

# Pessoa in Durban: the making of a poet.

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JENNINGS, Hubert D. (1986). *Fernando Pessoa in Durban*. Durban: Durban Corporation, 188 pp.

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(1984). *Os Dois Exílios. Fernando Pessoa na África do Sul*. Porto: Fundação Eng. António de Almeida / Centro de Estudos Pessoaanos, 214 pp.

The author of *Fernando Pessoa in Durban*, Hubert Jennings, was born in England in 1896, joined the army at 16, was wounded in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battle of Ypres, sent home, but returned to France where he was wounded again and lost an eye. Invalided out of the army, he went to study at Aberystwyth University, qualified as a teacher and moved to South Africa in 1923, where he joined the teaching staff at Durban High School. On his retirement, he was commissioned to write the history of Durban High, whose former students included Roy Campbell and Fernando Pessoa. Jennings had never previously heard of Pessoa, but became particularly interested in him after reading a letter written by Roy Campbell to a mutual friend and in which Campbell wrote: "I have just discovered that Fernando Pessoa, the finest poet in any language in this century, also went to Durban High School." Jennings then went on to learn Portuguese, spent time in Lisbon doing further research, and was awarded an MA from Aberystwyth University at the age of 80. His MA thesis forms the basis for his biography of the Portuguese poet, charting the nine years that Pessoa spent in Durban, South Africa, and providing an insight into the young Pessoa and his early and enduring fascination with language and literature.

Pessoa arrived in Durban in 1896, when he was seven. His widowed mother had remarried, and his stepfather was the Portuguese consul. Jennings disputes João Gaspar Simões's theory that Pessoa's whole introverted personality was shaped by the trauma of losing his father when he was only 5, being uprooted from Lisbon and transplanted to Durban, and, in a sense, 'losing' his mother to her new husband and new siblings (SIMÕES, 1951: 55). Jennings provides evidence that the stepfather was very kind and welcoming, and that Pessoa was very fond of his siblings, who recall him telling them stories and making up puzzles for them.

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\* Literary translator.

# FERNANDO PESSOA IN DURBAN



BY H.D. JENNINGS

[Cover of *Pessoa in Durban*]

Pessoa arrived in Durban knowing no English at all, and made astonishing progress as a student, rapidly becoming fluent in English and French. His family visited Portugal between 1901 and 1902, but little is known of that period. On his return, Pessoa enrolled at the Commercial School, where he won first prize for an essay on Macaulay (whose work lacks genius, he said, because Macaulay was too sane!) and spent his spare time reading and writing voluminously. His reading diary for June 1903 includes such writers as Byron, Keats, Edgar Allen Poe, Espronceda, Molière, Voltaire, Shelley, Tolstoy, Shakespeare and Aristotle. Pessoa was clearly not an average student. A fellow pupil described him as:

a shy and likeable boy, of pleasant character, extremely intelligent, intent on speaking and writing English in the most academical form possible.

(JENNINGS, 1986: 17)

When that same pupil, a Mr Ormond, was told that his former schoolfellow was now considered to be a great Portuguese poet, he commented:

Although I was very young at the time, I remember feeling that no matter what came of it he was a genius... [he] was then a lively fellow, happy, good-humoured and of attractive appearance: I felt myself attracted to him as a piece of iron is attracted to a magnet.

(JENNINGS, 1986: 17)

Another pupil, Mr Geerds, described Pessoa thus: "A little fellow with a big head. He was brilliantly clever but quite mad." He also mentioned that when he left Durban to study at Oxford University, he received a letter from Pessoa, with whom he had remained friends. The letter purported to come from a doctor in Lisbon, but Geerds was sure it had been written by Pessoa himself. Geerds had not kept the letter, but Jennings later found a fragment written in French among Pessoa's many papers, and which he believed to be a draft of that letter to Geerds. In this document, Pessoa describes "the patient P":

[la vie mentale de P.] n'est pas absolument normal [...] Plus, à sept ans P montre déjà ce caractère réservé—nonenfantile—mais une pondération (non la pondération du bon-sens tout-à-fait bourgeois, mais la pondération mélancolique et intellectuelle), une sérieux qui étonnent. S'isole déjà, il aime jouer seul, à lire, à écrire (il l'apprit lui-même). C'est un solitaire, on le voit bien! Et à tout celà il faut joindre beaucoup de rage impulsive (...) beaucoup de peur. On peut résumer le caractère—précocité intellectuelle, imagination prématurément intense, méchanceté, besoin d'isolement. C'est un neuropath en miniature.

