we might have expected, with a mastery of interhuman communication. There is something emblematic in Montezuma's repeated refusal to communicate with the intruders. During the first phase of the conquest, when the Spaniards are still close to the coast, the main message sent by Montezuma is that he does not want any exchange of messages to take place! He receives his information clearly, but this does not please him—quite the contrary, here is how the Aztec accounts describe him: "Montezuma lowered his head, and without answering a word, placed his hand upon his mouth. In this way he remained for a long time. He appeared to be dead or mute, since he was unable to give any answer" (Durán, III, 69). "When he heard this, Montezuma merely lowered his head; he remained in this attitude, and did not speak at all, but remained a long time full of affliction, as if he were beside himself" (Florentine Codex, XIII, 13). Montezuma is not simply alarmed by the content of the messages; he shows himself literally incapable of communicating, and the text establishes a significant parallel between "mute" and "dead." This paralysis does not merely weaken the gathering of information; it already symbolizes defeat, since the Aztec sovereign is above all a master of speech—the social action par excellence—and since the renunciation of language is the admission of failure.

Montezuma's fear of information received is associated quite coherently with fear of information sought by the other, especially when this latter concerns his own person. "Each day, numerous messengers came and went, reporting to the King Montezuma all that occurred, saying how the Spaniards asked many questions in his regard, inquiring after his person, his behavior, and his household. By this he was much distressed, hesitating as to the way to take, to flee or to hide himself, or else to wait; for he dreaded the greatest evil and the greatest outrages for himself and his entire kingdom" (Tovar, p. 75). "And when Montezuma had heard that earnestly he was inquired after and asked about, that the gods urgently wished to behold him before their eyes, he felt torment and anguish in his heart" (Florentine Codex, XII, 89, p. 26). According to Durán, Montezuma's first reaction is to want to hide in a deep cave. According to the conquistadors, Montezuma's first messages declare that he will offer them everything in his kingdom, but on one condition: that they renounce any desire to come and see him.

This refusal of Montezuma's is not a personal action. The very first law promulgated by his ancestor Montezuma I says: "The king must never appear in public unless the occasion is extremely important" (Durán, III, 26), and Montezuma II applies it scrupulously, even forbidding his subjects to look at him when he receives himself in public. "If any common man dared to lift his eyes and look upon him, Montezuma ordered that he be slain." Durán, who reports this fact, complains of its deleterious effect on his work as a historian: "I once questioned an Indian as to the facial characteristics of Montezuma and..."
about his height and general appearance, and this is the answer I received: "Father, I will not lie to you or tell you of things I do not know. I never saw his face!" (Durán, III, 53). It is not surprising to find this law heading the list of rules concerning the hierarchic differentiation of society: what is ordained in both cases is the individual's pertinence to the social regulation. The king's body remains individual; but the king's function, more completely than any other, is a pure social effect; hence this body must be withdrawn from scrutiny. By letting himself be seen, Montezuma would contradict his values quite as much as by ceasing to speak; he leaves his sphere of action, which is the social exchange, and becomes a vulnerable individual.

It is quite as revealing to see Montezuma receiving information but punishing those who bring it, and hence failing on the level of human relations. When a man arrives from the coast to describe what he has seen, the king thanks him but orders his guards to cast him into prison and to keep a close watch on him. The magicians try to have prophetic dreams and to interpret the supernatural omens. "When he saw that the dreams were not in his favor but that they confirmed the earlier ill omens, he ordered that the dreamers be cast in prison. They were to be given food in small measures until they starved to death. After this no one wished to tell his dreams to Montezuma" (III, 65). But it turns out that they are no longer to be found in their prison; Montezuma then decides to punish them in an exemplary fashion: "He ordered the jailers to rise and go to the towns of all those who had prophesied evil things. 'Tear down their houses,' he cried, 'kill their wives and children and dig in the places where the houses had been, until you reach water. All their possessions are to be destroyed. And if any one of them is ever seen in a temple, he is to be stoned and his body thrown to the wild beasts!'" (Ibid.). We realize that, under these conditions, volunteers to provide or interpret information about the Spaniards' behavior will become quite infrequent.

Even when the information reaches Montezuma, his interpretation of it, though necessary, is made in the context of a communication with the world, not of that with men; it is his gods from whom he seeks advice about how to behave in these purely human affairs (indeed, this was how he had always behaved, as we know from the native histories of the Aztecs). "It seems that the prince was very devoted to his idols Tlazaltipoca and Huitzilopochtli, the god of war and the god of hell respectively, and sacrificed youths to them every day in hope that they would tell him what to do about us" (Bernal Díaz, 41). "We learned on trustworthy authority that when the prince heard the news he was deeply grieved and angry, and that he immediately sacrificed some Indians to his idol Huitzilopochtli, the god of war, in order that the god might tell them what would be the outcome of our journey to Mexico and whether he should admit us into the city" (ibid., 83).

Hence it is quite natural that, when the rulers of the country wish to understand the present, they address themselves not to those who know men but to those who practice an exchange with the gods—the master interpreters. Thus in Tlaxcala: "It seems therefore that they were ill-disposed to listen to the envoys, and that their decision was to summon all the soothsayers, and those others whom they call teuca-tecatl, who are like witches and foretell the future, and ask them to discover by their witchcraft, charms and divination what sort of people we were and whether if they fought us continuously by day and night we could be conquered" (Ibid., 66). But the reaction is precisely the same in Mexico: "The king immediately summoned his whole court and took counsel, telling them the bad news, asking what means might be employed in order to drive out of their country these cursed gods who came to destroy them, and by arguing the question at great length, as so serious a matter required, it was resolved to summon all the wizards and the necromancers who had a pact with the demon, in order that they might make the first attack, raising by their art dreadful visions which, by terror, would force these people to return to their own country" (Tovar, p. 75).

Montezuma knew how to inform himself concerning his enemies when these were called Tlaxcaltecs, Tarascans, Huastecs. But that was an exchange of information already perfectly well established. The identity of the Spaniards is so different, their behavior to such a degree uninterpretable, that he whole system of communication is upset, and the Aztecs no longer succeed precisely where they had previously excelled; in gathering information. If the Indians had known, Bernal Díaz writes on many occasions, "how few, weak and exhausted we were at that time..." All the Spaniards' actions take the Indians by surprise, in fact, as if it were the latter who were waging a regular war and as if the Spaniards were harassing them by guerrilla tactics.

