

Notebooks, Non-Books and Quasi-Books

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PESSOA, Fernando (2012). *Philosophical Essays: A Critical Edition*. Edited by Nuno Ribeiro. Publisher: New York: First Contra Mundum Press, 2012.

PESSOA, Fernando (2014). *The Transformation Book*. Edited by Nuno Ribeiro and Cláudia Souza. Publisher: New York: First Contra Mundum Press, 2014.

*I was a poet animated by philosophy,
not a philosopher with poetic faculties.*
Fernando Pessoa

Over the last decade in Portugal, at least one book is published each year that is attributed to Fernando Pessoa, whether it is an unfinished project, notes, letters, reflections, fragments, or new alternative editions. This is not the case at all in the Anglophone publishing world, but knowledge of Fernando Pessoa is slowly trickling out, which is mostly due to the success of the excellent translations into English of *Livro do Desassossego* by Margaret Jull Costa (with *Serpent's Tail* in 1991) and by Richard Zenith (published by Penguin in 2001). Now, finally, there is the opportunity to publish more writings of Pessoa in the English language, a language of course that was much loved by the Portuguese author.

Two books attributed to Pessoa have been published recently – *Philosophical Essays* (2012) and *The Transformation Book* (2012) – which are curious additions to the international Pessoa publications because, not only are they fragments of a young poet thinking through philosophy, but that they are firstly, for the most part, written in English by the author. Language seems to be key here as these writings emerge when Pessoa is only recently back from English-speaking South Africa with the ambition of writing poetry only in English. Pessoa returned to Portugal in 1905 at the age of seventeen, and these essays and fragments from both books are all written before 1914. Even though Pessoa never left Portugal again and only very occasionally stepped outside Lisbon once he returned, he remains multilingual¹ and the cosmopolitan man, while at the same time being proudly Portuguese. His mother spoke French fluently; he was educated in English and his favourite writers were English; and Portuguese was his native language where his genius would be realised. If, to paraphrase Bernardo Soares, one's homeland is one's language (“*Minha pátria é a língua portuguesa*”), then Pessoa was homeless

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¹ To read the poems written in French by Pessoa, see *Poèmes français* (2014), edited by P. Ferrari.

and an exile at least until 1914, the year of the “dia triunfal”² when he came home to his language, and his three most famous heteronyms (Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos and Ricardo Reis) exploded unto the literary scene. The so-called *The Transformation Book* remains a homeless work when we think of Bernardo Soares’ comment, and when the editors Nuno Ribeiro and Cláudia Souza give the title in the three languages of English, French and Portuguese in the inside pages.

So what kind of books are these? And what do they add to the Pessoa authorship? Whereas *The Book of Disquiet* has been called a “non-book” [não-livro] by Eduardo Lourenço (in the essay “O Livro do Desassossego, texto suicida?) and an “anti-book” [anti-livro] by Richard Zenith (in his introduction to the book), these two new publications are, in an important sense, not books at all but rather works in progress, and ultimately unfinished and abandoned projects. Let us look at the first of these two new publications.

Philosophical Essays: A Critical Edition

The relationship between European philosophy and the poetic thinking of Pessoa is still an overlooked aspect and there is much to praise in publishing a book on Pessoa’s philosophical writings. Despite the publication of *Textos Filosóficos* by António Pina Coelho in 1968, and recently in 2012 *Poesía, ontología y tragedia en Fernando Pessoa* by Pablo Javier Pérez López, which contains transcriptions of previously unpublished philosophical fragments, Pessoa’s philosophical writings are almost a completely unexplored aspect of Pessoa’s authorship at least in the English-speaking world. *Philosophical Essays* focuses on Pessoa’s earlier unfinished philosophical essays written in English, either under the names of two early, undeveloped heteronyms or “pre-heteronyms” – as Alexander Search and Charles Robert Anon are called in the introduction –, or they are left unsigned. This term “pre-heteronym,” it is important to note, was one that was never used by Pessoa. The book is divided into two parts: the first presenting ten “philosophical essays”; and the second part goes under the title of “Addenda,” which has four sections that are notes and fragments to the “essays” and some extra philosophical fragments. These two parts are preceded by an introduction by the editor, and followed by an approving afterword by Portuguese philosopher Paulo Borges, and ends with a very slim bibliography selected by the editor. There are interesting inserts and sentences throughout the collection, especially in the first two “essays” which take up over half of the first part, “On the Nature and Meaning of Rationalism” and “On Free-Will”; and also the fragmented essays “On

