Conversations with Myself

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THE BOOK OF DISQUIET
by Fernando Pessoa, translated by Margaret Jull Costa.
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In 1968, when not too many people outside Portugal had heard of Fernando Pessoa, now regarded as one of the great Modernist poets, the linguist Roman Jakobson, in collaboration with Luciana Stegagno-Picchio, wrote an essay centring on Pessoa's use of oxymorons. The piece was a complex formal study of a poem from *Mensagem* (1934), the single volume of verse Pessoa published in Portuguese in his lifetime. The complete poem, 'Ulisses', an elaboration in Pessoa's best cryptic style of a myth that associates Ulysses with the founding of Lisbon, reads as follows (my translation, to borrow Jakobson's expression for his own into French, is 'literal in so far as possible'):

The myth is the nothing that is everything.
The sun itself that opens the skies
Is a brilliant and silent myth –
The dead body of God,
Alive and naked.

This man, who landed here,
Was because he didn't exist.
Without existing he was enough for us
Because he didn't come he came
And created us.

Thus the legend fades
As it enters reality,
And in animating it trickles away.
Down below, life, that is half
Of nothing, dies.

O mito é o nada que é tudo.
O mesmo sol que abre os céus
É um mito brilhante e mudo –
O corpo morto de Deus,
Vivo e desnudo.

Este, que aqui aportou,
Foi por não ser existindo.
Sem existir nos bastou.
Por não ter vindo foi vindo
E nos criou.

Assim a lenda se escorre
A entrar na realidade,
E a fecundá-la decorre.
Em baixo, a vida, metade
De nada, morre.

We see the oxymorons immediately – nothing is everything, a dead body is alive, being has no existence, non-arrival is arrival, there can be half of nothing, life dies – and Jakobson shows in detail how they play out. I want to take them a step further, though, and suggest that for Pessoa they are just a beginning, one way of troubling language's comfort, of indicating what we might call the truth of nonsense, or the importance of the impossible. *The Book of Disquiet*, for example, which is not a poem or a riddle, is full of them: 'Everything wearies me, even those things that don't'; 'Not even here, where we were happy, were we happy'; 'this immortal but dying evening'. At one point the author – Pessoa and/or his literary representative, we'll come back to this partnership – highlights the 'two principles' on which his 'stylistic system' rests. First, he will match his language to his feelings, be clear when things seem clear, obscure when they seem obscure, and confused when they seem confused; and second, he will 'understand that grammar is a tool not a law'. 'An ordinary person' might say of a boyish-looking girl that she 'looks like a boy'. Another, using an oxymoron, might say, 'That girl is a boy,' but Pessoa prefers a genuine violation of the agreement between noun and pronoun: 'She's a boy.' In a more intricate move he decides he might want to use 'exist' as a transitive verb. Self-creation could be worded as 'I exist me,' and Pessoa claims that the phrase will have 'expressed a whole philosophy in three small words'.

Needless to say, he doesn't write like this, and he is never obscure or confused. But he is very lucid about the discreet war we need to wage with logic if we want to approach the actual tangles of the self and the world. The multiplied self is not an oxymoron or a grammatical problem, but it is hard to talk about. Anticipating Woody Allen's joke about how many people inhabit our psyches, Pessoa writes: 'Each one of us is two, and whenever two people meet, get close or join forces, it's rare for those four to agree.' But quite apart from making the ordinary shifts of consciousness we all know – those moments when we start to address ourselves as 'you' – Pessoa acted out self-difference with actual names. The scholars Jerónimo Pizarro and Patricio Ferrari list 136 heteronyms for him. A heteronym, for Pessoa, was a pseudonym that went beyond pseudo, it signalled the work of 'an author writing outside his own personality . . . the work of a complete individuality made up by him, just as the utterances of some character in a drama of his would be'. Pessoa said this in an anonymous article; and we note that whatever the names, and whatever 'outside' may mean, there's only one person doing the writing. Not the death of the author then, but as Adam Phillips shrewdly said in these pages (17 July 1997), we do see a writer who was 'acutely aware of how the author got in the way of the writing'.

