**Commonwealth Essays and Studies**

**29.1 | 2006**
**Strange/Stranger**

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**Electronic version**
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/ces/9563
DOI: 10.4000/ces.9563
ISSN: 2534-6695

**Publisher**
SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

**Printed version**
Date of publication: 1 September 2006
Number of pages: 59-69
ISSN: 2270-0633

**Electronic reference**
Richard Samin, "The Myth of Adamastor: the Ambivalent Metaphor of Otherness in South African Literature", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 29.1 | 2006, Online since 14 January 2022, connection on 10 November 2022. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ces/9563 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.9563

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# The Myth of Adamastor: the Ambivalent Metaphor of Otherness in South African Literature

The myth of Adamastor as represented in Luis de Camoens's epic poem *The Lusiads* has been frequently used as a metaphor for the unknown and dangerous other in South African literature. While analysing how this monstrous figure was used by the white colonial subject to represent Africa and Africans the article focuses on the ambivalence of its representation. The construction of such a repulsive figure serves by contrast as a proof of the white man's humanity, and reinforces his awareness of selfhood and agency. It also serves a hermeneutic function whereby he can legitimate his subjugation of the colonised Other. As a simulacrum proceeding from European subjectivity, it evinces contradictory feelings of fear and fascination, rejection and attraction, and elicits a discourse which by endowing it with a personal voice exorcises the fear and uncertainty it arouses. This article shows how throughout South African literary history, from the early nineteenth century to the present day, representations of Adamastor have registered shifting and ambivalent attitudes towards the country's colonial conundrum.

In his analysis of Dutch travellers' narratives in southern Africa in the middle of the 17th century, J.M. Coetzee notes their tendency to collapse what he calls the "synopticism of description" into "the immediacy of narrative" (Coetze 2 15). What Coetzee means is that the image of the Other in these texts was a crafty construction whereby a set of carefully selected observations were projected into a narrative frame so as to suggest the immediacy and authenticity of original encounters. But one should immediately add that the categories used to account for the observations made were to a large extent derived from mental representations which were all but rational, rooted as they were in age-old speculations or fantasies. Thus the image of the Other, right from the outset, was underpinned by an epistemological tension at the nexus of two forms of knowledge, one partaking of fiction, the other grounded in empirical evidence. The Other became a depository of heterogeneous elements whose coherence was dependent on the totalising gaze of the colonial subject: he was primitive, barbaric, bestial, sexually rapacious, stupid and idle but, for all that, he could not be entirely excluded from humanity. As one Dutch traveller remarked in 1652: "The local natives have everything in common with the dumb cattle, barring their human nature" (Coetzee 2 12). This epistemological indeterminacy brought about an impression of strangeness which elicited

paradoxical responses ranging from utter repulsion to compassion or even secret admiration. The aim of this article is first to show how the paradigm of the southern African Other as both a strange and ambivalent figure originated in the myth of the giant Adamastor created by Luis de Camoens in *The Lusiads* published in 1572, and second, how it was subsequently used by white South African writers as a heuristic tool to address the issue of white South African identity and probe into the nature of colonial relations with Africa and Africans.

The myth of Adamastor, like all myths, proceeded from the desire to come to terms with the unknown and with difference, in short with otherness. The strangeness of Adamastor proceeds from a confrontation with geographical wilderness. The geography of the African continent long before Portuguese sailors travelled down its western coast was not strictly speaking unknown. Since Antiquity it had been mapped out in imaginary representations by poets, philosophers and historians. Thus in Homer's *The Odyssey* Poseidon travels to "the farthest outposts of mankind" among two kinds of Ethiopians "half of whom live where the Sun goes down, and half where he rises" (Homer 21). In the Ancient world the term Ethiopian was a general term of reference for the people who lived south of a line ranging from Mauritania to India. This division became one of the dominant ethno-geographical clichés of classical, medieval and early Renaissance representations of Africa. It established a binary opposition between "wild Ethiopia" in the west and "fabulous Ethiopia" in the east and their correlative ethnographical differences between the "savage Ethiopians" of the west and the "fabulous Ethiopians" of the east. (Van Wyk Smith 4)

