



THE BALLAD REVISITED Elizabeth Bishop's "The Burglar of Babylon"

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Due to its formal structure and its exceptional length, the poem I propose to analyze falls somewhat outside of the Bishopian canon. Indeed, throughout the numerous critical studies now available on Bishop, it is seldom dignified with more than passing remarks. Bishop's only experiment with the form of the ballad, "The Burglar of Babylon" [Bishop 112-18]¹ does not, however, owe this critical oversight to its formal characteristics *per se*. Indeed, while J.D. McClatchy [McClatchy 140] is right to point out that poems following a strict stanzaic pattern are infrequent in Bishop's poetry, some of her greatest achievements are nonetheless to be found among poems that meet various formal constraints, from "Sestina" (or the earlier "A Miracle for Breakfast," which follows the same medieval model) to the often-quoted villanelle "One Art," not to mention the various sonnets scattered throughout *The Complete Poems: 1927-1979*. As for the narrative features of "The Burglar of Babylon," they do not come as much of a surprise to readers of "The Fish," "The Moose," or "The End of March," to name but a few of Bishop's poems with a strong diegetic element.

Included in the section of *Questions of Travel* (1965) entitled "Brazil," "The Burglar of Babylon" was inspired according to Bishop herself by a true episode in which the poet claims she introduced two minor modifications [Monteiro 29]. There is no need to stress the ideological message imparted by the narrative contents of this text intentionally built upon the schematic opposition between the wealthy inhabitants of Rio and the underprivileged class from which the burglar Micuçu stems. If not by its transparency, this reading is disqualified by one of Bishop's explicit statements on the issue of political engagement: "Politically I considered myself a socialist, but I disliked 'social conscious' writing" [Bishop 22].

In order to define the specifically literary issues the poem raises, I would like instead to pick up on Lavinia Greenlaw's suggestion that for Bishop "showing us how to see as she sees, what it is that interests her [...] is more important to the poet than realism. It's not just the composition that interests Bishop, but what it does to the eye" [Herbert & Hollis 275]. I hope to show that this observation may first be brought to bear on the *composition*

¹ Bishop's *Collected Poems* will be referred to as *CP*.

of the poem which reflects Bishop's aesthetic of description. It also calls into question the role of the gaze whose pivotal function both as object and origin of desire this reading aims to elucidate by invoking Slavoj Žižek's challenging redefinition of nostalgia. Much as the diegesis of Bishop's ballad owes its dynamic to the tragic mechanism to which its main character submits in order to remain true to his own desire, I will finally examine how its semiosis is intimately connected to the problematic inscription of the lyrical subject in the order of symbolic filiation.

Following Wordsworth's own method in such lyrical ballads as "The Idiot Boy" [Wordsworth 86-101] or "Goody Blake, and Harry Gill" [54-58], Bishop's main narrator is identified by way of the deictics ("This," lines 28 and 173) and of the present tense ("And the man that sells umbrellas," line 127; "the little soldiers / Are on Babylon hill again," lines 173-74), two formal devices which prompt the reader to surmise that this fictional voice originates in the community that shares the burglar Micuçu's set of spatial and temporal references. Contrariwise, the speaker, who is behind the first five stanzas which make up the poem's prologue, and who is heard again much later in the epilogue, maintains a degree of neutrality in his initial description of the setting. This narrator's voice it is, which proffers the metaphor of the stain and compares the poor of Rio to blotches of lichen:

On the fair green hills of Rio
There grows a fearful stain:
The poor who come to Rio [1-3]
[...]
But they cling and spread like lichen,
And the people come and come [13-14]

For reasons that will become clear further down, this central metaphor is echoed only once in stanza 31, focalized on Micuçu. Suffice it to say for the time being that this first narrative voice, alternating gnomic and descriptive uses of the present tense, is strikingly detached from the story proper, whose inception is marked by a sudden time shift ("Micuçu was a burglar and a killer"), by the double blank separating stanzas 5 and 6, and finally by the change of register from plain statement of fact to indictment in lines 21-22: "a burglar and a killer / An enemy of society."

