

Notes for the Memory of My Master Caeiro and a Random Note

By Álvaro de Campos

Translated by

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Introductory remarks by the translator

After a seven-year hiatus in which virtually nothing seems to have been written in Caeiro's name, 1930 saw a burst of activity for the deceased shepherd, who managed to produce five poems for "O Pastor Amoroso" 'The Shepherd in Love' (a sixth one was written in late 1929), a handful of "Poemas Inconjuntos" 'Uncollected Poems,' and at least one poem from *O Guardador de Rebanhos* 'The Keeper of Sheep.' It was probably also in that year that Pessoa-Campos began writing the "Notas para a Recordação do meu Mestre Caeiro." The oldest of the five dated "Notes" is from April 1930, and this is one that Pessoa himself published, along with four undated "Notes," in the Jan./Feb. 1931 issue of *Presença*.

Of the six "Notes" translated here, the first two were published in *Presença*. The other four were transcribed and published by Teresa Rita Lopes in her *Pessoa por Conhecer* (Lisbon: Estampa, 1990), and republished in *Notas para a Recordação do meu Mestre Caeiro*, (Ed. Lopes. Lisbon: Estampa, 1997), which contains a total of 22 "Notes." The "Notas" were also published by Teresa Sobral Cunha in her edition of Caeiro's poetry, *Poemas Completos de Alberto Caeiro* (Lisbon: Editorial Presença, 1994).

"Nota ao Acaso" 'Random Note' was almost the last Campos text to be published in Pessoa's lifetime. It appeared in the November 1935 issue of *Sudoeste*, which didn't actually hit the stands until a few days after Pessoa's death on November 30th.

Notes for the Memory of My Master Caeiro and a Random Note

I met my master Caeiro under exceptional circumstances, as are all of life's circumstances, especially those which in themselves are insignificant but which have outstanding consequences.

After completing, in Scotland, almost three quarters of my course in naval engineering, I went on a voyage to the Orient. On my return, I disembarked at Marseilles, unable to bear the thought of more sailing, and came by land to Lisbon. One day a cousin of mine took me on a trip to the Ribatejo, where he knew one of Caieiro's cousins, with whom he had some business dealings. It was in the house of that cousin that I met my future master. That's all there is to tell; it was small like the seeds of all conceptions.

I can still see, with a clarity of soul, that memory's tears don't cloud, because this seeing isn't external... I see him before me as I saw him that first time and as I will perhaps always see him: first of all those blue eyes of a child who has no fear, then the already somewhat prominent cheekbones, his pale complexion, and his strange Greek air, which was a calmness from within, not something in his outward expression or features. His almost luxuriant hair was blond, but in a dim light it looked brownish. He was medium to tall in height but with low, hunched shoulders. His visage was white, his smile was true to itself, and so too his voice, whose tone didn't try to express anything beyond the words being said—a voice neither loud nor soft, just clear, without designs or hesitations or inhibitions. Those blue eyes couldn't stop gazing. If our observation noticed anything strange, it was his forehead—not high, but imposingly white. I repeat: it was the whiteness of his forehead, even whiter than his pale face, that endowed him with majesty. His hands were a bit slender, but not too, and he had a wide palm. The expression of his mouth, which was the last thing one noticed, as if speaking were less than existing for this man, consisted of the kind of smile we ascribe in poetry to beautiful inanimate things, merely because they please us—flowers, sprawling fields, sunlit waters. A smile for existing, not for talking to us.

My master, my master, who died so young! I see him again in this mere shadow that's me, in the memory that my dead self retains...

It was in our first conversation... Apropos I don't know what, he said, "There's a fellow here named Ricardo Reis whom I'm sure you would enjoy meeting. He's very different from you." And then he added, "Everything is different from us, and that's why everything exists."

This sentence, uttered as if it were an axiom of the earth, seduced me with a seismic shock—as always occurs when someone is deflowered—that penetrated to my soul's foundations. But contrary to what occurs in physical seduction, the effect on me was to receive, all at once, in all my sensations, a virginity I'd never had.

