

Learning from Plants: Fernando Pessoa's *Phytographia*

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Abstract

Fernando Pessoa identified Alberto Caeiro as his master and as the core of his poetic universe. Caeiro, in turn, chose plants as his masters, their unassuming simplicity and resistance to metaphysical categories an inspiration for his writings. In this article, I analyze Caeiro's relationship to plants as a proto-phenomenology and as an example of what I call "superficial realism," an approach to the real that has abandoned the search for depth, considered an obsolete metaphysical construct. I conclude by interpreting Pessoa's heteronymy and inauthenticity as an example of phytographia, a kind of writing influenced by the plants' mode of being in the world.

Keywords: Heteronymy, Plants, Phenomenology, Superficial Realism, Phytographia

Resumo

Fernando Pessoa identificou Alberto Caeiro como o seu mestre e o centro do seu universo poético. Caeiro, por sua vez, elegeu as plantas como os seus mestres, sendo a postura despreziosa e simples e a resistência a categorias metafísicas destas últimas uma inspiração para a escrita do heterónimo. Neste artigo, analiso a relação de Caeiro com as plantas como uma proto-fenomenologia e um exemplo do que defino como "realismo superficial," uma abordagem à realidade que abandona a busca pela profundidade, considerada como uma construção metafísica obsoleta. Concluo com uma interpretação da heteronímia de Pessoa e da sua inautenticidade como um exemplo de fitografia, uma escrita influenciada pelo modo de estar no mundo das plantas.

Palavras-chave: Heteronímia, Plantas, Fenomenologia, Realismo Superficial, Fitografia

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Alberto Caeiro's Masters

In a letter to Adolfo Casais Monteiro about the genesis of his heteronyms dated from just a few months before his death, Fernando Pessoa famously describes one of these heteronyms, Alberto Caeiro, as the “master” of his poetic world. Caeiro, in turn, followed no literary mentors and owed allegiance to no human masters. Portrayed as an almost translucent medium that transforms sensations into poetic language, he depicted things as they are, freed from conventions, rhetorical adornments and metaphysical speculations. As Pessoa put it, writing under the name of Álvaro de Campos in his “Notes in Remembrance of my Master Caeiro” (“Notas para a Recordação do meu Mestre Caeiro”): “He was like the voice of the Earth, which is everything and nobody.”⁶¹

And yet Caeiro was not without a master, or rather, masters. Let us revisit a short selection of his poetry to identify his teachers:

[...] I am something natural –
For instance, an old tree.⁶²

Let us be simple and calm,
Like the brooks and the trees,
And God will love us and make us
Beautiful like the trees and the brooks.⁶³

How sad not to know how to flourish!
[...]
And I look at the flowers and I smile...
I don't know if they understand me
Or if I understand them,
But I know that the truth is in them and in me [...].⁶⁴

⁶¹ “Era como a voz da Terra, que é tudo e ninguém.” *Arquivo Pessoa*, <http://arquivopessoa.net/textos/683>. This and all other quotes from Pessoa's texts are rendered in my translation.

⁶² “sou qualquer cousa natural – | Por exemplo, a árvore antiga.” (Pessoa, 1990: 204).

⁶³ “Sejamos simples e calmos, | Como os regatos e as árvores, | E Deus amar-nos-á fazendo de nós | Belos como as árvores e os regatos.” (Pessoa, 1990: 208).

⁶⁴ “Que triste não saber florir! | [...] | E olho para as flores e sorrio... | Não sei se elas me compreendem | Nem sei se eu as compreendo a elas, | Mas sei que a verdade está nelas e em mim” (Pessoa, 1990: 222).

