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Stevens and Pessoa/ Caeiro: Poetry as “Degree Zero”

Other writers (...) have therefore undermined literary language, they have ceaselessly exploded the ever-renewed husk of clichés, of habits, of the formal past of the writer; in a chaos of forms and a wilderness of words they hoped they would achieve an object wholly delivered of History, and find again the freshness of a pristine state of language (...) to create a colourless writing, freed from all bondage to a pre-ordained state of language (...) The aim here is to go beyond literature by entrusting one's fate to a sort of basic speech, equally far from living languages and from literary language proper (...) writing is then reduced to a sort of negative mood in which the social or mythical characters of a language are abolished in favour of a neutral and inert state of form; thus thought remains wholly responsible, without being overlaid by a secondary commitment of form to a History not its own.¹

Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*

*You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it.*

Wallace Stevens, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” (CP 380)

*I try divesting myself of what I've learned,
I try forgetting the mode of remembering they taught me,
And scrape off the ink they used to paint my senses,
Unpacking my true emotions,*

¹ Barthes, 1977: 74-7. For more details on Barthes's discussion of the attainment of a “degree zero” in writing, see chapters “Writing and Silence” and “Is There any Poetic Writing?”. See also José Augusto Seabra (1974) for a Barthesian reading of Caeiro's poems.

*Unwrapping myself, and being myself, not Alberto Caieiro,
But a human animal that Nature produced.*²

Fernando Pessoa/ Alberto Caieiro, "One Way or Another"

Coming from opposite sides of the Atlantic, from two different cultural backgrounds, one American, the other Portuguese, Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) and Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) shared little more than their literary attachment to Modernism. Although contemporaries, there is simply no evidence as to whether Stevens or Pessoa knew of each other's existence. This is also extensive to each other's poetic output; there is absolutely no hint of literary influence. One may *a priori* question the very foundations of this study since there is no direct link between both poets. The point, however, is that the similarities have already been established.³ But there is still much more to be said about the correspondences between both poetic universes; the similarities are simply overwhelming. This study aims at highlighting these two voices in the very process of liberating from language and literature the crushing weight of literary tradition and the embellishments of literary discourse. By this is meant that Pessoa and Stevens yearned for a language reduced to its bare essentials. Their poetry is clearly an invitation to see the world with new eyes. Both poets argue that the world as they knew it had become overwhelmingly complex. If we are to understand the meaning of life and the power of written discourse, in these poems, at least, we are challenged to assume the role of a reborn Adam so that we may apprehend their pristine beauties. This is the message conveyed in some of their poems, some of which will be discussed later in greater detail. At a theoretical level, it can be argued that some of the poetry written by Pessoa and Stevens aims at achieving what Roland Barthes calls a "degree zero", a viewpoint displayed in his critical work, *Writing Degree Zero*. It is now impossible to think of the poems in which Pessoa and Stevens call for a language reduced to its bare essentials without Barthes as a point of reference. Or is it that Barthes, instead, theorizes their viewpoint?

Despite the fact that Barthes propounded such a view of poetry only in 1953 when *Writing Degree Zero* was first published, it should not be forgotten that Stevens had touched on the heart of the matter much earlier. Usage of language in its nakedest form in Stevens's poetry can be traced as far back as 1935 when he published *Ideas of Order*. The poem "Academic Discourse at Havana" is a prime example of such a debate. "The Man on the Dump" (*Parts of a World*, published in 1942) sheds even more light on this issue. It was in 1947 when *Transport to Summer* saw the light of day that we witness Stevens pressing this issue even further, especially in such poems as "The Motive for Metaphor"; "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"⁴; "Credences of Summer" and "Estheti-

² Hereafter, all quotations of Fernando Pessoa's/ Alberto Caieiro's poetry in English translation are taken from *The Keeper of Sheep*. Trans. Edwin Honig and Susan M. Brown (Riverdale-on-Hudson, N.Y.: Sheep Meadow, 1986).

³ In Edinger, 1982. Catarina F. T. Edinger comments on the sun, ice-cream, and chocolate imagery in the poems of both poets. Another study by Maria Irene Ramalho de Sousa Santos focuses on the bird imagery prevalent in the poetry of Stevens and Pessoa – see Santos, 1985: pp. 94-101.

