

Fernando Pessoa and International Modernisms

Darlene J. Sadlier

Between 1910 and his death in 1935, Pessoa witnessed a series of important events in Portuguese social and political history: the demise of the monarchy, the establishment of the Republic, the rise and fall of Sidónio Pais, and the ultimate creation of the *Estado Novo*. His writing in the beginning of the period was strongly affected by a wave of revolutionary nationalism that swept across the country; at the same time, however, he was an artistic internationalist and a key figure in the development of Portuguese literary modernism. The twin influences of nationalism and modernism—one looking back to “native” sources, the other looking forward to a cosmopolitan sensibility—helped to shape not only his aesthetic theories but also his attitudes toward history. Similar to William Butler Yeats’s in Ireland, but with significant local differences, his work manifests contradictory impulses that are held in a productive tension. On the one hand, he attempted to define an “authentic” national tradition, expressing nostalgia for the epic glories of the Lusitanian empire; on the other hand, he was keenly aware of vanguard poetic movements, and he participated in the worldwide drive to “make it new.” The Janus-faced quality of his thinking probably contributed to the development of the heteronyms and at the same time enabled him to manipulate different stylistic tendencies within single poems, where he was able to reconcile powerful oppositions.

In certain ways, Pessoa’s heteronyms are symptomatic of modernist literary technique in general. They have something in common with Yeats’s “masks” and Pound’s “personae,” and are a logical outgrowth of modernism’s attempt to make poetry seem impersonal or purely dramatic. But Pessoa also makes us aware of the more general crisis in subjectivity in nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy. Like Kierkegaard, he invents different authorial personalities who embody contrasting views of life; like Nietzsche,

he suggests that the self is “something that must be created”; and like Foucault, he seems to believe that “one writes to become someone other than who one is.”

Pessoa's different personae may have grown out of his simultaneous attraction to a traditional style, rooted in Portuguese medieval and Renaissance lyrics, and to a modern aesthetic derived from French symbolism. But the various poets he created cannot be explained by any single motive. Pessoa was disposed from his childhood onward to a kind of literary ventriloquism; his aesthetic depended upon techniques of pastiche or quotation, which ultimately formed into dramatic characters or full-fledged authors. These authors served various functions, indicating a number of possible “splits” in his subjectivity: they allowed him to explore the “romantic” versus “classic” tendencies within modernism; they enabled him to express his nationalist versus his internationalist political inclinations; and on a more psychological level, they offered him the chance to participate in a kind of masquerade in which he sometimes could experience emotions he did not allow “himself” to feel. At the same time, he was one of those peculiarly modern writers who, either intentionally or inadvertently, seem to “loosen” what Barthes has called “the sway of the Author” (143). Like Mallarmé, Proust, Joyce and many other key figures of modernism and postmodernism, Pessoa's authority is achieved paradoxically by a subordination of romantic authorship to a kind of ever-changing mimicry or textual performance.

In regard to Pessoa's mimicry, we might want to keep in mind a famous statement from T.S. Eliot's “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But of course only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from those things” (29). The short verses in Portuguese signed by Pessoa “himself” derive much of their power from a tension between nationalism and modernism. But these poems also manifest a dynamic interplay between two important tendencies within European modernism itself. Borrowing language from T.S. Eliot, we could name these tendencies “tradition and the individual talent,” or perhaps “classicism and romanticism.” Several of the characteristic figures of high modernity (including T.E. Hulme and Eliot) are associated with the first tendency, which entails a doctrine of impersonality and a severe formal perfectionism;

other modernistic poets (such as Hart Crane) exemplify the second tendency, which is associated with emotional effusiveness and confessionalism. Pessoa (meaning in this case the man who wrote *all* the poems of the various heteronyms) is situated between the two extremes, but he belongs more in the first camp than in the second. Indeed, the lyric poems signed by Pessoa could be understood as an elaborate formal strategy for holding the personal or confessional at bay, allowing emotion to emerge only when mediated by artistic convention or a fictional persona. Pessoa suggests as much in his famous letter to Adolfo Casais Monteiro:

