

Post-Imperial Bacchus: The politics of literary criticism in Camões studies 1940-2001

Hélio J. S. Alves

Abstract. A post-imperial approach to Camões cannot ignore the figure of Bacchus. As Camões's very epic might suggest, Bacchus strongly tends to constitute a non-subject for both "imperial" and "liberal" critics. Given that context, one ought to denounce the politics of criticism apparently sustained by reliable philological practice and show how they silence or put aside a presence that, also through philology, cannot but dominate the meaning of *Os Lusíadas*.

Baco [...] é o problema dos *Lusíadas*¹

Arguably the most important critical reference today on the relationship between epic poetry and imperialism is *Epic and Empire*, published by Yale professor David Quint. The subtitle of this indispensable work, "Politics and generic form from Virgil to Milton," as the author himself states (369n15), is supposed to elicit memories of C. M. Bowra's classic 1945 study, *From Virgil to Milton*. In a clear testimony of the pervasive intertextuality of literary criticism, Quint phrases his relationship with his predecessor as one of "rewriting." Exactly as the epic poems read by both authors, Quint chooses, quite adequately, his most influential precursor in the criticism of so-called "secondary epic" so as to overshadow him through a process that involves supplanting and refusal, as well as a considerable dose of admiration.

Considering that a substantial part of Quint's book revolves around the question of imperial representation of the relations between Western and

Eastern powers, and that we owe to his study some illuminating pages on Camões's *Os Lusíadas*, it is somewhat surprising to find in it no mention, critical or otherwise, of Bowra's interpretation of the gods in the Portuguese epic. In fact, Quint chooses Adamastor as the central symbolic figure of non-Western identities, while Bowra, having observed the historical content of the giant's episode, had clearly stated that Adamastor represented only the "untamed forces of nature" defying the maritime heroes (126). I would guess that Quint, finding an African connection in the episode, decided to "rewrite" indeed that section of Bowra's, noting that the natural forces, which Adamastor is supposed to represent in the older critic, are, in fact, a cover-up for the silent, effaced, African identities met by the Portuguese in their voyages and, developing the implication, already found in Bowra, that the Giant of the Cape symbolized the very triumph, in its overwhelming pride, of the heroes he is threatening.

However, by choosing to work on the Adamastor episode as an axis that makes other themes in the poem converge towards it (the Veloso anecdote, the sea-storm, the sea-nymphs etc.), Quint chose to avoid, not only the most important mythological symbol of the alien, Eastern, identities in Camões's epic, but also the one which, according to Bowra's essay, best exemplifies the ideological arguments for empire, particularly for Western political, cultural and "spiritual" preeminence.² I am referring, of course, to the god Bacchus. In a scheme of things involving the rewriting of a predecessor in the field, Quint's silencing of Bowra's most unambiguous form of legitimation of empire through literary criticism places him inside the group of intellectuals whose treatment of poetry I shall call "liberal" for their theoretical commitment to freedom of interpretation, but also for their lack of real engagement with the most forceful ideological issues that texts, both artful and critical, are promoting.³ In the game of winners and losers Quint creates for rhetorical epic, the final result is known even before the game has begun. Virgil, Tasso, Camões praise the winners; Lucan, Ercilla, Milton make claims for the losers. In this sense, as we shall see, Quint's liberalism ends up at least accepting, possibly encouraging (and possibly unwillingly), a view of the politics of identity and epic poetry in general, as well as of the poetic structure of *Os Lusíadas* in particular, which coincides with Bowra's, to my mind, "imperial" agenda.

C. M. Bowra's book, as has been suggested above, provides an excellent example of "imperial" criticism of the kind David Quint finds rhetorically illustrated in that which he calls "versions of Actium," i.e., the pattern which,

in epic narrative's imperialist discourse, is followed in its perceptions and representations of identity.⁴ Thus, for Bowra, the god Bacchus means "the spirit of the East in its vanity, cunning and disorder." This clearly vicious qualification is applied not only to the Greek god, however, as Bowra clarifies almost immediately afterwards: "So in *Os Lusíadas* Bacchus aptly typifies these qualities of the East which are opposed to the order and reason of the West" (112). It is, therefore, the East itself, the oriental shores visited by Vasco da Gama and others in Africa and Asia, that is characteristically vain, cunning and chaotic, while the West, of which the Portuguese are the first imperial representatives, will speak for the opposite virtues.

