

Tamesis

Founding Editors

†J. E. Varey

†Alan Deyermond

General Editor

Stephen M. Hart

Series Editor of

Fuentes para la historia del teatro en España

Charles Davis

Advisory Board

Rolena Adorno

John Beverley

Efraín Kristal

Jo Labanyi

Alison Sinclair

Isabel Torres

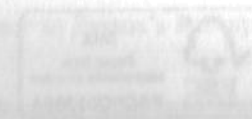
Julian Weiss

FERNANDO PESSOA'S MODERNITY WITHOUT FRONTIERS

INFLUENCES, DIALOGUES AND RESPONSES

Edited by

Mariana Gray de Castro



TAMESIS

© Contributors 2013

All Rights Reserved. Except as permitted under current legislation, no part of this work may be photocopied, stored in a retrieval system, published, performed in public, adapted, broadcast, transmitted, recorded or reproduced in any form or by any means, without the prior permission of the copyright owner

First published 2013 by Tamesis, Woodbridge

ISBN 978 1 85566 256 8

Tamesis is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK
and of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
668 Mt Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620-2731, USA
website: www.boydellandbrewer.com

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

The publisher has no responsibility for the continued existence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this book, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate

Papers used by Boydell & Brewer Ltd are natural, recyclable products made from wood grown in sustainable forests



Typeset by BBR, Sheffield
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

The Poet as Hero: Pessoa and Carlyle

LEYLA PERRONE-MOISÉS

During his adolescence, Fernando Pessoa was an admiring reader of Thomas Carlyle. The Scottish writer was part of the young poet's school curriculum,¹ and the book *Sartor Resartus. Heroes Past and Present* (1833-4) can be found in his personal library at the Casa Fernando Pessoa in Lisbon.² This opus was very much on Pessoa's mind, for he made several references to it in his writings, quoting the same phrase by Carlyle, for example, in two different fragments of the *Livro do Desassossego* [*Book of Disquiet*].³

In *Fernando Pessoa na África do Sul* [*Fernando Pessoa in South Africa*], Alexandrino E. Severino dedicates a chapter to the influence of Carlyle on Pessoa, specifically regarding the poet's role in the government of nations. What I propose to examine in this essay, more generally, is Carlyle's concept of the Poet as Hero, and Pessoa's different stances, as a man and as a poet, in relation to this concept.

The concept of the poet as a hero was introduced by the German romantics and taken to England by Thomas Carlyle. In his famous lectures 'The Hero as Man of Letters' and 'The Poet as Hero',⁴ both in 1840,

¹ See Alexandrino E. Severino, *Fernando Pessoa na África do Sul* (Lisbon: Publicações Dom Quixote, 1983).

² Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus. Heroes Past and Present* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1903).

³ Fernando Pessoa (Bernardo Soares), *Livro do Desassossego*, ed. Richard Zenith (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1999), p. 155: "Qualquer estrada", disse Carlyle, "até esta estrada de Entepfuhi, te leva até o fim do mundo"; and p. 398: 'Qualquer estrada, esta mesma estrada de Entepfuhi, te levará até o fim do mundo'. [Any road, even this Entepfuhi road, will lead you to the end of the world' (*Sartor Resartus*, book 2, chapter 'Idyllie').

⁴ Hereafter quoted from the 'Sterling Edition' of Carlyle's *Complete Works* (Project Gutenberg, www.gutenberg.org/etext/13534).

Carlyle observed that divine or prophetic heroes belong to the remote past, being no longer cultivated in the modern world. And he proposed that writers should be considered the heroes of the new era.

Curiously, the first lecture, 'The Hero as Man of Letters', contains more information on the concept of the poet as hero than the second, whose title is precisely 'The Poet as Hero'. In this second lecture, the essayist merely provides examples for his thesis, citing Shakespeare, Goethe and Dante as the national heroes of their respective countries. It is on the first lecture, therefore, that we shall concentrate.

