

Milton and Camões: Reinventing the Old Man

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If we are to study the status of Camões in a post-imperial world one overwhelming question needs to be asked. How does the poem now look to a citizen of those territories that *The Lusiads* made into the emblems of Portuguese glory? The banners of Camões's vision (seen from a hilltop similar to the one on which Christ in *Paradise Regained* refused the kingdoms of the world)¹ are no longer to be seen on Asian soil. But more than the banners have vanished. Independence also means the independence of the Asian reader to assess the poem against his own history. If Camões is a world-poet, what are the terms of a global understanding about him or, more tentatively, the terms of that conversation within which such an understanding might be sought?

It is twenty-five years since Edward Said's *Orientalism* reconfigured our perception of inter-cultural relationships. Post-colonialism at its outset lacked historical depth, assuming disarmingly that the world began with Kipling. In the years that followed it has reached back to the time of Columbus and Vasco da Gama, demonstrating that its patterns of perception can indeed engage historically distant periods with the present and can give to the term "early modern" a significance that is penetrating rather than polemical. In the process the canon, which might be taken to be imperialism's steadfast stronghold, has been shown to be heavily conflicted and to be built around fault lines that oblige it to struggle with itself. Voices of protest are prominent in *The Lusiads* and might be taken to be evidence of these fault lines, and yet, paradoxically, they are prominent because the poem seems determined to deny them entry. Moreover they are dismissive rather than disarticulating. It

is not easy to make them the revisionary centre of a work that stubbornly remains the most triumphalist of Western epics.

Not all differences in poems lead to openings around which the poem can be rearticulated. Helgerson, for example, treats *The Lusiads* as a heroic poem of Portuguese nationhood² whereas Mickle, its eighteenth-century translator, describes it as "the epic poem of the birth of commerce, and, in a particular manner, the epic poem of whatever country has the control and possession of the commerce of India."³ In finding Mickle's reading "bizarre," Helgerson accounts for it by assigning it to a different reading climate, a different position on the "hermeneutic spiral."⁴ We in our time occupy yet another location on that spiral from which another view of *The Lusiads* needs to be launched. I leave aside this principal item on our agenda for the moment in order to point out that Mickle's allegedly "bizarre" view is not without roots in the text. Epic catalogues in the later books of *The Lusiads* are catalogues of spices, not heroes. One might argue that the commercial and the heroic run convergent courses that meet in today's global economy where the bottom line has been elevated to transcendence and where CEOs are either deified or satanized. To say this is only to remind the Asian reader that commerce and the pursuit of imperial glory have colluded persistently and with deplorable results. The aristocratic/middle-class distinction that separated the two in the sixteenth century seems less a debate about the imperial mission than a division of labour in its implementation. It does not offer the solace of a fault line around which the poem can be rebuilt.

A post-imperial era is not simply an era of vanishing empires. It is also a time in which others hitherto ventriloquized can speak as themselves and not be heard simply in allotted voices that they can do no more than modulate by their own voices of protest. When the constraints of a dominant discourse are removed, the line of the unacceptable will be drawn more firmly and deeply. Occasions for the willing suspension of disbelief will become less profuse. We can no longer leave our ideologies in the cloakroom as we enter the literary seminar. Some things that have been said cannot be lived with even in the name of literature. Perhaps we can live with them in the name of history. We then reduce them to documentary status. Another possibility is to estrange them and to ask ourselves what we learn from the estrangement. There can be both dissociation and connectedness as we negotiate the line of cleavage and joining. Historicizing the unfamiliar can become a crude, polemical tactic when civilizations of today are dismissed as mediaeval. It is a different matter when Milton pushes historicization to its limits by making the

principles of ideal order Edenic. The Fall is the maximum estrangement. We are the total other of our origins. The fissure is the poem and we read the poem along changing approaches because so much can be poured into the fissure.

