

*Message*

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*Selected English Poems*

*Message*

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# Fernando Pessoa

## *Mensagem / Message*

*translated by*  
**Jonathan Griffin**

*& introduced by*  
**Helder Macedo**

Shearsman Books & The Menard Press  
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## Preface

As Jonathan Griffin's publisher and literary executor, I went through his papers after he died. There I found various versions of a complete translation of Pessoa's *Mensagem* or, rather, several copies of a complete translation, but containing variant lines. It was impossible to determine which, if any, was the final version, because all contained a few dubious phrases or clumsy renderings which could be spotted even without a knowledge of Portuguese. My certainty that none of the versions was a final one was confirmed when I consulted our mutual friend, Professor Helder Macedo, Camoens Professor of Portuguese at King's College London. It was Griffin's custom to have a session with Macedo before finalising a major Portuguese project. This had not taken place in the case of *Mensagem*. I had therefore to incarnate Jonathan Griffin and organise that session with Helder and Suzette Macedo.

There is of course no way of knowing if – after consulting Helder Macedo – Griffin would or could have revised the translation in a general way, beyond incorporating necessary retouches and corrections and choosing between alternative versions already on paper: while the best poetry translators like Jonathan have their own signature they are also adept at avoiding mannerisms, of which there are some examples in the text. At this point the incarnation has to cease and one is left imagining Griffin and Pessoa engaged in a learned and animated conversation about the next stage of the dialectical process of vision and re-vision which inheres in the translation of poetry.

Anthony Rudolf

## Introduction

In the excellent introduction which Jonathan Griffin wrote for his translation of *Selected Poems* by Fernando Pessoa, published in the Penguin series of Modern European Poets, we find the following footnote:

‘John of Gaunt’s speech having shown that patriotic verse can be poetry of a high order, Pessoa in *Mensagem* showed this to be still true. Most of its poems also go beyond patriotism: those in which King Sebastian figures are metaphors for the religious quest, and those about the ordeals of the seafarers dramatize the poet’s inner perseverance.’

The comment is profoundly perceptive, since this multi-faceted poem may be understood as the convergence between a quest (though a broadly spiritual one, perhaps, rather than religious) and the poet’s dramatisation of self through the metaphor of nationhood.

*Mensagem* was the only book in Portuguese which Pessoa published in his lifetime – and then only in 1934, the year before his death. He had initially wanted a literary career in English (his secondary education in colonial South Africa had made him regard England as his cultural Mecca) and had published a couple of books of English poems, which were not well received. (One was characterised by the *Glasgow Herald* as ‘Tudor tricks of repetition, involution and antithesis’.) But it was in his native Portuguese that he found the voice which made him one of the greatest poets of European Modernism. And, contrary to what is often said, by the time he died he had already left a sufficiently impressive body of work scattered in Portuguese literary magazines to justify such a claim, independently of the vast opus that posthumously came – and continues to come – to light from the inexhaustible trunk where he kept his manuscripts. For Pessoa, after a brief period of public literary activity in the Portuguese Futurist movement, seems to have had no other life

than that of his own theatre of shadows, living in the dramatic writings of his poetic works through fictitious characters, the poet who wrote under the name of 'Fernando Pessoa' being no less a fictional construct than his heteronyms – Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, Alvaro de Campos, Bernardo Soares, and others of less importance.

The 'Portugal' which he emblematically reconstructs in *Mensagem* is also, perhaps, albeit in transposed form, a Pessoaan heteronym. The nation he conceives, seen in the fog of the Latter Days, is the nation whose identity is affirmed in transforming action into essence, biography into destiny, specific historical facts into timeless universality beyond History. It is the nation of the Second Coming which, in the prophetic tradition of the Age of the Holy Ghost, manifests itself in the non-being that is the spiritual expression of the sought-for totality of being. Portugal, as the face of Europe (whose arms are England and Italy) stares out, with a sphingical and fatal gaze (in Jonathan Griffin's translation: 'her gaze doom-heavy, sphingical') at the West, the future of the past. And it is the nation itself that Pessoa conceives as 'the nothing that is everything' (the oxymoron he uses to characterize Portugal's mythical founder Ulysses in the poem of that name). The concept is not very different, perhaps, to what he implies of himself, obliterating selfhood, in one of the poems written under his own name: 'Am I an expanded and murmured moment/of time-beings whose lives I am and live?'

In its tripartite construction, *Mensagem* is a heraldic emblem, anthropomorphised as a nation manifested through the personalities of its history. The first part, entitled 'Blazon' has five sections: The Fields, The Castles, The Inescutcheons, The Crown and The Crest; the second is a sequence of poems entitled 'Portuguese Sea'; and the third, exploring the consequence of the factual past as it flows into the mythical history of the future, is entitled, significantly, 'The Hidden One' ('O Encoberto'), with three sections which echo the overall structure of the poem: The Symbols, The Warnings and The Times. The esoteric logic underlying the global concept of the work culminates, in the last poem – 'Fog' – with the suggestion that because 'all is scattered, nothing is entire', and because 'Portugal has become fog', the Hour has come. 'The Hour' is, of course, the hour of the

promised return, the second coming, of a redeeming King who will initiate a new age of the spirit.

