

EXISTENTIAL BAROQUE: FRANCISCO DE QUEVEDO'S  
SONNET "MIRÉ LOS MUROS DE LA PATRIA MÍA"

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Among the names of the great Golden Age poets who wrote memorable sonnets, such as Garcilaso, Lope de Vega, Góngora, Calderón, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the name of Francisco de Quevedo is always included, both in our memory and in all the anthologies of Spanish poetry: Perhaps, if we compare Quevedo's sonnets to those of other Golden Age poets, Quevedo's will be found to surpass all others in the range and variety of subjects and moods, spanning a vast space from the grotesque to the delicate and refined, reaching the heights of the tragic and sublime. According to Dámaso Alonso, it is precisely because Quevedo did not avoid grotesque, "low" subjects in his poetry that he acquired a panoply of stylistic weapons that could be used when writing poems aiming at loftier goals: "La extraordinaria condensación de pensamiento en su lírica noble estaba, de una parte, señalada por sus modelos latinos, ya de prosa, ya de poetas satíricos; de otra, facilitada por esa violenta gimnasia a la que en lo burlesco sometía a la par su estilo y el castellano" (Alonso 574).

"Miré los muros de la patria mía" offers many stylistic traits that can be grouped under the heading "intensification." A sonnet is always, in principle, a poetic form that strives to concentrate and condense the poetic message. Quevedo's efforts at concentration seem particularly successful in this sonnet:

Miré los muros de la patria mía,  
si un tiempo fuertes, ya desmoronados,  
de la carrera de la edad cansados,  
por quien caduca ya su valentía.

Salíme al campo, vi que el sol bebía  
los arroyos del yelo desatados,  
y del monte quejosos los ganados,  
que con sombras hurtó su luz al día.

Entré en mi casa; vi que, amancillada,  
de anciana habitación era despojos;  
mi báculo, más corvo y menos fuerte.

Vencida de la edad sentí mi espada,  
y no hallé cosa en que poner los ojos  
que no fuese recuerdo de la muerte. (Bleuca 31-32)

The first three lines make extensive use of alliteration: the sound of the letter *r* vibrates time and time again, much as the vibrating sound of a drum which would call our attention towards an important event about to unfold:

Miré los muros de la patria mía,  
si un tiempo fuertes, hoy desmoronados,  
de la carrera de la edad cansados,  
por quien caduca ya su valentía.

To this alliteration of the letter *r* can be added what we might call a secondary alliteration, less powerful yet present, that of the letter *m*, present in "miré," "muros," "mía," acting as a sort of counterpoint to the dominant melody.

Quevedo's sonnet advances carefully, by stages, towards the final line, in which the last word, "muerte," seems to sum up the total meaning of the poem. This progression is organized by stanzas, each of which is devoted to an aspect of decay, all leading to the final bitter, desolate conclusion. The first stanza, however, deals with "los muros de la patria mía," and it is far from clear whether the poet is using "los muros," metaphorically or literally. "Muros," "murallas," were, of course, quite common during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as fortifications protecting cities and even towns against enemy armies or bandits. "Los muros de la patria mía" might well indicate the walls protecting Quevedo's "patria chica," his place of birth. If we follow a literal interpretation and contemplate real walls made of stone or masonry, an anthropomorphic element appears: the ramparts are said to be "de la carrera de la edad cansados," and "edad" refers usually to human time. Quevedo's ramparts might be said to be alive, aging, near death, the same way an old man or woman can be described as decrepit, approaching death. Yet, although tempting, is such a literal inter-

pretation of "los muros" warranted by what we know about Quevedo's life and times, and also, inescapably, about his place of birth?

Quevedo was born in Madrid in 1680. Both his parents were connected with the royal Court, both had always lived in Madrid. Quevedo was a second-generation *madrileño*. Our initial interpretation could well be that the poet is talking about the ramparts surrounding Spain's capital city: he remembers them as strong, and now he finds them in ruins.

