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In search of Fernando Pessoa

On the wall of this rondavel, which I use as a study, is a curious sketch. It shows a long melancholy face topped by a ridiculously conventional trilby hat. The eyes — dark, myopic, unseeing — look out through thick lenses into space, untroubled, indifferent; a smudge of moustache darkens the upper lip below the long curved nose: then, below the hatchet chin, another touch of the conventional, in the suggestion of a collar and tie: the rest is a mere whirl of lines and wash like old illustrations of the genie emerging from the bottle. Yet, somewhere from the centre of the folds, a hand is put forth, tentative, beseeching...

Below that is the artist's name, Jorge Brandeiro; the date September 1966, and the legend: *á procura do Fernando Pessoa* (in search of Fernando Pessoa).

The drawing not only commemorates my meeting with the artist, then giving an exhibition in Durban, and our somewhat unsuccessful search to find traces of the poet we both admired in the city where he spent his youth, it cleverly sums up the whole elusive, paradoxical, exasperating nature of the man who yet draws us to him 'with the force of a magnet' as one of his earliest admirers said.

Others I found, in the course of my long search after the will-o'-the-wisp poet, had racked the resources of their several languages to express the character of the man who seems to sum up the complexity of the schizophrenic race that has come to inhabit the earth.

'What is it,' writes the Frenchman Armand Guibert, 'that so attaches us to this *Janus quadrifrons*, whose changes of face advance to the limit of the teratological? ... A non-situate man, refusing for himself the comforting commerce of friendship, turn by turn he charms, he troubles, he alarms, lie irritates, he fires with enthusiasm — and never is he exactly where we expect to find him. But at least we know through him that he is flesh of the spirit, as much exposed to weakness and the assaults of evil, and also as noble and triumphant as any made from clay; a lesson which suffices to render dear to us among all other living beings (which he is) the rare, the disquieting, the inexhaustible Pessoa.'

And the Mexican poet and philosopher, Octavio Paz, adds a different but similar analysis:

'Anglophile, myopic, courteous, retiring, sombrely dressed, reticent and familiar, a cosmopolitan who preaches nationalism, "a solemn investigator of futile things", a humorist who never smiles and who freezes our blood, inventor of other poets and destroyer of himself, author of paradoxes as clear as water and as vertiginous, a mysterious person who did not cultivate mystery, yet was as mysterious as the moon at midday, a taciturn phantasm of the Portuguese noon, who was Pessoa?'

Many have tried to answer the question, but the poet retreats from mask to mask, and one comes to believe that one of his compatriots (Antonio Quadros) may have been right when he said that if in the future a reply was found it might well seem an answer to the whole problem of life and man.

I have never cherished the illusion that I might be able to solve this enigma, but by a sequence of events I have been able to add my quota to the snowball of knowledge and conjecture that has grown up around the figure of the shy and retiring poet.

It began in 1959. I had been commissioned to write the history of the Durban High School when I came across the first mention I had heard of the name Fernando Pessoa. It was in a letter from Roy Campbell to a friend in Durban. 'Guess what,' he wrote, 'I have just discovered that Fernando Pessoa the finest poet in any language of this half-century had also gone to the Durban High School.' By then both Roy Campbell and the friend were dead, so, drawing a bow at a venture, I wrote to Uys Krige. Uys put me in touch with Armand Guibert in Paris, who sent back some of his studies and translations of the Portuguese poet. He confessed, however, that he knew virtually nothing about Pessoa's life in Durban.

Guibert's translations soon convinced me that I had come into the presence of a major poet. Gradually I discovered that a small, select number of readers all over the world were making the same

discovery. (Octavio Paz tells us that he had the 'case' of Fernando Pessoa brought to his notice the year before — 1958 — and he, too, turned first to Guibert's translations.) The figure of the Portuguese poet caught my imagination and it was said afterwards that the whole of the *DHS Story* was written around him — somewhat to the chagrin of those who had expected the usual glorification of sporting characters which is common to works of this genre.

In the meantime, in 1964, there began a correspondence with Alexandrine Severino, which, in his own words, has proved 'most fecund for us both'. Alex, an American of Portuguese birth, was then teaching at the University of Sao Paulo in Brazil and preparing a doctoral thesis on Pessoa in South Africa. I gave him what information I had been able to gather and together we explored what other leads I was able to suggest. His dissertation was approved in 1966 — the same year as the *DHS Story* was published — and a distinction was awarded him.

