

“ORA PRO NOBIS”: THE PUBLIC EXPANSION
OF THE PRIVATE PORTUGUESE VOYAGE IN
Os LUSÍADAS

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A Camonian voyage can be understood in terms of its range. The various places the Portuguese navigate, and the several latent journeys, uncovered through a hermeneutic of the epic, each mark a distinct traversal through space—diegetic or otherwise. Although the central trip to India may appear to be the immediate cynosure of Luís Vaz de Camões’s poem due to its length, those it eclipses are equally, if not more, protracted in nature. Moreover, the teleological value of these treks makes the preponderance of Vasco da Gama’s nautical exploit suspect, insofar as the criterion responsible for bestowing importance on the physical travel is called into question when the ‘minor’ expeditions illustrate exactly *what* they are voyaging through. The scale of the *personal* expedition, amongst the ‘minor’ exploits in Camões’s work, merits attention because its course distends and ruptures the delimitations of the text. Intelligible in conjunction to a similar text, reading *Os Lusíadas* through an exegesis of Psalm 130 reveals, as their structures assist in demonstrating, that the voyage beginning inwards and moving outwards is the exemplary, albeit overlooked, manifestation of depth’s direct relation to a narrative of nationhood.

Characterized by its private nature, the trajectory of the personal excursion originates upon defining the role of the self. Vasco da Gama, as the captain of the Portuguese fleet, posits that the endeavour must begin from an inward source. Where Camões makes this patent is during the navigator’s moment of introspection before he recounts Portuguese history: “All those

present were waiting eagerly / For what the great da Gama would say, / When, losing himself a little in thought, he raised his eyes and spoke...” (III.3.i-iv).¹ The salient aspect of this instance is the need for da Gama to *reflect* on the task he is about to assume before it begins; that is, he realizes what *his* role as a narrator involves, prior to acknowledging the presence of others with the ‘raising of his eyes.’ It is in this context that the captain admits, “And I know that whatever time I take / Will be all too short to tell you all” (III.4.v-vi). The relationship between the enunciator (da Gama) and the enounced (the Portuguese feats), as these verses reveal, is one that posits the narrative in a sphere beyond the reach of human dialectics. For this reason, the humility displayed by da Gama communicates the position of inadequacy that is indispensable for commencing the definition of the self as it is one that considers its shortcomings. Accordingly, the effacement of an *a priori* solipsism that da Gama’s ineffability evinces becomes the metaphorical ‘sea port’ from which the expedition begins.

Nevertheless, this identification is merely a point of departure, and not the totalizing understanding of the self, because the dimensions of *depth* extend beyond a linear dichotomy of narrator and text and into the form of a plea. Whilst the position of da Gama in canto III is one that is figuratively below something greater, it is the author’s description of Adamastor that exteriorizes the abyssal quality of the self: “It spoke with a coarse, gravelly voice / Booming from the ocean’s depths...” (V.40.v-vi). In this case, Adamastor’s speech is one which originates from the nether regions of the ocean. This point stipulates that the only form of communication possible for the enigmatic monster inherently derives its force from a depth. Precisely because it is communicated through this voice, it stands to be understood that Adamastor’s melancholy, declared to the Portuguese sailors, is therefore a personal narrative originating from a depth. In this adjoining of profundity with plight, not only is a link forged between posterior ‘I’s of da Gama and the fiendish elocutionist, but an intertextual parallel is also brought forth between *Os Lusíadas* and Psalm 130. The incipit of the psalm found in the *Biblia Sacra Vulgata* is as follows: “De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine...” ‘From the depths I cry to you, Lord’ (Psalm 129:1). Within this verse one

¹ For the purpose of this paper, Landeg White’s edition of *Os Lusíadas* will be used and Frank Pierce’s text will explicitly be referred to as “the original Portuguese” whenever cited.

