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Foreword

Return to Quetzalcoatl

DAVÍD CARRASCO

It is the capacity for rising to a clear perception of structures of thought and knowledge, of their similarities and criteria of truth and validity; above all a grasp of their central principles—and therefore of what is the nerve and muscle and what the surrounding tissue in any human construction, what is novel and revolutionary in a discovery and what is development of existing knowledge—that lifts men intellectually. It is this that elevates them to that power of contemplating patterns, whether permanent or changing, buried in, or imposed on, the welter of experience, which philosophers have regarded as man's highest attribute; but even if they are mistaken in this, it is surely not an unworthy goal for what we like to call higher education.

ISAIAH BERLIN, *THE POWER OF IDEAS*¹

In the last ten years I have worked on one of Mexico's most beautiful and revealing early colonial pictorial "maps," the Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No. 2.² One challenging question when facing the historical puzzle of the labyrinthine story of the Chichimecas is, when did the narrative show major changes or turning points? Asking this same question about major turning points in Mesoamerican studies leads us to this new publication and the sustained innovative achievements and "clear perception of structures of thought and knowledge" by the Mexican anthropologist Alfredo López Austin.

Did his profound impact on Mesoamerican studies begin with his two-volume *Cuerpo humano e ideología: Las concepciones de los antiguos nahuas* (1987),

published in English as *Human Body and Ideology: Concepts among the Ancient Nahuas* (1988)? Some may argue that the Spanish and English versions of his synthetic *The Myths of the Opossum: Pathways in Mesoamerican Mythology* (1993) or his *Tamoanchan/Tlalocan: Places of Mist* (2000) were the game changers. An argument can be made that it all began as far back in his succinct 1975 article “Algunas ideas acerca del tiempo mítico entre los antiguos nahuas” and took a new turn with his *Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures* article “Cosmovision” (2000). In Mesoamerican archaeology, perhaps Proyecto Templo Mayor, directed by Eduardo Matos Moctezuma was the greatest turning point in the last fifty years. For Maya linguistic studies, we can pin the prize for game changing on the cracking of the Maya code over several decades with some credit to Linda Schele as the pioneer. In written scholarship, my answer to the question, where and when did a superior Mesoamerican “turning point” in interpretation begin—where did a *new* “grasp of central principles” show forth—is López Austin’s Spanish edition of *Hombre-Dios: Religión y Política en el Mundo Náhuatl*, first published in 1973. With the University Press of Colorado’s smart move to publish Russ Davidson’s meticulous translation of this book under the title *The Myth of Quetzalcoatl: Religion, Rulership, and History in the Nabua World*, we discover where and how López Austin elevated the discourse through his “power of contemplating” unseen patterns, permanent and changing, that were “buried in, or imposed on, the welter of experience” in Mesoamerica.

To begin to grasp López Austin’s significance and influence in Mesoamerican studies just peruse the articles of the recent publication *The Art of Urbanism: How Mesoamerican Kingdoms Represented Themselves in Architecture and Imagery*, edited by William Fash and Leonardo López Luján. You see traces of López Austin’s vision, language, categories, writings, insights, and arguments throughout the fifteen essays, often acknowledged by individual authors and present without acknowledgment. His writings about *hombre dios*, divine possession, *tamoanchan*, *cuero humanos*, myths of the opossums, the *altepetl*, *monte sagrados*, and cosmovision have come to permeate Mesoamerican scholarship as those of no other thinker in recent memory. This influence and new interpretive language all started with this book’s publication in Spanish—and now this book has a new birth in English.

This return to Quetzalcoatl is appropriate, for in his new introduction to this book, Alfredo writes about the “cyclical character” of his work. As though describing the serpentine and circular pathways of the Mapa de Cuauhtinchan he writes, “One constantly returns to the causes that underlay and inspired the resolve to write; the roads we face, and take, become circular.” For him his “obsession” with the complexity and richness of the “mysterious nature” of the history of Quetzalcoatl and the city of Tollan led him to write *Hombre-Dios*, wherein he identified the bedrock questions that led his prodigious, amazing career to move forward *and backward*.