This reading, although plausible, does not seem to find much corroboration in historical facts. It is true that Madrid was surrounded by ramparts, and always had been, to a greater or lesser degree. After all Madrid had started as an Arab fortress, built by the emir Muhammad I (852-886) on the banks of the Manzanares. In 932 King Ramiro II destroyed the Arab walls. They were rebuilt by Abd al-Rahman III. After Alfonso VI occupied Madrid and incorporated it to the Christian world the walls were reinforced and later on expanded. By the middle of the sixteenth century, the walls were extended in order to protect several suburbs that had been built outside the city proper. These walls were in good shape, not at all "desmoronados," but since the expansion of the city continued (the 1530 census offers a figure of 4,060 inhabitants; on the other hand it is possible to assume that Madrid had between 70,000 and 100,000 inhabitants under Philip IV) the walls had to be enlarged once more. Only in the nineteenth century, after 1868, were the ancient walls destroyed, deliberately, not by neglect, in order to enlarge the urban area.<sup>1</sup>

Demolition of the walls started in the eighteenth century under Carlos III and was completed much later, according to the plan submitted in 1860 by the engineer and city planner Carlos María Castro. Madrid had almost half a million inhabitants by the end of the nineteenth century. Just as in Paris and many other European cities, Madrid's ancient walls became a memory or gave names to a few streets and squares. The name "ronda" given to several streets denotes the ancient existence of part of Madrid's walls in such places.

We are therefore compelled to venture another explanation: "los muros" mentioned by Quevedo are not the real, stone and masonry ramparts surrounding the city of Madrid; they are rather a metaphor for the borders of the Spanish empire. Spain was not pro-

tected by a stone and masonry wall such as the one shielding ancient China from Mongol invaders, a wall sections of which have been preserved until today and are much admired by tourists. Since a literal interpretation of the sonnet's first stanza is totally impossible, we are forced to fall back upon a metaphorical one: Quevedo is thinking about the borders of the Spanish Empire, menaced by innumerable enemies and hard-pressed by ever more devastating attacks. By sea and by land the Hapsburg domains were under siege. Quevedo was, as we know, not only a literary man and a humanist but also a courtier, a politician, a patriot. From his youthful letters to Justus Lipsius to his last letters to his friends a few months before his death Quevedo expressed forcefully his keen interest in the survival of the Spanish Empire and his anguished fears about its decadence and impending ruin.

Quevedo's first stanza, therefore, compels the reader to project his imagination towards a vast horizon encompassing Flanders, the Franche-Comté in Eastern France, Northern Italy, the Alpine roads used by Spanish armies going towards Germany and Flanders, and also Naples and Sicily, as well as the Spanish fleets menaced by Turkish and Algerian pirates, the Spanish soldiers and sailors under attack in the Caribbean and in Florida, or trying to establish a foothold in the Philippines and other parts of the Orient. It is not excluded, on the other hand, that Quevedo may have been thinking about the hearts and wills of all Spaniards, all over the Empire, since it could be argued that the walls defending Spain were to be found in the resolute bravery of Spaniards, wherever they happened to be. In any case an allegorical interpretation of this first stanza (which, as I have stated before, is the only one possible) enlarges the scope and the geographical frame of the sonnet in a bold vision that has few parallels in the history of Golden Age poetry.

Quevedo's vision is both bold and melancholy. Spain's foreign policy, and the same can be said about Spain's finances, is truly in ruins, both can be said to be "desmoronadas." Spain's military and political decadence is becoming more and more obvious, and the Thirty Years War, which will end with the Peace of Westphalia three years after Quevedo's death, is bound to accelerate their process. Still, since according to a popular saying "the Sun never set on the Spanish Empire," due to the vastness of its geographical holdings, it was totally impossible for its borders to be embraced by

human eyes. It was even difficult for anyone not versed in geography to comprehend its vastness and come to terms intellectually with the size and diversity of the lands that were part of it. Quevedo is inviting us to use our imagination in order to contemplate in our mind the ruins of the great Hispanic project. Time has eroded everything; "la carrera de la edad" has sapped the courage of the Spanish ramparts, and also, we must assume, the courage of the Spanish defenders of these ramparts. The implacable and corrosive passing of time thus becomes one of the main subjects of the poem. A secondary yet important theme is nostalgia. The ramparts were strong in the past: "si un tiempo fuertes."

