

NICK BURNS

## THE POLITICS OF FERNANDO PESSOA

‘**I**N HOW MANY of the garrets and non-garrets of this world / Are there self-styled geniuses dreaming this very moment?’ By his death in 1935, the genius of Fernando Pessoa was in danger of emerging from anonymity. For decades, remaining unknown outside a small circle of literary friends had been a source of inspiration and a rampart from which to engage in period polemics. Pessoa drifted between cafés, rented rooms and tobacconists, quays and commercial offices in Portugal’s backwater metropolis, imagining one day his fame would surpass that of Camões. He had doubts: ‘At this moment / A hundred thousand brains dream themselves geniuses like me!’<sup>1</sup> But in his last years there were promising signs. He had acquired readers: a younger generation of modernist poets, clustered around the magazine *Presença*, would succeed in conveying his work to a broader national audience after the Second World War.

Internationally, talk of Pessoa spread in the 1960s, with a sweeping critical treatment from Octavio Paz at the start of the decade and another, narrowly formal, from linguist Roman Jakobson at its close.<sup>2</sup> In the *New York Review of Books* the critic Michael Wood soon seconded Jakobson’s assessment of Pessoa as a great undiscovered figure of the generation of Joyce and Picasso.<sup>3</sup> But the breakthrough came after the publication in Portugal of his incomparable collocation of prose fragments, *O Livro do Desassossego*, in 1982. Four different English translations of it as *The Book of Disquiet* appeared in 1991 alone, and three years later Harold Bloom saw fit to include Pessoa in the elite group of writers of his *Western Canon* (1994), on the merits of his visionary reading of Whitman. Today a cottage industry of Pessoa scholarship rivals the Joyce machine. Every

several years since the 1970s has seen the publication of fresh poems and prose from the massive trunk the author left behind at his death, a treasure trove still unexhausted.

Now Richard Zenith, Pessoa's leading English translator, has delivered a comprehensive biography of the poet, the first of its kind in any language. Previous treatments of the poet's life have been idiosyncratic, one recent effort the fanciful product of the retirement project of a former Minister of Justice in Brazil.<sup>4</sup> The very first biography, written by his contemporary João Gaspar Simões before Pessoa's subsequent canonization, is in its fashion markedly Freudian in outlook.<sup>5</sup> The task Simões took on was and remains extremely difficult, due to the obscurity in which Pessoa operated throughout much of his life, the tumultuous political conditions of early twentieth-century Portugal and the poet's own radical literary dispersion. Zenith has acquitted his huge undertaking—over nine hundred meticulously sourced pages—splendidly, the fruit of a dozen years of scrupulous research overturning many a legend accumulated in the previous literature (not a few deriving from Pessoa's own *canards* or those of contemporaries), and dispelling the confusions that have surrounded even some of the most prominent episodes in Pessoa's life. The portrait of the poet that emerges from his book is a work of striking sobriety and delicacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Álvaro de Campos, 'Tabacaria', *Presença* 39, July 1933. Translation mine. Pessoa may have signed 'Tabacaria' as Campos, one of his alternate identities, but the sentiment has little of Campos's energy, its sense of lonely defeat more reminiscent of Bernardo Soares in *The Book of Disquiet*—or of Fernando Pessoa himself.

<sup>2</sup> Octavio Paz's essay is the introduction to his anthology of Pessoa's poetry (Mexico City 1962), later featuring as one-fourth of his *Cuadrivio* (Mexico City 1965); Roman Jakobson's text first appeared as 'Les oxymores dialectiques de Fernando Pessoa', *Langages* 12, 1968, pp. 9–27.

<sup>3</sup> Pessoa on Joyce: 'oneiric delirium . . . presented as an end in itself'. Richard Zenith, *Pessoa, A Biography* [henceforward PB], London and New York 2021, p. 831.

<sup>4</sup> José Paulo Cavalcanti Filho, *Fernando Pessoa: A Quasi-Memoir*, Milan 2019; the Brazilian original appeared in 2011. Cavalcanti Filho's bizarre, disjointed compendium—often credulous, as Zenith illustrates (note 17, p. 991, e.g.)—is part of a long tradition of retirement hobby-projects among the Brazilian elite, which can be traced back at least to the 'history of the suburbs' which the narrator of Machado de Assis's *Dom Casmurro* (1899) repeatedly threatens to write.

<sup>5</sup> João Gaspar Simões, *Vida e obra de Fernando Pessoa: história duma geração*, Lisbon 1950.

Typical of this combination is Zenith's calm treatment of the sensitive subject of Pessoa's sexuality. Conscious of the limitations of Gaspar Simões's handling of this issue, he nevertheless takes it seriously and, without accepting the assessment of Pessoa as psychosexually infantile, devotes much space to charting the cursus of the poet's eros, and the complexity of his competing desires. Through his poems, prose, letters and innumerable fragmentary notes, we see Pessoa navigating his homosexual impulses, slowly shedding an early resentment of women, embarking on an *amitié amoureuse* with a young woman who longed to marry him, acutely aware of the strange shapes of desire in human life, yet in all probability dying a virgin. Searching for the best description of the contradictions of this temperament, Zenith finally terms it 'monosexual', the pattern of an existence of what the poet himself called 'self-fecundation'.<sup>6</sup> Such self-fecundity was, of course, directly related to Pessoa's extraordinary literary originality: the invention of his famous 'heteronyms', dissimilar figures endowed with distinctive styles, backgrounds, and philosophical views to whom he attributed much of his poetry. As the monarchist Ricardo Reis, Pessoa composed carefully balanced neoclassical odes until he dispatched Reis into exile in Brazil after the failure of a royalist rising. Whereas Alberto Caeiro's forte was nature poetry of an anti-philosophical cast, while the futurist naval engineer Álvaro de Campos staged bravura performances in wild free verse like a 'Salutation to Walt Whitman'.<sup>7</sup> Besides this major triad there were dozens more, including the 'semi-heteronyms' Vicente Guedes and Bernardo Soares, two obscure assistant bookkeepers—'sleepy' versions of Pessoa who authored in successive stages the fragments that compose the *Book of Disquiet*. How appropriate that Pessoa, meaning 'person' in Portuguese, comes from the Latin *persona*, or mask. Many of these masks seem more approachable than Pessoa himself, whose 'orthonymic' poetry, signed with his own name, is uneven: capable but stilted English poems after Shakespeare, 'swampist' verses and 'static

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<sup>6</sup> PB, p. 871.

<sup>7</sup> Extending a notion of Eduardo Lourenço, Zenith has suggested that Pessoa's reading of Whitman caused him to 'give birth' to Caeiro and Campos, but that these aesthetic children could not but attempt, Oedipally, to kill their father. See Lourenço, *Fernando Pessoa Revisitado: Leitura Estruturante do Drama em Gente*, Lisbon 1973, p. 86, cited in Zenith, 'Pessoa and Walt Whitman Revisited', in Mariana Gray de Castro, ed., *Fernando Pessoa's Modernity Without Frontiers*, Woodbridge 2013, p. 40.

dramas' in Portuguese, a handful of poems in French: only the heraldic cycle *Mensagem* stands out as an indisputably major work.<sup>8</sup>

Zenith's biography is predominantly concerned, as it should be, with the nature and scale of Pessoa's achievement as a divided, self-multiplied poet, in keeping with his reception around the world as a literary master. At the same time, his reconstruction of Pessoa's life situates him not only in the aesthetic debates but the ideological conflicts that marked the cross-currents of Portuguese public life of the period. His report of Pessoa's political interventions in these is attentive and respectful, if occasionally unsparing—holding that Pessoa, in seeing politics chiefly 'through a poetic lens', was often too sweeping in his assessment of actors on the public stage.<sup>9</sup> But though Zenith's judgements of this record are nearly always balanced and fair, they lack the depth and detail of the rest of his book. For his biographer politics is not a passion, whereas for Pessoa it unpredictably was. Nothing is stranger than this side of his life. For if he was seldom assured writing poetry in his own voice, Pessoa displayed surprising fluency and self-confidence in his writing on politics. This neglected portion of his corpus is enormously varied, encompassing contributions to some fifty publications, drafts of articles intended for English or French newspapers, innumerable unpublished notes of varying tone and level of completion. In sheer quantity and diversity, it is doubtful if there is a poet of his age who could match Pessoa's political output, which comes to us as a sprawling mine of insights on a disordered time by one of its most remarkable minds, as capable of unsettling analytic capacity as of polemical excess. A full appreciation of Pessoa's gifts cannot escape taking the measure of this unexpected dimension of them.