[the mental life of P.] was not absolutely normal. [...] Again, at seven years P. was showing that reserved character—unchildlike—and a ponderation (not that sensible, completely middle-class ponderation, but a melancholy and intellectual ponderation), and an astonishing *seriousness*. He is already isolating himself, he loves to play alone, to read, to write (*he learned to do so by himself*). He is a solitary, that is quite plain! And to all this must be added plenty of impulsive anger... plenty of fear. His character can be summarised as—

intellectual precocity, prematurely intense imagination, naughtiness, fear, need to be alone. It is miniature *neuropathy*.)

(translation and italics by JENNINGS, 1986: 23)

He also comments that:

Ayant vécu dans un pays (le Natal) loin de l'influence corruptrice de la civilisation, il n'a pas de dépuçelage mental; à cette époque il garde mentalement (à ce que je crois) une virginité d'imagination parfaite.

Having lived in a land (Natal) far from the corruptive influence of civilization, he had not lost his mental purity; at that time he still kept mentally (as far as I can tell) a perfect virginity of imagination.

(translation based on the one by JENNINGS, 1986: 23-24)

This description does perhaps support Simões's view of Pessoa as a wounded soul, but, more interestingly, it also provides an early example of Pessoa splitting off from "Pessoa ele mesmo" (*Pessoa himself*) and creating another self like himself but not himself.

Pessoa began writing very early on—stories, poems and pastiches. He also created word and logic puzzles that were good enough to be published in the local newspapers and to which we can perhaps trace his "detective" novels—*Quaresma*, *Decifrador*—which are really more puzzle than novel. The slightly stilted and old-fashioned English poems he wrote at the time are clearly (and unsurprisingly) the work of a young man under the influence of all the many writers he was reading. Jennings notes João Gaspar Simões's comment about Pessoa's ten years in South Africa:

One thing is certain that in all his work there is not a single word about that remote home – the distant land where he spent nearly ten years...

[*apud* and translation by JENNINGS, 1986: 27]

Jennings seconds this, noting that, despite Durban's great natural beauty, there is virtually no mention of this in any of Pessoa's early writings, almost as if Durban did not exist, as if it were less real than the literary world in which the poet was immersed. The brief account of Jennings's own life in Douglas Livingstone's introduction (and which I summarise at the beginning of this review) reminds one of what we consider to be a normal life full of incident and is in marked contrast to Pessoa's life which is lived almost entirely through poetry, puzzles and fictions.

In Part 2 of *Pessoa in Durban*, Jennings deals with the many literary influences on Pessoa's work. The poet was immersed in the work of English-language authors, but dismissed the work of Hugo, Musset and Lamartine as "constructive monstrosities" adding that "The French spirit is the apotheosis of the second rate." (PESSOA, s/d: 142-3). He felt quite differently about the classics. He learned Latin at school in Durban and was particularly drawn to the poems of

Horace, an interest that found an outlet in his heteronym Ricardo Reis. As Jennings writes:

Ricardo Reis frequently paraphrases not only the wording but sometimes the themes which Horace uses, but adding always his own marked and individual touch.

(JENNINGS, 1986: 75)

Pessoa never learned Greek, but had read most of the Greek tragedies and had, for his own amusement, translated into Portuguese some of W.R. Paton's *Greek Anthology* (PESSOA, 1965: 637). The impression one gets is of a man constantly in search of knowledge, but also someone already in search of other personae. Citing Octavio Paz's summation of Pessoa's work (PESSOA, 1962): "Su obra es un paso hacia lo desconocido. Una pasión" ("His work is a step towards the unknown. A passion."), Jennings in turn remarks:

It was a passion tempered by the Greek spirit of speculation and scepticism: things he had learned in South Africa, when, with fine prescience, he had taken for himself the name of Alexander Search.

(JENNINGS, 1986: 94-95)

The book concludes with a selection of translations by Jennings of poems by Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos, Ricardo Reis and Fernando Pessoa *himself*. There is also a series of photos of Durban, Durban High School and of Pessoa at the ages of 8, 11, 13, 19, 27, as well as the famous one of him striding along in the Baixa, and the last one taken in 1935. In all of them one sees the same wariness, the same withheldness, which may simply be explained as the way people posed for photos long before the age of the beaming selfie. It is hard, though, not to interpret them all as Pessoa-the-façade behind which seethe all those many other lives. This is particularly true of the last photo, in which he looks cautiously at the photographer and at us or at some point just beyond. He seems to find it almost painful to be seen at all.

