

## Provincetown's Portuguese

Frank X. Gaspar. *Leaving Pico*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999.  
George Monteiro

When a mature writer creates a novel out of the stuff of his own childhood the results are masterpieces, such as *David Copperfield*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *La forja de un rebelde*, or this book, which takes us to the old part of Lisbon.

Gerald M. Moser on José Rodrigues Miguéis's  
*A Escola do Paraíso* (1961)

And how many times have you read in some review or other that a writer has finally found his 'voice'? Of course he has done no such thing. Instead, he has found a way of writing words down in a manner that creates the illusion of a voice.

Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer On Writing* (2002)

Published by the University Press of New England in 1999, *Leaving Pico* is a poet-novelist's initiation book about a summer crucial to a boy's life in Provincetown about forty years ago. It is written as a first-person narrative from the boy-hero's point-of-view. It is that boy's voice that emanates from the pages of this first novel. It is also, paradoxically, the voice of the artist in mid-life who has discovered his "voice" (or at least one of them) or, rather, if we concur with Margaret Atwood, it is the "illusion of a voice." No one will insist, if he thinks for a moment, that Josie's words are exactly those that a boy his age would (or could) have spoken, anymore than anyone will think that Huck Finn's words and description are exactly recalled from pre-adolescent speech (whether Mark Twain's or his friend Tom Blankenship's) in mid-nineteenth-century Missouri. The magic lies in thinking that this must be the way such boys—Mark Twain's or Frank Gaspar's—spoke in their time. And more, we accept—when the illusion succeeds completely—that such voices are capable of carrying a credible narrative, whether or not we are asked to accept the notion that the boy-hero is a writer (as in Mark Twain's great novel, for instance).

Not all writers of such so-called boy's books have attempted the feat of narrating their tales in their boy-hero's own voice. At the beginning of the great American tradition of the boy's book, for instance, the New Englander Thomas Bailey Aldrich achieved a great success with *The Story of a Bad Boy*, an engaging narrative written from the omniscient vantage point of an adult looking back on (and judging) his childhood. It is precisely that inevitably judgmental perspective of the adult that the adult writers of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, as well as *Leaving Pico*, strive and manage to evade.

From the earliest days of the genre, novelists have employed so-called interpolated tales. This device often takes the form of one character's giving the author a breather from his carrying on his major narrative by telling a story of his own. At their most cohesive, even when such tales shed thematic light on the main narrative (see, for instance, "The Town-Ho Story" in *Moby Dick*) such tales remain somewhat tangential to the main story. Gaspar avails himself of this device but makes a valiant and largely successful attempt to incorporate the tale of the great fifteenth-century Azorean Ancestor (Francisco Carvalho), whose monumental adventure—the discovery of America before Columbus—must be recovered, not through history books that do not mention him, but through the storytelling imagination of the boy Josie and his not entirely acculturated grandfather. With some indebtedness, I think, to Faulkner's dramatization of the story recovery and inventive efforts of Quentin and Shreve in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, Gaspar's device is to dramatize the act of co-operative storytelling ("putting the ancestor together" [189]) in installments skillfully folded into the main action of the novel. If this novel strains, it may be when the boy attempts to recreate the voice of his grandfather as narrator. If the illusion of the boy's voice breaks occasionally, it is when John Joseph speaks about the Ancestor he would insert into his own revisionary history of Portuguese exploration and discovery.

At this point, permit me an interpolation of my own. The Grandfather's tale of the Ancestor's pre-Columbus discovery of the New World has at least one suggestive antecedent in John Fiske's *The Discovery of America*, his late nineteenth-century account of the King of Portugal's dealing with Columbus:

King John was not in general disposed toward unfair and dishonest dealings, but on this occasion, after much parley, he was persuaded to sanction a proceeding quite unworthy of him. Having obtained Columbus's sailing plans, he sent out a

ship secretly, to carry some goods to the Cape Verde islands, and then to try the experiment of the westward voyage. If there should turn out to be anything profitable in the scheme, this would be safer and more frugal than to meet the exorbitant demands of this ambitious foreigner. So it was done; but the pilots, having no grand idea to urge them forward, lost heart before the stupendous expanse of waters that confronted them, and beat an ignominious retreat to Lisbon; whereupon Columbus, having been informed of the trick, departed in high dudgeon, to lay his proposals before the crown of Castile. (397-98)

Over the many decades, if not centuries, there has been a great deal written about Provincetown, most of it by visitors or temporary inhabitants. Some of that writing, for example, Henry David Thoreau's prose or Harry Kemp's poetry, has been distinguished. But there is little or no distinguished writing by a native worth singling out prior to the publication of *Leaving Pico*. Mary Oliver makes the point that while "over the years there has been a lot of talk about what the 'creative' people have added to the town," "none of us was born here. And no one, if you get my meaning," she continues, "ever considered the possibility of a Frank Gaspar" (xiii).

