

Alberto Caeiro, An Assassinated Poet

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Translated by

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Orgnuno sta solo sul cuor della terra trafitto da un raggio di sole: ed è subito sera.

Salvatore Quasimodo

La bêtise n'est pas mon fort. J'ai vu beaucoup d'individus; j'ai visité quelques nations; j'ai pris ma part d'entreprises diverses sans les aimer; j'ai mangé presque tous les jours; j'ai touché à des femmes. Je revois maintenant quelques centaines de visages, deux ou trois grands spectacles, et peut-être la substance de vingt livres. Je n'ai retenu le meilleur ni le pire de ces choses: est resté ce qui l'a pu.

Cette arithmétique m'épargne de m'étonner de vieillir. Je pourrais aussi faire le compte des moments victorieux de mon esprit, et les imaginer unis et soudés, composant une vie heureuse [...]. Mais je crois m'être toujours bien jugé. Je me suis rarement perdu de vue; je me suis détesté, je me suis adoré;— puis, nous avons vieilli ensemble.

Paul Valéry

(*Monsieur Têste*, 1895)

Se depois de eu morrer, quiserem escrever a minha biografia,

Não há nada mais simples

Tem só duas datas—a da minha nascença e a da minha morte.

Entre uma e outra cousa todos os dias são meus.

Sou fácil de definir.

Vi como um danado.

Amei as coisas sem sentimentalidade nenhuma.

Nunca tive um desejo que não pudesse realizar, porque nunca ceguei.

Mesmo ouvir nunca foi para mim senão um acompanhamento de ver.
 Compreendi que as coisas são reais e todas diferentes umas das outras;
 Compreendi com os olhos, nunca com o pensamento.
 Compreender isto com o pensamento seria achá-las todas iguais.
 Um dia deu-me o sono como a qualquer criança.
 Fechei os folhos e dormi.
 Além disso, fui o único poeta da Natureza.

Fernando Pessoa
 (Alberto Caeiro, 1915 [?])

Me voici devant tous un homme plein de sens
 Connaissant la vie et de la mort ce qu'un vivant peut connaître
 Ayant éprouvé les douleurs et les joies de l'amour
 Ayant su quelques fois imposer ses idées
 Connaissant plusieurs langages
 Ayant pas mal voyagé
 Ayant vu la guerre dans l'Artillerie et l'Infanterie
 Blessé à la tête trépané sous le chloroforme
 Ayant perdu ses meilleurs amis dans l'effroyable lutte
 Je sais d'ancien et de nouveau autant qu'un homme seul pourrait des deux
 savoir
 Et sans m'inquiéter aujourd'hui de cette guerre
 Entre nous et pour nous mes amis
 Je juge cette longue querelle de la tradition et de l'invention
 De l'Ordre et de l'Aventure.

Guillaume Apollinaire
 (*La jolie rousse*, 1918)

Three retrospective views, three opposite paths of wisdom are expressed in these texts by Valéry, Pessoa and Apollinaire. Three texts that appear to have been written during the final moments of the authors' lives, looking back as though to evoke decades of experience and maturity. The first two texts are fictional, the third is factual. Valéry is 24 years old when he writes *Monsieur Teste*. Pessoa is 27 and his literary creation Caeiro is a year younger. Apollinaire is 38 years old and *La jolie rousse* will in fact be his poetic farewell.

Teste and Caeiro inspire passivity, whereas Apollinaire, enraptured by the luminosity of the *esprit nouveau*, evokes action lucidly invigorated by the contemplation of the young redheaded girl, simultaneously representing reason and passion. Both Valéry and Pessoa will tranquilly ignore Apollinaire, as they cannot accept harmony between reason and passion nor Apollinaire's optimistic art derived from this concept. Placed before the order versus adventure dilemma, Valéry and Pessoa will choose order, yet allowing an intimate, sheltered space for anarchy. Apollinaire had chosen adventure, and was, possibly, about to return to order, but death took him before he could carry out such a change.

