

A POETIC SYSTEM IN EXPANSION AGAINST THE ABYSS:  
FERNANDO PESSOA'S HETERONYMS AND  
KIERKEGAARD'S CONCEPT OF ANXIETY

*Um sistema poético em expansão contra o  
abismo: os heterônimos de Fernando Pessoa  
e o conceito de ansiedade em Kierkegaard*

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**ABSTRACT**

After a short introduction on the reception of Kierkegaard's ideas in Portugal, the work focuses on the links between Fernando Pessoa's heteronomy and the reflection on anxiety by Kierkegaard. I will show in which sense Pessoa's *oeuvre* is – in its entirety – guided by an anxiety drive; which reflections of Kierkegaard are investigated by the Portuguese poet and which are the different strategies adopted by the three main heteronyms in order to cope with their anxiety. The link between the categories of anxiety and possibility is central in this respect. The hypothesis of God as an entity that conditions and gives shape to peculiar form and degrees of anxiety is also present and particularly troublesome, as it will be shown.

Key-words: *aesthetics of feelings; anxiety; Fernando Pessoa.*

**RESUMO**

Depois de uma breve introdução sobre a recepção das ideias de Kierkegaard em Portugal, o artigo indaga os pontos de

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contato entre os heterônimos de Fernando Pessoa e o conceito de “ansiedade” em Kierkegaard para defender o papel determinante da ansiedade na construção do sistema pessoano e a influência de Kierkegaard na obra de Fernando Pessoa. Além disso, ilumina como os heterônimos pessoanos encontram estratégias retóricas diferentes para enfrentar a ansiedade e o problema de Deus.

Palavras-chave: *estética dos sentimentos; ansiedade; Fernando Pessoa.*

The works of Søren Kierkegaard have never been regarded as a seminal reference for the establishment of modern Portuguese thought until the second half of the Twentieth Century. Kierkegaard never had the chance to be widely read, reflected and quoted in Portugal, as he did in France, where he notoriously became, *malgré lui*, a founder of the French Existentialist movement. Nevertheless, as a recent essay by Elisabete de Sousa underlines, the slow and winding road that brought the Danish thinker to the Portuguese intelligentsia was not the consequence of a predetermined act of censorship, nor his incompatibility with the local dominating philosophical systems. In fact, more pragmatic reasons intervened. In the first half of the Twentieth Century, Portuguese translations from less linguistically familiar European languages such as Danish totally depended on already existing translations in French, English, Spanish or Italian. This was an obvious reason for his late arrival and diffusion. Ideas often reached Portugal after already circulating through the rest of Europe; the ‘Kierkegaard case’ confirms this tendency. In 1911, the first translation of a work by Kierkegaard (*The Diary of the Seducer*) was edited by “Livraria Clássica”, a publishing house in Lisbon. The original title of the book was manipulated by its translator Mário Alemquer. In Portuguese this volume sounded like an up-to-date version of the classical *Ars Amandi* by Ovid: *O diário do sedutor: a arte de amar*. “Besides the Ovidian touch in the title, Alemquer also wrote a short introduction, portraying Kierkegaard as a kind of romantic novel hero, who tried helplessly to forget the love of his life by writing” (DE SOUSA, 2009, p. 1). Apart from this misguiding initial presentation of Kierkegaard, other factors, such as the unsystematic selection of his books for publication, and the recurrent translation of the same handful of titles, determined the pattern of “discontinuity and repetition” – as De Sousa put it – in the Portuguese reception of Kierkegaard. Nevertheless, it seems important to underline a contingent aspect: in 1911, Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa was working as a translator in the same publishing house that first edited Kirkegaard’s

book<sup>1</sup>. Although *The Concept of Anxiety* was only published in Portugal in 1936 (with the title *O desespero humano: doença até a morte*; literally “the human despair: sickness until death”), a year after Pessoa’s death, it is possible that the closeness to the “Livraria Clássica” might have made Pessoa familiar with other works by Kierkegaard. Moreover, Pessoa’s voracious curiosity about foreign cultures might have led him to read Kierkegaard in other languages. These hypothetical questions are not considered here. In fact, The “anxiety of influence” regarding Pessoa has been well established; Harold Bloom explained in his controversial *The Western Canon* (1994) Pessoa’s poetics through the lesson assimilated from Walt Whitman. To defend the absolute autonomy and originality of Pessoa’s thinking or, on the contrary, to support a derivative elaboration of forms and contents from Kierkegaard is not the object here.