We find a general confirmation of this attitude of the Indians in the very construction of their own narratives of the conquest. The latter
invariably begin with the enumeration of the omens announcing the coming of the Spaniards. Moreover, Montezuma is apparently bombarde with messages that all predict the newcomers’ victory. “In this time, the idol Quetzalcoatl, god of the Cholula, announced the coming of strange men who would seize the kingdom. Even so the king of Tezoco [Nexahualpilli], who had a pact with the demon, came one time to visit Montezuma at an untoward hour and assured him that the gods had told him that great trials and great sufferings were in store for him and all his kingdom; many sorcerers and magicians were saying the same thing” (T maçı, p. 69). We have similar indications concerning not only the Aztecs of central Mexico, but even the Caribs Tainos “discovered” by Columbus, the Tarascans of Michoacán, the Mayas of Yucatán and Guatemala, the Incas of Peru, etc. One Mayo prophet, Ah Xupan Nauzt, apparently warned as early as the eleventh century that the invasion of the Yucatán would begin in 1527. Taken together, these accounts, proceeding from peoples very remote from each other, are striking in their uniformity: the arrival of the Spaniards is always preceded by omens, their victory is always foretold as certain. Further, these omens are strangely alike; from one end of the American continent to the other. There is always a comet, a thunderbolt, a fire, two-headed men, persons speaking in a state of trance, etc.

Even if we did not want to exclude the reality of these omens a priori, there is something about so many coincidences that should put us on our guard. Everything suggests that the omens were invented after the fact! but why? We see now that this way of experiencing the event is quite in agreement with the norms of communication practiced by the Indians. Instead of perceiving this fact as a purely human if unprecedented encounter—the arrival of men greedy for gold and power—the Indians integrate it into a network of natural, social, and supernatural relations, in which the event thereby loses its singularity: it is somehow domesticated, absorbed into an order of already existing beliefs. The Aztecs perceive the conquest—i.e., the defeat—and at the same time mentally overcome it by inscribing it within a history conceived according to their requirements (nor are they the only people to have done such a thing): the present becomes intelligible and at the same time less inadmissible, the moment one can see it already announced in the past. And the remedy is so well adapted to the situation that, hearing the narrative, everyone believes he remembers that the omens had indeed appeared before the conquest. But meanwhile, these
by an incapacity to perceive the other's human identity—i.e., to recognize him both as equal and as different.

The first, spontaneous reaction with regard to the stranger is to imagine him as inferior, since he is different from us: this is not even a man, or if he is one, an inferior barbarian; if he does not speak our language, it is because he speaks none at all, cannot speak, as Columbus still believed. It is in this fashion that European slaves call their German neighbors 'nemos,' the Mayas of Yucatán call the Toltec invaders 'mepoh,' 'mutes'; and the Cakchiquel Mayas refer to the Mam Mayas as 'stammerers' or 'mutes.' The Aztecs themselves call the people south of Vera Cruz 'nemosuo,' 'mutes,' and those who do not speak Nahua, they call 'tenins,' 'barbarians,' or 'popoloca,' 'savages'; they share the scorn of all peoples for their neighbors, judging that the remotest ones, culturally or geographically, are not even suitable to be sacrificed and eaten (the sacrificial victim must be at once foreign and esteemed—i.e., in reality close at hand). "Our god does not like the flesh of those barbarous peoples. They are yellowish, hard, tasteless bread in his mouth. They are savages and speak strange tongues" (Durán, III, 28).

For Montezuma, differences among Aztecs, Tlaxcaltecs, and Chichimecs exist, of course, but they are immediately absorbed into the internal hierarchy of the Aztec world: the others are those who are subjugated and among whom are recruited the sacrificial victims. But even in the most extreme cases there is no sentiment of absolute strangeness of the Totonacs, for instance, the Aztecs say both that they speak a barbarous language and that they lead a civilized life (Florentine Codex, X, 29)—i.e., one that can appear such to Aztec eyes.

Now, the otherness of the Spaniards is much more radical. The first witnesses of their arrival hasten to report their impressions to Montezuma: "We must tell him what we have seen, and this is a terrifying thing: nothing of the kind has ever been seen" (Florentine Codex, XII, 6). Unable to integrate them into the category of the Totonacs—whose alterity is not so radical—the Aztecs, faced with the Spaniards, renounce their entire system of human otherness and find themselves obliged to resort to the only other device available: the exchange with the gods. Here again we may compare them with Columbus, and yet an essential difference also appears: like Columbus, Montezuma does not readily manage to see the other as human and different at the same time; but for this reason he treats the others as animals. The Indians' mistake will not last long, however, but just long enough for the battle to be definitively lost and America subject to Europe. As the Chihuahua Balaram says on another occasion: "Those who die are those who do not understand; those who live will understand it." (9)

Now let us leave the reception and consider the production of discourses and symbols as practiced in the Indian societies at the period of the conquest. There is no need to go back as far as the Popol Vuh, the sacred book which makes the word the origin of the world, to realize that verbal practices are highly esteemed: nothing would be more mistaken than to suppose the Aztecs indifferent to this activity. Like many other peoples, the Aztecs interpret their own name as referring to their linguistic excellence, in opposition to other tribes: "The Indians of this New Spain derive, according to what is generally reported in their histories, from two diverse peoples: they give to the first the name Nahualá, which means 'people who explain themselves and speak clearly,' thereby differentiated from the second people, at the time very wild and barbarous, concerned only with hunting, and to whom they gave the name of Chichimecs, which signifies 'people who go hunting' and who live by that primitive and uncouth occupation." (Tovar, p. 9).

To learn to speak constitutes part of family education; it is the first thing parents think of: "They took great care that their son should converse fittingly with others, that his conversation should be proper" (Florentine Codex, VIII, 28), and an ancient precept, addressed by parents to children, says: "Do not set a bad example or speak indelicately, or interrupt the speech of another. If someone does not speak well or courteously, see that you do not do the same; if it is not your business to speak, be silent" (Cimos, in Zonitá, 9). The fathers invariable tell their sons: "You are to speak very slowly, very deliberately; you are not to speak hurriedly, not to pant, not to squeak, lest it be said of you that you are a howler, a growler, a squeaker. Also you are not to cry out, lest you be known as an imbecile, a shameless one, a rustic, very much a rustic... And you are to improve, to soften your words, your voice" (Florentine Codex, VI, 22).

