

The Quest for the Knowable and Symbolic Transgression in Camões' *The Lusiads*

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Abstract: Luís Vaz de Camões' epic poem *The Lusiads* dedicated to the voyage of Vasco da Gama to India may be seen as a mark of the closure of the expansive period of Portuguese cultural history. Read as an epic of knowledge, *The Lusiads* celebrate symbolic transgression and the transformation of the culturally defined scheme of global space as its central point shifts away from Jerusalem and the mobilising project of the Crusades. The poem speaks of the trauma of transgression and the endeavour of completing the creation of the world, initiated and left uncompleted by God. This is why its meaning is analysed in terms of spiritual adventure. The maritime voyage realizes the paradigm of universal conjunction, establishing unity situated on the mystical plane.

Keywords: Transgression, epic poetry, *The Lusiads*, globalization, knowledge

The Presentment of an End

Although it thematises the auroral moments of the discovery of the maritime passage to India, *The Lusiads* should be read as a text of a twilight. Camões's masterpiece narrating Vasco da Gama's voyage from Europe to India is obviously a glance back: the poem published in 1572 refers to the events that took place during a voyage that lasted from 1497 to 1499. Situated in relation to the historical process of Portuguese maritime discoveries, the work of the epic poet is a conclusion, the result of an intellectual processing of the experiences of an entire era, roughly covering over a century and a half (if we count it since the beginnings of the maritime exploration in the first half of the fifteenth century). Marking not the beginning but the end of the greatest period of Portuguese maritime adventure, *The Lusiads* is tainted with a melancholic awareness of shortcomings and chances lost, haunted by the presentment of an end. Arguably, such a historical ending actually happened at the moment of the childless death of D. Sebastião which brought about a dynastic crisis. What is more, the mysterious disappearance of the king during the battle of Alcácer-Quibir in Morocco created a fertile ground for the surge of legends and millenarian prophetism resumed under the term 'Sebastianism'. It pushed the Portuguese out of the pragmatic and experimental vein of the maritime expansion into a phantasmal mood of existence. Portuguese life went on not just under the yoke of the Castilian dynasty but, even more importantly, under the Inquisition stifling the impetus of intellectual and ideological revolutions brought about by the maritime discoveries.

On the other hand, the aura of an end in *The Lusiads* may also be seen as inherent to the epic genre. As Frank Kermode wrote in a classical essay, *The Sense of an Ending*, the progress of Aeneas may be resumed as a passage from a broken city to a new one, beyond any end, as Rome would stand for an eternal empire. It is thus close to the apocalyptic and millenarian scheme in which "ends are consonant with origins" and the episodes narrated "all exist under the shadow of the end."²¹ Vasco da Gama narrating the origins of Portugal in his speech to the King of Melinde will strive to close the cycle, to see the end, as he will do while receiving his enlightenment on the mountain peak of the Island of Love. At the same time, one may feel that *The Lusiads*, rich in prophetic discourse—even if it is

repeatedly put in the mouth of an antique deity, Jove or Tethys—is a prefiguration of the millenarian thought of António Vieira transforming Portugal into the Fifth Empire, an eschatological state of peace and justice.

Luís Vaz de Camões, born around 1524, grew up in a society that was already profoundly transformed by maritime affairs. He was an experienced seafarer and soldier, a critical participant in various episodes of warfare accompanying the construction of the Portuguese *Estado da Índia*. His epic poem, created in the Far East, bears marks of this personal involvement and existential disenchantment. It was brought by the author back to the royal court in Lisbon and read before the young king D. Sebastião, in whose eyes, as it seems, the work did not gain high esteem. Nonetheless, from the first printed edition (1572) *The Lusiads* conquered a vast readership. The figure of Camões as the prince of national poets became particularly important during the period of Portugal's dependence on Castile (1580–1640) that followed the disaster of the battle of Alcácer-Quibir. Cultural peculiarity became a bulwark of autonomy under political dependence on the powerful neighbour. The life of the author became a legend—in parallel to the legend of the king—and the epic poem was revered as an everlasting testimony to the glory of Portugal. Although the country became dependent on a foreign political entity, the Portuguese continued to experience, at least at the level of collective imagination, the golden age of discoveries, reopening, over and over again, the gates of mythical India.

The Incompleteness of the World

The Lusiads, however, became more than just a book of a nation. The work has been translated into several languages and has grown beyond the Portuguese context to constitute an important part of the global literary heritage.² The eulogy of Vasco da Gama and his discovery of the maritime passage to India overlaps a topic of timeless importance: the encompassing vision of human existential vocation understood as a commitment to knowledge. As it will be argued, such an epistemological endeavour comes before the commitments to empire and the expansive (either Crusader or missionary) understanding of religion. *The Lusiads* is an epic of cognitive achievement conditioned by symbolic transgression.

The concept of transgression appears more often in sociology and cultural analysis than in literary studies. The notion acquires diverse inflections in each of these disciplines. Speaking in this essay of symbolic transgression, I refer to the understanding of the term rooted in the tradition of Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of culture, associated with the spatial metaphors of border-crossing between areas invested with peculiar qualities. In the third part of his seminal work *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, he stated that, in the process of knowledge, space is not just "a simple intuitive datum", but suffers a process of symbolic formation.³ This symbolism implies the existence of opposites and polarised continua such as 'right'—'wrong', 'sacred'—'profane' as well as their spatial distribution. A symbolic transgression is always associated with and conditioned by a culturally determined system of values against which it is realized. The transgressor infringes not just a legal or social norm of behaviour but also more subtle cultural distinctions, such as the spatial distribution of the sacred and the profane. In this essay, the epic poem of Camões will be read as a narration of a transgressive story, built up on multiple inversions of values. In a significant switch of polarisations, the transgressors implicated in the shadow zone of wrong-doing and betrayal will emerge in the glory as discoverers and innovators modifying not only the map of sea routes but also the symbolic boundaries and distinctions concerning the axiomatic continuum 'valuable'—'worthless', 'legitimate'—'unjustified', and 'sacred'—'profane'.

