

Surfaciality: Some Poems by Fernando Pessoa, one by Wallace Stevens, and the Brief Sketch of a Poetic Ontology¹

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In this paper, I attempt to give a reading of some poems by the great Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa, focusing in particular on the relation between thought and things or mind and world as it is figured in poetry. On this basis, I seek to develop a poetic ontology using certain insights of Heidegger's on language, interpretation and world. In the closing pages, I pursue this ontology through a reading of a key poem by Wallace Stevens.

In "poetical" ("dichtenden") discourse, the communication of the existential possibilities of one's state-of-mind can become an aim in itself, and this amounts to a disclosing of existence.

Martin Heidegger²

Unbelievably, the word "*pessoa*" means "person" in Portuguese, and the original meaning of person, of course, is a mask or actor as in the notion of *dramatis personae*. Those familiar with Fernando Pessoa's work will know that he wrote using a series of invented personae or "heteronyms" that were not pseudonyms, but fictional voices complete with distinct biographies and dramatically different literary styles. There are at least twenty heteronyms, although we do not know for sure. After Pessoa's death in 1935, 27,500 fragments of writing were found in chests in his

1. This paper is dedicated and deeply indebted to Thamy Pogrebinski.

2. Heidegger, *Being and Time* 162.

workroom in Lisbon, in much confusion and containing a profusion of fictional, aesthetic, philosophical, political, sociological and autobiographical writings, in addition to a large quantity of verse. As only 5000 of these manuscripts have been published, less than a fifth, there may well be some surprises in store in the future.

Pessoa's maxim is "*Sêr plural como o universo!*" ("Be plural as the universe!") (*Alguma Prosa* 41), and his work is a galaxy, a vast and decentred plurality of stars. In my view, what is important to grasp with the idea of heteronymic authorship is that this galaxy does not orbit around one creative God-like authorial sun, but is a vast, shifting and interconnected energy field with numerous and conflicting centres that form into distinct personages.³ As Bernardo Soares, whom Pessoa refers to as a "semi-heteronym," writes in *The Book of Disquiet*, "This book is the autobiography of a man who never existed" (466). What exists is a multitude irreducible to the authority of any imperial authorship.

I would simply like to read a few poems by Pessoa, or rather by the heteronym Alberto Caeiro, who is always referred to as "the master." Caeiro was born in 1889, a year after Pessoa, and died of tuberculosis in 1915, although - somewhat mysteriously - the master heteronym continued to write poems posthumously through the person of Pessoa until 1930. Pessoa himself died in 1935 and may still be - who knows? - producing poems, perhaps through the person of someone reading this paper. Caeiro was recognized as the master by two other of Pessoa's major poetic heteronyms, Alvaro de Campos - the sexually ambiguous Whitmanesque "sensationist" who smoked opium, drank absinthe and studied naval engineering in Glasgow - and Ricardo Reis - the Horatian classicist and monarchist sympathizer who fled to Brazil after the abdication of the last king of Portugal in 1910. In an extreme literary conceit, Caeiro was also recognized as the master poet by Pessoa himself, the orthonym as it were. What is perhaps most extraordinary about the galaxy of heteronyms is the intertextual communication, admiration and criticism that circles amongst the various personae, with Caeiro writing prefaces to the verse of Campos and Reis, Campos writing a memoir of Caeiro that is delightfully critical of Pessoa, Pessoa writing the preface to the "Factless Autobiography" of Soares, and so on, and on, and on. . . . The shape of the galaxy keeps subtly shifting.

3. On the question of how to understand Pessoa's heteronyms, I have learnt a great deal from discussions and correspondence with Judith Balso and Julia Weber. I would also like to thank Filipe Ferreira for emboldening me to write on Pessoa.

I would like to begin with Poem XXXIX by Caeiro:

*O mistério das cousas, onde está ele?
Onde está ele que não aparece
Pelo menos a mostrar-nos que é mistério?
Que sabe o rio disso e que sabe a árvore?
É eu, que não sou mais do que eles, que sei disso?
Sempre que olho para as cousas e penso no que os homens pensam delas,
Rio como un regato que soa fresco numa pedra.*

*Porque o único sentido oculto das cousas
É elas não terem sentido oculto nenhum,
É mais estranho do que todas as estranhezas
E do que os sonhos de todos os filósofos,
Que as cousas sejam realmente o que parecem ser
E não haja nada que compreender.*

*Sim, eis o que os meus sentidos aprenderem sozinhos: -
As cousas não têm significação: têm existência.
As cousas são o unico sentido oculto das cousas.*

The mystery of things - where is it?
Where is it, since it does not appear,
At least to show us that it's a mystery?
What does the river know about this and what does the tree know?
And I, who am no more than they, what do I know about this?
Whenever I look at things and think about what people think of them,
I laugh like a brook that sounds freshly against a rock.

