and images are forcefully separated by the colonial logic of writing, the painting of the singing Xipe Totec is a correlative of the transcribed chant, which also seems to have the power to breathe life into the image.

8.1.2. The huehuetlatolli and the book

Aside from the cuicame, there is another section in both Primeros Memoriales and the Florentine Codex that includes the transcription of recited texts—namely, prayers and admonitions given by the rulers to their people and by parents to their children. Paragraphs 15–17 of Primeros Memoriales and Book 6 of the Florentine Codex are dedicated to the huehuetlatolli (words of the elders; Sullivan 1974). Unlike the cuicame, these texts are prosaic, although the language employed is still profusely rhetorical and metaphorical. The corresponding illustrations in both manuscripts share a lack of color and evident reliance on European models, especially engravings.

In Primeros Memoriales (paragraphs 15–17, ff. 61v–66r), uncolored images were deliberately employed to illustrate the rulers’ speeches and admonitions in a section of the manuscript on rulership. In folio 65v, the image of a lonely man illustrates “how the ruler felt compassion for the people” (Sahagún et al. 1997, 248; Fig. 8.5). The bearded

Figure 8.5. “How the ruler felt compassion for the people,” Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España. Madrid, Real Academia de la Historia, 9/5524, f. 65v.
man sits on an icpalli, a straw seat with a high back, and rests his head on his left hand in a pensive manner. This posture is typical of an innovative type of Ecce Homo or Man of Sorrows, which developed around 1500 in northern Europe and was especially popularized through German engravings and the work of Albrecht Dürer (Fig. 8.6). In New Spain, a close geographical and chronological example can be found in the upper cloister of the Augustinian convent in Malinalco in the state of Mexico. A despondent Christ sits on the cross, awaiting crucifixion (Fig. 8.7). A nun kneels and prays in front of Jesus, indicating the devotional and meditational nature of the image.

In the Florentine Codex, Book 6 includes the speeches of leaders but begins with prayers dedicated to the ancient gods, followed by a series of expiatory texts. In the first prayers, Tezcatlipoca is introduced as “principal god” (principal dios), betraying the Christianized overtones found throughout the texts. Moreover, all the illustrations are in grisaille, which led Magaloni Kerpel (2011, 73) to suggest an explicit adherence to European book illustrations of a mostly doctrinal and liturgical nature. The question remains, however, as to why the artists decided to employ such a strategy in this particular book.

Figure 8.8 presents a double illustration. A group of kneeling men in the bottom image direct their gaze upwards. The object of their attention is seemingly a monstrous creature floating in the sky in the top vignette. In the latter, a lone man stands with his arms crossed in a sign of respect for the same being. The illustrations seemingly depict Tezcatlipoca, who appears at the beginning of Book 1 in full attire. Here, however, the god is completely transformed, and his bifurcated tongue suggests a diabolical creature. In the image, the presence of both worshipers and a priest, who is cast in an intermediary role, separates the divine from the human in a clear hierarchical arrangement. At the same time, there are no costumes or musical instruments to indicate a specific ceremony or gods; instead, the image is a diagrammatic representation of a religious power structure.

Throughout Book 6 of the Florentine Codex, images and texts make constant (albeit indirect and implicit) references to Christianity by employing an image typology that abruptly deviates from Mesoamerican types and adheres to models derived from Christian doctrinal texts. Printing presses had been active in New Spain since 1539 and were almost exclusively devoted to the production of religious texts in Indigenous languages. It is likely that Indigenous peoples participated in the production of books in their native language, not only as writers and translators but also as illustrators and typographers (Grañén Porrúa 1991, 24–25, Garone Gravier 2011, 161–163). Despite fragmentary historical information, the participation of Indigenous intellectuals seems quite reasonable given that New Spain’s doctrinal books made extensive use of their native language in bilingual texts, a feature shared by Primeros Memoriales and the Florentine Codex, and indeed an innovation of New Spain’s presses. Therefore, it is unsurprising that manuscript and book illustrations resembled each other, as they were all simultaneously produced in the same intellectual milieu of the friars’ conventual schools.
The strikingly different visual references used by Nahua artists in illustrations of the cuicame and the discourses of the elders demonstrate that there were two types of religious images at play, each with a distinct cultural ancestry and formal and iconographic features. They conveyed a different religious experience in pictures and words. It is generally assumed that huehuetlatolli was a Mesoamerican genre (León Portilla 1961). In the colonial context of book production, while the cuicame were largely left untranslated, the more prosaic discourses of the elders seem to find a counterpart in the doctrinal genre employed by the friars (Dibble 1974).

As for the illustrations, Tezcatlipoca is distorted and monstrous in Book 6 of the Florentine Codex. In Book 1, he appears with all his diagnostic attributes, along with all the other Mesoamerican gods in an arrangement akin to the Greco-Roman pantheon (Botta 2016, Olivier 2016). Perhaps a Classical topos allowed the tlacuilo a truer image of the ancient gods who were no longer worshiped (not openly, at least) when the book was compiled. However, is this depiction more reliable, or have we come to “believe” colonial images of Mesoamerican gods because they present the readable iconic pictures that we need as scholars?