Fernando Pessoa was born in Lisbon in 1888 and died there in 1935. He spent much of his childhood in South Africa, returning to Portugal when he was 17. He worked on *The Book of Disquiet* for large patches of his life, leaving two trunks full of drafts carefully written but not definitively collated or sifted. The earliest passages are dated 1913, the latest 1934. A version of the book appeared in Portuguese in 1982, and was at that point attributed to Bernardo Soares, an assistant bookkeeper working for a fabric firm in Lisbon. The name is a pseudonym rather than a heteronym, because although he is not exactly Pessoa – the name is not a transparent mask – he does write in a style which is, Pessoa says, 'for good or ill, my own'. 'In prose,' he adds, 'it's hard to *other* oneself.' Pessoa's best-known heteronyms are all poets, one of whom, Alberto Caeiro, he described as his 'master'. The effect of all this, as Pessoa well knew, is to turn his own legal name into a fiction. If we could express our surprise to him, he would no doubt ask us what else we thought a name, or indeed a personality, was. There is an engaging moment in *The Book of Disquiet* where Soares quotes Caeiro and identifies strongly with a particular line: 'Because I am the size of what I see.' A fiction strengthens itself through another fiction, which declares a creative relativism. Caeiro is not denying his own size, or the smallness of the rural world he likes to celebrate; only claiming that small worlds help us to imagine large spaces.

This first version of *The Book of Disquiet* was translated into English four times in one year: in 1991, by Margaret Jull Costa, Alfred MacAdam, Ian Watson and Richard Zenith. The last of these texts started out as *The Book of Disquietude*, but the longer word was soon dropped. As Jull Costa says, *desassossego* can be rendered as 'unease/disquiet/unrest/turmoil/anxiety'. The prefix 'desas' means what 'dis' means in most Latin-derived languages, and *sossego*, meaning 'calm', is remotely related to 'sedere' and our word 'session'. It is a book about not being able to sit, supposedly written by someone who, apart from his occasional walks around town, does nothing else.

Every passage in the new version, based on Jull Costa's earlier translation with new material from Pizarro's 2013 Portuguese edition, is identified by its date. Most of the early dates have question-marks, as do quite a few of the later ones, so we can no doubt look forward to many exchanges of scholarly fantasies about where to place which bit of text. There is a lot more material here, and above all there is an additional author, also a bookkeeper, also the inhabitant of a fourth-floor Lisbon flat, but a little more strenuously romantic about his non-project. 'I am the great defeat of the final army that sustained the final empire,' he writes. 'I taste of the fall of some ancient master civilisation.' *Excusez du peu*, as they used to say. He is called Vicente Guedes. He wrote the drafts from 1913 to 1920; those of Soares are from 1929 to 1934.

It might be hard to distinguish Guedes from Soares in the flesh, if either had flesh, and it's not unreasonable to think they both look like Pessoa. Guedes is 'a man in his thirties, thin, fairly tall, very hunched when sitting though less so when standing, and dressed with a not entirely unselfconscious negligence'. Soares describes himself as he appears in an office photograph: 'I look like a rather dull Jesuit. My thin, inexpressive face betrays no intelligence, no intensity, nothing whatever to make it stand out from the stagnant tide of the other faces.' No, there is a difference, and it's the same as the one we find in the writing. Guedes is working at being no one, Soares has already got into the habit.

'This book is the autobiography of someone who never existed,' a third-person prefatorial passage asserts, a more complicated remark than it seems, since the sentence

means not only that the author as presented is fictional but that the supposedly real person behind the text didn't have much of a life – he was a sort of reverse Ulysses, failing to be although he did actually exist.

Both Guedes and Soares pause quite often to tell us what they are doing. The first says: 'This book is a single state of soul, analysed from every angle, traversed in every possible direction.' The second asserts: 'These are my Confessions and if I say nothing in them it's because I have nothing to say.' Are they telling *us* anything? Surely these are 'conversations with myself', as Soares says. Or as Guedes more wittily puts it, 'Only business letters are *addressed* to someone.' But then the wit itself gives the game away. There are plenty of writers without actual readers, there are no performers without imaginary audiences. And both of Pessoa's autobiographers situate themselves very precisely within their own history, telling themselves what only other persons would need to be told.

'I belong to a generation,' Guedes says,

> or rather to part of a generation, that has lost all respect for the past and all belief or hope in the future . . . We are convalescing . . . The truth is . . . that the things we love most, or think we love, only have their full value when we merely dream them . . . We would be anarchists had we been born into the classes that describe themselves as underprivileged, or into any other of the classes from which one can fall or rise . . . Those of us who are not pederasts wish we had the courage to be so . . . Bereft of illusions, we live on dreams, which are the illusions of those who cannot have illusions.

Soares says: 'I was born at a time when most young people had lost their belief in God for much the same reason that their elders had kept theirs – without knowing why.' They believed in science, Soares says, because they saw it as a form of fate, and 'like feeble athletes abandoning their training, we gave up the struggle and, with all the scrupulous attention of genuine erudition, we concentrated instead on the book of sensation.'

