

# The Enduring Presence of Pessoa

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## Keywords

Boyers, Moure, Shapiro, Bernard, Holman, Dickey, Rago, Roditi, *Poetry Magazine*.

## Abstract

Continuing *The Presence of Pessoa* (MONTEIRO, 1998), which offers accounts of how a number of significant English-language writers have reacted to the work of the Portuguese poet in major ways, this piece calls attention to "A Friend of Dr. Reis," a story by Robert Boyers; poems by Eirin Mouré (*Sheep's Vigil by a Fervent Person*), David Shapiro ("At the Grave of Ferdinand Pessoa or the Triple Tomb"), and April Bernard ("Lisbon: 1989"); Bob Holman's unique way of using Pessoa's poetry in teaching ("Notes Toward Exploding 'Exploding Text: Poetry Performance'"); and James Dickey's initial enthusiasm over his discovery of Pessoa's creation and employment of various personae, but later sour grapes denigration of Pessoa's poetry.

## Palavras-chave

Boyers, Moure, Shapiro, Bernard, Holman, Dickey, Rago, Roditi, *Poetry Magazine*.

## Resumo

Dando continuidade ao livro *The Presence of Pessoa* (MONTEIRO, 1998), que relata como um número significativo de escritores anglófonos reagiu ao trabalho do poeta português, este artigo chama à atenção o conto "A Friend of Dr. Reis", de Robert Boyers; os poemas de Eirin Mouré (*Sheep's Vigil by a Fervent Person*), David Shapiro ("At the Grave of Ferdinand Pessoa or the Triple Tomb") e April Bernard ("Lisbon: 1989"); a maneira singular em que Bob Holman emprega a poesia de Pessoa no ensino ("Notes Toward Exploding 'Exploding Text: Poetry Performance'"); e James Dickey, com seu entusiasmo inicial, ao encontrar a criação de múltiplas personae por Pessoa, e a sua atitude posterior de descrédito amargo da poesia pessoana.

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In *The Presence of Pessoa* I considered, along with other matters, the famous Beat writer Lawrence Ferlinghetti's anarchist banker, my colleague Edwin Honig's confidence-man Pessoa,<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton's anti-poet of the dark night of the soul, Charles Eglinton's Pessoa as Southern African poet, and Roy Campbell's Homeric Pessoa, a Melvillean poet of the sea (MONTEIRO, 1998).

Here I take note of a half dozen other instances of writers who, in one way or another and in more recent years, have paid homage to the Portuguese poet. Of course this constitutes no more than a drop in the bucket, given his ever-widening appeal to readers and writers alike. But they do represent the different ways in which his audience has chosen to regard Pessoa's work.

Taking his hint from Pessoa's fictive world surrounding Ricardo Reis, the Horatian heteronym (PESSOA, 2016a), José Saramago took full imaginative possession—if only for a spell—of that world. He devoted to him what turned out to be his most widely admired novel, *O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis*, published in 1984, and, in 1992, in an English translation by Giovanni Pontiero, as *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*. But as things go in such matters, Saramago's own presumptive rule (in this, admittedly, his own favorite among his many novels) over the life of Ricardo Reis engendered, twenty some years later, a notable sequel. In 2005, Robert Boyers, the editor of the American journal *Salmagundi*, brought to light "A Friend of Dr. Reis," a long short story employing characters from Saramago's novel. Published in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Boyer's story is told from the viewpoint of a Henry James-like observer who, after the death of Ricardo Reis in Lisbon in 1937, becomes intimately involved with the hotel maid created by Saramago. She is called Lidia, and is Ricardo Reis's companion, perhaps lover, but certainly, at least, the patient listener to his, at times, dismal complaints. Another writer has found her inspiration in Alberto Caeiro. *The Keeper of Sheep* [*O Guardador de Rebanhos*] (PESSOA, 2016b) has come in for a radical re-doing, a re-personalizing, if you will, by a Canadian poet and translator, Erin Mouré.<sup>2</sup> She calls her book-length parody, *Sheep's Vigil by a Fervent Person* (MOURE, 2001), describing it as a "transelation" of Caeiro's famous sequence of poems.

More modestly and on a lesser scale, the art historian and literary critic David Shapiro, inspired by the presence of the names of Pessoa's three major heteronyms—Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, and Álvaro de Campos—on the three visible sides of the square that constitutes the marker for Fernando Pessoa's bones,

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: Poet, translator, critic, and professor of English and Comparative Literature at Brown University from 1957 until his retirement in 1982, Edwin Honig (1919-2011) is responsible for the first US translation of a *Selected Poems of Fernando Pessoa* (PESSOA, 1971). Among his papers, held at The John Hay Library of Brown University, figure unpublished material regarding the preparation of this translation and other writings on the Portuguese poet.

<sup>2</sup> As translator of this book Erin Mouré signed Eirin Moure, which is another way of writing her name in Galician.

disinterred from the cemetery called Prazeres in 1988 and reinterred below the stones of a passageway bordering the courtyard at the Mosteiro dos Jerónimos—wrote a short poem in which he gives voice, briefly, to the three heteronyms.

