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Fernando Pessoa: A Peripheral Shakespearean out of his Time

I was a poet animated by philosophy, not a philosopher
with poetic faculties.
I loved to admire the beauty of things,
to trace in the imperceptible through the minute the poetic
soul of the universe.
The poetry of the earth is never dead.
— FERNANDO PESSOA

Traces of Portuguese Modernism

The first historical avant-garde of Portuguese literature may be easily identified from a chronological point of view. The blaze of avant-garde iconoclasm burned itself out in a little less than two years, as part of a modernist experience which, by contrast, was to continue in its various forms and recurrences at least until the Second World War. This period of the first avant-garde falls between the publication dates of two short-lived but highly significant journals, *Orpheu* (1915) and *Portugal Futurista* (1917). The first two issues of *Orpheu* – a third was on the brink of publication but was never printed for financial reasons – came out in March and June of 1915 and, for all the critical complications involved, mark the beginning of Modernism in Portugal. In Fernando Pessoa's words, *Orpheu* was the 'sum and synthesis of all modern literary movements' and was to prove capable of absorbing Europe's disruptive literary aesthetic movements (Futurism, Cubism, Vorticism, Orphism) through a process which was not merely

of imitation but transposition, as became a peripheral context such as Portugal: with a hallmark of originality which best represents the form, transitory perhaps, but also highly typical, of early Portuguese Modernism. A rather homogeneous expression of Modernism: entirely based, at least so far as literature is concerned, on the new ‘-isms’ (Paulism, Intersectionism and Sensationism) created between 1913 and 1915 by Fernando Pessoa. Paulism¹ sought for studied expression, in tension between brilliance and silence of line, still evoking the poetry of Symbolism with its condensed imagery yet with a modern indolence of existence. Intersectionism,² on the other hand, a ‘quasi-Futurism’ as Pessoa called it, boldly adopted a technique of poetic representation capable of rendering the dynamism of the intersections between sensation and reality, merged in apparently non-logical fashion. Sensationism,³ Pessoa’s most thoroughly developed ‘-ism’ and the one he applied most in poetic terms, was intended to rise up as an *art of summary-synthesis* combining nationalist modernity with the cosmopolitan avant-gardes of Europe: a wild celebration of the moment and of modern life, a compendium of the whole of the present and the whole of the past, as proclaimed by its verse-programme: ‘feel all things in all ways’ [sentir tudo de todas as maneiras] (Pessoa: 1944).

Portuguese Modernism lived in the protective and proteiform shadow of its prolific but solitary avant-garde creator, Fernando Pessoa. Despite

- 1 From the first word (*Pauis*) of the manifesto-poem *Impressões do Crepúsculo*, Paulism, indirectly born out of the influence of Symbolism and the preference for the vague and mysterious of Saudosism, was Pessoa’s first aesthetic proposition and was to be taken up again in various programmatic texts by Mário de Sá-Carneiro.
- 2 Originating from a new poetic experience of Pessoa (*Chuva Oblíqua*), the intersectionist aesthetic, influenced by Cubism and Futurism, was to take the form of technically experimental poetry, entirely devoted to the search for the combination-intersection of word and sensation, so that the sensory perception of the outside world would intersect with the inner experience.
- 3 The Sensationism practised from the outset by Álvaro de Campos, Pessoa’s most avant-garde heteronym, in his lengthy odes, *Ode Triunfal* and *Ode Marítima*, is meant to sing of the modern world and man, of technology and speed, in the manner of Futurism (but a highly personal Futurism), and all filtered through the *blank verse* model of Walt Whitman.

the first impression given by the fact that some of its leading players were daily visitors to cafés in central Lisbon, only rarely did the movement come together in a single group or salon. More than a group, the avant-garde of early Portuguese Modernism was a constellation of artistic personalities. These were often remote from each other as a result of their different origins, but tended to gravitate around what might be termed a decentralized centre, the axis Pessoa-Mário de Sá Carneiro. The latter was a confidant of Pessoa and brought a firsthand account of the latest developments in Paris.

