

***The
Collected
Poems
of
Alberto
Caeiro***

The Pessoa Series from Shearsman Books:

Selected English Poems

Mensagem / Message

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Lisbon: What the Tourist Should See

Zbigniew Kotowicz: *Fernando Pessoa – Voices of a Nomadic Soul*

Fernando Pessoa

*The Collected Poems of
Alberto Caeiro*

translated by
Chris Daniels

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General Introduction

Alberto Caeiro da Silva was born in Lisboa on April [...], 1889, and died of tuberculosis in the same city on [...], 1915. He spent all but his first two years living in a grange in the Ribatejo and only returned to the city of his birth in his final months. In the Ribatejo he wrote nearly all his poems, those of the book entitled *Keeper of Flocks*, those of the incomplete book, *The Amorous Shepherd*, and some of his first poems which I myself, having inherited them for the purposes of publication with the rest, gathered together under the designation graciously suggested by Álvaro de Campos: *Detached Poems*. His final poems, beginning with the one numbered [...], were written in the final period of the author's life, after he had returned to Lisbon. The task befalls me briefly to establish a distinction. Some of these poems reveal, by reason of the perturbation caused by illness, something new and rather foreign — in nature and direction — to the general character of his work.

Caeiro's life cannot be narrated: there is nothing in it to be told. His poems were the life within him. In all else there was neither incident nor story. Even the brief, fruitless, and absurd episode which gave rise to the poems of *The Amorous Shepherd* was not an incident but rather, so to speak, a forgetting.

Caeiro's work represents the absolute essence of paganism, fully reconstructed. The Greeks and the Romans, who lived in the midst of paganism and therefore did not think about it, would have been incapable of such a thing. Yet Caeiro's oeuvre and its paganism were never thought through, nor were they even felt. They came from something within us deeper than feeling or reason. To say any more would be to explain, which serves no end; to affirm any less would be to lie. Every work speaks for itself with its own voice in the language that shapes both work and voice. "If you have to ask, you will never know." There is nothing to explain. Imagine attempting to explain to someone a language he did not speak.

Ignorant of life and nearly so of letters, practically without companionship or culture, Caeiro created his work through a deep and imperceptible progress, like that which drives the logical development of civilizations through unconscious humanity's conscious mind. His was a progress of sensation, of ways of feeling, and an intimate evolution of thought derived from these progressive sensations. Through some superhuman intuition, as one founding a religion (yet the mantle of "religious" does not suit him — witness his repudiation of all religion and metaphysics), this man described the world without thinking about it, and created a concept of the universe — a concept thoroughly resistant to exegesis.

When first confronted with the enterprise of publishing these poems, I thought I would write a long and discursive critical study of Caetano's work, its nature and natural destiny. But I found I could make no satisfactory study.

It weighs heavily upon me, but reason has compelled me to preface the work of my Master with a few, null words. Beyond what I have already written, I can write nothing else useful or necessary, that had not been heartfully said in Ode [...] of Book I of my works, where I weep for the man who was for me (as he will come to be for a great many others) the unveiler of Reality, or, as he himself said, "the Argonaut of true sensations" — the great Liberator, he who restores us, singing, to the luminous nothing that we are; who draws us away from death and from life, and leaves us among simple things which, while they last, are ignorant of life and death; who frees us from hope and despair, so that we might neither seek groundless consolation nor find pointless sadness; so that we might live unthinking alongside him, fellow guests of the objective necessity of the Universe.

I give you his work, whose editing was entrusted to me by the ineluctable hazard of the world. I give it to you, and I say:

O rejoice, all you weeping
In History, our worst disease!
Great Pan is reborn!

Ricardo Reis

A. Caeiro

In placing before the English-reading public my translations of these poems, I do so with the full confidence that I am making a revelation. I claim, in all confidence, that I am putting before Englishmen the most original poetry that our young century has as yet produced—a poetry so fresh, so new, untainted to such a degree by any kind of conventional attitude, that the words a Portuguese friend said to me, when speaking of these very poems, are more than justified. “Every time I read them,” he said, “I cannot bring myself to believe that they have been written. It is so impossible an achievement ...!” And so much more impossible, that is of the simplest, most natural and most spontaneous kind.

