Drama em Gente:

Review of George Monteiro’s The Pessoa Chronicles

Frank X. Gaspar*


The Pessoa Chronicles is a volume that threatens to burst at the seams. It comprises 516 poems written over the span of 36 years, and Pessoa is everywhere in it, inhabiting not only his familiar heteronyms Alvaro de Campos, Ricardo Reis, Alberto Caeiro and Bernardo Soares but also inhabiting George Monteiro the author who by some great alchemy brings a sense of order to what, in a lesser hand, would fly apart from its own centrifugal forces. Monteiro conducts the many voices like the master that he is, and more often than not, we hear him going toe to toe with that other Master, that sly and slippery modernist who pretended to elude notice even as he craved recognition. Pessoa seems to have achieved both his temporal obscurity and then great fame, and the Chronicles encompass virtually everything and everyone he touched during his life and after his death.

George Monteiro is known for his translations, critical essays and numerous books on both American and Portuguese literature including The Presence of Camoes, Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil and After, Fernando Pessoa and 19th Century Anglo-American Literature, There’s no Word for Saudade, and many others. But Monteiro is also a memoirist (38 School Street) and, significantly, a poet (As the Crow Flies, The Double Weaver’s Knot, and The Coffee Exchange). And while he brings with him his vast critical and historical knowledge of everything Pessoa, it is not Monteiro the scholar but Monteiro the poet, with his imagination and creative sensibility, who gains entry into the minds and spirits of not only Fernando and his coterie of heteronyms, but a host of others: artists, writers, friends and more—you could wear a pencil down to a nub just jotting down the names and associations, descriptions and particulars that make this book a marvel.

Here is the first poem of the Chronicles, written, we know, on July 11th, 1980 because unlike Pessoa, Monteiro organizes every poem by date, to be kept in folders that will hold the organized contents of the book. No messy baú for Monteiro. But one cannot help noticing that the date approaches some sort of concordance (almost) with Pessoa’s—that is, Alvaro de Campos’s unusually dated—“Salutation to Walt Whitman,” June 11th, 1915.

* Graduate Writing Program at Pacific University, Oregon.
Surface Noise

It scares me, this life
I can’t face up to. In
fact, while I can’t
entirely bring it off, I
do better facing it down.
I’m an aggressive son-
of-a-bitch, but it’s a
touch-and-go existence
I allow myself. Or is it
the touch-and-go myself
that allows the other—
the me I am—this,
and only this much?
Who speaks for me now
or through me? Is it
Fernando Pessoa, his
orthonymic self, sporting
with me, or is it one
of his sweaty heteronyms
scraping out a horned-bottom
scapegoat, who can’t, or
won’t, cry foul?

“It scares me, this life | I can’t face up to...” This starts as a slender piece of introspection that we might see from a contemplative writer at any particular junction in life. With Monteiro one can infer the middle of the journey, but his dark wood, in this case, is identity, and as we read further we see it is an identity, if not completely vexed, then surely complicated, remarkably, by the presence of Pessoa (it is impossible not to borrow those last three words from Monteiro). What makes this poem significant in its position in the book is that the introspective voice reaches beyond the confines of the self (that self, at least) when Pessoa enters the question. Monteiro is thinking, not so much about Pessoa as subject, but personally and compositionally using Pessoa as a sling to propel Monteiro himself into a journey of self and identity, and he includes reference to the “sweaty heteronyms”—in the literary sense of course, but, tellingly, in a personal mode. This poem introduces subtly, yet at the same time quite vividly, the engine of the book: Pessoa and his life and times, his literary reputation and the heteronyms, will accompany Monteiro in a complementary excursion. Monteiro searches for his self (or selves) by immersion in the complicated nexus of names and identities that are Fernando Pessoa. And Pessoa speaks to and through Monteiro (and therefore us). It is a give and take carried out in a way that no other American Poet or writer that I can think of would be equipped for.
Let us get briefly to those “sweaty heteronyms.” It is fair to say that much of Pessoa’s post mortem notoriety stems from his heteronyms which, he is careful to point out, are distinct personalities with varying points of view, unlike pseudonyms, which are simply the writer’s auxiliary names. Pessoa in several places speaks to the incubation and birth of the principal three. Part of their longevity, I think, is their constant binary nature: we know that they are both Pessoa and entities quite separate from Pessoa at the same time. We cannot help but hear this binary nature of the speakers. Pessoa, in one of his several explanations of the heteronyms, cited King Lear and Shakespeare as an analogy, in a letter to Armando Côrtes-Rodrigues in 1915. When Lear speaks, we hear Lear. When Lear speaks we hear Shakespeare. Pessoa of course takes this drama at least one step further. He walks and talks with, lives with, the heteronyms. But so too does George Monteiro. He’s going to spend a long time wandering among them. Here, addressing Pessoa himself on June 20th, 1986, he makes short work of them in order: Ricardo Reis, the doleful Epicurean; Alberto Caeiro, The unintentional “master” of them all; and Alvaro de Campos, the blasé sensationalist (and smoker of opium).

