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Notes on the Memory of My Master Caeiro: Heteronomy and Self-Consciousness in the Work of Fernando Pessoa

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Opening Remarks: Warning! The following may contain spoilers

Three of the four poets discussed in this paper never existed in the usual sense. The body of the fourth, Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935), rests in the Jerónimos Monastery in Lisbon. With regards to the critical appreciation of Pessoa's work, one of the most essential facts of his writing is that the bulk of it was authored not by himself but by several distinct "heteronyms" operating through him. It is certainly inadequate to describe these other personalities who commandeered his corpus merely as a succession or multiplicity of masks donned by the true author. Such a designation, with its emphasis on exteriority and dissemblance, would flatten and obscure the immanence of their relationship to Pessoa. In fact, it may be more accurate to suggest, provisionally at least, that Pessoa was the mask. To the reader of his heteronymic work, he writes, "you should suppose...that you're going to read books by different poets, or different writers, and that through those books you'll receive emotions and learn lessons from those writers, with whom I have nothing to do except as their publisher" (*Selected Prose* 5). It is out of obedience, therefore, to Pessoa's stated wishes that in the first

section of this paper I preserve the autonomy of Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, and Alvaro de Campos, and it is only to avoid unnecessary confusion that I have just come clean.

Baldly stated, this essay attempts to illustrate the conformity between Pessoa's network of major heteronyms and the movement of self-consciousness traced in the fourth section of Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Deleuze and others have criticized the movement of the Hegelian dialectic as but a *false* movement ... as the fundamentally static play of mere phantoms. Whether or not we accept this as a valid criticism, with respect to the material at hand, I find it not entirely inappropriate to request that for the duration of the argument you grant those phantoms at least some measure of reality.

Caeiro the Master

Alberto Caeiro was "born" in Lisbon in 1889, but he spent most of his life in the country trying to see things "as they really are," *sans* the mediation of their concepts:

I try saying what I feel
 Without thinking about what I feel.
 I try fitting words to the idea
 Without going down a corridor
 Of thought to find words. (XLVI, *Keeper of Sheep*
 59, trans. Edwin Honig)

His philosophy, which was no philosophy, substituted sensation for thought. "To think a flower is to see it and smell it,

/ And to eat a fruit is to taste its meaning" (IX, *Keeper* 21). The universe in which he found himself was un-idealized and un-imagined ~ the uncalculated calculus of its concrete diversity. "Caeiro fixes," according to Alain Badiou in his *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, "the restoration of an identity of being, an identity that would be prior to any subjective organization of thought" (Badiou 40), and part of what this means is that *there is no subject* in Caeiro's poetry; when he refers to an "I," it means precisely as much as when a stone or a tree does not. Caeiro's genius is not to negate the subject, but to pre-exist it-for it never to be born in thought. Consequently, he pre-exists as well any thought of the object-in-itself: "Nature hasn't any inside. / It wouldn't be nature, otherwise" (XXVIII, *Keeper* 40). Under these conditions, interpretation of Caeiro's poetry becomes a tricky business. Having restored an identity of being, Caeiro's poetry aborts any distinction in thought between nature and its representation. Caeiro's poems, thus, are nature-and heirs to its inscrutability.

Nevertheless, the quiet and natural certainty to which the poems attest gathered to him restless and uncertain disciples, notably, Ricardo Reis, António Mora, Álvaro de Campos and to a much different degree-Fernando Pessoa. According to Campos, Pessoa:

...met Caeiro a little before I did-on March 8th, 1914, according to what he told me. Caeiro 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 "Slanting Rain" in one go. (*Selected Prose* 49)

Contrast Campos' version of this meeting with another by Pessoa himself given in a letter written in 1935 to Adolfo Casais Monteiro, a young editor of the magazine *Presença*:

...it was March 8th, 1914-I walked over to a high chest of drawers, took a sheet of paper, and began to write 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*. This was followed by the appearance in me 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," 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 nonexistence as Alberto Caeiro. (*Selected Prose* 256)

A year younger than Pessoa, who was born in 1888, Caeiro unfortunately "died" of tuberculosis the year after they met; Caeiro was twenty-six, and although he once wrote that

"remembering betrays Nature" (XLIII, *Keeper* 56), he could not help but leave a lasting footprint in his wake.

