

**When an Image is Not Worth a Thousand Words:
Divergent Codes of Representation of Death and the
Afterlife in Francisco de Quevedo's Satirical Works
and the Art of Hieronymus Bosch**

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The queer, mysterious, and fascinating imagery created by the Flemish painter Hieronymus Bosch (’s-Hertogenbosch c. 1450–1516) seems to be a critical favorite in the exercise of the old Horatian dictum of *Ut Pictura Poesis*. Bosch’s art has been recently compared to the writings of Nikolai Gogol, Franz Kafka, Octave Mirbeau, Ted Hugues, Reinaldo Arenas, Herman Melville, Fernando Arrabal, and Bertold Brecht. However, pioneering these contemporary comparisons, the Spanish Baroque culture had already resorted extensively to the fanciful art of the Flemish painter (well known in Spain, since Phillip II had been an avid collector of his works) as a source of hyperbolic vocabulary of comparison dear to the literature of the period, as well as to characterize distorted and grotesque writing styles. A symptomatic case of the need to explain (to illustrate, to illuminate, to “ground”) the slippery text through the fixed image is the frequent association between the humorous and whimsical textual creations of the Spanish Golden Age *conceptista* Francisco de Quevedo (1580–1645), and Hieronymus Bosch, the paragon of figurative whimsicality.¹ The Quevedo-Bosch association, instigated by the author’s own invocation of the painter’s name in his jocular texts, started already during Quevedo’s life and would attract critical attention through the centuries up to the present day.

Indeed, a first reading of the *Los Sueños* (Dreams), one of Quevedo’s most popular satirical prose works, could bring to mind Bosch’s portrayals of death and afterlife punishments. Besides, or added to, the fact that Bosch’s name is actually quoted in Quevedo’s text, both the painter and the writer seem to coincide in a bafflingly dehumanized, detached, and grotesque representation of death and suffering, which is both brilliant and astonishing in its proliferating inventiveness. In their words and images, human beings are not

dignified, pitied, or even individualized in the face of death; they compound an amorphous mass of stupid creatures that mechanically and absurdly die and then face an eternal and cruelly sophisticated punishment. But, surmounting the obvious temptation to illustrate Quevedo and Bosch's representations of death and the afterlife with each other's words and images, this essay is not so much about their artistic formulations and understandings of the physical act of dying and its aftermath, but about the death of interpretation that happens when word and image are uncritically joined under the comforting epistemological fantasy of the Same.

The goal of this essay, then, is not to support or deny the possibility of the influence of the painter on the writer; there is a long established critical tradition of comparison. Rather, this essay elaborates on a certain blindness to the irreducible codes of representation in text and image that carries on from the Renaissance to the overpowering visual culture of the present. It aims to explore the sometimes too hasty and seductive connection of art and literature that relies on the epistemological ease conveyed by sight. In the case of Bosch and Quevedo, the impossibility of equating text to image is furthered by the historical and cultural divide between the pre-Reformation, late medieval and early capitalist context of the Flemish painter, and the Counter-Reformation, Baroque world of the Spanish writer, who witnessed the social and economic crises that would eventually bring the haphazard Spanish empire to its downfall. By examining the manner in which Quevedo uses Bosch in his texts, I intend to point out not only their cultural differences, but also the irreconcilability between their verbal and visual codes of representation.

The fluidity that critics have established between Bosch's art and other cultural manifestations (mostly verbal) is proof of the ready acceptance of the "oneness" of culture that was proposed as a desired ideal during the Renaissance. This is exemplified, as Marc Bensimon notes, in Bosch's *tondo* of *Los pecados capitales* (The Seven Deadly Sins) (Fig. 1) in which the all-seeing quality of the eye of God at the center of the painting is underlined by the words "Cave, cave, Deus videt" (Be careful, be careful, God is watching).²



Fig. 1. Hieronymus Bosch. *Los pecados capitales* (The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things). 1475–1480(?). Courtesy of Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Bosch's *The Seven Deadly Sins* represents an iconography in tune with a burgeoning Renaissance philosophical trend, one that emphasized connections and spatiality versus chasms and temporality. Nicolas Cusanus expounds the abstraction of the circle as “a movement of the thought itself [. . .] Consciousness thus becomes aware of its own secretions, its own thinking processes of forming relationships” (qtd. in Bensimon 268). This aspiration to reduce the world's many contradictions to systematic connections is exemplified by Marsilio Ficino's image of the metamorphoses of Man. The figure is transformed into a gigantic eye which contemplates (in a unified manner) the whole universe, thus abolishing time and difference in its simultaneous and immanent gaze (qtd. in Bensimon 272).³ I will return to the significance of this Lacanian fantasy of the totalizing gaze later in this essay.

