STYLES OF DISILLUSION

by PHILIP WARD

DISILLUSION in early seventeenth-century Spain is at once a symptom and a style. In a great writer, such as the Quevedo of *Los sueños,* disillusion becomes a total world-view. In common with his contemporaries, he fails to realize the disastrous implications of the trading deficit, economic inflation as a result of importing silver from America, the intellectual stranglehold of the Jesuits, and the peculiar delusions of military supremacy that induce Olivares to rekindle the fires of war in the Low Countries. His social awareness is, typically, undeveloped. But he realizes the malaise behind these symptoms, and strives to root out hypocrisy from Spain. To this end he will not allow his voice to be shouted down, using as his principal vehicle for satire the varied phantasmagoria of *Los sueños.*

'Sueño' is normally translated 'dream', but in Quevedo the word is more accurately rendered 'vision' in the tradition of Virgilian and Dantean visions. Quevedo is not a measured, sublime writer in this tradition, however. He is modern, even Freudian in his lurid fantasies. Valbuena Prat has summed up the relationship acutely: 'Veremos la gran distancia que las separa [las visiones] del mundo dantesco y cómo se hallan, en cierto modo, a la mitad del camino que va del autor de *La divina commedia* a las burlas incrédulas de Voltaire. Quevedo, en medio, *cree y se burla,* distingue entre lo exterior y lo dogmatico todavía'.

Se burla without a shadow of a doubt, but nobody could call Quevedo a humorous writer: he broods within and lashes pitilessly out at human frailty. Arriving at two paths, one leading to Paradise and the other to Hell, he unhesitatingly chooses the latter: his reason, characteristically sardonic, is that the company on the narrower path would be too beggarly and morose for his taste. In *El mundo por de dentro,* the narrator's sleeve is tugged by 'un viejo venerable en sus canas, mal tratado'. Who is he? 'Yo soy el Desengaño'. And further, 'Yo te enseñaré el mundo como es, que tú no alcanzas a ver sino lo que parece'. The narrator asks which street is the greatest in the world – the one they have to traverse.

'Llámase', respondió, 'Hipocresía, calle que empieza con el mundo y se acabará con él'. The first vision is the funeral of a woman, of whom

Disillusion reports that she was nothing in her life and is rather less now. Her husband is already planning to marry again, cursing the expenses of the funeral, and the mourners would all rather be elsewhere.

The second vision is that of a woman mourning her husband. Disillusion urges us to look behind appearances, and understand that the old mourning women lament at a certain rate per hour, and the woman herself plans an early conquest.

The third vision is that of a catchpole pursuing a thief 'que iba tan ligero como pedía la necesidad y le mandaba el miedo'. The catchpole's chase, explains Disillusion, is not due to assiduity but to disappointment and avarice, since the thief withheld a 'cut' of his last robbery. A fine courtier rides by with two elegant friends who are simpering parasites, and an army of attendants (but those are all creditors). The gentleman's wealth is fictitious.

Finally, a beautiful harlot comes along. Quevedo falls in love with her pretty face, bur Dr Desengaño warns him that (in the fine Edinburgh translation), 'if you did but see this puppet taken to pieces, you would find her little else but paint and plaster', a rendering that pays the author the startling compliment of improving on the original.

It has long been fashionable to compare Quevedo's spectres with the nightmare denizens of Hieronymus Bosch's art. To some extent the analogy is viable, but Quevedo never hints in either style or content at the possibility of surrealism, while the unbridled imaginings and bizarre associations of the Fleming do quite clearly lead up to the work of Ernst, Dalí, or de Chirico.

But whereas Quevedo makes a moral stand of his disillusion, using it a system of belief in the same way that sensitive people simulate toughness as a barrier, a more superficial writer like Rodrigo Fernández de Ribera uses disillusion as a literary means: for an aesthetic rather than a moral purpose. This is of course a decadent approach, but at a period of failing greatness, a stand for real values on tenuous grounds is better than no stand at all.