finds the psalmist asserting his position of spatial and spiritual inferiority to God as he ‘cries from the depths.’² What this indicates is that a supplication rising from below is a distinctive attribute of the pleading voice. Turning to the commentary provided by Manuel de Faria e Sousa on the previously cited episode of Adamastor, the connection can be made between the Psalm and the monster’s melancholic voice: “Hasta la misma de[s]cripción dessa voz está atroná[n]do los oídos; i el efecto q[ue] luego se sigue causando otro semejante al leerse: i todo parece a imitació[n] del versículo 10. del c. 3. de Habacuc. *Dedit abyffus vocém suám: altitudo manus suas levavit*” ‘Even the description of that voice thunders in one’s ears; and the effect intensifies upon being read aloud: everything seems to imitate verse 10. of chap. 3. of Habakkuk. *The abyss raised its voice: and towards the heavens it lifted its hands*’ (V.1.520).³ Faria e Sousa draws a correlation between the creature’s lament and that of the prophet Habakkuk, indicating that the plea is something that moves upwards beyond the depths of one’s current position, even surpassing a hermeneutic effect on the reader to a sensorial one that “atron[a] los oídos”. Therefore, declaring that the ‘lowered’ supplicant is able to be raised by his voice elevates this oral tool to the level of a conduit through which change or movement is possible. In essence, Adamastor, da Gama, and the *De Profundis* collectively position the void as the place from which the ‘cry’ operates, and this ‘cry,’ as one that is not consigned to remain there, performs the function of a catalyst for moving outwards.

Accentuating the *cognitive* element involved in the *recognizing* of the self, the aforementioned outwards movement becomes plausible only through another type of distancing that the epic poem creates — the ontological retrocession. Camões conceives of the ‘I’ of the abyss as the self-conscious ‘I,’ the ‘I’ which extends beyond the simple relationship with the narrative that da Gama details in the third canto and into a relationship with the *space* of the depth. One commentator who articulates this notion in his study of the *De Profundis* is Saint Augustine:

For this is the voice of one ascending, belonging to the ‘Song of Degrees.’ Each of us ought therefore to see in what deep he is,

² The translation is mine here and elsewhere in this paper when no English translation is cited.

³ The columns in the text are used to reference Faria e Sousa’s work.

out of which he crieth unto the Lord. . . . For this mortal life is our deep. Whoever hath understood himself to be in the deep, crieth out . . . until he be delivered from the deep... (61)

What underlies the apparently Christian stance of assigning ‘the deep’ a post-lapsarian quality is the cognisance of *where* this deep is located. In the case of the Latin scholar, it is found within one’s quotidian life, whilst Camões situates it in the depths of the mind; more specifically, to be in ‘the deep’ is to be able to not simply call, but *recall*. Memory is what propels the Portuguese protagonist and the mercurial beast, in cantos three and five respectively, to realize their position in terms of the greater narrative of *Os Lusíadas*. Adamastor, on one hand, uses his ‘aquatic’ voice to express his personal lament, which derives precisely from being aware that he was tricked or, as it is put in the Portuguese text, *enganado* (V.54.v). His consciousness of Thetis’s scheme is also the consciousness that her repudiation places him below her aesthetically and literally because knowing the cause of one’s fall is to know that one has fallen. Vasco da Gama, in contrast, recognizes that his memory is not private, but public; however, he is likened to Adamastor as his recollection is also constructed by comparing himself to others. That is to say, when da Gama states that it is much more desirable to praise the feats of others (III.4.i-ii), he is establishing a touchstone between the conventional duty of remembrance and the one he is asked to undertake. Effectively, a movement away from his dual relationship with the narrative is initiated as this third facet is included in the act of remembering. Historicity in the epic poem thus becomes unorthodox as it strays from what is ‘normally’ done. It appears that the same entreaty that allows them to leave the depth begins to carry the characters outwards only once the recognition of their position within the depths is initiated, and this drift away from the concentric self—witnessed in Thetis’s *engano* of Adamastor and the conventions through which da Gama compares and understands his duty—is achieved through private or public memory that lets the individuals look at the past in order to define their location in the present.