Hans Blumenberg, another German philosopher and historian of ideas concerned with early-modern transformations, inquired, in the *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, about "absolute metaphors" that cannot be translated back into the strict, conceptual language. They play a crucial role in the evolution of human thought. One of those "absolute metaphors" is the concept of 'world', an intuitive, yet quite complex shorthand of the abstract notion of totality. The changing ways of concep-

tualizing this primary concept provided Blumenberg with keys to the early-modern evolution of culture which could be understood as a series of answers to the basic question 'what is the world?'. Blumenberg speaks of two such answers that may serve as keys for the understanding of the early-modern Portuguese culture: the 'world' is configured as a "terra incognita" and as an "incomplete universe". Both of them are rooted in the Portuguese collective experience of maritime discoveries: in the first place, the sea-faring expedition transcends the boundaries of the 'known world' that seemed to be stable and unchanging, and is *a posteriori* seen as covering only a small fraction of the reality. The other view conceptualises the universe as "analogous to a workpiece and draws from the newly emerging idea of evolutionary cosmogony the metaphorical conclusion that man is faced with the 'task' of bringing the workpiece to completion. 'Evolution' is transformed via the metaphor into a transitive idea: everything that nature has already effected becomes the framework for future human achievement."⁴ The Portuguese maritime endeavour is seen as a human complement to the unfinished divine Creation.

Beyond the Crusades

The Lusíads is profoundly engaged in the transcription of the early-modern geography of the sacred and the profane, striving to formulate a new answer to the general question concerning the organization of 'the world'. The normative code against which Camões stands up in his epic poem is rooted in the late-medieval imagination of chivalry and its Crusader duties. It presupposed a sacred geography with Jerusalem and the Holy Land at its centre. Certainly, Camões did not strive to obliterate the Crusades nullifying their value; the fight against the Muslims is still a leitmotif in *The Lusíads*. But repeatedly paying elaborate homage to chivalry in the narration of national history pronounced by Vasco da Gama before the ruler of Melinde and the Samorin of Calicut,⁵ he strives to close it in the sphere of deeds already completed, like on a well-finished painting that Gama shows to the Indian visitor of his ship. Also, Camões appears to relegate the Crusade to the remote origins of the nation. Gama speaks of the conquest of Jerusalem in a *plusquamperfectum* referring to it as a long-gone circumstance in the life of Henrique, the ancestor of the first Portuguese king ("Já tinha vindo Anrique da conquista", etc. – Canto III, 27).⁶ Yet somehow, the Crusade does not let itself be hemmed in a vision of the past. It slips out of historical narration to make its showy comeback as a rhetorical device in the vituperation against the European nations that fight among themselves rather than fulfilling their duties toward Christianity (Canto VII, 9). Even if *The Lusíads* is generally associated with "the growing recognition of Europe's coming role in a wider world"⁷ at the dawn of the early-modern era, the opposite might also be argued: that the poem deplores the loneliness of the Portuguese on the seas and the lack of wider European participation in the maritime projects.

It is important to notice that the imaginary constellation of chivalrous ideal biographies and paradigms of self-realisation did not die with the end of the Middle Ages but remained valid as late as the sixteenth century.⁸ The very king to whom Camões dedicated his epic poem, D. Sebastião, with his projects of fighting the infidels in North Africa (materialised in the disastrous expedition to Morocco), was a man faithful to a cultural scheme that the new prospects of maritime expansion made obsolete. His obsession with male virginity and sexual reluctance may be explained in the light of the ultra-normative system of medieval chivalry, where the utmost prize, the discovery of the Grail, could be acquired only by a sexually pure knight. Such reasons, together with an extremely strict upbringing supervised by the Jesuit Luís Gonçalves, seem to have motivated or at least contributed to D. Sebastião's refusal of marriage, endangering the dynastic continuity of the Portuguese crown. This is why, as Saúl Jiménez-Sandoval puts it, Camões "will urge King Sebastian to 'see' the body of women as the key to Portugal's future."⁹ Exploring the modalities of transgression, Camões strives to mediate the passage from an obsolete (the Crusades) to a novel collective venture, his "maritime modernity"¹⁰ with all its consequences. He builds up a system of distribution of symbolic values to uphold a new social reality, already transformed by maritime activities.

What is more, he also creates another space of transgression beyond the construct legitimizing the maritime empire centred in India rather than the Holy Land. As I will argue below, Camões fosters a spiritual venture under the disguise of maritime journey. This transgressive quest for enlightenment appears as a flickering light in times of falling Inquisitorial darkness. Although the Crusader idea of expansive religion was about to be abandoned, the Iberian Peninsula effectively stepped on the threshold separating the expansive phase of spiritual freedom (early Renaissance and Humanism) from the phase of contraction under growing Inquisitorial control.