II

Alberto Caeiro—that is not his whole name, for 2 names are suppressed—was born in Lisbon in August 1887. He died in Lisbon in June of the past year.

...

The Keeper of Sheep remains one of the highest works of all time, hard-bound upon a sense of nature or spirit, so spontaneous, so fresh and so natural that it is astonishing that any one should have had it.

...

The Keeper of Sheep is both a series of solitary [?] poems and a philosophical [...]; hence its strength, its unity and its power. The later poems, even allowing for the fact that they are mere fragments, are weak even in form, in comparison with that great achievement. Exception must be made for the two love poems. But thereafter his tone suffers. It does not become garrulous or, properly speaking, weak. But it loses its intellectual keenness, it becomes uncertain, even tentative. Each thing must have cost him effort to write, and he seems to have been tired of things to write it.

* * *

Caeiro has created (1) a new sentiment of nature (2) a new mysticism (3) a new simplicity, which is nether a simplicity of faith, nor a simplicity of

sadness (as in [...]’s case), nor a simplicity of abdication from things and (). Much as he likes to prove his irrationalism, he is a thinker and a very great thinker. Nothing is so ennobling as this faith that declares the senses superior to the intellect, that speaks of intellect as a disease.

He has contradictions very slight, but he is conscious of all of these and has forewarned his critics. His contradictions are of 3 kinds: (1) in his thought, (2) in his feeling, (3) in his poetical manner.

...

But the most astonishing circumstance is that C possesses in an extraordinary degree that metaphysical subtlety which is generally, if not universally, considered as associated with spiritualistic and transcendentalist doctrines.

This pure and absolute materialist, who admits no reality outside things as he feels them, writes, quite in accordance with his theory of things, [...]

There is something not less than scholastic and [...] in the exterior subtlety of his metaphysics. Yet no one can ignore that it is natural from beginning to end.

As the astonishing final verse of the () poem

Things are the only occult meaning of things
The only occult meaning of things is the things themselves.

A verse of which it is not too much to say that it opens new roads for philosophical meditation.

Caeiro is the only poet of nature. In a sense, he is Nature: he is Nature speaking and being vocal.

He has neither interest in mankind, nor in any human activity, not even in art. All these things are to him unnatural.

Only Nature is divine and it is not divine.

(unsigned)

[On Alberto Caeiro]

But Caeiro displaces all our mental habits and puts all our notions out of drowsing.

He does it, first of all, by the philosophy which can hardly be said to be simply “at the bottom” of his poetry, because it is both at the bottom and at the top of it. Whatever a mystic may be, he is certainly a kind of mystic. But he is, not only a materialistic mystic, which is already strange enough, but still can be imagined, for there is some sort of modern precedent in Swift and of an ancient one in some poets, but a non-subjectivist mystic, which is quite unworldly. [...] but it is so difficult to discover a recent “modern” being precisely like a primitive Greek, that we are not at all aided by the very analogy that does at first seem to help us.

Caeiro puts us out, next, by the secondary aspects of his philosophy. Being a poet of what may be called “the absolute Concrete” he never looks on that concrete otherwise than abstractly. No man is more sure of the absolute, non-subjective reality of a tree, of a stone, of a flower. Here it might be thought that he would particularize, that he would say “an oak,” “a sacred stone,” “a marigold.” But he does not: he keeps on saying “a tree,” “a stone,” “a flower.”

All these observations will be better understood after reading the poems.

But, if the matter is this perplexing, the manner is more perplexing still.

The intellectual manner, to begin with. There is nothing less poetic, less lyrical than C’s philosophical attitude. It is quite devoid of “imagination,” of vagueness, of “sympathy” with things. Far from “feeling” them, his mental process, a hundred times explicitly put, is that he does not feel them, or feel with them.

Again, his simplicity is full of intellectual complexity. He is a poet purely of sense, but he seems to have his intellect put out his senses.