These brief quotes make it clear that Caetano did have some models that influenced his writing, in fact his whole existence — writing and existing, or simply being, were for him inextricably linked; his aim was that his poetry would be no more than a simple exhalation, as uncomplicated as breathing itself. Caetano did take a leaf out of someone's book when it came to writing poetry, but this someone was, paradoxically, the leaves themselves. In other words, Caetano did not turn to his literary predecessors — he pitied other Portuguese poets, such as Cesário Verde, for writing an artificial kind of literature —, nor did he turn to animals as an alternative model for poetic endeavors, like some of his Modernist contemporaries, including D. H. Lawrence and T. S. Eliot. Instead, he chose the trees and the flowers as his masters, who taught him both how to live and how to write. In the rest of this article, I will address what I call Caetano's *phytopoesis*, i.e. his plant-inflected writing. I will focus on two main features of Caetano's poetry that are, in my view, determined by his reliance on plants as his poetic masters: first, his anti-metaphysical stance and, second, his rejection of depth and of interiority. I will finish with some reflections about the impact of Caetano's *phytopoesis* on Fernando Pessoa's own poetic universe. Was Pessoa also indebted, in his own way, to the mode of being of plants? Can Pessoa's heteronymy be understood as a plant-like form of subjectivity? Is the Pessoaan corpus, at its core, a form of *phytographia*?

Anti-Metaphysics as a Proto-Phenomenology

The poetry of Caetano submits traditional metaphysics to a merciless interrogation, examining its tacit assumptions and pointing out its failures. There is a realization implicit in the Pessoaan corpus that, at the dusk of Western philosophy, abstract thought finds itself in an arbitrary relation to that which it is trying to understand and that the only adequate response to this situation is an anti-metaphysical posture taking the side of lived existence.

Caetano's anti-intellectualist, anti-metaphysical stance comes through in most of his writings. In poem V of *The Keeper of Sheep* he famously wrote that “to not think of anything is metaphysics enough,”⁶⁵ only to add, further down in the same poem:

Metaphysics? What metaphysics do those trees have?
 Only that of being green and lush and of having branches
 And of bearing fruit in their season, and we think nothing of it.
 We hardly even notice them.
 But what better metaphysics than theirs,

⁶⁵ “Há metafísica bastante em não pensar em nada.” (Pessoa, 1990:206).

Which consists in not knowing why they live
 And in not knowing that they don't know?
 [...]
 The only inner meaning of things
 Is that they have no inner meaning at all.⁶⁶

Pessoa posits the trees' being-in-the-world as a model for human behavior. Neither reflecting about their past situation nor speculating about the future, trees simply "are", keeping in tune with their surroundings and responding to present challenges and needs. They do not search for the hidden, metaphysical import of reality, wisely aware of the fact that the only meaning of things is the one that shows itself to us.

For Caeiro, traditional metaphysics culminates in an idealized view of reality, to which he opposes the simple existence of natural phenomena, such as the trees or flowers. Idealization is tantamount to a sickness that poisons metaphysicians, rendering them unable to pay attention to what surrounds them or to do justice to what is precisely as it is, as well as to the bare fact of its being-there: "To think is essentially to err. To err is essentially to be blind and deaf."⁶⁷ The mistake in thinking has not only theoretical repercussions, but it inflicts violence onto its subjects and objects alike. The singularity of phenomena is subsumed under general categories and put in the straightjacket of extraneous, forcefully imposed significations.

Still, it would be rash to interpret Caeiro's take on abstract thought as a dismissal of thinking as such. Caeiro's praise of thoughtlessness is moderated by his statement that: "I do not have a philosophy: I have senses."⁶⁸ Sense-perception is substituted here for metaphysical considerations, inaugurating a novel, plant-inflected kind of thinking. Perception, understood as sensitivity to stimuli shared by humans, animals, and plants, is a

⁶⁶ "Metafísica? Que metafísica têm aquelas árvores? | A de serem verdes e copadas e de terem ramos | E a de dar fruto na sua hora, o que não nos faz pensar, | A nós, que não sabemos dar por elas. | Mas que melhor metafísica que a delas, | Que é a de não saber para que vivem | Nem saber que o não sabem? | [...] O único sentido íntimo das cousas | É elas não terem sentido íntimo nenhum." (Pessoa, 1990: 207).

