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FERNANDO PESSOA:
VOICES OF A NOMADIC SOUL

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'Maritime Ode', 'Opium Eater', 'Salutation to Walt Whitman', 'Lisbon Revisited (1923)', 'Lisbon Revisited (1926)', 'I love and animate everything. . .' from *Poems of Fernando Pessoa* translated and edited by Edwin Honig and Susan M. Brown. First published by Ecco Press in 1986. Reprinted by permission.

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Contents

Preface	7
I	11
II	39
III	71
IV	85
The Tobacconist's	97
References and Notes	104
Bibliography	108

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

This text was written a little over ten years ago. Since then, new translations of Pessoa's writings have appeared, and scholarship has evolved. Consequently, in this new edition most of the translations of poems and of *The Book of Disquiet* have been replaced. Apart from corrections of misprints, odd punctuation and syntactical wobbles and a few re-written sentences, the text remains unchanged, except for the last section in which I update the account of editorial activities around Pessoa's work.

The first edition owed its appearance to José Blanco, at the time at Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon, through whom I was given a generous grant to research for this book, and to Anthony Rudolf of the Menard Press who saw fit to publish it (again with assistance from the Gulbenkian Foundation). When I was working on it, I was fortunate enough to meet and discuss Pessoa with some who already had intimate knowledge of his work. José Blanco, who is perhaps the leading authority on bibliographical matters, read this text in the earlier stages; many conversations with the now-retired Professor Luís de Sousa Rebelo of King's College, London were of great help to me; Richard Zenith, an editor and translator of Pessoa's writings was another interlocutor. Kate Chalkley and Aldous Eveleigh were my 'non-professional' readers. I thank them again for their help.

Lisbon,
September 2007

I

Everything stated or expressed by man is a note in the margin of a completely erased text. From what's in the note we can extract the gist of what must have been in the text, but there's always a doubt, and the possible meanings are many.

The Book of Disquiet

An encounter with Pessoa is unsettling. About the only thing that almost never changed were the insignia: a hat, a bow tie, spectacles and the moustache. The rest was elusive, slipping away like a snake. A solitary insomniac, at odds with himself and others, a chain-smoker, heavy drinker, unsmiling and meticulously dressed, he bombards us with contradictions and paradoxes. He created fictional poets, wrote political pamphlets, penned one of this century's great confessionals. Each time we look at him we see something different. Today Fernando Pessoa is recognized as one of the great figures of Modernism but he still remains an enigma.

Pessoa was born in Lisbon in 1888. When he was five he lost his father. Two years later his mother married the Portuguese vice-consul in Durban, South Africa, and the young Pessoa moved to live there. He returned alone to Lisbon when he was seventeen and the following years were a mixture of restlessness and immobility. For over a decade he changed address more than once a year; then, when his mother, a widow again, returned to Lisbon, he moved in with her and the rest of the family and he never budged again. He ventured out of Lisbon only twice, on trips to provincial towns. He had some friends, though not many, most of them also poets. He never married and the sole amorous liaison that Pessoa is known to have had lasted all of a few months, was rekindled for another brief spell almost ten years later, and left for posterity some poignant love letters.

After returning from South Africa to Lisbon, Pessoa enrolled at the university. This he gave up almost at once to venture, with a little inheritance, into publishing. The money was quickly lost and Pessoa finally settled as translator of foreign correspondence for business firms. At one point he considered setting himself up as an astrologer and two years before he died he applied for the job of a librarian, which he did not get. Translating business letters (and a few books) was Pessoa's only professional activity.

All his life Pessoa was in emotional and spiritual turmoil. He often feared going insane and at certain periods contemplated putting himself in a lunatic asylum. This turmoil may have had something to do with the number of deaths that he experienced when still very young—his father, a brother, a half-brother, and a half-sister. And death followed him later. His closest friend, the poet Mario de Sá-Carneiro committed suicide, Spanish flu took away some leading artists with whom Pessoa worked together. He also knew insanity from close up. When in his late teens, Pessoa lived for some months with a grandmother who was apparently completely unhinged.

A psychoanalyst would find plenty to speculate on but otherwise there is not much to excite a biographer. Pessoa would reply, like many have before him and many since, that his life is in his work, nowhere else. Writing meant to Pessoa everything. He wrote on any subject that came his way, he wrote when sober and when drunk, in notebooks and on all sorts of scraps of paper. When he could not write he suffered and he also suffered when he wrote. Pessoa left behind a trunk stuffed with manuscripts and when researchers laid their hands on it, they discovered that it contained poetry, prose, literary criticism, philosophical remarks, mysticism, astrology, aesthetics, morals, psychology, lists of projected books, writings for a commerce periodical, a guide to Lisbon and much more. According to the official count there are in all 27,543 documents that make up the Pessoa archive.

