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**LUÍS DE CAMÕES:
THE FIRST EX-PAT POET
Landeg White**

In his elegy *O Poeta Simónides, falando* Portugal's greatest poet Luís de Camões faces up squarely to the major crisis of his life. In 1552 during the Corpus Christi celebrations, he had brawled with Gonçalo Borge, keeper of the King's harness, and wounded him with a sword thrust. Initially jailed in the Tronco Prison, he was released on payment of a fine and an undertaking to enlist as a common soldier in Portuguese India. Until then, Camões had lived precariously and with interruptions on the fringes of the court, hoping his skills as a composer of pastoral elegies and sonnets in the Petrarchan manner would gain him patronage and possible preferment. Now he was condemned to serve in India as what would later be termed a 'degredado'. His very life was at risk. Of four ships that sailed for India in 1553, three were wrecked, and though Camões arrived safely he had three years of military service before him in Goa and the Persian Gulf. But his concern in the elegy is not with survival but with the future of his poetry.

What was the point of writing if he had no audience? What did a court poet do when banished from the court?

He begins with a grim joke. The Greek poet Simonides had invented a method for perfecting memory, offering it to his friend Themistocles as a means 'to file/ systematically all his experiences'. Themistocles replies "If only you could show me the knack / of recalling nothing from my past, / you'd be doing me the better work.'

With this, Camões embarks for India. As he proceeds down the Tagus, the nymphs Galateia, Panopeia, Melanto and Dinamene accompany him, surfing in their scallop shells. They had been the heroines of his early pastorals, thinly disguised versions of ladies at court, and he chats with them companionably. But they cannot face the Atlantic. He sails on without them and, within three tercets he is in entirely new poetic territory under constellations he doesn't recognize as 'The waves became vertiginous', 'the rigging whistled in the uproar', and 'the blaspheming of the shocked/ mariners curdled the atmosphere.'

Ovid's *Tristia*, the poems of his Black Sea exile (especially 1.10) were partly in Camões' mind here: it was part of the etiquette of Renaissance poetry to make courteous reference to classical writers. Camões himself had never written anything remotely similar.

Then at the storm's height, he makes a most curious vow. Turning as it were back from Ovid to Petrarch, he promises that wherever his fate takes him he will stay true to the values of chivalry 'for love is never truly courtly / while in the presence of its cure'. (Having arrived in India, he tries this out, in one sonnet proclaiming his lady's name as he goes into battle, in another wearing her favour on his shield.) But even as the Elegy continues, a gap yawns between such high-flown poetic ideals and his actual circumstances. His first campaign against the Sultan of Chembe is a distinctly un-chivalrous affair with the aim of cornering the market in pepper, as 'with very little effort we won / against a people skilled only with bows, / punishing them with death and arson.' Courtly values seem as irrelevant to colonial India as were Don Quixote's books of chivalry to early seventeenth-century Spain. (The comparison is not irrelevant: Cervantes praises 'the excellent Camões' in part 2, chapter 58 of Don Quixote.)

Camões continues the Elegy by reflecting on what might have been were he not 'harnessed for life / to others ambitious to be gentlemen. / O happy those who work the land, if /only they knew their own good.' Thirteen tercets follow, invoking the benefits of rural existence, including its aesthetic and intellectual pleasures, in contrast both to the court and to his present existence 'having to pursue dreadful Mars, / my eyes always on my jeopardy.' The sentiment rings true. As we see from his *Redondilhas* (Songs), Camões was a great admirer of folksong, and life as a rural poet might have suited him. But given that fate 'has such authority / to divide me so far from all I prize', he must find a new style of writing. The Elegy concludes with the vow that so long as he lives nothing will separate him 'from the prime duty / of my muscular verse'.

Camões did not travel for travel's sake. He experienced his seventeen years in Africa, India and China as a long and bitter exile, and his poetry contains little of those places. But exile forced him to rethink what his poetry was for, and the process turned him into one of the greatest poets of the age. Take this example:

Busque Amor novas artes, novo engenho

Invent fresh arts and cunning, Love,
to destroy me, and new frustrations;
but you can't remove my expectations
by taking away what I don't have.

Look where my hopes are grounded!
Observe what perilous guarantees
that I don't fear even on the wildest seas
contrast or change, the ship having foundered.

But insofar as I'm not unhappy
when hope fails, Love maintains within
an evil that destroys, and in secret:

some days there pitches camp in me
I know not what, nor where it is born,
nor whence it comes, nor why it hurts.

As with his early courtly poems, his preferred form is the Petrarchan sonnet. Petrarch's *Canzonieri* (Song Book, 1360), a series of high-flown, elaborately paradoxical love poems, had launched a literary craze that swept through Italy, Spain, France and Portugal, washing up two centuries later on the shores of Elizabethan England. But already, fifty years before Shakespeare was to do so, Camões is bucking the trend. Love is still his theme, but this is hardly courtly love. There is no high-born, snowy-bosomed lady with her customary disdain, nor courtly presence at all, not even courtiers pretending to be shepherds and shepherdesses. Camões has moved away from the sophisticated wit of the Petrarchan code to write a completely new kind of love poem, one that is intense, personal, and direct (and, for the translator dismaying, simple). The life that floods into these later sonnets is the effect of a natural, questioning and energetic mind, drawing its images from his experience of exile. Love involves voyaging to dangerous coasts, to which the lover is fated to keep returning. It involves shipwreck and drowning, unjust sentences in vile prisons or being chained to the galley oar. It involves pacing the Indian Ocean beaches questioning the stars, or the cards, or the turn of the wheel, about sacrificing more than lambs or heifers. It involves Cephalus's misplaced passion for Procris, or Daliana's for Silvio while her husband Laurenio suffers in silence, or Nise and Montano, divided by circumstance, or Jacob, cheated of Rachel by his father-in-law.

It culminates in the series of sonnets addressed to the lover who has perished at sea. Again, she is called Dinamene, but with this difference - that outside the world of courtly pastoral nymphs do not belong in water. They drown.

But these sonnets of exile are not his greatest achievement for it was in exile that he wrote his masterpiece *The Lusíads*. This is not the place to take to task those scholars who contend Camões never needed to leave Portugal to write his epic. No one denies those seventeen years of bitter exile, and I stand by the claim in the introduction to my translation that *The Lusíads** is overwhelmingly an expatriate's poem. It was in Africa, India and perhaps China that the great vision took shape:

First, he learned what it was to be Portuguese, to come from a landscape whose towns and rivers he loved, whose plains and castles were haunted by the ghosts of warriors who had fought for this territory, whose provinces were part of Christendom and the Holy Roman Empire but were emerging as a 'state', and whose people were learning loyalty to a concept of nation which transcended loyalty to kings. Secondly, he learned to celebrate what the Portuguese had given to the world with the pioneer voyages of the fifteenth century, culminating in then voyage to India, in revealing the planet's true dimensions, its wealth, and its multitudes of peoples. It was the former of these ideas that was prophetic, taking wing after the restoration of Portugal's independence from Spain in 1640. The latter, Camões's celebration of the newness of the world, was a theme that required, and requires, constant rediscovery.

Expatriate poets, by choice or bitter exile, are increasingly common in today's world. Camões was the first great European poet to cross the equator with all the questioning of his art that that entailed.

He remains our first and best model.

**Camões, Luis Vaz de. The Lusiads, translated Landeg White. Oxford University Press (The World's Classics), 1999. ISBN 0-19-283191-7.*

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