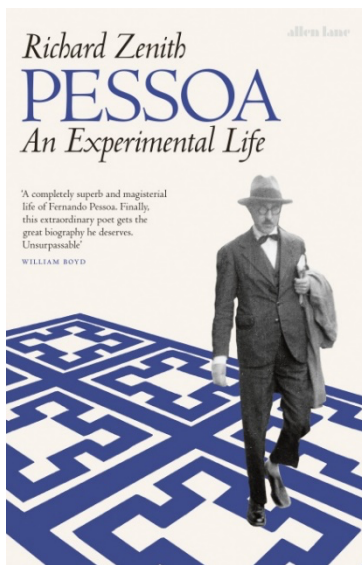


No magic, no madness

[Nem magia, nem loucura]

Paulo de Medeiros*

ZENITH, Richard. (2021) *Pessoa: An Experimental Life*. London: Allen Lane, 1055 pp. [ISBN: 978-0-24153-413-7] [cf. ZENITH, Richard. (2021) *Pessoa: A Biography*. New York: Liveright, 1088 pp. (ISBN: 978-0-87140-471-8)]



Richard Zenith's new contribution to Pessoa Studies, the first biography in English of Portugal's most important Modernist, is remarkable in many ways: in volume, breadth, and style. It marks the culmination of what can almost be termed a lifetime dedication to Pessoa's writing, principal among all of the other writers Zenith also has studied and translated. Zenith mentions having spent a bit over a decade researching the biography (939) and it is certain to remain a reference work for the foreseeable future. Clearly, one of its strong points is the intricate interweaving of the personal, sometimes minute, detail, with the larger context of Portuguese society at the time, its historical predicaments as well as its political turmoil. For the seasoned reader of Pessoa,

Zenith's new contribution holds many rewards, be it in terms of this or that little known fact, be it in the lively imagination Zenith displays as he tries to fill in the many gaps in our knowledge about Pessoa. For a reader new to Pessoa, this biography provides a seemingly inexhaustible mine of information about the writer, his family, his affections, dreams, and shattered hopes, in a rich scenario replete with all the upheavals of the early twentieth-century, the end of an era, and the ushering of a new one along with the reshaping of Europe brought on by WWI and the subsequent rise and spread of totalitarianism.

Zenith's opening remarks in the Prologue set the stage for the whole to unfold: "When the ever elusive Fernando Pessoa died in Lisbon, in the fall of 1935, few people in Portugal realized what a great writer they had lost" (xvii). Hermione Lee, when discussing *Biography* as a genre (2009), ventured a distinction between those on the one hand that read much like an autopsy of their subject, and those, on the other, that paint a portrait. From that opening—immediately after a list of eighty-some heteronyms are listed under the heading "Dramatis Personae"—one could think indeed that this might fall in the first category, the announcement of Pessoa's

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death at the very beginning probably leading to a ruthless, clinical, dissection and exposure of the poet's affairs. Yet, even if there is ample space devoted to reflecting on Pessoa's various business ventures or possible love inclinations, and a detailed examination of documents and testimonies of those who had known Pessoa, Zenith's work falls, if anything, on the side of the portrait: a mostly generous, expansive portrait, that combines filigree detailing with broad brushstrokes. Considering the importance Pessoa's heteronyms rightly receive, it might even be better viewed as a group portrait.

Critical reception of Zenith's latest work in the most important literary and cultural supplements, from *The New York Times* to the *London Review of Books*, from the *Folha de São Paulo* to the *Financial Times*, has been frankly positive, not to say exuberant, the one odd and lamentable one in *The Guardian*, the exception that proves the rule. Adjectives like "monumental", "magnífica", and "mammoth" abound. Reviewers are duly impressed by the book's size and refer to it as "hefty", "gargantuan", and "massive". Colm Tóibín, whose own recent fictionalised biography of Thomas Mann (*The Magician*, 2021) runs over four hundred pages, goes as far as asking: "since nothing of any interest ever happened to Pessoa, surely a biography of him should be brief. How, then, can Zenith justify writing a book that runs to over a thousand pages?" ("I Haven't been I", *London Review of Books*, 12 August 2021). What might appear as a provocation is simply a way of actually justifying the book's length by then bringing up the way Zenith imbeds Pessoa in the context of his time. Another way of looking at it is already provided by Zenith himself:

I have tried to construct, with as much credible detail as I could muster, a "cinematographic" life: what Pessoa looked like and how he behaved, where his steps took him, the people he interacted with, and the lively settings where his life unfolded. But this film, on its own, would tell us little about Pessoa the writer, whose essential life took place in the imagination. And so my larger ambition has been to chart, as far as possible, his imaginative life.

