

VISIONS OF PESSOA

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*Sans faire face au regard fatal de Méduse, seulement
à son reflet dans le bouclier de bronze poli comme un
miroir, Persée voit sans être vu ...*

Derrida, Mémoires d'aveugle

Mas tudo fragmentos, fragmentos, fragmentos.

Fernando Pessoa.¹

How to start, and where to start, if all is but fragments? A reading of Pessoa that may aspire to go beyond commentary should begin by acknowledging that reading Pessoa's work is foremost a posthumous reading, and by that I do not mean simply that we, now, must read Pessoa posthumously, but that in many ways Pessoa himself wrote posthumously already, that is, he wrote not for his time but in advance of his time and yet still very much centered on his time. If there can be no doubt of Pessoa's importance for Portuguese modernism, and, in a sense, but already a posthumous sense, for European Modernism, the way this came about has more to do with the texts Pessoa left unpublished than with those – and they are not so few – that he did publish. Beyond the scandal of *Orfeu*, one must contend with the multiple scandals of heteronomy and, I would venture, with the scandal of restlessness, the scandal of the *Livro do Desassossego*, that book which is not a book at all, may indeed be an anti-book, at once its negation and its most refined affirmation. Yet, what may be more scandalous by now is not so much the scandal of Pessoa's texts but the way in which he has become commodified, co-opted by both state and market, a process that can be set back as early as the awarding of the second-prize to *Mensagem* by the Ministry for Propaganda in 1934, but reaches all the way to the present, both in the nationalist spin government agencies like to give to his texts and in the decontextualized marketing blurbs that

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make Pessoa a paragon of the postmodern. Amidst the ruins of the various European social utopias of the post-war period, and in an epoch of savage capitalism, Pessoa's multiplicity might well have been seized on as an iconic statement of the anxiety of current times.

The reading of Pessoa I would like to propose is itself a fragmentary reading. Obviously one needs to be able to relate different Pessoa's texts to each other; one needs to be aware that the *Livro do Desassossego*, or the texts that have been published, in different forms, under that title, were written at different times throughout Pessoa's life, beginning in 1913, and as such necessarily reflect different aesthetic projects. But an attempt to produce a global reading of Pessoa's oeuvre, or even a global reading of the *Livro do Desassossego*, should it be possible, would necessarily betray the fragmentary nature of Pessoa's project. I do not wish to be misunderstood on this. Pessoa had always an infinity of projects and the very *Livro do Desassossego* is proof of that as it was meant to be different books by different authors at different times. When I say that a global reading would betray Pessoa's project what I mean by that is not any one project Pessoa might have, or that he might have so formulated, but rather an extrapolation, posthumously, on my part of the very form of writing Pessoa engaged in as a Project. In other words, by not having a unified project, indeed not having a unified authorial voice, Pessoa, in a sense, was setting up a project that depends, I would suggest, on its fragmentary nature. The reading I propose then of the *Livro do Desassossego* as absolute fragment, that is, as a project that can never be complete because completion would negate its principle, is not necessarily new and yet it may seem to some as outrageously doing violence to Pessoa's.²

To avoid possible confusion I also must remark at the outset that the type of fragment I am considering is not so much an incomplete piece of text but rather a piece of text that, however complete in itself, presents itself as a piece of an impossi-

ble whole. As George Steiner, commenting on Richard Zenith's translation of *Livro do Desassossego* aptly remarks,

The fragmentary, the incomplete is of the essence of Pessoa's spirit. The very kaleidoscope of voices within him, the breadth of his culture, the catholicity of his ironic sympathies - wonderfully echoed in Saramago's great novel about Ricardo Reis - inhibited the monumentalities, the self-satisfaction of completion. Hence the vast torso of Pessoa's *Faust* on which he laboured much of his life. Hence the fragmentary condition of *The Book of Disquiet* which contains material that predates 1913 and which Pessoa left open-ended at his death. As Adorno famously said, the finished work is, in our times and climate of anguish, a lie.

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As is well known, the notion of the fragment conceived in these terms is linked with the history of German Romanticism, and especially with the Jena School and Friedrich Schlegel, in particular. As Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy point out in what I regard as the seminal discussion of the condition of the fragment, "[f]ragments are definitions of the fragment; this is what installs the totality of the fragment as a plurality and its completion as the incompleteness of its infinity" (Lacoue-Labarthe; Nancy, 1988: 44). Consequently, what I propose is a reading of the *Livro do Desassossego* in tune with its absolute fragmentarity, a reading that privileges fragments and must itself be conceived of as a fragment as well. In order to do so I would like to focus on a passage from *Livro do Desassossego* that I consider as emblematic, not of a whole that does not and cannot exist, but rather of this notion of absolute fragmentarity. It is a complex passage that treats some of the central questions of Pessoa in a manner I regard exemplary. One of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's comments on one of Schlegel's fragments from the *Athenaeum*, could be seen as a possible definition precisely of the way Pessoa works the fragment: "But fragment 206 must be read in its entirety: 'A fragment, like a small work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be

complete in itself like a hedgehog” (*Idem*: 43). In my reading I also propose to isolate the fragments; but then want to relate them to each other in the hope of this better illustrating the precision with which Pessoa frames the question of the fragment and does so in relation to the question of *simulacra*, so that both fragment and *simulacrum* become, in Pessoa’s terms, not only completely linked but absolute.