Keeping his distance equally from 'demo-liberal' bourgeois opinion, from fascism and from traditionalist monarchism, Pessoa presented himself idiosyncratically as a nationalist averse to Catholicism, a severe critic of democracy yet a proud liberal. That pose attracted little

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<sup>8</sup> 'Swampism' (*paulismo*) was a languorous, decadent ultra-Symbolism conceived under the influence of Baudelaire and Mallarmé, the static drama a technique borrowed from Maeterlinck. Pessoa's self-published English poems received a warm review in the *Times Literary Supplement* of 19 September 1918, though Zenith considers the *Glasgow Herald's* notice published the same day, criticizing Pessoa's 'foreigner's English', a more perceptive judgement. PB, pp. 346, 360, 559.

<sup>9</sup> PB, p. 177.

contemporary attention. As Paz puts it, though the ‘harsh light of scandal’ momentarily fell on his name on several occasions, each time it faded always into the darkness of obscurity.<sup>10</sup> His political writing, often incisive, sometimes infuriating, always unusual, has never attracted a posthumous readership on a par with his poetry, and what scant attention it has drawn from scholars has for the most part been highly critical. The leading exception is José Barreto, editor of an impressive collection of Pessoa’s texts on themes of fascism and dictatorship in Portugal and abroad, handsomely produced by Tinta da China, featuring many documents appearing in print for the first time, an extensive introduction by Barreto, careful explanatory notes to the texts and painstaking descriptions of their provenance and publication history.<sup>11</sup> Photos of newspaper articles offer a glimpse into the literary culture of the period, while scans of Pessoa’s handwritten notes show the author’s infamously indecipherable penmanship and rejection of modernizing orthographic reforms introduced by the republican government of his early adult years. The sheer volume of political material composed by Pessoa—the trunk in which he left his unpublished writings numbered some 28,000 items—has nevertheless forced Barreto to be selective chronologically as well as thematically. Concentrating on the period from 1923 to Pessoa’s death in 1935, the collection omits the highly productive phase of his life from 1914 to 1922, without which no overview of Pessoa’s political writing can be complete.

### *The Early Republic*

Pessoa was born in Lisbon in 1888. Descended on his mother’s side from the minor nobility of the Azores and on his father’s from a general who fought on the liberal side in the civil wars of the nineteenth century, like many Portuguese he was also in part a descendant of Jewish *conversos*. On his fifth birthday his father, a civil servant and music critic for a Lisbon newspaper, died of tuberculosis, leaving the family in a precarious financial situation—promptly remedied by his mother’s remarriage to a naval officer appointed Portuguese consul in South Africa, which

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<sup>10</sup> Octavio Paz, *Cuadrivio*, p. 136.

<sup>11</sup> *Sobre o fascismo, a ditadura militar e Salazar* [henceforward SF], Lisbon 2015, 431 pp. Barreto’s introduction to the book stands alongside his earlier essay in English, ‘Salazar and the New State in the Writings of Fernando Pessoa’, *Portuguese Studies*, 2008, no. 2, pp. 168–214, in some respects a more detailed and substantial survey.

brought the child to Durban. There he proved an excellent student at the English colonial school in which he was enrolled, absorbing Poe, Keats and Tennyson, and contributing to its student magazine a suggestive, precocious essay championing Carlyle over Macaulay. Yet as a Portuguese national his prospects within the British Empire were dim, and in 1905 the seventeen-year old returned alone to Lisbon, while his mother and stepfather remained in Africa.

Pessoa arrived in Portugal at a time of considerable upheaval, the country's constitutional monarchy hamstrung by rapid-fire rotation between political parties and an insurgent republican left. Soon bored with his classmates, he lasted barely a year at a course that was disrupted by a student strike. In 1908, the Portuguese king and his heir were shot dead by two republicans. Public indifference to the assassinations scandalized Europe. By 1910, the monarchy was no more. Pessoa's material situation changed in 1909, when he inherited the equivalent of some \$140,000 in today's money from a grandmother who before her death had long been mentally ill—fear of himself inheriting madness too would trouble Pessoa for many years. But in a trice he blew the entire sum—and more—on an ill-fated, short-lived publishing venture he named after the ancient Egyptian bird Ibis. To cope with the debts in which he was henceforth entangled, Pessoa began doing irregular freelance translations for commercial houses in Lisbon, and by borrowing incorrigibly from family and friends, financed a long succession of further unsuccessful literary enterprises, and the few luxuries of an impoverished existence—daily coffees at his favourite cafés *A Brasileira* and *O Martinho da Arcada*; wine, brandy and cigarettes; the worn but elegant suits in which he can be seen strolling in photographs of the time, which he bought on credit and sometimes failed to repay.<sup>12</sup>

Portugal, an agrarian country with a literacy rate of a mere quarter of the population, had become only the second declared republic on the European continent. But the liberal politicians who took over, unable to resolve the paradox of political advance and socio-economic backwardness, recycled the failings of the monarchy, achieving only one of their aims, permanent destruction of the temporal power of the Church. Against this background Pessoa published his first major essay in 1912: a comparative study in the literary sociology of England, France and

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<sup>12</sup> PB, pp. 246, 281–6, 304.

Portugal in the mystical-nationalist review *A Águia* ('The Eagle'). In England, Pessoa wrote, literary production had reached its peak, both in 'national' content and aesthetic quality, between 1580 and 1610, preceding a period of great political and civilizational achievement. During Cromwell's Commonwealth, 'England gave the modern world one of the great civilizational principles that are peculiar to it—that of *popular government*, which after the French Revolution, scantily creative, became simply *republican democracy*'. Yet this was followed by a steep literary and civilizational drop-off. In the eighteenth century England merely 'realized, apathetically and weakly, the principle she had created', achieving 'her own greatness and nothing else'. English literature during this period, based on French models, was 'absolutely null and sterile', devoid of national character. Only since the nineteenth century, with the advent of a partially national, partially international (i.e. German) Romanticism, had English literature revived its fortunes. France's trajectory was almost the opposite. Its literature was denationalized by classicism under the *ancien régime*, and the 'premature' French Revolution of 1789 realized its promise only later, between 1848 and 1870, with a maturing of the idea of a democratic republic and the work of Victor Hugo. Since then, however, French civilizational force had completely dissipated, the country subsisting on principles created in earlier periods (this despite the strong influence on Pessoa of Symbolism and the *décadents*).

