

A P E S S O A E X C H A N G E

To the editors:

Elide Oliver's review of *Fernando Pessoa & Co.—Selected Poems*, published in *Metre* 6, was so full of empty assertions and so devoid of critical engagement that it's hard to take seriously. Unfortunately for me and my book, Ms Oliver's carping observations on pedantic minutiae (missing accent marks and such) may lead some to suppose that, although not the surest critic of poetry, she is at least well-informed. In fact even her pedantry is flawed, and worse yet, she distorts.

Ms Oliver begins by taking on my introduction, called "obfuscating". She proceeds to explain heteronyms, the necessary "point of departure" for understanding Pessoa, as if to suggest that I missed the boat, when my introduction actually goes into great detail about heteronymy, about Pessoa's relentless depersonalization and the fact that his life was a kind of empty stage for the writer-characters he invented. In his review of my book for the *TLS* (18 December 1998) Jonathan Keates, no novice to Portuguese literature, wrote: "Until now the best introduction to Pessoa has been Octavio Paz's preface to his own Spanish translations, published in 1962. Zenith's essay, presenting this new selection, bids fair rival to Paz in the trenchancy with which he detaches the components of what we might call the Pessoaan performance, a drama in which, as he says, 'there was no drama, except for the literary kind.'"

Ms Oliver quotes the following sentence (the only one she quotes) from my introduction: "Pessoa was sincere in his insincerity; heteronymy was not a game he acquired or invoked along the way, it was woven into his DNA". She makes fun of me for wrongly imagining that Pessoa was, after all, sincere. This is almost unbelievable, since Pessoa's implacable *insincerity* is the underlying theme of my entire introduction. Not only the theme but the very word keeps popping up, on pages 3, 17, 18, 21, etc. In the paragraph preceding the one she quotes from, I write: "The only way Pessoa could conceive of being a poet was by not being, by pretending, by achieving complete insincerity". The sentence Ms Oliver quotes simply makes the point that this insincerity was intrinsic to Pessoa's whole person, and began already in childhood, when Pessoa invented his first heteronyms.

Next she makes a big deal about the epithets I have appended to Pessoa's heteronyms (e.g. "Álvaro de Campos the Jaded Sensationist"), as if I were attempting to create new critical categories for Pessoa scholarship rather than simply suggesting convenient framing devices for the benefit of the general reader. Each of those epithets appears exactly *once* in the book, as part of the title for the short "biography" I've written for

each heteronym. Surely only bad faith devotes an entire and misleading paragraph to such a small point.

Finally she gets to the poetry, and declares, without citing one line of verse to support her claim: “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”. This is patently false (though I do admit to using English rather than Portuguese punctuation). My translations are attentive to meter, Pessoa’s deliberate repetitions, and rhyme. I don’t always rhyme, but neither did bilingual Pessoa, when he translated the first part of a long Campos poem, “Opiário,” from Portuguese to English. Ms Oliver would no doubt rap the dead poet on his knuckles, for she feels that translations of his work should adhere to the original metrical and rhyme schemes, which is a defensible position, but she should argue it and present solid evidence. She could compare, for example, various versions of “Autopsicografia,” Pessoa’s most translated poem. Here are two:

Autopsychography

Poets are people who feign.
They feign so thoroughly,
They’ll even mime as pain
The pain they suffer really.

Read what a poet has said —
In the pain on the page you discern.
Not the two he had
Only one they disown.

So on the circular track,
To keep the mind happy, it
Runs on, round and back —
This clockwork train called the heart.

Translated by Jonathan Griffin

Autopsychography

The poet is a faker
Who’s so good at his act
He even fakes the pain
Of pain he feels in fact.

And those who read his words
Will feel in what he wrote
Neither of the pains he has
ut just the one they don’t.

And so around its track
This thing called the heart winds,
A little clockwork train
To entertain our minds.

