

Ollin

The winds that whistle through the valley of Mexico whisper. They don't howl, don't scream or beat or bellow. They are old and somber, patient, intelligent, sentient-nothing hectic like the blister of New York or the chorus of hopes deferred that flows through L.A., not the shattered pane that flies over Europe or winds thick with the pleas of a third world metropolis. It's as if the valley is an old sage, the hills and rivers the subtleties of his face, his soft exhales the breeze that has kissed striped cliff sides that look like slices cut from a cake and been the voice of a majestic desert with its invisible vibrance for thousands of years. He speaks his wisdom in this wind, in one word sermons because it is his only voice left; and his stories survive winding through blades of grass that grew in as much blood as water. Yes, the temples have crumbled and the gods have changed with the language of the prayers; gods of snakes and coyotes and stars are now saints and ghosts. Yet it's as if the sagacious wind escaping from underneath the old altars' falling blocks is God's pundit, his title sentence from which he swirls the words of the wind in a Victorian script. One may still hear the immortal whispers, echoes of an empire, flickering timeless truths like power, glory, honor, fate, destiny. I know because I've heard it, seen it exalt the receptive and topple the undeserving, and have allowed it to pervade every thought of my own. But this is not about one individual. It is about every individual. And lucky for us, the ancient wind that whispers still, does so in the dialect of that valley once called Anahuác-a language that has one word for those aforementioned truths ready to be heard in the wind's drive-by lecture. "Ollin," it calls- power, fate and legacy in a single word.

But when you translate the Nahuatl *ollin* to English, it loses its essence. Scholars have agreed on words like "motion" or "change" to confine the ambiguity of *ollin*, but I think the fact that we've used two words not even necessarily related in our own language to define something that's not entirely lucid in its native tongue is evidence to the complexity of a word that possesses an empire's story in two syllables. And that's because it's a concept and not just a word, a philosophy and cultural component that was very deeply ingrained into the everyday life of the Aztec people. If we absolutely must find words in English to contain *ollin* within the limits of our understanding, then I guess "impossible fluidity" might suffice for now. But that's not it either. To really understand *ollin* as a philosophy and decipher how absolutely vital it is to one's perception, one must first dissect the entire essence of an empire whose legacy is preserved in the graveyard of memories that serves as the hourglass's basement. But why? Because of power, vitality, efficiency, and the execution of purpose. After all, that is the definition of *ollin*-time passing and its uncertainty; fate's futility; potential and legacy; the seizing of power, true and personal, in our allotted time so that we survive beyond our years. It's about the demons of the clock and their evanescence and how a man is as powerful as he decides to be, about not fearing what is not understood because fear and power cannot coincide. To get to this understanding though, we must go back to the beginning-back to a time when power was prophylactic and weakness was fatal.

As is the case with any philosophy, understanding lies in application and not linguistics. And while the origins of *ollin* are unclear, that employment is thoroughly visible in, of all things, the naming of children-which is significant on two fronts: any

principle of living is only as relevant as it is livable; and our identities as individuals define our legacies.

When a child was born those centuries ago, the Aztecs (specifically the Mexíca tribe) had, like basically everything else in their culture, a symbolic and ritualistic, ceremonial process involved in the naming of that child. Upon birth, parents would take their offspring to a sort of scribe whose job it was to name and record the new citizens, referring to a pictographic "book" and calendar with which he'd name children based on the day, month, year, corresponding gods and unique traits associated with the day of birth. Thus, one's birthday immediately became part of one's identity, and you became a component, a working part of this complex society dependent on roles from the very first day. It was a means of control-subconscious, yes, but part of their philosophy: that roles are courses set for one's life and one's legacy-imperative, involuntary and vital; to not have a specific purpose in life was to not live. In essence, loose ends were weaknesses, which was not tolerated. Question marks were reserved for the gods because uncertainty, to the Aztecs, was a part of nature designed in the heavens, a tool of the gods to limit men and confuse the faint of will. And so, knowing what they did of human nature, the Mexíca social structure attempted to limit the possibility of confusion by writing one's story, one's fate, from birth.

The universe is not so easily contained, though. And adding even further to their wisdom, the Aztecs understood this as well. They made room within their belief system for the unknown, for that sliver of ambiguity that the gods desired. This is the cradle of the individual in the western ancient civilizations, the birthplace of, yes, greed and the thirst for power in society, but also of personal philosophy and discontent with predestined normalcy. It is the beginning of all those things that we today call individualism, freedom and the spirit of democracy. But stripped of all those titles that accompany modernization, this spirit was simply "ollin"- the spark of an individual's power in a world of puppetry.

When ollin took its residence in the scribe's "Naming Book", it appeared as more of a shadow than a picture of anything. This being because the Aztecs had no written language. They relied on pictures and colors to record, and each day in the naming book had a corresponding image. However, the days that fell under ollin's cloud had no set tone. They fell under the jurisdiction of a minor god who was dark, mysterious and double minded. They had no predetermined fate, no future colored red with blood and glory or the black of the priests, no lump of clay destiny with a personality already outlined. Instead, the children born on these days, these ollin days set aside in the calendar at the gods request, were born wanderers, explorers of time and power and fate, experiments in human will. They just didn't know it yet. And so this identity that was really a lack of one was ingrained from birth- a point of the finger and come hither from the heavens, even if it wasn't perceived as one.