That by contrast Portugal was experiencing simultaneously 'poor, depressed' social conditions, a 'pitiable' political situation, and a promising, distinctively 'national' literary climate—here he referred deferentially to *Águia* editor Teixeira de Pascoaes—was a sign that it would soon follow the English model of development. The impending arrival of a 'Great Poet' or 'supra-Camões' would be followed by a general political and civilizational renaissance.<sup>13</sup> Pessoa's ambition to become this figure himself is clear (and today could be said to be nearing fruition, though his nebulous hopes for a Portuguese renaissance—in which the country gave its own new 'principles' to the world—remain as distant as ever).

Teixeira de Pascoaes's vision of such a renaissance, centring on *saudade*—nostalgia—as a source of renewed civilizational energy for newly republican Portugal, clearly appealed to Pessoa, but differences

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<sup>13</sup> 'A nova poesia portuguesa sociologicamente considerada', *A Águia* 2, no. 4, Oporto 1912.

soon emerged. Pascoaes's vision of the national spirit was parochial and pastoral, Pessoa's highly abstract and universalizing. Others in the *Águia* circle found Pessoa 'too cerebral',<sup>14</sup> and Pessoa drifted into another current: a small circle of young writers, more pessimistic than the *Águia* set, more mischievous, more inclined to look to Europe for inspiration. Among them, in 1914—Pessoa would say—came 'the appearance of someone in me': Alberto Caeiro, and in his train, Campos and Reis. A year later Pessoa and his new friends started a modernist review, *Orpheu*, scandalizing Portugal's staid parnassian literary establishment, which labelled them 'madmen'.<sup>15</sup> (Their riposte was to publish poems by an inmate of Lisbon's Rilhafoles asylum in the second issue of the journal.)

A convinced enemy of the Church, excited by the prospect of a republic after his return to Lisbon, Pessoa was never a radical republican. Disgusted at the celebrations that met the regicides, he decided that the anti-clerical measures of a self-appointed provisional government went too far,<sup>16</sup> and the outbreak of war in Europe prompted a shift to the right in his thinking. Painfully aware the British press disapproved of Portugal's republican turn, Pessoa's own (moderate) republicanism may in part have been a rebellion against his acquired identity in South Africa. Certainly, though he never visited Britain, England always occupied a conspicuous place in Pessoa's thought, often appearing in the guise of a cultural father figure which he alternately resented and was eager to impress. Portugal's traditional confederate and source of his own education, the country had provoked a wave of indignation in 1890, when an ultimatum from London vetoed Portuguese claims to the land between Angola and Mozambique. Pessoa was only two at the time, but the national memory lingered: Álvaro de Campos would in due course revenge himself on the British with an 'Ultimatum' of his own, denouncing all the participants in the Great War as plunging Europe back into barbarism. When hostilities broke out in 1914, Portugal was naturally, as England's 'oldest ally', in official sympathy with the Entente, though it had to be strong-armed by Britain into entering the war in 1916 and

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<sup>14</sup> PB, p. 324. This sentiment derived from Mário Beirão, who apparently nurtured it long enough to torpedo Pessoa's hope of a first prize for his collection of poems *Mensagem* (a book whose highly abstract nationalism was likely to confirm Beirão in his earlier judgement), for which he was a juror: PB, p. 861.

<sup>15</sup> From the front-page review in *A Capital*, 30 March 1915. Mentioned in PB, p. 447.

<sup>16</sup> PB, pp. 259, 293.



sending troops to France, a third of them to die there. A year earlier, as the republic suffered its first authoritarian interruption—a few months' rule without parliament by Pimenta de Castro, military officer and university professor at Coimbra (two significant professions for Portuguese politics, as it turned out)—Pessoa found himself toying with the idea of supporting Germany. In this mood he penned several notes—some signed as the neopagan asylum resident 'António Mora'—in favour of German arms, including one that argued 'if man, in the depths of his humanity, can be horrified by the cruelties perpetrated by Germany in Belgium', these had nonetheless to be understood as an attack 'on the principle of small states'. Sympathy for the country as a state (rather than Belgians as people) was invalid: 'for the sociologist, Belgium has no right to exist'.<sup>17</sup> Pessoa's defence of Germany was related to his theories about the rise and fall of national 'civilizational' energy in *Águia*: he seems to have believed that of the nations fighting each other in Europe, only Germany now possessed a compelling and novel set of principles (including, he was convinced, paganism).<sup>18</sup>

This foreign policy turn had been preceded by a fateful campaign against leading figures of the republic. On 3 July 1915, the strongman of the dominant Portuguese Republican Party (PRP), war hawk Afonso Costa, leapt off a tram after mistaking a short-circuit on it for an assassination attempt and was hospitalized, though not seriously injured. Whereupon Pessoa wrote a letter to a newspaper as Álvaro de Campos dwelling on the 'deliciously mechanical' way that divine providence appeared to work by way of an electrified tram. An outcry in the republican press over this applause for violence ensued. That in turn split *Orpheu*, which was politically diverse—Raul Leal, a monarchist member of the circle, took Pessoa's side, but managing editor António Ferro was an avowed partisan of Costa and the PRP.<sup>19</sup> Pessoa's friends Mário de Sá-Carneiro and José de Almada Negreiros disavowed the comment, identifying Campos as Pessoa, and helpfully explaining their friend had composed the letter when inebriated. Members of a paramilitary group associated with the PRP went looking for Pessoa in the restaurant where the *Orpheu* set met: only after receiving a tip in time did he escape harm. An unpublished letter reveals that Pessoa wanted to repeat his insult and was presumably

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<sup>17</sup> Fernando Pessoa, *Ultimatum e Páginas de Sociologia Política*, Lisbon 1980, p. 38.

<sup>18</sup> PB, p. 454.

<sup>19</sup> PB, p. 475.

stopped from doing so only by the pleas of friends, fearing for the effects on their magazine. It was too late. Plans for a third issue fell through, and the group drifted apart, Sá-Carneiro, Pessoa's best friend, decamping for Paris, where he would swallow strychnine the following year. *Orpheu* never published another number.<sup>20</sup>

### *War and the aftermath*

Meanwhile, monarchist uprisings and splits from the PRP were accompanied by endemic corruption and rapid-fire cycling through governments (the final tally was 46 over 15 years, only a slight improvement on the last decades of the monarchy). A growing sense of absurdity characterized the efforts of Portugal's self-consciously modern and cosmopolitan elite to preside over a country that had not rid itself of medieval conditions. Disillusionment with the promise of parliamentary government was nearly universal among the educated young. By 1914 many of the country's few thousand university students, sons of landowners and industrialists alike, had exchanged the liberalism of their fathers for the die-hard traditionalism of *Integralismo Lusitano*—a Catholic monarchist movement inspired by (though less militant than) Action Française—which enjoyed a talented exponent in António Sardinha (1887–1925) and a brief entrée into politics courtesy of Major Sidónio Pais, charismatic dictator for several months after a military coup in 1917.<sup>21</sup>

Pessoa had developed an appetite for political polemic, and the desertion by his friends over the Costa episode did not discourage him. Earlier in 1915 he had been hired as a columnist for the newspaper *O Jornal* then quickly fired for making fun of monarchists.<sup>22</sup> In 1918, after Sidónio Pais was assassinated, Pessoa fell in with a group of former supporters of the brief 'president-king' (his term) around the magazine *Acção*, as the republic returned for a doomed reprise lasting till its definitive overthrow by the military in 1926. In *Acção* he discharged repeated fusillades against democracy, and the notion of public opinion, on the grounds that

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<sup>20</sup> See Antonio Almeida, "Brandindo o cutelo da Maldição": Em torno do manifesto *O Bando Sinistro* de Raul Leal', *Pessoa Plural* 8, 2015, pp. 564–601. Zenith, describing the incident, regards the danger of lynching as exaggerated and argues that Sá-Carneiro's departure had nothing to do with the episode: PB, pp. 473–4.

