

# The making of a lyric: Pessoa's theory

[A elaboração de uma lírica:  
A teoria de Pessoa]

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RAMALHO-SANTOS, Irene (2022). *Fernando Pessoa and the Lyric. Disquietude, Ruminaton, Interruption, Inspiration, Constellation*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books. 190 pp. [ISBN: 9781666903133].



After *Fernando Pessoa e Outros Fingidores* (Lisboa: Tinta-da-China, 2021), Irene Ramalho-Santos offers us in *Fernando Pessoa and the Lyric. Disquietude, Ruminaton, Interruption, Inspiration, Constellation* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2022) another example of her brilliantly insightful reading of Pessoa, this time in English and enlarging the scope of her criticism with other lines of analysis.

Professor emerita of English and feminist studies at the Faculty of Letters, and senior researcher of the Center for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra, Irene Ramalho-Santos was also visiting professor at such different places as the University of East Asia, the King's College London, or the University of Wisconsin-Madison, being the only non-American who has received the American Studies Association Mary C. Turpie Award (2008). She was responsible for the foundation of American Studies in Portugal, and she was (still is) the supervisor and mentor of most Portuguese Americanists.

Ramalho-Santos is also one of the major scholars of Pessoa and her work has always been concerned with situating the Portuguese poet in a vast transnational and interpoetic context, making his poetry universal whilst (or precisely because) insisting on his locality. That is probably the most important innovative trait in her reading of Pessoa's work, and, once again in this new book published by Lexington Books, she makes clear from the very beginning that the aim of her critical work is to compare and contrast Pessoa with other poets. However, influence, an important concept in Comparative Literature, is questioned, and the Benjaminian (as well as Pessosan, as she will show) concept of constellation takes the lead in her criticism.

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Choosing the concept of “misreading” instead of his concept of poetic influence, Ramalho-Santos argues, with Harold Bloom, that there are no individual poets, just relations between them. She discusses “constellation” in the first and the last chapters of the book, and starting from Pessoa’s invention of his own master, Caetano, creator of a group of “inconjunct” poems, that the poet claimed were “like stars out of conjunction in a constellation” (1). She goes also through the poet’s scattered notes and finds them echoing Bloom *avant-la-lettre*—including his concept of belatedness, for it was Pessoa who first wrote: “the earlier man is nevertheless smaller. (It is the latter man who is the earlier)” (1).

The concept of constellation is particularly important also from a political perspective—and one must underlie the fact that for Ramalho-Santos there’s never a poetics that is not political. A constellation is an optical illusion, always depending on the position of the observer—thus, the importance of locality and the need to translate the diverse readings depending on the diverse observation positions. Furthermore, the light that is finally reaching our eye may be from a star that does no longer exist. In a sense, a constellation is an event—and Ramalho-Santos discusses this question in (and with) Pessoa, namely in his heteronymic construction. But what I would also like to argue here is that the literary criticism that has always been the work of this Portuguese scholar has never lost this perspective from sight: not only does she discuss the different positions of other critics, but she is always discussing her own positions in the constellation that her own criticism also portends in the process of her diverse readings (which then become events, too). What I am basically saying here is that Ramalho-Santos refuses any totalizing or totalized reading or reader. Hers is always an open text, in process, capable of permanent inclusiveness, but also of loss. Her making is, I dare say, very Pessoaan and very Stevensian in the complex connection between the pursuit of truth and the awareness of the inescapability of fiction.

The five concepts in *Fernando Pessoa and the Lyric’s* subtitle—*disquietude, rumination, interruption, inspiration and constellation*—point precisely to Pessoa’s theory on the making of his own lyric, the poet’s theory of his own practice, something that Ramalho-Santos finds especially in his *Book of Disquietude* [*Livro do Desassossego*]. She starts with an epigraph, “o poeta é um fingidor,” “the poet is a faker”—a translation chosen amongst the many already used in English—for it resonates with “maker.” She explains: making as faking.

As with Sidney’s defense against Plato’s banishment of the poets from the *polis*, but also with Stevens, Crane, and Dickinson, she believes that for Pessoa “poetry does not claim to tell you the truth, rather it makes you think about the truth and how to give it words” (2). That is “the truth of fiction,” a very Stevensian subtitle for the Introduction to her book.