The similarity in the treatment of the theme of “anxiety” – the topic of this analysis – in the works of Kierkegaard and Pessoa could in fact be viewed as merely accidental. What is relevant here is the study of a similar rhetorical device in order to give expression to the disquietude implicit in the relationship among man, divinity and the world, and in the gesture of making life choices, although inscribed in very different cultural landscapes: the Protestant Denmark of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the Catholic Portugal of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>. For this reason, the aim is to illuminate the treatment of a particular theoretical problem (the origin of people’s feelings in relation to their religion) and existential psychophysical condition (anxiety) inherent in (or maybe induced by) the culture of the inhabitants of diverse Christian spiritual domains. In both cases, the act of making or rejecting choices is regarded as a turning point in the determination of the individual in relation to the society in which he or she is a part. The consequences of this – both practical and symbolic – act or rejection give origin to the particular psychological differences among human beings.

The rhetorical (although not coincidental) device that Søren Kierkegaard and Fernando Pessoa adopted is the creation of different fictional authorial voices in their works. Out of respect to differences in terminology, we are obliged to differentiate between Kierkegaard’s “pseudonyms” and Pessoa’s “heteronyms”, although this distinction runs the risk of passively paying homage to Pessoa’s dramatized mythopoetics, more than to describe a substantial difference between the functions of these “voices” in their

<sup>1</sup> “Fernando Pessoa worked for Livraria Clássica, which had published the first Portuguese translation of ‘The Seducer’s Diary’, in its *Theosophy and Religion* series. From 1914 onwards, Pessoa translated six titles by exactly the same authors that Alemquer had translated before for the same series (namely Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater)” (DE SOUSA, 2009, p. 4).

respective works. In his famous letter dated 13 January 1935 addressed to critic Adolfo Casais Monteiro, Pessoa explained the heteronyms as the result of his “relentless, organic tendency to depersonalization and simulation”<sup>2</sup>. For Kierkegaard, the invention of pseudonyms followed the reading of Schleiermacher’s letters. There, Kierkegaard found a device that helped construct a rich and efficacious kaleidoscope of personalities and points of view. Following Kierkegaard’s statements, the pseudonyms are literary devices only. The difference is clearly shown, although the ontological or psychological “reality” of Pessoa’s heteronyms must not distract the readers’ attention from the analysis of the calibrated, literary, usage of them. In this essay, Pessoa’s heteronyms are considered as literary personifications of points of view that do not represent his ideologies but rather investigations of existential questions.

The biographical data of Kierkegaard and Pessoa show some superficial points of similarity: immense poetic and philosophical talents, prolific writing activity (much of which was appreciated only posthumously), lives lived in one place (Kierkegaard in Copenhagen; Pessoa in Lisbon); and total engagement with their creative work at the expense of successful intimate relationships. Álvaro Ribeiro, one of the early Portuguese translators of Kierkegaard, was the first to compare Kierkegaard and Pessoa, in his preface (1953) to “In Vino Veritas” (*O Banquete* in Portuguese). The use of literary *personae* was successively explored in essays by Eduardo Lourenço and, more recently, by Professor Luís de Oliveira e Silva<sup>3</sup>.

