

Revisiting Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet*

Susan Margaret Brown*

MEDEIROS, Paulo de (2015). *O Silêncio das Sereias: Ensaio sobre o Livro do Desassossego*. Lisbon: Tinta-da-China, 168 pp.

_____ (2013). *Pessoa's Geometry of the Abyss: Modernity and the Book of Disquiet*. London: Legenda, 134 pp.

Yet our mental capture at the hand of Pessoa results, even more profoundly, from that fact that philosophy has yet to exhaust his modernity. So that we find ourselves reading this poet and not being able to wrest ourselves from him, finding in his work an imperative to which we do not yet know how to submit ourselves: to follow the path that sets out, between Plato and the anti-Plato, in the interval that the poet has opened up for us, a veritable philosophy of the multiple, of the void, of the infinite. A philosophy that will affirmatively do justice to this world that the gods have forever abandoned.

Alain Badiou

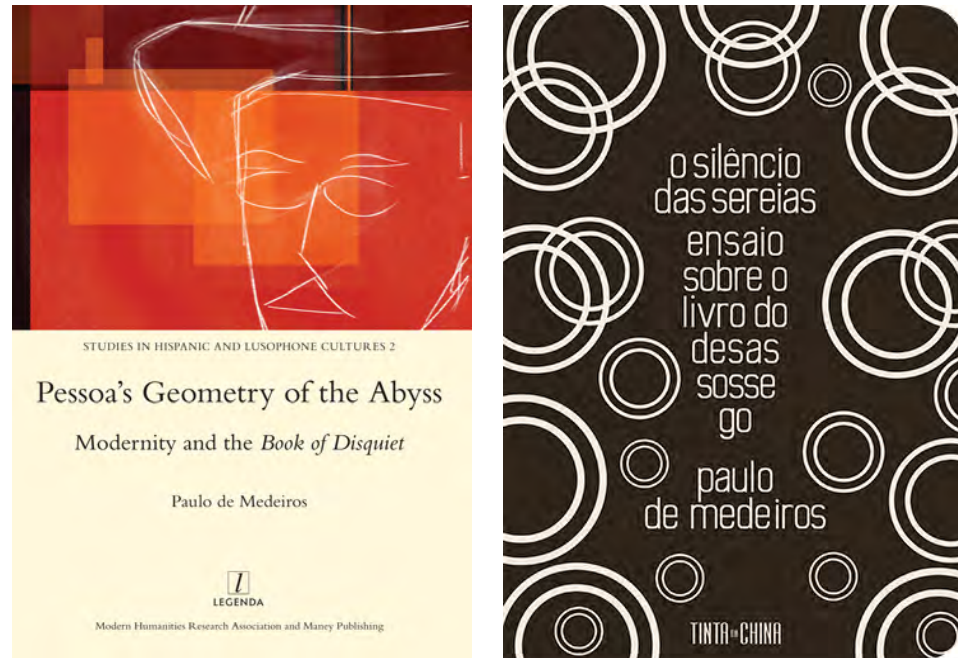
When Jacinto do Prado Coelho's first edition of Pessoa's *Livro do Desassossego* (Book of Disquiet), in two volumes, came out in 1982, scholars, critics and general readers of Pessoa remained stunned and disbelieving—as survivors of an earthquake often are—by the unexpected explosion of a sumptuous prose in the unwieldy form of endless, frequently undated fragments, written by a self-described semi-heteronym. Almost overnight the aftershocks began in the form of articles, essays, books, new editions and translations—much of which contained an underlying paradoxical ambivalence in their treatment of the “book”: enthrallment, on the one hand, by the magnificence of the text and uneasiness, on the other, about how to bring it into the larger, overriding context of Pessoa's heteronyms.

Two recent books, both published in 2013 and each in its own way a seismic event, provide the reader with the tools and insights necessary for revisiting and exploring the work of the semi-heteronym Bernardo Soares¹ in significant new

* Susan Margaret Brown teaches at the Community College of Rhode Island.

