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The Decline of the Humanist Ideal in the Baroque: Quevedo's Attack on the *Refrán*

Judgments on the meaning and value of Baroque art and culture are still greatly varied and confusing for almost everyone. The statement that "Life is a dream and dreams are [only] dreams" is a nice thought and is conveyed to unnumbered undergraduate and graduate students to their satisfaction in its pretty poetry and solemnity. But a reasoned study of the Spanish Baroque will reveal that it is also a statement unmatched in nihilism and despair. From the grandiose grotesqueries of Góngora early in the 17th century through Quevedo in the middle and finally to Calderón toward the end, it is possible to document a systematic and consistent anguish in men's lives and hearts expressed in their varied and yet related motifs and styles.

All this is common knowledge, but we need further and more exact documentation to understand more clearly what precise motives drove men to these extremes of disillusion and desperation. A study of Quevedo's attitude toward the refrán—and a similar attitude in many other writers—will provide an interesting approach to the problem.

The cult of the *refrán* in the 16th century reflected an essential aspect of humanism and the Renaissance, and can be linked to such issues as the theme of the "dignity of man," the proliferation of bucolic expression with its bland and virtuous shepherds and exaltation of nature, the capacity for communication and affection that we discover in Lazarillo, etc. It had, of course, as Américo Castro revealed, a major catalyst in Erasmus, but cannot be limited to him alone and indeed belongs absolutely to that entire celebration of nature whether in the eclogues of Garcilaso or in the discovery of urban and secular nature in the *Celestina*. It expressed, in short, that devotion to and belief in mankind which, whatever the exceptions to the rule, especially in Spain, was central to what we call Renaissance. We should dwell briefly on this matter so as to better appreciate how what was so cordially exalted in the Renaissance come to be so earnestly impugned by Quevedo in the Baroque. Erasmus will serve as well as anyone to clarify the general character of the *refrán* for his time and to explain how the concept of popular wisdom constituted a central matter of the 16th century—more in Spain than elsewhere, as Castro pointed out—and how the *refrán* itself was so significant a sign of this ideal.

In first place always comes the mention of the great age and dispersion of the *refrán*, which justifies both its stylistic excellence and its content of eternal truth. In Castro's translation from the *Adagia:* "¿Qué más

verosimil argumento que el que por tan largos años han aprobado tantas naciones, tantos pueblos, tantas ciudades y villas? Estoy por dezir que los refranes significan en cierta manera naturalmente. Pues aunque se trasladen de una lengua en otra lengua, son rescibidos y se persuaden con ellos. . . ." "Es grande maravilla que se acaben los superbos edificios, las populosas ciudades, las bárbaras pyrámides, los más poderosos reynos," and Juan de Malara adds how extraordinary it is that this "Philosophía vulgar siempre tenga su reyno dividido en todas las provincias del mundo." The meaning of this is quite clear. The *refrán* emerges from beyond time, outlasts all manifestations of civilization, and is transmitted orally through eternity in the mouths of the simple and unlettered: that is to say, Nature (or God) speaks directly in the words of the *vulgo*. This perpetuated such an exalted view of the proverb as to call it "evangelio abreviado. . . ." ". . . Nasciendo en los hombres hechos por la mano de Dios una manera de profesión de sabios. . . . Assí vino la sciencia por sucesión . . . de padres a hijo; y porque mejor quedasse impressa la figura de tal philosophía, hiciéronse ciertas proposiciones, o verdaderas o probables . . . dándoles un particular nombre de refranes. . . . El vulgo . . . dezía él también cosas altas, aunque disfraçadas en el lenguaje de sus proverbios" (*Hacia Cervantes*, Madris, 1967). A number of qualities are not ascribed to the refrán: stylistic excellence, brevity, etc. It's great age, absolute truth and divinely inspired character, however, are its salient qualities in the 16th century, and it will be these that the Baroque will engage directly.