That such attention be paid to what the Latin rhetoricals called ratio or pronomatio suggests that the Aztecs are not indifferent to other aspects of speech; and we know that this education is not left to parents alone, but is dispensed in special schools. As a matter of fact, the Aztec
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That such attention be paid to what the Latin rhetorics called actio or pronuntiatio suggests that the Aztecs are not indifferent to other aspects of speech; and we know that this education is not left to parents alone, but is dispensed in special schools. As a matter of fact, the Aztec
state has two kinds of schools, those in which students are prepared for the life of a warrior, and others that produce priests, judges, and royal dignitaries; it is in the latter schools, called calmecac, that particular attention is paid to language: "Very carefully were they taught good discourse. If one spoke not well, if one greeted others not well, then they drew blood from him with magery thongs... Carefully were they taught the songs which they called the gods' songs. These were inscribed in the books. And well were all taught the reckoning of the days, the book of dreams, and the book of years" (Florentine Codex, III, Appendix, 8). The calmecac is in fact a school of interpretation and speech, of rhetoric and hermeneutics. Thus every precaution is taken for students to become fine speakers and good interpreters.

Indeed, as another chronicler says (Juan Bautista Pomar, in the Relación de Texcoco), they learned at the same time "to speak well and to govern well." In the Aztec civilization—as in many others—the high royal dignitaries are generally selected for their qualities of eloquence. Sahagún reports that "among the Mexicans, the learned, virtuous, and powerful rhetoricians were greatly esteemed" (VI, "Prologue," 2), and specifies: "The kings always kept by their side certain skilled orators, in order to speak and reply as would be necessary. They used such men from the first moments of their taking the throne" (VI, 12, 8). Among the ancient Maya, the function is even more important: the future leaders are chosen with the help of a procedure resembling a trial by riddles: they must be able to interpret certain figurative expressions, known as the language of Zuyua Power demands wisdom, which is attested by the capacity to interpret. "These are the things to be understood in order to become chiefs of the town, when they are brought before the ruler. These are the words. If they are not understood by the chiefs of the town, ill-omened is the star adorning the night" (Chilam Balam, 91). If the candidates do not pass this test, they are severely punished: "The chiefs of the town shall be seized because they lack understanding... They shall be hanged by the neck; the tips of their tongues shall be cut off; their eyes shall be torn out" (ibid., 92). Like the victims of the sphinx, the future chiefs are confronted with this dilemma: to interpret or die (though differing from certain characters of the Aztec Nights whose law is, instead, "Narrate or Die!") But no doubt there exist narrative civilizations and interpretative civilizations; and it is said that, once chosen, the chief is marked by the tattooing of pictograms on his body: his throat, his foot, his hand.

The association of power and language mastery is clearly marked among the Aztecs. The ruler himself is called huitzomatl, which means, literally, "he who possesses speech" (something in the manner of our "dictator"), and the periphrasis designating the wise man is "the possessor of red ink and of black ink"—i.e., he who knows how to paint and interpret the pictographic manuscripts. The native chronicles describe Montezuma as "an excellent orator. His manner of speaking was so fine that he could attract and win over others with his reasoning, and all were delighted by his pleasant discourse" (Durán, III, 54). In Yucatán, the prophet interpreters—chilanes—enjoy the highest esteem and the greatest privileges: "It was the office of the priests to discourse and teach their sciences, to indicate calamities and the means of remedying them, preaching during the festivals, celebrating the sacrifice and administering the sacraments. The chilanes were responsible for giving those in the locality the oracles of the demons, and the respect paid them was so great that they did not ordinarily leave their houses except borne upon litters carried on the shoulders of bearers" (Landa, 27, p. 47).

Even after the conquest, the Spaniards cannot help admiring Indian eloquence. Fifteen years after the fall of the Aztec empire, Vasco de Quiroga writes: "Each of them thanked us in his turn with as much eloquence as if he had studied the art of rhetoric all his life" (p. 316). Sebastian Ramírez de Fuenleal, president of the second audiencia (the tribunal which was also the source of all legal power) of which Vasco de Quiroga is a member, experiences such pleasure hearing the Indians speak that he forgets the annoyance provoked by the tenor of the remarks: "Ten days ago, the chief of Michoacán and the sons of Cuauhtecatl [the local king] came to lodge their complaints with Your Majesty. So well ordered was their oratory that it was a veritable pleasure to hear the translation of it made for us by the interpreters."

The Spaniards of the period are equally fascinated by language. But the mere existence of an attention paid to verbal production by both Spaniards and Indians does not signify that the same aspects of language were being valued. The language privileged by the Aztecs is ritual speech—i.e., speech regulated in its forms and its functions, memo-
of passage in the individual's life (birth, puberty, marriage, death), departures, encounters, etc. These are always formulated in carefully selected terms and are supposed to come out of the immemorial past, whence their stylistic archaism. Their function is that of all ritual speech in a society without writing: they materialize social memory, i.e., the body of laws, norms, and values to be transmitted from one generation to the next in order to assure the very identity of that collectivity, this also explains the exceptional importance given to public education, unlike what occurs in societies of the book, where the wisdom to which one can gain individual access counter-balances the values transmitted by the collective institution.

The absence of writing is an important element of the situation, perhaps even the most important. Stylized drawings, the pictograms used among the Aztecs, are not a lesser degree of writing: they note the experience, not the language. The unfamiliarity to the Indians of European writing creates relations the literary tradition will exploit: the Indian is often represented bearing a fruit and a written message that mentions the act; the Indian eats the fruit en route and is astonished to find himself confronted by the letter's recipient. "Thus the news spread through the island that the leaves speak in response to a sign from the Spaniards; and this obliges the islanders to be very careful of what is confided to them" (Peter Martyr, III, 8). The codex drawings only preserve the great landmarks of history, which as such remain unintelligible; they will be brought to comprehension by the ritual discourse accompanying them. We realize this today; since certain drawings remain opaque to us, in the absence of any ancient commentary.