² See the famous letter from Pessoa to Adolfo Casais Monteiro, when, referring to the 8th March 1914, he expresses that “It was the triumphal day of my life, and I can never have another one like it [Foi o dia triumphal da minha vida, e nunca poderei ter outro assim]”. Included in *Eu Sou Uma Antologia: 136 autores fictícios* (2013: 646).

Sensation," "On Heraclitus," and Pessoa's comments on Aquinas and Pascal, which cannot at all be called essays as such. Many of the titles and inserts hold clues to the trajectory of the later Pessoa in his lifelong struggle and fascination with systems of belief and religions, the problem of the "I," and psychology of interior travel.

The editor is correct in pointing out in the introduction that Pessoa was immersed in philosophy in his early period in Lisbon, as he was attending philosophy classes at the University of Lisbon in 1906 and 1907 at the same time these "philosophical essays" were written. However, I put the title here in quotation marks as it can be misleading for philosophers approaching this book without much knowledge of Pessoa, as these "philosophical essays" are not really essays as such, because none of them are complete, and they remain incoherent and fragmented. A book, for example, like Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* (or *Philosophical Crumbs* to be exact, as the word is *Smuler* in Danish) from 1844, which as an example of poetic philosophizing, is a far more coherent book than the misleading volume and title here of *Philosophical Essays*, but of course Kierkegaard was in control of his own posthumous identity in publishing his work during his lifetime and under his own terms, and the title he gave is not without irony. Also, it is very important to remember that these fragments were written by Pessoa when he was only 18 and 19 years of age, when he was still unsure of his vocation. And unlike the major unfinished work of *Livro do Desassossego*, this project was abandoned early on and has no original ideas or insights other than thinking through some of the philosophers referred to throughout the fragments and notes, most especially Kant and Schopenhauer, with hints of Plato, Spinoza and Nietzsche. It is important to know all this before dipping into this collection.

Philosophical Essays is also referred to as a "critical edition" but it is far from complete, there are gaps in the description and use of materials, there is no index included in the book, and the inclusion of some fragments and exclusion of others in the Addenda is decided at the editor's discretion. One might wonder why, for example, Pessoa's remarks in English on infinity, his comments on Spinoza, or Alexander Search's passage on the "Internal Nature of the Faculties" are not included in the Addenda, which often hold more clues to the workings of Pessoa and which also shed light on his later, more celebrated writings. These unfinished philosophical "essays" are, nonetheless, a valuable insight into Pessoa as a very young man working through difficult European philosophers on the threshold of becoming an adult and mature writer. Ribeiro states in his introduction that "Coelho presents the various *Textos Filosóficos* as if they were loose sheets, lacking any discernible connection among themselves." However, I cannot see how this publication will evoke more interest in Pessoa's philosophical writings than Coelho's groundbreaking *Textos Filosóficos* from 1968.

