

The Dialectics of Redemption. Autonomous Language, Heresy and Divine Truth in Francisco de Quevedo's Dream of Hell

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The present article proposes a reading of 'El sueño del infierno' that may clarify the connection between at least some of the diverse elements of Quevedo's strange world, concentrating on the relation between his ubiquitous awareness of the arbitrariness of human language — separated from divine truth after the Fall, and hence autonomous — and his quest for authoritative metaphysical meaning.

Man is the shadow of a dream. (Pindar, *Pythian Odes*, 8.135)

I. Introduction

In 1627 the final edition of a collection of early prose compositions by the Spanish Golden Age writer Francisco de Quevedo (1580–1645) was published under the title *Los sueños*. Among these was 'El sueño del infierno' (1608), a satirical description of Hell as recorded by an eye witness who is said to have visited the infernal world in a dream, and now wishes to enlighten his fellow men by relating the horrors he has seen. A scholar, satirist, lyrical poet, novelist and a committed political, religious, and ethical writer, Quevedo was one of the most diversely productive writers of the Spanish Baroque. His early correspondence with the famous Belgian humanist Justus Lipsius, his devotion to the Knights of Santiago, and his prison time in San Marcos Castle in the city of León (1639–1643) — all well-known biographical facts — only add to the complexity of the picture, and to the perplexity of the scholar. Where (if it exists) is the unifying feature of Quevedo's utterly heterogeneous literary production and highly idiosyncratic personality to be found? Twentieth-century critical reception of the Quevedean oeuvre has either viewed its heterogeneous character as a direct expression of the author's notoriously anxious and protean personality — recurring thereby to empathy and extratextuality,

not explaining the literary texts as aesthetic phenomena, and exaggerating, moreover, the negativity and darkness of Quevedo's world¹ – or it has, as a reaction to the existentialist and negativist interpretations, concentrated on revealing the endless number of intertextual references on which the Quevedean writing is based, aiming at scientific objectivity, but not always interpreting the actual use Quevedo made of his multiple sources — thereby in the last analysis neglecting the problem of cohesion and meaning altogether.²

The present article proposes a reading of 'El sueño del infierno' which may clarify the connection between at least some of the diverse elements of Quevedo's strange world, concentrating on the relation between his ubiquitous awareness of the arbitrariness of human language — separated from divine truth after the Fall, and hence autonomous — and his quest for authoritative metaphysical meaning. As will be shown subsequently, Quevedo's text deals with these important topics on a formal level via an ingenious exploration of the sheer materiality of autonomous language in Hell, and on a thematic level via the vivid metaphor of heresy. The text is fundamentally concerned with the representation of an ever more distant metaphysical truth. At the same time it is, however, as a result of the basic awareness of the arbitrariness of language, on the verge of degenerating itself into the very same sinful 'fiction,' hedonistic play or pure aesthetic form, devoid of substantial metaphysical meaning, that is condemned as heresy on a thematic level.

II. Dreams, Visions, and the Legitimacy of Aesthetic Form

The literary genre of dreams and visions of the Beyond is as old as Western literature itself. In Homer's *Odyssey* we find Odysseus travelling to Hades, the Greek underworld, where he is to consult the blind seer Tiresias; in the *Politeia*, Plato presents the myth of the soldier Er, who is brought to the underworld by mistake as he lies wounded on the battlefield. As is also the case in the dialogue *Gorgias*, Socrates tells about the Beyond to illustrate the point that leading a just life pays off in the end, and that (by analogy) it is indeed important that the state be built on the idea of Justice. In the *Timeaus*, Plato answers affirmatively to the question, already posed by Homer and subsequently by Aristotle, of whether dreams

come from the gods, and are therefore divinatory. That God may enter into communication with man through dreams is asserted in *Numbers* 12:6, and still more explicitly in *Job* 33:14. Divine revelation through dreams occurs frequently in both the Old and New Testaments. In most of the cases recorded the dream is expressly said to come from God, e.g., the dreams of Abimelech (*Gen.* xx,3), Jacob (*Gen.* xxviii,12; xxxi,10), Solomon (*IIIK.* iii,5–15), Nabuchodonosor (*Dan.* ii,19), Daniel (*Dan.* vii,1), Joseph (*Matth.* i,20; iii,13 and Paul (*Acts* xxiii,11; xxvii,23). The prophets Isaias and Daniel describe the resurrection of the dead on the Last Day, and Saint John the Evangelist tells of The Last Judgment in splendidly figurative and visionary language in the *Apocalypse*. In the first century C.E., Cicero employed the dream genre in *Scipio's Dream* to make the dead military general Scipio Africanus address his grandson Scipio the Younger and teach him about politics. In the second century Lucian of Samosate, to whom Quevedo is greatly indebted, wrote *Menippus or The Descent into Hades*, in which the character Menippus visits the underworld in a dream, as well as a number of *Nekyomanteia* (Dialogues of the Dead). Virgil makes his hero Aeneas travel to the underworld in the *Aeneid*, and around 1300 Virgil himself guides the pilgrim Dante through the three worlds of the Beyond in the *Divine Comedy*. From the Middle Ages onwards, a strong tradition of visionary literature flourished in Europe, represented, for example, by St. Catherine of Sienna's *Dialogues*, a series of extatic visions of the Beyond, and culminating in the inspired writings of the great Spanish mystics St. Teresa of Ávila and St. John of the Cross, representing in a richly metaphorical and visionary language their nuptials with Christ. About 30 years later, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the dream is still an important means of communication between the creatures of the Beyond and the living. In the context of English literary history, Bunyun's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1675) is, however, probably the most obvious example of the connection between Christian theological writing and the writing of dreams.³

Except maybe for his contemporaries Shakespeare and Bunyun, the extraordinarily learned Quevedo surely knew all these important texts of the Western literary canon as he composed his *Sueños*. As will be shown, he consciously entered this literary tradition, and with earnestness discussed its inherent problem of authority and authenticity: Does the dream or vision come from God, is it more likely a human phantasm, or

even a demonic illusion? What kind of legitimacy applies to the aesthetic text representing phenomena of the Beyond? Already in Homer we meet the conviction that there are two kinds of dreams: the prophetic and benevolent ones sent by the gods, and the illusory and dangerous ones which are not to be trusted. St. Bernhard of Clairvaux, preaching on the *Song of Songs* in the twelfth century, makes a strikingly similar observation, emphasizing that some of the dream-like images in the *Song* and in the extatic visions of the numerous mystics are sent by God, while others are sent by the Evil One, and are therefore extremely dangerous. Literary dreams and visions are consequently — in both the Graeco-Roman and Judeo-Christian forms — characterized by the problem of the aesthetic legitimacy: How is poetic language able to describe phenomena of the Beyond?

