

Twentieth-Century
Literary Criticism

TCLC 257

Volume 257

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
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Fernando Pessoa

1888-1935

(Full name Fernando António Nogueira Pessoa; also wrote under pseudonyms Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos, Ricardo Reis, Alexander Search, Bernardo Soares, and others) Portuguese poet, essayist, critic, editor, and short story writer.

The following entry provides an overview of Pessoa's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *TCLC*, Volume 27.

INTRODUCTION

Pessoa is considered one of the most important Portuguese literary figures of the twentieth century. Often described as a quintessential modernist, Pessoa produced numerous poems, essays, stories, epigrams, letters, and autobiographical writings, most of which were published in newspapers and journals during his lifetime and later collected in such works as the eleven-volume *Obras completas de Fernando Pessoa* (1942-74) and the multi-genre *Livro do desassossego* (1982; *The Book of Disquiet*), the latter of which engaged the writer for nearly all of his literary career. Despite its diversity and fragmentation, Pessoa's canon addresses a recurring set of themes, all of which are related to the primary spiritual, philosophical, and psychological concerns of the twentieth century. Throughout his career, the author confronted the chaos and plurality of modern life and explored the ephemeral nature of personal identity. He also employed experimental formal techniques, such as the creation of literary alter egos, or "heteronyms," to convey distinct philosophical and aesthetic perspectives, and thereby present a more complex view of reality. Relatively unknown outside of Portugal, Pessoa has increasingly been acknowledged as one of the masters of Western literary modernism. Ellen Sapega, writing in 1985, described the author as "the greatest Portuguese poet of the twentieth century and the principal theorist of modernist aesthetics," adding that one of his most important legacies "is the elaboration of a concept of multiplicity that openly questions our notions of reality."

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Pessoa was born Fernando António Nogueira Pessoa on June 13, 1888, in Lisbon, Portugal, to Maria Madalena Nogueira and Joaquim de Seabra Pessoa, a public em-

ployee who also wrote music reviews for a Lisbon newspaper. When the author was five, his father died, and the following year, his mother married a Portuguese consul in Durban, South Africa. Over the next decade, Pessoa lived with his family in Durban and received his formal education in English. He excelled in his studies and won the Queen Victoria essay prize in competition with nine hundred other students; by the age of fifteen, he was composing Shakespearean sonnets in English. Pessoa returned to Portugal in 1905 and briefly attended the University of Lisbon before securing an office job as a commercial translator, a career he maintained throughout his life. He continued to write poems and in 1912 began producing essays on modern Portuguese poetry which appeared in *A Águia*, a journal associated with a group of writers interested in the renewal of Portuguese literature, known as the Nova Renascença. Pessoa also published works in *Orpheu*, a journal that he cofounded. During this time, the author invented a variety of literary alter egos, termed "heteronyms," each of which possessed a distinctive biography, personality, world view, and literary style.

Pessoa created over seventy distinct heteronyms, four of which stand out as the major voices of his literary career. The first of these, Alberto Caeiro, was recognized as the master of the other heteronyms, as well as Pessoa. The major work Pessoa attributed to Caeiro, "O guardador de rebanhos," was purportedly written in a trancelike state on the afternoon of March 8, 1914. Ricardo Reis, Pessoa's second heteronym, is described as a fatalist and neo-classicist pagan, who wrote in fixed forms, while Álvaro de Campos, a modernist, is referenced as the master of the open-form poem. Caeiro, Reis, and Campos together comprise what the author referred to as his "coterie inexistent." Pessoa's semi-autobiographical work, *The Book of Disquiet*, which is now considered one of the author's major achievements, is attributed to the heteronym Bernardo Soares. In addition to poems attributed to Caeiro, Reis, Campos, and Soares, Pessoa published poems under his own name in various newspapers and literary journals, many of which remained uncollected until after his death. One of the few poetry collections compiled during his lifetime, *Mensagem* (*Message*), appeared in 1934. In 1920, Pessoa began a brief affair with a younger office worker, Ofélia Queiroz, but terminated the relationship after several months, fearing that his mental health was deteriorating. The author supplemented his income throughout the 1920s translating English-language works, and he continued to compose

his own poetry and prose in both English and Portuguese. Pessoa eventually abandoned his nearly decade-long plan to establish himself as an English poet when his efforts to get published in English newspapers and journals routinely failed, and he shifted his focus to build a career in Portugal as a critic, poet, essayist, and editor. By the 1930s, after the publication of a number of his poems in the influential journal *Presença*, he was regarded as one of Portugal's greatest living poets. On November 30, 1935, Pessoa died in Lisbon, after the onset of a sudden illness.