The Trauma of Transgression

As we might see it, an individual act of transgression is hardly more than a misdemeanour. To acquire heroic proportions, to become an epic deed, the transgressive act must be accompanied by strenuous, sustained effort and self-denial. What is more, the heroic transgression must be transformative. It must gather a collective momentum, an amount of energy needed to crush the dominant system of values and to replace it with a new state of awareness, able to integrate new data and circumstances. Therefore, transgression and symbolic reconstruction are closely related and mutually conditional. The process of exploration is a transgressive-cognitive cycle, consisting of sustained refutation and reconstruction of hypotheses about reality. As the flow of collective experience solidifies in an epic vision, it draws new boundaries and distinctions, a new symbolic order.

The conquest of new knowledge requires more than patience and perseverance. It also implies meddling with the established notions of the sacred. This is why the venture of exploration implies a considerable spiritual cost. To achieve his discovery, Vasco da Gama and his crew must deny their faith, accepting the burden of guilt as they betray the truths constituting the foundation of the spiritual order of their time. They must willingly walk into a crisis that shakes the foundations of their universe. Their experience is thus marked by trauma, uncertainty, and remorse. No wonder that the solemn moment of departure of the armada is described by Camões in ambivalent terms. The procession of mariners accompanied by monks appears almost as a funerary conduct. Vasco da Gama and his crew see themselves cursed even before they have time to leave the port. Clearly, the expedition does not enjoy the support of their countrymen, and this is for more than one reason. At the most immediate level of collective mobilization, Gama's endeavour of reaching India appears as a betrayal of the Crusader cause of reaching Jerusalem and liberating the Holy Land. Apparently, Vasco da Gama puts the profane before the sacred. The collective voice of accusation, that resumes, according to Gerald Moser, "the widespread opposition voiced in the general assemblies and royal council meetings during the reigns of João II, Manuel, and João III"¹¹, is embodied in a nameless figure traditionally designated by scholars as the Old Man of Restelo. It might seem that in the general framework of Camões' "historico-imaginative engagement with the ocean"¹², the journey to India hardly implies any positive values.

The greatest of all maritime dangers is the eventuality of crossing the final frontier of what is conceptualised as 'the world'. The explorers are in danger of reaching the last cape, beyond which there is no return. Camões exploits the belief in the existence of such a final limit of available space, expressed in the legend of Cabo Não—a cape that cannot be circumnavigated because behind it lies a space of a different kind, unsuitable for human life due to torrential heat or haunted by monsters. As mentioned by Zurara in his *Crónica dos Feitos da Guiné*, this superstition, deeply rooted among the sailors ("geral e antiga fama"), could be proven false only at the risk of "ulterior harm", i.e. the eternal damnation ("postumeiro dano")¹³. There is thus a Christian factor in the superstition. Sailors setting out to search for a sea passage to India cross the invisible limits of the inhabitable sphere designed by God in his scheme of creation and redemption of man. Their transgressive deep-sea navigation is almost a repetition of the original sin committed by Adam and Eve in paradise. The inability to return is modelled by the expulsion of the first couple from the Garden of Eden. Yet in *The Lusíads*, the cape is removed from this Christian paradigm and reverted into the pagan sphere: it is personified by the titan Adamastor guarding the southern tip of Africa.

The project of navigation violates the divinely established order in more than one way. Hélder Macedo calls our attention to the intertextual relationship between *The Lusíads* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as two epic texts thematising the disturbance of the natural order: "as in the impious Iron Age, the final collapse of the harmony of the Golden Age is marked when the trees were brought down from the mountains and 'as ships, ploughed the unknown seas'. [...] Camões echoes Ovid's image to claim that the Portuguese ships, which in other passages he refers to as 'lenhos' (timbers) or 'troncos' (tree trunks), have ploughed through 'mares nunca dantes navegados' ('seas no man has ever sailed before')." ¹⁴ The displacement of the vegetal element from the earth to the ocean evokes a vision of chaos, destruction, dislocation, and the profound trauma of the transformative process switching the elemental polarities between such categories as 'the dry' and 'the humid'.

At a fundamental level, all deep-sea expeditions involve crossing the limits of the permitted sphere, because all of them involve abandoning the earthly element, the 'dry' world proper to man, in which humanity—in its natural state—is supposed to remain. All navigation is, in this sense, a violation of the order of nature. This is why, at the beginning of the expedition, a general curse is cast upon the heads of all sailors. Camões refers to the negative valuation of deep-sea navigation widespread in European medieval culture. As if in a premonition of the future becoming of Portugal, Dante had already criticised Florence, a city *quae mare, quae terram, quae totum possidet orbem* according to an inscription carved in the Palazzo del Bargello, for her sea-borne aspirations. In his *Inferno* (Canto XXVI) he depicted the flawed greatness of Ulysses, a figure that plays the same Adamic role in Dante's mythical system as it does among the invented ancestors of the Portuguese. His curiosity and will to penetrate the secrets of the world prompted him to abandon his household and domestic duties:

[...] nor fondness for my son,
nor pious reverence for my agèd father,
nor ev'n the bounden love which should have cheered
Penelope, could overcome within me
the eagerness I had to gain experience
both of the world, and of the vice and worth
of men; but forth I put upon the deep
and open sea with but a single ship (Canto XXVI, 84–91). ¹⁵

In hell, Odysseus suffers among fraudulent counsellors not just as the author of the war ruse that ensured the capture of Troy by the Greeks but also as one who has created a precedent of betraying most sacred duties to undertake reckless seafaring expeditions. The Portuguese, who according to legend are his descendants (as the inhabitants of the city of Ulissipo—Lisbon allegedly founded by Ulysses), are predestined to commit similar crimes. The Old Man of Restelo rebukes the inventor of deep-sea navigation as one who leads his descendants to certain death ("Oh! Maldito o primeiro que, no mundo, l Nas ondas vela pôs em seco lenho!" – Canto IV, 102).

