

In search of lost quietude: On Pessoa

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Installed on the upper floors of certain respectable taverns in Lisbon can be found a small number of restaurants or eating places, which have the stolid, homely look of those restaurants you see in towns that lack even a train station. Amongst the clientele of such places, which are rarely busy except on Sundays, one is as likely to encounter the eccentric as the nondescript, to find people who are but a series of parentheses in the book of life.

There was a period in my life when a combination of economic necessity and a desire for peace and quiet led me to frequent just such a restaurant. I would dine at around seven each night and, as chance would have it, I was almost always there at the same time as one particular man. At first I took little notice of him but as time passed he came to interest me.

He was a man in his thirties, thin, fairly tall, very hunched when sitting though less so when standing, and dressed with a not entirely unselfconscious negligence. Not even the suffering apparent in his pale, unremarkable features added any interest to them nor was it easy to pinpoint the origin of that suffering. It could have been any number of things: hardship, grief or simply the suffering born of the indifference that comes from having suffered too much.

He always ate sparingly and afterwards would smoke a cigarette rolled from cheap tobacco. He would watch the other costumers, not suspiciously, but as if genuinely interested in them. He did not scrutinize them as though wanting to fix their faces or any outward evidence of their personalities in his memory, rather he was simply intrigued by them. And it was this odd trait of his that first aroused my curiosity.

I began to observe him more closely. I noticed that a certain hesitant intelligence illuminated his features, but his face was so often clouded by exhaustion, by the inertia of cold fear, that I was usually hard to see beyond this.

I learned from a waiter at the restaurant that he worked as a clerk in a company that had its office nearby.

One day there was a scuffle in the street immediately outside the restaurant – a fight between two men. The customers all rushed to the windows, as did I and the man I've been describing. I made some banal comment to him and he replied in kind. His voice was dull and tremulous, the voice of one who hopes for nothing because all hope is vain. But perhaps it was foolish of me to attribute so much to my evening companion at the restaurant.

I don't quite know why but after that we always used to greet each other. And then one day, prompted perhaps by the foolish coincidence of us both turning up for supper later than usual, at half

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past nine, we struck up a casual conversation. At one point he asked me if I was a writer. I said I was. I mentioned the magazine Orpheu, which had recently come out. To my surprise he praised it, indeed praised it highly. When I voiced my surprise, saying that the art of those who wrote for Orpheu tended to appeal only to a small minority, he replied that maybe he was one of that minority. Anyway, he added, he was not entirely unfamiliar with that art for, he remarked timidly, since he had nowhere to go and nothing to do, no friends to visit and no interest in reading books, after supper he usually returned to his rented room and passed the night writing.

This is the way Fernando Pessoa, himself, introduces Bernardo Soares, his invention and *The Book of Disquiet's* author.

If we weren't talking about Pessoa, we might think we were in the presence of one more literary expression of an organic tendency to depersonalization and simulation, as he says about the origin of his main heteronyms – *whatever the case, the mental origin of my heteronyms lies in my relentless, organic tendency to depersonalization and simulation.* Firstly, because everybody knows that Soares fulfills Pessoa's urge to be with himself, that's why he observes himself from outside, why he makes an auto-observation. In other words: Soares and Pessoa, the one, in search of some quietude: *There was a period in my life when a combination of economic necessity and a desire for peace and quiet led me to frequent just such a restaurant.* Secondly, because we can discern there almost everything which generally refers to dissociative identity disorder: the retreat regarding his own feelings, acts and thoughts; the careful way he describes them; the same thing regarding his own body; the imagined chats; without forgetting the constant depression, the emotional disorders, the distressing suffering and emptiness. In short, the feeling of incompleteness we immediately feel from the presentation which Pessoa makes of Soares and which Soares himself exhibits throughout his own book.