⁶⁷ "Pensar é essencialmente errar. | Errar é essencialmente estar cego e surdo." (Pessoa, 1994: 135). Caeiro expresses this idea in a variety of ways both in the collection of poetry *The Keeper of Sheep (O Guardador de Rebanhos)* and in a number of poems from the collection *Scattered Poems (Poemas Inconjuntos)*. Thus, in the former, he states: "Mythical poets are sick philosophers, | And philosophers are crazy men" ("Os poetas místicos são filósofos doentes, | E os filósofos são homens doidos" (Pessoa, 1990: 219) and in the latter he underlines the gulf separating experience from abstract thinking: "That which exists for the eyes does not have to exist for thought; | It exists directly for the eyes and not for thought" ("E o que existe para os olhos não tem que existir para o pensamento; | Só existe directamente para os olhos e não para o pensamento," (Pessoa, 1994: 134).

⁶⁸ "Eu não tenho filosofia: tenho sentidos..." (Pessoa, 1990: 205).

mode of thought that does not aim to penetrate the “core” of things, or their “inner meaning”, but remains essentially superficial, in that it registers only what is apprehended through the senses.

Caeiro learns from the unreflective, simple existence of plants to distrust metaphysics. He wishes to go back to the things themselves, such as real trees and flowers, and to discard their philosophical or literary connotations. This approach echoes the considerations of early twentieth-century philosophy, in particular the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, for whom purely theoretical discourses about phenomena, such as metaphysics, create layers of sedimentation that bury and occlude reality, instead of disclosing it. Husserlian phenomenology responds to the dangers of this rampant theoreticism by calling for a reduction of the ossified strata overlaying the phenomena and for a bracketing of unwarranted assumptions about all beings. Caeiro's *phytopoesis* can be read as the practice of a proto-phenomenological reduction in its emphasis on the mere presence of things, liberated from the presupposition that they are but objects put in the service of a human subject. He highlights the uniqueness of each thing, each tree, each flower, imperceptible from the standpoint of conventional philosophy, and makes this uniqueness shine forth in poetic language, which is an exceptionally apt medium for expressing such singularities.

A Superficial Realism

Given his uncompromising anti-metaphysical, proto-phenomenological posture, it is not surprising that Caeiro criticizes all acts of totalization that subsume concrete entities as parts of a larger whole.⁶⁹ The most blatant example of this tendency is the concept of Nature, which dematerializes the multiplicity of natural things and strips them of their inherent reality.

⁶⁹ In one of the *Scattered Poems*, Caeiro criticizes the idea of “totality,” or of the “whole,” that is created by abstract thinking: “If man were, as he should be, | Not a sick animal, but the most perfect of animals, | [...] He would have acquired a *sense* of the “ensemble” | [...] And not, as we did, an *idea* of the “totality” of things. | [...] And then — we would see — we would not have a notion of the *ensemble* or the *totality*, | Because the *sense* of “totality” or “ensemble” would not be of a “totality” or of an “ensemble” | But of true Nature perhaps neither totality nor parts.”

(“Se o homem fosse, como deveria ser, | Não um animal doente, mas o mais perfeito dos animais, | [...] Devia haver adquirido um *sentido* do “conjunto”; | [...] E não, como temos, uma *ideia* do “total” das coisas. | E assim — veríamos — não teríamos noção de *conjunto* ou de *total*, | Porque o *sentido* de “total” ou de “conjunto” não seria de um “total” ou de um “conjunto” | Mas da verdadeira Natureza talvez nem todo nem partes.”) (Pessoa, 1990:135).

I saw that there is no Nature,
 That Nature does not exist,
 That there are hills, valleys, plains,
 That there are trees, flowers, weeds,
 That there are rivers and stones,
 But there is not a whole to which these belong,
 That a real and true whole
 Is a sickness of our ideas.
 Nature is parts without a whole.⁷⁰

Nature is a mere idea superimposed onto the phenomena said to be “natural,” a human projection that is unrelated to the trees or the flowers it endeavors to describe. The natural environment is a collection of unrepeatable and, therefore, non-idealizable living beings that cannot be reduced to a whole.