Referi-me, como viu, ao Fernando Pessoa só. Não penso nada do Caeiro, do Ricardo Reis ou do Álvaro de Campos. Nada disso poderei fazer, no sentido de publicar, excepto quando...me for dado o Prémio Nobel. E contudo—penso-o com tristeza—pus no Caeiro todo o meu poder de despersonalização dramática, pus em Ricardo Reis toda a minha disciplina mental, vestida de música que lhe é própria, pus em Álvaro de Campos toda a emoção que não dou nem a mim nem à vida. Pensar, meu querido Casais Monteiro, que todos estes têm que ser, na prática da publicação, preteridos pelo Fernando Pessoa, impuro e simples! (2:338)¹

Interestingly, the Whitmanesque persona Álvaro de Campos is the only “emotional” poet mentioned in this passage, and Pessoa wistfully remarks that Campos represents a tendency “that I give neither to myself nor to life.” Caeiro and Reis are characterized by extreme forms of “depersonalization” and “mental discipline,” whereas Fernando Pessoa “himself” seems to be situated somewhere in the “impure and artless” middle. As a result, the heteronym known as Pessoa serves to dramatize the split between reason and feeling, between consciousness and direct sensation.

The poet named Pessoa is distinctive in his inability or refusal to experience what Kant described as the *Ding an sich*. Likewise, he is guarded when it comes to the direct expression of emotion. “Not insincerity,” he wrote, “but a translated sincerity is the basis of all art” (3:63). Thus his lyric poems have little spontaneity. In “Ela canta, pobre ceifeira,” for example, the “pure” emotion of the reaper is contrasted with the “feeling/thinking” self of the observing poet. As George Lind noted, this attitude toward art and emotion is similar to that of T.S. Eliot, who proclaimed in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” that “the emotion of art is impersonal” (quoted in Lind 312-13).

On the other hand, the poet named Alberto Caeiro dispenses with feeling in quite a different way. What Caeiro represents is the fairly widespread desire among high modernist theorists of the period to divest poetry of sentimentality or “rhetoric.” We might borrow the words of Ezra Pound in 1912 and say that Caeiro embodies the poet who specializes in the “direct treatment of the thing itself.” For the most part, he dispenses with psychological philosophy, politics and religion, concentrating on empirical observation. He is a nature poet, but the nature that he observes is little more than the common paraphernalia of literary pastoralism. Because of this artistic minimalism, he becomes a “pure” poet, representing the most fundamental qualities of literariness; as Eliot would say, he treats “poetry as poetry and not another thing.”

Caeiro is in some ways like the reaper figure in Pessoa’s “Ela canta, pobre ceifeira.” Both the reaper and Caeiro are born out of the romantic desire to commune directly with Nature, free of mediating self-consciousness. In “Ela canta,” the reaper sings as she works, apparently oblivious of her own happy state; Caeiro is no cheerful peasant, but he writes poems that are critical of the second-order lyricism we find in “Ela canta,” where the speaker is always “thinking what he feels.” Of course, in the last analysis, Caeiro’s “absence of sentiment” and un-self-consciousness are illusory; all of his work is based on the idealized and philosophically dubious notion of a *Ding an sich*, or a natural world that the poet can somehow record truthfully by means of an organic fit between signifier and signified.

Pessoa was intrigued with the relationship between art and emotion, and he formulated a typology of sentiment to rank the different subjective feelings that an artist might express. His ideas on this subject seem to have derived from John Ruskin’s famous essay “Of the Pathetic Fallacy” (1865), which evaluated poets according to their ability to “perceive” nature objectively.² At one point Ruskin alludes to Wordsworth’s poem “Peter Bell: A Tale” in order to make the following distinction:

So then, we have the three ranks: the man who perceives rightly, because he does not feel, and to whom the primrose is very accurately the primrose, because he does not love it. Then, secondly, the man who perceives wrongly, because he feels, and to whom the primrose is anything else than a primrose: a star, or a sun, or a fairy’s shield, or a forsaken maiden. And then, lastly, there is the man who perceives rightly in spite of his feelings, and to whom the primrose is for ever

nothing else than itself—a little flower apprehended in the very plain and leafy fact of it, whatever and how many soever the associations and passions may be that crowd around it. And, in general, these three classes may be rated in comparative order, as the men who are not poets at all, and the poets of the second order, and the poets of the first (67-68).

