The Nation in History: Decline, circularity and *desengaño* in the poetry of Fray Luis de León and Francisco de Quevedo*

Ivan Cañadas
Hallym University
<i_canadas@hallym.ac.kr>

Abstract

This article examines Fray Luis de León's ode, *Profecía del Tajo*, in terms of nostalgia and the baroque concept of *desengaño*. Its circular view of history —a godlike conflation of past, present and future, whereby the river's invocation to the last Visigoth king, Rodrigo, is a reproach, a warning of the (historically) imminent Muslim conquest of Spain, and a melancholy prophecy of the sacrifices of the Christian reconquest— also involved the poet's tacit warning about Spain's analogous corruption and decadence in the *Siglo de Oro*. Also discussed are some poems by Fray Luis de León's great admirer, Francisco de Quevedo —«Advierte la temeridad de los que navegan», «Las torres de Joray», and «A Roma, sepultada en sus ruina»— which, similarly, provide an implicit critique of the poet's own time through historical analogy, and motifs of corruption, maritime danger and nostalgia for past glories. My own English verse translations of the poems discussed are provided as an appendix.

Keywords: «Profecía del Tajo», *desengaño*, *Reconquista*, historical decline, analogies.
Received: 8.VI.2008 – **Accepted:** 20.XI.2008

*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Tenth Annual Religion, Literature and the Arts (R.L.A.) Conference: «Nostalgia, Melancholy and the Religious Imagination» (University of Sydney, September 21–22, 2007). I would like to thank Professor Norman Simms for his insightful comments and advice.

Ianua. Revista Philologica Romanica
Vol. 8 (2008): 203–223
ISSN 1616-413X
http://www.romaniaminor.net/ianua/

© Romania Minor

BDD-A5262 © 2008 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:23 UTC)

Written at the height of Spain's imperial fortunes —at the end of the reign of Charles V, or the beginning of that of his successor, Philip II, and decades before the Armada debacle of 1588— Fray Luis de León's «*Profecía del Tajo*» [Prophecy of the Tagus] is a mid-sixteenth-century poetic attempt to connect Spain's past, present and future. It takes the form of an imaginary address, directed at Rodrigo, the last Gothic king of Spain, whose rape —or seduction— of the daughter of a vassal lord was traditionally blamed for the Muslim conquest of the Iberian Peninsula in the eighth century. Fray Luis de León's inscription of legendary history in the form of an imaginary prophecy by the symbolic figure of the Tagus —which flows through Toledo, in the heart of Spain— implies a circular view of history, pointing to the dangers faced by Spain in his own age —the peak of Spanish colonial expansion in the Americas, and the subject of considerable political and spiritual controversy.

This focus on history —in a context of religious conflict and danger to the nation— along with the classical precedent for cautionary poetry concerning maritime adventurism, in turn, makes Fray Luis de León a precursor of the elegiac treatment of national decay in some psalms and sonnets by Francisco de Quevedo, foremost satirical poet of the latter Golden Age.

Luis de Léon (1527–1591) was a native of Belmonte, in the province of Cuenca —located some twenty miles from Dulcinea's town of El Toboso. A member of the Augustinian order, Luis de León would end his days as the Vicar General of that order. But, amidst theological disputes with the Dominican order, his life —to use a maritime metaphor— was not all smooth sailing. In his younger, more tumultuous days, Fray Luis was imprisoned for five years for his criticism of the Vulgate version of the Bible. Theology aside, Luis de León's Jewish ancestry by way of a great-grandmother, and his skill as a translator, not only of Greek and Latin but also of Hebrew, made him vulnerable to highly dangerous accusations in a period of religious persecution.

We are therefore dealing with a militant individual, not cowed by danger or controversy, possessed of a spirit more active than meditative. I can only concur with one of his biographers, James Fitzmaurice-Kelly, that, although the author did not have «the unfettered liberty of a godless layman», being «restrained by his austere temperament», a «monk's habit» and «Christian doctrine», he clearly could work in a style not associated with the *vita contemplativa*, giving us in «The Prophecy of the Tagus», a poem «besprinkled with sonorous place-names», in which «Father Tagus describes with a mixture of picturesque mediaeval sentiment and martial music the onset of the Arabs and the clangour of arms as they meet the doomed Gothic host» (Fitzmaurice-Kelly 1921, 218-219). Of course, more than simple «sonorous place-names» —though they are that— their rapid enumeration, underlines the sense of the swift, relentless advance of the Moors inland from their first arrival across the Strait, at Gibraltar —epically dubbed «*el puerto a Hércules sagrado*» [the port sacred to Hercules]— and, thence, the extent of Rodrigo's domains, over the ranges, and across the plains, from Constantina in the South to «*Lusitania*» (Portugal) in the west.[1]

[1]Bell (1926) similarly notes «the sweep forward of Moorish victory through Spain», culminating

© Romania Minor
http://www.romaniaminor.net/ianua/

BDD-A5262 © 2008 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:23 UTC)

Particularly ironic, in view of the problems that the poet-clergyman faced on account of suspicions attached to people of New Christian, or *Converso*, stock, his surname itself —*de León*— harks back to the centuries-long *Reconquista* to which he refers in the «*Profecía del Tajo*». León, an important city in the northern Spanish region of Asturias, and, subsequently, the capital of the medieval kingdom of León, boasted a central, iconic position in the *Reconquista*, when following some of the first significant victories for the Christian forces pushing southwards, it had become their capital in the early tenth century.[2]

As modern historians see it, the swift Islamic conquest of most of Spain in the course of 711 was «the result of the weakness of the Gothic Christian kingdom», rather than «the strength of the North Africans» (Cuder-Domínguez 2002, 321). The cause of the invasion probably lay in «the ancient elective system of succession», which had seen the three sons of King Witiza passed over in 710 with the support of the bishops, and perfectly within the existing conventions of legitimate succession (Thompson 1969, 249), in favor of Roderic, Earl of Baetica, which resulted in their conspiring with the invaders, perhaps with the mediation of Julian, the Christian governor of the North-African city of Ceuta (Cuder-Domínguez 2002, 321).