⁴ Although this poem is grouped in *Transport to Summer* (1947) of Stevens' *Collected Poems* of 1954, it should be pointed out that it was first published in 1942.

que du Mal". Finally, with *The Auroras of Autumn* of 1950, Stevens comes back to this view of poetry in such poems as "A Primitive Like an Orb" and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven". Through time, Stevens became more and more infatuated with this viewpoint. It should be mentioned, however, that this theme was one of the major obsessions pertaining to his twilight years. Pessoa, through the voice of Alberto Caeiro, did very much the same although much earlier than Stevens. A brief digression is here pertinent in order to fully grasp such an eruption of inner voices within Pessoa the man. Although we learn in Pessoa's horoscope that Caeiro was born on 16 April 1889 (the year after Pessoa was born) at 1:45 p.m. in Lisbon, Caeiro's poetic output, nonetheless, emerges only in March 1914. It should be pointed out that most of the poems in which Caeiro calls for a reduction of language to its bare essentials are written during this period. Caeiro, however, is not the only voice Pessoa chooses to convey the diversity of modern life. Ricardo Reis and Álvaro de Campos are two more voices composing the heteronymic spectrum.⁵ In a letter to Adolfo Casais Monteiro, dated 13 January 1935, Pessoa explains the genesis of these heteronyms:

I see before me, in a colorless but real space of a dream, the faces and gestures of [Alberto] Caeiro, Ricardo Reis and Álvaro de Campos. I made out their ages and their lives. Ricardo Reis, born in 1887, not that I remember the day and the month (though I have them somewhere), in Oporto, is a doctor and is living at present in Brazil. Alberto Caeiro was born in 1889 and died in 1915; he was born in Lisbon, but lived almost all his life in the country. He had neither profession nor any sort of education. Álvaro de Campos was born in Tavira, on the fifteenth of October, 1890 (at 1:30 p.m., Ferreira Gomes tells me; and it's true, since it's confirmed by a horoscope made of this hour). As you know, he is a naval engineer (in Glasgow), but now lives here in Lisbon, not working. Caeiro was of medium height and, though really delicate (he died a consumptive), didn't seem as delicate as he was. Ricardo Reis is a bit, though very slightly, shorter, but also shrewd. Álvaro de Campos is tall (1.75 meters tall, two centimeters more than I), thin, and with a tendency to a slight stoop. All are clean-shaven – Caeiro pale without color, blue eyes; Reis a vague dull brown; Campos between fair and swarthy, a vaguely Jewish Portuguese type, hair therefore smooth and normally parted on the side, monocled. Caeiro, as I said, hadn't any education to speak of – only primary school; his father and mother died early and he remained at home, where he lived on the income of a few small properties. He lived with an old aunt, on his mother's side. Ricardo Reis, educated in a Jesuit college, is, as I said, a doctor; he's been living in Brazil since 1919; for he became an expatriate immediately because he was a monarchist. He is a Latinist by schooling, and a semi-Hellenist by virtue of his own efforts. Álvaro de Campos had a high-school education; he later went to Scotland to study engineering, first mechanical, then naval. On some holiday he went to the Orient, from which "Opium Eater" is derived. An uncle, also a priest, from the Beira, taught him Latin (...) (qtd. in Pessoa, 1986: 3)

Of all these voices, Caeiro's is clearly the one which seems closest to that of Wallace Stevens. Both share an abhorrence of any type of ornamental discourse as well as anything that obstructs the perception of the world. This is precisely the common ground shared by both poets and the one pertinent to this study. Before proceeding to a comparison of both poetic outputs, it is essential to focus on their poetic theories and craft of poetry.

⁵ Caeiro, Reis, and Campos are the three main voices composing Pessoa's heteronymic spectrum. Apart from these, there are also other minor voices.

In *Fernando Pessoa Revisitado: Leitura Estruturante do Drama em Gente*, Eduardo Lourenço acknowledges the contribution of José Augusto Seabra's Barthesian reading of Caeiro's poems and how this reading sheds new light on Pessoa's overall poetic output. When analyzing Caeiro, Lourenço notes that

What "he says" (as well as what Pessoa or Campos claim he says) is, in fact, the expression of a desire for a "degree zero poetry", or, even better, something that comes much earlier than the very distinction between poetry and prose. In essence, a yearning for a *non-poetry*, as José Augusto Seabra has emphatically reiterated. But what he is, what he lives for in each poem is the (infinite) *distance* that separates consciousness and the world, glance and thing seen. Caeiro was born to annul it, but it is in space that he separates the act of looking and reality, consciousness and the sensation that his utterance – his voice – ironically and gravely articulates itself. That is why it is important from the viewpoint of that desire for a "degree zero poetry" as expressed by the *creator* (Pessoa). When applied to Caeiro, however, this sentence does not make sense because Caeiro is not the subject of his poems. Instead of looking for a distance, a moving away from prose, Caeiro, instead, aims at reducing the poetic language to a mere denotative or referential role, from which, at the most, connotation would be completely absent (my translation). (Lourenço, 1981: 36)

