

Robert Browning in Portugal:

The Response of Poets, Critics and Readers in the Lusophone World

by Paula Alexandra Guimarães

The average Portuguese reader of English poetry, either in its original or translated form, usually comes across Robert Browning through the interposed medium of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who due both to her popular *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) and modern feminist critical assessments of her work has attracted considerable attention among Portuguese students and scholars.¹

Furthermore, like other nations, the Portuguese are profoundly moved by the celebrated love affair between the two Victorian poets, which is for us somehow reminiscent of other intense love stories in our past history, namely that of Luís de Camões and Catarina de Ataíde.² It is also a known fact that this ill-fated story associated with our revered national poet has served as a major inspiration for many of Elizabeth Barrett's poems, precisely those that Browning and other contemporaries of his most admired in her repertoire.³ But her own vast poetic output also includes works that seem to engage the Portuguese reader more directly and forcibly than those of her husband with the social and political issues of her day and, as such, with what the reader conceives as the reality of Victorian Britain.⁴

Browning, in contrast, has attracted the attention of a much smaller though arguably more influential group of readers. The poets and writers of the Modernist movement, most notably Fernando Pessoa, became not only more interested than their nineteenth-century predecessors in Anglophone literature as such,⁵ but also in the new technique of a

depersonalised poetic voice, found variously in Pound and Eliot, and pioneered by Robert Browning. Were it not for this very restricted group of Portuguese and Brazilian intellectuals, amongst poets, critics and translators, the panorama surrounding Browning's scholarship and readership in the Lusophone world might seem as barren or deserted as the devastated expanses Childe Roland traverses in his quest for the Dark Tower.

There have, however, been a number of significant attempts made to change this situation in the last thirty years or so. One of these contributions has been offered by the Portuguese scholar and translator João Almeida Flor in his work entitled *O Poeta, a Verdade e as Máscaras: Leitura de Robert Browning*.⁶ It is in the profound knowledge of the ideological and cultural implications that link Victorianism to Modernism that Almeida Flor identifies the dramatic monologue in the writing of Browning as the form of expression of a 'forest of deceptions' established in the midst of an 'aesthetics of reiteration', in the face of which readings of the poems 'are but subjective, sophisticated, fallacious and fragmentary interpretations', each contributing 'with its own amount of truth (and illusion) to our interpretation of the real'.⁷ About the specific features of discourse in monologue, Almeida Flor states that besides its placement in space, it is located both in an individual biographical time (which he designates as 'climax-instant') and, very frequently, in a collective historical time, necessarily one of 'crisis'.⁸

Four years later, Almeida Flor would publish the first bilingual anthology containing a translated selection of Browning's poems – *Monólogos Dramáticos por Robert Browning* (1980).⁹ In a critical review of this work, the Portuguese critic Luís de Sousa Rebelo mentions the fact that the selection is dominated by a tacit dialogue between Fernando Pessoa and Robert Browning;¹⁰ this is openly corroborated by the question that Almeida Flor himself formulates to his reader in the Preface: 'Could Pessoa be the Browning of twentieth-century Portugal?' (1980: 5)¹¹ Rebelo argues that there is a 'duel of peers in the dialectics of the

discourse’, a suggestion reinforced by the inclusion of poems such as ‘How it Strikes a Contemporary’ and ‘Two in the Campagna’ (*Men and Women*). The latter, in particular, expresses a veiled paganism intertwined with renunciations which recalls the *Odes* of one of Pessoa’s *alter egos*, Ricardo Reis.¹² For Rebelo, the purpose of the translator was to ‘reveal to the Portuguese reader one of the aspects of Browning’s poetry to which he could be more sensitive at that moment’.¹³ This corresponds to a search for a literary space in the target language where a new text can be born that is meaningful for that particular culture. For Rebelo, ‘[the] rhythm and euphony of Almeida Flor’s verse are manifested in the veiled assonances, the occasional rhyme, in caesura, and in the combined art of metre and discursivity learned precisely with Modernism’.¹⁴ (78).