But Bowra's ideological affirmations go even further. From his perspective, Bacchus is a symbol of the eastern "barbarism" that is figuratively expressed, in the poem, by the god's creation of "violence and disorder in the elements" of Nature (113). Bacchus, therefore, is about evil (the "evil forces of the world"), an evil that the Portuguese epic supposedly depicts as defeated, since, in Bowra's words, "the discovery of India [...] is a great victory for harmony and order in physical nature and in the human heart" (114). In other words, Western imperialism is equated with harmony, order, civilization, all-embracing Good. Naturally, "imperial" criticism such as this identifies its opinion with the poet's, making Camões-as-author responsible for such a view of his and our world.

If it could be argued that, by writing that essay on *Os Lusíadas*, Bowra is in fact contributing, with a late conservative effort, to the political discourse legitimating empire, particularly the British empire during its Second-World-War wane, contemporary Portuguese criticism, living with, and in many respects from, a nationalist ideology of empire, settled for a long time with similar views of Camões's epic message.

Hernâni Cidade, writing in 1943—three years after the *Exposição do Mundo Português* which represented the apex of the Portuguese brand of fascism in terms of cultural policy and artistic achievement—declares in his *A Literatura Portuguesa e a Expansão Ultramarina* that Bacchus is a personification of hostile Nature and of local and private economic and political interests (282). It is significant that, in Cidade's characteristically friendly and amenable tone, Bacchus is a symbol of the pettiness of those interests when faced with, according to his *Luís de Camões, o Épico* of 1950, "a missão [de] estabelecer na Terra a hegemonia da civilização" (113).⁵ Cidade's option is to emphasize the unity of vision presiding over the entire structure of the poem,

as if Camões had been talking all along about Civilization's benign conquest of the world. The thought that Arabs or Asians might not be interested in this "civilizing" power, other than for the wrong reasons, never occurs, since from Cidade's equation of his perspective with Camões's, nothing can be envisaged outside the imperialized nation. The keyword here is *ecumenismo*: according to Cidade, Camões is the voice of the union between Church and State in the expansion of civilization among all domains and races. Everything other than this inspiring and supposedly universal "high ideal" (*alto ideal*) amounts to mere detail, *pormenores* that Camões does not lower himself to mention. Amongst these "details" are included, in Cidade's phrasing, "relações entre Portugueses e povos que sujeitaram ao seu domínio [...] que patenteiam as feridas abertas pela violência da fúria guerreira" (*O Épico*, 75). This is clearly Bacchus's place in the poem: an outsider whose "nature" is to represent the petty private interests of those who have no place in Portuguese *ecumenismo* and therefore end up simply disappearing into oblivion.

The latter is exactly the view propounded explicitly by historian Jorge Borges de Macedo in an essay published in 1972 for the fourth centenary of the publication of *Os Lusíadas*. His "philological" choice of taking Bacchus as the god of forgetfulness, serves him to emphasize how those who chose not to collaborate with Portuguese *objectivos ecuménicos*, once again because of private, implicitly petty, interests (*interesses particulares*), are deemed to vanish from Camões's poem and from history itself.⁶ Bacchus is equally doomed to invisibility in the introduction of a same-year edition of *Os Lusíadas* by another of the distinguished doyens of Portuguese University, Álvaro da Costa Pimpão,⁷ although he reworks the symbolism attached to the god in a slightly different sense, albeit with similar claims for philological rigour. While Borges de Macedo chose Plutarch and Heitor Pinto as authorities for his reading of Bacchus, Pimpão preferred Arrian's explanation that the Arabs of Alexander the Great's time adored only two gods, Heaven and Bacchus. In this context, Camões would have chosen that god as enemy of the Portuguese, because he had been the one the Arabs had adored. This way, the Arabic populations of Alexander's day are made equivalent to the Islamic adversaries of da Gama's and Camões's times, without the critic once indicating where and how the epic text impels the philologist to arrive at such a conclusion. In both 1972 essays, the complexity of the Greek and Roman myths involving Bacchus is overlooked, and the philological truth-claims rely on arbitrary classical and Renaissance sources without apparent authority, either

in Camões's text, or in its demonstrable intertexts. This is, of course, typical of Ideology leading the way for its handmaiden Philology.