¹ In the following passage of his famous letter to Adolfo Casais Monteiro of January 13, 1915, Pessoa explains the terms heteronym and semi-heteronym: “My semi-heteronym Bernardo Soares, in many ways similar to Álvaro de Campos, appears when tired and half asleep my natural impulse to reason and to control slackens; his prose is an ongoing reverie. He is a semi-heteronym because even though he is not my own personality, he is not so much different from myself as he is a mere distortion of that personality. He is me without my rational and emotional aspects. The prose, except for what in mine seems reasoned, is the same as mine, and the Portuguese is completely the same.” The translation is taken from *Selected Letters of Fernando Pessoa* (Sheep Meadow Press, 2016), my forthcoming book of over one hundred letters of Pessoa.

ways. For this reason, the edition of the *Livro do Desassossego*² by Jerónimo Pizarro (based on the 2010 critical edition also by Pizarro), and *Pessoa's Geometry of the Abyss* by Paulo Medeiros are watershed moments. In this review I will concentrate on the relatively short text of Medeiros's probing analysis. I will also make mention of his more recent book *O Silêncio das Sereias*.



[Covers of Medeiros's 2013 and 2015 books, respectively]

Medeiros claims that the *Livro do Desassossego* deserves recognition as one of the major texts of modernity's most radical achievements. Why? Because it embodies a philosophical complexity equal to what is most radical within the modernist aesthetic. Furthermore, because it is not like any other book (its nearest analogues being Kafka's paradoxes³ or Benjamin's *Arcades Project*⁴), certain expectations on the part of the reader must be adjusted accordingly.

In the opening chapter of *Pessoa's Geometry of the Abyss*, Medeiros discusses his five main protocols of reading. First, the reader must forget Pessoa's heteronyms while reading the *Livro do Desassossego*. As long as the mental backdrop of the heteronyms is allowed to over-determine the prose of the semi-heteronym, the text remains little more than a pretext for hearing echoes of the *drama-em-gente*, thus making it impossible to recognize the full complexity of its theoretical implications.

² Lisbon: Tinta-da-China, 2013 (hardcover) and 2014 (paperback).

³ KAFKA, Franz (1961). *Parables and Paradoxes* (Bilingual edition) New York: Schocken Books.

⁴ For a good introduction, see *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* by Susan Buck-Morss (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).

To read Soares as an aggregate of the heteronyms is to misread him; to misread him is to refuse Pessoa the greatness due him. The second protocol follows logically, and has to do with the nature of the fragment, the fragmentary nature of the book, and the requisite need to read the fragments with a philosophical orientation. Along with Maria Irene Ramalho de Sousa Santos—quoted frequently and always incisively—Medeiros (2013: 14-18) identifies Friedrich Schlegel's work as a key source for understanding Pessoa's emphasis on the fragment as a poetic form that conceptually implies, like Schlegel's hedgehog analogy,⁵ an ironic and self-contradictory view of the writing as being simultaneously self-contained and non-referential, while remaining open, pointing outwards to another fragment. This poetic practice, as Ramalho states, "best exemplifies the modern poet's realization that the 'I' does not exist, after all, and that the 'lyric I' has its only grounding in the negative subjectivity that all lyric writing is" (MEDEIROS, 2013: 14).

Especially with texts like the unfinished drama *Fausto* and the *Livro do Desassossego*, it is incumbent upon readers to reverse what conventions of reading have taught: namely, to think of fragments as incomplete, as lacking something. If we simply invert our thinking— see the incomplete and fragmentary nature of the text as an achievement rather than a problem—we come closer to understanding the intention of the text.