Once we begin to talk about Pessoa, everything becomes more complex. As we can read, Bernardo Soares is made to be the solution to a disorder with much more important proportions, a kind of artificial refuge against a structural disorder which makes such depersonalization look almost insignificant. It is known that Pessoa was "victim" of a fertile and cruel imagination from his childhood, when the first heteronyms did appear, as we can read from his letter to Adolfo Casais Monteiro in 1935: *Ever since I was a child, it has been my tendency to create around me a fictitious world, to surround myself with friends and acquaintances that never existed. (...) Ever since I've known myself as "me", I can remember envisioning the shape, motions, character and life story of various unreal figures who were as visible and as close to me as the manifestations of what we call, perhaps too hastily, real life.* A certain Chevalier de Pas, a captain Thibeaut and then Alexander Search, most likely a way to compensate for the emptiness left by the death of his father, are just some examples of little Pessoa's effervescent imagination. The same imagination which keeps a very special relationship with his mother, pushed to leave the country to be at the side of her new husband in a diplomatic mission in South Africa and from whom Pessoa, already a young adult, will be separated as he returns to Lisbon. Then he just has to follow that tendency, giving free rein to it and live up to its name: Pessoa, person, persona and which etymologically means mask, the mask through which we hide and reveal who we really are. From one of his poems written in English, a language in which he was fluent having studied in Durban where he won his first prize – creative writing –, he didn't do anything else but to break himself into different faces through which he inevitably runs: *How many masks wear we, and undermasks/ Upon our countenance of soul, and when,/ If for self sport the soul itself unmask/ Knows it the last mark off and the face plain?*

The heteronyms and semi heteronyms of Pessoa are multiples. It's very possible that some of them still remain unknown inside the famous safe which still keeps several *pessoanos* busy. Pessoa, who sometimes feels himself to be nothing, at other times says he feels to be shelter to all the dreams in the world: *I'm nothing./ I shall always be nothing./ I can only be nothing./ Apart from this, I have in me all the dreams in the world.* However, there are three heteronyms which stand out: for the importance of their literary production, for their consistence and, most of all, for their psychological density. I mean Ricardo Reis, Alberto Caeiro and Álvaro de Campos, author of *Tobacconist's* and where we can read the verses above.

Regarding Ricardo Reis's birthday, Pessoa talks about different dates. The first version says that Dr. Ricardo Reis came upon his soul January 29th, 1914. Later, in the very same letter to Adolfo Casais Monteiro, he changes his mind and says that Ricardo Reis did appear to him in 1912. The confusion about his birthplace is the same: firstly Lisbon, then Porto. About the rest there's no doubt: we are in the presence of his first important heteronym, even if not the first one entering upon a literary activity which was intensive and coherent till December 13th 1933 – the year of the death of Ricardo Reis. Doctor by profession, monarchical, the reason he emigrated to Brazil, he got his formation from the Jesuits. He's expert on classical authors and Latin poets old style, the style he uses in his own poetic creation. He preconizes a simple conception of life, accepting serenely the relativity of everything. This is the closest heteronym to its creator: physically – tawny, middle-sized, bent way of walking, thin and looking like a Portuguese Jew (Pessoa had Jewish antecedents) –, as well as his way of being and thinking. He's a sensationalism supporter, something he takes from Caeiro, and he's inspired by Stoicism and Epicureanism which influence the way he conceives the world.

Alberto Caeiro, the master, around whom all other heteronyms evolve, was born in April 1889 in Lisbon, although he spent a great part of his life on a farm in Ribatejo where he would meet Álvaro de Campos for the first time. He talks about himself as someone simple and natural, befitting someone with no more than a primary school education. He's blond, blue-eyed and a little shorter than Ricardo Reis. He's fragile, even if he doesn't look it, and dies young in 1915, victim of tuberculosis. Compared to all the others, the master's biography took the least amount of time from Pessoa. As Ricardo Reis did say, the master's life was his poems. Anyway, we know that he did appear in Pessoa's life on March 8, 1914, apparently in a spontaneous way, in the same epoch when he was strongly trying to run from subjectivism and mysticism. That's the source of Alberto Caeiro's simplicity and also explains his mocking attitude toward all occultisms, the reason why he fights the transcendence, the same reason why he becomes pagan and materialist and does not loose much time on philosophical issues.

Álvaro de Campos was born in 1890 in Tavira, a southern Portuguese town. Professionally, he is an engineer. He studied in Glasgow, Scotland, and graduated in naval technology. Visiting the Orient, he writes *Opiário*, the poem he dedicated to Mário de Sá-Carneiro, on the Suez Channel crossing. Disappointed with the visit, he comes back to Portugal where he will meet the master Caeiro, becoming his disciple. Meanwhile, he follows the modernist tendencies, such as futurism, but keeps his distance from sensationism. Just as he keeps his distance from master's objectivism, preferring to organize the sensations around the subject. This is why he becomes a subjectivist and also explains his consciousness of the absurd, his experience of boredom and his disillusion. His first composition dates from 1914 and he continued writing poetry, at least, till October 12, 1935, just before Fernando Pessoa died.

