

# Blindfolded Eyes and the Eyable Being

## Pessoa, the senses, and the *35 Sonnets*

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### Keywords

*35 Sonnets*, Heteronymism, Performativity, Skepticism, Unity and Diversity.

### Abstract

This article revisits Pessoa's heteronymism (as performativity) in relation to the old issue of poetic unity/diversity. It examines Pessoa's epistemological skepticism, while handling the five senses in the *35 Sonnets*, in comparison and contrast with his so-called "obscene poems" and the rest of his poetry.

### Palavras-chave

*35 Sonnets*, Cepticismo, Heteronimismo, Performatividade, Unidade e Diversidade.

### Resumo

Este artigo revisita o heteronimismo de Pessoa (como performatividade), em relação à velha questão da unidade/diversidade poéticas. Debruça-se sobre o cepticismo epistemológico com que Pessoa trata os cinco sentidos nos *35 Sonnets*, em comparação e contraste com os ditos "poemas obscenos" e o resto da poesia de Pessoa.

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*Ser a mesma coisa de todos os modos possíveis ao mesmo tempo*  
 [To be the same thing in all possible ways at the same time]  
 Álvaro de Campos, "A Passagem das horas"<sup>1</sup>

*Make thee another self for love of me*  
 Shakespeare, Sonnet X

In one of his novels, Helder Macedo suddenly brings Fernando Pessoa vividly to presence by telling his readers about a favorite Portuguese poet who wrote as if he were different people, in order to live as if he were always the same person ["escrevia como se fossem pessoas diferentes para poder viver como se fosse sempre o mesmo" (MACEDO, 2013: 40)].<sup>2</sup> Jacinto do Prado Coelho was the first critic to explain how Pessoa's poetic devices contribute to preserving both stylistic unity and aesthetic diversity. I still read Prado Coelho's *Unidade e Diversidade em Fernando Pessoa* [*Unity and Diversity in Fernando Pessoa*] (1950) with great pleasure and profit, but my approach here is somewhat different. I begin by acknowledging that the empirical man orchestrating the various heteronyms is always one and the same. Whether posing as decadent or futurist or both at the same time, whether impersonating male or female or both at the same time, whether assuming bucolic simplicity or inordinate sadomasochism or sophisticated artistry or all three at once, the man pretending is always the same. Whether lyric, epic, drama or theoretical and critical prose, or the prose of his poems, the man writing is always one and the same person, a *pessoa* hankering after aesthetic multiplicity: to be everything in every possible, poetic manner of being. As I look once again at Pessoa's poetry in English, Helder Macedo's witty description suddenly strikes me as signifying to perfection what Judith Butler calls performativity. Says Butler: "identities can come into being and dissolve depending on the concrete practices that constitute them [...]. To what extent is 'identity' a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience? [...] [T]he 'coherence' and 'continuity' of 'the person' are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility" (BUTLER, 1990: 15-17). To revisit the heteronyms with Butler, we just have to switch from "real life" to poetic performativity. Leaving aside, for the moment, the coherence and continuity of the person I claim for the empirical Pessoa, I suggest that Butler's problematization of gender identities helps us to understand Pessoa-the-poet as he went on imagining concrete practices for his various impersonations.

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<sup>1</sup> Line 3 from Portuguese poem "A Passagem das horas" ["The Passage of the Hours"], written *circa* 1916. See PESSOA (2015: 135).

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

Whether writing in English or in Portuguese,<sup>3</sup> either as a Portuguese or as an English poet, the man behind the manifold masks, that is to say, the *peessoa* constantly donning his many, ongoing, invented *personae*, is ever one and the same—a person whose poetic goal is to go on imagining multiple experiences (i.e. identities) of infinite variety. No doubt because in “real life” he felt in his own body the contradictions of diversity—as he sensed, in his conventional, socially heterosexual figure, homosexual longings<sup>4</sup>—the civic person Fernando António Nogueira Pessoa, as the artist he also was, could not help but imagine and pursue the powerful allure of multiplicity. Whatever the proclivities of the man behind the masks, sexual or otherwise, Pessoa-the-poet creates and performs all of them in his work.

