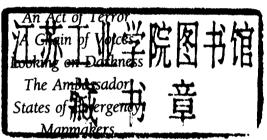


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André Brink

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The First Life of Adamastor



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Designed by Hyun Joo Kim Illustrations by Julie Metz Manufactured in the United States of America

3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brink, André Philippus, date.

Cape of storms: the first life of Adamastor: a story / by André Brink.

p. cm.

Adamastor (Legendary character)—Fiction. I. Title.
 PR9369.3.B7C36 1993
 823—dc20

92-39321

CIP

ISBN 0-671-79907-X

Quotations in Chapter 1 from Canto V of the Lusiads are from the translation by J. J. Aubertin (Kegan Paul, London, 1884).

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This is the use of memory:
For liberation—not less of love but expanding
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
From the future as well as the past.

-T. S. Eliot



In which, after some critical remarks about early French and Portuguese interpretations of Adamastor, the narrator proposes the terms of his contract with the reader

nce upon a time there was and there wasn't. A formula I found in a book I can no longer trace, on the history of narrative forms. An old Spanish tradition, I believe, and particularly useful in the present context, where distinctions between was and wasn't are rather blurred. Rabelais, to my knowledge the first to introduce

Adamastor* in a story, does not shed much light on the subject. His character rates a mere mention (*Pantagruel*, Chapter 1) in the long genealogy of giants who begat one another, among them the hundred-handed Briareus, culminating of course in Gargantua and Pantagruel ("... Briare, qui avoit cent mains, Qui engendra Prophyric, Qui engendra Adamastor, Qui engendra Antee ...").

Camões, who may well have been familiar with Rabelais before embarking on his own *Lusiads* (1572), places the giant among the Titans who rebelled against Zeus ("Qual Egeo e o Centimano"—the latter once again a creature with a hundred hands). Admittedly, in his version, in the justly famous Canto V, Adamastor is not a giant to be treated without respect. When Vasco da Gama and his crew on their precarious voyage around Africa to the spicy and miraculous East are confronted by this "horrid monster," he addresses them in lofty rhetoric:

"I am that mighty Cape occult and grand Who by you all 'The Stormy' named has been"—

which resounds even more splendidly in the original:

"Eu sou aquelle occulto e grande Cabo, A quem chamais vós outros Tormentorio."

^{*} In Greek, adamastos signifies "wild," "untamed."

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But in the final analysis the Adamastor conceived by Camões is more revolting than impressive, "Of stature all deformed and vast and tall,/The visage frowning, and with squalid beard;/The eyes were hollow, and the gesture all/Threatening and bad; the colour pale and seared;/And full of earth and grizzly was the hair;/The mouth was black, the teeth all yellow were."

His tragedy, as explained by Camões, lies in his consuming love for Thetis,* Nymph and Princess of the Wave, whom he has seen but once, fleetingly and fatally, as she was bathing naked with her Nereids on the shore:

"... no power my sense could save, I felt by love o'ercome in such a way That nought I know I'd long for more to-day."

It is inconceivable that his love can ever be requited. "What love of nymph could e'er suffice/To cope with that of giant of this size?" asks our pretentious poet. But here I must protest. My own suspicion, the product no doubt of a more cynical and secular age, is that if the lack of response to the poor creature's amorous advances had indeed been partly caused by a discrepancy in size, this may well have involved only one part of his anatomy. On this, perhaps with the best of intentions, Camões seizes, taking pars pro toto, blowing up, in a manner of speaking, out of all proportion a stum-

^{*} Her spouse was Peleus, and she was later the mother of Achilles.

bling block that might well have been overcome with some patience and considerable pleasure. As if that were not enough, he drags the nymph's mother Doris into a particularly dirty plot to trick the giant.

In exchange for a promise that Adamastor will cease his war against the armies of the Sea, she undertakes to arrange a nocturnal tryst with her oh-so-innocent daughter:

"Already fooled, already war denied, At last one night, by Doris promised, shone, When from afar the beauteous form I spied of Thetis white, unrobed, and all alone."

But when, "mad-like," he approaches to take the fair maid in his arms and proceeds to attempt what hopefully seems natural to both,

"I found within my arms a rugged mount, With harshest wood and thorny thickets faced; Standing before a rock, e'en front to front, Clasped for her own angelic form in haste, I was not a man, but deaf and dumb by shock, And fixed against one rock another rock!"

This disillusionment coincides with Zeus's decision finally to punish the rebellious Titans. Some of them, as we know from Greek mythology, are buried under huge mountains;

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Adamastor is turned into the jagged outcrop of the Cape Peninsula:

"Into hard earth my flesh converted lies, My bones are turned to rocks all rough and strange,

These members and this form ye see, likewise, Extended through these spreading waters range; In fine, my stature of enormous size Into this Cape remote the Gods did change; While for redoubled anguish of my woes, Thetis around me in these waters flows."