This dichotomous geo-ethnological partition of Africa into east and west also cuts across a theological division between north and south. Accounts of voyages down the west coast of the continent were represented as a kind of descent into hell peopled with wild and diabolic creatures as Herodotus records in his *Histories* (Van Wyk Smith 4), or with gigantic creatures like Briareus and Anteus in Dante's *Inferno* (31), who, buried to the waist, guard the entrance to the ninth circle of hell. This picture was furthermore compounded by the Aristotelian speculation that there existed beyond the Sahara desert and south of the equator another temperate and habitable region which was complementary to the Mediterranean world (Van Wyk Smith 8). Travelling east was not merely a commercial venture, an adventurous journey through hostile territory, but also a kind of spiritual progress motivated by the expectation of better things to come.

This is where the myth of Adamastor comes in. He was first introduced by Camoens in Canto V of *The Lusiads* which relates Vasco da Gama's sudden, dramatic encounter with the giant as he was rounding the Cape of Good Hope in 1497. He is a hybrid creature combining elements borrowed from Antiquity – Adamastor is one of the Titans who rebelled against the Olympian gods who

had overthrown their fathers – and from various literary texts such as Homer's *Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Rabelais' *Pantagruel*. His nature partakes of the ambivalence with which Europeans responded to the African continent: he stands for both the evils they encountered (or imagined) and the anticipation of wealth and splendour once circumvented as intimated by the name "Cape of Good Hope" which Bartholomew Diaz allegedly gave to it. Straddling two worlds at the southern tip of the continent, Adamastor is a guardian who controls the access to the coveted "fabulous East" but also an ordeal to overcome. Accordingly, Camoens stages a dramatic scene in which the threatening giant opposes a formidable challenge to Da Gama who is not only ready to meet it but who, besides, draws his strength and determination from this very confrontation.

Adamastor is first described by Da Gama, as he materializes out of a storm cloud hovering over the Cape peninsula:

> A horrid form took shape before our gaze
> A figure huge and strong, with heavy jowl
> And unkempt beard, whose sullen eyes, ablaze
> From caves beneath the beetling forehead, scowl
> With hate enough to frighten and amaze —
> Grey and clay-matted was his shock of hair;
> Yellow his teeth in his black mouth.
>
> So vast his limbs and such a height he showed
> He must second only in size
> To that colossal statue of old Rhodes,
> A wonder of the world to ancient eyes (51).

He then warns Da Gama of the terrible risks that he and other seafarers after him would be taking if they entered his secret domain and prophesies the disasters that will befall them. Da Gama remains undaunted: he challenges the giant and bids him decline his identity: "Boldly I cut short, demanding: 'say,/What is your name! Foe your prodigious size/Astounds my mind and takes my breath away'" (54). Adamastor answers that he is the Cape of Storms, the last sentinel of the African coast and declares that he was one of the Titans who rebelled against the Olympian gods but chose "to fight by sea" and to brave Poseidon because ever since he had seen Thetis, the wife of Peleus and mother of Achilles, bathing naked, he had been in love with her. His love being unrequited he threatens to have her by force. So with the help of her mother Doris, Thetis decides to lure the giant into a trap, pretending that for the sake of peace she will submit to his entreaties. When they meet, Adamastor hugs Thetis, but suddenly realizes that what he holds between his arms is a rocky outcrop and that he himself has been changed into a rock, the rocky promontory of the Cape (or Table Mountain) whose feet, Thetis, the sea, keeps bathing tantalizingly: "While beauteous Thetis round me shines

and flows/ Still trebling my intolerable woes" (56). Adamastor's metamorphosis manifests his otherness: he is an inchoate being whose incompleteness is intimated by the name of the first man – Adam – set into another – Adamaste – whose etymology allegedly conveys the idea of wilderness. He partakes of both mankind and nature, and his inscrutable strangeness elicits a European discourse which is all the more hyperbolically negative as it is conscious of its inadequacy to account for such radical difference. It is a situation which Shakespeare thematises in *The Tempest* with the character of Caliban, described by both Prospero and Miranda in almost similar terms to those used by Camoens in his epic: "uncouth", "wild", "devilish", "brutish", "sullen", "slave", "lustful".

