

To breed another thee: Pessoa mythologising English

[Para criar um outro tu: Pessoa mitificando o inglês]

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Keywords

Fernando Pessoa, English poetry, Literary mythmaking, English canon, Cultural identity.

Abstract

This article examines how Fernando Pessoa mythologises the English language and literary tradition through his English poetry. Often dismissed by critics as a weak imitation of William Shakespeare, Pessoa's English verse can instead be read as an attempt to construct and legitimise an English literary identity of his own. Drawing on his Anglo-South African upbringing and his lifelong distance from England, Pessoa reimagines Englishness as both inheritance and aspiration. In this sense, his engagement with the English canon resembles other processes of cultural assimilation, such as T. S. Eliot's self-fashioning within English literature. The article argues that Pessoa's appropriation of English literary myths becomes an act of poetic self-creation, reshaping both his authorial identity and his relationship with literary tradition.

Palavras-chave

Fernando Pessoa, Poesia inglesa, Mitificação literária, Cânone inglês, Identidade cultural.

Abstract

Este artigo examina a forma como Fernando Pessoa mitifica a língua inglesa e a tradição literária inglesa através da sua poesia em inglês. Frequentemente desvalorizada pela crítica como uma imitação débil de William Shakespeare, a poesia inglesa de Pessoa pode antes ser lida como uma tentativa de construir e legitimar uma identidade literária inglesa própria. Partindo da sua formação anglo-sul-africana e do seu afastamento permanente de Inglaterra, Pessoa reconfigura a ideia de englishness como herança e aspiração. Neste sentido, o seu diálogo com o cânone inglês aproxima-se de outros processos de assimilação cultural, como o de T. S. Eliot na literatura inglesa. O artigo defende que esta apropriação dos mitos literários ingleses constitui um acto de criação poética de si mesmo, capaz de reformular simultaneamente a identidade autoral de Pessoa e a sua relação com a tradição literária.

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A haunting in reverse

Fernando Pessoa's English orthonymous poetry, some of which published during the poet's lifetime, received mixed reviews from English critics. Some considered it as little more than an attempt to imitate William Shakespeare (BUCI-GLUCKSMANN, 1990); others acknowledged its literary ambition while dismissing it as excessively foreign. In the very first review of Pessoa's poetry, published in *The Scotsman*, the poems were praised as a "literary accomplishment of a foreigner writing well in English" and yet ultimately dismissed: "but it is always a foreigner's English, and is often too Southern both in expression and in feeling to be likely to please a strictly English taste" (15 Aug. 1918, p. 2). In general, Pessoa's English poetry was perceived as antiquated, out of step with contemporary literary trends, and merely imitative of a bygone age.

English poetry during the reign of George V was largely dominated by the Georgian poets, amongst them Rupert Brooke, Robert Graves, D. H. Lawrence, Walter de la Mare, and Siegfried Sassoon. The movement was shaped around the five *Georgian Poetry* anthologies, published between 1911 and 1922, under the editorship of Edward Marsh. Even though poetry from this period emerged as a reaction to the harsh realities of World War I and against the perceived didacticism of earlier poetic establishments, particularly the Victorians, it maintained a traditionalist and romantic approach (both in form and content). Within such a literary climate, a poet like Pessoa was unlikely to be warmly received and would almost inevitably appear eccentric or out of fashion. As Jorge de Sena observes:

[...] a crítica britânica da época achá-los-ia uma curiosidade estrangeira, uma imitação das fantasias estilístico-intelectuais do soneto isabelino e jacobita não reposto em glória, um excesso dos requebros esteticistas, ou inspirações literárias (a poesia georgiana, extremamente literária, afectava uma simplicidade "natural").

(SENA, 1974: 39)

[British criticism of the time would regard them as a foreign curiosity, an imitation of the stylistic and intellectual conceits of the Elizabethan and Jacobean sonnet—not restored to glory—an excess of aestheticist mannerisms, or merely literary inspirations (Georgian poetry, though highly literary, cultivated an appearance of "natural" simplicity).]

Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that the artificiality and excessive literariness of Pessoa's English poetry did not accord with the "affected simplicity" cultivated by the Georgian poets.

In a similar fashion, Pessoa's deliberate return to the formal and linguistic models of the Elizabethan period—his consciously archaic style, which aligned him with William Shakespeare, John Donne, and others—was equally at odds with the formal innovations being advanced at the same time by poets such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound in their avant-garde attempts to reshape English-language poetry.

