Presence of Islamic philosophy in unpublished writings by the young Fernando Pessoa

Fabrizio Boscaglia

Keywords

Fernando Pessoa, Islamic philosophy, philosophical narrative, National Library of Portugal / Archive 3, Fernando Pessoa's private library, Curso Superior de Letras (University of Lisbon).

Abstract

Here published are fragments of a philosophical narrative by Fernando Pessoa, on the subject of Islamic philosophy. These are accompanied by other documents from the author’s estate and private library on the same subject. Most of these documents were written by Fernando Pessoa at a young age, around 1906, in the period when he attended the university-level course of Arts and Letters at the University of Lisbon.

Palavras-chave

Fernando Pessoa, filosofia islâmica, conto filosófico, Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal / Espólio 3, Biblioteca particular de Fernando Pessoa, Curso Superior de Letras (Universidade de Lisboa).

Resumo

Publicam-se aqui fragmentos de um conto filosófico escrito por Fernando Pessoa, sobre o tema da filosofia islâmica. Também vêm a ser publicados e analisados outros documentos do espólio e da biblioteca particular de Pessoa, inerentes ao mesmo tema. A maior parte destes documentos foram escritos por Pessoa por volta de 1906, no período em que o jovem Pessoa frequentava o Curso Superior de Letras na Universidade de Lisboa.

* Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa – Centro de Filosofia.
At the National Library of Portugal, among Fernando Pessoa’s estate (Archive 3) are the fragments of a philosophical narrative written by the Portuguese author, based on his first reflections on Islamic philosophy. Fernando Pessoa wrote these texts probably around 1906, at the age of eighteen, when he was a student at the university-level course of Arts and Letters in Lisbon (from October 1905 until, probably, June 1907). That course included a philosophy class. Pessoa had returned alone to Portugal from Durban, South Africa, where he had lived with his family from 1896 until 1905 (with a stay in Portugal between 1901 and 1902).

The fragments here published have no title but it seems reasonable to assume that this material was written in accordance with Pessoa’s declared intention to produce some “Arabian Tales”, possibly around 1903-1904, with the following titles: “Conscience”; “The Enemies”; “The Arab’s Bounty” (BNP/E3, 153-9; Pessoa, 2009a: 112 and 313).

These fragments were written by Pessoa in English and narrate the encounter and dialogue between a young man (could this be an imaginary transposition of Pessoa himself or is it, on the other hand, one of his many literary personas?) and an Arab sage called Al-Cossar. This dialogue, mostly sustained by the young man’s questions to Al-Cossar about Islamic philosophy and some of its main proponents, concerns mainly metaphysical, gnoseological and spiritual issues.

The first set of documents [26A-60v to 61v] describes the moment of the encounter between the young man and Al-Cossar. Narrated here is the beginning of their conversation (driven by the young man’s questions) and it is important for two reasons: Firstly, it is the clearest and most well structured of the documents

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1 Thomas Carlyle, “The Hero as a Prophet. Mahomet: Islam”, in On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic of History (1903: 64 [CFP, 8-89]). The quoted sentence was underlined in pencil by Pessoa on his copy. He probably started reading it around February 1904. After the initials of the Casa Fernando Pessoa comes the catalogue reference. Fernando Pessoa’s private library was digitalized and catalogued by Jerónimo Pizarro, Patricio Ferrari and Antonio Cardiello. Cf. Pizarro et al. (2010: 13-25); and the following webpage: http://casafernandopessoa.cm-lisboa.pt/bdigital/.

2 The name of the Arab sage Al-Cossar may evoke the Arabic etymological root ǧāf-ṣâd-râ, from where the words within the general meaning of abbreviate, confine, bind, restrain – as in the word al-qaṣr, “castle, palace” – derive. There is some probability that Pessoa knew this word on account of it being the lemma of the word Alcácer-Quibir (al-qaṣr al-kabîr, “the big castle”). This is a Moroccan city where a battle – in which the Portuguese King D. Sebastian disappeared – was fought in 1578. D. Sebastian is a major figure in the Portuguese movement called sebastianism, which is addressed in a part of Pessoa’s work (cf. Pessoa, 2011).
found and secondly it directly relates to the history of Islamic philosophy as several Islamic philosophers are named within the text.

The following documents [2718 A3-10; 15A-32v and 32a; 15A-33] are sketches of another part of the narrative. These fragments describe, with some differences of terminology and meaning, the Arab sage as he explains philosophical concepts to the young man using drawings on the ground (e.g. a circumference with some lines inside it).

These documents offer us an opportunity to explore a part of Fernando Pessoa that has previously received little attention i.e. his interest in Islamic philosophy. It appears to be unlikely that other fragments of this narrative have been previously published; therefore they deserve our attention and should provide material for those wishing to examine this area of Pessoa’s work in more depth.