Eduardo Lourenço’s critical contributions are especially significant for their scrutiny of the origin of and the contradictions between Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms and Pessoa’s heteronyms. Kierkegaard and Pessoa “sont deux héros culturels pour lesquels la question da masque et du visage

<sup>2</sup> From the letter to Adolfo Casais Monteiro anthologized in *The Selected Prose of Fernando Pessoa*. All the quotes from Pessoa in this essay have been translated from the Portuguese into English by Richard Zenith. Pessoa adds: “Ever since I was a child, it has been my tendency to create around me a fictitious world, to surround myself with friends and acquaintances that never existed. (It can’t be sure, of course, if they really never existed, or if it’s me who doesn’t exist. In this matter, as in any other, we shouldn’t be dogmatic.) Ever since I’ve known myself as ‘me’, I can remember envisioning the shape, motions, character and life story of various unreal figures who were as visible and as close to me as the manifestations of what we call, perhaps too hastily, real life. This tendency, which goes back as far as I can remember being an I, has always accompanied me, changing somewhat the music it enchants me with, but never the way in which it enchants me” (PESSOA, 2001, p. 254).

<sup>3</sup> Professor Eduardo Lourenço wrote the fundamental study of the works of Kierkegaard in his miscellany book *Heterodoxia* (“Søren Kierkegaard, Espião de Deus”) and divulged the Existentialist thought in Portugal with many other studies. The articles dedicated to the confrontation between Kierkegaard and Pessoa are “Kierkegaard and Pessoa ou a Comunicação indirecta” (1954-6) and “Kierkegaard e Pessoa ou as Máscaras do Absoluto” (1981).

a été l'unique question" (LOURENÇO, 1997, p.71). The question of the mask is, for Lourenço, a rhetorically efficacious way to present different visions of life leaving any qualitative evaluation open to the readers' judgment. A justification for sorrow and the search for meaning in the personal behavior of the individual are implicit in Kierkegaard's operation. Pessoa uses his masks as a tool for testifying to a fracture in the relationship between the subject and a community of men who have lost faith in God. Their gestures seem to be, respectively, of construction and destruction: while Kierkegaard focuses on the existential, factual assumptions of being a Christian, Pessoa offers a dramatized performance of the dissolution of the "I" as a consequence of the death of God. Although their respective visions and aims are divergent, Kierkegaard and Pessoa are, according to Lourenço, linked by a shared emphasis on the experience of the individual who is confronted with the philosophical and practical questions of existence, including his/her relationship with God, the moral behavior of society and the question of time.

The specific and multifaceted aspects of "anxiety" in the poetic work of Fernando Pessoa are not at the core of Eduardo Lourenço's analysis. Nor is the anxiety of influence detected by Harold Bloom<sup>4</sup>, but rather the (maybe unintentional) echoes of Kierkegaard's theory of anxiety, as expressed in *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844). In the following, we will investigate in which sense Pessoa's *oeuvre* is – in its entirety – guided by an anxiety drive: which reflections of Kierkegaard are investigated by the Portuguese poet and which are distinct strategies adopted by the three main heteronyms in order to cope with their anxiety. The link between the categories of anxiety and possibility is central in this respect. The hypothesis of God as an entity that conditions and gives shape to peculiar form and degrees of anxiety is also present and particularly troublesome.

"Born in a sinful world, the individual becomes anxious about the possibility of sin, and this anxiety, rather than any innate concupiscence, is what results in sin" (KIERKEGAARD, 1980, p.16). Anxiety is for Kierkegaard the incommunicable private experience of the singular individual. While not felt with universal intensity, anxiety dominates the life of human beings who have spirit and intelligence. Although sin is unavoidable, the acceptance of anxiety as a shadow to human choices is a sign of under-

<sup>4</sup> Harold Bloom dedicated a part of his *The Western Canon* to the anxiety of Pessoa in relation with the poetic works of Walt Whitman. Eduardo Lourenço recognized as well the seminal importance of Whitman for Fernando Pessoa: "[...] the entirety of Pessoa's heteronymic architecture arose from his encounter with the poetry of Walt Whitman [...] Caeiro inherited the familiar, calm descriptive enunciation and Campos the apostrophe, the interjection, the epic and provocative vulgarity" (LOURENÇO, 2002, p. 55 and 71).

standing human existence. Pessoa's poetic creation is completely immersed in this atmosphere of uncertainty and individuality. Regulating anxiety is what organizes Pessoa's system of heteronyms. God makes an appearance at this point: he is the antagonist whom each heteronym defies, tries to annihilate or ignore.