The voice of the prologue, closer to the enunciator of the other poems in the collection, delays our entry into the main narrative in the same way as, later on, the stanzas depicting the landscape and focalized on Micuçu may be seen to introduce descriptive gaps in the action whose linearity they disrupt, as do the numerous repetitions scattered throughout the ballad. It is thus as if Bishop's perspective were being relayed by the burglar's own view of his surroundings, a view surprisingly similar to that of the painter Gregorio Valdes to whom Bishop dedicated a short monograph. The following extract from this text published in Bishop's *Collected Prose*² is revealing not only of Valdes's technique but also of the poet's own stylistic priorities:

His pictures are of uneven quality. They are almost all copies of photographs or of reproductions of other pictures. Usually when he

² Henceforth referred to as *Coll Prose*.

copied from such reproductions he succeeded in nothing more than the worst sort of “calendar” painting, and again when he copied, particularly from a photograph [...] he managed to make just the right changes in perspective and colouring to give it a peculiar and captivating freshness, flatness, an remoteness. [CP 58]

The same primitive aesthetic underpins the writing of stanzas 14-16:

Below him was the ocean.
It reached far up the sky,
Flat as a wall, and on it
Were freighters passing by,

Or climbing the wall, and climbing
Till each looked like a fly,
And then fell over and vanished;
And he knew he was going to die.

He could hear the goats baa-baa-ing,
He could hear the babies cry;
Fluttering kites strained upward;
And he knew he was going to die.

These two stanzas are brought into relief by the recurrent /ai / rhyme which, as if *marginally*, becomes resonant with the first person pronoun precisely at a juncture where Bishop’s predilection for bidimensional surfaces asserts itself—a phenomenon all the more noticeable since in the lines that immediately follow, where the action further unravels with the ominous appearance of the buzzard and of its mechanical counterpart, the helicopter, rhymes are temporarily superseded by mere assonances. In the stanzas quoted just above, the sensation of distance is enhanced by the almost childish simile that reduces the freighters to so many flies, while the landscape is projected on a plane where ocean and sky seem to merge—a process that culminates later on in the text when Micuçu’s pointillist vision finally shrinks the heads of swimmers to “little colored spots.”

As the gap between the doomed Micuçu and the world of the living widens, his vision and the poet’s become more indistinguishable, as may be judged by briefly comparing stanzas 14-15 and the first lines of “Pleasure Seas” [CP 195]:

In the walled off swimming-pool the water is perfectly flat.
The pink Seurat bathers are dipping themselves in and out
Through a pane of bluish glass.

Likewise in stanza 19, where Micuçu is the main focalizer, the policemen on his trail are seen from such a height that they seem both frozen in their advance and reduced in scale. Yet even after Micuçu’s death, when the poem is no longer focalized on the protagonist, they are still referred to as “little soldiers,” as if the burglar’s and the narrator’s perspective had ultimately merged.

Several formal devices bear witness to Bishop’s primitivist choices, notably the ballad form itself, rooted as it is in the folk literature of eighteenth-century Germany and England, but also the epitaph of stanza 24

which creates a slightly comical effect by juxtaposing in the space of three lines matters of Christian faith and considerations of civil status:

They ran and got a priest,
And he died in hope of Heaven
—A man from Pernambuco
The youngest of eleven.

We also notice such hackneyed rhymes as “baskets”/“market,” “near”/“ear” or the odd coupling of “lichen” with “chicken,” vaguely reminiscent of the eponymous character of the children’s story “Chicken-licken.” All these seemingly artless formulations undermine the realism of the narrative and thus implicitly reaffirm the precedence of the poetic over the diegetic.