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How does one ever do that? Zenith's predecessor, Pessoa's first biographer, João Gaspar Simões, took recourse to a heavy Freudian lens, something for which he was afterwards duly criticised, and which may help explain Zenith's seeming reluctance to use any insights psychoanalysis might provide in order to read Pessoa's work. It all depends on how one views this charting of the imaginative life. Julian Barnes, in a much-quoted passage from his *Flaubert's Parrot* draws on a weaving metaphor to describe biography as a kind of net, "a collection of holes tied together with string" (1981, 38). Zenith's book, in any case, is one intricate net, its string as dazzling as its holes remain seductive. The overall structure is clear though far from simple: divided in four main parts that contain seventy-six chapters, the book is anchored by a frame consisting of the various paratexts, from the already mentioned table of

actors and prologue, to the epilogues, acknowledgments, profuse photographs and other illustrations, such as maps and tables, the index, and an extensive set of notes and references running over 70 pages. There are many reasons to view all these materials as actually forming a fifth part—or act, if one prefers.

One of those has to do with the powerful, documentary effect, that the photos have on us. Even if we know that photography, like any other medium, is a complex representation, it still performs the central role of letting us see that the characters really existed in the flesh, that they were not just simulations of whatever kind, while also allowing each one of us to indulge in our own imagination of what they might have been like. Another reason: the assumed facticity invested in any scholarly apparatus. It is not difficult to imagine other Pessoa scholars taking issue with this or that reference, or lack of, as it might be. Others, myself included, might just be puzzled as to why Zenith, as good a critic of Pessoa as they come, has here decided to tone down the examination of his texts other than as they might refer to aspects of the life of the author. Or why some minor critics get mentioned when other, influential ones, such as José Gil and Alain Badiou (mentioned indirectly *a propos* an article by another critic), are left out. Given Zenith's rightful emphasis on the connections between Pessoa's work and that of some of the great Anglo-American modernists, seeing that someone like Maria Irene Ramalho, whose work in the area has been pioneering, is mentioned only once, seems odd. Like any other work, this one has its blind spots. Although Zenith aptly evades some of the more common ones, such as duplicating the romantic image of Pessoa as some kind of ghost while still alive, he nonetheless retains traces of the exoticizing of both Pessoa and Portugal that attaches to all those spent concepts of 'minor' literatures, belated modernisms, and simplistic notions of economic and cultural development. Given that the primary audience is English-speaking this is perhaps to be expected, though a missed opportunity to question the supposed centrality of Anglo-American modernism.

Besides having a straight-forward, mostly chronologically linear development—the few times the narrative advances or backtracks on the timeline are usually tied to building up expectations or to remind readers of a given point—structurally this biography can be said to revolve around three main lines: the significance of the heteronyms, a fascination with Pessoa's sexuality, and a sustained focus on his interest in esoteric matters. All three form conducting lines interwoven throughout the biography and cutting across the numerous other considerations and reflections into Pessoa's attempts at businesses, achieving literary recognition, and family life. This is a successful strategy as it keeps readers interested and waiting to find out more. As far as the heteronyms are concerned, even if Pessoa can never be reduced to that aspect of his creation, they are certainly very important, both in theoretical terms and in how they can serve as a fascinating way to introduce Pessoa to a general audience. As for the focus on sexuality, leaving aside the more prurient and

ultimately unverifiable aspects such as the fascination with Pessoa's supposed virginity, one should keep in mind that, as Julian Kaplan astutely remarked already in 1996, "[b]y current standards, biographies without voyeuristic, erotic thrills are like ballpark hot-dogs without mustard" ("A Culture of Biography," in *The Literary Biography*, ed. by Dale Salwak, 1). The focus on Pessoa's engagement with various strands of esoteric philosophies and endeavours is important, yet it can all too easily slip into yet another form of exoticizing Pessoa.