When comparing literature and painting, though, most critics of the period were moved by more practical reasons. In a time when censorship and decorum were limiting factors in writing, and painting had not achieved yet the liberal

art status that it aspired to reach, equating *pictura* and *poesis* helped to ensure respectability for them both. For a modern scholar like Helmut Heidenreich, this would be an important explanation for the appearance of Bosch's name, especially in satirical and picaresque texts, with the purpose "to forestall the objections of the moralists to amusing or even unedifying literary subjects" (174). According to this same author, the most obvious explanation for the proliferation of Bosch's allusions in Spanish seventeenth-century literary criticism and satirical writing is, in the context of a revival of the *ut pictura poesis* doctrine (Heidenreich 172–73), the new found taste of Baroque culture for the ugly, grotesque, and monstrous. The complex and "unnatural" forms and meanings are proof of the wit and creative powers of the artist and writer (Eco 169).⁴ Bosch had become such a popular figure in seventeenth-century Spanish culture, that there was not only an *entremés* (short farce performed during the intermission of a play) about him (*Entremés de las pinturas del Bosco*, 1645, by M. de Lanuza), but also a 1643 *entremés* attributed to him: *El viudo consolado. Entremés famoso de Gerónimo Bosque* (Heidenreich 194).⁵

If Bosch seems to have been a favorite iconographic referent for literature, the reverse maneuver (literature as an explanation for his iconography) has also been undertaken by art historians. Induced by the lack of artistic models for Bosch's innovative imagery,⁶ critics have eagerly sought and found textual referents for Bosch's seemingly unprecedented creations: the popular devotionaries known as *Ars Moriendi* (which would have inspired paintings like the *Death of the Miser*); Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* (his calling to abandon life's meaningless riches would have been behind Bosch's *Haywain*); the millenarist writings of Master Eckhart, Alain de la Roche, and Jan van Ruysbroeck (texts that would be behind his depictions of the Final Judgment); the *Golden Legend* by Jacopo da Voragine, the source for his representations of saints like Saint Anthony or Saint Jerome; and especially the *Vision of Tundale*, a harrowing twelfth-century depiction of Hell that achieved new fame in the end-of-the-world craze at the close of the fifteenth century and which had been reprinted in 's-Hertogenbosch during Bosch's life (Dello Russo 138–39). Not only written texts, but also popular oral culture has been proposed as a means to decipher Bosch's enigmatic creations. Gibson has proposed that one of the main keys for the interpretation of the painter's baffling imagery is Bosch's literal transpositions of local proverbs such as "At the end all is hay" (a saying that would be the conceptual base for the *Haywain*), or the euphemisms, "to pick flowers" or "to play the violin," referring to sexual activities as seen in the erotic games and hellish punishments in the triptych of *El jardín de las delicias* (The Garden of Earthly Delights) (center and right panel of Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Hieronymus Bosch *El jardín de las delicias* (The Garden of Earthly Delights). Left Panel (Paradise); Central Panel; Right Panel (Hell). 1503–1504 (?). Courtesy of Museo del Prado, Madrid.
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Assumptions about the facile interchangeability of word and image are equally present in the critical corpus that has established (or rejected) the thematic and stylistic choices made by Quevedo. This is especially true for his satirical prose *Los Sueños*, believed to be influenced by Bosch, whose paintings were known as “dreams” in the sixteenth century (Levisi 166).⁷ Such claims are bolstered by the fact that, as a member of the Royal Court and art *aficionado*, Quevedo probably had many opportunities to view the striking art of the painter. Beyond the original paintings, Bosch’s work was also known through engravings (some of dubious authorship), which further testify to the popularity of the Flemish painter and the broad distribution of his images beyond the restricted circles of the Royal Court.⁸

Both Heidenrich and Margarita Levisi offer comprehensive reviews of the association between Quevedo and Bosch. Some of the sources cited by these critics that reinforce the Quevedo-Bosch relation include: *El tribunal de la justa venganza* (The Court of Fair Vengeance), a pamphlet concocted in 1635 by some of Quevedo’s well-earned enemies, accusing Quevedo of heresy and disbelief because of his ridiculous representations of Hell that are paralleled to those by Bosch;⁹ the art critic Jusepe Martínez, who, in 1675, plainly affirmed that Quevedo had received inspiration for *Los Sueños* from Bosch’s paintings; the French Hispanophile Ernest Merimée (1886), who helped to spread the Bosch-Quevedo connection beyond Spain; Aureliano Fernández Guerra, a biographer of Quevedo, who in 1897, affirms “Quevedo es Bosco” (Quevedo is Bosch). Heidenrich and Levisi also include prestigious hispanists from the first half of the twentieth century such as Américo Castro,

Luis Astrana Marín, and Leo Spitzer, who would also underscore the argument that Quevedo was influenced by Bosch. Finally, Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo can be added to the list of critics linking the artist and the painter. However, as mentioned by Heidenreich, Menéndez y Pelayo was the only one to warn about a too literal understanding of the *ut pictura poesis* topos (176). Clearly, the persistence of the comparison has taken on the status of tradition in literary studies.