Pessoa's work, however, in contrast with that of others, including Mário de Sá Carneiro himself who committed suicide in Paris in 1916, went beyond the initial avant-garde and indeed provided a connecting channel between the first and second generations of Modernism. In Portugal, the movement belongs to the post-war period, as elsewhere in Europe, but in contrast to Paris or London it happened relatively late, especially if one considers that the so-called second Modernism took shape around the journal *Presença* (1927–42), published by the Coimbra intellectuals who elected none other than Pessoa as the grandmaster of national literary modernity.

Pessoa's volcanic output is complex in nature and from a linguistic point of view, too, with texts written in both Portuguese and English and also, partly, in French. As such, it takes up a relationship of virtual exclusivity in the context of Portuguese Modernism with the literary and biographical mythography of Shakespeare. Although that relationship was a direct or indirect result of the English and colonial education of the young Pessoa, it was not, however, played out entirely on the level of influences, re-readings and re-writings. The Shakespeare palimpsest operates on a number of levels in Pessoa, at once textual, linguistic and cultural *tout court*. Critical historians, both in Portugal and internationally (Buci-Glucksmann: 1990), have looked at the ways in which Pessoa assimilated Shakespeare, either dwelling on the issues that Pessoa himself partly outlined or else repeating, with certain timid variations, first-reading impressions that labelled Pessoa's English poetry as imitative and 'ultra-Shakespearean'. Recognition of the excessive influence supposedly exercised on Pessoa's English poetry by Shakespeare's verse can be traced back to the first reviews in the English-language edition of the 35 *Sonnets*. See, for example, the reviewer's comments in the *Times Literary Supplement* (Issue 870, 19.8.1918, p. 403):

Mr Pessoa's command of English is less remarkable than his knowledge of Elizabethan English. He appears to be steeped in Shakespeare; and, if he is not acquainted with Daniel, John Davies of Hereford and other Tudor philosophical poets, this affinity with them is even more remarkable than it appears. [...] The sonnets [...] probing into the mysteries of life and death, of reality and appearance, will interest many by reasons of their ultra-Shakespeareanism, and their Tudor tricks of repetition, involution, and antithesis, no less than by the worth of what they have to say (Blanco: 2008, p. 47).

Quite beyond the biographical elements of his stay in South Africa (from 1896 to 1905), his English and colonial cultural training, his bilingualism in English and Portuguese, Pessoa's entire literary project – a project which belongs *par excellence* to European modernity, despite its peripheral nature vis-à-vis the great intellectual centres – cannot be fully interpreted unless at the crossroads of two cultural traditions such as those of Portugal and the English-speaking world. It is no coincidence that at the origin of heteronomy, the literary process of nominal dispersion, lay the English poetry of an imaginary Alexander Search, the author of a hundred or so compositions in verse, nor even that the first volumes published during Pessoa's lifetime (and the only ones, too, except for *Mensagem* in 1934) should have been in English: in 1918 Monteiro & Co. published *Antinous* and *35 Sonnets*, while 1921 saw the publication of *English Poems I-II* and *English Poems III*, which, as well as a re-issue of *Antinous*, contained *Epithalamium* and *Inscriptions*. The two small volumes were published by Olisipo of Lisbon, the tiny and short-lived publishing house that Fernando Pessoa had himself set up the same year.