Severino's work, of course, took on more majestic proportions than my first faulty little essay on Pessoa in the *DHS Story*, but both of us knew what was lacking in our joint research: it was the absence of a sufficient and cogent word from the poet himself. All that we had been able to find from Pessoa's hand during the decade he spent in South Africa (1896-1905) were two poems in English written when he was just under twelve, a poem in Portuguese a few months afterwards (actually written in the Azores when the family was on leave) and a brilliant and astonishingly adult essay which he wrote at the age of 16 for the Durban High School Magazine (December 1904).

It might well seem to be true what Simaes states so categorically in his biography of Fernando Pessoa: 'One thing is certain that nowhere in all his written work does Fernando Pessoa make any mention of that remote home where he passed nearly ten years of his life.' As with Severino and me*, Joac, Gaspar Simaes was under the impression that the only evidence of Pessoa's stay in Durban was to be found in South Africa. It was not until I came to stay in Lisbon (1968-9) and was allowed the privilege of sifting through Fernando Pessoa's papers that I realized how wrong we all were.

In the huge coffer where he kept his manuscripts and other documents (and elsewhere) were scattered poems, stories and essays enough to fill a small volume; and not only these but a varied assortment of other non-literary things such as the following: school reports, examination certificates, fragments of homework, games, tricks and puzzles (Pessoa received a prize from the *Natal Mercury* for his skill in these), two cricket scores, a reading study for 1903 (dauntingly erudite), two vile coloured postcards of Durban, and a letter from one of his old masters of the Durban High School. Some of these things turned up in most unexpected places. I was wading through some 400 unpublished Portuguese poems (without much enthusiasm, for they were plainly rejects) when I came across some newspaper cuttings. They proved to be from the *Natal Mercury* of June-July 1904 and concerned a silly season controversy arising out of some execrable verse by Haggar, Hillier and others concerning the poet Horace. The debate had reached what he himself called 'a magnificent crescendo of absurdity' when the young Pessoa (under the pseudonym of CR Anon') decided to add a few words.

Hillier did first usurp the realms of rhyme
To parody the bard of olden time:
Haggar then followed and, in shallow verse,
Proves that to every bad there is a worse.
Some nameless critic then in furious strain
Causes the reader cruel pain
While after metre pure he seems to thirst
But shows how every worse can have a worst.
(*Mercury* — 6. 7. 1904)

Few would have believed — not even myself — that in later times, in another land and under a different pseudonym the author of these lines would be acclaimed as the greatest writer of Horatian odes since the 18th century. But he had only just turned sixteen and was thoroughly enjoying the scene

* And Armand Guibert, who as early as 1946 (in company with Uys Krige) made a fruitless journey to Durban to try to discover evidence of Pessoa's stay there.

where his seniors belaboured one another with such reckless good humour. Hillier was a former mayor of the town and 'Dr' Haggar (his opponents were quick to point out that the title was self-awarded) had been Pessoa's teacher the year before at the Commercial School. (Fernando Pessoa had temporarily deserted the High School.) It gives a picture of a jaunty, carefree time, which must have had its part in shaping one who was later to be known as the 'poet of the Absurd Hour' and 'a solemn investigator into futile things'. Haggar too, must have left his mark. He later became the wordy, bathetic Labour Party member of the Natal Legislative Assembly and perhaps the prototype of the self-styled 'friend of the people' who is given some caustic treatment in two of Pessoa's Caieiro poems.

My eighteen-month stay in Lisbon was a happy, busy time. It was made possible by a grant from the Gulbenkian Foundation which had been recommended by the late Professor Will Gardner and Alex Severino. Part of the time was spent attending lectures at the Lisbon University, where one of the lecturers was Professor Jacinto do Prado Coelho, the foremost Pessoaan critic. I also met such enthusiasts as Georg Rudof Lind who has probably collected more unpublished Pessoa texts than any other researcher and who made me a present of his collection of Pessoa's English poems which I helped to correct; Fr A de Pina Coelho who had just published two volumes of philosophical texts from the poet's papers; the hawk-eyed Almada-Negreiros, friend and collaborator of Pessoa's and equally eminent as writer and artist (his murals, showing Pessoa's heteronyms, adorned the portico of the university); J G Simões, author of the great biography; and two visitors from England, Peter Rickert from Cambridge and Quintanilha who was then lecturing at Cardiff. Both produced books on Pessoa that were sponsored by their universities.