In his *Sueños*, Quevedo continues this honourable tradition of combining metaphysical speculation with an acute investigation into the legitimacy of aesthetic form, not only through the multifaceted exploration of the materiality of autonomous language on a formal level, but also through the rather choleric treatment of the problem of heresy on a thematic level.

III. The Sinful Materiality of Autonomous Language

In the present context I will examine those formal characteristics of Quevedo's text that point to the central topics of the legitimacy of aesthetic language, the sinful and fictitiousness of signification after the Fall, and the transcendence of divine truth. First, a quick glance at the prologue — the most rude and aggressive prologue in the entire collection of *Sueños* — will clearly demonstrate the narrator's quite stereotypical view of Man, allegedly unwilling to lead a pious life and to change his wicked ways:

Eres tan perverso que ni te obligué, llamándote pío, benévolo, ni benigno en los demás discursos por que no persiguieses; y, ya desengañado, quiero hablar contigo claramente. (p. 141)

Having previously without any luck tried to improve on the *perverso* reader by gentler means, flattering him in the preceding prologues as was customary, the narrator's tone now gets nasty. He eventually ends his

prologue by stating that he neither cares much about the reader nor about his own text:

Al fin, si te agradare el discurso, tu te holgarás, y si no, poco importa, que a mí de ti, ni de él se me da nada. (1958, p. 141)

The discourse of Hell being thus properly introduced, the problem of the legitimacy of the dream (and of literary dreams as aesthetic phenomenon) is immediately posed, as the text refers to the common consensus that dreams more often than not are illusive products of idle imagination (*burla de la fantasía y ocio del alma*), and that the devil never speaks the truth. Given the apparent aim of improving the reader's sinful behaviour by representing in the tortures of hell in the dream, and given the infernal denizens moralistic speeches, the tone of the introduction seems strange. Not comprehensible in any other way, it must be seen as part of the general discussion of aesthetic legitimacy in 'El sueño del infierno,' initially relativizing the narrating discourse and pointing to the problem of representational language:

Yo que en el Sueño del Juicio vi tantas cosas y en El alguacil endemoniado oí parte de lo que no había visto, como sé que los sueños, las más veces, son burla de la fantasía y ocio del alma, y que el diablo nunca dijo verdad, por no tener cierta noticia de las cosas que justamente nos esconde Dios, vi, guiado del Ángel de mi Guarda, lo que se sigue, por particular providencia de Dios, que fué para traerme en el miedo la verdadera paz. (1958, p. 141)

The narrating voice thus presents itself as a wiser and more experienced version of the figure experiencing the horrors of Hell. The relationship between the two is essentially the same as the relationship between the narrator and the pilgrim in the *Divine Comedy*. The narrating voice of the prologue consequently represents the present state of mind of the narrator, retrospectively relating his story with the attitude of a disillusioned (*desengañado*) man wishing to enlighten his contemporaries. The experience of disillusion (*desengaño*) and mistrust of appearances (*engaños*) of any kind, so characteristic of late Spanish Golden Age mentality, and especially of Quevedo, now manifests itself as an acute awareness of the illusory nature of language, including the aesthetic language constituting 'El sueño del infierno' as a literary text. By the initial reference to two other texts in the collection, 'El sueño del Juicio Final' and 'El alguacil endemoniado,' the text sets off in an extremely

self-conscious manner, demonstrating the awareness of the literary self — literary, hence an aesthetic phenomenon or a fiction. The initial relativization of the narrative discourse may be seen as an example of negative dialectical aesthetics or (depending on the angle employed) negative theology: self-reflexion or self-negation as a means of legitimizing the narration, and keeping the proper distance between representational language and the unattainable divine truth ('las cosas que justamente nos esconde Dios') to be represented, so that the latter is not obscured or blurred by deceitful human language. The fundamental negative dialectical or negative theological intention of the text is stated by the narrator's comment that he was made to see the horrors of Hell 'para traerme en el miedo la verdadera paz'— to be brought peace through fear — a comment later echoed in Judas' claim, that he originated the salvation of mankind through his delivery of Christ ('di principio, en la entrega, a la medicina de vuestro mal,' p. 154), and advocating a basic dialectic of redemption: without the Fall of man, the redemption through Christ would be meaningless. Similarly, without evil and deceit to be negated, negative theology would be left empty-handed (divine truth being decisively out of reach). Finally, the same logic applies, to negative dialectical aesthetics: without the immensity of mythic fables to be negated, negative dialectical aesthetics would end up silent, since the metaphysical truth ultimately aimed at is absolutely sublime and hence unattainable beyond the indirect approach of negativity. The basic negativity of 'El sueño del infierno' must be understood as inextricably bound up with this 'dialectic of redemption;' its elaborate criticism of falseness is the only possible way of pointing at transcendent divine truth.

Ya desengaño, the narrator of the prologue is more experienced than both the reader and the narrating figure of the discourse, and therefore explicitly lays claim to authority on the part of his story. The initial relativization of the narrative discourse, however, simultaneously points to the fundamental tendency of the text to develop into illegitimate fiction, devoid of any metaphysical meaning. Although the text from the outset lays claim to divine authority (the narrator is said to be led by a guiding angel, and to see Hell 'por particular providencia de Dios'), the fundamental problem of legitimacy cannot be ignored. Literary dreams and visions call into question the legitimacy of aesthetic language.

This problem introduced, the narrator now begins the story of how he came to visit Hell. He was resting in a peaceful setting, when his thoughts started to wander, moved as thoughts are by indolence and passion:

Halléme in un lugar favorecido de la naturaleza por el sosiego amable, donde sin malicia la hermosura entretenía la vista (muda creación y sin respuesta humana), platicaban las fuentes entre las guijas y los árboles por las hojas; tal vez cantaba un pájaro, ni sé determinadamente si en competencia suya o agradeciéndoles su armonía.