The principal ideas expounded by Carlyle are as follows:

1. The propagation of the press brought a new form of heroism that was to continue in future eras.
2. The writer should be considered the most important of modern people.
3. The life of a writer allows us to understand better the period that shaped him and in which he lived.
4. The role of the writer is equivalent to that attributed, in the past, to the Prophet, the Priest and the Divinity.
5. Literature is a form of revelation.
6. Contemporary society provides difficult conditions for the writer, both from a moral and material point of view; however, his importance should be recognised and he should govern nations.
7. This society is miserable and 'pestilential', but will improve in the future; moral and intellectual scepticism must be overcome, because 'A man lives by believing something, not by debating and arguing about many things'.
8. We should not think of saving the world, for God will take care of this. We should look to ourselves and fulfil 'the duty of staying home'.
9. The Hero-Man of Letters deserves to be adored and to be followed by adorers. But he should remain tranquil, and indifferent to celebrity.
10. The Hero-Man of Letters is not victorious, but 'a fallen Hero'.

Let us examine to what extent Fernando Pessoa adopted these ideas of Carlyle's. In his youth, he maintained the romantic conviction that literature is a kind of revelation, that the poet has a transcendental mission to fulfil and an imperious calling to honour: 'a terrível e religiosa missão que todo o homem de génio recebe de Deus com o seu génio' [the grave

and religious mission that every man of genius is granted by God, together with his genius] (letter to Armando Cortes Rodrigues, 19 January 1915).⁵

In keeping with Carlyle's pronouncement, Pessoa believed that men of letters ('the men of dreams') should have a relevant role in the government of nations. In another letter to the same addressee (2 September 1914), the poet claimed he was writing a 'Teoria da República Aristocrática' [Theory of Aristocratic Republic], in the manner of Carlyle.

In several texts, Pessoa lamented that his contemporary world no longer permitted the alliance of dream and action, as had occurred in Portugal during the age of the Discoveries. But the heroic ideal can be found in his poetry and essays, in the form of messianic utopia. In *Mensagem* [Message] the poet celebrates the heroes of his country, who are evoked to inspire a future Portuguese 'império' [empire]. (Pessoa's proposals, however, did not directly concern the *res publica*, and the Fifth Empire announced by him would be a cultural empire.)

The idea that his epoch was an age of decadence is also abundantly expressed in his work. He disliked the vulgarisation of the press, as he disliked any vulgarisation. The small number of his publications, in contrast to the astounding volume of his unpublished texts, reveals his high regard for the Book and his low expectations concerning the common people. In *Livro do Desassossego* he writes:

Publicar-se – socialização de si próprio. Que ignóbil necessidade! Mas ainda assim que afastada de um *acto* – o editor ganha, o tipógrafo produz.

[To be published – the socialisation of oneself. Contemptible necessity! But still not involving an act, since it is the editor who earns, the printer who produces.]⁶

However, Pessoa's texts display to what extent the situation had changed since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Carlyle was a Christian who believed in a providential God. Pessoa, on the contrary, considered Christianity a disease of modern civilisation. He lived in the time of the absence of the gods, the silence of the oracles, a time in which the Poet was no longer the Prophet or Priest, but merely an emissary with no credentials.

⁵ Pessoa, *Cartas*, ed. Richard Zenith (Lisbon: Assírio & Alvim, 2007), p. 100.

⁶ Pessoa (Bernardo Soares), *Livro do Desassossego*, p. 216; *The Book of Disquietude*, ed. and trans. Richard Zenith (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), p. 126.

As a religious man, Carlyle believed in Truth with a capital T, and considered sincerity as the principal quality of a poet. Pessoa did not believe in the existence of a sole truth, and called into question the sincerity of the poet. Finally, Carlyle was optimistic about the future, while Pessoa was often guilty of the sin of nihilism condemned by the Scottish writer. When, at the end of *Mensagem*, he writes 'É a Hora!' [It is Time!], this Time hidden in the mist is more of an aspiration than a belief. More appropriate to the poet, because more frequent, are these lines:

Os deuses vão-se, como forasteiros.
Como uma feira acaba a tradição.
Somos todos palhaços e estrangeiros.
A nossa vida é palco e confusão.⁷

[The gods go away, like strangers.
Like a market tradition ends.
We are all clowns and foreigners.
Our life is a stage and confusion.]⁸

In common with Carlyle, Pessoa did not believe in redemptive political programmes, particularly socialist programmes. His concept of society is aristocratic, based on values that the masses cannot absorb. For this reason, the heteronyms fulfilled the 'the duty of staying home'. All are home loving: Álvaro de Campos stays 'em casa sem camisa' [shirtless at home]; Alberto Caeiro remains in his house on the hill; Ricardo Reis sits by the river or seaside, contemplating; Bernardo Soares is literally 'o da mansarda' [the one in the garret]. The difference is that Carlyle left the world to the charge of divine providence, whereas Pessoa, in his various incarnations, is predominantly a sceptic.

