

PESSOA'S GALAXY OR
A DESPERATE QUEST FOR THE CENTRE

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White house black ship

Happiness in Australia...

(Alvaro de Campos [Fernando Pessoa], 1916)

To the structuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida, every structure can be defined through the existence of a central point, that makes that structure possible.¹ Nevertheless, he thinks this central point is a multiple place and this is perhaps the reason why it is so difficult to grasp it, to seize it behind the various shapes it may take. This could certainly apply to the great Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa, who struggled all his life to maintain a centre, even if multiple, that would hold together his centrifugal personality. Having created various masks, he hid behind them, still escaping our scrutiny and leaving wide open the doors of our imagination.

Before considering his works, we will go through a few facts about him. However, we will not forget the words of the great Mexican writer, Octavio Paz, who wrote that 'poets have no biography: their works are their biography'.² This is particularly true of Fernando Pessoa, but it is nevertheless important to know some of the events that leave their print in his poetry. He was born, in 1888, in the joyful and nostalgic town of Lisbon, where he lived alone with his mother since the time when his father and his younger brother died from tuberculosis when he was five

¹ Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la Différence*, Paris, Seuil, 1979, p.409.

² Octavio Paz, *O Desconhecido de si mesmo (Fernando Pessoa)*, [s.l.], Iniciativas Editoriais, 1980, p.7.

years old. In order to escape this somewhat gloomy universe, he soon began to create imaginary figures, which filled his lonely life. Two years after his father's death, Fernando's mother married the Portuguese consul in Durban, South Africa, and settled in this town, where the young boy carried out his studies till the end of high school.

In 1899, he created what is considered his first heteronym, that is to say, a literary character, possessing a biography and a style of its own. His name was Alexander Search, and he wrote English poems, Pessoa being perfectly fluent in this language all his life. After high school, Pessoa decided to go back to Portugal, in order to enter university, where he did not stay long. In fact, he soon began to work as a commercial correspondent in foreign languages, this job presenting the advantage of leaving him enough spare time to write.

The year 1914 was to be a decisive one for him, because it was the year which saw the big bang of his heteronymic universe. He tells this episode in a letter to a friend, dated from 1935:

One day... it was March the 8th, 1914 – I approached a high chest of drawers, and, taking a sheet of paper, I began to write, standing up, as I use to do whenever I can. And I wrote about thirty poems at a stroke, in a kind of ecstasy, the nature of which I could not describe. It was the day of triumph in my life... I began with the title : The Keeper of the Flock (O Guardador de Rebanhos). What followed was that someone emerged from inside me, whom I christened without delay Alberto Caeiro. Forgive me for the absurdity of the following sentence : my master had appeared within me Once Alberto Caeiro had emerged, I immediately – both instinctively and subconsciously – undertook to find him some disciples. I snatched the latent Ricardo Reis from his

false paganism... All of a sudden, from an origin opposed to that of Ricardo Reis, a new individual impetuously came forth in me. At a stroke, on the typewriter, with neither interruption nor correction, 'Ode to Triumph' ('Ode Triunfal') by Alvaro de Campos appeared suddenly.³

This account will lay the foundations of Pessoa's myth, as he wanted it to be left to posterity. The study of manuscripts seems to prove that the poems referred to here were not the result of a trance, but of intense remodelling work. We are undoubtedly faced here with Pessoa's tendency to mystification, which is one of the keys to understanding his universe. Explorer of his own crowded desert, Pessoa also left some self-analyses to satisfy his readers' curiosity that are not necessarily sincere either. They often sprang from what he called his 'organic and constant tendency to depersonalization and simulation.'