Bishop’s adoption of a bird’s eye view throughout the ballad creates a miniaturizing effect that may help maintain at a safe distance the tragic component that will be examined further down. The fusion of gazes that seems to thus take place between the Bishopian speaker and the story’s main character also invites us to analyze how looks are made to interrelate in “The Burglar of Babylon.” In connection to this, Lavinia Greenlaw’s statement that Bishop’s interest lies in what the composition “does to the eye” may help us account for a formal feature where the poem’s significance is also at stake. From stanzas 1 to 29, *comparison* is the dominant trope. It first comes up in stanza 2 (“On the hills a million people, / A million sparrows, nest, / Like a confused migration”), then in stanza 8 where anonymous voices foretell: “ ‘He’ll go to his auntie, / Who raised him like a son.’ ” The two following comparisons are focalized on Micuçu, successively in stanzas 14-15 (“Below him was the ocean. / It reached far up the sky, / Flat as a wall, and on it / Were freighters passing by, / Or climbing the wall, and climbing / Till each looked like a fly”) and 29 (“The yellow sun was ugly, / Like a raw egg on a plate—”). In these last two instances the preposition “like” which connects both terms of the comparison operates as a screen between the reader’s and Micuçu’s visions. The distance it creates is therefore analogous to that which separates the rich holding their binoculars from the thief who is being hunted down. In stanza 31, however, the emergence of *metaphor* cancels the distance previously maintained by comparison: “Far, far below, the people / Were little colored spots, / And the heads of those in swimming / Were floating coconuts.” Metaphor thus functions like the aforementioned binoculars: indeed, not only does it produce a connection between heads and coconuts, as unusual, if not laughable, as would be any attempt at fraternization between opposed social classes; it also superimposes two identities with a view to their becoming one and the same. A similar effect may be obtained with a pair of binoculars: if the width between the two telescopes is poorly adjusted, two overlapping circular images appear, until a proper distance is found between the two lenses, and a single image comes into focus.

“Alike, but certain as a stereoscopic view,” Bishop writes in “Cape Breton,” thus opposing the orders of comparison and metaphor (*qua* the stereoscopic coincidence of two signifiers). In “The Burglar of Babylon” we witness a transition from one to the other and simultaneously, a *mise en abyme* of gazes where Micuçu’s view of the landscape below is both similar

to (being stereoscopic) and contained within the gaze of the wealthy citizens of Rio who follow his attempted escape through their binoculars. By way of internal focalization, which makes us see from the character's own angle of vision, the reader's gaze is also captured: Bishop thus reaches her goal of "showing us how to see as she sees," so that, as in the paintings of Gregorio Valdes where pictorial representation is always preceded by a photograph, the reader's vision is superimposed on Micuçu's. Underlying this structure is the dynamics of the drive in which the desiring subject, initially identified with the gaze, seeks out the other's gaze. As Alain Juranville writes in his account of the Lacanian theory of the scopic drive, "this explains how castration is elided: the lost gaze is inseparable from the gaze being constituted, from the 'erection' of the gaze" [Juranville 184]. This erection is manifested in the poem by the double mention in stanzas 26 and 34 of the binoculars which place the story under the sway of a hypertrophied gaze, as well as by the "lighthouse out at sea" (line 108, with a possible pun on the verb *see*) whose alternative motion reminds us that "the drive is involved in the appearance and disappearance of the gaze" [Juranville 184]:

Micuçu hid in the grasses
Or sat in a little tree,
Listening for sound, and staring
At the lighthouse out at sea.
And the lighthouse stared back at him.

To the extent that Micuçu knows that his fate will be sealed in the birth place where a tragic necessity has compelled him to return, the look he casts on the hill of Babylon is imbued with nostalgia, i.e. literally, the 'sickness' of 'return.' As Slavoj Žižek suggests, the fascination of nostalgia does not originate in the spectacle that triggers it in the objective world, but rather in "the gaze of the naive 'other' absorbed, enchanted by it" [Žižek 114]. That this naive other is the burglar of Babylon himself, allows us to better grasp the function of this gaze in connection with the stain mentioned in stanzas 1 and 46, which frame the ballad: this function, I would argue, exactly corresponds to what Žižek calls the "blot." Indeed, following the critic's reading of Lacan's *Seminar XI* there is "the irreducible discord between the gaze *qua* object and the subject's eye. Far from being the point of self-sufficient self-mirroring, the gaze *qua* object functions like a blot that blurs the transparency of the viewed image. I can never see properly, can never include in the totality of my field of vision, the point in the other from which it gazes back at me"³ [Žižek 114]. The role of the nostalgic gaze-*qua*-object is thus to veil this eye-gaze dichotomy, in other words, the traumatic impact of the scopic object:

In nostalgia, the gaze of the other is in a way domesticated, "gentrified." Instead of the gaze erupting like a traumatic, disharmonious blot, we have the illusion of "seeing ourselves seeing," of seeing the gaze itself. In a way, we could say that the function of fascination is precisely to blind us to the fact that the other is already gazing at us. [Žižek 114]

In "The Burglar of Babylon" that other already gazing at us is reduced to the original *stain* in its collusion with the gaze, a collusion readable in the pun

³ All translations from Lacan are mine.