If we think about the Golden Age writers who have devoted part of their attention to contemporary history, more specifically to Spain's foreign and domestic policies, we soon realize that it is difficult to find any one who can rival Quevedo. Gracián and Saavedra Fajardo are possible candidates, as are, in previous generations, the Valdés brothers. Yet Quevedo, with important prose texts such as his *Política de Dios*, *La hora de todos*, *El lince de Italia*, among many others, is probably the writer most consistently inspired by political life, patriotic feelings, and the development of military and political affairs. His was a passionate political vocation, and he felt a deep personal involvement in the victories and defeats of the Spanish Empire.

Another sonnet, attributed to Quevedo, but for obvious reasons never signed or acknowledged by him, may shed light upon the first stanza of the sonnet we are discussing. From the very beginning, from the sonnet's title, it can be concluded that this sonnet had to remain anonymous, "Al mal gobierno de Felipe IV":

"Los ingleses, Señor, y los persianos  
han conquistado a Ormuz; las Filipinas  
del holandés padecen grandes ruinas;  
Lima está con las armas en las manos;  
el Brasil, en poder de luteranos;  
temerosas, las islas sus vecinas;  
la Valtelina y treinta Valtelinas  
serán del Turco, en vez de los romanos.

La Liga, de furor y astucia armada,  
vuestro imperio procura se trabuque;  
el daño es pronto, y el remedio tardo."

Responde el Rey: "Destierren luego a Estrada,  
llamen al conde de Olivares *duque*,  
case su hija, y vámonos al Pardo." (Del Río I: 651-52)

Angel del Río includes this sonnet in his *Antología de la literatura española*, attributing it to Quevedo. The sarcastic style, with the insensitive and obtuse royal reaction of the last stanza contrasting with the long enumeration of disasters in the body of the sonnet, is certainly worthy of Quevedo. The sonnet as a whole is more effective in its description of political and military ills afflicting the Spanish Empire than the famous *Epístola satírica y censoria*. If Quevedo was indeed its author, as is probable, and the fact was known to the King and to Olivares, it would by itself be enough to explain the main cause of Quevedo's long imprisonment. It also helps us understand the poet's attitude while writing the first stanza of "Miré los muros." Quevedo sees in the decadence and ruin of Spanish defenses, all over the world, a mirror of his own physical decadence, a premonition of his own death. This identification of the poet's life with the life and vitality of his country can also be found in Quevedo's correspondence, where the poet is most sincere and less prone to use rhetorical devices. In a letter to don Sancho de Sandoval written in January, 1645, Quevedo comments upon several defeats suffered by Spaniards around the borders of the Empire, in Portugal and in Mexico, and also on the apathy, indifference, and passivity at the Court, and continues: "Dios asista a Su Majestad y a su santo celo, pues de todas partes nos combaten. ... Los sucesos de la guerra se parecen a los de mi convalecencia: salgo de un mal y entro en otro" (Lida.121).

By then Quevedo was acutely conscious of the failure of the Hapsburg plan of consolidation in central Europe. France, which at first was content to intervene secretly and by proxy in the Thirty Years War, by 1635 had declared open war against Spain and Austria. Thus began the last and most destructive phase of the conflict, in which France and Sweden opposed Spain and Austria. In some regions of Central Europe more than half the population perished. Famine and disease spread death through lands ravaged by pillaging armies out of control and utterly lacking in discipline. In 1634 the best general of the Hapsburgs, Wallenstein, was assassinated in a plot hatched by his own officers. In 1637 Emperor Ferdinand died,

and five years later it was Richelieu's turn to disappear. Meanwhile the plague and hunger had covered Europe's fields of unburied bodies, wolves ran through the streets of towns and villages in Germany, and the peasants of some regions, hopeless, resorted to cannibalism. Quevedo was writing in a bankrupt Spain, where the Hapsburg monarchs were incapable of carrying out any plan and saw their armies become progressively weaker, always fighting on the defensive.