Legend, however, put a different and very human face on the conquest, making of the Spanish king, *Rodrigo*, an abuser of royal power, who, in accordance with a time-honored classical tradition of depicting tyrants, erred in giving rein to his sexual passions. According to tradition, he did this by betraying a vassal lord, Julian, *Earl* of Ceuta, thus bringing calamity upon his realm —either as the rapist, or at least the seducer, of Earl Julian's daughter, Florinda, who had been sent to Rodrigo's court at Toledo. Affronted by the king's actions as a stain on his family honor, Julian then proceeded to aid the enemy in their crossing of the Strait of Gibraltar. Despite the tragic consequences for himself and the country, Rodrigo was treated with some sympathy in many cases —seen as the tragic subject of human fallibility and resulting *desengaño*— a term which encompasses disillusion/disenchantment, and regretful, knowing hindsight.

A central aspect of the myth of the *Reconquista* —and certainly an unfounded one— was the nostalgic view of Spain —or, rather, of Hispania, a peninsular kingdom also comprising Portugal— as a nation, consistent with ideas of a national identity not in existence at that point in history. By extension, as one historian explains, it was a «notion of continuity existing between the new kingdom of Asturias and the Visigothic kingdom», a belief which «had a major influence on subsequent development of the idea of reconquest» (O'Callaghan 2003, 6).

In addition, and inextricably linked to this, the monarch, blamed though he often was for the loss of the kingdom, was seen, nevertheless, as a representative of his people, and sometimes treated as a tragic figure, who bemoaned the great losses. However, the *don Rodrigo* of the medieval ballads was itself an inven-

in the reference to «*espaciosa y triste España*» [extensive and unhappy Spain] (p.168).

[2] «Encouraged by the expansion of the Asturian kingdom and evident Muslim weakness, García I (911–914) moved his capital southward from Oviedo to the city of León» (*Enc. Brit.* Macro, 17, 407).

BDD-A5262 © 2008 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:23 UTC)

tion —a false, idealistic *naturalization* of the essentially un-integrated Visigothic people, the small minority of Germanic barbarian nobles, who lorded it over the overwhelmingly Hispano-Roman population following the collapse of the Roman empire.

Making up no more than a quarter of the population of the major towns, and much less elsewhere, the Visigoths seized two thirds of the land for themselves, leaving the Hispano-Roman majority with the remaining third (Shaw 1906, 210-211). Indeed, despite disagreement among historians, regarding the total population of Visigothic Spain, it is clear that the Visigothic elite did not amount to 4 % of the total population (O'Callaghan 1983, 70-71).[3]

Incorporated *religiously* into the Catholic majority only late in the sixth century, the Visigothic elite, being followers of the Arian heresy, had previously withdrawn the privileges and administrative prerogatives of the Catholic clergy. For instance, as part of the legislative changes of Alaric II (c. 516), «Catholic bishops», who «had previously had the right of trying civil cases between laymen when both parties agreed... lost their jurisdiction in such cases. They also lost their exemption from being called as witnesses in secular courts» (Thompson 1969, 29). Moreover, even after their conversion to Catholicism, late in the sixth century, the Visigothic nobility remained a separate caste, ethnically, politically and materially speaking, so that, in the words of one historian, it was due to their «tyranny and rapacity» that «the middle class of freemen and landowners, on whom fell the heaviest burden of taxation, were gradually depressed into a condition of dependence and serfdom»; while beneath these there was, in turn, a populous class of slaves, «as a Roman inheritance of many generations», who, understandably enough, had little investment in that community (Shaw 1906, 212). Thus, the last Visigothic king is more properly dubbed *Roderic* —and rendered into the Latin *Rvdericvs* on surviving coins; there never was a Spanish king called *Rodrigo*.

Some scholars argue parallels between Luis de Leon's «Prophecy» and the Old Testament account of the misdeeds and consequences of David's passion for Bathsheba; others note parallels between some ballads dealing with this traditional material and the Biblical fall of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, whereby Rodrigo, falling through temptation into sin, symbolically loses paradise (Burt 1978, 435). Poetic versions that stress the king's blame —some even calling him a rapist— as Fray Luis de León does in the «Prophecy», where Rodrigo is dubbed an «*injusto forzador*» [unjust ravisher] —also recall the Roman myth of Tarquin and Lucretia, in which the tyrannical abuse of power that precedes tremendous political change is manifested in the personal and individual sphere, as rape.

In such a scenario, as John Burt observes, though Julian's daughter Florinda is not an active temptress —in contrast to Eve, for instance— she *does* function as «the apple ... in the Biblical account ... an object violated which is the

[3] As Joseph O'Callaghan sums up, «Valdellano and others estimate that about 300.000 or 400.000 Visigoths settled among 9 million Hispano-Romans; on the other hand, Vicens Vives gives figures of 200,000 Visigoths and 6 million Hispano-Romans» (O'Callaghan 1983, 70-71) —in other words, 3,0–3,4 %.

© Romania Minor
http://www.romaniaminor.net/ianua/

BDD-A5262 © 2008 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:23 UTC)

repository of tradition and law» (Burt 1978, 439). In fact, Florinda —more commonly known as *la Cava*, of which more below— was usually condemned «as the reason for which Spain was lost» (Burt 1978, 436).

We might think of the grumbling and animosities, described in the *Iliad* of Homer, concerning Helen as the cause of the Trojan war, where the Greeks curse the disproportionate sacrifice made to avenge the affront to her outraged husband —and make bitter observations about her little worth; while, on the Trojan side, Hector himself, perhaps the most selfless of heroes, rebukes his brother Paris, telling him: «the Trojans are too soft. Otherwise you would have been stoned to death long ago for the evil you have done» (*Iliad*, III – Trans. Rieu , 65).

