

Pessoa's fictions

– an essay by Peter Poulsen on a poet without a biography

In 2003-8 the Danish composer Klaus Ib Jørgensen wrote a series of works based on poems by the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa. In 2009 the music was released on a CD by Dacapo Records with Iris Oja (mezzo-soprano), the Portuguese ensemble REMIX and the conductor Paul Hillier. In connection with the release the Danish-language website moonpain.nu was launched, from which this essay could be downloaded as a radio talk in MP3 format. This is an English translation of the original manuscript of the essay.

*I am nothing.
I shall always be nothing.
I can only want to be nothing.
Apart from this, I have in me all the dreams of the world*

This is the preamble to a great work in the history of modern poetry. It is in Portuguese and could be read for the first time in the periodical *Presença* in 1933; the title is *Tabacaria* (The Tobacconist's); the author is Álvaro de Campos. In the same issue you could read poems by one Fernando Pessoa, quite different in tone: succinct, concentrated and metrical. One of them, *Autopsychograph*, begins:

*The poet is a fake
His faking seems so real
That he will fake the ache
Which he can really feel*

You feel that these two poets have quite different natures. On the face of it you would never guess that the poems were written with the same hand that signed itself



Alberto Caeiro,
Ricardo Reis, Alexander
Search, Bernardo Soares and other names,
some of them heavyweights of Portuguese literary
modernism.

Apart from one, they did not exist: at least not in the usual sense, as people with a domicile, identity papers, tax brackets, insurance policies, families and all that stuff; which doesn't mean that they didn't have – and don't still have – an existence. Álvaro de Campos, as he himself writes, has all the dreams in the world within him, even though he is nothing.

The only one who existed in the documentable sense is Fernando Pessoa, from whom the others originated, and in whom they resounded and dreamed their dreams. Álvaro de Campos never drank a cup of coffee and chased it down with a brandy; he never had to choose between fish and flesh, red and white wine, tram and taxi, Catholicism and agnosticism. Fernando Pessoa did all that for him, and for the others in the bouquet.

Early childhood in Lisbon

Fernando António Nogueira Pessoa was born on 13th June (Saint Anthony's Day) 1888 at 3 p.m., on the fourth floor of a patrician property on what was then the Largo de São Carlos in central Lisbon, opposite the São Carlos Theatre, the city's opera house. This was the year when Eliot and O'Neill came into the world; Wilhelm II became Kaiser in Germany, Brazil became a republic, the Eiffel Tower was inaugurated; Rimbaud's *Les Illuminations* was published, Ibsen

Fernando Pessoa i Chiado, c. 1934.

premiered *Hedda Gabler*, van Gogh painted *The Yellow Chair* and died a couple of years later; Fauré, Richard Strauss and Borodin were active, and in Paris a pianist called Satie composed three bizarre piano pieces where he experimented with a very simple modal style with unresolved, dissonant chords.

Pessoa may never have heard (or heard of) Satie; but in a way, especially because of certain elective affinities and a well-developed feeling for the eccentric, he was related to the French composer and musician, who worked as a pianist in a café on Montmartre and had certain links with the Rosicrucian Order, in which Pessoa and some of his colleagues also later took an interest.

The only music Pessoa may have sensed that June afternoon came from the bell of the Church of the Martyrs: its delicately chiming tones can still be heard over his childhood district, o *Chiado*. Often, when the adult Pessoa heard these chimes, he would be reminded of the first period of just five years when he was permitted to live on the atmospheric São Carlos square and to be chimed to sleep or woken up by the bells ringing over what he called his village.

Pessoa's belonged to the haute-bourgeoisie; his mother was from the Azores, where the family had a country house on the island of Terceira; for her last years of schooling her father, who was a judge, sent her to Lisbon to give her a better education than was possible on the islands; she was described as a well-read woman who spoke fluent French, wrote Portuguese verse and played the piano; she was 26 when her first-born, Fernando, arrived, and he idolized her from the first second.

Pessoa's paternal grandfather was a general, and the family had military traditions; but his father was a civil servant in the Ministry of Justice and thoroughly civilian. His passion was music, and alongside his ministerial activities he wrote concert and opera reviews in Portugal's biggest newspaper, *Diário de Notícias*. He was 28 when his son was born.

The Pessoa family was privileged, and lived in surroundings and circumstances that seem to have been perfect; and scattered through the poems one does in fact catch glimpses of a childhood Eden.

It isn't hard to imagine the little boy looking out of one of the windows of the residence and seeing his father stride over the square and disappear into the elegant São Carlos theatre for an opera premiere, perhaps of Wagner's *Flying Dutchman*, of which he is said to have written an insightful, enthusiastic and much-discussed review.

The year after Fernando Pessoa saw the light of day, in 1889, the English poet Robert Browning died; one day he was to have an influence on Pessoa's artistic development, and the same year someone was born who in many respects was a kindred spirit – especially of the above-mentioned Álvaro de Campos: no less a figure than Charlie Chaplin. 1889 was also the year in which Alberto Caeiro was born; but that is another story.

South Africa and the encounter with English language and literature

Visits to Paradise are often short; Pessoa's already ended on 13th July 1893, when his father died of tuberculosis, just 33 years old. This meant farewell to the church bells and the magical theatre, the world he recollects so supremely well in the sixth and last movement of the poem *Slanting Rain*, which he wrote in special circumstances on 8th March 1914.

The expulsion from Paradise was harsh and brutal: his mother had to auction off most of the family's possessions, and they had to move to a far smaller apartment farther from the centre. The next year, in 1894, his little brother Jorge died, and Fernando invented his first fictional character, a Chevalier de Pas, whose name smacks of legend and illustrated children's books. Later – far later – he wrote disguised as Álvaro de Campos in the poem *Dactylograph* about the dichotomy between the spheres of dream and reality that the deaths of his father and younger brother had made him experience.