<sup>21</sup> See Herminio Martins, 'Portugal', in S. J. Woolf, ed., *European Fascism*, New York 1969, pp. 308–13.

<sup>22</sup> PB, p. 456.

modern science had proved that most are unable to think for themselves (the influence of Gustave Le Bon's *psychologie des foules* is likely). The eighteenth century had considered man a rational animal; the twentieth century knew he was irrational. Lamenting the loss of Pais as 'another Alcácer-Quibir'—the battle against the Moors in 1578 at which Portugal lost its king Sebastian, inspiring a durable folk belief (in Brazil as well as Portugal) that he would one day return to restore the glory of the empire—Pessoa treated the secular millenarianism of *Sebastianismo* as a kind of ideological rootstock on which to graft a nationalist saviour for modern times. Responsible for this turn was a neo-Sebastianist tract by a Portuguese writer of the previous generation who, like Pessoa, had found himself drawn to the occult: Sampaio Bruno's 1904 *O encoberto* ('the hidden one').<sup>23</sup> Zenith wonders how Pessoa could spend so much time writing for *Acção*, playing the unconvincing part of a reactionary (he proposes a crush on a fellow editor).<sup>24</sup> In fact Pessoa's praise for Pais was chiefly posthumous: once the major was dead, he was safely abstract, and the chief way in which Pessoa found it possible to love, politically as well as personally, was in the abstract.

Yet Pessoa always took his distance from the *integralistas* and often positioned himself to their left. These efforts included a symptomatic clash with a group of Catholic monarchist students at the University of Lisbon over Pessoa's decision to publish homoerotic poems by António Botto, in 1922, and Raul Leal's provocative hymn to homosexuality, *Sodoma divinizada* the following year.<sup>25</sup> After students attacked these writings as 'filth', Pessoa wrote two pamphlets defending his friends, one signed as Álvaro de Campos and another under his own name, to no avail: the authorities confiscated every copy of the offending texts they could find and burnt them. In later unpublished notes, Pessoa repeatedly described *Integralismo Lusitano* as inappropriately French in origin, at variance with Portuguese needs, and turned Maurras on his head to argue that 'Anglo-Saxon' individualism was not a threat to European civilization, rather its greatest virtue. 'Maurras, poor fellow, in repudiating Kant repudiates the best opponent of low rationalism.'<sup>26</sup> Criticizing the *integralistas* in Nietzschean-Thrasymachean style, he contended that only the weak and

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<sup>23</sup> PB, p. 424.

<sup>24</sup> PB, p. 578.

<sup>25</sup> See PB, pp. 624–6; José Barreto, 'Fernando Pessoa e Raul Leal contra a campanha moralizadora dos estudantes em 1923', *Pessoa Plural* 2, 2012, pp. 240–70.

<sup>26</sup> SF, p. 55.

ignorant, unable to compete under capitalism, fell back on imaginary ideals of an obsolete societal form, the medieval corporation.<sup>27</sup>

Another indication of Pessoa's hyper-individualist liberalism in this period came with a short story of 1922 somewhat like the product of a subtler Ayn Rand, entitled 'The Anarchist Banker'. In it, a wealthy financier explains that his rapacity, far from betraying his early anarchist convictions, is entirely consistent with them, for his own rise from humble birth to great wealth has released him from the distorting grip of the 'social fiction' of money, thereby decreasing the total power of the artificial institutions that limit man's natural freedom. Ascribing the continued existence of poverty to want of ingenuity and talent among the poor—that is, 'natural inequalities' which anarchism cannot and does not seek to address—he ends by hailing Aristotle's most notorious dictum: 'If a man was born to be a slave, liberty, being contrary to his nature, would be for him a tyranny.'

### *Reactions to fascism*

With this we arrive at 1923 and the stretch of Pessoa's political writing covered by Barreto's collection, spanning a period marked in Europe by the rise of fascism, and in Portugal by the decline of the republic and the establishment of the Estado Novo. The scholar António Costa Pinto has argued that but for the pronounced Catholic and traditionalist tendencies in Salazar's regime—that is, if Salazar had been a more typical fascist—Pessoa would probably have supported him.<sup>28</sup> Barreto, by contrast, contends that Pessoa's hostility to corporatism set him apart not only from the *integralistas* but fascist economic theories more generally, and presents good evidence that Pessoa was a consistent critic of fascism as the term was understood at the time, in the shape of Mussolini's regime in Italy. If he acknowledged the personal charisma ('prestige' was the term he preferred) of the Duce, and appeared to suggest that Southern Europe was doomed to dictatorship or absolute monarchy, it was more in a spirit of fatalism than apologia. Italian fascism itself he repeatedly described as a tyranny.<sup>29</sup> In a telling note that Barreto dates to

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<sup>27</sup> SF, p. 79.

<sup>28</sup> António Costa Pinto, 'Modernity versus Democracy? The Mystical Nationalism of Fernando Pessoa', in Zeev Sternhell, ed., *The Intellectual Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*, Jerusalem 1996, p. 354.

<sup>29</sup> Introduction to SF, p. 20.

1923–25, he wrote of the regime: ‘The fascists kill your grandfather, but you can be sure the train will arrive in time for his burial.’<sup>30</sup>

In 1926 Pessoa published, anonymously in a republican newspaper, a bizarre interview he fabricated with a fictitious Italian antifascist who pronounces Mussolini a madman, and then goes on to declare that fascism is only a ruse. The world is ‘directed by special forces’, whose nature he declines to elaborate. The document is a mishmash of genuine antifascist sentiments held by Pessoa and an irrepressibly crankish streak of his own. When the Italian embassy wrote to complain that Angioletti did not exist, Pessoa happily forged another letter as Angioletti maintaining that he did.<sup>31</sup> A month before his death in 1935 he was more straightforward, composing a blistering denunciation of the Italian invasion of Abyssinia that was suppressed by the censors.<sup>32</sup> On the Third Reich he had less to say, though his contempt for Hitler was plain: ‘even his moustache is pathological’. For authoritarian governments in Southern Europe that were not themselves fascist he had greater sympathy, comparing in a prescient touch the situation in Spain in 1930—the fate of the monarchy in the balance—with that of Portugal in 1910, and warning of the potential consequences of Primo de Rivera’s lack of personal ‘prestige’.<sup>33</sup> Eight months after his death, civil war erupted across the frontier.

Notwithstanding a few outbursts as Álvaro de Campos, never fully convincing, Pessoa did not have much of a stomach for political violence. But that he was attracted for much of his life to authoritarian rule of a particular kind is clear. What was it then that prevented Pessoa from succumbing to the temptations of fascism? Barreto ascribes it to an Anglophilia that was philosophical as well as aesthetic, citing Pessoa’s description of himself in 1935: ‘A conservative in the English style, that is to say, a liberal within conservatism, and absolutely anti-reactionary.’<sup>34</sup> Besides the youthful influence of Carlyle, he was prompted by his reading of Herbert Spencer towards positions that Barreto does not balk at terming ‘proto-Hayekian’: defence of a limited or minimal state, hatred of corporatism, insistence on the total freedom of the individual, belief in an essential similarity between fascism and communism. This side of Pessoa’s thought, along with his respect for human dignity and

<sup>30</sup> SF, p. 57.