Therefore, Pessoa did not seemingly belong to either camp, remaining instead a kind of “foreign curiosity”, situated at the margins of what constituted the canon of poetry written in English. Even the more generous critical responses—such as the review of 35 *Sonnets* published in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 19 September 1918—while acknowledging the poems’ merit, could not avoid singling out their artificiality:

Mr Pessoa’s command of English is less remarkable than his knowledge of Elizabethan English. He appears to be steeped in Shakespeare [...]. The sonnets [...] will interest many by reason of their ultra-Shakespearian Shakespearianisms, and their Tudor tricks of repetition, involution and antithesis, no less than the worth of what they have to say.

By drawing attention to those “ultra-Shakespearian Shakespearianisms” and to a series of other stylistic pyrotechnics (“tricks”), the review effectively highlights the dense layer of artificiality that rendered Pessoa’s poetry out of tune with contemporary literary sensibilities. Moreover, the apparent praise for “the worth of what they have to say”, placed alongside the display of outdated technical virtuosity, ironically suggests that the poems’ content is as valuable as the artificiality of their style—i.e. possibly lacking in originality. The review may therefore be read less as genuine praise than as a backhanded compliment. From this perspective, Pessoa’s English poems are effectively dismissed, while Pessoa himself appears as what the Portuguese would scornfully call *mais papista que o papa* [more Catholic than the Pope].

Likewise, the relatively small number of Portuguese critics who have engaged with Pessoa’s English poetry—mostly many decades after its publication—have seldom shown much enthusiasm for it. Even Jorge de Sena, one of Pessoa’s most attentive readers in both English and Portuguese, remarks in the essay “O heterónimo Fernando Pessoa e os *Poemas Ingleses* que publicou”, which serves as the preface to Ática’s edition of the *English Poems*, that Pessoa’s English is excessively complex, overly literary, and somewhat archaic.¹

Another reader, the Czech-Portuguese poet and playwright Jorge Listopad, disliked the tendency towards mythification displayed particularly in *Mensagem*—a tendency that could equally be applied to Pessoa’s English poems:

Achei que era extremamente patético. Ainda hoje não compreendi a grandeza da *Mensagem*. Mais tarde gostei muito de ler a obra de Álvaro de Campos, por exemplo, e o resto dos heterónimos de Pessoa, mas tinha muita dificuldade com a *Mensagem*. É a quintessência do português. Para alguém que chega do outro lado, da República Checa, não se entendia aquela espécie de religião, de mitologia.

(LISTOPAD, 2012)

¹ Cf. “[O] inglês de Pessoa é muito complexo e ambicioso, além de por vezes excessivamente literário e até arcaizante” (SENA, 1974: 13).

[I found it extremely pathetic. Even today, I still do not understand the greatness of *Mensagem*. Later on, I greatly enjoyed reading the work of Álvaro de Campos, for example, as well as Pessoa's other heteronyms, but I always had great difficulty with *Mensagem*. It is the quintessence of the Portuguese spirit. For someone coming from the other side—from the Czech Republic—that sort of religion, that mythology, was impossible to understand.]

Listopad, himself a foreigner becoming acquainted with Portuguese culture and literature, perceived Pessoa's mythological density as something "quintessentially Portuguese", thereby paradoxically highlighting a national tendency from which Pessoa could not free himself.

What Listopad observed, this Portuguese tendency towards mythologising, is perhaps a product of an insecure nation trying to claim their stake in a work of art, something which Pessoa might have sussed out, thus producing the appeasing - for the Portuguese psyche - *Mensagem*. As Pessoa tried to inscribe himself in the canon of English literature, one must look no further than to the fate of the translations of his English poems to realise that Portuguese cultural agents have also fallen into the trap of mythologising, i.e. *nationalising*, their Pessoa. Early editions of these poems, particularly the bilingual edition published in 1974 by Ática, edited, annotated, and translated by Jorge de Sena, with additional translations by José Blanc de Portugal and Adolfo Casais Monteiro, largely respected the original spirit of the work, that is, its belonging to the English rather than the Portuguese canon. Jorge de Sena had understood that these were poems which communicated with a different literary tradition, without detriment of its value for Portuguese culture, as his extensive and comprehensive introductory essay demonstrates. By contrast, when Assírio & Alvim republished the volume in 2000 with new translations by Luísa Freire, the process of assimilating Pessoa as a Portuguese national myth has been completed². This becomes particularly evident in Freire's translations of the sonnets when compared with Sena's earlier versions. Sena maintains the form of the Elizabethan sonnet, that is, fourteen verses organised in a block (not divided in stanzas), with three quatrains (four-line stanzas) and a couplet (two lines) with an ABAB CDCD EFEF GG rhyme scheme. Luísa Freire, however, "latinises" the sonnets, introducing an actual division into clearly marked stanzas, an octave (eight lines) and a sestet (six lines) with an ABBAABBA rhyme scheme for the octave.