Ved cuál es de peregrino nuestro deseo, que no hallé paz en nada desto. Tendí los ojos, curioso de ver algún camino, por donde buscar compañía, y veo (cosa digna de admiración) dos sendas que nacían de un mismo lugar, y una se iba apartando de la otra, como que huyesen de acompañarse. (1958 p. 141)

The general outlook of Quevedo's text may be considerably illuminated by a comparison with the opening lines of the *Divine Comedy*. Whereas the pilgrim of the latter is initially on the verge of a nervous breakdown — literally as well as metaphorically 'in the woods' — the narrator of Quevedo's text is initially in what may be conceived of as the garden of Eden ('un lugar favorecido de la naturaleza'), or at least an uncorrupted natural paradise ('donde sin malicia la hermosura entretenía la vista'). Whereas Dante's epic is the story of salvation and grace, Quevedo's satire is the story of the Fall without any immediate or direct redemption. Whereas Dante is safely guided through the three worlds of the Beyond (first by Virgil, then by Beatrice), the narrator in Quevedo's text soon loses his guardian angel, who is mentioned shortly in the first lines of the discourse only to disappear immediately after, and reappear just once for a brief and insignificant comment on page 147. The mysterious disappearance of divine guidance in 'El sueño del infierno' may very well be seen as an expression of the essential transcendence of divine truth, ever escaping the reach of man, and leaving him alone in the darkness of negativity and materiality.

The narrator now has to face the old dilemma of choosing between the unpleasant path of virtue and the comfortable path of vice. After a short walk on the path of virtue, he is soon tempted by the festivities ('bailes y fiestas, juegos y saraos') on the path of vice:

¡Pesía tal! – dije yo entre mí - , pues tras ser el camino tan trabajoso, es la gente que en él anda tan seca y poco entretenida. ¡Para mi humor es bueno! Di un paso atrás y salíme del camino del bien; que jamás quise retirarme de la virtud que tuviese mucho que desandar, ni que descansar. Volví a la mano izquierda, y vi un acompañamiento tan reverento, tanto coche, tanta carroza cargada de

competencias al sol en humanas hermosuras, y gran cantidad de galas y libreas, lindos caballos, mucha gente de capa negra y muchos caballeros. Yo, que siempre oí decir: “Díme con quién fueres y direte quién eres”, por ir con buena compañía, puse el pie en el umbral del camino y, sin sentirlo, me hallé respaldado en medio de él, como él que se desliza por el hielo; y topé con lo que había menester. Porque aquí todos eran bailes y fiestas, juegos y saraos... . (1958 p. 142)⁴

In fact, this passage may be seen as a meta-aesthetic comment on the latent tendency of the text — fundamentally on a mission to enlighten mankind through the exposition of sin — to degenerate into hedonistic play with the inviting aesthetic material of the world (‘tanta carroza cargada de competencias al sol de humanas hermosuras,’ etc.). Initially following the exhausting path of virtue, and struggling to reveal divine truth through poetic language, the text now testifies to its own weakness and vulnerability faced with the tempting and sinful voluptuousness of the material world, and, by analogy, with the material voluptuousness of autonomous aesthetic language. Like he who slips on ice (‘como él que se desliza por el hielo’), the narrator is quickly led to the path of vice, surrendering, that is, to the temptations of matter and to the materiality of aesthetic language and giving up the representation of metaphysical truth. From the cited passage may, then, be drawn the important conclusion, that Hell is a place of form without substance, meaningless and fallen language cut off from metaphysical meaning or divine truth, and therefore likely to be falsely interpreted or even manipulated by sinful Man. It is consequently, as will soon be clear, a place of devilish mirth and witty wordplay of sinners toying with and manipulating autonomous language, ultimately exploiting it to justify their wickedness. Not realizing that it is exactly on the grounds of this metaphysical emptiness and linguistic materiality that they are condemned to eternal torture in Hell, the sinners continuously try to justify themselves and legitimize their sins by twisting language — a phenomenon which never fails to get a big laugh from the devils (‘y cada palabra que hablaban se hundían siete u ocho mil diablos de risa,’ p. 148).

Leaving now the problem of the narration and of the narrator, I will examine some of the many examples of witty wordplay in the text, emphasizing the extreme self-consciousness of the Quevedean writing, and pointing to the arbitrariness of fallen language, separated from divine

truth, and hence interpretable in multiple ways. In each of the following examples of linguistic gymnastics, the joke is based on the ambiguity and multiple meaning of a central term or phrase:

- A bookseller complains that he is being condemned for the bad works of others. The passage plays with the double meaning of the word *obras*, meaning both ‘deeds’ and ‘literary works’: ‘Pues es tanta mi desgracia, que todos se condenan por las malas obras que han hecho, y yo y todos los libreros nos condenamos por las obras malas que hacen los otros’ (p. 145).
- When the narrator meets a group of entertainers (buffoons, clowns, jesters, jokers, tricksters and the like), the text plays with the double meaning of the word *gracia*, meaning ‘grace’; in common usage, however, the expression *tener gracia* means ‘to be funny’: ‘Y repliqué como se condenaban, y me respondieron que como se condenan otros por no tener gracia, ellos se condenan por tenerla o quererla tener’ (p. 146). While the condemnation of others is a question of the absence of divine grace, the clowns are condemned to be fools for ‘having grace.’
- When the pastry-makers complain that they are being condemned for the sin of the flesh, dealing mostly with food, and not with women, the text plays with the double meaning of *la carne*, both ‘meat’ and ‘flesh’, hinting at the common prejudice that pastry-makers substituted flies, rats, and dog meat for more exquisite filling in the notoriously unhealthy *pasteles* sold in the streets of Madrid: ‘¡Ay de nosotros – dijo uno -, que nos condenamos por el pecado de la carne, sin conocer mujer, tratando más en huesos!’ (p. 147).
- It is said that a merchant is condemned for wanting to be like God, and hence measureless: ‘Gente es ésta – dijo al cabo muy enojado – que quiso ser como Dios, pues pretendieron ser sin medida’ (p. 148). The text plays with the word *medida*, comparable to the English word ‘measure,’ hinting at the common prejudice that merchants overcharged their customers when weighing their goods in the dark grocery shops, and hence were ‘without measure.’
- In the passage on the whores, a witty one presents the paradox that while thieves are condemned for taking what doesn’t belong to them (‘tomar lo ajeno’), women are condemned for giving away their own (‘dar lo suyo’): ‘Decidnos señor, como ha de ser esto de dar y

recibir: si los ladrones se condenan por tomar lo ajeno y la mujer por dar lo suyo; aquí de Dios, que... el ser puta es ser justicia, si es justicia dar a cada uno lo suyo, pues lo hacemos así, ¿De qué nos culpan?” (p. 155). The text plays with the phrase ‘dar lo suyo,’ which in a Biblical context would mean ‘to give away one’s earthly possessions,’ but taken literally may be interpreted as ‘to give away one’s body.’