The period in the new home was short. In 1894 his mother made the acquaintance of the commandant João Miguel Rosa, whom she married the next year almost at the same time as he was appointed Portuguese Consul in Durban, South Africa.

In 1896 the family was installed in Durban's diplomatic neighbourhood, and a crucial chapter

of Pessoa's life began. He was admitted to a convent school in the South African city and started an education where English was the language of instruction. Before long he was doing well in English – so well that he began writing poetry in it.

Pessoa's destiny rather recalls Baudelaire's; the French poet too lost his biological father at an early age, and his mother also married a prominent military officer. But Baudelaire, who like Pessoa was close to his mother, hated his stepfather and planned at one point to murder him. There is no evidence that Pessoa harboured similar feelings towards his stepfather – on the contrary. Life in South Africa seems to have been peaceful and harmonious, and the quiet, rather shy and introverted child thrived in the new home and at the excellent schools where, besides English, he was to master French so well that he later wrote poems in that language too, although not as many and not as good as the English ones.



Fernando Pessoa in Durban, 10 years old, c. 1898.

It is evident from the biographies that in Durban he got to know about poets like Milton, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson and Poe; Carlyle and Pope too were among those he read in the course of the decade his South African life was to last – only interrupted by a single holiday back in Portugal, where along with his mother and the new siblings they brought him, he visited Lisbon and his mother's family on Terceira, where Pessoa wrote a short love poem in Portuguese in 1902, *When she walks by*, which shows a surprisingly well developed talent for his age (he was only 13).

Back in South Africa his education continued, and his knowledge of English and English literature deepened; in those years, besides the above-mentioned English poets, he studied Shakespeare, Browning and Dickens, whose *Pickwick*

Papers became a favourite work which later went with him everywhere; one important experience was the encounter with Walt Whitman's poems – this must have been at about the same time as the Danish writer Johannes V. Jensen, who was a good fifteen years older than Pessoa, became enraptured by the great American, this force of nature of whom Pessoa later wrote: "he is the epitome of modern times. His expressive power is consummate, like Shakespeare's."

The first heteronyms

In these years, as mentioned above, he wrote poems in English, and he tried his hand at novels and detective stories. New authorial identities were invented: Alexander Search, Robert Anon and others; and Jean Seuil, in whose name he wrote French poems over the years, appeared in South Africa. Far later, in 1935, he tried to explain what was going on in a letter to the writer and editor Adolfo Casais Monteiro, who was one of the first to grasp the extent of Pessoa's activities

"This tendency to create around me another world, just like this one but with other people, has never left my imagination. It has gone through various phases including the one that began in me as a young adult, when a witty remark that was completely out of keeping with who I am or think I am would sometimes and for some unknown reason occur to me, and I would immediately, spontaneously say it as if it came from some friend of mine, whose name I would invent, along with biographical details, and whose figure – physiognomy, stature, dress and gestures – I would immediately see before me. Thus I elaborated, and propagated, various friends and acquaintances who never existed but whom I feel, hear and see even today. I repeat: I feel, hear and see them. And I miss them."

(Previous page: translation by Richard Zenith, from "The Selected Prose of Fernando Pessoa", Grove Press, New York. Copyright by Richard Zenith. Reproduced with kind permission from the translator.)

As far as we know Pessoa created 72 fictive friends and acquaintances during his 47-year life; some of them were transitory, but others were enduring and creative.

Back in Lisbon alone – Pessoa the Symbolist takes form

Once Pessoa had passed his Baccalaureate, it was decided that he should study literature back home in Lisbon. At the end of August 1905 he went aboard the German passenger ship S/S Herzog and sailed for the second (and last) time north along the coast of Africa; with him the 17-year-old had his company of non-existent but extremely tangible companions; they all absorbed maritime moods and oceanic feelings.

In Lisbon he lived with his paternal grandmother and a couple of aunts and tried to get used to the idea of becoming a university student. He felt alone in the world, to put it mildly:

"I have no one in whom to confide. My family understands nothing. My friends I cannot trouble with these things; I have really no intimate friends [...] I am shy and unwilling to make known my woes. An intimate friend is one of my ideal things, one of my daydreams, yet an intimate friend is a thing I never shall have [...] No more of this. Mistress or sweetheart I have none; it is another of my ideals and one fraught, unto the soul, with a real nothingness. It cannot be as I dream. Alas! poor Alastor! Shelley, how I understand thee! Can I confide in Mother? Would that I had her here. I cannot confide in her either, but her presence would abate much of my pain. I feel as lonely as a wreck at sea. And I am a wreck indeed. So I confide in myself. In myself? What confidence is there in these lines? There is none. As I read them over I ache in mind to perceive how pretentious, how literary-diary-like they are! In some I have even made style. Yet I suffer nonetheless. A man may suffer as much in a suit of silks as in a sack or in a torn blanket. No more."

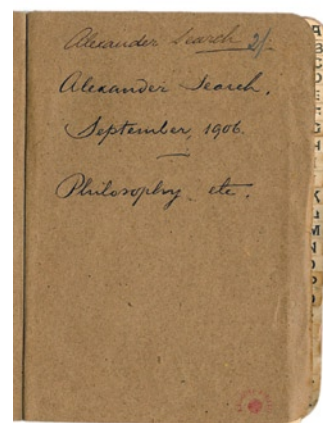
This entry of July 25th 1907 (written by Pessoa in English), exhibits some of the frankness that is so hard to shake off, a good deal of self-insight and the seeds of a number of poems.