MAJOR WORKS

Pessoa's only full-length book of poetry in Portuguese that was published during his lifetime, *Message* is comprised of fifty-four poems which are written in modernist form but explore traditional subjects and themes. The poems are largely elegiac, orphic, and prophetic, and treat subjects associated with Portuguese history and culture. Pessoa details the triumphs and tragedies of Portugal's past, as well as its underlying principles, in the work and offers prophecies regarding the future of the country. A primary theme in the collection is the legend of King Sebastian and his resurrection as the savior of Portugal. Scholars have presented contradictory interpretations of the work; some have argued that the collection is largely patriotic, while others have viewed it as an ironic treatment of Portugal's history of decadence and decline. The third poem of the collection, "Ulysses," often identified as a key verse in the text, introduces the concept that myth, or "the nothing that is everything," empowers life and shapes human reality. As some critics have noted, the collection also employs occult patterns and systems as an organizing structure in its depiction of the individual's spiritual progress towards enlightenment.

Scholars speculate that Pessoa employed his numerous heteronyms in order to explore one of his primary thematic concerns, the elusive nature of identity. One of the author's principal heteronyms, Alberto Caeiro, is described as a pastoral, free-verse poet. Writing as Caeiro, Pessoa eschewed supernaturalism and instead celebrated the concrete reality of the natural world, as well as the senses, which provide the only legitimate basis for knowledge. In "O guardador de rebanhos," for example, Caeiro proclaims: "I think with my eyes and with my ears." Another section from the same poem contemplates the domestic life of Jesus as an infant. The author introduced his second heteronym, Ricardo Reis, as Caeiro's protégé, although the aesthetics of the personas diverge in significant ways. As Reis, Pessoa utilized fixed forms, primarily the ode, and produced verse that celebrated sensual reality, but he adopted a sophisticated and fatalist tone, in contrast to the naive pastoral perspective of Caeiro's free verse poems. Poems such as "Quando, Lídia, vier o nosso outono"

("When, Lydia, Our Autumn Comes"), for instance, express Reis's resignation regarding the temporary nature of human existence. The third of Pessoa's primary heteronyms, Álvaro de Campos, is a modernist poet, credited with some of the author's most original lyric poems, including "Ode triunfal," "Ode marítima," and "Tabacaria," as well as "Saudação a Walt Whitman," an irreverent tribute to Walt Whitman which describes the American poet as the "Great pederast brushing up against the diversity of things." Writing as Campos, Pessoa produced free verse and "open-form" poems, many of which express complicated and sometimes contradictory attitudes toward modern life. While "Ode marítima" indicates the poet's longing to encompass all of existence in lines such as "in every corner of my soul stands an altar to a different god," other poems convey a sense of isolation and emptiness, such as the line "I invoke Myself and find nothing" from "Tabacaria." By employing these distinct heteronyms, Pessoa attempted to isolate and give autonomy to the different aspects of his own personality. As a result, his body of work offers a multiplicity of perspectives. Some scholars have insisted, however, that when read in relation to each other, Pessoa's disparate works together provide a clearer understanding of the author's perspective regarding identity and the struggle of the individual in modern society.

Since its publication in 1982, critics have increasingly studied Pessoa's unique work, *The Book of Disquiet*, which is attributed to another heteronym, Bernardo Soares. A singular text within the canon of Western literature, *The Book of Disquiet* is a semi-autobiographical work, though it purports to be the "factless autobiography" of Soares, an assistant bookkeeper. Soares is depicted as an unremarkable office worker who hates his job and lives in a constant state of disappointment and depression. Comprised of poems, narratives, and self-reflexive fragments, the work offers insights on failure, inertia, and the tedium associated with modern life. As a result of its fragmentary modernist form and existential themes, it is generally considered a seminal work within twentieth-century modernist literature. The first fragment from the collection, titled "Na floresta do alheamento," or "In the Forest of Estrangement," was published in *A Águia* in 1913, while other fragments, written throughout Pessoa's life, were left without a prescribed strategy for their organization. Collected and published together several decades after his death, *The Book of Disquiet* is now viewed as Pessoa's masterpiece.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