on the signifier “spot” in lines 72 (“But they never spotted him”) and 122 (“Far, far below, the people / Were little colored spots”). In this logic, designating the primal stain as the metaphor of the poor who flock on the hills of Rio is a way of euphemizing “the function of the stain [as] identified to that of the gaze [...] which surrounds us and primarily defines us as being gazed at, but without our being made aware of it” [Lacan 71]. This absolute anteriority of the gaze is indeed conveyed by the first line of stanzas 40 and 41 (“We have always been respected”) by way of the Latin etymology of the verb *respect*, meaning *look behind* or *direct one’s eyes towards something*. This also explains why the narrator’s only historical incursion connects a gaze to the origins of the city of Rio: “They used to watch for Frenchmen / From the hill of Babylon.”

“There are never two gazes, but only a gaze and an eye, and more specifically an eye that becomes a gaze and seeks out the other’s gaze [...] and which, as soon as this other gaze appears, is deposed as gaze”⁴ [Juranville 184]. To the extent that Micuçu’s nostalgic gaze exerts its fascination on the reader, it is likewise the reader’s own gaze that is thus “deposed”—a gesture the text summons him to perform, as the imperative contained in the italicized onomatopœia of lines 125-26 implies: “He heard the peanut vendor / Go *peep-peep* on his whistle.” That the visual sense of the signifier *peep* is latent here is further corroborated by the mention of the “watchman’s rattle” which once again reverberates with scopic undertones.

What causes the spot or stain on the hill of Babylon—a name that conjures up the monarchs who desecrated the temple of Jerusalem—is thus perhaps also that by making the reader’s gaze coincide with the protagonist’s, the ballad traps him in a perverse configuration: “The coincidence of the subject’s view with the gaze of the big Other [...] defines perversion” [Zizek 108]. Micuçu being the very locus of this coincidence, the pursuit and execution scenario in which he is caught might lend itself to a Girardian reading where the superimposition of gazes would become interpretable in terms of mimetic desire, and the death of this operetta thief—desired both by the police and the “populace,” as the paronomasia of line 153 suggests— would place him as *pharmakos* at the centre of an emissary mechanism.

By focussing instead on the role of the gaze as object of the scopic drive, however, we are led to question the subject’s relationship to the death drive as the fundamental form of all other drives [Juranville 186] in which the tragic hero is seen to acquiesce [Lacan *Seminar VII*], and which is staged in Bishop’s own avatar of the ballad. Indeed one of the thematic constants of the genre is a character’s encounter with his destiny—or with his final destination, since while to the poor the city of Rio is a place of adoption from which they cannot escape, symmetrically the hill of Babylon where Micuçu was raised by his aunt (acting as a mother substitute) is a space from which he breaks away but where he must ultimately return. Following the suppletive logic whereby Micuçu’s aunt is made to stand for his mother, the hill of Babylon, with the transgressive connotations its name carries, is substituted for what Freud in *The Uncanny* called “the place to which

⁴ All translations from Juranville are mine.

everyone dwelt once upon a time and in the beginning" [Freud 51], the mother's body as the ultimate target of nostalgic longing. Insofar as it refers to the archaic time of fusional enjoyment preceding the utterance of symbolic law, the mythical time of a subject's encounter with the primordial Thing, the tropism exerted by the hill of Babylon on its inhabitants is proportional to the mortiferous potential inscribed like fate in its toponymy: indeed, not only is "Babylon" also reminiscent of the deportation of the Jews in the fifth century B.C., here paralleled with the migration of the poor toward Rio, but the names of all the other surrounding hills seem loaded with ominous associations: the signifiers "Catacomb" and "Skeleton" foretell the burglar's imminent death; "Astonishment" precludes to the police officer's accidental death in stanza 21; "Kerosene" likewise does not simply carry the seme of combustion which may be associated with the sunrise that seals Micuçu's fate in stanza 29: its last syllable also bears witness to the burglar's passive status as a *seen* object, exposed to the onlookers' *Schaulust*. Finally I have pointed out how the name of the one hill called "the chicken" is the signature of Bishop's naive aesthetic and thus encapsulates the poem's destiny as a verbal artifact inspired by Gregorio Valdes's primitivism.