It must be added that he often used these heteronyms in order to 'mystify' his friends, playing with his different *alter egos* simultaneously, a brilliant producer of a whole 'theatre of being'. In it, Alberto Caeiro plays the part of the leader of the Portuguese neo-pagan movement, totally made up by Pessoa; Ricardo Reis writes both stoic and epicurian *Odes*, and Alvaro de Campos is the leader of the Portuguese futurist movement and a great admirer of the American poet, Walt Whitman. A semi-heteronym, Bernardo Soares, will write the *Book of Disquietude* (*Livro do Desassossego*), a long prose reverie which was published in 1982 and knew a large success all around the world. Pessoa himself, the orthonym, is the author of hermetic poetry and of the only book to have been published in his lifetime, *Message* (*Mensagem*, 1934), both a nationalist and mystic book of poems. Pessoa will die not long afterwards, in 1935, from too much, even if discreet,

³ Fernando Pessoa, *Obra Poética e em Prosa*, Vol.II, Porto, Lello e Irmão, 1986, p.341.

drinking, hiding behind his masks a form of despair his poetry bears witness to.

Most of Pessoa's works were long kept in a trunk and left unpublished. It took strenuous work to put them together, in the way it seemed probable Pessoa would have liked them to be. Hundreds of pieces of the enormous puzzle of his creation brought to light the depth and diversity of his thought, expressed both in English and Portuguese. We think, by the way, the choice of each language was not casual, English corresponding above all to secrecy and intimacy. One of his first heteronyms was English and called Alexander Search, as we have said before. His poems are about lost childhood, purity, an Age of Innocence from before the Fall of Man.⁴ The theme of the mask appears in his 35 *Sonnets*: 'How many masks wear we, and undermasks?'⁵ The truth of human being seems to hide behind all those masks, identity itself disappears, scattered among multiple and fictitious personalities.

By pushing this process to its ultimate consequences, Pessoa became the centre of a true galaxy of literary personalities or heteronyms, as we have seen. It is interesting to note that he writes about masks in English – and it is all the more so if we take it for granted that his bilingualism, which may be considered as a sort of mastered schizophrenia, was in part responsible for his tendency to depersonalization.⁶ This tendency is no doubt common to a number of writers of European Modernism, like James Joyce, Vladimir Nabokov, T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound, who were bilingual, one of the two languages becoming a real mask to them. As far as Pessoa is concerned, it seems to us, that the Portuguese language, his

⁴ Ibid, Vol.I, pp.723-724.

⁵ Ibid, p.480.

⁶ See Ana Maria Binet, 'Fernando Pessoa, un poète entre deux langues', in *Pays de la Langue / Pays de la Poésie*, Pau, ed.Covedi, 1998, pp.47-52.

mother-tongue, was the mask, and that English, as we have already hinted, the language in which he makes some confidences, tells his intimate thoughts, unveils something about his sexuality, and often confesses his belief in a hidden truth. It is in English that, still very young, he tells of his solitude ('no soul is so lonely as mine'), his fear of madness ('one of my mental complications – horrible beyond words – is a fear of insanity, which itself is insanity').⁷ Written around 1910, these notes show us some fundamental tendency to depersonalization, which would develop later on.

As we have said before, the esoteric themes appear very early in English works. Platonism is to a great extent the philosophical basis of this esoteric thought, through the recurrent theme of a true life before the fall into our illusive world, a happy state before existence, to which the poet would like to come back: 'There, lining walks immemorial, / Great antenatal flowers / My lost life, before soul, recall'.⁸ The great metaphysical questions are already present in this poem from 1901 (Pessoa was 12 years old), called 'Anamnesis', as they are in another poem from the same period of his life, called 'The Foreself':

I had a self and life
 Before this life and self.
 When the moon makes woods rife
 With possible fay or elf,
 There comes in me a dreaming
 That is like a light gleaming
 Somewhere in me away,
 On seas that I have known
 And placeless lands that own
 Another kind of day.

⁷ Fernando Pessoa. *Páginas Íntimas e de Auto-Interpretação*. Lisboa, Atica, [s.d.], 1966, pp.3-6.

⁸ Fernando Pessoa, *Obras Poéticas e em Prosa*, Vol.I, op.cit., p.445.

