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MELVILLE AND THE QUESTION OF CAMÕES

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Of Herman Melville’s interest in the life and works of Luis de Camões there exists ample evidence. First, there continues to sing out from the pages of his novel White-Jacket (1850) the cries of the “matchless and unmatchable Jack Chase,” who appears to have been the young sailor Melville’s beau ideal: “For the last time, hear Camoens, boys!”1 Secondly, from the pages of Melville’s encyclopaedic novel Moby-Dick (1851) come unmistakable references to Camões’ poem of empire The Lusiads (1572), a work that Erich Auerbach calls “the great epic of the ocean.”2 Third, among the books in Melville’s library (the term library being defined to cover both the books owned by Melville and/or known to have been read by him) we can with confidence number The Lusiad: or The Discovery of India, translated by William Julius Mickle (1776), Poems, From the Portuguese of Luis de Camoens, translated by Lord Viscount Strangford (1803), and Poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1854), the last of which includes the unmarried Miss Barrett’s “Catarina to Camoens,” a poem well known to Melville and, it has been suggested, useful to him in the writing of his long poem Clarel (1876). Fourth, several of Melville’s poems allude to or draw upon Camões’ work. And, finally, as culminating evidence of his abiding interest in the Portuguese poet, Melville has left us “Camoens,” a poem made up of paired sonnets entitled “Camoens” and “Camoens in the Hospital.”

Yet, important as Camões was to Melville, it was not until 1924 that their names were first linked in a scholarly piece. Without insisting on influence, Merritt Y. Hughes made the connection in an essay commemorating the four hundredth anniversary of Camões’ birth by relating the whale Moby Dick to the giant Adamastor.3 It would be another five years before another critic, Lewis Mumford, would again bring up the matter.4 Incidentally, it is possible that Mumford was consciously following up on Hughes’s hint, for it is all but certain that he had seen Hughes’s piece. The very issue of the New York Evening Post Literary Review that carried Hughes’s essay also carried a book review by Mumford.

Even Hughes’ and Mumford’s modest references to the links between Melville and Camões stand out nearly alone in Melville scholarship until Newton Arvin’s seminal pages on the subject of
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Camões and Melville appeared in his American Men of Letters volume on Melville in 1950. "It is hard indeed not to feel that Moby Dick would have been somewhat different from what it is," decided Arvin, "if Melville had not known the Lusiads." Arvin's work was followed by Leon Howard's consideration in his biography of 1951, a work drawing upon the documentary materials assembled by Jay Leyda for his two volumes of The Melville Log published in the same year, and by Lawrance Thompson's provocative study Melville's Quarrel With God (1952). Incidentally, Thompson became the first critic to attend in detail to the two soliloquies constituting Melville's poem "Camoens." In the same year, 1952, appeared the Hendricks House edition of Moby-Dick, edited with copious explanatory notes (in which references to and echoes of The Lusiads were identified) by Luther S. Mansfield and Howard P. Vincent.

The 1960s brought the first recognition of the Camões—Melville connection from scholars in the Portuguese-speaking countries of Brazil and Portugal. First there was a passing reference by the Brazilian Augusto Meyer, and then, in The Portuguese and the Tropics (called in the original O Luso e o Trópico), a second Brazilian, Gilberto Freyre, incorporated considerations of both writers into his elaboration of his immediately appealing if somewhat controversial theory of lusotropicalism. The publication of Freyre's influential book prompted some appropriate remarks on the subject of Camões and Melville by the Portuguese scholar Américo da Costa Ramalho.

These pioneering efforts paved the way for most of the subsequent studies of the Camões—Melville connection. Salient among these are Brian F. Head's piece published in English in Brazil in 1964, William H. Shurr's contextual commentary on Melville's poems in 1972, Edwin Haviland Miller's suggestive pages in 1975, my own article in 1978 on Melville's re-reading in 1867 of Lord Strangford's Poems (an expanded version of which appeared in 1982). Lucy M. Freibert's study of the influence on Melville's Clarel of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work, especially her poem "Catarina to Camoens," and Alexandrino P. Severino's essay on Camoenean echoes and traces in Moby-Dick, a piece based on his talk at the Modern Language Association meetings in New York in 1972.