Within such linguistic and cultural horizons, we may identify three broad lines of interest in Pessoa's output which relate to the personality and work of Shakespeare: the biographical question as re-interpreted in the light of the Romantic and Victorian bibliography; Shakespearean poetics as a critical laboratory, in view of an attempt to define such concepts as the nature and brilliance of genius – we may recall how Alexander Search is the attributed author of the fragmentary essay entitled *O Génio e a Loucura* (Pessoa: 2006); finally, aesthetic practice in the English-language poetry suspended between imitation and transcendence of the model. The influence exerted by Shakespeare's work on the young Pessoa is well-known, often repeated and commented upon by the poet himself, as for instance in a letter (1932) replying to José Osório de Oliveira as to which books

had most infused in him their intensity and greatness of soul: ‘in childhood and early adolescence there was for me, who lived and was educated in English-speaking lands, one supreme and involving book – Dickens’ *Pickwick Papers*; [...] During later adolescence my spirit was dominated by Shakespeare and Milton’ (Pessoa: 1999, pp. 278–9).

In the first place, there was his study of the ‘Shakespeare problem’ (as he was often to call it),⁴ the multi-faceted debate between Stratfordists and anti-Stratfordists over the latest biographical elements relating to the Bard in the 1910s and 1920s, which we know Pessoa was aware of, thanks to the various books on the subject in his library. The ‘problem’, jointly with his planned Portuguese translation of the complete dramatic works,⁵ gave him the opportunity for critical reflection on the biography, work and critical reception of Shakespeare, as well as on the mythographical aspects accumulated on these issues by an entire tradition. The truth is that, for Pessoa, Shakespeare provided a mirror in which the mechanisms of depersonalization – which determine an aesthetic of alterity as prerequisite for illusion on stage – are not substantially different from the processes which lead to the ontological breach of heteronomical discourse. In a text probably dated 1928, Pessoa refers to the lyrical genius as one suffering from hysteria:

The basis of lyrical genius is hysteria. [...] Shakespeare was then 1) by nature, and in youth and early manhood, a hysteric; 2) later and in full manhood a hysteroneurasthenic; 3) at the end of his life a hysteroneurasthenic in a lesser degree; he was also of a frail constitution and of deficient vitality, but not unhealthy. Thus much we have determined already. (Pessoa: 1966b, p. 299)

4 ‘All my books are works of reference. I read Shakespeare only in relation to the “Shakespeare Problem”: the rest I know already’ (Pessoa: 1966a, p. 21).

5 On the difficulty of translating Shakespeare into the romance languages, anticipating the position later taken up by André Gide, Pessoa writes: ‘But to translate Shakespeare into one of the Latin languages would be an exhilarating task. I doubt whether it can be done into French; it will be difficult to do into Italian or Spanish; Portuguese, being the most pliant and complex of the Romance languages, could possibly admit the translation’ (Pessoa: 1993, 92). It should be remembered that in 1923 Pessoa proposed to translate 12 of Shakespeare’s plays for a small publishing house, starting with *The Tempest* on which he was in fact already working, as is proven by the presence among the author’s papers of a number of translated passages.

For Pessoa, Shakespeare represents the most convenient critical palimpsest in which to set down his own process of nominal and authorial dispersion, claiming a precedent of genius for his project of heteronomical fiction (*Zenith*: 2008, pp. 798–800). If the psychological self-diagnosis put forward by Pessoa to explain heteronomy implies a ‘deep streak of hysteria and neurasthenia existing within me’, the interpretation of the figure and works of Shakespeare is characterized by a supposed predominance of the hystero-neurasthenic element.

Today I no longer have personality: whatever is in me that is human I have divided among the living authors of whose works I am the executor. I am today the point of reference for some small amount of humanity that is mine alone. [...] I do not mind admitting that I am mad, but I demand that people understand I am mad in a manner no different from Shakespeare, whatever be the relative value of what the healthy side of our madness has produced. (Pessoa: 1966a, p. 101)

If heteronomy is conceived not exclusively as a rhetorical and cultural expedient, but as the result of a medical and pathological process of authorial alterity, it may be represented as being close to the madness of Shakespeare.

To state that these men, all so different, so well defined, who have moved embodied through his soul, do not exist – is more than the author of these books can do; for he does not know what it is to exist, nor who, out of Hamlet and Shakespeare, is more real, or truly real.

