

# Book Review

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**Monteiro, George.** *The Pessoa Chronicles: Poems, 1980-2016*. Bricktop, 2016.

The existence of a “late style” that is not brought to rewarding closure by wisdom has been fleshed out by Edward Said, impressed as he was by Theodor Adorno’s account of Beethoven’s later work. The concept is exposed as a “modern culture” event, a moment “when the artist who is full command of his medium nevertheless abandons communication with the established social order and achieves a contradictory, alienated relationship with it. His late work constitutes a form of exile” (Said, *On Late Style* 8). This reflection can hardly apply to authors who die young, like Fernando Pessoa; it also has seemingly little connection with George Monteiro’s *The Pessoa Chronicles*, since the book’s subtitle indicates a work spanning the years 1980 to 2016, covering the same amount of time as its subject’s life—an overlap that justifies the book’s preface describing the book itself as “something of an autobiography.” And yet, this is a book that gives an added meaning to the idea of “late style.” This is so not only because Monteiro decided to collect these poems at a later phase of his life (four decades from his previous two anthologies, *The Coffee Exchange* (1982), and *Double Weaver’s Knot* (1988)), not only because in several poems the attitude towards death is one of outrage and defeat, not only because Monteiro calls on Pessoa as a projection of his own fragmented identity and sentiment of exile in lines that the preface connects to “an unidentified voice, usually indistinguishable from mine,” but rather because this is perhaps most of all the poetry of one who is, one assumes, a latecomer despite his rejection of Harold Bloom’s anxious belatedness (he writes, on page 129, “a poem cannot but honor the strong poem that gives it its first / breath, lends it its bone”).

There is something deeply poignant in the imagination of the poem that springs both from rigor and out of defiance of the norm—as the Luso-American scholar of English Studies, triggered by encounters with Portuguese (translation with Jorge de Sena, comparative literature with Pessoa) sets aside the highly codified, often mystifying display of academic learning and scribbles poetic lines

that etch an affectionate conviviality. As if amid the painstaking research that yielded, over four decades, the production of three major monographs devoted to understanding the little-studied English Pessoa—*The Presence of Pessoa* (Kentucky, 1998), *Fernando Pessoa and Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Literature* (Kentucky, 2000) and *As Paixões de Pessoa* (Ática/Babel, 2012) —Monteiro had been flooded by his poems and tuned in to poetic voice(s).

These are poems without pretense that for the most part shun being taken seriously: “*Falta-me limar os versos / said one of my cohort. / Me? I just file them / away*” (74). What the collection would gain in “polish” might equally be lost in the book’s original design: a poetic journal of an intellectual passion. By an overt gesture of genre hybridization—poems come as “chronicles” and at the same time oscillate between two categories that are reflexively presented as “so-called criticism-poems” and “what one may call a literary theory-poem” (250)—the reader is immersed in the delight of poetry as hermeneutics. In several instances, the jotting down of these poetic notes is placed in tandem with the task of the scrivener (Bernardo Soares?), while spectral aspects of others’ writings interfere as apparitions: “and the other? ‘most men / lead lives of quiet desperation.’ *Bartleby?*” (290).

The poetic imagination gives Monteiro the liberty to expand Pessoa’s connections with English-language literature and to overstep the requirements of criticism. The result is that in this book Pessoa can freely dialogue not only with the precursors he ostensibly read or the latecomers that have paid him homage but also with a cohort of other *personae* that trigger iconic associations (from *The Wizard of Oz*’s Dorothy to Leonard Cohen and even Groucho Marx *à propos* Facebook). An intersection with the issue or re-presentation, plastic and protean, recurs throughout, exposing us to various-sided Pessoa—Almada’s, Pomar’s, Costa Pinheiro’s, the Benois’—and including several observations on the seated statue in front of Lisbon’s Café Brasileira, which becomes a kind of focal point for Lisbon’s society through the eyes of the poet. Many of the poems with references to Pessoa’s counterparts in other languages partake of an admirable effort to read Pessoa within the broader modernist context. Besides remarkable insights into shared characteristics, like the address of the dramatic form in Eugene O’Neill and T.S. Eliot, uncanny coincidences are brought to the fore, forging kinships that would merit further investigation. It is the case of Pessoa and William Carlos Williams, who at some point both lived on a “Ridge Road”

in the poem aptly titled, “Comparative Literature”: “One was a decade-long place to live / in, the other a rest-of-one’s life / place-of-business, house to live in, / to die in. Almost the same age, / these stay-at-home poets labored / at their trades, forms of translation / engaged in by the pediatrician and / by the writer of commercial letters / in foreign tongues” (43). Translation, featured in these lines, secures a fair ground in the whole book, reminding us that Monteiro, too, has done service not only by rendering some of Pessoa’s central poems in English, but also those of other Lusophone writers, such as Jorge de Sena, Miguel Torga, and Rodrigues Miguéis. While his hand tries to soften the occasional flaws of the arduous “turn / of phrase and enviable looping” (32), the reminder that the “great names of [Pessoa’s] time did not speak / in tongues” (131) becomes another merit of the multifaceted Pessoa. We are thus led to insights on an intertextual and polyphonic process of writing, where Monteiro’s erudition on the Anglophone precursors, in particular Ernest Dawson, Walt Whitman, and Edgar Poe, is granted a medium for expressing inklings that one cannot fully place inside a critical framework.

What to make of the neologism *hyperacusia*, which Monteiro suspects “was once used / by one poet (Pessoa) / to speak of his and / Edgar Poe’s affliction” (119)? It might, perhaps, lend us the key to one of the tropes most cogently wrought in Monteiro’s poetic craft: the gift to hear beyond the “surface noise” (the title of the collection’s first poem) into a sublime-inducing silence or quietness, which nonetheless will not resolve itself in harmony—not for any momentary revelation and not for later wisdom. For Monteiro, genial insight will not dispel the “daily confusion” we experience: “Then to beat a path / to the homely noise and shocks of my nocturnal life” (265).

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