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Belatedness as Cold Memory: The Case of Fernando Pessoa. Pessoa's Unmodernity: Ricardo Reis

According to the story (or at least one of its versions), Ricardo Reis was the third of the most important Pessoa's heteronyms to appear, in June 1914, shortly after his master (actually, the master of them all) Alberto Caeiro (April 1914) and only a few days after the first manifestation of the futurist Álvaro de Campos. (One wonders if there might be any connection in this temporal coincidence between a classical man being born immediately *after* a futuristic man or, at any rate, one wonders about this strong connection between classicism and futurism.) Reis was a classicist formally trained as a physician, and all his poems incessantly repeat the typical crossing between Epicureanism and Stoicism that already Horace's odes, from whom Reis so deeply draws, manifested (Pereira 1988: 261-285). In Reis, however, Epicureanism is but a faint mask to a deep distrust about the self and about the world, whose stoic outcome merges with modernist Pessoa's 'pain of knowing'. It is this pain of knowing that is re-enacted, over and over again, in Pessoa's poems, through his different heteronymical voices: it is not hard to understand that the futuristic non-conscious machines sung by Campos are the exact counterpart of the trees or the sunflowers found in Caeiro and also Reis himself, as well as of the cats, the reapers, or the children of Pessoa as oronym. They all correspond to the contentment felt by the 'herd' of those who lived 'unhistorically', about whom Nietzsche had talked in a despising manner in the 1870's.

Although having appeared in 1914 (with a faint previous manifestation), Ricardo Reis would only come to be published in the literary journal founded by Fernando Pessoa in 1924, *Athena*. Along

with his master Caeiro, as well as other semi-heteronyms such as António Mora, they bear out the centrality of neopaganism and of classicism as part of Pessoa's poetic and theoretical views. It was through this neopaganism that a truer, less human and more impersonal poetic programme was to be subsumed by modernity – so Pessoa argued. And we are thus at the core of a concept of the *avantgardes* that is inextricably woven with the *arrières-gardes*, as it feeds on them. It is what I have termed elsewhere 'going forward backwards' (Buescu 2001: 237-256) – and it *is* a reflection on modernity and the future.

The question may therefore be put as Baudelaire had put it in 'Le Peintre de la vie moderne': how is modernity worthy to become antiquity? Under what conditions may this occur? : 'En un mot, pour que toute *modernité* soit digne de devenir antiquité, il faut que la beauté mystérieuse que la vie humaine y met involontairement en ait été extraite' (Baudelaire 1980: 798), says Baudelaire. This 'extraction' of beauty from modernity is only to be performed by the 'observer' of such beauty: 'L'observateur est un *prince* qui jouit partout de son incognito' (795) – and it is not hard to see that this observer, in Baudelaire's view, is also the one who travels to the past and immerses himself in it in the same kind of impersonal, detached way that Reis himself used:

If each thing has its corresponding god,
Why shouldn't I have a god as well?
Why shouldn't it be me?
It's in me that this god moves, for I feel.
I clearly see the outside world –
Things and men with no soul. (1931)
(Pessoa 2006: 131)

He who follows Baudelaire, as Reis so obviously does, walks through the past in the manner of the *prince*, and truly as yet another type of 'observer' of that past, that is, of *flâneur*. We might therefore say that modernity is able to be worthy to become antiquity once it has been appraised as *cultural repetition*: as it unfolds itself, cultural repetition implies the awareness of legacies, traditions, and inheritances that transform each one of its agents into someone who acts as a *testimony*

of that repeated past. By it, one places oneself within the recognition of how one's individual and personal acts may not be understood outside an intersubjective panorama, where repetition also entails a difference: the difference introduced by Reis is his *impossible* classical purity, his diction being the most classical diction of all Portuguese lyrical poetry, almost to the point of non-recognition. Dissent and transgression are thus a central part of repetition, and make no sense without it: each time *rupture* is asserted as the dynamic movement in culture, as was for instance the case with the modernist *avantgardes*, tradition is equally asserted, through which that difference is to be assessed within a context of how repetition is conceived and also significantly misconstrued. This is precisely the case of what happens with Fernando Pessoa and his ability to create a convergence and compatibility between historically incompatible, if not altogether contradictory, literary traditions: bucolism as Whitmanian modernism, for instance, with Alberto Caeiro; classicism and *arrière-garde* as one of the most transgressive forms of *avant-garde* modernism, with Ricardo Reis; neopaganism as a form of being 'human, all too human', with António Mora; futurism as a moving meditation on classical melancholy, with Álvaro de Campos; and so on and so forth. What is at stake here, then, is a notion of poetry as a form of *integrative and omnivorous language and awareness*, conceived more as a *locus* where violent and tensional inclusions are played, than as the creation of discursive and poetic homogeneities, ruled by the gesture of exclusion.