That the absence of writing is revelatory of symbolic behavior in general, and at the same time the capacity to perceive the other, appears to be illustrated by another fact. The three great Amerindian civilizations encountered by the Spaniards are not located on precisely the same level of the evolution of writing. The Incas are the most unfamiliar with writing (they possess a mnemonic use of braided cords, moreover one that is highly elaborated); the Aztecs have pictograms; among the Mayas we find certain rudiments of phonetic writing. Now, we observe a comparable gradation in the intensity of the belief that the Spaniards are gods. The Incas firmly believe in this divine nature. The Aztecs do so only during the initial period of exposure. The Mayas raise the question to answer it in the negative rather than "gods," they call the Spaniards 'strangers,' or even "eaters of amonites"—a fruit they themselves eat—or the "bearded ones," or at best "the powerful ones"; but never "gods." If we remark that they experienced a brief hesitation on this subject (as in the Annals of Cacaxtla—Guatamala, but not in Yucatan), we also note that it very soon passes over and that their vision of the Spaniards remains fundamentally a human one. This is all the more remarkable in that only a few priests or nobles are initiated into the Mayan writing, but it is not the effective use of writing, writing as a tool, which matters here, but rather writing as an index of the evolution of mental structures. Yet we must add another explanation here (unless it is the same one): of the three groups only the Mayas have already undergone a foreign invasion (that of the Toltecs); they know what a different and at the same time a higher civilization it, and their chronicles will often inscribe the Spaniards within the rubric reserved for the Toltec invaders.

What is important here is that since writing cannot assume the role of memory support, speech must do so. This is why the huaxtciatlalli have such importance, and also why, even outside these fixed genres, we notice in reading Sahagún's informants, for instance, that their answers express a knowledge they have learned by heart, without individual variations. Even if we suppose that these informants, doubtless old men, exaggerate the importance of ritual discourse to the detriment of improvised speech, we cannot help being impressed by the number and the length of such discourses, and hence by the place ritual occupies at the heart of the community's verbal life.

The essential feature of these discourses, then, is that they come from the past: not only their interpretation, but their production is dominated by the past rather than by the present; the very word huaxtciatlalli signifies "speech of the ancients." These remarks, says one old man, "the men and the women of old left you, handed down to you, have been carefully folded away, stored up in your entrails, in your throat" (Florentine Codex, VI, 35). This is confirmed by other chronicles: "In order to preserve [the orations and poems] word for word as declaimed by the orators and poets, the young lords who were to be their successors were drilled in them and, with constant repetition they committed them to memory without changing so much as a word," writes Tovar ("Letter to Acosta").

More generally, reference to the past is essential for the Aztec
mentality of the period. We find a moving illustration of this in a quite exceptional document entitled The Aztec-Spanish Dialogue of 1524, only three years after the conquest. The first twelve Franciscans have arrived in Mexico and they have begun their work of conversion. But one day, in Mexico, a man stands up and protests: he is of course not capable of answering the Christians' theological arguments, but the Mexicans, too, have had their specialists in divine affairs, and the latter might confront the Franciscans and explain to them why the Aztec gods are not inferior to the god of the Spaniards. The Franciscans accept the challenge, and Cortés himself gives orders to organize the debate. Other discussions of the same kind doubtless occur in these first post-conquest years, today we possess one Aztec narrative, collected by Sahagún, which is presented as an account of the Mexican confrontation of 1524, but which in reality must be a literary and generalized representation of such discussions. The debate as a whole is located within the context of Christian ideology, but its value as testimony remains very great.

Now, what will be the Aztec theologians' initial argument? Our religion, they say, is an ancient one; our ancestors have long adhered to it; hence, there is no reason to abandon it. "It is a new word, this one you tell them, and because of it we are distressed, because of it we are frightened. Indeed, these our fathers, these who came to live on the earth, did not speak in this way. ... They used to say that indeed they, the gods by whose grace we live, they deserved us. ... And perchance now are we the ones who will destroy the ancient law?" (7, 596-6). The Franciscan fathers were convinced by these arguments. In its way, the very narrative we possess illustrates the greater efficacy of the Christian discourse; this dialogue is quite asymmetrical, for the Evangelizers' words occupy a place that is not only greater, but growing; we get the impression that the voice of the Mexican priests, asserting attachment to the past, is gradually stifled by the abundant discourse of the Franciscans.

This is not an isolated example; we find an almost identical narrative by Cortés, who reports this improvised debate. "On hearing this I spoke to them, telling them to observe how vain and foolish was their belief, for they placed their trust in idols which could not even defend themselves and were so easily overthrown. 'They replied that they had been brought up in that belief by their fathers' (Cortés, 5). Forty or fifty years later, Durán still receives the same answer: "I have ques-
from father to son. The Nahua word designating the truth, neltitliltl, is linked etymologically to "root," "base," "foundation"—the truth is allied with stability; and a huicheltliltl regards two questions as parallel. "Does man possess the truth? Are there fixed and lasting things?"

(Collazo, 10, 15.)

Into this past-oriented, tradition-dominated world creeps the conquest: an absolutely unpredictable event, surprising and unique (what ever the omens collected subsequently may say of it). It brings another conception of time, which conquers the Aztec and Maya conception. Two features of the Indian calendar, in which the latter conception is expressed particularly clearly, are relevant here. First of all a specific day belongs to a larger number of cycles than with us: there is the religious year of 260 days and the astronomic year of 365 days; the years themselves form cycles, in the manner of our centuries, but more consequentially, cycles of twenty, or fifty-two years, etc. Then, this calendar rests on the intimate conviction that time repeats itself. Our chronology has two dimensions, one cyclical, the other linear. If I say, "Wednesday, February 25," I am indicating the day's place within three cycles (week, month, year); but by adding "1983" I submit the cycle to the linear procedure, since the account of the years follows a succession without repetition, from the negative infinity to the positive infinity. Among the Mayas and Aztecs, on the contrary, the cycle prevails over linearity: there is a succession within the month, the year, or the "cluster" of years; but these latter, rather than being situated in a linear chronology, are repeated exactly from one to the next. There are differences within each sequence, but one sequence is identical with the next, and none is situated in an absolute time (whence the difficulties we encounter in translating Indian chronologies into our own). It is no accident that the graphic and mental image of time among the Aztecs and the Mayas is the wheel (whence ours would probably be the arrow). As one (belated) inscription in the Chilam Balam says: "Thirteen score years, and then it will always return again." (22)

The ancient books of the Mayas and Aztecs illustrate this conception of time, as much by what they include as by the use they make of it. They are kept in each region by the priest-prophets and constitute (among other things) chronicles, books of history; at the same time, they make it possible to foretell the future because, since time repeats itself, knowledge of the past leads to that of the future—or rather, it is the same thing. We see, therefore, in the Maya Chilam Balam that the event must always be located in its place within the system (a certain day of a certain month in a certain sequence of years) but that there will be no reference to the linear passage of time, even for events following the conquest; we have no doubt as to the day of the week on which a certain thing occurred, but we may hesitate among some twenty years! The very nature of events obviates this cyclical principle, since each sequence includes the same events; those occupying identical places in the different sequences have a tendency to be identified with each other. Hence in these books the Toitec invasion bears features incontestably proper to the Spanish conquest; but the converse is also true, so that although we know an invasion is in question, we cannot tell which one, though centuries separate them.

