Camoens and the Epic of Africa.*

II.

To follow Camoens through all the episodes of his amazing Odyssey in the East would be a task too ambitious for a single lecture, even were the chronology of his life after 1553 better established than it is. Fortunately we have to deal with him here principally as an African poet, and the main lines of his African experiences are laid down with great clearness not only in the "Lusiads" but in certain of the lyrical poems also, in which he speaks directly in his own person (e.g. Elegy III., Canção X., etc.).

The poet sailed for India in the squadron of the Captain-General Fernão Alvares Cabral, with whom he had probably seen service already in North Africa. The fleet consisted of five vessels, of which one was burned in harbour before the armada set out. Although Camoens was given a passage on the flag-ship the "San Bento," his situation was no better than that of the common soldiers who were forcibly recruited throughout Portugal whenever a fresh armada set out for the East. "The ships that go to the Indies," says the traveller Linschott, "carry ordinarily four hundred to five hundred men each, soldiers and mariners, and sometimes more according to the exigencies of the time. As soon as the ships are well out to sea a review is held of all the mariners and soldiers. Those who are enrolled and found absent have their names recorded by a notary—(Port. "escrivao")—in order that application may be made to their sureties, for all must find surety before they embark." Bail was found on this occasion for Camoens,—not as in 1550 by his father, but by a certain Belchior Barreto of whom we know nothing whatever. Whether Camoens, like our own Elizabethan Thomas Lodge, was able to write on board ship or not, the opening stanzas of Canto V. of the "Lusiads" certainly preserve an admirable impression of the sentiment of his departure.

* A Lecture delivered at the Transvaal University College, Johannesburg, with Headpieces from Manoel de Faria y Sousa's edition of "The Lusiads" (Madrid, 1639).
and are full of the rush of new sensations. Our quotations hitherto have been from Quillinan’s translation, but here Burton is a more satisfactory guide.

“Slow, ever slower, banisht from our eyne,
Vanished our native hills astern remaining:
Remained dear Tagus, and the breezy line
Of Cintran peaks, long, long our gaze detaining:
Remained eke in that dear country mine
Our hearts with pangs of memory ever paining:
Till, when all veiled sank in darkling air,
Nought but the welkin and the wave was there.”

In all this part of his translation Burton writes as an explorer for explorers, and his version of the African voyage, unclassical though it be, is more inspiring than the colder and more halting translations of the same episode by Mickle and Quillinan. For Burton a geographical catalogue was a mere delight, and Camoens’ account of his voyage south from Madeira to the line is an inspired catalogue, which is purely fanciful as regards Vasco da Gama (who kept well out to sea after passing Cape Verde) but simply a poetical dressing of the truth with regard to the “San Bento,” which hugged the Guinea coast closely and only lost touch with land somewhere south of the Congo. Then the weather broke and Cabral’s fleet was tossed back and forward in the South Atlantic current, while the poet acquired a large and terrifying experience of maritime phenomena, which he has condensed into the powerful description of the waterspout (St. 20, Canto V.) with the Homeric simile of the leech that drinks of the heifer’s blood. At last the Cape was passed by the “San Bento” at some date (probably in July or August, 1553) which we cannot fix, and Camoens found himself at length in the enchanted world of the Indian seas. But the hold upon him of the experiences through which he had passed was too powerful to be lightly shaken off, and when these experiences had their tragic lines deepened by the news of fresh disasters which reached him immediately on his landing in India, and still more when a year later he learned of the loss of the “San Bento” with all her crew on the homeward voyage, the contours of the huge figure of Adamastor were probably fixed indelibly in his imagination. “Adamastor,” says Braga, “grew up as the synthesis of all the famous disasters of the unimaginably tragic maritime history of Portugal.”