While prudence dictates careful avoidance of the hill of Babylon where his pursuants will most likely look for him, Micuçu nonetheless decides to take refuge there, in the name of a motivation briefly hinted at in the poem's tenth stanza where we witness a temporal contraction analogous to the reduction of visual space made possible by binoculars:

Ninety years they gave me.
Who wants to live that long?
I'll settle for ninety hours,
On the hill of Babylon.

The protagonist thus rejects what Lacan calls "pleasure as the law of what happens on this side of the apparatus to which we are drawn by the terrible aspiring center of desire" [Lacan 1986, 288] or in a more straightforward formulation, "the service of goods" [Lacan 1986, 357], i.e. the fundamental law of *primum vivere*. Instead, Micuçu chooses to embrace *jouissance* as that surplus enjoyment which cannot be quantified within the economy of pleasure. Lacan's "aspiring center" is here metaphorized by the hill of Babylon as the locus circumvented by the death drive to which Micuçu yields, thereby gaining the dignity of the tragic hero who accedes to "pure desire though the assumption of his being-for-death" [Julien 112 (Trans. mine)]. This assumption hammered by the spondee at the close of stanza 11 (" 'You were good to me, and I love you, / But I'm a doomed man' ") is also attested by stanzas 12 and 17, marked by the brief appearance of two creatures Micuçu addresses, and with whom he acknowledges a kinship directly connected with the way in which they both reflect his own mortality—the woman, via the comparison which assimilates her to the corpse Micuçu himself is about to become (" 'If you say you saw me, daughter, / You're as good as dead' "); the scavenger, because he is destined to feed on Micuçu's dead body ("A buzzard flapped so near him / He could see its naked neck. / He waved his arms and shouted, / 'Not yet, my son, not yet.' ")

The omens perceived twice (in stanzas 16 and 19) by the protagonist function like the cards in the story of *Carmen* which, according to Žižek, are fragments of the real to which the tragic character's death drive clings. First an object of fascination and a symptom of the social gangrene denounced by the ballad's first stanza, the burglar of Babylon is subjectivized by unreservedly acquiescing to the death drive. This, I would argue, helps us account for the character's demotion from the hyperbole of evil in stanza 6 ("Micuçu was a burglar and killer, / An enemy of society") to the quasi anonymity of a poor among the poor in stanza 45 ("the poor Micuçu"). While at the outset the burglar of Babylon exists as an object of fascination and dread due to his role in the fantasy space where he is confined [Žižek 64], Bishop's poetic narrative follows the stages of his progressive breakout from this imaginary enclosure.

Thus, in keeping with the awe-inspiring titles bequeathed on the character in stanza 6, a footnote specifies that the name "Micuçu" designates a poisonous snake, a feature which is actually brought to our attention in stanza 27, where the thief perched in his tree evokes the snake of *Genesis*. Armed with a "Taurus" revolver which metonymically confers upon him the taurine potency already sometimes associated with ophidian imagery, given additional prestige by the alliterative title of the ballad which prompts the reader to anticipate some tale of wonder in the manner of "The Thief of Baghdad," associated with "Babylon," both the city of Nebuchadnezzar and the great whore of the book of *Revelation*, in any case the epitome of excess, Micuçu first appears to us bedecked with "a whole fan of inconsistent hysterical masks" [Žižek 65].

But in the same way as "Babylon" is only a borrowed appellation, the quasi-mythical identification of the burglar by the same name soon comes apart: as much as the snake of original sin, Micuçu hiding in the grass brings to mind the more innocuous fauvist version of the reptile under the brush of Douanier Rousseau. His offspring, namely the buzzard and the young girl previously referred to, is metaphorical at best. The count of his attempted escapes from jail is hardly to his benefit ("He had escaped three times, [...] He got caught six times—or more," lines 23 and 172), and no one knows for sure how many murders he has committed, if any ("They don't know how many he murdered"). Finally, although he wounds two police officers in stanza 7, the only one who does lose his life actually dies under friendly fire. To a large extent, therefore, the criminal reputation of the burglar of Babylon appears as no less than the result of a hystericization which primarily affects his pursuants:

He hit him in three places;
The other shots went wild.
The soldiers had hysterics
And sobbed like a little child.

