The Primacy of the Imagination:
Jennings, Pessoa and *Contrast* magazine

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JENNINGS, Hubert D. (1979). "In Search of Fernando Pessoa," in *Contrast 47, South African Quarterly*. Cape Town: S. A. Literary Journal Ltd., Jun. 1979, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 16-25.

____________________ (1971). "The Many Faces of Pessoa," in *Contrast 27, South African Quarterly*. Cape Town: S. A. Literary Journal Ltd., Nov. 1971, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 51-64.

Contrast, which has since 1990 been styled *New Contrast*, is South Africa's oldest, and one of its most respected, literary magazines. The 170th issue has recently appeared. When the first issue appeared in the summer of 1960, South African English poets of reputation—like Anthony Delius and Sydney Clouts—and the Afrikaans poet Uys Krige[1] were present on the editorial masthead. These were all men who were individualistic in their pursuit of verbal art and whose work would not be entrapped in political agendas of any kind. From the outset, and for twenty years thereafter, the editing of the magazine would be headed by the novelist and poet Jack Cope. It was he who noted in the foreword to *Contrast 1* that "to true artists nothing remains concealed and no heart is completely closed" (p. 11). Up until the time that Cope relinquished the editorship in 1980, he did his best to maintain for his authors a room for manoeuvre, and to remain as open as possible in the largely closed ambience of a country given over to apartheid ideology.

It was Cope who published during the 1970s two articles on Fernando Pessoa submitted by Hubert Jennings—the first entitled "The Many Faces of Pessoa" (*Contrast 27*) and the second "In Search of Fernando Pessoa" (*Contrast 47*).[2] There is a gap of eight years between the two pieces, a time during which Jennings continued the work on the Portuguese poet which he had begun during the 1960s. From their titles, one might have thought that the order of the articles should have been the other way round. One might have assumed that a "search" would be followed by a discovery of "the many faces." Such an assumption has no traction with a poet of Pessoa's extraordinary qualities. Jennings got the sequence of the titles entirely right. When one is in pursuit of a talent which fragments itself in a myriad of heteronyms (Pessoa had more than 130 of them), the further one penetrates his work the more difficult the terrain becomes.

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[1] See the letters from Uys Krige to H. Jennings, introduced by S. Helgesson in this issue of *Plural*.

[2] Facsimiles of both *Contrast* articles by Jennings are included in the image gallery of *Plural* n.º 8.

[Cover of *Contrast 27*, 1971; Jennings literary estate]

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When Cope published "The Many Faces of Pessoa" in 1971, Jennings was able to bring to the attention of the *Contrast* readership an international talent who had spent eight and a half formative years in Durban, a coastal city in the then British dependency of Natal. Pessoa came to South Africa at the age of seven with his mother and step-father, a military man and Portuguese diplomatic representative to the Colony. The years in Natal taught the young boy English, established an Anglophile tendency, and exposed him to the loneliness of a human consciousness when it is exiled from its core culture. In the period 1899-1904[3] which he spent in part at the prestigious Durban High School, Pessoa was already developing the technique by which he extended his imaginative self into *personae* or alter egos and wrote with their identities. David Merrick, Charles Robert Anon, Horace James Faber and Alexander Search were among these. To the average reader, this might seem like the use of pseudonyms or pen-names, but for Pessoa the whole affair would become more complex and, indeed, vital to his existence as a poet.

It was only after his return alone to Lisbon in 1905 (his family stayed on in South Africa for some years) that the heteronyms gained overwhelming importance in his life as an author. In "The Many Faces of Pessoa," Jennings sees the centrality of this issue to the poet's work. He quotes from Michael Hamburger's description of Pessoa as "the most extreme case of multiple personality and self-division in modern poetry" (*Contrast 27*, p. 52) and then proceeds to lay out details of three of the most important heteronyms whom Pessoa evolved—or perhaps one should rather say who emerged from a source to which Pessoa acted as a kind of middleman or medium. First up is Álvaro de Campos, the man "with the monocle" (p. 52) who experiences alienation wherever he may be living. Jennings notes: "According to Pessoa's auto-mythology he was half-Jewish, half-Portuguese, a marine engineer trained in Scotland, a drug addict and a homosexual" (p. 54). Second is Ricardo Reis, described as "medico, self-exiled in Brazil for political reasons, a Latinist and semi-Hellene" (p. 57). The third, Albert Caeiro, came to Pessoa—Jennings explains—"on the night of 8th March 1914 when, standing up [...] at a high chest of drawers, he wrote at a stretch the first thirty or so of the poems" (p. 59) claimed by this heteronym[4].

