
REVIEWS

George Monteiro. *The Presence of Pessoa: English, American, and Southern African Literary Responses*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998. 160p.

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This book attempts to introduce us to a variety of writings in English that appear to bear the impress of Portuguese modernist poet Fernando Pessoa. Pessoa is a figure who occasions either the strongest admiration or, more usually, the utmost indifference in the English-speaking world, and Monteiro's is one more effort by an enthusiast to suggest ways in which we might become converted — that is, by seeing how compelling or intriguing a range of writers in English have found Pessoa. While Monteiro's enthusiasm and wide-reading carry us with him part of the way, ultimately I feel that the effort falls short.

The first problem is the total absence of the last thirty years of literary criticism in Monteiro's approach, redolent of the hit-or-miss impressionistic approach that used to pass for literary criticism. Even if Monteiro is hostile to the tendencies introduced during this period, they need to be faced up to in some form and not simply ignored. Much sophisticated work has been done on intertextuality, translation, cross-cultural reading and responding and the ways in which gaps, echoes, and shadows in texts might be operating, and a work such as this would have profited from attention to them.

The second problem is the severely reduced size of the book, which seriously hampers Monteiro's exertions. In only 105 pages of text he tries to introduce Pessoa, who through his multiple heteronyms is a world of poets all by himself, and then show how the following figures have mediated him in their work: Roy Campbell, Edouard Roditi and Thomas Merton, Edwin Honig, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, Joyce Carol Oates, Charles Eglington, Michael Hamburger, John Wain, Andrew Harvey, and Dennis Silk. Inevitably these writers are treated in reduced and summary fashion, in which assertion and lengthy quotation serve instead of analysis and argument. As sketches of the writers dealt with in terms of those aspects related to one or more of Pessoa's heteronyms, they are illuminating in an introductory way, but no more. Anyone familiar with the work of any of these writers will find little of interest in almost every case. In this breath-

less rush through, perhaps the chapter that handles Ferlinghetti's debt to Pessoa's *O banqueiro anarquista* is more focused and absorbing than the others.

Take one example, that of South African poet Roy Campbell. Because appreciation of Pessoa is an absolute good in Monteiro's view, any slighting of Campbell by critical tradition is in some way an assault on Pessoa and needs to be rebuffed. Monteiro's assertion that there was some sort of unfair "holding Campbell ... closely accountable for his politics, offering caricature and general accusation rather than analysis or aesthetic evaluation" (20) is nothing less than breathtakingly dismissive of the fact that Campbell traded in the most vituperative caricature and general accusation himself, and moreover that he was not simply any right-wing poet but the poet who breezily wrote in 1939 that Lorca's death had been necessary! Nonetheless, Stephen Spender was to defend him in public, even after having been punched in the face on stage by Campbell, by telling the audience that genius needed to be pardoned such excesses. In Valentine Cunningham's benchmark summary of the period in which Campbell's reputation was largely made, *British Writers of the Thirties*, Campbell is in fact paid extensive attention. He may not be so much the forgotten and slandered figure Monteiro would have us believe. We also read of Campbell's referencing of Camões's Adamastor, but Monteiro accepts the traditional, conservative reading of Camões and his epic as heroic, when in South Africa the Adamastor figure is now read in terms of such complications as race and the sexual interest of black men for white women (as per South African academic, Dorothy Driver). This level of contemporary critique of cultural myths is not found in Monteiro's gentlemanly introduction. On the other hand, he does a real service in providing, in an appendix, the entire text of Campbell's beginnings of a book on Pessoa, which Monteiro also introduces well, making one think that he is much happier talking about Pessoa than about the other writers he has chosen. As Pessoa is much more interesting than any of them, this is not surprising.

Indeed, with most of the writers in this volume of secondary importance or less, it is not much of an advertisement for Pessoa either. The chapter on Ginsberg, discounting long quotations, comes to four pages, which is not enough to deal with the very real confluence of Whitman, Pessoa (or heteronym Álvaro de Campos), and Ginsberg. The chapter on Joyce Carol Oates' *The Poisoned Kiss* makes it clear that there is an absorbing issue of palimpsest, ventriloquism, and source, but it is no more than gestured toward and we are off and away into the next chapter. It doesn't help the analysis that limp connections are made such as "Oates's epigraphic use of lines from Campbell's translation [of St John of the Cross] introduces the notion that her stories carry some curious overall Iberian baggage" (79)

or “this is the kind of poem that Fernando Pessoa might have written about the fading Portuguese presence in Lourenço Marques’s African future ... had he had the benefit, say, of not being himself Portuguese” (93).

Finally, after leading us through massed ranks of quotations and enjoiners to make connections between them, the book finishes with no conclusion, which, after all, best befits its nature as an enthusiast’s list. ✱