The young Pessoa seems lost and frightened – for himself and his situation. We can already trace the sensibility, the nervous susceptibility that was characteristic of him; you sense the pulse of the world through him, the complexity of existence, and feel that there are changes, departures and shifts in consciousness in the air – as there demonstrably were as the twentieth century came marching in.

The cities got electricity, the first automobiles appeared, the first films appeared on the silver screen, the excavation for the Panama canal began, the Wright brothers lifted themselves a few centimetres above the flat ground, telephones were installed and cables were laid; and as further signs that the old world was fading, we can mention Freud's interpretations of dreams, Planck's quantum theory and the death of Queen Victoria; in those years Chekhov wrote *Uncle Vanya*, Conrad *Lord Jim*, Munch painted *The Scream*, Richard Strauss composed *Salome*, Villa-Lobos his *Cânticos sertanejos*, Schoenberg wrote his *Pieces for Piano* – opus 11, which formed the basis for atonality; Braque, Picasso and others discovered African art and introduced Cubism; and Arthur Lourié, who was later the victim of a conspiracy of silence from Soviet Bolshevism, produced a work of audiovisual music, *Formes en l'air*, three short piano pieces which were in fact dedicated to Picasso.

In poetry too new departures were in the offing. I have already mentioned Johannes V. Jensen, whose Whitman raptures produced modernist

Fernando Pessoa left a wealth of notebooks; this one is from 1906 with poems by Alexander Search. At this time Fernando had just arrived in Lisbon from Durban the previous year, and after a short while as a student at the university he felt alone, abandoned and lost.



eruptions in the famous Poems of 1906; and in the first decade of the century Ezra Pound, born in 1885, and Apollinaire, in 1880, were on the track of new modes of expression that were to revolutionize poetry. Rilke was working on his New Poems, which introduced a sculptural objectivity in poetry; Gottfried Benn and others were on the way with what was to result in the Expressionist explosion; Pessoa was still writing in English, as he had done in Durban, but the transplant to Lisbon meant that Portuguese literature and language took a firmer hold on him, and slowly he matured as a poet and innovator.

At the university he never settled down. Student life, and the political unrest that was part of it at the time under João Franco's dictatorial leadership of a still-monarchist Portugal, was not to his taste; Pessoa was not a fan of street-fighting and processions. So he left the faculty and the university for an uncertain future.

In 1907 he inherited a sum from his grandmother, and he immediately invested the money in printing equipment, which he installed in the Rua da Conceição da Glória under the company name *Imprensa Íbis* – *Officinas a Vapor*. But his career as a printer and publisher was short. After a few months he was bankrupt. It is said that he was offered positions in various places in the city, but he declined. At this time he was convinced that he wanted to be a poet and therefore could not commit himself to fixed

daily working hours. Instead he began working freelance a few days a week as a correspondence clerk in English and French and as an interpreter in various merchant houses, and that was how he lived for the rest of his days. He lived in a succession of rented rooms in and around the centre of Lisbon, which he never left again except for a single journey to Alentejo and a couple of trips to places in the surroundings such as Cascais and Sintra. His knowledge of the big world outside belonged to his childhood and the early years of his youth; yet he never became a local patriot or a provincial; the journeys he made took place, like so much else, in his poetic imagination. "In the end, you travel best by feeling," he wrote in a poem.

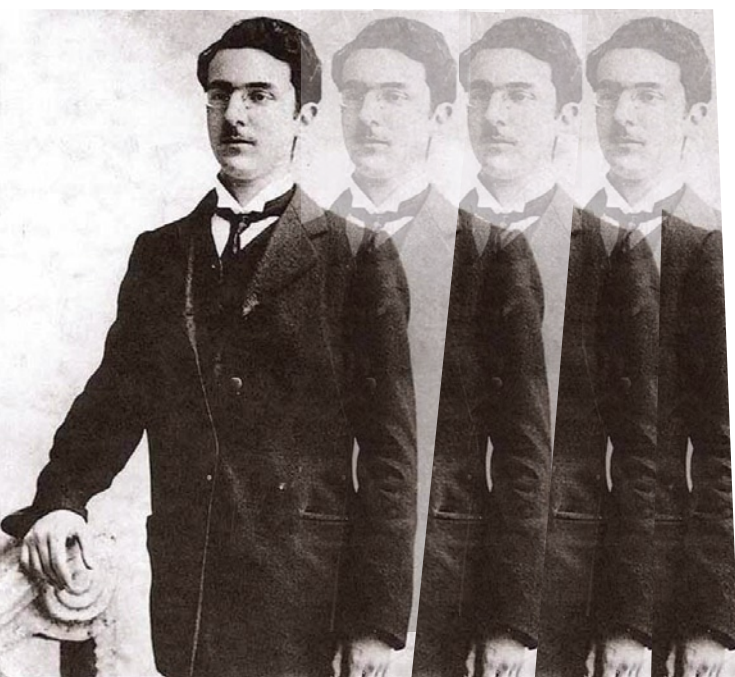
In reality Pessoa's biography stops here; or stops being interesting, if it ever was. In an excellent essay from 1962, *Unknown to himself*, the Mexican Octavio Paz writes of Pessoa:

"Poets don't have biographies. Their work is their biography. Pessoa, who always doubted the reality of this world, would readily approve if I were to go straight to his poems, forgetting the incidents and accidents of his earthly life. Nothing in his life is surprising – nothing except his poems. I do not think his 'case history' – one must resign oneself to using that unpleasant term – explains them; I think that, in the light of his poems, his 'case history' ceases to be one. Pessoa means person in Portuguese and derives from persona, the mask of Roman actors. Mask, character out of fiction, no one: Pessoa. His history could be reduced to the passage between the unreality of his daily life and the reality of his fictions. These fictions are the poets Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos, Ricardo Reis and, above all, Fernando Pessoa himself. Thus it is not pointless to recall the salient features of his life, as long as we know that it is the footprints of a shadow we are following. The real Pessoa is someone else."