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[3] Pessoa studied at the Durban High School (DHS) from Aug. 1899 to Jan. 1904, with an interruption when the poet went back to Portugal with his family in 1901 and, upon returning to South Africa in 1902, joined the Commercial School before re-enrolling at DHS.

[4] This date of 8th March 1914 was first presented as a Pessoan mythology (and not reality) by Ivo Castro, in 1986 (*O manuscrito de "O guardador de rebanhos" de Alberto Caeiro*; Lisboa: Dom Quixote); Castro showed that many drafts of Caeiro's poems existed previous to 1914.

Jennings shows how Pessoa's use of heteronyms creates complications for the reader's understanding of the poet's own everyday name. There is a distinction—perhaps even more than one distinction—to be drawn between Fernando Pessoa, the natural person, and the Fernando Pessoa who writes, and lends his name to, particular poems. The reason for this is that the natural person embraces both himself and his heteronyms, whereas the entity writing as Fernando Pessoa has a particular perspective which excludes the perspectives of the heteronyms. According to Jennings, "Fernando Pessoa is the mystic in the poetic family [...] He is also the lyricist, the poet of the fleeting moment" (p. 62).

Many of *Contrast's* South African readers would have been familiar with the use of *personae* made by Roy Campbell and William Plomer, two of the country's leading English language poets of the early 20th Century. In the first issue of the influential *Voorslag* magazine (1926), the duo had contributed work as Mary Ann Hughes ("Tolstoy and Dostoevsky") and as Pamela Willmore ("The Strandloopers") in addition to writing under their own names. But, before the appearance of Jennings's article, most *Contrast* readers would not have been aware that there was anything as complex as Pessoa's personal pantheon of heteronyms. Pessoa died when not yet fifty, with only four slim books in English and one in Portuguese published, a mere fraction of the vast accumulation of manuscripts which he left behind. If his footprint on the global stage was small, the ignorance which long clouded his reputation in the country of his childhood and education was profound.

Cope prefixed "The Many Faces of Pessoa" with an allusion to "the powerful and enigmatic poet of Portugal, now held by many to be among the most significant voices of our age" (*Contrast 27*, p. 51). This was in itself an indirect tribute to Jennings and to the service he rendered to South African literature by bringing Pessoa and his work to public notice. In his article, Jennings not only identifies and describes Campos, Reis and Caeiro—plus the ortonymic Pessoa; he also provides samples of their work in his own translations.

In the Álvaro de Campos selection the reader senses the marine-engineer's personal fragmentation: "My soul has been broken like an empty vase" ("A Note", p. 54). His isolationism is stressed: "Don't take me by the arm! | I don't like anyone taking my arm. I like to be alone" ("Lisbon Revisited 1923," p. 56). A bitter statement concerning lack of transcendental meaning is found in certain lines of "That old Anguish": "If I could believe in any kind of fetish— | Jupiter, Jehovah, Humanity— | Whichever is convenient, | For what are they all except what we think they are?" (p. 57). Jennings's translation of "Three Odes" by Ricardo Reis manages the stylistic formality which Pessoa so admired in the Portuguese original: "I rest secure on the firm pillar | of the verses in which I live | Nor fear the unnumbered future influences of time and oblivion" (p. 58).

As “the poet of primeval innocence” (p. 59), Alberto Caeiro takes over Pessoa’s pen to produce “Five Poems” translated by Jennings. Caeiro is empirical, sensationalist, and without the tendency to pre-judge: “what I see every moment is something | I never saw before” (p. 59). He confesses “I feel myself born every minute | into a world that is eternally new” (p. 59). His approach appears to lead to the following conclusion: “To be complete it is enough to exist” (p. 61). The ortonymic Fernando Pessoa is the last of the poets from whose work Jennings makes a selection for translation. Pessoa’s tendency to plangent nostalgia and his use of bold images are clearly suggested. Bravely, Jennings tackles the poem entitled “Initiation” which is both the evocation of a death experience and also an approach towards the elusive self. “The night comes which is death; | The unreal shadow ends. | You go into the night the mere shape | Of what though unwished was you” (p. 64).