Translated by Richard Zenith

The rhyme scheme of the original is *abab* throughout, and Griffin stuck to the scheme, but at a price: “the pain on the page you discern” and “To keep the mind happy” are not happy phrases. Furthermore, only two of Griffin’s six rhymes are perfect, and the severely slanted rhyme “happy, it”-“heart” makes for a rather unsatisfying closing. That is my opinion, and Ms Oliver is entitled to her own, but she should discuss the matter. I opted for a less demanding rhyme scheme, *abcb*, because the resulting translation does (I think) more justice to the poem. Ms Oliver may disagree, but it is more than a little dishonest to say that I’ve translated “with no regard to rhyme”.

Ms Oliver spends the last part of her piece on *Mensagem* [Message], about which she is misinformed. Pessoa never referred to this book (the only collection of his Portuguese poetry to see print in his lifetime) as a single poem, as she does several times. It was, ultimately, a highly structured and cohesive work, but one that Pessoa continued to modify even after it was published, in 1934. The oldest poems in it were written without any book in mind, and Pessoa published many of the poems separately during the twenty years that their composition spans. It is odd, then, that Ms Oliver thinks it so important for individual poems from *Message* to be numbered, with detailed notes explaining their exact position in the original framework of the book, as if they could not stand on their own as poems. The seven poems she says I “excerpted clumsily” all come from the same section, “Portuguese Sea,” one that Pessoa particularly liked, having published it twice (with significant differences the second time) in magazines. Contrary to what she indicates, it is eminently clear in my 200-word explanatory note that the seven poems do not constitute the entire book. As for “archaic style” orthography, Ms Oliver is under the wrong impression that this was something unique to *Mensagem*. In fact it is the orthography that Pessoa used in everything he wrote. Why mention it with special reference to *Mensagem*? (At this point, in parentheses, Ms Oliver takes up the “crucial” problem of mistaken accent marks. There was, yes, one mistake: “Pessoa” was a typographical error, corrected in the second edition of the book, published in April 1999. As for the accent marks that Ms Oliver thinks are missing, “Pancracio” and “Gaudencio” were written by Pessoa without accent marks, and that is how Pessoa scholars write those names today.)

Finally, in the last paragraph, Ms Oliver cites two verses of my translation (the only ones she ever cites) to prove the rather curious complaint that I have not followed Fernando Pessoa’s word order, a feat that Jonathan Griffin did achieve. Anthony Rudolf, in his preface to Griffin’s *Message* (Rudolf was his literary executor), freely admits that the various translations left by Griffin (who did not arrive at a final version that satisfied him) contained “a few dubious phrases or clumsy renderings,” as well as “mannerisms,” but Ms Oliver knows better, declaring that he translated “all” of the book “excellently”. Griffin was an admirable, sensitive translator, but there are occasional, rather basic errors in his versions (the last verse of “Epitaph of Bartholomeu Diaz,” for example, to take one of the poems I also translated). And “Peril and abyss has God to the sea given,” while it satisfies Ms Oliver’s ear, may well be one of the manneristic lines that Rudolf had in mind. Her example is, at any rate, a preposterous basis for recommending a translation (Griffin’s) or throwing one out (mine).

I have found Ms Oliver’s scholarship to be severely wanting, and I’m sure that your readers, presented with the facts, will concur. To conclude anything at all about her critical judgement, given those facts, would be irrelevant.

Yours,

Richard Zenith.

It is true, I wrote a critical review of a book of Pessoa's translations. As a result, the translator, Mr Zenith, attacks me personally, accusing me of bad faith and bad scholarship. He must have changed his mind, for when he submitted translations of Antero de Quental and Camões to *Metre*, the editors sent me his work for a critical appreciation. I corrected mistakes, suggested other variants and completely disapproved of his translation of a poem by Camões. Mr Zenith, then, accepted all my criticism. The only difference between these two occasions was that the first one was a private circumstance, the other, public. Could this be the reason why Mr Zenith reacted so angrily, attacking personally somebody he does not know and therefore does not have instruments to judge? Things that we say tell more about ourselves than the people we want to attack, Mr Zenith. If my review was "so full of empty assertions and so devoid of critical engagement that it's hard to take seriously", I wonder why you took time to attempt to respond to it.

