

Connections and Transformations: Fernando Pessoa Reads and Writes in English

David Mittelman*

FERRARI, Patricio and Jerónimo PIZARRO, guest eds. *Fernando Pessoa as English Reader and Writer. Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies*, n.º 28, University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, Tagus Press, Spring 2015. Print.

If it occasionally seems that scholarly publications on Fernando Pessoa must have already exhausted every significant aspect of the poet's work and life, the fact is that the field of Pessoa studies is subject to the same sorts of blind spots that cause interesting topics to be overlooked in every area of inquiry. Pessoa's voracious study of literature in English and his own extensive writings in the language constitute one such topic, frequently mentioned in passing, sometimes studied in compelling detail, but only receiving sustained and penetrating critical attention in the hands of a few scholars. In this volume, editors Patricio Ferrari and Jerónimo Pizarro offer us a richly varied collection of articles and other materials relating to Fernando Pessoa's participation in the English-language literary tradition, with the aim of moving the subject closer to the center of the discussion of Pessoa's legacy. Claiming the distinction of producing the first book-length publication focusing exclusively on the study of Pessoa as a reader and writer of English, the editors present five major themes to be explored over ten articles: "the Durban years; Pessoa's short and long poems; mediating Portugal; the nineteenth century and a theoretical framework for heteronymism; and Pessoa's archive" (4). In addition, the book includes little-known works by Pessoa, including the short story "A Very Original Dinner," excerpts from the essay "Erostratus," both originally composed in English, and incomplete Portuguese translations of poetry by Dryden, Keats, Tennyson, and Browning. The final section contains an interview with translator Margaret Jull Costa and three reviews of recent books relating to Pessoa.

Among its many strong articles, the collection contains several highlights worth mentioning specifically. Richard Zenith's article on Pessoa's *Os Rapazes de Barrowby* disputes Hubert Jennings's autobiographical interpretation of this early project and argues instead that though Pessoa's story was "not a translation or even a remake of the original," his experiments were closely based on the serialized boys' novel *The Boys of Barrowby*, written by Edgar Joyce Murray under the pseudonym Sidney Drew (19). It is possible that Zenith goes too far in rejecting Jennings's reading, since Pessoa could very well have appropriated the title and

* PhD Candidate; Department of Portuguese and Brazilian Studies, Brown University.

narrative equipment of *The Boys of Barrowby* in order to tell an autobiographical tale. However, regardless of the view we adopt, Zenith has solved for us the small mystery of the formal origin of Pessoa's Barrowby.