In *A Poesia de Fernando Pessoa*, Adolfo Casais Monteiro notes that Alberto Caeiro – in a much earlier phase – and the French writer, Alain Robbe-Grillet,

Had much in common because both had attained identical goals when aiming for the undressing of consciousness, after the collapse of romantic fetishism. In essence, both give voice to the "crisis of the individual", which is resolved, exactly, in the case of both, through an establishing of the "object", through their acknowledgement that things are not man. Man ceases to be the center of the world, things no longer exist for him or because of him; his solitude is, in essence, marked by the knowledge that there is simply no identification. Man and things are no longer imbued with the spirit of solidarity and to "proclaim that man is everywhere", after all, says Robbe-Grillet, is "really the mood of one's soul placed between man and the things themselves". (my translation) (Monteiro, 1985: 130)

In his assessment of both poetic voices – one fictional and the other real – Monteiro further adds that Caeiro, "he goes, in fact, much further than Robbe-Grillet, because in addition to 'suppressing' a landscape where humans dwell, he also suppresses man himself, substituting him for 'something' else among a myriad of other things" (my translation) (*idem*, 131).

While Lourenço and Monteiro agree that Caeiro has written a "degree zero poetry", completely uncluttered by stylistic embellishments or emotions, other scholars, do not concur with this. In *Diversidade e Unidade em Fernando Pessoa*, Jacinto do Prado Coelho argues that Caeiro fails to fulfill what he has set out to do in his craft of poetry. Prado Coelho begins his analysis of Alberto Caeiro, noting that "There are two Caeiros, the poet and the thinker, the first being the one who, in theory, develops himself in the second one. The major goals of the poet consist in the endless variety of Nature, in the states of semi-consciousness, sensuous pantheism, and in the relaxed and pleasant acceptance of the world as it is" (my translation) (Coelho, 1987: 23). While Caeiro aims at convincing his readers that his poetry is the epitome of simplicity, Prado Coelho, however, is of the opinion that at the very core of Caeiro there lies the soul of

an abstractionist who, paradoxically, abhors abstractions; the end result being a lack of lexical variety and a certain wooden style. Often, we listen to him arguing, criticizing, not conveying sensations but discussing sensations (...) Undoubtedly, Caieiro is, above all, intelligence. Philosophy against philosophy. "With philosophy – he argues – there are no trees: there are ideas only". Here is where his argument simply falls flat: when we read Caieiro we do not see trees, we listen to him propound a theory, we are, therefore, in the domain of the axiom, syllogism, generalisations, and that which is used as an example is simply not well defined: "A rainy day is as beautiful as a sunny day".

"To enjoy a flower is to stand by it unconsciously". (my translation) (*idem*, 27-28)

Prado Coelho concludes his argument stressing that "The *real* Caieiro can be defined by intimate tensions, by an asceticism of ingenuity reachable within no specific deadline; he is a civilized being who tries to get rid of the burden on his shoulders, which has become unbearable, due to a thousand-year-old tradition" (my translation) (*idem*, 31).

David Mourão-Ferreira tells us in *Nos Passos de Pessoa* that to grasp "the astonishing reality of things" is, as has already been stated, Alberto Caieiro's innermost desire. Remaining faithful to this principle,

the poet of "The Keeper of Sheep" condemns just about everything that, in one way or another, may adulterate such a reality. According to him, there are two factors which essentially contribute to that: a certain poetic imagery and the act of attributing false meanings to the objects and phenomenons of nature. This, in itself, shows that Alberto Caieiro is a poet who is totally at odds with the overall development of Portuguese lyric poetry. Thus, Alberto Caieiro says things as objectively as possible, without utilizing images, symbols or just about any other artistic means, which would misconstrue the idea or, rather, the expression of the sensation which he had received. (my translation) (Mourão-Ferreira, 1988: 165-166)

Mourão-Ferreira then goes on to question the long-held view that Caieiro's poems are essentially about Nature. To him, this is completely misleading:

One is left with the following impression after an attentive reading of his work: the poetry about nature often alluded to *is nowhere to be seen*. There is no poetry in the verses of Alberto Caieiro; there are recurrent statements about its existence; frequent definitions about how the poet grapples with "the astonishing reality of things", and yet, poetry never materializes. And if it happens to come to the surface here and there, it is overburdened by the poet's eagerness to state and define just about everything. In short, one may claim that Alberto Caieiro's poetic *oeuvre* is the embodiment of a poetry that is almost completely unfulfilled. (The exception being the 'Eighth Poem of the Keeper of Sheep' – without a doubt, the most *poetic* of his poems). (my translation) (*idem*, 166-167)

While Pessoa aimed at capturing the diversity and complexity of modern life by, so to speak, giving birth to his heteronymic voices, Stevens, too, was so mesmerized by this plurality that one may aptly describe him as a multi-faceted poet. That is why it is simply difficult – if not impossible – to pin down his theory of poetry in just a few sentences. Because Stevens was such a prolific writer, his poems touch upon practically all aspects of modern life and aesthetics. Scholars have, therefore, responded to this with a myriad of critical approaches.