It was due to a social mistrust of a roleless individual that the ollin distinction was no benefit. And as is the case with any society anywhere, social mistrust will breed pressure and labeling. The result here was that many "ollins" tended to dabble in sorcery and taboo to the point that some citizens even believed that certain ollins possessed the power to transform into jaguars at night. (This inability, or rather, refusal, to decipher reality from superstition would eventually be the death of the empire.) Thus, when the symbols that represented ollin appeared in the catalog of names, a shadow fell from the sun where

Huitzilopochtli resided. Through clouds and smoke and unanswered prayers it dove, passing across the scribe's face before it pierced the eyes of the newborn like a needle through leather-gradually, pervasively. The child, laying crying and ignorant, will live with the shadow forever as it becomes his reflection-what he sees when he looks through a glass, dimly. This baby doesn't know yet that it will have to choose between power and acceptance, between blood with its immediacy and the defeat of inaction, between that which he wants and that which is wise. The questioning glances and paper smiles will accompany him through his life until they become his demons and he becomes either a demon eater or cynicism's victim. He is destined for nothing, this ollin, except an existence on the edge, teetering constantly between choices either fatal or poor, but more powerful for it.

Here is where we must listen-or try to. Here is where the wind's whisper is translated to us as individuals-to English from Spanish; Spanish from Nahuatl; from Mexico City to Tenochtitlan and Tula to Tollan. It is where a seemingly simple tradition in an ancient empire becomes, through true perception, a philosophy of power, defying fate, a constitution of legacy. The translation, then, is not ephemeral, not alleged in the sense that it is questionable; for truths spoken through mirrors ring true in a way reserved for wisdom. Any soldier of time knows that.

Before more connections can be made, though, one must practice a vital and often forgotten part of philosophization: questions precede answers. So maybe ponder this: were they lost in a stitch, these wanderers of time, of ollin? Were they misplaced in a drawing of straws, or in possession of a power the majority could not control? Did they defy a society, or epitomize a culture so much that they transcended it? This is what we must ask ourselves, we who receive wings only by night, we who think that dreams must be restricted to hobbies. At least that's what we're told. But also, it's what ollin as a concept contains: that power and legacy are optional; that a man is or can be that which he decides to be and not what he is allowed.

That's the problem, though, isn't it?-that society as a means of control will stigmatize those who defy conformity by declaring them dangerous, defunctive, or weak. Ollin defies this. The Aztec people did not fear ollins for stigmatized weakness. They didn't fear anything human at all. Rather, they mistrusted the human will unrestrained because they knew all too well the power of a man, knew what damage a man on fire could inflict. With no set fate and no expectations to speak of, ollins did what was right to them. And that is exactly what society fears: The power of the individual. For whether one chooses to spur a mass with oration or take a life, society is terrified by what structures are crumbled by a well placed hand.

But power is polarizing: it either immortalizes or crumbles its holder. For that very reason, the lesson that arose from Anahuac was left incomplete; but time has left a bookmark from which those set apart might pick up at. It's not desert or mountains or fences that separate, but ollin and the incapability to capitalize on one's own power. Men with the power to build or break seldom build. We can add blades of knowledge to minds sharpened by time, yet we scheme instead of plan; our machinations wage wars on battlefields of our enemies' choosing because we perceive that all fights must be fought. We make often ignorance a flag as if it is a characteristic of infantry when it is really an indication of infancy in conviction, a justification of our state and our perceived inability to learn disguised as apathy. But it's no man's destiny to be dormant, no potential's fate

to be wasted. If one is a victim of their environment (or of anything), then they have allowed that victimization. And who is their assailant? Time? Another man? Or is it their own shortcoming, a failure to realize power over emotion, themselves? The identity that is victimization is allowed and voluntary and a pity. We live privileged to write our own destinies, so it makes no sense to allow our legacies to be controlled by the conformed.

I do understand, though, that legacy and the difference between fate and destiny are terms that confuse us outside of the usual context. Let us then travel that path for the sake of, if nothing else, perception.

A story left incomplete holds no power. It cannot be retold or relived, not revived because it lies comatose in its disunity. And so a story, like a person whose potential is unreached, loses its legacy, or the possibility of one; because legacy is a process, the result of meaning or significance becoming purpose; purpose becoming efficacy; and efficacy, when its potential is achieved, becoming legacy. Like the statue of an overthrown dictator, the incomplete story lives for nothing and thus will eventually die for nothing. Rather, it doesn't receive the privilege of dying, but is immortal in its failure, being whatever the opposite of power is. Relegated to a graveyard of regret, that which lives in the evanescence of mediocrity is vampiric in the sense that it or they live as something that means nothing, an echo of a battle already lost overheard by the hopeful awaiting news.

