

Notes toward a Review of the 1991 Portuguese Issue of *Translation*

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At first I planned to title this unwritten review “More in Sorrow than in Anger: Notes toward a Review of the So-called (and Misnamed) Portuguese Issue of *Translation*, n.º 25 (Spring 1991); or Half a Loaf is Better than None, though not Everyone would Agree.” Richard Zenith was the guest editor of the special issue of *Translation*, a journal published at Columbia University under the general editorship of Frank MacShane and William Jay Smith. The piece, never offered for publication, appears here for the first time.

Apparently, the mere act of setting down these numbered notes in 1991 either was sufficient to satisfy my sense of disappointment (and annoyance) at this “Portuguese Issue” (and thus the review itself was no longer worth writing) or, as Robert Frost says famously about the wood-cutter who has not come back for his wood (“The Wood-Pile”), I turned to “fresh tasks.” I like to think it was the latter. In any case, here are the notes, unchanged, except for correction of typos and the insertion of inadvertently omitted words. I have resisted the temptation to eliminate those observations that are examples of unconscionable nit-picking and thus meretricious. So, here are the notes, warts and all.

1. An opportunity to introduce English – language readers to an energetic, highly attractive contemporary literature – squandered through editorial mismanagement, arrogance, condescension, carelessness, what have you. These jokers have done it all.

2. The illustrative photographs perpetuate a sentimental, out-dated view of a country benefiting and suffering from its membership in the European community. Quaint fishing boats, women scarved in black, foreground men in black with more contemporary garbed men off to the side in the far background, a fish-monger standing behind her upright display of sardines or *carapaus*, a woman balancing a large drum on her head as she leads a calf, both woman and calf being trailed by a farmer carrying a stick or a hoe. Oddly, though appropriately, perhaps, three of the photographs carry erroneous attributions, seemingly corrected by a card sent along with the volume.

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3. Such carelessness is not new to *Translation*, apparently, for the editors print a third of a page of "Errata" covering three mistakes in earlier issues, including the statement that Donald Keene's translation of "Mademoiselle Hanako" by Mori Ogai in the Fall 1990 issue was from the French.

4. What, by the way, is the mark over the "r" in the name "Franco" of "António Franco Alexandre" in the table of contents (viii)? It looks like a superscripted comma. Is it a diacritical mark? Will the editors apologize for it in the next issue of the journal?

5. In a two-and-a-half-page, eight-paragraph essay entitled "The World of Fernando Pessoa," Richard Locke spends four paragraphs talking about José Saramago's novel *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*. And a good thing, too, for what he says about Fernando Pessoa and his heteronyms fails to go beyond the commonplace. And that's when it is not misleading. Although it is true that Pessoa translated "commercial correspondence," it is not so that he was "a clerk in a Lisbon business office." It was not after Pessoa's death that it was revealed that he had created three other bodies of work under the names of Ricardo Reis, Alberto Caeiro, and Álvaro de Campos. He had been publishing their work over their discrete names for decades. He had even published some of *Livro do Desassossego* under the semi-heteronymic name "Bernardo Soares." But Locke would rather talk about Saramago anyway.

6. An unsigned note, preceding the translation of Pessoa's "static" drama, "The Mariner," asserts that this play is "a fundamental text for understanding Pessoa's work," but fails to tell us in what way this is so. Álvaro de Campos's "Letter to Fernando Pessoa," which is given, testily asks the questions that have not yet been answered to anyone's satisfaction.

7. What is the principle of selection? Why choose Lobo Antunes and not João de Melo, Ruy Belo but not Jorge de Sena, Pedro Tamen and not Pedro da Silveira, why João Miguel Fernandes Jorge and not Joaquim Magalhães, why Carlos de Oliveira and not Vitorino Nemésio, why Fátima Maldonado and not Natalia Correia, Antonio Botto, Maria Velho da Costa, Lidia Jorge, Olga Conçalves, Mário de Sá-Carneiro, Mário Cesariny, Ruy Cinatti, Tomaz Kim, Miguel Torga, José Martins Garcia, Adolfo Casais Monteiro, José Régio, Bernardo Santareno, Alberto de Lacerda, David Mourão Ferreira, José Rodrigues Miguéis, Graça Moura, and on, and on. Virtually any reader of twentieth-century Portuguese literature can make up a formidable list of omissions. The point is that I cannot think that anyone will be satisfied that the editor(s) have done even an adequate job of representation in this issue of *Translation*. There is an unsigned disclaimer following the guest editor's note of introduction to the effect that "Because of space limitations, this issue of *Translation* was unable to include work by some authors that the Guest Editor considered important, such as Mário de Sá-Carneiro, Mário Cesariny, Vitorino Nemésio, José Cardoso Pires, and Jorge de Sena." Note that it is the "guest