The text contains many more examples of the same kind. Another way the text states the fundamental materiality of autonomous language can be observed in the different groups of incarnated refrains, also explored by Quevedo in the *Cuento de cuentos*. To this group belong the retrospectively remorseful ¡Oh, quién hubiera!’ (p. 150), the naive ‘Penséque’ (p. 156), and the scrupleless ‘Dios es piadoso’ (p. 150), always counting on God to forgive their sins.

I will briefly consider the aesthetic structure of ‘El sueño del infierno’, primarily its overtly polyphonic character, and secondly its structural logic of parataxis, enumeration or accumulation — structural phenomena which must necessarily be related to the central topic of the legitimacy of aesthetic language.

The polyphonic nature of the text manifests itself in the multitude of infernal voices made to speak, complain, joke, defend themselves, preach and moralize all through it. Essentially a result of the ‘weak’ narrative position, initially relativized as previously described, the polyphony of voices basically attests to the problem of legitimacy, as the self-conscious narrator is only just able to prevent his own story from developing into a genuine cacophony of independent statements. With the authority of the narrative voice initially relativized by the emphasis on its own fictionality, the text virtually presents itself as a loosely orchestrated chorus work, led by the allegedly authoritative voice of the narrator, blessed by divine providence and out to represent divine truth, but, as the preceding examples of linguistic gymnastics demonstrate, not entirely able to prevent his own discourse from degenerating into mere play.

To this description must be added the observation that Quevedo’s text is fundamentally structured according to the logic of what one may call non-systematic accumulation or enumeration, i.e. a strictly paratactic, non-hierarchical order of phenomena. Beyond the logic of the parataxis, it is

indeed difficult to find any other structural principle in 'El sueño del infierno.' Tailors, lawyers, buffoons, theologians, pharmacists, cuckolds, merchants, vain ladies, coachmen, homosexuals, hypocrites, officials, booksellers, *dueñas* (old women guarding the decency of young girls), noblemen, whores, innkeepers, and pie-makers — all of seventeenth-century Madrid — are presented paratactically without any obvious principle of differentiation. All represent empty and sinful worldviews, segregated from divine truth, manipulating purely instrumental language, and pleading their innocence. Quevedo surely has an acute sense of this negative development since the good old days in Paradise, when Adam gave each animal a name that corresponded exactly to its nature. His text may very well be seen as fundamentally oriented towards this Adamic ideal as the basic motivation and background for the investigation into the legitimacy of language. The formal qualities just examined, however — as well as the thematic treatment of heresy to be examined succeedingly — certainly reveal an intimate kinship of 'El sueño del infierno' with the fallen and autonomous, instrumental and arbitrary language of Hell. One can only agree with Raimundo Lida when he describes Quevedo's oneiric visions with phrases such as 'immense stream of words', 'torrential enumeration', and 'frenetic movement of the discourse', resulting in an evident 'losing sight of the point of departure', and 'the steady accumulation of more and more images and ideas.'⁵ Not unlike the empty discourses of the sinners in Hell, Quevedo's text is, then, potentially developing into what may be thought of as a case of signification run riot. Thus, it may be said to be hopelessly far from the Adamic language of Paradise, indirectly posed as a linguistic ideal through the criticism of autonomous language on the one hand, and through the criticism of heresy on the other hand.

IV. The Problem of Heresy

I will examine three groups of sinners in Hell: the scientific, literary and religious heretics. Quevedo's censure aims at the immense number of false teachings that obscure the decisively transcendent, yet still authoritative divine truth. As such, 'El sueño del infierno' may again to a certain extent be viewed as an expression of the dialectics of redemption inherent in negative theology and in negative dialectics as the basic idea that sin is only

the reverse side of redemption, and that the negation of falseness, consequently, amounts to an indirect representation of truth. However, the text is not to be described as an unproblematic example of negative dialectics or negative theology, protecting a metaphysical truth by uncompromisingly exhibiting the wickedness of human signification. As will become clear, I think, from the present reading of the passages in question, the text is marked by a notable tendency to lose itself in the sinful heretical fictions as a colourful and exotic aesthetic material to be passionately explored, losing track of the transcendent truth as a divine light leading through the labyrinth of falseness and sin — a tendency corresponding to that towards aesthetic play on a formal level.

The first group in the pandemonium of heretics on trial are the scientists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with their esoteric discussions:

Eran astrólogos y alquimistas. Estos andaban llenos de hornos y crisoles, de lodos, de minerales, de escorias, de cuernos, de estiércol, de sangre humana, de polvos y de alambiques. Aquí calcinaban, allí lavaban, allí apartaban y acullá purificaban. Cual estaba fijando el mercurio al martillo, y, habiendo resuelto la materia viscosa y ahuyentado la parte sutil, lo corruptivo del fuego, en llegándose a la copela, se le iba en humo. Otros disputaban si se había de dar fuego de mecha, o si el fuego o no fuego de Raimundo había de entenderse de la cal o si de luz efectiva del calor, y no de calor efectivo de fuego. Cuáles con el signo de Hermete daban principio a la obra magna, y en otra parte miraban ya el negro blanco, y le aguardaban colorado; y juntando a ésto la proporción de naturaleza, con naturaleza se contenta naturaleza, y con ella misma se ayuda, y los demás oráculos ciegos suyos, esperaban la reducción de la prima materia, y al cabo reducían su sangre a la postrera podre; y en lugar de hacer el estiércol, cabellos, sangre humana, cuernos y escoria, oro; hacían del oro estiércol, gastándolo neciamente. (p. 158)

