

The Songs of António Botto. Translated by Fernando Pessoa. Edited with an introduction by Josiah Blackmore. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

Recent years have seen a revival of interest in António Botto, abetted by Eduardo Pitta's fine new editions of his works for Quasi Edições. It is nonetheless remarkable that two new editions have appeared of Fernando Pessoa's exquisite 1933 translation of Botto's *Canções*, previously available only in a privately produced and circulated 1948 edition, of which precious few copies survive. While Jerónimo Pizarro and Nuno Ribeiro's edition for Guimarães Editores, also published in 2010, responds to the needs of Pessoa scholars, Josiah Blackmore's elegant and meticulously researched volume presents the *Songs* for an Anglophone readership, opening with a cogent, perceptive introductory essay, which powerfully advocates Botto's claim to the world's attention on three counts. Botto, in Blackmore's estimation, matters firstly because his candid and multifaceted evocation of homoerotic desire and experience is unprecedented in Portuguese poetry and scarcely paralleled in contemporary European literature, and secondly because his art is intricately related to the unique brand of modernism fostered by Pessoa's literary coterie. Ultimately, though, Botto demands our attention through his limpid, flexible handling of the rhythms of popular Portuguese verse forms, which Hernani Cidade extolled as a "lustrous wash of perfect form and music" unequalled by any of Botto's contemporaries, but which Pessoa transposes into English with notable aplomb.

Blackmore's introduction provides a succinct account of Botto's life and troubled career, foregrounding the friendship with Pessoa that endured from the so-called "literatura de Sodoma" scandal of 1923, when the Lisbon municipal police seized and burned copies of the *Canções*, through to Pessoa's untimely death, mourned by Botto in a 1941 elegy, included here in Blackmore's resonant translation. Far from presenting Botto as mere Pessoa imitator or groupie, however, Blackmore stresses his distinct idiom, tracing its roots in popular lyrical tradition, in "musically oriented" symbolism, and particularly in the Portuguese decadentism that fueled Botto's predilection for "scenarios ... set in darkness, shadow, or failing, crepuscular light" (xxv). Armed

with these observations, Blackmore makes a refreshingly sceptical appraisal of Pessoa's well-known essays on Botto (essays which, together with appreciations by José Régio, dominated critical discussions of the *Canções* for decades). Pessoa's defense of Botto as a neo-Hellenic "aesthete," dispassionately hymning the beauty of the male body, may have provided a dignified rebuttal to those who denounced the *Canções* as obscene. However, by glossing over the *Canções*'s "intense and personal immersion in the ecstasy and sometimes resulting emotional anguish of homoerotic encounter" (xxi), Pessoa diminishes what for Blackmore is Botto's greatest distinction: his singularity and originality as a writer who embraced the neoclassical aesthetic just as he embraced elements of *decadentismo*: as "an available platform for the expression of a homoerotic self" (xxii).

Fortunately for us, as translator Pessoa not only triumphs in retaining the bold and supple beauty of Botto's lines, but also proves more sensitive to their emotional and libidinous animation. Occasionally, his inclination towards the archaisms of Victorian sentimental verse—"But alas! He tarries so!" (37)—lends a rather precious tone and traduces Botto's vigorously matter-of-fact evocation of forbidden passions. Generally, though, Pessoa seems to relish the dynamism and sensuality of Botto's conjuring of desire and its objects. His approach, avoiding lexical embellishment and deftly recreating Botto's subtle rhymes, feels most spontaneous and unaffected in the rendering of sensation, touch, and movement, as when presenting Botto's "Athlete" as "Springy / Dark / With a gesture full of litheness and sway" (103). Through his attention to corporeal sense and animation, Pessoa preserves many of Botto's most striking insights and images, as when longing

To feel
Another body that means
Really to become mine,
To vibrate,
To make all its life my own,
Not to be as you have been,
A bodily monotone. (31)

One notes, meanwhile, Pessoa's sensitivity to (and occasional intensification of) intimations of the same psychic enigmas and anxieties explored in his own verse: a lover yields his body "in a posture / Which was mysteriously feigned" (20); the poet complains that "living too much near you / Has changed me, I am another" (11).

Not every reader of this elegant volume will endorse its cover blurb's claim of Botto's place "alongside C. P. Cavafy and Federico García Lorca as one of the major poetic voices of the twentieth century." However, the audacity of Botto's *sui generis* "queer self-fashioning" (x) is truly remarkable, and his perfectly formed stanzas and striking, sonorous turns of phrase are justly rendered in Pessoa's translation. Moreover, Blackmore's introduction argues powerfully for the presence in Botto's imagery of insights into the relationship of sensory experience, memory, and identity that eluded Pessoa. One keenly hopes that Blackmore will continue to illuminate these insights in future studies.

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