

José María Heredia (1803-1839)

En el teocalli de Cholula¹

¡Cuánto es bella la tierra que habitaban²
los aztecas valientes! En su seno,
en una estrecha zona concentrados
con asombro se ven todos los climas
que hay desde el polo al Ecuador. Sus llanos
cubren a par de las doradas mieses
las cañas deliciosas. El naranjo
y la piña y el plátano sonante,
hijos del suelo equinocial, se mezclan
a la frondosa vid, al pino agreste,
y de Minerva al árbol magestoso.
Nieve eternal corona las cabezas
de Iztaccihual purísimo, Orizaba
y Popocatepec; sin que el invierno
toque jamás con destructora mano
los campos fertilísimos, do ledo
los mira el indio en púrpura ligera
y oro teñirse, reflejando el brillo
del sol en occidente, que sereno
en yelo eterno y perenal verdura
a torrentes vertió su luz dorada,
y vio a naturaleza conmovida
con su dulce calor hervir en vida.

How beautiful is the land the brave Aztecs
once inhabited! In their bosom,
concentrated into a narrow region
are all climate zones seen from the pole
to the Equator that dazzle the eyes. Tasty
sugarcane as well as golden cornfields
cover their plains. Orange trees
pineapple and resounding banana trees,
offspring of the equinoctial soil, intermix
with leafy vines, with sylvan pines,
and with Minerva's majestic tree.³
Eternal snows crown the heads
of purest Iztaccíhuatl, Orizaba
and Popocatépetl;⁴ but winter,
with its destructive hands, never touches
their extremely fertile fields, where the Indian
happily watches them turn to hues
of light purple and gold, reflecting the sun's
western rays, for, winter, calmly
in eternal ice and everlasting greenery
poured down its golden light in torrents
and saw Nature deeply moved and stirred
to teeming life by its sweetly gentle heat.

Era la tarde: su ligera brisa
las alas en silencio ya plegaba,
y entre la yerba y árboles dormía,
mientras el ancho sol su disco hundía
detrás de Iztaccihual. La nieve eternal
cual disuelta en mar de oro, semejaba
temblar en torno de él; un arco inmenso
que del empíreo en el zenith finaba,
como espléndido portico del cielo
de luz vestido y centellante gloria
de sus últimos rayos recibía
los colores riquísimos. Su brillo
desfalleciendo fue: la blanca luna
y de Vénus la estrella solitaria
en el cielo desierto se veían.
¡Crepúsculo feliz! Hora más bella
que la alma noche o el brillante día,
¡cuánto es dulce tu paz al alma mía!

Hallábame sentado en la famosa
Cholulteca pirámide. Tendido
el llano inmenso que ante mí yacía,
los ojos a espaciarse convidaba.
¡Qué silencio! ¡qué paz! ¡Oh! ¿quién diría
que en estos bellos campos reina alzada
la bárbara oppression, y que esta tierra

In the late afternoon its soft breeze
was folding its wings silently,
while falling asleep among the trees
and vines, and the disk of the broad sun
was sinking behind Iztaccíhuatl. Dissolving
into a virtual sea of gold, around it
seemed to tremble the eternal snows;
a giant arc, like a sublime celestial portico
dressed in light and bathing in the rich,
colorful, sparkling glory of its final rays,
was waning in the empyreal zenith.
Its shimmering light was failing: the white
moon and Venus, the first solitary star
in the deserted sky, were coming into view.
Most felicitous twilight! Oh signal hour
more beautiful than the refreshing night
or shining day. The peace you bestow
is most welcome sweetness for my soul!

I found myself sitting atop the famous
pyramid of Cholula. Stretching out
at my feet was the vast unmatched plain
inviting my eyes to a sumptuous feast.
What silence! What peace! Oh! Who could say
that barbarous oppression once reigned
over these beautiful fields, and this soil

brotan mieses tan ricas, abonada
con sangre de hombres, en que fue inundada
por la superstición y por la guerra...?

produces such fertile cornfields manured
by human blood, and that it was flooded
by ancient superstition and by war... ?

Bajó la noche en tanto. De la esfera
el leve azul, oscuro y más oscuro
se fue tornando: la movible sombra
de las nubes serenas, que volaban
por el espacio en alas de la brisa,
era visible en el tendido llano.
Iztaccíhuatl purísimo volvía
del argentado rayo de la luna
el plácido fulgor, y en el oriente,
bien como puntos de oro, centellaban
mil estrellas y mil ... ¡Oh! Yo os saludo,
fuentes de luz, que de la noche umbría
ilumináis el velo,
y sois del firmamento poesía!