My master Caeiro wasn't a pagan; he was paganism. Ricardo Reis is a pagan, António Mora is a pagan, and I'm a pagan; Fernando Pessoa himself would be a pagan, were he not a ball of string inwardly wound around itself. But Ricardo Reis is a pagan by virtue of his character, António Mora is a pagan by virtue of his intellect, and I'm a pagan out of sheer revolt, i.e. by my temperament. For Caeiro's paganism there was no explanation; there was consubstantiation.

I will clarify this in the weak-kneed way that indefinable things are defined: through example. If we compare ourselves with the Greeks, one of the most striking differences we find is their aversion to the infinite, of which they had no real concept. Well, my master Caeiro had the same nonconcept. I will now recount, with what I dare say is great accuracy, the astounding conversation in which he revealed this to me.

Elaborating on a reference made in one of the poems from *The Keeper of Sheep*, he told me how someone or other had once called him a "materialist poet." Although I don't think the label is right, since there is no right label to define my master Caeiro, I told him that the epithet wasn't entirely absurd. And I explained the basic tenets of classical materialism. Caeiro listened to me with a pained expression, and then blurted out:

"But this is just plain stupid. It's the stuff of priests but without any religion, and therefore without any excuse."

I was taken aback, and I pointed out various similarities between materialism and his own doctrine, though excluding from this his poetry. Caeiro protested.

"But what you call poetry is everything. And it's not even poetry: it's seeing. Those materialists are blind. You say they say that space is infinite. Where did they ever see that in space?"

And I, confused: "But don't you conceive of space as being infinite? Can't you conceive of space as being infinite?"

"I don't conceive of anything as infinite. How can I conceive of something as infinite?"

"Just suppose there's a space," I said. "Beyond that space there is more space, and then more space, still more, and more, and more... It never ends..."

"Why?" asked my master Caeiro.

I reeled in a mental earthquake. "Then suppose it ends!" I shouted. "What comes after?"

"If it ends," he replied, "nothing comes after."

This kind of argumentation, which is both childish and feminine, and therefore unanswerable, stumped my brain for a few moments, until finally I said, "But do you *conceive* of this?"

"Conceive of what? Of something having limits? Small wonder! What doesn't have limits doesn't exist. To exist means that there's something else, which means that each thing is limited. What's so hard about conceiving that a thing is a thing and that it's not always some other thing that's beyond it?"

At this point I had the physical sensation that I was arguing not with another man but with another universe. I made one last attempt, with a far-fetched argument that I convinced myself was legitimate.

"All right, Caeiro, consider numbers... Where do numbers end? Let's take any number—34, for example. After 34 comes 35, 36, 37, 38, etc., and it keeps going like that forever. No matter how large the number, there's always a still larger one..."

"But that's all just numbers," objected my master Caeiro. And then he added, looking at me with a boundless childhood in his eyes: "What is 34 in Reality?"

One day Caeiro told me something absolutely astonishing. We were talking, or rather, I was talking, about the soul's immortality. I felt that this concept, even if false, was necessary for us to be able to tolerate existence intellectually, to be able to see it as something more than a heap of stones with greater or lesser consciousness.

"I don't know what it means for something to be necessary," said Caeiro.

I answered without answering: "Just tell me this. What are you to yourself?"

"What am I to myself?" Caeiro repeated. "I'm one of my sensations."

I've never forgotten the shock that phrase produced in my soul. It has many implications, some of which are contrary to what Caeiro intended. But it was after all spontaneous—a ray of sunshine that shed light without any intention.

One of the most interesting conversations with my master Caeiro was the one in Lisbon where everyone in the group was present and we ended up discussing the concept of Reality.

If I remember correctly, we got on to this subject because of a tangential remark made by Fernando Pessoa apropos something that had been said. Pessoa's remark was this: "The concept of Being does not admit of parts or degrees; something is or it isn't."

"I'm not sure it's that simple," I objected. "This concept of being needs to be analyzed. It seems to me like a metaphysical superstition, at least to a certain extent."

"But the concept of Being isn't open to analysis," replied Fernando Pessoa, "due precisely to its indivisibility."

"The concept may not be open to it," I said, "but the value of that concept is."