Similarly, *both* Rodrigo and Florinda became the object of condemnation, tinted with the sense of nostalgia and regret that we might think of as *desengaño*; filled with a certain *remorse*, through masculine identification with the monarch, but also sometimes betraying simple scorn at the idea of how much was lost just for one girl. This is illustrated in a sixteenth-century broadsheet version of the ballad of Rodrigo and la Cava, which reads:

> *que por sola una doncella,*
> *la cual Cava se llamaba,*
> *causen estos dos traidores*
> *que España sea domeñada.*
>
> [That for just one maiden, / Who Cava was named,/ These two traitors should cause/ Spain to be subdued].[4]

Another ballad of the «*amores*» (literally *loves*, or love-conduct) of Don Rodrigo and Cava is less equivocal about the king's culpability, and about the gravity of his crime:

> *Cumplió el rey su voluntad*
> *Más por fuerza que por grado*
> *Por lo cual se perdió España*
> *Por aquel tan grande pecado*
>
> [The king fulfilled his will / More by force than by her liking / For which Spain itself was lost / For that sin so heinous].[5]

The blame traditionally placed on *La Cava* is made particularly patent if we consider that this was not her name, but a nickname or epithet, derived from the Arabic word *cahba*, meaning «a prostitute» (Cuder-Domínguez 2002, 323). Of course, by the time people in post-*Reconquista* Spain sang some of the popular traditional ballads —printed, altered and reworked well into the sixteenth century— they might well have ignored the meaning of the nickname, or even thought that it was her actual name, as suggested by the excerpt quoted immediately above, where we are told regarding the «*doncella*» [maiden] that «*Cava*

[4]Menéndez Pidal 1926, vol. II, p. 9, lines 47–50 (cited in Burt 1978, 439).
[5]Menéndez Pidal 1926, vol. II, p. 9, lines 27–30 (cited in Burt 1978, 439).

BDD-A5262 © 2008 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:23 UTC)

se llamaba» [she was called, or *named*, Cava]. However, the epithet clearly indicates that, at least in the initial stages of its emergence during the *Reconquista* properly speaking, Moors and Christians agreed in placing considerable blame on the daughter of *Conde Julián*.

As we have seen, Luis de León's poem is among those which draw blame away from *la Cava*, as the king is blamed from the outset as an «*injusto forzador*» [unjust ravisher]. Nonetheless, the reference to «*el mal*» [evil, or misfortune], which is seen to offer Rodrigo «dulce regazo» [sweet lap] implicitly ascribes blame, through displacement, onto Cava herself, and *her* lap.

By these means, «The Prophecy of the Tagus» emphasizes various betrayals of duty and of the common good, in favor of selfish desires, and individual prerogatives. For, besides Rodrigo's abuse, there is also Julian's attention to his personal honor, through his desire to avenge his daughter's disgrace —rather than the posthumous ill-fame of his betrayal, as he fails to sacrifice self to nation. Thus, the Tagus describes him as «*el injuriado Conde, a la venganza / atento, y no a la fama*» [the affronted earl, mindful of vengeance and not of fame].

The Tagus also functions as an important emblem of Iberian identity —understood in terms of a people's attachment to, and identification with, a particular homeland— since it is the longest river in the Iberian Peninsula, cutting across most of it, and flowing into the Portuguese coast at Lisbon; in addition, it flows through the city of Toledo, located in the heart of Spain, and its capital at the time of the conquest. Though, equally ironic and inextricably bound to questions of religion and national identity —particularly in view of the author's ancestry— Toledo was the center of Spanish Jewish culture until the Inquisition and the economic growth of Madrid conspired to bring about its decline —executions, mainly in the period 1480-1530, aggravated by migration of perhaps half of the Jewish population (Kamen 1998, 29-31).

The motif of the personified river also makes Luis de León's Tagus comparable to Scamander in the *Iliad*, the animated god-river flowing across the Trojan plain and faithful to the city. In Book XXI of the *Iliad*, that minor god, in fact, nearly succeeds in drowning no lesser hero than Achilles until the fire god, Hephaestus, comes to the rescue, so that «The River himself was scalded» (Trans. Rieu , 389).

In Luis de León's «Prophecy», the Tagus' imprecations and reproaches for Rodrigo, serve to impress that the king is, ultimately, the one *calling down* woe upon his people —much as Julian will summon the enemy. In addition, the original Spanish refers to «*Padre* Neptuno» [*Father* Neptune] who ushers in the Muslim forces, implicitly doubling the actual role of Florinda's father in aiding their safe passage across the Strait of Gibraltar.

Neptune's aid to the Moorish invaders also suggests Poseidon's support in Homer for the Achaeans, against Troy; while his «*punta acerada*» [steel tip] —evidently of the sea-god's *trident*— which pushes the Moorish armada across the *Herculean Straits*, may imply Neptune's identification with the Devil. However, having said this, this onslaught is, of course, the will of Heaven, or the scourge of God —as clearly shown in the lines that immediately follow:

© Romania Minor
http://www.romaniaminor.net/ianua/

BDD-A5262 © 2008 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:23 UTC)

Oye que el cielo toca
con temeroso son la trompa fiera
que en Africa convoca
el moro a la bandera
que al aire desplegada va ligera

[Hear now, how Heaven plays / with fearsome note, the fierce trumpet, / which in Africa does summon / The Moor to the warlike banner, / Which, unfurled, floats in the air].

The immediacy and urgency of *Tajo*'s harangue are emphasized by the repetition of sharp monosyllabic terms used to rebuke and hasten to arms the thoughtless and unwatchful king; «*ya*» and «*aún*» (translated as *now*, *already*, *still*, or *yet*, as seen above), are also used in rhetorical questions to reinforce the reproachful tone of the River Tagus' dramatic utterance:

¿ni llamado
al mal que sobreviene
no acorres?, ¿ocupado
no ves ya el puerto a Hércules sagrado?...

[Not even warned thus / To bravely face th' impending sorrow, / Come you running? So distracted, / Seest thou not *already* the port to Hercules sacred?...].

As we have seen, the poem focuses on the moment of the outrage, and takes the form of an imprecation voiced by the Tagus, underlining the communal, national, and religious troubles that will result from those moments of selfish, private pleasure.

