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## **Fernando Pessoa's Dreams of Albion**

When one comes across Fernando Pessoa's harlequin-like compendium of poems and aphorisms, one immediately begins to doubt whether the man ever truly existed at all. Writing under a multitude of heteronyms, for each of whom he invented detailed biographies, writing styles and ultimately deaths – once they'd outgrown their usefulness – Pessoa, Portugal's towering figure of early 20<sup>th</sup> Century modernism is at times enigmatic and at others, simply baffling. Marching as a "phalanx of poets",<sup>1</sup> his range of guises was remarkable. From the classical elegies and satires of Ricardo Reis and the sensual futurism of Álvaro de Campos, to, bizarrely enough, the poetry of two Durban-based brothers, James and Alexander Search and finally Charles Robert Anon, of whom only one sonnet (penned in English) survives, it becomes immediately clear that any evaluation would inevitably involve as much psychoanalysis as constructive criticism.

After all, the modernists of Pessoa's generation were "fascinated by masks and personae" writes Bernard O'Donoghue in his essay *Fernando Pessoa and W.B. Yeats*. Just as Dorian Gray had his portrait to embody his moral decay, Pessoa created the Search brothers, with whom he nurtured a long-standing correspondence, as a means for him to re-visit his adolescent years spent in South Africa where his consul stepfather, João Miguel Rosa had been assigned. It was within the repressively puritanical walls of Durban's St. Joseph's school that Pessoa rebelled against the Victorian ideals that had been transplanted in a land far removed from whence they had originated. Themes of constant search and re-evaluation were forged in South Africa and were to dominate his personas, providing one of the few threads of continuity in a body of work that is in all other aspects largely disjointed. Upon his return to Portugal in 1905, Pessoa was incapable of re-inserting himself into a reality (both physical and linguistic) that he had often longed for in his years of exile. He was an internal émigré, a solitude which invites comparisons to Kafka's German and Beckett's French and that bore its fruits in his 1926 collection *Lisbon Revisited*.

Pessoa was prey to disturbing visions regarding politics and mysticism. Initially flirting with fascism, as so many others of his generation, he later helped popularise a mythological concept that he dubbed *Quinto Império*. Yearning for a rebirth of the intrepid sea-faring nation that had anticipated its European counterparts in the Age of Discovery, Pessoa envisioned a 'Fifth Empire' that would bring about a fusion between the material and spiritual world under the guidance of Portugal, assuming the reins of global hegemony from the declining British Empire. A nation of heroes guided by

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<sup>1</sup> H. Bloom, *Fernando Pessoa*.

classical gods; notwithstanding, he railed against Rudyard Kipling's 'imperialism', yet drew on the very same mythical images as the latter to provide imprints for lands he never truly understood due to the childhood traumas he had faced. Pessoa's 'Fifth Empire' thus assumes a symbolism as significant as that of Albion had been to Blake.

There is, of course, another dimension to be considered. Pessoa was acutely aware of what Rimbaud had written in a letter to Paul Demeney, dated May 1871: "*I* is another". As such, he pioneered what was to become a post-war phenomenon, whose highest novelistic expression perhaps was Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* – that of inventing landscapes within the self as a means of ultimately escaping it. Furthermore, Rimbaud, as Blake before him and Yeats after, knew that the esoteric was best-placed to summon up the creative daemon, as Harold Bloom is often fond of repeating. Although Pessoa warned his readers of mistaking his work for any "Yeats fairy nonsense"<sup>2</sup> his *Ode Marittima*, here newly translated is unarguably a product of his immersion in Anglophone culture – he was an avid reader of Keats, Shelley and Browning – and the folklore that imbues it. Indeed, its author Álvaro de Campos is almost Whitmanesque in his desire to contain multitudes and explore identity. In the following extracts, the themes of death, the sea, night and belonging can be perceived at every step, or nautical mile rather, and the shores of Albion, like those of his Portugal are kept in sight by that 'aimless compass of emotions', shores always perceived but, alas, never reached. It is a cosmopolitan panorama

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<sup>2</sup> B. O'Donoghue, *Fernando Pessoa and W.B. Yeats* (portalpessoa.org) 2006.

**Fernando Pessoa**

## ***Maritime Ode***

[An Edited Extract]

& you Jim Barns, sailor & friend, was it you  
 who taught me that ancient English yell,  
 that captured, spreading contagiously as some disease,  
 souls as complex as mine, distancing itself  
 from the confused clamour of waves,  
 that calls in an unedited voice everything that's to be said  
 of seas & oceans, of shipwrecks & distant shores.

Your English yell became universal in my blood,  
 losing all trace of voice, humanity,  
 this terrifying yell that seems to echo  
 from the pits of a cavern whose sky-like vault  
 narrates all the sinister acts that can  
 befall in the distant darkness of the sea, of night...

Ah, and travels, joy rides & others,  
 sea trips, where we're all companions to one another  
 in a special way, as if some sort of maritime mystery  
 bound our souls together, made us, if just for a moment  
 patriots in transit of a single uncertain land  
 forever floating on the immensity of water!  
 The great Hotels of infinity, oh my transatlantic friends,  
 with a perfect & total cosmopolitanism that never stays still  
in a single place  
 long enough to contain all the assorted costumes, countenances, creeds & races!

It grows on me, that sad steamship, so humble & true.  
 There it goes departing the docks where I now find myself.  
 Tranquilly passing by where carracks & caravels once anchored  
 long ago, long ago...  
 To Cardiff? Liverpool? London? It doesn't matter.  
 It carries out its duties. So that we may do ours. What  
a beautiful life!

Farewell! Farewell!  
 Farewell, my poor occasional friend, you helped me,  
 taking away with you the fever and glumness of my dreams,  
 & resurrected me to witness your departure & gradual drift into the distance.  
 Farewell! Farewell! This is life...

What natural elegance, so unmistakably morning-like  
 in your exit from Lisbon, today!  
 I feel for you a curious predilection & feel grateful for it...  
 For what? I don't know what it is!... It comes... It goes...  
 With a light tremor  
 (t-t – t – t – – t...)  
 the flywheel within me comes to a halt.

Slow steam, pass me by & don't linger...  
 Shirk from me, go beyond my line of sight,  
 leave my heart be,  
 lose yourself in the distance, God's mist,  
 lose yourself along your own destiny's path & depart...  
 Who am I to weep & ask?  
 Who am I to speak to you & love?  
 Who am I to be troubled by your sight?  
 Weigh anchor, the sun rises, dipped in gold,  
 dock buildings & roofs glimmer,  
 this entire part of town is incandescent...  
 Depart, leave me be, become  
 first the ship in the canal's midst sharp in your silhouette  
 then towards the ocean's narrowing mouth shrinking into a black miniature,  
 then a dot on the horizon (oh my anguish!),  
 then nothing, & only my plight,  
 & the town stretches inundated by sunlight  
 & the hour now for when the dock is bled of its ships,  
 & the slow coil of the winch that, as a compass needle,  
 traces a semi-circle of some unnamed emotion  
 within the upset silence of my soul...

*Translated by André Naffis*