

Second Attempt

Miguel Tamen

Abstract. In his well-known, and often very loose, paraphrase of Psalm 137, Camões suggests that he has “hung on the willow trees / The organs with which I had sung” (ll.54-55). This looks *prima facie* false, since he has already produced at least 53 lines after that event, and will go on to produce many more, to the total of 365. What is the status of a poetic composition that purports to escape the pitfalls of poetry, and, more to the point, what is the use of poetry if not that of perpetuating itself through elaborate excuses for its own emergence?

Luís de Camões’s paraphrase of Psalm 137 (or 136), “*Super flumina Babylonis*,” known in Portuguese as “*Sobre os rios*” or “*Sóbolos rios*,”¹ is a wonderful and deceptively well-known poem,² and so the kind of poem that prompts initial caveats, or at least a few promises. Here are my own: to the relief of most readers, I will not talk about Psalm 137; nor will I discuss the two versions of the title of the poem; thirdly, I will not interfere in the ongoing discussion about the date of the poem; fourthly, with one passing exception, I will not address the relatively intricate textual history of the poem;³ and, fifthly, most importantly, I will not draw any mileage from the fact that the poem, as published after 1595, has 365 lines, nor will I indulge in any numerological expeditions.

Several commentators have remarked, correctly in my view, that there is a crucial shift in tone around line 201 of the poem. The shift corresponds to the end of the manuscript version of 1578, in the *Cancioneiro de Cristóvão*

Borges. Talking about shifts in tone is often talking about not very palpable entities. Not so here: in the history of “Sobre os rios,” this shift in tone means that whereas up to line 200 you would tend to use as explanatory and descriptive tools general references to the Bible and to Orphic myths, after line 200 you normally switch toolboxes and tend to resort to less vague heavy artillery such as Plato and Augustine (and even, to believe one critic, the pseudo-Jerome). Both tool-sets prove useful when it comes to characterize Camões’s opinions both about his own poetry and his poem. And, more to the point, they were used by Camões himself to describe at least two incompatible doctrines about poetry.

No characterization of such doctrines, however cursory, would do without previously underscoring their connection with the conspicuous dualistic organisation of the poem. More than the nevertheless extensive references to Babel and Zion, what the Psalmist has given Camões was a compositional device whereby for every P there is a not-P lurking somewhere. The oppositions between heaven and earth, memory and reminiscence, and even between two kinds of poetry clearly belong here, not of course to the psalm but to the form the poem shares with the psalm. The device is so extensively used that minimal amounts of interpretive effort are required to come up with a general description of the poem—which explains not really why so many exegeses have been produced thereon as why they all resemble each other so much.

In the poem, the technical term for such a compositional device is ‘simile’ [‘comparação’]. The poem starts amidst the display of an impressive profusion of watery fluids. Shortly thereafter, however, some order is imposed:

Sobre os rios que vão
 por Babilónia m’achei,
 onde sentado chorei
 as lembranças de Sião
 e quanto nela passei.
 Ali o rio corrente
 de meus olhos foi manado,
 e tudo bem comparado:
 Babilónia ao mal presente,
 Sião ao tempo passado. (1-10)⁴

The first stanza of the poem contains a short, but nevertheless surprising, narrative, which could be paraphrased as follows: I sit by the rivers of Babylon, I cry over my memories of Zion, tears spring from my eyes, and everything falls into place, that is, literally “everything was properly compared” (8). What is surprising is of course that the tearful poet finds in himself the strength to indulge in notoriously unsentimental tasks such as simile-making. The outcome of this first operation is the great meta-interpretive description of the poem, that no commentator has failed to notice: “Babylon to present woe / Zion to time past” (9-10). So if one were to summarize this little story, forgetting for a moment all about the impressive waterworks, one would come up with something as simple (and as surprising) as: the poet sits down by the rivers of Babylon and proceeds into explaining what it all means. This is sometimes called *allegoresis*. Terminological quibbles aside, one should remark that *allegoresis* is a very important energy-saving device, since the readers, from now on, will not be required to agonize over the meaning of any particular passage in the poem. The only thing they will have to do is to connect every problematic term with either Babel or Zion, and restate, however artfully, the dualistic structure so clearly indicated at the beginning of the poem.