Yet the backward movement that remembering provokes does not remain restricted in the recesses of the mind, but rather uses the awareness of the presence of others to construct inclusive layers that drive the narrative forward. Part of Camões’s movement away from the space of the deep, from which the singular person exclaims, consists in moving towards a collective

exclamation. Namely, the central 'I' must now account for those who have allowed it to notice its spatial position. Where this is most pronounced is during the cataclysmic storm goaded by Bacchus in which da Gama desperately begins to pray:

Must I endure another Scylla
 And Charybdis like those we have passed,
 More gulfs like Syrtes with its quicksands,
 More rocks like the Acrocerania?
 At the climax of so many travails,
 Why, O God, do you now forsake us?
 Where is the offence? How are we to blame
 For this service undertaken in Thy name? (VI.82)

Upon analyzing the pronouns employed in this prayer, one detects a progress from the single 'I' that must "endure" the tempest to the "we" that is faultlessly castigated. As the plea travels from the self to the communal in order to reach God, there is a penetration of layers from the personal to that of the mutual during the process. Interestingly enough, this traversal is found in a prayer performed "from the depths of despair" (80, vii). Landeg White's insertion of this comment in his translation is an apt deviation from the original Portuguese in as much as it indicates the spatial source of the supplicant's 'despair.' Furthermore, it epitomizes the spatial stratification illustrated in the aforementioned progression of the prayer's pronouns. White's selection of words resonates with the logic that guides Franz Delitzsch's exegesis of the *De Profundis*: "The depths ... are not the depths of the soul, but the deep outward and inward distress in which the poet is sunk as in deep waters. ... In this sense the poet prays that His ears may be turned ..., with strained attention, to his loud and urgent petition..." (302-03). As he attempts to explicate the clemency of God for the poet of the psalm, Delitzsch, drawing on the germane analogy of a shipwreck, emphasizes the importance of being heard as the voice must travel from the 'sub-aquatic' depths to reach "His ears." Aural layers are also prominent in Saint Augustine's interpretation of the psalm as he mentions through an intertextual example that the gravitas of the petition was what allowed Jonas to escape his depth: "It penetrated all things, it burst through all things, it reached the ears of God" (61). When these words are read in juxtaposition to *Os Lusíadas*, the 'bursting' motif

of Saint Augustine expresses a type of struggle inherent to the movement between layers, simultaneously suggesting that the movement outwards is a type of expansion that breaks through boundaries. Hence, Camões's traversal from a personal profundity to the recognition of an existing collective (which da Gama refers to as “os meus próprios” ‘My own’ [III.4.iii]) is fundamentally a *voyage* away from the ‘I.’

Amidst the travel from the centripetal to the centrifugal, the pivotal self within these layers becomes inevitably ensconced. Adamastor, for example, ultimately utilizes his voice to set a perimeter to the journey of the Portuguese vessel, as his foreboding prevents an incursion into his personal ambit (V.43). Since his depth is expressed by a self-consciousness of his physical monstrosity, and, since due to his corporeal idiosyncrasy Adamastor cannot associate himself with any greater collective, his expedition out of the depth is eventually curtailed by merely becoming *uroboric* melancholy. This is why he is adamant on guarding the sea, as this, being his ontological representation, is the crux of his existence. Returning to the *De Profundis*, protection is also what the poet strives for in his wait for salvation: “Mi alma aguarda al Señor más que los sentinelas la aurora” ‘My spirit awaits the Lord more than sentinels await the dawn’ (*Biblia de Jerusalén*, Psalm 130:6). This Spanish edition of the psalm, based on the original Greek scriptures, uses the figure of the sentinel, lost in most translations, to convey the idea of a guard anxiously anticipating an external force to loom like the crepuscule of the morning. Within this context, the external force is Salvation; within Camões's work, conversely, the intrinsic benevolence associated with an ‘approaching entity’ is lost and its significance changes to that of an intruder. Revisiting Adamastor's endeavour, the sole preoccupation of the creature is to guard the self from trespassers. The Portuguese, on the other hand, are directed by a commander who is devoted to representing his countrymen in a ‘self-less’ manner. Contrasting both situations, the Portuguese protect the ‘I’ but, unlike the inscrutable creature, they do not make this their *telos* as they move on in their journey to attain a holistic understanding of the self.