Becoming thus, at the least a madman who dreams aloud, at the most not a single writer, but an entire literature, were its purpose no more than my own amusement, which for me at any rate would be worth quite something, I may perhaps contribute to expanding the universe, because he who, dying, leaves behind a single beautiful line enriches the heavens and the earth thereby and makes more emotionally mysterious the reason for being of stars and people.

With such an absence of literature as there is today, what can a man of genius do if not turn himself, alone, into a literature? With such a dearth of ‘coexistent’ people as there is today, what can a man of sensibility do, if not invent his friends, or at least, the companions of his spirit? (Pessoa: 2005, p. 26)

Heteronomy is frequently the subject of the Portuguese poet’s reflections and on several occasions reference to Shakespeare serves as a kind of claim to coincidence between his own literary process and that of

the English dramatist. Pessoa compared himself directly to the creator of Hamlet, described as 'o supremo despersonalizado', in a classic paradigm of literary practice as illusion or insincerity. In a text called *Nota ao acaso*, published in a magazine in November 1935, the heteronym Álvaro de Campos writes that 'Shakespeare was essentially and structurally fictitious; and therefore his constant insincerity ends up by being constant sincerity, hence his great greatness' (Pessoa: 2000a, p. 520).

The Shakespeare problem

In one of the many fragments written by Pessoa as part of his projected complete study of the figure and mythography of Shakespeare, we read:

SHAKESPEARE

Great as his tragedies are, none of them is greater than the tragedy of his own life. The Gods gave him all great gifts but one; the one they gave not was the power to use those great gifts greatly. He stands forth as the greatest example of genius, pure genius, genius immortal and unavailing. His creative power was shattered into a thousand fragments by the stress and oppression of like. It is but the shreds of itself. *Disjecta membra*, said Carlyle, are what we have of any poet, or of any man. Of no poet or man is this truer than of Shakespeare. (Pessoa: 1966b, p. 303)

Pessoa's inquiry into the Shakespeare problem was coherently multi-faceted and profound, revealing not only a thorough knowledge of the complex philological studies of the sources, but also the remarkable extent of his reading, surprisingly up to date for one 'at the periphery', around the problem of authorial identity and the authenticity of the canon. In the period from the late nineteenth to the first decades of the twentieth century, these aspects were still the subject of broad international debate. We should not forget that the early broadside of Smith's essay *Bacon and Shakespeare* was fired in 1857, nor that Delia Bacon's attribution of the Shakespearean canon to Sir Francis Bacon dates back as far as the late

eighteenth century.⁶ The many publications on the Shakespeare problem amassed by Pessoa and now preserved in his library in Lisbon, together with his marginal notes on these writings, demonstrate both his meticulous philological scholarship and, at the same time, his determination to build an active role for himself in the critical process around Shakespeare by putting forward an innovative, if not entirely original interpretation. Defending the Bacon hypothesis⁷ in a lengthy essay which remained unfinished, Pessoa reveals once again, in this specific instance of the Shakespeare problem, an omnivorous process of erudite ‘appropriation’, plus the intention to transpose that knowledge into a structured system of thought and a textual organization worthy of publication. The deep and tragic hiatus between the textual projects and Pessoa’s practice, as a remarkable reader and glossarist of Shakespeare, lies entirely in the disproportion between the vast extent of his plans and the absence of any systematic correspondence in his actual writings. The accumulated erudition exemplified by the lists of works already read,⁸ or to be read, the infinite number of notes and drafts,

