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Fernando Pessoa

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FERNANDO PESSOA might be bewildered by the current rush to “discover” him. His bronze statue sits outside the Café Brasileira in the Chiado district of Lisbon, one of his haunts, but other facts of his death better demonstrate the respect accorded him in Portugal: Once buried in the Cemitério dos Prazeres (the Cemetery of Pleasures), his body was moved to the Jerónimos Monastery, where Vasco da Gama and the epic poet, Luís Vaz de Camões, lie in sarcophagi. (I should use the term once reserved for saints: They *translated* his body.) He is, however, beneath a modern obelisk tucked off by himself, away from the grandeur, in a quiet corner of the cloister. A visitor must know to ask where he is. This seems a concerted effort to offer respect but also eternal privacy.

Born in Lisbon in 1888, he spent years in Durban, South Africa, where he learned English, but in 1905 he returned to Portugal for the rest of his life, moving through a succession of small rooms and mild jobs. He was a clerk, a commercial-letter writer; a timid man who considered opening an astrology business, a drinker alone or with friends in the cafés.

Pessoa’s most heralded invention was probably the introduction of his heteronyms: Creatures born out of him—chiefly Ricardo Reis, Álvaro de Campos, and Alberto Caeiro—who wrote poetry under their own names, with their own distinct histories and personalities. (The Pessoa-industry machine now consists of scholars eagerly digging up eighty or more heteronyms in his work, a process that would probably cause Álvaro de Campos to answer with one of his Whitmanesque explosions.) The heteronyms are not emblems of a split-personality; they are independent light-beings born and free to walk about and argue with each other. Pessoa (peh-SO-ah, which means “person”) once wrote, “I saw within me, in a colorless space more real than a dream, the faces, gestures, of Caeiro, Ricardo Reis and Álvaro de Campos. I made out their ages and their lives . . .” Think of them not as characters dreamed up by an author, but entities that someone has released to be themselves.

In a burst of inspiration, he stood at a lectern one day and wrote one poem after another in the mode of Caeiro, a shepherd whom Pessoa called his master. Caeiro insisted that a plant was a plant, nothing more; metaphysics was an illness. Ricardo Reis, a monarchist and physician, wrote odes and went to live in Brazil. (José Saramago had him return in *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*.) Álvaro de Campos is a sensationist, the writer of the homoerotic “Maritime Ode.”

On one occasion when Pessoa wrote as himself, he asserted that a poet was a faker, someone who even fakes the pain he authentically feels. This recalls Magritte's "This is not a pipe" painting: a poem is a poem, the way a rock is nothing more than a rock, Caeiro would retort to Pessoa; what do you expect? A poem may be about suffering, but it isn't the suffering.

"The Tobacco Shop," by Álvaro de Campos, contains some key sections that are a puzzle to convey in translation. The original opening lines are: "Não sou nada/Nunca serei nada/Não posso querer ser nada." Because of the double negative, which Portuguese allows, it might read: "I'm nothing/I'll always be nothing/Not that I want to be nothing" or: "I am not nothing/I've never been a nobody/(but even so) I can't hope to be anyone," or combinations thereof.

This notion of easy contractions being equal truths should be read throughout the poem, especially at the end, when Esteves enters in. The translator, Richard Zenith, keeps the name in the original rather than Anglicizing it into "Steven" so that it will continue to suggest *esteve*, the past tense of the verb "to be"—he was, she was, it was. The narrator of the poem is smoking a cigarette, following the long road created by the smoke, and splices that moment onto unmetaphysical Esteves in the act of buying tobacco. The narrator himself, of course, was precisely this: a buyer of tobacco in the recent past. He's a dreamer-pragmatist, fully aware that he is enjoying the illusion that time can achieve an infinitesimal freeze. Eternity is amusing itself with bigger things—the destruction of all reality. The smartest option is to go amusedly on smoking, you who are waving at you whom you were, you waving at whom you are not.