

Francisco de Quevedo

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Francisco de Quevedo

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Luis Ingelmo

translated from Spanish by
Michael Smith & Luis Ingelmo

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SAMPLER

SAMPLER

QUEVEDO —AN INTRODUCTION—

Biography

Francisco de Quevedo y Villegas was born in Madrid on Sept. 17, 1580, during the *monarquía universal* of Philip II. He was baptized in the church of San Ginés on Sept. 26. His father was Pedro Gómez de Quevedo, a court sub-treasurer, highly regarded by Ana of Austria, the fourth wife of Philip II, for whom he performed secretarial work. Quevedo's mother was María Santibáñez Villegas, a lady-in-waiting to the Queen, some years younger than her husband. After her marriage in 1576, Doña María left the palace and did not return until 1586, when she came back a widow (Don Pedro, Quevedo's father, died in 1586) to serve the *Infanta* Isabel Clara Eugenia.

Besides Quevedo, the marriage produced five other children: Pedro, three years older than Quevedo; María, born in 1578, who lived only a few months; Felipa, three years younger than Quevedo, who became a Discalzed Carmelite; Margarita, who married a courtier; and another María, born in 1586, who died at the age of nineteen in 1605. In a family context, death early impressed itself upon the young mind of Quevedo. His father's death especially must have struck hard. The return of Quevedo's mother to the distracting life of the court when he was only six, would probably have meant that he hardly received much in the way of maternal love and comfort. And that was all the more important in Quevedo's case: for he was physically handicapped. He was bowlegged and severely myopic (he had to wear glasses), two defects that were then as now cruelly jeered. Combined with the boy's precocious intelligence and acute sensitivity, his physical defects could have been expected to throw the boy in on himself, turning him into a reclusive neurotic. Instead, seeing that he would never cut a dashing military figure – the normal aspiration for boys of his class and time – Quevedo determined to distinguish himself as a poet and intellectual. Throughout his entire life, Quevedo was nothing if not a fighter.

At an early age he devoted himself to study. First he attended the Jesuit school for the nobility in Madrid, the *Estudio de los Teatinos*; here, between the ages of seven and sixteen, he learnt Latin and Greek, scholastic philosophy, rhetoric and mathematics. In 1596 he registered in the University of Alcalá de Henares. The student population of Alcalá – there were more than five

thousand students – was made up of the usual two broad categories: those serious about their studies and those intent on enjoying their newfound freedom from family restraints and responsibilities. Quevedo vigorously participated in the life of both groups. He caroused, visited brothels, kept a mistress and became a fine swordsman, despite or perhaps because of his physical handicaps.

On the other hand, when he left Alcalá in 1600, he was already an accomplished Latinist, knew Greek and Hebrew, had mastered the philosophy and theology of his times, had studied canon and civil law and acquired some knowledge of medicine; later he would add Portuguese, Italian, French and some Arabic to his store of languages. Early in his career Quevedo had a deserved reputation for prodigious learning: Aureliano Fernández-Guerra, in his introduction to Quevedo's *Obras* published in Madrid in 1852, relates (at second hand, admittedly) how Quevedo was so devoted to study that he read while travelling, while dining, in bed, and that for his travels he had especially made a mobile library of one hundred small volumes of different kinds of literature. Quevedo's first known poem, an elegy to Lucas Rodríguez, *Concepto de divina poesía*, dates from 1598.

In 1601 Quevedo appeared with the court in Valladolid. There he lived with his guardian (he was still legally a minor), Agustín de Villanueva, an in-law. Twice during his years in Valladolid – in 1602 and in 1604 – Quevedo had a close brush with death through illness, an experience not lost to his poetry. At the bustling court of Valladolid, Quevedo no doubt added to his early intimate knowledge of courtiers, diplomats and court intrigue, knowledge that was to serve him well in his later career with the great Osuna. The acquisition of such worldly knowledge, however, did not detract from his pursuit of book learning. He entered into correspondence with the great Flemish humanist, Lipsius, who referred to the young man as *decoro magno de los españoles*.

In 1606 Quevedo returned to Madrid and there wrote his first *Sueños*, a work which Gerald Brenan considers one of the four outstanding books of Spanish prose to appear before the middle of the nineteenth century (the other three are *La Celestina*, *Don Quijote* and *Lazarillo de Tormes*). In this year Quevedo became acquainted with the Duke of Osuna, the beginning of a relationship that was to have a decisive effect on the remainder of Quevedo's life.

