

The astonishing materiality of things: On a new translation of the works of Alberto Caeiro

[A espantosa materialidade das coisas:
Sobre uma nova tradução das obras de Alberto Caeiro]

Adam Mahler*

PESSOA, Fernando (2021). *The Complete Works of Alberto Caeiro*. Edited by Jerónimo Pizarro and Patricio Ferrari. Translated by Margaret Jull Costa and Patricio Ferrari. New York: New Directions, 2020, 217 pp. [ISBN: 9780811227803]



“Nothing can give an adequate idea of the originality of the work except total quotation of it” (p. 207) writes Fernando Pessoa, in English, of his heteronym Alberto Caeiro’s masterpiece, *O Guardador de Rebanhos* [*The Keeper of Sheep*]. For decades these lines—part of a promotional blitz Pessoa had planned to execute on Caeiro’s behalf across Europe—went unheeded, at least in the Anglophone world, where with few exceptions Caeiro has had to share the stage with the other cast members of Pessoa’s *drama em gente*. As a result, Caeiro’s poems, usually appearing in anthologies that compile, in English translation, the selected works of the three major heteronyms, won only partial exposure in the Anglophone world. Now, with the release of New Directions’

The Complete Works of Alberto Caeiro—which features lucid translations of all of Caeiro’s poetic texts alongside selected facsimiles, prose excerpts about Caeiro penned by Pessoa and his heteronyms, as well as a penetrating introduction—Pessoa has gotten his wish: a major bilingual edition that offers a panoptical overview of his master heteronym, that champion of unobstructed vision.

Based on the 2016 Tinta-da-china critical edition prepared by Pizarro and Ferrari, the volume opens with a wide-lens shot: the prefatory note by Margaret Jull Costa compellingly distills Pessoa’s biography and variform poetic project in the space of three pages. In their introduction Pizarro and Ferrari situate Caeiro’s poetic production among Pessoa’s works; the study places a unique emphasis on Pessoa’s life as a student of English literature, and as an incorrigible corrector of never-issued poems. This dual focus is particularly relevant for readers who seek better to understand Caeiro and Pessoa’s long dormancy on the world stage: their poetics,

* Adam Mahler is a Ph.D. student in Romance Languages and Literatures at Harvard University

fusing Anglophone as well as Lusophone metrics and conceits, befuddled many of his early Portuguese critics, and the arcane, belabored publishing history of Pessoa's poetry and prose meant it would take decades for his readership to reach its current dimension. But it was not for lack of trying that Pessoa and Caetano initially failed to attract a large following. As Pizarro and Ferrari explain, in one of several striking parallels with Walt Whitman, Pessoa prepared a number of "self-reviews" under his own name, as well as interviews and prefaces drafted by his fictitious authors, in an attempt to promote Caetano's peculiar brand of materialism in European belletristic circles. A relatively unexplored nook of the Pessoaan house, these self-reviews illustrate the heteronymic machine at its best and most baffling. The introduction and critical interventions throughout the edition are characterized by these sorts of affecting, succinct explanations of the Pessoaan project, including a significant aside on the perennial question of Pessoaan poetic sincerity. Caetano, the face of Pessoaan poetic spontaneity, is for both scholars among the most rehearsed heteronyms: "[O]riginal manuscripts can gainsay an author or a fictitious author... [Pessoa-Caetano's] notebook is full of changes and confirms the fact that spontaneity requires a lot of work" (p. xix). The pair's decision to frame Pessoa-Caetano's output explicitly in terms of negative capacity and the willing suspension of disbelief will generate interesting conversation about Pessoa's Romantic inheritance as well as the complex ethics of writing literary criticism about fictive persons. Following the introduction is the text of Caetano's complete poems, with Portuguese and English versions *en face*. Notably—all the more so when one considers the expediciencies of publishing translations in the States—Pizarro and Ferrari have chosen to preserve the original and fittingly heterogenous Portuguese orthography of Pessoa's autograph manuscripts. *The Keeper of Sheep* opens the section, followed by (what Pessoa considered) the less powerful poems of *The Shephard in Love*, and Caetano's uncollected poems, among which are found such treasures as "The astonishing reality of things" ["A espantosa realidade das coisas"], as well as a number of lesser known compositions. The final section of the book, "Prose Works," consists of interviews, promotional texts, prefaces, and, perhaps most interestingly, the critical commentary of an unusual heteronymic quartet: Ricardo Reis, Álvaro de Campos, Antonio Mora, and I. I. Crosse. Though Caetano gets top billing, Pizarro and Ferrari have seized on the opportunity to present the Pessoaan universe in miniature: heteronyms sparring with, as well as commending, each other and their creator, in a little over thirty pages. A poet like Caetano—a poet who thrills while observing from his hilltop perch "as much of the earth as can be seen from the universe" ("quanto da terra se pode vêr do universo", pp. 23-24)—stands especially to benefit from an edition that offers new intellectual vantages.