The names of the medieval Islamic thinkers presented by Pessoa in these fragments (Al-Kindī, Al-Fārābī, Ibn Bājah, Ibn Sinā, Ibn Ṭūfayl, Al-Ghazzālī and Ibn Rushd/Averroes) are exactly the same that can be found on Histoire de la Philosophie by Pierre Vallet (1897: 170-178), a book taken from Durban to Lisbon by Pessoa when he left from South Africa in 1905 (Ferrari, 2012: 370; cf. Pessoa, 2009a: 261). It is also possible that Pessoa was familiar with Averroes and Ibn Ṭūfayl (the author of a philosophical novel known as Philosophus Autodidactus3 in the Western world) for they were also mentioned in Antero de Quental’s Causas da Decadência dos Povos Peninsulares nos Últimos Três Seculos4. In fact, as Pizarro argues (in Pessoa, 2009b: 222), some of Pessoa’s texts written between 1916 and 1918 appear to enact a direct dialogue with this work on Peninsular decadence (cf. Pessoa, 2009b: 222-227; Pessoa, 2012: 70-74). In those texts, Pessoa praised (in a similar way to Antero, some decades earlier) the Islamic civilization, and particularly its presence in the medieval Iberian Peninsula – on account of its tolerance and for its important part on the transmission of Greek science and thought to Europe (cf. Boscaglia, 2013; Boscaglia and Pérez López, 2013). Furthermore there are several marked passages

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3 The original title of this novel is Ḥayy ibn Yaẓān (“Alive, son of Awake”).
4 In English: Causes of the Decline of the Peninsular Peoples on the Last Three Centuries. Consider the following excerpt: “Nem posso tambem deixar esquecidos os Mouros e Judeus, porque foram uma das glórias da Península. A reforma da Escolasticismo, nos séculos 13.º e 14.º, pela renovação do aristotelismo, foi obra quasi exclusiva das escolas árabes e judaicas de Hespanha. Os nomes de Averroes (de Cordova), de Ibn-Tophail (de Sevilha) e os dois judeus Maimonides e Avicebron serão sempre contados entre os primeiros na historia da philosophia na Idade Media” (Quental, 1871: 10; cf. 2008: 42). In English: “I must mention the Moors and the Jews, since they were one of the peninsula’s glories. The reform of the scholasticism during the 13th and 14th centuries, through the renewal of Aristotelianism, was accomplished almost exclusively by the Arabic and Judaic schools of Spain. Such man as Averroes (from Córdoba), Ibn-Tufail (from Seville) and the two Jews Maimonides and Avicebron will always be remembered between the most important ones on the history of philosophy in the Middle Ages”. English translations of the titles and citations are mine. In other cases the translator’s name is given.
in Fernando Pessoa’s private library, which are references to Islamic philosophers as the transmitters of Greek philosophy to Europe. (cf. Benn, 1912: 4 [CFP 1-174 MFC]; Alighieri, 1915: 18 [CFP 8-139]; see Figs. 19 and 20).

It is also possible to suppose that Pessoa, while attending the university-level course of Arts and Letters, attended classes on the subject of Islamic civilization as the transmitter of Greek philosophy and Culture. This would most likely have been based on the work of Agostinho José Fortes, who had presented a dissertation entitled *O Hellenismo ou Persistencia da cultura helenica através da civilização*\(^5\) (published in 1904), which helped him to obtain the appointment as the lecturer of the course on Antique, Medieval and Modern History in the university-level course of Arts and Letters. This dissertation included a chapter about the Islamic civilization, mostly about the middle age Islamic philosophers and their role as transmitters of Greek philosophy to Europe (Fortes, 1904: 36-44). Can we say that Pessoa had read or consulted this volume? If so, it could have happened in two places: either at the university-level course of Arts and Letters or at the National Library of Portugal where the young Pessoa used to consult philosophical texts (cf. Pessoa, 2009a: 256-257). While researching Islamic philosophy, Pessoa also consulted at least in 1906, and probably without finding representative material, one edition of the work *Histoire de la Philosophie Européenne* by Alfred Weber (cf. Pessoa, 2009a: 218, 257, 259). Pessoa mentions an English translation of this book in a manuscript note, published by António de Pina Coelho in *Os Fundamentos Filosóficos da Obra de Fernando Pessoa*,\(^6\) (BNP/E3, 15\(^3\)-12\(^r\) and 13\(^r\); cf. Pina Coelho, 1971, vol. 2: 142). Pina Coelho’s edition does not mention that the list of books presented by Pessoa (including “Averroès ‘Commentary’”) had been copied by the young Pessoa from Weber’s book where it can be found (cf. Weber, 1892: 8; Weber, 1898: 9-10).

There is a possibility that the young Pessoa wanted to acquire one of Averroes philosophical commentaries, nevertheless none of them is on the list of books of Fernando Pessoa’s private library compiled by Pizarro, Ferrari and Cardiello (2010). It must be noted that both Vallet’s and Weber’s works weren’t kept at the author’s private library, but undoubtedly were either in his possession or read by him.

It was possibly based on that small note about Averroes, that Pina Coelho wrote in 1968, in the introduction of *Textos Filosóficos de Fernando Pessoa*,\(^7\) that Pessoa “also studied the Arab philosophers”, among other thinkers (Greek, German, etc.) (Pina Coelho, 1968: XV). In fact, this statement cannot be sustained by the two volumes of Pessoa’s philosophical texts edited by Pina Coelho in 1968. In these volumes there are no references made to the Islamic philosophy or

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\(^5\) In English: *The Hellenistic Period or The Perdurance of the Hellenistic Culture through Civilization*

\(^6\) In English: *The Philosophical Foundations of Fernando Pessoa’s Work.*

\(^7\) In English: *Philosophical Texts of Fernando Pessoa.*