It is important to underline that the "subjective anxiety" illustrated by Kierkegaard, dictates the genealogy of Pessoa's heteronyms. His entire system of characters is the response to the author's incapacity to make definitive choices. Pessoa's system is a universe in constant expansion: apart from the three main heteronyms (Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis and Álvaro de Campos), Pessoa invented tens of other fictional authorial voices. As it is widely known, the majority of these voices have yet to be deciphered, given the fact that Pessoa published so few poems while living. Pessoa avoided uniformity of style and vision in his poetry, choosing instead to embrace a multiplicity of points of view. This system in expansion permits Pessoa to perform numerous declinations of the human. Possibility is never overcome. The dialectics between the "out there" (many visions, choices and consequences) and the moment of selection is not meant to produce rest. The saturation of meanings and ideologies produces an *impasse* derived from the absence of an absolute authority, a ruling voice of sorts. Here anxiety is contained in a system where, ideally, all the possibilities are contemplated, discussed and debated but ultimately left unresolved. The only divine gesture that can be found in this overpopulated creation is Pessoa himself, suggesting that the writer occupies the role of God in this parallel world.

The predominance of disquietude, originated by the landscape of possibilities that unfold before its subjects, is reflected in the microcosms of each heteronym. None of them escape anxiety: in the ideological fortress they inhabit, antagonistic thoughts pervade their discourse and subvert it: anxiety follows the repressed. Among these voices, there is a young poet recognized as the "master": his name is Alberto Caeiro. The construction of his identity is guided by Pessoa's will to give shape to a stage of innocence. In fact, Caeiro argues in his poetry that he rejects any metaphysical thought and even the act of thinking itself. For him, "[...] to think is to not understand./ The world wasn't made for us to think about it/ (To think is to have eyes that aren't well)"/ (PESSOA, 2006, p. 11). To avoid thinking is evidently a strategy to avoid choosing. Respected by Ricardo Reis and Álvaro de Campos, Caeiro plays a paramount role in the economy of Pessoa's system. He is the first, the master, the innocent. His longing for ignorance defends the existence of a *continuum* between nature and human beings. It also imagines a primal stage of human development. Innocence and ignorance comprise a mythical

stage of pre-anxiety<sup>5</sup>, a stage absent of original sin. Caieiro's act deliberately diminishes the role of critical thinking. Where there is no thought, there is not anxiety, no choice<sup>6</sup>, no sin from which to fall. By highlighting the absence of thought, individuals are stripped of any psychological dimension. As Kierkegaard describes: in the natural state, "there is peace and repose, but there is simultaneously something else that is not contention and strife, for there is indeed nothing against which to strive. What, then, is it? Nothing. But what effect does nothing have? It begets anxiety" (KIERKEGAARD, 1980, p. 41). Similarly, in the paradoxically artificial universe that Caieiro inhabits, there are disruptive elements. In fact, the frequency with which he asserts and explains his absence of thoughts is obsessive and consumes as much time as the elaboration of entire philosophical theories. Anxiety emerges from numerous passages: the prescriptive "Let's be simple and calm/ Like the trees and streams [...]" occurs after the metaphysical *incipit* "To think about God is to disobey God,/ Since God wanted us not to know him,/ Which is why he didn't reveal himself to us..." (PESSOA, 2006, p. 15). The perennial contradictions in Caieiro's discourse reveal the presence of a subterranean anxiety in relation to his position in the universe and to a non-existent God, constantly evoked ("And if God should ask: 'And what did you see in things?'/ I'll answer: 'Just the things themselves. That's all you put/there./And God, who after all is savvy, will make me into a new kind/ of saint", p. 57). The possibility of choice is avoided, performing a false negation of anxiety's symptoms, already recognized as potentially implosive inside him. In his denial, Caieiro offers a luminous personification of Kierkegaard's definition of anxiety: "a sympathetic antipathy and antipathetic sympathy" (p. 42). Thought, metaphysics and God are all enemies of Caieiros and objects of investigation and desire.