But this state of ineffectiveness I've described, this chosen mediocrity, is modern in western civilizations. In the East, both ancient Japan and India had states of social irrelevance, along with many other ancient civilizations. The Aztecs, however, had no such belief. Everybody had a role, and those few who did not- the ollins-were given a pen with which to write their fate. It's the modern western cultures-the religious ideology introduced by Spain in Mexico and South America; the obsession in American culture with capitalism and, in the past, Anglo Christian principles-that instituted class conflict and the tolerance of weakness in the lower stratus of society. It was ollin that gave every man a sword, ollin that let men refuse to live as shadows. This history allows us to see that legacy (what we are remembered by or for) outweighs fate (what we think we are supposed to do). Destiny, then, can be, if only in the sanctuary of the individual, that which we can be, the livability of potential. Because we are not remembered by potential, though, but by our history, legacy is destiny fulfilled, a process of which power is a by-product. In essence, we are only as remembered as we were effective. Yet we, in this society, with this culture, as stories unfinished, speak of fate as if it is anything in time, when in reality it is just a convenient reasoning, a justification of our present and our means and our mistakes. Our fate is only what we allow it to be, but our legacy once achieved is cement, finalized by the period that is our conviction. We may be, through our own ollin, stories finished because of meaning found, purpose pursued, and efficacy accomplished.

In my mind's eye, scribes sat on a hill slightly outside Anáhuac or Tula, looking at the stars they knew to be demons and pondering things like the means to an end, if purity in victory is anything, and if any man is destined to answer to another. Two hundred years later an author sits at his desk; his memories are shadows dancing on the wall to the rhythm of candlelight. Quill in hand he swirls his script and stares into his own thoughts. Another three hundred years go by, and now two men separated a world apart have the same wistful deliberations. One sees his past played out by vaporous forms on a desert

stage, watching patiently through a rifle scope; the other spends days in a palace of corners, sitting in a cell with ghosts for company while he lives preserved and the world goes on living and decaying and forgetting.

Yet from the ancient scholars to the soldiers of today's battlefields both concrete and sand, the spirit of ollin- of legacy, of destiny, of power-lives consistent. The leaders think; the author at that scroll top desk writes on. He writes, and unless his writing-the soldier's fighting; the convict's living-reaches a purpose, his entire existence is forgotten. His story can be translated a thousand times, copied by pen and print, but it is nothing without having done anything. But as he strives and sweats and compiles what is his ink essence, the scene turns to history. His final period becomes his legacy. A sepia stained photograph shows the author at his now famous desk, reveled in a work, and thus a life, now complete. It no longer matters if he had vices, if he did anything else or failed in some way outside of what he made his purpose to be. He is great, even if he was not good.

But the separation of vocation and being, of ends and means, is another modern concept. The idea that our jobs are different from our living is Machiavellian, an Adam Smith-ian shade of philosophy that ollin and the Aztecs defied. Those two hundred years later, an author named Thoreau did indeed write to a capitalistic young America, "It is remarkable that there is little or nothing to be remembered written on the subject of getting a living: How to make getting a living not merely honest and honorable, but altogether inviting and glorious; for if getting a living is not so, then living is not." Thus the Aztecs believed: that one's purpose was his career; that each man lived to be most efficient to his people, and that that was his purpose and eventually his legacy. If a man in Aztec society was not good at his "job", his purpose, then he was not a good man. This side of ollin is imperative who strive to achieve power over the afflictions of time, greed and ignorance, the vices of the conqueror; for once ollin is applied, the powerful man must control himself or "Lend [himself] to the wrong which [he] condemns," as Thoreau said.

In all, if the waist of the hourglass is "fate", then it is the bridge between what one could be and what one is remembered by, if at all. Our windows are small. ollin is then not when we fall but how-because we all must fall, though our falling may be our conquering if we so choose. And though the philosophy of ollin is open to interpretation, it is not whatever we decide it to be. The mindset that is achieved by practicing the philosophy, then, in less flowery terms, is this: nothing is concrete. One writes one's own greatness, and anything else is a shame to oneself. Regardless of one's path, those who wish to control their destiny must realize that if their days are easy then the battle is being lost. What is easy is not often vital. Time is a feeble old man, and power is a choice. Maybe power, though, is not a path at all but how we walk our chosen paths. Maybe each man is destined for greatness and the determined few will lead them there. Maybe the whole point of clay destiny is artistry.

I think the part the Aztecs got wrong about ollin is that it is selective and dark. Rather, we whose births accompany the shadow of doubt, whose lives will be ran at a sprint, will, or should, walk proudly with our distinction, knowing we shall be no victims.

I fully understand that the explanation of something so subjective is never complete, and so I've left much of the connection between history and application laid bare by design. The pieces are there; the metaphors are obvious to those intent on understanding.

After all, olin is not about completion. It's about always striving for it, because legacy-completion-is only found in the death of the productive.

If one does not have time to think, then I assure they have no time for power.

"Wherever a man separates from the multitude, and goes his own way in this mood, there indeed is a fork in the road, though ordinary travelers may see only a gap in the paling. His solitary path across-lots will turn out the higher way of the two."-Henry David Thoreau.