Some Comments on Iterative Thematic Imagery in Quevedo's *Heráclito christiano*.

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A copy of Quevedo's *Heráclito christiano* was sent to Doña Margarita de Espinosa, the poet's aunt, on the third of June, 1613.¹ It seems to have been composed when the author was in the thirty-third year of his life, at a time of grave personal crisis.² It is not clear why Quevedo chose such a significant title for this work, but it is possible to speculate that he associated Heraclitus-known to the Spanish Renaissance as *el lloriente*, the weeping philosopher - with the tears and lamentations present in his own poetry.³ *Heráclito* is presumably *christiano* because the poems are motivated by a Christian outlook that depaganizes, so to speak, the pre-Socratic philosopher.

Although it is commonly known as the *Heráclito christiano*, Quevedo's title does not stop there; it continues "y segunda harpa a imitación de David." James O. Crosby has noted that David is the "primer rey de la dinastía de Judea" of whom it is said that he played the harp skillfully and that he "se arrepintió de sus pecados." He had committed adultery with Bathsheba and arranged for the death of her husband, Uriah. Crosby also tells us that "a David se le han atribuido diversos Salmos del Antiguo Testamento, como, por ejemplo, el «miserere» del pecador que pide misericordia de Dios" (Psalm 51). Other psalms express similar sentiments and run parallel to the poems of Quevedo. Crosby suggests as examples psalms 37, 38, 50 and 51.⁴

Even a quick reading of these psalms shows that the similarities between them and Quevedo's poetry are not to be found at the surface level of simple repetition for Quevedo's *Heráclito christiano* is deeply imbued with the spirit of the psalms. And it is this "spirit" which the investigator must pinpoint. John McKenzie's classification of the psalms into five distinct groups may help. He distinguishes between the following types, each with its own different structure and style: 1) Royal Psalms; 2) Hymns; 3) the Lamentation or Supplication which is itself divided into Collective lamentations and Individual Lamentations; 4) Individual Songs of Confidence; and 5) Thanksgiving Songs.⁵

Now it is possible to eliminate from the outset Royal Psalms, Hymns, Collective Lamentations, Individual Songs of Confidence, and Thanksgiving Songs. Quevedo basically did not use them as models for the *Heráclito*. The *Heráclito*, on the other hand, does have a great deal in common with the Psalms of Individual lamentations. There are few direct borrowings; rather, the spirit of the individual lamentations enters the *Heráclito* at such an organic level that theme, style, and structure often run parallel in both collections.

In addition to classifying the psalms into types, McKenzie also isolates twelve thematic, stylistic, and structural elements which the individual lamentations hold in common. These are 1) the invocation of Jahweh, asking for help; 2) the description of the need; 3) the petition for deliverance; 4) the motivation for granting the petition; 5) an expression of confidence; 6) a plea of innocence; 7) a confession of guilt; 8) the divine attributes; 9) the divine promises; 10) Yahweh's saving deeds in the past; 11) considerations of the misery and helplessness of man; and 12) the brevity of life. I will now analyse the poems of the *Heráclito* beneath each of these headings.

1. Invocations of Jahweh, asking for help

Such invocations can be made directly to God, as in Psalm 1:

Vn nuevo coraçón, vn hombre nuevo
a menester, Señor, el alma mía;
desnúdame de mí, que ser podría
que a tu piedad pasase lo que deuo. (1, 1-4)⁶

Here God is spoken to directly and the invocation is accompanied by a specific statement which contains the sinner's plea for help. Similar invocations can be found in 16 of the *Heráclito*'s 25 poems (64%), but it is not always God that is addressed. Thus, in Psalm 8:

Dexadme vn rato, bárbaros contentos,
que al sol de la verdad tenéis por
sombra los arrepentimientos. (8, 1-3)

Or again, in Psalm 10, with its echoes of Garcilaso de la Vega:

Trabajos dulçes, dulçes penas mías;
pasadas alegrías
que atormentáis ahora mi memoria. (10, 1-3)

Psalms 16 and 18 are directed to the poet's death "Ven ya, miedo de fuertes y de sabios" and to his life respectively "¡Cómo de entre mis manos te resualas!/ ¡O cómo te desliças, vida mí!" Psalm 21 is addressed to the everliving Christ who inhabits the host:

Oy te entierras en mí con propia mano,
que soi sepulchro, aunque a tu ser estrecho,
indigno de tu cuerpo soberano. (21, 9-11)

Psalms 22 to 24 contemplate the passion of the dying New Testament Christ and the following are invoked: Jesus, Psalm 22; the cross itself, Psalm 23; and Christ again, Psalm 24.

