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Sea-birds at the Cape of Storms, c. 1497

Bernhard Klein (Kent)

Abstract: Der Aufsatz behandelt das 1572 erschienene Epos *Os Lusíadas* (*Die Lusiaden*) des portugiesischen Dichters Luís de Camões, und darin speziell die Figur des Adamastor, eines gefallenen und als Strafe für sexuelle Übergriffe ins Kap der Guten Hoffnung verwandelten Titan. Adamastor ist ein von Camões erfundener Mythos, der über die Jahrhunderte als Sinnbild des afrikanischen Kontinents und seiner Bedeutung für Europäer gelesen wurde. In der zeitgenössischen südafrikanischen Literatur wurde der Mythos zuletzt von André Brink im Roman *The First Life of Adamastor* (1993) behandelt, der seinerseits zur Grundlage des Wandgemäldes *T'kama-Adamastor* (1999) von Cyril Coetzee wurde. Das Bild hängt heute im Lesesaal der Universität Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Brink und Coetzee setzen dem europäischen Mythos eine dezidiert afrikanische Sichtweise entgegen. Der Aufsatz untersucht beide Werke im Verhältnis zu den *Lusiaden*, ausgehend vom Bild der "Seevögel", mit dem sowohl im Roman wie im Gemälde die portugiesischen Karacken gemeint sind, die Ende des 15. Jahrhunderts zum ersten Mal am Kap gesichtet werden.

If one chief purpose of epic is to consolidate historical knowledge and make an authoritative version of it binding for posterity, then the epic at the centre of this essay – *Os Lusíadas* (*The Lusiads*) by the Portuguese poet Luís de Camões, first published in Lisbon in 1572 – ostensibly meets that very expectation: its version of Vasco da Gama's first voyage to India is still taught across many schools in the Lusophone world and has shaped the popular history of Portugal's former empire more widely across the globe. Scenes from the poem have entered Portuguese folklore and the popular idiom; street names and inscriptions across Portugal attest to its enduring hold on the national past. Yet the triumphal version of the nation's history ascribed to the poem has been extrapolated from a text open to many readings. When looked at from angles other than the one established by a historiography content to label European landings on foreign shores as "discoveries" – for example, through the angle of late twentieth-century South African art and fiction, or through an African geography that dominates the poem but rarely its reception – the knowledge bequeathed by the epic

to the present may be seen to shape historical understanding in ways that make it serve a distinctly anti-imperial purpose.

I

Camões is Portugal's most famous poet, usually honoured with the epithet "national" and credited with an influence on modern Portuguese that rivals that of Shakespeare's on English. Largely unread now outside a Lusophone context, Camões was revered by writers such as John Milton and Herman Melville,¹ and baptized the "Portuguese Virgil" by Voltaire.² Camões's theme, unusual for an epic poet, is his country's very recent history; he describes the voyage of one of Portugal's most celebrated navigators, Vasco da Gama, into the Indian Ocean, from 1497 to 1499, and he bases the factual contents of his long poem on a number of sixteenth-century sources, among them the only eyewitness account of the voyage and several contemporary historical narratives.³ The poem purveys this very recent historiography (recent for its first readers) by combining it with modern travel knowledge, with lore of the ancient world, with cultural knowledge of an Indian Ocean world that few Europeans had yet encountered, and with the practical knowledge of seafarers, seen as supplanting the dry book knowledge of Europe's armchair geographers at every turn.⁴ Indeed the epic announces its own sense of superiority over the ancients with some confidence right at the start of the poem:

Boast no more about the subtle Greek
Or the long odyssey of Trojan Aeneas;
Enough of the oriental conquests
Of great Alexander and of Trajan;
I sing of the famous Portuguese
To whom both Mars and Neptune bowed.

¹ See Maria Leonor Machado de Sousa (ed.), *Camões em Inglaterra*, Lisboa: Ministério da Educação, 1992; and George Monteiro, *The Presence of Camões. Influences on the Literature of England, America, and Southern Africa*, Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996.

² Voltaire, "Idée de la Henriade", *La Henriade*, in *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, nouvelle édition, Paris, 1877, p. 3.

³ On Camões's sources, see Rebecca S. Catz, "Camões and the Writers of the Discoveries", Maria de Lourdes Belchior and Enrique Martínez-López (edd.), *Camoniana Californiana. Commemorating the Quadricentennial of the Death of Luís Vaz de Camões*, University of California, Santa Barbara: Jorge de Sena Center for Portuguese Studies, 1985, pp. 147-53.

⁴ For a reading of the poem that foregrounds the perspective of the common mariner, see my "Camões and the Sea: Maritime Modernity in *The Lusiads*", *Modern Philology* 111, no. 2 (2013), pp. 158-80.

Abandon all the ancient Muse revered,
A loftier code of honour has appeared.⁵

[Cessem do sábio grego e do troiano / As navegações grandes que fizeram; / Cale-se de Alexandre e de Trajano / A fama das vitórias que tiveram; / Que eu canto o peito ilustre lusitano, / A quem Neptuno e Marte obedeceram. / Cesse tudo o que a Musa antiga canta, / Que outro valor mais alto se alevanta.]

The advantage of the present over the past – and the advantage of *The Lusíads* over the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* – is a matter of wisdom, size and substance, of courage and daring, and of “modernity”, expressed not only in nationalist terms, as in this early stanza, but also as a kind of epistemological conquest over the limitations of time and space. Camões’s seafarers set out from a small country at the edge of Europe and find themselves absorbed into a cosmic vision towards the end of the poem; a trajectory of spatial expansion clearly signalled in the epic through the juxtaposition of a narrow European chorography in canto three with the expansive image of the universe expounded by the sea goddess Tethys in the final canto.⁶ What *The Lusíads* exemplifies in its ten cantos of accomplished ottava rima is the ongoing acquisition of knowledge through the physical act of voyaging. It is a poetic instance of the claim made in 1537 by Pedro Nunes, the royal cosmographer, who was convinced that the Portuguese had not only discovered “new islands, new lands, new seas, new peoples”, but also “a new sky and new stars”.⁷ Such hubris, embedded in a claim to the ownership of unattainable skies and stars, clearly relegates the new knowledge gained through extreme travel to the realm of science.

In what follows I want to explore how this knowledge – newly entered into European consciousness in the sixteenth century – is subject to an increasingly ambivalent reception in subsequent centuries. My focus will be on Africa, scene of the opening moves of the first global empire in history, labelled by later Portuguese historians the period of “Expansion”. The beginnings of that history, from which a poem like *The Lusíads* emerges, can be usefully dated to 1415, the year in which the

⁵ Canto 1, stanza 3, lines 1-8. All quotations from the English translation of the poem are taken from the Oxford World’s Classics edition: *The Lusíads*, trans. Landeg White, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. The original Portuguese text is taken from Luís de Camões, *Os Lusíadas*, ed. and intr. Frank Pierce, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973. Later references quote canto, stanza and line numbers.

⁶ See also my “Mapping the Waters: Sea Charts, Navigation, and Camões’s *Os Lusíadas*”, *Renaissance Studies* 25, no. 2 (2010), pp. 228-47.

⁷ “[N]ouas ylhas / nouas terras / nouos mares / nouos pouos: e o que mays he: nouo ceo: e nouas estrellas”. Pedro Nunes, *Obras, Vol. 1: Tratado da sphaera* [1537], Lisbon: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2002, p. 120. English translation quoted from Patricia Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe’s Conquest of the New World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 100 (epigraph to chapter).