On August 21, 1645, Quevedo wrote his friend don Francisco de Oviedo a letter in which he expresses fully his pessimism and his tragic vision of the future of Spain and its rulers: "Muy malas nuevas escriben de todas partes, y muy rematadas, y lo peor es que todos las esperaban así. Esto, señor don Francisco, no sé si se va acabando ni si se acabó. Dios sabe; que hay muchas cosas que, pareciendo que existen y tienen ser, ya no son sino un vocablo y una figura" (Lida 122).

Raimundo Lida, who has edited many of Quevedo's letters, comments:

Sí, en estas últimas cartas de Quevedo vemos morirse juntamente a Quevedo y a su España. No es la sotana del licenciado Cabra lo único que se deshace en opiniones y vagas conjeturas... No es la comida del pupilaje segoviano ni la cama de Aranjuez lo que, con metafísico escamoteo, ha sido reemplazado por un no sé qué, por un soñar que comemos o que dormimos. El no sé qué último son estos misteriosos tiempos de ahora: 1645. Es España. Porque sólo Dios sabe si España existe o si la estamos soñando; si tiene ser o ya no es "nada sino un vocablo y una figura." (Lida 120-21)

In other words, an empty word, a cardboard baroque facade behind which no building exists.

If the first stanza of Quevedo's sonnet reminds us of a huge circle (ramparts often have a circular form; if we choose a metaphorical interpretation, as I propose, we still come up with the jagged yet circular borders of an Empire), the second stanza invites us to examine a somewhat less expansive view, one that our eyes can really encompass:

Salíme al campo: vi que el sol bebía  
los arroyos del hielo desatados,

y del monte quejosos los ganados  
que con sombras hurtó su luz al día.

There is a thaw, "los arroyos del hielo desatados," and therefore it must be spring. It is thus a spring landscape that the poet describes, but a very strange and somber one, having nothing in common with the *locus amoenus* of classical and medieval poetry, pastoral novels and Garcilaso's eclogues. Quevedo's lines paint a hostile Nature offering no refuge or consolation. Ice turns to water, and the sun's rays steal it from the earth; the flocks complain about a lack of sunshine since the sun is hidden by the mountains. Nature is at war with itself. Nothing in this landscape can remind us of Botticelli's *Primavera*; it is rather the antithesis of spring as it has long been described in Western literary tradition.

It is probably not a coincidence that Quevedo is writing this desolate description in the first half of the seventeenth century, a time in which the climate suffers a marked deterioration in Western Europe. Winters became colder than usual, the North Sea froze several times. These years have been called "a little Ice Age." In one of his letters Quevedo complains about the intense winter cold. He writes from his house in Torre de Juan Abad on December 11, 1644: "Aquí es invierno terrible de hielos... Yo, señor, por la rabia del hibierno, que es terrible con hielos y nieve, sin apartarme de la chimenea, me quemó y no me caliento... Yo he pasado los Alpes muchas veces, y los Pirineos, cuando ellos mismos no pueden sufrir la nieve ni el hielo, y no he padecido tan rabiosa destemplanza de frío como padezco en este lugar." (Lida 120). Ice and snow, Quevedo complains, "tienen la vida de los hombres aterida, y hacen tiritar a las mismas ascuas. Considere vuestra merced cómo estará este esqueleto... Estoy tal, que la habla me duele y la sombra me pesa" (Lida 121).

An Empire in ruins framed by a Nature hostile to man, sad, frozen, soggy with snow and rain. Quevedo comments in one of his letters: "El tiempo se ha vuelto loco. Dijera que estaba borracho; empero, alegrará que no gasta otra cosa sino agua" (Lida 115).