*Leaving Pico* will be misread or at least read reductively if it is approached as merely a local-color novel populated by quaint characters, exposing their quirky mores and odd customs. Something else is intended. If the novel is written from the inside by an insider, its energy comes from its empathy and sympathy for what once was in all its particulars and no longer is or what, at least, no longer is the same. It can be legitimately described, moreover, as an ethnic novel, if one recognizes that it is the view of Provincetown four decades ago available to the typical second-born generation Portuguese-American boy. Of course, the author of *Leaving Pico* is hardly typical, but his boy-hero Josie Carvalho is meant to be just that. At the least one can say that most of his experiences offer Portuguese-American readers shocks of recognition. But to say this is not enough, after all, for Frank Gaspar intends his narrative to typify his young hero's growing-up. In that sense it is the story of one summer in the village life of a child. Because his theme is as universal as can be imagined, the author writes about only what the boy sees, hears, thinks or imagines. The two men, who every summer rent the same rooms in Josie's house, therefore, are never "outed" in Josie's narrative, while the grandfather's women, rather comical bohemian types, are seen and commented on only in the context of the Portuguese-American community. It is what the

boy sees and hears that matters. That the boy is observant, resourceful, even talented is shown to us in the way he can answer correctly the priest Father Santos's avid questions about the horrific deaths of the Church's martyrs. Only barely touched by his sanctimonious "Great Aunt Theophila," who has constructed a home shrine peopled by plaster figures of saints, he is already a child of the sea, skilled at maintaining and sailing his grandfather's skiff grandiosely bearing the name of Caravella.

Frank Gaspar's achievement here is to have populated a highly credible historical town with realized characterizations. Without ceasing to contribute to the local color of a certain recent time in Provincetown, the neighbors and hangers-on—the kith and kin who speak and move and possess what may now be their only reality in the poems of *The Holyoke* or *Leaving Pico*—share, in their own way, the universality of those individuals who populate the best regional literature—the figures of Edwin Arlington Robinson's Tilbury Town, say, or the fence-menders and apple-pickers living north of Robert Frost's Boston. Provincetown's Carvalhos and the Portuguese in their orbit— Islanders and "Lisbons" alike—have their niche in this New England literary company.

With an almost clerical focus, Frank Gaspar searches for the right word in the right place, the word that will move him forward in his quest for the immanent, in his search for what is meaningful, for what has import, in the characters and incidents stored away in memory. In short, as all writers worth reading must do, he searches for what must be written about, for what is most compelling to his artist's imagination, and not for what is merely the fancy of a passing moment.

*Leaving Pico* has earned Frank Gaspar a place at or close to the head of American fiction writers of Portuguese descent, a category that includes the redoubtable John Dos Passos. If Gaspar can be legitimately called a regional or ethnic writer—and those adjectives are not, in my lexicon, dismissive—he is also to be numbered, justly and primarily so, among those skilled and compelling artists whose interests are humanistic and whose themes are universal.

### Works Cited

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George Monteiro's most recent books are *The Presence of Camões* (1996), *The Presence of Pessoa* (1998), *Stephen Crane's Blue Badge of Courage* (2000), and *Fernando Pessoa and Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Literature* (2000). Forthcoming are bilingual editions of Miguel Torga's *Poemas Ibéricos*, Pedro da Silveira's *Poemas Ausentes*, and *Selected Poems* by Jorge de Sena. He is currently at work on two other books, *The English Face of Fernando Pessoa* and *Elizabeth Bishop's Brazilian Beat*. "The Bureaucratic Tale of the Harbor-Master and the Collector of Customs," his translation of a story by José Saramago, appeared in *Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies* 6. Email: georgemonteiro@prodigy.net