It is in this context, it would seem, that one can understand that which may be the clearest manifesto for an oppositional reading of Camões in the "liberal" sense, a short text by prize-winning essayist Eduardo Lourenço entitled *Camões 80*. After stating, in what seems to be an argument against Hernâni Cidade, that the Portuguese should not make Camões more "unified" than he was or could be, since the poet represents the maximum expression of *contradiction* (I am paraphrasing), Lourenço writes:

A Direita pode servir-se mais *naturalmente* da letra camoniana do que a Esquerda. Não se tem privado de o fazer e continuará. [...] enfim, é exacto que o Canto épico camoniano contém [uma] mais que exaltada versão do ideário "contra-reformista" que foi o nosso, de portugueses, no século XVI. Escamotear esta evidência é absurdo.

However, he adds, there is another side to the "Camões question," the one Lourenço describes as follows:

No corpo e na alma camonianas, na sua paixão pela mulher-musa e no seu entendimento, corre ainda o ardente rio da sensualidade e do amor da vida [...] No seu coração Vénus atravessa ainda o espaço que separa o nosso Desejo do sexto céu onde desarmada se abandona ao terrestre amor sublimado. Um vento de Liberdade (não política, como nós a entendemos), mas cultural, sensível, transgressiva, lambe as páginas do Canto [...] Camões [só] pode "pousar" no palco cultural da Esquerda [...] como encarnação daquela Ideia que de Ficino a Gôngora se faz poema...

In general terms, this is the guideline that "liberal" criticism of Camões has followed at least since António José Saraiva began expounding his theories in the late 1940s, of which I find a perfect resumé in an essay by the Brazilian intellectual José Guilherme Merquior:

[...] como todos aprendemos com António José Saraiva, o sentido último do poema não é o de exortação bélica e nacional, mas [...] o depreendido da própria trama mitológica, onde desde o início os navegantes se colocam sob o amorável signo de Vénus.⁸

An extensive example of the “liberal” view I have just illustrated can be found in the work of Helder Macedo. From this author’s perspective, one which, incidentally, has been adopted by some schoolbooks in Portugal, “o tema mais profundo [de *Os Lusíadas*] é a iniciação através do amor.”⁹ As with Saraiva’s earlier studies and the post-revolutionary criticism published for the fourth centenary of the poet’s death in 1980, this is a view that turns Venus into the overarching character of the epic and Camões into the poet of love. A significant growth in the interest for Camões’s lyric poetry and its conjoined meaning with the epic is another result of these approaches. Sublimated erotic love, with a reminder of its supposedly transgressive content, is fostered as the anchor whereby *Os Lusíadas* can still be a great poem for the political left. Unsurprisingly, Bacchus has no room of his own in the scheme of things proposed by these critics. At the most, he represents the degradation of such love,¹⁰ a degradation that somehow goes so far as to turn him into a child-devouring ogre.¹¹

This view of the overall meaning of Camões’s poem, the disengaging understanding of him as poet of unsolvable contradiction and passionate love, has not, to be fair, satisfied Saraiva’s later research. Once he returned to the study of *Os Lusíadas* after his Marxist phase, from 1972 onwards, Saraiva was able to accommodate the warring imperial ideology with the narrative of loving desire by encountering what he calls an “aesthetic law” that, in his view, presides over the conception of *Os Lusíadas*. Now, Saraiva tried to demonstrate that the epic has nothing to do with the intimate thoughts of its author, that the politics of the poem is not the politics purported by Camões the person. In his opinion, the Portuguese epic follows a deliberate authorial aesthetic effort at *objective timelessness*, an effort that, though not completely successful (because the historical, empirical, Camões emerges once in a while), allows it to remain ever impervious to the concerns of its and our times. The militant rhetoric the epic exposes in favour of war against Islam, for instance, is considered part of the objectivity supposedly inherent to the genre as Camões understood it:

Quanto à cruzada, quer Camões estivesse de acordo com ela, quer não, era o estereótipo por excelência e não podia faltar [...] Camões era estritamente *objetivo*, quer dizer, desenvolvia um estereótipo independente dele próprio (mas talvez assumido) quando via na cruzada o destino e a vocação portuguesa na história universal.¹²

In this way, in spite of a slight and uncomfortable hesitation (in the expression “talvez assumido”), Camões and his “liberal” critics are exempted from engagement with the politics expressed in the text, a politics that obviously, as Lourenço implies, continues to be a sort of embarrassment for the left-wing of literary criticism.

I would argue, then, perhaps rather perversely, that what unites the “liberal” critics of Camões, apart from thematic elements like the narrative and symbolic predominance of Venus, is the achievement of a clear conscience with respect to the embarrassing politics celebrated in the poem. In distinguishing themselves from the nationalist *ecumenismo*, the “liberal” critics wish to remind us, as Merquior puts it, that “o ‘poema da raça’ pode efectivamente ser lido como uma mais ampla, mais completa e perene mensagem humana.”¹³

The actual result of the attempts at reinterpreting *Os Lusíadas* in a way that makes it politically harmless to the left-wing, however, is a narrowing of the semantic power of Camões’s epic poetry. Bacchus is a good instance of this. Even more than the imperialist perspectives, which at least found a role for him as the symbol of the enemy whose necessary destruction fills the Portuguese with a sense of imperial identity, the “liberal” critics cannot envisage a place, within their structures of interpretation, for the only god opposing the chivalric adventures of love, discovery and cognition. If, for readers like Bowra and Cidade, Bacchus represents the Eastern vice and interests that require defeat, for the “liberals” the god either appears in the role of monster or is an outsider (because that is what a *monster* means) to such an extent that he does not even turn up for discussion. Therefore, although the non-conformity of Bacchus to the latter’s thematic interpretations may be occasionally observed—in any case, a rare phenomenon—this dyonisiac invisibility is really met with relief, since it helps in avoiding commitment to the political analysis of that which effectively goes on in the poem. In the end, as in the imperialist conservative *position*, the marginalization or absence of Bacchus has become convenient to the liberal *opposition*.

Now that the last outposts, Macau and East Timor, have finally gone from the remnants of the Portuguese empire, a truly post-imperial Bacchus, as well as a new look at the epic text’s ideology, ought to become a reality. I could argue, as British cultural materialists do, that ideologically biased readings are inevitable and necessary to counter both reactionary and “liberal” dominant interpretations. Nevertheless, I prefer to encourage analysis of the phallacies of philology as employed by critics very much respected, in many cases

rightly, for their work on Camões. Besides, Bacchus has clearly been much underrated as a character and symbol in *Os Lusíadas*. It is far from enough to notice how the god is the moving force behind the story-line, although a lot of the critical work I have mentioned so far seems reluctant to arrive even at this obvious point. Some attention to what Camões effectively wrote and to the intertexts with which he, in all likelihood, involved himself, should be able to afford a post-imperial, if not postcolonial, perspective on his epic, an approach philologically engaged in understanding and confronting the undeniably central political motivations of such a text as *Os Lusíadas*.

To begin with, the very title of the epic is almost tantamount to propaganda of Bacchus's preeminence in it. It is certain that Camões found in *Os Lusíadas* echoes of other titles, namely of the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, proper to the suggestion of the classic epic genre. However, this fine-wrought word, as it repeats a humanist Latin neologism identifying the Portuguese, enters fully and deliberately within the dyonisiac realm.

