LUÍS VAZ DE CAMÕES
(Portugal, 1524/5-1580)

[Monday 1 January 2007]

Generally regarded as the greatest poet of the Portuguese language, at least until Fernando Pessoa came along, Camões led a rambunctious but uncertain life, much of his biography being based on conjecture and what we can extract, or extrapolate, from his poems. He was probably born in Lisbon, the son of minor, impoverished aristocrats, and definitely died there in 1580. In between, he lived or sojourned in many places: Coimbra, where he is assumed to have studied at the university; Morocco, where he lost an eye during combat as a soldier for the Portuguese army; India, where he served as a soldier for three years, after which he probably held administrative posts; Arabia and the East African coasts, on military expeditions launched from western, Portuguese-ruled India; Macao, in the employ of the Portuguese government; and Mozambique, without funds enough to continue the journey back home. Some friends came to his aid, sharing the cost of his passage to Lisbon, where he arrived in 1570, after 17 years abroad.

Two years later Camões published The Lusiads, one of the last great historical epics, in certain respects modeled after the Aeneid and taking Vasco da Gama’s voyage to India as its immediate theme. Although the poem was well received, earning its author a small pension from the crown, Camões died in poverty and was buried in a collective pit for plague victims. That same year – two years after a disastrous expedition to North Africa in which the heirless King Sebastião and thousands of Portugal’s most able-bodied men were slaughtered – the country fell under Spanish rule, which would last until 1640.

From public records and four surviving letters signed by Camões, we know he was a rowdy and lusty sort, who landed himself in a Lisbon jail for roughing up a court official during a religious feast, and in a Goan
jail for failure to pay his debts. And his one and only eye was continually on the lookout for women, whether
they belonged to nobility or to brothels.

It makes no sense to pit Camões against Pessoa in a contest to decide who was greater – they are too far apart
in historical and poetic time for that. But it is interesting to note how Portugal’s two master poets had
diametrically opposed sensibilities. The twentieth-century poet was the great negator, who divided himself
into fictional ‘heteronyms’ capable, he claimed, of experiencing and feeling life better than he himself could.
Pessoa wrote about politics, but his ideology was utterly utopian. He read hundreds of books and wrote
hundreds of pages about assorted religions but committed himself to none. And love was for him such a
thoroughly literary matter that he very probably died a virgin.

Camões was the opposite of all that. A Falstaffian lover of life, he never conceived of his writing as a
substitute for living but as its literary embodiment. Camões is wholly, passionately present in most of what
he wrote – if not literally so, then in the manner of his writing, probably comparable to the way he made
love. And when, in his last years, he “got religion”, it wasn’t a scholarly inquiry; he embraced the Roman
Catholic faith with ardor, repenting the carnal loves of his younger days. Pessoa, in contrast, could only
repent (and did somewhat repent in his later poems) for not having ever loved except in theory. Which is not
to say that the 16th-century poet was a ‘natural’ who simply wrote out of experience. He was an intellectual
with an enormous capacity for synthesis, drawing on the philosophy and literature of antiquity (Plato,
Aristotle, Hesiod, Virgil, Ovid, Plutarch), on Neo-Platonist thought, on Petrarch and his followers (especially
Garcílaso de la Vega and Juan Boscán), and on the Portuguese popular and formal poetic tradition that
preceded him.

The Lusiads has been so widely read and translated that Camões’s vast and no less impressive body of lyric
poetry has tended to be overlooked. Over the centuries, there have been at least ten complete translations of
Os Lusíadas into English, but only several large-scale translations of his lyrical œuvre, which includes about
200 short poems in popular verse forms, over 150 sonnets, a sestina, and poems of larger scope: odes,
elegies, songs (or canzones), octaves and eclogues. Camões’s sonnets are comparatively well known
(Wordsworth pays them homage in his ‘Scorn Not the Sonnet’, where he also mentions the sonneteers
Shakespeare, Petrarch, Tasso, Dante, Spenser and Milton), but his full powers as a lyric poet are revealed by
some of the longer poems, which succeed in sustaining a narrative across 150 or even 250 verses, interwoven
with lessons from mythology, ancient history and philosophy. The excerpted octaves from ‘On the World’s
Chaos and Confusion’, for instance, retell a story from antiquity which is perfectly integrated into the longer
story (thirty octaves in all) announced by the poem’s title.