The poet's mind reflects in part an external, objective reality: the political and military decay of the Spanish Empire, and also the deteriorating weather, a world at war, a frozen wasteland. The same desolate landscape the poet sees around him can also be



found inside him, in his mind, his consciousness, his memory. This is how Quevedo sees himself, as he analyzes his life in a long sad glance towards his past and present experience as described in a letter to his friend Manuel Serrano del Castillo, dated August 16, 1635:

Señor don Manuel, hoy cuento yo cincuenta y dos años, y en ellos cuento otros tantos entierros míos. Mi infancia murió irrevocablemente; murió mi niñez, murió mi juventud, murió mi mocedad; ya también falleció mi edad varonil. Pues, ¿cómo llamo vida una vejez que es sepulcro, donde yo propio soy entierro de cinco difuntos que he vivido? ¿Por qué, pues, desearé vivir sepultura de mi propia muerte, y no desearé acabar de ser entierro de mi vida misma? Hanme desamparado las fuerzas, confiésanlo vacilando los pies, temblando las manos; huyóme el color del cabello, y vistióse de ceniza la barba; los ojos, inhábitos para recibir la luz, miran noche; saqueada de los años la boca, ni puede disponer el alimento ni gobernar la voz; las venas para calentarse necesitan de la fiebre; las rugas han desamoldado las facciones; y el pellejo se ve disforme con el dibujo de la calavera, que por él se trasluce. Ninguna cosa me da más horror que el espejo en que me miro. (Blecuá 3-4)

Quevedo's letter is a clear indication of his state of mind: he sees himself as a man coming face to face with death. This text is perhaps more pathetic than the sonnet, yet it is less moving. Art, stylistic devices, well chosen rhythms and rhymes, strong images, the right adjectives, are always more economical and more effective than straightforward earnest prose. What is obviously missing in the letter, as compared to the sonnet, is the strategy of concentration: each one of the sonnet's stanzas relates to a total vision that progressively shrinks our viewpoint. Having started with an expansive panorama, we are brought more and more towards a center, an intimate space which is at the end of the poem not a space at all in the ordinary sense but the inner space of the poet's mind and heart.

This movement towards an intimate space becomes more apparent in the first tercet. The previous expansive spaces are replaced by a much more limited space, one with well-defined boundaries, the poet's home, and immediately afterwards an object, a familiar one, appears, the poet's walking stick:

Entré en mi casa; vi que, amancillada,  
de anciana habitación era despojos;  
mi báculo, más corvo y menos fuerte.

As the vision shifts inward and the horizon shrinks, we are tempted to delineate a spacial representation of the sonnet. It may remind us of a huge inverted cone, shrinking more and more towards the base as the poet's eyes gaze first upon a vast panorama but are later fixed upon his home and his familiar surroundings and objects. The sonnet started by a description of the outside world that gave at first sight an impression of objectivity. The poet was or seemed to be, primarily, a witness. Little by little the description of the outside world became internalized, tinged with emotion, more and more subjective.

More than three centuries after Quevedo wrote this sonnet, a whole generation of Spanish poets, writing soon after the end of the Spanish Civil War, would create poems that have been labeled by critics as "poesía testimonial," testimonial poetry. In these poems the poets seem to be primarily witnesses, describing the outside world in what at first we judge to be an objective manner, informing their readers of facts they have observed, things they have found out. By doing so the poet carries out a social mission, his readers are learning something that perhaps otherwise would have escaped their attention. Yet the initial objectivity of the poet dissolves soon into a warm, passionate subjectivity. The best and most illustrious example of this "poesía testimonial" is probably to be found in Dámaso Alonso's book, *Hijos de la ira*. Its first poem begins with a startling, dramatic line that includes in succinct proximity both objective and subjective factors: "Madrid es una ciudad de más de un millón de cadáveres (según las últimas estadísticas)."