The Transformation Book, or Book of Tasks

The second book published is even more eccentric and controversial, even by Pessoa standards, in calling it an actual book. Pessoa's project follows in the tradition of the notebooks of alchemy, secret societies and mystical traditions with Pessoa's Faustian figure of Alexander Search at the helm. The editors state at the beginning of the introduction that the book "is a transcription and collocation of a series of fragments that were never published during Pessoa's lifetime" and that it is "in many senses, a plural book." But this "book" was never conceived as a book at all. It is what its subtitle says, a book of tasks. This is a notebook of tasks. In fact, it is a small notebook that Pessoa made by hand, an assignment book. As said before, *Livro do Desassossego* is not a proper book per se, but at least Pessoa never fully gave up on this project, and after a silence of nearly ten years returned to this open-ended book, which became something most dear to him during the last years of his life. *The Transformation Book* was an idea that was abandoned more than twenty years before his death. To make things even more complicated, it has two titles in a way as *Transformation Book* and *Book of Tasks*, and is divided into three languages (English, French, and Portuguese), which the editors, understandably, leave as they are, rather than attempt to translate into one language. This makes for a curious work and is perhaps only really of interest to the die-hard Pessoa reader. That said, there are still many treats to be found inside these pages. The cover design itself is intriguing and mischievous, and the artist Alessandro Segalini does a wonderful job in capturing this eccentric, unfinished and unrealised project that the two editors bravely bring together into a kind of book. And to complete the mad yet alluring farce of this project, the writing is attributed not to Pessoa or to his heteronyms or semi-heteronyms, but rather, according to the editors, to his "pre-heteronyms" once again. The four so-called "pre-heteronyms" are Alexander Search, Pantaleão, Jean Seul de Méluret, and Charles James Search.

This publication can also be a misleading entry point to anyone coming to Pessoa for the first time, but perhaps Pessoa would have enjoyed the confusion. Like *Philosophical Essays*, this book has no index, and is divided into two parts: the first being the outlined scatterings of the unrealised *Transformation Book*; and the second part coming under the title "Addenda," again with fragments and notes to various aspects of part one. There is a case of repetition here as the essay on Rationalism is included in this book also, which is explained by the editors in their introduction. But there are some fascinating entries published for the first time with an English language publisher such as the chapter "The Mental Disorder of Jesus,"³ fragments of translations of classic Portuguese writers such as Camões, Quental and Junqueiro by Charles James Search, and the fairytale-like collection of

³ "The Mental Disorder of Jesus" was only published for the first time anywhere in 2006 in *Escritos sobre Génio e Loucura*, edited by Jerónimo Pizarro.

whimsical poems by Alexander Search under the title "Delirium." This is the first time that so many poems of Alexander Search have been published by an Anglophone publisher, including the fine poems "A Temple," "On the Road," "Soul-Symbols," "Song of the Leper," "Doubt," and "The Story of Solomon Waste." Perhaps this publication might encourage someone to publish the complete poems of Fernando Pessoa that he wrote in English in an international edition.

The editors declare in the introduction that this book "marks one of the fundamental stages in Pessoa's elaboration of a new conception of literary space, one that he came to express as a 'drama in people'." This is true and this collection is an indication of the inner workings of Pessoa's workshop in making his way towards his more developed and successful heteronymic authorship from 1914 onwards. In essence then, this abandoned and never realised *Transformation Book* is a work of transition from the teenage boy who returns to Portugal from South Africa to the Portuguese modernist poet *par excellence* who actually only manages to articulate his literary art as a "drama-in-people" in 1928, in his "Tábua Bibliográfica," published in the Coimbra based magazine *Presença*.

In conclusion, while there are some pearls to be found in these two new and all so rare publications of some of the writings from Fernando Pessoa in the English language, one hopes that it will open up rather than deter others from publishing more of Pessoa's more original philosophically inclined writings that he did as an adult at the height of his powers. Examples of these could be from some of Campos' writings such "Ambiente" [Environment], "O Que é a Metafísica?" [What is Metaphysics?], "Apontamentos para uma Estética Não-Aristotélica" [Points on a Non-Aristotelian Aesthetics], and the brilliant "Notas para a recordação do meu mestre Caeiro" [Notes in Memory of my Master Caeiro]. These "Notas" by Campos have never been published with all its fragments in the English language, and within them contain not only some of the best psychological insights into Pessoa and his art but also into his own diversified and playful philosophical thinking. There are also the writings on neo-paganism and the return of the gods from Antonio Mora, Ricardo Reis and Fernando Pessoa, and the overlooked essay "Erostratus" to think about and bring to light. Perhaps the most startling philosophy is ultimately expressed implicitly in the poetry itself from Pessoa, Campos, Caeiro and Reis, the one act static play *O Marinheiro*, some of the prose in the detective stories and short story *O Banqueiro Anarquista*, and in the profound insights and visionary passages from the *Livro do Desassossego* – all of which also await future exploration and rediscovery.