I dream, and as a blast
 Fans into fire and ember,
 My heart gleams with a past
 That I cannot remember.
 And as the ember's glowing
 Is not fire but fire's showing,
 I waste the empty pelf
 Of my mute sense of me.
 As a rain within the sea
 I fade within myself.

There are mazes of I.
 I am my unknown being.
 I have, I know not why,
 Another kind of seeing
 (Other than this vain vision
 That is my soul's division
 From what girds sight about)
 Where to see is to know,
 Whose life is faith, and woe
 Fled by the hand of Doubt.

My life has happy hours :
 'Tis when I feel not living ;
 And, as the scent of flowers
 Round flowers a flower-soul weaving,
 That is a corporate spirit,
 From myself I inherit,
 My soul's blood's spirit-air,
 A foreself and inself
 Which is the being-pelf
 That with God's loss I share.⁹

As in the previous poem, a dream-like condition allows the access to the remembrance of a previous life, out of time ('another kind of day') and of space ('placeless lands'). In his actual life, he feels as if he had lost his identity ('I waste the empty pelf / Of my mute sense of me'), and he fades within himself, losing himself in 'mazes'. Exile and loneliness are two common items of these poems, which

⁹ Fernando Pessoa, *Œuvres*, Paris, Bourgeois, 1992, pp.192-195.

stress inner vision as redemption, as well as the absolute beauty of a previous life, of which flowers are the symbols. The poet will ask himself later on if we are 'mere intervals, God's Absence and no more, / Hollows in real Consciousness and Thought...'.¹⁰

The poem entitled 'The Circle' dates from 1907: the poet traces 'a circle on the ground', 'a mystic figure strange'. As his 'thinking is condemned / To symbol and analogy', he thought 'a circle might condense / With calm all mystery's violence.' But 'imperfect the made circle stood', magic failed, he could not master the perfection of the circle, that is to say, of God and created universe, but also of total psyche. The failure in drawing the circle may thus be interpreted as the sign of a narcissistic wound, which prevents a real cohesion of Self.¹¹

We are here confronted with a central problem in Pessoa's poetry, that of the Reality of the Self for, as far as he is concerned, 'we are our dreams of ourselves, souls by gleams, / And each to each other dreams of others' dreams'.¹² The poet only can have a glimpse of his self, a mere reflection of soul, through the multiple images of it. Lacking an unifying centre, it scatters in the flood of time, allowing Pessoa to declare: 'I will never be again the one I never was...'.¹³ The feeling of an identity, like a mirage, disappears as soon as he is on the point of seizing it. The image of the Self in the mirror is bound to change, and the reflections in the mirror that Pessoa's heteronyms are must multiply themselves constantly in order to give the impression of totality. He is conscious this is in fact an illusion, as we clearly see in these verses by his heteronym Alvaro de Campos: 'The magic mirror where I used to see me identical is broken, / And in each fatidical fragment I

¹⁰ Fernando Pessoa, *Obra Poética e em Prosa*, op.cit., p.484.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.724-725.

¹² Fernando Pessoa, *Poemas Ingleses*, Lisboa, Atica, 1974, p.156.

¹³ Fernando Pessoa, *Poemas Dramáticos*, Lisboa, Atica, 1966, p.39.

see but a piece of myself'.¹⁴ In a note written in 1915, he had already used this image of the mirror: 'I feel multiple. I am like a room with numberless fantastic mirrors that twist into false reflections a unique previous reality that is in none of them and at the same time in all of them.'¹⁵ Prisoner of a Self he cannot identify, he lives an imaginary life, full of the characters he creates in order to try and fill the void between him and himself ('Between me and myself I am the interval'). Thus living in a world apart, he becomes his masks, his unity being in fact this open plurality, where masks have no real face behind them.

