

BYRON, *QUEVEDO REDIVIVUS*

Little could have Francisco de Quevedo imagined when writing his work *Los Sueños* (1605-1622), that two centuries later, Lord Byron would sign *The Vision of Judgment* (1822) with the name *Quevedo Redivivus*, publicly acknowledging the genius of the Spanish satirist. However, Byron was not only paying homage to Quevedo's wit and sagacity, but he was also exploiting a peculiar form of genre—the *somnium*—using it as a satiric tool in his personal revenge against Robert Southey, creating a great parody of his enemy's poem (*A Vision of Judgment*, 1821), and taking to the limit Quevedo's techniques with successful results.

As a matter of fact, Quevedo and his *Sueños* are already pointed out as source of authority in Byron's long preface, allowing the English author to solidly justify the use of dreams as narrative device:

It is possible that some readers may object, in these objectionable times, to the freedom with which saints, angels, and spiritual persons discourse in this "Vision". But, for precedents upon such points, I must refer him to Fielding's "Journey from this World to the next," and to the Visions of myself, the said Quevedo, in Spanish or translated. (153)

With that clarification, Byron wanted to be considered among those authors in the tradition who had discussed the literary possibilities of dreams (Homer, Virgil, Propertius, Petronius, etc.), and he was cleverly aligning himself with satiric contemporaries such as Swift or Fielding, whose incursions into unrealistic worlds had been excellent comic revisions of social values. Besides, following Quevedo's *Sueños* (specifically, *Sueño del Juicio Final*) subtly proved Byron's expertise handling the genre, as opposed to Southey's, whose literary reputation as *Poet Laureate* is openly discredited in this poem. Byron does not

hesitate to remark on Southey's erroneous use of the vision, offering his own composition as model:

The reader is also requested to observe, that no doctrinal tenets are insisted upon or discussed; that the person of the Deity is carefully withheld from sight, which is more than can be said for the Laureate, who had thought proper to make him talk, not "like a school-divine," but like the unscholarlike Mr. Southey. (153)

In the handling of deities, Byron closely follows Quevedo, who in his *Sueño* did not allow God's voice to be heard. Quevedo lets the crowd of human characters and allegorical types be comically scrutinized, but the figure of God is analyzed separately. His portrait however, reveals somehow the narrator's mocking attitude, as the solemnity and respect that God infers is described in exaggerated terms:

Al fin vi hacer silencio a todos. El trono era donde trabajaron la omnipotencia y el milagro. Dios estaba vestido de sí mismo, hermoso para los santos y enojado para los perdidos, el sol y las estrellas colgando de la boca, el viento quedo y mudo, el agua recostada en sus orillas, suspensa la tierra temerosa en sus hijos...(106)

That same burlesque attitude is exploited in Byron's poem, where in his supposedly serious *Final Judgment* God is not present, but represented by a peculiar body of authorities: an old and grumpy Saint Peter, a serious Archangel Michael and a group of cherubs and saints ("To state, they were not older than St. Peter/ But merely that they seem'd a little sweeter", 156). In the poem, authority rests in the figure of the Prince of Air, Satan, whose relaxed attitude maintains the burlesque tone of the event. His powerful presence is also described in farfetched tones, reminding us of Quevedo's exaggerated portrait of God:

Then Satan turn'd and waved his swarthy hand,
Which stir'd with its electric qualities
Clouds farther off than we can understand, . . .
Infernal thunder shook both sea and land
In all the planets, and hell's batteries
Let off the artillery, which Milton mentions
As one of Satan's most sublime inventions. (159)

In both Spanish and English compositions the satiric effect rests in the burlesque treatment of the scene of the Final Judgment, dramatically described in the book of Revelation, in the Old Testament. The fear of Doom, the presence of Death, and the ruthless action of Justice that invariably acts upon human beings is recreated by both authors with mocking undertones. Thus, references to the day of wrath, the trumpets of angels, and the frightful views of Hell become key elements that are

humorously subverted. In Quevedo's *Sueño del Juicio Final*, a chaotic compendium of characters is described in relation to their professional tasks (doctors, judges, merchants, prostitutes, philosophers, poets, kings, ministers) or to their historical relevance (Judas, Mohammed, Luther, Herod, Pilate). Humor overlaps with moral advice in the satiric scene where dramatic and even gothic references mix with the caricatures of the portraits.

However, Byron disregards such a series of human *tableaux* and focuses on a concrete and personal attack. In fact, his Judgment becomes the comic trial of king George III's salvation, being Robert Southey a dull, ignominious and pedantic bard that acts as one of the witness. Historical figures, such as Wilkes, the King of France, or even the anonymous Junius enter into this chaotic scene, where political and literary references abound. The mocking tone of the rhyming stanzas, the mixture of elevated words and comic expressions, and the lack of moralizing intention enriches Byron's scornful attack *ad hominem*, in a much more challenging way than Quevedo's.

The convergence of both authors lies in their choice of a clever, witty and humorous narrator. Quevedo's narrator openly laughs recalling his dream, and Byron's poetic voice frivolously adds to the narration all sorts of comments, even about his own grammatical style ("I am doubtful of the grammar/ of the last phrase, which makes the stanza stammer/ But take your choice. . . , 159). However, the colloquial ease of both narrators does not overlook the relevant and fragile boundary between dream and reality, which they acknowledge as an indirect way to critically revise human behavior. The last advice in Quevedo's *Sueño* proves it: "Sueños son estos que si se duerme V. Excelencia sobre ellos, verá que por ver las cosas como las veo las esperará como las digo" (133). Likewise, Byron's narrator takes advantage of the paradoxical nature of the vision, that offers an unreal perspective to explore reality. Often he points at the relevance of "this true dream" (169), and remarks on its authenticity: "T is every tittle true, beyond suspicion, / And accurate as any other vision" (157). Both Quevedo and Byron, aware of the fictionality of their compositions, converge in the recreation of the *somnium* as a useful satiric structure, that offers a clever and interesting way to revise reality as a counterpart of a dream.

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