In an attempt to define Caeiro's ideas about sentiment, Pessoa, under the guide of Álvaro de Campos, records the following exchange between himself and Caeiro about the same Wordsworth poem:

Referi-me, uma vez, ao conceito directo das coisas, que caracteriza a sensibilidade de Caeiro, citei-lhe com perversidade amiga, que Wordsworth designa um insensível pela expressão:

*A primrose by the river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him,
And it was nothing more.*

...O meu mestre Caeiro riu. “Esse simples via bem: uma flor amarela não é realmente senão uma flor amarela.”

Mas, de repente, pensou.

“Há uma diferença,” acrescentou. “Depende se se considera a flor amarela como uma das várias flores amarelas, ou como aquela flor amarela só.”

E depois disse:

“O que esse seu poeta inglês queria dizer era que para o tal homem essa flor amarela era uma experiência vulgar, ou uma coisa conhecida. Ora isso é que não está bem. Toda a coisa que vemos, devemos vê-la sempre pela primeira vez, porque realmente é a primeira vez que a vemos. E então cada flor amarela é uma nova flor amarela, ainda que seja o que se chama a mesma de ontem. A gente não é já o mesmo nem a flor a mesma. O próprio amarelo não pode ser já o mesmo. É pena a gente não ter exactamente os olhos para saber isso, porque então éramos todos felizes.” (157-58)³

Caeiro is an instance of Ruskin's poet of the “first order,” who has “entire command of himself, and can look around calmly at all moments, for the image of the word that best tells what he sees.” Caeiro also embodies what Ruskin describes as the “highest power in a writer,” which is “to check all such habit of thought, and to keep his eyes fixed firmly on the *pure fact*, out of which if any feeling comes to him or his reader, he knows it must be a true

one.” In this sense, he is the antithesis of the poets of the second order, who are “subdued by the feelings under which they write...and therefore admire certain expressions and modes of thought which are in some way diseased or false”; as well as the “inspired poets” or urban-weary romantics, who looked to nature as a way of representing directly the pain, sorrow, and often turbulent, irrational states of mind brought on by day-to-day living (68-69). As a result, Caetano’s poetry often has a bare, imagist or haiku-like quality. He feels none of the angst or ennui of much romantic verse, nor does he represent nature as an escape or as a mirror of the poet’s state of mind. Nature (meaning simply the objective world) is an unknown entity to be sung, and the “self” is indistinguishable from landscape.

Caetano makes use of modernist free-verse, and partly for that reason he has often been compared with Walt Whitman. There can be no doubt that Whitman was a major influence on Pessoa—just as he was for many other modernists, including Pound. But it should be noted that Whitman drew inspiration from the “Psalms” and “Song of Songs,” whereas Caetano’s sources seem to derive from medieval songs. Whitman is a powerful lyric poet who demonstrates a deep tenderness and lofty spirituality while Caetano keeps his sentiments at bay. Unlike Whitman, Caetano is not concerned with progress, democracy or the utopian community of nature, humanity and God. He has no special interest in his fellow beings: “Que me importam a mim os homens / E o que sofrem ou supõem que sofrem?” (82) and, at best, he is skeptical of God: “Não acredito no Deus porque nunca o vi” (49). He even denies the existence of nature as an idealized concept: “Vi que não há Natureza, / Que Natureza não existe” (98). The humanist Whitman gathers everything and everyone in reach, embracing them as part of his self and his world. By contrast, Caetano writes: “Ser poeta não é uma ambição minha / É minha maneira de estar sozinho” (42).