Pessoa’s most important note for her is the fifth in “The degrees of poetry” [“Os graus da poesia”]—a reflection on lyric poetry in Western modernity (Pessoa’s

reflections on author and authority, the subject depersonalization and poetic making as faking) where Pessoa questions romantic lyric as the expression of sincerity and subjective flow of emotions. As Ramalho-Santos sees it, the heteronymic drama of the lyric, the fifth degree of poetry, is the most extreme degree of depersonalization and de-subjectivation. The poet radically becomes other, stops being lyrical, but does not yield entirely to the dramatic form. He impersonates an Other objectively, she argues, as Nietzsche wanted lyric poetry to be: as objective as Hegel's demanded of modern art. She concludes: "Lyric poetry writing and reading call for a kind of rigorous and detached surrender to language—rational and emotional, fabricated and spontaneous" (3).

It is that kind of reading that this book also offers us. As Ramalho-Santos herself describes it: reading *The Book of Disquietude* as the poet's theory of his own practice; showing that Pessoa's poetry and poetics anticipates poststructuralist misgivings about "the subject;" arguing that the heteronymic multiplicity points to, and undermines, Harold Bloom's theory of poetic influence; departing from Adorno and Blanchot, offering poetry writing as a mode of interruption; discussing Portuguese poet Ana Luísa Amaral's interpellation of Pessoa's *Mensagem* in her work *Escuro*; looking into the question of the poetic and the sacred in poets such as Pessoa, Whitman, Dickinson, and Stevens; discussing the modernistic abandonment of the concept of inspiration; discussing Pessoa's masculinist role in the founding of the Portuguese modernist little magazine *Orpheu*, and comparing it to the American *Poetry* and *Little Review*, edited by feminist women; finally, seeing Pessoa, Crane, and Dickinson as stars of a constellation, reading Crane's *The Bridge* from a Pessoa point of view, and imagining Dickinson reading Pessoa.

In "The 'Great Book' *Caeiro*, and Pessoa's Theory of Poetry," she starts with her concept of "rumination" to deal with what she paradoxically calls a simultaneous poetics of absence (of the subject) and excess to discuss the heteronymic multiplicity. *Caeirismo* is Pessoa's invention of this other "-ism" of Modernism, an "-ism" that goes well beyond what he and Mário de Sá-Carneiro were discussing as intersectionism. According to Irene Ramalho-Santos, "the book of ruminations" is the "Great Book" beyond the intersection of the two books that Bernardo Soares had to deal with (the one of accounts and the one of his poetic scribblings) in the place of writing (the Portuguese "escritório," the locality where constellations emerge, including the ones for the self).

The question is "What is writing for?" if fiction is unavoidable because there is a subject involved? The impossible task of the writer, she argues, cannot but lead to the utter de-subjectification that *Caeiro* becomes the master of. "I am the size of what I see!" implies "to be destined to reconstruct the universe constellatedly" (12) and such must be the construction of the self. For this discussion in the first chapter, Ramalho-Santos goes through the work of major scholars of Pessoa, establishing a kind of polylogue that also includes authors like Hölderlin or Kafka, all of them a

part of the constellation that led her to what she sees. “‘Caeiro’ is a *poetry poet*” (16), she claims—and I also read this as a way pointing to the co-substantiality of poetry and writer. That is why poems may be “part of a constellation, but they are not in conjunction. So are Caeiro’s *inconjunct poems*” (16). Bernardo Soares said they were “deconstellated stars;” “stars out of conjunction” (17), underlines, in this book of 2022, the Portuguese scholar.

In “The Tail of the Lizard. *Pessoan Disquietude and the Subject of Modernity*,” Ramalho-Santos continues her Pessoaan discussion of the subject with the reading of Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy’s book *Who Comes After the Subject?* (1991). This chapter, in particular, raises the question of the crisis of the post-Cartesian subject. But it also raises the question of the limits between poetics and philosophy. One of the major words is “interval,” as used by Badiou, but mainly as used *avant-la-lettre* by Pessoa himself in *Book of Disquietude* to indicate “the inbetweenness-of-being-nonbeing-in-multiplicity” (25), presence and absence, as well as the consciousness of the opacity of language. It is the interval that creates disquietude. What kind of a citizen can we think of if this is the experience of the subject of modernity? What is there beyond simple names and naming, events, situations, subjectivized procedures, if a change in space, time, or situation makes the “I” something other? What kind of a community can we think of if there is no subject? Or, better, as with Cadava’s quotation: “Who thinks, if not the community?” (32). If community is that which only takes place through others (the “I”s that are not egos, but others), Ramalho-Santos answers these questions with “Tabacaria” and “Saudação a Walt Whitman,” showing how Pessoa anticipated all of these post-structuralist dilemmas.