In addition, a classic essay by Susan Hill Connor examines the particularly pertinent and fascinating usage of «maritime imagery» in this poem, involving the motif of the sea's dangers, which can be traced to Roman models, including poems by Virgil, Horace, Lucretius and Catullus, and which involved the condemnation of unreasoned greed, or the hazards attendant on the pursuit of worldly things (Connor 1980, 47 n. 24). At the same time, the association of overwhelming dangers *from the sea* implies the Spain of Fray Luis de León's own day —this poem most likely composed in the 1550s, the final years of the reign of Charles I of Spain— Charles V, in his capacity as Holy Roman Emperor (1500–1558); at the peak of Spain's imperial pride, as Connor notes, the country was «[c]aught up in the fervor of territorial expansion ... a great proportion of its hope for future enrichment on the promise of ultramarine conquests and trade» (Connor 1980, 40).

In these terms, Fray Luis de León's ode is an impassioned corrective to such optimism —the *hubris* which providential order will chastise. Connor also points out the sea's ('negative') «role as the agent which brought evil into the Peninsula in the form of the pagan Moors», the culmination of this being «a variation on the *naufragium* [or, *shipwreck*] theme», whereby the Tajo's southern counterpart,

BDD-A5262 © 2008 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:23 UTC)

the Betis, delivers onto the treacherous sea's «dark waters the broken helmets and mangled bodies of the noble Spanish heroes» slain in the invasion (Connor 1980, 41).

Ironically, our poet —clearly conscious of the adage that pride precedes a fall— would live until 1592, long enough to witness most of the reign of Philip II —born, just like Fray Luis, in 1527— and, particularly, the darkest hour of that reign, the disastrous expedition of the so-called «invincible» Armada, in 1588.

Fray Luis de León's approach to history and the fate of nations is pious and deeply moralistic. An ancient historian such as Tacitus, could appreciate an element of chaos in «the actual course of events», which he rather pessimistically perceived to be «largely governed by chance» (*The Histories*, I.4). Fray Luis de León, by contrast, would perceive an element of providence at work, whereby the ruler's misconduct will bring down upon the kingdom the catastrophe of divine wrath.

The framing of this prophetic utterance, the lack of clarity as to where the words of the river end, and specially its temporal intricacy («Already, I see...») adds to the sense of urgency, as well as impatience with Rodrigo, leading to disillusion with the condition of fallible and fallen humanity, a sense of human vanity and of the instability of this world. Thus, the poet looks at the past; while Rodrigo errs and Tagus foresees the imminent invasion, which is already long past, and Tagus also refers to the struggles to come in the centuries to follow, which is, again, also in the reader's past. And, yet, the fact that it is past is no cause for self-satisfaction, or for a sense of achievement, since Time itself is so telescoped in the prophecy of the *Río Tajo*, so conflated, in fact —rendered simultaneous, in the timeless scheme of an ageless river— that historical recurrence and our own precarious position are implied:

> *ya el sonido,*
> *y las amargas voces,*
> *y ya siento el bramido*
> *de Marte, de furor y ardor ceñido*
>
> [already, the noise, / And the bitter cries, and the clamor / Of arms, I do hear, and the roaring voice, / Of Mars, invested with rage and ardour].

And, likewise:

> *Ya dende Cádiz llama*
> *el injuriado Conde, a la venganza*
> *atento*
>
> [Already from Cadiz doth call / The affronted Earl, on vengeance bent].

In this fashion, the focus is on their being overwhelmed —of the inevitable rout of the Christian forces by an innumerable enemy horde, who are fast, active, vigorous and lethal. That vigor is emphasized through movement, but

© Romania Minor
http://www.romaniaminor.net/ianua/

BDD-A5262 © 2008 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:23 UTC)

also through ease of motion. For example, the banner borne lightly; squadrons «innumerable» to count; the ground covered with people; the seas covered with enemy sails; the cacophony of voices raised to the heavens. In reality, as noted above, the swiftness of the conquest —a historical puzzle for centuries —was brought about by the sheer weakness and dividedness of the domain.

*

Francisco de Quevedo y Villegas (1580–1645) was the author of one of the definitive picaresque novels of the early seventeenth century, *El buscón* [The Swindler] (c.1604; pub. 1626). Most importantly, of course, Quevedo excelled as a poet, and is primarily known as a satirist with an incisive, though often grotesque, vision of the essential corruption and decline of Golden Age Spain. The culmination of this vision would be embodied in the collection of macabre visions, known as the *Sueños* [Dreams], fantasies of death and hell, peopled with figures and types from his contemporary Madrid, on which he worked during the first three decades of the seventeenth century —and for which there was arguably no match until Goya produced his own nightmarish visions two centuries later in the *Caprichos*. In addition, and of relevance to the present discussion, Quevedo was also an admirer, staunch advocate and first editor of the work of Fray Luis de León, whose poems he published in 1631.

From a social perspective, the period was marked by an increase in poverty and deprivation for many; losses to the plague in 1596–1602, for example, amounted to 1,75 million deaths, and, were perceived to be largely among the poor (Maravall 1987, 159). In 1609–1614, there was also the expulsion of the *Morisco* population —amounting to a third of the people of Valencia, and a considerable proportion of the peasantry along the eastern coast of Spain, as well as in the Castilian cities of Toledo, Cordoba and Seville (Domínguez Ortiz 1971, 171). Though the period is associated with the great wealth of the Indies, it is worth considering, that the «tenfold» increase in silver in the years «1580–1630, the great age of Spanish imperialism» was also responsible for a «price revolution» that saw «the rich ... getting richer and the poor poorer» (Lynch 1964, 129, 134); while, as José Antonio Maravall stresses, the accompanying decline of social bonds and alienation, amidst the emergence of a materialist culture, witnessed the denigration of the working poor and the criminalization —if not outright demonization— of vagrants, who were perceived as actual or potential evildoers (Maravall 1987, 58, 74).