Carlyle's Hero-Man-of-Letters is indifferent to celebrity. According to him, 'celebrity is but the candle-light'. Although he may have dreamt of it occasionally, Pessoa never sought celebrity, leaving fame to 'as actrizes e os produtos farmacêuticos' [actresses and pharmaceutical products] (*Ultimatum*, by Álvaro de Campos).⁹

At various points in his work, Pessoa and his heteronyms describe themselves as Anti-Heroes: 'Não sou nada, nunca serei nada'; 'sou reles,

⁷ Pessoa, *Obras Poéticas*, ed. Maria Aliete Galhoz (Rio de Janeiro: Aguilar, 1963), p. 193.

⁸ My translation.

⁹ Pessoa (Álvaro de Campos), 'Ultimatum', *Portugal Futurista 1* (1917; facsimile ed. Lisbon: Contexto, 1981), pp. 28-32 (p. 30).

sou vil como toda a gente' [I am nothing, I will never be anything; I am despicable, vile like everyone else] (Álvaro de Campos), 'sou ninguém' [I am nobody] (Fernando Pessoa 'himself' and Bernardo Soares).¹⁰ In *Livro do Desassossego*, we read: 'Fui génio mais que nos sonhos e menos que na vida. A minha tragédia é esta. Fui o corredor que caiu quase na meta, sendo, até aí, o primeiro.' [I was a genius in more than dreams and in less than life. That is my tragedy. I was the runner who led the race until he fell down, right before the finishing line.]¹¹ Here again we discover Carlyle's 'fallen Hero'. Carlyle's three Hero-Men-of-Letters – Johnson, Rousseau and Burns – were in their day fallen heroes, facing material poverty and the incomprehension of society; like Pessoa, to some extent.

All of Carlyle's writings underline the tragic nature of the hero-writer, who in a period of crisis in society can only be a 'Half-Hero'. The attempt to exalt this new type of hero itself fails in the lecturer's demonstration. One consolation remains: 'They fell for us too, opening a way for us'. Bernardo Soares similarly tries to transform failure into victory: 'Façamos de nossa falência uma vitória, uma coisa positiva e erguida, com colunas, majestade e aquiescência espiritual.' [Let's make our failure into a victory, into something positive and lofty, endowed with columns, majesty and our mind's consent.]¹² Like Carlyle, he draws on Rousseau to illustrate this idea:

Rousseau é o homem moderno, mas mais completo que qualquer homem moderno. Das fraquezas que o fizeram falir tirou – ai dele e de nós! – as forças que o fizeram triunfar. O que partiu dele venceu, mas nos lábaros de sua vitória, quando entrou na cidade, viu-se que estava escrita, em baixo, a palavra 'Derrota'. No que dele ficou para trás, incapaz do esforço de vencer, foram as coroas e os ceptros, a majestade de mandar e a glória de vencer por destino incerto.

[Rousseau is the modern man, but more complete than any modern man. From the weaknesses that made him fail, he extracted – alas for him and for us! – the forces that made him triumph. The part of him that came forth conquered, but on his victory banners, when he entered the city, there appeared the word 'Defeat'. In the part of him

¹⁰ This affirmation appears countless times in the work of the orthonym, Álvaro de Campos and *The Book of Disquietude*.

¹¹ Pessoa (Bernardo Soares), *Livro do Desassossego*, p. 279; *The Book of Disquietude*, p. 249.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 290/261.

that stayed behind, incapable of struggling to conquer, there were crowns and sceptres, the majesty of rule and the glory of conquest – his by an inner destiny.]¹³

Pessoa belongs to a lineage of fallen heroes, of highly modern unrecognised geniuses. The above fragment recalls Baudelaire's text on Edgar Allan Poe, which begins thus: 'Il existe dans la littérature de chaque pays des hommes qui portent le mot guignon écrit en caractères mystérieux dans les plis sinueux de leur front.'¹⁴ [In the literature of every country there are men branded with the word misfortune, written in mysterious letters in the sinuous wrinkles of their foreheads.] Baudelaire read Carlyle, who is certainly behind his interpretation of Poe when he writes: 'Edgar Poe, ivrogne, pauvre, persécuté, paria, me plaît plus que calme et vertueux, un Goethe ou un W. Scott' [Edgar Poe, a drunken, poor, persecuted pariah, pleases me more than a calm and virtuous Goethe or Walter Scott].¹⁵ Baudelaire makes the same comparison as Carlyle when he identifies the poet, who suffers for us, with Christ, considering him a saint whom we can ask to intercede.