Transgressors know well the boundaries they transgress and the punishments that await them. The Portuguese are aware of their share in Odysseus' fate, and yet they risk their "postumeiro dano", the eternal damnation. They ignore multiple warnings: not only the fate of Ulysses in Dante's *Inferno* but also the sign of Heracles, referring to the Pillars named after him as the limit of the navigable sea. They strive to overshadow the achievements of ancient travellers just like the new epic poem is to overshadow the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as well as Camões' immediate textual model, Virgil's *Aeneid*: the notoriety of their overseas expedition is repeatedly supposed to fade away the fame of the protagonists of the Trojan war and other heroes of the vaster antique world including Assyria, Persia, Greece, and Rome (Canto II, 44). What is more, at the very beginning of the text they are presented as men in contest with Death ("se vão da lei da Morte libertando" – Canto I, 2). This aspiration of immortality is precisely what brings about the wrath of the Olympian gods, who always punish those carried away by *hubris*, the guilty presumption that leads man to new endeavours and inventions. The wrath of Bacchus is kindled by the Portuguese endeavour to outbid not only the

glory of ancient heroes (“Cesse tudo o que Musa antiga canta” – Canto I, 3) but also his own deeds in India—he is presented as the first conqueror of India: his statue appears in the gardens of the palace of Samorin, the ruler of Calicut (“[...] esquecerão seus feitos no Oriente | Se lá passar a Lusitana gente” – Canto I, 30). This is why Bacchus, although a legendary forefather of the Portuguese (as the father of Luso or Lusus, the mythical founder of Portugal¹⁶), strives to hinder their progress.

The role of the defender of the established order is thus played not by Christian God but by Bacchus, the patron of drunkenness to whom such a role is the least becoming. However, by pitting the drunken pagan god against the Portuguese, Camões reduces the voltage of transgression. It becomes an expected and desirable act: Vasco da Gama is called to break an old, delegitimised order, barely standing on its shaky foundations. Triumphant over the will of the Olympian deities, he proclaims the advent of the Christian God and carries out his verdicts. Yet arguably, he is also instrumental in bringing about the new order of *Humanitas* personified by Venus, opening new sea routes and thus making possible new conviviality of the dispersed mankind.

Be that as it may, the Portuguese compete with their forefathers. Bacchus, Adamastor, and the Old Man of Restelo appear as old men confronted by young daredevils. As it has often been stressed, *The Lusíads* is a poem profoundly implicated in the patriarchal order¹⁷, be it in its overthrowing or merely its renovation. Bacchus embodies the figure of a father whom the young men wish to overcome and surpass in the eternal *agon* inscribed in the very centre of patriarchy. Hélder Godinho interprets the figure of the Old Man of Restelo as the embodiment of the sacred link with the native land.¹⁸ Yet he is also a failed, decadent patriarch, excluded from the ongoing rhythm of life. What is significant, each of the forefathers stands also for an aspect of male sexual dysfunction. Adamastor, a titan transformed into rock and therefore unable to bring to consummation his love for a nymph,¹⁹ epitomizes the eternal suspension in frustrated desire, just like the Old Man of Restelo and Bacchus incarnate impotence and inertia of the matter in which they are imprisoned. Masculinity encased in rock is incapable of either of the two types of performance that befit Gama’s companions: heroic acts and sexual union (consumed in the final sections of the poem on the Island of Love). What is more, Philip Hardie interprets the figure of Adamastor not only as the personification of alien geography, of the African coast as a space of wilderness and danger but also as a dark double of the epic poet himself. Delving into the link between Virgil’s *Fama* in the *Aeneid* as a figure impersonating the uncontrollable nature of rumour and the figure of Adamastor linked with excessive, uncontrolled desire translatable into the poet’s ambition of excellence, he reached conclusions concerning Camões’ fascination with the irrational factor in both poetry and history-making.²⁰

Adamastor curses the sailors for their aspiration to reach out for forbidden knowledge. In his elaborate speech (Canto V, 41–59) he emphasizes the guilt resulting from crossing the eternal boundaries and learning about what was supposed to remain forever hidden from human sight (“[...] vens ver os segredos escondidos | Da natureza e do húmido elemento” – Canto V, 42). The titan predicts a punishment that will be meted out not only to the explorers but to all those who follow in their footsteps. The transgression perpetrated by Gama and his companions, the crossing of the eternal border, should remain without consequences: a road once travelled should not become a beaten track. Therefore, the curse of Adamastor is intended to bring punishment not on the explorers themselves but on their successors and all people who dare to take advantage of the new prospects that are open upon vast horizons of the future (“Sabe que quantas naus esta viagem | Que tu fazes, fizerem, de atrevidas, | Inimiga terão esta paragem” – Canto V, 43).