And before long night fell. The powder blue
of the sky increasingly darkened more
and then darkened more again: the moving
shadow of the peaceful clouds, flying
through the region on the wings of the air,
was visible across the entire plain.
Purest Iztaccíhuatl was returning
tranquil glow of the moon's silvery rays
and far distant in the east, just like
points of golden light, a thousand stars
and a thousand more ... Oh! I greet you,
the fountains of light, who illuminate
the veil of shady night,
and who are the poetry of the firmament.

Al paso que la luna declinaba,
y al ocaso fulgente descendía
con lentitud la sombra se extendía
del Popocatepec, y semejaba
fantasma colosal. El arco oscuro
a mí llegó, cubriome, y su grandeza
fue mayor y mayor, hasta que al cabo
en sombra universal veló la tierra.

In step with the moon gradually sinking
into the resplendent western sky,
the shadow from Popcatépetl slowly
reached out and spread forth resembling
a colossal phantasm. The shaded arc
finally touched me, covering me,
its grandeur grew and grew until at last
it veiled the earth in its cosmic shade.

Volví los ojos al volcán sublime,
que velado en vapores transparentes,
sus inmensos contornos dibujaba
de occidente en el cielo.

¡Gigante del Anáhuac! ¿Cómo el vuelo
de las edades rápidas no imprime
alguna huella en tu Nevada frente?
Corre el tiempo veloz, arrebatando
años y siglos, como el Norte fiero
precipita ante sí la muchedumbre
de las olas del mar. Pueblos y reyes
viste hervir a tus pies, que combatían
cual hora combatimos, y llamaban
eternas sus ciudades, y creían
fatigar a la tierra con su Gloria.

Fueron: de ellos no resta ni memoria.
¿Y tú eterno serás? Tal vez un día
de tus profundas bases desquiciado
caerás; abrumará tu gran ruina
al yermo Anáhuac; alzaránse en ella
nuevas generaciones, y orgullosas
que fuiste negarán...

Todo perece
por ley universal. Aun este mundo
tan bello y tan brillante que habitamos
es el cadaver pálido y deforme

I turned my eyes to the sublime volcano,
which, visible through a foggy curtain
in the western sky, was outlining
the contours of its immense design.
Oh, Giant of Anáhuac Valley!⁵ The flight
of fleeing ages, why has it not stamped
some sign on your snow-covered forehead?
Time advances swiftly, carrying away
years and centuries, like a fierce Norther
headlong hurls before it the wave upon wave
of the sea's wild surf. You've seen peoples
and kings boil at your feet, those who would fight
as we fight now, and they used to think
their cities were eternal, and they thought
they could overwhelm the earth with their Glory.
They ceased to exist: nothing, not even memory
of them remains. And will you be eternal?
Perhaps someday you too will fall unhinged
from your solid pedestal; your grand ruin
will fall like fog over barren Anáhuac Valley;
new generations, proud ones, will rise in it,
they will deny your ever existed ...

Everything perishes
by universal edict. Even this world
that we inhabit, so beautiful and shining,
is the pale and misshapen cadaver

de otro mundo que fue ...

En tal contemplación embebecido
sorprendiome el sopor. Un largo sueño
de glorias engolfadas y perdidas
en la profunda noche de los tiempos
descendió sobre mí. La agreste pompa
de los reyes aztecas desplegóse
a mis ojos atónitos. Veía
entre la muchedumbre silenciosa
de emplumados caudillos levantarse
el déspota salvaje en rico trono,
de oro, perlas y plumas recamado;
y al son de caracoles belicosos
ir lentamente caminando al templo
la vasta procesión, do la aguardaban
sacerdotes horrible, salpicados
con sangre humana rostros y vestidos.
Con profundo estupor el pueblo esclavo
las bajas frentes en el polvo hundía,
y ni mirar a su señor osaba,
de cuyos ojos férvidos brotaba
la saña del poder.

Tales ya fueron

tus monarcas, Anáhuac, y su orgullo,

of another bygone world ...

Deeply enmeshed in these meditations,
suddenly I fell into a stupor.
Into a dream of engrossing delights
I lapsed, lost in the deepest, darkest night
of the ages. The coarse, rural splendor
of the Aztec monarchs at once appeared
before my astonished eyes. I could see,
hidden among the vast silent masses
of befeathered caudillos, rising up
the savage despot seated on a throne
encrusted with gold and pearls and feathers;
and, to the sound of warlike seashell bells
the vast procession deliberately marched
to the pyramid's temple, where there stood
horrific priests splattered from head to foot,
both faces and vestments, in human blood.
In a profound stupor the enslaved people
cast their downcast eyes on their dusty feet,
not did they dare raise their eyes to their lord,
from whose fervent, burning eyes there gushed forth
the cruel fury of power.

