



Leonard Bacon's Unpublished Harvard Lecture On Camões

Edited, with introductory remarks, by

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How the poet Leonard Bacon,ⁱ to date the only American to have published a translation of Os Lusíadas, first discovered Luiz Vaz de Camões and his epic is a good story. Bacon was fond of telling how he came across a passage from Os Lusíadas in John Fiske's Discovery of America. Incorporating it into a footnote, Fiske did not condescend to his readers by presenting the passage in translation, expecting, obviously, that they would be able to make out the original on their own. Here is what Bacon encountered.ⁱⁱ

The greatest of Portuguese poets represents the Genius of the Cape as appearing to the storm-tossed mariners in cloud-like shape, like the Jinni that the Fisherman of the Arabian tale released from a casket. He expresses indignation at their audacity in discovering his secret, hitherto hidden from mankind:—

Eu sou aquelle occulto e grande Cabo,
A quem chamais vós outros Tormentorio,
Que nunca á Ptolomeo, Pomponio, Estrabo,
Plinio, e quantos passaram, fui notorio:
Aqui toda a Africana costa acabo
Neste meu nunca vista promontorio,
Que para o polo Antartico se estende,
A quem vossa ousadia tanto offende.

Camoens, Os Lusíadas, v. 50

Bacon claimed that despite not knowing Portuguese he would someday translate Camões great poem. Not until the mid-1940s did he start the task, learning the language as he read the

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poem and worked the scholarship. Here is how he would eventually translate the stanza that had so favorably impressed him when he first came upon it in Fiske's history thirty years before:

I am that vast cape locked in secrecy,
That Cape of Hurricanes your people call,
Of whom Pomponius, Strabo, Ptolemy,
Pliny, the whole Past, lacked memorial.
I round out Africa's extremity
In my hid headland, where the shore lines fall
Away, toward the Antarctic Pole prolonged,
Which your audacity has deeply wronged. ⁱⁱⁱ

Bacon was well enough satisfied with the version he had completed by 1946 to submit it (unsuccessfully) to Harper & Brothers. ^{iv} The book achieved print only in 1950 when it appeared under the auspices of the Hispanic Society of America. (At last check it was still in print.)

Bacon described the years of his life that he dedicated to his work on Camões as a period of "monomania" in which, along with his study of the language, literature, and history of Portugal, he wrote poems about Camões, lectured on his subject, reviewed pertinent books, carried on correspondence with Camonians and other writers, and, of course, worked at his translations.

During that time Bacon consulted with various scholars regarding not only Camões but Portuguese history and culture. Among the first individuals so consulted was Professor Francis M. Rogers of Harvard University. This initial contact prompted Rogers to invite Bacon to Harvard to talk about Camões. Bacon accepted the invitation and gave his talk to the University's Luso-Brazilian Club on November 3, 1947. His remarks on the occasion survive in manuscript in the Beinecke Library, Yale University.

Camões and his epic ^v

When Professor Rogers did me the honor of inviting me to address you he put me in a position of some difficulty. Though, for my sins, I was once what Bunyan called "a fair and flourishing professor" my work at that time was concerned with matters I might be said to know something about. Here, on the contrary, I am talking about subjects with respect to which my ignorance is so dense as to be magnificent. I venture the guess that if anyone in the room can talk Portuguese at all he knows the language better than I. I may be said never to have heard it spoken, and have had to rely on books for such knowledge of the beautiful tongue as I possess, if

I do possess it. The only virtue I can claim is that the zeal of a great poet's house has eaten me up. But I want you to understand that whatever I may say about Camões (don't laugh at my pronunciation, or I'll cry) will be spoken in a spirit of necessary and becoming humility. For God's sake don't ask me trick questions of a philological or linguistic nature. No sportsman ought to shoot a sitting bird, particularly when the bird is suffering from a species of literary battle-fatigue.

