

Pasciolla, Francesca (2016). *Walt Whitman in Fernando Pessoa*. London: Critical, Cultural and Communications Press, pp. 131

Bernard McGuirk
(University of Nottingham, United Kingdom)

Refreshingly, the arrival of a new kind on the block, the construction site, of Pessoa scholarship, signals more than just another brick in the wall of mere influence studies. If Francesca Pasciolla's is indeed a debutante's voice in the addressing of the Portuguese writer's oft-visited relationship with Walt Whitman, her stance *vis à vis* the treatment of the 'great yawp' – *ipse dixit* – of North American literature, is set firmly in established wisdom. "Trust the tale not the teller", D.H. Lawrence's advice, sadly unheeded by influence-chasing Pessoaans oblivious to (or, presumably, detesting) Harold Bloom's definitive demolition of pseudo-biographical or assertively causative if habitually unsubstantiated conjectures, is assiduously if not explicitly taken and followed throughout this the second volume of a new series of studies on Fernando Pessoa, launched in 2016 by Critical, Cultural and Communications Press.

In concentrating on the textual dynamics of Pessoa's appropriation of Ezra Pound's challenge, "I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman", Pasciolla betrays no fear of *The Anxiety of Influence*. Hers is a thoroughly disciplined adherence to the discursive structural implications of that readerly/writerly 'pact' outlined by Roland Barthes for an earlier, often *insouciant*, generation of critics. For, in reading Pessoa texts that interact with precursor writings, she eschews – whilst obviously aware of – the biographical in the "endeavour to keep speculation under control in favour of looking at the evidence of the irrefutably critical poetic relationship" (p. 9).

This book may be read as dually faceted. Pleasing, it may be presumed, to mainstream scholars of Pessoa's inexhaustible *espólio*, it begins with a strict examination of the marginal annotations and underlinings to be found in the four volumes from "among the 1,311 items of Fernando Pessoa's particular library" either by or on Walt Whitman (p. 14). In Chapter 1, "Pessoa, reader of Whitman", the would-be bibliophile is teased by an epigraph, lifted from Whitman's "So Long": "Camerado! This is no book; | Who touches this, touches a man". Craftily, Pasciolla prefaces her extensively illustrated perusal of Pessoa's (via Alexander Search) glosses

with the reminder that there is no man to touch – only the textualized (con)figuration... the con-trick whereby many a pre-Bloomian (and, alas, post-) has been entrapped. For, whilst the scratchings of the archive-rats may elsewhere be heard, the option in what follows here is, at this stage, strictly thematic in respect of what “Pessoa inherited from Whitman: contact with rural nature, acceptance of reality as it is, universal complicity, abolition of the distinction between soul and body, subject and object, the self and others” (p. 18). Gently, Pasciolla’s reader is led to re-write, for example, the celebrated “Song of Myself” – in an F P perspective? – as anything but. Who, however foolhardy, might (still) seek to identify a Pessoa *ele mesmo*...? Already we are embroiled in her other-than-heteronymic approach to heteronymy – “really a calculated act” (p. 16). Bravo. For nowhere in this study does Pasciolla fall for such a Pessoa annotation as “explanation for Caeiro’s”... Caeiro’s what? Illustration provided: “Detail of p. 4 of *Poems by Walt Whitman*” (p. 17). For her, *Leaves of Grass* – and *contra natura* – are pages, first and last.

In Chapter 2, “Whitman, writer of Pessoa”, in order “to respond to the call of the American writer”, and specifically to his “I am the man who, sauntering along without fully stopping, turns a casual look upon you | and then adverts his face | Leaving it to you to prove and define it, | Expecting the main things from you” (p. 22), Pasciolla surreptitiously plays thus with the ingenuous heteronymist; Pessoa “availed himself of the unbridled Álvaro de Campos and the apparently *naïf* Alberto Caeiro” (p. 22). Walking the tightrope of acknowledging whilst departing from the insights of the main cognoscenti of the Whitman-Pessoa *topos*, she achieves an indispensable juxtaposition, ostensibly not of (confessional) poets but of poems, ‘out’ together dancing text to text. Heaven... Textuality ever takes precedence over sexuality in her analyses of the overtly admitted erotics of the writerly tryste. *Vive le lisible* as it passes through the filter of “Saudação a Walt Whitman”, “Ode Triunfal” and “Ode Marítima”, enlivened by Pasciolla’s sharp, ever *scriptible*, insights, original whilst reflective of the seminal prior speculations of Honig, Brown, Ramalho and Lourenço, *inter alia*. Here, in the central section of the book, is comparative poetry criticism of a high order, illuminating the ambivalence of the chosen title, “Whitman, writer of Pessoa”. Thereby, the ‘salute’ is shown, intertextually, to work both ways.

Thus, “the poem is now held open to the precursor, where once it was open, and the uncanny effect is that the new poem’s achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the precursor’s characteristic work”. There, Harold Bloom on Apophrades. Here, intelligently, Pasciolla has opted to focus on “rhythmic principles”, *d’après* Ferrari, as the poetic function whereby the mere, and past, “was” has become the “now held” – always present and “open”, her key argument, “to be discontinued” (p. 125). Of

this style of theoretically informed though never over-burdened literary analysis we shall hear more from this fluently well-informed critic.

What then is the benefit of Pasciolla's stance? A disciplined awareness of the panoply of different methodologies, not to say shibboleths, of the myriad, nay, over-populated, realm of Pessoa studies. The finding of a place, a space, for her measured assertions is evinced in the final Chapter 3, "Toings and froings". Allowing herself to enter the generational if irresolvable debates around the role of Pessoa's "encounter" (p. 84) with Whitman, she nonetheless adheres to pervasively evidential textual interplay. Step by step, via Search through Caeiro (broadly neglected) to de Campos "signatures", Pasciolla renders both axial and legitimate her engagement with the signal "paradigmatically relevant" critical voice of Eduardo Lourenço in respect of the "prodigious concealment" of Alberto Caeiro's birth (p. 95); albeit that she is no less alert to Richard Zenith's key "distancing" of his own interpretation, in corrective "historical terms" (p. 114), in "Pessoa and Walt Whitman Revisited", from the former's theories in *Pessoa Revisitado*. "Talkin' 'bout" their generation, Pasciolla ensures that hers and other emergent voices in the new CCCP series are "not trying to cause a b-big sensation"; nor will they invite "them", the pioneers, to "f-fade away". The 'who?' and the 'why?' of precursor literary critical investments and practices are thus respectfully echoed though never really foregrounded as the 'what' and the 'how' of writing are enlisted to suffuse and inform a comparativist's predominantly textual hermeneutics; neither easily put down... nor, itself, likely just to fade away. So, again, (why not?), in respect of, and for, Fernando Pessoa adherents, whether *anciens* or *modernes*, "Let there be commerce between [them]"... in *discontinuity*.