The association of Pessoa with Robert Browning was closely investigated by the Brazilian scholar George Monteiro in 1991 and, more recently, in 2000.¹⁵ Firstly, he briefly presents Pessoa as a ‘disciple’ of Browning in an International Conference of Pessoa Studies¹⁶ and, secondly, he analyses the overall influence of nineteenth-century Anglo-American literature, including Browning’s poetry, on the Portuguese poet’s work.¹⁷ In the dedication to his play *Strafford* (1837), Browning had significantly described drama as ‘one of Action in Character, rather than Character in Action’;¹⁸ thus, Monteiro explores Browning’s dramatic notions and how they may have influenced both the theory and the practice of Pessoa’s poetry, pointing not only to striking similarities but also emphasising major differences between the two artists’ methods and purposes.¹⁹

Following Fernando Pessoa’s self-questioning regarding his ‘explosion’ into his poetic *personae* or great heteronyms – ‘Have I turned myself into a nation?’ – Monteiro suggests that the Portuguese poet had indeed turned himself into a ‘nation’, but that ‘it was an odd nation’, ‘a nation of poets’.²⁰ (2000: 58). And Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis and Álvaro de Campos were that rare combination: *imaginary* poets who wrote *real* poetry, ‘each in his own

distinctive voice and on his own terms'.²¹ If, as Monteiro stresses, this creative method had no direct literary precedent, the theoretical explanation offered by the poet himself closely resembles the ones Robert Browning had put forward in some of his works, namely in 'One Word More' (from his collection *Men and Women*):

[...] you saw me gather men and women,
 Live or dead or fashioned by my fancy,
 Enter each and all, and use their service,
 Speak from every mouth, -- the speech, a poem.
 (XIV, 129-32)

Fernando Pessoa, in his turn, would write around 1915:

Let us suppose that a supremely depersonalized writer such as Shakespeare instead of creating the character of Hamlet as part of a play, had actually created him as simply a character without a play. He would have written, so to speak, a *one-character play* – a *prolonged analytic monologue* (*Correspondência*, 63, my emphasis).

Based on this extremely revealing statement, and in spite of the fact that Pessoa himself failed to mention Browning's similar technique, Monteiro suggests that 'Browning's creations could [and should] be seen as the immediate predecessors for Pessoa's heteronymic creations' (59). It is perhaps significant, in establishing a direct connection between the two poets, that the 'Casa of Fernando Pessoa' includes the *Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, with introductory note by Charles W. Forward, a centenary edition published in 1912 that includes a picture of him.

Interestingly, at the early age of twenty, Browning had apparently come up with a very similar idea of heteronymic creation but, as Monteiro concludes, he never materialised it

fully; Browning thought of publishing works in several genres and under different identities, in such a way that ‘the world was never to guess that ... the respective authors ... were no other than *one and the same individual*’ (quoted in Monteiro, 2002: 60, my emphasis).²² This convergence is extraordinary, but after he had failed to a certain extent as a dramatist and as a conventional lyric poet, Browning devised another form in which to conceal his ‘identity’ – what he would designate as the ‘dramatic lyric’.

As late as 1930, Browning would again, and more explicitly, come to the forefront of Fernando Pessoa’s theorising about poetry, which is indicative of the pervasiveness of this influence. In writing about the ‘four grades (or levels) of lyric poetry’,²³ Pessoa first mentions Browning as an example of the third degree, in which the ‘intellectual poet’ begins to depersonalise himself in ‘monologues revealing diverse souls’ and feel ‘states of the soul that he really does not possess’ (1966: 151); then Pessoa mentions Browning again in describing the fourth level, in which the poet ‘becomes completely depersonalised’, not only feeling but actually living ‘the states of the soul that are not directly his’ (152).²⁴

It is at this level that Monteiro believes we can place Pessoa’s own poetic practice or heteronymic creation, including the one of Bernardo Soares, asking whether they are not creations as dramatic as those that populated Browning’s poetic world (2000: 62). But if ‘each one of Browning’s characters’ has ‘a discrete existence of his own’ and Pessoa’s heteronyms are similarly ‘biographical entities in themselves’ (62), a fundamental difference stands out, Monteiro suggests. Pessoa created characters and speakers who are poets, who have their distinctive body of poetry and poetics; Pessoa even planned to publish the individual volumes of poetry – one for each heteronym – and corresponding biographies.²⁵

Monteiro sees this process also as an ‘overall, unifying drama’ that ‘emerges from the play of voices’ (2000: 63) and, as such, one that could be described in Browning’s terms as

‘action in character’, and in Pessoa’s own as ‘a drama in people’. Pessoa writes, in fact, that ‘each one makes up a kind of drama; and together they make up still another drama’ (1966: 153) – an ‘overall drama of discipleship’, in Monteiro’s words (66). Thus, to complicate matters even further, Pessoa apparently conceived a fifth level of lyric poetry to account for his own relationship to his heteronyms, ‘in the guise of theorist practising theory as ... an act of depersonalization’ (63). In 1927, Pessoa writes in the periodical *Presença* that ‘All true emotion is a lie in the intellect, [...] To express one’s self is to say what one does not feel’ (1966: 154).