Caeiro's dismissal of totalization and idealization goes hand in hand with a rejection of any form of “interiority,” of a depth of meaning that would envelop natural things:

Because I know I understand Nature on the outside;
 And I do not understand it from the inside
 Because Nature does not have an inside;
 Otherwise it would not be Nature.⁷¹

For Caeiro, the concept of nature has no depth because nature as such does not exist. Things and living beings immanently are the way they are, and there is no concept that can contain their existence. But the lack of interiority in Nature is also applicable to non-human entities: “To talk about the soul of stones, of flowers, of rivers | Is to talk about oneself and about one's false thoughts.”⁷² The mystical view of living beings and things as ensouled entities is a product of their anthropomorphization, ascribing to them a psyche that they do not have. The realization that non-human beings lack psychological depth is one of the many lessons Caeiro learns from plants. Both scientists and philosophers have often noted that plants offer themselves to exteriority. Having to maximize their intake of sunlight in order to perform photosynthesis, plants turn themselves inside out, as it were, offering their bodies to the outside world. Goethe, for instance, believed that the leaf, completely

⁷⁰ “Vi que não há Natureza, | Que Natureza não existe, | Que há montes, vales, planícies, | Que há árvores, flores, ervas, | Que há rios e pedras, | Mas que não há um todo a que tudo isso pertença, | Que um conjunto real e verdadeiro | É uma doença das nossas ideias. | A Natureza é partes sem um todo.” (Pessoa, 1990: 226-7).

⁷¹ “Porque sei que compreendo a Natureza por fora; | E não a compreendo por dentro | Porque a Natureza não tem dentro; | Senão não era a Natureza.” (Pessoa, 1990: 219).

⁷² “Falar da alma das pedras, das flores, dos rios, | É falar de si próprio e dos seus falsos pensamentos.” (Pessoa, 1990: 219).

superficial and exposed to the elements, is the prototype of all other plant organs, including the roots, the stem and the flowers. Caeiro takes this quintessentially vegetal feature of superficiality to be a characteristic of all non-human entities, which do not have the depth we commonly attribute to them. He therefore conceives of all natural beings by analogy to the mode of being of plants.

The question remains, however, as to whether humans themselves have the psychic interiority they tend to attribute to other things and creatures. Caeiro's goal is not to pit the exteriority of non-humans, especially plants, against human interiority but, rather, to use plant life as a model for humankind. He reiterates that human beings should strive to be in tune with trees and flowers and that, in order to do so, their existence must also be exterior. Humans must give up the illusion of psychic depth and of the interiority of the soul that sets them apart from the world: "Yes, before being interior we are exterior. | Therefore, we are essentially exterior."⁷³ This attachment to exteriority presupposes that there are no inaccessible things-in-themselves — the Kantian *noumena* — behind or above the external phenomena given to the senses. Caeiro's privileging of the sense of vision in particular is evidence for this emphasis on exteriority, given that the eye registers the external surfaces of things within perceptual presence.⁷⁴ The givenness of phenomena and of our own human selves *qua* phenomena remains undisputed in Caeiro, forging a very unique strand of non-metaphysical realism. His *phytopoesis* is, at heart, a form of superficial hyper-realism.

Caeiro's belief that humans should be more plant-like is but a sign of his decentering of humanity, traditionally considered to be the pinnacle of creation and the hierarchical tip of the great chain of being. For Caeiro, there is nothing inherently superior in humans, when compared to other entities:

Yes, I write poems, and a stone doesn't write poems.
Yes, I have ideas about the world, and a plant doesn't have any.
But stones aren't poets, they're stones;

⁷³ "Sim, antes de sermos interior somos exterior. | Por isso somos exterior essencialmente." (Pessoa, 1990: 242).

⁷⁴ In his article "A Noção das Coisas," Fernando Cabral Martins argues that Caeiro's emphasis on visibility can be explained by the fact that vision is a synecdoche for the other senses (Martins, 2014: 285). Martins further points out that there is in Caeiro a link, very common in Modernist writings, between poetry and painting, which would explain the choice of vision as the privileged sense to experience the world (*ibid*:286). Yet, one can read a deeper philosophical meaning into Caeiro's preference for vision as a way to access the things themselves, as Judith Balso point out: "L'exigence de 'savoir voir quand on voit' souligne que le regard est le seul lieu possible d'une pensée non métaphysique ou antimétaphysique" (*ibid*:52).