“You shall understand,” says the Englishman Thomas Stevens, writing from Goa in 1579, “that, the Cape passed,
there be two ways to India; one within the Ile of S. Laurence, which they take willingly, because they refresh themselves at Mosambique a fortnight or a moneth, not without great need, and thence in a moneth more land in Goa. The other is without the Ile of S. Laurence, which they take when they set foorth so late, and come so late to the point, that they have no time to take the foresayd Mosambique, and then they goe heavily, because in this way they take no port. And by reason of the long navigation, and want of food and water, they fall into sundry diseases, their gummes waxe great, and swell and they are faine to cut them away, their legges swell, and all the body becometh sore and so benummed, that they cannot stirre hand nor foot, and so they die for weaknesse, others fall into fluxes and agues, and die thereby.” Of these two ways the second was that taken by the “San Bento,” which, battered by the Cape seas and separated from the rest of the fleet which it had left behind, reached Goa in September, 1553. Camoens was thus prevented on his outward voyage from seeing Mozambique or any of the Arab-Portuguese towns of the East Coast; but this was perhaps fortunate for his work. He arrived in India with the powerful natural impressions of his six months’ voyage unweakened by other elements, and the significance of this in the inspiration of the “Lusiads” cannot be too much emphasised.

It may be questioned indeed if the whole sixteen years of Camoens’ life in the East, spent in confusing alternation between the Malabar coast and the China sea, between conflicts with Red Sea pirates and conflicts with pirates in the Moluccas, meant as much to him poetically as the six months in which he lived over again the experiences of Da Gama. No doubt these sixteen years furnished him with the Oriental background to his poem—and the Oriental background of Camoens is as great a novelty in his work as it was in that of Byron,—but background after all is only an accessory. “The play’s the thing,” and Camoens had mastered that already when he set foot in India. There is little excuse needed then for passing over in summary fashion the whole period between his landing at Goa (September, 1553) and his return to South African waters and compulsory detention in Mozambique (1567-1569)—a broken man with only his epic to console him.

Camoens’ long exile—the “desterro” par excellence of his Portuguese biographers—falls into two parts. During the first
—1553-1558—he is nominally fulfilling the compulsory military service which was the price of his escape from prison in Portugal, although engaged latterly on civil duties, such as those of the post he held in China, “Provedor dos defuntos e ausentes” (Commissary for the effects of defunct and missing persons). During the second phase—1558-1569—he takes refuge, according to Braga, in “poetic idealisation,” and in spite of many troubles finds consolation in his literary friendships, especially those with the two historians, Diogo do Couto and Gaspar Correia, to whom he is indebted for historical matter in the “Lusiads,” and with the poet Hector da Silveira. During the whole period of his long exile Goa, which Camoens calls in a famous phrase “the fond mother of villains and the stepmother of honest men,” remains his headquarters. He comes back thither in 1559 after his historic shipwreck off the mouth of the Mekong River in Cambodia, when the manuscript of his poem was all that he saved, and he sets out thence on his various expeditions east and west.

The capital of Portuguese India is familiar to us in many descriptions of the sixteenth century (in Hakluyt, Linschott, and others), but Camoens in his satires reveals its inner life and corruption with an unsparing hand. No doubt much is conventional in these poems—“Babylon” set over against “Sion,” for Goa and Lisbon,—but the general picture is admitted by Portuguese writers to be no exaggeration. But Goa had its saints as well as its sinners. In the year Camoens left Coimbra, or possibly the year after, a youth of noble family who was afterwards to become the first Christian martyr in Portuguese Africa, entered the Jesuit College in the poet’s Alma Mater. He was zealous and precocious for the faith so that in 1556 he was sent to Goa and soon became the most prominent figure in the Jesuit community. Camoens was proud to be called his friend,—his name was Father Gonçalo da Silveira,—and when this heroic Jesuit met his death in 1561 on that mission to Africa, which is described both by Mr. Colvin and Dr. Theal, Camoens remembered their friendship and enshrined Gonçalo’s memory above even that of Francis Xavier in the tenth canto of the “Lusiads”:

Ve do Benomotaça o grande Imperio,
de selvatica gente, negra, e nua;
onde Gonçalo morte, e vituperio
padecera pella Fe sancta sua.
With another prominent figure in early South African history Camoens’ relations are more disputed. Francisco Barreto was not Governor of India in 1555, and a long tradition has represented him as unfriendly to the poet. But Braga has shown that this opinion rests on no certain foundation. "Never was man so loved and esteemed by the people," writes a contemporary witness, and this judgment of Barreto is borne out, as Braga observes, by two of Camoens’ intimate friends, Diego do Couto and Alvaro da Silveira, so that the Portuguese critic is inclined to "consider as absurd the often repeated tradition that he was hostile to the poet," or that Camoens was sent to China because of his disfavour. Under Barreto’s Governorship, indeed, literature was specially honoured in Goa, and dramatic entertainments, at one of which Camoens’ Auto of “Filodemo” was performed, were a favourite form of official recreation.