The third protocol, recalling the work of José Gil⁶, proposes viewing the work as an experimental laboratory for writing, wherein the key word *desassossego* refers to the restless need to write in spite of there being no closure but rather only the open-ended dialectical reading of fragments together with other fragments. A fourth protocol, developed at length in the final chapter, emphasizes the value derived from comparing the *Livro do Desassossego* to other texts, not in terms of identifiable influences but rather in regard to specific queries and practices of writing shared with other vanguardist authors of European modernism such as Franz Kafka and Walter Benjamin.

All of these notions come together to bear on the fifth and final protocol, the task of criticism, defined as "the search for a way to submit oneself to an unknown imperative of the text" (MEDEIROS, 2013: 28), plus a close reading of Fragment 32 ["E eu que digo isto—por que escrevo eu este livro?"] for further clues as to how one should proceed. Much of this final section relies on the thought of Alain

⁵ The reference to the hedgehog occurs in Fragment #206 of the *Athenaeumsfragment*: "Ein Fragment muß gleich einem kleinen Kunstwerke von der umgebenden Welt ganz abgesondert und in sich selbst vollendet sein wie ein Igel." (A fragment, like a small work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a hedgehog). For a good introduction to Schlegel's aesthetic theory of the fragment, see "The Fragmentary Imperative" in *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings*, edited and translated by Jochen Schulte-Sasse et al. Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 289-358.

⁶ GIL, José (1987). *Fernando Pessoa ou a metafísica das sensações*. Lisbon: Relógio d'Água.

Badiou, whose challenge to us as readers is to become capable of being a contemporary of Pessoa, a posthumous writer, who wrote for the future. We must catch up to him if we are to appreciate his radical modernism which, in Badiou's view, is his creation of an entirely original space wherein a profound and deeply ambivalent writing occurs, somewhere between the Platonism of the nineteenth century and the Anti-Platonism of the twentieth. Acquiring that sense of contemporaneity is no easy task, insists Medeiros, for it demands that we 1) deliberately peel away the layers of preconceived notions about Pessoa that prevent our seeing him as a contemporary; 2) remain attentive to the text's historical context while exploring its significance for the present; 3) focus especially on the notion of the interval and, as Ramalho recommends (MEDEIROS, 2013: 26), construe the gaps as constitutive elements of the text that possess as much presence as the fragments dependent upon them for their existence; 4) understand theory in the Heideggerian manner; that is, as dependent upon the thinking already done by the poet, as a "sensuous sense of what is called thinking, a bringing to presence by grasping" (MEDEIROS, 2013: 26).

This notion of "grasping" or seeing what is not there becomes the topic of the second chapter. Divided into three sections—Seeing (the) Unseen, Photographic Writing, Shadows and Splinters—this chapter argues that the text is inherently grounded in the sense of seeing (the unseen) by underscoring the centrality of the visual. In his effort to elicit and communicate thinking about the impossibility of knowing (seeing) the Self, Soares relies largely on visual metaphors to make the unbridgeable distance between outer reality and inner consciousness palpable. Pessoa's use of photography in particular allows Soares to explore this division. Citing Fragment 59 ["Sou uma placa photographica prolixamente impressionavel."], Medeiros concludes that Soares conceives of his writing "as a photographic writing" (MEDEIROS, 2013: 44). The third section of this chapter rounds out the discussion by recalling visual representations of Pessoa by Antonio Tabucchi, José Saramago, Almada Negreiros, Alfredo Margarida and Júlio Pomar.

"Phantoms and Crypts," the title of the third chapter, pursues the discussion of the text in terms of its haunting qualities as it purports to reveal the various connections with film.