Infant Henry, anachronistically known in English as Henry the Navigator, fitted out a fleet that sailed from Oporto in northern Portugal to capture the city of Ceuta on the southern side of the Strait of Gibraltar, then a notorious base for Barbary pirates. Ceuta, together with Melilla further east along the Moroccan coast, which was captured in 1497, are still today Spanish possessions, hence part of the European Union, small urban enclaves in mainland Africa surrounded by high-security fences intended to keep migrants out of Europe. The fifteenth-century Portuguese chronicler Gomes Eanes de Zurara called the capture of Ceuta a “taking” [tomada],⁸ a refreshingly unambiguous admission of the first instance of European land-grabbing in the imperial age.

In the following decades, the Portuguese explored the entire western coast of Africa, moving steadily further south until Bartolomeu Dias was the first of the navigators to reach the Cape in 1488. He did sail around it but then abandoned the voyage, reporting back that the African continent stretched into an eastern direction far beyond the Cape (geographically an accurate observation, given that the Cape is not the southernmost point of Africa and located to the west of a south-facing shoreline). A decade later, in 1497, Vasco da Gama succeeded in rounding the entire southern tip of the African continent and then sailed up north along the east African coast, making landfall several times until he reached Malindi in modern-day Kenya. There he encountered a friendly ruler who agreed to supply a local pilot with knowledge of Indian Ocean geography. With the help of this pilot, who most likely hailed from Gujarat in India, it only took a further three weeks for the Portuguese fleet to reach Calicut on the Kerala coast in 1498.⁹

A popular tale originating with the Meccan chronicler Qutb al Din Muhammad Nahrawali about 80 years after the event, and redacted early in the twentieth century by the French Orientalist Gabriel Ferrand, identified this pilot as the great Indian Ocean navigator Ahmad Ibn Majid, the “Lion of the Sea” and author of a substantial body of Arab navigational literature.¹⁰ Nahrawali described Ibn Majid as

⁸ See Gomes Eanes de Zurara, *Crónica da tomada de Ceuta* [1450], ed. Reis Brasil, Mem-Martins: Publicações Europa-América, 1992.

⁹ On Vasco da Gama’s voyage, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

¹⁰ See Gabriel Ferrand, “Le pilote arabe de Vasco de Gama et les instructions nautiques des arabes au XVe siècle”, *Annales de Géographie* 31, no. 172 (1922), pp. 289-307. On Qutb al Din Muhammad Nahrawali, see *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. 7, ed. C. E. Bosworth et al., Leiden/New York: Brill, 1993, pp. 911f. On Ibn Majid, see G. R. Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean before the Coming of the Portuguese*, London: The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1971, pp.

drunk when he traded his knowledge of the route to India for a passage back home on one of da Gama's ships, and suggested that without Ibn Majid's help, the Portuguese would have never been able to reach India.¹¹ The identification of Ibn Majid as the Malindi pilot is almost certainly erroneous, and the need for the Portuguese to recruit local help was probably owed less to the lack of navigational skills than to their insufficient knowledge of the south Indian coastline.¹² But the early vilification of Ibn Majid as a drunkard and traitor (a story that persists to our own day), combined with the cunning attributed to da Gama, throws some light on the fraught story of global knowledge transfer in the early modern period.

It is the history of this very voyage that Camões celebrates in his poem, three quarters of a century later, as a great rite of passage from west to east and a "discovery" of the Indian Ocean – as though that ocean, first traversed by humans over 5000 years ago, making it "the oldest of the seas in history",¹³ needed any Europeans to advertise its existence to the world. The poem recounts the entire voyage and gives the relentless expansionist drive a mythological respectability by adding a cast of Greek gods to the narrative, who interfere in various ways with the historical mission. What enabled the Portuguese to reach India were the knowledge systems of astronomy and applied mathematics, translated into sophisticated instruments and a theory of celestial navigation. The Indian Ocean had, of course, its own indigenous, and equally successful, navigational techniques, many of which Ibn Majid describes in his works, and the existence of which Camões acknowledges in the poem.¹⁴ The claims of Nunes and many subsequent historians, that the maritime endeavours of the Portuguese constituted an unparalleled push beyond the boundaries of human knowledge, hardly stand the test of historical scrutiny.

The Lusiads is known as a poem about India, the final destiny of the voyage and ultimate telos of Portuguese imperial desire. This shorthand neglects that the entire first half of *The Lusiads* is set not in India but in Africa. The geographically

7-41, and *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. 3, ed. B. Lewis et al., Leiden/New York: Brill, 1986, pp. 856-9.

¹¹ For Portuguese and English versions of the passage on Ibn Majid in Nahrawali's chronicle, see A. da Silva Rego and T. W. Baxter (edd.), *Documentos sobre os Portugueses em Moçambique e na África central / Documents on the Portuguese in Mozambique and Central Africa, 1497-1840*, Vol. 1 (1497-1506), Lisbon: National Archives of Rhodesia and Nyasaland / Centro de estudos históricos ultramarinos, 1962, pp. 33ff.

¹² See Tibbetts (as note 10), pp. 9ff.; and Subrahmanyam (as note 9), pp. 121-8.

¹³ Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, London: Routledge, 2003, p. 3.

¹⁴ See Canto 5, stanza 75, lines 6f.

most detailed account of the great voyage is the passage from St Helena Bay in southern Africa to Malindi on the east African coast, where Vasco da Gama not only meets his pilot but where he also narrates the history of Portugal to the local Muslim ruler on his flagship, in full view of the shore, taking up almost three entire cantos out of a total of ten. It is hardly surprising, then, that the poem and its bewildering array of characters, both real and mythical, have been a source of inspiration, and often rejection, for African writers.

One of the most enigmatic characters from *The Lusiads*, who has long fired the imagination of readers and taken on a life outside the text, is Adamastor, the giant monster and protector of the Cape, who appears just as the Portuguese prepare for the historic rounding of the massive rock: an enormous, vaguely human shape with unkempt hair, dark skin and yellow teeth rises before them out of a black cloud and promises bitter revenge for their audacious trespass into his realm. In the mythic imaginary of the poem, Adamastor is a guardian not of a tree but of a sea of knowledge, a protector of moral limits, an antipodean version of the pillars of Hercules. He is also an entirely original poetic creation, invented “by Camoens and the sea”¹⁵ as a telluric representation of that “vast, secret promontory”¹⁶ [oculto e grande Cabo], a titan turned – in the most literal translation of Camões’s original lines – into the Cape of “torment”,¹⁷ suffering, anguish. The imprisonment in the rock is punishment for Adamastor’s romantic pursuit of Thetis, one of the sea nymphs, whom he saw naked but who rejected him for his ugly looks and huge size, and whose mother tricked him into embracing the rock, making him think it was her daughter, only to transform him into the Cape as he was hugging the stone. The punishment is cruel; the immobile and impotent Adamastor is now forever aroused by Thetis’s waves lapping agonizingly against him.