I believe the present publication in English will reveal the book to be what the great Italian essayist Italo Calvino calls a “classic.” In his free-flowing essay “Why Read the Classics,” Calvino gives fourteen “suggested definitions” of a classic, including a “book that has never finished saying what it has to say.”³ For Spanish-speaking readers this book is already a classic, still saying much and well over forty years after it first appeared. Now the classic is reborn in English, and soon many more students and colleagues at a growing number of universities will gain access to the author’s deeply engaged work on the religious imagination of the long and continuing history of Mesoamerican societies.

I express my gratitude to the University Press of Colorado for the contributions this book will make to future scholarship and understandings of Mesoamerica’s long history of Quetzalcoatl, “other” Tollans, *hombre dioses*, and politics. In the end the best comparison is between Alfredo’s achievement and what Isaiah Berlin says at the beginning of this preface. If anyone among us can be said to demonstrate the capacity for grasping the central principles and showing us what has been the nerve and muscle *and heart* in the human constructions of Mesoamerica, it is Alfredo López Austin, who began that journey in this publication that helped lift us intellectually into a new era of understanding.

NOTES

1. Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, 223.
2. Carrasco and Sessions, *Cave, City, and Eagle’s Nest*.
3. Calvino, “Why Read the Classics.”

Introduction

ALFREDO LÓPEZ AUSTIN
MEXICO CITY, DECEMBER 2013

Broadly speaking, our life unfolds and develops amidst the confluence of two types of time: time that is linear, unidirectional, and irreversible and time that is circular, cyclical, and repetitive. The difference between them has proved to be grist for the history mill, leading many who study the past down a wayward path; they have used this difference, and the supposed opposition that it sets up, to ground and subordinate history and its meanings in and to the conceptions of time that the major cultures have evolved. I believe that this scheme of categorical opposites, while attractive, is false. As peoples and individuals alike, we live simultaneously in the consciousness of both types of time, something that the older among us can appreciate more vividly.

Whenever the possibility of a reedition or a translation of one my books presents itself, and a certain obligatory question is put to me, I tend to reflect on this problem. Recessions and translations constitute turns, whether large or small, in the cycle that began with the original publication. In their own way, they are a return to the starting point of the editorial part of a work. In the case at hand, the translator, Russ Davidson, asked me the familiar question: Would I like to take advantage of the occasion to revise, or modify, or amplify what I had written some four decades earlier? I answered as I had on previous occasions, that I did not think it opportune. In general, such changes as I have made involve only truly glaring problems: a wrong fact or datum, an unfortunate misprint, a rash proposition; oversights that, once recognized, have led to many a restless night. As for any remaining problems,

they are entries in the ledger of unsuccessful experiences that help one acquire the understanding that, while no work is perfect, it nonetheless demands maximum care. Hard lessons, these, but they prepare the way for future work and for aiming at the chimera of perfection. For the researcher and his labor of investigation and writing, it is the reality and the imprint of linear time.

Yet the cyclical character of the researcher's work is likewise present and calls for recognition. In all this work, one constantly returns to the causes that underlay and inspired the resolve to write; the roads we face, and take, become circular. The cycle manifests itself in the form of permanent obsessions. The researcher is again animated by themes that, in the passage of time, have taken on new semblances and configurations; the questions that are never wholly answered strike us once again, and we find ourselves swimming in what seem to be the same waters as before.