Whatever the roots of Pessoa's intense introversion—whether it was the early loss of his father, his mother's remarriage, being transplanted to another culture and another language and another family when only seven years old—what comes across in this brief biography is that even from that very young age he was recognisably Pessoa, trying out different languages and voices and personalities and already creating a personal universe to be peopled with his many alternative selves, a universe existing in parallel to the real world. Jennings's thesis was, oddly enough, first published in Portuguese in Portugal under the title *Os Dois Exílios*, a reference to four painful and enigmatic poems by Pessoa. The first line of the second of these poems seems to sum up the Pessoa of that last photograph:

Doe viver, nada sou que valha ser.

(PESSOA, 1956: 49)



Fernando Pessoa - last portrait, 1935.

*From the Pessoa and Rosa Family Collection.*

[reproduced in JENNINGS, 1986: last page of photos]

And yet this is the same man who concluded “Ode Triunfal” (*Triumphal Ode*) with the words:

Ah não ser eu toda a gente e toda a parte!

(PESSOA, 1915: 83)

What one takes from this biography is a sense of a man who wanted simultaneously to be no one and to be everyone.

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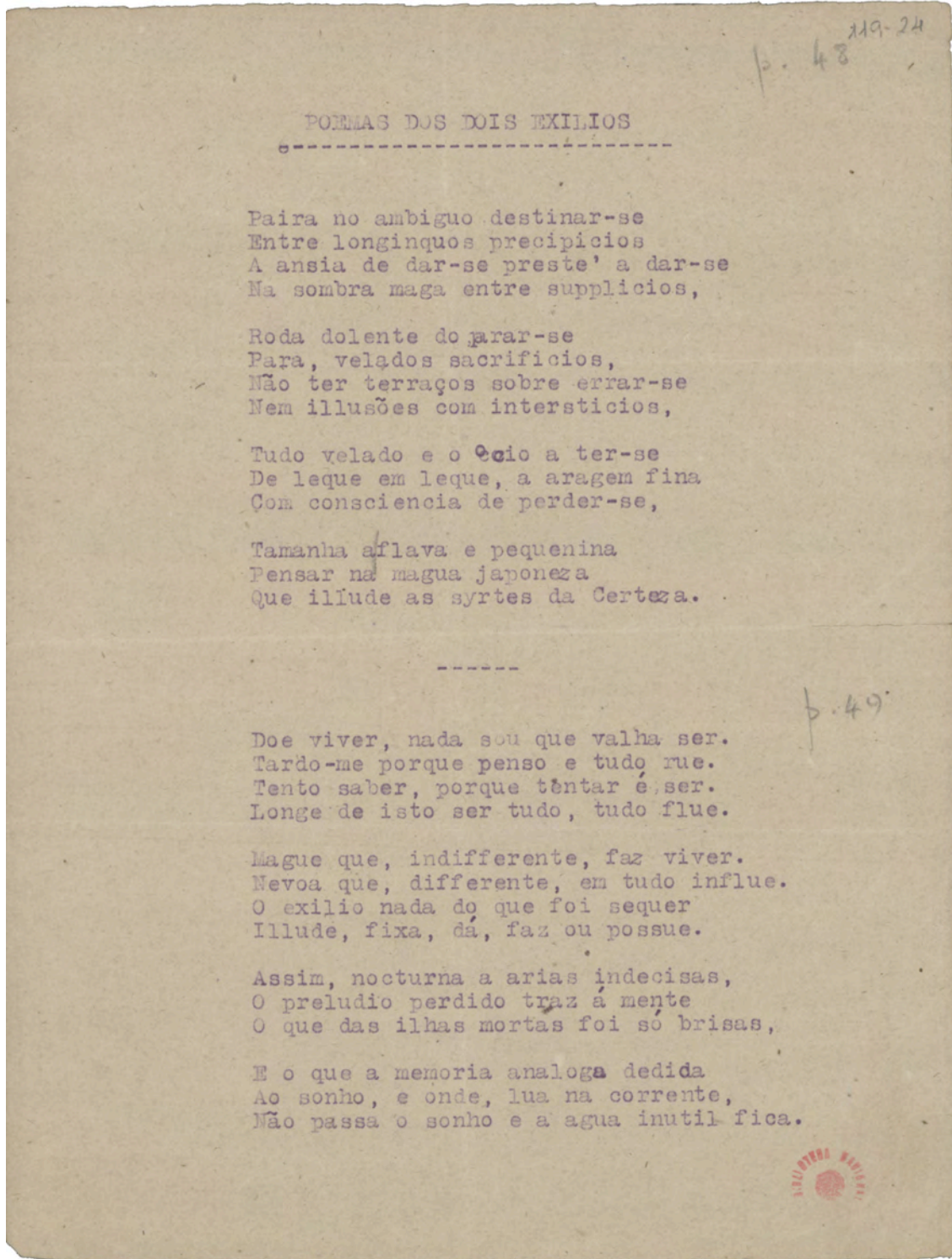