I can now return to the incompatible theories about poetry that I mentioned earlier. The first theory is expounded in the context of a very long apostrophe to music (to be understood as *mousikē*, or the art of the Muses), that extends from lines 58 through 115. The apostrophe is a farewell to music, an important feature to which I will have to amply return below. Three lines into the apostrophe, “beloved music” (58) becomes “my flute” (61), and one is offered a description of the effects of flute-playing, the activity proper that is being deliberately forsaken:

Frauta minha que, tangendo,
os montes fazíeis vir
para onde estáveis, correndo;
e as águas, que iam decendo,
tornavam logo a subir.
Jamais vos não ouvirão
os tigres que se amansavam;
e as ovelhas, que pastavam,
das ervas se fartarão
que por vos ouvir, deixavam. (61-70)⁵

Along the lines of the description above, the musical activity performed with the help of a flute has effects that counter both the laws of physics (mountains run, waters change course) and some widely shared assumptions as to the natural dispositions of animals (tigers become tame, and sheep forget to graze and leave everything behind). One could of course resort to one's Orphic toolbox here, but that is not even required by my argument. It is enough to remark that flute-playing and thus poetry *lato sensu* makes things happen—the sorts of things that no assumptions about what can *plausibly* happen can encompass.

The second doctrine comes up much later in the poem. Instead of the flute one has a “lyre holy and capable / of higher forms of invention” (267-8). And instead of descriptions of effects, one has clear poetic prescriptions: “Let this confusion be silenc'd / The vision of peace be sung” (269-70). Of course, the prescriptions contain implicit descriptions of the *first* doctrine. Non-grazing sheep and moving mountains are not visions of peace, and there is an important sense in which tigers lying down with lambs are confused descriptions, or descriptions of a change in the natural order of things. Accordingly, within doctrine number two nothing physical ought to follow from poetry. It is in this sense that, as Auden once memorably remarked, “poetry makes nothing happen.”

So far, so good. Even if deep down in our physicalist hearts we all more or less agree that the second doctrine is true (all of us in the profession more or less carry the scars of our previous attempts at brandishing sonnets at reluctant tigers), the fable could therefore go as follows: whereas in my happy days in Jerusalem I could afford to indulge in paradox, a poet *in dürftiger Zeit* has other duties. Babel, so to speak, requires poetic order, whereas Zion can tolerate at least a certain amount of physical nonsense. This is therefore a fable about *why* there was a change in doctrine. One should never underestimate the charms of chiasmus (disorderly Babel requiring poetic order vs. orderly Zion dispensing with that same order), but of course one is merely reiterating the interpretive schema laid down at the beginning of the poem. No interpretation that succumbs to this dizzying array of contraries will ever be our own, for the simple reason that Camões had already anticipated it.

A different question, however, is that of knowing or describing *how* this major change was effected. Here again, the poem provides a special term that one should examine more closely. Almost immediately after the description of the second doctrine, Camões provides a new apostrophe, this time directed at shepherds and kings:

Ouçá-me o pastor e o rei,
 retumbe este acento santo,
 mova-se no mundo espanto,
 que do que já mal cantei
 a palinódia já canto. (271-5)⁶

This passage depends on a crucial distinction between the use of two verbal tenses: the perfect of “cantei” [“have sung”] and the present of “canto” [“sing”].⁷ “Palinode” is therefore a description of what I do now, which itself requires a description (and a negative evaluation) of what I have done in the past. The poem appears to be in its own terms a palinode, which seems to mean an act of atonement for past poems.

Even if the term *per se* is only introduced here, there are several and well-known images in the earlier part of the poem that appear to denote this kind of change. In lines 54-55, Camões suggests that he has “hung on the willow trees / The organs with which I had sung.”⁸ As we have seen, these organs are basically a flute. The passage is developed in lines 251-5 as

Fique logo pendurada
 a frauta com que tangi,
 ó Hierusalém sagrada,
 e tome a lira dourada
 para só cantar de ti! (251-5)⁹

One could be tempted to collapse the two passages, since after all they appear to instantiate the same emblem, whereby the end of a certain kind of poetry is assimilated with the ritual deposition of one’s poetic tools. This was after all what the Psalmist said about surrender, in the second verse of Psalm 137.¹⁰