“At the Grave of Ferdinand Pessoa or the Triple Tomb”

1. *Caeiro*

Do not shelter me like any day’s all day  
Or push me toward the fields of a river.  
Don’t say it is enough the theme of shelter  
As if work and happiness were carnivores and a flower.

2. *Reis*

Is it enough for the interior to seem vast. Nothing  
Exaggerated but multiplicity itself?  
Does everything fall into one thing? Like the weak poet counting  
Quantities or fatally subdivided like a minute?  
Is it enough to fall like everything late  
Shining, and shining with the light at the bottom of a heteronym?

3. *Campos*

No, and again you wanted nothing green or marvelous  
Like writing a great agreement in the middle of the street.  
Nothing, but the most youthful night of no conclusions, but for him,  
Then, the unique conclusion of dying (as if one existed, ever) to the everyday.

(SHAPIRO, 1999: 69)

Then there’s Bob Holman, a poet, translator and former professor of creative writing at Columbia University, who brings in Pessoa when he advocates teaching poetry through performance. “Teach [Charles] Olson’s ‘Projective Verse’ and [Frank] O’Hara’s ‘Personism: A Manifesto’ back to back,” he suggests. “Toss in some Surrealist and Futurist Manifestos. Then have the class invent schools of poetry, characters who write in that style, and write ‘their’ poems.” Then comes, rather strikingly, a plug for the Portuguese poet. “Pessoa is great here,” he interjects. “Physicalizing Pessoa’s heteronyms is a great performance. I had a student, Amanda Graham, who wrote a ‘Dating Game’ play where she was the contestant and Pessoa’s heteronyms were her suitors. Pessoa personifies the performance of writing” (HOLMAN, 2006: 295-96). Now that’s a script I’d like to see.

But not everybody is a fan of Pessoa’s poetry. Let me tell you, briefly, about the American poet James Dickey (1923-1997) and what he called Pessoa’s “terrific idea.” Although Dickey is perhaps best known now as the author of *Deliverance* (1972), a novel made into a popular movie starring Burt Reynolds (with Dickey himself playing a sheriff), in his day Dickey was considered to be a poet of stature

and a critic of major influence. In the 1960s, it has been observed, “Dickey’s best work as a poet and critic” was done, “and while it may be difficult for us to remember now, he looked hard to beat in the American poetry sweepstakes” (MASON, 2006: 669). It was in his guise as poet that in 1963 he tried out his new idea on the editor of *Poetry Magazine*. He offered to send Henry Rago poems (not yet written) to be published under pseudonyms:

I want to write some poems under another name—a couple of other names, in fact—to see if I can take on different ‘writing personalities’ in case I get tired of the one I have. I’d like to send some of these to you and see what you think of them, but, in case of publication, I wouldn’t want my real identity known. Is this a legitimate kind of pursuit, in letters? A Portuguese poet named Pessoa did this some time ago—he had four alter egos!—and I wanted to try it, just to see what would happen.

(DICKEY, 1999: 195, n. 527)

Curiously, in mentioning Fernando Pessoa to Henry Rago, Dickey was carrying coals to Newcastle, for *Poetry Magazine* had already published, under Rago’s direction, several of Pessoa’s poems, some of them in Edouard Roditi’s translation, eight years earlier, the poems accompanying Roditi’s essay entitled “The Several Names of Fernando Pessoa” (RODITI, 1955: 26-29 and 40-44).<sup>3</sup>

I do not know what sort of answer Dickey received from Rago regarding his offer to imitate Pessoa’s creation of multiple “alter egos.” What is known is that Pessoa’s great project in heteronomy continued to interest Dickey—but with a caveat. In an interview he granted to the *New York Times* in 1970, he stated: “I think it’s important, as you get older, to discover and energize different parts of yourself. I like to think about a Portuguese poet named Fernando Pessoa, who spread himself out into four personalities, and tried to create a completely separate body of work for each of the four. Unfortunately, I believe none of the four turned out to be very good, but what a terrific idea!” (1970: 298). At the last, though, Dickey’s notion of adapting Pessoa’s “terrific idea” to his own work came to nothing, for he published no poems under the names of “Jesse Shields” and “Boyd Thornton,” two of his stillborn pseudonyms.

Decidedly more ambiguous in its reference to Pessoa than Dickey’s fox-and-grapes write-off, is April Bernard’s “Lisbon, 1989,” a poem published in the *New York Review of Books* on November 6, 2014. The author, formerly the senior editor of the splashy journal *Vanity Fair*, is now identified as a member of the faculty of the Master of Fine Arts Program at Bennington College. The question for me is how does the reference to Pessoa that closes out the poem, replete, as it is, with

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<sup>3</sup> Roditi’s piece was accompanied by examples, in translation, of Pessoa’s poetry: Pessoa’s “Autopsycography,” Alberto Caeiro’s “Discontinuous Poems” and “The Herdsman,” and two of Ricardo Reis’s odes.

unfavorable descriptions of “how it was” in Portugal’s capital city nearly thirty years ago, actually work.