Even so, this position is not without its critics. Xavier de Salas (1943) is the first scholar who openly refutes the established idea that Quevedo was influenced by the inventiveness and themes of Bosch. Salas blames this long-established connection on the Golden Age literary wars and Bosch's ill reputation as a non-believer.¹⁰ Bosch's name, then, was ostensibly used as an insult by and against Quevedo (Levisi 169). The negative or positive way in which the painter's name was bandied about seems to be one of the main points of contention among contemporary critics. Morreale denies Quevedo's negative use of the painter, placing both in the same Christian tradition,¹¹ and, reminding his reader of the often-contradictory joy rides of Quevedo's moralistic satire. Heidenreich agrees with Morreale, tracing Quevedo's mention of the painter as an expert on Hell to an established literary tradition from which the author draws in order to bring home his point about who the real devils are—not the distorted figures painted by Bosch, but “the pandemonium of society” (186). Levisi also qualifies Quevedo's full-fledged inspiration in Bosch's paintings by attributing thematic coincidences (representations of Hell, the final judgment and the afterlife, the foolishness of men, *vanitas vanitatis*, etc.) to the same Christian background. However, Levisi also acknowledges a stylistic affinity deriving from their employment of the dream as a milieu for artistic freedom, which would explain their parallel use of accumulations, hybridizations, and inversions as a way to reproduce an oneiric, distorted world.¹²

From this brief review, it is clear that, with the exception of the suspicions raised earlier by Menéndez y Pelayo, no critic has reflected consistently upon the theoretical significance of the persistent, centuries-long comparison between Quevedo's texts and Bosch's images. While they have acknowledged the existence of the critical tradition, and have debated the appropriateness (or not) of the comparison in terms of the cultural meaning of Bosch in Quevedo's time (its negative or positive connotations in Counter-Reformation terms), they have never delved deeply into the theoretical implications of such a comparison. To do this, one must begin by questioning the primal assumption of the “oneness” of culture and the search for connections that dominate Western epistemology since the Renaissance. The critical tradition that has oversimplified the *ut pictura poesis* topos is part of this quest for establishing connections and finding similarities. These cautionary words from the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* make for an apt point of departure:

The great danger in any specific application of the theory of the relations between poetry and painting is that the literary critic starts to see 'pictures' in even the slightest touch of detail or suggestion of stasis. A critic's interest in *ekphrasis* may tempt him toward a full analogy between a particular poem and a particular painting on the basis of a few similar but minor details. (4: 467)

A danger exists of the literary critic being blinded by the power of the unifying gaze. The visual seduction of the ready-made image often contravenes the perils of interpretation. Indeed, Levisi suggests this when, in her exhaustive review of the centuries-long Quevedo-Bosch coupling, she reflects on the fact that Quevedo invokes many other names—like Dante, Propertius, Hippolitus, and the list goes on—but critics have fixated on Bosch (173). This seems to beg the question: In the current trend towards focusing on visual culture in North American hispanism, could we not be witnessing a symptomatic case of a culture (of the modern, Western culture) where the eye, as determined by the philosophical foundation of the enlightenment and positivism, has been privileged as the purveyor of ultimate truth and meaning?

Interestingly, in the Spanish Baroque culture (of which Quevedo is one of its most salient representatives), the faculty of sight and the images obtained by seeing were regarded as a main source of *engaño* (illusion and deception). For the Baroque epistemological skeptics (which anticipate in some way the postmodern position), our senses deceive us, especially that organ which we trust the most, our eyes. There is a paradoxical way out of *engaño*: that major deceiving machine called art was also a site for enlightenment through *desengaño* (the realization of deception and the melancholic acknowledgement of the illusory character of so-called reality).¹³ This context of art as a simultaneous producer of *engaño* and *desengaño* must be taken into account when revising Quevedo's resorting to a hallucinatory painter of images that defy reality as we know it. Thus, the presence of Bosch in his texts functions as a mechanism inside of his own fictions destined to (de)construct human illusion.