This is why today we do not hesitate to acknowledge, after Jorge de Sena said it first many years ago, that “Fernando Pessoa” is but one more heteronym (SENA, 1974). As the famous *arca* [trunk] continues to yield new unpublished manuscripts, most of them perhaps never meant for publication, many Pessoaan scholars feel rightly entitled to claim more knowledge of the empirical-man-behind-the-poet, particularly concerning matters related to Pessoa’s sexuality. Often, not always, such knowledge leads to new ways of better appreciating Pessoa’s plural work in the context of the social mores and literary traditions of the West at the beginning of the twentieth century or in the light of new theoretical frameworks.<sup>5</sup> Suddenly, and not surprisingly, the English poems, relatively neglected for so long,<sup>6</sup> as well as Pessoa’s ambiguous relationship with them, catch more of the critics’ attention.<sup>7</sup> One of the critics just referenced (Mark Sabine), resorting to Lacan and Deleuze/Guattari, firmly links homosexuality to Pessoa’s major heteronymic explosion as a way of escaping compulsory subjectivity in the patriarchal order. Although I, myself, have suggested as much (RAMALHO SANTOS, 2003: 75), I would

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Patricio Ferrari and Patrick Quillier, we have now a critical edition of the approximately 200 poems the man behind the mask wrote in French as well. See PESSOA (2014).

<sup>4</sup> See the well-known, predictably sexist, autobiographical note about acknowledging in himself a (passive) feminine temperament coupled with a (presumably active) masculine intelligence, while fearing that his “mild sexual inversion” might “descend into his body” and force him to act as a gay person: “Não encontro dificuldade em definir-me: sou um temperamento feminino com uma inteligência masculina [...] Sempre [...] me inquietou [...] que essa disposição do temperamento não pudesse um dia descer-me ao corpo” [I find no difficulty in defining myself: I am a feminine temperament with a masculine intelligence [...] I have always worried [...] that this temperament disposition might someday descend into my body] (PESSOA, 2003: 186).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, ZENITH (2002: 35-56).

<sup>6</sup> But see SENA (1974 and 1982); EDINGER (1982); VIEIRA (1989). Closer to us, see FREIRE (2004).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. ARENAS (2007: 103-123); MONTEIRO (2007); SABINE (2007: 148-177). Recently, thanks to Patricio Ferrari’s initiative, the poems Pessoa wrote in the English language have become center stage. I am alluding to “Inside the Mask: The English Poetry of Fernando Pessoa,” a symposium held at Brown University on 17-18 April 2015.

like to add now that what Pessoa does, rather than attempting to escape male, hegemonic, phallic subjectivity, is to subvert it and call it radically into question by allowing for the proliferation of many different poetic identities. In other words, and in spite of the possible “sexual problem” of the man behind the masks, “homosexual Pessoa” strikes me as one more heteronym inside Sena’s *o heterónimo Fernando Pessoa* [the heteronym Fernando Pessoa]. Indeed, I tend to read the not particularly sexually-minded poet’s surmisings in the *35 Sonnets* (1918) as a huge footnote to the vociferous carnality of “Epithalamium” (1921) and the necrophilic sensuousness of “Antinous” (1918 and 1921). Somewhat like the interruptive gesture of “sensual” and “gross” Walt Whitman in Section 38 of “Song of Myself” — “Enough! enough! enough!” — the poet suddenly aware of the burden of being and feeling everything and everybody to the utmost bodily intensity. This is not to say that a new empirical Pessoa may come out of this. As Richard Zenith wisely warns, it is risky to draw conclusions on Pessoa’s civic person on the basis of poems that totally depend on imaginative faking (ZENITH, 2007: 20). Not to mention the fact that possible autobiographical material included in a poet’s work immediately becomes fiction.

Pessoa’s own justification for his “obscene” English poems is well known. In a letter addressed to his young admirer and future biographer, João Gaspar Simões, dated 18 November 1930, Pessoa argues that, by writing the homoerotic “Antinous” and the rather voyeuristic, ostensibly heteroerotic “Epithalamium,” he had wanted to get rid of that particular element of the “order” of “obscenity” to which he claimed every person is prey.<sup>8</sup> Writing those two poems and getting “obscenity” out of his system, as it were, was perhaps for him like a rite of passage: after having written them, the poet seems to intimate, he felt ready to engage “in superior mental processes” [“processos mentais superiores”] (PESSOA, 1957: 67-68). Curiously enough, however, the “obscene” poems are coeval with compositions that would thus be the result of what Pessoa no doubt wanted Gaspar Simões to consider “superior mental processes.” For instance, Fernando Pessoa’s “Gládio” and “Chuva Oblíqua,” Alberto Caeiro’s *O Guardador de Rebanhos* and “Poemas inconjuntos,” Ricardo Reis’s “Mestre, são plácidas” and “As rosas amo dos jardins de Adónis,” Álvaro de Campos’s “Ode Triunfal,” “Ode Marítima,” “Saudação a Walt Whitman” and “Passagem das horas.”<sup>9</sup> Not to mention the “obscene” moments in the great odes of Álvaro de Campos, whose “gaze is a sexual perversion” (“Ah, olhar é em mim uma perversão sexual” [“Ode Triunfal”]) and who sadomasochistically longs to be the passive body of raped women (“Ode Marítima”).