The shift towards a Petrarchan form is introduced by the translator without explanation and represents a significant departure from Pessoa's deliberate approximation to William Shakespeare. Whether intentional or not, it constitutes an act of reclaiming Pessoa as a poet belonging to a Latin rather than an Anglicised canon. In other words, Freire's translation attempts to distance Pessoa from the English tradition

² The abundance of tourist knick-knacks, souvenirs, and other forms of paraphernalia featuring Fernando Pessoa's image—particularly in Lisbon—is perhaps the clearest indication of the extent to which the poet has been commodified.

and reclaim him as a specifically Portuguese poet through a transformation of the sonnet's formal structure itself. The mythologising is, here, forcefully shaped by the translator, a treason (*traduttore, traditore*) which results in the misappropriation of Pessoa exclusively as a Portuguese poet. Such a gesture arguably runs counter to Pessoa's own intentions, since his choice of the English sonnet model appears to have been entirely deliberate. As Madalena Lobo Antunes argues in the article "Fernando Pessoa: entre Milton e Shakespeare", "o poeta português preferia a estrutura para o soneto inventada pelos poetas ingleses quinhentistas e difundida por Shakespeare à tradicional petrarquiana utilizada por Camões" (LOBO ANTUNES, 2016: 69).

Given that Ática is no longer active, and that Assírio & Alvim remains one of the most prominent and respected publishers of Fernando Pessoa's work, it is reasonable to argue that the process of mythologising—that is, of inscribing the writer within the mythical landscape of the nation—is complete.

However, these readings do not consider that, for Pessoa, the mythical inscription would always resist any attempt of national(istic) appropriation, given the fundamentally "spiritual" nature of his approximation to William Shakespeare, given the "spiritual" nature of the poet's approximation to Shakespeare, which happened more at the level of a "haunting" than of mimicry, as we will see later on. The distinction seems facetious, but it is crucial for understanding Pessoa's broader "mythical project": the attempt to write himself alongside Shakespeare, inserting himself not as the English poet's successor, but as his peer.

This process unfolds less in the material reality of the poems themselves than within a higher "spiritual realm". In other words, the poems are not simply possessed by a Shakespearean spirit; rather, Pessoa himself seeks to embody that spirit. Mariana Gray de Castro has identified the importance of this distinction:

[...] the reviewer had described Pessoa's poems, not their author, as being 'steeped in Shakespeare', with no mention of shadowy spirits, whereas Pessoa's word 'espírito' [spirit] refers to a state of mind but has additional religious connotations pointing to the notion of souls and, by extension, soulmates. Pessoa would continue to employ the word 'soul' in his appreciations of Shakespeare's genius, and his explanations of his own.

(CASTRO, 2015: 35)

As I will argue further on, the process of mythologisation of Fernando Pessoa is driven mainly by the poet's own self-creation as myth, borne out by the attempt to insert himself, as ghost, in the canon. For Pessoa, his genius did not reside merely in his ability to imitate William Shakespeare, but rather in his conviction that he was Shakespeare's spiritual counterpart.

Setting aside, for the moment, these "ghostly" considerations and their inherent resistance to national canonisation, it is nevertheless necessary to reflect upon the question of literary tradition and the ways in which it articulates—and contributes to—the dynamics of mythologisation. The rub is in trying to reclaim, to chain, a

poet to a specific national tradition, which invariably proves to be a futile endeavour. In his 1917 essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, T. S. Eliot reflects on the relationship between (European) tradition and poetic production:

Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense [...]; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.

(ELIOT, 1961: 14)³

Thus, the historical sense that Fernando Pessoa carries within himself—the substratum of which is undoubtedly English, even if not recognised as such by the English themselves (“too Southern”, whatever that might mean)—places him within a cultural landscape that resists easy categorisation. His multiple inheritances—Western, Portuguese, and English—coexist in what T. S. Eliot describes as a “simultaneous existence and a simultaneous order”, thereby resisting any fixed cultural appropriation. This very slipperiness, coupled with Pessoa’s immense posthumous reputation, has left literary critics scrambling to claim him for “their” canon.

The importance of the process through which a writer is elevated to the status of myth—particularly for the reassertion of national(istic) narratives—is highlighted by Bernard McGuirk:

[...] the status of a so-called national literature is indisputably central to the critical discourses generated; and vice-versa. The critic approaching the reciprocal and mutually feeding phenomena needs to beware, and be wary, of neglecting the power of such appropriations—and the root of *proper* is enough to remind the oft-deemed intruder that he or she be respectful whenever within the property of the host.