Pessoa the Slave

The first passage quoted here is a demonstration and the other will suffice for now as a description of Pessoa's famous technique of writing through heteronyms: alternate personalities that he invented-complete with biographies and physiognomies different from his own, the most important of these including the three poets mentioned already, Caeiro, Campos, and Reis, as well as the two "semi-heteronyms"¹ Bernardo Soares and the Baron of Tieve, authors of two unfinished works of prose, *The Book of Disquiet* and *The Education of the Stoic*, respectively.

Much has been made of what Pessoa has termed the "dramatic ensemble" of his heteronyms (*Selected Prose* 3). In one of the final chapters of his polemic, *The Western Canon*, Harold Bloom, seeing fit to include Pessoa on the short list of writers of the chaotic age worth the investment of our time, compares Pessoa to Walt Whitman, but as a "Whitman who gives separate names to 'my self,' 'the real me' or 'me myself' and 'my soul'" (Bloom 452), while Badiou, not entirely at odds with Bloom, construes in the relationships

¹ To Monteiro on Soares, Pessoa writes, "he's a semi-heteronym because his personality, though not my own, does not differ from my own but is a mere mutilation of it. He's me without my logical reasoning and emotion" (*SP* 258-9).

between Pessoa's heteronyms a "*dispositif* for thinking" in which Caeiro stands in for the figure of the Same, for univocity, and for the finite; Campos for the Other, for the formless, and for the infinite; Reis for form; and Pessoa himself for equivocality (Badiou 43). Pessoa's own explanations are, of course, equivocal.

In the passage quoted above, Pessoa describes his mental state under the influence of Caeiro as ecstatic; Caeiro's poetry flows out of him as though he were in a trance. "Instantly" he names his master, and "immediately" he feels his master's presence. He writes "all at once." Absent is any active deliberation or even resistance on Pessoa's part. His agency is reduced to mere reaction: he is "the helpless slave of his multiplied self" (*Selected Prose 2*). Earlier in the same letter, Pessoa explains to Monteiro that "my heteronyms have their origin in a deep-seated form of hysteria ... in my relentless, organic tendency to depersonalization and simulation" (*Selected Prose 254*). A particular psychological necessity, therefore, might be the name of his true master, and yet, in an unfinished introduction to his unfinished complete heteronymic works, Pessoa (without denying the hysteria that may enslave him) reworks the relationship between his heteronyms and himself in such a way as to preserve for himself a precious freedom:

Neither this work nor those to follow have anything to do with the man who writes them. He doesn't agree or disagree with what's in them. He writes as if he were being dictated to. And as if the person dictating were a friend (and for that reason could freely ask him to write down what he dictates),

the writer finds the dictation interesting, perhaps just out of friendship (*Selected Prose 2*).

Although it may be argued that the request of a friend is no less compulsory than the commandment of a master or even the automatism of hysteria (such is one interpretation of John 15:14, "You are my friends, if you do whatsoever I command you"), Pessoa nonetheless wins for himself, in the passage above, the freedom to neither affirm nor negate the work of his pen. He finds himself, thus, in the position of Hegel's Stoic self-consciousness and in possession of its fleeting repose. "Self-will is the freedom which entrenches itself in some particularity and is still in bondage, while Stoicism is the freedom which always comes directly out of bondage and returns into the pure universality of thought" (Hegel 121). In this very important sense, Pessoa as himself stands opposite to his master Caeiro. Whereas, for Caeiro, saying and being coincide, Pessoa indeed is both unwilling and perhaps incapable of saying what he is or of recognizing himself in what he says. Campos, in fact, states that Pessoa "doesn't exist, *strictly speaking*" (*Selected Prose 49*, my emphasis).