Where Baudelaire goes further than Carlyle and the romantics, paving the way to the modernity of a poet like Pessoa, is when he dares to affirm that Poe was great as a caricature, as a juggler, as a *farçeur*.¹⁶ The condition of Anti-Hero is the one that remains for the poet in an environment hostile to poetry, an environment that no longer grants him a position of distinction and even denies him the possibility of a decent material existence.

Walter Benjamin returns to this definition of the poet as a hero of modernity in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. He argues: 'The poets find the refuse of society on their street and derive their heroic subject from this very subject'; and he quotes Baudelaire, 'quite satisfied to leave so bored a world, where dream and action disunite.'¹⁷ The affinity between these ideas and those of *Livro do Desassossego* are obvious. Incognito in the mass of society, the poet is viewed as an ordinary man ('without a halo', says Baudelaire; 'without

¹³ Ibid., pp. 243/143.

¹⁴ Charles Baudelaire, 'Edgar Allan Poe, sa Vie et ses Ouvrages', in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), pp. 319–36 (p. 319).

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 336.

¹⁶ Baudelaire, 'Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe', in *ibid.*, pp. 345–62 (p. 347).

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: New Left Books, 1973), pp. 79, 80.

a wreath', says Álvaro de Campos), as man who is even despised due to his insignificance. However, paradoxically, for this very reason the poet is a hero. His persistence in poetic activity is an act of heroism in modern society.

Today, in another century and another millennium, Pessoa has been elevated posthumously to the status of a genius of modern literature. In at least one text he foresees his future celebrity:

Eu, porém, que na vida transitória não sou nada, posso gozar a visão do futuro a ler esta página, pois efectivamente a escrevo; posso orgulhar-me, como de um filho, da fama que terei, porque, ao menos, tenho com que a ter. E quando penso isto, erguendo-me da mesa, é com uma íntima majestade que a minha estatura invisível se ergue acima de Detroit, Michigan, e de toda a praça de Lisboa.

[I, however, who in this transitory life am nothing, can enjoy the thought of the future reading this very page, since I do actually write it; I can take pride – like a father in his son – in the fame I will have, since at least I have something that could bring me fame. And I think this, rising from the table, my invisible and inwardly majestic stature rises above Detroit, Michigan, and over all the commercial district of Lisbon.]¹⁸

Pessoa is not only now recognised as one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century, but has become a character in novels, films, plays and even ballets. He has been transformed from a man into an icon, an inspirer of great artists. In our consumer society, he has become a porcelain doll and a T-shirt illustration. Pessoa, so discreet in his appearance and behaviour, has ended up becoming sometimes a caricature of himself. This is celebrity in the vulgar sense.

Could this be the only type of hero that our age allows? Carlyle, based on prior considerations by the German philosopher Fichte,¹⁹ pointed to the propagation of the press, in the form of the book market and journalism, as one of the reasons behind the vulgarity of the age in which his Hero-Men-of-Letters, Johnson, Rousseau and Burns, lived:

¹⁸ Pessoa (Bernardo Soares), *Livro do Desassossego*, p. 163; *The Book of Disquietude*, p. 130.

¹⁹ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Nature of the Scholar – The Vocation of Man – The Doctrine of Religion – With a Memoir* (New York: Broughton Press, 2008).

That was not an age of Faith, – an age of Heroes! The very possibility of Heroism had been as it were, formally abnegated in the minds of all. Heroism is gone forever; Triviality, Formulism and Commonplace were come forever.

What to say, therefore, of the poet in our age of the market and the internet? Carlyle calls his time 'these loud-shrieking days'. What could we call ours? Have things worsened or, as Jorge Luis Borges said, does every man think that his epoch is a bad time?

In his last course at the Collège de France, Roland Barthes affirmed that great literature is in its death throes, in practice and in teaching. Barthes gazed with admiration and nostalgia at the great writers of the past, and observed that in our day there are no more literary heroes:

I said: disappearance of literary *leaders*; this is still a social idea; the leader = figure in the organization of Culture. But within the community of writers [...] another Word imposes itself, less social, more mythical: hero. Baudelaire on Poe = 'one of the greatest literary heroes'. It's this Figure – or this Power – of the literary Hero that's dying out today.