Monsieur Teste is both the hypothetical portrait of master Mallarmé and the fixed mirrored image that Valéry offers himself, an image that he hopes to encounter when it is time to reflect back upon his own life. It is an itinerary through a desert whose aridity will mark Valéry's creative production for many years, also a victim of the "hésitation entre les divers personnages qu'il y a en moi."¹ Apollinaire, in turn, outlines the throne on which he hopes to be admired by the poetic generations of the post-war; he is pope Apollinaire with his pipe, just as Picasso caricaturized him. The words of Caeiro, written by Pessoa and by Pessoa hidden shortly thereafter, are the witness that destroys the alibi thus constructed in order to attenuate the feeling of imminent death that is to be inflicted upon Caeiro. They are the excuse for Pessoa to believe that he can assassinate Alberto Caeiro without remorse and remove him from the gallery of masks with which he anarchized himself on a daily basis.

The retrospective examinations of these three lives are voiced at moments that announce imminent agony. Agony indispensable for *Monsieur Teste*, given that death conveys upon him a sense of enigma, of unsolvable mystery, that constitutes the essence of the character portrayed by Valéry. The death that Apollinaire attempts to create by retracing his poetic trajectory was the daily companion of the poet-soldier, "blessé à la tête et trépané sous le chloroforme," a companion that embraced him at the end of the war, greeting him with the indistinct and impersonal epidemic of Spanish influenza. Tuberculosis, that is already consuming Alberto Caeiro and that would soon after cause his death, is the manifestation, under the guise of poetic jealous homicide, of Pessoa's demiurgic powers: Pessoa affirms his all-mighty capability of acting upon his personages, giving them both life and death. The three testaments appear to convey a reconciliation with the idea of death,

with a touch of nostalgia that accompanies the inevitable loneliness of death and the incommensurable briefness of life perfectly evoked by Quasimodo. It is the boldness of this very reconciliation that will cost Alberto Caeiro his poetic life.

Contrary to what occurs with Valéry and Apollinaire, for whom the encounter with death is episodic, for Fernando Pessoa death is a constant and central theme of his work. The very creation of the heteronyms, “beings” on whom death can take no toll (except when it is manipulated by the poet-Saturn), constitute an answer to this obsession. The problem of posthumous glory and the immortality of the poet are extensively documented in the manuscripts left in the chest, but the theme of death that I am referring to is the refusal of inevitable physical death. Death is excessively present in Pessoa’s biography: at the age of five, the death of his father; at the age of five and a half, the death of his youngest brother; at the age of eight, the death of his maternal grandmother; at the age of thirteen, the death of his half-sister Madalena Henriqueta, whose body he would accompany from South Africa to Lisbon; at the age of eighteen, another half-sister dies, Maria Clara. All of these grievances weighed heavily upon his mother and reflected on Pessoa himself.

However, Pessoa chose not to mention these particular deaths, and it will be death as an abstract figure that will be transformed into an explicit theme in his poetry, conveying a feeling of gray melancholy on all of his work, even that which does not refer explicitly to death. The great vitalistic shouts of Álvaro de Campos are a testament to the exasperated and useless desire to break these chains, to reverse the affirmation of man being “a deferred corpse that procreates.” Pessoa is quickly convinced of his incapability to eliminate these ghosts and the annihilation of Alberto Caeiro is the immediate consequence of this conviction, given that Caeiro is too healthy a companion to enable Pessoa’s morbid poetic vein to live, even fictionally, with him.

For the reader, Alberto Caeiro appears to have overcome the phase of anguish, that is, if he did feel anguish at one time. To the reader—who repeats the poet’s I as his/her own—Caeiro communicates, repeatedly, a state of peace with the universe, and therefore also with death. It is a state of tranquility that the reader accepts in the blissful and momentary illusion of reciting his/her own creed. From whence one can deduce that Pessoa, upon re-reading his work, would have first savored this illusion and then destroyed it.

