

Worlds of Difference, Words of Equivalence: Pessoa's Prose Writings and the English-language Reader

Pessoa, Fernando. *The Selected Prose of Fernando Pessoa*. Ed. and trans.

Richard Zenith. New York: Grove, 2001.

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For many who still talk of greatness in literature, Fernando Pessoa is at least four great poets. But will he ever be considered more than one great prosodist? Due in part to the comparative ease of translating and marketing prose fiction, Pessoa's recent canonization as a giant of world literature derives in large measure from the international impact of *O Livro do Desassossego de Bernardo Soares*, which an international writers' panel recently declared one of the "100 greatest books of all time."¹ Even Pessoa's greatest admirers might wonder, however, what readers outside his native land and language would make of the vast remainder of his prose, much of it still little read in Portugal. They will be delighted, perhaps even surprised, to discover what an elegant, well-proportioned and richly entertaining anthology Richard Zenith has fashioned from the supposed "also-rans" of the Pessoaan catalogue. For many years one of Pessoa's most able ambassadors to the Anglophone world, Zenith has edited, translated and introduced a selection that, for three reasons, represents a watershed in the publication of Pessoa in English. First, the comprehensive range of Zenith's selections grants Anglophone readers unprecedented insight into the full complexity of Fernando Pessoa's universe. Second, in addition to succinctly enlightening the reader who is unfamiliar with the Portuguese cultural context of Pessoa's work, the anthology also directs a spotlight at that work's interaction with, and continuing relevance to, English-language cultures. Finally, the volume, and Zenith's sensitive and imaginative English renderings, vindicate Pessoa in his many incarnations besides that of Bernardo Soares, as a prosodist of subtlety, power and versatility.

Zenith's success in extracting so many memorable and nuanced passages from the generality of Pessoa's prose, and his emphasis on those texts' relationships with English letters, will make this anthology a delight and enhance

Pessoa's international popularity. The importance of this book, however, is its adept packaging of a much broader sample of prose than any that has yet reached the English-language market, for example, the judicious yet slim selection in Lisboa and Taylor's *Centenary Pessoa* (1995). The refusal of Zenith's volume to treat its raw material as a mere appendage to the "major" poems demonstrates how attention to Pessoa's prose makes him appear, all over again, as a still larger writer than previously imagined: his output more multifaceted yet also better integrated, and more engaged in dialogue with its social and historical contexts.

This is not simply because the collection introduces more than fifteen of Pessoa's lesser-known voices alongside the familiar quintet, though here one must applaud Zenith's pioneering work in transcribing much unpublished material from Pessoa's famous trunk. More significantly, the output of "neo-pagan" theorist António Mora, astrologer Rafael Baldaya and lovestruck, hunchbacked Maria José et al. is not unloaded before the reader in all its bewildering diversity. Rather, Zenith insists—persuasively—on presenting the contradictory, often fragmentary products of the heteronymic enterprise as a system, and that "system in its totality" as "Pessoa's one perfect work."² Álvaro de Campos's rambunctious rebuttal of Nietzsche in his *Ultimatum* asserts that the "superman" of the modern age will not be the "strongest [...] toughest [...] freest man," but the "most complete [...] most complex [and] most harmonious" (86-7). While Campos's prediction of the riven subject's supremacy is best not taken too seriously, it helps us define the first of three key observations that Zenith's anthology stresses regarding Pessoa's transgression of the constraints of a unitary, singular identity. Heteronymy, on one level, facilitates the articulation of comprehensive debate of questions meta-physical, political and aesthetic, in which both thesis and counterthesis are presented from diverse perspectives, rational and emotional. The vast and systematic nature of this project makes it insufficient for Alberto Caeiro's "neo-pagan" disciples to critique earnestly each other's poetic styles and aesthetic principles. It requires Pessoa, for example, to create the supercilious critic who attributes the "dullness" of *Paradise Lost* to Milton's preference for a "desert of blank verses" over prose (216), and then to counterpose to him the nutty Professor Jones whose "recipe" for blank verse advises poets to chop their "prose effusion" into "bits about four inches or ten centimeters long" (227).