Jacqueline Vaught Brogan, for example, has noticed a double thread woven into the texture of Stevens's poetry, namely what she sees as "the combination of (...) two qualities – the playful and the theoretical display – that makes Stevens's poetry so noto-

riously enigmatic (and, equally, so seductive)". Paradoxically, Stevens's poetry is both simple and difficult to grasp and this, she tells us, stems from

The relentless sense of sheer play in his poetry that repeatedly forestalls any attempt to arrive at *any* interpretation and, second, a consistent display of theoretical perspectives that undermines even the attempt to describe *the range* of interpretations possible in a given poem. What are we students to make of a poet who whips from himself that "damned hoo-bla-hoo-bla-hoo-bla-how" and "such tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk" and who, alternately, rejects totally the 'rotted names' of poetry or embraces thoroughly the "theory/ Of poetry" as the "theory of life"? (Brogan, 1994: 52)

Delight, notes George S. Lensing, is what one experiences when approaching Stevens's poetry from a purely prosodic perspective. This will, Lensing argues, enable us to "participate in the carnival of the poem, the entertainment of rhythm and sound" (Lensing, 1994: 118).

Other critics, however, have looked into his poems for biographical elements. Such is the case of, for example, Joan Richardson, one of Stevens's biographers, who notes that "In paying attention to the facts of Stevens's life, I was struck innumerable times by how these facts were occasions of poems – "The poem is the cry of its occasion,/ Part of the res itself and not about it". Through biography, she believes, readers may grasp quintessential aspects of Stevens's life and, in doing so, often unlock the riddle to the poem under consideration. Such is the case with, for example, the line "In that November off Tehuantepec", taken from "Sea Surface Full of Clouds", a poem she sees as harking back to the time when

Stevens's only child was conceived, after fourteen years of marriage, on the first extended holiday he and his wife had taken since April 1910, when they last traveled together for a few weeks as they had on their honeymoon. It was fortunate for me that Holly Stevens had in 1966 published her edition of her father's letters. Perusing them in 1970, looking for clues as to what could have happened "In that November off Tehuantepec" that prompted a poem – *not* that the poem could be reduced simply to an account of that occasion – I realized, as I tell my students, the limitations of a strict New Critical approach and, I see now, began working on Stevens's biography. (Richardson, 1994: 148, 145)

Unlike Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, for whom modernism was an essentially international movement, A. Walton Litz argues that the poetic outputs of Stevens and William Carlos Williams can be classified as belonging to what he defines as "a native American modernism" (Litz, 1994: 235). Such is also the opinion of Helen Vendler, who considers Stevens's theme and style as that of a

conspicuously and even outrageously American poet (...) Stevens interrogates the adequacy of America to poetry and of poetry to America more often than any of his contemporaries except Williams, and spent more time walking the American countryside and recording it than the other Modernists. Any comprehensive account of Stevens has to represent him as a Euro-American poet interested in both the exotic and the native. (Vendler, 1993: 373)

Vendler goes on to stress that:

Because Stevens is so many-sided, and has attracted such different sorts of readers, he is variously represented by different commentators. A deconstructionist critic will be interested in Stevens's anticipation of contemporary attention to absences, negatives, gaps, contradic-

tions, and ambiguities; a theorist may look at the tendency of Stevens's poetry to allegorize its own moves and place Stevens's essays on poetics in the line of Coleridge and Shelley; an Americanist will focus on Stevens's inheritance from Emerson, Poe, Whitman, Dickinson, William James, and Santayana; a genre critic will see Stevens as a link in the history of lyric written English, whether in England, America, or elsewhere; a historian of Modernism will focus on Stevens as a representative of the twenties through the fifties (where Stevens is interestingly hard to place, as he is successively Imagist, nativist, neoromantic, minimalist, and so on); a contemporary critic might want to see him as the precursor of, e.g., Ashberry. (*idem*, 378-379)