Not that it's of any particular importance except as it illustrates the uncomfortable truism that no one ever knows what is going to happen to him I mean to tell you how I got interested in Camões. In 1921 I was on sabbatical leave from the University of California, which in the words of George Fitch I had infested for some time. At my leisure, simply for entertainment, I began to read John Fiske's Discovery of America. It has been fashionable to run Fiske down of late years, but I am not having any, for Fiske belonged to a noble and almost extinct race of intellectual animals, the so-called "ferocious omnivores." He had read everything and remembered everything he had read and he did my business in a footnote, in which, apropos of the death of Bartholomew Dias, he quoted entire the 50th octave of the Fifth Book of the Lusiads, where you will remember Adamastor reveals his identity to Vasco da Gama. I didn't know a word of Portuguese, but with the help of a little French and less Latin I tore out the meaning, quite literally, "by the roots." I don't know why it overwhelmed me. Magic cannot be analysed. But the subtle poison ran through every vein and I saw in a lucid interval that here was something that it would be sport-royal to translate. Many things intervened but twenty-three years later the original estimate of the situation proved to be strictly accurate. For the last three years the poem and the magnificent human creature that made it have provided me in equal measure with ineffable interest and lacinating agony of spirit

I doubt if anyone would object very greatly when I say that in one sense we don't know a great deal about Luis Vaz de Camões. That modern spate of interlocking autobiographies, laboriously documented standard lives, volumes of letters, etc., which overwhelm us now is a recent invention. 350 years from now it will be easier, provided we don't blow the universe to bits, to write with a certain authority about some obscure 20th century figure than it ever can be to hit off one of the greatest poets of the 16th century. 56 years by my calculation is 20394 days if you reckon in the 14 necessary 29ths of February. Not counting three periods in Prison, we can say with some certainty where he was or what he was doing, or that something immediately

important to him happened on perhaps 30 of those days. We have a right to infer some things but always with caution. And above all it is necessary to beware of that strange tissue of intuition, picturesque gossip and actual invention founded on the fourth hand the non-existent or the impossible, which is the Camonian myth. Though, as you know, the trouble about a myth is that there is nearly always something at the bottom of it.

After which caveat I mean to summarize briefly what I think we know, and I may be mistaken. That he was born in 1524 in the year when his hero Gama died seems a fair inference from an entry in a registry of persons enlisting for service in India which gives his age; at the time of enlistment his father being present. Other sources reveal that he belonged to the minor nobility and was of Galician descent, which does not deter him from the conventional dig at the expense of the Gallegos which I gather is common form in what used to be called "the Spains." We believe that he attended the University of Coimbra presumably from 1539 to 1542, that he wrote some poetry there, and that shortly after he went to Lisbon where certain noblemen appear to have admired his talents. We are pretty sure that he saw a pretty girl of thirteen on Good Friday, 1544, and that some time in the next year the first of his three plays was acted, perhaps with some success. It would seem that he got into some sort of trouble about this time, whether about the pretty girl or the play or both, is not too clear and he was rusticated or exiled from the Courts to some point on the Tagus where he probably wrote certain poems. Apparently still in the bad books of the Courts from whatever cause, perhaps in 1547 (you see how cautious I am) he went or was sent to Ceuta, the North African citadel-outpost of Portugal opposite Gibraltar. The Empire's power was already waning there and Portugal barely had a toehold. Camões tells us in a verse letter that when he walked outside the walls he carried a shield and an assegai. He also describes brilliantly the barbaric splendor of a troop of Moorish horse, bad customers, who were in the habit of raiding to the very gates. The service in fact was so dangerous and profitless that the unwarlike in Northern Portugal eagerly paid a tax which exempted them from being drafted across the Straits. And all that Camões got out of two years there was the loss of an eye whether by land or sea (take your choice), several great similes in the Lusiads, and a lot of local color. Incidentally it may be observed that the probability is high that already he had the idea of a great national epic in his head. References in various poems and internal evidence in the Lusiads lead to this conclusion. It would be fun if someone should dig up a fragment of a letter, say, from Gonçalo de Silveira to this effect: "Luis will never see out of his wounded eye again, but

you must read the episode of Ighes de Castro." We have no such direct evidence. But we have it in another connection in a big way a year or two after his return from Africa. On Corpus Christi Day, 1552, he had the effrontery to stab a Court official named Borges who was engaged in a brawl with some friends of Camões. As a result of this unpleasant affair, the poet spent eight months in gaol, whence he was released after apologizing to Borges who agreed not to prosecute and forgave him. One wonders a little about the proper form of words to be used in such an apology. Within a month he had the King's pardon and sailed almost immediately for the Indies. He never again saw the pretty girl, who may in some occult way have been the cause of his misadventures. But no one who has read him can forget her. Catarina de Ataide was the fountain and origin of some of the greatest poetry ever written by man. The Third Elegy, the Tenth Canzon, the glorious sonnet "Alma gentil," and above all "By the Waters of Babylon" are enough for any woman that ever was born and set her beside and not below Beatrice of the Portinari. I should state that I do not think I am in any sense a sentimentalist.