Yet for all of this, there is still much to be done, for the subject of Camões and Melville—their personal and intertextual relationships—is far from exhausted. To throw out a couple of ideas, as examples that cannot be pursued here: William Julius Mickle distinguishes between John Milton's Paradise Lost and Camões' The Lusiads: "In
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contradistinction to the Iliad and Æneid, the Paradise Lost has been called the Epic Poem of Religion. In the same manner may the Lusiad be named the Epic Poem of Commerce.”19 Is it far-fetched to suggest that Melville in Moby-Dick, taking hints from all earlier epics, but specifically the notion suggested by Mickle, attempted, by focusing on whaling, to write the great American Epic Poem of Commerce? Moreover, just as Camões wrote his celebratory poem in the years of Portugal’s decline as a nation of explorers, so, too, did Melville choose to romanticize the industry of whaling when it had fallen into decline and disrepute. Ishmael puts the matter succinctly in “The Advocate” (Chapter 24). “This business of whaling has somehow come to be regarded among landsmen as a rather unpoetical and disreputable pursuit,” he explains, “therefore, I am all anxiety to convince ye, ye landsmen, of the injustice hereby done to us hunters of whales” (p. 106). And as for Ishmael, was not Melville’s decision to make his first-person narrator a member of Captain Ahab’s crew anticipated by Camões’ decision to place himself, both ahistorically and anachronistically, on Vasco da Gama’s ship of exploration? These and other matters, particularly in the cases of Moby-Dick and Melville’s last work of fiction, Billy Budd, are still open to scholarly and critical investigation. But what I shall do here is something else. I shall look at the ways in which Camões’ life and work served Herman Melville the poet. In short, I shall examine the evidence supporting the notion that not only is Camões present in some of Melville’s poems but that the circumstances of Camões’ life became increasingly emblematic to Melville in the last decade of his life, a period almost exclusively devoted to poetry.

To begin with, there is a poem from Melville’s first collection of poetry, published in 1866, a year after the end of the War Between the States. In Battle-Pieces and Aspects of War appears the poem entitled “The Fortitude of the North under the Disaster of the Second Manassas”:

No shame they take for dark defeat  
While prizeing yet each victory won,  
Who fight for the Right through all retreat,  
Nor pause until their work is done.  
The Cape-of-Storms is proof to every throe;  
Vainly against that foreland beat  
Wild winds aloft and wilder waves below:  
The black cliffs gleam through rents in sleet  
When the livid Antarctic storm-clouds glow.20
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The poem turns on a simple comparison. The Northern army, defeated for the second time at Manassas, is compared to the Cape-of-Storms, that foreland whose “black cliffs” are impervious to winds and waves, to sleet and storm-clouds.

This rather direct poem has not been materially misread. Yet that it is touched by Camões has gone undetected. Indeed Melville’s reference to “The Cape-of-Storms” recalls Camões’ “Cabo Tormentorio” (V, 50, 65; X, 37), which Mickle renders as “the Cape of Tempests.”

Robert Penn Warren and Hennig Cohen, two of the more prominent critics who have worked with Melville’s poetry, misfire when they identify “The Cape-of-Storms” as a reference to Cape Horn. Cohen simply gets it wrong when, annotating the poem, he says: “For Melville, Cape Horn, the ‘Cape-of-Storms,’ was a place of great tribulation. He had rounded it as a seaman and a passenger, and in his journal de August 7, 1860, gave it this telling description: ‘Horrible snowy mountains — black, thunder-cloud woods — gorges — hell-landscapes.’” Warren, on the other hand, linking “The Fortitude of the North under the Disaster of the Second Manassas” with an earlier poem, “The March Into Virginia Ending in the First Manassas,” draws on the reference to “The Cape-of-Storms” to insist: “Once the nature of the self and the terms of life are clear, one can bear the ‘throe.’ So here the theme of the poem goes back to Melville’s old obsessive theme. First Manassas is like the Horn that must be rounded if man is to be fully man.”

But it is not Cape Horn that is traditionally known as the Cape of Storms. The key, of course, is not in Melville’s references to Cape Horn in a letter or an entry in his journal, but in his novels. In “The Spirit-Spout,” Chapter 51 of Moby-Dick, Ishmael cries out: “Cape of Good Hope, do they call ye? Rather Cape Tormentoto, as called of yore” (p. 233). And earlier, in White-Jacket, Melville writes: “Turned on her heel by a fierce West Wind, many an outward-bound ship has been driven across the Southern Ocean to the Cape of Good Hope—that way to seek a passage to the Pacific. And that stormy Cape, I doubt not, has sent many a fine craft to the bottom, and told no tales.”

When we turn to John Marr and Other Sailors with Some Sea-Pieces, Melville’s second collection of lyric poems, published in 1888, we find Camões all but named in “Crossing the Tropics,” a twenty-one line poem divided into three stanzas of five lines each followed by a couplet. This is a nicely turned love poem that would not usually call for special attention. Given the topic of Camões’ presence in
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Melville’s poetry, however, I would point to the reference to Vasco da Gama in lines ten and twelve:

By day the blue and silver sea
   And chime of waters blandly fanned—
Nor these, nor Gama’s stars to me
May yield delight since still for thee
I long as Gama longed for land.  (Coll. Poems, p. 202)

Since Mickle’s translation of The Lusiads was most likely Melville’s principal text for knowledge of Vasco da Gama, it is reasonable to look in that place for a specific source for Melville’s references in this poem. Brian Head points to such a place, Canto 5, stanzas 13-15 (Head, p. 65). I limit myself to quoting three lines:

While nightly thus the lonely seas we brave
Another Pole-star rises o’er the wave;
Full to the south a shining cross appears[.]26

These lines are echoed by Melville at the very opening of his poem:

While now the Pole Star sinks from sight
   The Southern Cross it climbs the sky[.]  (Coll. Poems, p. 202)

Melville’s use of Camões in “Crossing the Tropics” is not particularly suggestive. His borrowings from The Lusiads are tributary, of course, but only in the way a professional might tip his hat at the achievement of a fellow craftsman. The borrowings in this poem are not deeply personal, as they will become in other poems.