- 6 Commenting ironically on the work and actions of Delia Bacon, ‘an American old maid from Hartford, Connecticut’, Gabriele Baldini writes: ‘Once the floodgates for absurdities of the kind had been opened, it was to prove difficult to halt the flow, and even today – now that rival attributions have been made to the Earls of Oxford and Derby, to Christopher Marlowe and even to Queen Elisabeth I – Bacon continues to be the favourite’ (Baldini: 1965, p. LIX).
- 7 To prove the Bacon hypothesis, Pessoa used a new method: the psychological approach. His intention was to analyse Shakespeare’s work ‘until he discovered what was, fundamentally, the soul of the man that produced it’.
- 8 The following titles in the poet’s library give some idea of the extent of his knowledge on the issue: Rev. W. Begley, *Bacon’s nova resuscitatio; or The Unveiling of his Concealed Works and Travel* (1905); G. Greenwood, *The Shakespeare Problem Restated*, 1908; H. C. Beeching, *William Shakespeare Player; Playmaker; and Poet: a Reply to Mr George Greenwood*, 1909; G. Greenwood, *In re Shakespeare Beeching v. Greenwood: Rejoinder on behalf of the defendant*, 1909; W. Smedley, *The Mystery of Francis Bacon*, 1912; J. M. Robertson, *The Baconian Heresy*, 1913; Celestin Demblon, *Lord Rutland est Shakespeare. Le plus grand des mystères dévoilés – Shaxper de Stratford hors cause*, 1913; H. T. S. Forrest, *The five authors of ‘Shakespeare sonnets’*, 1923; Abel Lefranc, *Sous le masque de ‘William Shakespeare’ William*

some far more than fragmentary, and the whole para-textual constellation of projected titles never reach the form of 'closed' works but exist solely as the pulverized remains of compositions whose history may only ever be reconstructed posthumously. Indeed the posthumous character of Pessoaan literature – to borrow Giulio Ferroni's apt description (Ferroni: 1996) – probably lies in this very aspect.

Pessoa's projected works include dozens of papers (manuscripts, typed sheets or 'mixed' documents), in both English and Portuguese, which suggest various titles for his study of the Shakespeare problem.⁹ These writings include his glosses on the problem of genius and literary creation from a medical and psychological point of view. One of the handwritten papers left by Pessoa offers further variants on the title: *The Person of Shakespeare. A Study in Transcendental Detection*; *The Person of Shakespeare. A Study in the Higher Detection*; *The Person of Shakespeare. A Detective Study*. Ana Maria Freitas tells us that these last versions of the title confirm that Pessoa had gone so far as to consider transforming the essay on the question of Shakespeare's identity into a detective story. This would have been part of the 'crime' series attributed to Abílio Quaresma, the imaginary investigator into strange and mysterious cases. The kind of arguments developed for the Shakespearean problem would have been perfectly adaptable to the process of deductive reasoning used by Abílio Quaresma in solving his cases. As so often with Pessoa's literary output, however, the projected story, which was to be called *Shakespeare*, failed to take shape.¹⁰

Stanley VI Comte de Derby, 1919, J. M. Robertson, *The genuine in Shakespeare: a conspectus*, 1930.

- 9 These are some of Pessoa's draft titles for his study: *William Shakespeare, Pseudónimo*; *The defects of Shakespeare*; *The Anti-Shakespeare Illusion*; *The Identity of Shakespeare*, *A Conspectus of the Problem*.
- 10 Abílio Quaresma, doctor and investigator, is the main character of a series of crime stories written in Portuguese by Pessoa over a number of years, which he thought of as collected under the heading *Quaresma, decifrador*.