Then, again, he is absolutely self-conscious. He knows every possible unconscious of his. Where there may be a big fault, he hastens to the rescue with a simple and direct argument. Where ()

This man, so purely or anciently a primitive greek that he is unworldly, is quite “modern” at the same time.

...

It is this man of contradictions, this lucidly unworldly personality that gives him his complex and intense originality—an originality, in every way, scarcely ever attained by any poet: certainly never before attained by any poet born in a worn and sophisticated age.

Thomas Crosse

The Keeper of Flocks

(1911-1912)

If the critic will apply himself to a careful analysis of these apparently very simple poems, he will find himself again and again faced with unexpected and increasingly complex elements. Taking for axiomatic what immediately impresses him — the naturalness and spontaneity of Caeiro's poems — he will be surprised to find that they are at the same time rigorously unified by a thinking which not only coordinates and links them, but which also foresees objections, anticipates criticism, and explains away flaws by integrating these flaws into the spiritual substance of the work. Though we think of Caeiro as an objective poet — as indeed he is — in four of his poems we find him expressing entirely subjective emotions. But we are not allowed the cruel satisfaction of pointing out his error. In the poem preceding these poems, he explains that they were written during an illness, and therefore they must be different from his other poems, because sickness is not health. The critic is unable to raise to his lips the cup of his cruel satisfaction. When he seeks the slightly less concrete pleasure of ferreting out transgressions against the work's own inner theory, he is confronted by poems like Nos. [...] and [...], where his objections have already been raised, and his questions answered.

Only someone who reads this work patiently, and with readiness of spirit, can appraise what is surprising about Caeiro's foresight and his intellectual coherence (his coherence is in fact more intellectual than sentimental or emotional).

Caeiro's work is truly a manifestation of a pagan mind. The order and discipline of paganism which Christianity caused us to lose, the reasoned intelligence of things, which was paganism's most obvious attribute and no longer ours — permeate his work. Because it speaks here its form, we see the essence, not the exterior shape, of paganism. In other words, I do not see Caeiro reconstructing the exterior form of paganism. Paganism's very substance has in fact been summoned up from Avernus, as Orpheus summoned Eurydice, by the harmelodic magic of Caeiro's emotion.

What are, by my own criterion, the faults of this work? Only two, and they do little to dim the brightness of this brother of the gods.

Caeiro's poems lack the one thing that would complete them: there is no exterior discipline to match the strength, coherency, and order reigning in the heart of his work. He chose, as will be seen, a poetic form which, though strongly personal — as it could not fail to be — is merely the free verse of the moderns. He did not control his writing with an over-arching discipline comparable to the discipline with which he nearly

always controls his emotion, with which he always controls his ideas. We may forgive this flaw, because we must forgive much in innovators, but we must not omit saying that it is a flaw, and not a distinction.

Neither did he fully control the sick emotions (still slightly demi-Christian) out of which his poet's soul rose into the world. His ideas, always essentially pagan, are sometimes cloaked in ill-fitting emotive garb. In "The Keeper of Flocks," one can follow a gradual perfection taking place. The final poems — especially the four or five preceding the last two — are perfectly unified in idea and emotion. I would forgive the poet for remaining burdened by certain sentimental accoutrements of Christian mentality if he had never, even at the end of the work, succeeded in ridding himself of that baggage. But since, at a certain point in his poetic evolution, he did succeed, I do chastise him, and I chastise him severely (as I chastised him severely to his face), for not returning to his earlier poems and adjusting them to his acquired discipline. If he had been unable to subject any of them to this discipline, he should have crossed them out entirely. But the courage to sacrifice is a trait seldom found in poets. It is so much more difficult to remake than it is to make for the first time. Truly, contrary to the old saying, the last step is the hardest.

And so, I find the [...] poem, so irritating to a Christian, to be absolutely deplorable for an objective poet in the process of reconstructing the essence of paganism. In this poem he descends to the utter nadir of Christian subjectivism, even as deep as that admixture of the objective and the subjective which forms the characteristic malady of the moderns — from certain pages in the in-tolerable work of the ill-named Victor Hugo to the near-totality of the amorphous magma which sometimes passes for poetry among our contemporary mystics.

