

Fernando Pessoa

## Posterity, says Faguet, likes only concise writers:

Posterity, says Faguet, likes only concise writers: *la posterité n'aime que les écrivains concis*. Men will ever read even though with trouble the immediate temporal, for what private interest, so to speak, there may be in it for them. They will always read a five-hundred page novel on their own times, as they will always read a five-hundred page manuscript on the history of their family, or of their neighbours. But the past will appeal to them only by perfection and brevity. It is curious how many a man, who is a disastrous critic of his contemporaries, is lucid about the past. This is frequently seen in historical writers; and the man who judges Walpole with considerable sociological instinct will be unable to apply the same principles (if he have any) to the elucidation of the current premier. The moment he comes home he goes out.

Fame, in respect of the lesser poets and the lesser prosers, will narrow down from anthology to anthology. In a hundred years from now it will be impossible to issue a complete edition of Byron, or of Shelley or of Goethe the poet or Hugo. Even modern selections from them will be further pared down by the stress and storm (?) of time: the hundred pages, in which we now know Wordsworth (to any purpose), will become fifty; the fifty, in which we know Coleridge, will perhaps be no more than ten. Every nation will have its great fundamental books and one or two anthologies of the rest. Competition among the dead is more terrible than competition among the living; the dead are more.

Some poets and prose-writers will survive, not by absolute value, but by absolute relativeness. This will keep sweet "Pickwick Papers", which is not a great work of genius, but is a representative work of the genius of the nineteenth century (and this will be all of Dickens); this will preserve Whitman — how reduced or selected I cannot foresee — , for, great as is the part of place and occasion in the "Leaves of Grass", there is (...).

These books will survive as types.

Most of modern literature is written talk, fireside telling with the voice raised, the wrong afflatus, sometimes that sad Letter to Posterity which, as Voltaire said of J. B. Rousseau's poem of the name, will never reach the addressee. We waste in writing the time we should gain in talking, or, mayhap, we do not

waste it, but have no one to talk to by voice, or we like an audience too large for the reach of the larynx, and the patience of the far-off listener. Hence our bright and futile novels, our clever and null satires and essays, our dinner-table poems: things often entertainings frequently superior, always worth doing so long as we do not call them art. But it is true that if we did not think them art we would not do them, little as they are, at all.

The concentrated effort required to produce even a small good poem exceeds the constructive incapacity, the meanness of understanding, the futility of sincerity, the disordered poverty of imagination which characterise our times. When Milton wrote a sonnet, he wrote as if he were to live or die by that sole sonnet. No sonnet should be written in any other spirit. An epigram may be a straw, but it should be the straw at which the dying poet grasps.

Great art is not the work of journalists, whether they write in periodicals or not.

The great scientific influence of the second half of last century was unreceived. It produced materialism instead of the scientific spirit. The man in the street heard of phrenology or astrology or alchemy, and he said they were rot. The scientific spirit would have led him to say nothing or to examine each thing directly. Phrenology was driven out of the scientific field by mere religious prejudice, and it is one of the delights of Nemesis that its gradual reinstalment should have been the work of a Catholic alienist, Grasset. Alchemy has returned with the latter chemistry. Astrology is verifiable, if anyone will take the trouble to verify it. Why the stars influence us is a difficult question to answer, but it is not a scientific question. The scientific question is: do they or do they not? The reason why is metaphysical and need not trouble the fact, once we find that it is a fact.

The great novelists, the great artists and the great other things of our time point with pride to their fortunes and to their public. They should at least have the courage to sneer at their past inferiors. Wells should laugh at Fielding and Shaw at Shakespeare; as a matter of fact, Shaw does laugh at Shakespeare.

They have celebrity, such as the time can give; they have the fortune which follows upon that celebrity; they have the honours and the position which follow upon either or both of those. They cannot want immortality. What the Gods give they sell, the Greeks said. And English children are told that they cannot have the cake they eat.

s. d.

“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: 204.