First of all, as the poem itself states, the obscure character recalled in the title, Lusus, is both the mythical origin of the Portuguese and a son of Bacchus (III, 21 and VIII, 2-4). The nineteenth-century socialist Oliveira Martins, in a still valuable essay on this poem, quotes João de Barros, the poet's older contemporary, to the fact that the first origins of Portugal lay with Bacchus.¹⁴ In a sense, it can be sustained that Camões's epic tells the tale of a struggle for identity between father and children, in itself a subject of tremendous psychoanalytical interest. What is perhaps most relevant, though, is that this fact places Camões in an extremely unorthodox position as author of epic poetry: as far as I know, there was no epic precedent in having the heroes being thoroughly antagonized in the main narrative by their own father. By comparison, other interesting readings of the title made so far, including those based especially on its Luís Franco manuscript form *Elusíadas*, seem merely speculative.¹⁵ The title of Camões's epic, then, is partly a statement of Portuguese heroic etiology, which emphasizes a disconnection, a fault that turns mythico-historical continuity into a field of deeply ingrained resistances.

If Bacchus is the "voice within" Portuguese origins, he is also the lord of India, both in Greek myth and in *Os Lusíadas*. Just as he represents the first memory of Portugal's identity, he represents also the knowing thoughts of the Oriental anti-subjects of the epic, as much in Africa as in Asia. In this respect, contrary to what some "imperial" critics have argued over time, Bacchus

never lies to his eastern interlocutors or to himself. All he does is argue rhetorically against the heroes and in favour of the old order: supremacy of the gods over humankind and conservation of African, Indian and Muslim “ways of life.” He does attempt (actually with success) to fool the Portuguese in Camões’s narrative, and it is the deceitful side of him that imperialism has emphasized in literary criticism. However, as I hope to have shown in my recent book on the semiotic system of sixteenth-century epic poetry,¹⁶ Bacchus’s deceit is perfectly suited to his place as the noblest opponent in the main narrative of *Os Lusíadas*. In the power tactics the poet applies to the relationship between Bacchus and the heroes, deceit is contextualized positively as an indispensable and unavoidable resource of every good leader struggling, as is the case, against all odds.

Finally, one should also reevaluate the virtually unchallenged present notion that Bacchus is effectively defeated in *Os Lusíadas*. His last appearance in the poem is another moment of Camões’s deliberately defying gestures towards genre and intertextual codes. True triumph in the epic means leading the enemy to accept fate and the project of the hero. It is so in Homer and Virgil, whose avenging gods are the indubitable epic models for Bacchus. It is not so in Camões. Bacchus’s last word in *Os Lusíadas* is not a suggestion of Western *imperium sine fine*, but rather an order for a future of Oriental resistance with no foreseeable end (VIII, 50). And when the fictional prize comes for the navigators in the form of an island, a prize that should mean the allegorical victory of the heroes’ project, the irony is that it is filled with the shade of Bacchus. As Fernando Gil has put it, “a Ilha de Vénus é abertamente e exclusivamente *dionisiaca*: ou seja, *Vénus inimiga de Baco dá por prémio aos navegantes os valores de Baco*.”¹⁷ The orgiastic nature of the meeting between men and goddesses, which forced neo-platonic readings have tried to cover up, is the sound philological conclusion to the famous stanzas of the Ninth Canto. Bacchus can thus silently overcome, as the liberator (*liaios*; *liber*) that he is, the strict regime of discovery and war that the heroes and their heavenly protectors were following.

But as he does so, *the god of freedom* is also showing why the heroic project as imperially designed must end in some sort of failure. And how could it be otherwise, since the future beyond the poem, as Camões slyly seems to be predicting, will have Acteon devoured by his dogs just before Bacchus sounds his hoarse cry of triumph?¹⁸

Notes

¹ Gil 51.

² The word "spiritual" is Bowra's. A passage on p. 125 of his book seems to make Quint's avoidance more glaring, since it compares Adamastor directly with Bacchus with respect to exactly those issues that Quint is discussing: "Just as Bacchus symbolises the difficulties which the Portuguese meet on their journey to the East, so Adamastor symbolises a natural obstacle, [...] the point where East meets West."