As a student in South Africa, Pessoa first began writing English-language poems in the early 1900s, producing a number of Shakespearean sonnets, which were later

collected and published as *35 Sonnets* in 1918. In 1912, however, the author made serious attempts to launch his career in Portugal, producing critical essays on modern Portuguese poetry in the journal *A Águia*. During this time, he began composing poems in Portuguese and became associated with poets of the *saudosismo* movement, a group concerned with the glorification of Portugal's past. By 1915, Pessoa was a recognized poet and critic within Lisbon's artistic and intellectual circles. His work, which reflected the concerns of early twentieth-century modernist literary trends in Europe, was published in various literary journals throughout his lifetime. The author gained further notoriety as one of the founders of *Orpheu* and *Presença*, two of Portugal's major modern literary journals. Pessoa considered himself a bilingual and bicultural poet writing in the English tradition, and he produced poems in both Portuguese and English throughout his career. His work failed to find an audience among English-language readers, however, and at the time of his death, he was relatively unknown outside of Portugal. Beginning in the 1940s, scholars began preparing Pessoa's previously uncollected poems and fragments for publication. With the appearance of the first volumes of his collected works, *Obras completas de Fernando Pessoa*, interest in the author's work was renewed. The volumes had a powerful impact on Portuguese literature but also drew international attention to Pessoa's achievements as a writer of both poetry and prose.

Since the 1940s, Pessoa's writings have continued to attract critical interest. The author's use of heteronyms has frequently been a topic of discussion among scholars. Edouard Roditi, writing in 1955 [see Further Reading], studied six of Pessoa's poetic identities and suggested that his bilingual upbringing may have contributed to his "extraordinary and almost psychopathic diversity as a Portuguese poet." In 1969, Jane M. Sheets linked Pessoa's creation of Caeiro with the author's need to "escape the currents of contemporary literary movements," while Darlene J. Sadlier, writing in 1997, claimed that the contradictory impulses of Pessoa's aesthetic, including his participation in both traditional and vanguard poetics, contributed to the development of his heteronyms. Leland Guyer, however, drew connections between the cubist artistic movement and the multiple perspectives presented in Pessoa's poetry. A number of commentators have also focused on Pessoa's representation of modernist themes and concerns. Scholars such as George Monteiro, Geoffrey R. Barrow, and Francisco Cota Fagundes have all examined the author's preoccupation with the mysteries and contradictions of human existence and personal identity, while Richard Zenith and Kathryn Bishop-Sanchez [see Further Reading] concentrated on issues of gender and sexuality in his works. In recent years, Pessoa's fiction and other writings have elicited interest from a number of critics, including Ellen Sapega, Zbigniew Kotowicz,

and Maria de Lurdes Sampaio. Kotowicz, who studied Pessoa's more recently published work, *The Book of Disquiet*, described the text as "one of the most moving literary testimonies of a tortured twentieth century soul." Scholars have continued to appreciate the entirety of Pessoa's oeuvre, and some, such as Anne J. Cruz, have suggested that a comprehensive approach to his work is necessary to reveal "the rhetorical strategies" through which he "creates himself." An obscure figure for much of his lifetime, Pessoa has emerged in recent decades as one of the most innovative and emblematic European authors of his time. Appreciated for his formal experiments as well as his exploration of twentieth-century concerns and questions, he is increasingly acknowledged by scholars, in the words of Kotowicz, as "one of the great Modernists."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Antinous* (poetry) 1918
- 35 Sonnets* (poetry) 1918
- English Poems*. 3 vols. (poetry) 1921
- Mensagem* [*Message*] (poetry) 1934
- Obras completas de Fernando Pessoa*. 11 vols. (poetry, criticism, essays, and philosophy) 1942-74
- Selected Poems* (poetry) 1971
- Sixty Portuguese Poems* (poetry) 1971
- Livro do desassossego* [*The Book of Disquiet*] (poetry and prose) 1982
- Always Astonished* (essays, diaries, and short stories) 1988
- Poems of Fernando Pessoa* (poetry) 1998
- The Selected Prose of Fernando Pessoa* (essays, short stories, criticism, diaries, and letters) 2001

CRITICISM

Jane M. Sheets (essay date January 1969)

SOURCE: Sheets, Jane M. "Fernando Pessoa as Anti-Poet: Alberto Caeiro." *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 46, no. 1 (January 1969): 39-47.

[In the following essay, Sheets examines poems attributed to Pessoa's heteronym Alberto Caeiro, claiming that Caeiro emerged out of the author's "semi-conscious compulsion to experiment and to escape the

currents of contemporary literary movements," and that with this creation he "succeeded in renewing and expanding his awareness far beyond his expectations."]

If one accepts poetry in the traditional sense, as a way of looking at things, not directly, but following the poet's eye, if one thus accepts the poet as a perceptive *interpreter* of his surroundings, then the intention of Alberto Caeiro, Fernando Pessoa's first heteronym, is distinctly antipoetical: 'Por mim, escrevo a prosa dos meus versos/E fico contente . . . ' and 'Eu nem sequer sou poeta: vejo' ([*Obras Completas*] III, 82).