<sup>5</sup> In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard arguments: "Innocence is ignorance. In innocence, man is not qualified as spirit but is psychically qualified in immediate unity with his natural condition. The spirit in man is dreaming. This view is in full accord with that of the Bible, which by denying that man in his innocence has knowledge of the difference between good and evil denounces all the phantasmagoria of Catholic meritoriousness" (KIERKEGAARD, 1980, p. 41).

<sup>6</sup> The negation of choice is strongly affirmed by Caieiro in this poem: "Beyond the bend in the road/ There may be a well, and there may be a castle./ And there may be just more road./ I don't know and don't ask./ As long as I'm on the road that's before the bend/ I look only at the road that's before the bend./ Because the road before the bend is all I can see./ It would do me no good to look anywhere else/ Or at what I can't see./ Let's pay attention only to where we are./ There's enough beauty in being here and not somewhere else./ If there are people beyond the bend in the road./ Let them worry about what's beyond the bend in the road./ That, for them, is the road./ If we're to arrive there, when we arrive there we'll know./ For now we know only that we're not there./ Here there's just the road before the bend, and before the bend/ There's the road without any bend" (PESSOA, 2006, p. 55).

Álvaro de Campos and Ricardo Reis are disciples of Alberto Caeiro, although their respective poetics are divergent, even opposite, to those of their master. Pessoa's literary trinity reflects three different styles of copying with the pressure created by the plurality of responses to the problem of anxiety and religion. Whereas Caeiro fights against anxiety through denial of his human faculties, Álvaro de Campos immerses himself completely in accepting the multiplicity of choices offered by reality. In fact, he writes in a style similar to the Futurist Italian poets: fast, overcrowded with images, noisy in its display of onomatopoeias. The multiple is embraced, albeit in an expressed state of mental disorder. As a result, Álvaro de Campos is overwhelmed, drowning in the stream of rhythms and imagery. Dizziness is his condition. ("Now/ Every morning I wake up/ Dizzy.../ Yes, literally dizzy.../ Unsure of my own name,/ Unsure of where I am,/ Unsure of what I've been,/ Unsure of everything" p. 260). In this feverish state, it is not possible to distinguish a path to follow, not to even make clear decisions ("By the painful light of the factory's huge electric lamps/ I write in fever./ I write gnashing my teeth, rabid for the beauty of all this,/ For this beauty completely unknown to the ancients", p. 153). His relationship with God is nothing short of an appeal for help ("May God/ Change my life or else snuff it out... What I really want is faith and peace/ And to get these sensations under control./ Put an end to this, God! Open the floodgates!/ Enough of this comedy in my soul!", p. 152) or a blasphemous forwardness ("Even if God tries to stop us, let's go forward...It doesn't/ matter.../Let's go forward [...]", p. 201) where the aim is the annihilation of any decision or direction ("[...] Forward, to no place at all.../ Infinity! The Universe! Goal with no goal! What does it/ matter?/ Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!/ Right now, yes, let's go, straight ahead, boom!", p. 201). Álvaro de Campos creates his own strategies to postpone the moment of a choice and to confound imminent anxiety and doubt. Nevertheless, sometimes he is overcome by a sudden "absurd desire for the two parallels of God and life to/ meet" (p. 208). These moments of interference complicate the disorganized mental world of Álvaro de Campos: paradoxically, a precise, ordered, metaphysical thought introduces the elements of the unexpected and disruptive in his programmatically chaotic life.