Camões’s sonnets are thematically far more diverse than those of Petrarch or Shakespeare. Some are
retellings of Biblical tales (‘Jacob’) or Greek myths, often with a new twist; or they present historical or
mythological figures in new scenarios, as in the sonnet which has the goddesses Diana and Venus discussing
the merits of trapping animals versus ensnaring human hearts (‘While Phoebus was lighting up the
mountains’). Other sonnets take up the theme of the world’s disorderedness and the inevitability of change
(‘Times change, desires change’), life’s brevity (‘Oh how long, year after year’), and the hardships imposed
by exile (‘Epitaph for Pero Moniz’). But love, for Camões as for most Renaissance poets, is an ever-present
hope and complaint, a source of pain alternating with ecstasy, a rich symbol and a chimera – an inexhaustible
subject of poetic and existential exploration. Love, in the sonnets and sestina presented here, is not merely a
hankering after an idealized and beatified ‘senhora’ (lady); it is a psychological territory for self-discovery. This is most blatantly the case in the celebrated ‘Transforma-se o amador na cousa amada’, a twentieth-century remake of which ‘The Lover Transforms’ by Herberto Helder was produced by Herberto Helder (b. 1930).

Because the Renaissance world and its world-view are so far removed from our own, a reader of Camões needs to make an imaginary leap, for no translation can possibly bridge the gap in consciousness between 16th-century Portugal and the 21st century in whatever part of the world. In dealing with that wider-than-usual gap, the four translators into English of the poems presented here have remarkably different approaches. See ‘Translating Camões’\(^1\) for a brief discussion of the problems they face and how they try to resolve them, or elude them!

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\(^1\) see article mentioned after the “Poems” section

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**POEMS**

**CRUEL SENHORA**
**DEAR GENTLE SOUL, YOU THAT DEPARTED . . .**
**DROWNED LOVER**
**FEW AND WEARISOME YEARS I LIVED . . .**
**JACOB**
**LOVE IS A FIRE THAT BURNS UNSEEN . . .**
**MAY LOVE SEEK OUT NEW ARTS, DEVISE A PLOT . . .**
**MY ERRORS, CRUEL FORTUNE AND ARDENT LOVE . . .**
**OH HOW LONG, YEAR AFTER YEAR . . .**
**ON THE WORLD’S CHAOS AND CONFUSION (EXCERPT)**
**SESTINA**
**SHIPWRECK**
**SINCE MY EYES DON’T TIRE OF WEEPING . . .**
**THE LOVER BECOMES THE THING HE LOVES . . .**
**TO A GARDEN LUXURIOUSLY VERDANT . . .**
**WHILE PHOEBUS WAS LIGHTING UP THE MOUNTAINS . . .**
**WHOEVER, LADY, SEES PlainLY ON VIEW . . .**
CRUEL SENHORA

Cruel Senhora, I’ve always been wary. I knew I needed to watch you closely in case your doubts would surge to disaffection and erase our love. Then I’d be ruined, since I love only you.
And now, everything I’d hope to have is lost: you’re pursuing another lover. So I detach myself, believing your retribution will match the sacrificial depths my love has cost:
I’ve given my soul, my senses, and my life to you; I’ve given you everything I have within me, and you promised love, but now, there’s only disdain.
Lost and hopeless, I don’t know what to do, yet I know the day will come when this memory will crush you down with terrifying pain.

© Translation: 2005, William Baer
From: Selected Sonnets
Publisher: University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005

Dear gentle soul, you that departed . . .

Dear gentle soul, you that departed this life so soon and reluctantly, rest in heaven eternally while I remain here, broken-hearted.

If there in the ethereal skies memories are still allowed to move, do not forget that ardent love you once saw shining in my eyes.

And if you judge there might be merit, however small, in this pain that stays, grieving with nothing to repair it,

petition God, who cut short your days, to take me to you, in that reckless spirit he used to summon you from my gaze.

© Translation: 2006, Landeg White

Alma minha gentil, que te partiste tão cedo desta vida descontente, repousa lá no Céu eternamente, e viva eu cá na terra sempre triste.