The earliest direct mention of Bosch by Quevedo is in his (debatably) picaresque novel *Historia de la vida del Buscón* (published in 1626). The first person narrator (supposedly the *pícaro* and lowlife Pablos) describes some poor students who try to mend their tattered clothes:

Qual para culcuxirse debaxo del braço, estirándole, hazía L. Uno hincado de rodillas, remedava un cinco de guarismo, socorría a los cañones. Otro por plegar las entrepiernas, metiendo la cabeza entre ellas, se hacía un ovillo. No pintó tan extrañas posturas el Bosco como yo vi. (171)

(One, trying to reach under his arm, stretching it, became an 'L.' One,

kneeling down, looked like a number five while mending the rags around his legs. Another one, sticking his head between his legs while trying to fold the cloth around his crotch, looked like a ball of yarn. Bosch did not paint as strange figures as I saw.)

In this quote, Quevedo (forfeiting verisimilitude, since his impoverished protagonist was, very unlikely, an art connoisseur) resorts to Boschian imagery as a hyperbolic term of comparison that enhances his own artistic ability. His “vision,” his literary creation, surpasses that of the painter, with whom, the writer assumes, the reader has enough familiarity to both understand the iconographic referent, and to mentally complete the process of grotesque defamiliarization of the human body that the writer has undertaken with words. In a convoluted Baroque fashion, Quevedo is imparting “reality” to his fiction by referencing an established and well-known pictorial fiction. Nevertheless, through the self-favoring comparison of inequality—Bosch did not paint as strange figures as he “saw”/wrote—Quevedo creates a surplus of meaning, a gap, a difference produced by the higher level of defamiliarization that the text generates over the painting. We may know the painter’s work, but what the writer has to offer is something *more*, something that we are not able to “see,” but are challenged to fill, to supplement the empty space of difference between the seen and the unseen, the known image and the signifying instability and unreliability of the word.

In one of his many misogynist poems entitled “Pintura de la mujer de un abogado, abogada ella del demonio” (Portrait of a Lawyer’s Wife, Herself Lawyer of the Devil), we find another mention of the painter, in a context indeed appropriate for his name to appear, since it combines painting, women, and the devil:

barba que con la nariz
se junta a dar un pellizco;
sueño del Bosco con tocas,
rostro de impresión del grifo (*Historia* 980).

(A chin that joins the nose / to give a pinch; / a dream of Bosch with a head scarf, / a face that looks like a gryphon.)

This evocation of an unspecific Bosch image could be understood as a short-handed way to remedy the multilayered and tortuous verbal creation. But by Baroque standards, Bosch’s appearance means the addition of yet another layer of complexity to the cultural monument of incongruity that Quevedo is constructing in this poem. The use of *sueño* (dream as “vision” or “illusion”), the concept so dear to Baroque epistemology, has, in this quote, the same meaning that Quevedo gives it in his own *Los Sueños*: an imaginary recreation of reality that reveals all the absurdity and monstrosity

that remains hidden—or repressed, as Freud would have it—while the social superego is vigilant or—as Quevedo would say—blinded by hypocrisy. Quevedo uses Bosch as a self-referent that only serves to highlight to his own inventiveness, and that referent never fills the gap between the spectacle of absurd “reality” and what the textual recreation strives to represent.

In “Alguacil del Parnaso” (The Bailiff of Parnassus), a poem that is the product of the vicious poetic war with Góngora, Quevedo describes his literary enemy as “Bosco de los poetas / todo culos, demonios y braguetas” (The Bosch of Poets / All asses, devils and codpieces).¹⁴ Here again it might seem that Quevedo equates painting and writing by stating that Bosch belongs to the poets. Indeed, “Bosco de los poetas” might be called a true metaphor (etymologically “metaphor” is a *translatio*, a sign carried to a different place) in the sense that visual and literary media are fused into one.¹⁵ Nonetheless, I would argue that “Bosch” is a sign whose meaning constantly slips in an ever shifting system of signification in Quevedo’s writing. “Bosch-as-sign” in Quevedo generally means “that which is absurd, deformed or monstrous,” but its *value*, in the Saussurean sense, oscillates and changes depending on its use, context, and relative position. This changing value of the “Bosch” sign parallels Quevedo’s understanding of writing itself. As William Clamurro also sees it, Quevedo’s writing is ultimately a commentary on the deceptive, unstable nature of language.