Don Pedro Téllez Girón, the third Duke of Osuna, was a great nobleman, immensely ambitious, of broad interests, an adept at court

intrigues and a man of the world in the substantial Renaissance sense. Quevedo admired him in the same way that Shakespeare admired the Earl of Southampton (though the stature of Osuna was closer to that of the Earl of Essex). As far as Osuna was concerned, the admiration and services of a brilliant young man with good court connections, merited encouragement.

In 1609 Quevedo began his endless legal squabbles with the vassals of his estate at La Torre de Juan Abad (Ciudad Real), which he had inherited through his mother. This is the famous *Torre* of the letters.

In 1613 Quevedo left Spain for Palermo to enter the service of Osuna, who was at the time Viceroy of Sicily. With Osuna during the next seven years, Quevedo functioned as adviser, ambassador and chief minister. He must have amassed a considerable store of the worldly knowledge during this time. In 1615 Osuna sent Quevedo as his ambassador to the court of Philip III. His mission there was to dispense the *donativo* to buy off Osuna's jealous rivals and enemies and to advance his appointment as Viceroy of Naples. For the time being Quevedo was successful. In 1618, however, Osuna was heavily implicated in a conspiracy against Venice, the famous *Conjuración de Venecia*. The conspiracy was uncovered. Osuna was in deep trouble. So, too, was his chief minister and advisor.

On Quevedo's return to Spain, no doubt to see what he could salvage, he was imprisoned in Uclés (Cuenca) and later confined to his estate of La Torre de Juan Abad. During a brief intermission in this confinement, he went to Madrid, where he tried to rehabilitate his fortunes. But his great patron Osuna was finished politically (he died in 1624), and Quevedo went through a difficult period. In 1622 he was again confined to his estate at La Torre, where he fell ill.

With the death of Philip III and the accession of Philip IV, the powerful figure of the Conde-Duque de Olivares came on the scene of Spanish politics. It was the declared intention of Olivares to halt Spain's rapid decline and restore the country to its former strength and imperial grandeur. To this end he was given unprecedented power by the King. His life still in danger because of his service with the disgraced Osuna, Quevedo courted the powerful new minister with some success, and he became honorary secretary to Philip IV. In his approaches to Olivares, just as in his relationship with Osuna, Quevedo displayed that fatal attraction which intellectuals often have towards the strong leader in a time of decadence and confusion; Ezra Pound was not the first poet to be led astray by a *Duce*.

In practice, Quevedo withdrew from active politics; and for the next ten years, which were by and large good years for him, he busied himself

with literary matters and the domestic affairs of his estate. During this time he published the *Buscón* (1626) and the *Sueños* (1627); he engaged in literary polemics with the *gongoristas*; he championed the cause of Saint James to be considered the patron saint of Spain; and he edited and published the poems of Fray Luis de León. In 1634, at the age of fifty four, probably on the advice of his friends, Quevedo married a widow, Doña Esperanza de Mendoza; the couple lived together for only three months, though the lady lived on until 1641.

During all this time Quevedo's enemies, often goaded by his polemical writings, continued to do him what harm they could. In 1632 he was denounced to the Inquisition but survived a short detention. His friend and new patron, the Duke of Medinaceli, did what he could to protect the writer; but not even Medinaceli could protect Quevedo when he was arrested and imprisoned in 1639. Olivares seems to have been behind this. Quevedo's imprisonment in the monastery of San Marcos in León, in terrible conditions, lasted until 1634, when Olivares fell from power. When Quevedo emerged from prison, his health was permanently ruined. In 1644 he sought refuge for the last time in La Torre de Juan Abad. He died on Sept. 8, 1645, in Villanueva de los Infantes (Ciudad Real).

Historical

Quevedo was a man of his time. He was a poet of the baroque. Like all thinking men of his period, he was deeply affected by the Copernican discovery that the earth moves around the sun and that the earth is not the centre of a universe that revolves around it as had been believed for centuries. This discovery displaced man from the centre of a universe created by a God who remains outside it but whose plan for it is revealed in scripture and natural philosophy. Instead, man had now to be viewed as part of a *continuum* stretching into infinity. The necessary inter-connectedness of all things had now to be acknowledged, and the search for the laws that govern that interconnectedness initiates empirical science. Things are no longer seen as comprehensively finite, conforming to the providential plan, their sum being equal to a known whole. The concept of an infinite universe expanded man's consciousness while at the same time instilling him with dread in the face of what Pascal well described as 'the eternal silence of infinite spaces.' This dread or awe of cosmic infinitude would in time be ameliorated by progress in the empirical science as European man met the challenge to understand the new powerful universe in which he

found himself. By the eighteenth century, empirical reason was triumphant and the securities of a new classicism could be indulged.