The Lusiads is not a poem into which the human condition can be emptied. I would say this of the *Mahabharata* but in the western world there may be only one such poem. *The Lusiads* is less capacious than *Paradise Lost* and perhaps for that reason less riven within itself. Like the *Aeneid*, to which it alludes eighty times and claims to surpass, it is the story of a dangerous voyage, but a voyage in the bronze world of reality rather than the golden one of poetic feigning.⁵ Unlike the *Aeneid*, *The Lusiads* is not the narrative of a dispossessed people, journeying across strange seas to establish a new homeland. That story should be familiar in New England and I am sometimes surprised that the *Aeneid* is not the American epic. The waste of war, the weariness of wandering, and the tragic cost of destiny suffuse the Virgilian hexameter, the “stateliest measure,” according to Tennyson, “ever moulded by the lips of man.”⁶ There is enough in the poem to turn it against its *telos* for those wishing to doubt the imperial enterprise.

The Lusiads is more self-confident than the *Aeneid*. It has to be confident because it is more than the epic of Portugal. It is the poem of the early modern movement.⁷ It offers us a beginning and beginnings can be peremptorily clear. They can also be tentative, wrapped in ambivalences and offering multiple routes out of their nuclei whose consequences can diverge and entwine. *The Lusiads* is in the former category. Bold beginnings often leave something behind, such as an old man on the seashore. He speaks with wisdom as the narrator notes, but wisdom falters as the paradigm shifts. It is a shift that in its nature has to be peremptory, that must ignore rather than take in the Old Man, that must refrain from engaging itself with the world-view it abandons. Misgivings can only come later, as the shift opens itself to the consequences that its initial clarity elides.

Early modernism is marked by competing nascent empires. Commerce with Cathay and curiosity about the Far East’s fabled civilizations were the motives for Columbus’s westward voyage. When the New World came in the way, conquest, plunder, and settlement became agreeable options. In the East, the military balance of power made regime change impractical. Since Portugal was given the East by papal dispensation,⁸ commerce had to be the prize, along with glory, establishing links with distant Christian communities including the elusive Prester John, and converting infidels in whom the East

abounded. Vasco da Gama's voyage was an audacious move, typical of an exuberant nationhood, eager to assume a world destiny. Commerce with the East had been in existence for centuries but it had been largely Arab-controlled, moving along the Silk Road and through ports on the Arabian Sea to Venice. Da Gama's mission was to open a sea route to the Indies that would undermine the Venetian dominance and break open the Arab grip on commerce between Asia and Europe. The Old Man had said that if glory was important, Portugal should seek it in battle with the traditional enemies of Christendom. He was not thinking of economic victories that were to count as much in the future as military triumphs. Da Gama's voyage was not simply from Lisbon to Calicut but from a pre-modern to an early modern world-view.

The cost of the voyage was high and its tactics were daring. They involved plunging West where the shoreline of Africa turns East and journeying deep into the Atlantic before making the turn that would enable trade winds to carry the three ships to the Cape.⁹ Da Gama's men were out of sight of land for ninety-six days. Though the epic does not suggest this, the passage from the Cape to India was less of an advance into the unknown. Commerce between India and the Eastern African and Arabian coasts had been intensely active for centuries. Another Braudel is needed to write the history of the world of the Indian Ocean.¹⁰ Da Gama's difficulties were further eased by the services of an experienced pilot who may have been the legendary Ibn Majid.¹¹

Nevertheless one third to one half of Da Gama's men did not return to Portugal. When Camões set sail for Goa fifty-five years later in a flotilla of four ships, three were lost on the way out and the one remaining did not survive the return journey. The cost was higher than in the Second World War when German submarines operating from Dakar preyed upon Allied shipping obliged to take the Cape route.

A cost-benefit analysis may seem beside the point in circumstances where international standing among empires was more important than the return on venture capital. It can be observed, nevertheless, that the Portuguese bid for eminence, both commercially and in world imperial rankings, was, at the outset, spectacularly successful. Albuquerque had prophesied that if a sea-route to the Indies was opened, "Cairo and Mecca will be entirely ruined, and to Venice will no spices be conveyed except what her merchants go and buy in Portugal."¹² By the early sixteenth century seventy-five percent of spices from the East were arriving in Portuguese vessels and profits of ninety percent were being reaped.