It is not hard to relate the gesture of inclusion implied in this view to the notion of the 'weak messianic power' (Benjamin 2003: 390) that Walter Benjamin argued for each present generation, as it relates to the preceding ones – especially if we take into account how much Pessoa himself was aware of a definite form of messianism in his own conception of literature. The 'secret agreement' that Benjamin argued each present generation has with the preceding ones manifests itself, in Pessoa's case, with special strength, as he 'secretly' comprehends, in that moment 'without transition' that is the present (Benjamin, 16th thesis), a whole set of connections with mostly improbable pasts. By so doing, the present is confirmed in its heterogeneity and, as Benjamin would argue, becomes 'a model of messianic time' (396), of redemption

of the past by the present, as it ‘comprises the entire history of mankind in a tremendous abbreviation’ (396). My contention is therefore that Pessoa’s surge into heteronymia belongs to this exact same tradition, trying to encapsulate into just one generation, and one poetic universe, what otherwise might appear in diverse if not dissenting fields of poetic tradition.

But this ‘messianic surge’ also entails that a distinct unmodern awareness becomes integral to modernity: the *Angelus Novus*’ typical gaze, as described by Benjamin, is also associated by him to the historian’s gaze, in his *Paralipomena to ‘On the concept of history’*, as he comments fragment 80 of Schlegel in the *Athenäum*:

[...] the historian turns his back on his own time, and his seer’s gaze is kindled by the peaks of earlier generations as they sink further and further into the past. Indeed, the historian’s own time is far more distinctively present to this visionary gaze that it is to the contemporaries who “keep step with it”. (405)

The paradoxical quality of the historian’s gaze is therefore also a central characteristic of his: as he looks backwards, his own ‘now’ becomes ‘recognizable’ as such. In a sense, it is the *political* implications of this backward stance that also make it decisively present, as they make it decisively historical. To live historically, that is, to live humanely, is therefore quite the contrary to the bovine satisfaction of the herd which Nietzsche described in the beginning of his essay ‘History in the service and disservice of life’ (Nietzsche 1990: 75-145). Ricardo Reis’ problem with the past and with the present is just one of Pessoa’s instances of the problem that had also occupied Nietzsche, and stems from the same kind of ‘unmodern observations’ that had engaged the philosopher in the mid-1870’s.

A brief detour through Nietzsche’s meditations may therefore help us situate Pessoa’s poetic project and understand Reis’ unmodernity as yet another form of thorough modernity. For even if Nietzsche stresses the importance of forgetting for life, it may well be said, as we shall see, that for him the burden of the past must be made manifest in the description of human life as distinct from the un-historicity of the herd. The three kinds of history that in Nietzsche’s perspective

may do a service to life are *monumental history*; *antiquarian history*; and *critical history*. The first has a definite heroic quality, aiming at being exemplary of the greatness of great men and events (we might connect it with the only published volume by Pessoa in his lifetime, *Mensagem*, and the way it rewrites and therefore responds to Camões' epic poem, *Os Lusíadas*). The third one might well be considered the key to a revisionary approach of the past, as obsolescence is reassessed and replaced in the context of the present. It is in the second form that, in my view, we might locate that use of history that does a service to life, in the way Pessoa and Reis practice it. Antiquarian history implies the observation and indeed 'veneration' (99) of past in its pastness, the recognition of its tradition-value and of its power to preserve what should be preserved. From this point of view, it is the exact counterpart to the revisionism offered by critical history.

But Nietzsche is also occupied, in this essay, with stressing how much historicism is ultimately a way of making a *disservice* to life itself – so we should not forget that the preservation of the past he is talking about, and to which Reis is indebted, must never obfuscate the life of the present. In my view, this is achieved, in Pessoa's work, by the necessary consideration of Reis as just *one* of many heteronyms Pessoa invented and alternatively used. It is in the dialogue between the different heteronyms (and therefore in their context-boundness) that historicism comes to be avoided. The hieratic stance of Reis may thus be interpreted not as a refuge in the past (are there true refuges in the past?), but instead as a radical gesture of bringing that past into the present day, and making a statement about the now, or even about the future, as Nietzsche advocated: '[For] I cannot imagine what would be the meaning of classical philology in our own age, if it is not to be unmodern – that is, to act against the age and, by so doing, to have an effect on the age, and let us hope, to the benefit of a future age' (88).

Baudelaire's paradoxical condition returns under the guise of the Nietzschean observations: one is to be the 'child of [one's] age' only to the point that one of the uses of the past is precisely to counteract one's age, as Reis does. The fact that Antiquity is *unmodern* is therefore at the core of its meaning to modernity. Pessoa and Reis could not be more in accordance with this observation, as he (they) wrote:

I love the roses of Adonis's gardens.
Yes, Lydia, I love those winged roses,
Which one day are born
And on that day die.
Light for them is eternal, since
They are born after sunrise and end
Before Apollo quits
His visible journey.
Let us also make our lives one day,
Consciously forgetting there's night, Lydia,
Before and after
The little we endure. (1914) (83)

There is still another trait that needs stressing. Although Nietzsche accounts for a relativistic approach of the degree and the ability to forget, in different men and cultures, he also envisages greatness in the voracious ability to assimilate the past and integrate it:

The more strongly rooted a man's inner nature, the better he will assimilate or overcome the past; and if we imagine a man of the strongest and most exceptional nature, we would realize that in his case there would be no boundary beyond which his historical sense would overwhelm him and injure him. He would summon up and engage the entire past, his own as well as that most alien to him, and transform it into his own blood. (90)

Such a man would occupy, Nietzsche argues, 'a *supra-historical* vantage point' (92), and would write, as Leopardi, about 'omnipresent, imperishable types, [...] motionless forms of unchanging value and eternally equal meaning' (93) – just as Ricardo Reis does. Consider the similarities between the Leopardi quoted by Nietzsche and Reis himself:

Leopardi:
Nothing is worth your moving.
Earth is unworthy of your sights. Life
Is bitterness and boredom, nothing more.
And the world is foul.
Now be still (93)

Reis:

[...] Time passes
And tells us nothing.
We grow old.
Let us know how,
With a certain mischief,
To feel ourselves go.

Taking action
Serves no purpose.
No one can resist
The atrocious god
Who always devours
His own children.

[Let us pick flowers.
Let us lightly
Wet our hands
In the calm rivers,
So as to learn
Some of their calmness.]

Sunflowers forever
Beholding the sun,
We will serenely
Depart from life,
Without even the regret
Of having lived. (1914) (85)

It is also through this quality of motionless that Leopardi and Reis are able to avoid one of the dangers that Nietzsche recognizes: the 'excess of history [that] in a given age is hostile and dangerous to life' (108). To put it in his own terms, '*only strong personalities can endure history; the weak are completely annihilated by it*' (111). Ricardo Reis, and under his guise Pessoa, is indeed one of such 'strong personalities', one that from being a 'latecomer' will be reckoned by future generations

as a ‘forerunner’ (129). Anachronism once more reveals itself as one of the most pregnant forms history can present.

We once more come into the territory of Walter Benjamin’s *Angelus Novus*, the angel blown into the future by the winds of history, while contemplating the ruins of the past. It is perhaps surprising, but nevertheless to be noted, that, a few years later (1947), Sartre himself portrayed Baudelaire in much the same way (although in a more ‘mechanical’ setting), as William Marx (2004) accurately points out (10): ‘[Baudelaire] avait choisi d’avancer à reculons, tourné vers le passé, accroupi au fond de la voiture qui l’emporte et fixant son regard sur la route qui fuit’ (Sartre 1994: 10). And if to these two strikingly similar images we add that of Paul Claudel (another unmodern man, to be sure), also recalled by William Marx (17), of the two different positions to occupy when you ride a train, ‘la banquette avant et la banquette arrière’ (1936-1937), then we get an extremely convincing ‘family trait’ between all these images, through which moving forward seems to be possible only when it also includes looking back.

The historical problem of modernity and unmodernity is both Benjamin’s and Sartre’s, and it has to do with the historical and symbolic significance of *anachronism* itself, especially that part of anachronism that looks backwards. To appear out of time (and out of place) is certainly to be perceived as one of the densest, if indeed paradoxical, forms of meditating about the historicity of human’s procedures. From this respect, *belatedness* and the presentification of the past may sometimes appear as vibrant examples of how historical awareness may be lived as a problem, if not a war. *Retrogardism* and *retroavantgarde* (terms coined by Eda Cufer and Peter Weibel) are therefore to be seen as an integral part of that revisionary act that is necessary to every rupture, particularly modernist rupture. However, all this becomes even more interesting when we realize that, as Claudio Guillén has convincingly argued, one of the specific temporal historicities of literature as art is the intermittent duration of its phenomena. This means, among other things, that the *arrières-gardes* may suddenly discover themselves to be a very central part of the *avantgardes*. It is precisely from this awareness that Fernando Pessoa’s work stems, arguably hesitating and alternatively choosing between *avant-gardism* itself, under the name of Álvaro de

Campos' futurism but also under some of the 'isms' of Pessoa himself (ortonym); and *arrière-gardism*, to which we might relate not only the extremely purist classic diction of Ricardo Reis but also the apparently uneducated rustic pastoral of Alberto Caeiro as well as the 'childlike' awareness of part of again the ortonym.

We come therefore to the core of this apparent paradox: the notion of *arrière-garde* also implies, as Péguy understood as early as 1910, and as Antoine Compagnon notes, the ability to be a survivor, if not a posthumous representative of something that has died, and yet survives as such. From this perspective, being the 'après-derniers', in the moving expression by Péguy, becomes a central feature of a special form of belatedness. For if all belatedness is untimely, there is something especially significant in the awareness that this untimeliness has come after everyone else has disappeared from sight: one is not only 'le dernier' but 'l'après-dernier'. It is for this reason that Alain Finkielkraut speaks about Péguy as a 'mécontemporain', in a significant expression that in my view describes much of modern stance itself.

This is Ricardo Reis' family, after all. Reis reaches back to an improbable classical purity much in the same way Compagnon, in 2003 (100), quoted an 1980 Barthes who himself quoted an 1870 Verdi, who hailed: 'Let us look back to the past, it will be a progress'.

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