Fernando answered, "But what is the 'value' of a concept independently of the concept? A concept—an abstract idea, that is—is never 'more' or 'less' than it is, and so it cannot be said to have value, which is always a matter of more or less. There may be value in how a concept is used or applied, but that value is in its usage or application, not in the concept itself."

My master Caeiro, who with his eyes had been attentively listening to this transpontine¹ discussion, broke in at this point, saying, "Where there can be no more or less, there is nothing."

"And why is that?" asked Fernando.

"Because there can be more or less of everything that's real, and nothing but what's real can exist."

"Give us an example, Caeiro," I said.

"Rain," replied my master. "Rain is something real. And so it can rain more or rain less. If you were to say, 'There can't be more or less of this rain,' I would say, 'Then that rain doesn't exist.' Unless of course you meant the rain as it is in this precise instant; that rain, indeed, is what it is and wouldn't be what it is if it were more or less. But I mean something different."

"I already see what you mean," I broke in, but before I could go on to say I can't remember what, Fernando Pessoa turned to Caeiro. "Tell me this," he said, pointing his cigarette: "How do you regard dreams? Are they real or not?"

"I regard dreams as I regard shadows," answered Caeiro unexpectedly, with his usual divine quickness. "A shadow is real, but it's less real than a stone. A dream is real—otherwise it wouldn't be a dream—but it's less real than a thing. To be real is to be like this."

Fernando Pessoa has the advantage of living more in ideas than in himself. He had forgotten not only what he'd been arguing but even the truth or falseness of what he'd heard; he was enthused about the metaphysical possibilities of this new theory, regardless of whether it was true or false. That's how these aesthetes are.

“That’s an extraordinary idea!” he said. “Utterly original! It never occurred to me.” (And how about that “it never occurred to me”? As if it were impossible for an idea to occur to somebody else before it occurred to him, Fernando!) “It never occurred to me that one could think of reality as that which admits of degrees. That’s equivalent to thinking of Being as a numerical idea rather than as a strictly abstract one...”

“That’s a bit confusing for me,” Caeiro hesitated, “but yes, I think that’s right. My point is this: to be real means there are other real things, for it’s impossible to be real all alone; and since to be real is to be something that isn’t all those other things, it’s to be different from them; and since reality is a thing like size or weight—otherwise there would be no reality—and since all things are different, it follows that things are never equally real, even as things are never equal in size or weight. There will always be a difference, however small. To be real is this.”

“That’s even more extraordinary!” exclaimed Fernando Pessoa. “So you evidently consider reality to be an attribute of things, since you compare it to size and weight. But tell me this: what thing is reality an attribute of? What is behind reality?”

“Behind reality?” repeated my master Caeiro. “There’s nothing behind reality. Just as there’s nothing behind size, and nothing behind weight.”

“But if a thing has no reality, it can’t exist, whereas a thing that has no size or weight can exist...”

“Not if it’s a thing that by nature has size and weight. A stone can’t exist without size; a stone can’t exist without weight. But a stone isn’t a size, and a stone isn’t a weight. Nor can a stone exist without reality, but the stone is not a reality.”

“Okay, okay,” said Fernando impatiently, grabbing at uncertain ideas while feeling the ground give way beneath him. “But when you say ‘a stone has reality,’ you distinguish stone from reality.”

“Naturally. The stone is not reality; it has reality. The stone is only stone.”

“And what does that mean?”

“I don’t know. It’s like I said. A stone is a stone and has to have reality to be stone. A stone is a stone and has to have weight to be stone. A man isn’t a face but has to have a face to be a man. I don’t know the reason for this, nor do I know if a reason for this or for anything exists...”

“You know, Caeiro,” said Fernando pensively, “you’re formulating a philosophy that’s a bit contrary to what you think and feel. You’re creating a

kind of personal Kantianism, making the stone into a noumenon, a stone-in-itself. Let me explain..." And he proceeded to explain the Kantian thesis and how what Caiiro had said more or less concurred with it. Then he pointed out the difference, or what he thought was the difference: "For Kant these attributes—weight, size (not reality)—are concepts imposed on the stone-in-itself by our senses, or rather, by the fact we observe it. You seem to be suggesting that these concepts are as much things as the stone-in-itself, and this is what makes your theory hard to grasp, while Kant's theory—whether true or false—is perfectly understandable."