One other poem in this collection deserves a new look. Head (p. 65) has suggested that “The Enviable Isles” may have been “at least partly inspired by Camoens’ ‘Isle of Love.’”

Through storms you reach them and from storms are free.
   Afar descried, the foremost drear in hue,
But, nearer, green; and, on the marge, the sea
   Makes thunder low and mist of rainbowed dew.

But, inland, where the sleep that folds the hills
A dreamier sleep, the trance of God, instills—
   On uplands hazed, in wandering airs aswone,
Slow-swaying palms salute love’s cypress tree
   Adown in vale where pebbly runlets croon
A song to lull all sorrow and all glee.
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Sweet-fern and moss in many a glade are are,
Where, strown in flocks, what check-flushed myriads lie
Dimpling in dream—unconscious slumberers mere,
While billows endless round the beaches die.
(Coll. Poems, p. 204)

Head adduces passages from Mickle’s translation of Camões’ description of this place (Canto 9), which I shall not reproduce here. The Melville who had visited the, at least superficially, Edenic islands of the Pacific and who would incorporate those experiences in his early books, Typee and Mardi, did not miss, one can be sure, as Head first pointed out, Camões’ verses on the Blessed Isles as the locus of seductive beauty and enticing serenity. The suggestion that Melville’s poem is indebted to Camões is plausible, though there is some likelihood that the similarities point as well to a more generic debt the two of them share with Homer, Vergil, Milton, Dante, Spenser, Ariosto and Tasso.27

Head’s additional suggestion that the four-line poem “In a Garret,” published in Timoleon in 1891, can be related to the life of Camões has not hitherto been picked up by Melville scholars. Yet it does seem to me that it has considerable merit though I do think that the case Head makes for it can be enhanced. “In a Garret” reads:

Gems and jewels let them heap—
Wax sumptuous as the Sophi:
For me, to grapple from Art’s deep
One dripping trophy! (Coll. Poems, p. 228)

Head points to the fact that in White-Jacket Melville has Jack Chase, the lover of Camões, refer to “the cave at the end of the flowery, winding way, where Camoens, according to tradition, composed certain parts of his Lusiad.” He then adduces an original meaning for “garret”—that is, “shelter”—and equates “shelter” with “cave” to make his link in this poem between Melville and Camões. One additional connection that he does not make is the one implicit in the phonological similitudes in the words “garret” and “grotto,” the latter a term used to describe the place in Macão made available to Camões while he was exiled from Goa and where he worked on his epic poem. As John Adamson writes, “A Grotto is shewn at Macão, wherein tradition reports Camoens spent great part of the time, during which he was employed on the completion of his poem: accounts of it may be seen in the works of the authors, who have recorded the proceedings of the two last embassies sent from England to China. It is still called
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The Grotto of Camões. The same information was available to Melville in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s massive anthology of European poetry in translation first published in 1845, where he could have read that in Macao Camões “spent much of his time in a grotto overlooking the sea, and there the greater part of the ‘Lusiad’ is said to have been written. The place is still shown to strangers as the Grotto of Camões.”

In 1964, the same year in which Head published his speculative reading of the poem, appeared Hennig Cohen’s Selected Poems of Herman Melville, a carefully prepared edition armed with commentary. What he says about “In a Garret” has some bearing on the question of how Camões functions as a presence in the poem. Cohen (pp. 232-233) begins by glossing Melville’s reference in the second line of the poem to “Sophi.” He sees it as referring to St. Sophia in Constantinople, which Melville visited in 1856 while on his travels in the Near East. “‘Supurb [sic] interior,’” wrote Melville in his journal, “‘Precious marbles Porphyry & Verd antique. Immense magnitude of the building.’” In a second entry, also quoted by Cohen, he added: “‘Owing to its peculair [sic] form St: Sophia viewed near to, looks as partly underground; as if you saw but the superstructure of some immense temple, yet to be disinterred. You step down to enter.’”