Probably the most fascinating use of Bosch-as-sign by Quevedo is in a passage from one of *Los Sueños*, “El alguacil endemoniado” (The Bailiff Possessed by the Devil), the quote that prompted the traditional affiliation of *Los Sueños* to the art of the Flemish painter. The narrative context of the quote, as it is common practice in Quevedo’s satirical prose (Clamurro 306), is undermined with turns and contradictions that void all claims to truth and meaning. The first person narrator (there is no pretense in the text to separate him from the author) goes to see a hypocritical priest (the *licenciado* Calabrés), and finds him in the act of trying to exorcise an “alguacil” or bailiff who has been possessed by the devil—or better, as the entrapped devil puts it, he has become a “demonio enaguacilado,” possessed by the unwanted bailiff’s body. The narrator asks permission to stay and ask questions about Hell and its inhabitants, and the result is a typical Quevedian, witty, satirical rant against certain despised social groups (the bailiffs are one of the most prominent of these). There is not a logical motive for the narrator to seek confession with a priest, whom he describes as a “hipócrita, embeleco vivo, mentira con alma y fábula con voz” (hypocrite, live illusion, a lie with a soul, and a fable with a voice). Given this description, it is also quite unbelievable that this fake priest could have exorcising powers. The narrator claims to very much enjoy the devil’s “sutileza” (subtlety) which, as the *Diccionario de la Real Academia* defines it, is a “dicho o concepto excesivamente agudo y falto de verdad, profundidad o exactitud” (a concept or expression excessively witty and

lacking truth, depth, or exactitude). This definition illuminates Quevedo's slippery (self-undermining) use of wit in this piece, as well as elsewhere in his satirical prose. To secure the pleasure that the devil's "sutileza" provides him, the narrator lamely appeals to the "friendship and intimacy" that he and the hypocritical priest share in order to be able to stay and listen:

Yo, que había comenzado a gustar de las sutilezas del diablo, le pedí que, pues estábamos solos y él como mi confesor sabía mis cosas secretas y yo como amigo las suyas, que le dejase hablar [. . .]. Hizóse así, y al punto dijo:

‘Donde hay poetas, parientes tenemos en corte los diablos, y todo nos lo debéis por lo que en el infierno os sufrimos, que habéis hallado tan fácil modo de condenaros que hierve todo él en poetas y hemos hecho una ensancha a su cuartel.’ (57)

(I, who had started to like the devil's subtleties, asked him [the *licenciado* Calabrés], since we were alone, and he as my confessor knew all my secret things and I as his friend knew his, to please let him [the devil] speak [. . .]. This was granted, and immediately he [the devil] said:

‘Where there are poets, we the devils have relatives in court, and you owe us a lot because of how much we have to endure from you all in Hell; you have found such an easy way to condemn yourselves that all Hell is brimming with poets and we had to make it bigger because of you.’)

All speaking characters, starting with the narrator, himself (who, as a poet, is also part of the condemned lot), and including the smart devil, "padre de la mentira" (65) (father of all lies), are, therefore, unreliable. The narrator describes many seemingly arbitrary condemnations, such as cuckolds and men who fall in love with old women, and men with such bad taste that they try to sodomize the black devils who they imagine to be "white and blond." The devil complains about the *potajes* (stews or concoctions) that humans invent to represent the image of the devil and exclaims: "Remediad esto, que poco ha que fue Jerónimo Bosco allá y preguntándole por qué había hecho tantos guisados de nosotros en sus sueños, dijo que porque no había creído nunca que había demonios de versa" (60) (Correct this, since a short while ago Hieronymus Bosch went there [to Hell], and when asked why he had made so many stews out of us in his dream-visions, he answered that he had never believed that there were real demons).

Quevedo's famous quote would have found fellowship in the company of a slightly earlier one, which was noted by Xavier de Salas in reference to the egregious fictionality of Bosch's diabolical creations. It is a fragment from a letter to his daughters by the monarch who was passionate about collecting Bosch. In this passage, the king Philip II comments upon the reactions of his

children to a religious public pageant, drawing a telling distinction between real and unreal demons:

Muy bien es que vuestro hermano no tenga miedo, como decís vos la menor, y no creo que le tuviera de los diablos de la procesión, porque venían buenos y víanse de lexos y más parecían cosas de Hieromo Boces que no diablos. Y cierto eran buenos, pues no eran verdaderos. (Letter from Philip II to his daughters, dated September 17, 1582, quoted by De Salas 11)

(It is very good that your little brother was not afraid, as you the youngest one said, and I don't believe that he feared the devils in the procession, because they were good and you could see them from afar, and they looked more like things from Hieronymus Bosch than real devils. And indeed they were good, because they were not real.)

