

Fernando Pessoa

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Nothing worth expressing ever remains unexpressed; it is against the nature of things that it should remain so. We think that Coleridge had in him great things he never told the world; yet he told them in the “Mariner” and “Kubla Khan”, which contain the metaphysics that is not there, the fancies they omit and the speculations nowhere to be found Coleridge could never have written those poems if there had not been that in him that the poems do not express by what they say, but by the mere fact that they exist.

Each man has very little to express, and the sum of a whole life of feeling and thought can sometimes bear total in an eight-line poem. If Shakespeare had written nothing but Ariel’s song to Ferdinand, he would not indeed have been the Shakespeare he was — for he did write more — but there would have been enough of him to show that he was a greater poet than Tennyson.

Each of us has perhaps much to say, but there is little to say about that much. Posterity wants us to be short and precise. Faguet says excellently that posterity likes only short writers.

Variety is the only excuse for abundance. No man should leave twenty different books unless he can write like twenty different men. Victor Hugo’s works fill fifty large volumes, yet each volume, each page almost, contain all Victor Hugo. The other papers add up as pages, not as genius. There was in him no productivity, but prolixity. He wasted his time as a genius, however little he may have wasted it as a writer. Goethe’s judgement on him remains supreme early as it was given, and a great lesson to all artists: “he should write less and work more”, he said. This is, in its distinction between real work, which is non-extended, and fictitious work which takes up space — for pages are no more than space — one of the great critical sayings of the world.

If he can write like twenty different men, he is twenty different men, however that may be, and his twenty books are in order.

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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: 208.