All national myths, because they are myths, are greater than the nations that gave rise to them. The Portuguese Sebastianic myth is also the 'English' myth of King Arthur, the 'German' myth of Frederick the Second. With the myth transformed into emblem and the emblem into poetry, the 'message' which Fernando Pessoa is bringing us is a message about the end of nations, the other side of History, in which all nations are heteronyms of the 'time-beings' whose lives are lived in timeless poetry.

I would have preferred not to have had to write this brief introductory note to Jonathan Griffin's translation of *Mensagem* but much rather, as so often in the past, to have benefited from his privileged understanding of Fernando Pessoa's poetry. My point of departure was the striking perception crystallized in Jonathan Griffin's footnote. Re-reading *Mensagem* in the light of this perception I have written not, of course, what he might have written in developing his comment but what I might not have written without it. And, as in all translations, what will emerge from the pages that follow is not the voice of the poet translated, the voice of Fernando Pessoa, but the voice of Jonathan Griffin undertaking, in his own diction as an English poet, Pessoa's initiatory voyage through a universal 'Portugality'.

Helder Macedo

Postscript: In *Mensagem* Pessoa sometimes uses old-fashioned orthography, which has been respected in this edition.

# **MENSAGEM**

**Benedictus Dominus Deus Noster  
Qui Dedit Nobis Signum**

## **MESSAGE**

**Benedictus Dominus Deus Noster  
Qui Dedit Nobis Signum**

## PRIMEIRA PARTE / BRASÃO

*Bellum sine bello*

**FIRST PART / BLAZON**

*Bellum sine bello*

# 1. Os Campos

## PRIMEIRO / *O DOS CASTELLOS*

A Europa jaz, posta nos cotovellos:  
De Oriente a Occidente jaz, fitando,  
E toldam-lhe românticos cabellos  
Olhos gregos, lembrando.

O cotovello esquerdo é recuado;  
O direito é em angulo disposto.  
Aquelle diz Italia onde é pousado;  
Este diz Inglaterra onde, afastado,  
A mão sustenta, em que se appoia o rosto.

Fita, com olhar sphyngico e fatal,  
O Occidente, futuro do passado.

O rosto com que fita é Portugal.

8-12-1928.

## 1. The Fields

### FIRST / *THE CASTLES*

Europe is lying propped upon her elbows:  
From East to West she lies, staring  
Out, reminiscent, – Greek eyes from the shelter  
Of romantic hair.

Behind her back the left elbow is cast;  
The right has the angle place.  
That one says Italy in its repose;  
This one says England where, gathered apart,  
It holds the hand up to support the face.

She stares, her gaze doom-heavy, sphingical,  
Out at the West, the future of the past.

The face with which she stares is Portugal.

8-12-1928.

## SEGUNDO / O DAS QUINAS

Os Deuses vendem quando dão.  
Compra-se a gloria com desgraça.  
Ai dos felizes, porque são  
Só o que passa!

Baste a quem baste o que lhe basta  
O bastante de lhe bastar!  
A vida é breve, a alma é vasta:  
Ter é tardar.

Foi com desgraça e com vileza  
Que Deus ao Christo definiu:  
Assim o oppoz à Natureza  
E Filho o ungiu.

8-12-1928.

**SECOND / THAT OF THE INESCUTCHEONS**

The gods are selling when they give.  
The price of glory is disaster.  
Grieve for the happy, seeing they live  
Only what passes!

Whom what contents him does content,  
Let him content him with that thing!  
Life is short, soul is extent:  
Having's straggling.

With disaster and all that's low  
God to Christ pared Himself down:  
Set him against Nature so,  
Anointed him Son.

8-12-1928.

## II. Os Castellos

### PRIMEIRO / *ULYSSES*

O mytho é o nada que é tudo.  
O mesmo sol que abre os céus  
É um mytho brilhante e mudo –  
O corpo morto de Deus,  
Vivo e desnudo.

Este, que aqui aportou,  
Foi por não ser existindo.  
Sem existir nos bastou.  
Por não ter vindo foi vindo  
E nos creou.

Assim a lenda se escorre  
A entrar na realidade,  
E a fecundal-a decorre.  
Em baixo, a vida, metade  
De nada, morre.

## II. The Castles

### FIRST / *ULYSSES*

Myth – nothing, everything. Brute  
Sun throwing skies wide  
Is a myth, brilliant, mute –  
The dead body of God  
Living and nude.

This man who here came ashore  
Was by way of not being.  
Came? Was here before.  
Did us proud by not being.  
Made us, what's more.

So legend trickles, tries  
To seep into real life.  
And runs, can fertilise.  
Down below, life – half  
Nothing – dies.