Fernando Pessoa

ENGLISH POETRY

selected & introduced by

Richard Zenith

ASSÍRIO & ALVIM

The greatest Portuguese poet of the twentieth century wanted to be an English poet. Born in Lisbon in 1888, Fernando Pessoa lost his father to tuberculosis one month after his fifth birthday. Two and a half years later he sailed with his mother to South Africa, where her second husband had just been named Portugal's consul in Durban, the port and largest city of Natal. The future poet lived there from the age of seven to seventeen.

About one quarter of Durban's population was Zulu, another quarter Indian, and the rest European, mostly British. They all walked the same streets, but it was only in their relationships as worker and employer, or buyer and seller, that the three groups interacted. The English colonists were, if possible, even more English than people living in England, and Fernando received a resolutely British education. His teachers at Durban High School had degrees from universities like Oxford and Cambridge. He was at the top of his class, and excelled in Latin, English, and French. When he was just fifteen years old, he sat for a nationwide, university placement exam and won a prize for the best English essay. There were 899 examinees.

Pessoa's Durban years were broken by an interlude that would prove crucial for his poetic formation: at the age of thirteen, he and his family made a year-long trip to Portugal, where he wrote more than fifteen poems in Portuguese. Once back in Durban, however, Fernando went back to using English for virtually all of his writing. Famous for inventing fictional authors, some of whom he called heteronyms, as a teenager he published poems in a Durban newspaper under the names of Karl P. Effield (who was supposedly from Boston) and Charles Robert Anon (from England).

In 1905 the young poet returned for good to Lisbon, to study in the Curso Superior de Letras (School of Arts and Letters), and C. R. Anon went with him. That is, Anon's name continued to sign poems and prose pieces written by Pessoa in English. A chess-player who could move his pawns forwards and backwards, Pessoa retroactively credited most of Anon's poems to Alexander Search, an alter ego he invented in 1906, at which point he retired C.R. Anon from the game. During the next several years he wrote dozens of English poems in the name of Search, and no poetry in Portuguese, except for a handful of political poems — satires bashing the monarchy and the Catholic Church. (Portugal became a republic in 1910.)

The only thing that prevented Pessoa from writing poetry in Portuguese was his consuming ambition to be an English poet. Portuguese was profoundly rooted in his intellect and creative imagination as well as in his psyche. His schooling began in Lisbon, before he departed with his mother for South Africa, where he never lost touch with his native language. After school and on weekends, he found time to read in Portuguese, and the Portuguese poems he wrote in 1902 — when the family was in the home country for an extended holiday — display an impressive familiarity with traditional forms and versification techniques. But he wanted to be an English poet.

It was only towards the end of 1908, three full years after his definitive return to Lisbon, that Pessoa began to write lyric poetry in Portuguese — without in the least slackening the pace of his poetic production in English. The same year he retired Alexander Search, 1910, he began writing Shakespearean sonnets in his own name. They were Shakespearean not only because their fourteen lines were divided into three quatrains followed by a resolving couplet (the Petrarchan sonnet has two quatrains followed by

two tercets) but also because of their "Tudor tricks of repetition, involution and antithesis." These words are from a *Times Literary Supplement* review of Pessoa's *35 Sonnets* (1918), which he published in Lisbon with his own funds. The reviewer was impressed by the sonnets' "ultra-Shakespearian Shakespearianisms", as well as "by the worth of what they have to say". A review in the *Glasgow Herald*, on the other hand, noted that the sonnets, though well done, suffered from "a certain crabbedness of speech, due to an imitation of a Shakespearean trick".

In 1918 Pessoa also self-published *Antinous*, a long poem in which the emperor Hadrian, next to the corpse of his lover who drowned in the Nile, recalls the sensuous rituals of the "love they lived as a religion", and he vows to build him a deifying statue not made of stone but of his yearning for "our love's eternity". The *Times Literary Supplement* cautiously noted that it was "not a poem that will appeal to the general reader in England". A critic for the *Athenaeum* wrote: "The theme is often repellent, but certain passages have unquestionable power." In fact *Antinous*, written in 1915, is easily Pessoa's greatest poetic achievement in English.

In 1913 Pessoa had written another long poem about sexual desire, but from the perspective of a bride who looks forward to giving up her virginity in exchange for "joy-hot unity" with the groom. It was an "Epithalamium", a genre that the Greeks invented to sing at wedding processions or at the bride's marriage chamber while interspersing frequent invocations to Hymen, the god of marriage celebrations. The Romans infused the form with more directly sexual references. Pessoa read the epithalamia of John Donne and probably those of Edmund Spenser and Ben Jonson, but his bridal song was more ribald than any of theirs. None of them could match, in explicitness, Pessoa's description of the groom's groping "for the lipped lair, / The fortress made but to be

taken, for which / He feels the battering ram grow large and itch." Unfortunately the poet's attempt to be erotic had an unintentionally comic result.

Between 1910 and 1917, while writing Shakespearean sonnets, Pessoa was also writing the poems that would eventually form *The Mad Fiddler*. As the title suggests, the poems of this collection have a more musical quality, but their subject matter is philosophical, or contemplative. They are at once an attempt to create "pure poetry" (à la Mallarmé) and a search for God or for whatever is "twixt thing and thing" (from the poem "King of Gaps"). They are an artist's journey and a soul journey, and the two journeys converge. Pessoa's aesthetic and spiritual searches were in fact one and the same search.