It is interesting, I think, that Paz considers Pessoa himself at least as fictional as the others.

Mário de Sá-Carneiro and Futurism

Although Pessoa lamented the lack of an intimate friend, someone in whom he could



Fernando Pessoa in Lisbon, 20 years old, 1908.

confide, and although he had neither mistresses nor lover, through his job he slowly established a circle of acquaintances, and in editorial offices, cafés and restaurants, streets and public squares he met poets and literati as well as visual artists and composers of his own (and the previous) generation – indeed also of the next; with his linguistic skills, his knowledge and his talent he became a regular contributor to the cultural pages and literary supplements of the newspapers, and a sought-after staff member of the many art and literary periodicals that flourished in those years and died almost as quickly as they had appeared.

In 1913 one of the conspicuous events to which Paz refers occurred. That year Pessoa made the acquaintance of the young poet, dramatist and prose writer Mário de Sá-Carneiro, who had just come home to Portugal from Paris, and in him he found the closest he ever came to the intimate friend he had sighed for and in whom he could confide. The correspondence between the two, after Sá-Carneiro had returned to Paris in 1914, which he left again shortly after the outbreak of war and to which he returned again for the last time in 1915, shows that they can have kept few secrets from each other.



Mário de Sá-Carneiro (1890-1916)

His friendship with the painter and all-round artist Almada Negreiros, who painted fine portraits of Pessoa, was also of importance. Sá-Carneiro and Negreiros, along with among others Armando Côrtes-Rodrigues, Luis de Montalvor, José Pacheco and Pessoa, were involved in introducing Futurism and Modernism to Portugal.

In 1913 Pessoa and the others from his circle were still under the sway of decadent, Symbolist (first and foremost French) poetry; it was hard to emancipate oneself from the themes and tone of the nineteenth century and the *saudosismo* (nostalgic yearning for the past) that characterized poetry in Portugal. Something was missing that could open their eyes and give them the courage to express themselves on new premises. One clearly senses the will to blaze new paths for poetic language and how Pessoa draws his bow to a linguistic breaking-point in a couple of his attempts from these years, first and foremost *Twilight Impressions* and the long, almost claustrophobic *Absurd Hour*, which can be read as a desperate plea for liberation:

*Open all the doors, let fresh gusts blow away
The stale salon air our thoughts are shrouded in ...*

But then Sá-Carneiro came from Paris with the Italian Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto*, which he presented for Pessoa and the others. Today Futurism has hardly any importance – presumably because of its compromising affinities with Fascism – but at first, in the years just before and during World War I, it was the spark that ignited the wildfire of -isms that ravaged and purged Europe from Moscow to Lisbon, from Mayakovsky to Pessoa. Marinetti was the ideologue, and in poetry it was perhaps Apollinaire, perhaps Pound, who took the first steps into the twentieth century.

The encounter with Futurism released energies in the young artists and led to the foundation of the periodical *Orpheu*, which despite its tradition-borne name (“Orpheus”) became the platform of renewal and the object of outrage.

The great heteronyms are born

But before the first issue was on the streets, and probably partly as a result of the overheated atmosphere and the nervous anticipation, something crucial and fundamentally inexplicable happened – absolutely the most important event in Pessoa's whole existence.

In 1914 three crucial and crucially different poets suddenly took the floor and were given voices by Pessoa; they were Alberto Caeiro and his two disciples Álvaro de Campos and Ricardo Reis. The last of these, it is true, had

haunted Pessoa's mind a few years before as a possibility, but he disappeared again and gave no samples of his abilities before 1914.

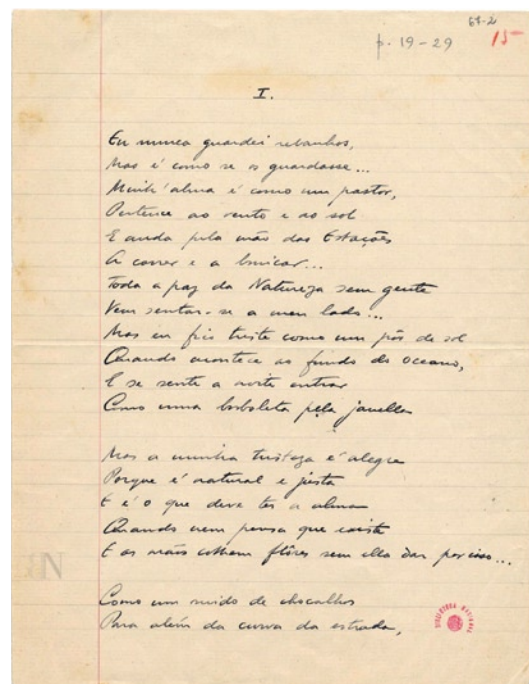
It began in earnest on 8th March 1914, and for a few months things moved very fast. In the same letter to the above-mentioned Casais Monteiro Pessoa writes:

"In 1912, if I remember correctly (and I can't be far off), I got the idea to write some poetry from a pagan perspective. I sketched out a few poems with irregular verse patterns (not in the style of Álvaro de Campos, but in semiregular style) and then forgot about them. But a hazy, shadowy portrait of the person who wrote those verses took shape in me. (Unbeknownst to me, Ricardo Reis had been born.)