It seems, therefore, we have no choice but to rethink our original hypothesis with which we began our paper and to look beyond the simple expression of an apparent depersonalization. Instead, if we want to keep thinking about this case as a dissociative identity disorder, we must approach it from the perspective of a deeper multiple personality disorder. As in all such cases, we can distinguish different personalities coming from the same person, each with its own behavior and feelings. Even so, we are in the presence of a very particular and interesting case: aside from the fact that we cannot say exactly how many personalities we are talking about, they are not foreign to each other. They know about the others, they get in touch and develop personal relationships. As we can read in their biographies, they cross each other – Campos becomes a disciple of Caeiro – they quote each other and don't hesitate making comments about the others, something that usually doesn't happen in the typical cases of splitting the ego. Should we talk about a controlled disorder? One more case of artistic sublimation? Even if more complex? One more opportunity to evaluate the art as a therapeutic exercise? Regarding this, Bernardo Soares is the first to say that life would be nothing without the meaning given by art. Another opportunity to think of the analysis itself as an artistic exercise? Are we in the presence of a structural dissociation on the relation with The Other, as Lacan would say, or are we talking about psychosis as Freud would see it? Here there are some possible issues.

The issue about the existence of a primary identity, because there always is one, is yet another reason to keep thinking about Pessoa's case as a very special one. If we insist on distinguishing Pessoa and Soares – actually the same person searching for the same quietude –, we must think about three primary identities instead of just one as usually happens. Caeiro, the master, a heteronym regarding whom the others develop their own identities. Soares, who claims to know all the others very well. And Pessoa, for sure, oronym, who delegates that function to the author of *The Book of Disquiet*. A book written by a man obviously subjected to depressions, invaded by tedium and anguish from the burden of living. A man who's pushed by all those circumstances to introspection with no bounds, a kind of self-analysis that reveals the exciting spiritual life of a modest employee: *I envy – though I'm not sure if envy is the right word – those people about whom one could write a biography, or who could write their autobiography. Through these deliberately unconnected impressions I am the indifferent narrator of my autobiography without events, of my history without a life. These are my Confessions and if I say nothing in them it's because I have nothing to say.*

The book itself is a book definitively absent, with no center, written at the mercy of chance, with no organic plans, full of intimate and tortuous impressions. A book where form and substance become necessarily one. As Breton will say about his *Nadja: un livre qu'on laisse battant comme des portes, et duquel on n'a pas à chercher la clef*. A book where the disquiet and Pessoa's inaptitude to connect to himself and to the world, and nothing else but it, assume total importance. According to some critics, this does not mean that it must be read as a symptom of blind dispersion or of any other mental disease. But rather as a superior state of mind that entitles the writer to overfly and to embrace several contradictory meanings which are, after all, the different faces of reality.

I confess that I don't know which superior state of mind some readers talk about. Probably they want to refer to the mysticism and esotericism which also did draw Pessoa's attention. If it is the case, we have one more reason to validate the hypothesis of a splitting of the ego, even if more complex. It's known that studying visionaries and mystics was essential for experts to arrive at an understanding of the different kinds of personality changes. But it is also possible that these literary critics are unaware that they are accepting Lacan's proposal, which sees behind the dissociation between the imaginary ego and the unconsciousness a more fundamental division. One a structural dissociation, one an imposing refracture on the unconsciousness itself. In any case, as Soares said about himself, one life which observes its own slow wreck: *I've witnessed, incognito, the gradual collapse of my life, the slow foundering of all that I wanted to be. The life of someone who decides to exploit and live from the other's dreams: Ce qui se passe, en fait, c'est que je fais des autres mon propre rêve, me pliant à leurs opinions pour en pénétrer mon esprit et mon intuition, pour les faire miennes, et pour les plier à mon gout et faire ainsi, de leur personnalité, des choses apparentées à mes rêves.* A life spent hanging between depressions and troubles, that's what Soares exhibits as one exhibits a disease, which could be explained by several reasons: the death of his father when he was a child, the distance between himself and his mother, the almost inexistent affective life and the alcohol he drank excessively his entire life. In short, the black virgin¹.

¹ *O Virgem Negra*, the black virgin, is the title chosen by Mário de Cesariny, the most important Portuguese surrealist, for the book where he ironically tries to explain Pessoa to children. We suspect that this title came up when Pessoa's remains were transferred from the original cemetery to Mosteiro dos Jerónimos, to be side-by-side with Camões – and it was discovered that his cadaver was intact and blackened. A life drowned by alcohol? Perhaps.