A huge Pessoa industry has since developed. Literary critics, psychologists, philosophers and others have been deciphering a miscellany of personal notes, rough drafts, letters, abandoned projects, as well as completed but unpublished works. For decades after his death new poems and prose pieces have been coming out in print. This posthumous activity could lead one to think that, like Kafka, or Bruno Schulz, Pessoa was known in his life to no more than a handful of friends and fellow writers. Not quite true. When he died, in 1935, his reputation was considerable: translations into French had already appeared, and one of the leading national newspapers *Diário de Notícias* announced his death on its front page with a photograph and the title 'Death of a Great Portuguese Poet'. Pessoa was reticent and timid in his personal life but his literary life was active and he was not at all shy when it came to creating his public persona. He published regularly and he was careful about what he published. His literary biography is very intriguing. Here are some of the significant signposts:

Pessoa makes his first appearance in 1912 with three polemical articles on the state of Portuguese literature. The next three years he continues with polemical interventions and in 1914 he publishes his first few poems. 1915 is a watershed year. With a group of avant-garde poets and painters Pessoa runs two issues of an influential modernist review *Orpheu*. He publishes in *Orpheu* six poems entitled 'Oblique Rain', a 'static drama' *The Mariner* and, under the name of a certain Álvaro de Campos, three long poems: 'Opium Eater', 'Maritime Ode', 'Triumphal Ode'. In the same year Pessoa writes more polemical articles and he undertakes the translation of several volumes of theosophical works of Besant, Leadbeater and Blavatsky. In 1916 a series of poems *Stations of the Cross* appears and more translations of theosophical works. In 1917, with some people from the *Orpheu* group, Pessoa is involved in another avant-garde review (seized by the police as soon as it appeared) *Portugal Futurista*. Here Pessoa publishes some poems and a provocative manifesto 'Ultimatum' signed by

Álvaro de Campos. In 1918 he brings out a slim volume of English poems, in 1920 a long poem 'In Memory of President-King Sidónio Pais', in 1922 a cycle of poems *Portuguese Sea*, a piece in prose *The Anarchist Banker* and two more volumes of English poetry—all of these under his own name. In 1923 a new poem by Álvaro de Campos appears and three poems in French. In 1924 a new name enters: Ricardo Reis, with twenty of his Odes. The next year Pessoa introduces still another name: Alberto Caeiro, with a selection from a cycle *The Keeper of Flocks* and other poems. Between 1925 and 1934 sporadic poems signed by Pessoa, Reis, Campos and Caeiro find their way into various periodicals; further polemical interventions appear, some of them on matters of literature, some political, the most notorious an article from 1928: 'The Interregnum. Defence and Justification of Military Dictatorship in Portugal'. In 1934 Pessoa publishes his only book of Portuguese poems *Message* for which he is awarded a national prize. The following year he writes in a daily newspaper an article in defence of Masonry which was coming under increasing attack from the government. The same year Pessoa dies of a sudden attack of hepatitis, which means that he more or less drank himself to death. He was forty-seven.

This is a very eccentric list. Political and artistic interventions and a most unusual poetic output—poems in English and in French as well as in Portuguese, many of them written under different names. Each time we seem to be reading a distinctly different poet. Alberto Cairo's *The Keeper of Flocks* is a cycle of quiet bucolic poems, Ricardo Reis is a classicist who imitates Horace and Álvaro de Campos is a manic, free verse, sometimes Whitmanesque poet. When Pessoa wrote under his own name he differed just as much. 'Oblique Rain' reads like a poetic attempt at cubism, with intersecting and parallel sensations brought into a single poetic stream; *Stations of the Cross* is a series of occult poems; 'In Memory of the President-King Sidónio Pais' and *Message*, which includes most of the poems from the earlier *Portuguese Sea*, are intensely patriotic. We are confronted

with disjointed voices belonging to different discourses, written in different languages coming under different names.

Pessoa cultivated this multiplicity and he explained it in different ways. According to one account this was a sign of a psychological anomaly, which went way back to childhood. Already when he was six he would write letters to himself under the guise of someone else. From then on he lived with a multitude of voices, discourses, personalities and this at times drove him mad. These imaginary people, usually writers, were given names and they wrote on different subjects and in different languages. There was an António Mora who speculated on metaphysics, there was an Alexander Search who wrote only in English, and there were many others, including the poets Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos and Ricardo Reis. According to another explanation Pessoa experienced metempsychotic phenomena. He felt within himself, like a medium, the presence of others; 'it happens, that when looking in the mirror, I see my face disappear and a face of a bearded man emerge, or of another one (there are four in all that appear this way)', he confided in a letter. His lifelong fascination with the occult, Theosophy, and Rosicrucianism seems connected with these. He wrote occult poems, he experimented with automatic writing and the occult theme comes up in many unexpected places in Pessoa's work.