In this second passage, nevertheless, the temporal structure is completely different: the taking up of the lyre is described as a *future* event, and the surrendering of the flute is rather a *present* event. Since, at least according to doctrine number two, nothing follows from poems, it would be totally inaccurate to describe this present event as some kind of performative. There are no ways for us to be sure of whether any act has actually taken place. This is not the proper time for me to vent my hostility towards literary glosses of speech-act theories. The fact remains that the description of the taking up of the lyre can only be made in flute-terms, as it were, and so of course the language of

palinode is inevitably the language one is trying to get rid of. The claim being made in the *earlier* passage is therefore *prima facie* false: nothing has been hung anywhere, except perhaps doctrine number two. A reverse effect, and a very puzzling one, is meanwhile the verb choice for the description of the flute playing, what I have uninspiredly rendered as “to play.” The Portuguese verb “tanger,” literally “to touch,” refers mainly to the playing of *string* instruments. Only very metaphorically is a flute ever “tangida.” Unless, of course, the flute is already a lyre.¹¹ If so, the taking up of the lyre in flute-terms is the sort of fable that can only be construed in lyre-terms. Again, this time, nothing is *being* hung anywhere—except perhaps doctrine number one.

To some, these questions might resemble a less talented version of the kind of waterworks the poem so adroitly displays elsewhere. And yet they point to a problem that I hope even the most ill-disposed reader might understand: is this the kind of poem one would write in Jerusalem (according to doctrines one *and* two) or, instead, is this yet another example of what Camões calls, in line 45, “confusão de Babel,” “Babel-like confusion” or babble? In other words, was the palinode successful, is the poem any good *on its own terms*, was Camões’s second attempt worthwhile? Put this way, of course, there is no clear answer. I do happen to believe nevertheless that there is an answer, and so I propose we leave the question unanswered for the time being, and try to change the description of our problem.

Changing a description means, of course, changing toolboxes again. The second part of the poem, immediately after line 200, starts out in a somewhat clumsy way, with a theological objection, followed by the answer, for which we had not been prepared before anywhere in the poem.

Mas ó tu, terra de Glória,
se eu nunca vi tua essência,
como me lembras na ausência?
Não me lembras na memória,
Senão na reminiscência. (201-5)¹²

Every student of theology would recognize here the answer to a predicament whose Christian form was first made famous by Augustine: “If I find Thee without memory, then am I un-’ mindful of Thee. And how now shall I find Thee, if I do not remember Thee?” (*Confessions*, 10:17, § 26).¹³ Given the fallenness of human beings, and the passage of time, how is one expected

to remember a place where one has never been, or an entity that has never come across one's senses? Augustine's answer consists of course in suggesting that whereas memory is the power of recalling empirical facts, that is, of justifying descriptions of facts to which I was present, memory per se is not enough. It is therefore necessary to "*transire memoriam*," to "pass beyond memory" (idem) into a realm where one remembers things one does not even remember having forgotten (idem, 10:20, §29).¹⁴ Rest assured, I will not dwell any further on the analogy (as well as on the substantial differences) between the Platonic realm of Ideas and Augustine's Heavenly Jerusalem. What interests me is what comes next in the poem:

Que a alma é tábuas rasa
que, com a escrita doutrina
celeste, tanto imagina
que voa da própria casa,
e sobe à pátria divina. (206-10)¹⁵

What comes next is a doctrine of the soul, now loosely Aristotelian, whereby the soul is described as a *tabula rasa*, a clean slate.¹⁶ The ascending movement towards Jerusalem is therefore predicated on a feature of the soul. There are some momentous features to this explanation of ascent: the "doctrine writ celestial" ignites the imagination and propels the soul upward and homeward. This is moreover an answer to a question we had seemingly left behind a while ago, namely the question of knowing *how* is palinode at all possible. Palinode is possible, the poem appears to tell us, because the soul is infinitely writeable. The *tabula rasa* feature of the soul, one could say, is what allows for ever more perfect second attempts. For the poet, this means that he can plausibly hope, as Camões puts it in lines 264-5, that "Cancelled out be all I've done / From the great book of the living."¹⁷ No failed attempt is ever final, and, more to the point, no trace of one's previous misadventures can remain after successful take off.