Camoens’ claim to be regarded as a South African poet by residence as well as by inspiration rests solely upon his two years’ residence in Mozambique (1567-1569). Although Camoens had left his native country repeating Scipio’s vow that she should not possess his bones a deep nostalgia seems to have settled upon him during his last years in India. The “Lusiads” had probably taken nearly its final shape, and the poet, once more ready to fall a victim to illusions, began to think of the young King D. Sebastião as a hopeful patron. A passage having been offered to him by the new Governor of Mozambique, Pedro Barreto (1567), Camoens turned his face again towards Portugal. Arrived in Mozambique, the poet found a fresh humiliation awaiting him. The story has been often told, and each new teller has not failed, as Burton says, to cast another stone at Barreto’s memory. The Governor, having lent the poet two hundred crusados in his need, had him thrown into prison when he attempted to leave Mozambique. Camoens lay there till November, 1569, when the arrival of the “Santa Clara” from India, with his friends Do Couto and Héctor da Silveira on board, put an end to his distress. The sum required (some £25 in our money) was advanced by the poet’s two friends and eleven others, and for it “were simultaneously sold the person of Camoens and the honour of Pedro Barreto.” It is something, however, that Mozambique should have the celebrity of being Camoens’ last workshop before his epic was sent out into the world.
The last years of Camoens' life have become almost an allegory. They are the accepted instance in literature of the contrast between poetical fame and the neglect of the poet. The "Lusiads" came out in 1572, and had not to wait for recognition. A second edition was called for within a year, and there has been never a break in its popularity since. But apart from the pension of 15 milreis (some £20) a year assigned to the author there is no sort of recognition that a great poet is alive; and indeed for all that Camoens obtained from his Royal patrons it would have been better had he died in the faith of his dedication to D. Sebastião, with one heroic illusion unshattered. But

"Death lagged (was there none to intercede
With Her for thee?) that thou shouldst live to hear
The tidings that rang out from Alcacer,
Thy country's knell and thine, as she decreed."*

III.

Some time in the year 1548—when Camoens was fighting in Africa—a poor French law-student of Poitiers returning to Paris fell in by the way at a country tavern with a young gentleman of literary tastes and uncertain vocation. They recognised in each other a kindred spirit and discovered even that they were distantly related. They found that they cherished similar dreams for their country's literature, pledged themselves to a close friendship, and continued their journey to Paris together. Their names were Joachim du Bellay and Pierre de Ronsard, and the first fruits of their friendship was the famous "Defence and Illustration of the French Language" (1549), one of the great literary programmes of the sixteenth century. The task which these young men had set themselves was to raise their literature to a level with the works of antiquity,—to make it hold up its head, as Du Bellay said, and, without blinking, look the superb languages of Greece and Rome in the face, as the Italian Ariosto had done. Of the many ways in which that equality might be won none seemed to promise a fairer reward than the "long poem in French,"—the heroic poem that should borrow matter from the old French romances (such as "Lancelot") or the old French chronicles and build them up (after the fashion of Livy) into Annals, or