He was six months at sea, and his ship sailed straight from the Cape where he went through a hurricane magnificently described in E 3 [Third Elegy] to Goa about two hundred miles south of Bombay on the West Coast of India. Goa was a renaissance boom town which the great Albuquerque had taken forty-three years before in spite of the strangest military device that has come to my attention. The river at whose mouth the island city lay had been deliberately stocked with crocodiles. It was a great town as times went with possibly 100,000 inhabitants and it was Gomorrah and Sodom Camões more delicately often calls it Babylon as contrasted with the Sion of Lisbon. But he was evidently happier there at first than he was later to be. Almost immediately he went on an expedition against the King of Porca near the southern tip of India. And he was to see service on the African Coast at Guardafui and the Persian Gulf very soon. Presently he went to South China and the Spice Islands, though Senhora Vasconcellos, one of the greatest Camonian scholars, points out that there is no explicit mention of Macão where he had a job for several years.

As many of you probably know he got in trouble there and was ordered back to be tried apparently for malversation in Goa where that art found its highest expression. This was about 1559. On his way he was wrecked at the mouth of the gigantic Mekong in Cambodia and swam ashore with a large section of the Lusiads as he tells us in that poem. Prestige has lent the terror of his name to the tradition that he wrote one of the greatest of all laments "By the Waters of

Babylon" on the banks of the tremendous river. Certain stanzas for ought I know he may have written there. But if it be true that he could not have heard of the death of Catarina till he reached Goa the tradition cannot be wholly true. The vicissitudes of travel in the 16th century are illustrated by the circumstance that it apparently took him over a year after the wreck to get from Cambodia to Goa. I suspect that the great lyric lament was written in prison in what he had already called Babylon many times. The Count of Redondo finally quashed the charges against him. But he was almost instantly in gaol again for debt. However he got out of that too. And about all we know about his last years in the East, is that he probably consoled himself with a native girl, flirted with white women, wrote an introductory poem for a work on the Drugs and Simples of the Orient and was stuck for two years in Mozambique in the power of the Port-Captain to whom the poet owed 200 cruzados (8000 reis) evidently enough to live on for about six months. Friends finally bought him off. And in 1570, after 17 years in the Orient Camões and the Lusiads crossed Lisbon bar. Juromenha may be forgiven his rhetoric when he says that no ship had ever carried greater Treasure from the Gorgeous East.

He brought out the epic two years later. And the poem that was to make the glory of Portugal perpetual is addressed to a King who six years later while the unhappy poet yet lived was to lose his life and an Empire and the very independence of the Kingdom in the most terrifying catastrophe since the yell of Horror was heard along the long wall from the Peiraeus to Athens. Camões survived the blasting of every hope for two years. He died of the plague in Lisbon in 1580. And five years later Philip II of Spain now master of Portugal was still paying the poet's pension to Camões' mother of whom the poet never speaks so far as I know.

"I will not go so far as to defend Camões," said Hazlitt. I forget the connection if any, but that's the sort of remark which lays its maker open to such ridicule as is the reward of patronizing pomposity. Nevertheless it is as absurd to defend a great poet as it is to protect the Pyramids or to bind someone over to keep the peace with Chartres Cathedral. Camões defends himself with perpetual and irresistible ability against whatever change in taste and opinion. And well on in the fourth century after his death men absorbed in the doctrines and fashion of these times continue to return to him and his Lusiads with an enthusiasm such as one feels when recaptured by "the Homeric largeness and simplicity." One may rail at classical artifice and allegory, one may yawn over the catalogues of the Viceroy. Yet this has happened to me. My talent for railings is in the sere and yellow. And as for yawning, in some strange manner, I have lost my

