

## The Disquiet of Influence

George Monteiro. *Fernando Pessoa and Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Literature*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000.

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George Monteiro's most recent book on Fernando Pessoa is also the latest installment in the fertile line of inquiry initiated by Charles David Ley, who dedicated a chapter to the Portuguese poet in his *A Inglaterra e os Escritores Portugueses* (Lisboa: Seara Nova, 1939), and taken up seventeen years later by the present author's homonymous predecessor, Maria da Encarnação Monteiro, in her *Incidências Inglesas na Poesia de Fernando Pessoa* (Coimbra: Coimbra Editora, 1956). In the following years, Pessoa's literary Englishness came to be explored most fruitfully by Jorge de Sena, in several of the essays gathered in his posthumously published *Fernando Pessoa & C<sup>a</sup> Heterónima*, and Monteiro's own important—indeed, in some respects groundbreaking—contribution signals on frequent occasions its indebtedness to Sena's investigations and insights in its author's continuing exploration of Pessoa's "genuine biculturalism" (9). Monteiro enters also into a dialogue with other (all too few) critics who over the years have given serious, sustained attention to Pessoa's Anglo-American connections; their views are presented, sometimes endorsed, occasionally contrasted with Monteiro's own, and often symbiotically integrated within his argument. Anyone wishing for a synthetic yet reasoned overview of the English Pessoa's critical fortune need look no further than Monteiro's copious bibliographic endnotes, which, as an added bonus, occasionally hint at rich interpretive opportunities his chapters stop short of exploring. This is, therefore, not merely an accomplished study, but also an inspiring one: one of its substantial merits is that it openly *raises* the questions it chooses not to consider in depth (thus pointing the way to future approaches, as well as preempting the almost inevitable charges of incompleteness that virtually any approach to Pessoa's labyrinthine oeuvre is likely to provoke).

The book's goals are stated simply, so simply as to almost deceive an unsuspecting reader into believing that the task at hand is in fact straightforward:

"*Fernando Pessoa and Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Literature* examines the consequences for his work of Pessoa's knowledge of English and American literature in the nineteenth century" (11). However, although Monteiro himself names the vast areas of potential inquiry that he leaves out from his study—most notably, Pessoa's reading of pre-nineteenth-century English writers, including Shakespeare, and the poetry he wrote in English, both published and unpublished in his lifetime—what remains is by no means limited in scope, much less uncomplicated. Although the author steers clear of any founding theoretical engagement with the concept of literary influence, letting himself be guided instead by what he describes as Pessoa's own recognition of the "simple principle [...] that writers influence other writers and that, by implication, the specific consequences of such influence are worth study" (1), his subtle and intricate discussions of this mechanism at work in the Portuguese poet's *oeuvre* reveal that while the principle itself may be simple, its consequences are far more likely to emerge as exceedingly complex. No critical constructs comparable to the elaborate edifice of the Bloomian "anxiety of influence" may be found to sustain Monteiro's arguments, yet his study plunges deeply into the overflowing reservoir of Pessoa's own home-grown *desassossego* over questions of literary influence, creativity, and genius that are a pervasive presence in his writing. As the author notes, the entire "*companhia heterónima*" may be viewed as an exercise in the fertile dynamics of literary discipleship, with its own historical trajectory along which the principal heteronyms played out their multilayered reciprocal relations, informed by varying degrees of loyalty and resistance (116).

Following a useful chronology of Pessoa's life and work and an introductory overview of his largely unsuccessful attempts to establish himself as an acclaimed English poet, the book's ten chapters examine the reverberations in Pessoa's work of writings by nine British men and women (Wordsworth, Gray, Keats, Byron, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning, Ruskin, Alice Meynell, and Caroline Norton) and three Americans (Poe, Hawthorne, and Whitman). The chapters vary considerably in length and scope, ranging from the compact eleven pages on the young Pessoa's poetic apprenticeship, viewed through his engagement with Grey and Keats, to the generously footnoted twenty-eight pages dedicated to discussing the echoes of Wordsworthian inspiration in Pessoa "himself" (notably in his famous "ceifeira" poem), Alberto Caeiro, and Álvaro de Campos. The latter study, which refers the reader to a number of earlier discussions of the Pessoa-