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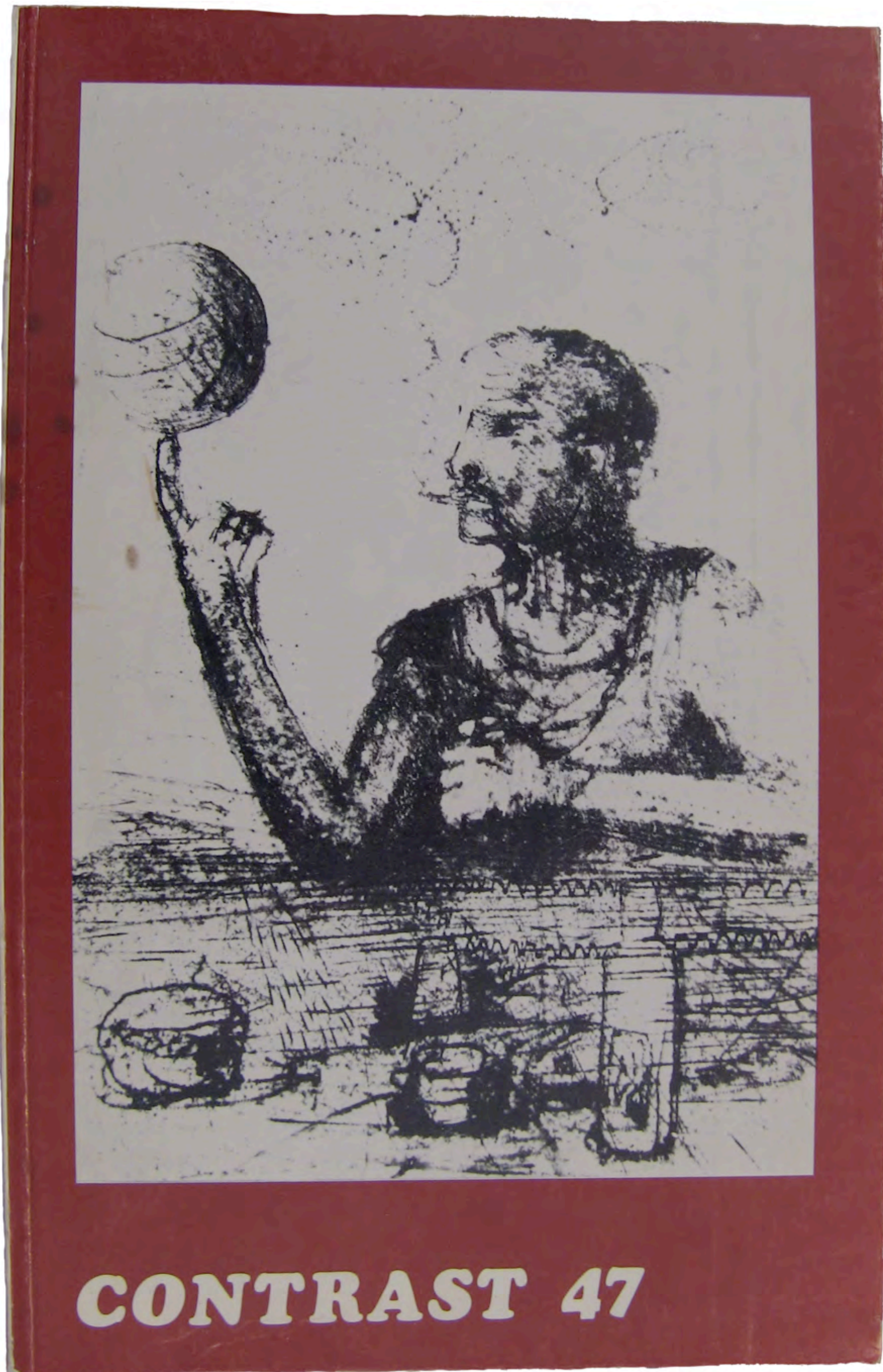
Knowing the blueprint of Pessoa’s poetic technique and reading samples of his work is only the beginning. Contemplating the poet’s “many faces” invites a process of diving down into the significations and contradictions which are unfolded. “You will never get to the bottom of Fernando Pessoa. There are too many of him,” writes Carmela Ciuraru (2011), an expert on the *nom de plum*e, in “Fernando Pessoa and his Heteronyms.” Jennings seems to have been in just this position when he contributed his second article on the poet to *Contrast 47*. “In search of Fernando Pessoa” is written in a very different way to the first piece. Whereas the style of “The Many Faces...” is schematic and relatively impersonal, that of the “In Search...” is involute, tentative at times and as much about Jennings himself as it is about his admired poet.