As for Quevedo's vivid appreciation first of this basic Renaissance tenet and then his very Baroque reaction to it, I studied this master some years ago without realizing its implications for the *Baroque*. I will return to it now discussing its deeper meaning which has become clear to me through the years. The three main documents dedicated to this theme, among a host of other mentions scattered throughout his work, are the *Sueño de la muerte* (1622), the *Entremés de los refranes del viejo celoso* (1624), and the *Defensa de Epicuro* (1635). To take the *Entremés* first, Quevedo avails himself of a novel device, namely to endow the old folkloric figure of the "viejo celoso" (mostly connected to Cervantes, here), with a mania for proverbs, a trait not unnatural, however, throughout old people in folklore. This will permit the satirist to effect the disgrace and death of that very "sabiduría popular" which engages his well-known aggressiveness. In direct and conscious view, then, of Erasmus and the entire Renaissance concept, Quevedo launches his assault here against the central character of the *refrán*, its great age. The combining of the age of the "viejo celoso" with the hoary longevity of the proverb permits this novel juxtaposition; that is, they are both ancient, infirm, impotent and useless ("clueco" and "potroso" in Cervantes): "este maldito/cada palabra es un refrancito/cuanto habla dice/ son bexeces,/repitiendole mas de dosmil veces." In the spirit of the *entremés* the proverb will deserve such epithets as "nezedades boberías

. . . inoranzias frialdades." The old man—as if hearing Erasmus' words more than a hundred years after his death—will defend himself saying that "los mas antiguos son los berdaderos," even as his wife accuses him: "Sois un bexete clueco echo de baro/deposito de tos i del cataro," and most important, "todo refranes como el dueno gueros." Finally, his executioner will advise: "agora biexo os abiso/que si os alcanzo os hare/ que pagueis buestro delito," the crime being the habit of *refranes*. Quite a remove from the 16th century of burgeoning humanism. To be sure the spirit of the *entremés* permits this aggression, exaggeration and caricature, but as we shall see the century itself was little less condemning of the *refrán* and popular wisdom. The meaning of all this is quite clear: the antiquity and longevity of the proverb which in the view of the Renaissance justifies its pretension to validity and philosophic truth, becomes in the Baroque a principal reason for its invalidity and falsity. The proverb is "clueco," like Cervantes senile old man; never was of any worth, according to Quevedo. God, who in humanism was thought to speak through the mouth of the *vulgo*, has completely absented himself in the Baroque, replaced by the devil, as we shall see in Gracián. This really means that the Baroque has turned against nature itself; indeed, that its most subtle minds in turning against Nature, have turned against themselves, against their very humanity. More than simple mockery of the rustic, which is immemorial, this goes straight to the heart of Baroque anguish; ever seizing on the great promise of the past, it cannot be recaptured. That is really the essence of Baroque gloom: the inevitable continuation of Renaissance forms and spirit together with their now inaccessibility. It is ever a wrenching struggle. Raimundo Lida, examining Quevedo's last letters, discovered that the satirist's most intimate and final thoughts express an awesome and agonizing spectacle of a "lucha contra sí mismo: "Pues si antes de preguntarnos qué es Quevedo para nosotros, nos preguntamos qué fue Quevedo para sí mismo, una imagen nos sale al paso, violenta entre todas: la de Quevedo contra sí," words which faithfully reflect the entire age's spirituality and explain its well known unease.