For the only hidden meaning of things
Is that they have no hidden meaning at all.
It is stranger than all estrangements,
Than the dreams of all poets
And the thoughts of all philosophers,
That things are really what they seem to be
And there's nothing to understand.

Yes, this is what my senses learned on their own:
Things have no meaning; they have existence.
Things are the only hidden meaning of things. (*Obra Poética* 223)⁴

4. The poems by Caeiro that I cite are co-translated with Thamy Pogrebinski. They are

The poem sets out to undermine the idea of the mystery of things. For Caeiro, the mystery of things is that there is no mystery. Things are exactly as they seem to be and they have no hidden meaning. The hidden meaning is that things have no hidden meaning, where “hidden” translates “*oculto*,” a word that we will come back to. With regard to things, there is nothing to understand, for we understand them already. We understand them as they are and no more, but no less. Caeiro insists - and this is the most compelling thought in the poem - that there is something stranger than all the dreams of poets and thoughts of philosophers: that things are really what they seem to be and there’s nothing to understand. That is, we understand things already, always already as Heidegger might add, and the purpose of the poem is to point this out. This means that poetry, as nothing more but nothing less than the enactment of the poem itself, is the pointing out of that which we understand already, but have forgotten or passed over. That is, the poem gives us reminders, it functions as what I like to call “everyday anamnesis,” the recollection that brings us back to the fact that things are what they really seem to be. Such a notion of anamnesis does not, as it might do on a certain caricatural metaphysical reading of Plato, invoke the existence of some world behind the scenes, some invisible and hidden meaning that supports visible and manifest meaningfulness. On the contrary, as Caeiro insists, “Things have no meaning” (“*As cousas não têm significação*”) in the sense of a hidden signification. What we can say of them, what the poet says of them, is that they exist, or better that they *have* existence (*têm existência*). Things merely are; or better, they are in and through their mere existence in the world. This is what Campos calls his Master’s “direct concept of things” (“*ao conceito direto das coisas*”) (*Obra Poética* 247).

This line of meditation is continued elsewhere by Pessoa,

*O que nós vemos das cousas são as cousas.
 Por que veríamos nós uma cousa se houvesse outra?
 Por que é que ver e ouvir seria iludirmo-nos
 Se ver e ouvir são ver e ouvir?*

*O essencial é saber ver,
 Saber ver sem estar a pensar,
 Saber ver quando se vê,*

indebted to the versions published by Richard Zenith in *Fernando Pessoa & Co: Selected Poems*, although I have striven for much greater literality than Zenith. For the original text, see Pessoa’s *Obra Poética*. Poems are referred to by the pagination given in *Obra Poética*.

*E nem pensar quando se vê
Nem ver quando se pensa.*

*Mas isso (tristes de nós que trazemos a!),
Isso exige um estudo profundo,
Uma aprendizagem de desaprender
E uma seqüestração na liberdade daquele convento
De que os poetas dizem que as estrelas são as freiras eternas
E as flores as penitentes convictas de um só dia,
Mas onde a final as estelas não são senão estrelas
Nem as flores senão flores,
Sendo por isso que lhes chamamos estrelas e flores*

What we see of things are the things.
Why would we see one thing when another is there?
Why would seeing and hearing be to delude ourselves
When seeing and hearing are seeing and hearing?

The essential is knowing to see,
To know seeing without thinking,
To know seeing when seeing
And not think when seeing
Nor see when thinking.

But this (sad are we who bring the soul clothed!) -
This requires deep study,
An apprenticeship in unlearning,
And a withdrawal into the freedom of that convent
Of which the poets say the stars are the eternal nuns
And the flowers the devout penitents of a single day,
But where after all the stars are but stars
And the flowers are just flowers,
Which is why we call them stars and flowers. (*Obra Poética* 217-18)