In the 1935 letter to Casais Monteiro in which he discusses the genesis of the heteronyms, Pessoa describes his conscious attempts, early in March, 1914, to create a pastoral poet; when at last he gave up, lacking inspiration, he was suddenly compelled to go to his desk, where he took out paper and began to write. Without stopping, he produced, on the 8th of March, more than thirty poems, all assigned to Alberto Caeiro. The poems were written in a kind of 'indefinable ecstasy . . . '—'foi o dia triunfal da minha vida, e nunca poderei ter outro assim'.² From the very beginning, Pessoa was certain not only that the moment itself was supreme and sublime, but also that the poems were superior to any of his own to that time and would perhaps even surpass any subsequent work. 'Desculpe-me o absurdo da frase: aparecera em mim o meu mestre. Foi essa a sensação imediata que tive'.³

Immediately after this burst of inspiration, Pessoa took another paper and wrote six poems, '*Chuva Oblíqua*', signed with his own name. These are 'poems interseccionistas', characteristic in mood and content of what had been up to then a main stream in Pessoa's work: they are vague, subtle, complex, with intersecting images within a static framework. Their appearance marked a return from Fernando Pessoa Alberto Caeiro to, simply, Fernando Pessoa. The poems are, in Pessoa's words, a 'reaction against' the state of mind in which Caeiro's poems were written, a reaction against the poet's temporary loss of self as Caeiro.⁴ They represent the return of a familiar level of consciousness and invite the conjecture that Pessoa, who possessed 'una modestia parecida al desdén', felt compelled to de-emphasize this fortunate hour with an 'as-you-were' stance.⁵

For several years Pessoa continued to add to Caeiro's *obra*—a few poems were attributed to him as late as 1930—but by 1920 most of Caeiro's poems had been written, and were summarized succinctly by the third heteronym, Álvaro de Campos: 'O meu mestre Caeiro foi o único poeta inteiramente sincero do mundo'.⁶

The three parts of Caeiro's work vary slightly in their point of view. In the first group of poems, '*O Guardador de Rebanhos*', Caeiro's gentle, but increasingly

persistent, message about Nature is that it has no interior, that it is parts without a whole, that there is, in fact, no Nature: there are only mountains, flowers, rivers and stones, and Caeiro's self-appointed task is to bring these objects to the reader's attention, as directly and simply as possible, without the use of metaphor or other poetic devices:

Procuro encostar as palavras à ideia
E não precisar dum corredor
Do pensamento para as palavras.

(III, 66)

The six poems of '*O Pastor Amoroso*' represent a second, but very brief, phase in Caeiro's thought. The once-solitary shepherd is still in touch with Nature, but he is also in love. The sense of sight, once so essential, gives way to feelings. There is no longer a looking outward, but 'Toda a realidade olha para mim como um girassol com a cara dela no meio' (III, 99). The most obvious change in attitude is the willing reversion to thought. In '*Keeper of the Flocks*' thinking was scorned, but now, very simply: 'Amar é pensar' and 'Quero só/Pensar nela' (III, 100).

In the third and last section, '*Poemas Inconjuntos*', the theme, once again, is *seeing*, a direct experience of objects, but there are now other concerns: disappointment in love ('*Sentir é estar distraído*' [III, 85]), the acknowledgment and acceptance of all things in the world, including injustices, an absolute focus on the present, on one's being and, as he contemplates death, a self-portrayal: 'Sou fácil de definir/Vi como um danado' (III, 86). Although Caeiro's perspective shifts slightly, his original purpose remains: to confront objects *as they are*, without thought or analysis, to acknowledge *Dinge-an-sich* without attempting to generalize or to compare and, above all, to make no attempt to create or to invent reciprocal relationships between man and nature. Feelings are acknowledged, but are unexplored: 'Eu não tenho filosofia, tenho sentidos' (III, 22).

Caeiro's point of view is frequently labelled 'anti': he has been called 'anti-intellectual',⁷ 'anti-Romantic',⁸ 'Antisubjektivist',⁹ 'anti-metaphysical',¹⁰ even an 'anti-metaphysical philosopher'.¹¹ Other critics suggest that Caeiro's claim to objectivity is cancelled by the very formulation of his impressions.¹² Still another common thread in the criticism is that the poet and his works, because of their surfeit of clarity, seem to belong to other periods in literary time: Pessoa is 'half-Greek, half-Bedouin',¹³ a 'modern classicist',¹⁴ his poems 'lack Atlantic softness'.¹⁵ Two suggestions of this kind will be taken up here: Adolpho Casais Monteiro's belief that Caeiro's technique is related to that of Robbe-Grillet, and Thomas Merton's observation on the Zen-like quality of certain of Caeiro's experiences. Both approaches reveal much more of Pessoa-Caeiro's literary precocity