Nature or the most direct treatment of Nature, mostly in the bucolic, underwent a severe transformation in the 17th century. The pastoral novel petered out in 1633 (*Los pastores del Betís* of Gonzalo de Saavedra), after a steady decline and decrease in quality and number. Góngora's grandiose pastoral pageantry throughout his serious work can be considered nothing but a caricature thereof. Lope de Vega is certainly the most prolific of bucolic authors of the age but is, as we shall see presently, an exception for his time. Certain other bucolic poets, Francisco de Figueroa, Trillo de Figueroa and some others, sustained for a time the great Renaissance bucolic impulse, even while dilute pastoral elements filtered into otherwise rather "courtly" pastoral novels which appeared as the century advanced. The pastoral drama, which had such a clamorous success in late 16th century Italy, was little fitting to the spirit

of the *comedia*. And as for Quevedo, as Emilio Carilla has shown, he is practically silent in bucolic terms, allowing only a brief mention in his *Anacreon*. Something of temperament, no doubt. It is hard to imagine the daughty satirist revelling in scenes of green swards, river banks, and sad shepherds, except in parodic terms like Góngora. But it is also inescapable that the great Renaissance enthusiasm for Nature is dying. Quevedo is witness to this too by his very silence.

To go on with the *Sueño de la muerte* we are engaged now with what is perhaps most central to the *refrán*'s character, its pretension to universal and philosophic truth. The matter of great age is not the main issue here. Quevedo ranges widely over the whole world of vulgar sayings, proverbs and similar, concerning which—like Góngora—he is an accomplished master, and allows them to indict popular wisdom from their own vantage. The "Rey que rabió" can serve as an example. "No ha habido tan desdichado rey en el mundo, pues no se acuerdan dél síno vejeces y harapos, antigüedades y visiones. Y ni ha habido rey de tan mala memoria. . . . Han dado en decir que rabié, y juro a Dios que mienten." Or Mateo Pico ("No dijera más Mateo Pico"): ¿"Cómo sabéis que no dijera más Mateo Pico? . . . Pues si yo viera vuestras insolencias . . . ¿no dijera más? Dijera más y más, y dijera tanto que enmendárades el refrán, diciendo: 'Más dijera Mateo Pico.'" Agrages, of "Ahora lo veredes, dijo Agrages": "Mira bien que no he dicho tal. Que a mí no me da nada que ahora ni nunca lo veáis." And so forth, concerning the proverbial figures of fantastic cast. The real folk, Juan del Encina, whom Quevedo will recall vividly when he comes to lament the "proverbial" Epicurus, and Enrique de Villena, are equally ardent about the lies perpetuated around their names: "Los disparates de Juan del Encina" elicits: "Pues en cuanto a decir necedades, sacadme un ojo con una. Ladrones, que llamaís disparates los míos y parates los vuestros," and Villena bitterly confesses his own reduction to the character of "nigromántico" in the popular mind: "no te advierten que soy aquel famoso nigromántico de Europa?" This is quite a novel way for the satirist to express his animus against proverbs, but again a most effective one: the case is dramatized by declarations from the mouths of the "refránes" themselves: it is all lies. No such truth as the *refrán* proclaims ever was. This indictment together with the condemnation of the justification by age forms a nicely rounded destruction of the *refrán*'s presumed value; we can scarcely seek any further value in the concept of popular wisdom after that.

Góngora's twisting and distorting of the great models from the ancient world and Garcilaso are no different in their ultimate meaning: rather than being an attempt to improve on those great models from Garcilaso or antiquity, his long works in the cultist vein constitute a wholesale attack on the great humanist past, an annulment of everything they stand for: harmony, simplicity, clarity, humanity, in short. The tone of irony and "sorna" is constant: "dulces escorpiones," indeed. Góngora

and Quevedo, who fought and maligned each other unendingly in the 17th century, nevertheless *had* to share this century's compulsion; there was no escape from history for them.

But there is yet another issue around the school of "cultismo" which urges out attention. What is the meaning of a declared style of poetry so involved and distorted as to wrack the minds of the best of us to decipher it (Dámaso Alonso's description of cultist verse as conceived in a style of "deslumbrante claridad" does not, I imagine, convince many today)? And what does it mean that Góngora (and I can see that terrible visage in the Boston Museum staring down at us at this moment) deliberately formulated a poetry for even less than the "cultured few," indeed for practically no one except those determined devotees who could give the time to it? The answer is, obviously, that he was declaring his entire disbelief in the capacity of men to read literature, that is to participate in humane letters, in humanity, in which case his attitude is no different than Quevedo's own scorn of humanity in his indictment of the *refrán*. How different is Cervantes' attitude toward his own main work, where even "los niños lo manosean." We shall return to this directly.

