

BAROQUE · ALLEGORY · COMEDIA

The Transfiguration of Tragedy
in Seventeenth-Century Spain

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INTRODUCTION

Eres tan perverso que ni te obligué llamándote pío, benévolo, ni benigno en los demás discursos por que no me persiguieses; y ya desengañado, quiero hablar contigo claramente. Este es discurso del infierno; no me arguyas de maldiciente porque digo mal de los que hay en él, pues no es posible que haya dentro nadie que bueno sea. Si te parece largo, en tu mano está: toma el infiero que te bastare, y calla. Y si algo no te parece bien, o lo disimula piadoso, o lo enmienda docto; que errar es de hombres, y ser herrado de bestia o esclavos. Si fuera oscuro nunca el infierno fué claro; si triste y melancólico, yo no te he prometido risa. Sólo te pido, lector, y aun te conjuro por todos los prólogos, que no tuerzas las razones ni ofendas con malicia mi buen celo [...].

Francisco de Quevedo, *El sueño del infierno*, prólogo al ingrato y desconocido lector

Francisco de Quevedo's *El sueño del infierno* (around 1608, published 1627) in many respects captures the very essence of the Baroque. This fascinating short prose text is a most detailed and vivid account of seventeenth-century Madrid, complete with its deceitful merchants, prostitution, hypocrisy, proverbs, disgusting pastry, struggle for social ascension, duels, incompetent doctors, mad scientists, religious superstition, over-protective *dueñas*, and much more. Even if it must be acknowledged that the narrative mode of the text is satirical, hence exaggerative and even on occasion malignant (with the spiteful invocation of the 'perverse' reader in the prologue, the tone is set from the beginning), Quevedo probably gives a reliable — realistic — description of his native city and its inhabitants. However, as its title indicates, the text simultaneously transfigures this colourful contemporary reality into Hell itself with all its vices: although it is basically a realistic chronicle of seventeenth-century Spanish urban society, it is at the same time an allegory that subjects contemporary life to a stern moral scrutiny, beholding it, as it were, from a transcendental point of view. In this respect, too, *El sueño del infierno* captures the

essence of the Baroque period, restlessly oscillating between worldly and transcendental perspectives: we are at once deeply immersed in the unpleasant materiality of the early modern metropolis — one can almost smell the *pasteles*, hear the barking of the stray dogs and the buzzing of the fat flies (eventually the filling of the pastries), see the withering makeup of the prostitutes, feel the fabric of the pretentious *capas* worn by the *nouveaux riches* — and hovering high over it in a superior moral vision, which renders it all vanity, emptiness, and ignorance. In Quevedo's text, the Spanish capital is simultaneously a very concrete seventeenth-century city and another Babylon, Sodom, or Gomorrah: at once historical and figurative. Thus, *El sueño del infierno* suggests the central paradox of the Baroque worldview — modern, yet simultaneously all-but-modern — and of Baroque allegory (centre of attention in the present context): at once material, secular, realistic, and moral, spiritual, figurative.

This all seems unsurprising; since late Antiquity, Christian allegory had been reconciling matter and spirit, literality and figuration, history and morality. However, with the advent of the Baroque period this reconciliation suddenly became problematic. In the heated ideological climate of the seventeenth century, secular and transcendental perspectives were increasingly entering into conflict and the traditional allegorical mediation between material and spiritual realms hence experienced a crisis. Allegory now became equivocal. A Baroque meta-allegory — a text, that is, which exhibits the very conflict between worldly and transcendental perspectives characteristic not only of Baroque allegory, but of Baroque culture on a broad scale —, *El sueño del infierno* may serve as an initiation, as it were, into the ideologic and aesthetic mysteries of the period. Thus, I will begin my study of the Baroque by interpreting Quevedo's text.

The oneiric vision of *El sueño del infierno* is recorded by a narrator (allegedly on a 'divine mission' to enlighten his fellow men and initially led by a 'guiding angel'), through whose testimony the *engañado* reader, ignorant of the deeper moral meaning of history, is presumed to perceive the empty and purely material nature of the infernal city, filled with the shrewd apologetic lies of sinful inhabitants seeking to justify their wicked behaviour by twisting language and making puns (for example, the pastry makers complain that they are condemned for the 'sins of the flesh', when they are actually 'dealing more in bones', that is, cheating their customers). However, as the text develops, the narrator loses track of his divine guidance and becomes increasingly immersed in the sinful and empty materiality of the infernal sphere: a tendency that becomes formally manifest in the ostentatious degeneration of the text itself into a consummate, hedonist play with the very materiality of language (wordplay and puns, incarnation of proverbs and uncontrolled chains of metaphors), and is thematically represented by the highly equivocal obsession with

the vain and empty fictions of Hell's impressive amount of heretics. There is perhaps no funnier introduction to Golden Age science and the Christian pandemonium of miscreants — they are all here, the geomancers, the necromancers, the astrologers, and the alchemists; the worshippers of Baal and Astaroth (the grand duke of Hell), the Sadducees, the worshippers of the golden fly, Basilides of Alexandria, Muhammed, Luther, and many more. Even if this introduction is also a traditional medieval catalogue of human folly, it attests to an intimate kinship between detractor and the object of detraction, since the narrator parodies the creeds and terminology of these damned souls with the exactitude of an adept. Hence, the reader's attention is led toward the perhaps not all that orthodox and morally impeccable character of the narrator: how does he know all this? Has he perhaps himself been tempted by one or more of these heretic fictions? At any rate, his account of them is highly ambiguous, simultaneously imbued with a profound fascination and a sort of automatic repugnance. His description is at once an immersion in the exotic material of the most incredible human ideas and a severe moral reprehension of these as heretic fictions. The traditional allegory of the *stultifera navis* [Ship of Fools] has wrecked, as it were: the moralization of human folly is rivalled by the tendency to indulge in the seductive charms of utterly nonsensical and immoral heretic fictions. Again, the conflict between a horizontal, worldly perspective and a transcendental, vertical perspective makes itself felt. *El sueño del infierno* discusses this conflict with specific reference to aesthetics, turning itself into a virtual meta-allegory: a text which takes the allegorical duality of perspectives and the problematic relation between these perspectives as its central topic. Hence, well into the text, the narrator also meets a group of literary heretics (poets with 'almas de herejes', Culteranists) on his infernal journey. These poets have sacrificed substance to form, 'por el consonante condenados' and 'a puros versos perdidos', as one of them honestly confesses, caring more about formal matters of rhyme and alliteration than the revelation of moral truths through poetic language that is the objective of the narrator's divine mission. They have, in other words, let themselves get absorbed by pure matter and forgotten that literary art should not only be *dulcis*, but also *utilis*. Letting the formal aspect of poetic creation get the upper hand, they have neglected poetry's moral obligation, endorsed by secular as well as ecclesiastical authorities. In his fear of hearing something that might compromise him, as he says, Quevedo's narrator quickly abandons his conversation with the heretic poets whose delirious wordplay he notwithstanding parodies with great lucidity, thus exhibiting his kinship with the very aestheticist heresy that he so fervently condemns. As a meta-aesthetic commentary on the fundamental ambiguity of Baroque allegory, simultaneously densely material and vertiginously spiritual, this