(MCGUIRK, 2018: 17)

No wonder, then, that English critics have tended to put Pessoa in his place (an echo, “too Southern”), given that this “deemed intruder” has not shown respect, in fact has rather disrespected the property (Shakespeare) of the host (English canon). Regardless of the warning, undeterred, Jorge de Sena continues reflecting on the topic of mythologising Pessoa’s work in both the English and the Portuguese perspec-

³ It should be noted that there is no evidence that Fernando Pessoa ever read T. S. Eliot. None of Eliot’s works appear in Pessoa’s private library, and it seems unlikely that Pessoa would have encountered the essay given the proximity of its publication date (1917). Nevertheless, when considered side by side, the parallels between the two poets—particularly at the level of their underlying conceptions of poetry and tradition—are striking, as will become apparent throughout this essay.

tives. In his essay, Sena emphasises the importance of these poems not only for Pessoa's poetic development, but also as an integral component of the heteronymous project and, indeed, as fundamental to the emergence of Pessoa *as* a Portuguese poet.

Sena argues that the relative sexual explicitness of Antinous (homosexual) and Epithalamium (heterosexual) constitutes an attempt to exorcise and expunge Pessoa's deepest unconscious impulses, thereby clearing the way for a higher state of artistic wisdom (SENA, 1974: 30-31). An emptying, an erasure that could have only been expressed in English, the linguistic substratum of the poet's mental and creative expression. Paradoxically, this emptying also amounted to an erasure of the language itself, a necessary orgasmic release that would permit him to *heteronymically* open himself up to the *drama em gente*.

This gesture of opening constitutes yet another approximation to William Shakespeare who, according to T. S. Eliot, possessed an "instinctive recognition of something of theatrical utility" (ELIOT, 1961: 129), and whose heroes frequently displayed a form of "self-dramatization". Pessoa's "drama in people" unfolds not upon the stage but upon the page; and the process of self-dramatisation occurs not through the intensification of the self, but through its concealment.

The ingenious strategy of self-erasure and apparent fragmentation into a *drama em gente*—that is, into heteronymous multiplicity—may at first appear to originate in William Shakespeare's plays, as though it were merely the result of Pessoa's admiration for the playwright as a reader. Indeed, as Mariana Gray de Castro observes, "[w]hat Pessoa most loves and admires in Shakespeare is the way he creates, displays and inhabits other souls, the souls of the dramatic characters he puts on stage" (CASTRO, 2015: 55).

This fact, but mostly the poet's own deceptiveness in trying to deliberately hint at a kinship between his heteronyms and Shakespeare's characters, has confounded many critics into thinking them (the characters) as the pivotal point for the creation of the heteronyms. Yet, as Gray de Castro convincingly argues, this line of interpretation ultimately falls into what she terms the "kinship fallacy", a misconception initially encouraged by Pessoa himself (CASTRO, 2015: 189). She writes:

In everywhere approximating his heteronyms to Shakespeare's characters, Pessoa has blinded many readers to the essential differences between the two. Furthermore, in viewing Shakespeare's art in light of his own, he ingeniously fashions a retrospective projection of affinity, an inversion of the standard direction along which kinship travels.

(CASTRO, 2015: 188)

It as if, in a spurt of *jouissance*, Pessoa sought to father (reproduce) himself in English poetry, inserting his name in the English canon and then *exit ghost*. But had the ghost actually exited? There is little doubt that the poetry Pessoa wrote in English is haunted by several ghosts, the largest of all Shakespeare, but these are *chosen hauntings*, products of the poet's conscious strategy to achieve the status of myth.

According to Richard Zenith, “[f]or Pessoa, Shakespeare represents the most convenient critical palimpsest in which to set down his own process of nominal and authorial dispersion” (ZENITH, 2008: 798–800). What Zenith describes as “authorial dispersion”—arguably Pessoa’s central literary undertaking—is simultaneously a process of creation and self-recreation. The mythical palimpsest that Pessoa adopts as his substratum—Shakespeare, John Donne, Edmund Spenser, and others—is the same in which he inscribes himself, anew.

A consideration of the published triad—*Antinous*, *35 Sonnets*, and *Epithalamium*—makes this process particularly apparent when Pessoa’s works are set alongside their mythical antecedents. The sonnets are inevitably measured against William Shakespeare; *Epithalamium* has its precedents in John Donne and Edmund Spenser, whereas *Antinous* has no mythical equivalent. The only other known English-language *Antinous* (SEGER, 1916: 45) is the poem by the North American poet Alan Seeger, written during the First World War and published posthumously in 1916 after the poet’s death in the trenches in France. There is no evidence that Fernando Pessoa read Seeger or was even aware of the poem’s existence, as a consultation of his personal library confirms. One might also mention Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Lament for Antinous* (RILKE, 1964: 149), though again there is no evidence linking Pessoa to the text. In any case, these poems belong to Pessoa’s own historical moment rather than to the mythical literary past within which he sought to inscribe himself.