A year and a half or two years later, it one day occurred to me to play a joke on Sá-Carneiro – to invent a rather complicated bucolic poet whom I would present in some guise of reality that I've since forgotten. I spent a few days trying in vain to envision this poet. One day when I'd finally given up – it was March 8th, 1914 – I walked over to a high chest of drawers, took a sheet of paper, and began to write standing up, as I do whenever I can. And I wrote thirty-some poems at once, in a kind of ecstasy I'm unable to describe. It was the triumphal day of my life, and I can never have another one like it. I began with a title, *The Keeper of Sheep* [*O guardador de rebanhos*]. This was followed by the appearance of someone whom I instantly named Alberto Caeiro. Excuse the absurdity of this statement: my master had appeared in me. That was what I immediately felt, and so strong was the feeling that, as soon as those thirty-odd poems were written, I grabbed a fresh sheet of paper and wrote, again all at once, the six poems that constitute *Slanting Rain* [*Chuva oblíqua*] by Fernando Pessoa. All at once and with total concentration... It was the return of Fernando Pessoa as Alberto Caeiro to Fernando Pessoa himself. Or rather, it was the reaction of Fernando Pessoa against his non-existence as Alberto Caeiro. Once Caeiro had appeared, I

*instinctively and subconsciously tried to find disciples for him. From Caeiro's false paganism, I extracted the latent Ricardo Reis, at last discovering his name and adjusting him to his true self, for now I actually saw him. And then a new individual, quite the opposite of Ricardo Reis, suddenly and impetuously came to me. In an unbroken stream, without interruptions or corrections, the ode whose name is *Triumphal Ode* [*Ode triunfal*] by the man whose name is none other than Álvaro de Campos, issued from my typewriter."*

(Translation by Richard Zenith, from "The Selected Prose of Fernando Pessoa", Grove Press, New York. Copyright by Richard Zenith. Reproduced with kind permission from the translator.)



Page 1 of the original manuscript of *O guardador de rebanhos* (*The Keeper of Sheep*) – the heteronym Alberto Caeiro's first poem from 8th March 1914. Pessoa had seen the poet's name by chance on a chemist's sign on the street in Lisbon.

Whether it happened exactly as described is hard to verify – more than twenty years passed between the letter and the events referred to. But it is indisputable that in the spring of 1914 Portugal became three outstanding poets richer – perhaps four, for in the process something also happened to Pessoa himself.

Alberto Caeiro is the master, he declares; the sun around which the others orbit. Caeiro does not believe in anything, he exists; "he is", emphasizes Paz, "all that Pessoa is not, and that no modern poet can actually be: a human being at one with nature... Caeiro denies, simply by existing, not only Pessoa's Symbolist aesthetic, but any aesthetic, all values, all ideas." Especially ideas of a animistic, divine or Christian nature:

*To speak of the soul of stones, flowers, rivers
Is to speak of yourself and your own false thoughts.
Thank God the stones are only stones
And the rivers are just rivers
And that the flowers are nothing but flowers.*

If Caeiro is pure – one could almost say Zen – existence, one can say of Álvaro de Campos that he is susceptibility, sensitivity, nerves. Unlike Caeiro, who was fully developed from the first stanza, and who remained the same, de Campos changed signals as he grew older and the circumstances changed. His poems follow a biological-historical curve.

For Ricardo Reis it was always the verse form that governed his Stoic-Epicurean and hedonistic universe.

For Pessoa himself the symbols were important. Whether the mystic, the eccentric, the enigmatic hermetic poet, whether the patriot or the melancholiac who, often in short, transparent and sometimes philosophically pointed stanzas, captured the play of the world and put the absurdity of existence in relief, there is often one (or more) recurrent symbol(s) in his poems. They have the inevitability of dreams and the ability to weave together times, places, internal and external, night and day in a clear yet at the same time indissoluble network. A web without fixed points.

Orpheu

Only Pessoa himself and Álvaro de Campos were represented in the two issues of *Orpheu* that were published. The first issue contained Pessoa's static drama *O marinheiro* (The Sailor), which has Symbolism as its linguistic and attitudinal background, and two poems by Álvaro de Campos: *Triumphal Ode*, by the newborn Futurist, and *Opiário* (Opium Eater), by the fin-de-siècle poet before he was struck

by the lightning of Whitman and Marinetti. De Campos is one of the few poets (perhaps the only one?) in the history of literature to have written his earliest poems after the first. Pessoa claimed that the poems were blagues, put-ons, swindles, written with the deliberate aim of misleading and provoking tasteful society – which does not prevent them at the same time having passages that can make the reader feel dizzy.

The second issue announced a collaboration with the Futurist painter Santa Rita Pintor, to whom Álvaro de Campos dedicated his contribution, the mega-eruption, the Cyclopean *Ode marítima* (Maritime Ode), a 30-40-page tour de force of masochistic-neurasthenic madness, sometimes unbearable, sometimes oceanic in power and beauty. Paz compares it to Lorca's *Poet in New York*.

Pessoa's own contribution to *Orpheu 2* is *Slanting Rain*, the poem, or the suite in six movements that he wrote on that remarkable 8th of March 1914. It had now acquired the subtitle Intersectionistic poems, and this intersectionism, the philosophy of which was to mix the segments of consciousness and allow these mixtures to appear simultaneously in the work of art, were the orthonymic Pessoa's proposal for a modernist poetics – not as provocative as the Futurists', but actually more revolutionary and intellectually challenging. *Slanting Rain* is still a watershed poem.

Sá-Carneiro and the others did not hold back either, and *Orpheu*, whose two issues appeared in 1915, got the reviewers frothing at the mouth, the readers' letters bristling with hatred, threats and moral outrage, and people in the street shouting, threatening and pointing the finger at the culprits. The *Orpheu* artists achieved notoriety – it was so bad that Sá-Carneiro fled back to Paris, and it was impossible to find a publisher and capital for *Orpheu 3*, which had in fact been completed. Over the years the unpublished and unknown issue of the periodical gained almost mythical status.