This impossible unity is certainly the origin of Pessoa's literary scattering, his heteronymy. It is, at least we think so, a form of identity compulsion, of a quest for identity. However, we must be very prudent about speaking, as some critics have done, of 'multiple personality', as Pessoa has always controlled the appearance of the different literary personalities in him, even when he pretended the contrary. In his case, there is still someone saying he is another. He plays with these other Selves, pulling every string with incredible mastery, like a dramatic author with his characters. He himself tells us so:

The author of these lines... has never had one personality, has never thought or felt otherwise than dramatically, that is to say, through a fictitious person, or personality, capable of feeling more truly than himself... That this quality in a writer be a form of hysteria, or what is called a split personality, the author of these lines does not contest or approve... With so much literature missing, as is the case nowadays, what can a man of genius do apart from changing himself into a whole literature?¹⁶

¹⁴ Fernando Pessoa, *Poesias de Alvaro de Campos*, Lisboa, Atica, 1964, p.249.

¹⁵ Fernando Pessoa, *Páginas Intimas...*, op.cit., p.93.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.95-98.

He knew how to use, in a marvellous way, this deep psychological tendency in order to create a literary labyrinth where many got lost. His poetry is a dramatic *mise-en-scène*, which is the result of a difficult quest into the Self as a fiction. Thus, his heteronymic creation, besides being a fantastic literary mystification, was a kind of therapy to fight the suffering brought about by this lack of psychological unity. In fact, he tried hard to build as coherent an inner structure as possible. In a letter to a fellow-writer, Armando Côrtes-Rodrigues, dated from 1915, some months after the famous ‘big bang’, he wrote:

my self-discipline, gradually acquired, has succeeded to unify inside me those divergent elements of my character which were liable to be in harmony with one another. I still have lots of work to do inside me; I am still very far from unification as I would like it to be.¹⁷

The absence of a father, with whom he could identify himself, necessarily hindered a normal personality structure, as certainly did his leaving for a foreign country, being obliged to assimilate another language, another culture...and another ‘father’. In the gap that opened inside him, he created a whole literature – a centreless individual thus creating a centreless literature. Thus identity leaks through these other selves that lead the poet beyond himself, to an unknown land. The mask as a metaphor of oneself absorbs that disquieting strangeness, keeping the secrecy of the Self. Keeping, for instance, a latent homosexuality through an onomastic creation absorbing and imprisoning an unconfessed sexual desire. ‘Maritime Ode’ (1915), by Alvaro de Campos, is certainly a good example of what we are trying to prove:

¹⁷ Fernando Pessoa. *Textos de Crítica e de Intervenção*, Lisboa, Atica, 1980, p.106.

SEEKING THE CENTRE

Yes, yes, yes...Nail me to your sea ventures
And my shoulders will love the weight of the cross !
Bind me to each voyage as to a stake
And the pressure of the stake will pierce my spine
And will feel it in one great passive orgasm !
Do what you want with me, so long as it's done at sea,
On deck, to the sound of the waves.
Wound me, kill me, tear me apart !
What I'd like is to bring to Death
A soul spilling over with the Sea,
Dead drunk on everything having to do with the sea,
With sailors as with anchors and capes,
With faraway coasts as with wind sounds,
With the Distant as with the Dock, with shipwrecks
As with run-of-the-mill shipping,
With masts as with waves,
And in voluptuous mourning, bring Death
A body swarming with leeches, sucking, sucking –

Those strange green absurd sea leeches!...
To let my passive body be the grand sum-total-woman
of all women
Who were raped, killed, wounded, torn apart by
pirates !
To be, in my bondage, the woman having to serve
them all !
And feel it all – feel all these things at once – through
to the backbone ! ...
Make me kneel before you !
Humiliate me and beat me !
Make me your slave and your object !
And let your scorn for me never leave me,
O my masters, O my masters!¹⁸

It is true that a strong desire 'to feel everything in
everyway', as he said, inhabited him and his works. 'The
more I feel, the more I feel like several persons, / ...The

¹⁸ Fernando Pessoa, 'Maritime Ode', in *Poems of Fernando Pessoa*, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1998, pp.47-80.