Pessoa's criticism and aesthetics: Glosses on Shakespeare

In Pessoa's intriguing personal Western canon, writers such as Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Milton take up a paradigmatically central position. The two English poets – not only because of their relative historical proximity, but also and above all through linguistic and cultural affinity – were true literary idols for the Portuguese writer. His critical reflections on them were not confined to literary-historical accounts of their influence and legacy in European literary civilization, but also involved pure textual comparison, with precise aims of aesthetic theory in mind. In *Erostratus*, an essay from about 1930 on fame, and literary fame in particular, Pessoa dwells at length – partly in the course of a rather complacent critical inquiry steeped in his highly refined arguments – on a comparison between the works of Shakespeare and Milton. Interpreted in the light of dialectical dualism, the works of the two great English authors present different, even antithetical characteristics. Pessoa regards Milton as being more perfect by virtue of his greater constructive skill and the resulting structural harmony of his poetic edifices, while Shakespeare in his view was more inventive, endowed with an imagination so fertile as to be incapable of appropriate organization. Likewise, Milton was more talented than Shakespeare, who, however, had the greater intelligence. Shakespeare was 'as supreme in intuition, which is his genius, and in the rapidity of his singularity, as he was lacking in constructive skill and organisation' (Pessoa: 2000b, p. 68). Pessoa entrusts to the pen of a heteronym – the pagan and classicizing Ricardo Reis – the writing of an essay to demonstrate the superiority of Milton over Shakespeare. All that remains of this *Milton greater than Shakespeare* are three undated textual fragments, whose arguments – often provocative, we should point out straight away – can be summarized as follows:

1. An epic is more difficult to write – and therefore greater – than a play. No one should regard *King Lear* as being greater than *Paradise Lost*. It may be said that, taken together, Shakespeare's works, and especially the

tragedies, are greater than Milton's epic. The quantitative argument is tendentious, however.

2. *Paradise Lost* is also greater than any one of the plays. Milton is creator and constructor, therefore a greater artist.
3. Milton's work is less popular, less widely read, less accessible than that of Shakespeare. The more artistically perfect a work is, the less will it be popular. The fact that an English working man can enjoy reading Shakespeare is an argument which turns against Shakespeare.
4. The last consideration to be argued against, writes Pessoa, is the greater complexity of Shakespeare's work as compared to Milton. Complex in the psychological, not the artistic sense, and so in any case inferior to Milton in terms of construction.

Shakespeare is the greatest failure of all time
 Shakespeare is the youth of something of which Milton is the other visible side
 Shakespeare interprets what the Renaissance wanted to be; Milton what it was
 (Pessoa: 2003, p. 202)

Calibrating the attitude adopted by Pessoa as literary critic towards the overwhelming legacy of Shakespeare is no easy task. His destructive fury against the Bard of Avon is none other than the other side of the coin of the 'bardolatry' that has always run through Shakespeare's literary fortunes in Europe. There is a certain self-satisfied and barely concealed irreverence – in some ways rather similar to that of G. B. Shaw – which was allowed Pessoa's criticism by his peripheral position, and indeed it is always counterbalanced by a profound feeling of admiration and emulation, admirably expressed by Pessoa himself in a text (possibly dated 1923) on the 'modernity' of Shakespeare as compared to his epoch:

Let us admire, yet never idolise. And if we must idolise, let us idolise truth only, for it is the only idolatry that cannot corrupt, since what idolatry corrupts is truth, and the idolatry of truth is therefore the only one which cannot corrupt (stands self-suspended?). (Pessoa: 1966b, p. 306)

Pessoa's poetry in English: A Shakespearean out of his time

Published in 1918 and probably written between 1910 and 1918 (mainly around 1912, before the heteronyms began to appear), the *35 Sonnets* were all composed in English. Pessoa originally intended that the series of poems should be larger: his lists of projects include references to *Fifty Sonnets*, or even *Eighty Sonnets*. The poems give visible form to the close rapport between Pessoa, English literature and Shakespeare in particular, since they use the same classical structure adopted by Shakespeare in his 154 sonnets. Pessoa specifically declared his intention to follow that model, writing for example in a letter to his associate Armando Côrtes-Rodrigues of his intention to 'reproduce in a modern adaptation, without losing originality, and without imposing individuality, the complexity of Shakespeare' (Pessoa 1985, p. 77). The poems, faithful to his original intention of transposing the complexity, are indeed also faithful in respect of 'originality' and 'individuality', since the isotopy which runs through them involves the same themes that preoccupy and obsess not only the English heteronym Alexander Search, but also Pessoa himself. Earlier themes and motifs are present in his sonnets, but they also foreshadow the themes and motifs of all his poetry, in both English and Portuguese: dreams, the search for truth, the search for a reason of things, permanent doubt, the inability of beings to communicate with one another, the play of appearance and reality, the attraction of the hereafter, nausea with life, the fleeting nature of time, awareness of the inexplicable, etc. Yet these *35 Sonnets* are also a response, perhaps even a declaration of opposition, to Pessoa's youthful verse. Conceptual and metaphysical in approach, the series of 35 sonnets transposes a premeditatedly cerebral poetic language, made more patently obvious by the deliberately precious use of metre.