Micuçu is thus primarily a semblance substituted for the vacancy which the original stain covers, and whose collapse is concomitant to that of the signifier which defines him as a thief in the words of the *cachaça* drinker in stanza 43: "He wasn't much of a burglar." By stepping into that zone explored by the tragic hero which Lacan calls "in-between-two-deaths," Micuçu removes the mask placed upon him by the community, ceases to be

a symptom, and carries out an attempt at radical self-annihilation aiming at a second death, beyond physical destruction, because it implies erasing the symbolic texture of generation and corruption [Zizek 63-64]: indeed, as we have seen, Micuçu has no descendance and gives up all hope of a sepulture by relinquishing his own body to the buzzards. If not terror, this triggers at least panic (“And one of them, in a panic, / Shot the officer in command”) and pity, as suggested by the ambiguous syntax of the definite article in stanza 45, which closes the narrative on a note of pathos: “As the poor Micuçu.”

To the extent that “through pity and fear we are purged, purified of everything having to do with the imaginary, [and] we are purged by way of an image” [Lacan 1986, 290] we understand how the narrative—hence imaginary—ingredient of the ballad is particularly apt to integrate the tragic and thus possibly makes up for the poetic hybridity of the ballad form. Which is no way of implying that the specifically poetic resources of the ballad do not carry residual traces of the workings of the death drive that its diegesis illuminates. Indeed the connection drawn by Freud between repetition compulsion and the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is not only manifested by the fact that a story similar to Micuçu’s is about to be reiterated in stanzas 44 and 45,⁵ as indeed the very first rhyme of the ballad (“stain”/“again”) suggested was bound to happen. It is also programmed by that formal constant of the ballad which is the refrain. Under this category we may not only rank the recurring syntagm “the hill of Babylon,” heard in the fourth line of stanzas 5, 8, 10, 13, 25, 28, 38, and 47, but also stanzas 1 and 6⁶ whose repetition in the epilogue not only creates a mirror effect, but through the ellipsis of stanzas 2 to 4, carves out a void which is the literal counterpart of the protagonist’s death, and which is redoubled by the ballad’s most spectacular prosodic feature. For while “the pattern widely known as the ballad stanza is an abcb quatrain in which four-stress and three-stress lines alternate” [Bold 21], Bishop’s version is slightly truncated: it does not alternate trimeters and tetrameters, a deficit interpretable along the same lines as the ellipsis I have just alluded to.

I suggested earlier on that the stanzas focalized on Micuçu’s gaze bring the narrative to a halt: the same is true of the chiasmatic structure which situates his flight in-between two cries, as it were, namely, in stanzas 16 and 37, the lines “He could hear the goats *baa-baa-ing*” and the following quatrain:

He heard the babies crying
Far, far away in his head,
And the mongrels barking and barking.
Then Micuçu was dead.

⁵ “This morning the little soldiers / Are on Babylon hill again; / Their gun barrels and helmets / Shine in a gentle rain. / Micuçu is buried already. / They’re after another two, / But they say they aren’t as dangerous / As the poor Micuçu.”

⁶ “On the fair green hills of Rio / There grows a fearful stain: / The poor who come to Rio / And can’t go home again. [...] Micuçu was a burglar and killer, / An enemy of society. He had escaped three times / From the worst penitentiary.”[...] But they cling and spread like lichen, / And the people come and come” [1-3, 13-14].

The children's and the animals' cries draw two successive limits—an inner limit: the cries of the baby that mark a subject's entry into the dialectics of demand, the stage prior to desire; and an outer limit, which is also the limit of poeticity: the meaningless "baa-baa-ing" of the goats, inscribed in that *liminal* space which is the rhyme of stanza 16. As for the protagonist's death, it occurs immediately beyond those two limits, in line 148, thus testifying to the tragic hero's final crossing into the a-symbolic realm of the Freudian Thing, a locus outlined by the screams heard in the lines just quoted as is the cry of the mad mother that opens up an initial breach in the verbal network of Bishop's short story "In the Village" [CP 251].

Like the animals whose repeated cries mirror the circular trajectory of the drives only seeking their own reiteration, the text walks the edge of meaning through the various repetition effects I have indicated, and affords us a glimpse of what lies beyond through the discordant bleating of the goats, imperfectly domesticated by the -ing form, which points towards the possibility of the endless, mechanical return of phonemes—a possibility that haunts the very title of the poem where, behind "Babylon," we also hear *babble on*.