Fortified by Melville’s references, Cohen interprets the poem as follows:

The impression of the sumptuousness of the building is retained in the poem and the need to descend in order to enter it may lie behind the nautical imagery of grappling for objects from the depths of the sea. However, the word “grapple” also indicates the strain and conflict involved in plumbing the depths. Melville rejects great riches accumulated through the efforts of others for the opportunity to grapple for a single gem himself. If he had in mind the significance of the name St. Sophia, in English “Holy Wisdom,” then the poem hints at an opposition between philosophy and art in the process of artistic creativity. (Sel. Poems, p. 233)

“Sophi” refers, of course, first of all to the Persian princes whose waxing sumptuously results from an accumulation of gems and jewels. (Whether or not “Sophi” also refers to “the Magian priests” who brought myrrh and frankincense—in Melville’s poem symbolized by “wax”—as William Bysshe Stein has suggested, I shall not venture.) But it is Melville’s nautical imagery, unexamined as such by Head or
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Stein but pointed to by Cohen, that enhances the likelihood that Camões is present in the poem, however buried and disguised. Within Melville's asserted choice—"For me to grapple from Art's deep/ One dripping trophy"—are references to two poets: Schiller and Camões. Cohen points to Schiller and his poem "The Diver":

Titles which Melville considered but discarded include "Ambition," "Schiller's Ambition," and "The Spirit of Schiller." His copy of Schiller's Poems and Ballads in the translation of Edward Bulwer Lytton shows marked passages in "The Diver." This ballad is about a brave, ambitious squire who plunges into a maelstrom to recover a golden cup in response to the challenge of the king. When he succeeds, the king offers him the hand of his daughter if he dives for the goblet a second time. The squire does so and is drowned though he himself had warned that one should not "stretch too far the wide mercy of Heaven." "In a Garret" shares the idea of the risks involved in plunging for "One dripping trophy."32

Without gainsaying the strong evidence that Schiller was on Melville's mind when he entitled his poem on art and creativity, I would argue that at least subconsciously Camões was also on his mind. In Mickle's pages on Camões' life Melville had learned of the legendary survival of Camões' manuscript of The Lusiads. "Desirous to return to Goa," Mickle tells us, "he set sail, but was shipwrecked in the gulf near the mouth of the river Mecon, in Cochin-China. All he had acquired was lost in the waves: his poems, which he held in one hand, while he saved himself with the other, were all he found himself possessed of, while he stood friendless on the unknown shore" (Mickle, pp. lxx-lxxi). In Book 7 of The Lusiads Camões refers to the shipwreck:

Now bless'd with all the wealth fond hope could crave,
Soon I beheld that wealth beneath the wave
For ever lost; myself escaped alone,
On the wild shore all friendless, hopeless, thrown;
My life, like Judah's heaven-doom'd king of yore,
By miracle prolong'd; yet not the more
To end my sorrows: woes succeeding woes
Belied my earnest hopes of sweet repose:
In place of bays around my brows to shed
Their sacred honours, o'er my destined head
Foul Calumny proclaim'd the fraudulent tale,
And left me mourning in a dreary jail. (pp. 180-181)
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Obviously, one can point to the choice made by the shipwrecked Camões—his manuscript over any other kind of wealth—as not unrelated to the choice of “One dripping trophy” from “Art’s deep” indicated in Melville’s poem. To have grappled to keep The Lusiads from falling back into the depths of the subconscious (“Art” in Melville’s poem) only to lose the manuscript itself to the very sea that is both emblematic and natural would have been the poet’s greatest tragedy. The Lusiads, so saved from what Joseph Conrad called the destructive element, stands as the kind of “dripping trophy” that Melville would prize over all of the Sophi’s gems and jewels. As one of Melville’s contemporaries put it in 1848, “With but a single plank to which he could cling for succor, he suffered all else to perish—the savings of his exile—all his earthly possessions save the treasure of his heart, and to rescue this he struggled with the mighty ocean and was victor! He rescued his poem and himself, not without difficulty, from a watery grave.”

It occurs to me, moreover, as I look back at Camões’ lines just quoted, that in employing the phrase “myself escaped alone”—with its echo of Job—Mickle anticipates Melville’s use of the same Jobean verse in Moby-Dick when, in the epilogue, Ishmael says: “And I only am escaped alone to tell thee” (p. 567).

Immediately preceding “In a Garret” in Cohen’s edition of Melville’s poems appears the poem “The Garden of Metrodorus,” also from the volume Timoleon:

The Athenians mark the moss-grown gate And hedge untrimmed that hides the haven green: And who keeps here his quiet state? And shares he sad or happy fate Where never foot-path to the gate is seen?

Here none come forth, here none go in, Here silence strange, and dumb seclusion dwell: Content from loneness who may win? And is this stillness peace or sin Which noteless thus apart can keep its dell? (Sel. Poems, p. 140)

Cohen’s commentary is pertinent to our investigation into the matter of Camões’ presence in Melville’s poetry. He is alone, among Melville’s critics, in hinting at a connection, or at least evidence of an affinity, between the sentiments expressed in “The Garden of Metrodorus” and similar sentiments expressed in Camões’ poetry. Darrell Abel writes (p.
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335): “The Garden of Metrodorus’...symbolizes the cryptic character of the philosopher and his domain as seen by ordinary men, who may casually wonder about his esoteric experience but have no conception of its realities.” Cohen, on the other hand, sees it more as a poem about withdrawal and, perhaps by implication, estrangement (Sel. Poems, p. 232): “Melville suggests that the withdrawal into the silent, unkempt garden is in itself a puzzling response and raises more questions than it answers: for example, questions of whether the state of quietude is one of happiness or sadness, peace or sin. But he himself was sympathetic to withdrawal.” Cohen then follows up with this interesting sentence:

In his copy of Camoëns’s poetry he marked this passage from “Sonnet VI”:
My senses lost, misjudging men declare[,] And Reason banish’d from her mental throne, Because I shun the crowd, and dwell alone. (p. 232)

These opening lines, marked by Melville in the copy of Strangford’s Poems he acquired on May 17, 1867, were not the only lines so marked by the sympathizing author. In fact, the page appears as follows:

SONNET VI. (V.N.)

“Julgame a gente toda por perdido
Vendome tão entregue a meu cuidado,” &c.

My senses lost, misjudging men declare,
And Reason banish’d from her mental throne,
Because I shun the crowd, and dwell alone
In the calm trance of undisturb’d despair,
Tears all my pleasure—all my comfort care!

But I have known, from long experience known
How vain the worship to those idols shown,
Which charm the world, and reign unrivall’d there:
Proud dreams of pow’r, and fortune’s gilded glare,
The lights that blaze in tall Ambition’s tow’r,
For such, let others waste life’s little hour
In toil and weary search—but be it mine,
Lady! to muse of thee—and in my bow’r
Pour to thy praise the soul-impassion’d line!34

Here, too, as in “The Garden of Metrodorus,” “the single-minded good man is crushed by less naïve forces and cast out.”35 Here, with this poem by Camões, we can build a bridge between the Melville of “In a
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Garret,” committed to Art and grappling for “one dripping trophy,” and the Melville who, late in life, devoted one two-part poem to Camões.

Among the some forty poems Melville left in manuscript at the time of his death in 1891 at the age of seventy-two—including poems on Shakespeare’s Falstaff, Don Quixote, Montaigne—was, preeminently, a poem devoted to Camões. This poem remained unpublished until 1924, when it appeared under the rubric of “Miscellaneous Poems” in volume sixteen—Poems—of The Works of Herman Melville brought out by Constable, the British publisher. The poem has been reprinted several times since, of course, but never to my knowledge exactly as it first appeared in the Constable edition, for it is the version published in Howard P. Vincent’s Hendricks House edition, of the Collected Poems published in 1947 that has become standard. Yet since the Constable and Hendricks House versions both have authority in the extant manuscripts—the textual differences resulting from editorial decisions—it seems consonant with my present purpose to offer you the longer, Constable version of the poem “Camões.” Three minor typographical errors have been corrected silently.

CAMOENS

(Before)

And ever must I fan this fire?
Thus ever in flame on flame aspire?
Ever restless, restless, craving rest—
The Imperfect toward Perfection pressed!
Yea, for the God demands thy best.
The world with endless beauty teems,
And thought evokes new worlds of dreams:
Hunt then the flying herds of themes!
And fan, still fan, thy fervid fire,
Until thy crucibled gold shall show
That fire can purge as well as glow.
In ordered ardour, nobly strong,
Flame to the height of epic song.

(After)

CAMOENS IN THE HOSPITAL

What now avails the pageant verse,
Trophies and arms with music borne?
Base is the world; and some rehearse
How noblest meet ignoble scorn,
Vain now thy ardour, vain thy fire,
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Delirium mere, unsound desire;
Fate’s knife hath ripped thy chorded lyre.
Exhausted by the exacting lay,
Thou dost but fall a surer prey
To wile and guile ill understood;
While they who work them, fair in face,
Still keep their strength in prudent place,
And claim they worthier run life’s race,
Serving high God with useful good.36

There is much to be said about these two sonnets (though the first one, a sonnet manqué, runs to thirteen lines) but I shall limit myself to two or three observations. First, it will be immediately noted that in these first-person verses spoken in the voice of the Portuguese poet we are intended to hear, in sequence, the voice, first, of the poet in mid-career and, secondly, the voice of the ageing and infirm poet. In the former, the poet resorts to imagery of fire and crucibles to describe the poetic fervor he feels as he composes his epic song. In full stride, in the finest line in poem, he “hunt[s] then the flying herds of themes.” Here, then, are his two metaphors: those of the poet at his forging, and the poet as hunter. The speaker exudes strength, passion and purpose. In the latter sonnet, subtitled, it will be recalled, “Camões in the Hospital,” the tone is plaintive and recriminatory. “Vain now thy ardour, vain thy fire,” the poet laments. He has fallen victim, finally, to his art. He has been “exhausted by the exacting lay” and is prey, thus, to the “wiles” and “snares” (alternative manuscript reading in the manuscript) of those who have been more prudent, those who claim to have served “high God” in “practical mood” (again an alternative manuscript reading). It is as if, in this poem, Melville were trying to sound once again the note he had found in Ecclesiastes, as he acknowledged in Moby-Dick (p. 422): “the fine hammered steel of woe.”