Throughout intellectual Europe the baroque was an uneasy age. In Spain in the seventeenth century, political and economic events were occurring that heightened that philosophical unease. Gradually throughout the sixteenth century, Spain had risen to a position of dominance among the European powers. Portugal, Italy and Holland had been conquered; French power had been contained; Turkish invasion was stemmed; the Mediterranean by and large made safe by Spanish ships. Overseas, Spain had acquired a vast and rich empire so that its European position could be maintained by bullion shipped from the Americas and commodities from the East and West Indies.

But the very wealth that enabled Spain to rise to supreme power in Europe was also the main cause for its dramatically rapid decline in the opening decades of the seventeenth century. While in the rest of Europe during the sixteenth century, industrial and mercantile capitalism was developing within the strictures of feudal monarchism, forcing and expanding these to gain greater freedom for its enterprises and steadily working towards establishing a basis for political power, which would come soonest in England and the Netherlands, Spain's wealth from its colonies was being expended in maintaining a consumer, as opposed to a productive economy. The horns of Spain's dilemma in the closing decades of the sixteenth century were that the wealth created by Spanish military enterprises overseas had to be used to finance Spanish military dominance in Europe. That wealth maintained an aristocracy of feudal extravagance, but the *hidalgos*, born and bred to military achievement, were disastrously inept as financial entrepreneurs, industrialists and merchants, such occupations being left in general to foreigners. While the England of Elizabeth was seeing the rise of a mercantile and industrial bourgeoisie, expert in fiscal management, Spain's economy was crumbling under the burden of maintaining a vast courtly bureaucracy, its foundation of overseas bullion simultaneously being depleted by mine exhaustion, the raids of English, Dutch and French pirates, and its consumption by colonialists themselves on the import of luxury goods such as Chinese silks and porcelain.

The Personality and the Poet

Quevedo was a discontented man, and that discontent is evident in almost everything he wrote. He was at odds with the world in which he found

himself. The possible causes of his discontent are numerous: his physical handicaps; his inadequate resources to support the social position to which he felt entitled by birth and upbringing; the frustration of his grandiose political ambitions for himself, his patron, Osuna, and for Spain; the existential difficulties of his neo-platonism; his finely honed analytical intelligence (*agudeza*) and his encyclopedic learning; the moral decadence of the age, in particular its venality, profound disillusionment with human enterprises. Scholars and literary critics have made their own choices among these causes, and interpreted Quevedo's work accordingly. My own preference is to try to discover the broadest possible cause, one that will subsume most, if not all the others.

While there are many points of comparison between Quevedo and Swift, Quevedo did not have the great Anglo-Irish satirist's *horror* of existential life, that terrible alienation from one's own body. Quevedo's discontent must be seen in relation to a scholastic idealism that embraced the physical, and even glorified it. It is the same idealism that informs Shakespeare's work, however pessimistic it may be at times.

Quevedo believed in a Christianity on which Spain's past imperial greatness had been based. Its collapse, the growth of the money economy, the evolution of the new middle-class and the triumph of pragmatic self-interest, became Quevedo's grand obsession. And out of this obsession came his major theme: the fall from grace and greatness. It is this theme that gives Quevedo's vast and varied work its unity and coherence; for to this underlying obsession can be traced its pitiless and savage indictment (*desgarro* is the word Dámaso Alonso uses) of man and society fallen into error, its desperate desire to recover the lost world of medieval chivalry, its consciousness that this lost world now only exists as language, and finally, and this perhaps its greatest achievement, the manipulation of self-conscious language to create an alternative world which is an escape from and at the same time a reflection on a 'real' world that denies its values.

Of course, Quevedo is not unique in all this. England has its own great baroque poet in John Donne, whose work expresses the same divorce between a whole language of concepts and sentiments and the reality to which it was once believed they corresponded. For surely this is what the 'metaphysical conceit' is in essence. In Donne's case, however, there is the growing prosperity of England to keep in mind (though Donne, too, dramatically registers what Hauser has described as the cosmic 'shudder' of the baroque), while Quevedo's Spain shows everywhere the signs of national decline. Donne's satires are mild in comparison with the *saeva indignatio* of Quevedo's *Sueños* and the *Buscón*.