Se lá no assento etéreo, onde subiste, memória desta vida se consente, não te esqueças daquele amor ardente que já nos olhos meus tão puro viste.

E se vires que pode merecer-te algúa cousa a dor que me ficou da mágoa, sem remédio, de perder-te, roga a Deus, que teus anos encurtou, que tão cedo de cá me leve a ver-te, quão cedo de meus olhos te levou.

© 1595, Luís Vaz de Camões
From: Rimas
Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra
DROWNED LOVER

Dearest enemy, so often unkind, 
my life was in your hands, until that wave 
of the sea deprived you of an earthly grave, 
depriving me, as well, of peace of mind. 
The selfish drowning waters keep us apart, 
enjoying your lovely beauty within the vast 
cold sea, but as long as my broken life will last, 
you’ll always be alive within my heart. 
And if my ragged poems can last for long 
long enough, your love, so spotless, will persist 
forever and ever, as I, on your behalf, 
will praise you always with my singing song; 
as long as human memories exist, 
my poems will be your missing epitaph.

© Translation: 2005, William Baer
From: Selected Sonnets
Publisher: University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005

Few and wearisome years I lived . . .

Few and wearisome years I lived 
in the world, enduring vile hardship; 
the light of day went dark on me 
before I saw my twenty-sixth year.

I traveled distant lands and seas, 
trying to find a cure for life, 
but perilous ventures can’t attain 
what Fortune, finally, doesn’t will.

Portugal brought me up in dear 
green Alenquer, my home, but rotten 
air in my earthen vessel changed me 
into food for your fish, O vicious 
sea that rages by Abyssinia, 
so bleak and far from my happy homeland!

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*Pero Moniz was presumably a fellow soldier of Camões, 
whose own experience when stationed in the Gulf of 
Aden, near Mount Felix, is recorded in one of his Songs. 
The “rotten air” of the first tercet refers, perhaps, to a 
disease that took the speaker’s life. Alenquer, a small 
town north of Lisbon, is mentioned elsewhere in 
Camões’s poetry, leading biographers to wonder if he 
might have been born or partly raised there.
JACOB

For seven years, the shepherd Jacob slaved for the father of beautiful Rachel, working not for the man, but only for her, knowing ever since he began that she alone was the only reward he craved. His days, dreaming of the wedding that lay ahead, passed by, content to see her from time to time, until her father plotted his duplicitous crime, by placing Leah in Jacob’s marriage bed. Learning the cruel deception, Jacob, in tears, had lost the one he loved, as if, somehow, he hadn’t truly earned the proper wife. But he starts all over again, for seven more years, saying, “If life wasn’t so short, beginning right now, I’d serve even longer for Rachel, the love of my life.”

© Translation: 2005, William Baer
From: Selected Sonnets
Publisher: University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005

Love is a fire that burns unseen . . .

Love is a fire that burns unseen, a wound that aches yet isn’t felt, an always discontent contentment, a pain that rages without hurting, a longing for nothing but to long, a loneliness in the midst of people, a never feeling pleased when pleased, a passion that gains when lost in thought. It’s being enslaved of your own free will; it’s counting your defeat a victory; it’s staying loyal to your killer.

But if it’s so self-contradictory, how can Love, when Love chooses, bring human hearts into sympathy?

© Translation: 2006, Richard Zenith

Amor é um fogo que arde sem se ver, é ferida que doi, e não se sente; é um contentamento descontente, é dor que desatina sem doer.

É um não querer mais que bem querer; é um andar solitário entre a gente; é nunca contentar-se de contente; é um cuidar que ganha em se perder.

É querer estar preso por vontade; é servir a quem vence, o vencedor; é ter com quem nos mata, lealdade.

Mas como causar pode seu favor nos corações humanos amizade, se tão contrário a si é o mesmo Amor?

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From: Rimas
Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra
May Love seek out new arts, devise a plot . . .

May Love seek out new arts, devise a plot to kill me, and discover new disdain; for robbing me of hope will be in vain, since it can scarcely take what I’ve not got.

Behold the kind of hopes on which I stand! And see how perilous my certainties! For I fear neither change nor enmities, ploughing the sea, lost far from any land.

And yet, although one cannot pay grief’s toll where hope is gone, still Love has hidden there for me an ill, that kills and can’t be seen;

how long ago did Love place in my soul I don’t know what, born I don’t know where, come I don’t know how, nor why it aches so keen.