The apparently objective approach is suggested by the statement about Madrid's population, "más de un millón" and the also apparently objective and scientific reference to "las últimas estadísticas." Yet these supposed clear-cut "facts" are contradicted and made chaotic by the passionate, subjective and ultimately subversive definition. Instead of "habitantes" the poet has written "cadáveres," inspired by the anguish, pain, even despair that he intuited as the basic emotions in the daily lives of Madrid's

dwellers during the bitter years that followed the end of the Civil War.

Similarly, one of José Hierro's often anthologized poems, "Requiem," describes the death of a Spaniard who had emigrated to the United States and dies, friendless, ignored by everybody, in an accident related to his job. The poem seems to follow the pattern of a brief necrological note in a newspaper. The poet is at most a witness, probably much less, simply a disinterested idle reader of newspapers that repeats mechanically a short descriptive passage, an obituary. Yet at the end of the poem the anonymous deceased is compared to other Spaniards whose heroic deaths in the past were the subject of high praises. The present is gray, the life of the Spaniard whose obituary we have read was meaningless, the poet confesses that he was on the verge of tears while reading the news item; the initial impression of objectivity disappears, we are facing a highly charged emotional drama.

The intellectual framework of Quevedo's poem is, of course, Christianity and also, inescapably, Stoicism. In the case of Dámaso Alonso and José Hierro we can also detect an overlay: Christianity plus the Existential emphasis on death and anguish that both Martin Heidegger and, somewhat later, Jean-Paul Sartre had popularized in the Thirties and Forties. Obviously, for Spanish writers such as Alonso and Hierro a better source, because closer to home and also preceding the German and French philosophers, can be found in Miguel de Unamuno. And an excellent source, well known to both Alonso and Hierro, and certainly having precedence in time over Unamuno, Heidegger and Sartre, would also be Francisco de Quevedo. Spanish (or perhaps better Hispanic) culture is a continuum, a web in which certain subjects and attitudes can be found to recur in many writers and many centuries. Borges, in his essay on Kafka and his forerunners, has shown how the present can influence our view of the past. Without the above-mentioned poems by Dámaso Alonso and José Hierro, without some of the most poignant poems written by Unamuno, Quevedo's sonnet would not make as much sense. Intertextuality is often the needed antidote to a specialization that cuts into small pieces the growth of literary influences across the centuries since intertextuality helps us to understand the past as it is reflected in a complex multitude of modern texts.

Quevedo's sonnet goes on inexorably, bringing us closer and closer to the last word of the last line, "la muerte." The poet's gaze, at first encompassing a vast space, the four cardinal points, then concentrating upon a sad and cold landscape, is about to reach a more intimate area, the home where Quevedo dwells, the walking stick or cane that helps him to move about:

Entré en mi casa; vi que, amancillada,  
de anciana habitación era despojos;  
mi báculo, más corvo y menos fuerte.

Where is Quevedo at the time he writes this sonnet? We do not know whether he is referring to his dwelling in Madrid or to his summer house in Torre de Juan Abad. There Quevedo's home was surrounded by humble peasant houses, whose inhabitants apparently resented and even hated Quevedo's role as feudal lord and initiated against him a law suit that lasted many years. Quevedo, who frequented royal palaces, must have looked upon his two dwellings, in Madrid and in Torre de Juan Abad, with sadness, even with shame, he must have come to the conclusion that his fate, compared with the position of the great noblemen of the court, compared with a Count-Duke of Olivares or a Duke of Osuna, was one that condemned him to relative poverty and insecurity. His position at Court was never too solid, and obviously after spending years in jail and being in poor health the renewal of his political career became impossible. A humble abode surrounded by enemies, a walking stick less straight and less strong. Without excluding altogether the Freudian interpretation of the walking stick as a phallic symbol, and therefore here a subconscious image for Quevedo's growing impotence, it is probably useful to remember that a walking stick was in his later years an indispensable help for Quevedo, who had always had trouble with one of his feet and walked with difficulty. His lameness had without a doubt increased with his advancing years, hence the stick was also for him another reason to become aware of the passing of time and his approaching death.