Jennings first encountered Pessoa when writing a history of the Durban High School in which he had served many years as a master. *The DHS Story* (1966) devoted a chapter to the poet alumnus who was introduced as “that rarest of the human species, a genius.” From this moment the search which was to last a lifetime was on. By the time he wrote the articles for *Contrast,* Jennings had contacted Uys Krige who put him in touch with Armand Guibert in France, had corresponded with a Pessoan scholar, Alexandrino Severino, at the University of São Paulo in Brazil, and had finally travelled to Lisbon on funding from the Gulbenkian Foundation to study his hero at first hand. In Lisbon, he had also learned Portuguese, which put him in an obvious position to make his own translations of the original texts.



[Cover of *Contrast 47*, 1979; Jennings literary estate]

The nub of Jennings's 1979 article—if so mercurial a piece can be said to have a nub—is that Pessoa is super-elusive, the poet who "retreats from mask to mask" (*Contrast 47*, p. 17) and to explain what he is about might be to tantamount to answering "the whole problem of life and man" (p. 17). Jennings allows himself to consider the descriptions of Pessoa and his work offered by others. For a start, there is the description of a "curious sketch" (p. 16) by the artist, Jorge Brandeiro, which he keeps in the rondavel that serves as his study. This drawing depicts "a long melancholy face topped by a ridiculously conventional trilby hat"; it also encompasses "dark, myopic, unseeing" eyes, a "smudge of a moustache", a "long curved nose" and a "hatchet chin" with the remainder "a mere whirl of lines and wash like old illustrations of the genie emerging from the bottle" (p. 16). There are also the other literati. For Armand Guibert, Pessoa is a "*Janus quadrifrons* [...] a non-situate man" (p. 16). To the Mexican Octavio Paz, he is "an inventor of other poets and destroyer of himself" (p. 17).

Equally as interesting is Jennings's own response to Pessoa. The poet's inscrutability has the effect of galvanizing him into the boldest speculations about the creative process—speculations in which the transcendental, the psychological and the pathological all have their place. Jennings compares Pessoa and his heteronyms to the New Testament madman possessed by "tormented selves" (p. 24). The madman's demons, when liberated, took up their residence in the Gadarene swine. In Pessoa's case, no Christ figure is needed to resolve the nexus – the author himself has "changed his [demons] into poets" (p. 24). This leads Jennings to reflect on the creativity of poets generally. He cites *inter alia* Walt Whitman who claimed "I am large. I contain multitudes" (p. 25), Ezra Pound who asserted "in becoming no one I begin to live" (p. 25) and the symbolist, Arthur Rimbaud who uttered the contradiction "je est un autre" (*I is another*) (p. 25).

In a two-lined addendum to this paragraph of citations, Jennings offers his own intriguing suggestion concerning dramatic poetry. He implies that dramatic poets generally have much in common with a creator of heteronyms. "From Sophocles to Shakespeare" they have produced characters who are "released selves" (p. 25). And those "released selves" emanate from the auditors as much as from the authors. They are "ours and theirs" (p. 25).

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At first sight it seems surprising that a bluff schoolmaster and academic administrator should have been so powerfully drawn by an introverted and polymorphic Portuguese *flâneur* who was for the most part an autodidact. Jennings, people said, was a straight-up-and-down disciplinarian devoted to the conventional educational system. Pessoa, on the other hand, was intrigued by alternative studies—esotericism, occultism, hermetism, numerology and alchemy,

not to mention neopaganism, theosophy, rosicrucianism and freemasonry. One's surprise at the attraction leaves out of account the fact that Jennings had an inner life, too, which moved beneath the carapace of the pedagogue.

The details of how this inner Jennings was discovered have been written up elsewhere. It suffices to mention here that his traumatic experiences as a young combatant in World War I, plus a hidden life of innocent romantic encounters, did much to open up and to soften his personality. In addition to being a lover of poetry written by others, he was also a writer of poetry himself.