Perhaps I have exaggerated; perhaps I have abused. Having benefitted from the resurrection of paganism achieved by Caeiro, and having — as do all beneficiaries — busied myself with the easy secondary art of development, it is probably ungrateful of me to rail against the defects inherent in the innovation from which I have so benefited. But, where I find defects, even if I forgive them, I must name them as such. *Magis amica veritas.*

Ricardo Reis

I

I've never kept flocks,
But it's like I've kept them.
My soul is like a shepherd,
It knows the wind and the sun
And it walks hand in hand with the Seasons,
Following and seeing.
All the peace of Nature without people
Comes and sits at my side.
But I get sad
As the sunset is in our imagination
When it gets cold down in the plain
And you feel night coming in
Like a butterfly through the window.

But my sadness is quiet
Because it's natural and it's just
And it's what should be in my soul
When it already thinks it exists
And my hands pick flowers
And my soul doesn't know it.
Like the sound of sheep's bells
Beyond the curve of the road,
All my thoughts are peaceful.
I'm just sorry about knowing they're peaceful,
Because if I didn't know it,
Instead of them being peaceful and sad,
They'd be happy and peaceful.

Thinking makes you uncomfortable like walking in the rain
When the wind gets stronger and it seems to rain more.

I don't have ambitions or desires.
Being a poet isn't my ambition,
It's my way of being alone.

And sometimes if I want
To imagine I'm a lamb
(Or a whole flock
Spreading out all over the hillside

So I can be a lot of happy things at the same time),
It's only because I feel what I write at sunset,
Or when a cloud passes its hand over the light
And silence runs over the grass outside.

When I sit and write poems
Or, walking along the roads or paths,
I write poems on the paper in my thinking,
I feel a staff in my hand
And see my silhouette
On top of a knoll,
Looking after my flock and seeing my ideas,
Or looking after my ideas and seeing my flock,
With a silly smile like when you don't understand what somebody's saying
But you want to pretend you do.

I greet everyone who reads me,
I tip my wide hat to them
When they see me at my door
Just as the stagecoach comes to the top of the hill.
I greet them and wish them sunshine,
Or rain, when they need rain,
And that their houses have
A favorite chair
Where they sit reading my poems
By an open window.
And when they read my poems, I hope they think
I'm something natural —
The ancient tree, for example,
Where they sat down with a thump
In the shade when they were kids
All worn out playing, and wiped the sweat
From their hot brows
With the sleeve of their striped cotton smocks.

(3/8/1914)

II

When I look, I see clear as a sunflower.
I'm always walking the roads
Looking right and left,
And sometimes looking behind ...
And what I see every second
Is something I've never seen before,
And I know how to do this very well ...
I know how to hold the astonishment
A child would have if it could really see
It was being born when it was being born ...
I feel myself being born in each moment,
In the eternal newness of the world ...

I believe in the world like I believe in a marigold,
Because I see it. But I don't think about it
Because to think is to not understand ...
The world wasn't made for us to think about
(To think is to be sick in the eyes)
But for us to look at and agree with ...

I don't have a philosophy: I have senses ...
If I talk about Nature, it's not because I know what it is,
But because I love it, and the reason I love it
Is because when you love you never know what you love,
Or why you love, or what loving is ...

Loving is eternal innocence,
And the only innocence is not thinking ...

(3/8/1914)

III

In the evening, leaning out my window,
Watching the fields out front from under my brows,
I read Cesário Verde's book
Until my eyes were burning.

I felt so sorry for him! He was like a man from the country
And he walked through the city like he was out on bail.
But the way he looked at houses,
And the way he saw the streets,
And the way he had of taking things in,
Was like someone looking at trees,
Or lowering their eyes to the road where they go walking
Or taking in the flowers in the fields ...

That's why he had that great sadness
He could never really say he had,
But walked in the city like someone walking in the country,
Sad, like pressing flowers in books
And putting plants in jars ...

IV

This afternoon a storm fell
Down from the sky onto the hillsides
Like a huge pile of gravel ...