As the Portuguese break the imaginary limits of the Cabo Não and vanquish Adamastor, the discovery of the route to India fundamentally disrupts the world order, which until now consisted of separate, non-communicating areas, separated by the ocean. Now, due to the transformative and foundational value of the symbolic transgression, what was separated is about to come together: the oceans divinely created as obstacles change their symbolic polarity from negative to positive: they become roads of communication. This switch of polarities constitutes an offence against the will of the deity who organized the original order and may result in severe punishment, just like in Aeschylus’

tragedy *The Persians*, where military defeats – Salamis and Plataea – were presented as a punishment sent by gods for human *hubris*. The guilty achievement of the Persians consisted in building a bridge over the Hellespont; their *hubris* was to connect through a communication route what by the will of gods was supposed to remain separate. Yet in the humanist understanding of Christianity what comes to the fore is the partnership of the divine Creator and human transformers of the Creation.

It may also be regarded as a humanist peculiarity that the advocacy in favour of the Portuguese in their clash against the patriarchal order takes up a feminine form. The infraction implied in the seafaring endeavour is endorsed by Venus who appears in front of Jove hardly covered by “a veil of finest sendal” (“delgado cendal” – Canto II, 37). In her pleading in favour of the Portuguese, she uses not just arguments but also the embodied power of seduction, and as she speaks, sexual desires, almost materialised as ivy, entwine her legs (“Pelas lisas columnas the trepavam | Desejos, que como hera se enrolavam” – Canto II, 36). Yet significantly, female seduction is, in a way, just and truthful rather than false, misleading, or illusory. The Renaissance distribution of values differs from the medieval, essentially misogynous vision associating female charms and falseness. Camões follows the new astrological-allegorical order established by Florentine Neoplatonists in which Venus is the personification of *Humanitas*, just as the planet associated with her is regarded as a source of beneficent moral influences. The powers of illusion belong to Venus' adversary, Bacchus, who will repeatedly shape-shift and inspire false news, presenting the Portuguese as lawless sea robbers. Moreover, maritime transgression is repeatedly presented as something other than a crime resulting from giving in to impulses, material or erotic desires. Nobler motives are evoked, creating a sphere of excellence surrounding the foundational moments of imperial history. At the same time, the repeated idea of the Portuguese as a destructive, bloodthirsty, lawless factor (“Cristãos sanguinolentos, | Que quase todo o mar tem destruído” – Canto I, 79) creates a fluctuation in that sphere of discourse.²¹

As Bernhard Klein remembered in his provocative essay with a denial (*We are not pirates*) in the title, such a dimension of honourability and excellence was not in the least given in the maritime history that for centuries remained a peripheral sphere of activity where the horizon of lawlessness was constantly present. Camões strives to counter “a troubling moral accusation that could at any time be brought against the Portuguese imperial drive.”²² All along *The Lusíads*, Gama repeats his declaration of loyalty and truthfulness, while events often contradict his claims. Just to give an example, the Portuguese repeatedly attack unarmed embarkations and make their occupants captive on the mere presupposition they may be infidels (“porque haviam de ser da Maura gente” – Canto II, 68). Certainly, one may guess that Camões was perfectly aware of how inglorious the victories of the fifteenth-century maritime expansion might have been. The expression of bitterness accompanying victories obtained against humble, ill-equipped adversaries is frequent in his lyrical poetry; also *The Lusíads* bears the marks of profound disenchantment with inglorious military actions. Even the song of Tethys on the Island of Love, narrating the history of *Estado da Índia* yet as a prophecy, sounds strangely dissonant in the crystal clear palace on the top of the ideal mountain. The beautiful and fragile nymph evokes macabre images of war, full of chopped arms and legs (“verá braços e pernas ir nadando | Sem corpos, pelo mar” – Canto X, 36), just as she laments the utter disgrace and lack of recognition that awaits the maritime heroes in their homeland.

Overall, Vasco da Gama and his intrinsically just, valiant men are surrounded by obstacles, miseries, disloyalty, and humiliations. Also, they are aware of the inglorious and morally dubious aspects of their mission. The horrors of war and the dangers of the sea are hardly compensating in commercial terms (due to the opposition of the Arab traders, the Portuguese hardly sell any goods and acquire any species for which they came such a long way). At the bottom line, the balance of the expedition is positive only if it is considered as an epistemological achievement. Knowledge is the only treasure they are able to bring back home. This is why the only stable discursive sphere of excellence is associated with the cognitive endeavour as a value in itself. It is the cognitive progress that utterly justifies the conquest and the foundation of an empire, not the other way around.

The Completion of the World

The Lusíads constantly oscillates between the grandiose and the comely. Contrasting the Portuguese epic poem with the paradigm given in the *Aeneid*, Timothy Hampton sees a poem “divided between six books of wandering about the coast of Africa and four books of . . . well, dithering and negotiating in India. Indeed, one of the formal and rhetorical difficulties faced by Camões’ poem is precisely that, in contrast to the noble models it evokes at the outset, it offers no great feats of heroism, no unforgettable battles and no superhuman instances of individual courage. The poem is, in effect, about a trading mission or diplomatic sally from the Portuguese to India.”²³ Beyond this down-to-earth understanding of the events, the sea expedition is a guilty manifestation of *hubris* in the eyes of the ancient gods, and, as usually happens in similar situations, they try to punish the Portuguese for their presumption. However, this cannot succeed, because the venture of the explorers turns out to be the fruit of inspiration coming from the Christian God. The sailors obey the orders of a divinely inspired ruler, D. Manuel, as the idea of the expedition is the result of the ruler’s prophetic dream. Gama’s companions prove to be envoys, acting with a higher authority.