* F. York Powell.
better still into a new Iliad or modern Æneid. "Such a work," says Du Bellay, "would certainly be to our immortal glory, the honour of France, and the great embellishment of our language." And he ends the chapter with words strangely applicable to Camoens:—"Whatever be the misery of the age in which we live, do thou to whom the Gods and Muses have been so favourable, although thou art deprived of the favour of men, fail not to undertake a work which is its own best reward. Look only for the fruit of thy labour to a posterity incorruptible and free from envy. Glory is the only ladder by the steps of which mortals rise to heaven with a light foot and make themselves companions of Gods." The task which Du Bellay proposed for France, and which Ronsard failed to carry out, Camoens achieved for Portugal. Although the "Lusiads" is the first of modern epics, a course of reading in modern poetry is not the best preparation for enjoying it. It is a work of the classical Renaissance, heavy with mythological ornament and full of rich and sensuous pictures. Camoens has been greatly daring in choosing a subject as near his own time as the Great Trek is to ours. For this he must have seemed a bold innovator to his contemporaries; but the mixture of Christian and pagan mythology, for which he is censured by Dryden, was entirely in the taste of the time, and has not made Milton unreadable. If a criticism might be passed on Camoens' supernatural personages and pagan divinities it is that they are too interesting, that so much is made of them that the main action suffers, and that they tend to throw the human actors into the shade. There is next to no feminine interest in the "Lusiads," but Venus is a host in herself; and Bacchus unites the qualities of Iago and Odysseus to those by which he is commonly known.

I have already glanced at the style of Camoens in his epic: it only remains now to give a brief account of the whole work set in such perspective as this essay can furnish. Such a summary must necessarily be abrupt and incomplete, but if it sends readers to the poem anew, or makes some curious to read the "Lusiads" for the first time, it will have served its purpose. It is not so long ago that in two towns of very considerable pretensions in South Africa no copy of Camoens, text or translation, was to be found in either the public library or the bookshops. Things were better a generation or twenty years back, and it is not unusual to find English translations of the "Lusiads" in sale catalogues or the libraries of older settlers.
CANTO I.—The Sun enters Pisces (The Fishes), March 11, 1498. Jupiter holds a council of the Gods on Olympus: Mars addresses the assembly on behalf of the Portuguese. Vasco da Gama’s fleet passes between the Isle of S. Laurence (Madagascar) and the mainland ("the Ethiop coast").

CANTO II.—Venus (Dione) pleads with Jupiter for the Portuguese and hears from his lips a prophecy of their future exploits in the Indian seas. Mercury is sent to Melinda. The King of Melinda goes to greet Da Gama, while salutes are fired by the ships.
CANTOS III., IV., V.—Da Gama and the King of Melinda.

CANTO VI.—Bacchus descends to the palace of Neptune to obtain the help of the Sea-Gods against the Portuguese. (Observe the "Triton" with the "wreathed horn"). The Sea-Gods order Eolus to let loose the winds on the fleet. Venus summons the sea-nymphs to her assistance.
CANTO VII.—Da Gama and an escort of twelve land at Calicut.

CANTO VIII.—The priests take the auspices to discover the intentions of the Portuguese. Bacchus appears in a dream to a priest, disguised as Mahomet (?).
CANTO IX.—The navigators land at the Isle of Venus, with its "three fairy headlands." Velloso pursues the nymphs. Tethys leads Da Gama to a palace on the hill.

CANTO X.—Banquet given by Tethys and the nymphs to Da Gama and his men. Tethys explains the globes to Da Gama.
The title of the poem, the "Lusiads," in plain prose means the Portuguese. They are the sons of Lusus, the legendary companion of Bacchus, who came to Portugal in olden days and founded the race. The title of the poem is significant because it reminds us (what should never be lost sight of) that the true hero of the epic is not Vasco da Gama, but the whole people of Portugal.

The opening of the poem is the conventional statement after the fashion of Virgil of the poet's theme followed by his invocation to the Muses or rather to the nymps of Tagus.

"Arms, and the men heroic of the West,
Who from their native Lusitanian shore,
By seas till then un-navigated prest
Even beyond Taprobane, and more
Than seemed of human force the hardest test,
Through wars and perils resolutely bore,
Raised a new empire in a distant clime,
And crowned it with a glory all sublime."*

Then follows an invocation to the new King,

"Young, tender scion of a tree more blest,
In the dear love of the Redeemer mild,
Than all that ever flourished in the West,
Whether most Christian or imperial styled!
Behold the proof upon thy shield impressed,
A victory passed it shows thee, royal child;
A day wherein He gave thine ancestor
For arms the same that on the Cross He bore."