At the outset of *Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory*, B. J. Leggett argues that if we consider Stevens's canon as a whole, it might prove quite a herculean task to pin down a poetic theory which neatly reflects the complexity and contrariness of his work (Leggett, 1987: 1-4). In other words, the list of preferences critics of Stevens have been attracted to in his poetry could easily go on and on. For the purposes of this study, however, my interest in Stevens lies in his call – not for a national literature, as Emerson had urged – but for a poetry bearing the imprint of simplicity. In this sense, Stevens's poetry resounds with Thoreau's request to "Simplify, simplify" in *Walden* (Thoreau, 1960: 63). Stevens is fulfilling a tenet of the Modernist movement in the sense that he is re-cycling a quintessentially American Romantic and Transcendentalist theme, which, I believe, has been somewhat overlooked in much of the scholarship written about Stevens. Moreover, by confronting the poems where both Stevens and Pessoa/Caeiro advocate a poetry stripped of ornamental superfluities, I will, I hope, show that Stevens was not, as most critics argue, exclusively a modernist "at home", but connected with the movement internationally. To what extent, then, are both poets and their poetic outputs alike?

In "My glance is clear like a sunflower", Caeiro argues that one must apprehend the world with primitive, innocent eyes. To think about the world and its natural wonders is clearly what makes it far more complex and difficult to discern:

My glance is clear like a sunflower.
 I usually take to the roads,
 Looking to my right and to my left,
 And now and then looking behind me...
 And what I see each moment
 Is that something I'd never seen before,
 And I'm good at noticing such things...
 I know how to feel the same essential wonder
 That an infant feels if, on being born,
 He could note he'd really been born...
 I feel that I am being born each moment
 Into the eternal newness of the World...

I believe in the World as in a daisy
 Because I see it. But I don't think about it
 Because thinking is not understanding...
 The World was not made for us to think about
 (To think is to be eye-sick)
 But for us to look at and be in tune with...

I have no philosophy: I have senses...
If I speak of Nature, it's not because I know what Nature is,
But because I love it, and that's why I love it,
For a lover never knows what he loves,
Why he loves or what love is...
Loving is eternal innocence,
And the only innocence is not to think...

In "You, mystic, see a meaning in everything", Caeiro opposes abstraction and metaphysics because these concepts prevent us from perceiving the world easily:

You, mystic, see a meaning in everything.
For you, everything has a hidden meaning.
There is always something occult in everything you see.
Whatever you see, you always see it to see something else.

For me, thank goodness I have eyes just to see,
I see the absence of meaning in everything;
I see it and love myself, because to be a thing has no meaning at all.
To be a thing is not being subject to interpretation.
(my translation)

In section four of "Academic Discourse at Havana", Stevens aims at clearing the cataracts that obscure our vision so that we may all see the world with new or primitive eyes. What is being conveyed here is that metaphorical language prevents us from seeing things clearly:

Is the function of the poet here mere sound,
Subtler than the ornatest prophecy,
To stuff the ear? It causes him to make
His infinite repetition and alloys
Of pick of ebon, pick of halcyon.
It weights him with nice logic for the prim.
As part of nature he is part of us.
His rarities are ours: may they be fit
And reconcile us to our selves in those
True reconcilings, dark, pacific words,
And the adroiter harmonies of their fall.
Close the cantina. Hood the chandelier.
The moonlight is not yellow but a white
That silences the ever-faithful town.
How pale and how possessed a night it is,
How full of exhalations of the sea...
All this is older than its oldest hymn,
Has no more meaning than tomorrow's bread.
But let the poet on his balcony
Speak and the sleepers in their sleep shall move,
Waken, and watch the moonlight on their floors.
This may be benediction, sepulcher,
And epitaph. It may, however, be
An incantation that the moon defines

By mere example opulently clear.
And the old casino likewise may define
An infinite incantation of our selves
In the grand decadence of the perished swans. (*CP* 144)

"Hello there, keeper of sheep" is a fine example of Caeiro's abhorrence of connotation and subjectivity. He prefers a type of discourse which is either referential or simply objective:

"Hello there, keeper of sheep,
You there, by the roadside,
What does the passing wind tell you?"

"That it's the wind and it passes,
That it's done so before,
And that it'll do so again.
And what does it tell you?"

"A good deal more than that.
It speaks to me of many other things.
Of memories and yearnings
And things that never were".

"You've never listened to the wind.
The wind speaks only of the wind.
What you heard it say was a lie,
And that lie is part of you".

In "What we see of things are those things", Caeiro also makes it clear that metaphorical language prevents us from seeing reality with objective eyes:

What we see of things are those things.
Why would we see one thing if there were another?
Why would seeing and hearing exist to deceive us
If seeing and hearing are seeing and hearing?

The main thing is knowing how to see,
Knowing how to see without thinking,
Knowing how to see when one sees,
And not thinking when one sees
Nor seeing when one's thinking.