Gerald Brenan (*The Literature of the Spanish People*, Chapter 11) paints a distressing picture of Quevedo as a 'lonely egoist', and 'a man who did not know the meaning of love, a poet with no feeling for beauty, with obsessions that drove him hard and paranoiac tendencies, quarrelsome and inclined to meanness.' No doubt there is some truth in this, though I would immediately take issue with the charge of aesthetic inadequacy; yet it seems to me that underlying it there is some confusion between Quevedo the man and Quevedo the writer. The man *may have been* quarrelsome, mean, paranoid and obsessive: it does not follow necessarily that the writer was so. In fact, I believe the opposite to be true. Whatever of Quevedo's personality comes across to the reader from the poems, it is that of a man who has the courage to stand alone, eyes and mind wide-open, as he confronts the human condition and the God he believes will judge him after death. Although his discontent is generally resolved within the conventional bounds of Christian stoicism, there often remains in Quevedo's poems a residue of pessimism that lends them a remarkably modern ring. While the logic of its Christian stoicism produces a closure for the poem (especially in the sonnets), a rational or religious resolution, the poem's emotional development, if one may use such a phrase, frequently concludes in the expression of personal unhappiness, powerfully moving for all the dignified restraint of the conventional rhetoric in which it is clothed.

In considering Quevedo the poet, however, his personality should not overly concern us. Borges, both in his essay in *Otras Inquisiciones* and in the *Prólogo* to his *Antología Poética*, comes to the conclusion, having pondered the vast scope of Quevedo's poetry, that his greatness is 'verbal'. 'Quevedo's best work,' he writes, 'transcends the motives that engendered it and the common ideas that inform it. It is not obscure. Unlike some writings by Mallarmé or Yeats, it does not perturb or bewilder the reader with enigmas. Quevedo's works are (to find some way to express it) verbal objects, pure and independent like a sword or a silver ring.' And to illustrate what he means, Borges quotes sonnet XI.

Of course, this is not to say that Quevedo's poems do not have thematic preoccupations that carry over from poem to poem; even the most lively image can tremble on the verge of becoming a *memento mori* as in sonnet XXII.

But the real energy of the poetry, and I believe Borges to be generally correct in his analysis, is that energy directed towards the making of the poem as a literary artefact, a cunning verbal device that invites and entertains inspection and contemplation by the reader.

It was to the making of literary works that Quevedo turned after his disappointment with court politics. If he could not reshape the actual life of his time, if he could not engineer, diplomatically and by the persuasions of literary polemic, Spain's return to its past glory, he could nonetheless, as compensation, create alternative worlds of literature that would display the virtuosity of his inventive genius and his mastery of language. He can write a Petrarchan sonnet better than Petrarch; can produce a *gongorism* as good, if not better than Góngora; he can be erudite as he skilfully plays his Spanish off against the Latin of Horace, Virgil, Propertius and Seneca; he can be philosophical with the subtlety of the scholastics; he can be wittily humorous and profoundly serious. Though he gave so much of his life, dangerously, to politics, literature was the true metier of Quevedo's genius.

Michael Smith

SAMPLER

A NOTE ON THE SPANISH TEXT

The text for this collection of poems comes from *Poesía completa*, José Manuel Blecua (ed.), Madrid: Turner, 1995 (2 vols.), which is the standard text of Francisco de Quevedo's works. A previous edition of that collection, although without the emendations found in the 1995 edition, could be found in *Poesía original completa*, José Manuel Blecua (ed.), Barcelona: Planeta, 1981 (1 vol.), which is the edition Michael Smith used when he attempted his first versions of these poems.

It is equally important to point out the existence of an authoritative edition of *El Parnaso español*, Ignacio Arellano (ed.), RAE/Espasa, 2020 (2 vols.), which we have also consulted so that the text of the poems would benefit from the latest available philological findings. In this respect, we have added, as footnotes, all the variant spellings and punctuation found in the Arellano edition. This implies that, if a poem in this collection belongs to any other collection by Quevedo, such as *Las tres Musas últimas castellanas*, the text for those poems is that of the *Poesía completa* (J.M. Blecua, ed.).

Finally, the number that precedes each poem replicates that found in the 1995 edition of Quevedo's *Poesía completa*, with a specific reference to the numeric arrangement applied in the original 17th century collections, as well as that of Ignacio Arellano in his edition of *El Parnaso español*. Therefore, the abbreviation *Parnaso* refers to the 1648 edition of *El Parnaso español* published by José González de Salas, whereas "Arellano" refers to the 2020 edition of that same work. And, as to *Las tres Musas*, this abbreviation refers to the 1670 edition of *Las tres Musas últimas castellanas*, published by Pedro de Aldrete.