At the same time, however, Zenith enhances our understanding of the foundations of this immensely rich, yet inconclusive, debate. His selection is

calculated to stress how Pessoa interposes the question of subjectivity as a central issue in myriad discussions. The collection indicates just how many unsettling propositions Pessoa extrapolates from his favorite Protagorean dictum that “man is the measure of all things” (234; 304). Heteronymity, as a system, constitutes a tool used for opening up philosophical debate and challenging what Álvaro de Campos called a hegemonic “dogma of personal objectivity” wherein objectivity is but “a rough average of partial subjectivities” (84). However, Pessoa’s heteronymic voices also articulate uncertainty about whether—assuming the non-existence of a unitary self—one can control this challenge, and—if one can—what epistemological gain follows. Without overloading the reader, Zenith adeptly exposes how these anxieties color Pessoa’s disquisitions on every subject. Thus, his hopes of an exalted destiny for the Portuguese are pinned both on what “sub-heteronym” Thomas Crosse calls their cosmopolitanism and talent for depersonalization (63), and, conversely, on their assumption of a singular and specifically national identity predicated on Sebastianist mythology (163). Thus, also, Pessoa offers a reconciliation of these conflicting analyses, in a third text asking “who, if they’re Portuguese, can live within the bounds of just one personality?” (162).

An emphasis on the concept of *living* as a subjective plurality is the third feature of Zenith’s collection that so enlarges and animates Pessoa for the English-language reader. Zenith suggests that, in addition to their other functions, the heteronyms were “all born to save Pessoa from the life that bored him, or that he didn’t care for, or that he had little aptitude for” (301). This view does not, however, contradict Fernando Cabral Martins’s recent insistence that Pessoa, while enigmatic, was also “vivo, desconcertante, interventivo e presente no seu tempo” (Cabral Martins 134). The *drama em gente* was never a purely intellectual abstraction, or a retreat into a private literary never-land, but rather an ever-reconfigured interaction of the imagination with the “exterior” social world. Zenith’s collection equips the reader to assess the multifarious social manifestations of what Pessoa termed his “relentless, organic tendency to depersonalisation and simulation” (254): the tendency that spurred him to write and publish articles in the names of the major heteronyms (and even in those of their “subheteronyms,” such as Thomas Crosse and Federico Reis) as well as to pluralize his identity and aspects of his life history in his letters and personalia. Zenith is the first to have translated many of the most fascinating of these texts; some of them, such as Pessoa’s medial “automatic” writings, are here edited and published for the first

time. Together, they illustrate that the identities introduced into Pessoa's private and public lives represented more than an escapist dressing up in "other" personalities. Increasingly talked of today as an exponent of literary drag, Pessoa was an artist who, in any of his guises, could say "I am what I am" with genuine, though provisional, sincerity.

Zenith notes of Pessoa's prose that while "the untrammelled word did not necessarily probe more deeply than poetry, [...] it drew a closer, more naked picture of its subject" (xv). Certainly it is more apparent from this anthology than from the more familiar poems how immediate and spontaneous was the intermingling of what can only problematically be labeled Pessoa's life and his art. Most remarkably, Zenith guides his reader to a clearer view of this without falling victim to the twin perils of reading Pessoa: on the one hand, the temptation to a reductively (and often spuriously) biographical reading of the heteronymic writings and the designated "fictional" works, and, on the other, the temptation to read Pessoa's correspondence, and his pages of psychoanalytical and occultist self-analysis, as a fantastical fiction, rather than as traces of a life lived partly outside the boundaries of a consistent, individual subjectivity. Zenith provides a thorough social and historical contextualization in a series of evocative introductions and meticulously researched footnotes. He also ingeniously organizes the volume into a chapter sequence that constitutes both a thematic and an (approximately) chronological progression, thus aiding evaluation of Pessoa's political and philosophical discussions in relation to the fundamental concern with subjectivity, but also helping the reader assess how the emergence and—in certain cases—the demise of the heteronyms ties in with his milieu and personal history.