© Translation: 1998, Alexis Levitin

My errors, cruel fortune and ardent love . . .

My errors, cruel fortune and ardent love conspired to bring about my ruin; the errors and fortune were superfluous, since love alone would have done as much.

Although it’s over, the dreadful pain of what I suffered is still so vivid that I, with bitter rage, have learned never to try to be happy again.

In life and words I’ve always strayed, giving Fortune cause to punish my poorly founded hopes.

In love I’ve known just brief illusions. Oh! if only my ruthless Genius would have its fill of wreaking vengeance!

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From: Rimas
Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra

Busque Amor novas artes, novo engenho, para matar-me, e novas esquivanças; que não pode tirar-me as esperanças, que mal me tirará o que eu não tenho.

Olhai de que esperanças me mantenho! Vede que perigosas seguranças! Que não temo contrastes nem mudanças, andando em bravo mar, perdido o lenho.

Mas, conquanto não pode haver desgosto onde esperança falta, lá me esconde Amor um mal, que mata e não se vê.

Que dias há que n’alma me tem posto. um não sei quê, que nasce não sei onde, vem não sei como, e doí não sei porquê.

© 1616, Luís Vaz de Camões
From: Rimas
Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra

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Erros meus, má fortuna, amor ardente em minha perdição se conjuraram; os erros e a fortuna sobejaram, que para mim bastava o amor somente.

Tudo passei; mas tenho tão presente a grande dor das cousas que passaram, que as magoadas iras me ensinaram a não querer já nunca ser contente.

Errei todo o discurso de meus anos; dei causa [a] que a Fortuna castigasse as minhas mal fundadas esperanças.

De amor não vi senão breves enganos. Oh! quem tanto pudesse que fartasse este meu duro gênio de vinganças!

© 1595, Luís Vaz de Camões
From: Rimas
Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra
Oh how long, year after year . . .

Oh how long, year after year,  
my weary journey has kept on going!  
How short a space until my brief  
and useless human rambling ends!

Time wastes away and my ruin increases;  
a remedy I used to have is gone.  
If we can judge from past experience,  
every large hope is a grand illusion.

I chase some good that can’t be had:  
when halfway there, I’ve lost the trail;  
falling a thousand times, I despair.

It flees, I lag; and if, in my lagging,  
I look up to see if it’s still there,  
it’s lost from sight and lost from hope.

© Translation: 2006, Richard Zenith

Oh! como se me alonga, de ano em ano,  
a peregrinação cansada minha!  
Como se encurta, e como ao fim caminha  
este meu breve e vão discurso humano!

Vai-se gastando a idade e cresce o dano;  
perde-se-me um remédio, que inda tinha;  
se por experiência se adivinha,  
qualquer grande esperança é grande engano.

Corro após este bem que não se alcança;  
no meio do caminho me falece,  
mil vezes caio, e perco a confiança.

Quando ele foge, eu tardo; e, na tardança,  
se os olhos ergo a ver se inda parece,  
da vista se me perde e da esperança.

© 1595, Luís Vaz de Camões

From: Rimas
Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra

ON THE WORLD’S CHAOS AND CONFUSION (excerpt)

Happy the man who never places  
his small and humble fantasy  
in anything greater than simply leading  
his cattle to drink from the cold spring  
and drawing their milk so that he can drink!  
However Fortune may stir things up,  
he’ll never feel any greater grief  
than the weight of knowing his life is brief.

He’ll see the rising sun’s red face  
and see the clear spring always flowing,  
not wondering where the water comes from  
nor who on the horizon hides the light.  
Playing the flute where his cattle graze,  
h’e’ll know the grass that covers the hill;  
in God he’ll simply and calmly believe,  
not pondering truths he can’t conceive.

SOBRE O DESCONCERTO DO MUNDO (excerto)

Quem tão baixa tivesse a fantasia  
que nunca em mores cousas a metesse  
que em só levar seu gado à fonte fria  
e mungir-lhe o leite que bebesse!  
Quão bem-aventurado que seria!  
Que, por mais que Fortuna revolvesse,  
nunca em si sentiria maior pena  
que pesar-lhe da vida ser pequena.