Since the note struck at the very outset is the note of maritime adventure, there is something singularly fresh and appropriate in finding the curtain of the action first raised on the Portuguese fleet under sail to India. We plunge at once in medias res, and we are in African waters:

"Low! where their prows explore the watery vast,
Shouldering aside the billows on their course,
The winds breathe gently o'er the heaving waste
And fill the concave sails with easy force:
The rippling keels a trail of foam have traced,
In bubbles dancing on the waters hoarse,
As thus the armada cleaves the sacred tide
Where roam the flocks of Proteus far and wide."

The scene shifts to Olympus, where the gods have assembled to take council regarding the Portuguese people. Jupiter takes

* Quillianan.
them under his protection and Venus warmly takes their side, since she thinks to find again the old Roman courage and also the Roman speech in Portugal. Mars also agrees with her. The relentless enemy, however, of the Portuguese fleet is Bacchus, since he fears that the coming of this doughty stock to India may eclipse his former deeds there. We return to the fleet and find it sailing between the Isle of St. Laurence (Madagascar) and the mainland. It touches successively at Mozambique, Mombasa and Melinde. Vasco da Gama lands at Mozambique, but is forestalled by the treachery of Bacchus, who in the guise of an aged Moor has stirred up the Prince of the land against the newcomer. A plot is laid from which the Portuguese only escape by their bold front. The pilot, however, whom they have taken on at Mozambique is guilty of fresh deceit from which da Gama is only saved by the intervention of Venus. In the second canto the ships are at Mombasa, and again they are near their destruction at the hands of the King, who tries to lure them treacherously within the harbour. Again Venus is at hand to succour them, and with the help of her sea-nymphs, the Nereids, she rescues them almost against their will. Da Gama tries to urge his ship across the bar, and the Nereids push it back against the efforts of the crew. Then Venus hastens back to Olympus to complain bitterly to her father, Jupiter, of all the misfortune that steadily follows the brave Lusitanians. Jupiter consoles her with an eloquent prophecy of the future glory of the Portuguese people, and sends Mercury down to reveal the way to Melinde to Vasco da Gama, and to prepare a favourable reception for him there. Da Gama warned in a dream leaves Mombasa and sails to Melinde. The King of this place, who has been described as an impressionable person and who is certainly an uncommonly patient one, since he has to listen to the whole history of Portugal before his guest takes leave of him, invites Da Gama to stay for a season and asks him for a description of his country. Then follows in three cantos Da Gama’s narrative to the King. It contains the great passages of the poem, the episode of Ignes de Castro in Canto III., that of Adamastor in Canto V., Dom Manoel’s dream of the Ganges and the Indus in Canto IV., and the farewell of the old man of Belem at the end of the same canto. Da Gama ends with the elaborate and masterly description of his own voyage.

In Canto VI. Da Gama leaves Melinde generously provided
with pilots and provisions for the voyage to India. Bacchus again tries to stir up mischief by assembling the sea-gods in the Palace of Neptune. He succeeds in arranging a storm for the afflicting of the voyagers. Meanwhile on board ship Velloso entertains his companions with the story of the twelve of England, twelve Portuguese nobles who championed the honour of twelve English ladies. A fearful tempest bursts on the sailors, Venus and her sea-nymphs calm the storm, and the fleet arrives in the end of Canto VI. at Calicut, the end of their voyage. Canto VII. begins with a great poetic exhortation to the Princes of Christendom on the occasion of the famous discovery of India, urging them to like enterprises. Vasco da Gama asks his brother Paul to describe to the Governor of Calicut the meaning of the pictures and figures on the silken banner of the Portuguese. Hence some more history. Da Gama himself has already derived information from the Moor Monsayde concerning the natives of the country and the Malabar coast. Canto VIII. begins with the description of the banners and the early origin of the Portuguese, the meaning of the word "Lusitania," etc. But in the meantime Bacchus has not been idle. He has stirred up the minds of native augurs to report evil of the Portuguese. An attempt is made once more to destroy the fleet, but Da Gama’s eloquence and courage overcome the King. In Canto IX. the labours and trials of the Portuguese are ended. Da Gama and his men set out on the homeward journey bringing the glad tidings of the new route to India. Venus prepares a solace for her chosen people by directing them to a delicious island in mid-ocean. There they land and are entertained with all the pleasures of the senses. The soldiers are received by the Nereids and Da Gama by Tethys. In the tenth canto Tethys gives a banquet to Da Gama and his men, at which a nymph sings of the future exploits of the Portuguese in the East. Tethys takes the Admiral up a mountain and shows him suspended in the air a wonderful globe with different spheres, terrestrial and celestial. Then she gives him a description of the globe, especially of Africa and Asia. The martyrdom of St. Thomas is dwelt upon, and then the Portuguese quit the island and, continuing on their voyage, reach Lisbon happily.*

