

Alberto Caeiro as Zen Heteronym¹

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My gaze is clear as a sunflower.
My way is to walk the roads
Looking right and left
And sometimes looking behind me...
What I see at each moment
Is that which I never
Caught sight of before.
I have the knack of full awareness
The knack of essential astonishment
That an infant might experience
If at birth he were aware
That he was actually born!
I feel myself born at each moment
Into the everlasting newness
Of the world.

I believe in the world
As I believe in a daisy
Because I see it.
But I do not think about it
Because to think is to not-understand.
The world was not made
For us to think about it
(To think is to have sick vision)
But for us to look at it and assent.
I have no philosophy: I have senses...
If I talk of nature, that is not because

I know what nature is
 But because I love it, and love it for this only:
 For he who loves never knows what he loves
 Or why he loves, or what love is.

Loving is eternal innocence
 And the only innocence is not-thinking.²

This, which some will recognize as the second poem of *The Keeper of Sheep*, attributed to Alberto Caeiro, was the first poem by Fernando Pessoa to be translated into English in an English-speaking country.³ The translator was Thomas Merton, probably the most famous monk to come out of America. Merton, who wrote a number of outstanding modern contemplative classics, posed a problem for the Catholic Church as he grew older, for he became keenly interested in the contemplative and mystical traditions of the East, finding many points of contact with Western mysticism. In the early 1980s I spent a week at Gethsemane, the Trappist monastery in Kentucky where Merton lived in community with his Benedictine brothers, until in the last few years of his life he lived alone, in a tiny house on the monastery grounds. I approached several of the older monks who had known Merton, but they were reticent to speak, partly because of their vow of quasi-silence, and partly because Merton was a troublesome subject. One of the monks did venture to say that Merton was a very holy man but had gone “too far out on the limb.” I took that limb to mean Merton’s increasing interest, even passion, in Eastern religion generally and Zen Buddhism specifically. Just how far out on the limb he went was immortalized, so to speak, in the absurd way he died: electrocuted in a hotel room, while on a trip to the Orient in 1968.

Himself a poet as well as an ecumenical-minded contemplative, Merton was naturally drawn to the work of Pessoa-Caeiro, calling him one of “those Western writers who have expressed something akin to the Zen way of seeing,” and in 1964 he presented his translations to Dr. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, who in his 95 years of life did more than anyone to elucidate Zen Buddhism for the Western world. According to Merton, Suzuki agreed that the Caeiro poems had “a great Zen quality,” and it is a quality that has been explored by various Pessoa scholars in recent years.

"I have the knack of full awareness / The knack of essential astonishment." What do these words mean? Is it possible that Pessoa, in his Caeiro incarnation, had the enlightenment experience known among Zen Buddhists as *satori*? Can the poetry of Caeiro provide insight into the Zen mind, or even be a key for entering that mind?

The first thing we must note is that "I have the knack of full awareness" does not exist in the original Portuguese of the cited poem. It is a gross inflation of a line which another published translation has more faithfully rendered as "And I'm good at noticing such things."⁴ The "essential astonishment" of the next verse, on the other hand, is an accurate rendering and does suggest the Zen point of view vis-à-vis the most ordinary events of life. As the Zen poet P'ang-yun expressed it: "How wondrously strange, and how miraculous this! / I draw water, I carry fuel."⁵

Suzuki, in his writings, continually emphasized that basic acts such as eating, drinking, picking up a book or lifting a finger are astonishing events for a person who knows *satori*. But was Pessoa-Caeiro's astonishment before life due to *satori*, described by Suzuki as "the unfolding of a new world hitherto unperceived in the confusion of a dualistic mind"?⁶ Caeiro certainly seems to have understood and to have lived—on the pages of the poetry attributed to him—something resembling the Zen experience, but was there enlightenment? How did the world feel to Caeiro?