In a pathbreaking essay on Fernando Pessoa as an ontological mystery, Eduardo Lourenço characterizes the poet as the existential “absent I” [“o eu

<sup>8</sup> Composition dates of “Epithalamium” and “Antinous” are, respectively, 1913 and 1915.

<sup>9</sup> Creation dates of these poems range roughly from 1911 to 1916.

ausente”] (LOURENÇO, 1986). I claim, rather, that Pessoa-the-heteronymic-poet is the obsessively pluripresent I. The poet so multiplied himself that even the heteronyms had to have para-heteronyms inside themselves. The “Fernando Pessoa” heteronym manifests himself in Portuguese and in English, the English manifestations including stridently sexual (“obscene”) poems, that is to say, on the one hand, poems like “Epithalamium” and “Antinous,” in which sex and the concrete senses are major characters, and, on the other, quietly asexual poems, like the *35 Sonnets*, where the senses are conceptualized, called into question, and rendered abstract by philosophical surmise. While they overwhelmingly preside over “Epithalamium” and “Antinous,” the five senses are questioned in the *35 Sonnets*, whether explicitly or implicitly, as regards their perceptual power and epistemological trustworthiness; while “Epithalamium” resorts to coarsely sensual, graphic images to extol the fleshly pleasures of heterosexual intercourse (“flesh pinched, flesh bit, flesh sucked, flesh girt around | Flesh crushed and ground,” xvi) and while “Antinous” reimagines homosexual lust to turn a dead body into a “fleshly presence” (line 232) made of marble, the *35 Sonnets* wonder if reality or truth (or life) can be sensorily grasped at all; while “Epithalamium” and “Antinous” deal with mortal bodies of flesh and blood, in the *35 Sonnets* metaphysical reflections on the senses conceptualize the body and turn it into an abstract, immaterial presence. With one curious exception. If, indeed, the thirty-five sonnets may be read as a kind of counterpoint to the “obscene” poems, Sonnet IV seems to recast Hadrian’s monody in far more sobering terms as the poet’s loving memory and imagining (“my seeing thought”) cedes to the gruesome materiality of the beloved’s dead, decomposing body as mere “piecèd rot” (line 1).<sup>10</sup> Such intellectual questioning, if not suspension, of the senses is an aspect of the epistemological skepticism pervading the whole sonnet sequence. In sonnet xxviii we read: “I look, yet dream. | For sure reality cannot be this! | [...] | Only what in this is not this is true” (lines 2-3 and 8).

The English poems are not usually consensually considered to be part of Pessoa’s most remarkable or original poetic achievements. It is interesting, however, that several poets/scholars and admirers of Pessoa felt attracted to them to the point of wanting to appropriate them by translating them into their own language. As regards the *35 Sonnets*, to the best of my knowledge, Adolfo Casais Monteiro, Jorge de Sena and José Blanc de Portugal were the first to translate them into Portuguese. In 1975, a bilingual volume of Pessoa’s English poems, translated by Fernando Dias, was also published in Lisbon (PESSOA, 1975). More recently, besides Luísa Freire’s new renditions of all the then known English poems into Portuguese (PESSOA, 2007), a few Spanish-speaking poets and scholars were

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<sup>10</sup> I do picture Hadrian and Antinous in this sonnet, but all translators I mention in this essay read the beloved as female—except Sena, who keeps the ambiguity of the English.

tempted to render Pessoa's 35 *Sonnets* in their language.<sup>11</sup> I suspect that what caught such scholars' creative eye was precisely the challenge posed by the cryptic meanings resulting from the very complex and highly convoluted diction of the sonnets or, as an English critic put it at the time, their "Tudor tricks" and "ultra-Shakesperian Shakespearianism."<sup>12</sup>