All of the foregoing fully applies to *Hombre-Dios*. From an early age, and throughout my younger years, the history of Quetzalcoatl—its mysterious nature—captivated me, to the extent that I submerged myself in the historical sources that spoke of this strange personage. Subsequently, with the greater fund of information that only time can bring, I ventured to formulate the set of ideas that took shape in *Hombre-Dios*. Since these, however, were anything but orthodox, they sparked a debate that I carried on with myself for years. Only by slow degrees did I reach the point of accepting these ideas. Yet the cycle—the obsessive cycle—had taken wing, so that time and again, in subsequent works, all of the bedrock questions reasserted themselves. One of these was the emergence on earth of a host of terrestrial cities that aspired to be copies, extensions, the living inheritance of those rising up in the heavenly spheres, such as Paradise reflected in Jerusalem, or the cosmic Tollan projected in the Tula of Quetzalcoatl—a transposition to the world of men that was repeated down the centuries in Chichén Itzá, in Xicocotitlan, in Cholula, even in Mexico-Tenochtitlan. In due course, this phenomenon appeared in the studies I carried out on other cities, in particular, the mythical Tamoanchan, to which I devoted the book *Tamoanchan y Tlalocan*.¹ Elsewhere, in still another turn of the wheel, I examined—jointly with my son, Leonardo López Luján—the complex political dynamic that produced the tangled confusion of multiple Quetzalcoatl: the Quetzalcoatl of myth, of legend, and of history. Thus, our book *Mito y realidad de Zuyuá*.² For decades now, the obsession has also caused me to return to the theme of divine possession, or to what can be seen as a *nabualización* of the gods,³ who manifest themselves in the bodies of human beings so that the latter can carry out and fulfill their whims, desires, purposes, and functions. Similarly, the figure of Quetzalcoatl as a mythical personage is another theme to which I constantly return—for example, in his manifestation as Ehecatl, the god of the winds, when he makes the musicians of the Sun the victims of his deceptions; or in his role as

the maker, with his own blood, of the first men; or how later he divides himself into multiple gods so they, in turn, can become the patron gods who, in mimicry of Quetzalcoatl, will create different groups of humans out of their own substance. Thus has the obsessive return of Tollan and Quetzalcoatl recurred in my life. In the future, when my own being will have dissolved into nothingness, Tollan and Quetzalcoatl will mock my obsession with them and, indifferent to it, will go on rising up as great mysteries in the stream of history.

But again, I return to linear time. The book should remain unchanged. Like all individual works, it is a social product that corresponds to a particular era. As such, it reflects the scholarly questions and preoccupations of its time—the historiographical and ideological currents then in vogue; the difficulties imposed by the scant range of documentary sources; the echo of the dialogue, now free-flowing, now abbreviated, with one's colleagues; and the teachings of our academic mentors and guides, among them the unforgettable H. B. Nicholson, whose work *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl* circulated among us, though it was not published until many years later. In sum, *Hombre-Dios* is firmly anchored in linear time. It was, with all its errors, a small piece of the enormous puzzle of the Mesoamerican historiography of its day.

We are a product of the dialectic of our conceptions of time: that of linear time, that of cyclical time. In rebellion, I attempt to evade both forms of time in the smooth folds of continuity. On its first appearance, I dedicated *Hombre-Dios* to Martha Rosario. I go on doing so today, as always, with my love.

NOTES

1. Alfredo López Austin, *Tamoanchan y Tlalocan*, Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1994; trans. Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano and Thelma Ortiz de Montellano as *Tamoanchan, Tlalocan: Places of Mist* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1997).

2. Alfredo López Austin and Leonardo López Austin, *Mito y realidad de Zuyuí. Serpiente Emplumada y las transformaciones mesoamericanas del Clásico al Posclásico*, Mexico City: El Colegio de México, Fideicomiso Historia de las Américas y Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999; abridged version trans. Scott Sessions as “The Myth and Reality of Zuyuí: The Feathered Serpent and Mesoamerican Transformations from the Classic to the Postclassic,” in *Mesoamerica's Classic Heritage: From Teotihuacan to the Aztecs*, ed. David Carrasco, Lindsay Jones, and Scott Sessions (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000), 21–84.

3. Translator's note: See chapter 7, page 82, for a definition of this concept.