

Beyond himself, heteronymically reborn

[Além de si mesmo, renascido heteronimicamente]

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CUTLER, Charles; MAHONEY, Dan; GORDON-FOX, Gaby (2024) (eds). *In the Footsteps of a Shadow: North American Literary Responses to Fernando Pessoa*. Cheshire, MA: MadHat Press. 386 pp. [ISBN-13: 978-1-952335-88-4].



The penumbra is a space of gentle intrigue: a place where some light or attention is cast, though not all, leaving us to contemplate the parts of the shadow where no light reaches. From a similar contemplation emerges *In the Footsteps of a Shadow: North American Literary Responses to Fernando Pessoa* (2024), a long-awaited project exploring the musings, responses, and inspirations of English-speaking authors to the bilingual Fernando Pessoa. Conceived by Charles Cutler, Professor Emeritus of Portuguese at Smith College, alongside editorial colleagues Dan Mahoney and Gaby Gordon-Fox, the seeds for this project were first planted as far back as 1963-1964, during Charles Cutler's time in Lisbon on a Fulbright connected to his doctoral thesis and later

nurtured through courses taught at Smith. From the onset, the purpose of this anthology was to gather prose, poetry, and fragments inspired by Pessoa, his oeuvre, and heteronyms—those spectacular, shadowy selves that evaded many, perhaps none more so than Pessoa himself, in his singular expression of poetic agitation.

In the Footsteps of a Shadow opens with the poem “Hemispheric Pressures,” by the late George Monteiro. In this short piece, Fernando Pessoa is linked to North American poet Robert Frost through his heteronyms, which allowed the Portuguese poet to “[walk] down all the roads he cared to walk” (XL). Monteiro drafts the first of many literary bridges across the Atlantic imagined and solidified in the formation of this anthology, which features a total of 102 authors, including Monteiro himself. It is no small feat that this number should be limited to a hundred; in a recent interview (TINKY, 2025), Cutler mentioned receiving over a thousand submissions for the anthology, a testament to the Portuguese poet's relevance across literary traditions and linguistic cultures.

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Poems in English about Fernando Pessoa are at once startling, dissonant and disquieting—reminiscent of Pessoa’s own writing—as they are familiar and expected, reflecting his relationship to the North American continent. Although Pessoa never visited North America, he spent much of his childhood and adolescence in Durban, South Africa, where his stepfather was a diplomat. Fluent in English and well-versed in Anglophone poetry on both sides of the Atlantic, Pessoa expressed deep admiration for poets like Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Frost, and Walt Whitman, whose influence is evident in the works featured in this anthology. For example, Pessoa wrote his first sensationist poems in English (*The Mad Fiddler*) and later expressed admiration for United States aesthetics in “Saudação a Walt Whitman,” greeting Whitman like an old friend through the voice of Álvaro de Campos: “De aqui, de Portugal, todas as épocas no meu cérebro, | Saúdo-te, Walt, saúdo-te, meu irmão em Universo, | Ó sempre moderno e eterno, cantor dos concretos absolutos...” (PESSOA, 1992: 24). In his verses, Campos captures the spirit of contradiction and multitudes, echoing Whitman’s own declaration in *Song of Myself*: “Do I contradict myself? | Very well then I contradict myself, | (I am large, I contain multitudes.)” (WHITMAN, 1855).

Throughout the anthology, writers reflect on this lineage, building and enacting themselves in relation to Pessoa and his North American contemporaries. Lynn Emanuel writes, “Walt, I’m just a woman, chaperoned, actual, vague and hysterical!” (CUTLER *et al.*, 2024: 95), ending with, “We can’t hide! We recognize ourselves!” (2024: 96). Davis reinscribes the tale of Annabel Lee in a Pessoaan response to one of his great inspirations, the nineteenth-century American author Edgar Allan Poe: “My dear Mr. Poe, you silly twit, to sleep so by the sea!” (2024: 82). For others, Pessoa assumes the proportions of deeply “American” symbolism; Baller-Shepard imagines Pessoa as “a mustang, accustomed to running loose | caged in a pen, hammering, clamoring to get free” (2024: 16) while Lorenz, in a style evocative of Williams’ ode to a red wheelbarrow, writes the most Pessoaan of poems without explicitly referencing the Portuguese poet: “If only my life | were human, I’d believe | in the names of things” (2024: 187).

Authors and editors both situate Pessoa within a broader cultural and literary framework, with the latter referencing diverse figures like the Beatles and Nicki Minaj’s Roman Zolanski, tracing Pessoa’s legacy in a world of multiple literary and virtual selves, expressed through poetry, prose, music, video games, and social media, the latter being where alternative identities are most encouraged as an experiential ethos. For there is nothing more Pessoaan than the formation of a new poetic self through which one can explore the intricacies of alternate lived experiences. Benjamin Kunkel’s intervention also forms a rich tapestry of literary references, invoking Kafka and Sontag to illuminate Pessoa’s heteronymic impulse. In a Didion-like provocation, he suggests that “real people too are mostly imaginary—in that they imagine far more life than they lead” (CUTLER *et al.*, 2024: XXIX). Kunkel’s med-

itation mirrors the heteronymic quality it examines, as personal reflections bleed into something distinct and separate, an experiment in the heteronymic process that paradoxically becomes wholly oneself.