native capacity. Passages that I once thought dull and pedestrian have music or color or both for me now. For Stella's remark about Swift to the effect that the Dean could write beautifully about a broomstick has its application here. And perhaps it is one of the marks of a great writer that when in the nature of things he touches on what is intrinsically not exciting, he deals with it so that you never forget it. Be that as it may any man that reads the *Lusiads* is always going to remember the Duchess of Malfi tragedy of Ignes de Castro, Nuno Pereira before Aljubarrota, the Old Man of Belem, Adamastor at the Cape, Vasco da Gama's landfall after the storm at Calicut, the sensuous, beautiful, and incomparably diverting episode of the Vale of Venus, and the tremendous vision of the Universal Frame in the 10th Book. I should add something that I find mysterious. If anyone can explain to me how it is possible to write didactic passages such as the admonitions to Kings and soldiers and mankind at large which absolutely captivate instead of making a man spew, I'll be obliged to him, and beyond that I will admit being in the presence of a superior mind.

No mind of such superiority is required to see that Camões had chosen a perfect framework for a splendid theme. The discovery of India achieved only twenty-six years before he was born was in its self a magnificent episode to which other episodes could easily be attached by means of flash-backs ad majorem gloriam Portugalliae. And Portugal was and is a nation well worth glorifying. Probably you know all about this. But until recently, in my ignorance I had looked upon the Portuguese in the infuriating manner in which inhabitants of large powerful states are apt to regard small feeble ones, even if I had noticed that the manners of Bravas from the Azores are in general superior to those of their aboriginal neighbors in New England. But the history of Portugal is as exciting as that of any nation whatever and is almost automatically an epic. The half-mythical Affonso Henriques comes out of the clouds of tradition in part an actual and heroic man. Dinis "o Lavrador" (no king ever had a better nick-name than Denis the Ploughman) was a good poet, a good soldier, a good administrator, and founder of the University of Coimbra a year after his spectacular contemporary Frederic II, stupor mundi is said to have founded the University of Palermo. John I, the victor of Aljubarrota in 1385, was the father of such a crowd of sons as is generally denied to Kings. And Camões might well have dealt more largely with one of them, Henry the Navigator, for Gama's voyage, as Camões perfectly well knew, was only the logical result of Henry's operations. The great, enlightened, energetic, and apparently kindly scientist gleams like a fluorescent light among the foxfires of the 15th century.

Beginning as a soldier (he took Ceuta in the same year that another Henry of some interest to a younger contemporary of Camões fought a battle at Agincourt), he became one of the greatest of geographers; theoretical and practical. And his passionate interest and intelligence seemed to inform and inspire his whole people. They designed and built the best ships in the world, and they were adepts in using and improving navigation instruments which, Professor Morison informs us, Columbus never properly understood. No better sailors ever went down to sea in ships, and they were heroically enterprising. In 1484 they were the first Europeans to cross the Equator. Two years later Dias saw and named the Cape of the Hurricane subsequently rechristened Cape of Good Hope by a King who was good as kings go but didn't travel much. And fourteen years later Vasco da Gama with four ships, none over four hundred tons, crossed Lisbon bar, having traversed thousands of miles of absolutely unknown sea, where he had ridden out such storms as to this day overwhelm modern destroyers and buckle the flight-decks of 30,000-ton aircraft-carriers. As a feat of seamanship it is probably without parallel. Not even Leif Ericson, not even the even more impressive Polynesian discoverers of New Zealand, brought off such a triumph, the complete and brilliantly successful end-result of a concerted and accelerating effort which began certainly as early as 1430 and lasted sixty-eight years. I can only think of one thing like it, the concerted and accelerating effort which in my own lifetime in the course of half a century proved the much more terrifying end-result of nuclear fission.