The attack on the current world order, the intention to “add new worlds to the world”, turns out to be the result not of man’s presumption but of God’s decision. As an ultimate instance, it is God who decides to change the current organization of the globe (which so far consisted of parts that did not communicate with each other and were separated rather than connected by the oceans), because the Time has come—the inhabitants of distant lands must have the opportunity to become acquainted with evangelical good tidings before the end of the world. Although the sailors could not look into the eyes of their mothers when leaving their home port, they return radiant with glory, because man’s aspirations that coincide with God’s will and encounter supernatural help are transferred to the sphere of nobility and excellence; their legitimacy is put beyond any doubt. At the beginning of Canto VII (1–14), deep-sea navigation is not only harmoniously inscribed in the Christian order of values but also acknowledged as an act worthy of highest recognition. The Portuguese maritime venture takes on an advantageous aspect as compared with the achievements of other Christian nations. The expedition is sanctified through inclusion in a religious perspective. The Portuguese are shown as martyrs for their faith and are additionally exalted thanks to the virtue of humility; as the smallest nation in Europe, they do the most to expand the scope of the Christian world. They disregard their “weak forces” (“o fraco poder”), adopting the terms of religious thinking in which the last are to be the first. Within the biblical paradigm, the fragile youngster David triumphs over the mighty Goliath. To fulfil their God-given mission, the sailors do not necessarily have to be stronger in purely human, worldly terms; their triumph results from the inscription of their transgressive will into the projects of God.

As Camões presents it, the Portuguese cooperate with God in the work of creation. They reorganize the world, aiming at its global unification. Thanks to the Portuguese intervention, there is a transition from a divided world, consisting of parts without the possibility of communication, to a unified world, united by communication routes paved by Portuguese expeditions. Adamastor’s anger turns out to be powerless. This unification of the world is seen from a Christian, rather than pagan perspective, as the opening of new opportunities for proselytism. A united world is a world open to evangelizing activity. Stepping away from the historical venture of the Crusades, Camões recognizes nonetheless the value of cognitive endeavour subordinated to religious purpose, aimed at showing the truth to infidels. The sea voyage is legitimized as an activity in favour of the faith.

The argument of *The Lusíads* could end at this point. The doubts of the Old Man of Restelo have been dissipated and the discovery of the maritime passage to India is dignified as a higher form of Crusade. However, there are still other, unexpected values resulting from navigation: the sea expedition provides an opportunity to reveal true virtue on the Island of Love. Contrary to what the beginning of the poem suggested, it turns out that Gama’s companions are not only interested in surpassing heroes and heroic categories borrowed from the pagan world, in reaching where Heracles

and Odysseus failed. Quite disturbingly, they also try to achieve concomitantly bodily fulfilment through sex and mystical transformation through enlightenment. The poem's pagan integument conceals a mystical content. The navigation in the labyrinth of the world, including the oceanic space, is a winding path to meeting the Absolute. Camões therefore blurs the distinction that appeared on the pages of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where the sailing of the cursed Odysseus constituted an antithesis of the journey through Inferno, Purgatory and Paradise leading to God and true knowledge. In *The Lusíads*, the route leads through the ocean rather than the spaces of the afterlife, and sailing becomes the highest form of initiation. Transgression as a condition of the emergence of a new order requires a return to the formlessness of the original water element, from which the world will emerge in a new configuration, as if brought into existence by a renewed act of creation. It is realized as a violation of the spatial order, as an intrusion into an area from which man has been excluded. At the same time, it is also a violation of the order of the elements: the essence of the crime is the combination of what is dry and earthy with what belongs to the humid world. As Yvette Centeno emphasizes, a specific alchemical operation is necessary, leading to the creation of a new unity in which oppositions will be overcome.²⁴ The elements combined into a new type of *coincidentia oppositorum* must arrange themselves into perfected cosmic harmony.

The poem closes with the elaborate episode of the Island of Love, covering most of Cantos IX and X. As far as the explicit meaning of the text is considered, one may argue that the reader is confronted with a bold scene of collective orgy. On the Island of Love, the members of Gama's crew indulge in carnal pleasures in the company of sea nymphs, deliberately instructed by Venus in the art of love-making. The culmination of the epic appears as yet another instance of transgression, a betrayal of values in yet another sense. However, the events on the island mark a broader issue related to the possibilities and limitations of human cognition, and the interpretation of the episode allows us to reach the hidden, mystical message of the entire poem. The moment of triumph comes after the orgy: the captain of the expedition is shown the secrets of the organization of the world in a crystal sphere (the world in the womb of God) and learns about the future.

According to the traditional epic paradigm of catabasis (a journey to the underworld) present in the *Odyssey*, where Ulysses visits the dead, the sea voyage may be seen as analogous to the descent to hell. The navigation culminating in an orgy in the company of the sea nymphs is a return to the primordial chaos, from which the world will emerge in a new configuration, as if brought into existence by a renewed act of creation. The sailor's mission is to give a new structure to the global space, to recognize its order and mark it symbolically. In Camões' vision, the world can be transformed, yet this transformation involves sacrifice. The explorers expose themselves to countless sufferings and dangers, including the agony of guilt. Yet through the sailor's sacrifice, the vision of a world divided into regions with different characteristics is overcome. By breaking down the barriers dividing the major areas of the globe, the great unification is achieved. The final union of the divided world, the universal conjunction, takes place through love. As the microcosm of the human sexual body reflects the macrocosm, the supreme unifying force of desire operates not only on the bodily but also on the cosmic plane.