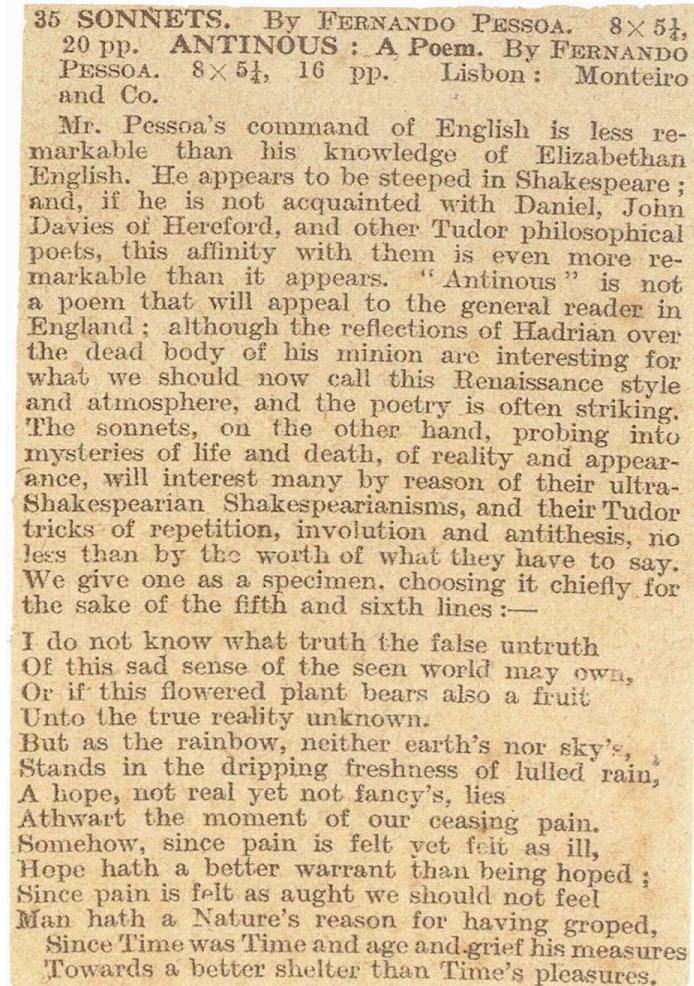


Fig. 1. Review of Pessoa's 35 *Sonnets* and *Antinous* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 19 September 1918, p. 11. Detail.

<sup>11</sup> For my purposes in this essay, I have particularly in mind the following: PESSOA (1988 and 2014). In his excellent *Posfácio* [*Postface*], Wiesse gives account of a couple of other translations into Spanish.

<sup>12</sup> Review of the 35 *Sonnets* and *Antinous*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 19 September 1918. The review, however, was not totally unfavorable; another one published in *The Glasgow Herald* (same date), though not raving, was even more sympathetic. Many decades later, Esteban Torre speaks ecstatically of the thirty-five "diamonds of language" that seduced and challenged him into translating them, precisely because of their "enigmatic" mode (11-12). Interestingly enough, Torre became familiar with the 35 *Sonnets* through Fernando Dias's bilingual edition, unexpectedly found by him in an old Lisbon bookshop. How Shakesperian the "complexities" of the 35 *Sonnets* are remains to be fully ascertained, but cf. Sena, "Introdução geral" to *Poemas Ingleses*, 77ff., and Zenith, "Prefácio" to *Poesia Inglesa*, 23ff. See also (FREIRE, 2004: 207), as well as the contributions by Russom, Portela, and Saval in this issue.

Or perhaps the crabbed English of the sonnets, so unlike the two “obscene” poems, struck them, as it does me, as an oblique poetic statement that makes even more challenging the task of the translator. Be it as it may, the translators’ strategies range from trying very hard to honor semantic and formal fidelity (Sena, Wiesse) to embracing, in varying degrees, *la belle infidèle* (Dias, Torre, Freire). Because to translate is not to say the same thing in a different language, but rather to say a different thing in a different language, translations of poetry can be very useful to the critic-as-interpreter.

I borrow my title from Sonnet II, to which I will turn in a moment, but first I wish to comment on Sonnet XXXII:

When I have sense of what to sense appears,  
 Sense is sense ere 'tis mine or mine in me is.  
 When I hear, Hearing, ere I do hear, hears.  
 When I see, before me abstract Seeing sees.  
 I am part Soul part I in all I touch –  
 Soul by that part I hold in day with all,  
 And I the unsunned part, that doth make sense such  
 As I can err by it and my sense mine call.  
 The rest is wondering what these thoughts may mean,  
 That come to explain and suddenly are gone,  
 Like messengers that mock the message' mien,  
 Explaining all but the explanation;  
     As if we a ciphered letter's cipher hit  
     And find it in an unknown language writ.