The episode with Adamastor has long been a favourite artistic motif as well as a challenge to critics. Adamastor creates knowledge about Africa through his embodiment of the Cape but advertises this knowledge as unattainable. Lawrence Lipking has defined the apparition in terms of the complex epistemologies it encompasses: “Geographically, Adamastor stands for the place where maps lose their

¹⁵ David Wright, “A Voyage to Africa”, quoted from Malvern van Wyk Smith (ed.), *Shades of Adamastor. An Anthology of Poetry*, Grahamstown: Rhodes University, 1988, p. 147.

¹⁶ Canto 5, stanza 50, line 1.

¹⁷ Canto 5, stanza 50, lines 1f.: “Eu sou aquele oculto e grande Cabo / A quem chamais vós outros Tormentório”. Dias named the Cape “Cabo das Tormentas”, or Cape of Storms.

potency – here be monsters; historically, for an unknown part of the past, a legend and reality concealed from the ancients and yet to be explored; epistemologically, for a point beyond which human perceptions fail; theologically, for the forbidden.”¹⁸ One of the earliest commentators on the poem, the Portuguese-born Manuel Faria e Sousa, a seventeenth-century Castilian translator and editor of the poem, had rather different ideas: he thought that “this giant ... represents none other than Muhammad”, hence the “Antichrist”, or the “devil”.¹⁹ The reputation of *The Lusiads* as “one of the most anti-Muslim epics in the national literature of Renaissance Europe”,²⁰ in Nabil Matar’s verdict, continues to this day, though the identification of Adamastor with Muhammad has not held sway. Twentieth-century critics have been more likely to see in him, amongst other things, a symbol of European colonization,²¹ a cartographic portent,²² or the embodiment of melancholy.²³

The curse that Adamastor lays on the Portuguese has perhaps been most acutely felt in South Africa, where the reimagined Cape giant haunts the national literature more than any other early modern revenant. “The figure of Adamastor is at the root of all subsequent white semiology invented to cope with the African experience”,²⁴ writes Stephen Gray, and in 1988 Malvern van Wyk Smith collected examples of more than 50 (predominantly white) South African poets who in one way or another used Adamastor in their work from the eighteenth century onwards, demonstrating the grip of European thought on an African locality.²⁵ In much of this writing, Adamastor stands either as a cipher for a dark and dangerous land, an apology for conquest and settlement, or a symbol for the plight of the African in need of European salvation, emerging in more recent poetry as a figure of ambivalence,

¹⁸ Lawrence Lipking, “The Genius of the Shore: Lycidas, Adamastor, and the Poetics of Nationalism”, *PMLA* 111, no. 2 (1996), pp. 205-221: p. 215.

¹⁹ Luis de Camoens, *Lusiadas*, ed., trans. and comm. Manuel de Faria e Sousa, Vol. 2 (cantos 3-5), Madrid: Ivan Sanchez, 1639: “Este Gigante ... no representa aqui otro personaje, que a Mahoma” (column 540; my translation); “Mahoma era el Antechristo” (541); “diablo” (542). See columns 539 to 565 for Faria e Sousa’s full line-by-line exposition of Adamastor as Muhammad, covering stanzas 39 to 60 of canto 5.

²⁰ Nabil Matar, *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, p. 164.

²¹ See David Quint, “Epic Curse and Camões’ Adamastor”, in Quint, *Epic and Empire. Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, pp. 99-130.

²² See Lipking (as note 18).

²³ See Josiah Blackmore, *Moorings. Portuguese Expansion and the Writing of Africa*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, pp. 105-54.

²⁴ Stephen Gray, *Southern African Literature. An Introduction*, Cape Town: David Philip; London: Rex Collings, 1979, p. 27.

²⁵ van Wyk Smith (as note 15).

guilt, and ominous foreboding. Thus, in one of the most widely discussed Adamastor treatments of the twentieth century, the 1930 poem “Rounding the Cape” by Roy Campbell,²⁶ scourge of the Bloomsbury Group, the lyrical I casts a glance back at the Cape from a ship departing for Europe to see “the phantom sinking in the sea”, while “Night, the Negro, murmurs in his sleep”.²⁷ Over 50 years later, in 1987, Guy Butler still berates Camões for finding only “few”, “frail” words for Africa, investing instead all his creative powers in a dispossessed and “exiled god”, whose thundering curse is “blasting ... / Whatever Man in Africa performs.”²⁸

Reviewing his own anthology, van Wyk Smith notes how the South African reception of Adamastor has changed in the twentieth century “from an image of hostile confrontation to be overcome by the European conquistador, to an implicit and growing emblem of resistance to such conquest.”²⁹ A vengeful Adamastor turning on European settlers may gesture in this direction, yet if Adamastor ever played a role for Africa that rivalled the one played by Caliban for the Caribbean and Latin America,³⁰ it did not survive the political upheavals of the 1990s.³¹ The African giant born of a European imagination focalized the torn loyalties felt by parts of the country, but clearly never held the same appeal for all South Africans. David Johnson, in 2009, went as far as arguing that van Wyk Smith’s “anthology ultimately stands as testimony to the decline of a resilient but solipsistic settler myth.”³² The poet Kelwyn Sole has responded most irreverently to the use of Adamastor as some kind of founding figure for South Africa, dismissing Roy Campbell – whose poetic

²⁶ See Jeremy Cronin, “Turning around Roy Campbell’s ‘Rounding the Cape’”, *English in Africa* 11, no. 1 (1984), pp. 65-78; Michael Chapman, “Roy Campbell, Poet: A Defence in Sociological Times”, *Theoria. A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 68 (1986), pp. 79-93; and Jonathan Crewe, “The Specter of Adamastor: Heroic Desire and Displacement in ‘White’ South Africa”, *Modern Fiction Studies* 43, no. 1 (1997), pp. 27-52.

²⁷ Roy Campbell, *Adamastor*, London: Faber, 1930, p. 38.

²⁸ Guy Butler, “Elegy” [1987], in van Wyk Smith (as note 15), p. 170.

²⁹ van Wyk Smith, “Introduction” (as note 15), pp. 1-44: pp. 18f.

³⁰ See Robert Fernández Retamar, “Caliban: Notes Toward a Discussion of Culture in Our America” [1971], in Retamar, *Caliban and Other Essays*, ed. Fredric Jameson, trans. Edward Baker, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, pp. 3-45. Retamar asks: “[W]hat is our history, what is our culture, if not the history and culture of Caliban?” (p. 14).

³¹ Malvern van Wyk Smith concedes this point himself in a partial rewrite of the 1988 introduction (as note 15). See his “Shades of Adamastor: the Legacy of *The Lusiads*”, David Attwell and Derek Attridge (edd.), *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 117-37. The sentence quoted in note 29 above is repeated verbatim on p. 121.