Like the houses described in the third stanza ("Building its nests or houses, / Out of nothing at all, or air") Bishop's ballad is also built on a void: evoking the last hours of a burglar who falls short of being a real criminal, it registers, through the gaps scattered throughout its diegesis as well as through the deficits in its literal make-up, "the presence of a hollow, a vacuum that may be occupied [...] by any object" [Lacan 1973, 162], a hollow metaphorized by those "light cracks in the floor" [80] that the drinkers try to stop and over which the gaze "as symbol of lack" [Lacan 1973, 95] is superimposed.

This indeed is not the only manifestation of lack in a poem which is often found to be wanting whenever we try to pin it down, be it through the epithet "tragic"—somewhat tempered by the comical death of the police officer; by applying the generic designation "epitaph" to stanza 24; by calling a eulogy the rather atypical funeral speech uttered by the customers of the bar in-between two gulps of *cachaça*; and finally by labelling as 'a ballad' a poem rife with descriptive detail whereas, according to the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* in most ballads "little attention is given to describing settings; indeed circumstantial detail of every sort is conspicuously absent" [*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* 62].

Perhaps, however, this partial inadequacy stems from Bishop's chosen model in "The Burglar of Babylon," which is a mediated version of the traditional ballad, much as Gregorio Valdes's paintings too were based on preexisting photographic material. Indeed, less than the stories of outlaws which, being the stock-in-trade of many ballads according to Jerome Mazzaro [Mazzaro 188], might have induced Bishop to opt for this form, it is rather the theme of the primal stain which justifies a parallel between Bishop, who called herself a "minor female Wordsworth" [Bishop 1994, 222], and her romantic forebear. For it is not simply Wordsworth's interest in the uncouth poetry of epitaphs that is mirrored in Bishop's ballad: his presence is also more keenly perceptible if we compare the syntax of the incipit of "The Thorn" [Wordsworth 70]:

There is a thorn; it looks so old
In truth you'd find it hard to say,
How it could ever have been young,
It looks so old and grey

and the third stanza of "The Burglar of Babylon,"

You'd think a breath would end them,
They perch so lightly there.

In both instances the reader is not merely called upon to verify the truthfulness of the hyperbole; more importantly the term chosen by Bishop to metaphorize the stain is "lichen" (at the end of line 13). Likewise in "The Thorn" our attention is drawn twice to the same overgrowth that covers the thorn, and thus metaphorically the unnamable reality of Martha Ray's dead infant, i.e., the stain of the mother's guilt.

As to justifying the label "lyrical ballad" with respect to "The Burglar of Babylon," it is a more risky exercise, although it has the merit of raising the issue of the place of the poetic subject, with which I would like to conclude this analysis where I have concentrated so far on the diegetic implications of the process of subjectivation. If we follow Don Bialostosky's criterion in his discussion of the 1815 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, the epithet "lyrical" ought to be discarded straightaway, since the definitory feature of lyrical ballads is that poetry does not satisfy itself with representing actions, but the linguistic *medium* through which those are represented [Bialostosky 15]. True, even if we note a slight discrepancy between the ill-defined temporal framework where the voice of the prologue is heard and the present tense used by the speaker of stanzas 6 to 45, on an equal footing with the events narrated, both voices remain fairly similar, if not identical. Besides, while, according to Käte Hamburger, the presence of a refrain is a hallmark of lyrical poetry, that of characters who originate their own utterances is much closer to epic mimesis. If we are dealing here with a poem where "a narrative fictionalizing agency is about to be substituted for the lyrical I" [Hamburger 237 (Trans. mine)], perhaps the specific lyricism of the ballad under scrutiny lies essentially in the mechanism evoked by David Jarraway concerning Bishop's early poetry: "writing calls attention to the performative presence of the self even in gestures of its own dissolution or self-effacement" [255]. Chief among these gestures is the partial eclipse of the lyrical subject and its assumption of a narrative persona that includes it in a borrowed community—a feature which, not to mention the poet's own indifference to the matter,⁷ might be connected to the ambiguity perceived by certain critics as to Bishop's nationality,⁸ and possibly also to the

⁷ "Actually I feel rather countryless," Bishop told Jim Bross in 1976 [Monteiro 60].