Not the least of the dangers of pretending to reflect on representing Pessoa is the fact that Pessoa himself incessantly staged new ways of representing himself and of representing representation. In a certain way, if considering any representation of Pessoa by others is a form of looking at Pessoa sideways, even looking at Pessoa’s own representations of himself in his multiple figurations is also already a game of mirrors. An analysis of Pessoa’s representations that does not take this into account, that does not indeed start by problematizing the intrinsic, double and multiple, specularity of all his representations is not simply naïve — it fails to even realize the complexity of the task at hand. It is not just a question of throwing a glazed glance at the seemingly exhausted issue of the heteronyms, or of Pessoa’s own setting in scene of them, but much more the necessity to accept that in the texts themselves Pessoa often proceeds to expose a seemingly infinite multitude of reflections on representation itself. That these more often than not are paradoxal, even aporetic, is well known. Who cannot, as it were by heart, cite the verses from “Autopsychography”, “O Poeta é um fingidor...” (Pessoa, 2006). And yet, repeated exposure can also produce a sort of blindness as if Pessoa had been merely witty, indulging in clever word games, another way of hiding himself behind a mask of intellectualism.

Pessoa’s writing lives from paradox. One is tempted to say that paradox is to Pessoa like an abyss into which he cannot stop staring and were he able to do so he only would go on seeing the same abyss everywhere. Or, as Campos put it, in a poem of his first phase but that is closely related to “Tobacco Shop”: “Great

are the deserts and all is a desert.” (Pessoa [Álvaro de Campos], 1993: 43).³ And one of the concepts that Pessoa never ceased exploring in a paradoxical way was that of truth or reality. But the function of the paradox in Pessoa is far from constituting merely a game, a wise play with words, even if it is also that. For ultimately, Pessoa’s oeuvre, unfinished, dispersed, based on difference and negation – the difference between the several heteronyms and the negation that so afflicts Campos and Soares and Pessoa himself – is a vast labyrinth with a myriad entries and no way out. José Gil, who so convincingly demonstrates the affinities between Pessoa’s poetry and the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, has characterized Pessoa’s writings as constituting an elaborate system based on the mastery of Caeiro who, unlike the others, would have rejected symbols and all metaphysics, preferring in their place a total vision. Gil does not hesitate to see in the radical difference between Caeiro and the other heteronyms the very principle of a system of Pessoa’s thought. (Gil, 1999: 134-5). But what if the system of Pessoa’s thought would rather be the attempt at completely and inexorably subverting the very notion of system? Perhaps this is just an attempt on my part to refuse Caeiro’s mastery over the other heteronyms; but it is based in part on the fact that even though Pessoa still went on attributing poems to Caeiro long after he had killed him, towards the end of his life it is not the total vision and careful aloofness of Caeiro that prevails but rather the distraught resignation of a subdued Campos or the restless search of Soares. Given the sheer number of texts Pessoa wrote as well as their complexity, it would be quixotic to try to master the complete Pessoa. Indeed, one cannot but feel that such a desire for mastery would in and by itself fail. It would fail to recognize how fundamentally dispersed and fragmentary Pessoa’s oeuvre is, just as it would fail to recognize that such an apparent failure might indeed be no failure at all but rather the very logic of its anti-systemic system.

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As Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy write:

Fragmentary individuality is above all that of the multiplicity inherent to the genre. The romantics did not publish a unique *Fragment*; to write the fragment is to write fragments. But this plural is the specific mode in which the fragment aims at, indicates, and in a certain manner posits the singular of its totality. Up to a certain point, the formula employed by Friedrich Schlegel for the *Ideas* may be applied to all the Fragments: each *one* "indicates [*deuten*] the center". (43-44)

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This observation is crucial to understand the work of the Fragment and, I would like to add, to a reading of the *Livro do Desassossego*. The Fragment I want to discuss, Fragment 25, that starts with the sentence "É uma oleografia sem remédio" (Pessoa [Bernardo Soares], 1998: 61), is not the central Fragment, indeed, there is, and cannot be, a central Fragment, but rather points out to the central issues of the book in its incomplete entirety. In this Fragment the narrator, Bernardo Soares, describes an oleograph he sees at a shop window and the effect that it has on him as well as the fact that the one he describes is almost identical to one hanging in his office. From this he proceeds to pose a series of unanswerable metaphysical questions that again revisit the issue of *simulacra*.