A Sevillian author, Fernández de Ribera followed Quevedo (in *Los anteojos de mejor vista,* c. 1625) in revealing the true state of things behind the façade, in his case by the device of a special pair of spectacles. The book is diffuse, even tedious, but demonstrates the impact of contemporary *desengaño.* It recalls the equally diffuse *Coloquio de los perros* (as opposed to the pointed, witty *Licenciado Vidriera*) in its failure to present a coherent philosophy – or even a possible moral attitude – that might win the reader's approval. But Fernández de Ribera's

book at least inspired the memorable *Diablo cojuelo* of Vélez de Guevara, probably the most attractive personality among Golden Age writers: the 'quitapesares' of Cervantes' affectionate encomium.

Disillusion is a way of life for Quevedo; a convenient attitude for the satire of Fernández de Ribera. For Vélez de Guevara on the other hand disillusion is a theme on which he plays the variations of his wit. Only the faintest hint of bitterness touches *El diablo cojuelo.* While Vélez struggled against poverty, his style is much closer to the brilliant sparkle of *Lazarillo de Tormes* than to the *juicio final,* say, of Quevedo. The chapters are called *trancos,* a joke enfeebled by repetition, much of the humour is weak (even the devil is lame, and the devil only knows how poor the writer was when putting ink to paper), and the style is often so peculiar and abrupt that one often feels the book was written, like Scott's, to gain temporary respite from swarming creditors.

But humour there is in plenty: so much so, indeed, that the edge of the satire is blunted. One recalls the lovely story of the husband and wife so enamoured of their carriage, like the latter-day Mercedes) that they lived in it, never emerging from one year's end to another. Yet they were so poor that they couldn't afford the horse to go with it. *Tranco* the fourth has the parody of the poet in a Toledo inn who wakes the lodgers in the middle of the night with shouts of *'¡Fuego, fuego!'* and they only go back to bed in surly anger when the innkeeper explains that the poet is only finishing his play *Troya abrasada.*

The Sancho-like innkeeper exhorts the Quijotesque poet: 'Vuelva a su juicio, que aquí no hay almidones ni toda esa tropelía de disparates que ha referido, y mucho mejor fuera llevalle a casa del Nuncio [the madhouse of Toledo] donde pudiera ser con bien justa causa mayoral de los locos, y metelle en cura'. We might almost be attending the exequies of Maese Pedro's puppet-show.

Vélez relates that, when the poet was writing his *Marqués de Mantua,* he shouted so loudly that a passing lady suffered a miscarriage; while during his *Saco de Roma* he hit out left and right, yelling '¡Cierra, España! ¡Santiago, y a ellos!' in such a tumult that soldiers sleeping nearby woke up and started to fight each other. The poet retorts that these commotions were as nothing compared with the 'mucho mayor alboroto ... si yo acabara aquella comedia de que tiene vuesa merced [meaning the innkeeper] en prendas dos jornadas por lo que le debo'. Among the effects would be the appearance of 'once mil dueñas' and the eclipse of sun and moon.

Clearly Vélez's attitude is playful, mocking the current fashion for stage spectacle at the expense of psychological subtlety. He laughs at the *nouveaux riches* and their aspiration for the latest status symbol. His satire is purely social in intention, where Quevedo's is essentially moral and literary. The influence of the picaresque novel is by now much fainter, leaving behind only 'el gracejo del andaluz que se burla de las hipocresías y etiquetas de una sociedad', as one commentator puts it. Vélez's principal merit is his spontaneity, and by the same token he lacks discipline, for after an episode of inventive humour he is capable of long stretches of barren narrative.

Baltasar Gracian (in *El Criticón*), Pedro Calderón de la Barca, and above all others the Cervantes of the *Novelas ejemplares* and the *Quijote* expressed their own styles of disillusion which, for J.M. de Semprún Gurrea, constitutes one of the most profound characteristics of all Castilian literature.

His paper on 'El desengaño en la historia del pensamiento español' (in *Cuadernos del Congreso por la Libertad de la Cultura,* no. 10, 1955, pp. 53-58) leads one to the possibility that our narrow interpretation of *desengaño* as 'disillusion' may usefully be broadened to include any descent into reality from Cloud Cuckooland, and that Aristophanes, the bawd Celestina, and the great Zen masters differed only superficially in their styles of disillusion.

LIONS OF METAL

the lion shakes his mane off like a wig,
plunges into the metal corridor
along the way that never ends
and grows old
listening to his beating heart
between five mirrors:
  left, up
  down, right
  and at the other end

the metal mirrors
five walking lions
the metal lions
walking mirrors
five

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