The full title of the *Defensa de Epicuro* is revealing: *Defiéndese Epicuro de las culumnias vulgares* (1635). Defenses and rehabilitations of the great Greek were of course fairly common from the early days of the Renaissance, a notable example being the treatise of Pedro de Valencia (1555–1620), a work of notable fairness and objectivity as can be gathered from Marcial Solana's description in his *Historia de la filosofía española: Epoca del Renacimiento*. Quevedo's principal motive however, is not simply rehabilitation, rather once more a condemnation of the falsehoods inherent in popular thought. Epicurus, indeed, though far remote in history, is seen to be victimized in quite the same way as Quevedo's own compatriot Juan del Encina: "A mi ver es tan ajustado el caso, que se pueden consolar el uno con el otro, y desengañar a todos del agravio sin razón de entrambos." They are not quite the same, indeed, since Epicurus had invited the hostility of certain ancient thinkers who themselves created the legend of the promoter of the lascivious and sensual way of life, against the real truth of the case, an Epicurus as ascetic and abstemious as a stoic. But then this infamy was passed on by the vulgar and porverbial mind, which, despite the repeated defenses and explanations of unnumbered writers, Pagan and Christian, down through history, perpetuated the lie forever, even up to the present day, with its Epicurean restaurants and the like. Thus, in yet another way, Quevedo felt and expressed his Baroque distrust of mankind. If nothing else it will misread your character and your deeds and reduce you forever in posterity, adjust you to a mere "común proverbio" or destroy you with "hablilla," as the satirist states in the *Defensa*.

Gracián, finally, will sum up the essence of the entire matter. We have seen how implicitly in Góngora and then explicitly and dramatically in Quevedo, the humanistic sense of the Renaissance has been set on its

head in the Baroque, and how this loss of faith in humanity and the individual has set up a conflict which serves to explain a main sector of Baroque "pessimism" and "disillusion." (quite simply, a mortal "lucha contra sí mismo," just as for the individual Quevedo). Gracián, summing up and characterizing his age, will define in exact and clear terms what we mean here, and indeed, Gracián is quite the proper one to give us this definition. We see it obliquely in the *Agudeza*, with its especial admiration for Góngora, and elsewhere, but with particular clarity in his very own style, tortured and complex and yet not without a certain perverse art in prose as Góngora in verse. What, indeed, is the fascination that these two styles can sometimes still preserve for us? I think it is clear. They evince powerful exercises of intellect at the expense of poetry and art. This is indeed the main quality of the great foursome of the 17th century: immense—though tormented—intellectual constructs, with Quevedo probably the master of them all in art. Gracián, then, is ideal for our purpose, since he closes the circle and stresses that other great support of the value and truth of the *refrán*, its status as the word divine, the mind of God speaking through the common man, the *refrán* as an "evangelio abreviado": "Que por ningún acontecimiento se diga que la voz del pueblo es la voz de Dios; sino de la ignorancia y de ordinario por la boca del vulgo suelen hablar los mismos diablos." With this it is obvious how we have reached the end of the Renaissance; how divinity working through the deeds of men has departed them completely. Gracián may have the notion that he is expressing the ideal of the sage confronted by the masses, like Góngora and Quevedo before him. But his mind is on Erasmus' and Malara's ideal of the Renaissance, and he is in full-blown opposition to it.