The linguistic complexity goes hand in hand with the complexity of thought, expressed in a profusion of images, symbols, metaphors and paradoxes which in turn affect the fluidity of discourse, rendering the sonnets far from easy to read. Luísa Freire (2008, p. 859) writes that Pessoa went beyond his own model. Perhaps we should say that Pessoa hyper-imitated Shakespeare, were it not for the fact that the word 'imitate' should in this

instance be understood within a horizon of recreation. For Pessoa, that in turn always becomes a process of identification-denial-surpassing, whose structure betrays a feeling of jealousy transposed into competitive terms, as has been convincingly explained by the critic and philosopher Eduardo Lourenço. The surpassing of his models, his constant comparison with them, the subversion of the readings he makes of them, constantly represent his strength of purpose and become a factor of poetic recreation. The attempt to compete by poetically rewriting the Shakespearean sonnet, as applied in the modern adaptation of the 35 *Sonnets*, should not be regarded solely as an impulse of technical and stylistic hubris (which is how the ‘anxiety of influence’ critics would like to see it), but as an ongoing poetic apprenticeship artificially completed in the ‘forgotten’ or ‘dead’ language of Elizabethan English. If we reason in the organic terms of a living or dead language, Pessoa’s English may be considered dead or defunct because it may be proven that, as judged by a series of English speakers, his English has been transformed into another language. In truth, ‘the poet’, as Iosif Brodskij put it, is ‘the means which a language uses to exist. Or, as my dear Auden said, is the person in whom the language lives’ (Brodskij: 2003, p. 70). Pessoa’s English is thus connotated as a ‘relict’ – not necessarily because of the individual’s determination to conserve that which he possessed in an earlier period of his life (adolescence in South Africa) – which emerges and persists, continually renewing and metamorphosizing itself. In his edition of the complete works of Shakespeare the sonnets, too, show constant underlining and annotation, at different times. It is surprising, however, that no echo of these notes can be found in Pessoa’s own sonnets, which instead reverberate other sonnets, recognizable in certain details or expressions. Comparative analysis of the two sets of sonnets must lead us to admit that the similarities are chiefly limited to formal aspects, while the differences appear far more substantial: not merely the obvious gap in terms of historical period, but also the world views that the poems convey, and the relationship established by their poetic subjectivity between writing and the concrete and abstract world or between thought and the practice of literature. In my view it would be a more interesting and original approach, as compared to the straightforward traditional mapping out of recognizable influences, to regard Pessoa’s poetry in English as poetic practice out of its

time, not only in the classic sense of temporal displacement, but as a genuine process of active potentiality, an action ‘against time, and in that way on time and, we may hope, in favour of a time to come’ (Nietzsche: 2003, p. 5).

In the specific and varied forms it took, the many-layered relationship between Pessoa and Shakespeare throws light on a story of the historical avant-gardes of European modernity which is set apart by its marginal and peripheral nature. The Portuguese contribution, caught up in the complex web of this otherness as compared to the norms dictated by Shakespeare’s legacy in the canonical avant-gardes of Europe (Britain, France, etc.), lies in the specificity of a rapport between the modern and tradition as it developed within asynchronous and intersecting temporal coordinates. In the Portugal of the early 1920s, Pessoa could still briefly be a contemporary of Shakespeare, at least in poetry. If only out of simple lust for literary glory, or entirely for amusement. The amusement of an author who summed up in a single line that *the poet is a pretender*.

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