Although Quevedo's sonnet, «*A Roma sepultada en ruinas*» [To Rome Entombed in its Ruins], was, ironically, a translation of a sonnet in a cycle on Rome by Joachim du Bellay (1522?–1560), titled *Les Antiquités de Rome* (1558)[6] — the entire cycle, in turn, translated into English, in 1591, by Edmund Spenser (c.1522–1599)[7]— Quevedo's sonnet presents a fascinating ideological analogy to

[6]My gratitude to *Ianua*'s anonymous reader, who directed me to the original French sonnet by Du Bellay.

[7]Hieatt (1983, 800). Du Bellay's original and Spenser's translation are both included in my appendix.

BDD-A5262 © 2008 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:23 UTC)

Luis de León's «*Profecía del Tajo*». The melancholy closing sestet is clearly pregnant with meaning and relevance for Golden Age Spain, as much as for long-fallen Imperial Rome:

> *Sólo el Tibre quedó, cuya corriente,*
> *si ciudad la regó, ya, sepultura,*
> *la llora con funesto son doliente.*
> *¡Oh, Roma!, en tu grandeza, en tu hermosura,*
> *huyó lo que era firme, y solamente*
> *lo fugitivo permanece y dura.*
>
> [Only the Tiber's ancient current did remain;
> It once watered the city, now its resting place
> Beweeps, with a distressing and doleful strain.
> Oh, Rome! In your grandeur and in your grace,
> What was firm has fled, never to return again,
> And only what was fleeting endures yet and stays].

Another of Quevedo's poems that looks longingly and soberly at the ruins of the past is his ballad to the Towers of Joray —poem 627 of the posthumous *Parnaso* collection— whose more expansive title is «*Funeral a los huesos de una fortaleza que gritan mudos desengaños*» [A Funeral to the Bones of a Fortress Which Mutely Cry of Disillusion]. In translation, the opening lines read thus:

> The old towers of Joray
> Are the skull of some walls
> In the misshapen skeleton
> Of a castle long passed away.
> Today concealed by mere stones,
> Which yesterday clouds did crown.
> If they inspired fear when armed,
> Having collapsed they are frightful.

There is also the poem's sober —and somber— refrain: «*Las glorias de este mundo / llaman con luz para pagar con humo*» [The glories of this world / Beckon with light and pay with smoke].

Lastly, Fray Luis de Leon's use of the classical maritime motif also has an analogue in a sonnet of Quevedo's —which is distinctly metaphysical in style; the title «*Advierte la temeridad de los que navegan*» [Warns of the Temerity of Those Who Sail], and does so by way of condemning hemp, from which sailcloth is made— and which is said to have «*toda el agua amenazada*» [all the waters under threat]. As the poem unfolds, we realize that Quevedo has holy water in mind, threatened by the fact that the oceans' salt waters are so greedily embarked upon; his concerns in the sonnet are clearly more spiritual than physical. Accordingly, the sonnet culminates with this warning:

> *Ahogáranse en ésta menos vidas*

© Romania Minor
http://www.romaniaminor.net/ianua/

BDD-A5262 © 2008 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:23 UTC)

corrida en lazos que tejida en velas:
mortajas a volar introducidas.

[Fewer lives will this fibre stifle tight, / In nooses knotted than when woven into sails: / Just like so many shrouds launched into flight.].

Quevedo followed Luis de León in his classicist emulation of Horace and other ancient poets, and even in his approach to the classical past —namely, his view of the fall of Rome as a cautionary moral. Living through times when Spain's own decline was already deeply underway, and easier to see, the sentiment of *desengaño* —so fundamental a part of Spanish Baroque culture— must have been inevitable for someone of Quevedo's moral temperament and insight; while, for Quevedo, the fact that it was already a feature of the poetry of Fray Luis de León must have seemed downright prophetic.

Primary material (Trans. from Spanish mine)

Fray Luis de León: «Profecía del Tajo» [Prophecy of the Tagus]. See *Appendix*.

Quevedo, Francisco de: «Advierte la temeridad de los que navegan» [Warns of the Temerity of those Who Sail]. See *Appendix*.

——— «A Roma, sepultada en sus ruinas» [To Rome, Entombed in its Ruins]. See *Appendix*.

——— «Son la torres de Joray...» *Parnaso*, 627. See *Appendix*.

Rieu = Homer: *Iliad*. Trans. by E.V. Rieu. [Toronto]: Penguin.

References

Bell, Aubrey F.G. (1926): «Notes on Luis de Leon's Lyrics.» *The Modern Language Review* 21:168–177.

Burt, John R. (1978): «The Motif of the Fall of Man in the 'Romancero del Rey Rodrigo'.» *Hispania* 61:435–442.

Connor, Susan Hill (1980): «Maritime Imagery in the Poetry of Fray Luis de León». *Hispania* 63:38–47.

Cuder-Domínguez, Pilar (2002): «The Islamization of Spain in William Rowley and Mary Pix: The Politics of Nation and Gender.» *Comparative Drama* 36:321–336.

Domínguez Ortiz, Antonio (1971): *The Golden Age of Spain, 1516-1659*. Trans. James Casey. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Fitzmaurice-Kelly, James (1921): *Fray Luis de León: A Biographical Fragment*. [Oxford]: Oxford University Press; Humphrey Milford. [Project Gutenberg. <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/16148> (June 29, 2005)].

BDD-A5262 © 2008 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:23 UTC)

Hieatt, A. Kent (1983): «The Genesis of Shakespeare's Sonnets: Spenser's Ruines of Rome: by Bellay.» *PMLA* 98:800–814.

Kamen, Henry (1998): *The Spanish Inquisition: an Historical Revision.* London: Phoenix Giant.

Lynch, John (1964): *Spain Under the Habsburgs.* Volume I: *Empire and Absolutism, 1516-1598.* 2nd ed. [1981]. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Maravall, José Antonio (1987): *La Literatura Picaresca desde la Historia Social (Siglos* xvi *al* xvii*).* Madrid: Taurus Ediciones.

Menéndez Pidal, Ramón (1926): *Floresta de leyendas heroicas españolas.* 3 vol. Madrid: Clásicos Castellanos. [rpt. 1958]

O'Callaghan, Joseph (1983): *A History of Medieval Spain.* Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press.