<sup>31</sup> SF, pp. 82–9.

<sup>32</sup> SF, pp. 341–7.

<sup>33</sup> SF, p. 213, pp. 151–4.

<sup>34</sup> SF, p. 291.

insistence on the independence of intellectuals, offered in Barreto's judgement an 'antidote' to the temptations of fascism.

### *Democracy and dictatorship*

There is, at the same time, no doubting that Pessoa was a critic of democracy. His dismissal of democratic systems was directed, however, at least some of the time at their failure to live up to the ideals they proclaimed, rather than the ideals themselves. The Portuguese First Republic was a façade for the rule of a corrupt oligarchy; more generally, the notion of 'public opinion', as commonly understood and identified with democracy, failed to capture the mental and political outlook of most people. Pessoa's gathering hatred for the First Republic caused him twice to support dictatorship, once in 1918 and again in 1926. But Barreto contends that a careful look at his major essay *O Interregno* of 1928, a 'defence and justification' of the military regime that had staged a coup in 1926—commonly cited as evidence of his authoritarian bent—reveals he defended it only as a necessary 'state of transition' to a future government 'based on opinion'. Considered in context, as the dictatorship pondered whether to return the country to parliamentary rule or to consolidate itself on a permanent basis, he judges Pessoa's essay to advocate implicitly the former path.<sup>35</sup>

Yet the dictatorship was consolidated. Under the guiding influence of Coimbra economics professor and Catholic politician António de Oliveira Salazar, who outmanoeuvred the generals at the helm after 1926 with his technocratic balanced budgets, military rule in Portugal evolved into a novel corporatist-authoritarian regime from 1930 onwards. Thereafter Pessoa's changing attitude towards Salazar and his *Estado Novo* tells its own story. At first there was reserved praise for Salazar's talent as finance minister, mingled with expressions of trust in his style of management, though 'unfortunately what he is most of all is a Catholic'.<sup>36</sup> In an especially characteristic note Barreto dates to 1932 or 1933, Pessoa wrote:

Professor Salazar possesses in the highest degree the secondary qualities of intelligence and will. He is a perfect executor of orders from those who possess the primary qualities. [He] has a lucid and precise intelligence; he does not have a creative or dominating one. He has a firm and concentrated will;

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<sup>35</sup> José Barreto, introduction to SF, pp. 21–5.

<sup>36</sup> SF, p. 178.

he does not have a radiant and secure one. He is timid when he dares, uncertain when he affirms. Not a statesman, he is an usher . . . A country must be governed *with* book-keeping; it cannot be governed *by* book-keeping. We are witnessing the Caesarization of an accountant.<sup>37</sup>

Yet Pessoa tried to keep an open mind. In 1934 he entered his book of 'heraldic' nationalist poems, *Mensagem*, in a literary contest staged by António Ferro, a former left-wing republican and collaborator with Pessoa on the masthead of *Orpheu*, who had now become Salazar's chief propagandist, and was aiming to boost his regime with a cultural offensive modelled on the successful mobilization of literary and visual avant-gardes in Italy under Mussolini. *Mensagem*, described by Pessoa as the subtraction of all the elements of his make-up save his mystic nationalism, was a baffling cipher. For the jury assembled by Ferro, the promising propaganda value of *Mensagem's* nationalist subject matter (kings and heroes of the Age of Discoveries) and rousing closing clarion call ('Now is the hour!') must have seemed all but nullified by its cryptic style and intricate oxymoronic elaborations. They awarded the prize instead to the crudely cloying verses of a Franciscan friar in praise of popular worship.<sup>38</sup> Embarrassed at this outcome, Ferro scrambled to increase the value of a second prize and get it awarded to Pessoa, while arranging for a laudatory review of *Mensagem* to be published in a major newspaper. Convinced that his talents were not properly recognized, and unmoved by this manoeuvre, Pessoa resolved to give up the enticements of official literature. The dictator's speech at the award ceremony for *Mensagem*, in which he demanded that Portuguese intellectuals follow the 'directives' of his own 'politics of the spirit' shocked and enraged Pessoa, who had boycotted the event.<sup>39</sup> He paid off his debts with the prize money, and proceeded to launch an open attack on the regime's

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<sup>37</sup> SF, p. 179. Translation mine.

<sup>38</sup> Mentioned in Orlando Raimundo's *António Ferro: O inventor do Salazarismo*, Lisbon 2015, is João Gaspar Simões' memorable description of the winning entry: 'as poor in literary quality as the founder of the Franciscan order was in material goods'.

<sup>39</sup> The notion of a 'politics of the spirit' was, as it turned out, borrowed from the work of another poet writing politically. Ferro had enticed Paul Valéry to write an introduction to a collection of Salazar's speeches, and had cribbed the idea from it: see Raimundo, *António Ferro*, p. 154; PB, p. 822. An extended discussion of the Valéry essay in question can be found in Nathaniel Rudavsky-Brody, 'Paul Valéry and the Mechanisms of Modern Tyranny', *Hedgehog Review* 23, no. 1, 2021.

introduction of a ban on Freemasonry, which it associated with the republican political class, in an article entitled 'Secret Societies'. A torrent of angry rebuttals in the official press ensued, and Salazar ordered the censors to prevent Pessoa from responding to them.

The publication of 'Secret Societies' in February 1935 marked an open rupture between Pessoa and Salazar's regime, and from this point until his death in November the tone of his writing about it became uniformly hostile.<sup>40</sup> A number of biting satirical poems portrayed Salazar as a 'poor little tyrant' who 'drinks freedom and liberty'. His name was dissected into *sal*, salt, and *azar*, chance, Pessoa imagining the arrival of a rainstorm to dissolve the salt—mistaking Salazar, who would prove durable, for a transitory strongman like Pais or Pimenta de Castro. Pessoa's new politics made for strange bedfellows: he went so far as to send an anti-Salazarist poem, 'Liberdade', to *Seara Nova*, a republican magazine that represented a faction Pessoa otherwise strongly disliked.<sup>41</sup> Most effective among these late political poems was perhaps 'Estado Novo Love Poem', a pastiche of Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 18' using the catchphrases of Ferro's propaganda network touting Salazar's financial acumen. Gesturing at the absurdity of placing political demands on literature, Pessoa has his speaker compare the object of his love to the national budget: 'On your favour I'm depending / Won't you stay another moment / O my lovely cut in spending?'<sup>42</sup>

At the very time Pessoa was making his break with Salazar in Lisbon, in London T. S. Eliot was negotiating the English-language rights of Ferro's sycophantic interviews with the dictator for Faber & Faber, packaged as a book for translation in various European countries, under the title *Salazar: Portugal and her Leader*. Curiously, Pessoa seems never to have registered Eliot's stature as a poet, his contributions to Wyndham Lewis's *Blast*, of which Pessoa read both numbers, apparently leaving him cold. Had he done so, and lived longer, he would have been dismayed to witness Eliot's arrival in Portugal as a guest of the regime in 1938, and what he had to say about his experience, writing to Ferro of its 'enlightened and far-seeing government', and his 'respect and admiration for Dr Salazar, formed by reading' and confirmed by 'having the

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<sup>40</sup> Introduction to SF, p. 39.

<sup>41</sup> The poem would not be published until two years after Pessoa's death, and with the final stanza cut by the censors: see *Seara Nova* 526, 11 Sep 1937.

<sup>42</sup> SF, p. 377. Original in Portuguese, translation mine.



pleasure of meeting him'.<sup>43</sup> No sentiments could have been more distant from Pessoa's.