Veria erguer do sol a roxa face,  
veria correr sempre a clara fonte,  
sem imaginar a água donde nace,  
em quem a luz esconde no horizonte.  
Tangendo a frauta donde o gado pace,  
conheceria as ervas do alto monte;  
em Deus creria, simples e quieto,  
sem mais especular nenhum secreto.
Among the things of Antiquity, it’s written of a certain Thrasyllus that, due to a grave infirmity, he lost his senses for a long season, during which time, bereft of reason, he claimed and believed that all the ships which at the port of Piraeus landed were ships he owned if not commanded.

He took himself for a mighty lord and enjoyed as well a happy life, since he lost nothing when ships were lost, and rejoiced for those that landed safely. Time went by till one day Crito his brother returned after a long absence and, seeing how Thrasyllus had lost his wits, was moved by fraternal love to pity. He gave him to doctors, charging them to perform the cure thus far refused. Alas! By restoring his brother’s senses, he robbed him of his sweet easy life! The herbs of Apollo, without delay, gave him back his former health. Now of sound mind, Thrasyllus thanked his brother for caring, not for his act.

For when he saw himself in danger of the toils that sanity would impose and saw no more that state of privilege conferred on him by his fantasy, he sighed: “O enemy brother, pretended friend, why did you take from me that life so calm and free of pains, which can’t be had by anyone sane?

“What king, or duke or mighty lord would I have wished to trade places with? What did I care if the world ended or if Nature’s order suddenly changed? Now dear life is a heavy burden, for I know what toil and sadness are. Restore me to that state of bliss; the only sane condition is madness.”

© Translation: 2006, Richard Zenith
Little by little it ebbs, this life
if by any chance I am still alive;
my brief time passes before my eyes;
I mourn the past in whatever I say,
as each day passes, step by step;
youth deserts me; what persists is pain.

And what a bitter variety of pain
that not for an hour in so long a life
could I give evil so much as a side step!
Surely, I’m better dead than alive?
Why complain, at last? What’s more to say,
having failed to be cheated by my own eyes?

Those lovely, gentle and lucid eyes
whose absence caused me as much pain
as her not understanding whatever I say!
If at the end of so long a short life
you should keep the burning ray alive
blessings will attend my every step.

But first I’m aware the ultimate step
must advance to close these sad eyes
love opened to those by which I live.
Pen and ink must witness to the pain
in writing of so troublesome a life
the little I lived through, and the more I say.

Oh, I know not why I write or what I say!
If contemplating yet another step
I envisage a sad version of life
that places no value on such eyes,
I cannot conceive how such pain
could find a pen to declare I’m alive.

In my heart, the embers are still alive;
if they found no relief in what I say
they would now have made ashes of my pain;
but beyond this grief I overstep,
I’m softened by the tears of those eyes
that, though life is fleeting, keep me alive.

I am dying alive;
in death I live;
I see without eyes;

Foge-me pouco a pouco a curta vida
(se por caso é verdade que inda vivo);
vai-se-me o breve tempo d’ante os olhos;
choro pelo passado e quando falo,
se me passam os dias passo e passo,
vai-se-me, enfim, a idade e fica a pena.

Que maneira tão áspera de pena!
Que nunca ûa hora viu tão longa vida
em que possa do mal mover-se um passo.
Que mais me monta ser morto que vivo?
Para que choro, enfim? Para que falo,
se lograr-me não pude de meus olhos?

Ó fermosos, gentis e claros olhos,
cuja ausência me move a tanta pena
quanta se não compreende enquanto falo!
Se, no fim de tão longa e curta vida,
de vós m’inda inflamasse o raio vivo,
por bem teria tudo quanto passo.

Mas bem sei, que primeiro o extremo passo
me há-de vir a cerrar os tristes olhos
que Amor me mostre aqueles por que vivo.
Testemunhas serão a tinta e pena,
que escreveram de tão molesta vida
o menos que passei, e o mais que falo.

Oh! que não sei que escrevo, nem que falo!
Que se de um pensamento n’outro passo,
vejo tão triste género de vida
que, se lhe não valerem tantos olhos,
Não posso imaginar qual seja a pena
que traslade esta pena com que vivo.