Parodying the terminology and the discussions of the alchemists with the exactitude of the adept, Quevedo demonstrates an intimate and accurate knowledge of this heretical science,⁶ adding still more to the impressive amount of learning emanating from the pages of his *Sueños*. Shortly after, the other main branch of contemporary science, astrology, is treated in a similarly parodic manner along with chiromantics and geomantics:

Al otro lado no era menos la trulla de astrólogos y supersticiosos. Un quiromántico iba tomando las manos a todos los otros que se habían condenado, diciendo - ¡Qué claro que se ve que se habían de condenar estos, por el monte de Saturno! Otro que estaba a gatas con un compas, mediendo

alturas y notando estrellas, cercado de efemérides y tablas, se levantó y dijo en altas voces: - vive Dios, que si me pariera mi madre medio minuto antes, que me salvo: porque Saturno en aquel punto, mudaba el aspecto y Marte se pasaba a la casa de la vida, el escorpion perdía su malicia, y yo, como di en procurador, fuera pobre mendigo. Otro tras él andaba diciendo a los diablos que le mortificaban que mirasen bien si era verdad que él había muerto; que no podía ser, a causa que tenía a Júpiter por ascendente, y a Venus en la casa de la vida, sin aspecto ninguno malo, y que era fuerza que viviese noventa años. Miren — decía —: que les notifico que miren bien si sy difunto, porque por mi cuenta es imposible que pueda ser esto. En esto iba y venía, sin poderlo nadie sacar de aquí. Y para enmendar la locura déstos, salió otro, geomántico, poniéndose en punto con las ciencias, haciendo sus doce casas gobernadas por el impulso de la mano y rayas a imitación de los dedos, con supersticiosas palabras y oración... (p. 159)

In both cases, Quevedo's profound knowledge of the object of his parody shines forth, and suggests a strong fascination with the heretical discourses treated. Still more names of famous heretical scholars, such as the mystic philosopher Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, the anatomist Paracelsus, the humanist Julius Caesar Scaliger (Aristotelian and adversary of Erasmus, author of *Poetices libri VII*, 1561), and the anonymous author of the *Clavicula Salmonis* (a legendary book on how to open the gates of the Beyond) are added to the list. The scientific heretics represent fictional world views blurring the divine truth with false teaching, and even undermining the holy Catholic religion by secretly associating with the devil at occult nocturnal rituals. On the one hand, Quevedo's harsh criticism of heresy is (in accordance with the logic of negative theology and negative dialectics) fundamentally motivated by a reverence for the transcendent and authoritative divine truth to be revealed through the aesthetic language of the text. On the other hand, the criticism of heresy tends to lose track of its aim, exploring with an almost demonic delight the infinite number of fascinating heretical fictions as colourful and exotic aesthetic material, thereby itself potentially becoming a delirious, hedonistic and sinful fiction paradoxically akin to the heresy explicitly and repeatedly condemned by the narrator. In other words, although Quevedo's text zealously seeks to keep track of divine truth by clinging to a negative theological criticism of heresy, all the same — as a result of an irrepressible fascination with the voluptuous material treated — it is about to degenerate into uncontrollable signification or mere aesthetic

play, devoid of the immediate metaphysical meaning it initially promised to reveal. In this sense, the text can be seen as a deconstruction, or even a refutation, of negative theology and of negative dialectics, exhibiting its latent tendency towards sheer metaphysical negativity. From a different perspective, however, this tendency may be seen as that of the text to catch the contagious disease of fictionality, leaving its original theological mission, and, potentially, leaping into the great abyss of unpreoccupied aestheticism — a capital sin in the context of a metaphysically rooted aesthetic.

The connection between metaphysical negativity and aestheticism becomes clear from the criticism of another important group in ‘El sueño del infierno’, namely the literary heretics. Quevedo was a notorious enemy of the literary phenomenon known as *culteranismo*, a term designating a highly stylized school of poetics, while at the same time phonetically evoking the religious heresy of *luteranismo*. Originally the idiosyncratic and highly sophisticated style of the great Spanish poet Luis de Góngora, and hence also known as *gongorismo*, culteranism soon degenerated into aestheticism at the hands of epigones, and became the target of much criticism, aiming primarily at the characteristic coinage of artificial words and phrases (*cultismos*), derived from Latin, Greek, Italian, and even Tuscan. Among the critics of culteranism, Quevedo distinguished himself by the method of his attack, launched in the guise of satirical texts aping the culteranist style, thus proving him simultaneously an equal of Góngora himself in manipulating poetic language. In the present text the culteranist preoccupation with aesthetic form and witty wordplay (*conceptos*) is exaggerated to an extreme so as to exhibit its innate, sinful emptiness:

¿Conceptos gastáis aun estando aquí? Buenos cascos tenéis - dije yo. Cuando uno entre todos, que estaba aherrojado y con más penas que todos, dijo: - ¡Plegue a Diós, hermano, que así se vea el que inventó los consonantes! Pues porque en un soneto

Dije que una señora era absoluta
y siendo más honesta que Lucrecia
por dar fin al cuarteto, la hice puta.

Forzóme el consonante a llamar necia
a la de más talento y más brío:
¡Oh, ley de consonantes dura y recia!

Habiendo en un terceto dicho lío,
un hidalgo afrenté tan solamente
porque el verso acabó bien en judío.

A Herodes otra vez llamé inocente
mil veces a lo dulce dije amargo
y llamé al apacible impertinente.

Y por el consonante tengo a cargo
otros delitos torpes, feos, rudos;
y llega mi proceso a ser tan largo,
Que, porque en una octava dije escudos,
hice, sin más ni más, siete maridos
con honradas mujeres, ser cornudos.

Aquí nos tienen, como ves, metidos
y por el consonante condenados.
¡Oh, míseros poetas desdichados,
a puros versos, como ves, perdidos!

