

Fernando Pessoa & Co. Selected Poems by Fernando Pessoa. Edited and Translated from the Portuguese by Richard Zenith. New York: Grove Press, 1998.

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Fernando Pessoa's poems, as with all good poetry, defy translation. It is a fact, however, that translations of poetry usually work within the limited horizon of what is possible. They are by definition icons of the original, representing it only to a degree as ambassadors and delegates. A faithful translation, then, must reach a consensus of representability capable of indicating the essential characteristics of the original in order to bear the simplest claim of a translation. Cervantes, in a felicitous image, remarked that all translations are the inside out of a tapestry; all the stitches are there, but pale, blurry, with faded colors.

In the case of this present volume, selected, introduced, and translated by Richard Zenith, notwithstanding the praiseworthy effort to put together a book of one of the most important and intriguing poets of this ending century, Cervantes's tapestry, regrettably, fades, blurs, and pulls apart.

Pessoa wrote under a series of what he called "heteronyms," and the fact that these heteronyms consist of powerful "poets" writing under different voices, styles, and diction about equally various themes is complex enough. In Pessoa's own words, we read that, "For some temperamental reason that I don't propose to analyze nor is it important for me to analyze, I've built inside myself many characters, distinct between each other and distinct from me as well, characters to whom I've attributed many poems that are not how I, in my feelings and ideas, would write them" (*Ficções do Interlúdio*, Aguilar, Rio de Janeiro [my translation]). He also adds, "Let's suppose that a supreme depersonalized being, like Shakespeare, instead of creating the character of Hamlet as part of a drama, created him as a simple character, without drama...It wouldn't be legitimate to look into this character for a definition of the feelings and thoughts of Shakespeare unless the character were flawed because the bad playwright is the one who reveals himself" (*ibidem*). This very phenomenon isolates Pessoa among the most original poets of the century and requires a fundamental examination of the crucial relationship between his life and poetic achievement.

It is not without embarrassment, however, that one reads Zenith's "explanations" of Pessoa's subtle dialectics of hiding by revelation and vice

versa. He tells us that “Pessoa was sincere in his insincerity; heteronymy was not a game he acquired or invoked along the way, [but] it was woven into his DNA.” One infers that the image is not trying to convey that Pessoa was genetically predisposed to heteronymy. Yet, it would be more useful to the reader who does not know Pessoa to be told instead that the poet would be better understood as a creature who, differently from most of us who are content with one personality, cultivated a multiplicity of them. One may even advance the hypothesis that this multiplication was only possible because Pessoa was structurally a “depersonalized” creature without a persona.

The discovery that Pessoa had many more heteronyms (over seventy) than was previously assumed (Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos, Ricardo Reis, Bernardo Soares, Alexander Search, António Mora, Raphael Baldaya, Charles Robert Anon, Jean Seul, Coelho Pacheco, Thomas Crosse) should not come as a surprise. Pessoa not only needed this expansion, but he also needed to make each heteronym “real.” In order to do so, more often than not, each was assigned details, like physical and psychological characteristics, philosophical and aesthetic preferences, natal horoscopes; he had them know and correspond to each other and engage in intellectual debates and other sorts of activities. This radically imaginative step should be taken as both a necessity and a play. Like prisms, Pessoa’s heteronyms reflected aspects of a manifold world.

In such a context, it strikes one as strange to “justify” Pessoa’s depersonalization by affirming that he was “sincere” in his insincerity. The exculpation sounds like a lame defense against a jury of Puritans who caught the poet lying. However, the case is not about sincerity or insincerity at all. In order to grasp Pessoa, one has to do two things: to meditate in the many senses of the concept of paradox and, as in the occult disciplines that Pessoa knew so well, not to try to understand, but to accept. Pessoa asks us to accept his paradoxes not because he felt he was particular, but because these paradoxes are those of the universe as he saw it.

O poeta é um fingidor.
Finge tão completamente
Que chega a fingir que é dor
A dor que deveras sente.

[Literally: The poet is a pretender. / He pretends so completely / That he reaches

the point of pretending it is pain / The pain he really feels.] In Zenith's versions:

The poet is a faker
 Who's so good at his act
 He even fakes the pain
 Of pain he feels in fact.