2. Description of the need

The poet's need is explicit in Psalm 1: *Vn nuevo coraçón, Vn hombre nuevo, / a menester, Señor, el alma mía.* In Psalm 2, on the other hand, the poet's need is implicit: *¡Quán fuera voi, Señor, de tu rebaño, / lleuado del antojo y gusto mío!* Clearly, the poet sees himself as a lost sheep whose need is to be found and to be returned to the flock. His inability to help himself together with his silent pleas for further assistance are both implicit within line 9: *Llámasme, gran Señor, nunca respondo.* Descriptions of the poet's need are present in 12 poems (48%); but note that the plea is not always addressed directly to God, nor is it necessarily a plea for help in the normal sense of the word. Thus Psalm 16 presents us with the seemingly unusual request for the poet's death:

Ven ya, miedo de fuertes y de sabios:
irá el alma indignada con gemido
debaxo de la sombras, y el oluido
veberán por demás mis secos labios. (16, 1-4)

Note that whereas 6 of the first 7 of Quevedo's Psalms describe the poet's need in some detail, such descriptions (transformed slightly as we have seen) occur in only 6 of the last 18 psalms.

3. Petition for deliverance

This is rare in the *Heráclito*, occurring in a pure state in only 4 of the psalms (16%). In Psalm 19, the poet seems to petition for deliverance from the storm, yet when analysed the opposite is in fact true. The petitioner asks to be returned to the storm since prayer and votive offerings are forgotten when the seas are calm:

¡Qué me enseñó de votos la tormenta!
¡Y qué de santos mi memoria deue
al naufragio y al mar! ¡Qué de oraciones!
Nunca tierra alcançara: antes violenta
mi naue errara, pues el puerto, breue,
me truxo oluido a tantas oraciones. (19, 9-14)

4. Motivation for granting the petition

This can be found in, at most, 5 poems (20%). In Psalm 1, the poet tries to persuade the Almighty that it is in His best interest to save the sinner, for *"ser podría/que a tu piedad pagase lo que deuo."* (1, 3-4) Or again, the persuasion may take more rhetorical forms: *"Tu imagen soi, tu hacienda propia e*

sido" (1,9) with the implicit suggestion that God saves Himself by saving His servant. This argument is at its strongest in Psalm 13 where the penitent states it explicitly: "espero en su piedad quando me acuerdo/que pierde Dios hacienda si me pierdo" (13, 20-21).

5. Expressions of confidence

I think it would be safe to say that there is no expression of confidence in these psalms of Quevedo! If there is, I have failed to find one.

6. Plea of innocence

The biographical circumstances that may have led to the writing of these poems are certainly not clear; but one thing is absolutely patent: there is not a single protestation of innocence in one of these poems. Whatever sin he committed, verifiable biographically or literary invention, the lyrical voice does not once proclaim its innocence.

7. Confession of guilt

On the other hand, confessions of guilt abound and can be found in 17 poems (68%). Psalm 3 is typical: "Confieso que mi culpa siempre creçe./y que es la culpa de que creçca mía" (3, 7-8). Or again, in Psalm 5, "¡Como sé quán distante/de Ti, Señor, me tienen mis delitos!" (5, 1-2) The confession of guilt may be explicit, as in the two psalms quoted above, or else it may be more implicit, as in these lines from Psalm 7:

¿Dónde pondré, Señor, mis tristes ojos
que no vea tu poder diuino [y santo]?

.....
si los buelvo a mirar los pecadores
que tan sin rienda viuen como viuo,
allí hallo tus braços ocupados,
más en sufrir que en castigar pecados. (7, 1-2, 10-13)