more I will possess the total existence of the universe, / ...The more similar will I be to God, whoever He may be'.¹⁹ His multiplicity allowed him to melt in universal diversity, a God-like diversity. There he searched to have a glimpse of Reality beyond Illusion, a revelation, perhaps through that 'conversation with angels' he thought initiation would lead to. At the same time, to meet one's angel is to meet oneself, one's soul, in a final ecstatic union. So, after a hard and long quest, the angel's alterity comes to be a true and profound identity. A beautiful poem, entitled 'Eros and Psyche' (1934), illustrates this. In the end, 'still dizzy by what had been, / He raises a floating hand to his head / And finds ivy around it, / And sees he himself was / The sleeping Princess.'²⁰ While freeing the beautiful princess, the young prince liberates his own Self. When he awakens, he understands he has integrated the immortal part of himself, represented by the ivy. This union with the feminine principle of his being, his *anima*, allows him to reintegrate his primordial hermaphroditism, his real nature from before the Fall. He has thus achieved the perfect union with the object of his quest. We must not forget that Eros, the winged god, can be considered as a platonic image of the angel.

Initiation is the way to find the mystery that lies in the deepest recess of oneself and this quest was at the very centre of Pessoa's spiritual life. A Gnostic Christian, as he would define himself, opposed to any institutional church, he looked for Christ through a higher form of knowledge depending on personal revelation. The hope for an inner vision, that will enlighten the heart of the poet, who finally finds his harbour, gives frequently place to the certainty that nothing will come from the distant world beyond the senses:

¹⁹ Fernando Pessoa, *Obra Poética e em Prosa*, vol.I. op.cit., pp.1024-1025.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.118.

SEEKING THE CENTRE

The secret of the Quest is that you find nothing.
Eternal worlds infinitely,
One inside the other, unceasingly roll,
Useless; Suns, Gods, God of Gods
Are interpolated and lost among them,
And we are even unable to find ourselves in infinity.
Everything is always different, and always beyond
God or gods: this is the flickering light
Of supreme truth.

In the wide starry skies
That lie beyond reason,
Under the law of fates
Nobody knows,
There are infinite systems,
Suns in the centre of their own worlds,
And each sun is a God.²¹

The plurality of the Gnostic cosmological system clearly underlies this poem, a part of an unachieved dramatic poem called 'First Faust.' *Logos* pervades the whole universe, following a scheme where different levels exist. Creation expands from a central Divinity, and will come back to It at the end of times.²² As an echo to his poem, Pessoa writes a note that asserts the same vision:

The God who created the world is not the Being.
There are other worlds than those God created. There
are other Gods than God. There are other Realities
than natural or supernatural Reality...Above every
god and every world, impersonal, neither good nor
evil, Pure Intelligence, bare from every attribute, is
Fate. Each world, each universe, has a God who
created it, its Good and Evil, who represent the
tendency to come back to God and to go away from
Him.²³

²¹ Fernando Pessoa, *Obra Poética e em Prosa*, vol.I, op.cit., p.611.

²² See H. Leisegang, *La Gnose*, Paris, Payot, 1971, p.106.

²³ Fernando Pessoa, *Obra Poética*, Rio de Janeiro, Aguilar, 1965, p.151.

Clinging to the platonic heritage through the concept of 'Pure Intelligence', inaccessible and unknowable, Pessoa stands very near to apophatism, an essential trend in his metaphysical approach, another one being this plural vision of reality and divinity. For him, 'the world of numbers is controlled by gods; this means that, as far as the world as we conceive it is concerned, polytheism is Truth'.²⁴ He divides gods into three categories: 'gods of Will, who rule material world; gods of Emotion, (Trinity), who rule spiritual world; gods of Intelligence – the sole Fate'.²⁵ Here we find once more the Gnostic *weltanschauung*, with its legions of intermediate entities between a unique God-Fate and Man. This one must be aware of the presence of these deities:

You must learn, you who feel Christian qualms,
Traitor to the multiple presence
Of gods, not to have
Veils on your eyes and soul²⁶

For the author of the *Odes*, Ricardo Reis, Christ is a god among other gods, even if He brought something new to mankind:

Hate you, Christ, I do not, or seek. I believe
In you as in the other gods, your elders.
I count you as neither more or less
Than they are, merely newer...
Take care, exclusive idolater of Christ : life
Is multiple, all days different from each other,
And only as multiple shall we
Be with reality and alone.²⁷

²⁴ Fernando Pessoa, *Textos Filosóficos*, vol.II, Lisboa, Atica, 1968, p.63.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p.102.

²⁶ Fernando Pessoa, *Odes de Ricardo Reis*, Lisboa, Atica, 1966, p.167.

²⁷ Fernando Pessoa, *Selected Poems*, Penguin Books, 1982, p.98.

This idea, according to which monotheism may create a feeling of anguish, was developed by some contemporary authors, among whom David Miller, who wrote *The New Polytheism*.²⁸ In his introduction, he sustains the idea of a possibility offered by the multiple polytheistic structures to free the radical plurality of the self, seldom achieved on account of the guilt complex attached to monotheism. Miller's theories are particularly interesting in Pessoa's case, as far as 'the radical plurality of the self' has laid the foundations of his literary creation and is one of the keys to his personality. Miller could be speaking about Pessoa when he declares that

from a psychological point of view, polytheism takes the form of a radical experience of a self made up of different aspects equally real, but incompatible. Identity becomes impossible to fix... One feels as if one was composed by different selves, each possessing an independent power, a particular life, coming and going, according to their own laws and without taking into account the central will of an unique self... The multiple self, due to its own diversity, seems to be able to survive.²⁹

The metaphysical attraction Pessoa shows for pluralism corresponds of course to his psychological structure. Besides, it is worth noticing that he seems close to Nietzsche in his refusal of monotheism. For Nietzsche, it would indeed lead to God's death. Above all, Pessoa wishes to integrate reality as a whole, as he does spirituality in all its manifestations. He certainly does not forget that Christian theology stems out of Greek philosophy and, consequently, of polytheist religion. He finds it important to bear this in mind, in order to prevent the feeling of anguish linked to a mutilated condition.

²⁸ David Miller, *The New Polytheism*, New York, Harper and Row, 1974.

²⁹ David Miller, *Le nouveau polythéisme*, Paris, Images, 1979, p.18.

This concept of a plurality of spiritual entities is common to most of western esoteric movements which 'always insist upon processions of stages, entities, intermediaries between God and his creature'.³⁰ They all teach this development of multiplicity from Unity, these spiritual beings corresponding to different spiritual stages, communication with them being possible, after a long and difficult initiation. They are called angels in a monotheistic context, Jewish Kabbalah naming *Sephiroth* the different forms of divine revelation.

Pessoa always balanced between hope of achieving this spiritual quest and despair before the great silence answering his questions, denying today what he passionately asserted yesterday. A short orthonym poem, called 'Christmas', bears witness to this dispirited state of mind:

One god is born. Others die. Truth
Did not come or go. Error changed;
Eternity is different now.
What happened was always better.

Blind Science plows the useless sod.
Fool Faith lives the dream of its observance.
A new God is but a word.
Search not, nor believe. All is hidden.³¹

Mystery is at the very end of everything, absolutely inaccessible:

The same God who created our World is perhaps one of numberless 'gods', creator of one of the numberless 'universes', mysteriously coexisting, all being liable

³⁰ Antoine Faivre, *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental*. Paris, Gallimard, 1986, p.17.