Parthenogenesis

One, two, three, born
just like that, each his

own man, all internal
network loyalties not

withstanding, Reis
Caeiro, Campos—a

hat trick if there ever
was one, profligacy

indeed for a poet who
owned no more than

one hat—never black—
at any given moment

Monteiro shows his colors here, and his wit (a hat trick is one, two, three goals in the game of hockey—Monteiro is from Providence after all), and then turns a triple-axle pun by bringing Pessoa’s actual hat into the poem). And if you hear a certain tone of voice in that poem, I would agree with you. A gesture toward snark perhaps. Monteiro begins the book bold and as the years progress becomes bolder. Monteiro is not afraid of these guys; he’s as tough and versatile as
they are. Here is Monteiro appropriating the voice of God (and His sarcasm—see Job) as he interrogates the poet in 1991:

From Politics and Ideology

Tell me Fernando, if you can, why bother with a narrative if
the payoff is to knock off a poet, eased into being, ode by ode.

I would assume this pique derives from Pessoa’s announcing the death of Alberto Caeiro in 1915. The two other heteronyms in the triumvirate appear to have died with Pessoa in 1935, although they could have survived him. Ricardo Reis, at least, seems to have, according to the investigations of José Saramago.

There are other heteronyms, of course. Bernardo Soares, putative writer of The Book of Disquietude is one. There are close to eighty others if you count some that Pessoa listed but never developed. Several are more like “imaginary friends” in his youth. Monteiro is smart enough to not get bogged down though. He’s having fun, nudging Pessoa, needling him here and there and riffing off the poet’s work and life. Throughout the Chronicles there is homage and extension, irony, and humor.

There is some precedent for this treatment of Pessoa. We learn about it from some of Monteiro’s own vast scholarship. Most American poets who have gotten past “Howl” and “A Supermarket in California,” are familiar with Allen Ginsberg’s “Salutations to Fernando Pessoa.” Monteiro includes a passage from it for perhaps more general readers in his essay “Barbaric Complaint.” Ginsberg is characteristically over the top in his humor. Here are a couple of clips from his long poem:

What way’m I better than Pessoa?
Known on four continents I have 25 English books he only 3
his mostly Portuguese, but that’s not his fault
U.S.A.’s a bigger country

and later:

Besides he was a shrimp, himself admits in interminable “Salutations
Walt Whitman”
whereas 5’ 7 ½ “ height
somewhat above world average, no immodesty
I’m speaking seriously about Fernando Pessoa.

In another essay, “Durban Echoes,” Monteiro quotes the South African poet Charles Eglington speaking about Pessoa’s hold on him:
Pessoa has a curious effect on me. I begin to translate one of his poems, and before I know where I am I have abandoned the translation and begun a poem of my own. In the finished result the prima anima of my own poem derives from the theme, some of the images or the main idea, of Pessoa’s poems.