Yet, although Zenith offers his own hypotheses, he mostly leaves the storytelling to Pessoa's texts themselves. He lets Pessoa be his own biographer, and define his troubled relationship to relationships—"I've always wanted to be loved but never to love" (201)—his disdain for nostalgia—"I'm unable to be pessimistic" (245)—and his sexuality—"a latent sexual inversion [that] stops in my spirit" (201). Zenith also addresses the tendency in some Pessoa criticism to a simplistic pathologization of the phenomenon of heteronymy. While Zenith suggests Pessoa may have suffered a couple of bouts of mental disturbance (7; 139), he generally leaves Pessoa equally free to be his own doctor, diagnosing his condition as that of a "hysterical neurasthenic" (125) or a masturbator (237), yet elsewhere treating such pathologization with hyperbolic irony, by claiming that "my craziness is no different from Shakespeare's, whatever may be the comparative value of the products that

issue from the saner side of our crazed minds" (262).

Zenith's inclusion of such diverse, often neglected, writings, and his limited interpretative intervention, produce an anthology that maintains an evaluative focus on its contents as texts but simultaneously reveals a psychological fascination and emotional intensity to match the philosophical weight and formal elegance more commonly attributed to Pessoa. The revelation of these qualities obviously affects attempts to assess Pessoa's writings as a unity or *oeuvre*, but it impacts equally upon the reading of the most familiar individual texts. The reader of almost any part of Bernardo Soares's *Livro* enjoys greatly increased interpretative options after sampling the work of the Barão de Teive, a fellow "semi-heteronymous" "mutilation" of Pessoa's "own" personality (301-10; 300; 259). This increase becomes exponential, of course, after comparing the Barão's fatally destructive anxiety about his literary legacy, or his regret for his sexual inactivity, respectively, with Pessoa *ele-mesmo's* *Erostratus: The search for immortality* (205-12) or the "automatically" transcribed dialogues in which 17th-century Rosicrucian Henry More counsels Pessoa on attempting to lose his virginity (103-6).

Likewise every aspect of the *drama em gente* is rendered more literally dramatic when contemplated in relation to Pessoa's love letters to Ophelia de Queiroz. Here, under the veneer of mawkish endearments and clownish humor, a sense of riven identity is painfully apparent in Pessoa's inability either to reconcile or to sustain his two roles as lover and joker. He turns a surreal joke about his unwittingly providing a spectacle for a group of empty chairs into an accusation that Ophelia is forcing the role of clown upon him (136), and allows Álvaro de Campos to intervene and sabotage the relationship, by impersonating him and rowing with Ophelia, or sending her insulting letters (137; 141-2). Pessoa's contrary attitude, forcing Ophelia to accept his subjective plurality and incapacity for consistent, or unqualified, sincerity, while demanding singularity and sincerity from her, can be viewed as a hyperbolic expression of the craving widely experienced in intimate self-other relationships for the self to be "understood" and accepted in all its complexity, and for the other to be reassuringly "understandable." Zenith includes an impassioned and gloomy letter to Mário de Sá Carneiro, in which this craving resurfaces and appears for once half-satisfied when Pessoa claims that "if I weren't writing to you, I would have to swear that this letter is sincere. [...] But you know all too well that this unstageable tragedy is as real as a cup or a coathanger" (90). Whatever the truth was about Sá Carneiro's capacity for understanding, ultimately Pessoa was to channel the

angst of the great existential dilemmas into literary creation, rather than dissipating them in love.

It is important to note that Sá Carneiro features in this anthology in regard not just to his apparent emotional impact on Pessoa, but also to his pivotal role in the intellectual ferment surrounding Pessoa in early twentieth-century Lisbon (58-61). It is remarkable how thoughtfully Zenith elucidates unfamiliar aspects of the Portuguese cultural context for his reader, employing his chapter introductions to present the key cultural figures and institutions around Pessoa, to fill in the necessary reference points from Portuguese history, and to relate Pessoa's *Paulismo*, Sensationism and Intersectionism to more familiar Modernist aesthetics. A particularly effective ploy is the inclusion of several of the prefaces written by Thomas Crosse to introduce an Anglophone readership to Portuguese Modernism and, more specifically, the major heteronyms; thus, the editor's interpretations of the original texts are, to a degree, offset by Pessoa's own reappropriations. One might regret the limited space provided in the collection for Pessoa's comments on the Portuguese literary figures and movements that preceded him. However, the root cause for this regret is arguably not the editor's judgment, but the seemingly increasing insularity of the English-speaking markets where he must hope to sell most copies of his book.