The moment passed almost as soon as it materialized. Portugal lacked the money and the ships to maintain the dizzying reach of its imperial design. The blockade of Arab ports could not be maintained and the loss of skilled manpower on dangerous voyages took a toll that became increasingly hard to sustain. By the end of the century Portugal's share in the pepper trade fell to a mere twenty percent. Aden could not be captured and Ormuz, the emporium of the Orient, was taken from the Portuguese in 1622. Even more devastating was an ill-fated military expedition to Moorish Africa launched in June 1578 with considerable pomp and circumstance. In five hours of battle under a searing sun the flower of Portugal's manhood was destroyed. Eight thousand men were killed and fifteen thousand taken prisoner. No more than a hundred found their way back to Portugal. Camões, with the deathbed wit that was part of his time's tragic gaiety, remarked that he was glad to perish not only in but also with his country.

Camões must have been aware of Portugal's decline at the time he wrote *The Lusiads*. We have to ask ourselves to what extent that awareness is taken into his poem. We could have had a poem that was elegiac rather than triumphalist. We could even have had a poem that foresaw in Portugal's decline, the eventual dubiousness of the imperial enterprise. It is obvious that we do not have either. Doubts about the imperial mission are expressed in *The Lusiads* but they are marginalized in relation to a triumphalist core. They circulate at the fringes of an undertaking that seems determined not to allow them into its space. Attempts have been made to move them closer to the centre and indeed revisionary readings of *The Lusiads* are heavily dedicated to such attempts. They seem to me to skew the poem immoderately.

Skewed interpretations are the order of the day. When literary texts make statements we find difficult to accept, we search for and foreground the text's anxieties so that the statements are undermined, or at least contested. We do so with the justification that this is how the text reaches out to its future. We want to think of a poem that endures as resisting its own indoctrination, as not being able to avoid its honesty. Literature could not be heard with involvement outside the auditory in which it was first performed if we did not listen to its contrapuntal music. Skewed readings are needed but skewing beyond a certain point is willful rather than accommodative. Disputes can and do occur about the permissible degree of reorientation but I remain persuaded that efforts to reconstitute the poem around the Old Man's harangue pull it too far away from its anchorage.

Among reflections on *The Lusiads*'s self-dismissals, an article by Jack Tomlins is particularly interesting. He argues that Camões after his return from India "saw the Oriental conquest—with India as the brightest diamond in the crown—as mere vanity and total ruin." The opening dedication, the Old Man's rebuke, and the disillusioned envoi of the epic were all composed after the poet's return and reflect this deep change in understanding. The poem thus "flies apart at three junctures" undoing "the very business of the epic."¹³ Tomlin's recuperation *via* chronology can only be conjectural and is not supported by any evidence except the desirability of the recuperative arrangement. Nevertheless it concedes the marginality of the poem's misgivings about itself. His argument is that the marginality is the result of the recantations coming too late to enter a central space already occupied by a previous poem. If so, the two poems are simply not sufficiently engaged for them to fly apart. What we have is a collision rather than a critique.

Our difficulty is that the counter-voice in the poem must be more than merely dismissive. It has to provide the basis for a revisionary turn within the poem itself. The Old Man is not saying that a different version of *The Lusiads* ought to be written. He is arguing that the epic should not be written at all.¹⁴ If, as I have already argued, Da Gama's voyage is to be seen not just as a voyage from Lisbon to Calicut but as an opening up of the early modern world, the Old Man's speech may have to be deposited in what Hegel derisively called the lumber room of history. In fact the Old Man is advocating almost that abandonment of history that the last books of *Paradise Lost* were once chided for embodying.

A protesting voice is needed but its location has to be different. It has to come out of the world the poem sails into rather than from the world it leaves behind. Milton more than any other poet seems to me to initiate this voice.

