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ONOMASTICS AND THE PRISMATIC REALITY
IN THE POETRY OF FERNANDO PEÇSOA

Víctor J. Rojas

The Portuguese Poet Fernando António Nogueira Pessoa (Lisbon 1888-1935) wrote under several names including Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos, Richardo Reis, Bernardo Soares, C. Pacheco, Alexander Search, the Baron de Teive, Le Chevalier de Pas, and his own name. The first three names, Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos, and Richardo Reis are what Pessoa himself called "heterónimos" (heteronyms) as opposed to "pseudónimos" (pseudonyms). Critics such as Peter Rickard, João Gaspar Simões, and Octavio Paz have dealt with the differentiations between Pessoa's heteronyms and conventional pseudonyms. Peter Rickard, for example, says, "A pseudonym is merely the use of another name in order to continue to be the same person, in order to go on saying what one would have said in any case. But Alvaro de Campos, Alberto Caeiro, and Richardo Reis (not to mention other less productive heteronyms which appeared later) were, Pessoa maintained, not just names: they were personalities who produced poetry -- and at times prose -- in keeping with their education, their temperament, their preoccupations and their philosophy of life." In this paper we shall examine the interrelations of Pessoa's
heteronyms and his interpretation of reality. We shall attempt to prove that in Pessoa's poetry there is a prismatic perception of reality, perception which is dispersed and reflected through the three heteronyms. Pessoa himself said in a letter to the poet Armando Cortes-Rodrigues "everything I write under the names of Caeiro, Reis, Alvaro de Campos is serious. In any of them I put a profound conceptual life, different in all three, but in all gravely attentive to the mysterious importance of existence."⁴

The first poems by Richardo Reis date from June 12, 1914 and the last ones from November 13, 1935. His collection of poetry is entitled Odes. The predominant theme is vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas. He is saddened by the impermanence of all things and the inevitability of old age and death. However, as he becomes aware of his inability to know the everchanging reality, he chooses to accept and enjoy each moment as if it were his last. In the poem "As rosas amo dos jardins do Adonis" ("I the Roses love in the Gardens of Adonis") we read:

As rosas amo dos jardins de Adônis,
Essas volucrens amo, Lidia, rosas
Que em o dia em que nascem,
Em ese dia morrem,

A luz para elles é eterna, porque
Nascem nascido já o sol, e acabam
Antes que Apolo deixe
O seu curso visível.

Assim façaemos nossa vida un dia,
Insicientes, Lidia, voluntariamente
Que há noite antes e após
O pouco que duramos

I the roses love in the gardens of Adonis
Lydia, I love those fast fleeting roses
    That on the day they are born,
    On that same day they die.

Light for them is everlasting: born
After the sun comes up, they die
    Before Apollo rounds
    His visible track.

So let us make our life a single day
And willingly ignore the night to come,
    The night already past,
    The little while we last.

For Ricardo Reis nothing has any real and lasting meaning;
everything is an illusion. Happiness is the illusion of being happy,
freedom is the illusion of being free:

Só esta liberdade nos concedem
Os deuses: submeter-nos
Ao seu domínio por vontade nossa.
    Mais vale assim fazermos
Porque só na ilusão da liberdade
    A liberdade existe.

In this respect alone the gods allow us
To be free: they let us of our own accord
    Acknowledge them our masters.
We do well to act thus,
    For in the illusion of being free
    Alone lies freedom.

The poetic production of Alberto Caeiro is entitled Poemas (Poems).
His first poems date from March 8, 1914 and the last ones from July
1930. Most of them were written from 1914 to 1920. All his poems
are grouped under two titles, *O guardador de rebanhos* (The Keeper of Flocks) and *Poemas inconjuntos* (Sporadic Poems). In his poetry predominate a kind of sensual pantheism and a clam acceptance of the world as it is. He contemplates reality and tries to convey in words the innocence and nakedness of his vision. To him, things are precisely what they seem. He writes:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{A espantosa realidade das coisas} \\
\text{É a minha descoberta de todos os dias} \\
\text{Cada coisa é o que é.}
\end{align*}
\]

The astonishing reality of things is something I discover every day Each thing is what it is.

