

An Interview with Margaret Jull Costa

Margaret Jull Costa is a renowned translator of Portuguese, Spanish, and Brazilian authors (mainly prose writers). She has translated Eça de Queirós, Fernando Pessoa, José Régio, José Saramago, Lídia Jorge, António Lobo Antunes, Teolinda Gersão, Javier Marías, Bernardo Atxaga, Julian Ayesta, and Luis Verissimo, among others.

Margaret Jull Costa has won various prizes, including the 2008 PEN/Book-of-the-Month Club Translation Prize and the 2008 Oxford Weidenfeld Translation Prize for her version of *The Maias*. In 2012, she won the Calouste Gulbenkian Prize for her translation of *The Word Tree* by Teolinda Gersão. In Portugal and in the Lusophone world, she is mostly known for her translations of Eça de Queiroz and José Saramago (for which she has won various prizes).

Recently, Jerónimo Pizarro asked Margaret Jull Costa to revisit *The Book of Disquiet*, a posthumous fragmentary work by Pessoa, which has been edited by various editors since 1982. She sat down with Maria de Lurdes Sampaio to answer some questions about the experience of translating Fernando Pessoa's work. We are extremely grateful to Margaret for her generosity.

MLS: You were the author of one of the four translations of *Livro do desassossego* (LdD) that appeared in English in 1991, and "your" *The Book of Disquiet* (published by Serpent's Tail) was joint winner of the Portuguese Translation Prize in 1992. Your translation remains in print. Was Fernando Pessoa the first Portuguese author you translated? And how would you describe your relationship with Pessoa?

MJC: Yes, he was the first Portuguese author I translated. I had translated three Spanish novels already when Pete Ayrton of Serpent's Tail asked if I would be interested in translating LdD. I immediately said yes, blissfully (or perhaps foolishly) unaware of the difficulties ahead. Before this, I had translated (purely for myself) some of FP's writings (that is, some of those he did not attribute to any of his heteronyms) poems, because I loved them so much, especially "Chuva oblíqua," maybe because the title is so hard to translate! LdD chimed perfectly with my own feelings of

melancholy at the time, and while I did find the text extraordinarily difficult to render into English—and sometimes doubted I could do it—I also found the whole experience an extremely companionable one, as if Pessoa himself were there with me. I think many people feel that same sense of companionship when they read the book.

MLS: Your translation of *LdD* opens a door not only to Pessoa's universe but also to Portuguese literature and culture, as well as to the city of Lisbon. Besides footnotes concerning certain foreign books and authors, you added crucial information about major Portuguese writers, such as Francisco Sanches, Frei Luis de Sousa, Father António Vieira, Camilo Pessanha, Cesário Verde, and Fialho de Almeida.

And most interestingly, you also inserted explanations and information about some emblematic places in Lisbon (often referenced in the "book"), such as the Baixa, the Rotunda, Café Leão, Cais do Sodré. Why these footnotes? Do they have to do with your view of the translator as a bridge between cultures?

MJC: I very rarely use footnotes, but I did feel it necessary to explain briefly who or what these people and places were and, in a way, what they meant to Portuguese readers. Translators, by the very nature of their work, do provide a bridge between cultures, and so, yes, I felt that was part of my role in this case.

MLS: Many years have passed since you translated *LdD*, but you doubtless often return to it as a reader and rewriter of some passages of your own translation. Do you feel it is the gloomy book some people consider it?

MJC: I have occasionally dipped into my own translation, and recently, Jerónimo Pizarro asked me to translate some extra passages for a brief selection of Pessoa's most Lisbon-centered pieces (for which he was using other texts from my translation). I was astonished at how difficult it was (a) to understand precisely what Pessoa meant (always assuming he knew!) and (b) to capture the density, compactness, and eccentricity of his language. I was amazed, too, at my own audacity, as a translator at the beginning of my career, in undertaking such a task in 1991. I did then go on to reread my original translations of the other texts, and there were a few places that needed a little adjustment, but not that many, which was encouraging! Perhaps I've become another heteronym.

As for the book's supposed gloominess, there were times when I felt like telling Bernardo Soares/Vicente Guedes to cheer up, but then Pessoa/Soares/Guedes are often very funny, and there is something very English about the self-deprecation at which he so excels. He speaks to us as a fellow failure, and perhaps therein lies that companionableness I mentioned earlier.

MLS: Fernando Pessoa published his first poems in English (in England), and his language was accused of being archaic (the same accusation was made of Ezra Pound's first books of poetry), but he was not accused of writing bad English. Up until his death, Pessoa went on writing in English, although his heteronymic work and *LdD* were written in Portuguese. As a native English speaker and as a skilled reader, how English does Pessoa's work in Portuguese sound to you?

MJC: Apart from that very English tendency to self-mockery and self-deprecation I mentioned earlier, Pessoa feels entirely Portuguese to me, even though he's using the Portuguese language as no one else does or has. It occurs to me that perhaps his other languages, especially English, did influence his use of Portuguese, but only in the sense that, being bilingual, his linguistic world and his perception of the possibilities of language are that much wider. Joseph Conrad, writing in his third language, produces wonderful English, but I sometimes think that the vividness and quirkiness of it comes about because it isn't his first language. Perhaps the same degree of fruitful alienation is there in Pessoa too.

MLS: There are some passages in your translation of *LdD* in which one seems to hear some Shakespearean echoes (more than in the Portuguese text). For instance, a passage that begins as follows: "To cease, to sleep . . ." [frag, 49 (99)] inevitably reminds anyone acquainted with Shakespeare of *Hamlet*. And there are many passages that seem (at least to me) to echo Shakespeare, perhaps the English author Pessoa most loved. Did you feel any Shakespearean undertones when you translated *LdD*?

MJC: I'm not sure this was deliberate, and I have no idea if those echoes are in the original Portuguese, but English is shot through with Shakespeare's language and imagery. It's very hard to avoid. Also, any Portuguese text is full of literary allusions that will get lost in translation, so perhaps I was

trying to fill in those gaps with English literary allusions. I don't think Pessoa would have minded.

MLS: One of the most quoted passages from *LdD* is "A minha pátria é a língua portuguesa." But there is another in the same "book" that, from a literary point of view, is more important: "Eu não escrevo em português. Eu escrevo eu mesmo." Can you comment on this last statement?

MJC: I agree absolutely with both statements. I think that, for both writers and translators, their mother tongue is their one true homeland, and the best writers do write *themselves* when they write. Mediocre writers use language; the best writers use language in ways it has never been used before, and their language is crammed full of a lifetime of linguistic memories and echoes.

MLS: As someone who knows Pessoa from the inside (you are an insider in Kermode's sense of the term), do you feel there is some kind of unity or design behind or beneath Pessoa's heterogeneous work (the heteronyms and the oronyms)?

MJC: I have no idea, although my feeling is that Pessoa had no grand plan for his work; he simply wrote and wrote using as many different personae as he could muster. Perhaps he was an actor manqué . . .

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