

Three Sonnets of Quevedo

*Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light;
that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth
aside the curtain, that we may look into the most holy place;
that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the
water.*

Preface to the King James Bible, 1611.

It has become the fashion among foreign language teachers today to place all stress on the spoken word and to decry the time-honored role of translation. Learning to converse in a foreign language is one thing, but history indicates that learning to translate is more important still, for translation is an art as well as a “proficiency.” Without translation we would have no English versions of the Old or New Testaments, nor of any of the great literature of the Greeks or Romans, nor indeed of any of the masterpieces of French, German, Russian, Italian, or other foreign literatures.

The following three sonnets of Quevedo are from a soon-to-be published *Anthology of Hispanic Verse*, from the beginnings to the present. The poetry of both Spain and Spanish America will be included. No such collection exists in English. The editors of *Mester* choose three sonnets of Quevedo out of this forthcoming anthology, and very properly so, for Quevedo is one of the most contemporaneous and existential poets of Spanish speech, although in time he belongs to the Spanish Golden Age.

His poetry is a finely honed expression of man’s anguish when he is confronted by the flight of time and the inevitability of death. It also catches the essence of Spain’s crumbling universe when the age of growth is clearly ended. Quevedo is steeped in *conceptismo*, and the *concepto* is his primary poetic instrument. “El concepto es algo muy difícil de definir; puede ser un juego de palabras, una agudeza del ingenio, o un adentramiento intuitivo en la esencia de un tema poético (el amor, la muerte, el tiempo): el concepto, en todo caso, apela a la inteligencia, no a los sentidos. La poesía conceptista es poesía *de contenido*: la palabra está al servicio de un contenido conceptual y emocional (más que empleada por sus posibilidades estéticas—o sea la palabra por la palabra misma—como en el caso de los gongoristas). La lengua poética en Quevedo resulta ceñida, cortante, presta a hacer saltar el concepto como una chispa.” This quotation from Antonio Sánchez-Romeralo places the poetry of Quevedo in a definite frame, but it is my personal opinion that the sonnets of the Spanish master *also* appeal to the senses, and *also* possess great phonic and imaginative beauty. The reader must be the judge.

The sonnet is a poem requiring both great technical and poetic skill. Francisco de Herrera defined it well in his *Anotaciones a las obras de Garcilaso de la Vega*: “Es el soneto la más hermosa composición, y de mayor artificio y gracia de cuantas tiene la poesía italiana y española. Y en ningún otro género se requiere más pureza y cuidado de lengua, más templanza y decoro, donde es grande culpa cualquier error pequeño.”

The first of the three sonnets is considered to be one of the finest love poems in the Spanish language. The poet for the moment tries to cast aside his existential anguish and finds immortality in the reality of the love that possesses him completely.

Dust that loves forever

Cerrar podrá mis ojos la postrera
sombra que me llevare el blanco día,
y podrá desatar esta alma mía
hora a su afán ansioso lisonjera;
mas no, de esotra parte, en la ribera,
dejará la memoria, en donde ardía;
nadar sabe me llama la agua fría,
y perder el respeto a ley severa.
Alma a quien todo un dios prisión ha sido,
venas que humor a tanto fuego han dado,
médulas que han gloriosamente ardido:
su cuerpo dejará, no su cuidado;
serán ceniza, mas tendrá sentido;
polvo serán, mas polvo enamorado.

The last shadow that takes the light of day
From me will close for good these loving eyes,
And will release this soul from mortal clay
Which has indulged its rapt and eager cries;
But no, upon that unknown farther shore
My flame will burst where frozen waters thaw,
Its memory will brightly burn once more
Without respect for man's most solemn law.

Soul that was prison to a god in chains,
Veins that have given fuel to so much fire,
Bones nobly burned to mock the heart's endeavor;
This body they will leave, but not its pains;
They will be ash, but quickened with desire;
They will be dust, but dust that loves forever.



Man's Day

Huye sin percibirse, lento, el día,
y la hora secreta y recatada
con silencio se acerca, y, despreciada,
lleva tras sí la edad lozana mía.

La vida nueva, que en niñez ardía,
la juventud robusta y engañada,
en el postrer invierno sepultada,
yace entre negra sombra y nieve fría.

No sentí resbalar mudos los años;
hoy los lloro pasados, y los veo
riendo de mis lágrimas y daños.

Mi penitencia deba a mi deseo,
pues me deben la vida mis engaños,
y espero el mal que paso, y no lo creo.

The long day passes by, slow, unperceived;
So do the secret and the hidden hours
Approach in silence, then like wasted flowers
They snatch my youth away, I am bereaved,
The vital force has lost its magic glow.
My flowering years that died before they bloomed
Were in last winter's discontent entombed,
And lie between dark shadows and cold snow;
I did not feel the mute years slip away,
But now I weep their passing, and I see
Them mocking at my quickened tears today;
My penitence masks all desire in me,
For this deceit's my life as I conceive it,
While I await the end, and do not believe it.

Passing Time

“¡Ah de la vida!” . . . ¿Nadie me responde?
¡Aquí de los antaños que he vivido!
La Fortuna mis tiempos ha mordido;
las Horas mi locura las esconde.
¡Que sin poder saber cómo ni adónde,
la salud y la edad se hayan huído!
Falta la vida, asiste lo vivido,
y no hay calamidad que no me ronde.
Ayer se fue; mañana no ha llegado;
hoy se está yendo sin parar un punto;
soy un fue, y un será, y un es cansado.
En el hoy y mañana y ayer, junto
pañales y mortaja, y he quedado
presentes sucesiones de difunto.

I greet you, Life! Will no one answer me?
The silent years that I have lived unknowing,
Saw Fortune thwart my hope and stunt its growing;
The hours conceal my madness as they flee
With scarce a trace of how or where they went;
Both youth and health have gone and left me ailing,
Life passed me by, what has been lived is failing,
Blind fate has struck me low, I am forespent.
Yesterday's gone, I have not seen tomorrow,
Today is rushing by, how quickly fled!
All that I was, shall be, I am, this husk of sorrow;
Past, present, future merge within my head,
Infant and corpse unite in this grim horror
Whose brief succession binds me to the dead.

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