Alberto Caeiro's profile is not the reverse of the Fernando Pessoa coin, as is Álvaro de Campos. His profile is unique and separate. And from there stems his quality of master of all the pleiad. If the invention of this pleiad (whether one accepts or not the explanation given Adolfo Casais Monteiro by Pessoa himself) can find its logic in the multifaceted configuration of Pessoa's personality and in his exercises of de-personalization, already at this stage does the genesis of Caeiro appear surprising. And, because of this, it is the most perfect of his inventions, even if created in Whitman's shadow, as Eduardo Lourenço claims, pulling him towards the limelight. Pessoa imagines Alberto Caeiro's personal and poetic world as a golden age of harmonious integration of man in the universe, that is neither pagan nor pre-Christian (as António Mora and Ricardo Reis will try to explain in various inconclusive attempts to write a preface to the master's work), but simply the vision of a world perceived by an intelligence not contaminated by culture. Pessoa describes Caeiro as a man of little learning, sheltered from the detrimental influence of masters of any given system. Caeiro believes he has a genuine, fresh outlook, in direct communion with nature, like a child who would only manifest his/her global perception of the world upon arriving at external life. The image is Caeiro's own. Such a person lives, necessarily, in a different world from that of Pessoa's. Almada Negreiros, hoping to recreate a semblance of innocence, claimed to have arrived at "the invention of the clear day," but not even he, "the child with giant eyes," managed to attain the limpid vision of Alberto Caeiro.

Pessoa's eventual, progressive irritation with the very fiction of Caeiro's universe, with an agricultural world idealized à la Virgil ("I have never read Virgil / Why would I have to read him?"), meets a similar echo in Paul Valéry's reaction before having to translate Virgil's *Bucolics*:

La vie pastorale m'est étrangère et me semble ennuyeuse. L'industrie agricole exige exactement toutes les vertus que je n'ai pas. La vue des sillons m'attriste, jusques à ceux qui trace ma plume. Le retour des saisons et de leurs effets donne l'idée de la sottise de la nature et de la vie, laquelle ne sait que se répéter pour subsister. Je songe aussi à toute la peine monotone que veut le tracement régulier de rides dans la terre lourde, et je ne m'étonne point qu'on ait vu une peine afflictive et infamante dans l'obligation infligée à l'homme de "gagner son pain à la sueur de son front." Cette formule m'a toujours paru ignoble. Que si l'on me reprend sur ce sentiment que j'avoue et que je ne prétends pas défendre, je dirai que je suis né

dans un port. Point de champs alentour, des sables et de l'eau salée. L'eau douce y vient de loin.²

And from here one could continue this comparative game between Valéry and Pessoa, from the Cete to the river Tagus, a river that does and does not flow through my village. Yet, instead of that, I prefer to return to Caeiro.

The invention of Caeiro corresponds to the most intense of Pessoa's creative periods, the *Orpheu* years from 1914 to 1915. Besides the poems and the miraculous genesis of the most important heteronyms, there are also personal notes, without a shadow of irony, that attribute exceptional value to these years: "Today I was struck by a ray of lucidness" (November 21, 1914). And in a letter to Sá-Carneiro, a few months before, Pessoa confirmed that he felt in full possession of his faculties. However, Caeiro is also the child of a period that was obscured by the suicide of Mário de Sá-Carneiro at the beginning of 1916. Coinciding with this fact, as Jorge de Sena³ has already observed, Alberto Caeiro is proclaimed dead. It is the sacrifice of the most opulent lamb in memory of the irreplaceable friend. Caeiro will continue, nonetheless, to reappear sporadically, until at least 1930. His shadow does not cease to overpower Pessoa himself, who came to consider the literary production signed by Caeiro the best of his work. Why, then, have reserved for Caeiro the most mortal condition of the heteronyms, when, not fearing death, he was the most deserving of immortality?