——— (2003): *Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Shaw, R. Dykes (1906): «The Fall of the Visigothic Power in Spain.» *The English Historical Review* 82:209–228.

Thompson, E.A. (1969): *The Goths in Spain.* Oxford: Clarendon.

Ivan Cañadas
Associate Professor
Department of English Language & Literature
Hallym University
Chuncheon, Kangwon-Do, 200-702
South Korea

© Romania Minor
http://www.romaniaminor.net/ianua/

BDD-A5262 © 2008 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:23 UTC)

Appendix

Quevedo, «A Roma, sepultada en sus ruinas»

Buscas en Roma a Roma, ¡oh peregrino!,
y en Roma misma a Roma no la hallas:
cadáver son la que ostentó medallas,
y tumba de sí propio el Aventino.
Yace donde reinaba el Palatino;
y limadas del tiempo, las medallas
más se muestran destrozo a las batallas
de las edades que blasón latino.

Sólo el Tibre quedó, cuya corriente,
si ciudad la regó, ya, sepultura,
la llora con funesto son doliente.
¡Oh, Roma!, en tu grandeza, en tu hermosura,
huyó lo que era firme, y solamente
lo fugitivo permanece y dura.

Quevedo, «To Rome, Entombed in Its Ruins» (Trans. Ivan Cañadas)

Oh pilgrim! You look for Rome in Rome,
And in Rome itself Rome cannot be found
Corpses now the medals she once did flaunt,
And the Aventine Hill is its own tomb.
Where the Palatine once reigned, now it rests,
And filed down by Father Time, those medals
Seem rather the destruction of the battles
Of the ages than imperial Latin crests.

Only the Tiber's ancient current did remain,
Which once watered a city, now its resting place
Beweeps, with a distressing and doleful strain.
Oh, Rome! In your grandeur and in your grace,
What was firm has fled, never to return again,
And only what was fleeting endures yet and stays.

Ianua 8 (2008)
ISSN 1616-413X

BDD-A5262 © 2008 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:23 UTC)

Joachim Du Bellay, *Les antiquités de Rome* (1558): Sonnet 3

Nouveau venu, qui cherches Rome en Rome
Et rien de Rome en Rome n'aperçois,
Ces vieux palais, ces vieux arcs que tu vois,
Et ces vieux murs, c'est ce que Rome on nomme.

Vois quel orgueil, quelle ruine : et comme
Celle qui mit le monde sous ses lois,
Pour dompter tout, se dompta quelquefois,
Et devint proie au temps, qui tout consomme.

Rome de Rome est le seul monument,
Et Rome Rome a vaincu seulement.
Le Tibre seul, qui vers la mer s'enfuit,

Reste de Rome. ô mondaine inconstance !
Ce qui est ferme, est par le temps détruit,
Et ce qui fuit, au temps fait résistance.

Edmund Spenser, *Ruines of Rome: by Bellay* (1591): 3

Thou stranger, which for Rome in Rome here seekest,
And nought of Rome in Rome perceiu'st at all,
These same olde walls, olde arches, which thou seest,
Olde Palaces, is that which Rome men call.
Behold what wreake, what ruine, and what wast,
And how that she, which with her mightie powre
Tam'd all the world, hath tam'd herselfe at last,
The pray of time, which all things doth deuowre.
Rome now of Rome is th' onely funerall,
And onely Rome of Rome hath victorie;
Ne ought saue Tyber hastning to his fall
Remaines of all: O worlds inconstancie.
That which is firme doth flit and fall away,
And that is flitting, doth abide and stay.

© Romania Minor
http://www.romaniaminor.net/ianua/

BDD-A5262 © 2008 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:23 UTC)

Quevedo, «Advierte la temeridad de los que navegan»

Creces, y con desprecio, disfrazada,
en yerba humilde, máquina espantosa,
que fuerza disimula poderosa,
y tiene toda el agua amenazada.
Ve, ¡oh Noto!, que, secreta y encerrada,
alimentas con caña maliciosa
tu más larga fatiga y peligrosa,
tu peregrinación más codiciada.

Con menos hojas vive que cautelas;
pues, a pesar del mar, sobre él tendidas,
juntará las orillas con sus telas.
Ahogáranse en ésta menos vidas
corrida en lazos que tejida en velas:
mortajas a volar introducidas

Quevedo, «Warns of the Temerity of Those Who Sail» (Trans. Ivan Cañadas)

You grow, and disguised, for spite,
As humble grass, a machine to be feared,
Whose mighty strength deviously concealed,
Has all the waters under threat.
See —O Notus,[8] devious and secret!—
You feed, with a reed malicious,
A scheme long-desired and dangerous,
The pilgrimage that you most do covet.

With fewer leaves than caution, it prevails;
For, despite the sea, over which it's spread,
It will link the shores with an array of veils.
Fewer lives will this fibre stifle dead,
In nooses knotted than when woven into sails:
Just as if so many shrouds into flight were led.

[8]In Ancient Greek mythology, Notus was the god of a violent, scorching south wind; the «mistral» wind.

BDD-A5262 © 2008 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:23 UTC)

Quevedo, *Romance*: «Funeral a los huesos de una fortaleza que gritan mudos desengaños» (*Párnaso*, 627)

Son las Torres de Joray
calavera de unos muros
en el esqueleto informe
de un ya castillo difunto.
Hoy las esconden guijarros,
y ayer coronaron nublos.
Si dieron temor armadas,
precipitadas dan susto.
Sobre ellas opaco un monte
pálido amanece y turbio
al día, porque las sombras
visitan su tumba de luto.
Las dentelladas del año,
grande comedor de mundos,
almorzaron sus almenas
y cenaron sus trabucos.
Donde admiró su homenaje,
hoy amenaza sus bulto:
fue fábrica y es cadaver;
tuvo alcaides, tiene búhos.
Certificóme un cimiento,
que está enfadando unos surcos,
que al que hoy desprecia un arado,
era del fuerte un reducto.
Sobre un alcazar en pena,
un balüarte desnudo
mortaja pide a las yerbas,
al cerro pide depulcro.