Zenith walks a careful line on this, refraining from capitalizing too much on the more immediately dramatizable elements such as Pessoa's acquaintance with Aleister Crowley, yet not quite abstaining either, with statements such as this: "He [Crowley] was one of the most reviled public figures in Great Britain, with a reputation for black magic, kinky sex, immoderate drug use, and the ruination of people who came into close contact with him. But for some people, including Fernando Pessoa, contact with Crowley was a spiritually life-changing experience" (754). Was it really? Even if Pessoa entertained a certain fascination with Crowley he could also refer to him rather dismissively, as someone who, though "essentially a great man", "has been wandering around celebrity with no more than occasional drunken plunges into it and out again" ("He never reached celebrity" in *Fernando Pessoa. O Guardador de Papéis*, ed. by Jerónimo Pizarro, 2009, 272). As Zenith himself notes, Pessoa had from very early on been obsessed with questions pertaining to genius and madness in himself and other artists. Even leaving aside plausible personal reasons such as having seen at close hand the effects of dementia in his grandmother, Pessoa certainly was lucid enough to recognize that for all his flaws he did possess an imagination and a capacity for expression that were far from common. The concept of genius has a long tradition whether one reaches back to Kant or even before, or whether one looks at it as the Romantics did, usually in connection with other idealized notions such as the sublime, inspiration, nature, and the like, all of which, including genius, even if not completely discarded by now, should be approached with appropriate care and reserve. Pessoa might well be referred to as a genius, if by that we have in mind his astonishing capacity for invention and for giving us not only the infinite pleasure of his literary creations, his infinite writing I would say, but that other priceless gift of continuously exploring the meanings of consciousness, which is to say, of our shared humanity. For all his tormented quests, a madman he was not.

Pessoa's involvement with the esoteric should also be seen in line with that unsatisfiable quest. Zenith touches on this when he expresses the opinion that "[m]ore than a quest for truth, Pessoa's exploration of Gnostic and esoteric religions was an attempt to give his soul meaning and substance, to find a home for it in the immense and apparently indifferent universe" (789-790). Perhaps. Or perhaps what Pessoa was after was indeed the truth, though not in any simple terms. Certainly, as someone who privileged both sensations, as the somatic base for cognition, and

dream images, that could be more real than what passes for reality, Pessoa's notion of truth was, far from the common one, plural like himself. But even in those moments when we feel most like taking a different view from the one Zenith chose, as I just did, we still should recognise that the way in which Zenith weaves his biography, shining thread and gaping holes, all the minutiae of facts assembled for us, together with the shimmering of his conjectures, is a resplendent assemblage. In a sense, any biography is also an autobiography. In it, we get closer to Pessoa, in all his diversity. But also get glimpses of Zenith with his own complexities. For instance, the final Pessoa that Zenith presents to us would be, in his view, starkly different from the younger one. Whereas the youth saw himself aloof from the rest of humanity, in the end of his life Pessoa would have come to express empathy with the common people. Zenith would see this as an attempt "to embrace banality" (932). And to reinforce his position, Zenith cites from *The Book of Disquiet* one of Bernardo Soares' gifts: "To belong is synonymous with banality" (932) [Pertencer — eis a banalidade]. Yet, Pessoa's growing contempt for fascism and all that the Salazar regime represented, was actually the opposite from banal. What was most common then, in Portugal as well as throughout most of Europe, was the quiet acceptance of, if not open jubilation at, the cruellest forms of debasement inflicted by human beings on other human beings. If anything, I would suggest, there was no magic in that. Pessoa remained consistent to himself and his notion of what it means to be free, throughout his life, and that also includes his many contradictions, simulations, and paradoxes. No magic, no madness. In that too, he remains an example for all of us.

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