We come now to the second tercet and with it the end of the sonnet. Quevedo was a knight of the Order of Santiago, and as such we can picture him dressed in the uniform of his rank, with a large

red cross across his chest and a sword hanging from his belt. He was, as we know, exceedingly proud of being a knight, a nobleman, and also a "cristiano viejo." Yet all the worldly pride and glory are turning into ashes, smoke, dust, nothingness; his very sword seems to have weakened and softened under the weight of time. And if time can do this to a steely sword, what can it not do to our lives?

Vencida de la edad sentí mi espada,  
y no hallé cosa en que poner los ojos  
que no fuese recuerdo de la muerte.

First the walking stick, now the sword, have been weakened, even vanquished, defeated, by the passing of time. The symbols of masculine power have been broken and are now useless. Quevedo's gaze is also cowed and defeated as we progress in our reading of the poem. In the first lines it was projected towards a vast horizon that has been shrinking progressively: a landscape, a house, finally a few familiar objects. The poet's eyes, the poet's gaze, have at last become focused on an internal vision: the thought of impending death. The external world thus becomes a series of flashing signals announcing the nearing doom and becoming internalized in the last line of the sonnet. This movement of the sonnet as a whole might suggest at first an inverted cone, with a wide rim towards the beginning and a narrow point at the bottom, where the eyes of the poet finally come to rest in a negation of time and space: "la muerte." Another possible graphic translation of Quevedo's poem that comes to mind, since the poem deals primarily with the negative effects of the passing of time, is a sand clock, or rather the upper part of an hourglass; only a few grains of sand remain in it, the poet's life is about to end. It is also relevant to point out the renewal, towards the end of the sonnet, of the alliteration device that Quevedo used at the very beginning, the repeated sound of the letter *r*, with its vibrating echoes that once more remind us of the sounds of a drum, perhaps a muffled drum during a funeral march: "mi báculo, más corvo y menos fuerte... recuerdo de la muerte." A parallel, or an echo, to the *r* sounds at the beginning of the poem.

When did Quevedo write this sonnet? The chronology of Quevedo's poems has always been and still is an endless source of unsolved problems. The old editions were full of errors and omis-

sions and it has been impossible to replace them with modern editions that are totally exempt from questionable chronological notations. Question marks could be drawn in the margin of every page of every edition, both old and modern. No old edition was revised by the author, and only seven poems handwritten by Quevedo have been found. Dámaso Alonso thinks, perhaps because of the subject of the sonnet, the passing of time and the approach of death, that it was written close to the end of the poet's life (Alonso 617). This opinion is psychologically satisfactory, less so the judgment of James Crosby and José Manuel Blecua, who give the date of 1613, because it belongs to a collection of poems bearing the title *Heráclito cristiano*, all of which apparently were written during a period of introspection, melancholy and depression (Blecua xxxv). Even though Dámaso Alonso's opinion seems intuitively right, it is not impossible to imagine that during a period of psychological crisis Quevedo may have projected himself emotionally towards the future, towards the end of his life, and may have expressed the feelings of anguish of a man about to face death. A muffled cry transmuted into poetry, Quevedo's sonnet is on the whole a sober statement of facts as interpreted subjectively by the poet, devoid of brilliant images or metaphors (with the possible exception of "los muros de la patria mía" if we accept its meaning as the borders of the Spanish Empire), and this very sobriety gives Quevedo's sonnet more pathos. Facing death is not the proper time for rhetorical flourishes, the poet seems to tell us. Instead of metaphors, adjectives and participles are often the key words in the sonnet, the words that create the feeling of loss, retreat, desolation: "desmoronados," "cansados," "amancillada," "corvo," "menos fuerte," "vencida." It is time to acknowledge our loneliness and impotence. Indeed, no other voice, human or divine, but Quevedo's, is heard in the poem's lines: the poet faces death in complete loneliness. In the collection that bears the title *Heráclito cristiano* the sonnet bears the title "Salmo XVII" and therefore we could assume that it is a gloss of this Psalm. This is misleading, for in the Biblical Psalms the poet, David or perhaps another author whose works have been traditionally attributed to David, finds consolation in a sustained conversation with Jehovah. Not so in Quevedo's sonnet, where the author recapitulates his observations and feelings for himself, without the intervention of any interlocutor, facing alone the passage of time

