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ONOMASTICS AND THE PRISMATIC REALITY
IN THE POETRY OF FERNANDO PESSOA

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.¹ 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.² 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."³ 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, Álvaro 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 Adónis" ("I the Roses love in the Gardens of Adonis") we read:

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

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

Assim façamos nossa vida un dia,
 Inscientes, 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, 5
The little while we last.

For Richardo 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.⁶

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 calm 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:

A espantosa realidade das coisas
É a minha descoberta de todos os dias
Cada coisa é o que é.

The astonishing reality of things
is something I discover every day
Each thing is what it is.⁷

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 Álvaro 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

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 Édouard 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."¹⁰ 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 Caetano all my power of dramatic depersonalization, into Ricardo 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.¹¹

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

¹For an account of all these names, see Edwin Honig, ed., Selected poems by Fernando Pessoa, with an introduction by Octavio Paz (Chicago: Swallow Press, Inc., 1971), pp. 1-21.

²Peter Rickard, ed., Selected Poems by Fernando Pessoa (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), pp. 1-61.

Joao Gaspar Simoes and Luis de Montalvor, eds., Obras completas de Fernando Pessoa, I, 2nd. ed. (Lisboa: Ediçoes Atica, 1973), pp. 11-16.

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

³Peter Rickard, p. 22.

⁴Honig, p. 167.

⁵Ibid, pp. 44-45.

⁶Ibid, pp. 44-45.

⁷Rickard, p. 139.

⁸Joao Gaspar Simoes, ed., Obras completas de Fernando Pessoa, III, 5th ed. (Lisboa: Ediçoes Atica, 1974), p. 79.

⁹Rickard, pp. 98-99.

¹⁰Joao Gaspar Simoes, Obras completas de Fernando Pessoa, I, 2nd. ed. (Lisboa: Ediçoes Atica, 1973), pp. 11-16.

Édourd Roditi, "The several names of Fernando Pessoa," Poetry, 87 (October 1955-March 1956), 40.

¹¹Honig, p. 163.