³¹ Fernando Pessoa, *Poems of Fernando Pessoa*, op.cit., p.160.

to be described as infinite and eternal. Mystery – according to the highest Occultism – is greater, not only than Universe, but than God himself.³²

So we see how this plural conception of reality, even divine reality, is constantly present in Pessoa's works. For him, it is important to try and climb the ladder made up by the different forms taken by divinity, even if this effort is most of the times unsuccessful. In any case, it may bring about a liberation of one's personality by this recognition of its plurality, reflection of that of gods. From this stand, we may consider Pessoa's heteronymic creation as accounting for the survival of his Self, otherwise probably doomed to a sterile split personality. He would himself define it as made up of a 'string of bead-beings strung all together by a memory strand',³³ fictitious forms trying to perceive a fictitious reality, reflection of an inaccessible one. This essential unreality, that of both the world and our perception of it, contaminates identity itself, that does not exist outside the world of dream: 'I know not whom I dream myself...'.³⁴ The disunity of the Self can be considered as a reflection of the loss of original unity and the fall in multiplicity: 'Thus I imitate God, / Who when he made what is / Took from it infinity / And even unity'.³⁵ To be saved, the poet must be united to his primordial being: 'to be who I was, without knowing of it. / Thus everything reminds me my home being, / And, as it reminds me of him, what I am hurts me'.³⁶

An existential void pervades humanity, and the poet is a reflection of something else he is aware of, but cannot see: 'I feel I am no one except a shadow / Of a form I cannot

³² Fernando Pessoa, *Obra Poética e em Prosa*, vol.III, op.cit., pp.647-648.

³³ Fernando Pessoa, *Poems of Fernando Pessoa*, op.cit., p.96.

³⁴ Fernando Pessoa, *Poesias*, Lisboa, Atica, 1967, p.28.

³⁵ Fernando Pessoa, *Poesias Inéditas (1919-1930)*, Lisboa, Atica, 1963, p.170.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.112.

see but haunts me, / And I exist nowhere as cold darkness'.³⁷ To escape this void, Pessoa tried to follow the path of initiation, or we should rather say, the paths of different kinds of initiation. It would even be possible to find a symbolic link between the degrees of initiation and the heteronyms. Stepping from one heteronym to another would correspond to reaching a higher stage in Alchemy, for instance, in order to find the Philosopher's Stone, the Self... or Nothingness, 'this nothing that is everything', Supreme Consciousness, Being Itself. A number of his poems are marked by this kind of spiritual experience, as we may see in the following verses:

All of me is an abyss
Where a vague light,
Thanks to which I know it is me and that I meditate
full of uncertainty,
Obscurely leads me,
Mere interval between non-being and being.³⁸

This state between 'non-being and being' corresponds to certain states reached during initiatory experiences, aiming the reconstruction of the Temple, symbol of association of spiritual energies. The quest is finally but a journey into the centre of oneself, 'the quest of who we are, in the distance / Of ourselves'.³⁹ The soul that searches and the object of its quest are one and the same – the Prince and the sleeping Princess are but one being. Central to so many fairy tales, this allegory of initiation is familiar to us from our childhood. Indeed, totality demands the union of what Jung called *animus* and *anima*, the masculine and feminine principles. Consciousness looks for its lost unity, out of real time and space, thus approaching from plenitude. 'Searching one's true self, one finds gnosis of divinity', as

³⁷ Fernando Pessoa, *Poesias*, op.cit., p.84.

³⁸ Fernando Pessoa, *Poesia Mágica, Profética e Espiritual*, Lisboa, Lencastre, 1989, p.65.

³⁹ Fernando Pessoa, *Mensagem*, Lisboa, Atica, 1967, p.99.

Mead put it in a book called *Quests Old and New* which Pessoa possessed in his library.⁴⁰ What Mead says is in fact particularly relevant in Pessoa's case, for above all he searches his own truth, even before that of Universe. 'I myself am what I have lost...', he said once,⁴¹ and this quest of his unknown self was certainly for him a kind of initiatory quest of total knowledge, gnosis light, 'the deserved kisses of truth.'⁴² In this context, poetry served this aim, being considered by Pessoa as a way to reach a spiritual realm and to liberate his self, thus allowing the unity of the mind. Feeling certain his destiny was ruled by occult forces, Pessoa would consider spiritual progress and literary creation as tightly interwoven. Heteronymy could be a complementary way to achieve this gnosis and find his paradise lost, that is to say, his final unity.