Reis the Stoic

Very briefly, I will recapitulate the relevant moments of the chapter on self-consciousness in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Despite the fact that Pessoa died in 1935 and therefore would have been unable to read first-hand Hippolyte's first full translation of the *Phenomenology* into French, his early

philosophical writings, in which Pessoa refers to the philosophy of Hegel as "that cathedral of thought" (NPP 96), clearly evidence at least an indirect familiarity with the philosopher. An awareness of the motion of the dialectic and of the fundamental role that negation plays in Hegel's thought thus offers us an insightful vantage point from which to understand the various ways Pessoa's heteronyms interact.

Desiring the meaningful recognition of another independent self-consciousness, self-consciousness doubles so as to provide for itself such an other. The two self-consciousnesses, then, each desiring the capitulation of the other, do battle with the result that the first, unafraid of its potential demise, becomes master of the second, who learns instead that "life is as essential to it as pure self-consciousness" (Hegel 115). The prize, for the master, turns out not to be at all what was desired, because the recognition it receives is now nothing more than that of a slave-not an independent consciousness but just the opposite. The slave, on the other hand, discovers that its master is not the other self-consciousness as at first it had thought but rather that it was death itself, "the absolute Lord," that had forced it into submission. "In that experience it has been quite unmanned, has trembled in every fibre of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations" (Hegel 117). In service to death, then, the slave commits its life (now understood to be fleeting) to work that is not its own. Unable to discover itself in such work, the slave instead poses itself outside of the particularity of its life's work, i.e. in the lifeless universality of its

thought.

In thought, the stoic finds a place to rest, at least temporarily, "and to maintain that lifeless indifference which steadfastly withdraws from the bustle of existence," and Ricardo Reis, perhaps, continues no further in the development of his consciousness than this. It would help to explain why Reis is so concerned with form, because at this stage, freedom is but an empty form without content. The stoic's freedom is merely the negation of his work and desire-not a living freedom but instead only the notion of it.

May the Gods grant me, stripped of all
Affections, the cold freedom of the heights
Of nothingness. Wanting little,
A man has everything. Wanting nothing,
He's free. Not having and not desiring,
He's equal, though man, to the Gods. (4-9,
Selected Poems 129)

Unrhymed odes in the style of Horace and Pindar make up almost all of the poetry of Ricardo Reis. His adherence to form ~ the careful alternation of eight and ten syllable lines ~ while contributing both to the cerebral dispassion and to the historical displacement characteristic of his work, also corresponds to a belief in fate and destiny as the abstract forms of existence. Reis seeks out "the heights / Of nothingness" as an ideal refuge from the vicissitudes of fate, but it is a summit essentially devoid of content, and to aspire to it is already to have turned back towards the base-camp. The stoic knows the locus of freedom, but he is at a loss to fill it with

something. Any and every attempt necessarily fails. After all, what thought would not serve to remind him and enmesh him once more in the useless clamor of existence? What thought could hope not to infect those cold heights with life and tarnish the mirror in which the poet thinks his resemblance to the Gods, and does not the poetic pronouncement in itself constitute precisely such a failure? Reis' poems are not the actualization of his freedom but quite the opposite. They evidence only his bondage and confirm for us the fact that the stoic's freedom *cannot* be actualized.

For Hegel, if not for Reis, the stoic's repose has just been irremediably disturbed, and the result is that self-consciousness comes to take on a new shape—that of the skeptic for whom thought itself is clamorous. "It pronounces an absolute vanishing, but the pronouncement *is*, and this consciousness is the vanishing that is pronounced" (Hegel 125). Here at last is the Pessoa that is characterized so much by disquiet rather than calm, who emerges never so vociferously as when in the guise of the monocled (though un-manacled) Álvaro de Campos.