Like someone shaking a tablecloth out of a high window,
And all the scraps falling together
Make some noise when they fall,
The hissing rain rained from the sky
And darkened the roads ...

When lightning flashes in the air
And space shakes
Like a big head saying no,
I don't know why — I don't feel afraid —
I start praying to Saint Barbara
Like I was somebody's old aunt ...

Ah! it's just that praying to Saint Barbara
Makes me feel even more simple
Than I think I am ...
I feel homey and domestic
Like I've gone through life
Tranquilly, like the wall of my yard;
I have ideas and feelings by having them
Like a flower has perfume and color ...

It makes me feel like someone who can believe in St. Barbara ...
Ah, to be able to believe in St. Barbara!

(Whoever believes there's a St. Barbara
Believe she's a person you can see
Or else what would they believe about her?)

(How phony! What do flowers, trees and flocks
Know about St. Barbara? ... If a branch of a tree
Could think, it never would
Construe saints or angels ...
It would be able to think the sun
Gives light and a storm

Is an angry bunch of
People above us ...
Ah, how the simplest of men
Are sick and confused and stupid
Next to the clear simplicity
And health in existing
Of trees and plants!)

And me, thinking about all this,
I became less happy again ...
I became somber and sickened and gloomy
Like when a storm threatens all day
And even by night it doesn't come ...

V

There's enough metaphysics in not thinking about anything.

What do I think about the world?
I have no idea what I think about the world!
If I get sick I'll think about that stuff.

What idea do I have about things?
What opinion do I have about cause and effect?
What have I meditated on God and the soul
And on the creation of the world?
I don't know. For me thinking about that stuff is shutting my eyes
And not thinking. It's closing the curtains
(But my window doesn't have curtains).

The mystery of things? I have no idea what mystery is!
The only mystery is there being someone who thinks about mystery.
When you're in the sun and shut your eyes,
You start not knowing what the sun is
And you think a lot of things full of heat.
But you open your eyes and look at the sun
And you can't think about anything anymore,
Because the sun's light is worth more than the thoughts
Of all the philosophers and poets.
Sunlight doesn't know what it's doing
So it's never wrong and it's common and good.

Metaphysics? What metaphysics do those trees have?
Of being green and bushy and having branches
And of giving fruit in their own time, which doesn't make us think,
To us, who don't know how to pay attention to them.
But what better metaphysics than theirs,
Which is not knowing what they live for
Not even knowing they don't know?
"Inner constitution of things ..."
"Inner meaning of the Universe ..."
All that stuff is false, all that stuff means nothing.
It's incredible that someone could think about things that way.
It's like thinking reasons and purposes
When morning starts shining, and by the trees over there
A vague lustrous gold is driving the darkness away.

Thinking about the inner meaning of things
Is doing too much, like thinking about health when you're healthy,
Or bringing a cup to a spring.

The only inner meaning of things
Is that they have no inner meaning at all.

I don't believe in God because I never saw him.
If he wanted me to believe in him,
I have no doubt he'd come talk with me
And come in my door
Telling me, *Here I am!*

(Maybe this is ridiculous to the ears
Of someone who, because they don't know what it is to look at things,
Doesn't understand someone who talks about them
With the way of speaking looking at them teaches.)

But if God is the flowers and the trees
And the hills and the sun and the moonlight,
Then I believe in him,
Then I believe in him all the time,
And my whole life is an oration and a mass,
And a communion with my eyes and through my ears.

But if God is the trees and the flowers
And the hills and the moonlight and the sun,
Why should I call him God?
I call him flowers and trees and hills and sun and moonlight;
Because if he made himself for me to see
As the sun and moonlight and flowers and trees and hills,
If he appears to me as trees and hills
And moonlight and sun and flowers,
It's because he wants me to know him
As trees and hills and flowers and moonlight and sun.

And that's why I obey him,
(What more do I know about God than God knows about himself?),
I obey him by living, spontaneously,
Like someone opening his eyes and seeing,

And I call him moonlight and sun and flowers and trees and hills,
And I love him without thinking about him,
And I think him by seeing and hearing,
And I'm with him all the time.