Como herederos monteses,
pájaros le hacen nocturnos
las exequias, y los grajos
le endechan los contrapuntos.
Quedaron por albaceas
un chaparro y un saúco,
phantasmas que a primavera
espantan flores y fruto.
Guadalén, que los juanetes
del pie del escollo duro
sabe los puntos que calzan,
dobla por el importuno.
Este cimiento verde,
este monumento bruto,
me señalaron por cárcel:
yo le tomé por studio.
Aquí, en cátedra de muertos,
atento le oí discursos
del bachiller Desengaño
contra sofísticos gustos.
Yo, que mis ojos tenía,
Floris taimada, en los tuyos,
presumiendo eternidades
entre cielos y coluros,
en tu boca hallando perlas
y en tu aliento calambucos,
aprendiendo en tus claveles
a despreciar los carbunclos,
en donde una primavera
mostró mil abriles juntos,
gastando en solo guedejas
más soles que doce lustros,
con tono clamoreado,
que la ausencia me compuso,
lloré los versos siguientes,
más renegados que cultos:
«*Las glorias de este mundo*
llaman con luz para pagar con humo.»

Tú, que te das a entender
la eternidad que imaginas,
aprende de estas rüinas,
si no a vivir, a caer.
El mandar y enriquecer
dos encantadores son
que te turban la razón,
sagrado de que presume.
«*Las glorias de este mundo*
llaman con luz para pagar con humo.»

Este mundo engañabobos,
engaitador de sentidos,
es muy corderos validos
anda disfrazando lobos.
Sus patrimonios son robos,
su caudal insultos fieros;
y en trampas de lisonjeros

© Romania Minor
http://www.romaniaminor.net/ianua/

BDD-A5262 © 2008 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:23 UTC)

cae después su imperio sumo.
«*Las glorias de este mundo*
llaman con luz para pagar con humo.»

Quevedo, *Ballad*: «Funeral to the Bones of a Fortress which Mutely Cry Out of Disenchantment» (*Párnaso*, 627).

The old towers of Joray[9]
Are the skull of some walls
In the misshapen skeleton
Of a castle long passed away.
Today concealed by mere stones,
Which yesterday clouds did crown.
If they inspired fear when armed,
Collapsed, now, they are frightful.
Above them a dark wood
Dawns pallid and misty
To a new day, because shades
Visit its tomb in mourning.
The jaws of many a-year,
Great devourer of worlds,
Have dined on its turrets,
And supped on its trebuchets.[10]
If its main tower inspired awe,
Today its bulk is imposing;
It was stonework, now a corpse;
It had wardens, it has owls.
A foundation did assure me,
Which is disrupting some rows,
That the one now despised by ploughs,
Was the redoubt of the fortress[11]
For a shroud it begs the grasses,
From the hill it seeks a grave.
Like so many mountain heirs,
The birds nightly carry out
The funeral rites, while rooks
Bemoan the counterpoints.
For executors there were left
An evergreen oak and an elder,
Phantoms which in the springtime
Frighten away both flowers and fruit.
Marshland, which the bunions
At the foot of the hard barrier
Knows, and the points that they wear,
Covers the obstacle beneath.
This verdant foundation,
This most uncouth monument,
Was picked to be my prison:[12]
I took to it as my study.
Here, in the academies of the dead,
Enrapt, I heard the lectures
Of Graduate Disillusion
Against sophisticated tastes.[13]
I, who had my eyes fixed,
Cunning Floris,[14] upon your own,

[9] *The towers of Joray* (or *Xoray*): located in the town of Villamanrique (Ciudad Real), this ninth-century Muslim fortress, imposingly built on a cliff, 852 metres high, was hotly fought over during the *Reconquista*; taken, in 1213, by Alfonso VIII —a significant and very symbolic triumph for the Christian camp— he conferred the towers the chivalric Order of Santiago, to which Quevedo, himself, would one day belong —albeit, the poem suggests, in a decadent, post-heroic age.

[10] *Trebuchet* (also: *trebucket*): a kind of catapult, considered particularly accurate, used in medieval warfare.

[11] *Redoubt*: a reinforcing earthwork within a permanent rampart; hence, a protected place of refuge or defence.

[12] «Picked to be *my prison*»: in 1621, following the fall of his patron, the Duke of Osuna, Quevedo was banished from the court to his own estate, at the Torre de Juan Abad, in the vicinity of the Towers of Joray.

[13] *sophisticated tastes*: Quevedo, thus, appears to distinguish himself from the *culteranismo* of his rivals.

[14] *Floris*: a conventionally flowery name for a love-poet's mistress.

[15] *Colures*: an imaginary circle in space —either of two great circles on the celestial sphere that intersect at the celestial poles, one of which connects the equinoctial points on the ecliptic, while

BDD-A5262 © 2008 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:23 UTC)

Boasting of eternities
'Twixt the heavens and the colures,[15]
Finding pearls inside your mouth,
Balm-apple posies in your breath,
Learning from your carnations
Rich carbuncles to despise,
Where one spring once did display
A hundred Aprils together,
Spending but on long tresses
More suns than are in sixty years,
With a most clamorous tone,
Which absence did confer on me,
I wept the following verses,
More unruly than cultured:[16]
«*The glories of this world*
Beckon with light and pay with smoke.»

You, who aim to understand
That envisaged eternity,
Learn from the ruins before you,
If not to live, then, to fall.
To command and to grow rich
Are two wily enchanters
Who bewilder your reason,
The sanctuary of which you boast.
«*The glories of this world*
Beckon with light and pay with smoke.»

This deceitful world of ours,
Beguiler of the senses,
Would seem a gentle bleating lamb,
But goes about disguising wolves.
Its legacies are but thefts,
All its wealth foul insults;
And in ruses of flatterers
Will its exalted empire fall.
«*The glories of this world*
Beckon with light and pay with smoke.»

the other connects the solstitial points.

[16] *Cultured* ('cultos'): a possible gibe at the exponent of culteranismo —a variation on *concetismo*— such as Quevedo's archrival, Góngora. Similarly, Quevedo earlier rejects «sophisticated tastes».