Is it any wonder if the epic venture caught the fancy of a young poet who could remember the first news from Peru and Japan and if he had tried could not have avoided talking with comrades of Diogo Cam, of Bartholomew Dias, of Pedro Alvares Cabral, and of the great Gama himself? And if her were to go himself Eastward on Gama's track and far beyond the last cairn that Gama set up at Calicut into the very womb of morning, what then? He was of course to suffer the very essence of disappointment, but we must never forget that he was the first great European artist who ever saw the tropics and the orient. I won't say he saw in every Calicut a Xanadu, yet for all his curious matter-of-fact veracity he is full of a wild sense of newness which he feels himself and induces in others. Mozambique, Mombassa, Goa, Malacca, Singapore, Macão, the Moluccas. (It is odd to think of Camões strictly meditating the thankless muse on a little island where Alfred Wallace three centuries later was to have his inspiration about natural selection), unknown coasts, gigantic rivers, strange men, savages or said not to be, the jewels, the silks, the spices filled his mind in a manner unfamiliar to any of the explorers and voyagers that

had gone before him. And he painted meticulously what he saw, the sacred threads of the trimurti on the breast of the Brahmin, the Zamorin of Calicut chewing his betel, the Moor with his assegai, the East African in his blue breech-clout, the Malay with his brio and poisoned darts, not to mention the brilliant birds levying tribute on the green nutmegs in the Moluccas, trees dripping camphor in Borneo, cinnamon, sandalwood, and a thousand other details of the unfamiliar and the faraway. Worshipping his Portugal almost to the point of the absurd he is nevertheless infatuated by the exotic and wildly aware of the fierce attraction of bizarre, terrible, exciting, or incomprehensible elements in the distant and hitherto unknown. Parenthetically it may be observed that the adjective exotic was brought into English by Ben Jonson nineteen years after Camões' death. I like to think that he was one of the persons who made such a coinage necessary. Romantic realists are the people who make men see and use new words.

The poem as you know came out in 1572, and was presently hailed in a noble sonnet by Tasso, a splendid competitor who knew a good thing when he saw it. The impact on Latin Europe appears to have been powerful. Two Spanish translations came out in 1580, the year of Camões' death. And Cervantes complimented Benito Caldera on his version de luso el singular tesoro. Italian and French translations appeared in rapid succession but it was seventy-five years before the first English translation was in print. About that book I wish to say a little something because it gives me a lead into a perhaps unimportant but to me entertaining subject. Sir Richard Fanshawe's version has many virtues. In one sense he was a born translator and when he wants to get the force of his author achieves his end with startling ability. I have made a point of not consulting other translators, but Fanshawe's feeling for Portuguese has been of service to me. And professor J. D. M. Ford of Harvard has put all Camonians in his debt not only by his fine text but by his edition of Fanshawe published by the Harvard Press and I believe of interest to bibliophiles as the second edition, the first being 1655. It was a long time between the drinks. It's really a remarkable job, in spite of the 17th century poet's strange habit of adding or subtracting from his original. But I'll never deny his fire—or his quaintness. And as I said he gives me a sort of lead in an odd connection.

During the first few months of my labors on the Lusiads I began to grow aware of things that were not unfamiliar as I struggled among the Octaves. Suddenly something went click in my mind at last and I jerked Paradise Lost from its shelf. I lit on what I was after almost instantly. Here it is. Then others turned up. And presently I was a little made on this subject. I could see

Camões lurking where the Gorgeous East with richest hand showers on her King's barbaric pearl and gold, which is exactly what it showered on the King of Melinde. Naturally I was irritated when I read in Juromenha's enormous commentary that I had been forestalled by Quillinan ninety years before. Quillinan was convinced on the subject and actually had used to lines of "Lycidas" to translate two lines of the Lusiads from which he believed that the English verses were derived, though I don't think they were. And in any case the skeptic might be justified in disagreement, if that was all we could produce. There is more however all tending in the same direction, but finally a set of circumstances turned up, which if not clinching are highly suggestive. Fanshawe was born in 1608. So was Milton. It is therefore not unusual that Fanshawe was at Cambridge during two of the seven years that Milton was there. Fanshawe's translation appeared in 1655. Three years later Milton began to dictate Paradise Lost, which he appears to have planned as early as 1640. It may be an illicit inference, but it was natural to infer that the place names of the African Coast first set down by the One-eyed were fascinating to the Blind man who has had a passion for faraway place names as is the case with all great poets. I have a passion myself for connecting the great exposition of the Ptolemaic system in Bk. X of the Lusiads with a dozen equally beautiful passages on the stars in their courses in Paradise Lost. But I'm not man enough and must stop this rambling.