Milton does not mention Camões but books have been written about Milton's relationship with authors he did not mention. J.H. Sims's many articles show that the connection of *The Lusiads* with *Paradise Lost* is more substantial than the two alliterative reminiscences that can be heard in Milton's poem.¹⁵ *Paradise Lost* actually lies in close chronological proximity not to *The Lusiads*, but to its first English translation by Richard Fanshawe, which was not published until 1655. A blind poet growing older, who had given his best years to a faltering revolution, might well have remembered a marginal voice on a receding shoreline. Milton does indeed step into the Old Man's shoes but the man in the shoes is imperiously Milton.

Commerce and empire are blended in the beginnings of early modernism from which they flow their consummation into today's globalism and the imperial power of the consumer ethos. Columbus's voyage and Da Gama's embrace the world between them. The world we live in is the result of that dubious embrace. The Old Man can say nothing about the synergy between commerce and empire because he does not speak out of the early modern moment. Milton begins his detection of that synergy with a famous speech by Comus that can be read as a prospectus for Da Gama's voyage.¹⁶ The lady replies by counselling temperance, and talk about temperance can be tedious, particularly for those who wish to find commendations of temperance sustained paradoxically by the plentitude of language. This is a difficulty Milton often confronts. Temperance becomes more acceptable when it is metamorphosed into the collective self-restraint that is necessary to safeguard our planet.

In *Paradise Lost* the argument against the early modern synergy is more clearly focused and driven with greater sternness. Satan is the original imperialist and his journey from Hell to Paradise, laden with evocations of the spice trade,¹⁷ is the infernal matrix of the heroic-commercial quest. The argumentative thrust is even clearer in the quite different accounts of forbidden fruit consumption provided in *Areopagitica* and in *Paradise Lost*. The prose tract tells us that the knowledge of good and evil leaped into the world "from out the rinde of one apple tasted."¹⁸ *Paradise Lost* has none of this delicate nibbling. Eve does not tentatively puncture the rind of an apple. She eats it rind and all. In fact, she seems to eat several apples. Having done so, she tears off a branch from the tree and carries it to Adam who after some hesitation shares with her the delights of unrestricted apple eating. None of this staging is to be found in Genesis or in any commentary that I know of on Genesis. Pleasing and sating the "curious taste" is, in Comus's perverse ecological reasoning, not merely a right but a responsibility bestowed upon us by earth's abundance.¹⁹ In *Paradise Lost* the justification for unrestricted consumption is embedded in our origins and carried to its lethal extreme.

The Old Man does suggest that original sin lies at the root of Da Gama's enterprise but he suggests this as part of the vaguely inclusive proposition that all mistaken undertakings are the result of original sin. He can say no more because he is on the wrong side of an historical divide. His is a discourse no longer relevant. The poem, to form itself, must move away from that discourse. Milton can say more because he is speaking from within the discourse that *The Lusiads* authenticates. One hundred and seventy-five years of early

modernism generate a critique that can be planted with precision not merely in the cultural stipulations of the moment but more fundamentally in the deep-rooted propensity to destructiveness that is so stubbornly part of the nature of our beginnings.

The Old Man's remarks on the vanity of human endeavour are more difficult to sharpen and direct. Augustine touches a responsive chord in Milton. Yet despite the almost overwhelming presence of the weight of woe within it, *Paradise Lost* is pledged to history as the Old Man's declamation is not. Even that classical heroism that is denounced as the poet tunes his note to "tragic" is embodied in a splendour of language that reinstates what it rejects and that Milton cannot quite bring to the "better fortitude."²⁰ The poet against empire writes a poem that is resplendently imperial, commanding and directing the history of Western literature into a work seeking to contain a history that rages against the borders of poetic form, as chaos did until it was compelled into order. *Paradise Lost* does not turn its back on history. History is its theme and its obsession. As a poem containing history (the phrase is Ezra Pound's)²¹ it has to proceed on the premise that history can be comprehended through containment, that it can be written and not merely endured, that its creative promise will prevail over its tragic momentum. But the conditions for that writing, the sweeping aside of all collective action until the rebellious self is fully aligned with the divine, will constitute a deferral as destructive as the premature action it bleakly anatomizes. The powerful foregrounding of fallenness does not sufficiently address a spectrum of religious and moral understandings that are with us today and in which fallenness does not play a crucial part. In a post-imperial world the time has come for the critique to be critiqued.