© Romania Minor
http://www.romaniaminor.net/ianua/

BDD-A5262 © 2008 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:23 UTC)

Fray Luis de León, «Profecía del Tajo»

Folgaba el Rey Rodrigo
con la hermosa Cava en la ribera
del Tajo sin testigo;
el pecho sacó fuera el río,
y le habló de esta manera:
«En mal punto te goces,
injusto forzador; que ya el sonido,
y las amargas voces,
y ya siento el bramido
de Marte, de furor y ardor ceñido.
¡Ay, esa tu alegría
qué llantos acarrea! Y esa hermosa,
que vio el sol en mal día,
¡a España, ay, cuán llorosa,
y al cetro de los godos cuán costosa!
Llamas, dolores, guerras,
muertes, asolamientos, fieros males

entre tus brazos cierras,
trabajos inmortales
a ti y a tus vasallos naturales,
A los que en Constantina
rompen el fértil suelo, a los que baña
el Ebro, a la vecina
Sansueña, a Lusitaña,
a toda la espaciosa y triste España.
Ya dende Cádiz llama
el injuriado Conde, a la venganza
atento, y no a la fama,
la bárbara pujanza,
en quien para tu daño no hay tardanza.
Oye que el cielo toca
con temeroso son la trompa fiera
que en Africa convoca
el moro a la bandera
que al aire desplegada va ligera.
La lanza ya blandea
el árabe cruel, y hiere el viento,
llamando a la pelea;
innumerable cuento
de escuadras juntas veo en un
[momento.
Cubre la gente el suelo;
debajo de las velas desaparece
la mar; la voz al cielo
confusa y varia crece;
el polvo roba el día y le oscurece.
¡Ay, que ya presurosos
suben las largas naves ¡Ay, que tienden
los brazos vigorosos
a los remos, y encienden
las mares espumosas por do hienden!
El Eolo derecho
hincha la vela en popa, y larga entrada
por el hercúleo estrecho
con la punta acerada
el gran padre Neptuno da la armada.
¡Ay triste!, ¿y aún te tiene
el mal dulce regazo?, ¿ni llamado
al mal que sobreviene
no acorres?, ¿ocupado
no ves ya el puerto a Hércules sagrado?
Acude, corre, vuela,
traspasa la alta sierra, ocupa el llano,
no perdones la espuela,
no des paz a la mano,
menea fulminando el hierro insano.[»]
¡Ay, cuánto de fatiga,
ay, cuánto de sudor está presente
al que viste loriga,
al infante valiente,
a hombres y a caballos juntamente!
¡Y tú Betis divino,
de sangre ajena y tuya amancillado,
darás al mar vecino
cuánto yelmo quebrado,
cuánto cuerpo de nobles destrozado!
El furibundo Marte
cinco luces las haces desordena,
igual a cada parte,
la sexta ¡ay!, te condena,
¡oh cara patria!, a bárbara cadena.[»]

BDD-A5262 © 2008 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:23 UTC)

Fray Luis de León, «Prophecy of the Tagus» (Trans. Ivan Cañadas)

King Roderick was having his way
With the beauteous Cava on the side
Of the Tagus, and ne'er-a-witness by;
The river, puffing its chest out, him did upbraid:
«Cursed be the hour when you take such joy,
Unjust ravisher; for, already, the noise
I hear —already— and the bitter clamor,
The clanging arms, and the roaring voice,
Of Mars, invested with rage and ardor.
Oh! Your sweet delight will turn bitter,
And weeping bear, and that lady fair,
Who saw the light in an evil hour
For Spain —Oh, fraught with many a-tear!
And for the scepter of the Goths, how dear!
Flames, and suffering and wars,
Deaths, houses razed, fierce ills,
Between your arms you enclose,
Labors hard and interminable
For you and your subjects humble:
From those, even now, breaking
Constantina's fertile soil to the sand
By the Ebro, for neighboring
Sansueña, for the Lusitanian land,
For all Spain, extensive and saddened.
Now already from Cadiz doth call
The affronted Earl —his mind bent
On vengeance, of fame unmindful—
The barbarous host's push to mount,
Calling them who know no delays.
Hear now, how heaven plays,
The fierce trump's fearsome clamor,
Which in Africa does summon
The Moor to the martial banner,
Which, unfurled, floats in the air.
The lance which some do brandish—
The cruel Arab, who with winds will parry,
As he beckons others to the clash;
Innumerable the host's full tally
Of squadrons which I see march jointly.
With people covered all the ground;
Beneath infinite sails vanishes
The sea; reaching heaven, the sound
Confused and disparate grows;
Dust cloaks the day's light in shadows.

© Romania Minor
http://www.romaniaminor.net/ianua/

BDD-A5262 © 2008 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:23 UTC)

O, for, in haste, already
They climb aboard the ships! O, and stretch
Out their arms, strong and mighty
To grasp the oars, as they set alight
The foamy seas through which they cut!
Aeolus, swiftly and straight,
Puffs up their sails, as Neptune th' Great,
Through the Herculean strait
Safely ushers in every last ship
With his trident's steel tip.
Ah, woe! And still find you comfort sweet
In misfortune's lap? Not even warned thus
To bravely face th' impending sorrow,
Come you running? So distracted
Thou seest not the port to Hercules sacred?
Hurry, run swiftly, fly here,
Cross the high ranges, cover the plains,
Put the spur to use, and do not spare,
Relinquish not the rein,
Like thunder wield the iron insane.[»]
O, tried and tested to excess,
How plentifully aches and sweats
He who wears the knightly cuirass,
Those warriors fighting valiantly,
Both the men and horses jointly!
And you, River Betis, most divine,
With other's blood and your own stained,
Will deliver the neighboring main
So many helms fatally broken
So many noble bodies misshapen,
While cruel Mars, furiously,
Five times casts the sheaves of fortune,
Which for each side fall evenly,
Till the sixth —O!— you condemns,
—dear motherland!— to barbarous chains![»]

Ianua 8 (2008)
ISSN 1616-413X

BDD-A5262 © 2008 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:40:23 UTC)