8. Divine attributes

The divine attributes are clearly expressed in 15 of the poems (60%). The attributes are varied; for example, the following are composed of a possessive adjective and a noun: tu piedad (1,4), tu interés (1, 10), tu blanco día (3, 5), tu piedad inmensa (3, 13), tu saña (4, 9), tu rigor (4, 12), tu sufrimiento (5, 13), tu poder diuino y santo (7,2), tu cuerpo amado (21, 2), and tu gloria (21, 4). They may also occur in a vocative statement in apposition to the subject of the verb: salud del tiempo enfermo (3, 2), eterno author del día/en cuja voluntad están las llaues/del cielo y de la tierra (6, 46); further, on one occasion, God is referred to as [el] Dios de los ejércitos (13, 15). God is also defined in terms of His powers over the things of nature: del sol en los ardientes raios rojos/te miro hacer asiento (7, 4-5), leies te veo poner a la

estrellas (7,7), te veo pintar las flores (7,9) hallo tus braços ocupados/más en sufrir que en castigar pecados (7, 12-13). Occasionally, death is invoked instead of God (Psalms 12, 18, and 23) and when this happens, it is the attributes of a classical, literary death, agent of Fortune and Disillusion, that are set down in the psalm.

9. Divine promises

These are almost entirely absent from the *Heráclito*. When they do occur they are implicitly associated with the New Testament promise of the resurrection (Psalm 23) and the sacrament of the communion (Psalm 21).

10. Yahweh's saving deeds from the past

These are absent from the *Heráclito*. Occasionally, when Death is addressed more or less directly then the contrast between the present and the past highlights the greatness and power of a death that humbled all things before it. The examples are classical in their origins: Carthage (12, 1), Troy (12, 5), Jerusalem (12, 8), Rome (12, 10), Caesar, Brutus, Decius (12, 12), Sagunto (12, 20), Cressus and Crassus (12, 23), Alexander and Darius (12, 25), and Curius, Decius, and Fabius (16, 5).

11. The misery and helplessness of man

Anyone who is familiar with the poetry of Quevedo will not be surprised to find out that these themes are to be found in 24 of the psalms (96%). The theme may be typically Quevedesque as in Psalm 1:

Dudosos pies por ciega noche lleuo,
que ya e llegado a aborrecer el día,
y temo que e de hallar la muerte fría
embuelta, en bien que dulce, mortal cebo. (1, 5-8)

Or again, in Psalm 2, where the conceit is so typical:

Mas, ¡ay!, que sólo temo en mar tan hondo
que lo que en castigarme ahora aguardas,
doblados los castigos, lo desquitas. (2, 12-14)

Or these lines from Psalm 11, so reminiscent of Quevedo's *poesía negra* to Lisi:

Nací desnudo, y solos mis dos ojos
cubiertos los saqué, mas fué de llanto.
Bolber como nací quiero a la tierra;
el camino sembrado está de abrojos;
todo es horror y espanto. (11, 1-5)

Finally, these lines from Psalm 18 recall the continuous presence of death and man's helplessness when faced by death's final assault:

¡Cómo de entre mis manos te resualas!
 ¡O cómo te desliças, vida mía!
 ¡Qué mudos passos traes, o muerte fria,
 pues con callado pie todo lo ygualas!
 Ya cuelgan de mi muro tus escalas,
 y es tu puerta maior mi couardía. (18, 1-6)

12. The brevity of life

It is difficult, at times, to distinguish this theme from the previous one. The realisation of the close proximity of death causes an anguish which in turn increases man's helplessness and suffering. The brevity of life theme can be found in 17 poems (68%) and it is, of course, encapsulated for all time in the sonnet (Psalm 17) which begins *Miré los muros de la patria mía*.⁷ The theme dominates other psalms; for example, Psalm 9:

Passa veloç del mundo la figura,
 y la muerte los pasos apresura;
 la vida fujitiua nunca para,
 ni el tiempo buelue atrás la anciana cara. (9, 7-10)

With its continuation:

A llanto nace el hombre, y entretanto
 [que] naçe con el llanto,
 y todas las miserias vna a vna,
 y sin saberlo empieça la jornada
 desde la primera cuna
 a la postrera cama reusada;
 y las más veçes, ¡o terrible caso!,
 suele juntarlo todo un breue passo. (9, 11-18)

The foregoing analysis reveals that five of the themes isolated by McKenzie occur with some frequency in the psalms of the *Heráclito*. These are: 1) the invocation of Jahweh (64%); 7) the confession of guilt (68%); 8) divine attributes (60%); 11) the misery and helplessness of man (96%); and finally 12) the brevity of life (68%). A statistical survey of the number of themes present in each individual psalm ranges from highs of 10 themes in Psalm 21, 8 themes in Psalms 1 and 16, 7 in Psalm 23, through an average of 6 themes in Psalms 2, 3, 4, 6, 12, 13, and 20, 5 themes in Psalms 7, 8, and 11, and 4 themes in Psalms 5, 10, 14, 15, 18, and 19 to a low of three themes in Psalms 9, 17, 22, and 24. A single poem, Psalm 25, has a mere two themes. When it is realized that five themes occur in over 60% of the Psalms and that 80% of Quevedo's psalms contain at least four of the themes isolated by McKenzie, then we can truly say that the *Heráclito christiano* is imbued with the spirit of the Old Testament psalms of David.