We get a glimpse from these samples of how Pessoa can inspire humor at his own expense (he pretty much asks for it: witness the innumerable caricatures of him; the cover of The Pessoa Chronicles sports a photograph of two made of wire—you’ll find the name of the artist in a poem written Feb. 28th, 2007). We also see the “curious effect” that Pessoa has on other writers. Once you let him into the kitchen, he won’t ever leave. And he has sat in Monteiro’s kitchen for more than thirty-six years. But the intent of these two examples is to emphasize scale. Certainly Pessoa invites attention and apportions influence, but Monteiro, measured against any host of writers caught in the poet’s sway, is enormous. His humor is more edgy than Ginsberg’s, more angular, and rises from deeper sources. And as for a prima anima, yes, images, ideas, themes, but far more. Monteiro inhabits, at times, becomes Pessoa, and the effect is singular and magical. (And when it comes to throwing shade, have a look at how Monteiro, in Sir Francis Bacon, works a twelve-line sentence rooted in renaissance detail, full of irony, and turning into a plangent lament-cum-bonk you can almost hear across a room (Pace, Ginsberg).

Sir Francis Bacon

He who took all knowledge to be his province, who, a jurist, rendered honest, judicious verdicts (but took bribes), and, who, an ever practical man died from complications linked to riding in a cab with a chicken in an experiment in refrigeration, an experiment tried, of course, after he had written every one of Shakespeare’s words—it’s no wonder he caught the intense attention of one who gave up love and marriage hands down for the sake of his “work” (so he said), one who had no interest in refrigeration (as far as we know), but did risk it all on a single throw, a single casting of the horoscope.

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But becoming Pessoa! This seems like dangerous magic. On June 13th, 1986 something momentous happens—albeit quietly. As if shrugging off all the manifold references to him in third person over the years, Pessoa speaks:

Anniversary

Today I’d be ninety-eight if not for the drink, the kidney
shutdown, and God knows what else that put me away before my time.

My remains—all that lived at the old address—have now been whisked away to Jerónimos.

Life’s like that. Just when it all seems settled—once and for all—you up and move or somebody does the moving for you. To live to ninety-eight, now that’s going too far, but seventy or seventy-five, that’s o.k.

What a chest I’d have left you. A fleet of chests, all of them filled with bits and pieces, things and puzzles that would amuse you for a century, nay, a millennium.

I would have preferred but one interment, when memory itself was fresh, rosy, green.

This sounds like Pessoa, or—to my ear—like Bernardo Soares, but that’s splitting hairs. George Monteiro has taken the step, which in his case, cannot be taken back. He enters Pessoa. This reader has the eerie feeling that he might have been lurking there for quite some time, but I’m not ready to sell Monteiro short in any case. This is Pessoa, speaking from the grave, (nothing new—regard Emily Dickinson, Edgar Lee Masters, and so forth) but: look at that “o.k.” That’s something different. A whiff of displacement, anachronism. It pries a crack in a door that Monteiro, with his restless poet’s imagination and his wit and artistry, cannot forbear breaking open.

We’ll jump to Pipe Dreams (Dec. 14th, 2015), a poem I favor for its audacious whimsy, and for Pessoa’s transformed voice:

Now trolling is something I would have done had the internet been around in my day. And, of course, I would have kept close track of my enemies, though I would have been chary with my own postings. WORD would have helped, too, for quiet composition, labeling folders, squirreling away poems and unsent screeds in files. I could have also have eliminated repetition notably in the desassossego mélange, which, come to think of it, would have cost me my current worldwide reputation as artist and thinker. Still, however, as Cash Bundren puts it, it would have made for a neater job.