In another poem he says, "Para mim, graças a ter os olhos só para ver,/ Eu vejo ausência de significação em todas as coisas." ("As for me, thanks to my having eyes only for seeing,/ I see absence of meaning in all things."\(^8\)

Caeiro concludes that the allegedly different faces of Nature are not a reality at all. It is we who look at reality in different ways. All created things are equal in that they exist equally.

The last heteronym that we shall discuss is Alvaro de Campos. In verse and prose alike, he contributed from June 1914 to October 1935. In the early years he expresses a great deal of vitality, a zest for experience. He acknowledges influence from and admiration for Walt Whitman. From 1916 on, however, Alvaro de Campos becomes appalled by the emptiness of his own existence, lethargic, lacking
in will power. He seeks inspiration in semi-conscious states, in the twilight world between waking and sleeping. Confused because of his inability to distinguish clearly between an outward and an inward reality of things, Álvaro de Campos says:

Estou hoje perplexo, como quem pensou e achou e esqueceu.
Estou hoje dividido entre a lealdade que devo à Tabacaria do outro lado da rua, como coisa real por fora,
E à sensação de que todo é sonho, como coisa real por dentro.

Today I'm at a loss, like one who thought and found the answer, then forgot.
Today I am torn between my loyalty
To a thing of outward reality--the tobacco-shop across the street,
And to a thing of inward reality--the feeling that it's all a dream. 9

If during the early years Campos had an urge to experience things, now he has an urge to question them. The prevailing tone in his poetry from after 1915 is one of agonized doubt, the doubt of a man who feels that he is being dehumanized by his surroundings and is gradually losing his self-awareness.

In summary, what do Pessoa's heteronyms tell us about reality? How do they reflect Pessoa's perception of reality? We have seen that Caeiro seems to regard reality as objective. He denies the existence of the transcendental. Reis does not believe that we can discover anything at all about the world. Campos doubts the reality of what he perceives, but he also doubts the reality of his own thoughts. Pessoa,
through his heteronyms seems to tell us that we, as human beings are always involved in a struggle between our rational powers and the reality in which we live. Unfortunately, we, the human beings seem to be the losers.

In closing our discussion on Pessoa's heteronyms, we must point out that the question of their genesis has puzzled many critics. Joao Gaspar Simoes has given a very elaborate Freudian explanation; whereas Édourd Roditi has said that "Pessoa's bilingualism--Portuguese-English--may indeed be the cause of his extraordinary and almost psychopathic diversity as a Portuguese poet." Pessoa himself, however, gave the following explanation:

The origin of my heteronyms is at bottom an aspect of hysteria that exists in me. I don't know whether I am simply a hysteric or if I am more properly a neurasthenic hysteric. . . . The mental origin of my heteronyms lies in a persistent and organic tendency of mine toward depersonalization and simulation. . . . I put into Caeiro all my power of dramatic depersonalization, into Richardo Reis all my intellectual discipline, dressed in the music that is proper to him, into Álvaro de Campos, all the emotions that I do not allow myself in my living.

Finally, and to state the obvious, we must add that even the name Pessoa could imply a multi-sided personality. Derived from the Latin word which means a mask or a character in a play, it now means, in spoken Portuguese, a mere person in the very vaguest sense of this word.
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NOTES


For Octavis Paz see Edwin Honig, ed., op cit, pp. 1-21.

3 Peter Rickard, p. 22.

4 Honig, p. 167.

5 Ibid, pp. 44-45.

6 Ibid, pp. 44-45.

7 Rickard, p. 139.


9 Rickard, pp. 98-99.


11 Honig, p. 163.