(PESSOA, 1993: 82)

In this sonnet, the five senses are abstracted from human bodily perception and philosophically discussed as conceptualized, intellectualized, and personified entities providing no access to reality (the “body” of “Truth” in Sonnet II). The senses of sight (“Seeing”) and hearing (“Hearing”) are used here as examples, the assumption being that the poem’s reasoning would apply to the other three senses as well. The sense of Touch is there before my concrete touching; the sense of Taste, before my concrete tasting; the sense of Smell, before my concrete smelling. That the sense of touch is mentioned in this sonnet in articulation with “Soul,” capital “S” (“I am part Soul part I in all I touch”), is significant, since touch-as-sex is actually the sense that, however unmentioned as such in the poems themselves, turns “Epithalamium” and “Antinous” into an orgy of sensuality, that being the reason why Pessoa felt he had to term them “obscene” on behalf of his prospective readers. Equally significant is the fact that neither taste nor smell is ever mentioned in Sonnet XXXII (or any other of the thirty-five sonnets). Taste, smell, and touch were conceived of by the hegemonic western philosophical tradition as the baser senses. Descartes’s *cogito ergo sum*, distinguishing the disembodied mind from the

experiencing body and hierarchizing them, would be corrected only much later by Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the body which put the empirical/epistemic subject firmly in the physical world via the senses and sensation, thus turning "I think therefore I am" into "I exist therefore I think" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1945). On the other hand, heavily influenced by Christianity, mainstream western philosophy and science have never had much respect for the fleshly senses in general. Just think of Augustine's temptations of the lust of the senses in his widely influential *Confessions*. Sight might be tolerated but only because, the notion went, it is the mind that "sees," not the eye (as is actually made clear in Sonnet XXI).<sup>13</sup> The same can be said of hearing. In Sonnet XXXII, the senses are totally disembodied: the eye (I) does not see, "abstract Seeing" (line 4) does; the ear does not hear, (abstract) Hearing does. Sense is there, being sense, before the "I" senses. And when the "I" presumes to sense, a mistake is bound to occur. The physical, concrete senses are definitely not reliable or trustworthy as a path to the knowledge of reality. Trusting the senses is like attempting to read a ciphered letter without knowing the relevant codes. Better to rely on thinking, for thinking alone grasps reality, if only by making it up: "thinking nought does on nought being confer" (line 9). Of the translations I have convened to help me read the English sonnets, only Sena's, Dias's and Torre's keep the crucial adjective "abstract" in "abstract Seeing." Wiese renders it as "el Ver puro," perhaps echoing Benjamin's "reine Sprache," whereas Freire drops the epithet altogether. In Freire's case, there are obvious, sound, and metrical reasons for an erasure that is part of a rarefying process running throughout her translation of the whole series, putting in this particular sonnet a slight emphasis on the subject's actual agency. A fine example is the rendition of the first line of the second quatrain: "I am part Soul part I in all I touch" ["No que toco, em partes Alma e Eu"]. The result is a completely different, but by no means lesser, poem.

I turn now to Sonnet II:

If that apparent part of life's delight  
 Our tingled flesh-sense circumscribes were seen  
 By aught save reflex and co-carnal sight,  
 Joy, flesh and life might prove but a gross screen.  
 Haply Truth's body is no eyable being,  
 Appearance even as appearance lies,  
 Haply our close, dark, vague, warm sense of seeing  
 Is the choked vision of blindfolded eyes.

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<sup>13</sup> Merleau-Ponty discusses this position in *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 263ff, the work in which consciousness is redefined as sense perceptive (467) (Page numbers refer to the online copy). In his recent work, Boaventura de Sousa Santos has been analyzing the consequences of the problem of the hierarchization of the senses for knowledge pursuit in contemporary social sciences (SANTOS, 2014).



Wherefrom what comes to thought's sense of life? Nought.  
 All is either the irrational world we see  
 Or some aught-else whose being-unknown doth rot  
 Its use for our thought's use. Whence taketh me  
     A qualm-like ache of life, a body-deep  
     Soul-hate of what we seek and what we weep.