³² David Johnson, “Remembering the Khoikhoi Victory over Dom Francisco Almeida at the Cape in 1510”, *Postcolonial Studies* 12, no. 1 (2009), pp. 107-130: p. 122. See also Johnson’s wider study *Imagining the Cape Colony: Literature, History, and the South African Nation*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012; and Meg Samuelson, “Rendering the Cape-as-Port: Sea-Mountain, Cape of Storms/Good Hope, Adamastor and Local-World Literary Formations”, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 42, no. 2 (2016), pp. 523-37.

engagement with Adamastor stretched beyond the poem quoted above to an entire collection and frequent references elsewhere – as hankering after the “mythopoeic”, ready “to adamastor / bate”.³³

II

Yet the most recent and most extended (though possibly “terminal”³⁴) literary re-emergence of the Cape giant occurred only in 1993, post-apartheid, in André Brink’s novel *The First Life of Adamastor*, the English version of an Afrikaans original first published five years earlier.³⁵ The novel has received mixed reviews (van Wyk Smith thinks its “substance is slight”³⁶) but has itself been the subject of a major reworking of the Adamastor myth in 1999, in the form of a massive wall painting by Cyril Coetzee (discussed further below). Both works deserve particular attention for their attempt to make the Adamastor figure relevant to the African experience, which sets them apart from the bulk of the treatments collected in the anthology mentioned above. Brink’s novel opens with the image that gave me the title for this essay:

Now that really was a sight to behold. From the sea, from the nesting-place of the sun, we could see two objects swimming towards us, looking for all the world like two enormous sea-birds with white feathers fluttering in a breeze that had newly sprung up. Not far from the beach, where our people were gathering mussels from the rocks exposed by the ebb-tide, the two birds came to rest and appeared to draw in their feathers. Made no attempt to come closer to the shore. Just stayed there, bobbing on the swell, waiting perhaps for fish ... (11)

A little later, the two birds

began to lay eggs of a curious roundish shape, and brown in colour. ... What amazed us was that these eggs did not emerge, as one would expect, from the tail-end of the birds, but rather from under their wings; and soon the eggs came drifting towards us on the tide. They had hardly reached the shore when people started hatching from them, not one at a time, but whole bunches. (11f.)

³³ Kelwyn Sole, “A White South African Poet Rounds the Cape”, in Sole, *Projections in the Past Tense*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1992, p. 41. The title is an obvious allusion to Campbell’s poem. The puerile pun in the line quoted only works, of course, if the word Adamastor is mispronounced as though it was an English, not a Portuguese name.

³⁴ van Wyk Smith (as note 31), p. 133.

³⁵ All quotations from the novel are taken from this edition: André Brink, *The First Life of Adamastor*, London: Vintage, 1993. Subsequent references quote page numbers directly in the text. The Afrikaans version appeared as *Die eerste leewe van Adamastor*, Cape Town: Saayman & Weber, 1988.

³⁶ van Wyk Smith (as note 31), p. 134.

The year is 1497 (or thereabouts – the narrator is not entirely sure anymore, speaking after the passage of centuries); the scene is Algoa Bay near modern-day Port Elizabeth, east of the Cape of Storms – baptized so, as legend has it, by the early Portuguese navigators before their king created the euphemism Cape of Good Hope. In a kind of reverse angle shot the narrator doing the “seeing” here is not the white European explorer, the customary agent of change in the narrative of expansion, but T’kama, a local Khoikhoi chief, who imagines the arrival of the fifteenth-century Portuguese seafarers in southern Africa as the landing of large maritime birds. The shift from “da Gama” to “T’kama” produces unexpected perspectives: we are told about strangers on the shore who are – surprisingly – clothed, who do not have “much in the line of skin, all pale and white” (13), who “knew nothing resembling a language” (18), chattering instead like birds, who cover up their faces with ugly hair, and who generally look like ostriches. All of these impressions, it is easy to see, are direct inversions of the observations made by generations of European commentators on the Khoikhoi and their habits.³⁷ The remainder of the novel will focus on T’kama’s encounter with a white Portuguese woman, whom he abducts and takes with him on an eventful trek round the interior of the country.

Brink’s title explains the plot: the novel reimagines the life of the Cape giant from an African perspective right up to the moment of his petrification. T’kama is Adamastor’s human incarnation, and the plot of the sexual entrapment of Camões’s figure is translated into T’kama’s love for the white woman whom the explorers mysteriously bring along on their ship. Like Adamastor spying on Thetis, T’kama first sees the woman naked on the beach, bathing, and like Adamastor, T’kama is tricked at the end of the novel into embracing what he believes to be the woman but what turns out to be another inanimate object – not a rock this time but the female figurehead of a ship which the Portuguese had placed for him in the sand. The novel adheres to the strictures of the myth as invented by Camões, yet the opening birth metaphor, in which ships are mistaken for birds and boats for eggs, hatching the first cohort of empire-builders to arrive in southern Africa, seems strangely out of place in a novel that explicitly aims to reimagine the myth of Adamastor from a local Khoikhoi perspective. Brink has elsewhere referred to Adamastor as “the guardian

³⁷ See Nigel Penn, “Written Culture and the Cape Khoikhoi: From Travel Writing to Kolb’s ‘Full Description’”, in Adrien Delmas and Nigel Penn (edd.), *Written Culture in a Colonial Context: Africa and the Americas, 1500-1900*, Claremont, South Africa: University of Cape Town Press, 2011, pp. 166-88.

spirit of the Cape”³⁸ and acknowledged his status as the “legitimate protector of the subcontinent who has every reason to hold his territory against any threat of foreign invasion and appropriation”.³⁹ The myth of origin should rightly be Adamastor’s prerogative, not that of the invaders.

The key image used at the outset of Brink’s novel – that of ships transformed into birds – has wider cultural currency. Early examples of the link would include the Sirens of Greek mythology, who are often depicted as birds with female features, luring sailors to their death. Cyril Coetzee, who visualized the bird-ships in his huge wall-painting (fig. 1), notes the flying versions on Hieronymus Bosch’s *Temptation of Saint Anthony* triptych (1505) and the salt cellars carved from ivory in sixteenth-century Nigeria, which depict a group of bearded Portuguese in elaborate costume holding a cup bearing a ship on its lid.⁴⁰ Near-contemporary illustrations of da Gama’s and later fleets make the analogy even more immediate (fig. 2): here Portuguese ships are portrayed with blown up sails, swelling in the wind, moving like feathery creatures with great wings across the water.⁴¹ A similar image can be found directly in *The Lusiads*, when Camões describes da Gama’s phallic flagship with “swelling sails” [velas ... inchando], “cutting” [cortando] a feminine sea, leaving “white foam”⁴² [branca espuma] behind. The idea of the masculine ship entering into some kind of sexual union with the ocean is reinforced in the poem by Camões’s choice of Venus, the deity of erotic love, as the fleet’s patron goddess, and by her later gift to the crew of explicitly sexual adventures on the Isle of Love (canto nine). It is not a long metaphorical journey from the phallic power and fecundity that this ship symbolically carries into the Indian Ocean, to Brink’s fertile, imperial, hatching eggs that spill the white explorers onto an African beach.

In a kind of sexual counter-image, T’kama is portrayed in Brink’s novel with an enormous penis, that gains in length every time he tries to use it, and thus prevents

³⁸ “Reimagining the Past. André Brink in conversation with Reingard Nethersole”, *T’kama-Adamastor: Inventions of Africa in a South African Painting*, ed. Ivan Vladislavić, Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 2000, pp. 49-57: p. 50.

³⁹ André Brink, “A Myth of Origin”, in *T’kama-Adamastor* (ibid.), pp. 41-7: p. 45.

⁴⁰ See Cyril Coetzee, “Introducing the Painting”, in *T’kama-Adamastor* (ibid.), pp. 1-21: pp. 9f. For an example of the sixteenth-century salt cellar, see the exhibit in the British Museum: http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=3103474&partId=1 (accessed 11 June 2018).

⁴¹ The illustrations have been reprinted in facsimile in *Memória das armadas* [1565], Lisbon: Edição da academia das ciências, 1979.