To conclude, I regard *The Lusiads* as a quintessential poem of the early modern moment. Its self-confidence is part of the moment's character. Protests against that self-confidence are driven to the poem's margins and essentialized to a point where they no longer seem pertinent. In recording a historical event *The Lusiads* is itself an event in cultural history, an intervention that shifts the parameters of debate. That debate remains in progress today.

Asian readers resent the commercial emphasis of *The Lusiads* and the trivial commodifications that resolutely bypass all that Asian civilizations have offered to world understanding. Yet that very reductiveness leads into and underlines the impoverishments of the economic universalism now being put forward as our final paradigm. It also advises us that commerce is the ally of

imperialism, not its replacement. The synergy between the two, which *The Lusiads* is so prophetic in making evident, will not be dismantled simply by being globalized. It will be dismantled only by commitment to a universalism adequately in accordance with human dignity, worth, and aspirations. Previous universalisms have built themselves on concerns more elevated than the profit principle. The Enlightenment offered us a world governed by universal reason free from the selectiveness imposed by a right-reason that had to be reconstructed from the debris of fallenness and that therefore had to be theologically certified. We need to proceed further into a world which is governed by conscience as well as by reason, a world in which to modulate Shelley's description of the poetic imagination "the pains and pleasures of the species must become [man's] own."²² Today we are threatened by citizenship of a world order in which what cannot be commodified does not exist. We are at the end of Da Gama's journey. Once again the Old Man needs to be reinvented but in a manner that speaks specifically to our time as well as more amply to eternity.

Notes

¹ Camões, *The Lusiads* 10, 77. All references to *The Lusiads* are to the translation by Leonard Bacon (New York: Hispanic Society of America, 1950). The mountain that Christ ascends (*PR* 3, 251-66) is specifically compared to the highest hill in the Paradise (*PL* 11, 377-82) from which Adam views the havoc wrought by his fall. Characteristically the approach to the hill of vision in *The Lusiads* is strewn with emeralds and rubies.

² Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992) 155-76, 189-90.

³ William Julius Mickle, *The Lusiad or The Discovery of India: an Epic Poem* (Oxford: Jackman and Lister, 1776) cxlvii.

⁴ Helgerson 190.

⁵ Camões does argue that the bronze world of his poem is as exemplary as the golden and has the added advantage of being actual rather than fictive.

⁶ "To Virgil," *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Longmans Green 1969) 1313.

⁷ Early modernism is associated with the emergence of the nation-state, the rise of the middle class, the development of a capitalist economy, and the collusion of commerce and empire.

⁸ Under the Treaty of Tordesillas, signed in 1494. The absence of a reliable computation of longitude led to complications. See J.R. Hall, *Renaissance Exploration* (New York: Norton, 1968) 45.

⁹ See, e.g., Hall, *Renaissance Exploration*, pp. 29-45. Developing the "wind route" was important because shorter and more predictable travel times would lead to higher profits. Da Gama's ships (unlike Columbus's) were specifically built to provide the maximum carrying capacity consistent with seaworthiness.

¹⁰ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II*, trans. Sean Reynolds, illustrated edn. (New York: Harper Collins, 1992). An important beginning in this direction has been made in K.N. Chaudhari's *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilization of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990). It is carried further in Richard Hall's superb *Empire of the Monsoon* (London: Harper Collins 1996; paperback edn. 1998).