Chapter Four, titled "Dreams, Women and Politics," continues to explore the text in unprecedented ways. Although it has become commonplace to allude to the dreamlike quality of Soares's prose, Medeiros's insights into the function of dreams in the text opens into a discussion of women and politics that charts unexpected new territory. The chapter has the feel of an elaborately woven fabric of various threads, connecting dream with desire, desire with representations of women as unreal presences, and both desire and women with political ideas, defined as "dreams on a large scale" (MEDEIROS, 2013: 91). Once we do the math

(the geometry of the abyss), that is, once we understand how the meaning assigned to the insubstantial presence of women gets inextricably woven into the political texture of the book, we begin to view the *Livro do Desassossego* as an anti-ideological book, a book that resists ideologies by placing its real desires within a dreamlike context. To conceive of the writing of Bernardo Soares in these terms has great import for contemporary readers, and this is the subject of Medeiros's discussion in his *envoi* (MEDEIROS, 2013: 121-26).

The final chapter, "Infinite Writing," poses the most difficult challenges for the reader. It is a bit longer than any of the previous chapters and more intensely philosophical in its nature, as can be gleaned from its four subtitles: "Intimations of Death," "Dream Images," "An Archaeology of the Present," and "The Geometry of the Abyss." Medeiros wants to solidify a theoretical construct by which the prose of Soares can be read as infinite writing, as "a key conceptual text in its exploration both of perennial human questions, such as death and finitude, and of some that are very much specific to its age at the onset of modernity" (MEDEIROS, 2013: 96).

The first section offers a detailed comparison of Emily Dickinson's poem ["I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—"] with Fragment 387 ["Quando, deostas as mãos sobre a mesa ao alto, lancei sobre o que lá via o olhar que deveria ser de um cansaço cheio de mundos mortos, a primeira coisa que vi, com ver, foi uma mosca varejeira (aquelle vago zumbido que não era do escriptorio!) poisada em cima do tinteiro."] The basis for comparison is their treatment of death. But why Dickinson? Medeiros explains: the two had nearly everything in common, "starting from their relentless pursuit of paradox, their uncompromising questioning of form, poetical or otherwise, and their search for infinity." (MEDEIROS, 2013: 97). By examining the strategies deployed to create the writing, we gain a keener notion of what Soares seems to mean in Fragment 387.

The next two sections proceed with the same intent (i.e., to build an understanding of the *Livro do Desassossego* as infinite writing), but the comparison is in relation to texts by Walter Benjamin (and Hannah Arendt's observations).

The final section continues to view Pessoa/Soares in the light of Benjamin but with the added presence of Kafka, another apt comparison with Soares as an example of modernism in crisis.

In 2015, two years after the publication of *Pessoa's Geometry of the Abyss: Modernity and the Book of Disquiet*, Medeiros brought out another book, *O Silêncio das Sereias: ensaio sobre o livro do desassossego*. The latter is organized into the following ten components, each of which is roughly fifteen pages long: "Fantasmas," "Memória," "Alteridades," "Fotografias," "Fragmentos... e Intervalos," "Simulacros," "Beijos," "Revoluções," "Geometria do Abismo," and "O Silêncio das Sereias." Conceived as a result of seminars that Medeiros conducted over a number of years, the book addresses questions first raised by his students. As such, it reads beautifully as a companion to the earlier work, for just

as one generally requires a good dictionary when reading a difficult text, this book can offer the reader a fuller understanding of what Medeiros means to convey through additional examples and explanations of virtually any point raised in *Pessoa's Geometry of the Abyss*. The ideal setting for a reading of the first text would most certainly include the presence of the smaller, thematically arranged text nearby.

Like everything Medeiros writes, each book is profound and original. In both he has paid careful attention on every page so as to remain clear in his analyses. This is unusual, and I believe an example of the generosity of his writing. Even in the most difficult, extremely philosophical passages, the reader never feels lost due to the limpid quality of his prose and the manner in which each step of his thought process is articulated precisely, with an authority tempered by an insistence in appraising, often applauding, various sometimes opposing views of scholars. A certain *plaisir du texte* can be derived merely from the convincing and eloquent nature of the writing itself. Simply put, so much may be gained from these two books, far more than any book review can convey. The only way to do justice to books of this quality is to read them in their entirety, slowly and with pencil in hand.