

# Hermeticism and Initiation in Pessoa

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PESSOA, Fernando (2015). *Hermetismo e Iniciação*. Organização, prefácio e notas de Manuel J. Gandra. Sintra: Zéfiro, 426 pp.

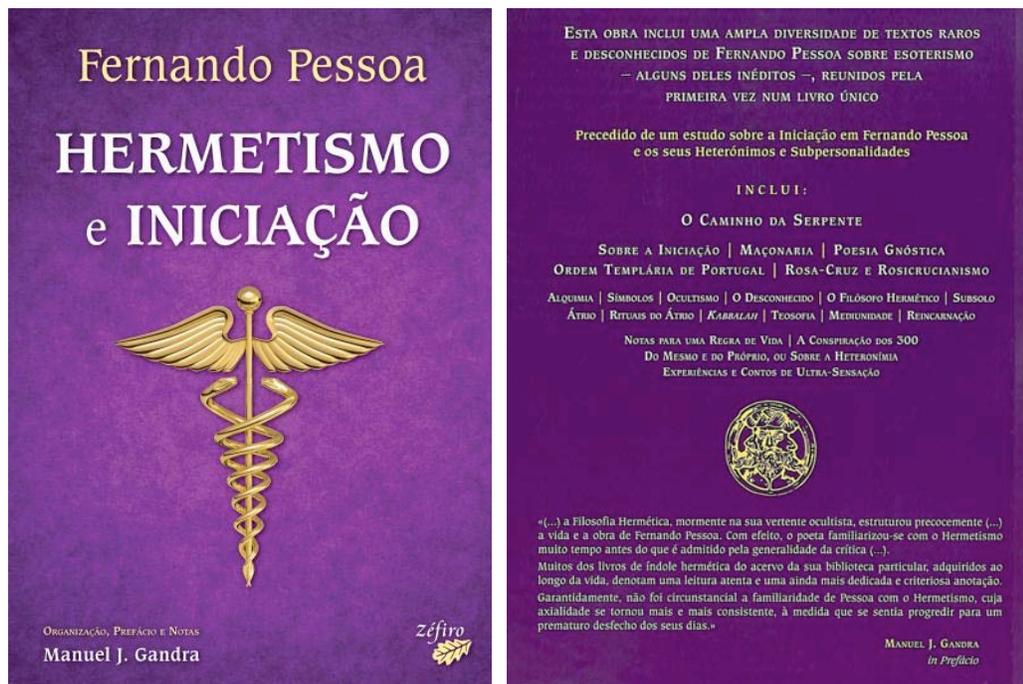
As it is known, most of Pessoa's numerous esoteric writings are fragments that were never published during his lifetime. Some of them seem to be part of larger projects, which were perhaps meant to be published sometime, but saw the light in such fragmentary form only posthumously. Several anthologies of these writings have been published, starting with the pioneering publications of Pedro Veiga (under the pseudonym Petrus) in the 1950s, up to those edited in the 1980s by Yvette K. Centeno, Pedro Teixeira da Mota, and António Quadros. Each of these publications, and their respective editors, had their merits. They showed an aspect of Pessoa's work that had been long ignored, neglected, or misunderstood. By making this material available for the first time, they made an important contribution to a better understanding of Pessoa's complexity as a literary author and as a thinker. But these publications also had shortcomings, which on the one hand were perhaps inevitable, given the pioneering aspect of these works, but on the other also depended on the particular agendas or presuppositions that the editors sometimes had with respect to this material. The fact that it has been difficult to treat Pessoa's esotericism in a non-esoteric manner is certainly a problem that has impeded a satisfactory appreciation of this body of work. It is therefore clear that, whereas it is certainly possible and desirable to rely on what was positive in these earlier publications, there remains also ample room for fresh research and editorial work on this material.

This is the reason why any new publication that tries to go in this direction, either by making previously unpublished writings available, or by preparing better editions of known texts, or even by offering new interpretations of Pessoa's esoteric corpus, should be welcomed with interest. This is even more true when one considers that the earlier anthologies that have been referred to are now out of print and difficult to find, and no new comprehensive edition of Pessoa's esoteric writings has appeared since the late 1980s—the only exception being the critical edition of *Mensagem* and other esoteric poems published in the Coleção Arquivos of the UNESCO in 1993 (which, however, focused almost exclusively on Pessoa's esoteric poetry, and not on the prose fragments and essays).

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To be fair, the book under review here does not have the pretension to fulfill any of these tasks. It does not present itself as a scholarly work, but rather as a book that has the honest intention of making a selection of this material available again to the common interested reader, rather than of marking a significant progress in its scholarly study. This disclaimer is necessary, because it feels somehow awkward to review a non-scholarly book according to scholarly standards. But whereas the common reader may (and perhaps should) ignore the present review and simply appreciate Pessoa's pages as they are offered in the book, it remains useful, for those who have a more scholarly interest in the subject, to have a closer look at it, so that it can find its proper place in the now vast bibliography on Pessoa's esotericism.