There is, of course, ample justification in the accounts of Camões known to Melville—those of his translators, Mickle and Strangford—for the double portrait (before and after) Melville gives us. Consider, for instance, the testimony of Josepe Indio, who testified that he had been present in 1579 at the poet’s death in an alms-house:

What a lamentable thing to see so great a genius so ill rewarded! I saw him die in an hospital in Lisbon, without having a sheet (shroud) to cover him, after having triumphed in the East Indies, and sailed 5500 leagues! What good advice for those, who weary themselves night
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and day in study without profit, as the spider weaves its webs to catch flies.\textsuperscript{37}

It is of little matter that historians have questioned the historicity of such accounts, for the legend of the poet maligned and neglected has a long history. Yet there is a puzzling fact about the extant manuscript for this poem. The word “Tasso” is written besides the rubrics of both verses of the poem. The first sheet reads:

\begin{verbatim}
Camoens    \quad Before
In the  \quad Tasso
\end{verbatim}

(Before)

And the second one contains an explanatory tag:

Suggested by a bust of that poet Tasso [.]\textsuperscript{38}

Melville knew both the poetry of Torquato Tasso, of course, and the story of his woeful life. Available to him was the scholarship of Richard Henry Wilde, the poet and translator of Camões, who entitled his book \textit{Conjectures and Researches Concerning the Love, Madness \& Imprisonment of Torquato Tasso} (New York: Alexander V. Blake, 1842). He knew as well Baroness de Staël-Holstein’s \textit{Germany}, in the second volume of which he scored and checked this passage: “The morbid sensibility of Tasso is well known, as well as the polished rudeness of his protector Alphonso, who, professing the highest admiration for his writings, shut him up in a mad-house, as if that genius which springs from the soul were to be treated like the production of a mechanical talent, by valuing the work while we despise the workman.”\textsuperscript{39} In 1857, in Europe on his way to the Levant, Melville made an obligatory visit to “St. Onofrio, church \& monastery, where Tasso expired.” “Tasso’s prison,” he wrote, “Mere cider-cellar. Grated window, but not strong” (\textit{Journal of a Visit}, pp. 207, 225).

In short, it is obvious that Tasso and Camões, melding somewhat in Melville’s mind, became emblematic for Melville of the fate of the poet in societies in which there was, to borrow Strangford’s words (\textit{Poems}, p. 24), a “decline of public spirit in matters of taste”—a “certain indication of political decay.” In 1881 Melville could have read in Richard Burton’s \textit{Camoens: His Life and His Lusiads}: “As Tasso, leaving the Hospital and Madhouse of St. Anne, found a last refuge in the Monastery of Saint, Onofrio, so his \textit{colto e buon Luigi} passed his
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latter days with the Religious of S. Domingos. Perhaps these were the only men, save the Licentiate Corrêa and a knot of personal friends, who could understand him" (Burton, 1:32).

The fact of the matter is that in his last years, perhaps for a decade or more, Melville took to seeing analogues for his own fate in the histories of other literary figures, both fictional and historical. In this sense, Camões’ fate was Tasso’s fate, and their fate was Melville’s own. As such “Camoens” is a poem about the seemingly universal experience of these national poets. It was as if the epic poet who had sung of Gama and Adamastor, the epic poet who had written of the First Crusade, and the epic novelist who had sung the tragedy of Ahab and Moby Dick, belonged, ahistorically, to a cohort of genius in which each of the members had been accused of going mad. Yet, what each had done through his poetry, regardless of the low estate of each in an infirm old age, remained his own monument. This is the message proclaimed by Tasso, precociously for himself, in his own sonnet on Camões:

Vasco, whose bold and happy bowsprit bore
Against the rising morn; and, homeward fraught,
Whose sails came westward with the day, and brought
The wealth of India to thy native shore;

Ne'er did the Greek such length of seas explore,
The Greek, who sorrow to the Cyclop wrought;
And he, who, victor, with the Harpies fought,
Never such pomp of naval honours wore.

Great as thou art, and peerless in renown,
Yet thou to Camoens ow'st thy noblest fame;
Further than thou didst sail, his deathless song
Shall bear the dazzling splendour of thy name:
And under many a sky thy actions crown,
While Time and Fame together glide along.

(Mickle, p. xcvii)

Melville undoubtedly knew Tasso’s poem, for it appears, in this translation, in Mickle’s introduction to his English version of The Lusiads. For the Melville who had been largely forgotten in his own lifetime, it must have seemed bootless to believe other than that rather than any of his songs, especially Moby-Dick’s, being “deathless,” they had long since fallen into nothingness. Melville chose, then, in imagining the words of Camões (or Tasso) both in mid-career and at the
end of his life, to bring out, first, the impassioned confidence and, then, the bitter disappointment attendant to a poet who fears that his work has come to nothing. Happily what might have seemed to be outrageously hubristic in Melville’s later years—identifying himself with Camões and Tasso—has turned out to be, a century later, fairly close to the mark. The Lusiads, Jerusalem Delivered, Moby-Dick—merely to rehearse their titles suffices to make the point.