Nevertheless, our long dialogue with his works gives us the inner conviction that his spiritual temple was never achieved, as he himself confesses:

Waves of the past, take me
To sea's oblivion !
Bequeath me to what I will not be,
For I surrounded with a scaffolding
My unbuilt house.⁴³

Prisoner of the walls he himself built, he regrets the absence of that spiritual light that he only succeeded to catch in his poetry. Losing himself in the labyrinth of his own self, from which he will never escape, he could not walk till the end of the Path towards Light. We would like to quote here the great sufi poet Faridoddin Attar (13th century), who wrote:

⁴⁰ G.R.S. Mead, *Quests Old and New*, [s.l.], 1913, p.200. The sentence quoted was underlined by Pessoa.

⁴¹ Fernando Pessoa, *Poesias*, op.cit., p.46.

⁴² Fernando Pessoa, *Mensagem*, op.cit., p.59.

⁴³ Fernando Pessoa, *Poesias*, op.cit., p.234.

What you looked for is in you. You are
yourself the obstacle between it and yourself.
Man rushes in the first place towards signs,
But as long as he has not found himself,
He will not find the Path.⁴⁴

Imagining his life instead of living it, imagining himself instead of being, Pessoa is clearly a neurasthenic personality, as he himself diagnoses:

The origin of my heteronyms lies in the profound streak of hysteria which is existent within me. I do not know if I am purely and simply hysterical; or if I am, in more accurate terms, a hysteroneurasthenic. I am more inclined towards this second hypothesis because phenomena of abulia exist within me which are not to be found on the list of the symptoms of hysteria itself.⁴⁵

Absence of desire, flight from the world, game of mirrors, Pessoa hides his melancholy behind his masks with which he tries to fill the void of his Self. His works are his life and they bear witness to a sincere spiritual quest, which took different forms, relying on multiple divine forms of revelation in order to reach Unity. Pessoa remains deeply convinced of man's tragic condition, while trying to find a sense to his life, or else, to his no-life. His esoteric quest was an element of cohesion of his thought and works, a thread we may follow in the labyrinth of his mental and poetic universe.⁴⁶ He always tried to find the centre through plurality, Nature and God(s) being plural before finally becoming One once again. As Jacques Derrida wrote, every structure 'must be thought as a series of replacements from centre to centre... The centre receives, successively and in

⁴⁴ Faridoddin Attar, *Le Livre de l'Épreuve*, Paris, Fayard, 1991, p.328.

⁴⁵ Fernando Pessoa, *A Galaxy of Poets*, London, 1985, p.17.

⁴⁶ See Ana Maria Binet, *L'Esotérisme dans l'Oeuvre de Fernando Pessoa*, (3 vol.), Université Michel de Montaigne-Bordeaux III, 1996.

a regulated manner, different forms or names'.⁴⁷ Thus, we may say the centre glides constantly, the structure he belongs to becoming more and more of a labyrinth – from an open structure moving to a closed one, where the centre cannot be found, its paths leading nowhere.

Talking about the group of modernist poets and artists to which he belonged as Alvaro de Campos, Pessoa wrote (in English, by the way): 'We are Portuguese writing for Europe, for all civilization; we are nothing as yet, but even what we are now doing will one day be universally known and recognised.'⁴⁸ His prediction is becoming reality, above all thanks to his genius. May Sydney become a landmark in this general recognition of his works, those of a man who took the risk of daring a Faustian attempt to rise above his human condition and penetrate that mysterious world that appealed to him from 'beyond God'.

⁴⁷ Jacques Derrida, *op.cit.*, p.410.

⁴⁸ Fernando Pessoa, *Páginas Intimas...*, *op.cit.*, p.119.