Quevedo and Philip II's quotes reflect a cultural current already starting to take shape in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, the idea of artistic creation as something divergent from reality—leaving behind the classical ideal of mimesis—that the ingenious mind of the artist creates another reality, transcends it (assigns a different meaning, an allegorical one, to the plane of reality) or makes an alternative one (marvelous, grotesque, or monstrous). Ideally, that artificial reality would help the viewer/reader to arrive at the notion of an “authentic” reality. By distancing oneself from it (via the moral distance of laughter, the epistemological distance of the acknowledgement of mere representation) and by transforming it (not just “devils,” but “good devils,” “concocted devils”), the audience member/the reader would be able to achieve, by default, an intuition of the non-representable (real, authentic evil). But, if, as Quevedo repeatedly claims, we live in a world of appearances, if nothing can be trusted (not our senses, not even language), then there exists a danger of becoming trapped in the world of fiction and of never getting to face the Lacanian Real (the reality of death and pure evil). As Malcom K. Read contends, in the Spanish Baroque culture epitomized by Quevedo,

[t]he elimination of the immediate, physiological senses lead to a cultural system so dissociated from reality as to be unstable. In the Baroque period the resultant inner tensions have become almost unbearable. Barriers are drawn, between the inner and the outer, between the soul/mind and the body. Repression of the second element of the dichotomies leads to the creation of a dream world. (242)

Quevedo reintroduces Bosch (carries forth Bosch, metaphorizes him) into this Baroque world and uses him as a warning sign against the perils of fiction, of

being trapped in a dream-world. It is human fictitiousness that gets lambasted in the fiction of *Los Sueños*: women's make-up and beauty tricks to feign youth and beauty; grandiloquent names of characters and offices without a reality underneath; refrains, proverbs, and popular types that function as mental prosthesis, emptying language out of meaning.¹⁶ And, summing it all up, as witnessed by the baffled spectator / narrator of the "Sueño del juicio final" (The Dream of the Final Judgement), hypocrisy (in language and behavior) as the new and confusing path that the souls follow after the body dies. The traditional two—the path to Heaven for the virtuous and the path to Hell for sinners—are unclear and confused in the face of this new, third path that marks the triumph of appearances.

In Bosch's representations of evilness and Hell, it is the devil who deceives and tempts (such as in *Death of the Miser* or the different *Temptations of Saint Anthony*). Evil forces are present since the moment of creation, as represented in the "Paradise" panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (Fig. 3), where, in the background of the idyllic Paradise, evilness lurches forward in the form of animals devouring each other, and in the owl and the crescent crowning the fountain of life.



Fig. 2. Hieronymus Bosch. *El jardín de las delicias* (The Garden of Earthly Delights). Left Panel (Paradise). 1503–1504 (?). Courtesy of Museo del Prado, Madrid.

But evilness, death, and afterlife's harrowing punishments are represented and representable. His paintings admonish the viewer of the presence of evil, warn about the possibility of deception, and alert us that deception and evil come from the devil. Here, it is only with the help of God that humankind can be saved. To this end, the medieval concept of the Eye of God watching everything (*The Seven Deadly Sins* Fig.1) functions as a center, a fixed point of reference to distinguish virtue from sin.

In contrast, in Quevedo's Baroque world, Ficino's Renaissance dream of Man as an all-encompassing eye that abolishes difference, has become a nightmarish, fake Lacanian Imaginary stage, where everything has become distressingly the Same. The upheavals and social changes in a post-Reconquest and inflationist Spain (where the implosion of wealth and new social categorizations brought by the colonization of the Indies have erased the old distinctions), have confused and mixed the social order, making things no longer "be," but "appear to be." The same principle of uncertainty is at the root of Quevedo's satirical writing. His constantly shifting semantics will not allow the stabilizing distinction between the Real and the Symbolic; meaning (the value of meaning) is in constant flux, and the writer both decries and imitates this loss of ground. For Quevedo, hypocrisy and deception are intrinsic to humanity, and the de-centered "I" cannot fix meaning any longer. Even language, the interpreting tool par excellence, cannot be relied upon as Quevedo's play with the inner contradictions and inexactitudes of language demonstrates. In addition, God is no longer there to help us find the true path, the right meaning; if, in Bosch's art, God and salvation still occupy a reduced space of the representation, in Quevedo's *Los Sueños*, God is far away, invisible, hidden behind a thick rhetorical cloud of metaphors and ellipses: "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" ("Sueño del juicio final" 43) (The Dream of the Final Judgment) (God was dressed as Himself, beautiful for the saints and angry for the condemned, the sun and the stars hanging from his mouth, the wind quiet and silent, the water resting at his shore, the earth suspended, fearful for her sons). If here, from the narrator's perspective, God is hidden and unfathomable, the knowledge of Him still exists, acting *somewhere*. For the bulk of the society satirized in Quevedo's prose, God has become even more divorced from Man's reckoning. This is particularly evident in the constant reiteration of the condemned souls in the "Sueño del infierno" (The Dream of Hell): "Dios es piadoso, Dios sea conmigo" (86) (God is merciful, May God be with me). In a society of free-floating signifiers, God has become an empty, dead sign, a linguistic cliché, yet another mask to add to the intrinsic fictionality of men.