editor” who thinks them important. Do the two editors of the journal also consider them important? Do they know their work? If they do legitimately consider them significant, why exclude them when the volume published contains only 185 pages devoted to Portugal, the theme of the issue as announced, when the entire issue numbers 286 pages? And why when space is so short are nearly twenty pages at the end of the section – an emphatic place – given over to an overly generous excerpt from an essay by the Englishman V. S. Pritchett, an essay that has been in print for thirty-five years? It just won’t do.

8. Pity that Vergílio Ferreira, the author of *Manhã Submersa* (a novel that decades after its first publication was still considered good enough to win the 1990 Prémio Femina, and of later novels such as *Aparição* and *Para Sempre*, not to mention his *Conta-corrente* series of journals), should be represented by “The Hen,” a rather slight and atypical tale. It’s a good thing that Americans do not vote on the Nobel Prize. Reading this story by itself would be enough to sink this candidate’s chances.

9. On the verso of the back cover are listed six names of writers represented in this issue: two of them are Portuguese – Fernando Pessoa and José Saramago – so far so good; the other four – not so good – are V. S. Pritchett, Václav Havel, Nina Cassian, and Eugenio Montale.

10. This Portuguese Issue is “dedicated to the memory of Graham Green and Max Frisch.” Secret lusophiles? If so, silent ones as far as I know.

11. The guest editor concludes: “Yes, Portugal is a land of poets...” Well, I doubt that many readers coming upon twentieth-century Portuguese literature for the first time in this issue of *Translation* will find the statement especially convincing. And we are not talking entirely about quantity.

12. The running title at the bottom of pages 28-29 should read “Bernardo Soares (Fernando Pessoa),” not “Alberto Caeiro (Fernando Pessoa).”

13. Beware the dangling modifiers (1) “Embittered by the reception he received from the French Academy (1845) and by political failure, the little he published towards the end of his life lamented the solitude to which genius must resign itself” (23).

14. Cronyism: Ruy Belo’s poetry is represented (in a translation by William Jay Smith, one of the continuing editors of *Translation*). Of Belo, the guest editor says; “Critical estimation has been increasing for the poet (Belo) since his death in 1978, and a critical edition of his work is nearing completion” (7). Who is the editor of Belo’s critical works? Joaquim Magalhães, who three pages later, is given the last word on Agustina Bessa-Luis as poet almost despite herself. And who is João Miguel Fernandes Jorge, whose work is represented, but Magalhães’s close friend?

15. The guest editor misleads when he says that Pessoa “did considerable work on Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, never published...” Never published in Pessoa’s lifetime, perhaps, but published by Dom Quixote in 1988. And there is

conclusive evidence to indicate that a version of Pessoa's translation was serialized in 1926-27, several years before Pessoa's death in 1935.

16. The guest editor publishes Pessoa's "Prose Poem" (in Portuguese and English). He says of it, "[T]he translations are quite good as translations, whereas the texts themselves tend to be flowery and trite." This remark strikes me as exactly contrary to what is there.

17. It is good to see Eduardo Lourenço represented, and by a short piece on Pessoa, though it deserves a better translation. This one is awkward and stiff in ways that Lourenço's work never is.

18. There is a mistake in Gregory Rabassa's translation of Vergílio Ferreira's story, "The Hen." If the asking price is at first \$20,000 and the woman buys a second hen just like the first one for \$7,500, it seems strange to say, "My mother was indignant because she'd haggled but had only managed to get the woman down to twelve thousand two hundred. . ."

19. Editorial inconsistency: Why are we told that Ruy Belo's poem "Muriel" derives from *Toda a Terra* (1976) when the same is not done for any other poem by any other author?

20. Is it not curious that the poet Herberto Helder should be represented only by two short stories – that are quite short, but even so are too long for their intentions? "Style" starts out well but slips into unprogressive repetition. "Dogs, Seaman" depends upon a conceptual reversal – seamen do not keep dogs, dogs keep seamen – and proceeds to an obvious conclusion. José Cardoso Pires, who is not represented here, does much with the same sort of stuff.

21. Antonio Lobo Antunes thrives on being excerpted. The problem with his long novels is that he writes them all at the same shrill pitch. This excerpt is quite effective for a few pages, but then becomes rather tiring and ultimately boring over the long haul of his typical recent novel.