My master Caiiro listened with rapt attention. Once or twice he blinked, as if to shake off ideas the way one shakes off sleep. And, after thinking a bit, he said:

"I don't have theories. I don't have philosophy. I see but know nothing. I call a stone a stone to distinguish it from a flower or from a tree—from everything, in other words, that isn't a stone. But each stone is different from every other stone—not because it isn't a stone but because it has a different size and different weight and different shape and different color. And also because it's a different thing. I give the name stone to one stone and to another stone since they both share those characteristics that make us call a stone a stone. But we should really give each stone its own, individual name, as we do for people. If we don't name stones, it's because it would be impossible to come up with that many words, not because it would be wrong."

"Just answer me this," interrupted Fernando Pessoa, "and your position will become clear. Is there, for you, a 'stoniness,' even as there is a size and a weight? I mean, just as you say 'this stone is larger—has more size, as it were—than that stone' or 'this stone has more weight than that stone,' would you also say 'this stone is more stone than that one,' or in other words, 'this stone has more stoniness than that one'?"

"Certainly," replied the master immediately. "I'm quite prepared to say 'this stone is more stone than that one.' I'm prepared to say this if it's larger or if it's heavier than the other, since a stone needs size and weight to be stone, and especially if it surpasses the other in all the attributes (as you call them) that a stone has to have to be a stone."

"And what do you call a stone that you see in a dream?" asked Fernando, smiling.

"I call it a dream," answered my master Caiiro. "I call it a dream of a stone."

“I see,” said Pessoa, nodding. “Speaking philosophically, you don’t distinguish the substance from its attributes. A stone, in your view, is a thing composed of a certain number of attributes—those necessary to make what we call a stone—and with a certain quantity of each attribute, which gives the stone a particular size, hardness, weight and color, thereby distinguishing it from another stone, though both are stones, because they have the same attributes, even if in different quantities. Well, this amounts to denying the real existence of the stone. The stone becomes merely a summation of real things...”

“But a real summation! It’s the sum of a real weight plus a real size plus a real color, etc. That’s why the stone, besides having weight, size and so forth, also has reality... It doesn’t have reality as stone; it has reality for being a summation of what you call attributes, all of them *real*. Since each attribute has reality, so too the stone.”

“Let’s go back to the dream,” said Fernando. “You call a stone that you see in a dream a dream, or at the very most, a dream of a stone. Why do you say ‘of a stone’? Why do you employ the word ‘stone’?”

“For the same reason that you, when you see my picture, say ‘That’s Caieiro and don’t mean that it’s me in the flesh.’”

We all broke out laughing. “I see and I give up,” said Fernando, laughing with the rest of us. *Les dieux sont ceux qui ne doutent jamais*. The truth of that phrase by Villiers de l’Isle Adam was never clearer to me.

This conversation remained imprinted on my soul, and I’ve reproduced it with what I think is near-stenographic precision, albeit without stenography. I have a sharp and vivid memory, which is characteristic of certain types of madness. And this conversation had an important outcome. It was, in itself, inconsequential like all conversations, and it would be easy to prove, by applying strict logic, that only those who held their peace didn’t contradict themselves. In Caieiro’s always stimulating affirmations and replies, a philosophical mind would be able to identify conflicting systems of thoughts. But although I concede this, I don’t believe there’s any conflict. My master Caieiro was surely right, even on those points where he was wrong.

This conversation, as I was saying, had an important outcome. It provided António Mora with the inspiration to write one of the most astonishing chapters of his *Prolegomena*—the chapter on the idea of Reality. António Mora was the only one who said nothing during the whole conversation. He just listened to all the ideas being discussed, with his eyes staring inward the whole

while. The ideas of my master Caeiro, expounded in this conversation with the intellectual recklessness of instinct, and hence in a necessarily inexact, contradictory fashion, were converted into a coherent, logical system in the *Prolegomena*.