Any attempt to create a new order must be preceded by a temporary descent into the state of original chaos and the abolition of all oppositions. The explorers accomplish this in many ways, not only by long sailing through the undifferentiated and formless water element but also by descending into the 'chaos' of the orgy on the Island of Love, where the sailors start the sexual 'hunt' for the nymphs of Venus' retinue. However, soon after this transgressive experience, the order is rebuilt in a new, sublime form. After descending into the animal condition of the sexual desire, the transgressive dimension is obliterated by the ceremony of marriage. The entire episode requires a reading that accentuates its hidden, mystical meaning. It is certainly not only about presenting a paradise of physical pleasures, because the captain of the expedition experiences knowledge in a unique form: he ascends a mountain where he is able to see a vision of the perfect world in its crystal 'womb'. The

literary image of sexual transgression hides a different, much more serious meaning: for it is forbidden, within institutionalized religion, to directly know God through mystical experience.

Conclusion

People and things in *The Lusíads* function on intersecting planes of illusion and deep, mystical meaning. Venus, who supports the Portuguese, and her retinue of nymphs do not entirely belong to the plane of the Olympian deities. Imperceptibly, the goddess transforms into the embodiment of God's Wisdom, and even the very space of moral transgression—the Island of Love—into the image of God himself. Vasco da Gama and his companions are ultimately shown not as traitors and criminals but as collaborators in the work of creation who 'give' new parts to the world and 'add' new areas to the global space. The transgressive coitus is only a symbolic announcement of the great unification of the world, a universal conjunction. Love becomes a principle of connection by which not only the bodies but also the separated parts of the world, as well as the world itself and its Creator are linked into a harmonious whole.

Radical transformative actions, both cognitive and those that interfere too deeply with matter, like those of an alchemist manipulating the elements, are risky. At any moment, man is exposed to the supreme danger of interfering with the divine will or entering the sphere of action reserved for God, the divine competencies. Such a concern is not alien to the spiritual climate of the Portuguese Renaissance. Yet Camões in *The Lusíads* rejects the attitude of quietism, assigning to man the role of God's partner. Man's involvement in the world, such as a daring maritime expedition, does not distract him or lead him away from true spiritual life. On the contrary, aspirations for worldly knowledge and spiritual illumination harmoniously combine. Even if the exploration of the world comes down to repeating the sin of curiosity committed in paradise, it ultimately turns out that the transgression made by the Portuguese is an indispensable part of the divine plan, just as the act of eating the apple of the Tree of Knowledge was also an integral part of the plan in which God's love for man is to be ultimately revealed. Without transgression, without an attack on the established and sacred world order, there would be no vision of the perfect world order that the Portuguese captain was allowed to see.

Through his epic narrative, Camões tried to acknowledge and codify certain rules of the relationship between man and the sacred. The poem was intended to reveal the essence of cooperation, breaking the apparent contradiction between man's unauthorized intervention in the world and his respect for the original, divinely created order of nature. It is intended to show the harmony underlying the relationship between man and God, and ultimately, not only to ennoble the discoverer but also to alleviate or solve the aporia inherent in the very essence of his activity.

The cycle of transgression and knowledge is a constantly repeating process of painful rule-breaking and the passage toward the euphoria of enlightenment that accompanies the discovery of a novel, transformative truth. Framing this cycle into an epic story, Camões tried to overcome the tragic potential of epistemic progress, building an image of great harmony extending to the world, man, and God. Knowing the cultural history that followed, we can see that his endeavour remained imperfect. The epic poem glorifying the transgression did not stop the progress of the Inquisitorial stifling of intellectual and spiritual freedom. Nonetheless, in the modern world, in which the rhythm of euphoria, disappointment, and new revision of the acquired knowledge becomes faster than ever before, Camões makes a productive reading. He explains the creative meaning of intellectual transgression, the necessity of betraying the obsolete truths, even the sense of exposing oneself to spiritual destruction while searching for new paths. In the religious horizon of his epoch, Camões taught that man could aspire to the status of a creature worthy of God only through transgression.

Acknowledgments

This paper is the result of a research project financed by Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, realized in Lisbon in 2024–2025. The author expresses her gratitude to the Foundation for their generous support, which made this study possible.