But it was not from university professors that I learned the difficult art of spoken Portuguese, but from Maria Joaquina, the daily woman — *mulher a dias* — who 'did' for me in the flat I rented in the Rua da Dona Estafânia. Maria, between chores, would regale me with the failings of her husband (her second one, fourteen years younger than herself), her disputes with her lodgers, with the grocer, with the fishwoman; she had the gift of lending to the events of everyday life the force of high drama. Being somewhat deaf herself, she was inclined to imagine that everyone else was and I was compelled to listen.

A few doors down the street, on the ground floor of No. 117, Fernando Pessoa had once lived. He too had a servant whom Fernando's cousin Eduardo (E da Costa de Freitas) described as the 'colourful Emiliana', but the experience did not last long for Pessoa was painfully poor all his life.

What in the end was the outcome of all this? Like others, I wrote a book to 'explain' Pessoa but which got no farther than the rest. But I did not try to pin on to it any preconceived theories and, knowing the background better and falling upon some unpublished material, I was able to throw more light on Pessoa's stay in South Africa. Quintanilha thought highly of the book and tried hard to get it published by the Portuguese Institute of Higher Culture. His efforts were cut short by two unhappy events: first, I heard that he had committed suicide, throwing himself from a fourth floor window in Lisbon, and, secondly, the Portuguese revolution broke out and Quintanilha's friend, the vice-president of the Institute, lost his post. Attempts to publish it in England and South Africa failed, and I therefore decided to submit the part which it seemed most worthwhile to preserve as a university thesis. I rewrote the South African evidence and added what I considered the most valid conclusions. I sent it to Cardiff because Wales was my old university and because of Quintanilha, to whom I dedicated the work*.

There remain to answer some questions which will arise in the mind of the reader — as they often have in the mind of the writer — and some of these are not easy to answer. Has anything been achieved by this study: Does the study of the boy help us to understand the man? Does that help us to understand the poet? Poets in general? The creative process? To all these questions, there can be, at best, only a qualified answer, and, in the space possible here, a very sketchy one.

In the narrow field of simple biography, and particularly in the period of boyhood and adolescence, it takes the previous work by Simões, Severino and Lind some good steps forward and will, it is hoped, provide stepping stones for workers in the same field in the future. What was once regarded as a

* The thesis was accepted with high praise and for this 'admirable achievement, as the University described it, Hubert Jennings, at the age of 80, was awarded an MA degree. -- Ed.

blank space in Pessoa's career can now, I believe, be seen as the best documented of all. It has its own merits, quite apart from wider questions, as showing a gifted mind at work, accumulating and rejecting, and preparing for the fame which, amazingly enough, he knew even then, would come only after death. It is interesting too to note the stimulation of his mind from learning a foreign language. For the rest of his life, Simões averred, Fernando Pessoa thought in English and he believed it added a precision and order to his writing which is rare among Portuguese writers. (It is rare among English ones too.)

For three years after he left Durban Pessoa continued to write poems under the name of Alexander Search who became so real to him that he had visiting cards printed with that name on them. It was not the beginning, but an important milestone in his progress towards becoming what Mark Hamburger called 'the most extreme example of multiple personality in European literature'. The heteronym Ricardo Reis, the one who wrote the Horatian odes already mentioned, was derived from his Latin studies at the Durban High School (where the headmaster was a demon for classics) and a lesser one wrote some French verse.

These, however, are fairly superficial observations. They account for aspects of his work but not for the protean inventor of them all himself. They provoke the question: Is there not some overall theory which might account for Pessoa's *démarche* upon European literature?

Simões thought there was, and for this purpose he boldly adopted the Freudian theory of art: that is, that the artist (or the patient, as one might say) suffers some frustration in his normal life and so develops a psychosis and creates an imaginary life as 'compensation'. It is a depressing theory, which, if it was true (which has been strongly disputed) would mean that all art — the works of Shakespeare and Goethe, of Mozart and Beethoven, of Michaelangelo and Titian, all, in fact, that is best and most enduring in our civilization — is simply the manifestation of a psychosis, that is, a symptom of mental disease.