When Mr Zenith went to Yale University to read his translations, I was among the six people who went to listen to his readings. I then asked him what were his criteria when dealing with complex renditions such as metaphors, rhyme, assonances, alliterations, etc. He candidly answered that he had none.

Mr Zenith invokes the argument of authority when trying to defend his introduction, citing a reviewer who compared him to Octavio Paz. Paz's view of Pessoa is general and by no means original. He was curious about Pessoa as he was curious about a number of other subjects. I cannot comment on other people's opinions, since everybody is entitled to one, but to compare Paz to Zenith is, at the very least, wide of the mark. Besides, Pessoa and the Portuguese language are so unknown in the English language that anything can pass for knowledge. The introduction in question has improper, weak, and imprecise opinions about Pessoa's achievement as a poet, and improper treatment of his complexity. "Woven into the DNA" is a base trope, inappropriate because it mythologises where it is supposed to be uncovering.

Another problem is the gross generalizations, as the very one Mr Zenith quotes in his letter to the editor: "*the only way* [my italics] Pessoa could conceive of being a poet was by not being, by pretending," etc. Yet, Mr Zenith attacks me again on the question of Pessoa's "insincerity". Would Mr Zenith accuse Shakespeare of being sincere or insincere? It is Mr Zenith who raises the question of insincerity, a notion remarkably below any critical approach to a complex poet like Pessoa. Pessoa's *artifices* should not be confused with the low confessional tone of much contemporary poetry which craves for "sincerity" or "insincerity" (depending on the case) as a measure of legitimacy. In order to affirm such a thing one needs more convincing argumentation and examples, materials that are not provided by Mr Zenith in his introduction. In my origi-

nal review I quoted a lot more, but, of course, for questions of space, my review was edited. However, the readers can read my article in full, where my examples are not “sparsely quoted”, *bien au contraire*, in *Portuguese Literary and Cultural Studies* edited by the Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture of the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth.

As for the epithets, Mr Zenith affirms they are “convenient frame devices for the benefit of the general reader”. But, is it to the “benefit” of the “general reader” to misrepresent Pessoa’s heteronyms with subjective, clumsy and misleading appendage? Just because these “epithets” “just appear once” this does not mean they are “small points”. These epithets are used as *headings* and because there are no critical footnotes to suggest otherwise, the “general reader” may actually be misled into thinking they are Pessoa’s own.

After actually stooping to say that I would chastise Pessoa himself, when in fact I am only indicating the serious flaws of a translation of Pessoa’s works, Mr Zenith spares me a lot of argumentation when, in his letter, he provides the readers with two versions of Pessoa’s *Autopsicografia*. His version offers some of the weaknesses one finds in his book. Here is the original:

O poeta é um fingidor.
Finge tão completamente
Que chega a fingir que é dor
A dor que deveras sente.

E os que lêem o que escreve,
Na dor lida sentem bem,
Não as duas que ele teve,
Mas só a que eles não têm.

E assim nas calhas de roda
Gira, a entreter a razão,
Esse comboio de corda
Que se chama coração.

If readers have the patience to compare this original with the two translations, they will notice a rhyme scheme *abab*. This is not the most important thing about the poem. What is vital is the naturalness of the rhyming against the paradoxical labyrinth of its imagery, in which Pessoa portrays the struggle between emotion and reason enacted by the poet. He can communicate because he feigns the real pain he suffers so that those who read him can identify with him. Thus, the heart, a model train that permanently leaps around, entertains reason. Let us avoid the implications of calling *fingidor* (feigner) a “faker” and *razão*, (reason), “mind”; let us also forget the introduction of “liddle” and the altogether inappropriate “this thing called the heart” that falsifies Pessoa’s tone for