Whatever the need for calculated marketing, Zenith's foregrounding of Pessoa the Anglophone and (literary) Anglophile is both appropriate and effective. He highlights stylistic affinities not only with Beckett and Whitman but also with Swift and Carlyle, and brings together the cream of Pessoa's criticism, by turns reverential, iconoclastic, and affectionate, of Shakespeare, Dickens and Milton. This thorough contextualization of Pessoa within the English literary tradition will doubtless benefit the reception of this and future English editions of his work. More importantly, Zenith's generous selection from the English prose permits exemplification of Pessoa's gamut of styles and genres at its fullest. We also discover his extraordinary capacity, as a non-native speaker, to put a hackneyed English idiom to a fresh, often idiosyncratic, use, as when claiming that "[the artist] must be on fire somewhere. Otherwise he will not cook the goose of his human inferiority" (207). Moreover, in Pessoa's English-language juvenilia there are fascinating hints at the literary lights that guided Pessoa towards expressing an experience of subjective plurality, as when teenage alter-ego Charles Robert Anon draws on Rimbaud at his most alienated in a histrionic cata-

logue of the “greater hell” of “the vast dung-heap of the world”: “I feel as lonely as a wreck at sea. And a wreck I am indeed” (11).

For all these riches, however, any collection of Pessoa’s prose must center on the texts that appeared when this exiled *bateau ivre* found an uneasy mooring in the harbour of the Portuguese language, circa 1912. Zenith translates with all the subtlety, finesse, and sheer poetic vigor that distinguish his two editions of *The Book of Disquiet[sude]*, from which a satisfyingly representative thirty pages are included here. If I had one quibble with these beautiful renderings, it would be regarding the occasional neutralization of the syntactic quirks that intensify the startling novelty of Soares’s imagery. However, this infrequent dilution matters less in the context of Zenith’s admirable preservation of the distinguishing qualities of the heteronyms’ prose, which Pessoa himself confessed he struggled to achieve. Soares’s meticulously constructed aphorisms and moody rhetoric remain distinct from the neo-classical rhythmic regularity of Reis’s sentences, and Zenith revels in Campos’s choppy cadences, lexical *épates* and scatological puns. Zenith is at his audacious best in the *Ultimatum*, serving up vivid assonantal flourishes that brilliantly compensate for those of the original that cannot survive translation. While Zenith offers footnote explanations of the “many possibly troublesome references” (71), even a reader unfamiliar with Anatole France will grasp the essence of Campos’s manifesto from France’s depiction as “Epicurus of homeopathic remedies [...] wilted Renan tossed with Flaubert and served in a phony seventeenth-century salad bowl!” (72).

This is not the only passage Zenith includes that illustrates the oft-forgotten fact of Pessoa’s broad and elaborate sense of humor. The author of the love letters revels in self-parody, re-inventing Álvaro de Campos as a comic-book baddie, not a literary and philosophical opposite number but something more like Dr. Evil to Pessoa’s Austin Powers. At the same time, Pessoa’s pen can bleed the lurid Sadeian satire of Jean Seul de Méluret’s report from “France in 1950,” where young girls are instructed in erotomania at the charitable “Institut Sans Hymen,” and where “animal sperm as a beverage has fallen out of fashion” (232-3).

In this as in so many aspects, Zenith’s anthology achieves his stated aim of attempting not to represent Pessoa’s universe in microcosm, but rather to give “a sense of how far it reaches, and by what diverse paths” (xviii). The volume compels us to (re)consider Pessoa as urbane, spirited, socially engaged and able to wear his encyclopedic erudition surprisingly lightly. And Zenith’s

flair as translator and discretion as editor safeguard the thrill of discovering the full extent of Pessoa's diversity. This is an important, and highly attractive, publication. It vindicates Pessoa's prose output as a fascinating and distinguished corpus in itself, and adds to our appreciation of the poetical works. Over and above its significance for the reception of Pessoa in English, it sets an example for anthologies in any language of how to bring Pessoa's ideas and his writing to life.

Notes

¹ The list of the "100 best works of fiction of all time," as compiled from a vote by "100 noted writers from 54 countries," was released by the Norwegian Book Clubs in the first week of May 2002 (*The Guardian*, 8 May 2002).

² Zenith 2001, "General Introduction," xvii. All subsequent references to this volume are given, by page number only, in the main text.

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