¡Hay tan graciosa locura, - dije yo - , que, aun aquí estáis sin dejarla ni descansaros della! ¡Oh, qué vi de ellos! Y decía un diablo: - Esta es gente que canta sus pecados como otros los lloran, pues en amancebándose, con hacerla pastora o mora, la sacan a la vergüenza en un romancico por todo el mundo. Si las quieren a sus damas, lo más que les dan es un soneto o unas octavas, y si las aborrecen o las dejan, lo menos que les dejan es una sátira. ¡Pues qué es verlos cargados de pradicos de esmeraldas, de cabellos de oro, de perlas de la mañana, de fuentes de cristal, sin hallar sobre todo esto dinero para una camisa ni sobre su ingenio! Y es gente que apenas se conoce de qué ley son. Porque el nombre es de cristianos, las almas de herejes, los pensamientos de alarbes y las palabras de gentiles. - Si mucho me aguardo - dije entre mí -, yo oiré also que me pese. (p. 156 f.)

The heretic poets in Hell have sacrificed substance to form ‘por el consonante condenados,’ and ‘a puros versos perdidos’ as one of them honestly confesses,⁷ caring more about formal matters of rhyme and alliteration than about the truth to be revealed through poetic language. As when the pilgrim Dante becomes uneasy at meeting in the Inferno the father of his former friend and spiritual companion, a famous *dolce stil nuovo* poet, Quevedo’s pilgrim quickly abandons the conversation with the heretic poets, afraid to learn something that might concern himself (‘Si mucho me aguardo - dije entre mí -, yo oiré algo que me pese’). Revealing the connection between metaphysical negativity and aestheticism, this passage also seems to suggest a deconstruction of negative theology as the guardian of divine truth, revealing its latent tendency towards sheer

negativity and immanent danger of developing into aestheticism, which is highly suspicious in the context of Christian aesthetics, and most intimately related to the capital sin of vanity, explicitly condemned in the emblematic passage on the ugly women ('las feas,' p. 153), made up to look pretty on the outside, but ultimately nothing more than deceiving appearances. On the surface a condemnation of heresy (the poets are said to have the souls of heretics, 'almas de herejes'), the text reveals its own intimate kinship with the object of its criticism by aping the linguistic cosmetics and witty wordplay of the culteranists.⁸

Furthermore, Quevedo's text again touches on the central question of aesthetic legitimacy, as the passage about the literary heretics takes up the prominent tradition of separating art from true beauty. The artist Plato's criticism of non-philosophical art in the dialogue *Ion*, in *Laws* 7, and (most importantly) in the *Politeia*, books 2–3 and 10 — naively misinterpreted as the rigid philosopher's rejection of art altogether — is an obvious precursor of the artist Quevedo's criticism of non-theologic art in 'El sueño del infierno,' as is the artist Cervantes' criticism of non-reflective romance in *Don Quixote* (the first part of which was published in 1605, only three years before Quevedo wrote his text). Many intermediary examples — Graeco-Roman as well as Judeo-Christian — of the separation of art and true beauty can be detected in between. Some time after Quevedo, in the eighteenth century, an echo of it is heard in Kant's important concept of aesthetic *Intentionslosigkeit*. In the twentieth century, Quevedo's greatest modern heir, the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, simultaneously continued and rebelled against it, entitling his most famous work *Ficciones*, and ultimately depriving its elegant and learned texts of any metaphysical legitimacy, while at the same time underlining their artificial and purely aesthetic beauty. Notwithstanding the geographical and temporal distances between the two, both writers were acutely aware of the problem of aesthetic legitimacy. Turning to the dogmatic side, the separation of art and true beauty can be traced in a variety of positions, from Christianity to Marxism, emphasizing the moral and ethical responsibility of art and the ultimate decadence of aestheticism. Among the historically most important examples of dogmatic Christian criticism of art are St. Jerome's conviction that poetry is the feed of demons (*Epist. ad Damasum* XXI,13.4), St. Augustine's criticism of mythological fables (*Confess.* I,16; *De civitate Dei*, II,8), and Boethius' condemnation of the Muses (*De Consolatione*

Philosophiae, I,1). Quevedo's text may — with its explicit criticism of the literary heresy of aestheticism — be seen as a pair with the latter position; its ambiguity towards this same heresy, and its already demonstrated tendency to develop into aesthetic play itself, however, also makes it a possible champion of the former position. Most of all, 'El sueño del infierno' seems to discuss the problem of aesthetic legitimacy, ultimately not offering any definitive answers, but analyzing the different aspects of the question on a formal as well as on a thematic level.

The problem of legitimacy is not only treated in its relation to science and to aesthetics. The treatment of the religious heretics demonstrates an extended knowledge of heathen religions, introducing through the central figure of Judas a new perspective, namely the problem of rhetoric: with the awareness of the arbitrariness of autonomous language follows an awareness of the power of rhetoric as linguistic manipulation. First, however, a short glance at the colourful pandemonium of religious heretics. An impressive list of religious phenomena, comparable only to the enumeration of scientific heretics, is presented with a notable delight in the monstrosity and depravity of the subject matter described:

Estaba luego Aspad el autor de los Saduceos. Los fariseos estaban aguardando a Cristo, no como Dios, sino como hombre. Estaban los Eliogaristas devictiacos, adoradores del sol; pero los más graciosos son los que veneran las ranas, que fueron plaga Faraón, por ser azote de Dios. Estaban los musoritas haciendo ratonera al arca a puro ratón de oro. Estaban los que adoraron la Mosca accaronita: Ocías, el que quiso pedir a una mosca antes salud que a Dios, por lo cual Elias le castigó. Estaban los trogloditas, los de la fortuna del cielo, los de Baal, los de Astarot, los del ídolo Moloch y Renfán, de la ara de Tofet, los puteoritas, herejes veraniscos de pozos, los de la serpiente de metal. Y entre todos sonaba la baraúnda y el llanto de las júbias, que, debajo de tierra, en las cuevas, lloraban a Tamar en su simulacro. Seguían los Bahalitas, luego la Pitonisa arremangada, y detrás los de Ashtar y Astharot, y al fin los que aguardaban a Herodes, y desto se llaman herodianos. Y hube a todos éstos por locos y mentecatos. (p. 160)

After seeing many other exotic heretics of the same kind, including among others Basilides of Alexandria, Menander of Samaria, the Spaniard Priscilla from the fourth century C.E., and the infamous, sexually liberated empress Barbara ('llamando necias a las virgenes,' p. 161), ruling over the devils and preaching the gospel of vanity ('decía que moría el alma y el cuerpo,' p. 161), the narrator finally meets the worst of all heretics, the founders of the other great religions. First, Mohammed is questioned

about why Moslems cannot eat pork and drink alcohol, both products so dear to the Spanish in the form of *jamón* and *vino*. Then, closest to Lucifer himself in his infernal cave furnished with human bodies, the Protestant heretics Calvin, Luther, Beza (friend and successor of Calvin), and Melanchton, who are joined by the alleged atheist Joseph Scaliger.