Some years after his death, a box was discovered by the husband of Jennings's granddaughter in the rafters of his Johannesburg garage. It contained an archive of papers and books. These included much work on Pessoa, and *Cracked Record*, a secret 697-page autobiography which came from the author's hand when he was in his early 90s. This—according to his biographer—was "a sometimes anguished chronicle that streams along... in a torrent of recollection." The box in the rafters is an uncanny analogue to the chest with the dome-shaped lid that contained the unpublished papers of Fernando Pessoa, to which Jennings had once been given access on his Gulbenkian Foundation expedition to Lisbon.

Both the poet and his disciple were driven men who felt the need to keep much of themselves hidden. Both left large caches of unpublished material. Both had left Europe to experience the sub-tropical ambience of the same South African city. Both had spent parts of their lives in the same Durban High School. On reflection, the bond between them seems not so surprising after all. The summation of Jennings's published work on Pessoa was, perhaps, his *Fernando Pessoa in Durban* (1986).

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This essay now returns to *Contrast* magazine. During the era of apartheid it was a constant struggle for Jack Cope and Geoffrey Haresnape, the editor who succeeded him, to maintain the open space which could properly be called a writers' forum. The threat to freedom of expression and its dire adjuncts—the tapped telephone, the intercepted letter and the plain-clothes policeman—were always looming. When Haresnape retired as editor in 1990, *Contrast* was restyled *New Contrast*, in part due to the promise of a political thaw. When the transition finally came in 1994, so much which was restrictive fell away. *New Contrast* could breathe more freely, and its contributing writers could find new wings with which to fly.

It is, however, clear that freedom of expression will always need to be jealously defended. The new South Africa has inexorably developed its own problems created by corruption, ignorance, and commercial greed. There has also been a recent political bid to curb the freedom of the press. These matters have

been touched on—usually indirectly—in the poetry and fiction represented in recent issues of the magazine.

In April 2015, there was mounted on Fernando Pessoa's bronze statue in Durban an attack which flies in the face of everything that Jennings had sought to promote in his lifetime. Red paint was used to deface the poet's image together with the legend, also scrawled in red: "EFF response" (PAYET, 2015). Vusi Khoza, a representative of Economic Freedom Fighters, the political party named in the legend, disavowed party responsibility for the act, but added these words. "We support the destruction, defacing and dismantling of apartheid symbols... We agree with what has been done". It is a sad irony the Pessoa of all people should have been targeted for this act. Given the nature of his life and work, his reduction to "apartheid symbol" is totally wide of the mark. From vandalising statues to proscribing books is only a short step. *New Contrast's* current leadership will no doubt be aware of the dangerous currents which are moving in the new South Africa and move to preserve an "open space" for free creativity.

The last word goes to "Homage to Fernando Pessoa", a four-part poem printed in *Contrast 16* (1967, pp. 16-18) and re-issued in *Seismograph*—both before the appearance of the Jennings articles. In this, Charles Eglington considers the trope of exploration in relation to a Portuguese mariner like Bartholomew Diaz and to a navigator of the psyche like the eponymous poet. Both men have experienced "the ache for unknown things" (*Seismograph*, p. 40)[5]. For Eglington, the outer and inner worlds are equally important. Subtextually, the poem is paying homage to the primacy of the imagination. Jennings and Cope would have agreed with that priority. Would the protean Pessoa have concurred? Perhaps.

[5] In the *Seismograph* version, Eglington has made a considered change, replacing *Contrast 16*'s "the fear of unknown things" with the version quoted. See *Contrast*'s version as Annex I.