⁴² Canto 1, stanza 19, lines 4ff. The reading of da Gama’s ships as openly sexualized in *The Lusiads* follows Blackmore (as note 23), pp. 145f.

him from making love successfully to the white woman in his charge (until a crocodile snaps it off in chapter 18 and it is subsequently replaced by a smaller and more functional specimen made from clay). T’kama’s name means “Big Bird”, and the meaning of “bird” is glossed early on as “a slang word for the male member” (14). Brink has explained this plot device through the grotesque context of the earliest known reference to Adamastor, who appears as a titan in the work of Rabelais, and he has also defended it, possibly without much persuasive force, as a veiled critique of phallocratic power.⁴³ What the conceit actually achieves is to blame African sexuality as the cause of the failed cultural union in the novel, since it “sites the primal transgression in the story between Europe and Africa in the unbearability of native ‘gaze’ on European woman”.⁴⁴ It is important to note here that Portuguese writing on Africa prior to Camões, while it foregrounds issues of race, religion, “barbarity”, and so on, does not actually place any great “emphasis on sexual difference or on the sexuality of the African as a characteristic of his alterity to European paradigms of civility.”⁴⁵ When Camões makes Adamastor’s lusting after a nymph the cause of the titan’s punishment, he is following mythological examples, not any recurrent features of contemporary Portuguese writing about Africa.

In any case the most immediate source of the image of ships as birds – and it matters little whether this is a conscious or an unconscious borrowing on the part of Brink – are fifteenth-century European travel accounts, through which the image migrates in its most elaborate form, fully worked out and with both components – birds and ships – fused into one. In all examples, the image also includes a set of observers watching from the shore. The 1453 Portuguese chronicle on Guinea by Gomes Eanes de Zurara puts the following impressions in the minds of some West Africans standing on the coast and gazing at the Portuguese ships:

And as the caravel was voyaging along that sea, those on land saw it and marvelled much at the sight, for it seemeth they had never seen or heard speak of the like; and some of them supposed it to be a fish, while others thought it to be a phantom, and others again said it might be a bird that ran so on its journey over that sea.⁴⁶

⁴³ See Brink (as note 38), pp. 52ff.

⁴⁴ Abulrazak Gurnah, “Prospero’s Nightmare” [review of Brink’s novel], *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 4691 (26th February 1993), p. 21.

⁴⁵ See Blackmore (as note 23), p. 22.

⁴⁶ Gomes Eanes de Zurara, *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea* [c. 1453], ed. and trans. Charles Raymond Beazle and Edgar Prestage, Vol. 1, London: Hakluyt Society, 1896, p. 99. The original manuscript reads: “E hindo fazendo sua vyage ao longo daquelle mar virõ a carauella os que estauã na terra da qual cousa foram muyto marauilhados. ca segundo parece nunca viram ne ouuyrã

The same trope of African ignorance about ships and navigation recurs in the account of the Venetian traveller Alvise Cadamosto, first published in 1507 but referring to earlier voyages, who claims that the following ideas were widespread among the Portuguese trading in West Africa:

It is asserted that when for the first time they [Tuareg traders in West Africa] saw sails, that is, ships, on the sea ... they believed that they were great sea-birds with white wings, which were flying, and had come from some strange place: when the sails were lowered for the landing, some of them, watching from far off, thought that the ships were fishes. Others again said that they were phantoms that went by night, at which they were greatly terrified.⁴⁷

These Europeans appeared in so many different places within such a short space of time, Cadamosto explains, that the locals must have thought ships were phantoms, since they had no knowledge or understanding of navigation. “If these be human creatures”, his fictive African viewers ask, “how can they travel so great a distance in one night, a distance which we could not go in three days?”⁴⁸

Both Zurara and Cadamosto ascribe a “naive imaginative capacity”⁴⁹ to West Africans, whose defective vision, faulty eyesight and lack of knowledge make them read the signs on the sea incorrectly, empowering in turn the Europeans as crafty shape-shifters and interpreters of native thought. The conceit has such force that it recurs in subsequent South African writing; for instance in Joseph Forsyth Ingram’s poem “The Discovery of Natal” (1893), in which a group of “natives, / Dressed in skins and plumes of feathers”, gaze in “superstitious terror” at a da Gama’s vessel, exclaiming “’Tis a bird upon the waters!”⁵⁰ Brink himself makes reference to a 1897

fallar de semelhante ca huvs presumyã que era peixe outros entenyã que era fãtasma. outros diziã que podya seer algva aue que corrya assy andando por aquelle mar E rrazoandosse assy sobre esta nouidade filharõ quatro daquelles atriumento de sse certificar de tamanha duuida”.

⁴⁷ See *The Voyages of Cadamosto and Other Documents on Western Africa in the Second Half of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. and trans. G. R. Crone, Hakluyt Society second series, no. 53, London: Hakluyt Society, 1937, pp. 20f. Original in *Paesi novamente ritrovati*, ed. Francanzano Montalboddo, 1507, chapter 11: “Certificandovi che quando costoro hebene la prima vista de vele o vero navili supra el mare ... credeteno che quelli fosseno ocelli grandi cum ale bianche che volasseno: & fosseno venuti de alcun stranio loco & fosseno de li capitadi: & da poi che li abassavano le vele per sorzer alle dicte rive: alcuni de loro pensavano che quelli navili fosseno pessi vedendoli cosi da lonzi: & anchora alcuni de loro diceano che lerano fantasme: che andavano de nocte & haveano grandissima paura.”

⁴⁸ Ibid. “Se queste fosseno creature humane como porriano andare tanti camino in una nocte: che nui non li podestamo andari tri di?”

⁴⁹ Blackmore (as note 23), p. 100.

⁵⁰ Quoted from van Wyk Smith (as note 15), p. 88.

poem in Afrikaans by Stephanus Jacobus du Toit, “Hoe die Hollanders die Kaap ingeneem het” [How the Dutch Took the Cape], in which ships appear as large water-geese observed by a group of Khoikhoi from the shore.⁵¹ The mistaken perception is reminiscent of the more famous colonial myth, which originates with the journal of another white European navigator, Columbus, who noted in his 1493 letter to the Spanish queen that the inhabitants of the New World received the bearded Spaniards like Gods, creatures descended from heaven. The ship-as-bird image belongs to the same set of self-aggrandizing gestures that early modern European travel writers resorted to as a way of showcasing the seemingly effortless superiority of western technology over naïve indigenous world-views. It might be seen as curious, perhaps even counterproductive, that such early modern ethnographic bias should be reaffirmed, if only indirectly, in late twentieth-century writing.

The inaction and naïvety ascribed to Africans via this type of imagery is hardly without alternative. The historical record could have supplied Brink with very different types of bird metaphors. João de Barros, for example, the preeminent Portuguese historian of the sixteenth century, linked the speed and agility of the Khoikhoi to the killing instinct of birds of prey. When the Portuguese fleet carrying the viceroy Francisco d’Almeida stopped at Table Bay en route from Cochin to Lisbon in March 1510, they felt safe in raiding a local village, taking “some cows and children” in the process. The Khoikhoi retaliated immediately, in large numbers, with devastating consequences: attacked by “men ready to face death to save their children”, Barros writes, the Portuguese “sank in the sand of the shore, and were entirely powerless and unable to move, and the negroes came down upon them so light-footed and nimble, that they appeared to be birds [que pareciam aves], or rather the devil’s executioners.”⁵² Barros’s use of the bird metaphor here is not only the opposite of Brink’s, it also reverses the customary terms of the confrontation between “agile” invaders and “passive” locals. No wonder it was this incident, rather than any memorials, textual or otherwise, left by the Portuguese in Africa, that Thabo Mbeki

⁵¹ Brink (as note 38), p. 46. Brink refers to the birds wrongly as ducks.