Although Portugal did much to repress the fact that Futurism and Modernism had paid a visit, it never quite succeeded, although Pessoa and his generation were slowly but surely pushed out into the cold and surrounded by a twilight of oblivion. But there was now a stone in the

shoe of Portuguese culture, and as soon as someone forgot to spray with the pesticides and drive out the field chopper, the experiments germinated and grew up from cracks and cranies. Neither the conservative bourgeoisie nor, later, the prudish Salazar, not to speak of the Catholic Church so deeply despised by Pessoa, could do more than postpone what they saw as the seeds of the decay of morals; and they could never hide their fear of the new.

The loss of the constant friend

However, the modernists had lost the first round; and when the news of Sá-Carneiro's suicide in Paris in April 1916 reached Lisbon, the brief euphoria was definitively over (although Negreiros attempted a congress and a periodical, *Portugal Futurista*, in 1917). Pessoa was inconsolable, and for the rest of his days he missed his good comrade-in-arms and confidant. Many years later, in 1934, he attempted a poem in memory of his friend, which he conceived of as printed "in the issue of Orpheu that is to be made of roses and stars in a new world". The poem, which is quite simply called Sá-Carneiro, was never finished, but it contains passages in a moving minor key and of heart-rending sadness.

*Sá-Carneiro

*In the issue of Orpheu that is to be made of
roses and stars in a new world*

*I've never expected what they call death to possess
Great enigmas, or any kind of meaning ...
For each of us who's turned up in this place
Where the laws of certitude and false fate reign,*

*There's only a passing stay on this station platform
Also called the world, the moment, or life,
From when the one train comes till the other goes;
The journey will continue, that's all that's certain!*

*Although your express train set off behind me
And got ahead of the one I'm riding in, I still came first;
In the terminal of everything, where it all ends, I'm
waiting
For this departure of mine, this coming home.*

*For at the central station where God alone rules
There will be moving scenes of welcome
For every rambling heart that struggled here in life
To find itself, its "I" in every way.*

*I miss you today – there are two of me on my own.
There are coupled souls, souls who have known the place
Where the living are souls, and the living likewise know
That (.....)*

*How we were one when we spoke! We two
Were like a dialogue born on the same stage.
Whether you're sleeping, or at last you've found some rest
I do not know, but I know I am two on my own.*

*It is as if I've always been sitting, waiting
To watch you, at the appointed time, walking
Into Arcada, this café
That almost lies out at the edge of the continent;*

*There where you sat, writing out your poems
About (.....) trapeze
And all the other things you said in Orpheu.*

*Oh, my best friend, never more I'll find
In this life that looks like a vast graveyard
A soul like yours, my dearest memory
Of what is real, what I understand.*

*And I who am so cold-blooded and false,
Whose name is someone else's, whose (.....)*

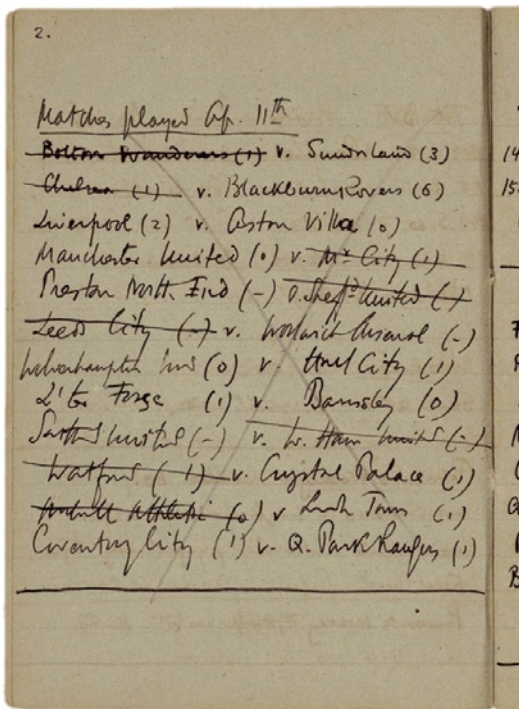
*Nevermore, never more; since you broke out
Of this high-security prison the world, I've known,
Numb at heart and void of fruitfulness,
That all that I am is a dream that is dreary and sad.*

*Because we both sustain, the more we are
Ourselves and alone without a trace of sadness,
A wish to be together each as one
With the friend with whom both of us love to talk.*

(1934)

Ophélia and the Kierkegaardian break-up ...

Now Pessoa had lost the close friend he had thought he would never have. Then in 1920 he met the sweetheart he had also believed was beyond reach. Her name was Ophélia (!) Queiroz, she was 19, and she worked at one of the offices with which Pessoa had connections. No one who has read the correspondence that has been published with the growing celebrity of the poet can be in any doubt that this was true love; or that they lived in two different universes. The young Ophélia, who was both intelligent and curious, was also worried about Fernando and his lifestyle, and for his part he was not about to abandon his poetic reality and all it involved for another reality whose



Pessoa's famous sea chest contained some 27,000 pieces of paper, mixed with a wealth of notebooks. In this the Anglomaniac writer proves that he not only took notes of a literary nature, but also kept a close tally of the results in the English First Division...



