

Fernando Pessoa

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It will at once occur to ask how it is that genius comes at all to be appreciated? If it is, in its work, a novel aspect of the permanent in mankind, and if, by virtue of that novel aspect, it falls out with the age it lives in, how is it that, by the very same novelty, it does not fall also out of touch with the generations or the periods, thereafter? There is no mystery in the fact nor difficulty in the explanation.

All life, and therefore all social life, is a system of actions and reactions. The character of each period is determined by the fact that it reacts against the period just before it. All social life is convention and formula, and will ever be. Conventions age and formulas become evident. When this happens, a new age sets in, which shouts down rightly as false the conventions and the formulae of the age before, and proceeds at once to acclaim as Nature the equally conventional conventions and the equally formular formulae which it sets up for its own. The least careful observer of social life will notice this. There is no more clearly conventional, formular and artificial age than our own; yet no age has ever shrieked more at the formulas just before — those of what someone has called the Victorian Age.

Now genius is precisely in the same case as the next generation. It is also in opposition to the age it lives in. There is therefore a coincidence between the function of a genius and the function of the time after him. And the coincidence becomes confluence because that time after, in opposing the time before, seeks a basis on it, and the basis within it is the man of genius. That man of genius becomes therefore both the creator and the child of the next age.

Men of genius either become celebrated in their own time, because they have either talent or wit too; or, not having these, and therefore being cold-shouldered by their age, they are celebrated in the next age. They are never made famous two ages or three off. Be it noted that I refer to genius — not to mere aspects of genius, or to literary curiosities, which may be discovered, forgotten and rediscovered times over.

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“Erostratus”. in Páginas de Estética e de Teoria Literárias. Fernando Pessoa. (Textos estabelecidos e prefaciados por Georg Rudolf Lind e Jacinto do Prado Coelho.) Lisboa: Ática, 1966: 200.