What I have said to this point stems logically from an initial decision to compile (and publish) a full collection of the available commentary and scholarship on the subject of Camões and Melville. The collection itself I chose to assemble chronologically because I thought others would be interested in the sequence of commentary and interpretation as established, seemingly, by dates of publication and by the provenience of certain observations and ideas insofar as I could trace them. In that compilation I did not make any attempt to weed out instances of repetition or overlapping, for those very instances seemed to me to be very much a part of the story of critical reception I would discover and display. This collection (soon to go to press) bears the same scholarly and methodological relationship, more or less, to a meticulously researched, richly detailed, and closely argued book (just out) bearing the title of Melville’s Camões, that Jay Leyda’s original Melville Log bears to Leon Howard’s biography of Melville. Melville’s Camões is the work of Norwood Andrews, Jr., and it was published in 1989 by Bouvier Verlag in Bonn. In it Andrews has brought together the existing scholarship, has synthesized it and organized it, and has put it back together to make the case anew for the importance that Camões held for Melville.

What Andrews reconfirms is (1) that Camões was even more important to Melville than the echoes of, and references to, Camões’ work that scholars have so far discovered would seem, at first glance, to indicate, and (2) that over his long career as a writer Melville found uses and reuses for Camões. In the paragraphs I have left, I will focus on only one of those uses, though because that use came late in Melville’s life and because it constitutes a major way in which Camões figures in Melville’s work, it takes on a truly large significance.

What are some of the implications in this late use of Camões that should be called to the attention of the student of Melville and his work? What are that student’s scholarly responsibilities, moreover, in the face of the fact that Melville insisted on superimposing his Camões on this Tasso? And if it is tenable to think that Melville identified closely with the Camões whose voice is dramatized in the two sonnets that constitute a single monologic poem (he had already unmistakably
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registered such an identification in 1867 when he annotated tellingly his recently acquired copy of Strangford’s translations of Camoes’ lyric poetry), then what must the biographer make of the fact that in this late period of relative quietude (and reconciliation with the idea of living out his life with his wife and in marriage) Melville was still writing poems that are bitter in the words he gives us as spoken by his great predecessors, poems levelling charges of social neglect and personal abuse? Through these poems we can discover that Melville’s conception of those predecessors as maligned, neglected writers of genius enabled him to link his fate with that of other unquestionably great writers who suffered grievously at the end of their lives. The unrequited Melville plunges himself into an archetype or paradigm (one that belongs as much to history as to literature) that tells us much about Melville’s way of thinking about himself, at least at the time he was writing about Camões. That Melville changed his mind not only about the title of the poem but about the identity of the poem’s speaker suffices to tip us off that Melville at the end still saw himself—in “colossal cipher” (Emerson’s words)—as a member of the pantheon of the great epic writers who in their own time have not been decently treated or adequately appreciated. And more. Was not Melville also implying that under the guise of history the author of Moby-Dick would some day come into his own? What, then, are the implications of all this for the biography of a writer who at the end of his life, in a tale about mutiny, turned to the themes of law and society, innocence and depravity, will and determinism? How, too, will the biographer measure the mind and personality of the Melville who would apply metaphorically to himself what was literally true for Tasso (imprisonment) and for Camões (sickness and death in an almshouse)? What we have here at least (though it is also something more and different, I would suggest), is Melville’s rather pure and uncritical application to himself (revealed indirectly) of the romantic view of the artist woefully and ungraciously misused and abused by his society. This view of Melville (or one similar to it) has of course been the historical view of Melville that has prevailed in the twentieth century. In fact, the strong desire to believe in the historicity of this view stands behind the continuing refusal by many readers to acknowledge the fact that Melville’s works were not entirely ignored during the latter decades of his life or that they were absolutely forgotten in the three decades following his death. That in the 1890s alone there were available various inexpensive editions of his major fiction (including Moby-Dick), and that they were advertised, noticed and sold, is a fact that is itself ignored.
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Moreover, since Melville held this Romantic-Renaissance conception of himself so late in life, that information must be factored into biographical accounts of those last years. What did it mean to him and what should it mean to his late-twentieth-century readers that in his final years Herman Melville rationalized and aggrandized his situation as a “failed writer” (within quotation marks)? Did it somehow enable that last collection of poems he was working on at the time of his death as well as the unfinished Billy Budd?

ADDENDA

There is something to be said, at least in passing, for including Jorge de Sena, the twentieth-century Portuguese writer, in this discussion of Camões, Tasso, and Melville. Sena makes numerous references to Tasso throughout his voluminous studies of Camões and the traditions of fifteenth-century literature, and he even translated Tasso’s sonnet on Camões, publishing it first in his anthology of world poetry, Poesia de 26 Séculos (Porto: Inova, 1971), 150, and then in the November 1972 issue of Ocidente devoted to Camões (p. 38). Of Tasso and Camões, Sena said once, “it was not without reason that the former died mad, just as the latter died of little more than hunger” (Trinta Anos de Camões [Lisbon: Edições 70, 1980], I, 53).