However, two things should be noted. In the first place, the Old Testament themes do not always occur in a pure state in Quevedo's *Heráclito*. Clearly, Jahweh and the death invoked so frequently by Quevedo may serve parallel poetic ends within a given body of verse, but they cannot be said to correspond perfectly, nor to be completely replaceable, the one by the other. In similar fashion, the Jahweh of the Old Testament can never be the Christ of the New. They seem at times to correspond, and yet the contrast between them is clear for the New Testament Christ actually persuades sinners to repent "Llámasme, gran Señor, nunca respondo" (2,9) whilst the Old Testament Jahweh is deaf to the supplicant's petitions "¿Hasta cuándo, salud del tiempo enfermo,/sordo estarás a los suspiros míos?" (3, 1-2)

In the second place, the difficulty of reducing Quevedo's poetry to any simple system of classification must be strongly emphasized. Thus, the first four lines of Quevedo's first psalm may be classified in any or all of the following fashions: 1) an invocation to Jahweh, asking for help: "Vn nuevo coraçón, vn hombre nuevo,/a menester, Señor, el alma mía" (1, 1-2); 2) a description of the supplicant's needs: the same two lines plus "desnúdame de mí" (1, 3); 3) a motivation for granting the petition: "ser podría /que a tu piedad pagase lo que deuo" (1, 3-4); 4) an implicit confession of guilt: surely such a renewal would not be necessary if the supplicant were innocent and not unhappy with his current way of life. Finally, 5) one of the attributes of the divine is set out in line 4. Other critics will produce different interpretations of these first four lines. Clearly, the multiple levels of meaning are by no means exhausted.

A poem by poem analysis of the *Heráclito* permits a further structural pattern to emerge. Psalms 1-7 form a group in which the Old Testament themes predominate. A second group is formed by Psalms 8, 9, 10, and 14. Here one finds an accumulation of themes taken from the canon of profane love. This material seems, at first glance, to be intrusive. A third group of psalms (11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19) has as its central theme the passing of time, the brevity of life, and the inevitability of death. These are, in many ways, the poems which are most closely associated with the best of Quevedo's verse. This group includes such poems as "Ven ya, miedo de fuertes y de sabios" (Psalm 16), "Miré los muros de la patria mía" (Psalm 17), and "¡Cómo de entre mis manos te resualas!" (Psalm 18), all of which underwent massive rewrites and revisions, so central were they to Quevedo's poetic thought and development. A fourth group (Psalms 20, 21, 22, 23, and 24) have as their central theme the contemplation of the crucifixion and death of Christ.

This new structure leads one to speculate that the *Heráclito* might be more than an imitation of the Heraclitus and the Psalms of David. If this were so, then the *Heráclito* might have been written around a lived experience,

