

Book Review

Pasciolla, Francesca. *Walt Whitman in Fernando Pessoa*. Critical, Cultural and Communications Press, 2016.

Walt Whitman in Fernando Pessoa focuses principally on Pessoa as a reader of Whitman and investigates the echoes of Whitman's work and philosophies in those of Pessoa and his heteronyms. As Francesca Pasciolla, the author of this study, declares in the preface, "[t]he purpose of this book is to explore the dynamics that connect two of the most celebrated poets and intriguing figures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (9). Pasciolla received her bachelor's degree in Línguas e Literaturas Estrangeiras and her master's degree in Literaturas Modernas, Comparadas e Pós-coloniais at the U di Bologna after studying in the Faculdade de Letras at the U de Lisboa. Pasciolla currently works as a researcher in Comparative Literatures at the U Ca' Foscari in Venice.

Pasciolla's book begins with a preface that provides a broad introduction to both Pessoa and Whitman as well as an overview of their work. The first chapter, "Pessoa, reader of Whitman," discusses the four books in Pessoa's library (out of 1,311) on or by Whitman, focusing particularly on *Poems of Walt Whitman* and *Leaves of Grass*. Utilizing facsimiles of these texts, the author discusses not only the marginalia written by Pessoa (and his heteronyms) on their pages but also what these notes reveal about Whitman's influence on Pessoa's later literary production.

The second chapter, "Whitman, writer of Pessoa," offers a more structural look at Pessoa's poetry in relation to Whitman's. Here Pasciolla investigates shared figures of speech as well as linguistic and stylistic elements—"onomatopoeia and innumerable typographical devices" and "enumerations, repetitions, juxtapositions and syncopations"—that tie the two poetic voices together (23-24). For Pasciolla, Whitman's "barbaric yawp" aligns closely with what she calls Pessoa's "fractious yell" (25). While some connections between the two poets may seem tenuous, others—such as Álvaro de Campos's "Saudação a Walt Whitman"—are much clearer. This is not to say that Whitman

holds full sway over Pessoa and his heteronyms. Indeed, Pasciolla points out that while Whitman almost “always keeps a ‘calma superior,’” Campos “is restless, frenetic, at times hysterical” (36). In spite of these differences, Pasciolla underscores important points of contact between Whitman and Pessoa’s heteronyms (Caeiro and Campos, principally), including a “nostalgia for the past” (47), “the ecstasy of escaping” (50), the “poetics of interruption” (55), an aspiration “to find their own identity” (60), an acceptance of “reality in its plurality” (60), “a sense of fraternity towards all men” (67), and the “absolute communion between man and nature” (68). Nevertheless, according to Pasciolla, these links and the relationship they reveal are both complex and complicated.

The last chapter, “Toings and Froings,” deals particularly with these complications. As the title reveals, Pasciolla uses this final section to discover the negotiations that occur between the two authors. These are especially influential when Pessoa leaves Alexander Search behind and fashions new heteronyms in the image (but not as a copy) of Whitman. Pasciolla explains that while Whitman cannot be compressed into any one of Pessoa’s heteronyms, Caeiro and Campos exist thanks to Pessoa’s efforts to “render himself a modern Whitman” by “unravel[ing] duality” (95). Pasciolla goes on to argue that “Pessoa found in the lines of *Leaves of Grass* an encouragement to go beyond his limits, thus inaugurating a *dramatic* poetry, the most famous moment of which is perhaps the heteronymy—the *drama em gente*” (124). Although direct correlations between the two bodies of work may be limited or tenuous, this encouragement allowed for “the releasing of multiplicity,” “the unrealizability of [...] synthesis,” and “the distinctive modernity of Pessoa” (124-25). Whereas tensions such as unity and multiplicity coexist within Whitman’s work, they are parsed out in Pessoa, leading to a richness of meaning and creativity.

Pasciolla’s study reveals a deep understanding of Pessoa, his heteronyms, and their work as well as thoughtful investigation into Whitman and his texts. Pasciolla also reveals her familiarity with the existing criticism on Pessoa through her use of previous studies to support her argument (although she disagrees with a few scholars, particularly about the precise year that Pessoa discovered Whitman). Archival research, conducted in Pessoa’s personal library, also lends authenticity and authority to Pasciolla’s work and the facsimiles of Pessoa’s notes allow readers a glimpse into his creative process.

Although *Walt Whitman in Fernando Pessoa* provides unique insight into Pessoa's poetic opus, its literary style may be off-putting to American scholars expecting a more academic tone. Pasciolla sometimes utilizes precious metaphors—"sing certain aspects of modern civilization, a melody played by the dexterous hand of Campos [...] diminished [...] by the ironic accompaniment of the left hand" (100)—and quaint vocabulary—"alas" (87)—in what seems like an effort to wax poetic in a Pessoa-like style. Even the last line of the book—"To be discontinued? Incompletion affords endless amplification" (125)—feels like an affectation. Additionally, as is sometimes the case with European scholarship, the onus of understanding the text tends to be on the reader rather than the author, which is certainly the case here. The author often eschews clear, academic writing in favor of a more recondite style.

While Pasciolla's study could be stylistically clearer, its content contributes decisively to the larger body of work on Pessoa. Pasciolla enters into dialogue with other academics while generating new and significant ideas about when and how Whitman's work influenced Pessoa and his heteronyms as they broke free from past strictures and exploited Whitman's "crack, a fissure, upon plurality and upon the extension of the experience of the Real" (124).

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