I don't wish to detract from the undeniable merit of António Mora, but it should be said that just as the very basis of his philosophical system was born (as he himself reveals with abstract pride) from that simple phrase of Caeiro, "Nature is parts without a whole," so too an important part of that system—the marvelous concept of Reality as "dimension," and the derivative concept of "degrees of reality"—was born from this conversation. To everyone his due, and everything to my master Caeiro.

The work of Caeiro is divided, not just in his book but in actual fact, into three parts: *The Keeper of Sheep*, *The Shepherd in Love*, and that third part that Ricardo Reis aptly titled *Uncollected Poems*.² *The Shepherd in Love* is a futile interlude, but the few poems that make it up are among the world's great love poems, for they are love poems by virtue of being about love and not by virtue of being poems. The poet loved because he loved, and not because love exists, and this was precisely what he said.

The Keeper of Sheep is the mental life of Caeiro up until the coach tops the hill. The *Uncollected Poems* are its descent. That's how I distinguish between them. I can imagine having been able to write certain of the *Uncollected Poems*, but not even in my wildest dreams can I imagine having written any of the poems in *The Keeper of Sheep*.

In the *Uncollected Poems* there is weariness, and therefore unevenness. Caeiro is Caeiro, but a sick Caeiro. Not always sick, but sometimes sick. He's the same but a bit removed. This is particularly true in the middle poems of this third part of his oeuvre.

My master Caeiro was a master for everyone capable of having a master. There was no one who got to know Caeiro, no one who spoke with him or had the physical privilege of keeping company with his spirit, who didn't come away as a different man, for Caeiro was the only Rome one couldn't return from as the same person he was when he went there, unless he wasn't after all a person—unless, like most people, he was incapable of individuality beyond the fact of being, in space, a body separated from other bodies and symbolically blemished by its human form.

Inferior people cannot have a master, since they have nothing for a master to be a master of. That is why strong personalities can be hypnotized very

easily, normal people less easily, and idiots, imbeciles, feeble or incoherent people not at all. To be strong is to be capable of feeling.

There were, as the reader will have gleaned from these pages, three main people around my master Caeiro: Ricardo Reis, António Mora, and myself. Without inflating myself or anyone else, I can say that all three of us were and are radically different—at least intellectually speaking—from the common, animal lot of humanity. And all three of us owe whatever is best in our souls to the contact we had with my master Caeiro. All of us became others—became our true selves, that is—after passing through the sieve of that fleshly intervention of the Gods.

Ricardo Reis was a latent pagan, unable to grasp modern life and unable to grasp that ancient life into which he should have been born—unable to grasp modern life because his intelligence was of a different species, and unable to grasp ancient life because he couldn't feel it, for you cannot feel what isn't there to feel. Caeiro, the reconstructor of Paganism, and from the eternal point of view its founder, brought Ricardo Reis the tangible substance that he was lacking. And so he found himself as a pagan—the pagan he already was before finding himself. Before meeting Caeiro, Ricardo Reis hadn't written a single verse, and he was already twenty-five years old. After meeting Caeiro and hearing him recite *The Keeper of Sheep*, Ricardo Reis began to realize that he was organically a poet. Some physiologists say that it's possible to change sex. I don't know if it's true, because I don't know if anything is "true," but I know that Ricardo Reis stopped being a woman and became a man, or stopped being a man and became a woman—as you like—when he met Caeiro.

António Mora was a shadow with philosophical pretensions. He spent his time mulling over Kant and trying to figure out if life had any meaning. Indecisive, like all strong minds, he hadn't discovered the truth, or what he felt was the truth, which as far as I'm concerned is the same thing. He discovered it when he discovered Caeiro. My master Caeiro gave him the soul he'd never had; inside the outer Mora, which is all there had ever been, he placed a central Mora. This led to the triumphal reduction of Caeiro's instinctive thoughts into a philosophical system of logical truth, as set forth in Mora's two treatises, marvels of originality and speculative thought: *The Return of the Gods* and *the Prolegomena to a Reformation of Paganism*.