Eduardo Lourenço responds as follows:

Caeiro dies early (he really only lived *one day*, the famous "triumphal day") because Pessoa could not bear the weight of a vision, a truth that were not his, unless presented violently, magically, in a reversal moment of the most profound, constant and unique feeling of himself and of life: the total abysmal *unreality* of both.⁴

As he grew inside Pessoa, Caeiro became unbearable. In him were reflected a world and a manner of reflecting the world radically opposed to Pessoa's daily life that it became impossible to continue to nurture it. The sap that ran through Pessoa became progressively more like poisoned blood and Caeiro was constantly demanding ambrosia. A transfusion was impossible. Caeiro was incessantly accusing Pessoa of his incapacity to be

like him, of his incapacity to apply to reality the lesson conceived as fiction. It is not by chance that Álvaro de Campos begins by praising his "Master, my dear master," to soon after defame him:

Por que é que me deste a tua alma se eu não sabia que fazer dela
 Como quem está carregado de ouro num deserto,
 Ou canta com voz divina entre ruínas?
 Por que é que me acordaste para a sensação e a nova alma,
 Se eu não saberei sentir, se a minha alma é de sempre a minha?

It is appropriate to recall, once again, the moment of Caeiro's birth, according to the letter dated the 13th of January 1935 and written to Adolfo Casais Monteiro:

One and a half or two years later, I decided to play a trick on Sá-Carneiro—to invent a bucolic poet, a complicated kind, and to present the poet to him, I don't remember how, but in some sort of reality. I spent several days elaborating the poet but I accomplished nothing. On the day that I finally gave up—it was the 8th of March 1914—I approached a tall dresser, and, paper in hand, started to write, standing up, like I always do whenever possible. I wrote thirty odd poems straight, in a sort of ecstasy whose nature I would not be able to define. I started with a title—"Keeper of Flocks." And what followed was the apparition of someone in me, to whom I immediately gave the name of Alberto Caeiro. Pardon the absurdity of the phrase: my master appeared in me. This was the immediate sensation that I had. And as such, once the thirty odd poems were written, I immediately reached for another paper and wrote, also one after the other, the six poems that constitute "Oblique Rain," by Fernando Pessoa. Immediately and completely... It was the return of Fernando Pessoa/Alberto Caeiro to Fernando Pessoa himself. Or rather, it was the reaction of Fernando Pessoa against his nonexistence as Alberto Caeiro.

Coming to life, Caeiro made Pessoa nonexistent, he annihilated him, to such an extent that Pessoa's reaction was to return to the quay of "Oblique Rain," leaving behind the bucolic scenario of the keeper of flocks. As in Valéry, the image of the sea superimposes itself on that of the fields, liberating him from a nightmare. Later, Pessoa's reaction to this danger of nonexistence will be to provoke the nonexistence of the other.

Subsequently, Caeiro will receive his marital status, his official date of birth (the 16th of April 1889), his horoscope and the date of his death (1915). Without concern to the above-mentioned, Pessoa will date several of Caeiro's poems from 1911 to 1912, in order to lengthen his creative period. This heteronym, regardless of the fulguration of his birth, is the last to be revealed to the public. It is only in 1925 that several of the poems of the "Keeper of Flocks" cycle appear in the journal *Athena*. Among these poems figures the only poem in which the heteronym nominates himself:

Procuro despir-me do que aprendi,
 Procuro esquecer-me do modo de lembrar que me ensinaram,
 E raspar a tinta com que me pintaram os sentidos,
 Desembrulhar-me e ser eu, não Alberto Caeiro,
 Mas um animal humano que a Natureza produziu.

(Poem XLVI)

In the subsequent issue of *Athena* several of the "unconjunctive poems" were published. After six years of silence, Caeiro appears in *Presença* with poem VIII of "Keeper of Flocks." Two years later, in 1933, Pessoa writes to João Gaspar Simões that he is ready for *Presença* to edit the complete cycle of the forty-nine poems of the "Keeper of Flocks":

I will thus have the pleasure of having you present the best of what I have done—work that, even if I were to write another *Iliad*, could not be surpassed, in the most intimate sense of the word, because it proceeds from a degree and a kind of inspiration (disregarding the exact word here) that exceeds that which I could rationally generate within myself, and that is never true of the *Iliad*.

