

# THE MASK BEHIND THE MAN



*Elide V. Oliver*

RICHARD ZENITH, *Pessoa and Co.* Grove Press.

Cervantes, in a felicitous image, remarked that all translations are the verso side of a tapestry; although every stitch is to be found there, the effect is pale and blurred. But at the very least, then, a faithful translation must achieve a level of representability capable of indicating some of the most essential characteristics of the original, in order to bear the simplest claim of a translation. In the case of this present volume, selected, introduced and translated by Richard Zenith, notwithstanding the praiseworthy effort to put together a book of one of the most important and intriguing poets of this century, Cervantes' tapestry, regrettably, not only fades and blurs, but pulls apart too.

Zenith's introduction to Pessoa's life and works is obfuscating. Pessoa wrote under a series of what he called "heteronyms" and the fact that these heteronyms consist of powerful "poets", writing under different voices, styles and diction about equally various themes, is the point of departure for understanding the links between Pessoa's biography and writing. As Pessoa himself tells us: "For some temperamental reason that I don't propose to analyse nor is it important for me to analyse, I've built inside myself many characters, distinct from each other and distinct from me as well, characters to whom I've attributed many poems that are not how I, in my feelings and ideas, would write them" (my translation). He goes on to add: "let us suppose that a supreme depersonalised being, like Shakespeare, instead of creating the character of Hamlet as part of a drama, created him as a simple character, without drama... It wouldn't be legitimate to look into this character for a definition of the feelings and thoughts of Shakespeare unless the character were flawed because the bad playwright is the one who reveals himself". Yet, Zenith does not seem to want to draw conclusions from Pessoa's own words and his particular dialectics of revelation by hiding and vice versa. We are told, instead, in an embarrassing and quite unironic way that "Pessoa was sincere in his insincerity; heteronymy was not a game he acquired or invoked along the way, it was woven into his DNA". One cannot help recalling Keith Waldrop's remark that "a bad poem is always sincere"; and as for the "game" and the

“DNA” one can almost hear Pessoa’s ghost laugh at such a distorted misconception of his aesthetics.

The idea of appending Pessoa’s orthonym and heteronyms with epithets (such as Álvaro de Campos, The Jaded Sensationist, or Fernando Pessoa himself, the Mask Behind the Man, etc.) is bizarre. It is hard to understand the purpose of such arbitrary and gratuitous intrusion, since Pessoa’s orthonym and heteronyms speak for themselves and do not need this kind of labelling to make them more revealing. Zenith’s procedure works against itself, weakening what it attempts to reinforce, doing a disservice to the poet as well as misleading the reader. It is also a dangerous precedent. Imagine anthologists a hundred years on adopting the practice: Yeats, The Inventor of Ireland; Wordsworth, The Poet of the Lake, “preserved in Amber”), and so on and so forth.

Also, in translating Pessoa and his heteronyms, Zenith is usually pedestrian and confused. There is no coherence in the choices that he makes as a translator, from line to line, word to word. Poems are translated according to the whim of the moment, with no regard to rhyme or internal rhyming, alliteration, assonance, rhythm, repetitions and occasionally punctuation. Given this arbitrariness, it is even more whimsical to resort to so many inexplicable and unnecessary inversions, since they do not correspond to the original, nor do they recreate the effects of Pessoa’s devices. They seem to be there merely to wriggle out of the linguistic and syntactical difficulties which the translator couldn’t cope with. We are, then, faced with an Alberto Caeiro who speaks a dull, pseudo-philosophical rant, miles away from Caeiro’s forthright common-sense in Portuguese; an Álvaro de Campos who sounds hysterical as opposed to the vitality of the original; a lukewarm Ricardo Reis sailing over seas of vapidty instead of the elegant and contained classical phrasing so characteristic of his Horatian odes in Portuguese.

As for the poems written under the orthonym of Fernando Pessoa, there are additional problems. *Message* is the only book Pessoa published in his lifetime (under his own name, or orthonym), and probably the only true epic achievement of the twentieth century. It is a long poem divided in parts which only makes complete sense if understood in its entirety. In the present volume, however, the translator has excerpted some of the poems clumsily. There is no warning note or comment explaining to the reader why the original numbering of each poem has disappeared. This fact in itself, if preserved, would have called the reader’s attention to the whole structure of the poem and made clear the point that only some parts of it were translated. Moreover, it would have been helpful to the reader to have offered a note explaining the internal divisions and titles of

the sections of *Mensagem* if only to give some idea of the nature of Pessoa's accomplishment in writing this multifaceted epic.

A remarkable characteristic of *Message* is that it is written in "archaic style" orthography. The impact of such use, in Portuguese, should not be ignored because it provides a certain specific tone that adds to the epic atmosphere. If the translator makes no attempt to create an equivalent for this feature (which is understandable), there is no reason why at least a note couldn't have been written explaining Pessoa's motivation in the choice of such particular orthography. (Speaking of the latter, there are mistakes in the Portuguese, especially where accents are concerned. Pessoa's name was written Pessoa and not Pêsoa. Needless to say, the mistake alters entirely the pronunciation of the poet's surname, which means "person" in Portuguese. Deserving each his accent too are Dr Pancrácio and Dr Gaudêncio, among others.)

One of the most famous poems Pessoa wrote, from *Mensagem*, is translated in this present selection. It is called "Portuguese Sea" [Mar Portuguez]. This little masterpiece is Pessoa at his best. The imagery of the theme (the Portuguese conquest and its high price) is so naturally resolved in the language, with its maritime rhythm and creative rhyming, that the poem became one of the most important in the Portuguese language. Jonathan Griffith, in a book published in 1991, translated *Message* (all of it) excellently. He was planning a volume on Pessoa before his premature death. His rendering of "Portuguese Sea" preserves the rhythm, inversions, timing and difficult rhyme scheme, especially in a crucial moment of the poem where Pessoa rhymes the verb "to give" in the past [deu] with the noun, sky/heaven [céu]. Griffith's translation reads: "Peril and abyss has God to the sea given / And yet made it the mirror of heaven." This represents quite an achievement, considering all the perils and abysses a translator has to face in order to double the stormy cape of literary translation, as the Portuguese of Pessoa's poem did, in order to conquer the world. Zenith's attempt, however, does not even have the merit of being straightforwardly literal. It is pedestrian and altogether prosaic; all the inversions of the original are lost, without good reason. The result is anaemic and uninspired: "God placed danger and the abyss in the sea, / But he also made it heaven's mirror." Compare the original: "Deus ao mar o perigo e o abysmo deu, / Mas nelle é que espelhou o céu." The tapestry pulls apart and Pessoa goes on waiting for a good weaver to render all his hues and nuances.