Rather exaggerated; but that is what happens to the truth when writers get their hands on it. And all of this is offered as a mere background to the somber prophecy Camões makes Adamastor utter (bearing in mind that what had been prophecy for da Gama and his crew had already become history for the contemporaries of Camões): shipwrecks, and all manner of catastrophes awaiting the explorers of the Cape of Storms, a litany of destruction, despair and death:

"And here I hope to take, if not misled,
'Gainst him deep vengeance who discovered
me."

His apocalyptic prophecies culminate in a vision worthy of that age of overstatement:

"Another too shall come of honoured fame, Liberal and generous and with heart enchained, And with him he shall bring a lovely dame, Whom through Love's favouring grace he shall have gained;

Sad fate, dark fortune nought can e'er reclaim, Call them to this my realm, where rage unreined Shall leave them after cruel wreck alive, With labours insupportable to strive.

"Their children shall die starving in their sight, Who were in such affection bred and born; They shall behold by Caffres' grasping might Her clothing from the lovely lady torn; Shall see her form, so beautiful and white, To heat, cold, wind, expos'd, and all forlorn, When she has trod o'er leagues and leagues of land

With tender feet upon the burning sand.

"And more those eyes shall witness, which survive.

Of so much evil and so much mischance: Shall see the two sad lovers, just alive, Into the dense unpitying woods advance; There, where the hearts of very stones they rive With tears of grief and anguished sufferance, In fond embrace their souls they shall set free From the fair prison of such misery."

In many ways this is an unsatisfactory translation; yet something of the great original melodrama shines through it, as baroque and exaggerated as the arches and architraves, the

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sheer excess, the inspired bad taste of the Manueline churches and cloisters in Lisbon or Oporto.

Bearing all of this in mind—and reacting to the suggestion of eurocentric revulsion implicit in that image of the mighty cape, occult and grand, with its deformed stature, frowning visage, squalid beard, black mouth and yellow teeth—I have been nagged for a long time now by a particular question: from what "raw material" could Camões have fashioned his typically sixteenth-century European version of the story? Is it possible that behind it looms an original, an unwritten Urtext? And if so, could this conceivably be reconstructed in our own time and terms?

This is the motivation behind my present venture. More precisely, my hypothesis is this: suppose there were an Adamastor, a model for the giant of Camões's fanciful history; and suppose that original creature, spirit, or whatever he may have been, has survived through the centuries in a series of disparate successive avatars in order to continue watching over the Cape of Storms: how would he look back, from the perspective of the late twentieth century, on that original experience?

This is the leap I propose to take; and my reader is invited to take the plunge with me.



In which the reader encounters a curious kind of bird, and a woman hatched from an egg

from the nesting place of the sun, we could see two objects swimming toward us, looking for all the world like two enormous seabirds with white feathers fluttering in a breeze that had newly sprung up. Not far from the beach, where our people were gathering mussels from the rocks exposed by the ebb tide, the two birds came to rest and appeared to draw in their feathers. Made no attempt to come closer to the shore. Just stayed there, bobbing on the swell, waiting perhaps for fish, but in that case it must have been whales, they were so huge. After a long time our eyes prised a third seabird loose from the horizon, all the way

from where sea and sky lay together in the blue to where it joined the first two. And then, much later, yet another. Then a strange thing happened. While we were still standing there staring, the two birds in front began to lay eggs of a curious roundish shape, and brown in color. (What the two at the back were doing we couldn't make out; for all we knew they were males.) What amazed us was that these eggs did not emerge, as one would expect, from the tail end of the birds, but rather from under their wings; and soon the eggs came drifting toward us on the tide. They had hardly reached the shore when people started hatching from them,* not one at a time, but whole bunches.

Well, people. We'd seen all kinds of human beings before. People like us, the *Khoikhoin* who'd inhabited these parts ever since the rock time of *Tsui-Goab*; and *San* (whom later generations of white foreigners would call "Bushmen"); and high up near the Upper River the Angry People we called the Xhosa had lived for longer than anyone could remember. But people like the ones that were hatched from those eggs we'd never ever set eyes on before. Like birds you might say, all colors under the sun; we first thought it was feathers but then we made out it was a kind of clothing. And strutting about stiff-legged like ostriches, and their heads so overgrown with beards and mustaches you could hardly see

^{*} About four centuries later, in 1897, the early Afrikaans poet S. J. du Toit used a similar image in his poem "Hoe die Hollanders die Kaap Ingeneem Het" ("How the Dutch Conquered the Cape"), probably borrowed from stories circulating freely at the Cape. But he talks about geese giving birth to little ones from their sides, which is patently ridiculous. Birds lay eggs. Including those we saw. I know; I was there.