N’alma tenho contino um fogo vivo,
que, se não respirasse no que falo,
estaria já feita cinza a pena;
mas, sobre a maior dor que sofre e passo,
me temperam as lágrimas dos olhos
com que fugindo, não se acaba a vida.

Morrendo estou na vida,
e em morte vivo;
vejo sem olhos,
tongue-less I speak;  
they march in goose step, 
glory and pain.

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From: Selected Sonnets
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SHIPWRECK

Like the weary sailor, the refugee
from wreck and storm, who escapes half-dead, 
and then, in terror, shudders with dread
at the very mention of the name of the ‘sea’;
who swears he’ll never sail again, who raves
he’ll stay at home, even on the calmest days,
but then, in time, forgets his fearful ways,
and seeks, again, his fortune above the waves;
I, too, have barely escaped the storms that
revolve
around you, my love, traveling far away,
vowing to avoid another catastrophe,
but I can’t, the thought of you breaks my
resolve,
and so, I return to where, on that fateful day,
I nearly drowned in your tempestuous sea.

Como quando do mar tempestuoso
o marinheiro, lasso e trabalhado,
d’um naufrágio cruel já salvo a nado,
só ouvir falar nele o faz medroso;
e jura que em que veja bonançoso
o violento mar, e sossegado
não entre nele mais, mas vai, forçado
pelo muito interesse cobiçoso;
assi, Senhora, eu, que da tormenta
de vossa vista fujo, por salvar-me,
jurando de não mais em outra ver-me;
minh’alma que de vós nunca se ausenta,
dá-me por preço ver-vos, faz tornar-me
onde fugi tão perto de perder-me.

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From: Rimas
Publisher: Almedina, Coimbra
Since my eyes don’t tire of weeping . . .

Since my eyes don’t tire of weeping sorrows that don’t tire of weighing on me, since nothing softens the fire I burn in for one whose heart I could never soften,

let blind Love be my tireless guide to lands I don’t know my way out of, and let the whole world keep on listening as long as my weak voice doesn’t fail.

And if there’s pity in hills, rivers and valleys, or if there’s Love in beasts, birds, plants, stones and streams,

let them hear my long tale of troubles and use my sorrow to cure their own, since greater griefs can cure smaller ones.

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The lover becomes the thing he loves . . .

The lover becomes the thing he loves by virtue of much imagining; since what I long for is already in me, the act of longing should be enough.

If my soul becomes the beloved, what more can my body long for? Only in itself will it find peace, since my body and soul are linked.

But this pure, fair demigoddess, who with my soul is in accord like an accident with its subject,

exists in my mind as a mere idea; the pure and living love I’m made of seeks, like simple matter, form.

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To a garden luxuriously verdant...

To a garden luxuriously verdant
and enamelled with countless flowers,
there came one day the two goddesses
of Love, and of dense forests and Hunting.

Then Diana plucked a perfect rose
and Venus the best of the red lilies,
but exceeding by far all the other flowers
in beauty and grace were the violas.

They asked Cupid, who was standing near,
which of the blooms, in his opinion,
was sweetest, purest and most lovely?

The youngsters answered with a grin:
— all three are gorgeous, but I much prefer
viol-a-tion to mere rose and lily.

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While Phoebus was lighting up the
mountains...

While Phoebus was lighting up the mountains
of Heaven with his radiant clarity,
to relieve the boredom of her chastity
Diana was killing time in hunting.

Then Venus who was descending secretly
to fetter the desire of Anchises,
seeing Diana so undisguised
addressed her half-jokingly:

“You come with your nets to the thick wood
to ensnare the fast-running deer,
but my own nets capture the mind.”

“Better”, the chaste goddess replied,
“to take the nimble deer in my snare
than be caught in one by your husband.”

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Whoever, Lady, sees plainly on view . . .

Whoever, Lady, sees plainly on view your beautiful eyes in their lustrous being without being blinded in the act of seeing is already not paying your face’s due.

This seems to me an honest price, but I, for the merit of deserving them, gave both life and soul to serve them apart from which I am without resource.

Enough that life and soul and hope and as much as I have is all yours, and the proof of this I alone know.

For such good fortune is beyond scope giving you all that is in my power as the more I pay you, the more I owe.