According to Adolfo Casais Monteiro, Fernando Pessoa was not an authentic dramatic poet because he ‘was incapable of giving physical incarnation to his ideas’, ‘to create characters’ (1985: 232); he could only indirectly lend them his own voice and ‘make each one of them into another poet’ (233). Like Browning, Pessoa was not successful in the theatre: this is proved by his fragmentary and unfinished *Fausto* and, even more, by his one-scene play *The Sailor*, an example of ‘static drama’ (published in *Orpheu*, 1915). According to Pessoa, this type of drama occurs ‘when action does not constitute the dramatic plot [...] there is no conflict and, strictly speaking, no plot. [...] it reveals the soul through exchanges of words and creation of situations’ (1966: 154, my emphasis). This description seems to fit exactly some of Browning’s precepts in regard to his own writing, especially in the preface to the 1863 revision of *Sordello* where Browning reveals that his purpose ‘lay on the incidents in the development of a soul,’ for ‘little else is worth study’ (quoted in Kennedy and Hair, 2007: 303); as such, it constitutes another suggestion of Pessoa’s indebtedness to the Victorian poet.²⁶

Unfortunately, in the last decade of the twentieth century, the works dedicated specifically to Robert Browning or his *oeuvre*, in Portugal and the Lusophone community, have been very few and far between. The Academy, and their respective research centres,

appear to be much more committed to the study and analysis of modern poets and artists, probably forgetting in the process that Browning was the very first Modern, and that his multifaceted works still have a great deal to offer to the attentive and diligent twenty-first century reader. As a conclusion, I will only mention that two or three small academic works on Browning have recently been completed at my university, thus proving that the ‘flame’ is not extinguished.

One of them is a Masters dissertation entitled “‘The less Shakespeare he’: Revelações da Mente Masculina sobre Poder e Género na Poesia Dramática de Robert Browning’. It analyses both the manners and forms in which Browning portrays the masculine mind and its often destructive passions, through profoundly revealing speeches of the moral, social and historical motives underlying power and gender relations between man and woman. The work also discusses the respective, and often contradictory, influences of Elizabeth Barrett and William Shakespeare in the poetry of Browning, with particular emphasis on issues of masculinity, the representation of woman and poetic form (dramatic monologue).²⁷

The other two works are articles recently published in International Conference Proceedings, reflecting upon specific aspects of Browning’s poetry, poetics and philosophy. The first one, entitled ‘Analysing Darker Motives, or Delving Robert Browning’s “Poetry of Revenge”’, sees the poet’s work as deriving from both a Classic and an English tradition of a ‘literature of revenge’, and as a distinctive and innovative analysis of the motives underlying many of our human actions (as disturbing and extreme as they may seem), in which notions of good and evil are made relative and ‘revenge’ and ‘forgiveness’ are seen as two sides of the same coin.²⁸ The second article, whose title is “‘Speak from every mouth – the speech, a poem’: Conflicting Voices, Discourses and Identities in the Poetry of Robert Browning’, analyses the way in which Browning creates for each of his speakers a highly individual ‘linguistic personality’ through the drama of conflicting internal voices, which in turn

involves a discursive conflict between the individual and some form of authority, whether institutionalised power, conventional morality or artistic formalism.²⁹

It would be an interesting and worthwhile task to explore much further (involving not only a wider but also a deeper investigation) how twenty-first century Portuguese writers, scholars and critics are at this precise moment receiving Browning's works, in original or translated form. To know exactly the extent to which a younger generation of Lusophone artists and intellectuals is reading, reassessing, translating and eventually recreating the multifaceted poetic and philosophical universes of this great English poet of alterity.

¹ It could be said that the initial interest in Barrett Browning's *Sonnets* was later transferred to works such as *Aurora Leigh* (1857) and she became lionised as a radical social visionary and feminist.

² As a young man Camões apparently frequented elite circles in Lisbon. Tradition has it that he began a romance with Caterina de Ataíde, a lady of the Queen's entourage, to whom he addressed some of his early poems. Influential members of the royal court, however, opposed the affair and forced Camões from the court into a life of exile.

³ Besides the well-known *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, emulating the style of Portuguese Renaissance love poetry, Elizabeth Barrett wrote "Catarina to Camoens", a poem in which the Portuguese lady addresses the poet from her death-bed and imagines his return to her.

⁴ Examples of these are "The Cry of the Children", "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point", "A Curse for a Nation", poems addressing the contemporary problems of child labour and slavery.

⁵ Previously, and for a long period that extended to centuries, the Portuguese literati and artistic coteries were mainly influenced by the distinctive French and Continental schools, which coincidentally were also closely studied by the Brownings themselves, as the references to George Sand and Joseph Milsand of Dijon in their respective writings may attest.