¹¹ G.V. Scammell confidently identifies the pilot as Ibn Majid, "the most distinguished navigator of the time." *The World Encompassed: the First European Maritime Empire c. 800-1650* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1981) 235. See also J.R. Hall 40. Portuguese sources describe him as the "Moor of Gujarat" and as Maleme, Cana or Canaqua (Captain Astrologer). It is hard to think of a Moslem pilot helping the Portuguese to destroy the very monopoly from which he himself was profiting. These difficulties are taken into account by Richard Hall 179-83, who nevertheless concludes that Ibn Majid was the pilot.

¹² As quoted in Ramakrishna Mukherjee, *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1973) 100.

¹³ Jack E. Tomlins, "Gil Vicente's Vision of India and Its Ironic Echo in Camões 'Velho de Rosselo,'" *Empire in Transition: The Portuguese World in The Times of Camões*, ed. Alfred Hower and Richard A. Preso-Rodas (Gainesville: U of Florida P, Center for Latin American Studies, 1985) 170-76.

¹⁴ Old Man could be read as voicing the conservative opposition to the king, particularly in his view that reformation at home was more important than adventures abroad. This is a stereotypical caution against expansionist enterprises that must be made specific to be effective. Instead it becomes lost by being distanced into fundamentalist statements about original sin and the vanity of human endeavour. The declamation takes in prevailing misgivings but it takes them in through a rhetoric designed to be dismissed.

¹⁵ James H. Sims, "Camões' *Lusiads* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*: Satan's Voyage to Eden," *Papers on Milton*, ed. Philip M. Griffith and Lester F. Zimmerman (Tulsa: U of Tulsa P, 1969) 36-46; "Echoes of Camoens' *Lusiads* in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (I-IV)," *Revista Camonianiana*, 3 (1971): 135-44; "Camoens, Milton, and Myth in the Christian Epic," *Renaissance Papers* (1972): 79-87; "Christened Classicism in *Paradise Lost* and the *Lusiads*," *Comparative Literature* 24 (1972): 338-56; "'Delicious Paradise' in *Os Lusíadas* and in *Paradise Lost*," *Ocidente* (Lisbon), Num. especial (Nov 1972): 163-72; "The Epic Narrator's Mortal Voice in Camões and Milton," *Revue de Literature Comparée* 51 (1977): 377-84; "A Greater than Rome: The Conversion of a Virgilian Symbol from Camões to Milton," *Rome in the Renaissance: The City and the Myth*, ed. P.A. Ramsey (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1982) 334-44; "Milton as a Camoist," *Performance for a Lifetime: A Festschrift Honoring Dorothy Harrell Brown: Essays on Women, Religion, and the Renaissance*, ed. Barbara C. Ewell, Mary A. McCay, Georgiann L. Potts (New Orleans, LA: Loyola U, New Orleans, 1997) 205-22; "Os Lusíadas: A Structural Prototype of *Paradise Lost*," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture*, 4 (1978): 70-75. The alliterative reminiscences are in *PL* 2, 639 and *PL* 11, 399.

¹⁶ *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle* 705-754. J. Martin Evans shows how "Comus's great hymn to Nature's fecundity" reflects encounters with the New World. *Milton's Imperial Epic: "Paradise Lost" and the Discourse of Colonialism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1996) 47-50.

¹⁷ See in particular, *PL* 2, 636-43.

¹⁸ *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Volume 2, ed. Ernest Sirluck (New Haven: Yale UP, 1959) 314. Comus's "curious taste" is taken up in the tasting of the apple but uninhibited consumption is here shrunk to a tentativeness that underlines the drama of the sentence as the twins leap explosively into the world. Syntactic deferrals add to the suspense of the drama.

¹⁹ It is remarkable how the sheer perversity of the argument is ignored by admirers of Comus's eloquence. If the firmament displays the glory of its maker it is so that we can treat it with a sense of reverence.

²⁰ *PL* 9, 1-41.

²¹ Ezra Pound, *Make it New* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934) 86. Interview with Donald Hall, *Pan's Review*, 1962. See also Balachandra Rajan, *The Form of the Unfinished* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985) 288.

²² Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry* in *A Defence of Poetry; The Four Ages of Poetry*, ed. John E. Jordan (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1965) 40.

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