Costa and Ferrari's quietly accomplished translation—which received an honorable mention for the MLA's Louis Roth Award for Translation of a Literary Work—departs from the original only in subtlest of ways, and only when strictly

necessary at that. The duo perfectly captures the austere concretion which sets Caeiro's highly philosophical body of poetry apart. Take, for instance, the celebrated opening stanza of "The astonishing reality of things" (p. 129):

A espantosa realidade das coisas
 É a minha descoberta de todos os dias.
 Cada coisa é o que é,
 E é difícil explicar a alguém quanto isso me alegra,
 E quanto isso me basta.

The astonishing reality of things
 Is my daily discovery.
 Each thing is what it is,
 And it's hard to explain to someone else how much joy this gives me,
 And how much that joy suffices me.

Before even considering the translation: the decision to preserve Pessoa's early 20th-century orthography pays surprising dividends. The geminate—i.e., Latinate—spelling of *diffícil* underscores the solidity and constancy of Caeiro's sensations, while gesturing graphically towards the Greco-Roman paganism that resonated with both Caeiro and his disciple Reis. The unpointed *alguem*, on the other hand, signals Caeiro's poetics of minimal intervention. With the compaction of the adverbial *todos os dias* into the adjective *daily* and the clever repetition of *joy* (in both cases a stand-in for *isso*), Costa and Ferrari succeed in recreating Caeiro's poetic idiom: vitally material, self-sufficient, sensorily engaged. The cited example is but one of many felicitous moments in the pair's translation; their simple, yet non-obvious solutions, when compounded, transmit Caeiro's complete works with utter clarity.

Thanks to Pizarro, Ferrari, and Costa's efforts, English readers may glimpse Alberto Caeiro as never before: fully contextualized, in his poetic and Pessoaan specificity. And the team's commitment to recreating and explicating the materiality of Caeiro's and the larger Pessoaan project could not be more timely. Some of the most innovative readings of Pessoa to emerge in the last few years have approached his sprawling output from vitalist and new materialist perspectives.¹ The acoustic and graphic heft of Pessoa's language; the numerous variants scrawled in the margins; the many occasions on which heteronyms would manifest and interact as though fully fledged, fleshly actors—all of it is proudly on display in this portable

¹ For an overview for the surprising affinities between Pessoa and the premier materialist thinkers, see Adam Morris' "Fernando Pessoa's Heteronymic Machine" in *Luso-Brazilian Review*, vol. 51, no. 2 (2014), pp. 126-149 and Bartholomew Ryan's "A Voyage in Immanence: Alberto Caeiro as an Expression of Spinoza's Ethics," pp. 153-177, in *Literature and The Encounter with Immanence*, edited by Brynnar Swenson, Brill-Rodopi, 2017. For a comprehensive account of the intertextual conversations and readerly marginalia that shaped Caeiro's works, see also Patricio Ferrari's "On the Margins of Fernando Pessoa's Private Library" in *Luso-Brazilian Review*, vol. 48, no. 2 (2011), pp. 23-71.

volume of Caeiro's poetry, richly illuminated with facsimiles, cogently framed, and elegantly rendered in English. In much the same way that Caeiro guided his creator over the vast, unexplored terrain of his imagination, *The Complete Poems of Alberto Caeiro* will help an international readership chart new paths through the seldom trodden territory of Portuguese poetry.

ADAM MAHLER is a doctoral student in Harvard's Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, specializing in the poetics of medieval Portugal and Spain. The recipient of a Fulbright research grant, he has written on Luso-Brazilian literature for *Caesura*, *Poetry International*, *Pessoa Plural*, and, in Portuguese, for *Colóquio/Letras*, Portugal's premier literary review. For his essay on literary unexemplarity in Dom Duarte's *Leal conselheiro*, he received *La corónica's* 2021 Nancy F. Marino Prize for best essay in Hispanomedieval Studies. For his translation-in-progress, a volume of minority-language poetry from Spain, he was awarded a PEN/Heim 2022 Translation Fund Grant. His first book of translations, Camilo Pessanha's *Clepsydra and Other Poems*, is forthcoming with Tagus Press at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth.

ADAM MAHLER frequenta o doutoramento em línguas e literaturas românicas na Universidade de Harvard. Especialista em literaturas castelhana e portuguesa medievais, recebeu uma bolsa de investigação da Fundação Fulbright. Os seus ensaios sobre a literatura luso-brasileira já foram publicados em *Caesura*, *Poetry International*, *Pessoa Plural*, e *Colóquio/Letras*. Em 2021, pelo seu ensaio sobre o sujeito não-exemplar do *Leal conselheiro*, de Dom Duarte, recebeu o prémio Nancy F. Marino, concedido pela revista *La corónica*. Também recebeu uma bolsa da Fundação PEN/Heim, pela sua tradução de obras poéticas redigidas nas línguas minoritárias de Espanha. É, ainda, tradutor de *Clepsydra and Other Poems*, de Camilo Pessanha, sendo que o livro irá ser publicado pela Tagus Press na Universidade de Massachusetts-Dartmouth.