To start with, this oleograph — a print made to simulate an oil painting — is, "a hopelessly bad lithograph". Soares proceeds to say that he "stare[s] at it without knowing if [he] see[s] it" and that it is, with others, at the center of the window under the stairway.⁴ In the ekphrasis that follows Soares concentrates on the eyes of the woman represented:

Ela aperta a primavera contra o seio e os olhos com que me fita são tristes. Sorri com brilho do papel e as cores da sua face são encarnado. O céu por trás dela é azul de fazenda clara. Tem uma boca recortada e quase pequena por sobre cuja expressão postal os olhos me fitam sempre com uma grande pena. ... Os olhos são realmente tristes: fitam-me do fundo da realidade litográfica com uma verdade qualquer. (*Idem*: 62)

The remarks on the sadness of the eyes of that image will be repeated several times always with some slight variation. It is important to note that Soares must remove himself from watching those eyes that in turn watch him with great violence, "Separo-me de defronte da montra com uma grande violência sobre os pés" (*Idem*: 62). One is reminded of Fragment 11 in which the second of only two lines reads: "Somos dois abismos — um poço fitando o Céu" (*Idem*: 54).

Again, we are confronted with a procession of images, the reproduction Soares looks at in the window shop and its double, identical but for the expression of the eyes, and so perhaps completely different even if the same, both of course an image of something else and pointing at yet another universe to be only glimpsed in the form of the staircase. Referring to the power the eyes of the woman represented in the oleograph exert over him, Soares says that, "Há em olhos humanos, ainda que litográficos, uma coisa terrível: o aviso inevitável da consciência, o grito clandestino de haver alma" (*Idem*: 62). But in reference to the oleograph hanging in the office and that he had seen first, Soares declares the opposite: "No escritório há, no canto do fundo, um calendário idêntico, que tenho visto muitas vezes. Mas, por um mistério, ou oleográfico ou meu, a idêntica do escritório não tem olhos com pena. É só uma oleografia" (*Idem*: 62). In this way Soares both affirms the fact that indeed both calendars are identical and that they are radically different. If Walter Benjamin decried the lack of auratic quality of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproducibility, Pessoa, here, would be reinstating it, indeed annulling the value distinction between copy and original and, if anything, placing that value in the copy or the copy of the copy. The oleograph that has so much power over Soares would have been, to him, who had seen countless times the other in his office, expressionless but which he refers to as the true one ("a verdadeira oleografia"), indeed a copy of a copy, yet another absolute *simulacrum*.

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The reproductions Soares contemplates are calendars and this detail is also significant in itself and because it introduces yet another issue, the relation between the image and its frame, with Time being the one element common to both:

A gravura tem um calendário na base. É emoldurada em cima e em baixo por duas réguas pretas de um convexo chato mal pintado. Entre o baixo e o alto do seu definitivo, por sobre 1929 com vinheta obsoletamente caligráfica cobrindo o inevitável primeiro de Janeiro, os olhos tristes sorriem-me ironicamente. (*Idem*: 62)

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Again, the poor quality of the reproduction is emphasized: Pessoa is deliberately not wanting to use a model of great art as a form of the transcendental, but rather bad, utilitarian, fake money and calendars, reproductions, as indeed possessing the ability of substituting themselves for the real, be it money or, as in the case of the oleograph, the mystery of humanity.⁵ The oleograph represents Spring with its intimations of eternal rebirth but it is also anchored in a given moment, January, 1929, with the detail of the obsolescence of the calligraphic detail.⁶ It is also important to note that although Fragment 25 plays with the notion of divinity, it would be divinity that is removed from view, that might be intimated at, questioned, but not found. I think it might not be far fetched to see Pessoa playfully alluding to Kierkegaard, when he describes the sickness and trembling Soares feels as a consequence of the staring of the oleographic figure. The conclusion of Fragment 25 can again be seen as a coda, which presents itself as a fragment within a fragment, itself pointing to the center of the text it belongs to and to the immaterial center of the Fragment in general:

Quero sorrir de tudo isto, mas sinto um grande mal-estar. Sinto um frio de doença súbita na alma. Não tenho força para me revoltar contra esse absurdo. A que janela para que segredo de Deus me abeiraria eu sem querer? Para onde dá o vão de escada? Que olhos me fitavam na oleografia? Estou quase

a tremer. Ergo involuntariamente os olhos para o canto distante do escritório onde a verdadeira oleografia está. Levo constantemente a erguer para lá os olhos. (*Idem*: 62)

