

Fernando Pessoa

The social transformation which has been taking place in Portugal...

The social transformation which has been taking place in Portugal for the last three generations, and which culminated in the establishment of the Republic, has been, as is natural, accompanied by a concomitant transformation in Portuguese literature. The two phenomena have a common origin, in the essential changes which have, with increasing rapidity, been taking place in the very bases of the national consciousness. To attribute the literary change to the political one, or the political one to the literary one would be as erroneous. Both are manifestations of a fundamental transformation which the national consciousness has undergone and is undergoing.

The literary change, represented by the definite rupture with Portuguese literary traditions, can be taken as having a definite beginning with Antero de Quental and the Coimbra School, though it had necessarily been preceded by hints and attempts at such a change, going back as far as 1770 to the forgotten José Anastácio da Cunha (a greater poet than the over-rated and insupportable Bocage); José Anastácio, with his complex culture (he knew, besides the usual French, English and German and translated from Shakespeare, Otway and Gessner) represents the first white glimmer of dawn on the horizon of Portuguese literature, for he represents the first attempt to dissolve the hardened shape of traditionalist stupidity by the usual method of multiplied culture contacts.

The Romantics continued this work in their half-hearted and lukewarm way; the insufficient power of their action can be measured by the circumstance that the strongest influence they brought into literature was the decadent classicist Castilho, whose damaging sway covers with its leaden influence some thirty years of Portuguese literature, a little recreation of the Dark Ages in modern Portugal, if it had not been for the parallel existence of real renovating forces, mounting up from Garrett to Guilherme Braga, to Antero de Quental, Guerra Junqueiro (first phase (manner) and Cesario Verde, who was the first to see in Portuguese poetry, the clearest vision of things and their real presence which can be found in modern literature.

The new introduction of culture contacts took place round 1890 with the bringing in of symbolist and decadent influences through Eugénio de Castro and António Nobre, Guerra Junqueiro (second manner). As the first, it was received with violent disapproval, as every new thing is.

From Antonio Nobre the pantheist movement (which the Porto monthly “A Águia” represents) gradually worked itself up through Afonso Lopes-Vieira (since fallen into imbecility) to António Correia d’Oliveira, up to the full transcendental pantheism of Teixeira de Pascoaes, one of the greatest of living poets and the greatest lyrical poet Europe now has, if only justice could be done to him. Guerra Junqueiro, as usual, by dint of his extraordinary (and thoroughly Portuguese) adaptability to new circumstances, followed this movement also, and the “Oração à Luz”, though it has no equal in modern poetry outside Wordsworth’s great Ode, cannot however reach the pure flight and wild spirituality of Pascoaes’ great Elegia (in “Vida Etérea”).

The central fault of the saudosists, however, was that, what they gained in depth they lost in surface; that while their great merit and originality was gained by a descent (never before realised) into the depths of national consciousness — which the old poets never approached, for Camões is an Italian and Gil Vicente only superficially (...).

1912?

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