⁸ "I didn't even know if Elizabeth was American or not; I wasn't quite clear because she spoke so much about Nova Scotia. I had the feeling that she didn't feel at home in this country somehow [...] she was more Canadian and more English than she was American" [Joseph Frank, quoted in Jarraway, 255]. "In much of Bishop's writing the importance of place resides in a world elsewhere: in works composed in Key West, it lies 'with the village pieties and simplicities that recalled Nova Scotia;' in works composed in Brazil, with the 'Nova Scotia childhood' [that Brazil] helped her recapitulate and reclaim" [David Kalstone, quoted in Jarraway, 245]. Jarraway reads Bishop's way of constantly slipping between cultures as an attempt to posit a lesbian identity founded on the lack of reference to the phallic signifier, on the lack of anchorage and on geographical drift. Following this logic, Micucu's tragic destiny

phenomenon pointed out by David Jarraway adopting the perspective of gender studies: “she purposes to turn a blind eye to universalist (i.e. natural, normal) notions of selfhood, constructing in their place hypothetical (i.e., synthetic, artificial) versions, whose endlessly rhetorical prospect makes true selfhood—even a genuine lesbian selfhood—unattainable, hence spectral” [Jarraway 251].

In the light of this last suggestion I would like to come back on a seemingly—and perhaps meaningfully—*peripheral* feature, namely the rhyme of stanza 34:

The rich with their binoculars
Were back again, and many
Were standing on the rooftops,
Among TV antennae.

In her 1969 piece on Marianne Moore, Bishop specifically refers to the “many” / “antennae” rhyme in the following terms: “Once, I found [Marianne Moore] consulting a large rhyming dictionary and she said, yes, it was ‘indispensable,’ and I myself was congratulated on having rhymed ‘antennae’ with ‘many’” [CP 139]. It is perhaps no accident if two pages further down, Bishop is led to mention how upon reading Marianne Moore’s “Four Quartz Crystal Clocks” she caught her mentor in the flagrant act of borrowing a phrase that had occurred to the young poet as she watched a porter carry her bags to a friend’s apartment. After thus reclaiming her literary property three years before Marianne Moore’s death, Bishop magnanimously concludes: “I am sometimes appalled to think how much I may have unconsciously stolen from her. Perhaps we are all magpies” [CP 141]. While it is hard to assess the extent of Marianne Moore’s possible contribution to “The Burglar of Babylon,” it is interesting to bear in mind Anne Ferry’s recent emphasis on Moore’s decisive influence on the modernist aesthetic, precisely through her unorthodox handling of rhyme which, according to Ferry, explains Bishop’s pride during the conversation just hinted at. The critic points out that “Moore congratulated her for the (Moore-ish) rhyme ‘antennae’ with ‘many’ [...]. Auden admitted to having ‘stolen a great deal’ from Moore” [CP 441].

Tempting as it might seem to compare Marianne Moore’s iconoclastic treatment of rhyme with the king of Babylon profaning the gold and silver plate of the Jerusalem temple,⁹ it might thus be more legitimate to rank the author of *Questions of Travel* herself in her own “Moore-ish” experiments with rhyme next to Auden among Marianne Moore’s debtors. This would be one more reason to assimilate to the burglar of Babylon the self-avowed “magpie” Elizabeth Bishop, already guilty of having purloined from Wordsworth’s poetic arsenal the slightly obsolete form of the ballad. This would help us account for the hypogrammatic inscription of the first person pronoun “me” among the phonemes that make up the name of the burglar Micuçu, combining in true Bishopian fashion the strangeness of a name imported from the Portuguese and the proximity of a personal pronoun

connected to his desire to return to the point of origin, would be incompatible with the liability of lesbian selfhood.

⁹ That Bishop was familiar with this Biblical reference is borne out by the mention of Nebuchadnezzar in her short story “In the Village” [CP 252].

whose ghostly presence I pointed out earlier on in the /ai/ rhymes and assonances of stanzas 14 to 16.

This would also explain why the very first time that rhyme is replaced by a plain consonance in /m/ (in stanza 4) our attention is drawn to the two letters which cause it to falter, namely the *e* of "come" and the *b* of "catacomb," two graphemes situated in the borderline space where, as I have just indicated, the question of filiation emerges. Thus the burglar of Babylon, whose story still remains to be told at this juncture, already haunts the margins of the ballad under the ghost-like figure of an unexpected partner in crime who leaves behind her initials: e(lizabeth) b(ishop).

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