

FERNANDO PESSOA WAS NOT A PHILOSOPHER


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Fernando Pessoa was not a philosopher. To say it, and to say the opposite, that he was above anything else a poet, may come as a dull statement. Nonetheless, not everyone would easily accept it. Teixeira de Pascoaes famously considered Pessoa too much of a thinker to be a poet. In his opinion, the mathematical type of reasoning Pessoa had been born with made it impossible for him to be a poet. While writing, he was overthinking, and so his poems lacked spontaneity. The absence of spontaneous ideas in his poetry did not make it more like philosophy, though. For Pascoaes, Pessoa was mostly a prankster.

Ill-appreciations like this are still very common. For some people—mostly those who deem poetry as the domain of deep feelings, where one should expect few or no rational thinking at all—neither an intellectual kind of poet nor a mere prankster can earn them their respects. They may even regard Pessoa as a great thinker and value his aesthetical ideas, his technical skills, or the remarkable capacity of creating an entire community of poets whose style and beliefs are not his own, but they judge him for not speaking from his heart. A poet who is too afraid or too

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embarrassed to reveal his true self, these people would think, is less of a poet.

Of course, Pessoa's famous utterance "the poet is a faker" comes as the bulwark of such a thought. What people usually disregard is that the poet, in this well-known line, is not just Pessoa himself, but every poet.

"Autopsicography" is not about Pessoa's poetry; it is about poetry in general. To be a poet, Pessoa claims, is to be a faker. What he means by this is that there is no way to make poetry other than to fake what one feels. Feelings are personal, private, and uncommunicable. The work of a poet is not to make his heart and soul visible to others but to translate what in himself is personal, private, and uncommunicable into something else. If this is so, great poets are necessarily great thinkers.

A discussion on sincerity now ensues. If every poet is a faker, and poems are misleading by definition, there is no difference at all between signing a poem using one's birth name or using any other name. A signature cannot change the deceitful nature of a poem. When Pessoa writes a poem on behalf of any of his heteronyms, he is not being less himself. The implication is neither that his heteronyms' personalities are equivalent to his own nor that they are transparent enough for anyone to recognize Pessoa's true face behind them. He is not being less himself because he never is himself, because a poem written on behalf of any of his heteronyms is as deceitful as any other poem he writes. Poems are made-up things, not bridges between the readers and the poet's true colors. Poems are forged, and therefore they are not sincere.

In January 1915, only a few months after he created his heteronyms, Pessoa wrote a letter to a friend, Armando Côrtes-Rodrigues, where he says something that actually makes this discussion more complicated. Dissatisfied with the kind of work he was producing at the time, and with most of the aesthetical ideas he had pursued during the previous two or three years, he surprisingly classifies as sincere not what he had done under his own name, but the work of Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, and Álvaro de Campos. This is so because, as he immediately explains, it is sincere whatever contains "a fundamental metaphysical idea."

Unlike pretty much everything he had done so far (some of the things that would nevertheless come up in *Orpheu* later that same year), what he had written on behalf of Caeiro, Reis, and Campos was sincere because each one of these authors had been given a deep concept of life, and because all of them, even though in different ways, were highly aware to “the mysterious importance of existing.” The idea that made-up poets could be more sincere than the real poet who made them up is difficult to accept only if we ignore the explanation Pessoa provides. They are sincere, even more than their maker, because they were endowed with metaphysical concerns and existential awareness, in other words, they were made philosophically active.

Alberto Caeiro’s obsessive and proud refusal of any kind of thinking makes him a radical defender of philosophical materialism. As he sustains over and over, things are only things, and they are marvelous exactly because they are nothing else. No mystery lies beyond this material world, and the true experience is the one we get while employing our five senses exclusively. Whenever we let our minds interfere with the direct perception of reality, we somehow corrupt it. As Caeiro claims, we should look at a flower as if it were the first time we ever looked at it. Knowledge blinds us, and even the smallest mental maneuver, like comparing one flower to another, is an error, for each flower is unique. Of course, he acknowledges how hard it is to live by these standards, and that to correctly perceive the world in front of us requires some effort. That is the reason why his poems are nothing but brief lessons on how to defend ourselves from what comes from within and to repel every feeling, emotion, or thought from our perception of the world.

Ancient philosophy, mostly stoicism and epicureanism, is easily related to Ricardo Reis. In a world where the ancient gods are now only idle names, where the ancient happiness is now impossible to get, what can a pagan by birth do? The strict stoic answer would be to just accept it. And at least in part, Ricardo Reis accepts it. As a pagan in a christened world, he stoically acknowledges he is a latecomer. Yet he still thinks life should be enjoyed as much as possible. Whereas old pleasures are inaccessible, pleasure is still what we should live for. But how exactly? The answer is by faking it. If he could pretend to be as happy as any pagan, he

would be able to achieve some pleasure. But what does it mean to be as happy as a pagan? From his master, Alberto Caeiro, he had learned that the reality of something is established by the reality of something else next to it (a rock is real if and only if there is another rock, or a flower, or anything else real next to it) and, consequently, by the boundaries these two things share and by which they separate from each other. If this is so, the reality of the outer world we behold, which is separated from the beholder we are by the boundary of our material body, ultimately establishes the reality of our inner self. Although Caeiro never acknowledges this splitting between his outer and inner halves, Reis is haunted by it. As a true pagan, who fully believed that everything in the world has its material part and its spiritual counterpart, that within a tree or a fountain there is a god who animates it, he could not think otherwise. Ricardo Reis is thus a latecomer not only because paganism is now long gone, but also because he no longer is the person who he was before such a splitting. So, his modern anguish is the outcome of both the full pagan life he cannot experience anymore and the unitarian self he had lost. Hence, what he needed to fake was his previous wholeness. Not surprisingly, to behave as if one is not aware of such a loss is what he keeps advising in his poems.