But all this (what a shame we all wear a dressed-up soul!) –
All this demands serious looking into,
A thorough learning in how to unlearn
And a curtailing of freedom in that convent
Where poets say stars are eternal nuns
And flowers are pious penitents of a single day,
But where stars finally are nothing if not stars
And flowers nothing if not flowers,
Which is just why we call them stars and flowers.

In “There, way over there by the hillside, a row of trees”, Caeiro satirizes man as someone obsessed with imposing artificial conventions such as names on the natural world. This is what makes the world far more complex and abstract:

There, way over there by the hillside, a row of trees.
But what's a row of trees? Only trees.
Row and plural trees aren't things, they're names.

Poor human beings, always putting things in order,
Tracing lines from this thing to that thing,
Sticking labels with names on totally real trees,
And plotting parallels for latitude and longitude
On the innocent earth itself, so flourishing and much greener than that!

The poem “Some days, when the light is perfect and precise” makes clear that the word beauty represents an abstract concept. Caeiro is arguing that the word itself cannot be objectified; it is not tangible:

Some days, when the light is perfect and precise,
When things contain all the reality they can ever have,
I slowly ask myself why
I even attribute
Beauty to things.
Is there really beauty in a flower?
Is there really beauty in a fruit?
No, they've got color and form,
And existence – nothing else.
Beauty is the name for something that doesn't exist,
A name I give things for the pleasure they give me.
It means nothing.
Then why do I say of things, they're beautiful?

Yes, even I, who live only by living,
Am reached invisibly by men's lies
Before the things themselves,
Before the things that simply exist.
How hard to be oneself and see only the visible!

This is pretty much what Stevens says in “Study of Two Pears”.

In “Only Nature is divine, and she's not divine”, Caeiro tells the reader that he wished he could express himself in “natural” terms when speaking of nature. Instead, he must resort to the “language of men”, a type of discourse which is totally artificial and ineffective:

Only Nature is divine, and she's not divine...

If I speak of her as a being
It's because to speak of her I must use the language of men,
Which endows things with personality,
And forces names upon things.
But things have neither name nor personality –
They exist, and the sky is vast and the earth wide,

And our hearts the size of a clenched fist...
Bless me for all I do know.
I enjoy it all as one who knows there is always sun.

Not only Stevens but Pessoa, through the voice of Caeiro, view literature and language as overburdened by the weight of figurative speech. In "Today I read nearly two pages", Caeiro argues that poetry must be liberated from the oppressiveness of rhetorical devices such as personification and the pathetic fallacy:

Today I read nearly two pages
In a book by a mystic poet,
And I laughed like someone who'd been weeping and weeping.

Mystic poets are sick philosophers,
And philosophers are madmen.

Because mystic poets say that flowers feel
And say that stones have souls
And rivers have ecstasies in moonlight.

But flowers wouldn't be flowers if they felt anything –
They'd be people;
And if stones had souls they'd be living things, not stones;
And if rivers had ecstasies in moonlight,
They'd be sick people.

Only if you don't know what flowers, stones, and rivers are
Can you talk about their feelings.
To talk about the soul of flowers, stones, and rivers,
Is to talk about yourself, about your delusions.
Thank God stones are just stones,
And rivers nothing but rivers,
And flowers just flowers.

As for myself, I write out the prose of my poems
And I am satisfied,
Because I know all I can understand is Nature from the outside;
I don't understand it from inside
Because Nature hasn't any inside;
It wouldn't be Nature otherwise.

Writing slightly over two decades later, Stevens's perceptions on this matter are not that radically different from those of Pessoa/ Caeiro. In "The Man on the Dump", for example, Stevens views the dump as an accumulation of stale images, analogies, similes, and metaphors. In this poem, the point Stevens attempts to make is that literature and language must be relieved from what he considers ornamental "trash". The difficulty in expressing something new about the wonders of the world is enormous because literature is simply burdened with the weight of tradition. Through the image of trash and waste, Stevens repeats the modernist notion that everything worthwhile had been done and the twentieth-century rested on the fragments of a great past. In this poem, Stevens advocates a language reduced to its essentials and strives to dismiss polished discourse for the sake of clarity:

Day creeps down. The moon is creeping up.
 The sun is a corbeil of flowers the moon Blanche
 Places there, a bouquet. Ho-ho...The dump is full
 Of images. Days pass like papers from a press.
 The bouquets come here in the papers. So the sun,
 And so the moon, both come, and the janitor's poems
 Of every day, the wrapper on the can of pears,
 The cat in the paper-bag, the corset, the box
 From Esthonia: the tiger chest, for tea.
 The freshness of night has been fresh a long time.
 The freshness of morning, the blowing of day, one says
 That it puffs as Cornelius Nepos reads, it puffs
 More than, less than or it puffs like this or that.
 The green smacks in the eye, the dew in the green
 Smacks like fresh water in a can, like the sea
 On a cocoanut – how many men have copied dew
 For buttons, how many women have covered themselves
 With dew, dew dresses, stones and chains of dew, heads
 Of the floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew.
 One grows to hate these things except on the dump.
 Now in the time of spring (azaleas, trilliums,
 Myrtle, viburnums, daffodils, blue phlox),
 Between that disgust and this, between the things
 That are on the dump (azaleas and so on)
 And those that will be (azaleas and so on),
 One feels the purifying change. One rejects
 The trash.