Not only do the sequences of the past resemble each other, but also those to come. This is why events are sometimes referred to the past, as in a chronicle, and sometimes to the future, in the form of prophecies: once again, past and future are the same thing. Prophecy is rooted in the past, since time repeats itself, the propitious or disastrous character of the days, months, years, centuries to come is established by the intuitive investigation of a denominator common to the corresponding periods of the past. Reciprocally, today we derive our information about the past of these peoples from their prophecies, which are often the only things to have been preserved. Durán reports that among the Aztecs, who distribute the years into cycles according to the cardinal points, "the years most feared by the people were those of the North and of the West, since they remembered that the most unhappy events had taken place under those signs" (Durán, II, 1). The Maya account of the Spanish invasion inextricably mixes past and future, proceeding by retrospective anticipation. "These words are to be treasured as a precious jewel is treasured. They concern the coming introduction of Christianity" (Chilam Balam, 25, p. 164). "Thus it is that God, our Father, gives a sign when they shall come, because there is no agreement. The descendants [of the former rulers] are dishonored and brought to misery; we are Christianized, while they treat us like animals" (ibid., 11). One later copyist adds this significant note: "On this day of August 1766, occurred a hurricane. I have made a record of it in order that it may be seen how many years it will be before another one will occur" (ibid., 143). Once we establish the term of the series, the distance separating two hurricanes, we will be able to predict all the hurricanes to come. Prophecy is memory.
The same books exist among the Aztecs (though they have been less well preserved); to them are consigned, along with delimitations of territories or rates of tribute, the events of the past, and they are consulted when it is desired to know the future: past and future belong to the same book, pertain to the same specialist. It is to this book that Montezuma turns in order to learn what the foreigners will do. We see him first commissioning a picture to represent exactly what his messengers have seen at the coast. The most skilful painter in Mexico is assigned this task; the picture completed, Montezuma asks him: "Brother, I beg you to answer this question: by any chance do you know anything about what you have painted? Did your ancestors leave you a drawing or description of these men who were to arrive in this land?" (Durán, III, 70). We see how reluctant Montezuma is to admit that an entirely new event can occur, and that what the ancestors have not already known might come to pass. The painter's answer is negative, but Montezuma does not stop there; he consults all the other painters of the kingdom, still nothing. At the end he is told of an old man named Quilatzli, who is "well informed in all matters which concern ancient history and painted books." Quilatzli, who has not heard of the Spaniards' arrival, nonetheless knows everything about the imminent strangers, and he tells the king: "So that you may see that what I say is the truth, behold it drawn here! This picture was bequeathed to me by my ancestors." He then took out an ancient picture on which were depicted the ship and the men dressed in the same manner as those which the king already knew through his painting. There he also saw other men mounted on horses or on flying eagles, all of them dressed in different colors, wearing their hats and swords" (ibid.).

The narrative is evidently very literary; it is nonetheless indicative of the Aztec conception of time and event: less that of Montezuma, of course, than of the narrator and his listeners. We cannot believe that there existed, long before the Spaniards' arrival, a drawing representing their ships and their swords, their clothes and hats, their beards and the color of their skin (and what are we to think of the men mounted on flying eagles?). Again, we are dealing with a prophecy fabricated a posteriori, a retrospective projection. But that there should be a need to forge this history is revealing: no event can be entirely unprecedented; repetition prevails over difference.

In place of this cyclical, repetitive time frozen in an unalterable sequence, where everything is always predicted in advance, where the singular event is merely the realization of omens always and already present, in place of this time dominated by the system, appears the one-directional time of apotheosis and fulfillment, as the Christians then experience it. Further, the ideology and activity inspired by it lend support to this moment: the Spaniards see the ease of their conquest as a proof of the excellence of the Christian religion (this is the decisive argument employed in the course of the theological debates: the superiority of the Christian god is demonstrated by the Spaniards' victory over the Aztecs), whereas it is in the name of this excellence that they have undertaken the conquest: the quality of the one justifies the other, and reciprocally. And the conquest also confirms the Christian conception of time, which is not an incessant return but an infinite progression toward the final victory of the Christian spirit (a conception subsequently inherited by communism).

From this collision between a ritual world and a unique event results Montezuma's incapacity to produce appropriate and effective messages. Masters in the art of ritual discourse, the Indians are inadequate in a situation requiring improvisation, and this is precisely the situation of the conquest. Their verbal education favors the paradigm over syntax, code over context, conformity-to-order over efficacy-of-the-moment, the past over the present. Now, the Spanish invasion creates a radically new, entirely unprecedented situation, in which the art of improvisation matters more than that of ritual. It is quite remarkable, in this context, to see Cortés not only constantly practicing the art of adaptation and improvisation, but also being aware of it and claiming it as the very principle of his conduct: "I shall always take care to add whatever seems to me most fitting, for the great size and diversity of the lands which are being discovered each day and the many new secrets which we have learned from these discoveries make it necessary that for new circumstances there be new considerations and decisions; should it appear in anything I now say or might in future say to Your Majesty that I contradict what I have said in the past, Your Highness may be assured that it is because a new fact elicits a new opinion" (Cortés, 4). Concern for coherence has yielded to concern for the truth of each particular action.

Indeed, most of the Indians' communications to the Spaniards are notable for their ineffectiveness. In order to convince his visitors to leave the country, Montezuma sends gold each time; but nothing is more likely to persuade them to remain. Other chiefs offer them
women, with the same intent; these become both an additional justification for conquest and, as we shall see, one of the most dangerous weapons—both defensive and offensive—to be put into the Spaniards' hands. In order to discourage the intruders, the Aztec warriors inform them that they will all be sacrificed and eaten, by themselves or by wild beasts; and when one occasion prisoners are taken, matters are arranged so as to sacrifice them under the eyes of Cortés's soldiers; the end is indeed just as was predicted: "Then they ate their flesh with a sauce of peppers and tomatoes. They sacrificed all our men in this way, eating their legs and arms, offering their hearts and blood to their idols, as I have said, and throwing their trunks and entrails to the lions and tigers and serpents and snakes that they kept in the wild-beast houses" (Bernal Díaz, 152). But their comrades' unsavory fate can produce only one effect on the Spaniards—to commit them to fighting with all the more determination, since they now have but one choice: to conquer or to die in the cauldrons.