“Lisbon, 1989”

The new year lurched  
 on a clamor of horns  
 trash cans and firecrackers  
 rising up from the harbor  
 over the window sills  
 into a hotel room where  
 civility had just died.  
 Next day we went for lunch  
 to a pricey restaurant  
 filled with leftover Nazis  
 and I was sick in the ladies’ room  
 where the walls were zebra skins  
 and the vanity stools moth-eaten  
 leopard. So I left alone

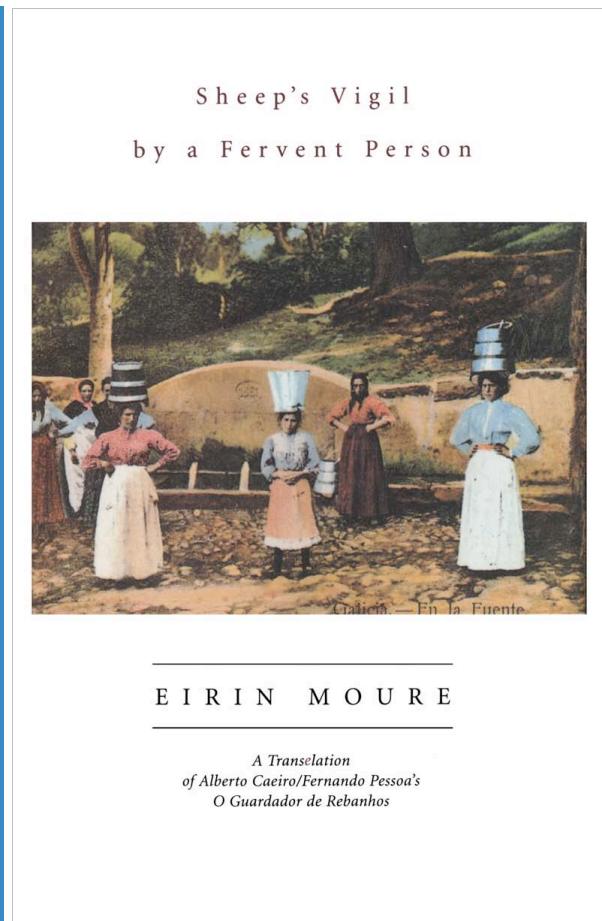
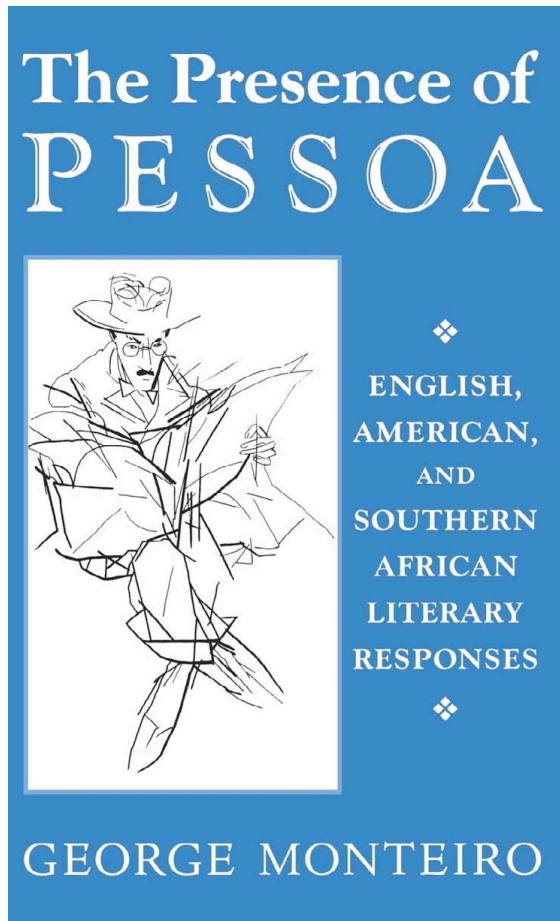
for a walk, drank a cold  
 espresso in a cold café  
 and reckoned my losses  
 in the face of lowering rain.  
 At a bookstore I opened a book  
 of poems: a few tender lines  
 about the emerald sea, memory  
 bringing a smell of salt and roses—  
 before the words swam back into  
 Portuguese, indecipherable.  
*Querido Pessoa*, your voice  
 was clear as music for those  
 few moments I could read  
 all the poems ever written.

(BERNARD, 2014: 10)

Poetry manifests itself on the page, though the words themselves, in Portuguese, are indecipherable, even those of the “dear” Pessoa. The question that I am left with is “has the bookstore moment” had the effect of saving for the poet a day that she has rued. Is this, thus, an experience remindful of Robert Frost’s poem “Dust of Snow,”<sup>4</sup> in which the day is saved by the way a crow shakes snow on him from above? Of is the focus on the loss of “those few moments” when the poet could read “all the poems ever written.” Caveat emptor.

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<sup>4</sup> According to the Robert Frost encyclopedia online, this poem was first published as “Favour” in the *London Mercury* in December 1920 and later reprinted as “Snow Dust” in the *Yale Review* in January 1921 before it was collected in the book *New Hampshire* (1923).



Figs. 1 & 2. Covers of books by MONTEIRO (1998) and MOURÉ (2001).

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