

VARIATION ON QUEVEDO'S VARIATION ON SENECA, OVID

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Miré los muros de la patria mía

He teaches that a gaze can crumble the walls
that once a country held, and that the storm
of time leaves wells of decrepitude.
Puddles really, but as my father taught me,
You see a patch of water on the road,
and no one knows what's in it,
so drive around it. The jaws of depth lurk.
Dip your tires like bread and it may be
your last supper. I drove over the hole
to test his theory, for its oily bronze
made my eye feel it was a minor
hold. The car shook and sure enough
he came back with his Spanish aphorism—
The devil knows more because he is old,
than because he's the devil. I would,
like Quevedo, vanish into fields
where there are no walls and the paths
are not betrayed by their bucklings.
The road of exile has no markings.
Shot at six along the beam that still hurtles
from a star consigned to was,
and will be, and now brittling,
I am the backpack and the bitterness,
quartermaster and siren. I will tell
what I know to those who know it.
The rest drive round the placid shimmers
sure the road not tested is good as gold.

GUILLAUME DE MACHAUT: ARGUMENTS

poet, composer (1300-1377)

1

Those who wrecked then saved dear France
are not the same, and are the same, two notes
I will marry to a syllable stretching for order.
Voice is not the field but the wanderer
who, filled, must fill with life both stern motets
and ardor's virelais. What chords don't dance?
But art cannot repair a broken land,
nor can balms cure, nor pain subside
by searing vision's cue or music's ponder.
These words in poems may charm the lute,
but they must journey into laws before
they can shape and not just praise life.
And brave and commoner, miter and crown alike
must find in Justice paradise, and ask no more.

2

Until that day comes, let us
endure with art what art cannot cure.
Let us stain the paltry glass with lapis
and carnelian—make beauty life's decree
and punish ugliness, savagery, and sloth
with forced immersion in the font of poetry.
Let not the moneyed brute say he ought
to tend his lands, defend his property,
nor let the sworded drunk confuse his revelry
with the dutiful joys. Ideas have their ribaldry,
and loose within the harem's heart, they engineer
what otherwise would flood. Hence, beauty wrought
merits time and instinct. Art's empire
scoffs, imperils, gorges—even at times inspires.