⁶ Doctoral thesis presented to the University of Lisbon in 1976; the title can be rendered in English as *The Poet, the Truth and the Masks: A Reading of Robert Browning*.

⁷ Flor, *A Reading*, pp. 279-80.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁹ Its literal English translation is *Dramatic Monologues by Robert Browning* (Lisbon: Na Regra do Jogo, 1980).

¹⁰ In "Tradução", *Colóquio de Letras*, Nº 7 (Nov. 1982), 76-78.

¹¹ Many scholars have previously documented Shakespeare's powerful presence in the nineteenth century and, namely, in Robert Browning. Oscar Wilde's assertion that Browning "is the most Shakespearian creature since Shakespeare", in 1890, may have initiated this critical process of identification. Adrian Poole begins his expansive study of *Shakespeare and the Victorians* by quoting Robert Browning's proclamation that Shakespeare is "our very bones and blood, our very selves". Robert Sawyer's *Victorian Appropriations of Shakespeare* (of 2003) also dedicates a chapter to Robert Browning.

¹² Ricardo Reis is one of the most important heteronyms of Fernando Pessoa, portrayed precisely as a rational epicurean pastoral poet.

¹³ Rebelo, "Tradução", 77.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁵ George Monteiro is Adjunct Professor, Professor Emeritus of English, Portuguese and Brazilian Studies at Brown University, as well as being a recognised translator and poet.

¹⁶ "Pessoa: Discípulo de Robert Browning", in *Actas IV Congresso Internacional de Estudos Pessoaanos*, Secção Brasileira, Vol. I (Porto: Fundação Eng. António de Almeida, 1991), 227-87.

¹⁷ *Fernando Pessoa and Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Literature*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000. It is important to mention, in this context, the Portuguese scholar Maria da Encarnação Monteiro, who had already published a study on the English influences in the poetry of Pessoa in her much earlier work entitled *Incidências Inglesas na Poesia de Fernando Pessoa* (Coimbra Editora, 1956).

¹⁸ Quoted in Kennedy and Hair, *The Dramatic Imagination of Robert Browning: A Literary Life*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007, 56-7.

¹⁹ See in particular “4. Drama in Character. Robert Browning”, pp. 58-66.

²⁰ Monteiro, *Fernando Pessoa*, p. 58.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² This statement was written by Browning on the copy of his first (suppressed) poem *Pauline* which he gave to John Stuart Mill. It was published (in part) in William Sharp’s widely-read *Life of Browning*, and so might have been seen by Pessoa (although it does not occur in the copy that Pessoa owned of Browning’s poems).

²³ This is, in fact, a short history of modern poetry, organised by the criterion of depersonalisation, a fundamental document to discern Pessoa’s understanding of ‘tradition’. Pessoa catalogues and distributes dead poets according to the stage of depersonalisation of their respective works. Report to *Páginas de Estética* (eds. Prado Coelho and Georg Lind, 1966). This ‘history’ seems to anticipate T. S. Eliot’s 1953 essay entitled “The Three Voices of Poetry”.

²⁴ As other examples of the four levels of lyric poetry, Fernando Pessoa mentions A. C. Swinburne’s work as second level, Alfred Tennyson’s as third level and William Shakespeare’s as fourth level. The coincidence that all of them, including Robert Browning, are English poets is a fact of some consequence.

The circumstance that Pessoa lived his earliest years in South Africa, spoke and wrote English fluently, and that he read the major Anglophone writers, may perhaps help explain those mentions.

²⁵ The heteronyms also have their own respective professions or occupations, as part of their defining features: for example, Alberto Caeiro is a teacher and Álvaro de Campos is an engineer.

²⁶ George Monteiro prefers to see Fernando Pessoa as having no precedent in the dramatic poetry of Browning; Pessoa is, in his words, “a director” who “having cast his play then refrains entirely from directing the players, who go on to spin webs and plots by themselves” (2000: 66).

²⁷ “‘The less Shakespeare he’: Revelations of the Masculine Mind about Power and Gender in the Dramatic Poetry of Robert Browning”, Masters dissertation by Jane Maria Bastos Ewerton, supervised by Assistant Professor Paula Alexandra Guimarães, and submitted to the Institute of Letters and Human Sciences of University of Minho, Braga (approved September 2011).

²⁸ This article is a more developed version of a paper I presented in the Panel on ‘Poe-etic Revenge’ of the First Global Conference on Revenge, Mansfield College, Oxford, in July 2010.

²⁹ This article is a more detailed version of a paper I presented at the XII Colóquio de Outono (‘Voices, Discourses and Identities in Conflict’), organised by the research Centre for Humanistic Studies of University of Minho, in December 2010.

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