In order to come to terms with the monstrous, Camoens produces a semiotic operation on clear cut binary oppositions. If Adamastor is a forbidding teratological figure, he is also a gullible fool symbolizing the ominous but dull spirit of a continent resisting foreign intrusion. He inspires fear and awe, but he is also a kind of beacon, standing on the threshold of a fabulous world, not totally unknown but as yet uncharted. To overcome the fear he inspires is a necessary rite of passage, and, accordingly, Camoens's epic points to the ontological underpinnings of the European drive for conquest and domination. It is Da Gama's very act of defiance and his readiness to face adversity which allow him to accede to a sense of self-accomplishment and identity. It is also in his capacity for survival and resilience that he draws his legitimacy to conquer and dominate. The fierce but not indomitable resistance of the Other operates like a revelation. Thus in his epic Camoens delineates a European psyche in terms of defiance, transgression and power. In South Africa, writers, and particularly English-speaking writers, have seized on the paradigm of Adamastor to codify and legitimize the relations between the white settlers and the native peoples. In his study of South African literature in English, Stephen Gray contends that Adamastor is the "white man's creation myth of self-appraisal" (Gray 15).

The liberal tradition in South Africa, known originally as Cape liberalism, was grounded on the Christian and humanistic legacy of Victorian England. Trusteeship is the notion which best encapsulates the type of relation that linked a white guardian to his black ward with the former trying to wrench the latter from a state of savagery so as to bring him up to a certain level of civilisation through hard work, self-help and obedience to the law. From the early nineteenth century to the present day, from poetry to prose fiction, South African literature in English has registered a range of ambivalent attitudes towards Africa and Africans whose nature was indexed on the changing political context. The thinking of white South Africans on Africans has constantly wavered between rejection and acceptance. A compromise between on the one hand the assumption of racial superiority, and, on the other, a concern for the educational and moral welfare of Africans was not

deemed impossible. For Stephen Gray this wavering was best symbolized by Adamastor: “the figure of Adamastor,” he says, “is at the root of all the subsequent white semiology invented to cope with the African experience” (Gray 27).

In the literature that comes out of South Africa in the 19th and early 20th centuries, writers use the myth of Adamastor as the symbol of their dominant position in Africa. John Wheatley, for instance, in “The Cape of Storms” (1830), celebrates the greatness of Da Gama by endowing him with the epic qualities of the giant:

> Spirit of Gama! Round the stormy Cape,
> Bestriding the rude whirwind as thy steed;
> The thunder cloud, thy car; thy spectre shape
> Gigantic; who upon the gale dost feed
> The Water spout; thy shroud, the skies;
> Thy sport, the South and vast Atlantic seas;
> Thine eye, the lighning flash — awake! arise
> From out the deep, in dread and awful sov’reignty! (Van Wyk Smith 74)

The theme of the subdued giant tamed by white civilization is recurrent in white South African poetry until the apartheid era with, for instance, Adèle Naudé’s poem “Cabo Tormentoso” (1953) in which the poet addresses the defeated giant with typical colonial smugness:

> But we have touched your heart and changed your mien
> You’re gentle now and stand mature
> With lichen of tradition, stuff
> Of history, enveloping your stone;
> And guided by the reins of discipline
> Your spirit,quietened, walks sure
> And steadily, for all the rough
> Wild tracks are worn that once you trod alone (Van Wyk Smith 117).