Ultimately, what is under this aegis of the ‘self,’ and what can be defined as the final destination of the ‘deep’ voyage, is, in fact, the very expansion of nationhood. The praying and historical recounting of da Gama amalgamates the ‘I’ with the nation of Portugal in order to bestow upon it a persona. Consequently, the country becomes a protagonist with memory,

self-awareness, and, more importantly, a voice. Through this voice it is capable of telling *its* stories and, as the captain does with the king of Melinde, disseminating a particular narrative. The *De Profundis* culminates exactly with this idea, as it is no longer the psalmist that waits for Salvation, but the whole of Israel (*Biblia Sacra*, Psalm 129:6). Above all, it is the bevy of Israelites that joins with the individual to create a univocal voice through which both the ‘I’ and the ‘us’ can be redeemed. Bacchus, aware from the very first canto of the imminent peril of the expansionist Portuguese voice, decides to replicate the ‘voice of the deep’ in order to protect his own narrative and seeks the help of Neptune. When the attack on the Portuguese ship begins, Camões writes about the impulsion of the calamity using words that reverberate with those of previous sections in the poem: “Agora sobre as nuvens os subiam / As ondas de Neptuno furibundo, / Agora a ver parece que deciam / As íntimas entranhas do Profundo...” ‘Now they were above the clouds / Those furious waves of Neptune, / Seeing them now they seemed / To come from the bowels of the Deep’ (VI.76.i-iv).⁴ The strength of Neptune’s wrath comes from “do Profundo” of his entrails, creating a voyage of destruction similar in origins to the Portuguese voyage of edification. Camões now has Neptune’s, and by extension Bacchus’s, counter-expansion rivalling the Portuguese expansion. As if the winds mentioned in subsequent lines represented this conflict in its most literal form, the storm qua storm in White’s translation suggests a turbulent use of *pneuma* in an effort to *silence* the voices of the supplicating sailors (VI.76.v-vi). It is here that the voice of the deities tries to overpower the human voice in a quintessentially imperialist action of outspeaking the other. Yet, whereas the ruler of the maritime depths wishes to preserve the honour of his kingdom (VI.31), the hedonistic god aims to recover his own (VI.7). It is therefore via this division that the pair lacks the potency of the single voice that characterizes the inexorable nature of the Portuguese trek. Thus, the paradigmatic episode of canto six invites one to reason that the storm is principally an imperialist battle between two depths in search of an overpowering voice.

In synthesis, the construction of a nation originates from the self but requires navigation ‘out of this depth’ and towards a collective identity in order for a journey of expansion to take effect. Beyond a metaphysical voyage, this egress represents the coalescence of *pessoa* and *pátria* because

⁴ The translation is mine, not White’s.

being in the depths and *speaking* from this position allows the inscription of a personal narrative to remain engraved as the history of a specific space; as a profound inscription for posterity, this national narrative inevitably becomes indelible. Furthermore, to place the voice that propagates this narrative on a roaming craft is Camões's suggestion that borders, such as those delineated by Adamastor, become transmutable when proliferation is involved. It is apposite to finally conclude that, tantamount to the shared eye amongst the Gorgons (V.11.i-iv), the condensing of more than one perspective under a single optic, whilst being a uniting force that removes national discrepancy, has the potential to also be hegemony in its most inchoate state.

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