Such poetic experiments are abundant in this collection, as both old and new heteronyms express themselves in unexpected ways. Davis, through his heteronym Chuck Calabrese, writes a striking Commencement Address to a new class of undergraduates, rippling with sensationism. Frank Christmas—who is certainly a heteronym of some other poet, though of whom is difficult to ascertain—contributes an ode and disappears almost as soon as he arrived. Roberto Christiano speaks in raw and vulnerable ways about his own heteronymic impulse in the poem “Sometimes It Is Necessary to Be Someone Else,” reflecting how each year Pessoa “emerges out of the darkness | as someone we do not know. | Each year I am still learning who I am” (2024: 54). And Portuguese-American poet Frank Gaspar, who himself draws inspiration from Pessoa for his heteronym Renata Ferreira, a lesbian artist living on the East Coast of the United States during the final years of Portugal’s fascist regime, remarks, “One must never let Pessoa across the threshold. I can say | this with a sober mind for just a while longer” (2024: 104).

The anthology also honors Pessoa’s primary heteronyms. Cirino writes staccato tributes to the physician Ricardo Reis: “How the fruit gleams, so ripe with sugar, | Sweet in the flesh, tart by the pit” (2024: 62). And thinking about Alberto Caeiro as the grand poetic master, he writes “And even if I did keep sheep, which I’ve never been good at, | I’d follow the strays into the gullies and dark places | light doesn’t enter, just to observe the most precious life” (2024: 65). Tributes to Álvaro de Campos similarly abound, like in Burton’s love letter to the engineer: “Dear Álvaro—you figment, you fragment, you | noncommit—where have you been?” (2024: 47). References to Pessoa’s other fictitious authors include the seminal Chevalier du Pas, the disquieting Bernardo Soares, and the English-speaking Alexander Search, demonstrating the breadth of the Portuguese poet’s reach through his varied and multitudinous poetic selves.

Contributors to the anthology also engage with the process of heteronym creation, rather than just its praxis. Christopher Buckley reflects on the enacted layering of the heteronymic process, remarking on the need “to pick the pocket of circumstance, never sure of the next crust” (2024: 43). Katherine Vaz, too, grapples with the difficult and at times grotesque process of poetic development: “The grandeur of creation exacts its due, its carving of the flesh... but at base there’s a horror of that green thread shooting out through sensation and getting knotted in the ether of disquiet” (2024: 267). For others like Aileen Bassis, the process of heteronymic development can be much simpler and less like the carving of a body. In “Watching a Stone,” Bassis reimagines Pessoa’s musing—“Sometimes, I busy myself with watching a stone, | I don’t begin thinking whether it feels”—by expanding it into an imagined dialogue: “or did he chip | and chip until he split | into a pile of stones, | one different

l from another..." (2024: 28). Charles Bernstein's short poem, written "At Pessoa's Grave," succinctly evokes the heteronymic lived experience in its final moments: "I'm not me l nor you you l neither we we l but all's found l in them's they" (2024: 30).

Pessoa's impact on the Anglosphere is undeniable. From the connections the Portuguese poet himself mapped out between his work and that of authors such as Frost and Whitman to his influence on each of the 102 authors featured in this anthology, it is evident how his literary legacy continues to shape poetics in the English language. Some may still wonder, however, about Pessoa's direct influence on figures like T.S. Eliot and Hart Crane, neither one explicitly referenced or alluded to solely in Cutler's letter from the editors. Harold Bloom is also not mentioned, despite playing a key role in bringing Pessoa into the public eye alongside visionary American (North *and* South) contemporaries like Whitman, as well as Emily Dickinson, Pablo Neruda, and Jorge Luis Borges. Each of these influences is palpable in Pessoa's writing, as they are in the works inspired by them and showcased *In the Footsteps of a Shadow*. The poems in this anthology will thus certainly fuel discussions on the production and reception of Pessoa's work overseas for decades to come, as his writing, translated into multiple languages, traces the cartography of his influence around the world.

The contributors' notes map out a final path to follow *In the Footsteps of a Shadow*; seventy-three authors share personal reflections on their relationship to Pessoa, including musings, wonderings, explanations, inspirations, admirations, confessions, reflecting the cacophony of voices central to the Pessoaan ethos. As I compiled this review, I found myself weaving together an array of quotes and observations from the notes and creative contributions, which together map out Pessoa's core themes across his many heteronyms and ideas. The true beauty of this collection lies in the myriad ways Pessoa's work continues to inspire poetic and prose writing. Allen Ginsberg, with playful arrogance, writes in his tribute, "Pessoa Schmessoa" (2024: 114), and I must agree: this anthology reveals Fernando Pessoa's ultimate form as a palimpsest—perpetually recreated and imitated beyond himself, destined to be endlessly reimagined, reworked, and heteronymically reborn.

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