(PESSOA, 1993: 67)

In this sonnet the “sense of seeing” is also radically questioned, but the questioning is clearly painful. This is very interesting because, at about the same time, the same person behind the performative-heteronymic masks was inventing Alberto Caieiro, the poet who claims not to be a poet because he is rather *all blissfully made of seeing*. As if giving the lie to Caieiro, or perhaps hinting at Caieiro’s sickness in poems XV through XIX of *O Guardador de Rebanhos* [*The Keeper of Sheep*], Sonnet II surmises, paradoxically, that the human, carnal sense of sight might well be blind. What could be a very concrete and palpable image of reality—the *body* of truth being *eyed*—is pictured as not graspable at all by the concrete organ of the sense of sight—the eye itself: “Haply Truth’s body is no eyable being” (line 5). To say that reality is not eyeable is technically the same as to say that reality is not visible, or that it is invisible, as three of the translators referred above have it (Sena, Dias and Freire). The translations that Torre and Wiese propose for this line, however, help us to realize the exactness of the poet’s phrasing and its implications for the overall conception of the sonnet. While Torre’s rendition calls further attention to the physicality of the senses by shifting from seeing to hearing—“Mas, ciertamente, la Verdade es muda”—Wiese puts the emphasis on the physically seeing subject: “Puede ser que no veamos la verdad.” The repetition of “haply” in the fifth and seventh lines shows that the conjecture shaping the poem is actually twofold: perhaps our eyes are blind to reality, or can only grasp it as “a gross screen”; or perhaps there is nothing *real* out there to be seen at all (let alone physically grasped): “Appearance even as appearance lies, | Haply our close, dark, vague, warm sense of seeing | Is the choked vision of blindfolded eyes” (lines 6-8). The poem surmises not just about the capacity of human eyes to see reality but also about the reality of reality itself. Our eyes cannot see because there is nothing there to be seen, since whatever is there is unknowable. Nothingness is thus what presides over sense perception: “Wherefrom what comes to thought’s sense of life? Nought” (line 9). The sonnet constructs sensorial impotence and helplessness before a world that is, in turn, totally incomprehensible (“irrational”) (line 10). As if the good-for-nothing senses could not but contaminate “thought” itself: “All is either the irrational world we see | Or some aught-else whose being-unknown doth rot | Its use for our thought’s use” (lines 10-12). Of the translators I have convened here, Dias and Freire best capture the sonnet’s intricate conclusion. (“Whence taketh me”) (line 12): the poet’s tormented surmises could not but lead to physical and spiritual anguish, despair, powerlessness, and self-deprecation.

Let me now convene Sonnet xxv:

We are in Fate and Fate's and do but lack  
 Outness from soul to know ourselves its dwelling,  
 And do but compel Fate aside or back  
 By Fate's own immanence in the compelling.  
 We are too far in us from outward truth  
 To know how much we are not what we are,  
 And live but in the heat of error's youth,  
 Yet young enough its acting youth to ignore.  
 The doubleness of mind fails us, to glance  
 At our exterior presence amid things,  
 Sizing from otherness our countenance  
 And seeing our puppet will's act-acting strings.  
     An unknown language speaks in us, which we  
     Are at the words of, fronted from reality.

(PESSOA, 1993: 79)

This sonnet helps us to realize that the poet of the thirty-five sonnets conceives of "us" (and of himself) as if without carnal senses. Without senses, meaning is inaccessible to us ("incommunicable," as Sonnet I has it), whether it be the sense of the world or the sense of ourselves. We lack "outness from soul" (Sonnet xxv, line 2) to comprehend ourselves as physically living in the world (or "in Fate") (line 1). Incapable of grasping the "outward truth" (line 5) of reality (or the world), we know nothing about ourselves either, and ultimately discover ourselves to be mere marionettes manipulatable by unfathomable otherness. The foreignness of language, a language we don't speak and rather speaks us, thus totally barring (*fronting*) us from reality, fully confirms the epistemological skepticism of the sonnet sequence. Sonnet I had already set the tone by insisting on the unbridgeable distance between subject and object that hinders meaningful representation and communicability: "What we are | Cannot be transfused into word or mien" (lines 2-3).

Finally, for my approach in this essay, Sonnet XXI is by far the most interesting. It actually reads rather like a gloss on the whole idea underlying the 35 *Sonnets*, that is to say, the idea that the senses are unreliable, that thought makes up for the unreliability of the senses, but that thought, in turn, must rely on the senses, even though the senses end up producing only mental abstractions.