Or can it? The detail of the text is again important for this precision. And what is explicitly said therein is that the flight so described takes place through and within the imagination. This is a crucial swerve from Plato's, Aristotle's, and Augustine's distinctions, that nevertheless Camões appears to quote. The fable is now substantially different from those of any of his philosophical precursors: old empty soul, prey to certain images conveyed by holy writ, flies

away from home and eventually *imagines* heaven. Thus says, at the very end of the poem, a final apostrophe to “divino aposento,” “divine abode” (356):

Ó tu, divino aposento,
 minha pátria singular!
 Se só com te imaginar
 tanto sobe o entendimento,
 que fará se em ti se achar? (356-60)¹⁸

What, indeed. Not much, possibly, but *surely* not poetry. The passage depends crucially again on two verbs, denoting two opposed actions affecting the understanding (also in the sense of ‘intellect’): “imaginar” (“to imagine”) and “achar-se” (“to be there,” or “to find oneself there”). Alas, for the understanding to come home (or, as Camões puts it a little earlier, using his own Platonic toolbox, for “understanding to pass / On to the intelligible world,” 344-5), the understanding person has to be dead, even if death is itself described, as in the last line of the poem, as “eternal rest” (365). And, of course, as long as one is writing poems, whether flute-propped or lyre-propped, one still remains uncontroversially alive. So poems can be at most *prospective* descriptions of a future world, which is to say, always, at best, acts of the imagination. Describing moving mountains or heavenly details is always describing acts of the imagination. We must consequently somewhat bid farewell to our laborious distinction between doctrine one and doctrine two.

There is thus something that remains permanently unchanged, regardless of the fact that one, say, a poet, is empirically located in Babel or Jerusalem. No amount of lyre-playing will give one eternal rest—which is after all a way of saying that all edifying poetry out of one’s Augustinian toolbox is undistinguishable from all non-edifying poetry out of one’s diffuse Orphic toolbox. The poem therefore, provides a negative, if contradictory, answer to the question we left suspended a few minutes ago: all poems are babble, and no amount of poetry will ever *clarify* poetry, let alone redeem one from poetry (compare with ‘no attempt to purify language will ever redeem one from language’). The only conceptually relevant difference would be at most one between Babel *and* Jerusalem, on the one hand, and *heavenly* Jerusalem, on the other. The *description* of that difference, whether poetic or theological, nevertheless, is always nonsensical babble, however well intentioned. Not by chance commenting on Psalm 137, Augustine remarks that in this sense all

human language comes down as "... a strange tongue, a barbarous tongue, which we have learnt in our captivity" (*Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 137, §9).

This appears to give a completely different sense to palinode-talk and indeed to 'second attempt.' It also forces us into a far more complex understanding of 'understanding.' It is relatively easy to see why 'palinode' now means something completely unlike atonement. In fact, if poetry can bring no redemption, atonement is at most the expression of a wish,¹⁹ and atonement through language always ends up by deplorably producing more of the poetry one was trying to evacuate in the first place. If palinode, therefore, is a general description of the self-perpetuation of poetry, then poetry cannot under that description be said to achieve any kind of cognitive insight, nor can the poet be said to understand anything proper. "That which we value the most," Camões had already written very early in the poem, "Is thus better understood / As more completely lost" (32-4). This is perhaps good advice for poets, but an even better, and more sardonic, remark on how our own descriptions of poetry, no matter how dithyrambic and well-meaning, are always bound to counter not only Augustine's dark verdict on language as this poem's even darker verdict on poetry.

Notes

¹ I use the text as published by Maria de Lourdes Saraiva in Luís de Camões, *Lírica Completa* (Lisbon: IN/CM, 1980) 1: 273-88. All translations mine. Occasionally, Keith Bosley's elegant but inaccurate translation, was used as a starting point. L. C. Taylor, ed., *Camões: Epic and Lyric* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990) 76-81. I have always tried to render the literal form of the poem and, when at all possible, the word order itself.

² For a sample of the literature available see Manuel Augusto Rodrigues, "'Sobolos rios que vão' à luz da exegese bíblica moderna," *Arquivos do Centro Cultural Português*, 16 (Paris: Gulbenkian, 1981) 387-425.

³ The best synopsis of these three topics can be found in Arthur Lee-Francis Askins, ed., *The Cancioneiro de Cristóvão Borges* (Braga: Barbosa Xavier, 1979) 207-27.