⁵² João de Barros, *Da Asia. Decada segunda, parte primeira* [1553], Lisbon: Na regia officina typografica, 1778, book 3, chapter 9: “Porque começando de entrar na arêa da praia, ficáram de todo decepados sem poderem da passo, e os Negros andavam sobre elles tão leves, e soltos, que pareciam aves, ou, (per melhor dizer,) algozes do demonio” (p. 340). English translation taken from *Records of South-Eastern Africa*, ed. and trans. George McCall Theal, Vol. 6, Cape Town: Government of the Cape Colony, 1900, p. 301.

used to “light up” Khoikhoi history in his “Farewell to Madiba” speech on 26 March 1999 in the National Assembly at Cape Town.⁵³

In the only eyewitness journal to survive from da Gama’s voyage, the historical sea-birds at the Cape of Storms described themselves like this:

On Saturday, the 4th of [November 1497], a couple of hours before break of day, we had soundings in 110 fathoms, and at nine o’clock we sighted land. We then drew near to each other, and having put on our gala clothes [vistidos de festa], we saluted the captain-major by firing our bombardas [bombardas], and dressed the ships with flags and standards [bandeiras e estendartes].⁵⁴

Gala clothes, flags and standards, the firing of bombardas: the occasion of the first sighting of land in the southern hemisphere was clearly a cause for celebration. The ship is here used as a token in the display of a triumphant selfhood: a show of European identity off an African shore enabled by the belief in superior navigational achievement. That confidence does not reflect what the inhabitants of Calicut saw in the strangers showing up unexpectedly on the Malabar coast, which da Gama finally reached several months later. As one critic has noted, the Portuguese may have “presented themselves as great and powerful lords sent by a great and powerful king”, but “[f]rom the Indian perspective, nothing could have been less plausible. They came from the sea, they lived in ships, and in India only those so poor that they did not even own a tiny patch of land on which to stand would dream of going to sea and living on ships.”⁵⁵ The mismatch in expectations was epitomized by the gift Vasco da Gama brought for the Zamorin of Calicut, which was so paltry that it moved the Zamorin’s advisers to tears of laughter over the inadequacy of the gesture.

On the surface, Brink’s narrative promotes just these kinds of historical ironies by turning the colonial encounter upside down: the whole plot is laid out to affirm the validity of an African perspective and to return dignity and agency to the African

⁵³ For a transcript of the speech, see <http://www.dirco.gov.za/docs/speeches/1999/mbek0326.htm> (accessed 10 June 2018). David Johnson explores the wider cultural and literary contexts of the 1510 Khoikhoi victory over d’Almeida (as note 32).

⁵⁴ “Aos 4 dias do dito mês, sábado antemanhã duas oras, achámos fundo de 110 braças ao mais, e às nove oras do dia ouvemos vista de terra. E entam nos ajuntámos todos e salvámos o Capitam-moor com muitas bandeiras e estendartes e bombardas, e todos vistidos de festa.” *Relação da viagem de Vasco da Gama*, quoted from the electronic edition prepared by Jeremy Lawrance in 2004 on the basis of the only extant ms (<http://alvarovelho.net/images/patrono/relacaodaviagem.pdf>; accessed 12 June 2018), p. 2. English translation taken from *A Journal of the First Voyage of Vasco da Gama, 1497-1499*, trans. and ed. E. G. Ravenstein, London: The Hakluyt Society, 1898, p. 5.

⁵⁵ Helder Macedo, “Recognizing the Unknown: Perceptions in the Age of European Expansion”, *Portuguese Studies* 8 (1992), pp. 130-36: p. 135.

historical experience. In his novel, Khoikhoi myths supplant European imports, and the invaders never speak, apart from the white woman, who eventually shares a common language with T'kama. In *The Lusíads* it is the other way around: European myths abound, and Africans rarely get to speak – when they do, they are usually ventriloquizing Portuguese concerns. And yet the encounter between Europe and Africa is not imagined in *The Lusíads* as a purely one-dimensional affair. This has not always been adequately recognized, perhaps because the focus has largely been on the elaborately orchestrated set pieces of the epic such as the mysteriously anthropomorphic Cape. The first encounter of the Portuguese fleet with sub-Saharan Africans is not actually with Adamastor but with a Khoikhoi tribesman, described as “a strange man of black skin”⁵⁶ [um estranho vir, de pele preta], who is hunting honey⁵⁷ near St Helena Bay, just to the north of the Cape. The incident is rarely noted,⁵⁸ even though it constitutes the earliest recorded face-to-face contact between Europeans and the Khoikhoi in southern Africa. In Camões’s version (which draws, amongst other sources, on the eyewitness account of the voyage and the writings of Barros, both mentioned above), both parties first attempt to communicate, then trade, before the mutual failure to observe diplomatic protocols acceptable to the other side leads to hostilities. After da Gama is hit by an arrow in his leg, the Portuguese stage a quick departure.

As I have noted elsewhere,⁵⁹ Camões’s comparison of the honey-hunter with the cyclops [bruto Polifemo⁶⁰] has led most critics to see in him no more than the archetypal wild savage of the European imagination. His role in the epic is either to prefigure Adamastor or to represent different traits of African savagery and a generic lack of culture. Yet the honey-hunter is not initially seen or denounced as a brute, and instead taken seriously as a potential trading partner. In addition, Camões imagines the encounter between da Gama and the honey-hunter as a personalized face-to-face exchange, an explicit departure from the precedent set in every single one of his

⁵⁶ Canto 5, stanza 27, line 6.

⁵⁷ Honey-hunting from wild rather than tended nests has been practiced for millenia in southern and other parts of Africa. See Eva Crane, *The World History of Beekeeping and Honey Hunting*, London: Duckworth, 1999, pp. 49-61.

⁵⁸ Crewe’s dismissal of the episode as one of several “inconclusive colonial-encounter type incidents with native peoples” is unusually haughty in tone but not untypical in assessment. See Crewe (as note 26), p. 29.

⁵⁹ See Klein (as note 4). In this essay I argue against the influential reading of the episode suggested by David Quint (as note 21).

⁶⁰ Canto 5, stanza 28, line 4.

sources. To emphasize the point, the eye-level juxtaposition is poetically expressed through a striking chiasmus – “Neither did he understand us, nor we him”⁶¹ [Nem ele entende a nós, nem nós a ele] – suggesting not the distance between, but the interdependence of, both voyager and local in the use of a “cross-shaped” rhetorical figure based on parallelism and equivalence.

Nor is this validation of the indigenous presence an isolated slip, as later passages confirm, for instance when Camões describes a meeting near Mossel Bay, happening only a few stanzas further on in the same canto:

The people who owned the country here, ...
Were cordial and humane ...
They came towards us on the sandy beach
With dancing and an air of festival ...