© Translation: 2006, Landeg White

Quem vê, Senhora, claro e manifesto o lindo ser de vossos olhos belos, se não perder a vista só em vê-los, já não paga o que deve a vosso gesto.

Este me parecia preço honesto; mas eu, por de vantagem merecê-los, dei mais a vida e alma por querê-los, donde já me não fica mais de resto.

Assi que a vida e alma e esperança e tudo quanto tenho, tudo é vosso, e o proveito disso eu só o levo.

Porque é tamanha bem-aventurança o dar-vos quanto tenho e quanto possuo, que, quanto mais vos pago, mais vos devo.

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ARTICLES

Translating Camões
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Luís Vaz de Camões (1524?-1580) wrote poetry in many different forms (he also wrote three plays), but here I will focus only on his sonnets, which are a little over 150 in number. Or over 350? Since virtually all his lyric poetry was published posthumously, in partial editions not organized by the author himself, it is not easy to establish with accuracy his poetic corpus. As his poetic reputation grew, so did the number of poems attributed to him. Camões criticism of the twentieth century radically pruned the overgrown canon of his presumed-to-be-authentic works, but there are several, quite wonderful sonnets whose Camonian authorship is hotly debated (among those few scholars who debate such matters).

Having settled on which sonnets to translate, the translator must ask something like: what makes this poetry poetry? What, more specifically, are the various formal elements worth preserving, and at what price? The division into two quartets followed by two tercets, a consistent rhyme scheme and the decasyllable stand out as these sonnets’ most obvious formal features. But there are others. Like Shakespeare, Camões was fond of syntactical inversions, purposeful repetitions, and various other kinds of word play. His syntax is often driven by ruthless logic, as if a sonnet were a mathematical proof. This is the case, for instance, in ‘Whoever, Lady, sees plainly on view’, which
is also a good example of extended metaphor, with the lexicon of commerce – paying, owing, price, profit, debt – dominating each stanza. Some of Camões’s word choices allude to philosophical concepts (‘The lover becomes the thing he loves’, for instance), and his language is concrete but also concept-oriented, rarely flowery or merely descriptive, and never long-winded.

We would love to bring everything over from one language to another – the rhyme and meter, the syntactical particularities, the lexical specificity, the tautness of the discourse – but that is never possible, and so the translator must make choices, deciding what matters greatly, what matters less. So let’s consider rhyme and rhythm. Can a sonnet (the word comes from the Provençal for “little song”) forego rhyme and not have ten – or at least roughly ten – syllables per verse and still be a sonnet? What defines a sonnet? Surely not the mere circumstance of having fourteen lines.

In his *Luís de Camões: Selected Sonnets* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005), translator William Baer has achieved perfect, natural-sounding rhymes for seventy sonnets. No easy feat, and to pull it off he has not worried too much about line length, with verses rarely having less than ten syllables but sometimes stretching out to as many as fifteen or sixteen. (The longer the line, the more room one has to maneuver and produce convincing rhymes.) According to his introduction, Baer has used “the versatile English iambic pentameter for [Camões’s] decasyllabics”. This seems to mean five stresses per line rather than five strictly conceived iambs, but I myself count four stresses for certain verses of ‘Shipwreck’ and six stresses for more than one line of ‘Jacob’. Does this matter? In the latter poem the verb *servir* is used four times in Portuguese, but ‘serve’ appears just once in English, with ‘slaved’, ‘working’ and ‘starts’ all over doing the job for the other three occurrences. English objectively has a larger vocabulary than Portuguese, so some expansion on Camões’s limited lexicon is to be expected, but the repetition of *servir* does seem to be quite deliberate. In his defense, Baer has deliberately opted for renderings in contemporary-sounding English, and they read very smoothly, making Camões readily accessible to today’s reader. Too smoothly? Is it still Camões?