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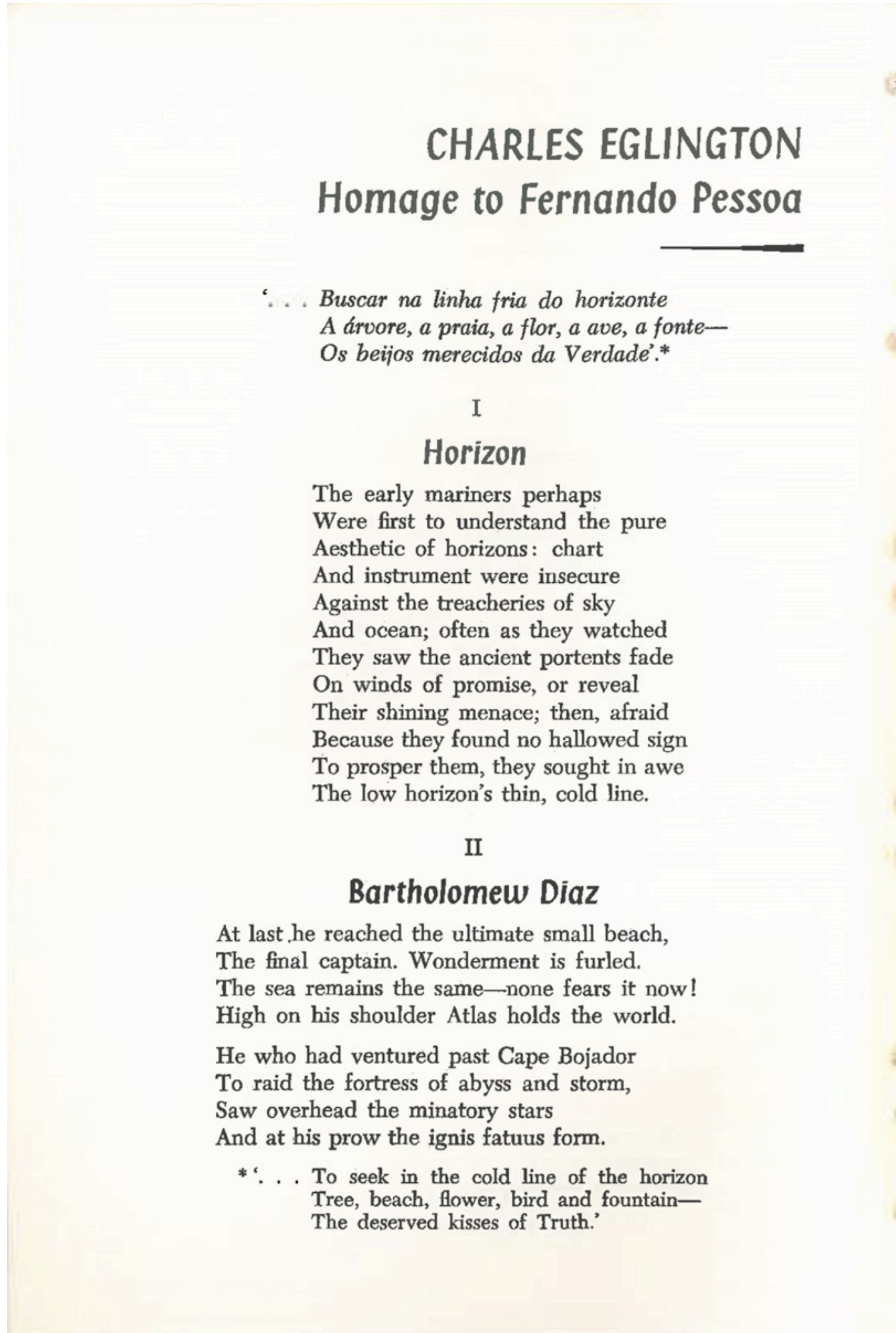
Annexes

I. *Four pages of the poem "*Homage to Fernando Pessoa*," written by Charles Eglington and published in the journal* Contrast 16, South African Quarterly *(Cape Town: S. A. Literary Journal Ltd., June 1967, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 16-19).*



CHARLES EGLINGTON
Homage to Fernando Pessoa

'. . . *Buscar na linha fria do horizonte*
A árvore, a praia, a flor, a ave, a fonte—
Os beijos merecidos da Verdade'.*

I

Horizon

The early mariners perhaps
Were first to understand the pure
Aesthetic of horizons: chart
And instrument were insecure
Against the treacheries of sky
And ocean; often as they watched
They saw the ancient portents fade
On winds of promise, or reveal
Their shining menace; then, afraid
Because they found no hallowed sign
To prosper them, they sought in awe
The low horizon's thin, cold line.

II

Bartholomew Diaz

At last he reached the ultimate small beach,
The final captain. Wonderment is furled.
The sea remains the same—none fears it now!
High on his shoulder Atlas holds the world.

He who had ventured past Cape Bojador
To raid the fortress of abyss and storm,
Saw overhead the minatory stars
And at his prow the ignis fatuus form.

* '. . . To seek in the cold line of the horizon
Tree, beach, flower, bird and fountain—
The deserved kisses of Truth.'