It remains now to consider the other side of the coin, the line from Cervantes and a few others, who were able to resist the general crash of culture and collapse of belief typified by those we have described. Despite a tone of irony and criticism inevitable in his time, there is no doubt that the Sancho of the second part of the *Quijote* represents a triumph of rustic wisdom, a triumph, that is, of the truth of what the refrán was supposed to represent, and thus a continuation—with all its reservations—of the basic Renaissance faith in men. Again, even "los niños lo manosean." Maurice Molho reached the conclusion (*Cervantes: raíces folklóricas, 1976*) that the human and literary reality of Sancho consists just in this absorption of elements out of real vulgar life, testifying to both Cervantes' continuing adhesion to Renaissance values and "sabiduría popular" as well as to his capacity—how could it be otherwise?—to derive these values from real life experience. But Georg Lukács in 1920 had made it clear enough: the realistic novel's basic function was to reflect "histórico-philosophic" reality, the real conditions of life in the epoch. Cervantes' espousal of Renaissance values combined with the inheritance of techniques of realistic prose (from the *Celestina* and picaresque, of course) made such a thing possible. Castro had

already seen this in historical and literary terms; Molho now demonstrates it according to more recent structuralist principles.

But there is, in fact, perhaps as always in times of decline (the schoolmen of the Middle Ages, for example), an undercurrent of rational good sense that, although embattled and mostly ineffective against the general tide, still preserves some balance in the course of history, or at least persists underground until history, hopefully, can right itself. Lope de Vega after Cervantes maintains something of the same equilibrium. Particularly impressive, since it was his final judgment on his age, his "summing up" of his own work and the course of culture and literature in his century, are his words in the 4th act of the *Dorotea*. These have been thought to be merely a general criticism of Gongorism, but a careful examination of them will show that they constitute more an attempt to puzzle out the peculiarities of his time, the Gongorine phenomenon in particular but the whole range of late Renaissance expression including his own. His conclusions, amid continual self-parody and even of his own *comedia*, are that Spain has reached the end of an era, that the forms and spirit of the Renaissance are exhausted. But there is a tolerance and an irony—self- and national—that herald some promise for the future. How different from the savage attacks of Quevedo on Góngora and Gongorism. An altogether marvelous subject for a doctoral thesis—if there is a graduate student left to do it—is precisely the Lopean stance against his time as shown here in his *Dorotea* but also in many other places in his work. He strikes me as, even more than Cervantes, the one with the clearest vision of the reality of culture and literature in his time.

Similarly, amid that "mortal flora parásita" of "ringorangos moralizantes" and other oddments stretching out in prose fiction toward the end of the century, one is able to discover some attempt to preserve coherence and clarity. Salas Barbadillo and Castillo Solórzano are not very good writers of novels, but better than most others, and they do manage a style reasonably clear and logical—following Cervantes, not Quevedo—which is a necessity for the prose fiction form. Valbuena Prat even observed in Salas Barbadillo's *La hija de Celestina* (1612) that "Es curioso el elogio a los refranes en el centro de la novela," concerning a passage which is indicative of a still surviving modicum of adherence to a Renaissance ideal:

> Bien sabrás hasta agora a ningún refrán castellano se la ha cogido en mentira; todos son boca de verdades; más vale la autoridad de uno de éstos, mayor doctrina encierra que seis sabios de los de esta edad (*La novela picaresca española*, ed. A. Valbuena Prat, 5 ed. [Madrid, 1966] p. 888b).

This was in reference to "Quien bien ata bien desata."

And so Spain's declining century wound toward its close. Of course political (not to mention social, economic, etc.) decadence accompanied the cultural and literary one, and Quevedo is an excellent witness to

both. Noting on his deathbed that "los sucesos de la guerra me parecen a los de mi convalecencia," he bears witness to the political decline of his country. Spain is dying with him. And as early as 1600, in one of his typical "prematicas," observing that "Primeramente, se quiten todos los refranes y se manda que ni en secreto ni en palabra se aleguen," he echoes that sense of humanistic decline. The two areas of decadence are of course inseparable.

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