Even if we managed to reduce Quevedo's verbal pyrotechnics to what Paul Ricoeur has called the "iconic moment," it is evident that the visual and verbal

codes used by the painter and the writer provide very different vehicles for the achievement of *desengaño*. Bosch's paintings show a direct image of evilness, tortures of Hell, the devil's monstrosity, and the sins of men. The direct apprehension of the visual entails a cognitive process that is not commensurable with the temporal development of a narrative, such as Quevedo's, that fluctuates between truth and lie, fiction and reality, and refuses to provide the comfort of a fixed ground for meaning.

In the society of suspicion that emerging capitalism and religious repression generated in early modern Spain, only a radical epistemological mistrust could provide a meager, self-canceling base of knowledge: "Es cosa averiguada [. . .] que no se sabe nada, y que todos son ignorantes, y aún esto no se sabe de cierto, que a saberse ya se supiera algo; sospéchase" ("El mundo de por dentro" 113) (The World Seen from the Inside) (It is a well known fact [. . .] that no one knows anything, and everybody is ignorant, and even this is not known for sure, because if we knew it, something would be known; it is only a suspicion.)

Despite the centuries-old tradition that "sees" Bosch in Quevedo, not only their different media, but their social and historical contexts create a deep chasm between them. Bosch is the product of a local culture, hinging between the moralist last stages of the Middle Ages and the complex intellectual world of the Renaissance and its taste for transcendent symbolisms. Today, the clear meaning of many of Bosch's images defies interpretation. His signs direct us to a lost plane of meaning; since we lack the univocal key to access that code, critics have looked for it in different textual creations. The obstacles for interpretation in Quevedo's prose are self-created and aim to "unmask" a similar situation of unreadable fiction in his society. In Quevedo's conceptist prose, the mere possibility of interpretation is denied to us by the sheer nature of language, a language that precludes being grounded, and where an iconic sign called "Bosch" has also been reduced to one component in the author's de-centered play of words. Rather than giving us a secure image that stabilizes Quevedo's slippery prose, as so many critics have propounded, the inclusion of Bosch in Quevedo generates an ambiguity that re-produces the epistemological uncertainty of vertiginous Baroque dreams. I consider it a sobering critical move, thinking from our own overwhelming and simplifying culture of images, to look back at a time when the search for meaning was problematized to the point of resorting to images not to explain, but to further complicate and delay the illusory satisfaction of the arrival of meaning.

Notes

1. *Conceptismo* was a literary trend developed during the Spanish Baroque (especially during the seventeenth century). Its texts are characterized by multiple and intricate layers of meaning expressed as concisely as possible. To amaze with wit, or

- “ingenio,” is the main goal of the writer, and it is achieved by an overconcentration of figures of speech and tropes. Francisco de Quevedo has been considered the most representative writer of *conceptismo*.
2. This *tondo*, used as a table top, was located in the palace of El Escorial as part of the personal collection of Philip II. It does not seem coincidental that Philip placed in his personal chamber this reminder of the all-seeing eye of God, since, geopolitically, he was trying to reproduce the same centripetal effect; El Escorial was the precise geographical center from which he overlooked his Empire.
 3. For the Neo-Platonist reliance on the sense of sight as means through which truth is achieved (as opposed to Plato’s idea of sight as a source of “phantoms” or illusions), see O’Rourke Boyle. For a thorough review of the evolving epistemological role of the senses through history, see Summers.
 4. In line with the Baroque pleasure on word-play and multiple meanings (analogy, puns, homophony etc.), Heidenrich proposes also that the Spanish name of the painter, Bosco, closely resembles “bosque” (forest), and could have been another reason for the repeated presence of the painter’s name “associated with everything *silvaticus*: the fabulous and the monstrous, the horrible and the obscure” (197).
 5. Further, Bosch was involved in the popular theater of his time; in 1435–1436, he and his father participated in the activities of a local Rederijkerkamer (cultural club), as actors, designers, and painters of stages (Boucquey 43). Based on Bosch’s obvious familiarity with the farce genre, Boucquey offers a nuanced analysis of Bosch’s *Haywain* as a painting that reveals the “grammar” principles that regulates the comic plays, asserting that “the ‘Haywain’ appears as a quasi ‘literal’ metaphor of farce” (44).
 6. Although, as Dello Russo points out, his grotesque figures can be traced to Gothic marginalia, and even to the Classical *grutesco*.
 7. Quevedo wrote the following moral-satirical short pieces about death, social evilness, and the afterlife at an earlier date (around 1604) and they were published under the general title of *Los Sueños* in 1627: “Sueño del infierno,” “El alguacil endemoniado,” “El mundo de por dentro,” “Sueño de la muerte,” and “Sueño del juicio final” (Dream of Hell, The Bailiff Possessed by the Devil, The World Inside Out, The Dream of Death, and The Dream of the Final Judgment).
 8. For a representative selection of some of these engravings, see those reproduced in Bosing.
 9. “Don Francisco de Quevedo parecía ser aprendiz o segunda parte del atea y pintor Jerónimo Bosque, porque todo lo que este ejecutó con el pincel, haciendo irrisión de que dijese que había demonios pintando muchos con varias formas y defectos, había copiado con la pluma el dicho don Francisco” (quoted in Levisi 164) (Don Francisco de Quevedo seemed to be an apprentice [the Medieval/Renaissance relationship between student and teacher was that of an apprentice and Master—part of the historic guild system] or follower of the painter and atheist Hieronymus Bosch, because everything he did with the brush, mocking the belief in the devil by painting them with many shapes and defects, the above said Don Francisco had copied with his pen). All translations from the Spanish original to English are mine.
 10. Affirms Xavier de Salas: “No creemos en la posibilidad de una directa filiación de los *Sueños* de Quevedo [. . .] demasiados ejemplos literarios existían a su alcance para necesitar estas pinturas, cuyo autor fue el primero en denunciar como ateo. Estilísticamente no nos parecen nada semejantes estas obras” (De Salas 31–37) (We don’t believe in the possibility of direct filiations of Quevedo’s *Dreams* [to Bosch] [. . .] there were too many literary examples at his reach to need those paintings, whose