Fernando Pessoa illuminates a third way to escape the emergence of multiplicity (and choice) in the lives of his heteronyms. Ricardo Reis is presented as a microcosm of complete independence. Pessoa describes him as somebody who "lives in himself, with his pagan faith and his Epicureanism, but one of his attitudes is precisely not to hurt anyone. He cares absolutely nothing for others, not even enough to be interested in their suffering or in their existence. He is moral because he is self-sufficient." (PESSOA, 2001, p. 55). Reis' strategies avoid the menacing multiplicity of the real and, in



particular, the possibility of illness and death in the uncorrupted equilibrium of his life. Pessoa chooses Ricardo Reis, –paradoxically and perversely a pagan believer–to reduce the relevance of Christianity in the lives of men. Reis supports the idea that “[. . .] Christ is one more god./ One that was perhaps missing [. . .]” (PESSOA, 2006, p. 86), “Not you, Christ, do I hate or reject./ In you as in the other, older gods I believe./ But for me you are not more/ Or less than they, just younger./ I do hate and calmly abhor those who want/ To place you above the other gods, your equals” (p. 101). The *reductio ad unum* of the pagan and the Christian pantheon is coherent with the implicit ideology inherent in the use of the classical metrical form by Ricardo Reis: the Horatian ode. To freeze the real following a strict classical paradigm is one of the strategies adopted by Reis in order to avoid the confrontation with the moment of the personal choice. The anachronistic form of the ode and the appropriation of an ideological motif (*carpe diem*), seem to delimit the boundaries of Reis’ world: “let’s enjoy/ this moment” (PESSOA, 2006, p. 87). Another strategy of avoidance is the presence of Fate, a seemingly omnipotent principle: “Each man fulfills the destiny he must fulfill/ And desires the destiny he desires;/ He neither fulfills what he desires/ Nor desires what he fulfills./ Like stones that border flower beds/ We are arranged by fate, and there remain, Our lot having placed us/ Where we had to be placed” (p. 106). In Ricardo Reis’ vision, thinking of options and choices is vain: “So let us learn, /Wisely unworried,/Not how to live life/ But to let it go by [...] (p. 84); “Taking action/ Serves no purpose./ No one can resist/ The atrocious god/ Who always devours/ His own children” (p.85). Nevertheless, exactly as it happens in Alberto Caeiro and Álvaro de Campos, what is avoided (the choice, the practical action) and what scares (sickness, death, God’s judgment) surreptitiously breaks into Reis’ sterile microcosm and consciousness (“Let us make our lives one day,/ Consciously forgetting there’s night, Lydia,/ Before and after/ The little we endure”, p. 83).

The system of Pessoa’s heteronyms and the inner dialectics of opposing points of view represented in the poetic texts of his fictional voices explore the same problems Kierkegaard exposed in his theory of anxiety: anxiety, possibility, choice and sin. Confronting the menacing moment of choosing a single path (and renouncing all others), Pessoa theoretically responds by choosing everything (as is illuminated in his overcrowded system). He avoids compromise with any single vision or style. On the contrary, his heteronyms operate in tandem as “poetics-shelters” (Caeiro’s innocence, Campos’ furor and Reis’ rules) to annihilate the moment of choice-making. Still, anxiety threatens to dismantle their projects through doubts, fears, contradictions and the sudden inclusion of other perspectives. As in

Kierkegaard, the iconic image of the abyss<sup>7</sup> emerges in Ricardo Reis' words, cautioning that unpredictable consequences await the individual who faces the threshold of a choice.

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Submetido em 28/07/2010

Aceito em 03/02/2011

<sup>7</sup> Ricardo Reis: "Don't plot your destiny, for you are not future./ Between the cup you empty and the same cup/ Refilled, who knows whether your fortune/ Won't interpose the abyss?" (PESSOA, 2006, p. 114).