Luther is approached by the narrator for his iconoclasm — a central part of the passage on the religious heretics, easy to relate to the text's discussion of the legitimacy of aesthetic language, seeing that the image (like the literary text) is fundamentally a representational instrument. The problem of imagery and the worshipping of images was a crucial point in the great schism between Catholics and Protestants, loaded with ideological significance, and essentially carrying on the old debate on idolatry of Byzantine times. Whereas the Protestants, continuing basically the line of the iconoclast emperors Leo III and his son Constantine V of Constantinople, condemned the comfort of pictorial representation (and, consequently, the comfort of the Saints and of the Pope as incarnations or human 'images' of the divine),⁹ the Catholics, following the defenders of holy images (Emperor Germanus I, Popes Gregorius II-III, and St. John Damascene), retained worship of images to a certain extent, depending on the fundamental distinction between orthodox iconographical representation and idolatry, and on the strict control hereof carried out by the Inquisition from the twelfth century to well into the eighteenth century. Quevedo's anxious inquiry into the legitimacy of representational language must necessarily be understood on this ecclesiastico-historical background, and his peculiar attention to the Lutheran policy on images must be seen as a typical expression of his astonishing ability to pinpoint the essence of ideological (theological) conflicts, relating them to aesthetics. Again, the text may be seen to have a certain kinship with the heresy condemned: the negative theological or dialectical intention of 'El sueño del infierno' considered, Quevedo's strict policy on aesthetic imagery may not vary considerably from Luther's, with the important distinction that Quevedo does fundamentally (following orthodox Catholic policy on these matters) allow images, but submits them to rigid control.

Like poetic language, images must, according to orthodox Catholicism, be allowed, but as controlled by ecclesiastical authority. A previous passage, describing the narrator's meeting with another infamous man, Judas Iscariot, demonstrates why this must be so, in a Catholic or any other

dogmatic world view. In 'El sueño del infierno' Judas is presented as the supreme manipulator of language:

Y así, llegándome cerca, le dije: ¿Cómo, traidor infame sobre todos los hombres, vendiste a tu Maestro, a tu Señor y a tu Dios por tan poco dinero?
 A lo cual respondió:
 —Pues vosotros ¿Por qué os queráis deso? Que sobrado de bien os estuvo, pues fué el remedio y arcaduz para vuestra salud. Yo soy el que me he de quejar y fui a quien le estuvo mal; y ha habido herejes que me han tenido veneración, porque di principio, en la entrega, a la medicina de vuestro mal. (p. 154)

The treachery of Judas would appear to every Christian to be the most mysterious and unintelligible of sins. For how could one chosen as a disciple, and enjoying the grace of the apostolate and the privilege of intimate friendship with Christ, be tempted to such gross ingratitude for the paltry price of 30 pieces of silver? By any standards the crime is so incredible, both in itself and in all its circumstances, that it is no wonder that many attempts have been made to give some more intelligible explanation of its origin and motives, and that the problem presented by Judas and his treachery has been the subject of strange and startling theories. Judas's comment, that heretics have venerated him as 'la medicina de vuestro mal,' does in fact correspond to the strange view held by the early Gnostic sect known as the Cainites described by St. Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.*, I,c), and more fully by Tertullian (*Praesc. Haeretic.*, xlvi), and St. Epiphanius (*Haeres.*, xxxviii). Certain of these heretics, whose opinion has been revived by some modern writers in a more plausible form,¹⁰ maintained that Judas was really enlightened, and acted as he did in order that mankind might be redeemed by the death of Christ. For this reason they regarded him as worthy of gratitude and veneration. In 'El sueño del infierno', Quevedo uses the Gnostic argument about Judas's crucial part in the redemption of mankind to demonstrate the power of rhetoric to blur divine truth. Provided that Judas is in Hell, he cannot be regarded as meriting veneration, and seeing that Gnosticism was condemned as heresy by authorities such as St. Irenaeus and Tertullian, the theory of his piety cannot be true. More likely, the passage is yet another contribution to the text's discussion of legitimacy, this time posing the problem of rhetoric as intimately connected with the arbitrariness of language. Judas's rhetorically brilliant self-defence, cleverly twisting the scriptural testimonies of the Gospels, demonstrates the necessity of Quevedo's criticism: heretics are not just mad scientists, decadent poets or

maniacs with exotic creeds; they are potential demagogues spreading false teachings and obscuring divine truth. The basic critical intention of 'El sueño del infierno' is consequently justified. Like Plato's fierce criticism of the Sophists' manipulation of language, Quevedo's criticism of the heretic fictions is fundamentally motivated by his essentialist concept of a transcendent, yet still authoritative divine truth, and moved by the conviction that heresy is after all not just an exotic and entertaining, but also a very dangerous phenomenon, abominable in the most immediate sense because of its seductiveness. Still, as was the case with the other passages on heresy, the passage on Judas demonstrates a certain ambivalence, as the 'traidor infame sobre todos los hombres' is allowed quite a long passus to defend himself. Again, the text seems to point to the narrator's latent fascination with heresy as a spell-binding and colourful phenomenon, endlessly producing the most extravagant and dazzling fictions.