transformed only in the sense that it has now broken free of all constraints of time and place, yet remains fully Pessoa (and Monteiro). Enter the binary genius of the
book, someone I will dare to call (lacking all creativity on my part) Pessoa-Monteiro. Borders are breached, blurred, erased. We have been headed this way since that “o.k.” in “Anniversary.” The Pessoa Chronicles are, of course, The Monteiro Chronicles as well, and how happy we are to have them, for Monteiro is a virtuoso of voice. Anachronisms now abound, but we do not read them as such because we understand that Pessoa is now with us, in our present, indeed he has always been with us, it is one of his uncanny qualities, the man who never was is the man who does not go away. The poem is daring and hilarious. And while we are at it, let’s look at that brief allusion to William Faulkner! The book is resplendent with allusions, all apt, witty, telling, loitering in the poems like cameos or walk-ons, sometimes occulted in delightful ways that make you go back and admire the fusion. Dickens, Lenin, Dickinson, Hemingway, Shakespeare, Robert Frost, Poe, Bernie Madoff (!), Cicero, and on and on. This is not Monteiro being literary or showing off. This his how his mind works—or so we think having read his poems. It’s as if he possesses some neural Alexandrian library in his head and has immediate access to everything in it. There is no shelf he cannot reach, and for that matter he does not even reach. It’s as though names, places, dates, history, data simply glide off those shelves and flutter into his nimble arms.

But Pipe Dreams attracts attention in another regard. It is humorous in its presentation of Pessoa thinking about the modern conveniences of the scrivener—Microsoft Word, the Internet, files and folders. But when we remember Monteiro’s preface to this volume we note he reveals a good deal of his own process (we assume he writes with Word or one of the lesser word processing programs), dating his entries, organizing them in files and folders as he accumulates the heft of his book. Yes, Pessoa is considering Monteiro, rather wistfully, imagining how much better off he would have been if he had Monteiro’s apparatus. Wistful for a while until he pulls himself back, realizing that his own disorganized trunk was in part responsible for his “worldwide reputation.” The reader will find many such pieces where the “unidentified voice” (Monteiro’s words) vibrates with its dual nature, Pessoa-Monteiro, a mercurial dialectic—well, almost a dialectic—wherein both locutors explore the vistas and limits of identity.

It’s hardly necessary to say that the few samples I offer in this small space cannot possibly do justice to the rich tapestry of this book. But I would be remiss in making an end if I did not go bit further about what is in store for the reader.

There is a great love of the city of Lisbon that permeates this collection. Monteiro takes us down to Cais do Sodré, Largos de S. Carlos, the Baixa, walking through the Chiado, contemplating sculpture, exploring cafés; and he leads us back to the beginnings, to the journals Orpheu, and Presença and the dawning of Portuguese modernism; he peoples the poems with the characters in and around Pessoa’s life—Sá-Carneiro, Gaspar Simões, Vascos Reis (!), Antonio Ferro, Miguel Torga, to name a scant few, and not forgetting Ophelia, his strange, failed,
unconsummated love (this in a poem titled *Portuguese Letters!* Pure Monteiro in wit and irony). And of course in this generous volume there is more. Happily, much more.

About Pessoa we know much. About Monteiro we know that his book begins with a question. “who speaks for me now | or through me....?” In the complex music of the poems everyone speaks for and through themselves and everyone else. It’s impossible to say what discoveries Monteiro made over the course of 36 years and 500 poems, but it is a safe wager that he is not the person (or persons) who began so long ago with that slender poem. It is, however, possible to say that his journey was epic in scale and completely successful as art. If indeed there is dialectic between the fused *Pessoa-Monterio*, and if dialectic is meant as a system toward truth, than this reader cannot say what truth comes to us from Pessoa (except, through Monteiro, perhaps a more poetic manifest of his inner being). With Monteiro, who confronts Pessoa in every possibility, in every mien, who has wrestled with Pessoa’s many identities and his own, it seems inarguable that he emerges from this 36-year pilgrimage with at least one clear identity: He is the singular poet who brings Pessoa and his time more alive than Pessoa did himself. *The Pessoa Chronicles’* result for its readers is a magnanimous gift, something to give hours of pleasure—and I daresay, raiding Aristotle, education, edification, and entertainment. George Monteiro has compiled an extraordinary achievement. You will profit from reading him. He contains multitudes.