Sena was aware that Melville was an admirer of Camões. In an entry on the Portuguese poet in the fifteenth edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1974) Sena observes: “The Italian poet Torquato Tasso’s sonnet to him [Camões] and the admiring quotations by the Spanish writer Baltasar Gracián in his Agudeza y arte de ingenio (1648) are examples of his fame, which was also noted by the Spanish dramatist Lope de Vega and poets Góngora, Milton, Goethe, the German Romantics, Byron, the Brownings, and others among his admirers, the last, but not the least, being Herman Melville” (see also Trinta Anos de Camões, I, 299).

In 1961—on June 11th, the day after Camões Day, an event celebrated annually in various parts of the Portuguese-speaking world—Sena, like Melville decades earlier, adopted the voice of Camões for a first-person historical poem in which the angry poet delivers himself of a Philippic against all mediocrities who now oppose him as well as those who will oppose him in the future. In “Camões Addresses His Contemporaries” ("Camões dirige-se aos seus contemporâneos"), Sena writes (in my translation):

Rob me blind:
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My ideas, words, images,
Metaphors too, themes, motives,
Symbols, and the primacy
In feeling the pangs of a new language,
In the understanding of others,
The courage to fight, judge, and to
Penetrate into the recesses of that
Love for which you are castrated.
And then you shall fail to acknowledge me,
Suppress me, ignore me, even acclaim
Other more fortunate thieves.
No great matter, for the punishment
Will be terrible. Not only when your
Grandchildren no longer know you
Will they have to know me better even than
That which you pretend not to know, for
All, all that you so laboriously steal,
Shall revert to my ownership. And
Even that which will be mine, taken for
My property, counted as mine, those
Small and miserly things that you,
Without robbing them, have done.
You shall have nothing, nothing at all—
Not your very bones, for even one of your skeletons
Shall be fetched
And passed off for mine so that other
Thieves, your peers, will on their knees
Bring flowers to the tomb.

(In Crete, With the Minotaur, and Other Poems [Providence, R.I.: Gávea-Brown, 1980], p. 41)

Sena himself, again like Melville, saw grand similarities between his own difficult circumstances and likely fate and those of Camões (see my essay, “In Quest of Jorge de Sena,” Hispania, 70 [May 1987], 257-64). While it is not certain that Sena actually knew Melville’s poem “Camoens,” there is no gainsaying that there are tantalizing similarities between his poem and Melville’s. Three quarters of a century after Melville’s example Sena had done exactly what the American had done. He had, like Melville before him (and Tasso before Melville), chosen to cast his biographical life along the mythic-legendary-literary lines of the paradigm that Camões’ putative life had first made available to them all.
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NOTES


2Introduction to Romance Languages and Literature (New York, 1961), p. 185.


4Herman Melville (New York, 1929), p. 58.

5Herman Melville (New Yorks, 1950), p. 150.

6Herman Melville: A Biography (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1951), pp. 73-74 et passim.


10Prêto & Branco (Sao Paulo, 1956), pp. 134-140.


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19 The Lusiad; or the Discovery of India: An Epic Poem (London, 1809), p. i.


21 Mickle, Lusiad, p. 123.


25 White-Jacket, p. 96. See also Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, revised and enlarged (New York, n.d.), p. 368: "The Cape of Storms: So Bartholomew Diaz named the south cape of Africa in 1486, but John II of Portugal (d. 1495) changed it to the Cape of Good Hope."


29 The Poets and Poetry of Europe (Boston, 1871), p. 739.

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32Cohen, Sel. Poems, p. 233. Darrel Abel argues along similar lines in "Laurel Twined with Thorn": The Theme of Melville's Timoleon," Personalist, 41 (1960), 338. Shurr also attends to the familiar Melvillean theme of "diving": "'Grapple' here is not the same as 'wrestle' in the previous poem ["Art"], though one may be tempted to make a connection. The figure is different and, though innocent enough in appearance, one needs to pause at this word to consider the usual function of grappling hooks and dragging operations. The figure has much in common with Melville's consistent diving imagery and his feeling for the kind of reality one encounters in the depths" (Mystery, p. 243).

33Ralph, "Camoëns," The Indicato [A Literary Periodical Conducted by Students of Amherst College], 1 (1848-49), 7.

34Poems, From the Portuguese of Luis de Camoens, translated by Lord Viscount Strangford (London, 1824), p. 90. Melville's copy is owned by J. C. Levenson of the University of Virginia, and is quoted with his kind permission.


38"Poems Unpublished by Melville" (Ms Am 188 [369.1]), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Quoted with the Library's consent.