The existential condition of the poet for Pessoa resides in this paradox. The poet pretends so completely (in such a complete imitation of nature), that even when he pretends he is suffering, his suffering becomes real. This situation can only occur under some given conditions; for instance, the full condition of mimesis in which the poet lives, a condition of imitation that is so *faithful* to reality, *becomes* reality. Seen in this light, the paradox seems less paradoxical, it is true, but there is still the tension between the fact that the poet is so complete a pretender that his pretension of pain covers his real pain. The anti-platonic refusal contained in the paradox is remarkable. Plato condemns the poet because he considers him to be not one step removed from the world of ideas, but two. For Plato, the poet was despicable because he was an imitator of the imitation. He was not looking directly into the world of ideas as the philosopher, but imitating the already defective world in which we live.

In this sense, Pessoa's poet, in imitating so completely, in being so completely a pretender, ends up opposing the *truth* of Plato's assumptions. And the reason why is that the act of pretending is so *complete* that it accomplishes in itself a true mimesis. Pessoa's poet advances one step in the direction of the world of ideas, facing Plato's theory against its own *contradictions*.

This is a philosophical step that has important connections with many modern theories of poetry. Pound and Eliot, among others, favored a conception of poetry that puts in relief a clear perception of reality conveyed in equally clear wording. Actually, the project is not far from a classic conception of poetry, as opposed to the romantic view in which the relationship between words and nature is mediated by the emotion of the voice orchestrating the poem. Pessoa's conception is *both* at the same time. It requires a fine mimetic quality in the poet, or rather a mimesis, so complete that it becomes real, and its reality equals the feeling of the poet.

There is a considerable distance between this paradox and the simplistic generalization of the "sincere in his insincerity" and the "DNA" theory advanced

by Zenith. Going deep into his point, he states that “the only way Pessoa could conceive of being a poet was by not being, by pretending, by achieving complete insincerity.” This is an altogether twisted understanding of Pessoa’s enterprise. It was precisely because of Pessoa’s radical capacity for *imagination* that he could and would write under any voice that he judged appropriate to convey his *necessary imagination*. This has nothing to do with “sincerity” or “insincerity,” qualities that alone do not offer a warranty against good or bad poetry. As a matter of fact, according to the well-known saying by Keith Waldrop that “a bad poem is always sincere,” it may be that “sincerity” is not a proof of good poetical behavior. Actually, what Waldrop emphasizes with his line is not that sincerity is bad, but that it is *irrelevant* for the quality of a poem.

Zenith is not alone in responding to the challenge: many other translations have failed just the same. Edwin Honig and Susan Brown are not happier. Their version runs:

The poet is a faker. He
 Fakes it so completely,
 He even fakes he’s suffering
 The pain he’s really feeling.

This version is more attentive to punctuation, whereas Zenith is more careless. But it, too, has lots of imbalances despite its undeniable cadence. The merit of the stop after the first verse, as in the original, should not be underestimated. Pessoa’s assumption in the poem is very affirmative: the poet is a pretender. STOP. The rest is complementary to the statement, working as a predication. This is very clear in the Honig-Brown version and not at all clear in the translation by Zenith, which engages the verse in a longer predication that does not exist in the original. The second verse in Portuguese begins with a hidden subject: *he, / (the poet) pretends so completely... that... etc.* This is the skeleton structure in which Pessoa wrote his paradox-verse, to which the Honig-Brown version is more faithful. Both versions, however, lack the sparking of clarity, which in Portuguese is so unambiguous and is responsible for the element of surprise and strength conveyed by the originality of the statement: *The poet is a pretender. (He) pretends so completely that he even pretends it is pain, the pain he really feels.*

Another problem is the difference in conception between “pretender” and “faker.” The word in Portuguese, *fingidor*, means “pretender”; in the context

of the poem, it is someone who pretends any feeling, including the feeling he already has. The word for “faker” is *falsificador*. “Faker” carries in it an intentionality of action that the adjective “pretender” does not. A pretender is more introspective. It might seem a trifle, especially when one considers the “freedom” with which poetry must be translated, or as some prefer, “transcreated.” But as there is nothing free in free verse, there is also nothing “free” in translation. Actually, the skill of a translator is always evident when given the least “freedom” with which to work.

Zenith’s translations often fail to convey with clarity Pessoa’s images. English-speaking readers can get puzzled by some of Zenith’s resolutions, such as:

I’m nothing.
 I’ll always be nothing.
 I can’t want to be something.
 But I have in me all the dreams of the world.

[NÃO SOU nada.
 Nunca serei nada.
 Não posso querer ser nada.
 À parte isso, tenho em mim todos os sonhos do mundo.]

Comparing Zenith’s translation with Jonathan Griffin’s, we have:

I am nothing.
 Never shall be anything.
 Cannot will to be anything.
 This apart, I have in me all the dreams of the world.