It is therefore not far-fetched to suggest that, by publishing *Antinous* alongside what appear to be deliberate pastiches of canonical predecessors, Pessoa was attempting to present himself as their peer rather than their imitator. The gesture is one of inscription into the past, not mere mimicry. One should also bear in mind that these poems are attributed to orthonymous Pessoa rather than to the heteronym Alexander Search. Might the haunting, then, operate in reverse? Is Pessoa attempting to haunt his English “predecessors”?

After all, as Jacques Derrida reminds us, “haunting is historical, to be sure, but it is not dated, it is never docilely given a date in the chain of presents, day after day, according to the instituted order of a calendar” (DERRIDA, 1994: 3). Reflecting on the historical processes of Europe, Derrida identifies spectral haunting as an anxious manifestation of “the great unifying projects”—paradoxically, something that resonates with Pessoa’s own attempts at self-dispersion and self-erasure. Here again one is reminded of the words of T. S. Eliot, who asserted that “the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (ELIOT, 1961: 17). Yet the extinction of personality is not the same as its erasure.

Pessoa’s great unifying project consists in an expansion of poetic possibility across both language (English and Portuguese) and historical time (Elizabethan poetry and modernism), achieved through a dialectical theatricalisation concentrated within a single poet, even if articulated through the many heteronymous voices constituting the *drama em gente*. Ultimately, this is not an act of erasure but of *fertilisation*.

The dilution of the self also entails its dissemination: an act of poetic procreation and reproduction. It is, certainly, a question of genealogy, as Derrida elucidates:

In the shadow of a filial memory, Shakespeare will have often inspired this Marxian theatricalization. Later, closer to us but according to the same genealogy, in the nocturnal noise of its concatenation, the rumbling sound of ghosts chained to ghosts, another descendant would be Valéry. *Shakespeare qui genuit Marx qui genuit Valéry* (and a few others).

(DERRIDA, 1994: 3)

Qui genuit Pessoa. He is Shakespeare's descendent, his son. But also, his brother, his peer, his ghost: "Yet, host and ghost are no less close: and the haunting of the house might scare or, at least, intimidate the however eager or informed guest" (MCGUIRK, 2018: 17).

Breeding (an)other: myth as reproduction

The rumbling sound of ghosts chained to other ghosts is the Pessoaan cacophony, born from the dialectical friction of the heteronyms within the poet himself. Its roots lie in desire. Pessoa's reproductive impulse—his need to inscribe himself within the mythical realm of William Shakespeare, John Donne, and Edmund Spenser—emerges from an affective desire. Myth, as Alfredo Bosi writes, is "the truth of the heart": "O mito é a verdade do coração: pensamento: pensâmor" (BOSI, 1980: 13). Bosi's notion of *pensamor* ("thought-love") speaks directly to Pessoa's characteristic interplay between rationality and emotion.

Focusing specifically on Pessoa's sonnets, one can trace a persistent preoccupation with desire and, more precisely, with its ultimate consequence: reproduction. Indeed, for Pessoa the theme of procreation appears to originate in the very first Shakespearean sonnets. In their reading of the poems, Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells observe: "Sonnets 1-17 are concerned with procreation, with breeding and re-creating the image of oneself in another living and autonomous being in order to combat the ravages of Time and so vicariously to achieve everlasting life" (EDMONDSON & WELLS, 2004: 65).

In Sonnet 3, William Shakespeare makes the argument for reproduction explicit: "Look in thy glass and tell the face thou viewest | Now is the time that face should form another" (SHAKESPEARE, 2008: 116). Although the poem gestures towards biological reproduction, it is also intended as a critique of youthful narcissism and self-absorption. Pessoa's reading of the sonnet—and his transposition of it into his own poetic practice—transforms that same narcissism into an expanded poetics of self-fragmentation. To "tell the face thou viewest" becomes, in Pessoa, a dialogue with the self enacted through depersonalisation.

Shakespeare returns to the theme in Sonnet 6: "That's for thyself to breed another thee, | Or ten times happier be it ten for one. | Ten times thyself were happier

than thou art, | If ten of thine ten times refigured thee | Then what could death do if thou shouldst depart | Leaving thee living in posterity?" (SHAKESPEARE, 2008: 118).

The multiplication of the self to which William Shakespeare alludes refers, in its original context, to the production of offspring as a means of perpetuating one's lineage and ensuring the survival of one's name in posterity. Yet it is difficult to overlook the resonances between this sonnet and Fernando Pessoa's own literary creations, with their characteristic repetitions and proliferations of the self, taken quite literally. Pessoa appears to enact Shakespeare's injunction to "breed another thee": for a writer famously associated with an absence of sexual life—and with no biological descendants—one possible mode of reproduction was to take literally the line "ten of thine ten times refigured thee" and embark upon the frenetic creation of heteronymous lives.