Wordsworth connection, would benefit from being read in concert with another recent contribution to this growing body of criticism, António M. Feijó's article "Pessoa e a correcção de Wordsworth." Feijó's central thesis is that Pessoa "corrects" Wordsworth, first through a rewriting of the English poet's lyric "Solitary Reaper" (in which the subject's "apocalyptic self-consciousness," hinted at but ultimately appeased in Wordsworth's text, is spectacularly revealed and exacerbated in Pessoa's), but especially through the invention of Alberto Caeiro as an "anti-Wordsworth" (360-61). While Monteiro's and Feijó's readings of the Pessoa-Wordsworth textual cross-fertilization are both parallel and remote from each other—given the respective parameters of their distinct critical idioms—perhaps the most inspiring portion of Monteiro's chapter is the final one, in which the author veers off the relatively predictable course of his discussion in order to engage with Campos's sonnet sequence "Barrow-on-Furness." That group of five sonnets offers another instance of Pessoa's "correction of Wordsworth," the process whose symptomatic index is displayed, however, in the (deliberate or accidental) *error* of its title: although "Barrow-on-Furness" situates itself firmly in the Romantic tradition of local-meditative poetry, with Wordsworth's *The River Duddon: A Series of Sonnets* (1820) as one of its most prominent examples, it also betrays that tradition in a number of ways. Staging his sequence in a commercial and industrial setting (as opposed to Wordsworth's pastoral landscape) and addressing the river from the vantage point of a man-made quay (seated on a barrel and not, like Wordsworth, on the river's grassy banks), Campos formulates his meditation so as to "out-romanticize the great Wordsworth himself":

While Wordsworth thinks of the high purpose of the river flow, a river that seems to laughingly dare the poet (the "Adventurer") who has climbed so high to fulfil a "rival purpose"—that is to say, a purpose as worthy as the river's—Campos's river serves not to challenge the poet to strive to achieve higher purposes or even to think higher thoughts but only to put the ironies of the poet's life in relief. (38)

The leading irony of Pessoa-as-Campos's sequence of sonnets is of course the fact that the river Furness does not exist: Barrow-on-Furness is, in the (geographical) reality of the English Lancashire, the seaport of Barrow-in-Furness, Furness being the name of a district, not of a river. It is tantalizing to realize that a somewhat different version of this vocalic equivocation (in

vs. on) reemerges, with reference to the same group of poems, in Campos's commentary on the circumstances of their composition, casting ambiguous light on a very particular "irony" of the heteronym's life. In the closing section of his discussion, Monteiro refers to a statement submitted by Pessoa in Campos's name in response to a literary survey. Published in 1926 in the newspaper *A Informação*, Campos's comments contained an account of an "amorous adventure" begun while he was sitting on an empty quay in Barrow-in-Furness (he gets the name right in this context), composing a sonnet:

Aproximou-se de mim uma rapariga, por assim dizer,—aluno, segundo depois soube, do liceu (*High School*) local—, e entrou em conversa comigo. Viu que eu estava a escrever versos, e perguntou-me, como nestas ocasiões se costuma perguntar, se eu escrevia versos. Respondi, como nestes casos se responde, que não. A tarde, segundo a sua obrigação tradicional, caía lenta e suave. Deixei-a cair. (*Fotobibliografia* 143)

The identity of the adolescent "girl, so to speak," who seductively distracts Campos from the poetic labor at hand, has tended to vacillate among various published versions of the testimonial. In his volume of Pessoa's *Páginas de doutrina estética*, Jorge de Sena maintained the version reproduced above (transcribed here from the photo facsimile of *A Informação*), and commented on the titillating disparity between the grammatical genders of "rapariga" and "aluno," stating that "[conforme] testemunho de Carlos Queirós, o próprio Pessoa lhe chamou a atenção para estes dois elementos, apontando a gralha como voluntária" (240). However, the latest version of the passage—to give but one of several examples—included in the second volume of Pessoa's correspondence, published in 1999 by Assírio & Alvim, changes "aluno" to "aluna" without an explanation, thus normalizing Campos's sexuality (and rendering meaningless, in the process, Pessoa's coyly precise qualifier "por assim dizer"). Curiously enough, given his unprecedented attentiveness to the homoerotic import of the Pessoa-Whitman connection (on which more later), Monteiro gives the gender of the young interloper as unequivocally female in his translation of the passage (reinforcing it, in fact, through a repeated insertion of the subject pronoun ["she"], which Pessoa, writing in Portuguese, was able to avoid altogether). He thus misses the opportunity to pose the following question: Is "aluno" to "aluna" as "Barrow-on-Furness" is to "Barrow-in-Furness," a deliberate dislocation of

established parameters of geographic and amorous reference? Is the Modernist Campos engaging in a sexual as well as a literary parody of the Romantic canon? While the equivocal spelling of the preposition linking “Barrow” to “Furness” may, after all, be attributed to a simple typographic lapse in the poems’ first edition by Ática (an unverifiable proposition, given that Pessoa’s manuscript of “Barrow-on-Furness” has been lost), the “aluno/rapariga” ambiguity stands out in plain view, endorsed and emphasized by its author, but all too often disregarded by his editors and critics.