In the fifth poem of *The Keeper of Sheep*, Caeiro rejects metaphysics, or, more accurately, states that "To not think of anything is metaphysics enough." He has no patience for analysis, saying that "The only inner meaning of things / Is that they have no inner meaning at all."⁷

This is reminiscent of the Doctrine of the Void, or *sunyata*, as formulated around the year 200 by Nagarjuna, a South Indian Buddhist monk and one of the great exponents of the Mahayana school of Buddhism. This doctrine, which does not mean that nothing exists but that nothing can be grasped through logic and analysis, was extremely important for the development of Zen in the centuries that followed. And modern Zen continues to appeal "directly to life, not even making reference to a soul or to God, or to anything that interferes or disturbs with the ordinary course of living. The idea of Zen is to catch life as it flows. There is nothing extraordinary or mysterious about Zen."⁸ Or as Caeiro put it, in the poem just cited, "The mystery of things? What mystery? / The only mystery is that some people think about mystery."

Leyla Perrone-Moisés has pointed out that Caeiro's "Zen quality" is not only at the level of ideas and sentiment but at the level of form, with many of Caeiro's verses resembling classical *haikus*, which were written more often than not by Japanese Zen monks.⁹ The tenth poem in *The Keeper of Sheep*, on the other hand, reads like a veritable *mondo*, the Japanese term for the characteristic question-and-answer story or vignette used to instruct aspiring Zen Buddhists.

"Hello, keeper of sheep
There on the side of the road.
What does blowing wind say to you?"

"That it is wind and that it blows,
And that it has blown before,
And that it will blow hereafter.
And what does it say to you?"

"Much more than that.
It speaks to me of many other things.
Of memories and nostalgias,
And of things that never were."

"You've never heard the wind blow.
The wind only speaks of the wind.
What you heard was a lie,
And the lie is in you."

Things are what they are, intensely so, without mystery, memories or metaphysics. In a similar vein, Zen teaching holds that when T'ung-Shan made his celebrated reply, "Three pounds of flax!", to the question "What is the Buddha?", he was not being mystical or metaphysical. He did not mean that the flax he was perhaps at that moment weighing was a physical manifestation of the Buddha, present in all things to the spiritually perceptive. No, he simply meant what he said: three pounds of flax.¹⁰

Things are what they are, with or without Alberto Caeiro, who happily recognizes that his death will have no importance whatsoever, for if, come spring, he is already dead, "The flowers will flower just the same, / And the trees will not be less green than last spring. / Reality doesn't need me."¹¹

If we remove the explanatory third verse, we would almost have a text worthy of the *Zenrin*, an enormous anthology of two-line poems compiled by Toyo Eichō (1429-1504) for the benefit of Zen students. Consider this one: "The blue mountains are of themselves blue mountains; / The white clouds are of themselves white clouds." Or this one, even more famous: "Sitting quietly, doing nothing, / Spring comes, and the grass grows by itself."¹² Things are what they are, and Caeiro Zennishly sees himself as one more thing, natural and spontaneous: "I never sought to live my life. / My life lived itself without my wanting or not wanting it."¹³

In other poems Caeiro says he would like to be a river, a poplar tree, a miller's donkey, or an oxcart, since then he would have no hopes and no regrets, and the ancient Zen master Yuan-wu (1566-1642) would no doubt have approved, for he recommended that Zen aspirants let their bodies and minds "be turned into an inanimate object of nature like a stone or a piece of wood," so as to obtain a perfect state of unawareness and finally "an illuminating insight into the very nature of things."¹⁴

Things are what they are, and Caeiro aims to see them as they are, in all their fullness. He prizes sight above all of the other senses, declaring, in another of the poems translated by Thomas Merton, that

The main thing is knowing how to see,
Knowing how to see without being in thought:
To see when you see—
And not to think when you see.

And according to the next stanza, this "demands deep study / Learning to unlearn."¹⁵ It is useful to compare this concern to *unlearn* and to clear the mind so as to see directly, mentioned in a number of Caeiro poems, with the renowned saying of Chi'ing-yüan that before a man studies Zen he sees mountains as mountains and rivers as rivers; then, after glimpsing into the truth of Zen through the instruction of a good master, he sees that mountains are not mountains and rivers are not rivers; finally, when he has really reached the place of rest, he again sees mountains as mountains and rivers as rivers. The place of rest is of course the post-*satori* stage. Is that the place inhabited by Caeiro?