and the approach of death. There is not in this sonnet any hint of hope in a future life, any consolation through God's forgiveness of sins, in a word, any presence of the author's Christian beliefs (which, of course, were real and sincere, and appear in numerous other poems of his), and a reader unacquainted with the author's name and the period in which the poem was written could well come to the conclusion that it had been written in pagan times, if the art of the sonnet had been known to Greeks or Romans.

Could Quevedo's sonnet have been influenced by Stoic principles? As a scholar and a humanist, Quevedo was familiar with the writings of the main Roman Stoics, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, Epictetus, and the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. The Stoics, like the Epicureans, emphasized ethics as the main field of knowledge. The foundation of Stoic ethics is the principle, proclaimed earlier by the Cynics, that good lies not in external objects or riches, but in the state of the soul itself, in the wisdom and restraint by which a man is delivered from the passions and desires that cloud ordinary life. Stoics held that differences such as rank and wealth are of no importance in social relationships. Stoics, before Christianity, recognized and advocated the brotherhood of humanity and the natural equality of all human beings. The four cardinal virtues of the Stoic philosophy are wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance, a classification derived from the teachings of Plato. Death should not be feared, as it is part of the laws of Nature and is to be accepted with equanimity; corruption of the mind or the soul is the real enemy.

Quevedo did, in fact, reflect Stoic attitudes in some of his sonnets. In the same collection of *Heráclito Cristiano*, we find the sonnet that bears the title "Salmo XVIII" with a final tercet that reads

Breve suspiro, y último, y amargo,  
es la muerte, forzosa y heredada:  
mas si es ley, y no pena, ¿qué me aflijo? (Blecuca 32)

González de Salas comments: "Concluye el discurso con una sentencia stoica" (Blecuca 32). We may well suspect that Quevedo would not have qualified as a perfect Stoic philosopher. He was too proud of his class and rank, too bitterly pitted against other human groups that differed from his own élite, too snobbishly critical of "pícaros" aspiring to better themselves, such as Pablos in *El Buscón*,

finally too overtly anti-semitic, all of which made him incapable of accepting some of the basic Stoic principles concerning human brotherhood. Courage, one of the Stoic virtues, was not lacking in him, yet to the other virtues Stoics admired he had only limited access. Quevedo's voice in this sonnet is manly, courageous, perhaps resigned, yet deeply sad and desolate. A Greek or Roman Stoic writer would have been less subjective in his description of the passage of time and the approach of death. The problem for a Stoic philosopher was one of general human values and expectations, not one of individual heartfelt perception, as in Quevedo's sonnet. If we attempted at all to read Quevedo's sonnet as the work of a Stoic writer we would have to conclude that he had become a modern, indeed a contemporary Stoic following in the footsteps of Miguel de Unamuno. In Quevedo's poem many contemporary readers whose thoughts have wandered towards the phenomenon of approaching or impending death can find a perfect mirror reflecting in measured, artistic and compact lines, their own anguish and their own desolation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>To sum up: Madrid's first ramparts were very probably of Arabic origin. The first ramparts of Christian Madrid were built under Alfonso VI. Enlarged by the Muralla del Arrabal in the fifteenth century, the walls were enlarged again, considerably, under Philip II, and again, during Quevedo's life, under Philip IV. On this subject see Bravo, Sainz de Robles (*Madrid and Historia*), Kenny (specially 104), and the article "Madrid" in the *Gran Enciclopedia Larousse*.

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