Pessoa sent this photograph to his Ophelia with an inscription that plays on the idea of being caught in the act drinking and the word for 'litre' – "in flagrante delicto".

existence he doubted. So after a relationship that lasted eight – certainly not unhappy – months he broke it off in almost Kierkegaardian fashion and thus avoided, as de Campos brutally put it, becoming "married, futile, humdrum and taxable". Ophélia may have been sad, but she was not offended in the usual sense, and from a distance she maintained her tenderness and interest in the poet, who did not forget her either, as is evident from a love poem he wrote at the end of his life, and which, as so often when it came to extreme earthly feelings, he had Álvaro de Campos put his name to. The poem *All love letters are ridiculous*, from 1935, is today a classic, an 'evergreen' of modern poetry.

One self or oneself, or who...?

– staging a world inhabited by heteronyms

Pessoa described himself as a dramatic poet; his heteronyms were actors in a drama with no theatre, actors he had himself invented as real people born in the years immediately before and after 1888. Their poems are monologues to an extent that recalls Robert Browning's, not in their form, but in their approach to the world, their way of being present and sometimes commenting on themselves and in their almost alchemistic faith in the reality of the imagination. Browning's opening of the poem *Mesmerism* – "All I believed is true!" could easily have come from Pessoa; both poets were a kind of mesmerists of language. Browning created a succession of voices, Pessoa went a step further and created a succession of poets.

"And so I created a nonexistent coterie, placing it all in a framework of reality. I ascertained the influences at work and friendships between them, I listened in myself to their discussions and divergent points of view, and in all of this it seems that I, who created them all, was the one who was least there. It seems that it all went on without me. And thus it seems to go on still."

– he wrote to Casais Monteiro shortly before his death. And he continued:

I see before me, in the transparent but real space of dreams, the faces and gestures of Caeiro, Ricardo Reis and Álvaro de Campos. I gave them their ages and

fashioned their lives. Ricardo Reis was born in 1887 (I don't remember the month and day, but I have them somewhere) in Oporto. He's a doctor and is presently living in Brazil. Alberto Caeiro was born in 1889 and died in 1915. He was born in Lisbon but spent most of his life in the country. He has no profession and practically no schooling. Álvaro de Campos was born in Tavira, on October 15th, 1890 [...] He, as you know, is a naval engineer (he studied in Glasgow) but is currently living in Lisbon and not working. Caeiro was of medium height, and although his health was truly fragile (he died of TB), he seemed less frail than he was. Ricardo Reis is a wee bit shorter, stronger, but sinewy. Álvaro de Campos is tall (5 ft. 9 in., an inch taller than me), slim, and a bit prone to stoop. All are clean-shaven – Caeiro fair, with a pale complexion and blue eyes; Reis somewhat dark-skinned; Campos neither pale nor dark, vaguely corresponding to the Portuguese Jewish type, but with smooth hair that's usually parted on one side, and a monocle. Caeiro, as I've said, had almost no education – just primary school. His mother and father died when he was young, and he stayed on at home, living off a small income from his family properties. He lived with an elderly great-aunt. Ricardo Reis, educated in a Jesuit high school, is, as I've mentioned, a doctor; he has been living in Brazil since 1919, having gone into voluntary exile because of his monarchist sympathies. He is a formally trained Latinist, and a self-taught semi-Hellenist. Álvaro de Campos, after a normal high school education, was sent to Scotland to study engineering, first mechanical and then naval. During some holidays he made a voyage to the Orient. He was taught Latin by an uncle who was a priest from the Beira region.

How do I write in the name of these three? Caeiro, through sheer and unexpected inspiration, without knowing or even suspecting that I'm going to write in his name. Ricardo Reis, after an abstract meditation that suddenly takes concrete shape in an ode. Campos, when I feel a sudden impulse to write and I don't know what."

(Translation by Richard Zenith, from "The Selected Prose of Fernando Pessoa", Grove Press, New York. Copyright by Richard Zenith. Reproduced with kind permission from the translator.)

On the other hand its doubtful whether one can conclude that he wrote as Pessoa when none of the circumstances he mentions applied, just as one cannot always decidedly say whether a given poem should be ascribed to one or the other of the masks. The fact is that as a rule Pessoa was himself aware who he was writing as, that he did not always consider it worth the trouble to sign the individual poem before he intended to publish it. And here we encounter a problem of literary theory and textual criticism in connection with his work, made no less difficult by the fact that on rare occasions he himself could be in doubt about what he should ascribe to whom. In fact it happened sometimes that he actually changed the name of the author.

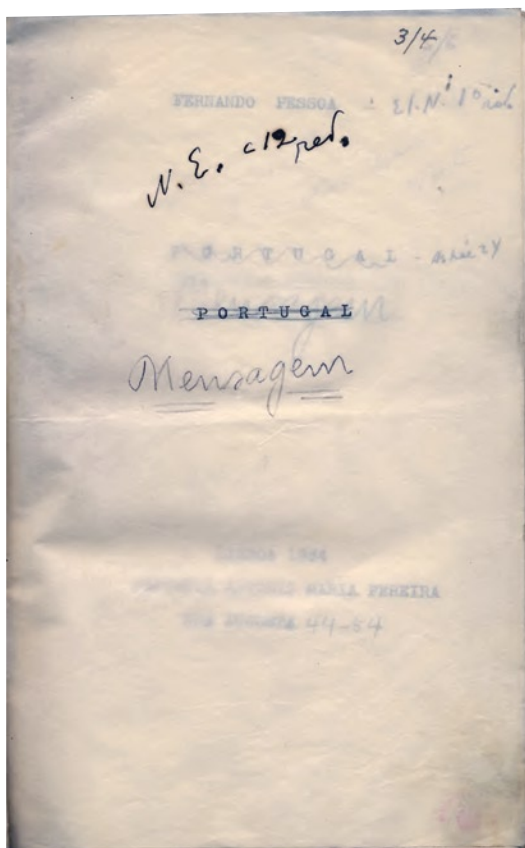
Pessoa was highly critical of his own productions and had plans to revise most of them before they appeared in their final form collected in one or more books. In his posthumous papers there are several drafts of how he had thought of ordering these works, and often these plans contradict one another. It would appear that he intended to publish his orthonymic poems under the title (a very ambitious one in Portuguese literary history, and rather self-conscious) of *Cancioneiro* (collection of songs), but the order and distribution is not clear. He also had plans for the heteronym Bernardo Soares, which was more of a pseudonym, but he did not realize these either.