⁴ "Beside the rivers that stream / Through Babylon I found myself / Where sitting down I have cried / My recollection of Zion / And what therein I have been through. / Thereupon the running river / Of mine eyes has sprung forth / And everything properly compared: / Babylon to present woe / Zion to time past."

⁵ "Flute of mine, when played upon / You have made the mountains come / Running to where you were; / And the waters, purling down, / Would immediately go up. / No longer shall you be heard / By the tigers turned so tame; / And the ewes at pasture there, / Of their grass shall be forgotten / And depart to hear your sound" (61-7).

⁶ "Listen shepherd, listen king / Let this holy accent ring / Let the world with terror fill / Of that I have sung ill / Now the palinode I sing."

⁷ I am deliberately omitting a very important complication, as "canto" will be used very ambiguously in l.335 in "cabeça do Canto," "head of Song," which, in connection to "pedra"

("rock," or "stone," 334) will also become "cornerstone": as Bosley has it, "... the stone which is the head / Of the corner in this age" (334-5). Poetry, in this sense, becomes the "rock" or "stone" of the Scriptures, mentioned e.g. in Psalms 118:22 and Isaiah 28:16 ("I am laying a stone in Zion, a stone that has been tested, A precious cornerstone as a sure foundation; he who puts his faith in it shall not be shaken") and in the synoptic gospels (Mt 21:42, Mk 12:10, Lk 20:17)

8 "nos salgueiros pendurei / os órgãos com que cantava."

9 "So let it stay hanging there / The flute with which I have played, / O sacred Jerusalem, / Taking up the golden lyre / So I sing only of Thee!"

10 The Psalmist, in the Vulgate translation of "ta organa" from the Greek of the Septuagint ("in salicibus in medio eius suspendimus organa nostra") was talking about "organa," which can mean in both Latin and Greek 'instruments,' 'military engines or tools,' and 'pipes' (as in a musical instrument) (cf. e.g. Lewis & Short, s.v. *organum*; Liddell & Scott, s.v. *organon*). In the Latin translation from the Hebrew, that Camões of course did not follow, one has "citharas" (acc. pl.), 'citharas,' 'guitars' or 'lutes' (Lewis & Short, s.v. *cithara*) instead, translating the Hebrew "knrvtyv" from 'kinnowr,' 'harp' or 'lyre.' One can easily imagine the Greek translator, unsure as to the specific technical meaning of "knrvtyv," using the general word for musical instruments in Greek that unfortunately also meant pipe-instruments and military instruments (and which was then faithfully translated into Latin). So the Hebrew harp has turned into various objects, among which a flute.

11 Which of course it (more or less) is, as the word for flute was mistakenly taken as synonymous with the word for lyre (see previous note). Perhaps the Camões poem is in this sense a poetic correction of that error and so a classic case of poetic justice at work.

12 "But O Thou glorious land, / If I never saw thine essence / How doest thou call me in absence? / Thou recallest not from mem'ry, / Yet from reminiscence."

13 "Si praeter memoriam meam te inuenio, immemor tui sum. Et quomodo iam inueniam te, si memor non sum tui?"

14 "longing to learn it as a thing unknown, which either I had never known, or had so forgotten it as not even to remember that I had forgotten it [*sive quam sic oblitus fuerim, ut me nec oblitum esse meminerim*]" (*Confessions*, 10:20, §29).

15 "For the soul is a clean slate / That, with doctrine writ celestial / By dint of imagination/ Flies away from its own home / Ascending to land divine."

16 *De Anima*, 429b24-430a2, famously quoted by Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae*, I.79.2. A related, equally famous, metaphor in Plato, *Theaetetus*, 191c-e.

17 "risque-se quanto já fiz / do grão livro dos viventes." (264-5).

18 "O thou divine abode / My singular homeland! / If only by imagining thee / So ascends the Understanding / What shall it do once it's there?"

19 See *Confessions*, 10:20, §29, namely the references to a *beata uita* "longing to learn it as a thing unknown [*per appetitum discendi incognitam*]."

Miguel Tamen teaches in the Program of Literary Theory (which he chairs) and Romance Literatures Department, University of Lisbon. He has been a regular visiting professor at the University of Chicago. His latest books are *The Matter of the Facts* (2000), *Friends of Interpretable Objects* (2001) and *Artigos portugueses* (2002). Email: mtamen@mail.doc.fl.ul.pt