In an unusually precise and measured article written during the same period, which he hoped to publish in the Paris weekly *Les nouvelles littéraires*, Pessoa recounted Salazar's patient manoeuvres within the dictatorship to consolidate his power and his acute sense of the leverage afforded him by his expertise in finance. As for the dictator's temperament, he was 'intelligent without flexibility, religious without spiritualism', a species of Catholic materialist who was a born atheist, who merely happened to worship the Virgin. Under way was a change in the nature of the Portuguese dictatorship, from the 'simple' military type, along the lines of Primo de Rivera's Spain, to something more on the order of Mussolini's Italy.<sup>44</sup> Apparently seeking a return to the 'simple' form, Pessoa drafted a letter to the Portuguese president, General Carmona, begging him to check Salazar's influence. The Estado Novo was not what the 'state of transition' in *O Interregno*—a text which, he now wrote in a note of March 1935, 'should be considered non-existent'—was supposed to be.<sup>45</sup> Pessoa intended to reconcile his defence of Freemasonry with his pride in the Portuguese past with a new theory of 'liberal nationalism', to be propounded in an article for which he left a dozen notes, dying before he could complete a draft. For Barreto, this final phase reflects the enduring contradiction between Pessoa's liberal principles and his support for a 'transitory' dictatorship. Nor would he have necessarily achieved greater clarity had he lived: the Spanish Civil War might only have confirmed his sense of the necessity of a 'liberal dictatorship'.<sup>46</sup>

### *Verdicts on Pessoa*

Barreto, a researcher at the prestigious Instituto de Ciências Sociais of the University of Lisbon, belongs to the generation that came of age in the last years of the Estado Novo. Prior to his work on Pessoa, he produced studies on Portuguese labour history (emphasizing the deformations of corporatism persistent in contemporary unionism) and the Catholic Church (emphasizing Catholic resistance to the Estado Novo). A major motive of his writing on Pessoa has evidently been to defend the poet from accusations that he lent support to Salazar's regime or

<sup>43</sup> PB, pp. 900–1.

<sup>44</sup> SF, p. 320.

<sup>45</sup> SF, p. 289.

<sup>46</sup> Introduction to SF, p. 44.

harboured sympathies for fascism, levelled not only by António Costa Pinto, but Alfredo Margarido and Manuel Villaverde Cabral (a colleague of Barreto's at ICS-UL), both political exiles before 1974—Margarido for activity in Angola during the colonial war, Cabral for his membership of the banned Portuguese Communist Party.

How does Barreto's defence of Pessoa hold up? As to fascism in Italy and Germany, Barreto clearly has the better of Pessoa's critics, with the writer's opposition to Mussolini's regime well documented. Given Pessoa's bent for the outrageous, one would expect accusations of other forms of prejudice as well—racism or antisemitism. We learn from Barreto that Pessoa, who always had a penchant for the esoteric, wrote a number of fevered fragments on the 'conspiracy of the 300'—an occult ring supposedly ruling the world—in which he deprecates 'sub-Judaism', apparently a synonym for vulgar materialism. We do not, however, learn that he entertained plans to publish an edition of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* at his publishing house, Olisipo (the plans were abandoned).<sup>47</sup>

Barreto has maintained in the Portuguese press that Pessoa was not a racist.<sup>48</sup> Such a claim fails the test of his comment, in an unsent open letter to Woodrow Wilson that Zenith publishes in his biography for the first time: blacks 'are not human beings, sociologically speaking. The greatest crime against humanity was the abolition of slavery'.<sup>49</sup> To offset this outburst, Zenith musters Pessoa's criticism of the Italian invasion of Abyssinia as evidence of a later change of heart. Actually, Pessoa's letter to Wilson, extending Carlyle's 'Occasional Discourse' to its logical conclusion, is an extreme example of frequent outbursts in his private writing and perhaps not something he would ever have published or stood by, as Zenith suggests. On the other hand, nor is it sure that his text on Abyssinia indicated a general change to Pessoa's outlook. His kind of humanism had always been at odds with a firm belief in natural hierarchies—Aristotle by way of Herbert Spencer.

Would then the appropriate epithet be, not an incipient fascist but a poet of neoliberalism *ante diem*? Certainly Hayek, to whom Barreto compares Pessoa, was another Anglophile interested in the possibility of liberal dictatorship, and one who sent a copy of his *Constitution of*

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<sup>47</sup> SF, p. 55; PB, p. 609.

<sup>48</sup> 'Historiador José Barreto afasta acusações de racismo na obra de Fernando Pessoa', *O Observador*, 15 February 2019.

<sup>49</sup> PB, p. 534.

*Liberty* to Salazar. Curiously, Barreto's arch-opponent Margarido also spoke of Pessoa's 'most orthodox liberalism' in an early essay on his political thought.<sup>50</sup> In this sense the intense debate among Portuguese scholars on Pessoa's relationship to Salazar itself risks a Pessoaan-style critique—that of being parochial and outdated (related, or unrelated, to the way Portugal itself seems today in some ways a throw-back to a previous political age in Western Europe, with a still-going socialist party in power, a communist party with ten times the number of deputies on the far right, and a broad front against the austerity practised elsewhere in the EU?)

Is it fair, though, to read Pessoa as a neoliberal? The 'Anarchist Banker' was meant as a satire of Proudhon, as Zenith reminds us, though other writings suggest its sardonic reconciliation of liberty and social hierarchy was sincere.<sup>51</sup> But Pessoa was something of an anti-materialist, too, and a counterbalance to his 'orthodox liberalism' lay in his aesthetic commitments. Consider the ambivalent sentiment he expressed towards American capitalism in his articles in his step-brother's *Commercial Review*: American pragmatism might be productive, the accomplishments of Henry Ford no doubt 'in their way, admirable'—but this was a culture that produced rich men who did not know how to be rich, one that could be taunted with questions like 'How many of you have a harem, a real harem?'<sup>52</sup> American civilization had 'the maximum of the minimum'; there, people 'don't create, they only *arrange*'.<sup>53</sup>

Overall it could be said that Barreto blurs the contours of Pessoa's conception of democracy, at times frankly labelling him an antidemocrat, at others presenting him as just a pointed critic of the failures of existing democracies to live up their professed ideals. His association of Pessoa's *O Interregno* with the latter rather than the former strain in his thought seems especially a stretch. As its title suggests, Pessoa defended military dictatorship as necessary to establish a sense of national unity, currently lacking in the Portuguese but essential for the establishment—at some point in the perhaps distant future—of a government 'based

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<sup>50</sup> 'La pensée politique de Fernando Pessoa', *Bulletin des études portugaises* 32, 1971, p. 152.

<sup>51</sup> PB, pp. 533, 619.

<sup>52</sup> *Revista de Comércio e Contabilidade* 4, June 1926; quoted in PB, p. 668.

<sup>53</sup> SF, p. 52. The verb *arranjar* is one Pessoa used closer to home, calling Salazar on several occasions a mere 'arranger'. American evaluations could be very different, in ways Pessoa would have regarded as a vindication: see Dean Acheson's widely repeated description of Salazar as a 'philosopher-king'.

on public opinion'. For Pessoa, however, government based on public opinion was compatible not only with democracy but with regimes of many different kinds.