It is difficult to keep things separate in the last 15 years or so of the poet's life; after the hectic years during World War I when the great heteronyms were born, when Futurism and modernism came to Portugal and made history. The days, weeks, months and years became almost identical and the drinks more frequent. You could meet the Anglophile (or Anglomaniac?), short-sighted, often black-clad, reserved, courteous man with the little moustache in various cafés and restaurants where he sat longer and longer, and very likely alone with his glass.



Fernando Pessoa playing chess with the English writer and occultist Aleister (Edward Alexander) Crowley (1875-1947) in Lisbon, c. 1925. Crowley, who was a mystic, astrologer and numerologist, was one of Pessoa's sources of inspiration. Crowley was (almost) a declared bisexual, and the acquaintance of the two writers has since been claimed as an indication that Pessoa too was bi- or homosexual; an assumption that has been further fed by the fact that Pessoa's writing is on the whole devoid of women. However, there are no authoritative indications of Pessoa's sexuality.

Mensagem. The title page from Pessoa's original, typewritten manuscript. The poet had originally intended the work to be entitled Portugal, but later changed it in pencil.



***Mensagem* – a swansong?**

At some point around 1934, he may have sat like this, considering whether to participate in a competition held by the Secretariado de Propaganda Nacional, calling for an epic-lyrical paean to the Portuguese seafaring traditions and historic achievements. Perhaps he thought that if he could win such a competition it would bring him some of the esteem that had been in such short supply. At all events he entered it and won second prize: I don't know what the prize was; but the result, *Mensagem* (Message) appeared and was received with veneration. In a way Portugal had forgiven her modernist prodigal son.

This should not be taken to mean that Pessoa had bitten the bullet and wrote blustering national poetry – not at all. *Mensagem* is first and foremost a heraldic book, and heraldry, as Paz points out, is part of alchemy. *Mensagem* is an exotic work that uses all the national symbols in a sublime pattern. All the great figures of Portuguese history file past the reader, but 'mildly displaced'. *Mensagem* is thus much more than a patriotic poem. But at the same time it is an extremely willed, if utterly competent work. I have always been impressed by it more than I have loved it. But then I am not Portuguese.

That *Mensagem* was the only complete work Pessoa published in his mother tongue is an absurd reality we have to live with.

***Ele mesmo* – himself...**

I wrote that Pessoa, *ele mesmo* (himself), as he called himself, was a Symbolist. It is a world full of creatures and shadows that the reader encounters and, as Paz too points out, a world where woman is a rare visitor, so rare that she becomes conspicuous by her presence. But a world without women lacks an anchorage, and only an obscure reflection of unreality remains in nature and in things. Grief, denial and exhaustion are fundamental chords in these ethereal poems, which seem to be played out in the space between the moment that has gone and the next, just before it has manifested itself. In one of the fragments that were later to be published as *The Book of Disquiet*, Bernardo Soares writes:

“Art consists in making others feel what we feel, in freeing them from themselves by offering them our own personality. The true substance of whatever I feel is absolutely incommunicable, and the more profoundly I feel it, the more incommunicable it is. In order to convey to someone else what I feel, I must translate my feelings into his language – saying things, that is, as if they were what I feel, so that he, reading them, will feel exactly what I felt. And since this someone is presumed by art to be not this or that person but everyone (i.e. that person common to all persons), what I must finally do is convert my feelings into a typical human feeling, even if it means perverting the true nature of what I felt.”

I have a feeling that the orthonymic Pessoa was perhaps the one who least perverted his true nature, that in fact he was and is most himself as himself, so to speak.

Pessoa died of cigarettes and alcohol at the age of 47; most of his extensive oeuvre lay higgledy-piggledy in a sea chest with which he moved from room to room along with his books and the above-mentioned chest of drawers; around 27,000 pieces of paper lay in the chest. In recent decades researchers have thoroughly ransacked these papers, and many unknown poems and texts have come to light which have perhaps given rise to minor adjustments of earlier assumptions, but have never budged the fact that Pessoa belongs to world literature.

Peter Poulsen (2008)

Please visit www.moonpain.nu for more.

Right: The author of the essay, the Danish poet and prizewinning Pessoa translator Peter Poulsen, travelled to Lisbon in September 2007 to work with the composer and sound-artist Rudiger Meyer on the audio material for the website moonpain.nu, where Pessoa’s poetry is put into perspective and set to music by Klaus Ib Jørgensen. This picture is from an early morning outside the Café A Brasileira.]



Rua Coelho da Rocha 16, 1st floor, in Lisbon. In this house Fernando Pessoa lived out the last fifteen years or so of his life in two rented rooms. Today the building houses the Casa Fernando Pessoa – the city of Lisbon’s official Pessoa library with the poet’s furniture, personal book collection, and a succession of exhibitions.



The author, Peter Poulsen, in Fernando Pessoa’s regular café, Café Martinho da Arcada in Lisbon, in September 2007. According to Pessoa the café was the westernmost point of Europe. Perhaps not an entirely accurate claim, but such absolute and apparently indisputable categorizations are characteristic of Pessoa’s writing.