*Enseña a morir antes y que la mayor parte de la
muerte es la vida, y esta no se siente, y la menor,
que es el último suspiro, es la que da pena*

Señor don Juan, pues con la fiebre apenas
se calienta la sangre desmayada,¹
y por la mucha edad,² desabrigada,
tiembla, no pulsa, entre la arteria y venas;

pues que de nieve están las cumbres llenas, 5
la boca, de los años saqueada,
la vista, enferma,³ en noche sepultada,
y las potencias de ejercicio ajenas,

salid a recibir la sepultura,
acariciad la tumba y monumento:⁴ 10
que morir vivo es última cordura.

La mayor parte de la muerte siento
que se pasa en contentos y locura,
y a la menor se guarda el sentimiento.

[*Parnaso* 60 a; *Arellano* 48]

¹ Arellano.: desmayada

² A.: edad

³ A.: vista enferma

⁴ A.: monumento,

*Teaching how to die ahead of time, how the
greater part of death is life unfelt, and the
smaller part, our final breath, moves us to pity*

Since fever hardly heats enfeebled
blood, Señor don Juan, which through
old age, exposed, no longer throbs,
but shivers in arteries and veins,

since summits have been capped with snow, 5
the mouth plundered by the years,
sickly eyesight buried in darkness,
and faculties deprived of power,

go out and meet your burial place,
embrace your headstone and your tomb;
to die while still alive's a feat! 10

The greater part of death, I feel,
is spent in pleasures and in madness,
and sense is given what is least.

*Representase la brevedad de lo que se vive
y cuán nada parece lo que se vivió*

«¡Ah de la vida!» ¿...Nadie¹ me responde?
¡Aquí de los antaños que he vivido!
La Fortuna mis tiempos ha mordido;
las Horas² mi locura las esconde.

¡Que sin poder saber cómo ni adónde
la salud y la edad se hayan huido!
Falta la vida, asiste lo vivido,
y no hay calamidad que no me ronde.

5

Ayer se fue; mañana no ha llegado;
hoy se está yendo sin parar un punto:
soy un fue, y un será, y³ un es cansado.

10

En el hoy y mañana y ayer junto
pañales y mortaja, y he quedado
presentes sucesiones de difunto.

[*Parnaso* 63 a; *Acellano* 54]

¹ A.: vida!»... ¿Nadie

² A.: horas

³ A.: fue y un será y

*Dealing with the brevity of what we experience,
and how our lived experience amounts to nothing*

Ahoy there, life! Does none reply?
Whither the ages I have lived?
Destiny my days devoured;
madness hides away my hours.

That health and life should disappear, 5
never knowing how or whence!
Life fails, what's lived attends,
and all disasters prowl round me.

Yesterday's gone, tomorrow's not come, 10
today's in flight without a single pause;
I'm a *was*, *will be*, exhausted *is*.

I bind, in today, tomorrow, yesterday,
swaddling-clothes and winding-sheet.
Myself, a present succession of deceases.

SAMPLE

*Significase la propria brevedad de la vida,
sin pensar, y con padecer, salteada por¹ la muerte*

Fue² sueño ayer; mañana será tierra;³
poco antes,⁴ nada, y poco después, humo,⁵
y⁶ destino ambiciones, y presumo,⁷
apenas punto al cerco que me cierra.⁸

Breve combate de importuna guerra, 5
en mi defensa soy peligro sumo;⁹
y mientras con mis armas me consumo,¹⁰
menos me hospeda el cuerpo que me entierra.

Ya no es ayer; mañana no ha llegado;
hoy pasa, y es,¹¹ y fue, con movimiento 10
que a la muerte me lleva despeñado.

Azadas son la hora y el momento
que a jornal de mi pena y mi cuidado
cavan en mi vivir mi monumento.

[*Parnaso* 63 b; *Acellano* 551]

1 A.: *de*

2 A.: ¡Fue

3 A.: seré tierra!

4 A.: ¡Poco antes

5 A.: después humo!

6 A.: ¡Y

7 A.: ambiciones y presumo

8 A.: cierra!

9 A.: sumo,

10 A.: consumo

11 A.: hoy pasa y es

*Expressing the brevity of one's life, not
thinking, but full of suffering, surprised by death*

Yesterday, but a dream; tomorrow, dust;
a little earlier, naught; a little later, smoke;
and I set ambitions and boast,
scarcely a dot within the circling ring.

A shortlived combat in a persistent war!
I'm the greatest danger to my own defence!
And while exhausted with my armoury,
my body, instead of billeting, buries me.

5

Yesterday gone, tomorrow not come,
today goes by, is and was and bears
me headlong to the edge of doom;

10

the hours and minutes of my time are hoes
that, paid by wage of care and woe,
dig up my grave in the life I live.

SAMPLE