Figure 8.8. Prayer to Tezcatlipoca, Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Ms. Med. Palat. 219, vol. 2, bk. 6, f. 8r. Courtesy of MiC. Any further reproduction is prohibited.
The overall structure of the Florentine Codex, which loosely follows that of Primeros Memoriales, is encyclopedic and based on medieval and universalistic conceptions of knowledge (Robertson 1959, 167–172, Palmeri Capesciotti 2001, Rios Castaño 2014, ch. 3). As remarked by Quiñones Keber (1988, 207), the first six books of the manuscript are dedicated to ancient sacred wisdom, including chapters on gods, ceremonies, divination, and prognostication—all aspects also treated in ancient pictographic manuscripts. Books 7 to 12, by contrast, concern natural philosophy—topics and genres that have no counterpart in Indigenous manuscripts. The Mesoamerican roots of the first six books prioritized orality and performance tied to ritual events. Book 6 also belongs to this part, but incorporates Christian sermons and prayers, effectively mediating between a Mesoamerican conception of ceremonies and their depictions and Western rhetoric and images. While the texts are inspired and poetic in Book 6, Tezcatlipoca is depicted as unreachable and monstrous. Through the use of grisaille, the tlocuils commented on all that is missing when a Christian conception is applied to Mesoamerican religion: the gods are unrecognizable, distant, and silenced. Monochrome illustrations in Sahagún’s works typically accompanied very long texts that claimed to be verbatim reproductions of recited originals. The text is thus frozen and not performed. The gods have left this world, and the new religion posits a god who remains unknowable. The use of monochrome, based on engraved illustrations, communicates the idea that the Christian way of constructing doctrinal truth is incapable of conveying Mesoamerican divinity. Thus, Sahagunite illustrations express the impossibility of a resolution between Mesoamerican and Christian conceptions of the sacred.

8.1.3. History and its moral

Book 12 of the Florentine Codex relates the conquest of Mexico-Tenochtitlan by Cortés’ invading troops. The book is unique to the Florentine Codex and not present in Primeros Memoriales. Lockhart (1993, 1–27) argued that the narrative of the city’s siege and capitulations was likely collected at an early date in Tlatelolco, based on details of the account that specifically refer to this locality of Mexico City. It is well known that illustrations were left uncolored starting from Volume 3, Book 11, folio 178r, which is probably due to technical and logistical problems such as a lack of pigment or time to apply it before the work was shipped to Europe. However, in Book 12, the use of color is resumed in a few vignettes, thus creating a visible contrast with the rest of the images.

Folio 34r (Fig. 8.9) illustrates the rebellion of Tlatelolca warriors after the massacre perpetrated by the Spaniards in the sacred precinct during the celebrations of Toxcatl. A Nahua warrior overcomes his adversaries, who are falling in the background. His spear is horizontally positioned and straight, and the diagonal posture of his legs creates an abstract and solid composition that starkly contrasts with the dismembered bodies of the falling Spaniards. The colorful feathers on the warrior’s helm and the pink hue of his skin clearly indicate that the figures in the background are purposefully painted in grisaille. The Tlatelolca warrior is static and victorious, while the Spaniards are trampled and defeated.

The illustration neatly conforms to the genre of Book 12, which appears to be based on a long-standing European historiographic paradigm established by Greek historian Herodotus, a fact that has not been recognized before. Herodotus’ narration of the Greek war of resistance against the Achaemenid Empire combines eyewitness accounts of battles and other pivotal events of the conflict with anecdotal and ethnographic details about the jewelry, armor, and weapons of the foreign Persians (Hartog 2009). Sahagún (1950–1982, bk. 12) adheres to this Classical topos by declaring in the introduction to Book 12 that he wanted to compile the history of the conquest to record Indigenous terms for weaponry and other information related to the Nahua art of war. Ludo Snijders indicated to me in a personal communication (2015) that the reference to the Persian war was indeed explicit in the image under discussion, as well as in the following images in folios 36v and 39r because the shield of the Nahua warrior sports a capital lambda (Λ) whose diagonals mimic the firm posture of the Tlatelolca warrior. The letter is equivalent to the Latin “L” and stands for “Lacedaemon,” the Greek name of the city of Sparta. It bears remembering that the Spartans were the army that led the Greek coalition in a heroic last stand at Thermopylae.

In central Mexico, history was not as favorable to the Nahuaas as it was to the Greeks. When the Tlatelolca rebellion finally succumbed to the Spaniards, all was lost. The use of monochrome in this context functions within a specific historiographic genre and should not be understood in relation to chants, ceremonies, and performance, as analyzed above, but rather as a parable or moral. In “pagan” times, before the advent and imposition of Christianity, the confrontation between Spaniards and Nahuaas would have resulted in a favorable outcome for the besieged Nahuaas. The painter of the images in Book 12 took the final defeat and imposition of Christianity as an incontrovertible fact and a starting point. He projected the events of the conquest to an ancient time, when the “others” (or barbarians) would have been the Spaniards. Thus, the cities around the lake in the basin of Mexico were accordingly equated to the coalition of Greek cities against the invading Persian army.

The impact of Christianity’s imposition is evident in another illustration in which color is applied as a juxtaposition to monochrome. The vignette in folio 40v (Fig. 8.10) represents in a vertical arrangement the sequence of events that followed the death of Motecuhzoma II, leader of Tenochtitlan and the Mexica, and Itzquauhtzin, ruler of Tlatelolco, when the Spaniards threw their bodies into the city canals. Eventually, Nahua priests recovered the bodies and gave them a proper burial. In the first illustration at the top, two Spaniards and the rigid but lifeless body of Itzquauhtzin are painted in full color; this contrasts with