Or again, another touching episode reported by Bernal Díaz: Montezuma's first envoy paints a portrait of Cortés for him that is apparently a very close resemblance, since the next delegation is commanded by "a great Mexican cacique who in face, features and body was very like our Captain... On account of this resemblance we in the camp called them 'our Cortés' and 'the other Cortés'" (Bernal Díaz, 139). But this attempt to influence Cortés by a magic of resemblance (we know that the Aztecs thus "personify" their gods) obviously produces no effect whatever.

Just as the messages sent to (or against) the Spaniards turn out to be ineffective, the Aztecs no longer manage to dominate communication with the other Indians in this new situation. Even in peacetime, and before the Spaniards' arrival, Montezuma's messages are characterized by their ceremonial character, a potential obstacle for effectiveness: "He rode answered, for usually his reply was given through his intimates and familiar, who were always at his side for that purpose and served as secretaries, as it were," writes Motolinia (III, 7). In the state of improvisation imposed by conquest, new difficulties appear. Montezuma's presents, which produce on the Spaniards an effect contrary to the one he has anticipated, also do him harm among his own people, since they connote his weakness and thereby persuade other leaders to change sides: "Their chiefs said among themselves that we must be ixtles [beings of divine origin] indeed, for Montezuma was afraid of us and sent us presents of gold. So if we had already a reputation for valor, henceforth it was greatly increased" (Bernal Díaz, 48).

Alongside these intentional messages which do not communicate what their authors have hoped, there exist others which do not seem intentional but which are quite as unfortunate in their effects: these proceeded from a certain incapacity of the Aztecs to disseminate the truth. The war cry of the Indians invariably uttered when they do battle, and whose purpose is to alarm the enemy, actually reveals their presence and permits the Spaniards to orient themselves more effectively. Montezuma himself surrender, precious information to his jailers, and if Cuauhtémoc is captured, it is because he tries to escape in a boat richly decorated with royal emblems. We know that this is no accident. An entire chapter of the Florentine Codex is devoted to the "ornaments used by the kings in war" (VIII, 12), and the least we can say is that these decorations are not particularly discreet: "They wore the costly red spoonbill head dress, set off with gold, having very many quetzal feathers flaring from it, and with it, borne upon his back, the shield, upon a carrying frame and decorated with gold. And they dressed him in a red shirt, made of red spoonbill feathers, decorated with flint knives fashioned with gold, and his skirt of agave leaves was set all about with quetzal feathers. The shield was ringed with thin gold, and its pendants were made of precious feathers" (Florentine Codex, VIII, 12, p. 33). We are also told, in the book devoted to the conquest, of the exploits of the warrior Tlacizcapa, the latter disguised himself in a thousand ways in order to deceive the Spaniards; however, the text adds, "his head went uncovered, so that it was apparent that he was an Otomi" (Florentine Codex, XII, 32). So we shall not be surprised to see Cortés winning a decisive battle, soon after his flight from Mexico on the Noche Triste, precisely as a result of this lack of disguise among the Aztecs. "As Cortés battled his way among the Indians, performing marvels in singling out and killing their captains who were distinguishable by their gold shields, and disregarding the common warriors, he was able to reach their general and kill him with one thrust of his lance.... When Captian Hernando Cortés killed their general, they began to retreat and give way to us" (Francisco de Agui-
a weapon intended to manipulate the Other. This characteristic of communication among the Indians gives rise, among authors favoring their cause, to a legend according to which the Indians are a people who know nothing of lying. Motolinia declares that the first Catholic priests noted two chief features among the Indians: "that they were a very veracious people, and that they would not take the property of others, even though it had been lying about for a long time" (Motolinia, III, 4). Las Casas emphasizes the Indians' total lack of duplicity, with which he contrasts the Spaniards' attitude: "The Spaniards have never respected their word not the truth, with regard to the Indians" (Las Casas, Reledión, "Perú"), so that, he declares, "lie" and "Christian" have become synonyms: "Not once but many times a Spaniard would ask an Indian if he was a Christian, and the Indian would reply: 'Yes, sir, I am a bit Christian because I have learned to lie four times, another day I will lie big, and I will be a big Christian.'" (Histoire, III, 145). The Indians themselves might not disagree with this description; we read in Tovar: "No sooner was Captain Cortés finished with his peaceful speech, than the soldiers sacked the royal palaces and the residences of the dignitaries where they hoped to find riches, and thus the Indians began to consider the attitude of the Spaniards as very suspect" (Tovar, p. 80).

The facts, of course, belied the enthusiastic descriptions of the Indian friends: we cannot conceive of a language without the possibility of lying, as there is no speech which does not know metaphor. But a society may favor or, quite the contrary, strongly discourage any discourse that, rather than faithfully describing things, is chiefly concerned with its effect and therefore neglects the dimension of truth. According to Alvaerio Tenezacuac, "Montezuma promulgated a law whereby anyone caught telling a lie, however trivial, was to be dragged through the streets by the schoolboys of Texoco until he had breathed his last breath" (103). Zorrata also locates the origin of this character in the Indians' customs and education: "None dared swear falsely, fearing that the god by whom they swore would punish them with some grave infamy. ... Fathers warned their sons severely against lying, and a father punished a son who committed this offense by pricking his lip with a thorny thorn. As a result boys grew up accustomed to telling the truth. Aged Indians, asked why their people lie so much nowadays, reply that it is because falsehood goes unpunished. ... The Indians say that they learned this trait from the Spaniards." (Zorrata, 9).

During the first contact of Cortés's army with the Indians, the Spaniards (hypocritically) declare that they are not seeking war, but peace and love: "they did not trouble to reply in words but with a shower of arrows" (Cortés, 21). The Indians do not realize that words can be a weapon quite as dangerous as arrows. Several days before the fall of Mexico, the scene renews to the propositions of peace formulated by Cortés, who is in fact already the victor, the Aztecs stubbornly reply: "Do not talk to us any more about peace: words are for women, arms for men!" (Bernal Díaz, 134). This distribution of labor is not accidental. One might say that the warrior/woman opposition plays a structuring role for the Aztec social image repertoire as a whole. Even if several paths lie open before the young man in search of a trade (soldier, priest, merchant), he has no doubt that the warrior's life is the most glamorous of all. Respect for speech does not go so far as to set specialists in discourse above military leaders (the head of state combines the two supremacies, since he is both warrior and priest). The soldier is the male par excellence, for he can administer death. Women, who give birth, cannot aspire to this ideal; yet their occupations and attitudes do not constitute a second valued pole of the Aztec axiology; it is no surprise that they are weak, but such weakness is never praised. And the society makes sure that no one is ignorant of the role he or she must take: if the newborn baby is a boy, a tiny sword and shield are put in the cradle; if a girl, then a toy shuttle and loom.