However, during the same period, a less heavy-handed approach to Africa and Africans had begun to emerge in literature, especially in the poems of Thomas Pringle. The sonnet “Cape of Storms” (1834) expresses the poet’s ambivalent feelings on leaving South Africa by referring more or less explicitly to the topos of Adamastor. The evocation of the bleakness of the land finally tails off into nostalgia:

> O Cape of storms! Although thy front be dark,
> And bleak thy naked cliffs, and cheerless vales […]
> Yet, spite of physical and moral ill […] there are strong links that bind me to thee still,
> And render even thy rocks and deserts dear;
> Here dwell kind hearts which time nor place can chill -
> Loved Kindred and congenial Friends sincere. (Pringle 73)

In an almost similar vein, William Roger Thomson in "Cape of Good Hope" (1868) uses a prosopopeia to express his nostalgia and longing for a land otherwise described in grim terms:

> O land of storms, I pine to hear
> That music which others fear;
> I long to see thy storm-fiend scowl,
> I long to hear the winds howl,
> Hot with fell fires, across the plains. (Van Wyk Smith 78)

There also lingers throughout the poetic production of the 19th century the sentiment of a subdued form of sublime. We find traces of it in D.C.F. Moodie's poem "Adamastor, or the Titan shape of the mighty Cape" (1887) in which he conveys not so much colonial smugness as a vague romantic admiration for the savage beauty of the place with subdued pastoral strains: "And mark, oh mark! The noble profile set/In sternest beauty o'er the western wave […] The Giant guardian Genius of the Cape/Looks forth o'er lovely scenes of wood and wave". (Van Wyk Smith 81)

The mood changes radically in the 1930s with a poet like Roy Campbell who left South Africa disillusioned wih the mediocrity and narrow-mindedness of his native country. In his poem "Rounding the Cape" (1930) he takes up the Adamastor topos almost in the terms used by Camoens, but here it is not the monster who delivers prophecies but the poet's persona who warns that the brooding giant will perhaps awake one day. In his valediction he denounces the wanton destruction of Africa by white civilisation: "Across his back, unheeded, we have broken /Whole forests: heedless of the blood we've spilled" (Van Wyk Smith 111). But his feeling of revolt runs parallel to a traditional vision of Africa associating the continent with the forces of darkness: "Farewell, terrific shade! Though I go free/ Still of the powers of darkness art thou Lord" (Van Wyk Smith 111) . The closing metaphor, blending in a single image Africans and night, evokes the brooding threat of Adamastor: "And Night, the Negro, murmurs in his sleep" (Van Wyk Smith 111). The tensions present in Campbell's poem illustrate the growing contradictions which underpin South African literature at the turn of the twentieth century and beyond – contradictions between rejection and propitiation, fear and fascination – in an attempt to come to terms with the mounting political and social conflicts in the country.

The paradox of colonial writing was that, while it sought to contain otherness and strangeness within clearly identifiable and familiar forms in a bid to make them more intelligible, it actually failed to apprehend their reality. This strategy which consists in imposing a form on any living manifestation in order to make it amenable to one's desires and give it a meaning corresponds to Gilles Deleuze's conception of representation defined as "a phenomenon of accumulation, coagulation, sedimentation" (Deleuze 197).

The semiotic construction which proceeds from this strategy, as clearly illustrated by Camoens's poem, assimilates Adamastor to an abject creature. The abject, as Julia Kristeva explains, is that unknown force which threatens to overwhelm the very being of the subject, a threat which lies beyond anything that is conceived of as possible, tolerable and thinkable. It is an undefinable thing which is both repulsive and attractive. It is, Kristeva adds, "a massive and abrupt surge of strangeness which though vaguely familiar in an opaque and forgotten life now harasses [the subject] as radically other and repugnant" (Kristeva 10, my translation). The abject, she adds, is the very locus of ambiguity "where meaning collapses" (9). Adamastor is thus the inscrutable figure which the colonial subject has ceaselessly interrogated for answers about his identity and the meaning of his presence in Africa, even to the point of endowing it with a voice, as though to satisfy the deep-rooted colonial urge of "speak[ing] to Africa and be[ing] spoken to by Africa", as J.M. Coetzee contends (Coetzee 27).