V. Conclusion

In the previous reading I have tried to show how the thematic treatment of the topic of heresy in 'El sueño del infierno' is characterized by a deep ambivalence towards the object in question: on the one hand, the heretical fictions were explicitly and repeatedly condemned by the narrator; on the other hand the text was seen to demonstrate an obvious fascination, and — as an aesthetic text fundamentally a fiction itself — a possible kinship with them. As has been argued, the same ambivalence applies to the exploration of autonomous language on a formal level, manifest in the demonstratively self-conscious and self-relativizing narrative voice, in the witty word-play, in the polyphony of infernal voices, and finally in parataxis as predominant structural logic, constituting Quevedo's pervasive preoccupation with the legitimacy of aesthetic language. Thus characterized by an acute awareness of the arbitrariness of language and a conspicuous sense of the sinfulness of signification after the Fall, the text introduces itself as an inquisitorial tribunal trying an infinite number of heretics by way of a negative theological or dialectical criticism, restlessly concerned with keeping the transcendent divine truth free of false interpretation. In the process of investigating the legitimacy of language, however, the innate tendency of the text to lose track of transcendent truth and develop into sheer metaphysical negativity and unpreoccupied aestheticism was

revealed — making it virtually impossible to distinguish ‘El sueño del infierno’ itself from the sinful and theologically ‘empty’ fictions of the heretics. This fundamental ambivalence as to the question of the legitimacy of aesthetic language is deeply rooted in literary dreams and visions, always under suspicion of being mere human illusion, or even delusion — the work of the Devil.

As to the question of cohesion or unity of the Quevedean œuvre posed in the introduction, I think that the problem of the legitimacy of aesthetic language may be seen as the central axis around which the Quevedean universe revolves. Indefatigably investigating possible means of representing transcendent metaphysical truth, which might redeem sinful Man and re-transform his fallen language into ideal Adamic naming, Quevedo virtually explored the whole Graeco-Roman and Judeo-Christian cultural history, and employed a multiplicity of literary forms. His learned mind was deeply characterized, however, by an inescapable mistrust (*desengaño*) of appearances, and every aesthetic form employed was eventually found to be inadequate, erroneous, fictitious, and even sinful, not representing divine truth in a satisfactory manner, and possibly even obscuring it with false interpretation. To calm the tension and ease the pain of this extremely polarized universe, Quevedo proposes what one may call a dialectic of redemption, emphasizing (according to the logic of negative dialectics and theology) the crucial role of deceit and sin in the redemption of Mankind. However, as the preceding analysis of the topic of the legitimacy of language in ‘El sueño del infierno’ has proved, advocating this dialectic of redemption is indeed a very precarious intellectual stance to take. The combination of the absolute transcendence of divine truth and the tempting nature of voluptuous matter and of autonomous language all too easily lead to sheer metaphysical negativity and unpreoccupied aestheticism.¹¹ Thus, it may be said that Quevedo’s text makes manifest a schism between a metaphysically oriented spirituality and a hedonistic worldliness, essentially reflecting the basic, conflicting aspects of the Spanish Baroque.

NOTES

1. Important existentialist and ‘negativist’ readings of Quevedo are e.g. D. Alonso’s interpretation IN: *Poesía española* (Madrid, 1971); J.L. Borges, *Quevedo*, IN: *Otras inquisiciones* (Madrid, 1993) and *Foreword to Los Sueños*, IN: G. Sobejano (ed.),

- Francisco de Quevedo* (Madrid, 1978); R. Lida, *Prosas de Quevedo* (Barcelona, 1981); I. Nolting-Hauff, *Visión, sátira y agudeza en los Sueños de Quevedo* (Madrid, 1974).
2. An important example of this most recent Quevedo reception is P.J. Smith, *Quevedo on Parnassus. Allusive Context and Literary Theory in the Love Lyric* (London, 1987), whose opposition to the existing existentialist and negativist reception is quite explicit. A. Cullhed also traces intertextual references in his *Diktens tidsrymd. Studier i Francisco de Quevedo och hans tid* (Stockholm, 1995), with the aim of analyzing the concept of time in Quevedo's love lyric.
 3. I owe this observation to Thomas Rockwell, who made me aware of the similarity between the opening lines of *The Pilgrim's Progress* ('As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where was a den, and laid me down in that place to sleep; and as I slept, I dreamed a dream. [...]') and the opening lines of *El sueño del infierno*.
 4. The choice between the path of virtue and the path of vice goes back to Xenophon's *Memorabilia* 2.1.21 ff., in which the allegory (attributed to the Sophist Prodicus) of the hero Hercules' choice between virtue and vice is related. The allegory later on received a Christian interpretation crucial to Quevedo's use of it in 'El sueño del infierno.' Quevedo was surely also influenced, however, by Lucian's *The Dream or Lucian's Career*, an autobiographical adaptation of the Hercules-allegory.
 5. Cf. R. Lida, op.cit., p. 236: 'Inmensa corriente de palabras, [...] la burla al personaje, el placer de la enumeración torrencial, [...] desencadenada enumeración [...] movimiento frenético del discurso [...] perdiendo a veces de vista [...] el punto de partida y enhebrando más y más imágenes e ideas.'
 6. See also on this topic, A. Martinengo, *Quevedo e il simbolo alchimistico. Tre studi.* (Padua, 1967).
 7. This wording in fact echoes the famous opening lines of Luis de Góngoras *Soledad primera*, which reads (my italics):

Pasos de un peregrino son errante
cuantos me dictó *versos* dulce Musa
in Soledad confusa
perdidos unos, otros inspirados.

 Quevedo's polemic on culteranist aestheticism in 'El sueño del infierno' may incidentally be seen as a virtual homage to Lucian's *The Consonants at Law. Sigma vs. Tau in the Court of the Seven Vowels*.
 8. The passage on the vain nobleman, caring only about his lineage (p. 148 f.), may also be seen in this context. The succeeding sermon on the vanity of *la nobleza, la honra* and *la valentía* (nobility, honor and courage), given by one of the devils and imbued with Quevedean *desengaño*, may consequently be, at least indirectly or by analogy, applied to the cases of the aestheticist poets and the made up women.
 9. Cf. The Catholic Encyclopedia (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen>), the article on Iconoclasm.
 10. Cf., e.g., J.L. Borges, *Tres versiones de Judas*, In *Ficciones* (1944).
 11. The question of the dialectic of redemption (and, consequently, of negative theology and negative dialectics), I think, was what Walter Benjamin ultimately aimed at in his important analysis of Baroque allegory in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1925). Benjamin's description of the innate tendency of allegory towards sheer metaphysical negativity and unpreoccupied aestheticism, of the connection between allegory and

critical reason, and, finally, of the transformation of vanity-ridden allegory into revealed theological symbol through dialectical apotheosis, decisively points in this direction.

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