

Vision's Visions

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GIL, José (2016). *Ritmos e Visões*. Lisboa: Relógio D'Água, 119 p.

A new book by José Gil is always motive for rejoicing, and even more so if dedicated to Fernando Pessoa. Not only is Gil one of the most lucid and innovative contemporary philosophers, his work on Fernando Pessoa has unmistakably helped shift our conception of the poet's work and provided a series of analytical tools to probe Pessoa's texts rigorously. This does not mean that his views are always properly received and previous reviews of this book of essays in the Portuguese press have oscillated between the serious engagement with Gil's claims that characterize the review which appeared in *Jornal de Letras* in January 2017 to the diatribe masquerading as a review published in the *Observador* also in January. Nothing new or surprising in that of course, and, given the rifts, divisions, and shifting cliques that make up the micro-cosmos of Pessoa Studies, the level of vituperation in the last mentioned serves as a handy yardstick to measure the degree of discomfort José Gil can still cause on certain circles. It is a salutary discomfort, bred from a lifting of the musty veils that would serve to enshrine petty fiefdoms in the Portuguese world of letters. This is the fifth book Gil has published on Pessoa and even if it does not equal the extended elaboration of a specific thesis as was the case especially in his first two studies, *Fernando Pessoa ou a Metafísica das Sensações* (1987) and *Diferença e Negação na Poesia de Fernando Pessoa* (1999), it still forces us to reconsider some of the common assumptions concerning Pessoa and invites us to read him anew. This capacity to innovate and shake the field of Pessoa Studies can be seen as a hallmark of Gil's work. Even if one no longer can, as Eduardo Prado Coelho once did, claim to be taken aback with the shock ("espanto") of Gil's vision of Pessoa, its power and seductiveness remain unaltered ("José Gil: um terceiro paradigma nos estudos pessoanos," in *A Noite do Mundo*. Lisboa: INCM, 1988, p. 67).

In this book José Gil assembles four distinct and independent, though interconnected essays, under a beguiling title that points to, and yet does not quite cover, the book's reiterated preoccupation with reading Pessoa anew. As they are separate and autonomous, each essay in a sense constitutes a new beginning to the book. Beginnings, as Edward Said long ago remarked, inaugurate a text and announce it: "Beginning is not only a kind of action; it is also a frame of mind, a kind of work, an attitude, a consciousness" (SAID, *Beginnings*, 1985, XXI). The beginning of the first essay ("A Cobra e a Espiral") illustrates this well, as it gives

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start to the essay and the book as a whole and can be read programmatically: “Toda a obra de Fernando Pessoa se tece à volta de ritmos e visões. A poesia heteronímica nasce do funcionamento de máquinas rítmicas que produzem certas iluminações: a fulgurância da aparição de um heterónimo dá-se na visao súbita de um nexo de sensações, de um estilo” (9). One could say that Gil’s book in itself constitutes already a good example of a desiring machine as it goes about producing meaning and assembling a sort of system of relations between different elements of Pessoa’s textuality. Or, in other words, Gil’s reading of Pessoa could be said to both stem from a desire to unravel a string of meanings in Pessoa’s assembled oeuvre, and simultaneously produce forms of desire that are located squarely in Pessoa’s text and beyond. To some it may be that Gil’s general leaning on Deleuzian concepts will appear outmoded. Certainly, that will be the case if all one cares about is fitting in with whichever academic late fad might be current. Conversely, if one takes the complexity and radiance of Pessoa’s oeuvre seriously, the kind of rigorous probe Gil operates on, and through it, will appear not only timely, but even urgent. The ever expanding knowledge on Pessoa and the equally ever more easily accessible works in all of their difficulty and variation, strangely enough, has also led to a sort of congealing of prejudices and received notions enshrining the poet in a rarefied sort of tradition that can be hard to challenge.