³ My most direct references for the definition of a "liberal" literary criticism are the following: José Guilherme Merquior, "Tarefas da Crítica Liberal," *Jornal do Brasil*, 7 and 14th March 1981, collected in his book *As Ideias e as Formas*; Alan Sinfield, "Macbeth: History, Ideology and Intellectuals," *Critical Quarterly* 28, 1986, collected in the book *Faultlines*. It could be argued, perhaps, that this paper is also a rewriting of those two essays.

⁴ See Quint 21-49.

⁵ He adds: "mais progressiva," in the edition of his book available to me (1985). Does he really mean that Western civilization is older than Eastern, or is it simply a printing mistake for "progressiva"? In either case, the ideological dominant is obvious, although perhaps not consciously intentional.

⁶ "História e doutrina do poder n' "Os Lusíadas," *Garcia da Orta*, Revista da Junta de Investigações do Ultramar, Número Especial, 1972; reprinted in Jorge Borges de Macedo, *Os Lusíadas e a História*. The passages quoted are from pages 115-117 of the latter edition.

⁷ Luís de Camões, *Os Lusíadas*, leitura, prefácio e notas de Álvaro Júlio da Costa Pimpão, 1972. I quote from the 3rd edition, Instituto Camões/Ministério da Educação, Lisbon, 1992.

⁸ *Razão do Poema* 86-7.

⁹ "A Poética da verdade" 121-141. This statement, from page 123, is a recent one, but it summarizes the author's views ever since his *Camões e a Viagem Iniciática*.

¹⁰ "degradante submissão do amor ao corpo" is, in Helder Macedo's phrase, the symbolic value of the god Bacchus in *Camões e a Viagem Iniciática* (41).

¹¹ "[No] esquema iniciático da obra, a identificação de Baco com o baixo amor ganha uma importância fundamental na medida em que, mitologicamente, era [...] também o pai de Luso, o antepassado mítico dos Portugueses. [...] Mas é o falso pai, o pai tornado Ogre, que os próprios filhos procura destruir." (*Camões e a Viagem Iniciática* 41-2).

¹² Saraiva, "O objectivismo d' "Os Lusíadas,"" 26. Essay reprinted with most of the other post-1972 texts by Saraiva on Camões's epic in his *Estudos sobre a Arte d'"Os Lusíadas."*

¹³ *As Ideias e as Formas* 55.

¹⁴ Martins 167.

¹⁵ There come to mind Fiamma Pais Brandão with her esoteric approach (42) and José Madeira's more recent reading of the poem as "anti-epopeia" (189), although the latter bases himself, it seems unwittingly, on Renaissance interpretations of the word *lusus* repudiated by the Évora humanist André de Resende (cf. Ramalho, especially 151).

¹⁶ Alves 639-641.

¹⁷ Gil 53.

¹⁸ Camões refers to Acteon, in Faria e Sousa's accepted interpretation of the famous passage in the Ninth Canto, as an allegory of his King and so, by extension, of the Nation and Empire. Ancient sources, like Hesiod (*Catalogue of Women*, frag. 113) and Apollodorus (*Bibliotheca*, III, 4, 4), say that Bacchus will one day return to heaven as a triumphant god, while enjoying the company of the dogs that killed Acteon. Needless to say, Camões studies

have been silent on the mythico-symbolic connection between Acteon and Bacchus. There is even one instance of explicit denial that a strong possibility of kingly and national punishment is encoded in the reference to Acteon, in spite of the fact that both Renaissance allegoresis and the Portuguese epic text do suggest that possibility: see Aguiar e Silva 156.

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Hélio J. S. Alves is Assistant Professor at the Universidade de Évora. He is the author of *Camões, Corte-Real e o Sistema da Epopeia Quinhentista* (Coimbra, 2001); "Os Épicos Maiores: para uma nova história da poesia portuguesa" (Lisbon, 2001); and "Camilo, Gogol e as Moscas" (Porto, 1991). He works especially on Renaissance discourse theory (poetics, rhetoric), with special interest in comparative and Portuguese poetry (all genres) and is one of the editors of a new edition of Gil Vicente's "Compilação" (forthcoming). Email: halves@evunix.uevora.pt