As Madalena Lobo Antunes has pointed out, Shakespeare functions for Pessoa as a "modelo fantasma" [ghost model] (LOBO ANTUNES, 2016: 71), shaped according to the poet's own creative desires. Shakespeare thus becomes less a historical author of flesh and blood than an idea—a myth. Lobo Antunes emphasises Shakespeare's pervasive presence in Pessoa's critical writings, leading her to conclude that Pessoa "parte de uma ideia de Shakespeare por si criada" [starts from an idea of Shakespeare created by himself] (LOBO ANTUNES, 2016: 68).

Furthermore, Pessoa's evident fascination with the "question of authorship" surrounding Shakespeare's works—attested by the number of books on the subject in his private library—suggests that the possibility of the English playwright existing primarily as a fiction, or even as a forgery, may have appealed deeply to Pessoa in his own project of literary self-invention. As Lobo Antunes explains:

Para Pessoa, Shakespeare é claramente um modelo a seguir, mas resta procurar o autor modelo nessa obra modelo. Por exemplo, a possível atribuição da autoria das peças de Shakespeare a Francis Bacon explica-se com a consensualidade dessa ideia em muitos dos livros consultados por Pessoa, por um lado, mas também serve perfeitamente o propósito de aproximar Shakespeare do poeta português.

(LOBO ANTUNES, 2016: 70)

[For Pessoa, Shakespeare is clearly a model to be followed, but one must still search for the model author within that model work. For example, the possible attribution of Shakespeare's plays to Francis Bacon can be explained, on the one hand, by the widespread acceptance of this idea in many of the books consulted by Pessoa, but it also perfectly serves the purpose of bringing Shakespeare closer to the Portuguese poet.]

What is euphemistically presented here as an "approximation" is, in my view, a far more aggressive act of creative reproduction, one that transcends both time and space. Pessoa's ambition is therefore not merely to write himself as William Shakespeare's peer, but, more radically, to construct a larger mythical author: *Fernando Pessoa*. His project is to generate a myth comparable to Shakespeare's by creating a

figure that expands beyond Shakespeare in multiple directions: sideways through the orthonym, forwards into the future through the heteronyms, and even backwards into the past through the English Pessoa. As Madalena Lobo Antunes puts it, what takes place is a “criação shakespeariana tendo em vista a vontade supra-pessoana, a projecção para além de si, ou um poeta que se multiplicará em muitos outros” [Shakespearean creation directed towards a supra-personal will, a projection beyond the self, or towards a poet who will multiply himself into many others] (LOBO ANTUNES, 2016: 72).

It is not that Fernando Pessoa seeks to surpass William Shakespeare in any straightforward sense of literary rivalry. Even if we, as readers, can identify Shakespeare as Pessoa’s precursor—given the simple historical fact that one precedes the other—the important point is to avoid assuming that Pessoa’s intention is either to outshine Shakespeare or to invite favourable comparison with him. As Jorge Luis Borges warns: “En el vocabulario crítico, la palabra precursor es indispensable, pero habría que tratar de purificarla de toda connotación de polémica o de rivalidad” (BORGES, 1974: 711-712) [In the vocabulary of criticism, the word ‘precursor’ is indispensable, but one should attempt to purge it of any connotation of polemic or rivalry]. The *vontade supra-pessoana* [supra-personal will] is instead an attempt to transcend the self and, in doing so, to become not merely a poet belonging to a particular canon, but a mythical figure capable of reshaping perceptions of the past and thereby inscribing himself into the future. Once again, Borges proves illuminating: “El hecho es que cada escritor crea a sus precursores. Su labor modifica nuestra concepción del pasado, como ha de modificar el futuro. En esta correlación nada importa la identidad o la pluralidad de los hombres” (BORGES, 1974: 712) [The fact is that every writer creates his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, just as it will modify the future. Within this correlation, the identity or plurality of individuals matters little].

In the absence of biological reproduction, Fernando Pessoa turns furiously inward. As Michael Schoenfeldt observes, “Outward fasting is inward feasting” (SCHOENFELDT, 1999: 308). The separation between inner and outer realities—another characteristic Pessoaan trope—as well as the division between the subject and object of desire, can likewise be found in William Shakespeare’s sonnets. In Sonnets 44 and 45 we read, respectively: “No matter then although my foot did stand | Upon the farthest earth removed from thee; | For nimble thought can jump both sea and land | As soon as think the place where he would be. | But ah, thought kills me that I am not thought, | To leap large lengths of miles when thou art gone”, and “The other two, slight air and purging fire | Are both with thee, wherever I abide; | The first my thought, the other my desire” (SHAKESPEARE, 2008: 137).