As a literary construction, Caetano seems more like the Portuguese poet Cesário Verde, who recorded with a lyrical exactitude the sights and sounds of nineteenth-century Lisbon. In poems like Verde’s “Cristalizações,” for example, one can see an incipient Caetano, particularly in the emphasis on “clarity” and the important role of the senses:

Eu tudo encontro alegremente exacto.
Lavo, refresco, limpo os sentidos.
E tângem-me, excitados, sacudidos,
O tacto, a vista, o ouvido, o gosto, o olfacto! (60)

Cesário Verde was a protomodernist who was fascinated by city types, and who employed a subject matter not usually associated with poetry. He wrote about *engomadeiras*, calkers, fishwives, dentists and shop windows in such a strikingly new way that Portuguese poetry was never quite the same after him. Pessoa's heteronym Álvaro de Campos, who writes about hoists, cranes, and tobacco shops, is certainly in Verde's debt—but so is Caeiro in a more abstract way. Throughout Caeiro questions what constitutes the language of poetry; in his rejection of "inspired" verse, he is constantly attempting to write in a "cleansed" fashion—however impossible that goal may be.

Of all the heteronyms, Caeiro is perhaps Pessoa's most radical creation. Like Shakespeare's Hamlet, he is a fiction, but a fiction so improbable that it seems like a myth. Pessoa called him the "master"; he is certainly the most self-assured of the various authors, but that does not necessarily mean that he was the best or the greatest. He was simply the "pure" poet—the simple, direct versifier who set a minimal standard for good writing. The other heteronyms would build on his achievement, adding complex verse forms and giving philosophical and psychological range to their art. Caeiro came first in the order of things, much as the imagist and free-verse experiments of early British modernism preceded more difficult writings of the 1920s. Caeiro was therefore Pessoa's way of dramatizing the basic requirements of good literature, before it could aspire to any broad commentary on the world.

The two emotional extremes of Pessoa's poetic universe are represented by Ricardo Reis and Álvaro de Campos, who are at the classic and romantic poles of modernism. We know from Pessoa's comments that he regarded Campos as a "disciple" of Caeiro but also the "opposite" of Reis. Pessoa does not elaborate on this opposition, but even a cursory examination of the two poets' respective odes would reveal the obvious difference between them. Reis tends to write short, blank-verse poems about passing time and the small pleasures of life in the countryside. His style is elevated, untouched by the vernacular, and completely derived from the pastoral conventions of the eighteenth century. Campos, on the other hand, writes long, free verse odes in which factories, steamships, and all sorts of modern commerce merge with images of Portugal's seafaring past. His mood is sometimes lofty, even ecstatic; his style, however, is colloquial, profane, bordering on the stream-of-consciousness. Most of all, the two heteronyms differ from each other in terms of their emotional temperaments. Reis' poetry is nearly always measured, quiet and stoic; Campos' work ranges in tone from the wildly euphoric to the suicidally depressed.

Campos is a fascinating personality in part because he enables Pessoa to express the vital connection between early modernism and modernity itself. Without Campos, Pessoa would seem a much less cosmopolitan and innovative figure, and the modernist movement in Portugal as a whole would seem less exciting. But Campos is also fascinating because of his formal and psychological complexity. With the exception of Pessoa “himself,” he is the only heteronym to actually *evolve* as a poet. Early on in his “career,” he writes two sonnets that could easily pass for Pessoa’s own lyrics. By the same token, his early poem on the Orient, “Opiário,” is a series of rhymed quatrains that deal with the same themes of emotional disquiet and tedium that we find everywhere in the work of Pessoa “himself.”

It is in “Opiário,” however, that the seeds of the more volatile, sensationist and quasi-futurist Campos are also to be found. A naval engineer, Campos is interested in machines; unlike the other heteronyms, he speaks ecstatically of mechanisms, gears and fly-wheels. At the same time, he is a somewhat Rimbaud-like personality who drinks hard liquor, smokes cigarettes and opium, and injects morphine, while mindlessly crossing between Lisbon and the Orient. At times he seems like a latter-day, out-of-work Portuguese navigator. For the most part, he is an armchair traveler whose journeys are *inward* and nearly always induced by cigarettes and other drugs that fuel his imagination. Like Ricardo Reis, he seeks “calm,” but he cannot seem to discipline his emotions. He is also obsessed by death, which he sometimes welcomes as a release from his disquiet. Sitting on a deck chair while crossing the Suez Canal, he proclaims: “Ah que bom que era ir daqui de caída / Pra cova por um alçapão de estouro!” (1:877).

