

Book Review

Medeiros, Paulo de. *Pessoa's Geometry of the Abyss: Modernity and the Book of Disquiet*. Oxford: Legenda, 2013. Print.

The title of Paulo de Medeiros's book cryptically points to a reconsideration of traditional interpretations of the work of Fernando Pessoa. Beyond this, it urges the international academic and lectoral community to update the transnational modernist canon with Pessoa's work, namely with Bernardo Soares's *Book of Disquiet*—for Medeiros, “still one of the least studied works of Pessoa” (4). It is only in the final pages that Medeiros makes reference to his title, taken from Fragment 344 of the *Book of Disquiet*. There Soares presents himself as a geometry of the abyss or “o centro de tudo com o nada à volta” (119). The metaphor is introduced to signify a radical identity for Pessoa beyond the heteronym, and to deploy a new protocol of reading Pessoa beyond the traditional critical mythification of the Portuguese writer which, rightly said, “more often than not serves to mystify” (44).

Medeiros's detailed attention to Soares's text, sentence, and word use, and his analyses of critics and translations, admittedly “owe much to poststructuralist theory” (20). When countering traditional critical images of Pessoa as “brilliantly suicidal” (61) with Soares's repeated protest against suicide (61), or when he disagrees with the dominant opinion that “the question of heteronymy is the most important of all that Pessoa's art sets up” (4), he is challenging eminent interpreters of Pessoa such as Eduardo Lourenço, José Gil, Richard Zenith, and others who, when succumbing to the “danger of entering in Pessoa” (65), participate in the romanticization of Pessoa as genius and as ghost. Medeiros's elegant opposition or deepening of interpretations of Pessoa matches his authoritative critical appraisal of the scholarship on Pessoa and modernism, and validates his proposal for a radical reading of the *Book of Disquiet*.

The Introduction opens with the intriguing sentence, “Fernando Pessoa is not a ghost” (1). This leads to a selective account of the critical tradition of Pessoa's texts, aimed at an international readership (primarily Anglo-Franco-Germanic).

In Medeiros's study, Alain Badiou's injunction that we "become contemporary with Pessoa, that is, . . . [we] try to think the different forms of infinite thought that Pessoa proposed and sketched" (75), functions as a guiding summons to fulfill the task of criticism.

Chapter One, titled, "Protocols of Reading," presents the *Book of Disquiet* as a form of excess (an anti-book written by an anti-Self, composed of fragments, without a beginning and an ending), and calls for a reading that resists traditional aesthetic parameters: "as readers we should stop wishing for such a [conventional] book" (9). Although Medeiros does not discuss in depth the genealogy of editions of the *Book of Disquiet* since its initial publication in 1982, he acknowledges the centrality of Jerónimo Pizarro's pivotal critical edition of the *Book* in 2010 to his own study. This 2010 critical edition clearly shows that all editions of the *Book* are inescapably the editors' dreams of a conventional book that Pessoa/Soares never published. For Medeiros, Soares's radical writing and thinking require an equally-minded radical reader who discards dreams of unity and is able to "forget the heteronyms" (10). One other important proposal is to read the *Book of Disquiet* comparatively alongside other major modernist authors, "paying attention to specific writing strategies and issues without necessarily claiming a direct influence" (21).

Chapter Two, "(Un)Seeing Pessoa," explores the centrality of the image in Soares's writing ("photographic writing" 39) and is an important prelude to chapter 3, titled, "Phantoms and Crypts," which is perhaps the most complex chapter in the book. Here, Medeiros critiques a psychoanalytic interpretation of the traditional image of Pessoa as spectre (in literature and in criticism) and, along with Abraham and Torok, proposes a reading of the *Book of Disquiet* as a vast crypt that displays "a false Self so as to better hide the true Self" (13). He further offers an engaging analysis of João Botelho's 2010 film, *Filme do Desassossego*, as the director's personal haunting and also as a reconceptualization of Pessoa's relationship to cinema, enhanced by Pessoa's own interest in the medium, evidenced by documents published in 2007.

The last two chapters of *Pessoa's Geometry of the Abyss*, titled, "Dreams, Women, Politics" and "Infinite Writing," address the principal mission of this study. Impacted by an apparent "erasure of the name of Pessoa from the annals of modernism" (75), Medeiros calls for "a reading of the *Book of Disquiet* in line with other great European modernists" (75). Here Medeiros breaks ground on the

anti-genealogic project by reading authors such as Emily Dickinson, Walter Benjamin, and Franz Kafka along with and also through Pessoa/Soares, as a process of revealing a commonality of ideas across national borders and cultural contexts as well as innovative differences between authors, thereby enriching the modernist canon and unveiling instances of critical mythification. The Derridean title of “Envoi” offered in the place of a Conclusion, performs a summons to the reader, stating that “It is up to us to follow Pessoa’s and Soares’s example” (126).

The most passionate appeal to the reader appears in the final chapter, where Medeiros makes the strongest argument for reading and thinking like Bernardo Soares as a relevant form of resistance in a dystopian world (94). By extension, he also makes a claim for the power of literature, when read critically, to affect positive social change. Medeiros stops short of proclaiming Pessoa/Soares the most radical and innovative of modernist writers, but he emphasizes, as does Badiou, that Pessoa is the most contemporary, universal, and therefore most useful of all modernists today. *Pessoa’s Geometry of the Abyss* opens new avenues of access to the texts of Fernando Pessoa for reconsidering modernism and reinvigorating the field of Comparative Literature.

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