But even Freud's questionable theories have the merit of provoking thought and so Simões's use of it can be briefly recounted here.

Fernando Pessoa's home life would seem to provide the perfect setting for a Freudian 'case-history'. Pessoa's father died when Fernando was five years old. An infant brother died soon afterwards. The family lived in reduced circumstances and naturally the widow found her greatest consolation in the remaining son, Fernando. Two years later she met and married a naval officer, the Commandante, João Miguel Rosa. The officer was appointed Portuguese consul in Durban and there the family lived for the rest of Fernando's stay in South Africa. Five children were born to the second marriage, of whom two died in infancy.

Simões sums up the young exile's position in these words:—

He had had the hard experience of a son upon whom had been concentrated the tenderness of a mother who had lost a husband and a son of tender age almost simultaneously; this tenderness, if not actually taken away from him, would at least be gradually diminished from day to day, not only on account of the new husband who had appeared, but also thanks to the cares and caresses required for the children that had been born. Furthermore, he had suffered the experience of exile in an ugly land without poetry, where everything was strange, where all his consciousness was drawn to the lost paradise of his first infancy in Lisbon. (*Obra e vida de Fernando Pessoa*, vol. I, p. 75)

The theory will not hold water. Pessoa would not have brought back so many memorials of his exile (even to those garish postcard pictures of Durban already mentioned) if he had disliked the land so much. The family too got on well together. Pages in an old exercise book show that the whole family played games together and Fernando kept the record between pages of his literary attempts. The surviving children of the second marriage remember still (they have told me personally) the bedtime stories he told them and the games he devised — the rules of which are still to be found among his papers. Nor was there any conflict between Fernando and his stepfather that any of the children can remember, and comparisons between Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire must fall away. Nor can it be said, as Guibert did following the lead of Simões, that 'the young disinherited prince' (Pessoa) had to find 'both

family and country in the most obstinate study'. Pessoa, except perhaps in his first two years, did not work so hard.

In the public examinations of that time he obtained a first class in the Higher Schools Certificate (not the Junior Certificate), a third class in Matriculation (but gained a prize for the best essay written in the examination) and a second class in the Intermediate Examination.

So he made his choice, and it is hardly an exaggeration when he says

I put by pleasure like an alien bowl.
Stern, separate, mine, I looked to where gods seem ...

Though sometimes his verse sounds a mournful note as he looks at the more common lot:

Others will have
A home, perhaps love, peace, a friend
Cold, black and complete solitude
Is my lot.

He, like the mad king Sebastian he created, had no wish to be:

...a satisfied beast,
A postponed corpse that procreates.

They called him mad too, and mad he might have become (as we have no uncertain evidence) if he had not stumbled upon the touchstone that set free the pent-up energies within him. On March 8, 1914 — 'the most glorious day of my life', he wrote — he saw emerge from his pen Alberto Caeiro, followed soon afterwards by Alvaro de Campos and Ricardo Reis. From then on he was as free from his troubles as the Gadarene was from his and one is tempted to think that the difference between them was not very great. The Gadarene's tormented selves were turned into swine: Pessoa changed his into poets. Pigs, like poets, are intelligent and unpopular animals.

It is, however, no exaggeration to say that those who are blessed (or cursed, as some of them say) with great creative power do not so much possess that force as are possessed by it. They know no peace until they have exorcised it by means of their art. They must retreat from the empirical self in order to set free the other self, or selves, that cries out to be heard from some misty secret cave within us, which, for want of a better word, we call the unconscious.

Many others besides Pessoa have discovered this. Socrates spoke of the daemon that possessed him and C G Jung has put the same idea into clear and cogent modern terms. And among the modern poets who have trodden the same path, but not always to its logical conclusion, the following will come to mind:

Walt Whitman/-

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then, I contradict myself.
(I am large. I contain multitudes.)

Ezra Pound/-

I have been freed from the self that pretends to be someone
And in becoming no one I begin to live.

Jules Laforgue/-

When I organise a descent into myself,
I must confess I sometimes find at the table

