

Excerpts from “Erostratus” by Fernando Pessoa

The principal content of Fernando Pessoa’s “Erostratus” is his reflection on the quest for immortality or, more specifically, the desire for celebrity. “The proper reward of genius is therefore immortality,”¹ Pessoa wrote in a fragment of the essay, and almost immediately added, “The proper reward of talent is therefore what we have called fame.”² As a man and a writer, Pessoa strove to examine several points connected with the concept of celebrity: its meaning, the different ways of achieving it, its connection with other notions—inspiration, genius, sincerity, and so on—and with more concrete instruments, such as literary critique, propaganda, and language; he also explored its relevant relation with literature. However, Pessoa’s fragments are not only devoted to theoretical or even philosophical considerations. They are filled with examples of other authors’ works through which Pessoa attempted to understand and confirm his own ideas. We find observations about Shakespeare, Chesterton, Goethe, Huxley, Milton, and Dante, among many others. Shakespeare is seen as an “example of great genius and great wit linked to insufficiency of talent. He is a supreme in the intuition that constitutes genius and in the quickness of strangeness that constitutes wit as he is deficient in the constructiveness and the coordination which constitute talent.”³ Milton “is the example of the union of great genius and great talent. He has the intuition of genius and the formative power of talent. He had no wit; he was, in fact, a pedant. But he had the pedant’s firm, though heavy, will.”⁴ Victor Hugo’s works, however, “fill fifty large volumes, yet each volume, each page almost, contains all Victor Hugo. The other pages add up as pages, not as genius. There was in him no productivity, but prolixity.”⁵

For Pessoa, the justification is clear: “No man should leave twenty different books unless he can write like twenty different men.”⁶ This fragment is pertinent if we consider the fact that Pessoa created 136 fictional authors,⁷ from poetry to prose, giving each a different point of view. It is enough to recall the multiplicity we can find in Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos, Ricardo Reis, Bernardo Soares, António Mora, Barão de Teive, and so on. Although the heteronyms may show similar characteristics, there is no doubt that each reveals a singular world, giving Pessoa the authority to criticize other authors. As Pessoa

clearly reveals in his poem “Eu sou uma antologia” (“I Am an Anthology”), the poet is someone who should be universal, that is to say, a person who can compose in a way that reflects the world and its infinity. The poem that Pessoa wrote on December 17, 1932, states it clearly: “Sou como o mundo”⁸ (I am like the world). In his famous letter to Adolfo Casais Monteiro dated January 13, 1935, Pessoa tries to explain this peculiar ability of multiplying himself, something he displayed as a child and that would remain a part of him throughout his life, leading to his well-known multiple fictional work: “E assim arranjei, e propaguei, varios amigos e conhecidos que nunca existiram, mas que ainda hoje, a perto de trinta annos de distancia, oiço, sinto, vejo. Repito: oiço, sinto vejo . . . E tenho saudades d’elles.”⁹ (And so I created and propagated several friends and acquaintances that never existed, but to this day, after almost thirty years, I hear, I feel, I see. I repeat: I hear, I feel, I see . . . and I miss them.)

“Erostratus” was first published by Georg Rudolf Lind and Jacinto do Prado Coelho (in *Páginas de estética e de teoria e crítica literárias*, 1967), and later completed by Richard Zenith (in *Heróstrato e a busca da imortalidade*, 2000). Jerónimo Pizarro also published a few fragments in *Escritos sobre génio e loucura* (*Writings on Genius and Madness*, 2006), and found one unpublished document. It is not certain when “Erostratus” was written, because the texts are not dated, but according to Richard Zenith, it was probably written around 1930, in light of the texts’ material characteristics (for example, several fragments were written on the same type of paper and with the same ink as in fragments of the *Livro do desassossego* [*Book of Disquiet*], dating between 1929 and 1934; the 1929 stamp on the envelope on which Pessoa wrote one of the “Erostratus” fragments; or the reference to the death of Sir Henry Segrave¹⁰ in 1930, and so on).