... They sang pastoral songs in their own
Tongue, sweetly and in harmony,
Whether rhymed, or in prose, we could not gauge
But like the pipes of Virgil’s golden age.⁶²

[A gente que esta terra possuía, / ... Mais humana no trato parecia / ... Com bailos e com festas de alegria / Pola praia arenosa a nós vieram, / ... Cantigas pastoris, ou prosa ou rima, / Na sua língua cantam, concertadas / Co doce som das rústicas avenas, / Imitando de Tíro as camenas.]

These Africans are not described as savages or uncultured sexual predators: they own their land, keep cattle on it, they have culture and language, music and poetry; their lyrical talents even merit a comparison with Virgil. Stephen Gray, for whom Camões is the first white South African poet, has called the passage “a fundamental moment in south African literature – a Western poet composing an epic poem which, if only distantly, relies on oral rhetorical formulations, pausing to take note of the technique of other oral praise-singers who, like himself, codify and store a nation’s history, its brave deeds, and its way of life in their poetry.”⁶³ It might help opening up the creative possibilities of historical reimaginings if the African engagement of *The Lusíads* was not reduced, as it still too often is, to the confrontation between da Gama and Adamastor. Along the route leading from St Helena Bay to Malindi, Camões describes seven separate encounters with local Africans (not counting the exchange with Adamastor). None of these meetings are accidental or ephemeral occasions: each time there is cultural interaction, dependence on local provision, and reliance on

⁶¹ Canto 5, stanza 28, line 3.

⁶² Canto 5, stanza 62, lines 1, 3, 5f., and stanza 63, lines 4-8.

⁶³ Gray (as note 24), p. 24.

maritime expertise. T’kama’s story might be quite different had he been conceived as the avatar not of Adamastor but of the honey-hunter or of one of da Gama’s many other, mainly benign, African interlocutors.

III

And maybe that conceptual shift is exactly what is beginning to happen in T’kama’s own, already eventful, afterlife. In 1999, a massive painting entitled *T’kama-Adamastor* went up on an empty wall in the William Cullen Library of the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg (fig. 3). Cyril Coetzee, a figurative South African painter, based the story narrated in this “gaudy visual fantasia”⁶⁴ almost entirely on Brink’s novel.⁶⁵ Right in the centre he depicts T’kama and the white woman as a version of Adam and Eve in front of a flat-topped African acacia tree of knowledge. Many details on the canvas can be traced back to Brink’s novel: the ships as birds with their eggs are shown in the top left corner of the canvas, the monstrous manhood of T’kama is posing as an ostrich right in the centre, next to the crocodile lurking between him and the woman, and the female figurehead used to dupe T’kama at the end of the novel is seen on the right-hand side of the image. In front of the figurehead T’kama is being bound by the white, bird-faced explorers before being viciously beaten and then turned into the rock of the Cape.

Brink’s novel is the main but not the only intertext cited on the canvas. The image is full of visual references to early modern European artworks and engravings by Leonardo, Dürer, Bosch, the de Brys, and many others, as well as to visuals drawn from early European travel accounts and natural histories housed in the Africana collection of the very library where the painting now hangs.⁶⁶ For example, the depiction of T’kama and the white woman in the centre is modelled on the de Brys’ version of Adam and Eve as noble savages in a New World landscape,⁶⁷ which is itself based on Dürer’s more famous engraving of the Fall of Man. The arrival of the bird-ships is based on another de Bry image, the depiction of Columbus landing in the New World,⁶⁸ with even the erection of Dias’s cross (the *padrão*) imported into the

⁶⁴ Hedley Twidle, “First Lives, First Words: Camões, Magical Realism and the Limits of Invention”, *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa* 17, no. 1 (2012), pp. 28-48: p. 40.

⁶⁵ See Coetzee (as note 40).

⁶⁶ Coetzee spells out many of these visual quotations and borrowings in *ibid.*

⁶⁷ See Thomas Harriot, *Admiranda narratio fida tamen, de commodis et incolarum ritibus Virginiae*, ed. Theodor de Bry, Frankfurt am Main: Sigismund Feirabend, 1590, plate section.

⁶⁸ See Girolamo Benzoni, *Americae pars quarta*, Frankfurt am Main: Theodor de Bry, 1594, plate 9.

painting, just to right of the bird-ships. Many more citations on the canvas could be listed.

The painting is an imaginative reworking of the beginnings of African-European contact at the Cape, which appropriates the early modern cultural moment to tell a very differently focused tale of this encounter than the one proffered by the many European sources on which it is based. Notably, it makes the indigenous presence the most prominent feature of the canvas and gives a rich visual, even fantastic account of the local flora and fauna. By contrast, the violent European invaders are pushed to the pictorial margins and are seen leaving again after a brief stay. And yet, while the painting makes the African experience central to its own visual world, it presents that experience in an almost exclusively European framework: the gaze mocked and ironized on the canvas through its many allusions to Renaissance artworks replicates the view from Europe, not Africa.⁶⁹

As the artist himself and several critics have noted, the painting needs to be set into the context of the space where it now hangs and for which it was originally commissioned. Its presentation as a “mock triptych”,⁷⁰ in Coetzee’s own term, through which the canvas is divided into the three stages arrival (left), contact (middle), and aftermath (right), is no accidental choice. The painting took up its spot in 1999 on an empty third wall in the Cullen Library next to two other paintings that had been hanging there since 1936.⁷¹ Both these paintings were, like Coetzee’s, originally commissioned by the University, but in a very different age. Both adopt a tripartite structure, possibly because of the unusual dimensions required by each canvas to fit the wall space provided: eight to nine metres long, three to four metres high. The three paintings, in their present U-shaped arrangement, now form a visual illustration of the recent history of southern Africa, as well as the political processing of that history in the twentieth century.

⁶⁹ The charge of Eurcentrism has been levelled at the painting by Margaret Hanzimanolis, “Southern African Contact Narratives: The Case of T’kama Adamastor and Its Reconstructive Project”, *Kunapipi* 24, no. 2 (2002), pp. 251-71.

⁷⁰ Coetzee (as note 40), p. 8.

⁷¹ For the background on all three commissioned paintings in the Cullen Library, see Reingard Nethersole, “Reconfiguring Colonial Identity: Cyril Coetzee’s Answer to Amshewitz and Gill”, in *T’kama Adamastor* (as note 38), pp. 33-9. All three paintings are reproduced in high resolution as large fold-outs in this publication.

The first painting, by John Henry Amshewitz, depicts the scene in the port of Belém just before Vasco da Gama set sail in 1497.⁷² A crowd that includes a mapmaker, an astronomer, and several mariners, surrounds da Gama kneeling before his king, who hands him the flag of the Order of Christ. In the background lurks the mighty ship that will take the navigator to India, via the Cape. No reference to *The Lusíads* is included in the painting, but the scene depicted is of course the very one that Camões dramatizes at the end of canto four, when the Old Man of Restelo, who has become proverbial in modern Portuguese as a stubborn opponent of progress, rudely interrupts the solemn moment of departure and rails at da Gama in a long anti-imperial tirade.⁷³ On Amshewitz's painting, that early, outspoken critic of empire is nowhere to be seen. The second canvas, by the English painter Colin Gill, depicts the deck of an immigrant ship carrying British colonists to southern Africa in the 1820s.⁷⁴ Labouring mariners mingle with middle-class settlers in the foreground; a distant promontory, approached by a second ship, rises in the background. That promontory, stylized as impossibly white cliffs falling into the sea, represents Algoa Bay in the Eastern Cape, the imaginary starting point of T'kama's route round the interior of the country and principal setting of Coetzee's canvas.