The worst insult, then, that can be addressed to a man is to treat him as a woman, on one occasion, the enemy warriors are forced to don women's clothes, for they have not accepted the challenge and fought. We see as well that the women have internalized this image (whose masculine origin we can easily imagine) and that they themselves contribute to the maintenance of the opposition, attacking young men who have not yet distinguished themselves on the battlefield: "Truly, he with the long, tangled hair of a youth also speaks! Do you speak indeed? ... You with the evil-smelling, stinking forelocks, are you not only a woman like me?" And Sahagun's informant adds: "For thus the women could torment young men into battle; thus they moved and provoked them, thus the women prodded them into battle" (Florentine Codex, II, 213). Tovar reports a revealing scene, from the period of the conquest, when Cuauhtemoc, the incarnation of warrior values, attacks Montezuma, whose passivity identifies him with the women. Montezuma speaks to his people from the terrace of the palace, where he
a weapon intended to manipulate the Other. This characteristic of communication among the Indians gives rise, among authors favoring their cause, to a legend according to which the Indians are a people who know nothing of lying. Motolinia declares that the first Catholic priests noted two chief features among the Indians: "that they were a very venal people, and that they would not take the property of others, even though it had been lying about the ground for a long time" (Motolinia, III, 5). Las Casas emphasizes the Indians' total lack of "duplicity," with which he contrasts the Spaniards' attitude: "The Spaniards have never repeated their word for the truth, with regard to the Indians" (Las Casas, Relación, "Perú"). So that, he declares, "liar" and "Christian" have become synonymous: "Not once but many times a Spaniard would ask an Indian if he was a Christian, and the Indian would reply: 'Yes, sir, I am a bit Christian because I have learned to lie a bit; another day I will lie big, and I will be a big Christian.' " (Historia, III, 145). The Indians themselves might not disagree with this description; we read in Tovar: "No sooner was Captain Cortés finished with his peaceful speech, than the soldiers sacked the royal palaces and the residences of the dignitaries where they hoped to find riches, and thus the Indians began to consider the attitude of the Spaniards as very suspect" (Tovar, p. 80).

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of war (or two aspects of war, one valued by each side). The Aztecs cannot conceive and do not understand the total war of assimilation the Spaniards are waging against them; for them, war must be ended by a treaty establishing the amount of tribute to be paid the victor by the vanquished. Before winning the battle, the Spaniards had already won the decisive victory, which consisted in imposing their own type of war; their superiority was henceforth no longer in question. Nowadays it is difficult to imagine a war waged by any principle but effectiveness, even if the role of ritual is not completely dead; treaties forbidding the use of bacteriological, chemical, or atomic weapons are forgotten the day war is declared. Yet this is precisely how Montezuma understood matters.

Hitherto, I have described the symbolic behavior of the Indians in a systematic and synthetic form. In closing this chapter, I should like to follow a single account which I have not yet cited, that of the conquest of Michozacoan (a region west of Mexico City), both to illustrate a description in its entirety and in order not to let "theory" prevail over narrative. This account was apparently given by a Tarascan noble to the Franciscan Martin de Jesús de la Concha, who reported it in his Relación de Michocan, written around 1540.

The narrative begins with omen: "These people say that during the four years before the Spaniards came to the land, their temples were burned from top to bottom, that they closed them and they would be burned again, and that the rock walls fell, as their temples were made of flagstones. They did not know the cause of this except that they held it to be an augury. Likewise, they saw two large comets in the sky. . . . (III, 19).

"A priest related that, before the Spaniards came, he had dreamed that people would appear bringing strange animals which turned out to be the horses which he had not known. . . . The priest also indicated that the priests of the mother of Cuauhtemoc, who were in a village called Cuapecuauro, had come to the father of the late Cazon [the king before the preceding one] and reported the following dream or revelation prophesying the destruction of the house of their gods, in event which actually happened in Ucanca. . . . There will be no more temples or fireplaces, nor will any more smoke rise, everything shall become a desert because other men are coming to the earth" (ibid.).

"The people of the Hot Lands say that a fisherman in his boat was
fishing in the river with a hook and that a very large fish took the hook, but the fisherman could not bring it in. An alligator appeared, and from I do not know where in that river, snatched the fisherman from the boat, swallowed him and sank into very deep water. The fisherman grappled with the alligator and, defeating him, brought him to his own fine home. Upon arriving at his home, the fisherman bowed to the alligator, who then said to him: you shall see that I am a god; go to the city of Michoacán and tell the king, who is over all of us and whose name is Zhuangac, that the signal has been given that there are now new men and all who have been born in all quarters of the land are to die. Tell this to the king (ibid.).

"They say that there were other omens: that the cherry trees, even the small ones, would produce berries, the small magnets would produce stalls, and that little girls would become pregnant while still children" (III, 21).

The new event must be projected into the past, in the form of an omen, in order to be integrated into the narrative of the confrontation, for it is the past that prevails in the present. "How can we contradict what has been established?" (III, 19). If the event had not been predicted, one might simply not have acknowledged its existence. "Never have we heard of the coming of other people from our ancestors... By this we shall be guided, since there was no recollection of this in days gone by nor did the old people tell one another that these men were to come" (III, 21). Thus speaks the Cazoczi, king of the Tarascans, trusting more to the ancient narratives than to the new perceptions, and finding a compromise solution in the fabrication of omens.

Yet there is no lack of direct, firsthand information. Montezuma sends ten messengers to the Cazoczi of Michoacán to ask for help. These men supply a specific account: "The Master of Mexico, called Montezuma, sends us and some other lords with orders to report to our brother the Cazoczi about the strange men who have come and taken us by surprise. We have met them in battle and killed some two hundred of those who came riding deer and two hundred of those who were not mounted. Those deer wore coats of mail and carried something that sounds like the clouds, makes a great thundering noise and kills all those it meets leaving not one. They completely broke up our formation and killed many of us. They are accompanied by people from Tlaxcala, because these people have turned against us" (III, 20). Suspi-

The Cazoczi decides to check this information. He seizes several Otomi and interrogates them; they confirm the preceding account. This does not satisfy him; he sends his own delegation into the besieged city, they return repeating the earlier information and specifying the military propositions of the Aztecs, who have foreseen in detail the Tarascans' possible military intervention.