It is really a piece of insolence on my part to speak of Camões as a lyric poet and I'm only going to speak of one poem though there are many great ones. Lyric poets if they are bad are horrible. If they are good they are ineffable. Camões belongs in the latter category. I would rather have written the great Redondilhas, "By the Waters of Babylon," than almost any poem I know. Lope de Vega called it "the pearl of all poetry" and appears to have a strong case. I am not much given to religious meditation. But the divine becomes the human in that poem and the human becomes the divine. One seeks in vain for comparisons. "Vaughn's Retreat," "The Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity," "The Phoenix and the Turtle," "Adonais," Dante in sight of the Mystic Rose, Catullus experiencing the vision of St. Paul—I am not indulging a feeble talent for hyperbole—it is of such things that he makes you think. If that poem alone remained to us he would still be one of the great of all time. I'll let it go at that and have said too little and too much.

I should like to end on a note of a different kind. If you are interested in Camões you are in for a surprising and delightful experience, in the first place, because Camões is Camões,

and, in the second, for a reason which I could not have predicted. I can give you an example of what I'm talking about. I had been working on him in more or less dim privacy for some time, when Professor Ford's text of the Lusiads was sent me for review. I'm not enough of a Portuguese scholar to do more than be thankful for a book full of incomparable learning and judgment. But I blew my top in the cant phrase. Instantly from all parts of the country came letters from all sorts and conditions of Camonians, a mining engineer in Tennessee, a fish and game commissioner in Texas, a New York business man who must know about as much about Camões as Professor Ford or Professor Bell. They are all beastly intelligent and generous past belief. It was like being mad free of the Platonic idea of a delightful club. A Camonian will always help you, if he knows how, and if he doesn't he will try to find out. The glory of the Poet I had in some sort discovered for myself, but I confess I had not suspected that he was capable of making so many so delightful. In any case I can tell you this much that if you fish these waters in a big way, you will have splendid sport and pleasant companions, even if your Portuguese is as bad as mine.

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Leonard Bacon (1887-1954) was born in upstate New York, in the town of Solvay, near Syracuse, but when he was eight years old his family moved back to Peace Dale, Rhode Island, in keeping with its New England roots. His paternal grandfather, also named Leonard, had been a famous clergyman in New Haven, Connecticut. His mother was the granddaughter of Rowland G. Hazard, who achieved a modicum of fame as a philosopher. His great aunt was Delia Bacon, the vociferous champion of the theory that Francis Bacon was the actual author of the poetry and plays attributed to William Shakespeare. Developing his early bent for writing, Leonard Bacon served as co-editor of the Yale Literary Magazine while in college. In 1910 he went to the University of California to teach English. He stayed until 1923 when he gave up teaching to devote himself to his writing. He was a prolific writer, publishing numerous volumes of poetry, a good deal of prose in journals and magazines, and book length translations over a forty-five year period. His often satirical poems appeared in volumes titled The Scannel Pipe (1909), The Banquet of the Poets (1921), Ulug Beg (1923), Ph.D.s: Male and Female Created He Them (1925), Animula Vagula (1926), Guinea Fowl and Other Poultry (1927), The Legend of Quincibald (1928), Lost Buffalo (1930), The Furioso (1932), Dream and Action (1934), The Voyage of Autoleon (1935), The Goose on the Capitol (1936), Rhyme and Punishment (1936), Bullinger Bound (1938), and Sunderland Capture (1940). In 1939 appeared Semi-Centennial, an autobiographical volume. His work in translation includes collaborations with George Rapall Noyes on Heroic Ballads of Servia (1913) and with R. Selden Rose on Poema de mio Cid (1919), and, working alone, The Song of Roland (1914) and, of course, Os Lusíadas (1950). He died on January 1, 1954, in Peace Dale, Rhode Island.

ⁱⁱ John Fiske, The Discovery of America (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1892), I, 382.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Lusiads of Luis de Camões, translated by Leonard Bacon (New York: Hispanic Society of America, 1950), p. 187.

^{iv} Leonard Bacon to J. D. M. Ford, August 7, 1946, Beinecke Library, Yale University. Quoted with the consent of the Library.

^v The manuscript is published here for the first time with the consent of the Library. This title has been supplied editorially.