Although I am not at all sure about the image of the convent and the stars as eternal nuns (although Pessoa was first educated in a convent in Durban, South Africa), let's look more closely. We begin where we left off in the first poem, with the poet reminding us that what we see of things are things. Nothing more and nothing less. Just that. Such is Caeiro's or Pessoa's "sensationism," which has a family resemblance to Ezra Pound's imagism and which is wonderfully and succinctly expressed by Pessoa in a let-

ter to an English editor: “Art, fully defined, is the harmonic expression of our consciousness of sensations, that is to say, our sensations must be so expressed that they create an object which will be a sensation to others. Art is not, as Bacon said, ‘man added to nature’; it is sensation multiplied by consciousness - multiplied, be it well noted” (“Letter” 35).⁵ Keeping those words in mind, particularly the idea of the multiplication of sensation through the activity of the mind, the argument of the poem is deceptively simple, but its consequence is vast. It is the disappearance of the philosophical problem of skepticism concerning the external world or other minds. Caiero asks: why would we delude ourselves into thinking that another thing is in front of us rather than the thing that we see. Surely, seeing and hearing are seeing and hearing and that’s that. If they weren’t, then they wouldn’t be seeing and hearing. But in the second stanza Caiero makes a distinction between seeing and thinking. We become deluded, and the consequences of this will begin to become clear in the third poem, when we think instead of seeing and fail to see when thinking. That is, when seeing becomes thinking, then the possibility of skepticism announces itself and we bewitch ourselves with pointless ratiocination of various sorts: if the stick looks bent when I stick it in the pond, then how can I be sure of the evidence of my senses? Or, how can I be sure whether the people to whom I am speaking are really people like me and not automata or aliens from another planet who have snatched some local bodies? The problem, in Caiero’s words, the problem that gives rise to the so-called problem of skepticism, is that we have a clothed soul, *a alma vestida*, or what Richard Zenith translates as a “dressed-up heart” (48) and this is something *triste*, something sad. We translate the line, with deliberate awkwardness, as “sad are we who bring the soul clothed.” Therefore, we need to undress that soul, unclthe that heart, in order to see things as things and not think about things. As Caiero puts it with disarming directness elsewhere, “I don’t have philosophy: I have senses” (“*Eu não tenho filosofia: tenho sentido*”) (*Obra Poética* 207).

Yet, unclthing one’s soul is not so simple. Caiero insists that it requires *um estudo profundo*, a deep study; it requires, in Richard Zenith’s pleasing oxymoron, “lessons in unlearning” (49). Yet, the phrase is stronger and more tautological in the original (“*uma aprendizagem de desaprender*”), an apprenticeship in “disapprenticeship,” in unlearning or forgetting. This is where we withdraw or become sequestered (*seqüestração*) in the freedom of that convent where the stars are nuns and the flowers are devout penitents.

5. I’d like to thank Jim Finnegan for alerting me to this passage.

When we have undergone this disapprenticeship, these lessons in unlearning, then finally we will be able to see that flowers are just flowers and stars are just stars, which is why we call them flowers and stars. What we unlearn when we learn to undress our soul is the realization that things exist, or have existence, and that we see them before we think them. The “scandal of philosophy,” as Kant might say, is that we bewitch ourselves with thinking rather than seeing and delude ourselves that such is both the properly philosophical attitude and the true comportment towards things. The scandal is philosophy itself, if by that word we denote the activity of thinking and the cultivation of the theoretical attitude towards things. As Caiero puts it in the first of his *Poemas Inconjuntos*:

*Não basta abrir a janela
Para ver os campos e o rio.
Não é bastante não ser cego
Para ver as árvores e as flores.
É preciso também não ter filosofia nenhuma.
Com filosofia não há árvores: há idéias apenas.
Há só cada um de nós, como uma cave.
Há só ume janela fechada, e todo o mundo lá fora;
E um sonho do que se poderia ver se a janela se abrisse,
Que nunca é o que se vê quando se abre a janela.*

It is not enough to open the windows
To see the fields and the river.
It is not enough not to be blind
To see the tress and the flowers.
It is also necessary not to have any philosophy.
With philosophy there are no tress: there are only ideas.
There is only each of us, like a cave.
There is only one closed window and everybody is outside;
And a dream of what could have been if the window opened,
Which is never what is seen when the window is opened. (*Obra Poética* 231)

Philosophy is life in the cave with the dream of an open window, it is the monadic life of ideas cut off from sensuous contact with things. If we want to learn to see, then we have to unlearn philosophy. Poetry, we might conclude, is anti-philosophy. However, that conclusion is far too quick, for if we go back to the poem we can see that the similitude between stars and

nuns and flowers and penitents is something that the poets say, *os poetas dizem*. Learning to see and not think also requires that we unlearn the lessons of the poets, those mystical poets who believe that stones have souls and rivers feel ecstasy in the moonlight. I will turn to this line of thought in a third poem, but this brings out an important strand in Caetano's verse. He declares, "I'm not even a poet: I see" ("*Eu nem sequer sou poeta: vejo*") (*Obra Poética* 234). And in a fictional conversation between Caetano and Campos, the latter reports of the former that what is important is not poetry, but seeing: "*Nem é poesia: é ver*" (*Obra Poética* 248). Elsewhere, Caetano talks of the *prose* of his verse: "As for me, I write the prose of my verses / And I get happy" ("*Por mim, escrevo a prosa dos meus versos / E fico contente*") (*Obra Poética* 219). If Caetano is opposed to philosophy's theoreticism, then he is equally opposed to poetry's mysticism. He writes:

*Os poetas místicos são filósofos doentes,
E os filósofos são homens doidos.*

The mystical poets are sick philosophers,
And the philosophers are madmen. (*Obra Poética* 219)

Permit me a brief anecdote: on the first occasion that I talked publicly about Pessoa, the distinguished literary critic Marjorie Perloff was in the audience. Let's just say that we had a slight misunderstanding, particularly about my understanding of Heidegger. But afterwards we were talking at length and she told me that her problem with Pessoa, at least with the Caetano heteronym, was that she didn't think the work was *poetical* enough. In a way that she perhaps didn't intend, I think, she is right. Caetano is against poetry's obfuscations and mystifications of our relation to things and perhaps that relation is best caught in the stark and disarmingly straightforward prose line of his verse. Perhaps Caetano's poetry is an anti-poetry or what I have called in relation to the very late lyrics of Wallace Stevens, a poetry of the antipodes of poetry.

The final poem by Caetano that I would like to read was written "posthumously" in 1919, four years after his "death." The theme of the poem is the critique of mysticism and it pushes the line of thought that we have seen in the first two poems in a slightly more radical direction.

*Tu, místico, vês uma significação em todas as cousas.
Para ti tudo tem um sentido velado.
Há uma cousa oculta em cada cousa que vês.
O que vês, vê-lo sempre para veres outra cousa.*

*Para mim, graças a ter olhos só par aver,
Eu vejo ausência de significação em todas as cousas;
Vejo-o e amo-me, porque ser uma cousa é não significar nada.
Ser uma cousa é não ser susceptível de interpretação.*

You, mystic, see a meaning in all things.
For you everything has a veiled sense.
There is something hidden in each thing you see.
What you see you always see to see something else.

For me, by grace of having eyes only for seeing,
I see an absence of meaning in all things;
I see this and I love myself, since to be a thing is to mean nothing.
To be a thing is not to be susceptible to interpretation. (*Obra Poética* 233)

The poem is addressed in the second person singular to the mystic “*Tu, místico,*” where the comma breaks up the rhythm of the line for added emphasis. The mystic is the person, often the figure of the poet in Caieiro, who sees a meaning in all things and for whom all things have a veiled sense, *um sentido velado*. Elsewhere, Caieiro writes:

*Li hoje quasi duas páginas
Do livro dum poeta místico
E ri como quem tem chorado muito.*

Today I read almost two pages
Of a book by a mystical poet
And laughed like someone who has been crying a lot. (*Obra Poética* 219)

For the mystic, the mere existence of things is only a path that points beyond them to their hidden or occult meaning; once again, the word Caieiro uses is *oculta*. The mystic - or indeed any person whose religion involves a commitment to invisible realities - has an intuition of a reality behind appearances, an intellectual intuition whose keys, clues or symbols are written into appearances. The world becomes the visible symbol of the invisible truth of the divinity, whether this entails a belief in nature as the visible book written by the invisible hand of God or whatever, as for example in what is laughably called “intelligent design” at the present time. Mysticism can be defined here as the belief in a power of metaphysical intuition, or an intuition of a hidden meaning or a world behind the scenes. The mystic “sees” or “thinks he sees” the hidden meaning of reality behind the disorderly meaninglessness of appearances, which is a deceptive trait common to gu-

rus, sophists and some poets from antiquity to contemporary new ageism. For Caetano, on the contrary, all we see is an absence of meaning, *ausência de significação*, of meaning absenting itself in perception: “to be a thing is to mean nothing. / To be a thing is not to be susceptible to interpretation” (“*ser uma coisa é não significar nada. / Ser uma coisa é não ser susceptível de interpretação*”) (*Obra Poética* 233).