Although “Erostratus” is a fragmentary work and not a complete theoretical system, it allows us to understand Pessoa’s ideas about such a complex theme as celebrity, and his desire to comprehend or even achieve the path to immortality. As a poet who fulfilled his own literary potential and created a multiplicity of worlds, Pessoa seemed to be following his own belief: “a genius is a man who does a difficult thing, even when it is easy.”¹¹ In fact, the tendency to understand the meaning of celebrity or immortality is not only presented in “Erostratus.” We can also find fragments related to the idea of fame in Ricardo Reis and Fausto, for example. But it is interesting to see that Pessoa shows an apparent detachment from the desire for fame through some of these texts. Or so it seems, according to Reis: “Não quero a fama, que comigo a têm / Erostrato e o pretor”¹² (I

do not want the fame attributed to me / Erostrato and the pretor)—or Fausto—
 “Outrora quis a fama—e não a quis, / Que a fama, a popularidade, o ser / Con-
 hecido, falado—quando não visto—/ Confrange-me dum terror que não com-
 prendo”¹³ (Once I wanted fame—and I did not want it, / that fame, popularity,
 being, / Known, spoken of—when not seen—/ distresses me with a terror which
 I do not understand).

The importance of literature in achieving fame, or as the necessary instru-
 ment for the survival of an author’s name, is also present in Pessoa’s texts. For
 example, one fragment attributed to Barão de Teive declares the undeniable re-
 lationship between the writer and the writing: “Seria o fogo em minha casa?
 Corriam risco de arder todos os meus manuscritos, toda a expressão de toda
 a minha vida?”¹⁴ (Could my house be on fire? Were my manuscripts, all the
 expression of my life, at risk of burning?). Or when Bernardo Soares says, “A
 literatura, que é a arte casada com o pensamento, e a realização sem a macula
 da realidade, parece-me ser o fim para que deveria tender todo o esforço hu-
 mano”¹⁵ (Literature, which is art married to thought, and realization without
 the imperfection of reality, seems to be the purpose toward which every human
 effort should tend). These few examples are sufficient to elucidate the rele-
 vance of some concepts and relations in Pessoa’s thoughts. He tries to analyze
 and explore them throughout his writing, signed by himself or by one of his
 literary figures.

NOTES

1. BNP/E3, 19–44^r. First published in Fernando Pessoa, *Páginas de estética e de teoria e crítica literárias*, ed. Georg Rudolf Lind and Jacinto do Prado Coelho (Lisbon: Ática, 1967), 189.

2. BNP/E3, 19–44^r. Pessoa, *Páginas de estética*, 189.

3. *Ibid.*, 185.

4. BNP/E3, 19–41^r.

5. BNP/E3, 19–61^r, 208–9.

6. BNP/E3, 19–61^r, 208.

7. Pessoa, *Eu sou uma antologia: 136 autores fictícios*, ed. Jerónimo Pizarro and Patricio Ferrari (Lisbon: Tinta-da-China, 2013).

8. Pessoa, *Poemas 1931–1933*, ed. Ivo Castro (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional–Casa da Moeda, 2004), 109.

9. Pessoa, *Cartas entre Fernando Pessoa e os directores da presença*, ed. Enrico Martines (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional–Casa da Moeda, 1998), 255.

10. Henry Segrave (1896–1930) was an English racer who established several land and water speed records. He was knighted by the king in 1929.
11. BNP/E3, 19–74^r. Pessoa, *Páginas de estética*, 220.
12. Pessoa, *Poemas de Ricardo Reis*, ed. Luiz Fagundes Duarte (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional–Casa da Moeda, 1994), 93.
13. Pessoa, *Fausto: Tragédia subjectiva*, ed. Teresa Sobral Cunha (Lisbon: Presença, 1988), 134.
14. Pessoa, *A Educação do stoico*, ed. Jerónimo Pizarro (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional–Casa da Moeda, 2007), 44.
15. Pessoa, *Livro do desassossego*, ed. Jerónimo Pizarro (Lisbon: Tinta-da-China, 2013), 361.

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