Whatever the origins of this multiplicity Pessoa also worked out and published an aesthetical doctrine of a multiple personality. This came from Álvaro de Campos. In 1917, in the review *Portugal Futurista*, Campos published a lively manifesto 'Ultimatum'. Influenced by the rhetoric of Futurism, Campos launched into a tirade about the decadent state of European culture, 'I, of the Race of Navigators, . . . I, of the Race of Discoverers, . . . I am going to show you the Way.' He knows what the future holds: 'Science teaches . . . that each of us is an assembly of subsidiary psyches, a badly-made synthesis of cellular souls. For the Christian self-feeling, the most perfect man is the man who is most coherent with himself; for the man

of science, the most perfect is the man who is most incoherent with himself'. An artist should work towards an 'abolition of the dogma of artistic individuality. The greater the artist, the less definable he is, and he will write in more genres with more contradictions and dissimilarities'. In an undated fragment which later found its way into *The Book of Disquiet* Pessoa wrote: 'I'd like to write the encomium of a new incoherence that could serve as the negative charter for the new anarchy of souls.'

Pessoa acted out these postulates. Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis and Álvaro de Campos are the result. He was probably the first to subject the notion of 'I' to such radical scrutiny. How many am I? Am I the subject or object of speech? Is there a real author? We are multiple, incoherent and contradictory. A unified identity, a definable personality or subjectivity is an illusion. Today this would be recognized as a post-modernist programme and one could thus claim that Pessoa anticipated certain philosophical debates by more than half a century. This is to an extent true only that the matter is not so simple. Some of the contradictions in Pessoa are troubling. One would like to understand how it is that the same person writes some beautiful modern poems, like the Odes of Álvaro de Campos, and also writes and publishes the unattractive 'In memory of President-King Sidónio Pais', an esoteric poem which mourns the death of a president who rather than being a king was a dictator. Then again, the same Campos publishes 'Ultimatum'—a manifesto for new art and a few years later Pessoa, under his own name, writes 'The Interregnum. The Justification and Defence of Military Dictatorship'—the title is self-explanatory. Campos and Pessoa were speaking to completely different audiences, audiences which ascribe to conflicting values. Of this Pessoa was well aware as is obvious from his publishing practices. Campos began his activities in the scandalous, modernist review *Orpheu*, the poem to Sidónio Pais and 'The Interregnum' appeared in a right-wing monarchist periodical *Ação, Órgão do Núcleo de Ação Nacional*. It somehow does not seem satisfactory to explain this

away with a claim that one is multiple and that therefore, at one time or another, or simultaneously, one holds different, inconsistent views. Nor is it satisfactory to put it down as a sign of neurasthenia or metempsychotic experiences.

The particular set where modernist and reactionary forces co-exist is a raw nerve that shows in Pessoa's generation throughout Europe. The period is referred to loosely as Modernism. From Lisbon to Moscow artists were announcing a rebellion against old values. New horizons were opening. Literature, fine arts, music, as well as science, were undergoing profound changes. The number of avant-garde movements and artists involved in them is staggering and this century's greatest hopes were associated with these developments. Pessoa knew only a little about them but he firmly belonged there. And at the same time, from Lisbon to Moscow, political forces were brewing that turned this century into a horror. As it turned out, there were artists who were touched by both, who showed an enthusiasm for ideologies which were in blatant contradiction to the spirit in which they created their art. Amongst the most illustrious we find fascists, warmongers, misogynists, anti-semites, eulogists of Stalinism. Suicides, premature deaths, lunatic asylums are frequent entries in the biographies of artists of that period.

It so happens that in order to make sense of Pessoa the poet it is also necessary to have some understanding of his political and ideological beliefs. The matter is of particular interest because it has to do with a writer's relation to History. The way in which Pessoa was entangled with his country's spiritual, political and artistic past shaped his poetic destiny and it explains a great deal about the contradictions that are so much part of his project. It may also be that in unravelling his story we will be saying something about the others.

Pessoa entered the world of literature with a series of three polemical articles—of a political, sociological and historical bent—on the state of Portuguese poetry. In the first, entitled

‘New Portuguese Poetry Sociologically Considered’, Pessoa predicts a coming of a very fertile period. A poet, or several poets, of such quality will appear that they will push Portugal’s great bard Luís de Camões into the background. He says:

One can argue that the current political movement is not of a type to generate supreme poetic geniuses, as it is vulgar and mean. But *it is precisely for that reason* that we arrive more easily at the conclusion that a Supra-Camões will arrive in our land.