Through an exercise in speculative empathy, one may imagine that, for the young Pessoa, the geographical distance separating him from the English-speaking world—its culture and literature, in which he had been deeply immersed—came to

be experienced as an irretrievable object of desire. For the poet, perhaps the only way of bridging that distance was to cling to a mental projection of himself in dialogue with English culture, to remain attached both to the language itself and to a mythical projection—a thought-image—of Englishness. As Jorge de Sena observes, Pessoa sought to:

[...] conservar num abstracto que se temia concreto o contacto com a Inglaterra mítica (e distante em milhas náuticas) da sua adolescência. Aliás, esse contacto não o descurava ele em possibilidades de estabelecer ligações com editores ingleses que viessem a abrir caminho ao poeta inglês que ele se queria ser, ele que vira os poetas britânicos admirados nos confins da África e soubera, do mesmo passo, como eram ignorados e sem repercussão os poetas portugueses.

(SENA, 1974: 17-18)

[...] preserve, in an abstraction feared to be concrete, his connection with the mythical England (and distant by nautical miles) of his adolescence. Indeed, he did not neglect opportunities to establish links with English publishers who might open the way for the English poet he wished to become—he who had seen British poets admired in the far reaches of Africa and had simultaneously realised how ignored and without resonance Portuguese poets were.]

This mental attachment to a mythical England stood in sharp contrast to the realities of Portugal, which for Pessoa was itself, paradoxically, an unfamiliar and almost mythical realm:

Fernando Pessoa, quando em 1906 volta a Portugal, e se decide que em Portugal ficaria a estudar, dificilmente não se sentiria superior àquele mundo que era, para ele, tanto mais uma caricatura provinciana, quanto ele tinha do largo mundo sociopolítico do seu tempo, que nunca vira, uma imagem literariamente mitológica.

(SENA, 1974:15)

[When Fernando Pessoa returned to Portugal in 1906 and decided that it was there he would remain to pursue his studies, he could hardly have failed to feel superior to that world, which appeared to him all the more as a provincial caricature given that the broader socio-political world of his own time—which he had never actually seen—existed for him as a literary and mythological image.]

Physically and mentally displaced, Pessoa—heir to the mythic weight of a culture he regarded as superior—attempted to maintain a certain distance from the country and culture in which he found himself living:

Pessoa é, na verdade, e foi sempre, um “naturalizado” numa língua e numa cultura que não recebera na infância e na adolescência, e em que se integrou por actos da inteligência e também, possivelmente, por não terem tido os seus poemas ingleses a recepção britânica que ele ingenuamente esperava. Essa integração, porém, quer nas opiniões críticas, quer em intervenções polémicas, quer no próprio viver social ou literário, foi sempre marcada por uma distância que ele ciosamente cultivou.

(SENA, 1974: 14)

[Pessoa was, in truth, and always remained, a ‘naturalised citizen’ within a language and culture that he had not received during childhood or adolescence, and into which he integrated himself through acts of intelligence and also, perhaps, because his English poems did not receive the British reception he had naively expected. Yet this integration — whether in his critical opinions, polemical interventions, or even in his social and literary life itself — was always marked by a distance that he jealously cultivated.]

It is therefore unsurprising that Pessoa might have clung to his mythical image of English culture. Nor is it perhaps coincidental that, in the opening sonnet of 35 Sonnets, he echoes precisely this sense of estrangement: “Our soul is from us infinitely far. | [...] Our hearts are incommunicable still. | In what we show ourselves we are ignored” (PESSOA, 2000: 10).

Pessoa’s great English predecessors — above all William Shakespeare — constituted not merely a cultural anchor, but an essential component of his poetic identity. Reflecting on Shakespeare’s influence, Vincenzo Russo observes: “Perhaps we should say that Pessoa hyper-imitated Shakespeare, were it not for the fact that the word ‘imitate’ should in this instance be understood within a horizon of recreation. For Pessoa, that in turn always becomes a process of identification-denial-surpassing” (RUSSO, 2014: 202-203).

Within this “horizon of recreation”, as it is hinted at in the appendix of his book of correspondence with Armando Côrtes-Rodrigues, Fernando Pessoa “achou nos sonetos de Shakespeare uma complexidade que quis reproduzir numa adaptação moderna sem perda de originalidade e imposição de individualidade aos sonetos” (PESSOA, 1985: 77) [found in Shakespeare’s sonnets a complexity that he sought to capture in a modern adaptation without compromising their originality or imposing his own individuality on the sonnets].

However, it would be a disservice to Fernando Pessoa — for whom feigning constituted not merely a literary device but an entire *modus operandi* — to take such statements entirely at face value. The statement may itself be read ironically. On the one hand, Pessoa seeks to preserve the originality of Shakespearean “adaptation”; on the other, he rejects the imposition of his own individuality, thereby suggesting a renunciation of the self that is profoundly characteristic of his poetics.

This “renunciation of the self”, however, is itself another artifice: a poetic gesture situated within a broader dialogical process attainable only through self-dilution and depersonalisation. Recognising this process is crucial if one wishes to move beyond Pessoa’s seemingly naïve claim that he sought not to impose individuality and instead perceive the spectral game animating the heteronymous dialogue. As Vincenzo Russo notes, “Pessoa compared himself directly to the creator of Hamlet, described as ‘o supremo despersonalizado’, in a classic paradigm of literary practice as illusion or insincerity” (RUSSO, 2014: 197).

Indeed, in Sonnet I, after lamenting the impossibility of communicating the true self, Pessoa alludes to the dimension of illusion and artifice inherent in the poetic

act itself—the impossibility of exposing one’s true being, even to oneself: “Unto our very selves we are abridged | When we would utter to our thought our being. | We are our dreams of ourselves [...] | And to each other dreams of other dreams” (Pessoa, 2000: 10). Pessoa is naturally aware of the gap separating the mythologised English world of his inner landscape from the reality he inhabits—“our very selves abridged”—a reality insufficient for the fulfilment of this poetic project.

The only solution is the creation of masks: the complexification of the self through depersonalisation, fragmentation, and dilution, thereby acquiring the mythical status of an enigma to be deciphered. In Sonnet VIII he writes: “How many masks wear we, and undermasks, | Upon our countenance of soul, and when, | If for self-sport the soul itself unmask, | Knows it the last mask off and the face plain?” (Pessoa, 2000: 24). The apparent absence of a stable and well-defined self—the very opposite of truth—lies at the heart of Pessoa’s self-mythologising poetics. Legend, tale, illusion, fabrication: all become synonymous with myth.

This sonnet from 1918 echoes T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, published only a few years earlier, and reveals a striking synchronicity between the two poets. Like Pessoa, Eliot—through Prufrock—articulates a process of self-mythologisation enacted through masks, through the simultaneous destruction and creation of the identity presented to the world: “There will be time, there will be time | To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet; | There will be time to murder and create” (Eliot, 2015: 8). Depersonalisation (“murder”) and multiplication (“create”) are indeed two sides of the same coin when considering Pessoa’s literary project and the origins of his later heteronymous enterprise.

It is perhaps through this attempt to mythologise himself as William Shakespeare’s peer that Fernando Pessoa stumbles upon the very mechanism that will enable him to “breed another thee”, to become many others: language itself. As Vincenzo Russo observes, “If we reason in the organic terms of a living or dead language, Pessoa’s English may be considered dead or defunct because it may be proven that, as judged by a series of English speakers, his English has been transformed into another language” (Russo, 2014: 203).

Indeed, Pessoa’s language (i.e. “poetic voice”) is as haunting as it is haunted. Reflecting on the indelible marks left by precursor poets upon those who come after them, Harold Bloom reminds us that haunting operates in both directions: “The mighty dead return, but they return in our colors, and speaking in our voices, at least in part, at least in moments, moments that testify to our persistence, and not to their own” (Bloom, 1997: 141).

Some critics, such as Esteban Torre, go even further and argue—perhaps not entirely without reason—that it is precisely in the sonnets, rather than in William Shakespeare as playwright, that the key to the creation of the heteronyms may be found: “Todo o drama pessoano se encontra *in nuce* nos 35 Sonnets” (Torre Serrano, 1989: 72) [The entirety of Pessoa’s drama is contained *in nuce* within the 35 Sonnets].

Yet, as I hope to have demonstrated, such a view remains reductive. On the one hand, to locate the creation of the heteronyms merely as a by-product of Pessoa's approximation to Shakespeare would be to overlook the ambition and conscious intentionality underpinning that endeavour. On the other hand, to deny Shakespeare's crucial role in the formation not only of the heteronyms, but of Fernando Pessoa's entire poetic persona, would be to miss the true scale of Pessoa's project: namely, the aspiration to become a mythical entity capable of encompassing multiple poets and entire poetic eras within a single name. The great act of fakery, after all, is not the invention of the heteronyms, but the construction of that abstract my(s)t(h)ical figure that goes by the encompassing name of Fernando Pessoa.

It is therefore through the very *process* of attempting to become a myth that Pessoa ultimately attains mythical status. His ascension into myth emerges paradoxically as the by-product of his effort to create it. As Sonnet XIII declares: "In telling thee how much thy love's my dream | I find me listening to myself, the noise | Of my words othered in my hearing them" (PESSOA, 2000: 34). His words become *othered*. Pessoa himself is —like Shakespeare, whom T. S. Eliot described as an "instrument for transformations" (ELIOT, 1961: 139)— forever breeding someone else.

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