Campos the Skeptic

Campos was the youngest of Caeiro's disciples and the last to meet him. Before this he had studied naval engineering in Scotland and traveled around the world. This biographical detail differentiates Campos from Caeiro and Reis insofar that his studies had familiarized him with industrial mechan-

ics, making him, among other things, seem the most modern of the three. His biography also associates him with the ocean, a frequent metaphorical vehicle in his poetry which connects to infinite vastness, "Absolute Distance," and perpetual restlessness.

Particularly in his earlier poems, Campos celebrates machines and the mechanical, and in his longest poem, "Maritime Ode," Campos represents the dynamics of his mind as a flywheel that spins faster and faster until at the climax of the poem, "[his] flywheel consciousness / Is just a blurry circle whirring in the air" (*Selected Poems* 183). His is a chaotic and invigorating mechanism, which opposes a "seated, static, orderly and repetitive life" (176). We see an enspiriting of matter, as in the final thirteen lines of "Triumphal Ode," the poem Campos claims to have written "immediately" after meeting Caeiro:

Hey! hey! hey! Hey-ya-hi-ya!
 I'm oblivious to my inward existence. I turn, I spin,
 I forge myself.
 I'm coupled to every train.
 I'm hoisted up on every dock.
 I spin in the propellers of every ship.
 Hey! hey-ya! hey!
 Hey! I'm mechanical heat and electricity!
 Hey and hooray for all in all and all in me,
 machines at work, hey!

To leap with everything over everything! Alley-oop!

Alley-oop, alley-oop, alley-oop-la, alley-oop!
 Hey-ya, hi ya! Ho-o-o-o-o!
 Whir-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r!

Ah if only I could be all people and all places!
 (*Selected Poems* 160)

His exuberance clearly imitates Whitman's despite the absence of the organic. This passage demonstrates as well some of the formal resemblances between Campos' poetry and Whitman's, such as the irregular length of the lines and the use of a catalogue to bring together and unify the multiple.

It should come as no surprise for Harold Bloom to suggest that the burden of Whitman's influence is at work. Bloom in fact views the Caeiro/Reis/Campos triad as Pessoa's reaction against the triad implicit in *Leaves of Grass*: that of the "real me," the soul, and Whitman himself. If we accept this claim, an intriguing corollary to it is that Campos is then a Whitman cut off from both his soul and his fundamental self. He is isolated from himself in a way that Whitman is not, and not only from himself but from the rest of humanity, that "motley anonymous river where I'd love to swim but can't!" (*Selected Poems* 158). Because despite whatever mechanical form of sympathy enables Campos to see himself reflected in the inorganic and the inorganic reflected in himself, he never attains the feeling of fraternity with all people that Whitman enjoys after loafing with his soul on the grass: "all the men ever born are also my brothers....and

the women my sisters and lovers" (*Leaves of Grass* 33). Hence also Campos' incompatibility with Whitman's democratic idealism. Without fraternity, liberty and equality cannot be held together, therefore in Campos' poetry we often find equality sacrificed to anarchy, a state of seeming lawlessness (corresponding to the contradictory clamor of the skeptic's thought) in which he wildly alternates between the extremes of sadism and masochism, between the desire to be a cruel and tyrannical God and the desire to be the victim of every violent act.

If severing Whitman from his soul results in the loss of fellowship, then the consequence of severing him from his fundamental self, who stands "apart from the pulling and hauling" of trivial, everyday life, is that the peace and calm accessible to Whitman only through that "other I am" is also denied to Campos. In his fragmented "Salutation to Walt Whitman," Campos tries to attain for himself both peace and fellowship by invoking the undivided Whitman, but this attempt of course fails. Whitman does not materialize:

We'll meet at the Station, wherever it is...
 Wait for me at the entrance, Walt; I'll be there...
 I'll be there without the universe, without life, with
 out myself, without anything...
 And we'll remember, all by ourselves, in silence and
 with our sorrow,
 The world's tremendous absurdity, the bitter inade-
 quacy of things,
 And I'll feel the great mystery, I'll feel it far away, so

far away,
So abstractly and absolutely far away,
Definitively far away.