Barreto is right that *O Interregno* is not a pro-fascist tract. The forces behind the bloodless coup of 1926 were in the first instance neither fascist nor even far-right. With the failure of Sidónio Pais's *integralista*-backed dictatorship fresh in the generals' minds, their watchword was rather all-purpose opposition to parliamentarism under the PRP, Salazar brought in as a technocrat rather than (initially) a Catholic conservative.<sup>54</sup> *O Interregno* allowed Pessoa to revisit the theories of public opinion he had advanced in his *Acção* essays. He now held public opinion a partially rational phenomenon, rather than completely irrational (as previously). It encompassed a dialectical dance between progressive instinct and conservative habit, with the occasional 'abusive intrusion' of the active intellect. Of the three possible bases for government—brute force, traditional authority and opinion—only the last was viable for modern states, as the Enlightenment had irreversibly discredited traditional authority.

But public opinion was organic and could not be imposed on a people. The mistake of the French Revolution had been to assume that the English constitution was a 'metaphysical truth' or a 'formula' that could be imposed as such, rather than the idiosyncratic result of a series of accidents.<sup>55</sup> The Portuguese First Republic was born without the existence of the strong public opinion that could have sustained it, so it had failed, as would all future attempts of the same kind. Even where a public opinion had taken shape, a regime that answered to it would not necessarily be parliamentary or democratic. In Portugal these were considerations that could only obtain at a later stage: required now was a kind of non-regime, a sort of night-watchman state *avant la lettre* enforcing only order, stimulating the growth of a national 'idea'. The only group in a position to deliver this were the Armed Forces. Military dictatorship, whether the current regime or another, was the sole way forward for the country.

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<sup>54</sup> A. H. de Oliveira Marques, *History of Portugal*, vol. 2, New York 1972, p. 179.

<sup>55</sup> SF, p. 114.

Much of the naivety of *O Interregno* is corrected in Pessoa's later writings on Salazar. After endorsing military dictatorship as a solution to national division in 1928, by 1934 he could see that Salazar's deprecation of the 'party spirit' was mere rhetoric, his official National Union not the antithesis of a party—the official line—rather a mere 'party with a minus sign attached'.<sup>56</sup> Pessoa came to reject the Estado Novo as embodying ideological tendencies like Maurrassianism he thought foreign to the national spirit, being a French import. In the terms of *O Interregno*, it was neither a mere state of transition nor a true government of opinion resulting from one.

It bears asking what exactly Pessoa believed was inherent in the Portuguese national spirit. It could not be throne and altar, nor—Teixeira de Pascoaes's answer—*saudade*. Perhaps it was merely linguistic: 'My nation is the Portuguese language', he wrote in 1931.<sup>57</sup> The best answer Pessoa could give in *O Interregno* was a non-answer, to the effect that the Portuguese were paralysed by a lack of a national will and needed to acquire one as soon as possible. *Mensagem* was his final and most mysterious answer: Portugal lay buried somewhere in a heap of symbolic puzzles left over from the Age of Discoveries, in the mystical promise of King Sebastian's return.

### *Censorship, Freemasonry*

In truth the trajectory of the Estado Novo bore more than a passing resemblance to the future government Pessoa had predicted in *O Interregno*. The Estado Novo was in a sense only an outgrowth of the military dictatorship that preceded it: Salazar was shoe-horned into power by the military and it was a military rising that brought down his successor, Marcello Caetano, in 1974. Claiming to represent the Portuguese nation, after the death of the exiled Manuel II in 1932, the Estado Novo quietly resolved what Pessoa considered the principal obstacle to Portuguese unity, the quarrel between royalists and republicans. Ironically too, in waging the brutal colonial wars that finally undid it, the Estado Novo gave the Portuguese what for Ernest Renan was a crucial ingredient of national identity: something jointly to forget.

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<sup>56</sup> SF, pp. 230–7.

<sup>57</sup> *Book of Disquiet*, translated by Richard Zenith, London 2001, p. 225.

Barreto's case for Pessoa's late turn against the Estado Novo finds impressive illustration in unpublished material. Ultimately, it is not so surprising that Salazar—pious, withdrawn, technocratic—was finally a distasteful and anti-national figure for Pessoa. Weaker, in Barreto's portrait of Pessoa's politics, is his neglect—tactful bracketing?—of the lack of foresight which characterized its oscillations. For example, after previously dismissing complaints about censorship, Pessoa justified his late opposition to the regime by distinguishing between merely 'negative' censorship (preventing writers from publishing certain opinions or addressing certain subjects) and a more oppressive 'positive' censorship which instructed the writing of certain opinions. Casuistry dissembling tergiversation? In an English fragment on the newly inaugurated Estado Novo which Barreto dates to 1933, Pessoa could write: 'Now the present Dictatorship may frankly be described as liberal. Apart from the censorship of the press, which is not very harsh and is chiefly mutilatory [*sic*] of the products of worthless political fanaticism . . . there is in Portugal no oppression'. Only two years later he would find himself angrily protesting the mutilation of his own work.

In 'Secret Societies', the centrepiece in Barreto's account of his turn against Salazar, Pessoa makes a narrow defence of Freemasonry on its own terms without appealing to liberal principles, and while issuing several insults to the intelligence of the author of the anti-masonic law, proceeds to no broad criticism of the regime. When his article came under fire, Pessoa drafted a response—unpublished, with Salazar's ban in effect—insisting he remained a *situacionista* (supporter of the establishment) and absurdly claiming that he had the right to maintain his liberal principles while still supporting the now explicitly anti-liberal Estado Novo.

What might have happened had Pessoa not died at the end of 1935? Would he have maintained his opposition to the Estado Novo, accepting exile, imprisonment or enforced silence, or might he have found a way to adhere to the new regime? Pessoa prized his independence so highly that the last is hard to imagine, but so is his departure from Lisbon, or his survival in general into the era of the Estado Novo, which began in earnest the year after his death. Pessoa's highly plural literary production seems possible only in the world of the doomed Portuguese Republic, full of colliding forces and avant-garde excitements.

The poet seemed to realize this himself. Absurdity turns to tragedy in the last notes in Barreto's collection, showing Pessoa's escalating panic and despair at the political situation. 'The New State has aged me', he complained in an unsent letter to a friend. It had dawned on him that censorship meant that most of what he wanted to write was now unpublishable in Portugal, and he abandoned plans to publish abroad. And he was suddenly lonely: almost his entire group of friends, as well as the secretary with whom he had once stepped out, would earn a living working for Ferro's propaganda network or in related pro-regime activities.<sup>58</sup> Zenith points out that even his heteronyms seemed exhausted. An ode written in November 1935 and signed by Ricardo Reis no longer reflects Reis's classical repose, rather an existential scission that is all Pessoa's: 'I don't know, when I think or feel / Who is thinking or feeling. / I am merely the place / Where things are thought and felt.'<sup>59</sup> By the end of the month he was dead.<sup>60</sup>

### *Contradictions of the poet*

Barreto's compendium, including texts ranging in complexity from scribbled sentences to fully developed essays, supplies a fascinating storehouse of Pessoa's rhetorical arsenal. Successive drafts of the same essay reveal him trying out arguments, refining them, organizing abrupt assertions into a more systematic order. Pessoa often claimed he was a dramatist above all else—the influence of Shakespeare extending past the sonnet form, the heteronyms *dramatis personae* in the supra-drama of Pessoa's oeuvre—and a dramatic flair is noticeable in his political prose as well.<sup>61</sup> An admirer of the debating societies of Oxford and Cambridge, about which he is likely to have heard or read reports as a schoolboy in Durban, Pessoa seems to be performing in much of his political writing.

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<sup>58</sup> PB, pp. 928, 937.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in PB, p. 921.

