In praise of Ophelia: an interpretation of Pessoa’s only love

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Keywords
Fernando Pessoa, Ophelia Queiroz, Álvaro de Campos.

Abstract

Based on a presentation by Alexandrino E. Severino at the First International Symposium on Fernando Pessoa in 1977, this essay (written by Severino in conjunction with Hubert Jennings) was prepared for publication in the volume of symposium proceedings, eventually entitled The Man Who Never Was. Because permission to quote from Ophelia’s letters to Fernando (all of them unpublished at the time) was ultimately denied, this essay was not published then or, for that matter, later. The evidence, drawn from Ophelia’s side of the correspondence, attests to Ophelia’s honest and honorable behavior during the two phases of her love affair with the poet.

Palavras-chave
Fernando Pessoa, Ophelia Queiroz, Álvaro de Campos.

Resumo

Este ensaio, baseado numa comunicação de Alexandrino E. Severino por ocasião do Primeiro Simpósio Internacional de Fernando Pessoa em 1977 (redigido conjuntamente com Hubert Jennings) estava programado para publicação na Actas do Simpósio entituladas The Man Who Never Was. Por falta de permissão para citar passagens das cartas de Ophélia a Fernando (todas inéditas na altura), este ensaio não foi então publicado nem subsequentemente. A correspondência de Ophélia testemunha o seu comportamento honesto e honrado durante as duas fases do seu relacionamento amoroso com o poeta.

* This unpublished essay was edited by George Monteiro, who wrote the Editorial Foreword. The construction of the bibliography to resort to the shorter citation in the body of the paper was done editorially.
[An account of the “First International Symposium on Fernando Pessoa,” held at Brown University on October 7-8, 1977, was published in Pessoa Plural – A Journal of Fernando Pessoa Studies (n.º 3, Spring 2013, pp. 113-40). It was noted therein that in The Man Who Never Was: Essays on Fernando Pessoa, a volume of the conference proceedings, we were unable to include “In Praise of Ophelia: An Interpretation of Pessoa’s Only Love,” a paper co-authored by Alexandrino E. Severino of Vanderbilt University and Hubert D. Jennings from the Republic of South Africa. Having been given access to Ophelia’s letters to Pessoa with the consent of the Pessoa family executors to use them, the authors in good conscience wrote their paper, which Severino presented at the Symposium. Later, however, when the proceedings were about to be sent to the printer in Lisbon, the editor of this introduction was advised that Ophelia Queiroz was not amenable to permitting the quotation of her letters to Pessoa in any form. Reluctantly, I acquiesced and the paper was dropped from the book. In 1977, when this defense of Ophelia was presented, there wasn’t much known about the Fernando-Ophelia correspondence. Still in the future were, first, the publication of Pessoa’s half of the correspondence in 1978, and then, later, in 1996, Ophelia’s portion in this exchange. Not until well into this century (2008, to be exact) were the two sides of the total exchange joined and interleaved by date into a single volume – something I and others, I am sure, had done on our own for our own purposes some years earlier. But in 1977, Severino and Jennings were bringing us news about this relationship, the only documented case of love and sentiment known to have been experienced by Fernando Pessoa. That these two scholars judged that Ophelia was deserving of praise and not condemnation, based on her side of the correspondence, was ground-breaking news. In fact, their sympathetic view of Ophelia is hardly questioned. Their work, apart from its historical value, deserves a proper place in the world of Pessoa scholarship. It should also be noted, moreover, that many of the English translations of excerpts from the letters, done by Severino for the publication of the piece, continue to be the only such versions in print. This is especially noteworthy since not one of the books presenting the Pessoa-Ophelia correspondence – not those of Pessoa’s letters alone or Ophelia’s, or for that matter the volume combining the two sides of the correspondence – has appeared in an English-language translation.

One final matter. Before reading their joint paper at the Symposium, Severino introduced the absent co-author to the audience with remarks about Jennings, remarks that he wished to have appear along with their paper in the Proceedings. “Hubert D. Jennings was born in London in 1896. He served in World War I and after graduating from the University of Wales he went to South Africa where he was Assistant Headmaster at the Durban High School for twelve years (1923-1935). Thereafter, he was successively principal at the high schools at Stanger, Greytown and Dundee. Having been asked to write the history of the

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Durban High School, Hubert Jennings came upon Fernando Pessoa’s poetry – Pessoa had attended the school during its glorious years, 1898-1904. ‘That Long Patience which is Genius’ is the title of the chapter dedicated to Pessoa in the The D.H.S. Story, 1866-1966, an inspiring, beautifully written tribute to the poet-alumnus. So fascinated was Hubert Jennings with the poetry of Fernando Pessoa that he decided, at age seventy-three, to go to Portugal and learn Portuguese. Out of the year-and-a-half spent in Lisbon, among Pessoa’s unpublished papers, came several lectures, articles, and a book-length study which unfortunately has still to find a less profit oriented publisher, since Fernando Pessoa has not as yet attained the recognition he desired – and deserves – in the English speaking world. The paper that follows is a direct result of our many conversations concerning Pessoa’s work, which took place in Lisbon in the summer of 1968. We felt then, as we do now, that the story of the love between Ophelia and Fernando needed to be retold in a more sympathetic and hopefully accurate light.” – G.M.]

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Among the vast number of papers left by Fernando Pessoa are two packets of letters still in their envelopes. One carries the following inscription: “O. Q. Depositado 23-4-1920.” The letters are turning yellow; the ink is becoming faded. All are written in the same delicate and spidery feminine hand. They are the letters of Ophelia Queiroz, or as the poet always called her, Ophelia. She was the only woman he loved, and as far as we know, the only one that loved him.

It was on October 8, 1919, that he first noticed Ophelia. She was employed as a typist at the commercial firm where Pessoa drifted in from time to time to translate the business correspondence with France and England. The event seems to have been of some importance to Ophelia, for a year later she mentions the exact date in one of her letters. Perhaps because she was “small, with rounded figure and melting eyes” (Simões, 1951: II, 160), as João Gaspar Simões describes her, she had for Fernando Pessoa something of the fragility of a child; and Fernando Pessoa, “always shy and embarrassed in the presence of women” (Simões, 1951: II, 159), as the same writer tells us, was very fond of children. It may have been a passing smile, a sudden, amused gleam in the eyes momentarily diverted from their work at the typewriter. We can imagine the poet, surprised, muttering a brief “good morning” and making a hasty exit through the door, and perhaps the smile grew a little broader on the face of Ophelia.

Ophelia was well aware that the Senhor Pessoa was not the ordinary

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1 “O. Q. Deposited April 23, 1920”. Pessoa’s grouping of Ophelia’s letters into two distinct packets, the first bearing the April 23 date, seems to corroborate João Gaspar Simões’ assertion that the cooling of the poet’s ardor was caused by the arrival of his mother from South Africa on March 30, 1920 (Simões, 1951: II, 173-75).