In “The Art of Ruminantion. *Pessoa’s Heteronyms Revisited*,” the philosophical discussion continues, namely discussing the questions of memory and repetition with Heidegger, Nietzsche, Ramos Rosa, Hölderlin, Stevens, and Harold Bloom, amongst others. Challenging Bloom’s theory of poetic influence, the Portuguese scholar concludes that ruminantion “concerns the repetitive and self-interruptive rewriting of the heteronyms themselves as poetry” (42), “the theory of heteronymic poeming as pure intertranslatability” (48). Without Muses, “we invoke ourselves,” (42) proclaimed Pessoa. Caeiro thus looked for a superior kind of imagination that seems totally anti-humanistic: deconceptualized, capable of looking and seeing without thinking, and always self-interruptive.

Chapter 4 is then, unsurprisingly, titled “Poetic Interruption. *A Pessoaan Concept for Reading the Lyric*,” and in there Ramalho-Santos reflects upon the Pessoaan concept of poetic interruption with Adorno and Blanchot in mind, but also problematizing her previous discussion of this question, namely in her analysis of Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan.” Interruption is a social notion since, in the human infinite conversation, it is built on the awareness of the intertwining of silence and words, of waiting and saying anew. Thus, seeing the moment of interruption as a moment

of the “political-that-interrupts” (social being or life-in-community manifesting their existence as a naturalized structure of Western society that shapes people’s lives), she believes lyric poetry is “a making irrupting out of the mutually interruptive tension between the poetical and the political” (54). But now she adds to her previous reading of “Kubla Khan” the idea that this poem “in its fragmentary structure, gives body to the theoretical notion of interruption that grounds it *ex post facto*” (55). As Pessoa seems to have recognized in his own reading of “Kubla Khan,” there is no lyric poetry without interruption—and therefore, there is no poetry without the political. Pessoa’s *Mensagem* is then seen as an interruption of Camões’ *The Lusiads*, as our contemporary Portuguese poet Ana Luisa Amaral’s *Escuro* is seen as an interruption of Pessoa’s *Mensagem*. *Escuro*, a poem-made-of-poems, is anti-colonial, anti-imperial, and feminist—and, as such, it reenacts poetry as interruption, argues Ramalho-Santos.

The next chapter, “‘The God That Was Missing’. *Poetry, Divinity, Everydayness*,” deals with the question of divinity in Pessoa. Starting with the discussion of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, it is made clear that it is now the poet that occupies the place of the traditional Muse, a divinity, since the poet presents himself as a kind of a God in his claim to knowledge, perfection, incomprehensibility, and totality. It is after Whitman, Ramalho-Santos argues, that Caeiro reinvents poetry and the poet as “the god that was missing” (poem VIII of *O Guardador de Rebanhos*). Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens will then be read as other poets that reinvent poetry in comparison or contrast with the conventional notions of divinity of which the Muse is an example. For them as for Pessoa, the Muse is “no longer available outside his own body, outside his own senses” (77). In poem VIII of *O Guardador de Rebanhos*, the child Jesus, the poet and “poetry-as-everydayness” are a unity, i. e., “the god that was missing.” They are “wonder,” argues the Portuguese scholar: “wonder about the profane, the ordinary, or the commonplace in ‘everything’” (78). And so, she concludes, the great poem of the earth, that Wallace Stevens believed still remained to be written, had already been written in 1949 by Alberto Caeiro.

The discussion continues with “Modernist Muses That Matter. *Inspiration Revisited in Pessoa and Stevens*,” and it is the question of the body that is here addressed. Inspiration and the muse as recently discussed by Timothy Clark, Maurice Blanchot, and Jean-Luc Nancy lead, once and again, to Heidegger’s concern with the being and the origin of art, conceived by this philosopher as the composing of itself as unconcealedness or the truth (86). Ramalho-Santos sees the poem’s grounding as the poet’s body and takes from Judith Butler’s famous title, *Bodies That Matter*, to conclude that “Poetry speaks sense by letting the senses speak” (86). Both Stevens and Pessoa seem to share the belief that the body, the susceptible being, is the proper site of inspiration, but none of them was comfortable with his own body. Pessoa/Campos inhabits a sick and frail body, whilst Stevens feels too big and too large. The body is the real, and poetry is “the real.”

The discussion continues in the next chapter, “The Truant Muse and the Poet’s Body,” starting from the ode “Master, my beloved master” dedicated to Caeiro and from “Maritime Ode” by Álvaro de Campos: from Caeiro’s feeling of the universe coinciding with his own body and from Campos’ desire to be completely possessed by the sea, the ground of the poetic absolute. Finally, “Triumphal Ode,” where the poet uses the untranslatable word “passento” to refer to the body as muse—sensuous desire and the organicity of body—as Pessoa’s imagination aching bodily in Álvaro de Campos (109).

“Orpheu et al. Modernism, Women, and the War” (published in 2017, in *Pessoa Plural*, <https://doi.org/10.7301/Z0S75DH6>), discusses some poetry magazines and their role in Modernism, showing how the Portuguese *Orpheu* magazine, co-founded by Fernando Pessoa, appeared almost simultaneously, in 1915, contrary to what is usually the case in Portugal. However, whilst many of the international editors on both sides of the Atlantic were women, the Portuguese magazine had neither women editors nor women poets contributing. Worse than that, the way women were mentioned was extremely sexist and discriminatory. Ramalho-Santos writes: “For the first Portuguese modernists, sexual difference was a major issue, whether delicately interwoven in some poems or violently erupting in others” (118). Women appeared as what she calls “paper women” (120), conventional stereotypes invented by male poets. Pessoa’s reference to his “sexual problem” does come to mind when one reads “Triumphal Ode” moving between “its man ‘roaring’ and its woman ‘possessed’” (122). The Great War seems to be absent from *Orpheu*, but not from other poems by Pessoa, namely “His mother’s little boy” and “Martial Ode.” But war is also the principle of war, also nurturing the poet’s imagination, as one can read in *The Book of Disquietude*: “All life is war.”

The final chapters of *Fernando Pessoa and the Lyric*, “The Accidental Poem. Hart Crane’s *Theory of the Lyric*” and “Being Blind. Being Nobody. Being a Poet. *Emily Dickinson ‘Reads’ Fernando Pessoa*,” show how some of Pessoa’s poetic concepts may be useful in the reading of other poets. Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*, for instance, seems to be grounded on the concepts of interruption and rumination. Furthermore, these poets seem to share common views, such as the absence of any contradiction between the accidental and the fragment and poetry’s permanent incompleteness (a making in the becoming). They are poets of one constellation, as Ramalho-Santos puts it (144). Like Pessoa and Dickinson are poets of one constellation, sharing many common literary origins besides their concern with the construction of the lyric subject. Sight, nothingness, and poetry itself are their main poetic concerns, and sometimes Dickinson seems to be metaleptically answering Pessoa’s questions, like the ones on “the incomprehensibility of being and existence, identity and self-understanding, recognition and sense of future” (150). Stating herself as a representative of verse, writes Dickinson in a letter, means she is stating “a supposed person” (151). Ramalho-Santos is tempted to read “a supposed *pessoa*. Or *pessoas*”

(151). As she is tempted to read Dickinson's "Master Letters" and Álvaro de Campos "Master, my beloved master" as letters to poetry, because, ultimately, in poetry, there is no master. Or, in other words, poetry is the only master. For both poets knew that wonder is the god that was missing.

In Ramalho-Santos' hermeneutic choice, it is the open-endedness that is the beginning and the end of criticism: to open possibilities for new readings and/or new interpretations. This is a political stance whilst remaining an imaginative one, for it relocates the possibility of knowledge in a process that is never totalized or closed. The reader is challenged to enter the fracture where poet and critic are relocated once and again. It is thus that Pessoa is being reconsidered and reassessed—as well as all the other poets in Ramalho-Santos' constellation. This is a "rigorous and detached—rational and emotional, fabricated and spontaneous" (3) criticism.

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