Stylistically and thematically Campos is indebted to Whitman, who was also imitated by the French Unanimistes and by the avant-guerre modernists throughout Europe. As in the case of Alberto Caeiro, however, the general affinity between Campos and Whitman should not blind us to the fact that the two poets are also different. Whitman wrote utopian poems about such things as railroad engines and steamships. Campos also writes about machines, but his verse is more violent and Marinetti-like in its dynamic ferocity. He is always “grinding his teeth” and feverishly extolling the tough “eternal r-r-r-r-” of the modern mechanical age. Like Whitman, Campos is a homoerotic poet; but he also shares this tendency with Pessoa “himself,” who had already composed two lengthy homoerotic poems in English. Moreover, Campos’s sexual passages have a different tone from Whitman’s—as in “Ode

Triunfal,” where the speaker becomes positively orgasmic as he ponders the deadly arsenal of futurist technology. Campos is less benign, more noirish than Whitman; he anticipates a figure like Hart Crane and his sexuality is overtly masochistic. For example, he nearly swoons at the thought of being caught up in the teeth of moving gears; and at one point, he gushes about his desire to experience what Victorian writers called “the English vice”: “Espanquem-me a bordo de navios” (1:882).

Having stressed the differences among these poets, however, it is also important to note what they have in common. Pessoa once commented that it was difficult to simulate the differences among his heteronyms whenever they wrote in prose, adding “simulação é mais fácil, até porque é mais espontânea, em verso” (2:344). Not surprisingly, critical studies have tended to concentrate on the distinct characters of the various poets—as if anything that they had in common might diminish the project as a whole. But the importance of Pessoa’s heteronyms has less to do with issues of originality or uniqueness than with stylistic variations on several elementary constants. Without exception, Pessoa’s major heteronyms are preoccupied with large, existential problems: the meaning of life, the inevitability of death, and the conflict between the rational and emotional sides of human nature. In the final analysis, their “individuality” can be seen in their different stylistic responses to concerns they all share. Out of his knowledge, imagination and expertise, Pessoa was able to create a group of contemporary poets who have different filiations with Portuguese, Anglo-American and European literary history. His greatest achievement was not simply the idea of the heteronyms but the way he managed to weave different aspects of poetic modernism into an array of personae who, at bottom, were remarkably alike.

Notes

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Pessoa’s work are from his three volume *Obra Poética e em Prosa*.

² My observations on the importance of Ruskin’s “Of the Pathetic Fallacy” to a study of Alberto Caeiro are based on a discussion in my book, *An Introduction to Fernando Pessoa*.

³ All quotations from the poetry of Caeiro are from Teresa Sobral Cunha’s edition, *Poemas Completos de Alberto Caeiro*.

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. “The Death of the Author.” *Image-Music-Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.

- Eliot, T.S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *Selected Prose*. Ed. John Hayward. Middlesex: Penguin, 1963.
- Lind, George Rudolf. *Estudos sobre Fernando Pessoa*. 4th ed. Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 1981.
- Pessoa, Fernando. *Obra Poética e em Prosa*. 3 vols. Eds. António Quadros and Dalila Pereira da Costa. Oporto: Lello & Irmão Editores, 1986.
- . *Poemas Completos de Alberto Caeiro*. Ed. Teresa Sobral Cunha. Lisbon: Editorial Presença, 1994.
- Ruskin, John. "Of the Pathetic Fallacy." *The Genius of John Ruskin*. Ed. John D. Rosenberg. New York: George Braziller, 1963.
- Sadlier, Darlene J. *An Introduction to Fernando Pessoa: Modernism and the Paradoxes of Authorship*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998.
- Verde, Cesário. *Obra Completa*. 3rd ed. Ed. Joel Serrão. Lisbon: Portugália, n.d.