It does not seem so. Caeiro harps on the necessity of abandoning philosophy, of forgetting all that we have been taught, of quitting our minds,

so as to return to a state of childhood innocence in which everything looks new. While this in a certain way suggests the “no-mind” principle which Zen inherited from Taoism, it does not correspond to the process described by Chi’ing-yüan. The spirit of the shepherd-poet, according to Pessoa as Pessoa or as Campos, Reis, Mora, etc., was basically pagan. Rejecting Christianity, Caieiro celebrated Nature instead. He variously called himself “Nature’s only poet,” “Nature’s interpreter” and “Nature’s Discoverer,” and the word Nature appears 23 times—always capitalized—in the 49 poems that make up *The Keeper of Sheep*. One of the poems exalts Nature over music, another finds Nature superior to Virgil, and yet another praises country life over city life.

This is not what Zen is about. While Zen Buddhism certainly delights in nature, as it delights in all of life, it is mainly concerned with “getting into the real nature of one’s own mind or soul.”¹⁶ And *satori*, quoting again from Suzuki, “is a sort of inner perception—not the perception, indeed, of a single individual object but the perception of Reality itself, so to speak. The ultimate destination of *satori* is towards the Self.”¹⁷ And without *satori*, all Zen masters agree, there is no Zen.

Zen affirms rather than explains, and the *koan* method, with its paradoxical problems given to Zen students to beat their heads against, is designed to force the mind beyond dualistic thinking and logical reasoning. Whatever Zennish tinge may seem to color the sentiments of nature-loving Caieiro, this heteronym’s writings remain firmly in the domain of logical thought, and they spend a lot of ink on explanation. Like an atheist who makes a religion out of railing against religion, Caieiro’s campaign against philosophy amounts to a kind of philosophy. Merton, in an introductory note to his translations, recognized that Caieiro’s “Zen-like immediacy” is “sometimes complicated by a certain note of self-conscious and programmatic insistence.” Furthermore, Caieiro’s verses have a melancholy air, born out of an attitude of near total passivity. Zen, on the other hand, is vibrant and even cheerful, and it espouses a life of creative action. There is of course *zazen*, a species of meditation or quiet sitting, practiced especially by monks in the meditation hall known as a *zendo*, but if Zen thrives today in Japan, it is thanks to the far-from-passive samurai class, which embraced the new religion almost immediately on its arrival from China at the beginning of the Kamakura era (late 12th century).

Fernando Pessoa occasionally mentioned Buddhism in passing, but he never made reference to the Zen variety, and never claimed that Caieiro in any

way reflected an Eastern mentality. He did make claims for Caeiro's utter originality and proposed his verses as a kind of antidote for an "over-civilized" world "plunged in various kinds of subjectivisms."¹⁸ Though not any kind of spiritual master, Caeiro was conceived as the *poetic* master of Álvaro de Campos, Ricardo Reis, and even of Pessoa himself, and perhaps it is here—in Pessoa's radical act of depersonalization and self-fragmentation—that we can postulate a possible way of liberation from the false, individual ego and its concomitant suffering, this liberation being one of the fundamental ambitions of most Eastern religions, which tend to view man as a creature caught in the vicious web of *samsara*, the weary round of rebirth and redeath (a concept that usually but not always entails reincarnation). Buddhism went so far as to deny the existence within man not only of a relative ego but even of the absolute ego or true Self known as the *atman*, and Pessoa's heteronymic program might be seen as a similar denial, a recognition that there is no permanent Self, that man is a conjunction of various elements in continual flux. Or is it that Pessoa, thoroughly steeped in Western culture and Western ways, wanted to pluralize his self so as to augment his ego, to make his person even more imposing, more illustrious, more influential?

Suzuki speaks at some length of the profound, undisturbable silence that pervades all things Oriental.¹⁹ Pessoa, on the contrary, was a profoundly agitated soul. Leyla Perrone-Moisés rightly notes that in Caeiro, and only in Caeiro, Pessoa was able to find a repose from his anguished search for identity,²⁰ but wasn't it just that—a mere repose or respite—rather than a true transcendence? In Pessoa's famous letter of January 13, 1935,²¹ describing the genesis of his heteronyms, he claims that Alberto Caeiro emerged from within him on March 8, 1914, the "triumphal day" of the poet's life, when he wrote "thirty-some-odd poems at one go, in a kind of ecstasy whose nature I'll never be able to define." We know that Pessoa exaggerated, attributing poems to that date which were in fact written earlier or later, and we should not be surprised, for Pessoa was forever feigning, inventing, and re-inventing himself. There are writers whose output is a spontaneous expression, like an overflow, of what they live in the real world, but Pessoa was of the other school (or hospital?) of writers, who use words to create what they do not bodily live. But even if we grant that a momentous mystical experience occurred to Pessoa on the 8th of March, 1914, resulting in the "birth" (or consolidation) of Caeiro and a core group of poems written in his name—what then? Could this have been *satori*? Could a *satori*-like

awareness affect only the Caieiro corner of Pessoa's multitudinous personality? Would it not also have to affect the heteronym's creator? Did it affect Pessoa in his heart of hearts?