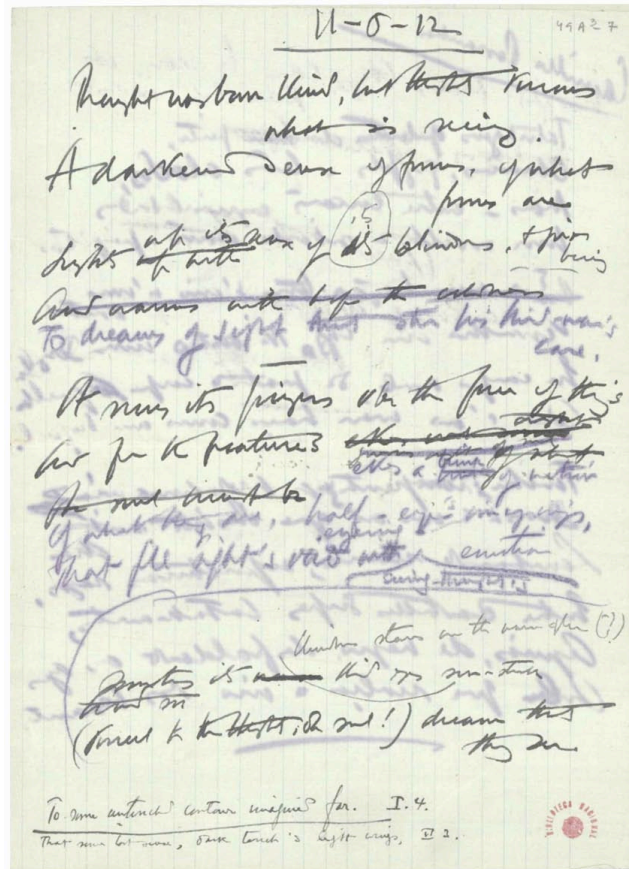


Fig. 2. Ms. of Sonnet XXI, (BNP/E3, 49A<sup>3-7</sup>).

The fascinating thing about this sonnet is its use of the sense of touch, one of the so-called baser senses because of its obvious physicality, as the touchstone, as it were, not of sensorial, but intellectual perception. Though born blind, thought knows what seeing is, perhaps, paradoxically, because of touch:

Thought was born blind, but Thought knows what is seeing.  
 Its careful touch, deciphering forms from shapes,  
 Still suggests form as aught whose proper being  
 Mere finding touch with erring darkness drapes.  
 Yet whence, except from guessed sight, does touch teach  
 That touch is but a close and empty sense?  
 How does mere touch, self-uncontented, reach  
 For some truer sense's whole intelligence?  
 The thing once touched, if touch be now omitted,  
 Stands yet in memory real and outward known,  
 So the untouching memory of touch is fitted  
 With sense of a sense whereby far things are shown.  
 So, by touch of untouching, wrongly aright,  
 Touch' thought of seeing sees not things but Sight.

(PESSOA, 1993: 77)

What does it mean to proclaim thought blind and, at the same time, endow it with the sense of touch? This is part of the epistemological paradox the thirty-five sonnets as a whole perform. The misperceptions of the senses, the poems suggest, are no pathway to understanding reality, knowledge, life or the truth; better to trust the intellect to grasp the body of truth. But what if the intellect is dependent on the senses for its very being? What if thought could not do without touch? Could the poet finally realize, Lucretius-like, that touch “corporis est sensus | is the bodily sense” (LUCRETIUS, 1953: 114-115)? I get some insight about the sonnet’s paradoxes from my translators. Could it be that thought is impaired by the rivalry of the senses, sight denouncing touch as empty, as Torre’s version suggests? (“¿Si no es de la visión, de dónde viene | que el tacto sea un sentido pobre y huero?”). Or is it touch that imprints reality on the mind in the form of memory, as Freire has it? (“A coisa omitida, uma vez tocada | Na memória está, sabida e real”). In other words, what if sense *thinks*? Didn’t the heteronym Fernando Pessoa also wonder once at his “thinking senses” (Sonnet XXIII) (line 3) in “Ela canta, pobre ceifeira?” (“O que em mim sente ‘stá pensando” (“What in me feels is thinking” [PESSOA, 1969: 144]). Could Merleau-Ponty have read Pessoa? Not probable, but his essay on the phenomenology of perceptions gets inspiration from numberless poets and artists. The truth is that poets and artists have never been able *to think* without the *senses*. Rimbaud was right when he said that poetry always goes *en avant* (letter to Paul Demeny, 15 May 1871).