As a disciple of Caeiro as well, Álvaro de Campos is also haunted by the same fundamental splitting. But unlike Ricardo Reis, he is not strong enough to keep it under control. That is the reason why he turns himself inwardly so often, and ultimately why he is a transcendentalist. It is also the reason why his poetry is either the endless account of all the things this modern world allows one to experience or the feverish and unstoppable outburst of his anguished imagination. Actually, the former is a safety measure against the latter. While logging all the diversity he finds outside, one thing after another, he keeps his mind busy and his inner self remains dormant. And so he moves on, chanting the filth and the noise of modern cities, their electrical lights, their businesses and trade, the working of wheels and gears, the metallic uproar of industrial machinery, the beauty of ships and shipyards, train stations and tramways, bridges, factories, music-halls, horse races, crowded boulevards, and so much more. For Álvaro de

Campos, this Whitmanian praise of the modern world works like a distraction. Sometimes, however, his inner self wakes up and takes over. While alone in a dockyard looking at boats departing from or arriving at Lisbon, in “Naval Ode,” his biggest poem, Campos’ imagination starts spinning faster and faster like an unruly steering wheel, and his topic rapidly changes to ancient boats and mariners or the adventurous lives of pirates, which he sings as if deeply intoxicated. It is only after he gets tired, and not before some emotional remembering of his childhood, that he manages to overrule his imagination and again focus on the outer world he has in front of him. The same struggle between these two forces reappears in “The Tobacco Shop,” his most famous poem, when he keeps moving back and forth between what is going on outside in the tobacco shop in front of his place, and what is going on in his own mind. To feel everything in every way, the practical philosophy he lives by, demands him to feel whatever there is to be felt, either out there or in himself.

Each one of Pessoa’s three main heteronyms was granted different philosophical attitudes and each one of them had some philosophical ideas and concerns of its own. Notwithstanding, they were not philosophers. They were poets. Even though they considered life in a very particular way and were made up accordingly, they were not interested in discussing or solving philosophical problems, but in writing their poems. Compare them with António Mora, the heteronym Pessoa created in order to write down the philosophical principles of Caeiro’s and Reis’ Neopaganism. Unlike the other three, Mora was certainly a philosopher. What is the difference? For once, the fact that he wrote several philosophical texts, aiming at philosophy. Despite the fact he never finished a book, from these texts it is possible to figure out the philosophical system he was trying to depict. And, more importantly, he thought like a philosopher, not like a poet. This is not the case with Caeiro, Reis, and Campos. They can occasionally use philosophical concepts, their poetry can occasionally have philosophical implications, and they can even openly engage in philosophical discussions, but they mainly think like poets. However important philosophy may be, they were interested mainly in poetry. The same is valid for their

creator. As a poet, Pessoa was interested in creating a world of his own, not in thinking about the one he lived in.

Surely, it is possible for a poet to be a philosopher and for a philosopher to be a poet. One activity does not exclude the other. But can a poet be a philosopher while being a poet? Or can a philosopher be a poet while making philosophy? Plato was a philosopher, no one seems to doubt it. Was he also a poet? Probably not. However, it is possible to say that he presented his philosophy more like a poet than, for instance, Aristotle. This does not make it less philosophy or, by the way, more poetry. The way a philosopher presents his philosophy says nothing about the philosophical nature of his thinking. Kant was a philosopher. Hegel was a philosopher. Nietzsche was a philosopher. The philosophy they made was very different, and yet they were all philosophers. Even about Kierkegaard or Rousseau, the more borderline cases I can think of, there is little doubt that they were philosophers. And they were so because they thought like so. No matter how different their philosophies were from each other, they were interested mostly in understanding the world they lived in. They thought like philosophers. The content of their writings was philosophical, even if the form was not what we should expect from a philosopher.

The difference between a philosopher and a poet is not that the former is prone to deep thinking and the latter is capable of powerful feelings. Both philosophers and poets can think deeply, and they both can feel powerfully. What is different is the type of thinking and feeling they devote themselves to. Even though poets can express themselves more like philosophers, they are not interested in understanding this world any better, in establishing the terms in which the reality should be perceived, in providing answers to conceptual dilemmas, etc. Pessoa had a lot of philosophical thoughts, he wrote a few philosophical texts, a huge number of philosophical remarks can be found in his papers, he created poets with clear philosophical dispositions, and he even created a few philosophers, but he thought mainly like a poet, not like a philosopher. His thoughts were poetical, even when their subject matter was philosophical.

For those who consider poetry as the domain of feeling and philosophy as the domain of thinking, the mere possibility of thinking as a poet or as a philosopher may sound strange. That is probably the reason why those same people do not see Fernando Pessoa as a poet. Whether they understand him more like a philosopher or more like a prankster, the idea that to be a poet is nothing but to think poetically sounds like nonsense. And yet, what better teaching could we get from Pessoa? If to fake is what the poet is born for, and if to fake is to think in a certain way, the poet is indeed a thinker. A lot of misunderstandings would be avoided if we have paid more attention to the poet's thoughts.