Pessoa's three main Portuguese heteronyms — Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, and Álvaro de Campos — all emerged in 1914 and were immediately, wondrously prolific, with many of their greatest poems emerging right when they did, or soon thereafter. Some stunning poems of Álvaro de Campos, an urbane naval engineer and the most vociferous poet in the trio, appeared in *Orpheu*, the short-lived literary magazine that brought Modernism to Portugal in 1915. But Pessoa, who was one of the magazine's founders, published none of Alberto Caeiro's deceptively simple "nature" poems and none of Ricardo Reis's odes in the style of Horace until the mid-1920s. He had other priorities.

Before and after *Orpheu*, Pessoa had sent small groups of his English poems to British literary reviews and book publishers, to no avail. In May 1917 he submitted *The Mad Fiddler*, a full-length collection, to a London publishing house, which swiftly returned the manuscript with a laconic rejection letter. The next year, as already mentioned, he brought out *Antinous* and *35 Sonnets* at his own expense and was gratified by several of the reviews they elicited. Finally, in 1920, he had a small breakthrough: he succeeded

in publishing "Meantime", a poem from *The Mad Fiddler*, in the prestigious literary journal *The Athenaeum*.

Encouraged to press on, Pessoa resorted again to self-publishing. In late 1921 he founded a small publishing house, Olisipo, which issued his English poetry in two slim volumes. *English Poems I-II* included "Inscriptions" as well as a revised version of "Antinous", and *English Poems III* consisted of "Epithalamium". Once more, as he had done in 1918, he sent copies of the chapbooks to British periodicals, but this time his poems garnered scant critical notice. And his momentum faltered. He continued to write poems in English for the rest of his life — the last poem in this volume was written eight days before he died — but only when it pleased him, not on behalf of his old ambition to be a 20th-century Keats or Shelley (the latter was his favorite of the English romantics).

Fernando Pessoa also wrote hundreds of pages of prose in English, including the majority of his personal notes, and it was by drafting business letters in English for firms with contacts abroad that he made his living. The last sentence he ever wrote was in English: "I know not what to-morrow will bring." The next day, 30 November 1935, brought his death, possibly from intestinal obstruction. He had been taken to the hospital with severe abdominal pains.

It does not seem to have ever occurred to Pessoa that his English was not the perfect instrument for whatever he might want to write. It served him well enough for prose texts, whose purpose is often to convey information, ideas, or opinions, in which case slightly defective syntax or an occasionally awkward phrase is not likely to detract from one's reading experience. Poetry, on the other hand, conveys itself. Each word in a poem, and its relationship to all the other words, is what a poem is "about", and one mischosen or misplaced word is enough to ruin the ensemble.

But there was another, more serious problem: the English that Pessoa used for writing poetry was too poetical. In Durban he was a shy boy and a maniacal reader. It was from books that he got his excellent English, and it was by imitating Milton, the English romantics and Edgar Allan Poe that he learned to write poetry. These were good masters, but for his poetry not to feel a little bookish, a little mannered, he would have needed to appropriate his second language in a more visceral fashion, by playing more ball with other children, shouting and whining and teasing in English. Or perhaps the real problem was simply that Portuguese, which he learned to read and write early, had jealously taken hold of his soul and would not let English get an equal foothold.

Pessoa, nonetheless, produced a fascinating and diversified body of English poetry, which explored many of the same themes as his Portuguese poetry, sometimes with greater intensity or in an unusually effective, original way. *Example 1*: The idea that the self can never be apprehended, since it is actually a profusion of selves, runs through much of Pessoa's work, but the eighth of his *35 Sonnets* ("How many masks where we, and undermasks") is a uniquely emphatic statement of that idea, replicated as it is by the interfolding tissues of the poem's tightly woven syntax. *Example 2*: God (or the gods) and the spiritual dimension are never far from Pessoa's literary imagination, but a specifically pantheistic vision imbues *The Mad Fiddler* as nowhere else in his poetry. *Example 3*: Sexual attraction between men is a recurring topic in Pessoa's poetry from the 1910s, particularly in English. "Antinous" is his major literary enactment of that attraction, and "I write this to thy memory, my love" (p. 190) is his most poignant, apparently personal reflection on it.

This selection of English poems encompasses all the ones published by Pessoa as an adult with the exception of "Epithalamium", thirty of the more than one hundred poems attributed to Alexander

Search, most of the poems from *The Mad Fiddler*, and some of the miscellaneous poems ("Other Poems") he wrote in English throughout his life. This last group includes several excellent sonnets as well as a number of spontaneous, less labored poems that show us a lighter, occasionally humorous side of Pessoa. Particularly amusing is a poem from a woman's point of view ("When I was very young") — a feminist poem, in fact — written one month before he died. The last poem Pessoa wrote in English, a wistful longing addressed to an unidentified "you", is presented here in its complete version for the first time.

VIII

How many masks wear we, and undermasks,
Upon our countenance of soul, and when,
If for self-sport the soul itself unmasks,
Knows it the last mask off and the face plain?
The true mask feels no inside to the mask
But looks out of the mask by co-masked eyes.
Whatever consciousness begins the task
The task's accepted use to sleepness ties.
Like a child frighted by its mirrored faces,
Our souls, that children are, being thought-losing,
Foist otherness upon their seen grimaces
And get a whole world on their forgot causing;
    And, when a thought would unmask our soul's masking,
    Itself goes not unmasked to the unmasking.

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