If we think of Mallarmé, of Kafka, of Flaubert, even of Proust [...], what is 'heroism'? Literature is accorded a kind of absolute exclusivity; monomania, or, in psychological terms, obsession: but also, put differently, a transcendence that proffers literature as the full expression of an alternative to the world: literature is Everything, it's the Whole of the world.²⁰

This was literature for Pessoa, a world greater than the world. And because of this he acceded to celebrity, in the noble sense of the universal admiration of readers. Currently, those individuals for whom literature is a sublime activity, and the poet a hero, are not very numerous. But they continue to exist. Is this a modern brotherhood, or still a romantic one?

Carlyle was already conscious that he was praising a condemned class of writers. He writes: 'It is rather the Tombs of three Literary Heroes that I have to show you. There are the monumental heaps, under which three spiritual heroes lie buried. Very mournful, but also great and full of interest for us'. We can say that Pessoa lies, now, under a monumental

²⁰ Roland Barthes, *La Préparation du Roman I et II* (Paris: Seuil-IMEC, 2003), p. 357; *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France, 1978–1979 and 1979–1980*, ed. Nathalie Léger, trans. Kate Briggs (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 281.

heap of critical writings. Every celebration is a 'Tomb'. It is mournful, but also great.

The lecture 'The Hero as Man of Letters' concludes with this striking metaphor:

Richter says, in the Island of Sumatra there is a kind of 'Light-chafers', large Fire-flies, which people stick upon spits, and illuminate the ways with at night. Persons of condition can thus travel with a pleasant radiance, which they may admire. Great honour to the Fire-flies!

The text closes with an ironic adversative: 'But – !' We can interpret this 'But – !' as meaning that despite their precious radiance, great writers are sacrificed by society. In Carlyle's eulogy of the poet as hero there is already the seed of the scepticism that we discover in his Portuguese reader.

Carlyle's ideas on the great writers coincide with his political conservatism. His praise of literary heroes correlates to the praise of great men as the drivers of History. Having researched the various phases of the French Revolution and written extensively on the subject, Carlyle arrived at the conclusion that revolutions end in disorder and terror, with the populace incapable of installing a democracy. The same scepticism in relation to the masses and the workers is manifest in several of Pessoa's writings. Even the defense of slavery by the Scottish historian, consistent with his elitist convictions, finds an echo in the work of the poet. It has already been shown, by various academics, that Pessoa's political ideas are complex, varied over time and frequently paradoxical. Some of his positions, however, are recurrent, and they are those of an individualist and aristocratic liberal. Other English thinkers contributed to these ideas, but the influence of Carlyle as one of the first and most persistent cannot be discarded.

Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland, *La Préparation du Roman I et II* (Paris: Seuil-IMEC: 2003).
 ———, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France, 1978–1979 and 1979–1980*, ed. Nathalie Léger, trans. Kate Briggs (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2011).
 Baudelaire, Charles, 'Edgar Allan Poe, sa Vie et ses Ouvrages', in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), pp. 319–36.

- , 'Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe', in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), pp. 345–62.
- Benjamin, Walter, *Charles Baudelaire, A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: New Left Books, 1973).
- Carlyle, Thomas, *Complete Works* (Project Gutenberg, www.gutenberg.org/e/text/13534).
- , *Sartor Resartus. Heroes Past and Present* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1903).
- Fichte, Johann Gottlieb, *The Nature of the Scholar – The Vocation of Man – The Doctrine of Religion – With a Memoir* (New York: Boughton Press, 2008).
- Pessoa, Fernando, *Cartas*, ed. Richard Zenith (Lisbon: Assírio & Alvim, 2007).
- , *Obra Poética*, ed. Maria Aliete Galhoz (Rio de Janeiro: Aguilar, 1963), p. 193.
- Pessoa, Fernando (Álvaro de Campos), 'Ultimatum', *Portugal Futurista 1* (1917; facsimile ed. Lisbon: Contexto, 1981), pp. 28–32.
- Pessoa, Fernando (Bernardo Soares), *The Book of Disquietude*, ed. and trans. Richard Zenith (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991).
- , *Livro do Desassossego*, ed. Richard Zenith (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1999).
- Severino, Alexandrino E., *Fernando Pessoa na África do Sul* (Lisbon: Publicações Dom Quixote, 1983).