Pessoa did not claim that he would be the Supra-Camões but it is quite certain that he saw himself in this role. Shortly afterwards he wrote in an autobiographical note: ‘I have come to a full possession of my Genius and have a divine consciousness of my Mission’. To say that this is akin to announcing in England the imminent arrival of a supra-Shakespeare, or in Italy of a supra-Dante would still be an understatement. Camões’s place in Portuguese history is doubly important. He was a great poet and he belonged to and is a symbol of his country’s golden age—the Great Discoveries of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. His epic *The Lusiads* is a paean to that age.

Almost a century earlier than anyone else the Portuguese were launching sea expeditions. Within a few decades they explored the West Coast of Africa, found the sea route to India, discovered Brazil, established a foothold in China, reached Japan, Sumatra, Java, Timor. They were the first to circumnavigate the earth. Vasco da Gama, Pedro Álvares Cabral, Fernão de Magalhães (Magellan), to mention only a few, gave navigation an altogether new dimension. They laid the world open, and the Portuguese reaped rich profits from it. But there was more to it than just the glory of Portugal. This small nation was showing the rest of Europe how to go about colonising faraway lands. In Prince Henry the Navigator, who for forty years organized the first sea expeditions, they had the prototype of a Minister of Overseas Affairs; they had the geographical knowledge; they had the navigators, soldiers to secure the

routes militarily, merchants to organize the trade; they had the first colonialist administrators. Greeks gave us culture, Romans the law, the Portuguese taught Europe how to expand.

Camões's life is very much part of that tale. He spends his youth as a soldier, troublemaker, womaniser and court poet. He takes part in some Crusade expedition in North Africa and loses an eye. Back in Lisbon after a brawl he ends up for a short while in prison. Later, to escape it all, he joins the King's service as a soldier and is shipped off to India to join the colonialist administration. He is away for sixteen years. During this time he is shipwrecked in China, imprisoned in Goa, stranded in Mozambique and throughout he hangs on to the one possession that mattered to him most—the manuscript of *The Lusads*. Three years after his return, the epic is published and recognition is almost immediate, but not by the then reigning King Sebastian who Camões dedicated the work to. So court recognition (and financial rewards with it) did not come and all that Camões was given was a pension for his services to the king in the colonies. The pension was meagre, paid irregularly and Camões died poor.

Camões set out to give Portugal a poetic voice to match its political greatness. He was well versed in classics, which suggests that he studied in Coimbra. He knew Virgil as well as the Florentines, Dante and Petrarch. He set out to create a Portuguese epic that would rival them. The title *The Lusads* carries analogies with *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid*, it fixes a lineage to the legendary Lusus from whom the Portuguese believed themselves to be descended, and it is in the plural—this is not a story about one heroic individual but about a people. And, unlike *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid*, which deal with the mythical past, Camões took as his raw material the most recent history, the Great Discoveries. The theme of the poem is Vasco da Gama's first voyage to India. The epic follows da Gama's route along the African coast, around the Cape of Good Hope and across the Indian Ocean to their destination. Travelling through territory controlled by the Muslims—some devious, some

trustworthy—they find friendly pilots, they get to India and they escape at the last moment. The other adversary, perhaps the most formidable, is the sea. It comes in the shape of the giant sea monster Adamastor, the most enduring image of *The Lusiads*. Adamastor bars the sailors' way around the Cape of Good Hope and is defeated by their will. The Portuguese navigate around the cape and lay the ocean open; they are the first masters of the sea.

The Lusiads is complex and ambiguous. Although it comes from a later period it belongs to the Renaissance when the new Christian God still had to co-exist with the older Greek pantheon. Camões mixed the two without any embarrassment. So, the sailors extol their God, it is in His name that they travel and conquer, and they pray to Him. The prayers are answered by Venus who favours the children of Lusus, and it is she who steers them through all the dangers. Camões is a Christian and a good patriot but he does not send Vasco da Gama home to stately honours, instead, through the good services of Venus, the sailors end their adventure on an Island of Love where each one of them finds his nymph. The heroes are rewarded with an orgy fit for the gods. Already at the second edition the Inquisition's scissors were busy at work.

Camões sang a hymn to his country's achievements when in fact Portugal's grandeur was coming to a rapid end. He already sensed the malaise that was setting in, there are passages in *The Lusiads* that attest to this, but he would have never predicted the swiftness of the decline. In 1580, only a few years after the epic was published and just weeks before Camões died, Portugal lost its independence to Spain and the mighty colonialist power crashed. The dream was over. Camões's poetry was the last great deed of the epoch. He gave the nation of navigators, soldiers and colonialists a poetic voice of European stature.

Pessoa's attitude to Camões was complex. In a letter he wrote: