

The Englishing of Fernando Pessoa

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What is the sum total of Fernando Pessoa's poetry? This question, ever since the first major inventory of the *espólio* by João Gaspar Simões in the 1940s, has received increasingly complex answers. The posthumous revelation of a literary oeuvre is not a unique occurrence (think of Franz Kafka), but there is much else that does make Pessoa unique. The heteronyms, who first were assumed to be four or five, have successively increased in number, the latest and 'definitive' count by Jéronimo Pizarro and Patricio Ferrari being 136 (*Eu Sou Uma Antologia: 136 autores ficticios*, 2.nd ed., Tinta-da-china, 2016 [2013]). This figure is the result of painstaking labor, as is the entire consolidation of Pessoa as a canonical poet of the twentieth century. It is the collective effort of several generations of scholars that has made his poetry available to us in ways that the man himself could hardly have imagined or intended. "Pessoa," understood as an oeuvre, is in that sense a scholarly construct and an object lesson in what Jerome McGann once called "the textual condition" – a condition often compounded by incomplete and not entirely legible manuscript documents.

The challenge, simply stated, is to overcome the *espólio's* own resistance to order and coherence. We see these in several of the philologically oriented contributions to *Inside the Mask*, the latest instalment in Patricio Ferrari's mapping of Pessoa the English-language poet. (The previous one being the 2015 edition of *Portuguese Literary and Cultural Studies*, which he edited together with Pizarro.) Written by experienced as well as emergent scholars, the majority of contributions in this elegantly designed volume engage in often meticulous detail with different sections of Pessoa's English output—some of which including previously unpublished texts. The extant writings, such as the political poetry of young Pessoa discussed by Carlos Pittella, or the manuscripts gathered under the pseudonym Frederick Wyatt, sometimes have a changing attribution as one project blends into another – poems by an early fictitious author such as Charles Robert Anon migrate, for example, to the more complex figure of Alexander Search.

But why this attention to the Anglophone Pessoa? And why now? Although it has long been known that Pessoa first fancied himself to be an English-language poet, and although a Portuguese translation of *Poemas ingleses* appeared already in 1974, the exclusively national reading of Pessoa as a Portuguese poet was long dominant. It seems fair to say that efforts by George Monteiro (*Fernando Pessoa and*

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Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Literature, University Press of Kentucky, 2000), Ferrari, Pizarro, and others have made it possible to read the English poetry as not just a curiosity, but as an integral part of a surprisingly consistent poetic project.

Pessoa's biographical motivation for writing in English is clear enough. His ten formative years in Durban not only made him fluent in English, they inculcated a late-Victorian attachment to Elizabethan and Romantic poetry in the budding writer. In his mature phase, he undertook a wide range of poetic projects in English: "The Mad Fiddler," *35 Sonnets*, *Antinous*, *English Poems I-II (Antinous, Inscriptions)*, *English Poems III (Epithalamium)*, and an almost finished translation of José de Espronceda's poem "El estudiante de Salamanca." The Elizabethan tendency is particularly evident in *35 Sonnets*. As the contributions by Irene Ramalho-Santos, Geoffrey Russom and Manuel Portela show, these are highly adept refigurations of mainly the Shakespearean sonnet at the lexical, metrical and thematic levels. Beyond this however, the sonnets as well as other English poems also point towards the more familiar Pessoa's constant concern with the elusiveness of reality and the deceptive powers of the imagination.

Pessoa was proud, even boastful, of his mastery of poetic technique in English, but also acutely frustrated by his subordinate location in the world republic of letters. Susan Margaret Brown traces this troubled relationship with the English literary world in great detail. In a 1912 letter to the Poetry Society of London he pleaded for a more general recognition for contemporary poetry from Portugal which was "not only ignored, which were tolerable, but insulted and insultingly ununderstood by the totality of such people as constitute international literary, and other, opinion." In his thwarted attempts to get published in England, he tried directly to enter the literary community of English-language poets, but was clearly hurt by the repeated rejections.

A bone of contention through all of this, both in Pessoa's own exchanges and among later critics, has been the strangeness of his English. Often passed off as a foreigner's English, Pessoa himself claimed that these were "wild oats of the imagination," consciously sowed. Geoffrey Russom concurs, stating that in *35 Sonnets* he could "not find one instance of second-language confusion" (165). Be that as it may, to this reader, Pessoa's conscious twisting of English can often appear contrived and hyper-literary. Although the volume convinces me that there are extremely subtle and ingenious allusions to Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Blake, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Poe, and others in the poetry, I seldom experience the same ease of expression (and compression) as in his Portuguese poetry.

A likely conclusion, therefore, is that Pessoa's English poetry will remain a concern more for Pessoa-readers than for a more general Anglophone readership. But in that capacity, the volume opens new inroads into our appreciation of the oeuvre. Sensationism, for example, that uniquely Portuguese modernist tendency coined by Pessoa, turns out to be a bilingual phenomenon, evident in the sonnets

which then become more than just an Elizabethan pastiche but modernist in their own right. It is also increasingly clear that the practice of translation was central to Pessoa honing of his poetic virtuosity.

The chapters vary in length and ambition, but there is a high level of professionalism throughout the volume, and sometimes an astonishing rigour, as in Manuel Portela's analysis of "Sonnet X" or in the detailed documentation of the corpus of *The Mad Fiddler*. This means that the volume will serve as a sourcebook for years to come as readers continue to come to grips with the expanding poetic universe known by the name Pessoa.