Of such a kind

were your monarchs, Anáhuac, and their pride,

su vil superstición y tiranía
en el abismo del no ser se hundieron.
Sí, que la muerte, universal señora
hiriendo a par al déspota y esclavo,
escribe la igualdad sobre la tumba.
Con su manto benéfico el olvido
tu insensatez oculta y tus furoros
a la raza presente y la futura.
Esta inmensa estructura
vio a la superstición más inhumana
en ella entronizarse. Oyó los gritos
de agonizantes víctimas, en tanto
que el sacerdote, sin piedad ni espanto
les arrancaba el corazón sangriento;
miró el vapor espeso de la sangre
subir caliente al ofendido cielo,
y tender en el sol fúnebre velo,
y escuchó los horrendos alaridos
con que los sacerdotes sofocaban
el grito del dolor.

Muda y desierta
ahora te ves, Pirámide. ¡Más vale
que semanas de siglos yazcas yerma,
y la superstición a quien serviste
en el abismo del infierno duerma!
A nuestros nietos últimos, empero,
sé lección saludable; y hoy al hombre

their vile superstition and tyranny
sank into the abyss of unbeing.
Indeed, for death—the universal mistress
who strikes down despots as well as slaves—
engraves the high and the low on their tombs.
With its beneficent mantle, oblivion
hides from both current and future peoples
your raging ardor and your senselessness.
This immense structure
saw the most inhuman superstition
enthroned upon its peak. It heard the cries
of its victims dying in agony,
while the priest, without pause or pity,
went about tearing out their bloody hearts;
it gazed upon the viscid steam of the blood
rising as a hot offense to the heavens,
laying a mournful veil over the sun,
and it heard the horrifying shrieking
with which those frightful priests would suffocate
their cry of pain.

Mute and deserted,
oh Pyramid, is how I see you now.
It's best you lie barren for weeks and weeks
of centuries and for the superstition
you served to rest in the abyss of hell!
Nevertheless, may you be a lesson
for our latest offspring; and, for today's

que ciego en su saber fútil y vano
al cielo, cual Titán, trueno orgulloso,
sé ejemplo ignominioso
de la demencia y del furor humano.

(Diciembre de 1820)

José María Heredia, *Poesías*. 4th ed.
New York: Roe Lockwood & Son, 1853.⁷

people, blind in their futile, vain knowledge,
do thunder to the sky, like proud Titan⁶
and be an ignominious example
of humanity's madness and fury.

(December 1820)

Translation by William Little©, 2010

¹ For the Mexican city of Cholula, see: => [Cholula](#).

² This poem's Spanish prosodic form is that of unrhymed hendasyllables (eleven syllables) in stanzas of variable number of lines. The English translation likewise is unrhymed but, unlike the Spanish version, no strict English meter is followed, but rather it follows only rule of the poetic sense of the line.

³ In Greek mythology the olive tree was the sacred tree the goddess Minerva (Rome) or Athena (Greece). Among other things, she is the goddess of wisdom, war, civilization, justice, and skill.

⁴ For the Aztec legend of Popocatepetl and Ixtaccíhuatl, see: => [Cholula's Volcanoes](#). For a photographic journey between these legendary peaks, see: => [Paso de Cortés](#). As for the stratovolcano Orizaba (Citlaltépetl in Náhuatl: mountain star) it is the highest mountain peak (18,490 feet) in Mexico and the third highest peak in North America.

⁵ The Valley of Mexico (Spanish: Valle de Anáhuac < Náhuatl: "land between the waters") is the high plateau region of central Mexico that once was the heartland of the Aztecs. The Valley encompasses Mexico's capital (D.F.: Distrito Federal) and parts of the states of México, Hidalgo, Tlascalá, and Puebla. Cholula is located in the last named state. The Valley has been continuously inhabited for the past 12,000 years due to its mild climate and rich soil that has supported an abundance of both agriculture and animal life including, notably, great human civilizations (i.e., Teotihuacán, Toltec, and Aztec).

⁶ The Titans in Greek mythology were early gods who ruled during the mythological Golden Age. However, like the Aztec Pyramid in Heredia's poem, these earlier god giants were overthrown by younger gods, the gods of Olympus, in a "titanic battle" known as the Titanomachy. The result was a cultural paradigm shift like the one that occurred when the Spanish empire supplanted the Aztec empire in Mesoamerica.

⁷ The translator has limited emendations in the Spanish transcription from the 1853 edition to modern diacritical marks when the stress is unaffected, and the English version modernizes the spelling of toponyms.