<sup>60</sup> Pessoa's last published article, introducing a November issue of *Sudoeste* reuniting survivors from the old *Orpheu* scene, indicates his despair was not total. In contrast to the resignation of his poem of 1933 'Tabacaria'—in which a defeated, peculiarly Bernardo Soares-like Álvaro de Campos despaired of his lonely aspirations coming to anything—in this piece he declared the immortality of his 'extinct and inextinguishable' set of hopes. 'We will always be around. *Orpheu* ended. *Orpheu* continues.'

<sup>61</sup> Octavio Paz reminds us that Pessoa was not exactly a dramatist: he invented not characters but rather the works of characters (*Cuadrivio*, p. 144).

The prose itself is direct and fresh, free of the pompous circumlocutions of Portuguese writing of the era. Pessoa's English education lent him an immediacy in his native language, though it also gave his Portuguese an unusual cast. Detectable too are a certain number of translated Victorianisms, and Pessoa can be dry or risible when, playing the part of the theorist, he tries to imitate the syllogistic style of Aristotle.

Certainly no one could tax him with an excess of maturity in this portion of his work. Yet from the vantage of the twenty-first century, the wildness of Pessoa's sorties is not without appeal. Protected by his obscurity and his ability to write for different audiences in different ephemeral magazines, he was always willing to try out a surprising or outlandish argument. Prizing his independence above all else, he had little fear of expressing unacceptable views or of contradicting himself. The darting shafts of his intelligence make much of the political writing by headline literati in this century seem packaged and predictable by comparison. In an age when all vantage-points in the world of letters seem to reveal ever more conformism and homogeneity, careful curation of indistinguishable personal 'brands' determined by hegemonic market and cultural forces, Pessoa's idiosyncratic heterogeneity appears positively revolutionary. What prospects would confront a talent like his today? The proliferation of journalistic fact-checking certainly militates against imitation of his delightful Borgesian forgeries. But the contemporary scene, with its combination of easily outraged moral sentiments and online ecosystems bristling with pseudonymous political commentary, cries out for the advent of some polemicist-cum-dramaturge, an infra-Pessoa capable of wreaking scandal by means of a dozen fake accounts.

If the fruits of Pessoa's boldness were mixed, his belated defence of intellectual freedom was well warranted and genuine, his mockery of Salazar vicious and acute. It can also be said (a low bar?) that his political judgement compares favourably with that of some of his old *Orpheu* comrades. Ferro was no doubt a born mercenary, but the story of Almada Negreiros is perhaps sadder: author of an epoch-making attack on the literary establishment in 1915—the *Manifesto Anti-Dantas*—he went on to paint murals for the Estado Novo.<sup>62</sup> Given its cold reception, his quick

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<sup>62</sup> Almada's cannonade was directed at Júlio Dantas (1876–1962), surgeon, author of popular dramas and veteran of the old guard of Portuguese literature; a perennial Nobel contender who had been among the establishment voices to criticize the *Orpheu* circle in print. Full of lurid objurgations—'Dantas looks horrible naked!';



change of heart and the nugatory propaganda value of his impenetrable *Mensagem*, the epithet Alfredo Margarido saw fit to apply to Pessoa's entry into the propaganda contest of 1934 ('official poet') seems excessive. Zenith suggests that Pessoa's friend Augusto Ferreira Gomes—a genuine fascist who wrote for the magazine of Rolão Preto's National Syndicalist movement—was the force behind his entry, assuring him there were no conditions attached to the prize.<sup>63</sup> Then there are the literary considerations: the contest provided the inducement for a dissipated, deteriorating Pessoa to assemble the only book of poems in Portuguese published in his lifetime. Falling short of communicating the full range of his genius, *Mensagem* stands nonetheless as the most complete of all his works, and its publication must have offered a poet often tortured by his own fragmentary condition some small measure of relief.

Barreto's emphasis on the contradiction within Pessoa between an English-style conservatism and a Portuguese-style mystic nationalism, the former serving as an antidote to temptations latent in the latter, is not unreasonable: in the last months of his life Pessoa himself articulated the tension in his thought in these terms. In his most extreme late attempt to square the circle, he declared that only the individual and the nation were real, while all other sociological categories—including class and even the family—were fictions.<sup>64</sup> What to make of this claim? In politics as in his poetry, Pessoa sought in his fashion to extract a single absolute out of an apparently meaningless flux of multiplicity. In their plurality and their otherness his heteronyms, each positing a unified and coherent self that was different, exacerbated rather than resolved his dilemma. Álvaro de Campos's 1928 poem 'Lisbon Revisited' offers the metaphor of a broken mirror: 'In every fateful fragment I see only a piece of myself / A piece of me and of you!'

Similar forces were at work in his political writing. Consistently refusing to accept the division of society into social classes, Pessoa considered materialism a vulgar reflex of spiritual slaves and their Marxist tribunes. Human emancipation—Pessoa cited Hegel—was before all else a liberation of the spirit. But where, politically speaking, lay the instrument

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'Dantas is a big gypsy!'; 'If Dantas is Portuguese, I want to be Spanish!' etc.—of the many displays of impudence by the members of the 'first' Portuguese modernism, Almada's manifesto stands out as the most spectacular.

<sup>63</sup> PB, pp. 823, 851.

<sup>64</sup> SF, p. 360.

of this liberation? Searching for a unifying force, Pessoa found two: the individual, who also represented humanity, and the nation, which formed a supernatural mystery. Which was the true absolute? Unable to give up either, he remained existentially torn between them.

Nor was it possible to stop theorizing. Octavio Paz was the first to recognize that Pessoa's pastoral heteronym Alberto Caeiro represented the 'myth of the innocent poet'.<sup>65</sup> His serene opposition to all theories and philosophies ('Metaphysics? What metaphysics are in these trees!') offers a seductive retreat for souls worn out by the onslaught of modern ideology.<sup>66</sup> But the most cursory analysis reveals Caeiro's rustic physicalism as itself a particularly narrow metaphysics, and this tension—longing for the peace that Caeiro promises, yet knowing the promise is false—is at the core of his role in the Pessoa corpus.<sup>67</sup> There could be no such easy escape from the philosophical life.

Pursuing both the nation and the individual gave Pessoa at least one point of contact with all his contemporaries, but also some disagreement with each of them. A negative Everyman, Pessoa approached everyone but reached no one—not even himself. 'The individual has something of the foreigner in him', he admitted, a general statement but also a self-epitome.<sup>68</sup> Who could be a less convincing figure to insist on the absolute unity of nation and individual than this Portuguese with his English education and his split personalities? Pessoa's political writing often took the form of a fugitive species of polemic, an attack on everything from a vantage point of nowhere, capable of arousing excitement and recognition, disappointment and revulsion, in equal measure. It is as hard to agree with as it is hard to dismiss. In that, it may frame a paradox of much modern political writing: the impossibility of identifying the self with any single existent theory, yet the irresistible temptation to try.

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<sup>65</sup> *Cuadrivio*, p. 149.

<sup>66</sup> Fernando Pessoa, *Antologia poética*, Lisbon 2013, p. 199. Translation mine.

<sup>67</sup> Borrowing Tocqueville's framing in *Democracy in America* II, part I, chs. 3–4, to the effect that English culture is fixated on details and Latin culture on general ideas, Caeiro also appears as an emanation of Pessoa's English-Portuguese double identity: he tries to dismiss the role of abstract considerations in favour of details, but does so in a manner which ends in abstraction.

<sup>68</sup> SF, p. 371.