[Cover of *Os Dois Exílios*, Portuguese version of *Pessoa in Durban*]



## Annexes

I. [BNP/E3, 119-24] *Four poems (or one four-part poem) by Fernando Pessoa, typed on both sides of a loose paper, under the title "Poemas dos Dois Exílios." Some parts of this text had different titles in manuscripts that preceded the typed version: 119-21<sup>r</sup> (Loucura 2), 119-22<sup>r</sup> (Loucura 3), 119-23<sup>r</sup> (Loucura 1) and 119-22<sup>v</sup> (untitled); these mss. are dated 24 Sept. 1923. First published in Poesias Inéditas, 1919-1930 (Lisboa: Ática, 1956).*



Análogo começo,  
Unissono me peço,  
Gaia sciencia o assomo -  
Falha no ultimo tomo.

f. 50

Onde prolixo ameaço  
Paralelo transpasso;  
O entreaberto haver  
Diagonal a ser.

E interludio vernal,  
Conquista do fatal,  
Onde, velludo, afaga  
A ultima que alaga.

Timbre do vespertino,  
Alli, caricia, o hymno  
Outomnou entre preces  
Antes que, agua, comeces.

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f. 51

Doura o dia. Silente, o vento dura.  
Vérde as arvores, molle a terra escura,  
Onde flores, vazia a alea e os bancos.  
No pinhal herba cresce nos barrancos.  
Nuvens vagas no perfido horizonte.  
O moinho longinquo no ermo monte.  
Eu alma, que contempla tudo isto,  
Nada conhece e tudo reconhece.  
Nestas sombras de me sentir existo,  
E é falsa a teia que tecer me tece.

POEMAS DOS DOIS EXILIOS

Paira no ambiguo destinar-se  
Entre longinquos precipicios,  
A ansia de dar-se preste' a dar-se  
Na sombra vaga entre supplicios,

5 Roda dolente do parar-se  
Para, velados sacrificios,  
Não ter terraços sobre errar-se  
Nem illusões com intersticios,

9 Tudo velado e o ocio a ter-se  
10 De leque em leque, a aragem fina  
Com consciencia de perder-se,

Tamanha a flava e pequenina  
Pensar na magua japoneza  
Que illude as syrtes da Certeza.

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15 Doe viver, nada sou que valha ser.  
Tardo-me porque penso e tudo rue.  
Tento saber, porque tentar é ser.  
Longe de isto ser tudo, tudo flue.

19 Magua que, indifferente, faz viver.  
20 Nevoa que, differente, em tudo influe.  
O exilio nada do que foi sequer  
Illude, fixa, dá, faz ou possue.

Assim, nocturna, a arias indecisas,  
O preludio perdido traz á mente  
25 O que das ilhas mortas foi só brisas,

26 E o que a memoria analogica dedica  
Ao sonho, e onde, lua na corrente,  
Não passa o sonho e a agua inutil fica.

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Analogo começo,  
 30 Unissono me peço,  
 Gaia sciencia o assomo—  
 Falha no ultimo tomo.

Onde prolixo ameaço  
 Paralelo transpasso,  
 35 O entreaberto haver  
 Diagonal a ser.

37 O interludio vernal,  
 Conquista do fatal,  
 Onde, velludo, afaga  
 40 A ultima que alaga.

Timbre do vespertino,  
 Alli, caricia, o hymno  
 Outomnou entre preces  
 Antes que, agua, comeces.

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45 Doura o dia. Silente, o vento dura.  
 46 Verde as arvores, molle a terra escura,  
 Onde flores, vazia a alea e os bancos.  
 No pinhal herva cresce nos barrancos.  
 Nuvens vagas no perfido horizonte.  
 50 O moinho longinquo no ermo monte.  
 Eu alma, que contempla tudo isto,  
 Nada conhece e tudo reconhece.  
 Nestas sombras de me sentir existo,  
 E é falsa a teia que tecer me tece.

Notes:

- 5 <a>/p\ arar-se  
 9 <co>/oc\ io  
 19 Mague *in the original, certainly as a typo; the ms. BNP/E3, 119-22<sup>r</sup> displays Magua.*  
 26 dedi<d>/c\ a  
 35 entre<ba>/ab\ erto  
 37 interludi<p>/o\  
 46 V<d>/e\ rde