The death of Alberto Caeiro in 1915 is peculiar, not only because Fernando Pessoa continued to sign several poems with his name, but also because his death passed completely unnoticed, except by the author himself, who thus prohibited himself to use this heteronym. The death of Caeiro would have only been *necessary* had the public been able to follow the evolution of his work, which in 1915 was presented as finished. However, as it is well known, Alberto Caeiro only began to enjoy a public literary existence ten years after his *death*. For the few friends that had heard about Caeiro, the staging of his death would have been superfluous. This *mise en*

scène appears to have been intended, more than anything else, for the poet himself. It is an intrinsic part of his static drama. The killing of Caieiro simulates an assassination or a suicide, but it also constructs the possibility to control the effect of death on the memory of a poet. Presenting Caieiro only ten years after his death, when he could have done it before, allows Pessoa to measure the posthumous reception that could have been spared Caieiro, and, by this interposed person (*pessoa*) anticipate the impossible experience of the future glory of all of his poetry. Despite not separately revealing the work signed by Alberto Caieiro until 1925, Pessoa had considered publishing the work in its entirety since 1917, prefaced by conspicuous studies by Ricardo Reis and António Mora on Neopaganism. These were ethereal studies that would only spoil the reception of the poems, whereas the critical profiles of the work and of Caieiro's personality, that he also prepared for this eventual edition, were tantalizing appetizers written by Ricardo Reis as a preface to the work of master Caieiro. When in the 1930s Pessoa spoke once again of the publication of a Caieiro *opus*, it is curious to note that he gave it the title of "The Complete Works of Alberto Caieiro," accentuating the completed aspect of the cycle, whereas the other heteronyms were granted continuity. Yet, it may be said, "Caieiro had already died..."

By orchestrating Caieiro's death and obsessively planning his post-mortem literary career, Pessoa created a situation similar to that which would have resulted for himself if he had not died in 1935, as it is believed, but had continued, in the shadows, enjoying the aggrandizement of his enormous and universal posthumous glory.

To create an illusion of such a hallucination—but a hallucination that indispensably was to become real throughout his life—Pessoa did not hesitate before the extreme gesture of eliminating Caieiro, of killing the master. "His poems were the life in him." The assassinated poet paid with his death the supreme pleasure of immortality.

Depriving himself of a heteronym was for Pessoa a severe castration and it is possible to imagine him meditating which heteronym he would sacrifice in the public square. The inherent hesitations of this meditation will possibly explain, in part, why Caieiro only came to life in 1925, already condemned to the gallows. Condemned, finally, because he was the most difficult mask to seize, one that the passing of the years made unbearably imaginary. The most beautiful, the *best*, but so distant from Pessoa's sordid daily reality that it was preferable to accept his death, decreed in successive moments before

his apparition. For the readers, Caeiro is born dead, for Pessoa, this death was a long agony, a never-ending fight with an angel.

If asked to explain Pessoa's homicidal gesture, Valéry would be able to lend the following explanation:

J'étais placé dans la nécessité d'inventer un personnage capable de bien des œuvres. J'avais la manie de n'aimer que le fonctionnement des êtres, et dans les œuvres, que leur génération. Je savais que ces œuvres sont toujours des falsifications, des arrangements, l'auteur n'étant heureusement jamais l'homme.⁵

Humbly acknowledging the assistance, Pessoa would have probably asked, with extreme courtesy: "Heureusement, dites-vous?"

Ouvero: "How I wish I could have been Alberto Caeiro!"

Notes

¹ Paul Valéry's letter to his wife in 1901, quoted by Agathe Rouart-Valéry in the "Introduction Biographique" to the first volume of his *Œuvres*. (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1957) 27.

² Paul Valéry, "Variations sur les Bucoliques," (1944), in *Œuvres*, vol. 1, 208-09.

³ Jorge de Sena, *Fernando Pessoa & Ca. Heterónima*, vol. 2 (Edições 70: Lisboa, 1981) 209-24.

⁴ Eduardo Lourenço, *Pessoa Revisitado* (Editorial Inova: Porto, 1973) 39.

⁵ Paul Valéry, "Note et digression" (1919) following "Introduction à la méthode de Leonard de Vinci" (1894), in *Œuvres*, vol. 1, 1230.