- author he [Quevedo] was the first one to denounce as an atheist. Stylistically we don't see anything similar to these paintings).
11. After all, as Leo Spitzer has noted, a Medieval religious mentality was still very present in the Spanish Baroque culture, a culture that “no se puede concebir [. . .] ni sin el trascendentalismo medieval ni sin la vida sensual del Renacimiento, sin danza macabra y sin bacanal” (quoted in Orozco 40) (cannot be conceived [. . .] neither without Medieval transcendentalism nor without the sensual life of the Renaissance, without the dance macabre an the bacchanalia).
 12. For an exemplary study of the techniques of the grotesque in Quevedo, see James Iffland.
 13. For the philosophical implication of “engaño” and “desengaño” in the Spanish Golden Age and the radical epistemological difference that “desengaño” will have during the eighteenth-century enlightenment (a move beyond handed-down learning and superstition through the empirical use of the senses), see Maravall.
 14. Traditionally, Spanish Baroque literature has been divided into two “schools,” one “conceptista” (see note 1) led by Quevedo, and the other one, “culteranista” (roughly, “overcultured”), epitomized by the work of Luis de Góngora y Argote (1561–1627). The main difference between the two would be *culteranismo*'s emphasis on a very complicated form that hides the meaning as much as possible through the use of Greek and Latin neologisms, accumulation of tropes, periphrasis, and mythological references. Its focus on the pure beauty of language can be viewed in opposition to the emphasis on wit in *conceptismo*. However, both movements share the same ideal of hiding meaning through an extreme rarification of language, with the reading pleasure achieved by the difficult and demanding process of interpretation. The apparent difference between both movements has also been traditionally maintained due to the vicious attacks levied by both writers against one another. As a matter of fact, the term “*culteranismo*” became a poetic heresy since it was an insult more than it represented a school of thought, a mixture of “*culto*” and “*luteranismo*” (Lutheranism).
 15. “‘Bosco de los poetas’ era el origen de aquella nota [. . .] : más tarde, al encontrar cierto fragmento del ‘Alguacil endemoniado’ comprendí que el calificativo no fué dirigido a lo formal de la obra, sino a lo íntimo del enemigo [. . .] a lo más escondido e inconfesable en todo caso” (De Salas 32) (‘Bosch of the Poets’ was the origin of that note [. . .] ; later, when I found certain fragment from ‘El alguacil endemoniado’ (The Bailiff Possessed by the Devil) I understood that the words were not directed towards the formal aspects of the work [Góngora’s], but to the most intimate part of the enemy [. . .] to the most hidden and unmentionable in any case). Here, Salas is making reference to religious abnormality, but the malicious coupling of butts and codpieces in the same line also alludes to a frequent insult that Quevedo used against Góngora, that of sodomite. It is not unusual to find in Bosch’s imagery figures that have been exotically sodomized, such as the one with flowers in the central panel of *The Garden of Early Delights*, or the one with a musical instrument in the left panel (*Hell*) from the same painting.
 16. Regarding Quevedo’s conflictive relationship with proverbs and colloquialisms, see Arellano.

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