And plants are just plants, not thinkers.
I can either say I'm superior to them because of that,
Or that I'm inferior.⁷⁵

Plants, animals and inanimate entities are not better nor worse than humans, just different, an ontological stance that bears clear ethical consequences. For if humans are not superior, why treat them thus? As Thomas Crosse — another of Pessoa's many *personae* and, supposedly, the translator of Caeiro's poetry into English — put it in the preface to his translation of Caeiro's writings: "he [Caeiro] brings an absolute contempt for the fate and the life of man, which, if it be thought excessive, is at least natural to him and a magnificent corrective" ("Translator's Preface").⁷⁶ This relativization of human life, which sounds to our twenty-first century ears as a post-humanist *avant-la-lettre* is, once again, a lesson Caeiro learns from plants.

Pessoa's *Phytographia*

If Caeiro's master was the vegetal world, and Caeiro was, as we saw in the beginning of this text, the master of all heteronyms, including Fernando Pessoa himself, how do plants impact Pessoa's poetry as a whole? In other words, was Pessoa's poetic universe also a form of *phytographia*, a writing inspired by lessons learned from plants?

It is well-known that Pessoa does not equate human existence with the authenticity of an inner psychic life: "When I speak sincerely I don't know with which sincerity I speak. I am variably another to an I that I am not sure exists."⁷⁷ Pessoa's inauthenticity, which speaks through the multitude of heteronyms, is an extension of the idea Caeiro drew from plants that the difference between the inner and the outer is an illusion. But if outside and inside are empty categories, the traditional conceptualization of Pessoa's subjectivity in terms of depth, of an almost limitless interiority, becomes meaningless. Pessoa's

⁷⁵ "Sim, escrevo versos, e a pedra não escreve versos. | Sim, faço ideias sobre o mundo, e a planta nenhuma. | Mas é que as pedras não são poetas, são pedras; | E as plantas são plantas só, e não pensadores. | Tanto posso dizer que sou superior a elas por isto, | Como que sou inferior." (Pessoa, 1990:234).

⁷⁶ *Arquivo Pessoa*, <http://arquivopessoa.net/textos/736>. Ricardo Reis, a neo-pagan poet and one of Pessoa's three main heteronyms, shares this contempt for human life with Caeiro. Reis believes humans should not attach themselves too much to their own living, stoically accept their fate and avoid strong emotions, which might cause them undue suffering. Reis's disengagement from human life is, therefore, an attitude cultivated for humans' own sake, i.e., he remains shackled to an anthropocentric perspective. Conversely, Caeiro realizes that human life is neither better nor worse than that of other living and non-living beings, thus overcoming Reis's anthropocentric bias.

⁷⁷ "Quando falo com sinceridade não sei com que sinceridade falo. Sou variavelmente outro do que um eu que não sei se existe" (Pessoa, 1966: 93).

heteronymy is then best understood using a plant model: the heteronyms are poetic voices that incessantly unfold without any center. They do not spring out of psychological depth but are flat planes that superimpose themselves onto one another, *ad infinitum*, in an essential superficiality that we could characterize as a form of *phytographia*.

I would like to conclude with a quote from Caieiro that could be used to summarize Pessoa's entire heteronymic enterprise:

I think and write like flowers have color
But with less perfection in my way of expressing myself
Because I lack the divine simplicity
Of wholly being only my exterior.⁷⁸

Like plants, who offer themselves and their bodies to their surroundings, Pessoa surrenders himself again and again to his readers in the form of the heteronyms, in a perpetual search for absolute exteriority, for the divine condition of fully coinciding with his written texts, in other words, for *phytographic* perfection.

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⁷⁸ "Penso e escrevo como as flores têm cor | Mas com menos perfeição no meu modo de exprimir-me | Porque me falta a simplicidade divina | De ser todo só o meu exterior" (Pessoa, 1990: 214)