Among the most satisfying “case studies” in *Fernando Pessoa and Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Literature* are those that proceed from accounts of spirited archival sleuthing (to which Pessoa’s sprawling and convoluted legacy lends itself wonderfully) to stimulating openings of promising lines of inquiry. The chapter on Pessoa’s translation of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* is a good example, as it moves from considerations of documentary evidence to “the question of why and to what end Pessoa translated *The Scarlet Letter* in the first place” (105). Monteiro’s answer is that it may have had to do with the central problem faced by the character of the minister Arthur Dimmesdale, who attempts to confess his guilty secret to his congregation, only to find that his expressions of self-abasement are taken instead as unmistakable signs of his moral purity and holiness. Monteiro finds echoes of Hawthorne’s Dimmesdale in Pessoa’s laconic dissection of the artifice of truth-telling in “Autopsicografia” and, most strikingly, in Campos’s “Poema em linha recta,” whose heteronymous author is said to avail himself of “Dimmesdale’s authentically inauthentic voice” in order to forge a bombastic parody of Fernando Pessoa himself. However, perhaps the most valuable aspect of Monteiro’s discussion—beyond his important and convincing identification of the Hawthorne connection—is that it draws attention to the centrality of confessional discourse in Pessoa’s writing, much of which is concerned, often indirectly but nonetheless pervasively, with resistance and attraction to the revelation of private truth, with courting and escaping recognition, with the embarrassment of disclosure and the temptations of absolute sincerity.

Another generous stimulus of future investigations may be found in Monteiro’s groundbreaking revisitation of the question of Walt Whitman’s influence on Pessoa. I am aware of no other published study that points in such unambiguous terms to the fact that the Walt Whitman celebrated by Álvaro de Campos was a very different Whitman from that honored, for instance, by Rubén Darío twenty-five years earlier (a contrastive example that



Monteiro considers at some length). According to Monteiro, “The key to the Portuguese poet’s Whitman lies in seeing that for Campos the truest and most meaningful Whitman is the poet as ‘great pederast,’ the poet for whom a man’s love for another man realizes, perhaps in its highest form, the love he sees metaphorically as the kelson of creation” (92). The chapter’s title, “Walt’s Anomaly,” refers to *Walt Whitman’s Anomaly*, a small book by one W. C. Rivers published in London in 1913 that was entirely devoted to a hostile denunciation of the American poet’s homosexuality. While Monteiro seems unaware that Pessoa’s own copy of *Walt Whitman’s Anomaly*, densely marked and underlined, survives in his library (now housed in the Casa Fernando Pessoa in Lisbon), his analysis is right on target in linking Pessoa to those English readers of Whitman (most notably John Addington Symonds) for whom the homoerotic charge of the American’s poetry was its most irresistible aspect. Pessoa’s reaction to Whitman was not far different from what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has described as “Whitman’s electric effect on his English readers”; however, while in the English context *Leaves of Grass* may have “operated most characteristically as a conduit from one man to another of feelings that had, in many cases, been private or inchoate” (113), no such unmediated communion seemed possible in Portugal, where Pessoa was just about the only reader of Whitman. Enter Álvaro de Campos and his unabashedly homoerotic “Saudação a Walt Whitman,” a centerpiece of what was to be, as Monteiro notes, an issue of *Orpheu* virtually devoted to Whitman-style *paiderastia* (“One would not be far from the mark in identifying the theme of the projected third issue of *Orpheu* as *paiderastia*” [164]).

It is one strong measure of a book’s interest when its reviewer finds it difficult to confine his or her remarks to the word limit prescribed by the journal’s editors. Several more of Monteiro’s chapters invite detailed commentary, not to mention a comprehensive rereading of significant portions of Pessoa’s oeuvre. It is to be hoped that this book, the author’s second study dedicated to the Portuguese poet’s English-language contexts, connections, and consequences (following *The Presence of Pessoa*, published in 1998 also by the University Press of Kentucky), is merely another link in a continuing chain of inspired and inspiring inquiry that readers of George Monteiro have learned to expect and welcome.

## Works Cited

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