Landeg White also rhymes his sonnets but is more relaxed about what constitutes rhyme. In ‘Whoever, Lady, sees plainly on view’, we find, along with some perfect rhymes, resource as a rhyme word for price, and yours rhyming with power. On the other hand, White, far from stretching out the lines, actually shortens them, into basically iambic tetrameter. Most of the lines of his ‘Dear gentle soul, you that departed’, which is Camões’s most translated sonnet, contain only eight syllables (counting up to the last accented one, that is). White had already justified this option in the Translator’s Note to his version (the most recent one in English) of *The Lusiads* (Oxford, 1997): “Time and again, rendering stanzas of *The Lusiads* into rough and ready English, I have found myself with feet or whole lines to spare, needing padding to restore the shape of the original.” English does not necessarily take up less space on the page, but it does take up less spoken space, i.e. has fewer syllables. The Portuguese word *soneto* has three syllables, while ‘sonnet’ has only two, though both words have the same number of letters. Keeping a short line and making it rhyme to boot, some problematic word choices are bound to occur. In the last poem cited, it does not make much if any difference to say “cut short your days” (the days of your life, that is) instead of the literal “cut short your years”, but “if (in heaven) memories are still allowed to move” is a more than slightly eccentric rendering of the original: “if (in heaven) memories of this life are permitted”. Rhyme so obliges, and didn’t Camões himself, to achieve all his perfect rhymes, occasionally resort to creative, eccentric formulations, which in the end actually had an enhancing effect on the poetry?

Alexis Levitin, translator of Eugénio Andrade and other Portuguese poets, employed perfect rhymes and the decasyllable (though the last two verses have nine and eleven syllables, respectively) in his rendering of ‘May Love seek out new arts, devise a plot’. The result is on the whole admirable, but
since my task here is to point out problems, I will mention that several roundabout, less-than-natural expressions – “discover new disdain”, “one cannot pay grief’s toll” – seem to have been employed to fill out (‘pad’) verses and facilitate rhyme. But again: perhaps these expressions are interesting in their own right.

My own sonnet renderings are arguably poor excuses for the form, as they make no attempt to rhyme. I worked at some rhymed versions for quite a while but finally threw in the towel, because the sacrifice seemed too great. There are other elements of Camões’s poetics which I am much more keen to preserve. In the first quartet of ‘Oh how long, year after year’, we have the long journey of the narrator’s aging life contrasted with the severe shortening of his brief and useless human discurso, a word that in those days meant not only spoken discourse but also spatial course or trajectory. My choice of ‘ramble’ as an English equivalent is an attempt to convey both those meanings. In the fifth verse we have the narrator’s age or years wasting away at the same rate that his ruin grows. These kinds of double meanings, contrasting expressions and logico-linguistic equations are much more interesting to me than rhyme. By dispensing with the latter I can more closely replicate the former, though not always to my satisfaction… .

The first five verses of one of the sonnets presented here [ to ‘Since my eyes don’t tire…’] would more literally translate as “Since my eyes don’t tire of weeping / sorrows that don’t tire of making me tired; / since nothing softens the fire I burn in / for someone [i.e. my beloved lady] I could never soften [i.e. make more amenable, receptive]; // let blind Love not tire of guiding me”, etc. I preferred to incorporate the fourth instance of ‘tire’ into an adjective, ‘tireless’, and I transformed “making me tired” into “weighing on me”, as the Portuguese cansar comprises – more readily than ‘tire’ – the notions of weariness and tedium. Rather than tire, I considered using the verb ‘weary’ throughout, but it sounds a tad antiquated today. Which of course could be a justification for using it, since the sonnet was written 500 years ago! Getting the right idiom, the right tone, is perhaps the greatest challenge in the case of poetry from a time and culture so distant from our own. And what is ‘right’ for me may strike another translator as completely misguided. That is why I consider it useful and sometimes even necessary to have various translations – based on different ground rules – of one and the same text. Taking all the good but diversely executed translations together, we can perhaps get closer to the original.

Translation is like opera – an ‘impure’ form of art, whose success lies in achieving the right equilibrium of the constituent parts. An opera cannot pursue ‘pure’ music at the expense of the dramatic action, nor focus on the overall visual impression at the expense of the music or drama. Translation, in a similar way, is a balancing act, with the translator slightly fudging on the transmission of the original, literal meaning for the sake of the poetry’s formal devices, and no one of these can be replicated to perfection if this will mean (as it almost always will) giving other poetic devices the short shrift. Translation is the art of knowing how to lose, balancing the losses so that no one part suffers. It therefore makes perfect theoretical sense to preserve rhyme, or some semblance of rhyme, by making concessions in other departments. Tossing rhyme out of the ‘opera’ is, to say the least, a dubious move.

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