presumably the one that caused the grave crisis alluded to in Quevedo's introductory letter. Hence the *Heráclito* could also be read in the following fashion: 1) an invocation to God, asking for help in the critical situation. This phase is represented by Psalms 1-7; and note that these are the Psalms where Quevedo follows the Old Testament most closely. 2) The sinner recalls his past sins and repents of the pleasures associated with them. This phase is represented by Psalms 8, 9, 10, and 14. These are the psalms where the profane canon of love seems to intrude into the otherwise religious poetry. If, indeed, Quevedo were repenting, at the age of 33, of a series of emotional entanglements, then that could very well be the explanation both for the writing of the *Heráclito* and for the phrasing of the letter to his aunt. I quote: "Tú, que me as oído lo que e cantado y lo que me dictó el apetito, la pasión o la naturaleza, oie ahora, con oído más puro, lo que me hace decir el sentimiento verdadero y el arrepentimiento de todo lo demás que e echo."⁸ If Quevedo were ashamed of his past conduct, then that would certainly explain away the brevity of the reference to it in the *Heráclito*.⁹ 3) In the third phase, Quevedo contemplates the proximity of death. This is represented in Psalms 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19, where some of the most powerful poetry of the *Heráclito* is to be found. Quevedo's source of inspiration here is Classical and his debt to the writings of Seneca and the Stoics is clear. At this stage the poetry is highly moral. The problem of an imminent and inevitable death is clearly presented, but no philosophical or religious answer is forthcoming. Any solution, if indeed one may call it a solution, is implicit within the spiritual progress of the lyrical voice which confronts death, realizes that it may be imminent, and then, persuaded by its naturalness and inevitability, prepares itself for its own close encounter with the personal. This accounts for the seeming paradox of the living poet calling for, and welcoming, the untying of the knot of his present being. As the wisdom of God is manifest in His management of the universe, so the wisdom of man is demonstrated in his acceptance of death. This is not a speculative solution; the lyrical voice does not offer its own experience as a way to understanding death; but rather as a way to live with it. 4) This "living with death" is further manifest in phase 4 (Psalms 20, 21, 22, 23, and 24) in which Quevedo, in an exercise that is reminiscent of the spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, follows his contemplation of man's mortality with an examination, again at a very personal level, of the meaning of the cross, the crucifixion, the death of Christ, and Christ's ability to live on within the individual by means of the sacrament of communion.

Notes

- 1 The letter, which appears at the beginning of the *Heráclito christiano*, ends: "Torre de Joan Abad, 3 de Junio de 1613." See *Cancionero de 1628*. Ed. J.M. Blecua. Madrid: C.S.I.C., 1945. p. 155. The *Heráclito*, which appears on pp 155-180, contains 25 poems in this version. J.M. Blecua studies it briefly in the introduction; see pp 13-17. Note that Blecua considers this version to be a primitive one: "me atrevo hoy a presentar una edición de lo que podríamos considerar como versión primitiva de veinticinco *Psalmos del Heráclito*," (p. 13). I have chosen to study the *Heráclito christiano* as it appears in the *Cancionero de 1628* for two reasons: 1) it is a complete, reliable, and reasonably accessible edition; and 2) it was collected during the author's lifetime.
- 2 See Francisco de Quevedo, *Poesía varia*. Ed. J.O. Crosby. Madrid: Castalia, 1981. I quote: "Hacia 1612 ó 1613, Quevedo sufrió una crisis de conciencia, aguda y quizá prolongada, atestiguada por diversas referencias suyas. Entre éstas, la más extensa, precisa y elocuente es la versión de 1613 del *Heráclito christiano*, junto con el pequeño prólogo y la dedicatoria que lo acompañan" (p. 97). See also, Henry Ettinghausen, *Francisco de Quevedo and the Neostoic Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972). I quote: "But two periods . . . were decisive for his development as a Neostoic. The first, marked by what seems to have been an acute and prolonged crisis of conscience, dates from about 1609 until his departure for Italy in 1613. There is every indication that at this period Quevedo felt deeply distressed by the more frivolous of his early writings and by his conduct as a university wit," (p. 15).
- 3 See Crosby, *Poesía varia*, p. 98. Also G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 182-215, especially p. 184.
- 4 Crosby, *Poesía varia*, p. 98.
- 5 See J.L. McKenzie, S.J. *Dictionary of the Bible* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1965), pp. 702-706. All further references to McKenzie are to the entry on the Psalms contained in this edition. I would like to express my thanks to my colleague and friend the Reverend Dr. Marc Smith, CSC, who suggested the possibilities to me of this particular line of research.
- 6 The manuscript tradition of the *Heráclito christiano* has yet to be untangled. See Crosby, *Poesía varia*, p. 97. In the meantime, all references to Psalm and line number are to the *Heráclito* as it appears in the *Cancionero de 1628* and will be contained within the text.
- 7 For a study of the text tradition of this poem, see my forthcoming article, "Different kinds of failure: Some comments on Quevedo's Revisions to *Miré los muro de la patria Mía*."
- 8 *Cancionero de 1628*, p. 155.
- 9 Each of the remaining texts of the *Heráclito* should be studied in an effort to determine the thought patterns which caused the changes apparent in the other manuscripts. Such a study should work at two levels: 1) at the level of the total unity of the *Heráclito* and 2) at the level of the rewriting of each individual poem.