We do not have that impression. When we go to a film we may be moved to the point of tears, but this lasts for a moment—it does not change our life. Whatever Caieiro may have meant to his maker, Pessoa killed him off at a young age, writing very little in his name after 1920.

"The only way to get saved," wrote Suzuki, "is to throw oneself right down into a bottomless abyss."²² Elsewhere Suzuki identifies this abyss with the Nameless, with life free of all conceptualizations. Pessoa, particularly in the name of Álvaro de Campos, often referred to the abyss of the unknown, the abyss of life, the abyss of the soul. It is as if the poet continually danced around that abyss, curious but horrified, eternally unable to throw himself down into it. Pessoa, finally and always, chose to write instead.

Notes

¹ This article, with slight differences, was presented as a paper at the "International Seminar on Fernando Pessoa" held at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, on April 6-7, 1995.

² The first of a group of twelve poems from Pessoa-Caieiro's *O Guardador de Rebanhos*, translated by Thomas Merton and published in *New Directions in Prose and Poetry 19*, ed. J. Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1966).

³ *Portuguese Poems and Translations*, a booklet published in 1947 by Leonard S. Downes in Lisbon, contained two translations of poems from Pessoa's *Mensagem*. Pessoa himself made English versions of two poems attributed to Álvaro de Campos, "I have a bad cold" ("Tenho uma grande constipação") and "Make use of my time!" ("Apostilla"), which were published in *Presença*, 1977, and he translated portions of several long poems.

⁴ *Poems of Fernando Pessoa*, trans. Edwin Honig and Susan M. Brown (New York: Ecco Press, 1986) 11. The line, in Portuguese, is: "E eu sei dar por isso muito bem..."

⁵ Cited by Suzuki in *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1964) 83.

⁶ Suzuki 88.

⁷ The translations from Caieiro, except where stated otherwise, are mine. Most of them can be found in Richard Zenith, *Fernando Pessoa & Co.-Selected Poems* (New York: Grove Press, 1998).

⁸ Suzuki 74-75.

⁹ Leyla Perrone-Moisés, *Fernando Pessoa, alguém do eu, além do outro* (São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1982) 134-52. The entire chapter, "Caieiro Zen" (113-159), is worth reading for a comprehensive survey of the "Zennish" aspects of the work and personality which Pessoa conferred on Caieiro.

¹⁰ See Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Aguilar, 1989) 127-28, and Suzuki 79.

¹¹ From the poem that begins "Quando vier a Primavera," on pages 170-71 in Fernando Pessoa, *Obra Poética*, 8th ed. Ed. Maria Aliete Galhoz, (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Nova Aguilar, 1981).

¹² Both poems are cited in Watts 134.

¹³ From the poem that begins "Nunca busquei viver a minha vida," on page 366 in *Pessoa por Conhecer*, ed. Teresa Rita Lopes (Lisbon: Editorial Estampa, 1990).

¹⁴ Suzuki 47.

¹⁵ Poem XXIV of *The Keeper of Sheep*. Merton's translation is cited here.

¹⁶ Suzuki 40.

¹⁷ Suzuki 93.

¹⁸ From a "Translator's Preface" written in English, in Fernando Pessoa, *Páginas Íntimas e de Auto-Interpretação*, ed. Georg Rudolf Lind and Jacinto do Prado Coelho (Lisbon: Ática, 1966) 371.

¹⁹ Suzuki 35-36

²⁰ Perrone-Moisés 129

²¹ Addressed to Adolfo Casais Monteiro. Published in Fernando Pessoa, *Obras em Prosa*, ed. Cleonice Berardinelli, 3rd ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar, 1982) 96.

²² Suzuki 55