

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  
And it enters reality,  
As 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 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 wears a middle, 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,

# Conversations with Myself

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THE BOOK OF DISQUIET

by Fernando Pessoa, translated by Margaret Jull Costa.  
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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 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 *sosego*, 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

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