In the Cullen reading room, the massive paintings occupy three walls of a rectangular space, communicating with each other across time, space and culture, above the heads of the students. Amshewitz's da Gama painting hangs on the left, Gill's colonists in the middle, Coetzee's T'kama painting on the right. The latter thus completes the narrative trajectory started by the other two: departure in Europe, voyage across the sea, arrival in southern Africa. While specific themes – dislocation and transposition; travel and colonization; order and chaos – recur across all three paintings, Coetzee's raises issues silenced in the other two: the violence of empire, dispossession and injustice, the erasure of the local. Clearly the T'kama painting emerges out of the huge transitions in 1990s South Africa and shares in the energies unleashed by that historical moment. Clearly, also, the painting aims to rewrite and reinvent the arrival and settlement of Europeans in southern Africa by resolutely affirming an African stake in that history.

⁷² On Amshewitz, see Sarah Briana Amshewitz, *The Paintings of J. H. Amshewitz, R.B.A.*, London et al.: B.T. Batsford, 1951.

⁷³ See canto 4, stanzas 94-104.

⁷⁴ On Gill, see the entry in Grant M. Waters, *Dictionary of British Artists Working 1900-1950*, Eastbourne: Eastbourne Fine Art, 1975, p. 130.

The choice of topic and the form of its execution are certainly not without risk. Can Adamastor, reimagined here not as an imposing rock but a Khoikhoi chief, really speak back with authority and entitlement to the Portuguese and the English, who make their heavy-handed historical statements with such stately, formal seriousness? Through its faith in a single novel as the channel of historical meaning and provider of narrative content, the canvas arguably risks getting mired in the unintended implications of its imagery in the same way as does its source text. Turning *Adamastor* into a new *Adam* suggests not only the arrival of the bird-ships as a doubtful myth of origin but also an absence of any significant human history and knowledge prior to the first literary manifestation of the poetic giant himself. One critic has asked a related question, wondering how successful both painting and novel are, in their embrace of magical realist techniques, “at allowing submerged elements of the deep southern African past to surface”.⁷⁵

I want to suggest a tentative answer to these questions, one which requires as a first step a sceptical look at the central conceit posited by the writer, adopted by the painter, and taken for granted by critics: the re-incarnation of Adamastor as T’kama. Brink transforms Camões’s Cape giant into a local Khoikhoi, and Coetzee visualizes that transformation in the male African figure placed in the middle of his canvas. In the lavishly illustrated book on the painting published in 2001,⁷⁶ in which both Brink and Coetzee write at length about their artistic intentions and the models they used, the latter mentions paintings of the biblical Adam by Blake and Dürer as sources for the figure of T’kama, as well as early European images of the Khoikhoi, especially the 1508 woodcut by Hans Burgkmair of the inhabitants of “Allago” (ie, Algoa Bay).⁷⁷ The Adamastor described in *The Lusiads* looks, of course, nothing like a barefoot Khoikhoi wearing only a loincloth. Instead, T’kama resembles another figure from the poem rather closely: the local tribesman whom da Gama meets face-to-face in canto five shortly before the encounter with Adamastor.

⁷⁵ Twidle (as note 64), p. 40.

⁷⁶ See *T’kama Adamastor* (as note 38).

⁷⁷ Coetzee (as note 40), pp. 14, 17. A simplified version of Burgkmair’s illustration is included in Balthasar Springer, *Die Merfahrt und erfahrung nūwer Schiffung und Wege*, Munich: n.p., 1509. Only four copies of this edition are extant; for a facsimile reproduction see Andreas Erhard and Eva Ramminger, *Die Meerfahrt. Balthasar Springers Reise zur Pfefferküste*, Innsbruck: Haymon, 1998. For an overview of early European imagery of the Khoikhoi, see Malvern van Wyk Smith, “The most wretched of the human race”: The Iconography of the Khoikhoi (Hottentots), 1500–1800”, *History and Anthropology* 5, no. 3 (1992), pp. 285-330.

If we imagine for a moment that the figure Coetzee has painted is not actually the Cape giant but da Gama's first interlocutor in southern Africa – the local honey-hunter referred to in *The Lusiads* only as “a strange man of black skin” – the scene fashioned in the reading room with da Gama and T'kama confronting each other across the hall takes on an entirely different meaning: not now as an encounter between two essentially mythical figures, disputing dominion of the Indian Ocean in a language both can mysteriously speak and understand, but between one real historical agent and another, engaged in the mundane but very human attempt of trying to make sense of each other's unintelligible words. The pictorial juxtaposition remains as intended: the European kneels in subjection to his king (Amshewitz), while the African asserts his freedom (Coetzee); both are engaged in coded speech acts (one taking an oath, the other making a hand gesture signalling “presence of giraffe” in the sign language of the San hunters⁷⁸); both are situated in their own but very different habitats of a built-up European port and the south African veld.

But once T'kama is seen as the honey-hunter rather than a permutation of Adamastor, the painting elevates into the realm of the visible, not another western myth created to process the meaning of Africa for Europeans, but one of the few individuals of southern Africa who have left traces in the historical record from the time of first contact. We know more about the honey-hunter than might be obvious, even though he can speak to us only in a voice mediated by Europeans: he was black-skinned, small of stature, thought little of the gold and silver presented to him, and took exception to the Portuguese prying into his and his community's living conditions.⁷⁹ At the point of encounter with da Gama's crew, he was engaged in one of the most ancient practices of food collection in Africa, honey-hunting, which is remembered in local rock art and folk songs, and rooted in a hunting ethos replete with ritual and taboo.⁸⁰ He also knew that the Portuguese boats were not birds. When one of the Portuguese mariners, Fernão Veloso, was chased back to the beach after an indiscretion, the Khoikhoi prevented him from reaching the longboat that had been sent for his rescue, clearly understanding its purpose.⁸¹

This “ordinary” representative of the local population might serve as a more inclusive memory of pre-European culture at the Cape than the hostile demigod

⁷⁸ Coetzee (as note 40), p. 14.

⁷⁹ For more details, see Klein (as note 4), pp. 166-73.

⁸⁰ See Crane (as note 57).

⁸¹ See canto five, stanza 32.

invented by a Portuguese poet, soldier and colonial official,⁸² especially since it was this same poet who fashioned the anonymous honey-hunter into an individual from the spare details provided in the sources. Camões understood the moment for what it was: a first encounter, a recognition, a mutual acknowledgment. The painting might also then stand as a reminder that *The Lusiads*, while heavily invested in the exceptional, the extraordinary, the mythic, is also a poem of the everyday, the mundane, the commonplace. The honey-hunter speaks to us as denizens of the real in ways that Adamastor cannot and never should nor will do.

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Fig. 1: Cyril Coetzee, *T'kama-Adamastor* (as fig. 3), detail.

Fig. 2: Vasco da Gama's fleet on his first voyage into the Indian Ocean. From *Memória das armadas* (1565). Public domain.

Fig. 3: Cyril Coetzee, *T'kama-Adamastor* (1999), oil on canvas, 8.64m x 3.26m, William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand (Reproduced with permission from the artist and the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa).

⁸² On Camões's biography, see Pierce (as note 5), pp. vii-xii.