Zenith’s translation is inaccurate and untrustworthy. It is not difficult to see that Pessoa’s rhythm disappears in Zenith’s translation. The poem in question, signed by the heteronym Álvaro de Campos, is not colloquial. It is lyrical, and it requires sensitivity to syntax that Zenith simply does not exhibit. Of course, it is impossible to repeat the word “nada” three times, as Pessoa does, and this is already a formal difficulty to be surmounted. But to complicate things, the double negative, usually accepted as a simple negative in Portuguese, implies logical and philosophical assumptions that are out of hand in Zenith’s version. In any case, after the utterly radical statement about

Being and Nothingness of the three first verses, Pessoa takes a radical turn that Zenith misses.

The fourth line of the stanza, “À parte isso, tenho em mim todos os sonhos do mundo,” Zenith translates: “But I have in me all the dreams of the world.” It is a key verse because it introduces a suspension of the poet’s judgment about himself as being nothing. It introduces an ironic distance to the previous statements. After a three-time confirmation of nothingness as an opening for his *Tabacaria* (The Tobacconist’s or the Tobacco Shop), the poet surprises the reader with an ironic turn that is introduced by the phrase “*This apart*” (I have in me all the dreams of the world).

In other words, *Apart the fact that I am nothing and will never be anything I have in myself all the dreams of the world*. The strength, originality, and beauty of the construction, and I mean here the existential and poetical construction together, are completely missing in Zenith’s version.

There is nothing in English against the literal use of “this apart” (À parte isso). Why, then, instead of following Pessoa’s words did he change them and erase Pessoa’s fundamental irony?

Imprecisions are a constitutive part of Zenith’s translations and impair on many levels a faithful rendering of Pessoa into English. His translations lack clarity.

Faithful translations usually strive to raise this luminous apprehension. They also try to preserve the wholeness and harmony of the original for which they stand.

A translator must create mechanisms of compensation; otherwise, the result of his work is unfaithful, poor, anemic, and doomed to pass around an utterly false image that does not correspond to the original. Much has been said about the commonplace of the *traduttore traditore*, and how sometimes a “good” betrayal works in favor of the original and not to its detriment. When Zenith betrays, however, as we have seen with the “This apart” question, he betrays for the wrong reasons.

The general impression caused by this volume of translations is that it is incomplete, hasty, and clumsy. The poems sound muffled, the images turn to be odd or trivial, and the translation of syntax lacks consistency. Moreover, there is no conscientious work with alliterations and assonances, nor is there concern for rhythm. The reader who knows the originals will also be able to detect problems with punctuation and errors in the accents in Portuguese. The notes are sparse and could be a lot more informative.

In many situations, Zenith's translation does not follow the punctuation of the original poems, and one is left with many conjectures. Is this part of his "free" translation, or has he had access to freshly uncovered manuscripts that would justify some of his daring punctuations?

Example:

A lavadeira no tanque
 Bate roupa em pedra bem.
 Canta porque canta e é triste
 Porque canta porque existe;
 Por isso é alegre também.

Zenith:

The washwoman beats the laundry
 Against the stone in the tank.
 She sings because she sings and is sad
 For she sings because she exists:
 Thus she is also happy.

The colon introduced by Zenith in the fourth line introduces a forcefulness that makes the fifth line look like an overemphatic consequence of the previous two verses. Yet, the verse here is light, and a less limiting punctuation like the semicolon of the printed editions would serve the poem better. However, what is even more important here is that the poem is written in a playful and musical rhythm, and Zenith is very uncomfortable with both. If the reader wants to have an idea of how playful and rhythmical the poem is, he will have to read Griffin's version:

The laundress at the pool
 Pounds clothes upon stone truly.
 Sings because sings, is grieving
 Because sings because living;
 Therefore is cheerful too.

The mistakes in Portuguese are related to diacritics. Pessoa's name was written *Pessoa* and not *Pêssoa*. This may seem a trifle for those who do not

speak the language, but the mistake alters considerably the pronunciation of Pessoa's name. This mistake comes at the very first line of Zenith's introduction and should be mended, for it suggests an embarrassing carelessness. Dr. Pancrácio and Dr. Gaudêncio, too, among others, each deserves his accent.

The only book Pessoa published in his lifetime is *Message*, written under his own name or orthonym. It was published in 1934, one year before his death. *Message* is probably the only true epic achievement of the twentieth century. In it, Pessoa conceives a nation somehow anthropomorphically represented whose identity is transformed from action into essence, from history into timeless myth. The poem is divided into three parts and bears analogies with heraldic symbols. The first part, "Blazon," has five sections: "The Fields," "The Castles," "The Inescutcheons," "The Crown," and "The Crest." The second part, "Portuguese Sea," is composed of a sequence of poems. The third part, called "The Hidden One," also has three sections, "The Symbols," "The Warnings," and "The Times," that repeat the structure of the whole poem.