The disquieting sense paradoxes we encounter in the 35 *Sonnets*, so brilliantly reenacted in 1930 in the *Livro do Desassossego* [*Book of Disquiet*] (“Sentir tudo de todas as maneiras; saber pensar com as emoções e sentir com o pensamento”) (PESSOA, 2010: 229) [“Feeling everything in every way; knowing how to think with the emotions and how to feel with thinking”], are also characteristic of the tormented poetry of Portuguese Fernando Pessoa and Álvaro de Campos, as well as of the seemingly serenely accepting odes of Ricardo Reis. At its root may well be a reconsideration of what William Blake once termed one of the greatest errors of all “Bibles or sacred codes”: the distinction between body and soul (or mind), privileging the mind as the sole organ of knowledge and understanding. Blake’s relevant text is “The Voice of the Devil” in his Dionysian *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-1793), and it is important to quote it here in full (BLAKE, 1968: 34):

All Bibles or sacred codes have been the causes of the following Errors.

1. That Man has two real existing principles Viz: a Body & a Soul.
2. That Energy, call’d Evil, is alone from the Body, & that Reason, call’d Good, is alone from the Soul.
3. That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies.

But the following Contraries to these are True<sup>14</sup>

1. Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age
2. Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.
3. Energy is Eternal Delight

The first of Blake's "contraries" is underlined in Pessoa's copy of Blake's works:

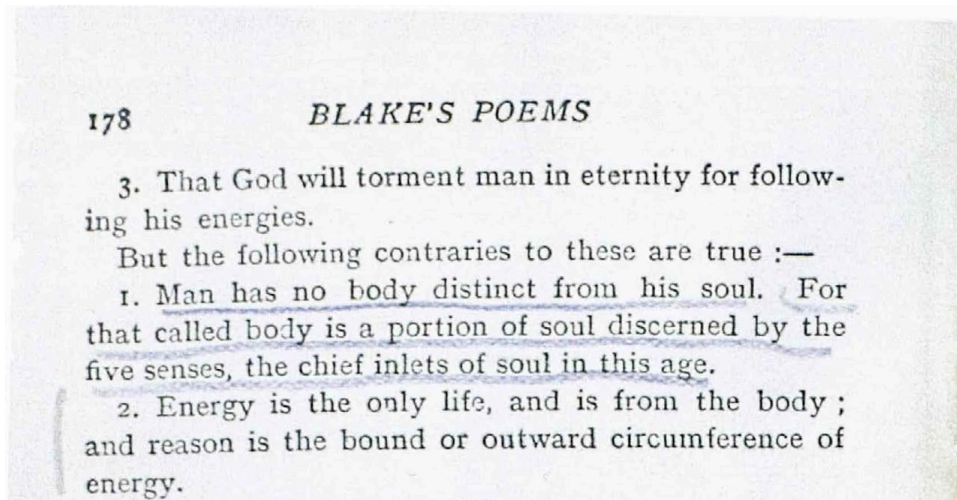


Fig. 3. William Blake, *Poems of William Blake*, n.d. [Fernando Pessoa House, call number 8-44]. Pessoa's markings.

No wonder the name of William Blake, together with that of Walt Whitman, appears in Pessoa's notes on sensationism. In the draft of a letter written in French, probably dated 1915 and apparently to be sent to Marinetti by Álvaro de Campos, the poet presents himself as the only and true "*sensationist*" (italics in the original), while indicating Blake and Whitman as his intellectual ancestry in this regard (PESSOA, 2009: 377). In another letter probably dated 1916—this time in English and presumably addressed to an English publisher, but also coeval with the English poems I deal with here—Pessoa explains that in the poetry of the "sensationist" (quotation marks in the original) "spirit and matter are interpenetrated and inter-transcended." Further down, he goes on to disclose "the central attitude of Sensationism" (PESSOA, 2009: 401-404). Reading this document today, it is difficult not to smile at Pessoa's rash and opinionated pronouncements on Shakespeare and Milton ("I tend more and more to put Milton above Shakespeare as a poet") coupled with his provocative confession of fickleness ("I try hard not to be the same thing three minutes running, because that is bad aesthetic hygiene"). But it is interesting to find in this irreverent sensationist's self-promotion a theoretical projection of the kind of "organized whole" he missed in Shakespeare and praised

<sup>14</sup> My emphasis.

in Milton. "The only reality in life," he states, "is sensation. The only reality in art is consciousness of the sensation." I suggest that these notes on sensationism, authored by the heteronymic poet roughly at the same time that the English poems I here deal with were also being composed, by implicitly bringing mind and the senses together, put in perspective the unity that Prado Coelho many years ago grasped in Pessoa's poetic production, including the English poems of the "heterónimo Fernando Pessoa." We could do worse than "eyeing" multiple Pessoa's works as the "body" of his performative "truth."

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