a start. These are presumably what Mr Zenith would label under my “pedantic minutiae”, or my “distortions”. Yet, the problem with Mr Zenith’s translation is that he does not create equivalences for Pessoa’s poetry. Where are the alliterations, like *comboio de corda*, the groups [gi] and [chi], [I], [r] just to cite a few? At least Griffin gives us “runs on, round and back”; “the pain on the page”, “clockwork...called”. What Mr Zenith’s versions gives us? “Neither of the pains he has /But just the one they don’t”. I ask where has Pessoa’s poetry gone in this awkward arrangement that passes for verse? Mr Zenith says his translations are “attentive to meter”. They are not. They are as prosaic as they can be and there is no worse betrayal to poetry than sterilising it with prosaic solutions. Not to speak of the bad word choice of the end, in complete anticlimax with Pessoa’s finale. It is in the last verse that Pessoa reveals what the metaphor of the train refers to: it is the heart. Mr Zenith’s version reads: “to entertain our minds”. Again, poetry was completely vanquished.

Yet, Mr Zenith does reach a climax. It is when he reveals his total ignorance of my native tongue and typically blames me for it. Not only does he say I am “misinformed” but he states that I was under the “wrong impression” that the orthography Pessoa used in *Mensagem* was “unique to [the poem]”. “In fact”, he goes on, “it is the orthography that Pessoa used in everything he wrote. Why mention it with special reference to *Mensagem*”? Well, Mr Zenith, because in *Message*, Pessoa *did* use a unique type of orthography that was *indeed* different from the orthography he (and everybody else) used by that time. It is you who cannot distinguish between the old Portuguese spelling, pre-modernisation (Reforma Ortográfica de 1948) (where all “ph” and double “ll” “ff”, “y” etc were still in use) and the special spelling Pessoa used in *Mensagem*. Mr Zenith should have read the philological notice, written by the editor of the critical edition of *Mensagem*, José Augusto Seabra, who together with Maria Aliete Galhoz wrote: “Since then, the editions of *Mensagem* divide themselves in two great groups: the ones that *respect the lesson of the 2nd edition, conserving the original latinising orthography, adopted by the poet for reasons of emblematic cratilism, as it happens with Editorial Ática until the 6th edition, and the ones that have chosen an orthographic actualisation*. [Pessoa, Fernando: *Mensagem*. Poemas esotéricos. Edição crítica José Augusto Seabra, coleção Arquivos, p.xlii]. A translator should be able to recognise the difference between standard orthography and invented “latinising orthography adopted by the poet for reasons of emblematic cratilism”. In other words, when Pessoa writes “O céu stella o azul”, [The sky stars the azure] he creates the verb out of stella (star) direct from Latin, not following the usual spelling of the time: *estrella*, that became in the modern spelling, *estrela*. Besides, the use of the noun as a verb is already uncommon. To miss these nuances is to miss Pessoa’s own creative use of the language.

Mr Zenith behaves strangely. He follows Pessoa when Pessoa is wrong and does not follow him when he is right. The question of the diacritics only shows that Pessoa, like all other writers and poets, made occasional mistakes in spelling, etc. It does not follow, though, that an editor should blindly reproduce those mistakes. On the other hand, Mr Zenith abandons the poet when he is right, as in the numbering of the poems of *Mensagem* to show that they are a coherent whole, a symbolic unit. Mr Zenith is, again, completely wrong when he states that "Pessoa continued to modify [*Message*] even after it was published in 1934". No, this is not accurate. Pessoa did not continue to modify his epic. What he did was to add dates to a certain number of poems and to correct mistakes. This is known as the "2nd edition" of *Mensagem*, in other words, the corrections Pessoa made, by hand, in a personal copy. This is easily perceived once we compare both editions. My remark against the use Mr Zenith made of the poems of *Mensagem* go in accordance to Pessoa himself. The poems of *Mensagem* constitute a whole and Mr Zenith should have made this very clear in his excerpts and not have treated them as independent from a context that gives them origin, sense and finality.

The general tone and vocabulary of Mr Zenith's letter is worrisome. One can only hope his irresponsible, immature and debased accusations are the fruit of a passing anger, instead of a reflexion of his own scholarship.