This is precisely what André Brink tries to do with his grotesque post-modern fable *The First Life of Adamastor* set in the middle of the 15th century when the first white sailors landed at the Cape of Good Hope. Brink imagines that there genuinely existed an historical model for Adamastor, a spirit of some kind that has survived until the present day "through successive avatars to look back from the perspective of the late 20th century" (Brink 7). This spirit is called T'kama (which translated from the Khoi language means the Big-Bird or ostrich, "bird" being also the name for the male member). It is endowed with his unusually oversized and encumbrous sexual organ with which T'Kama tries to seduce a white woman whom he spied bathing naked in a stream. Brink's short narrative imaginatively recreates the naive and puzzled vision, impressions and speculations the original inhabitants of that region might have had when they met white sailors for the first time. As Michael Chapman, notes it is "a witty meditation on the Adamastor myth" (Chapman 406) which, against the background of the original encounter between Europeans and Africans and its subsequent impact, explores the theme of the impossible sexual relation between T'Kama and Khois (the Khoi word for woman) since the former's penis, we are informed, grows bigger whenever he looks at her or seeks to have sexual intercourse with her. This quandary lasts until his member is bitten off one day by a crocodile and replaced by one made of clay by the clan's medicine-man enabling him at last to impregnate the white woman. Finally, T'Kama is lured into a trap by Portuguese sailors as he was looking for his "wife", and dies his first death fastened to a rock. The ironic reversal of the colonial point of view in Brink's novel raises several relevant issues on colonial intrusion and violence, but its import is somewhat weakened by his heavy insistence on the bawdy, which somewhat blunts the parodic and critical edge of the story.

To better appreciate the lasting influence of the Adamastor myth in South Africa, one has to turn to J.M. Coetzee's novels and particularly *Disgrace* (Coetzee 1 1999). *Disgrace*, just like *Age of Iron*, is a novel which, as Michael Chapman puts it, "re-engages the individual person in his power to feel what is just or unjust" (Chapman 405). The narrator, David Lurie, who has been fired from his university after being accused of having sexually assaulted one of his students, goes to his daughter Lucy, who lives on a small landholding in the eastern Cape. She grows vegetables and flowers for the market of a nearby town (Grahamstown) and runs dog-kennels. She is helped by a black farmer, Petrus, who also owns a plot of land next to hers and hopes to expand it by acquiring Lucy's holding. One day the farm is attacked by two men and a boy, all black. The dogs are shot, David is burned and Lucy is gang-raped. Although Petrus was absent during the attack, David is convinced that he had masterminded it. In David's eyes, Petrus embodies a dark and brooding threat. The man is practically endowed with the same mental features as Adamastor's: sullenless, a dark desire for revenge, a man who silently harbours a deep-rooted resentment and lurches in the dark ready to attack at the most opportune moment. David Lurie conjectures what his next move will be:

> Petrus is a neighbour who at present happens to sell his labour, because that is what suits him […] It is a new world they live in, he and Lucy and Petrus. Petrus knows it, and he knows it, and Petrus knows that he knows it […] A man of patience, energy, resilience. A peasant, a *paysan*, a man of the country. A plotter and a schemer and no doubt a liar too, like peasants everywhere (117).

David's diffidence is motivated by his inner conviction that Petrus protects the identity of the three black men who assaulted and raped his daughter. He suspects that this crime is a calculated move to oblige Lucy to leave her farm so that, in the context of the new political dispensation, Petrus might reappropriate the land: "Petrus would like to take over Lucy's land." (117). Despite her father's insistence that she should leave the farm, Lucy, who claims she wants to belong to the land, remains undeterred and refuses to lodge a complaint with the police or even have an abortion. She will eventually agree to become Petrus's third wife.