[Front and back covers of Gandra's 2015 edition]

First of all, a look at the contents. The book opens with a lengthy introduction ("Antelóquio") of almost ninety pages, which includes a new list of Pessoa's heteronyms. This is then followed by the selection of Pessoa's esoteric texts ("Hermetismo e Iniciação"), including both prose and poetry. This forms the bulk of the book. There is then a selection of three short stories by Mário de Sá-Carneiro ("Contos de Ultra-Sensação"), which, according to the editor, show an affinity of themes and inspiration with Pessoa's esoteric writings. The volume concludes with a bibliography. There is, unfortunately, no index of either names or text sources at the end.

There is not much to say about Gandra's selection of esoteric texts. Most of them have been published before, in one or another of the earlier anthologies mentioned above. As has been done by other authors before him, Gandra groups

the prose fragments and essays on the basis of their common titles (“Subsolo,” “O Caminho da Serpente,” “O Filósofo Hermético,” etc.) or, when they are untitled, on the basis of their apparent main topic (“Sobre a Teosofia,” “Sobre a Alquimia,” etc.). Less obvious are the titles of the two sections into which the poems are divided (“Experiências de Ultra-Sensação” and “Poesia Gnóstica”). Why are poems called “gnostic,” instead of, say, “Hermetic” or “Rosicrucian” is not clear to the present reviewer. The call number of the *Espólio* (Pessoa’s literary estate) for each text is usually given in a footnote, but not consistently. In many cases Gandra contents himself with referring to an earlier published source, which I take to mean that the text was extracted from that source without checking the original version in the *Espólio*. But this, given the intent of the book, is of course a minor fault. Also a minor fault, and for the same reason, is the fact that the editor does only give the Portuguese translation of those texts originally written by Pessoa in English. The texts also have practically no contextual or explicatory notes.

For the reader who is already acquainted with the texts included in the selection, the most interesting part of the volume is of course the introduction. Gandra offers here his interpretation of Pessoa’s esotericism. The main focus of Gandra’s interpretation is on the problem of heteronymy, which he interprets as being the result of “powers” Pessoa acquired during his life, and through which his heteronyms emerged. These powers would be analogous to those referred to as “siddhis” in the Indian tradition of Yoga. Gandra makes references here to both Indian and Tibetan traditions, whose relevance for the understanding of Pessoa’s work is not immediately clear, especially as Pessoa did not seem to be particularly attracted by Eastern mysticism<sup>1</sup>. But for Gandra the connection may have some historical basis on the well-known fact that Pessoa translated a number of theosophical works between 1915 and 1916. H.P. Blavatsky’s and Annie Besant’s theosophy would therefore justify such an “Indian” or “Tibetan” interpretation of Pessoa’s psychic “powers.” In fact, Gandra sees an obvious analogy between Pessoa and Blavatsky, because, as he points out, they both composed most of their works in an altered state of consciousness that they interpreted subjectively as a form of inspiration from higher powers. All of this is undoubtedly fascinating, but ends up being yet another esoteric interpretation of Pessoa’s esotericism, rather than a sound historical, critical one. And in fact, we can see here some of the problems that have marred research on this subject in the past, at least from a scholarly point of view. There is here scarcely an attempt at situating Pessoa’s ideas within the broader context of European esotericism in the first half of the twentieth century. Surely Blavatsky’s theosophy had an important influence on Pessoa, but she was only one of the various authors and currents with which Pessoa was familiar. And when, even within his idiosyncratic framework of

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<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note: See, nonetheless, about Pessoa and Eastern mysticism, PIZARRO et al. (2011) “Os Orientes de Fernando Pessoa,” in *Revista Entre*, pp. 148-185.

interpretation, Gandra refers to particular authors in the history of esotericism, one can often see a certain degree of superficiality. To give just one example: among the figures who would have shared these “higher faculties” (“*faculdades superiores*”) or “*siddhis*” there would be João Tirtheim (*sic*) de Spanheim (*sic*), who is none other than Johannes Trithemius von Sponheim (1462-1516), sometimes also known in Portugal as João Tritheim. There is now some reliable scholarly literature on Trithemius, starting with Noel Brann’s classic *Trithemius and Magical Theology* (1998), but the only reference to relevant literature that Gandra gives in a footnote is to a passage of H.P. Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled*. Now, Blavatsky is certainly relevant as a source when discussing Pessoa’s esotericism, but not to the point of choosing her as a substitute for serious scholarship on other subjects.

The insufficient historical contextualization is, however, only part of the problem. Another, perhaps more serious, problem, is the fact that Gandra does not seem to be aware that in the last twenty years academic research on esotericism has developed enormously. Technical terms and key concepts have been, and are still, the object of intense scholarly debate, and cannot be used today by any informed person without making the slightest reference to the related literature. It is quite telling that, when Gandra makes a list of the possible meanings of the term “esotericism” (p. 12), he omits precisely the meaning(s) that academic scholars give to it today. This and other key terms, such as “Hermetic philosophy,” “occultism,” or “gnosticism,” seem to be used interchangeably without a proper clarification or a distinction between them. This, in the end, does not help the reader to navigate the semantic ocean of this terminology in relation to Pessoa’s work.

In conclusion, this anthology can certainly help keeping the interest in Pessoa’s esotericism alive. It makes a wealth of relevant texts newly available, especially for new generations of readers who came of age after the 1980s. It is from this perspective that it can be appreciated, and even praised. But, if scholarly research on this subject wants to progress further, it will surely need firmer ground and a more solid approach.