* For part of this summary I am indebted to Prof. John Clark’s "History of Epic Poetry" (Edinburgh, 1900), which contains an admirable account of the "Lusiads."
There has never been a description more misleading than that of the "Lusiads" as an "epic of commerce." It is infinitely more an epic,—the only true modern epic,—of adventure by sea. Indeed in some ways the inspiration of Camoens was a deliberate reaction against the depressing influence of what Braga calls "mercantilism." He saw the beginnings of a national decline which had taken its rise from the very fact of the triumphs and gains of Portugal in the East. He saw nationalism being strangled by self-interest and by other forces, and he wished to recall his countrymen to the earlier and more heroic example of the fifteenth century. The three main themes of the poem according to what Camoens has himself declared are: first, the courage of the Portuguese heroes, with which they took their way through seas until then un-navigated; second, the political consequences of their bold voyage, since they founded a new kingdom abroad; and third, their services to the Christian faith, since they laid waste the lands of the heathen and extended Christianity. And the first of these is the most comprehensive. The whole poem of Camoens is really a poetic idealisation of the great geographical discoveries of his countrymen in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The whole nucleus of the poem is to be found in the fifth canto, which describes the African voyage. It is this which gives novelty and life to Camoens' epic. He is no longer merely a poet of the pagan renaissance, describing the gardens of Armida or the painted beauties of the East. He is a man of the real epic order, a singer like Homer of the deeds of men and of the things he has seen and known. And the inspiration which gave him this quality was neither that of his youth nor of his Odyssey in the East: it was the inspiration of his African voyage. Humboldt has paid an eloquent tribute to Camoens as a great painter of nature, and, he adds truly, a great painter of the sea. "Camoens is inimitable," he says, "when he depicts the perpetual change that goes on between sky and sea, the harmonies that exist among the forms of clouds, their successive transformations, and the different phenomena which pass over the surface of the ocean. First, he shows this surface gently ruffled by a slight breath of wind; the waves hardly lifted sparkle in the sun, refracting the rays of light which are mirrored in them; then another time the vessels of Coelho and Paul da Gama, assailed by the terrible tempest, are struggling against the unchained elements. Camoens is, in the proper
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sense of the word, a great painter of the sea.” Mrs. Browning
was drawn rather towards the romantic than the epic Camoens,
but she is right when she speaks in the “Vision of Poets” of

“Camoens, with that look he had
Compelling India’s genius sad,
From the wave through the Lusiad.—

The murmurs of the storm-Cape ocean
Indrawn in vibrative emotion
Along the verse.”

Although Storck has proved that Camoens had already
written or designed an historical poem answering to the
“Lusiads” before his departure for India, and that the third
and fourth cantos may have been already completed, it is the
fifth which not only gives unity but inspiration to the rest.
“The Lusiads” is then, as I have said, not only the first but
the greatest of South African poems. It is our portion in the
Renaissance.

John Purves.

OUR “DEPENDENCE ON SEA POWER.”

We invite the attention of our readers to the offer by the
Witwatersrand Cambrian Society of a prize of ten guineas for
the best essay in English or Welsh on “The Dependence of
British South Africa on Sea Power.” Essays, which should be
marked with the assumed names of competitors only, must
reach the secretary of the society (P.O. Box 3552, Johannesburg)
not later than the 15th April, 1910. Full particulars as to the
conditions of the competition, which is open to the world, may
be obtained from the secretary. The following will act as
judges of the essays submitted:—Mr. Patrick Duncan, C.M.G.,
Mr. Townley Williams, and Hon. R. Feetham, M.L.C. The
award of the judges will be announced at the annual Eisteddfod
to be held in Johannesburg on Empire Day, the 24th May,
1910.