Horizons that deceived with sensitive
Configurations, till at last a tower
Rose on the sky, a bird cried out and land
Burst through a mist of longing into flower.

And when, returning, he sailed past the cape
Whose saurian menace he had met and spurned,
The Tagus flowed to meet him in a light
That from the once-dark headland brightly burned.
Now distances have fountains, trees and birds;
Each cold horizon is the silver beach
That shelters him—for which he dared the seas
And sailed past all extremities to reach.

III

Fever

The fever to explore
Remains, Fernando: now
We like Diogo Cão,
Navigator,
Launch beacons on the huge
And possible ocean
Where stellar tides begin
To lap infinitude.
In that eternal calm
No final earthly port—
Like his, from God—is sought:
Our fever seeks its balm
In knowledge that can still
The fear of unknown things:
How brightly darkness rings
The astral terminal!

Lourenco Marques

'Ó mar salgado, quanto do teu sal
São lagrimas de Portugal!'

Once, grave laodicean profiteer,
This harbour welcomed neutral ships

And warring secrets: enemies,
Remote from where fierce, fatal loyalties
Strode armed with death, strolled casually
And mingled with shut faces and tight hearts
In this pacific city, open then
To an ocean menaced by their conflict.
In still blue waters of flamboyant shade
Intrigue and treason, treachery and hate
Fermented like paludal slime. In febrile dreams
The city shared the strangers' destiny.

Yet, in that tense neutrality
There was a brooding innocence:
The war was far away and though the sea
Might wash a blaze of fire from the night,
The city knew the probabilities;
Its lassitude was old and wise;
The ocean it confronted was
(As backward-looking, sad Pessoa knew)
Salt with the tears of Portugal;
The mother-country's wars had all been fought—
How could there ever come a time
For guilt, expatiation and remorse?

Now (many years have passed) I sit
In still blue waters of flamboyant shade
And muse as sad Pessoa never could:
I lack blood knowledge of those bitter tears,
Those centuries when caravels
Caught storms of hazard in their sails
And left, in spastic writing on all maps,
Directions to the unknown worlds of earth;
The city, grown and prosperous,
Exalts in me no backward-looking thoughts—
It has the future's brooding innocence.
I sense another taut neutrality.
Its world, though growing old, is young,
Its rooted heritage is germinal:
Behind its tall, proud back a continent
Throws out a challenge, like the oceans once.

A note: Fernando Pessoa was born in Lisbon on June 13, 1888, and died there on September 30, 1935. He came to South Africa at the age of five and returned to Portugal about 12 years later. He lived in Durban and his education was entirely in English—Roy Campbell mentions that Pessoa was at the Durban Boys' High School with one of his elder brothers—and during his lifetime he published four small volumes of poetry in English, but only one slim volume in Portuguese (MENSAGEM, 1935). Yet he is numbered among the greatest Portuguese poets and it can certainly be claimed for him that he ranks with the greatest poets of the 20th century.

He was a prodigious poet, in fact. Although he died at the comparatively early age of 47, he wrote hundreds of poems, most of which were not published until after his death. His range and his command of styles and forms were remarkable in the highest degree. After his death all his poems were collected and published in a scholarly edition of eight volumes. While alive he published his verse in a number of Portuguese literary journals, and was a powerful influence in Portuguese poetry for nearly three decades. He published his work under three heteronyms, as well as under his own name. Five volumes of the collected edition bear his own name; each of the other three bears one of the heteronyms: Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis and Alvaro de Campos.

Pessoa used the heteronyms to express different aspects of his complex personality—and the differences are astonishing. In my HOMAGE I am concerned only with 'Fernando Pessoa', and especially with the poems he wrote between 1918 and 1934 which are contained in MENSAGEM (Message). They deal with the Portuguese past, with the age of the great princes and captains, with the great mariners and discoverers. He dwells also—in a subtle and sublime mood of hope—on the decline of that age. These poems represent the backward-looking Pessoa —who could miraculously co-exist with the forward-looking, futuristic, avant-garde Álvaro de Campos. They are among the purest, the most mysterious and magical, of his lyrics.

My poems are not translations, nor are they 'after Pessoa'. But their *prima anima* is to be found in the MENSAGEM poems, and more particularly in a number of phrases, images and concepts which are central to them. C. E.