Coetzee dramatizes the dilemma of white liberalism and pushes to the absurd its sense of guilt. He bluntly lays bare the inconsistency of the liberal stance when confronted with the ugliness of racial violence. In his insistence that the rule of law should apply and that this criminal assault should not go unpunished even in the new South Africa, David Lurie does not hesitate to invoke the legacy of history to explain the gap that separates blacks and whites: "It was history speaking through them,' he offers at last. 'A history of wrong. It came down from the ancestors'" (Coetzee 156). On the other hand

his daughter, for almost similar reasons, adopts a stance which sounds difficult to accept. She claims that her rape is the sacrifice to pay for keeping the land:

> What if … what if that is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying? Perhaps that is what they tell themselves. (158)

There is something clearly unpalatable, even provocative, in this suggestion which leaves the reader perplexed. Coetzee's characters are agonisingly seeking a truth and explanations which are endlessly deferred through repetitive and obsessive speculations, to the extent that language itself becomes a petrified and meaningless material:

> More and more he [David] is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa. Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulation, their articulatenes, their articulatedness. Like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud, the language has stiffened (117).

There linger in the imagery used by Coetzee echoes of the Adamastor semiotic: the idea of rigidity, petrification obviously associated with the very name of Petrus (whose etymology means rock), the permanence of an archeological obsession with natural and mythic origins, the impotency of a European language to come to terms with an impenetrable mystery. At the same time, it is not the least of the novel's paradoxes that David's soul-searching eloquence belies his opinion that "the language has stiffened." The alleged impotence of a European language to account for a shifting and complex reality manifests the permanence of the Adamastor myth, as the ghost image of the white man's uneasiness to envision his position in the new political dispensation. It is as though the myth had come home to roost in the guise of a symbolical reversal: Lucy will eventually remain on her farm but only as Petrus's *bywoner* that is as a white share-cropper on a black man's farm.

Both Brink's and Coetzee's diagnoses concerning the end of white rule are correct, but seem unable to move beyond certain forms of rhetoric which do not allow a less self-centred approach to the present. They come up with narratives of fantasy, resignation, escapism, powerlessness verging on sheer posturing, in the image of Lucy pondering over her loss of landownership: "Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. No cards, No weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.' 'Like a dog.' 'Yes, like a dog'" (205), or of her father seeking solace in taking care of stray dogs. The white man's harrowing sense of guilt, resignation and even self-punishment

[1] See for example Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples* (Johannesburg: Queillerie, 1993).

frequently found in recent white South African fiction[1] partakes of a form of wounded pride which precludes the possiblity of a genuine dialogue with the Other to negotiate the terms under which new racial and social relations can be established. David Lurie gives the impression that the only thing the white man wants to do now is to withdraw in his little corner to sulk in sullen resignation. This is the ultimate and ironical avatar of the myth of Adamastor: Prospero turned Caliban.

The myth of Adamastor is a symbol of engagement with Africa seen from the white man's point of view. It is a representation of an inaccessible and inscrutable presence. The Adamastor topos conveys the impression of a colonial psyche tightly locked inside its own consciousness, desperately trying to peep over a racial, cultural, ideological and epistemological fence. As Derek Attridge puts it in his study of Coetzee's novels, "the racially or socially privileged character gains virtually no understanding of the inner world of the other who has been excluded" (Attridge 168). Yet the white man appears so guilt-ridden that he clings to the image of Adamastor in the vain hope of eliciting a revelation from it, both about Africa and about his ontological link to Africa, eager for a sign of recognition and acceptance in the form of an epiphany. But the myth of Adamastor is not simply the story of the metamorphosis of a giant into rock: it is, in the final analysis, the allegory of how racial and cultural differences have become stratified into what Deleuze calls the fallacy and tyranny of representation which, while giving the illusion of showing the real, in fact misses it (Buydens 59).

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[1] See for example Mark Behr's The Smell of Apples (Johannesburg: Queillerie, 1993).

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