.....
 (All its images are in the dump) and you see
 As a man (not like an image of a man),
 You see the moon rise in the empty sky. (CP 201-2)

In *Wallace Stevens, Harmonium, and The Whole of Harmonium*, Kia Penso states that “It’s not that spring or moonlight have ceased to be interesting experiences, but (...) the way they have been written about”. What she thinks Stevens is advocating in “The Man on the Dump” is the need for a clean slate to write about Nature and the heavenly bodies. Stale literary embellishments and the drawn-out pathetic fallacies poets have used rather too often are not welcome. Penso further adds that in this poem Stevens is trying to tell his readers that the “poet can use any instrument he wants to get at his subject, but to persist in producing with forms that have outlived their usefulness comes to look like ridiculous posturing and self-deceit” (Penso, 1991: 90-91).

In an article titled “O Poeta e a Originalidade ou Wallace Stevens e o ‘Lixo’ da Tradição”, Maria Irene Ramalho de Sousa Santos reads this poem somewhat differently, arguing that Stevens yearns to break free from the anxiety of influence of tradition – but never succeeding completely. She points out that:

The eighteenth-century in England left to the Great Romantic Poets of the following century, and to all who emerged afterwards, the terrible and oppressive legacy of a poetic rich-

ness which is, in essence, not more than a real prison. It is precisely this splendid, yet suffocating, poetic inheritance that Wallace Stevens overwhelmingly and ironically distorts, that he calls the *dump*.

Sousa Santos then goes on to add that this poem

denounces, in a serious/ comic manner, the difficulty experienced by the contemporary poet when confronted with the richness accumulated by tradition, which is his legacy, and his delight in aesthetically being able to resort to parody, which enables him to seek a momentary reconciliation, albeit problematic, with his poetic past ("One grows to hate these things except on the dump"). When creating the image of the dump so as to symbolize Tradition, Stevens risks (...) destroying poetic illusions. But when he comically adds to the dump his own half-playful images – ranging from metaphor and exotic personifications ("The sun is a corbeil of flowers the moon Blanche/ Places there, a bouquet") to the obscure, absurd and burlesque allusion ("it puffs as Cornelius Nepos reads"), to the empty and ridiculous comparison ("it puffs/ More than, less than or it puffs like this or that"), to the unexpected use of adjectives and the superlative punning ("...dew dresses...heads/ Of the floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew") – Stevens ironically places himself within his poetic tradition and sacrifices himself in his own parody (My translation). (Santos, 1977: 74; 79)

In "The Motive For Metaphor", Stevens frowns upon poets who resort to metaphor in poetic discourse. This, he believes, represents an evasion of reality. Apart from obstructing language, metaphorical discourse also overburdens literature:

You like it under the trees in autumn,
Because everything is half dead.
The wind moves like a cripple among the leaves
And repeats words without meaning.

In the same way, you were happy in spring,
With the half colors of quarter-things,
The slightly brighter sky, the melting clouds,
The single bird, the obscure moon –

The obscure moon lighting an obscure world
Of things that would never be quite expressed,
Where you yourself were never quite yourself
And did not want nor have to be,

Desiring the exhilarations of changes:
The motive for metaphor, shrinking from
The weight of primary noon,
The A B C of being.

The ruddy temper, the hammer
Of red and blue, the hard sound –
Steel against intimation – the sharp flash,
The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X. (CP 288)

In section two of "Credences of Summer", Stevens is working towards a poetry totally uncluttered by figuration. The image of the pine devoid of figures of speech, especially metaphor, is precisely what Stevens is looking for. In this poem, Stevens aspires towards what Barthes calls a "pristine state of language":

Postpone the anatomy of summer, as
 The physical pine, the metaphysical pine.
 Let's see the very thing and nothing else.
 Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight.
 Burn everything not part of it to ash.

Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky
 Without evasion by a single metaphor.
 Look at it in its essential barrenness
 And say this, this is the centre that I seek.