At this point the old Cazoczi dies; he is replaced by his oldest son. The Aztecs (under Cuauhtéocan rather than Montezuma) grow impatient and send a new delegation to repeat their proposals. The new Cazoczi's reaction is revealing: without impugning the truth or usefulness of what the messengers declare, he decides to sacrifice them. "Let them follow my father to the inferno and present him with the petition there. Tell them to prepare themselves because this is the custom." The Mexica were so informed, and they replied that as the Master had ordered it, it should be done, and they asked that it be done quickly, adding that there was nowhere for them to go, they could voluntarily come to their death. The Mexica were made ready in the customary manner, after being informed that they were taking their message to the dead Cazoczi, and were sacrificed in the temple of Caracax and Xaraxtang (III, 22).

The only positive step the Tarascans will take is to put the messengers to death; the Cazoczi provides no active response to the Aztecs' request. First of all, he does not like them, they are the traditional enemy and, in fact, he is not so sorry that such disasters should befall them. "What purpose would it have in sending men to Mexico, for we are always at war when we approach each other, and there is no peace between us?" (III, 20). "For what purpose are we to go to Mexico? Each one of us might go only to die, and we know not what they will say about us afterwards. Perhaps they will sell us to these men who are coming and will be the cause of our being killed. Let the Mexica do their own conquering or let them all come join us with their generals. Let the strangers kill the Mexica..." (III, 22).

The other reason for the refusal to oppose the Spaniards is that they are taken for gods. "Where would they come from but from the heavens?" (III, 21). "Why would the strangers come without cause? A god has sent them, that is why they come!" (III, 21). The Cazoczi said that these were gods from the heavens and to each Spaniard he gave a round golden shield and blankets" (III, 23). It is in order to explain surprising facts that a divine hypothesis is resorted to: the
supernatural is the child of determinism; and this belief paralyzes any attempt at resistance. "In the belief that they were gods, the dignitaries told the women not to harm them, for what those gods were carrying off belonged to them" (III, 26).

Thus the first reaction is the refusal to intervene on the human level, and the involvement of the divine sphere: "Let us wait and see. Let them come and try to take us. Let us do our best to hold our own a little longer in order to get wood for the temples" (III, 21; this wood is for the ritual fires). In the same spirit, when the Spaniards’ advent seems inevitable, the Cacozontes gathers his family and servants together so that they can all drown themselves in the waters of the lake.

At the last moment, he decides against this course of action; but his eventual attempts to resist continue on the level of communication familiar to him—communication with the world and not with men. Neither he nor his family manage to see through the conquistadores’ hypocrisy. "Perhaps the fate which awaits us at the hands of the Spaniards is not so bad as that," says one of the Tarascans leaders. "I saw the Lords from Mexico who are coming with them, if these were slaves why would they be wearing turquoise collars round their necks, and rich blankets and green plumages as they do?" (III, 25). The Spaniards’ behavior remains incomprehensible to them: "Why do they want this gold? These gods must eat it, that could be the only reason they want so much" (III, 26; Cortés, apparently, had offered this explanation: the Spaniards need gold as the cure for a sickness. The Indians, who identify gold with excrement, find this difficult to accept). Money, as a universal equivalent, does not exist among the Tarascans: the entire Spanish power structure eludes them. The production of symbols is no more fortunate than the interpretation; the first Spaniards bring the Cacozontes, God knows why, ten pigs and a dog; he accepts them with thanks, but in reality dreads them: "He took them to be omen, and ordered the pigs and the dog killed and the people dragged them off and threw them in a weed patch" (III, 25). With more tragic consequences, the Cacozontes reacts in the same way when he is brought Spanish weapons: "Whenever the Tarascans came into possession of firearms captured from the Spaniards, the weapons were offered to the gods in the temples" (III, 22). We realize why the Spaniards did not even have to wage war: they prefer, once they have arrived, to convokw the local leaders and fire their cannon into the air a few times: the Indians fall to the ground in terror; the symbolic use of weapons proves to be sufficiently effective.

The Spaniards’ victory in the conquest of Michoacán is swift and complete: no battle, no victims on the side of the conquistadores. The Spanish leaders—Cristóbal de Olid, Cortés himself, then Núñez de Guzmán—promise, threaten, and extort all the gold they find. The Cacozontes gives, always hoping it will be for the last time. In order to be more secure, the Spaniards take him prisoner; when they fail to obtain satisfaction, they do not hesitate to torture him and his family: they are hanged, their feet are searched with burning oil, their genitals prodded with a metal rod. When Núñez de Guzmán decides that the Cacozontes can no longer be of any use, he "condemns" him to a triple death: first, "he is attached to a piece of matting hooked to a horse’s tail, the horse being ridden by a Spaniard" (III, 29). After having been dragged through the streets of the town, he is garroted, and finally his body is flung on a pyre and burned; his ashes will be scattered in the river.

The Spaniards win the war. They are incontrovertibly superior to the Indians in the realm of interpersonal communication. But their victory is problematic: for there is not just one form of communication, one dimension of symbolic activity. Every action has its share of ritual and its share of improvisation; all communication is, necessarily, both paradigm and syntagm, code and context; man has just as much need to communicate with the world as with men. The encounter of Montezuma with Cortés, of the Indians with the Spaniards, is first of all a human encounter; and we cannot be surprised that the specialists in human communication should triumph in it. But this victory from which we all derive, Europeans and Americans both, delivers as well a terrible blow to our capacity to feel in harmony with the world, to belong to a preestablished order; its effect is to repress man’s communication with the world, to produce the illusion that all communication is interpersonal communication; the silence of the gods weighs upon the camp of the Europeans as much as on that of the Indians. By winning on one side, the Europeans lost on the other; by imposing their superiority upon the entire country, they destroyed their own capacity to integrate themselves into the world. During the centuries to follow, they would dream of the noble savage, but the savage was dead or assimilated; and this dream was doomed to remain a sterile one. The victory was already big with its defeat; but this Cortés could not know.