And, if one wanted, one could make even the conclusion of this passage, the repetition of Soares's involuntary raising his eyes to that corner where the real lithograph is, as yet another fragment to be read as self-contained by virtue of its repetitive nature. That, in any case, is what Richard Zenith seems to have done in the English translation, by adding one more repetition to the scene: "I involuntarily raise my eyes to the far corner of the office where the real lithograph is. I keep raising my eyes to that corner of the office where the real lithograph is. I keep raising my eyes to that corner" (Pessoa, 2001: 29). The hopeless oleograph becomes in a sense also a self-portrait of the artist, staring back at him, returning his gaze even when absent. >>

To conclude, I would like to call attention to the fact that even as Pessoa engaged with painting so as to work out the critical markers of his own writing, so painters have also engaged with the figure of Pessoa so as to work out their own artistic positioning. In many pictorial representations of Pessoa he has been fragmented and dematerialized to the point that only the spectacles or the hat or the nose become the irreducible markers of his mythical identity. One painter who has constantly engaged with the figure of Pessoa throughout his long career is Júlio Pomar. Let me just point out for instance how he deconstructs both the myth of King Sebastian, the eternal return of the messianic, and of Pessoa's entanglement with that particular facet of Portuguese identity, by portraying Pessoa and the open coffin with the dead King in it. Since the myth depends on the disappearance of the King the materiality of his dead body annuls it just as it calls into question Pessoa's own involvement with messianic esoterism. And, as a final example I would like to refer to yet another painting by Pomar, one of a series in which Pessoa appears alongside other great poets such as Mallarmé, Poe and Baudelaire. In this one painting, instead

of Pessoa what we see is an auto-portrait of Pomar as a monkey, one of the most traditional figures of the painter in relation to the problematics of representation and the *simulacra*. By displacing Pessoa and substituting himself as simian for it, Pomar successfully calls into question the idolization of Pessoa while remaining truthful to Pessoa's own engagement with representation, rejecting the visionary aspects of Pessoa and choosing instead for a radical vision of the process of art beyond questions of mimesis. At the same time these self-portraits of the artists are, just as Derrida mentioned it in relation to other paintings, indirect gazes that allow Perseus to see through a reflection without being seen, self-portraits that allow the artists to comment on their relation to Pessoa indirectly, their proximity and their distance, joined images yet completely opposed. <<

NOTES

[1] The complete citation is: "O meu estado de espírito obriga-me agora a trabalhar bastante, sem querer, no *Livro do Desassossego*. Mas tudo fragmentos, fragmentos, fragmentos", in Fernando Pessoa, "Carta a Armando Cortes-Rodrigues, em 19 de Novembro de 1914", [Bernardo Soares], *Livro do Desassossego*, Ed. Richard Zenith, Lisboa, Assirio & Alvim, 1998, 503.

[2] If one pays attention to the introductory essay Richard Zenith provides with his edition of the *Livro do Desassossego*, one can see how he both calls attention to the fragmentary nature of the text in question, as well as to the fact that had Pessoa prepared the book for publication, it would probably have been a much smaller book, the result of careful pruning and selection. I have no problem considering that indeed that might have been the case even as I have no interest in speculation on authorial intentions. But I would like to maintain that if one pays attention to the fragmentary nature of the text and sees that as a constitutive principle, then its incompleteness becomes a necessity rather than a fault. One other comment by Richard Zenith is also very important to the reading I want to propose. Just as Zenith refers that if Pessoa had written all the books he had projected, the resulting volumes would fill an entire library, he also then refers to the *Livro do Desassossego* as a "non-book in a "non-library" (17). The use Zenith makes of the term is clear but also limited. What I would like to propose is that the *Livro do Desassossego* not only is a non-book but also an anti-book, and by that I mean that it is a book which presents itself as excessively so at the same time that it denies what one usually expects from a book, completeness. Indeed, one could say that by actually publishing the fragments between book covers, a certain violence is made to the project of denying completeness. At the same time, it is only through actual publication as a book that the radical nature of the project, as I would like to call it, becomes visible at all, a paradox like so many that Pessoa excelled in. >>

[3] From *Poesias de Álvaro de Campos*, p. 43: "Grandes são os desertos, e tudo é deserto." My translation.

[4] For the English translation I use Richard Zenith's version in Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet* (2001, 28-29). At times Zenith's translation accentuates a point, at times it subdues it. In this initial passage, for instance, the word "centro" is rendered as "middle of" and the word "escada" becomes "the steps".

[5] One text where the issue of representation in reference to money is explored with great acuity, and which I analyze elsewhere, is "Um Grande Português ou O Conto do Vigário" first published in 1926.

[6] Richard Zenith provides in a note, as a variant for 1929, the color green, which would have an opposite effect of course, being again symbolic of a general Spring and not carrying the specificity of a date.

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