There are echoes of Baudelaire and Wilde here, parallels with figures to be found in the work of Eliot and Virginia Woolf. And throughout the book, early, middle and late, there are grand posturings about the horrible necessity of having to do something, or anything. 'Living seems to me a metaphysical mistake on the part of matter, an oversight on the part of inaction.' This tone is more Symbolist than Modernist perhaps, and Soares himself speaks of Decadence. I'm thinking of the great line in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Axël*: 'As for living, our servants will do that for us.' Guedes and Soares often seem to be saying something like, 'As for living, we can pretend we don't have to do it.' Or more fearfully: 'Above all, let's not become indistinguishable from our servants.' Soares does write of 'the suffocating quality of the ordinary'.

THESE lofty, wilting claims are repeatedly qualified by the intimate movements of the prose of the book, its sly consciousness of its own posturing. Guedes accuses himself of asking too much of the impossible: 'If only I knew how not to act and how not to abdicate from action either.' 'Tedium itself grows old,' he says, 'and does not fully dare to be the anxiety that it is.' This sounds pretty desperate, but is he perhaps cultivating his distress? He plays with his sensations, he remarks, 'much as a bored princess plays with her large, quick, cruel cats'. Bookkeeping may be a long way from royalty, but those brilliant adjectives are also a long way from bookkeeping. The following line is a wonderful giveaway: 'I sometimes think that I enjoy suffering. But the truth is I would prefer something else.'

Soares doesn't reveal himself quite so much, but he has a stronger analytic sense of his own condition, which in many cases is ours as well. 'We are all accustomed to think of ourselves as essentially mental realities and of others as merely physical realities.' 'I am more like myself than I would care to think.' 'After us the deluge, but only after all of us.' The idea of knowledge haunts him. A 'sudden notion of the true nature' of his being 'weighs on [him] as if it were a sentence not to death but to knowledge'. This sentence would then itself be a terminal miscarriage of justice. 'To know oneself is to err . . . . And to consciously unknow oneself is the active task of irony.' Even writing is no way to deal with 'the dissatisfaction of the bourgeois I am not and the sadness of the poet I can never be'.

Or so he says. There are moments in his prose that approach the poetry of his nonnamesake Pessoa and other heteronyms. Like this one:

> Where did I find the strength in my solitary soul to write page after lonely page, to live out syllable by syllable the false magic not of what I was writing but of what I imagined I was writing? What spell of ironic witchery led me to believe myself the poet of my own prose, in the winged moment in which it was born in me, faster than my pen could write, like a sly revenge on life's insults! And rereading it today I watch my precious dolls ripped apart, see the straw burst out of them and see them scattered without ever having been . . .

Or this one:

> I am the outskirts of some non-existent town, the long-winded prologue to an unwritten book . . . I'm a character in a novel as yet unwritten, hovering in the air and undone before I've even existed, among the dreams of someone who never quite managed to breathe life into me.

It's astonishing to see how precisely the Ulysses poem answers these cries, confirms and refutes them. The myth is everything because it's nothing, it wouldn't be a myth if it was real. But we wouldn't need myths if so-called reality didn't let us down so frequently. The mythical founder of the city, like the spellbound writer and his precious dolls, like the unreal outskirts, the windy prologue and the unwritten character, will stay with us as long as the myth holds, the false magic is actually true for a while. Or true in its way all the time, just not practical or verifiable – we know that the myth is a myth and that the novel isn't written.

Another poem signed by Pessoa himself addresses this question in the form of an epigrammatic challenge to the reader. The piece is called 'This/Isto':*

> They say I feign or lie
> In all I write. No.
> It's simply that I feel
> With the imagination.
> I don't use the heart.
>
> All that I dream or experience,
> All that fails me, or that finishes,
> Is like a terrace
> Looking onto something else beyond.
> It is the latter which is beautiful.
>
> For this reason I write in the midst
> Of that which isn't to hand,
> Free from my surprise,
> Serious about that which is not.
> Feelings? Let the reader feel!
>
> Dizem que finjo ou minto
> Tudo que escrevo. Não.
> Eu simplesmente sinto
> Com a imaginação.
> Não uso o coração.
>
> Tudo o que sonho ou passo,
> O que me falha ou finda,
> É como que um terraço
> Sobre outra coisa ainda.
> Essa coisa é que é linda.
>
> Por isso escrevo em meio
> Do que não está ao pé,
> Livre do meu enleio,
> Sério do que não é.
> Sentir? Sinta quem lê!

□

* The translation, slightly modified, is by David Butler in *Fernando Pessoa: Selected Poems* (2004).