As for myself, before meeting Caeiro I was a nervous machine that busily did nothing. I met my master Caeiro after Reis and Mora, who met him in 1912 and 1913, respectively. I met him in 1914. I had already written verses—

three sonnets and two poems ("Carnival" and "Opiary"). These sonnets and poems reveal my emotional state when I was helplessly adrift. As soon as I met Caiero, I found my true self. I went to London and immediately wrote the "Triumphal Ode." And from then on, for better or worse, I have been I.

The strangest case is that of Fernando Pessoa, who doesn't exist, strictly speaking. He met Caiero a little before I did—on March 8th, 1914, according to what he told me. Caiero had come to spend a week in Lisbon, and it was then that Pessoa met him. After hearing him recite *The Keeper of Sheep*, he went home in a fever (the one he was born with) and wrote the six poems of "Oblique Rain" in one go.

"Oblique Rain" doesn't resemble any of my master Caiero's poems, except perhaps in the rectilinear movement of its rhythm. But Fernando Pessoa would never have been able to extract those extraordinary poems from his inner world without having met Caiero. They were a direct result of the spiritual shock he experienced mere moments after that meeting occurred. It was instantaneous. Because of his overwrought sensibility, accompanied by an overwrought intelligence, Fernando reacted immediately to the Great Vaccine—the vaccine against the stupidity of the intelligent. And there is nothing more admirable in the work of Fernando Pessoa than this group of six poems, this "Oblique Rain." Perhaps there are, or will be, greater things produced by his pen, but never anything fresher, never anything more original, and so I rather doubt there will ever be anything greater. Not only that, he will never produce anything that's more genuinely Fernando Pessoa, more intimately Fernando Pessoa. What could better express his relentlessly intellectualized sensibility, his inattentively keen attention and the ardent subtlety of his cold self-analysis than these poetic intersections in which the narrator's state of mind is simultaneously two states, in which the subjective and objective join together while remaining separate, and in which the real and the unreal merge in order to remain distinct? In these poems Fernando Pessoa made a veritable photograph of his soul. In that one, unique moment he succeeded in having his own individuality, such as he had never had before and can never have again, because he has no individuality.

Long live my master Caiero!

Random Note

The superior poet says what he really feels. The average poet says what he decides to feel. The inferior poet says what he thinks he ought to feel.

None of this has to do with sincerity. In the first place, no one knows what he truly feels. It's possible to feel relieved when a loved one dies even as we imagine that we're feeling grief, because grief is what we're supposed to feel on these occasions. Most people feel conventionally, albeit with the greatest human sincerity; what they lack, when they feel, is any kind or hint of intellectual sincerity, which is what matters for poets. So rare is this quality that in the already long history of Poetry I don't believe there are more than four or five poets who ever said what they truly, and not just ostensibly, felt. There are some very great ones who never said what they felt, who were forever incapable of it. At best there are, in certain poets, a few moments in which they have said what they feel. It's the case, here and there, with Wordsworth, and in several poems by Coleridge, whose "Kubla Khan" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" are more sincere than all of Milton, or even of all Shakespeare. But it must be said of Shakespeare that he was essentially and structurally artificial, so that his constant insincerity is ultimately a constant sincerity, which is what makes him so great.

When an inferior poet feels, his feelings are made to order. He may be sincere in his emotion, but so what, if he's not sincere in his poetry? There are poets who throw all their feelings into their verses, without ever realizing that they never felt those things. Camões weeps over the death of his beloved "gentle soul," but who actually weeps is Petrarch. If Camões's emotion had been sincere, he would have found new words, a new form—anything but the sonnet and iambic pentameter. But no; he used the sonnet in decasyllables as he might use mourning clothes in life.

My master Caeiro was the world's only completely sincere poet.

Translator's Notes

¹ This word, meaning "across the bridge," is even rarer in Portuguese (*transpontino/a*) than in English. Perhaps Pessoa used it to mean "far-flung, esoteric."

² In the original, Campos is complimenting Reis for the neologism employed in the title *Poemas Inconjuntos*. English has several words that convey the sense of "inconjuncto" more convincingly than any neologism I could think of.