Fix it in an eternal foliage
 And fill the foliage with arrested peace,
 Joy of such permanence, right ignorance
 Of change still possible. Exile desire
 For what is not. This is the barrenness
 Of the fertile thing that can attain no more. (CP 373)

The number of poems in which Stevens advocates a poetry reduced to a “degree zero” (to use Barthes’ phrase) is enormous. As suggested earlier, “Study of Two Pears” is evidently a fine example and “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”, especially section nine, is another one where the best means of poetic expression –argues Stevens – is the one where poetry is marked by an absence of tropes, figurative speech, or any type of ornament. Poetry reduced to its nakedest form is clearly a theme which is present in Stevens’s later poetic career:

.....We seek
 The poem of pure reality, untouched
 By trope or deviation, straight to the word,
 Straight to the transfixing object, to the object
 At the exactest point at which it is itself,
 Transfixing by being purely what it is,
 A view of New Haven, say, through the certain eye,

 The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight
 Of simple seeing, without reflection. We seek
 Nothing beyond reality. (CP 471)

In *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, Harold Bloom reacts against Helen Vendler’s reading of this poem. He questions her view of the poem as “a portrayal of desiccation, of an old man’s most deliberately minimal visions”. For Bloom, the “poet who writes *An Ordinary Evening in New Haven* is about to turn seventy, but as a poet he is never less desiccated or leafless. Nothing else by Stevens is more exuberant or extravagant than this second longest and most indirect of all his poems” (Bloom, 1977: 305). While concurring with Vendler, who views the poem as marked by a certain “hars- hness”, he, nonetheless, points out that:

There is some deprivation, and yet the flesh, the sun, the earth, and the moon are all there, and so are a surprising vigor and joy. The poem I read is threatened not by its own starvation but by its own copiousness, its abundance of invention that varies the one theme, which is the problematic Stevensian image that he unhelpfully always called “reality”. Critics

can diverge absolutely on this poem because the text is almost impossible to read, that is, the text keeps seeking "reality" while continually putting into question its own apotheosis of "reality". Stevens said of the poem: "Here my interest is to try to get as close to the ordinary, the commonplace and the ugly as it is possible for a poet to get. It is not a question of grim reality but of plain reality". (*idem*, 306)

Another view shared by Stevens and Pessoa is that man must become a reborn Adam so that he may taste, once again, the freshness of the world. The role of the modernist poet, Stevens seems to argue in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (section one), is to become a primitive and culturally unburdened man. This view implies a return to an unstained and pristine state of being:

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
Of this invention, this invented world,
The inconceivable idea of the sun.

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it.

Never suppose an inventing mind as source
Of this idea nor for that mind compose
A voluminous master folded in his fire.

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,
Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven
That has expelled us and our images (...) (CP 380-81)

Caeiro, too, complains of the oppressiveness of a highly complex world in the poem entitled "One way or another". Not only is he in a frenzy to discard the emblems of refinement, but also leave behind his cultural training:

I try divesting myself of what I've learned,
I try forgetting the mode of remembering they taught me,
And scrape off the ink they used to paint my senses,
Unpacking my true emotions,
Unwrapping myself, and being myself, not Alberto Caeiro,
But a human animal that Nature produced.

Although coming from opposite sides of the Atlantic, Stevens and Pessoa shared not only an involvement in the Modernist movement but also a common language and literary training in English and American literature. If Pessoa wrote most of his poems in Portuguese, he also wrote poetry in English and may be considered a minor English poet. This was obviously due to his South African experience in Durban, where his stepfather was the appointed Portuguese consul. Another striking similarity between both poets is their attachment to the world of business. Stevens, the Vice-President of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, and Pessoa, a business correspondent and translator in Lisbon, managed to capture on paper the issues so pertinent to their time even if a few scholars may have considered business and the writing of poems an imperfect match. In the case of Stevens, as Frank Kermode reminds us, this is

an aspect of Stevens which has attracted much attention: the divorce between his activities as a man of business, a family man, a citizen of Hartford, Connecticut, and his work as a man of letters. This issue gets, I think, too much attention of the wrong kind, and even critics one would normally consider free of obvious vulgarity have allowed their judgment of the poetry to be corrupted by wonder or annoyance at the poet's double life. Stevens did not find that he must choose between the careers of insurance lawyer and poet. The fork in the road where he took the wrong turning is a critic's invention, and there is no point in dawdling there. (Kermode, 1989: 1)

Frank Kermode's words, I believe, would fit Pessoa's situation perfectly. Engaged in the world of business during the day, one can easily visualize both poets, at night composing words into poems. Two minds at work embracing the spirit of Modernism, writing poems which convey the same ideas, even if thousands of miles away from each other.

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