and, more important, his spontaneous assumption of a universal way of seeing, than do evaluations based solely on Western and often conceptual terms. By looking in detail at Caeiro's works in these seemingly disparate and remote contexts, accepting Pessoa's assertion that Caeiro is the most sincere, the master of the other heteronyms and himself ('... se há parte da minha obra que tenha um cunho de sinceridade essa parte é ... a obra de Caeiro'), the idea of Fernando Pessoa Alberto Caeiro as anti-poet, but as purposive anti-poet, as a strengthening opposition and a necessary part of a foundation for subsequent poems, is reinforced.

Casais Monteiro, in two short articles, compares Caeiro's attitudes to those found in Robbe-Grillet's essay, 'Nature, humanisme, tragédie', published in 1958.¹⁷ Both writers, he explains, believe the sense of sight is pre-eminent and they share the conviction that things have no interior, so that there is no need for the eye to explore beneath the surface of objects. They reject metaphor as false and artificial complicity and share a direct acknowledgement of the independence of Nature and its obliviousness of man.

Rejection of the interiority of things, denial of metaphysics and of an anthropocentric world—all are explicit attitudes of Caeiro:

Constituição íntima das coisas?
Sentido íntimo do Universo . . .
Tudo isto é falso, tudo isto não quer dizer nada.

(III, 27)

Casais Monteiro, like other critics, believes that Caeiro's poems are a reaction to the sentimentality and preciousness of the poetry of his time, but he proposes no answer to why they appear at first glance to be so closely related to an aesthetics which was elaborated half a century after his poems were written. He suggests a study of the coincidence from the point of view of phenomenology and existentialism, but offers only one collective and unsatisfactory term: Robbe-Grillet and Caeiro are materialists, or at least anti-spiritualists.

In Robbe-Grillet's other essays, in 'Une voie pour le roman futur', 'Temps et description dans le récit d'aujourd'hui', and in 'Du réalisme à la réalité',¹⁸ one finds further correlations, particularly concerning the kind of language which characterizes a literature consisting of presences, of objects; that is, words of a visceral, analogical or incantatory character, 'vertical' or 'deep' words, are replaced by visual or descriptive adjectives, words which measure, locate, limit, define.¹⁹ Caeiro's poems, written with simple vocabulary and syntax, consist of this kind of language, and take the same matter-of-fact approach to objects:

Uma flor acaso tem beleza?
Tem beleza acaso um fruto?

Não: têm côr e forma
E existência apenas.

(III, 50)

and

... as coisas não têm nome nem personalidade:
Existem, e o céu é grande e a terra larga,
E o nosso coração do tamanho de um punho fechado
...

(III, 51)

Movement becomes crucial for both writers in this environment of objects. Yet by shifting merely from one object to another, from one isolated part of a scene to another, time itself assumes a new role: it can no longer complete anything, reveal any destinies, or lead to any conclusions. One is aware not so much of time passing as of change which occurs *within the present*. No past is created, no headway made;²⁰ there is no evolution, only 'travelling'.²¹

The fifth poem of 'Poemas Inconjuntos' illustrates the dilemma: as Caeiro begins to consider the meaning of the terms 'Truth, lie, certainty, uncertainty', flirting, one might say, with signification, a blind man appears in the street. The poet crosses his legs. He folds his hands over his upper knee. The consideration begins again: 'Bem: verdade, mentira, certeza, incerteza o que são?' The blind man stops, the poet unfolds his hands and repeats the words once more. A new awareness intervenes: some part of reality is changing, he says. The blind man walks on. The gestures cease. 'Já não é a mesma hora, nem a mesma gente, nem nada igual'. And this, says Caeiro, is the meaning of reality: 'Ser real é isto' (III, 76).

Even though Caeiro makes a conscious effort to focus on words which evoke comparisons and trains of thought, on concepts, what he sees and what he does, simple actions and gestures, alone fill his consciousness. For him, existence and reality consist here of a limited scene, slight changes of the scene and an awareness of this change. If there are to be any configurations or patterns, they must be established by the reader himself, in his own mind. He, the reader, is presented only with a description, with the *sight*, not a *vision*, of limited surroundings; any profound or transcendent signification occurs not within the work, but outside it.

When Robbe-Grillet insists on equating surfaces with the whole, he is attempting to resolve, to 'melt down', as he says, pairs of contraries—to rid his work specifically of the dualism which opposes interior to exterior.²² In doing so, he is applying to literature a philosophical method, the attempt to establish the monism of phenomena, a topic which is taken up in the first pages of