It is in the first chapter, focused on the *Book of Disquiet*, that one of the book’s title nouns is more consistently explored: vision is something which Gil wants readers to consider as an important concept to understand the universe of Pessoa. In a sense this goes very much against the grain, both of a traditionalist understanding of Pessoa as someone obsessed by, and a virtuoso of, language, as of a generalized tendency with studies of modernist writers to downplay the enormous importance assumed by the visual, outside of a specific visual art context. One is tempted to think of Rosalind Krauss’ *The Optical Unconscious* (1993) as it too aimed at a reconceptualizing of modernism and the visual. Gil makes a very strong case – and it is one he has already been presenting in different ways and with regard to different Pessoa texts – for the importance of the visual in Pessoa, for how vision is always more than just a metaphor or figure of speech, how it informs and forms thought itself. Were this the only point made by Gil it still would have been worth a book in itself. Towards the conclusion of the first chapter Gil states his case very clearly: “... a visão, sendo diferente, não deve ser pensada independentemente da palavra poética, porque esta não se forma – na sua perfeita expressão – sem aquela. As ideias abstractas tornam-se concretas numa visão singular que só se exprime e *existe plenamente* quando se diz poeticamente” (22). It is perhaps symptomatic of how close Gil stays to the texts of Pessoa that the actual conclusion of the chapter is given to a long citation of a fragment in its entirety, starting with: “A maioria da gente enferma de não sabe[r] dizer o que vê e o que pensa” (*Livro do Desasocego*, 2010, dated 7-27-1930; quoted by GIL, 2016: 22).

That fragment also serves to illustrate how, in calling attention to the importance of vision. Gil is, to a great extent, following very closely Pessoa's own texts.

The four essays are interdependent but not in either a thematic or a causal way. What links them is more elusive and also more interesting. By far the most developed essay is the third, "A Máquina Rítmica da *Ode Marítima*", but this does not mean that it should be seen as more important than the others. One could of course see the fact that these four essays appear together under the same covers as merely accidental. Yet, there is a sort of growing sense of cohesion that comes from reading them together. Some of this inevitably must be put down to Gil's style and to his choice of points to be made whether he analyses Pessoa's poem, "Múmia", in the second chapter ("O Caos Criador") or focuses his attention on *Mensagem* in the last ("O Profeta de Si Mesmo"). But it also has to do with the close reading Gil performs as well as with his sustained effort to refresh the way we read and see Pessoa. Without in any way appearing obsessive, there is a cumulative effect to the essays that helps create the effect of unity and consistency so often absent from collections like this. In a sense this feels like an intensely personal book as well, as if the reader were allowed a glimpse into Gil's own critical machine. The book's conclusion is a good example of this as, after the last chapter – or is still within it? – readers get a short reflection on plurality and multiplicity, certainly one of the most charged topics when discussing Pessoa, if ever there was one. Gil starts this "Nota sobre o pensamento das multiplicidades" like this: "Grande parte dos comentários sobre a heteronímia pessoana e sobre os temas que a envolvem supõe que ela se deixe pensar sob a oposição categorial da diversidade / unidade" (112). As Gil goes on to argue for Pessoa multiplicity is never a totality because it is always in the process of becoming (112), a theoretical position that is crucial to understand not only Gil's approach to the texts of Pessoa, which also is always in the process of becoming and can never be assumed as implying a (nonexistent) totality, but crucially, Pessoa's own textuality. As Gil concludes this note – arguably denser and even more suggestive than the preceding essay – he makes an affirmation that is only apparently paradoxical: "O pensador das multiplicidades (como Caieiro, que não "pensa" os "objectos", ignora a transcendência) é o pensador da imanência que realiza a imanência do pensamento" (114).

If taken to an extreme, such claims can become counterproductive. Their power, or some of it anyway, resides precisely in that element of intellectual teasing that Pessoa also much enjoyed. Personally, even if I am ready to accept there may be much in Pessoa's poetics that is essentially immanent, I would like to think (indeed need to see it that way) that Pessoa's elaborate intellectual games always had a direct material reference. In a sense, that might even be glimpsed in Gil's own parenthetical comment on Caieiro. Or, to put it otherwise, for me, as reader, part of the timeliness and urgency of Pessoa, in the present, and into the future, is his constant slippage into difference, what I interpret in itself as a

political move. Needless to say, this new book from José Gil is an important and crucial addition to work on Pessoa. It shines with clear, even if complex, views on the need to rethink and reimagine Pessoa, away from the pieties that have attached to him, and in full recognition of his contemporaneity, as Alain Badiou might say (“Une tâche philosophique: être contemporain de Pessoa,” in *Petit manuel d’inesthétique*. Paris: Seuil, 1998, pp. 61-74). Readers may agree or disagree with this or that claim made by Gil along the essays, his remains an especially important vision of Pessoa for now, and for the future as well, in its insistence upon understanding Pessoa’s textuality as a becoming. Gil’s call for a serious reflection on the interconnectedness between language, vision, and thought is a serious injunction for work still to be done, one that calls for us to be attentive to the work of vision in any form of thought and to the need to break away from reductive oppositions that would only cloud our vision of Pessoa’s visions and our visions of his vision.