22. The excerpt from José Saramago's novel *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, taken from the beginning of the novel, reads very well indeed. Saramago may well be the Portuguese novelist of the twentieth century, but Sena's *Sinais de Fogo*, incomplete and unfinished though it is, rivals the best of Saramago. As do the best of Sena's stories, such as "O Papagaio Verde" and "As Memórias do ex-criminoso de Guerra."

23. Pritchett's 1956 piece, one that was surely calculated not to offend anyone in the oppressive Salazarist regime that had run the country for nearly three decades by that time, is a skillfully written travel poem. It applies a fresh coat of paint on commonplace notions about Portugal and Portuguese character. It is travel writing at its competent best. The writing is as fresh as it was thirty-five years ago. But the view it offers of Portugal is out-dated, and that is paradoxical since Pritchett's view feigns reality, passes for reality, but is really more like the women's mariner's dream of reality in Pessoa's static drama. Why, then, reprint

this piece in a special issue on modern and contemporary Portuguese literature? Were it of Portuguese authorship it might have qualified for consideration on that basis. But it is by a foreigner, and if it belongs to any literature, surely it cannot be Portuguese literature. As a matter of fact, were it written by a Portuguese, it would be held in something less than the implied high esteem singling it out for inclusion in this “Portuguese Issue” confers upon it. Even had there been space enough and time enough to include a full representation of modern Portuguese literature – three hundred pages could have gone a long way toward doing the job – there still should have been no point in including this well-written piece that is not out-dated only because it always was nothing less, nothing more than a few dozen pages out of the obligatory book all Englishmen of a certain stripe write on either on assignment or out of the need to improve the time spent on holiday. I suppose the essay’s recent reprinting in a collection of Pritchett’s essays (a volume recently remaindered) brought it freshly to the mind of editors about to put together such an issue as this one. Some foreign ballast would have helped, say Mary McCarthy’s incisive essay of her train journey from Lisbon to Porto. If the editors wanted to give the reader an up-to-date view of what really is going on in Portugal today – not the postcard views that Pritchett’s essay barely transcends but which the photographs capture precisely – they could have included something from Eduardo Lourenço’s timely book, *Nós e a Europa ou as duas razões*, the third edition of which appeared in January 1990.

24. By the way, is it Pritchett (or his editors) who insists on referring to the province in northeast Portugal as “Trasos-montes”? Somebody should have known better – then and now.

25. The illustrative photographs chosen fit to a T not the Portuguese literature reproduced – not Lobo Antunes, Saramago, or even Pessoa – but Pritchett’s travel essay. Where is Jorge de Sena when you need him? Not in this issue.

26. The editorial note introducing Pritchett’s essay reads: “Although written thirty-five years ago, V. S. Pritchett’s portrait of Portugal, which is published here with minor alterations, is as telling today as it was then. Portugal has undergone political and social changes, but the spirit of the country has remained essentially the same as it preserves its separate and independent character.” Tell it to the marines. Or, better, to Eduardo Lourenço, whose essays on the implications of Portugal’s entry into the European community are required reading for anyone interested in the Portugal that is – now – Portugal. Lourenço *sim*, Pritchett *não*.

27. The Portuguese Book Institute supported this issue. It says so on the verso of the back cover. On an attached sticker. Something should be made of this. I don’t know what exactly. I’m sure Havel, Pritchett, Montale (wherever he is), and especially the Italian Anna Bardi, whose thirty-page story is the longest thing in the issue – these are grateful. Or should be.

28. Upon receiving a copy of *Contemporary Portuguese Poetry* (1978), José Gomes Ferreira, whose own poems lead off the volume, complained to his diary that the selection of poets was not right, that the poems selected from the right poets was not right. And that such works would always be like that. Yet one should not be entirely dismayed if the barrier between languages was not entirely broken down by well-meaning anthologies such as these.

29. It is good to have some of the more unusual Pessoa translated here. *O Marinheiro*, something from *Livro do Desassossego*, a section from Álvaro de Campos's *A Passagem das Horas*. But none of these represents Pessoa at his best, not some snippets from what is admittedly a key work or a fragment of a poem. And what is the logic in including a single interview with a poet, even if that poet is Sophia de Mello Breyner? And what is one to make of the interview itself, one that is pleasant enough and even mildly informative (see her tunnel-vision charges against the Americans and Russians in Portuguese Africa) but which certainly does not earn its space in a section that purports to bring news of modern Portuguese literature.

30. Otherwise, a handsome production.