Notes

- ¹ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending. Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 5.
- ² The appreciation of *The Lusíads* as an important part of world literature may be exemplified by the contribution of Paulo Horta, “Camões as World Author: Cosmopolitan Misreadings”, *1616: Anuario de Literatura Comparada*, no. 3 (2013), 45–65. A great part of the present-day scholarly commitment to *The Lusíads* consists of the readings made outside the European context of interpretation, expanding eastwards and westwards. See f. ex. Balachandra Rajan, “The Lusíads and the Asian Reader”, *Under Western Eyes: India from Milton to Macaulay* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 31–49. Also, the generativeness of Camões’ text, as Sara V. Torres argues, expands beyond the usual boundaries of the European early-modern literary network, finding a resonance in such contexts as Brazilian *literatura de cordel*; see: Sara V. Torres, “Oceanic Epic: The Translations of the *Lusíads* in the Global Renaissance.” *Digital Philology: A Journal of Medieval Cultures* 8, no. 1 (2019), 105–122.
- ³ Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms (The Phenomenology of Knowledge)* (Trans. Ralph Manheim. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 143.
- ⁴ Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigms of Metaphorology* (Trans. Robert Savage, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1969), 123.
- ⁵ The question of *The Lusíads* as a narration of historical “truth” rather than poetic invention has been discussed in the classical essay by Thomas R. Hart, “The Idea of History in Camões’s *Lusíads*”, *Ocidente: Revista portuguesa de cultura*, 83 (1972), 83–97.
- ⁶ For English translation, I follow the version of William Atkinson (Penguin Books, 1952).
- ⁷ Clive Willis, “*The Lusíads* and the Literature of Portuguese Overseas Expansion”, *A Companion to Portuguese Literature*, Stephen Parkinson, Cláudia Pazos Alonso, & T. F. Earle (Eds.) (Boydell & Brewer, 2009), 72–84.
- ⁸ Sara V. Torres analyses the narration of the chivalrous expedition of Magriço to England in terms of anachronism and belatedness of the Portuguese culture. Sara V. Torres, “Oceanic Epic: The Translations of the *Lusíads* in the Global Renaissance.” *Digital Philology: A Journal of Medieval Cultures* 8, no. 1 (2019), 105–122.
- ⁹ Saúl Jiménez-Sandoval, “Love and the Empire in *Os Lusíadas*”, *Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies* 7 (2008), 240.
- ¹⁰ Bernhard Klein, “Camões and the Sea: Maritime Modernity in *The Lusíads*”. *Modern Philology* 111: 2 (2013), 158.
- ¹¹ Gerald M. Moser. “What Did the Old Man of the Restelo Mean?” *Luso-Brazilian Review* 17, no. 2 (1980), 141.
- ¹² Josiah Blackmore, “The Shipwrecked Swimmer: Camões’s Maritime Subject”, *Modern Philology* 109 (2012), 314.
- ¹³ Gomes Eanes de Zurara, *Crónica de Guiné* (ed. José de Bragança, Porto: Livraria Civilização, 1973), p. 46.
- ¹⁴ Hélder Macedo, “*The Lusíads*: Epic Celebration and Pastoral Regret”, *Portuguese Studies*, 1990, Vol. 6 (1990), 32.
- ¹⁵ For English translation, I follow the version of Courtney Langdon (Harvard University Press, 1918).
- ¹⁶ Camões widely recreates the figure of *Lusus*, transforming it into a part of a literary mythology of the Portuguese; see João R. Figueiredo, “Luís de Camões’s *The Lusíads* and the paradoxes of expansion”, in Kathleen Christian, and Bianca de Divitiis (eds), *Local antiquities, local identities: Art, literature and antiquarianism in Europe, c. 1400–1700* (Manchester, 2018; online edn, Manchester Scholarship Online, 23 May 2019), <https://doi.org/10.7228/manchester/9781526117045.003.0010>, accessed 6 Oct. 2023.
- ¹⁷ Denise Saive Castro, “Empty fathers and failing empires: patrilineality and masculinity in *Lusíadas*”, *Via Atlântica* 33, 2018, 325–341; Moira Richards, “Adamastor: a post-patriarchal approach”, *Scrutiny*, 4, 2 (1999), 73–74.
- ¹⁸ Hélder Godinho, “Para uma mitocrítica de *Os Lusíadas*”, in *A Viagem de Os Lusíadas. Símbolo e Mito* (Lisboa: Cosmos, 2000), 37–41.
- ¹⁹ Against the widespread opinion pointing to the *Aeneid* as the textual model of *The Lusíads*, Leonor Santa Bárbara calls our attention to the fact that the figure of Adamastor has no direct precedent in Virgil’s poem; it may derive from Theocritus’ Idyll XI, “The Cyclops”, where young Polyphemus is in love with Galatea.

- Leonor Santa Bárbara, “Two Giants in Love: Epic and Bucolic Poetry”, in *Literature and Cultural Memory* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 136–144.
- ²⁰ Philip Hardie, “Adamastor and the Epic Poet’s Dark Continent”, in Philip Hardie (ed.), *Augustan Poetry and the Irrational* (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2016), 281–292.
- ²¹ My point contradicts multiple readings of *The Lusiads* as “the central expression of imperial ideology in Portugal”, to quote the expression used by Josiah Blackmore, *Manifest Perdition: Shipwreck Narrative and the Disruption of Empire*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 20. In fact, the poem plays such a role in the dominant reading of Portuguese literary and cultural history, yet the locus of ideological incertitude, inscribed in the text, had to be overlooked in order to preserve the coherence of the overall cultural landscape. On the other hand, it has well been noticed that there is also a vein of anti-imperial dissent countering the overt praise of the Portuguese conquests within the poem; see Matthew M Gorey, “*Pietas* and the ‘Other Camões’ — subversive translation and allusion in *The Lusiads*”, *Classical Receptions Journal*, vol. 11, no 2 (2019), 211–229.
- ²² Bernhard Klein, “‘We are not pirates’: Piracy and Navigation in *The Lusiads*”, in Claire Jowitt (ed.), *Pirates? The Politics of Plunder, 1550–1650* (Palgrave Macmillan 2007), 106.
- ²³ Timothy Hampton, “Virgil in India: Epic, History, and Military Tactics in the *Lusiads*”, *MLN* 130, no. 2 (2015), 170.
- ²⁴ Yvette Centeno, “O Cântico da Água em *Os Lusíadas*”, *A Viagem de Os Lusíadas. Símbolo e Mito* (Lisboa: Cosmos, 2000), 17.

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