I stop, I listen, I recognize myself!
The sound of my voice in the air has fallen, lifeless.
I'm the same as I was, you are dead, and everything
is still...
Saluting you was a way of trying to inject life into
myself,
And so I saluted you in spite of feeling that I lack
The vital energy to salute anyone!

O heart that won't heal! Who will save me from
you?

(*Selected Poems* 214)

The skeptical self-consciousness "does those things and brings to realization what it knows has no truth for it" (Hegel 125), and in this spirit Campos salutes the corpse of Walt Whitman whose dead ears hear nothing. This doomed communiqué obliquely illustrates, perhaps, the chief appeal of machines for Campos: their lack of memory, the operation of which afflicts the present with absence. Lacking subjectivity (which, significantly, represents a link to the non-philosophy of Caieiro), mechanism erases everything except "the shrill and mechanical Moment" (*Selected Poems* 159). It is a moment in which what-is-not exerts no influence on what-is. Unfortunately, Campos' present is not so un-afflicted.

Ultimately, in "Salutation to Walt Whitman" and elsewhere, his awareness of what he lacks devastatingly forestalls the attainment of such a moment. Whitman and Caieiro are both dead, but their ghosts return to Campos, un-resurrected. "My master, my master, who died so young!" he writes in *Notes for the Memory of My Master Caieiro*. "I see him again in this mere shadow that's me, in the memory that my dead self retains...." (*Selected Prose* 39).

Pessoa's Unhappy Consciousness and the Murder of Caieiro

If Campos suspected the part Pessoa played in Caieiro's death, could he have forgiven him? If Campos discovered that the tuberculosis was only acting on orders, would he indict Pessoa as a coward and a criminal? The extent of Pessoa's culpability perhaps seems arguable. If we accept Pessoa's claim that Caieiro's poetry has nothing to do with the man who writes it down, then we might reason as well that Pessoa had nothing to do with Caieiro's death. However, suppose that a dual relationship exists between Pessoa and his heteronyms which corresponds to the "dual-natured, merely contradictory being" of Hegel's Unhappy Consciousness (Hegel 126).

The Unhappy Consciousness emerges, in the *Phenomenology*, as a consequence of the skeptic's experience of itself as internally contradictory. Whereas the skeptic only knows how to contradict, fighting as though against an absent enemy, the Unhappy Consciousness has become

aware that it is itself that invisible enemy in addition to that which fights against it. Or rather, the Unhappy Consciousness is itself the agon they perform. "The duplication which formerly was divided between two individuals, the lord and the bondsman, is now lodged in one" (Hegel 126). So although Pessoa is at once the compliant scrivener of his heteronyms, he is simultaneously their universe, the master intelligence that configures itself as fate in the poetry of Reis, as the sensation of absence in the poetry of Campos, and as non-being, as death, in the poetry that coincides with Caeiro's very being. All of this is only to state the obvious: that although Pessoa's heteronomy mastered him, it also was him. So regardless of whether we assign any degree of conscious intent to Pessoa, he was nevertheless the disease that killed Caeiro.

To read Pessoa in this way is to view not only all of his work but Pessoa himself as a life-and-death struggle. It is to recognize, in Reis' confrontation with fate and in Campos' confrontation with the void, the same confrontation as between Pessoa and his heteronyms. It is to understand that Pessoa was the death of Caeiro, but that as a result, Pessoa comes to transcend in some fashion his own physical death. Writing, for Pessoa, was an exercise in self-mastery, and each of his heteronyms represents a moment in the struggle, but it was also Pessoa's coming-to-be as a self-conscious universe.

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