Probably in order to fit the size of the volume, only some poems from *Message* were translated. Nonetheless, there is neither a warning note nor a comment explaining to the reader why the original numbering of each poem has disappeared in these versions, nor is there any explanation to help the reader contextualize the poems. The original numbering of the poems, with their reference to the section in which they appear, if only preserved, would have been enough to call the reader's attention to the close-knit structure of *Message*. It would have been an informative service to the reader as well to have offered a note explaining the internal divisions and titles of the sections of *Mensagem* if not, at least, to give some idea of the nature of Pessoa's accomplishment in writing it.

A remarkable characteristic of *Message* is that it is written with "archaic style" orthography. The impact of such use in Portuguese should not be ignored because it provides a certain specific tone that completes masterfully the epic atmosphere. If the translator makes no attempt to create an equivalent of this feature (which is understandable), there is no reason why, again, at least a note couldn't have been written explaining Pessoa's motivation in the choice of such particular orthography.

One of the most famous poems Pessoa wrote from *Mensagem* is translated in this present selection. It is called "Portuguese Sea" ("Mar Portuquez") and

stands as a compelling example of all the best verse Pessoa could write: rhythm and rhyming seem to spring from the same source of the theme, a powerful conjunction that adds to the complete naturalness of the epic pathos invoked by the title.

The whole of *Message* was translated by Jonathan Griffin in a book published in 1991. His rendering of “Portuguese Sea” preserves rhythm, inversions, timing, and the difficult rhyme schemes, especially in a crucial moment of the poem in which Pessoa rhymes the verb “to give” in the past (*deu*) with the noun, “sky/heaven” [*céu*]. Griffin translates the rich rhyme as follows:

Peril and abyss has God to the sea given
And yet made it the mirror of heaven.

This represents quite an achievement. Here the reader has not only Pessoa’s inversions, but also the rendering of the original rhyme scheme: a verb (*given*) and a noun (*heaven*), not to mention the success of the faithful rendition.

Zenith’s attempt, however, is pedestrian and altogether deprived of poetry; all the inversions of the original, as well as the rhymes, are lost, without a sober reason. The result is anemic and uninspired:

God placed danger and the abyss in the sea,
But he also made it heaven’s mirror.

There is no effort to work with linguistic compensations, creating equivalences where the encounter between the two languages, Portuguese and English, fails. The recourse to the syntax in direct order in both lines, where Pessoa placed an inversion, is merely a procedure to curb the translator’s own inability to render the verses faithfully.

Compare the original:

Deus ao mar o perigo e o abysmo deu,
Mas nelle é que espelhou o céu.

As for the presentation of the book, there are major issues that should be considered, especially if we take into account that this volume is meant for a public that has no access to the original Pessoa. Thinking of this, the idea of

appending Pessoa's orthonym and heteronyms with epithets (such as Álvaro de Campos, The Jaded Sensationist, or Fernando Pessoa-himself, the Mask behind the man, etc.) is misleading. One cannot understand the purpose of such arbitrary and gratuitous intrusion, since Pessoa's orthonym and heteronyms speak for themselves and do not need pseudo-didactical management to make them more revealing. Zenith's procedure works against itself, weakening what it attempts to reinforce, doing a disservice to the poet, and misleading the reader.

It also strikes a dangerous precedent. Imagine if the fashion is adopted by inexperienced scholars of our new Dark Ages. It may tag Yeats or Wordsworth, for instance, with any arbitrary "facilitating" epithet, such as "The Inventor of Ireland," and so on and so forth.

In translating Pessoa and his heteronyms, Zenith is usually pedestrian and confused. It can be clearly noticed that there is no coherence in his choices. Poems are translated according to the whim of the moment, with no regard to rhyme or internal rhyming, alliterations, assonances, rhythm, repetitions, and punctuation. We are, then, faced with an Alberto Caeiro who speaks a dull, pseudo-philosophic rant. A Caeiro who is miles away from the poet's direct and sensible common-sense in Portuguese; an Álvaro de Campos sounding hysterically banal; a Ricardo Reis whose elegantly classic inversions and rare words framing his Horatian odes seem to struggle against vapidness and commonplace.

This is most unfortunate. The reader who does not speak Portuguese is deprived of yet another occasion to get acquainted with one of the most original and imaginative poets of the twentieth century. Cervantes's tapestry is pulled apart, and Pessoa goes on waiting for a good weaver.