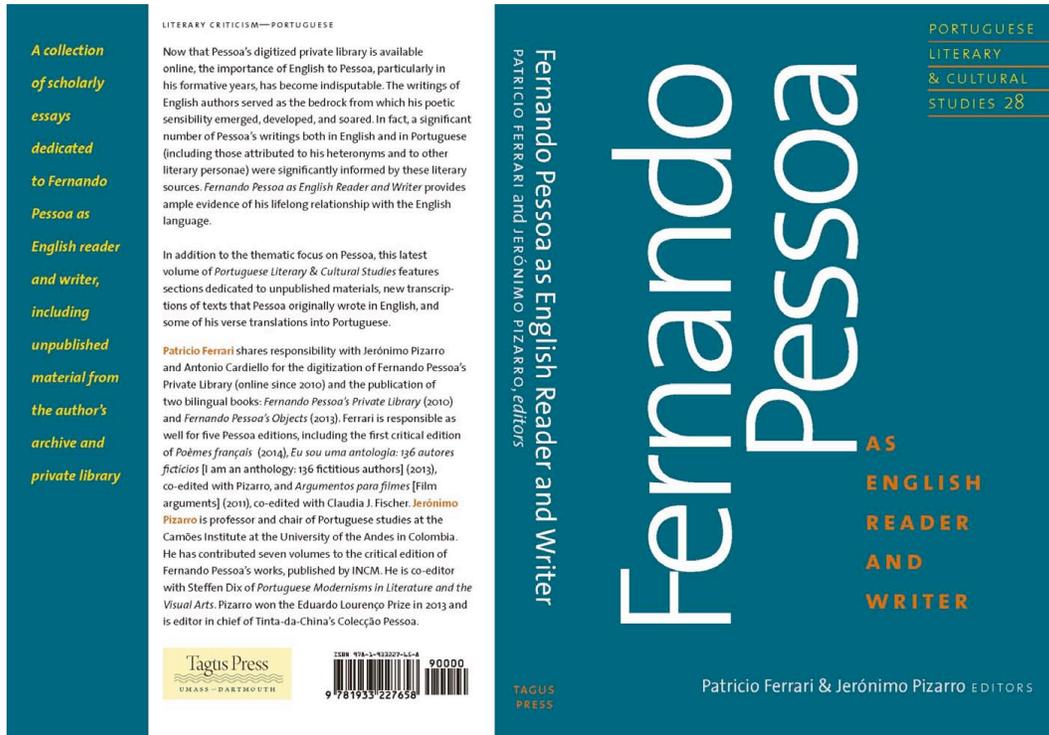


Fig 1. Cover and back cover of *Fernando Pessoa as English Reader and Writer*.

George Monteiro's discussion of Pessoa's "O menino da sua mãe" contests another received autobiographical interpretation. Against the psychoanalytic gloss promoted so vigorously by João Gaspar Simões, Monteiro compares Pessoa's lyric with the work of the English poets Rupert Brooke and A. E. Housman, interpreting the poem as a denunciation of war informed as much by Pessoa's reading of English poetry as by the news of the wars of his time. The comparative reading reveals "so stark a contrast, in fact, that one is tempted to see 'O menino da sua mãe' as something of an answer to the public sentimentality exemplified in the young Brooke's last poetry" (53). Vividly drawing out this contrast between celebratory and elegiac poetic treatments of war, Monteiro observes that "[i]n the poetry written during the war, body parts – usually referred to, with a strong trace of Victorian delicacy, as 'limbs' – were lost and heroically dead bodies were interred under fields of red poppies and blooming roses, but it was not noted that myriad corpses, unclaimed for burial, lay rotting on the battlefields where they died. Housman and Pessoa knew better, even if Brooke did not, or would not" (60).

Stefan Helgesson's discussion of Charles Robert Anon and imperialism provides a refreshing postcolonial appreciation of Pessoa's early writings and

intellectual formation. Helgesson approaches the issue of empire in Anon's poetry via the question of the "double elusiveness" of Fernando Pessoa's presence in South Africa and the presence of South Africa in Fernando Pessoa. The analysis reveals Anon's "imperial ambivalence," his critical understanding of the geopolitical order in the first years of the twentieth century as a violent inter-imperial game. At the same time, however, Helgesson calls attention to the limits of the criticism of which Anon (or Pessoa) was capable, since in the end "[t]here is no evidence in Pessoa's early poems that he was aware of anything other than white concerns in southern Africa" (40). The article concludes with a timely admonition for Pessoa scholarship: the imperial context in which Pessoa was educated and began to write must be addressed "not in a narrowly moralistic sense, but as its problematic onto-political condition of possibility" (42).

Other articles in the collection offer compelling discussions of many aspects of Pessoa's work. Patricia Silva McNeill shares a thorough exploration of Pessoa's reception in English modernist magazines, noting, in particular, the potential influence of *Blast* on the *Orpheu* 2. José Barreto's analysis of Pessoa's massive "History of a Dictatorship" project sheds light on the republican-leaning early period in the development of Pessoa's political thought, a phase frequently overshadowed by the poet's later writings on the concept of aristocracy. And the duo of Ferrari and Pittella-Leite provide a succinct and persuasive argument for their contention that Pessoa continued writing poetry in English, at least intermittently, long after he was thought to have stopped in 1921.

The articles are accompanied by a series of commented transcriptions that show the state of textual criticism on the English Pessoa and which will be of particular interest to enthusiasts of the archive. On the whole, though readers outside the immediate circle of Pessoa specialists might have benefited from greater clarity and contextualization regarding some editorial decisions, many will find a wealth of cutting-edge analytical and textual scholarship with which to dialogue. The release of *Fernando Pessoa as English Reader and Writer*, along with other recent publications and events organized individually or in tandem by Ferrari and Pizarro, including the collection *Eu Sou Uma Antologia* (Lisbon: Tinta-da-china, 2016) and the symposium "Inside the Mask: The English Poetry of Fernando Pessoa" (held 17-18 April 2015 at Brown University), marks another important development in the field of Pessoa studies, a turn in the direction of a more complete and transcultural appreciation of the great poet and his work.