Yet, how are we to understand the meaning of this statement? Are things meaningless? What is the meaning of this declaration of meaninglessness and this denial of interpretation? Well, it is said - and here is the essential paradox of Caetano's poetry, which encloses the meta-paradox that his words were not written by him but by the *pessoa* of another - in an act of meaningful interpretation. The poem is the formal, wrought and beautifully articulated meaning of meaninglessness. To see an absence of meaning in all things means, I think, seeing things without imagining some sort of hidden or occult meaning behind the scenes or interpreting the visible world by referring it to some invisible domain. The point for Caetano and for us, I think, is learning to see things without thinking, to see that things are, that they exist as such and they have been disclosed. We do not see in order to see something else, something occult; rather we see in order to see precisely what stands before us. In the words of the first poem I cited, there is nothing to understand because we understand things already. To think is not to understand, and to understand is not to think:

*Creio no mundo como num malmaquer,
Porque o vejo. Mas não penso nele
Porque pensar é não compreender . . .*

I believe in the world as in a daisy,
Because I see it. But I do not think about it
Because to think is not to understand . . . (*Obra Poética* 204)

Of course, one might respond that Caetano is simply replacing one kind of mysticism with another: that is, rejecting an other-worldly mysticism of the transcendent beyond with the here-and-now mysticism of immanent perceptual presence. To which Caetano might say, “that's fine” (“*está bem*”); his would be a mysticism of the body, of the bodily presence of things to the senses. The contrast is between what we might call a mysticism of gnosis that claims to see beyond appearances to their invisible source of meaning and an agnostic mysticism that is essentially thoughtless. Caetano does not claim to *know* anything about nature; he simply sings what he sees:

*Se quiserem que eu tenha um misticismo, está bem, tenho-o.
Sou místico, mas só com o corpo.
A minha alma é simples e não pensa.*

*O meu misticismo é não querer saber.
É viver e não pensar nisso.*

*Não sei o que é a Natureza: canto-a.
Vivo no cimo dum outeiro
Numa casa caiada e sozinha,
E essa é a minha definição.*

If you'd like me to have a mysticism, that's fine, I have it.
I'm a mystic, but only with the body.
My soul is simple and doesn't think.

My mysticism is not wanting to know.
It is to live and not to think about this.

I don't know what nature is: I sing it.
I live on the top of a small hill
In a whitewashed and solitary house,
And this is my definition. (*Obra Poética* 220)

For Caeiro, we need an apprenticeship in unlearning in order to learn to see and not to think. We need to learn to see appearances and nothing more, and to see those appearances not as the appearances of some deeper, but veiled reality, but as *real* appearances. Of course, it is often hugely difficult to even see those appearances as our vision becomes obscured by habit, by what Pascal called the machine. Such machinic habit is what Caeiro calls the "sickness of the eyes" that happens when we think and do not see: "*Pensar é estar doente dos olhos*" (*Obra Poética* 205). In our sickness, we pass over what is most *obvious*, most familiar and closest to us, namely the phenomenon of the world, the fact that things simply are, in their plain, palpable and everyday presence. What Caeiro counsels, and one finds similar advice in Wallace Stevens, is that we give up both the sceptical and mystical impulses that are distrustful of the world of appearances. If we follow the path of Caeiro's disapprenticeship, then what we might learn to cultivate is the art of appearances, the prose of things that surround us, those things that escape our attention because of their sheer obviousness, because they are under our noses. Everyday anamnesis returns us to the recalcitrant and enigmatic surfaces of things. To avoid the sceptical and mystical impulses means - and

this is important to underline - resisting two temptations, the philosophical and the poetic. Both are forms of sickness that lead us away from the difficulty of the obvious.

Campos reports that he was away in England when Caeiro died, while Reis was in Brazil. Pessoa himself was present, but - Campos adds, deliciously - it is as if he wasn't ("mas é como se não estivesse") (*Obra Poética* 249). Campos once asked Caeiro, "Are you happy with yourself?"; to which he replied, "No, I am happy."

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For reasons that I hope soon become clear, at this point I would like to sidestep into Heidegger and connect what we have learnt from Caeiro's writing with some passages from *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*) particularly Heidegger's remarks on understanding, interpretation and meaning. Hopefully, the light cast here will reflect both ways: onto both Caeiro's and Heidegger's words. As readers of *Sein und Zeit* will know, there is precious little discussion of the ostensive subject matter of the book - the meaning of being - and Heidegger keeps nudging it into the future until it falls over the edge of the published tome. Heidegger focuses rather on trying to define the meaning of the being of that being for whom being is an issue, namely the human being or *Dasein*. Yet, about five chapters into the First Division of the book, Heidegger momentarily pulls back and expands the focus of his concern. He writes:

If we are inquiring about the meaning of being, our investigation does not then become a "deep" one [*tiefsinnig*], nor does it puzzle out what stands behind being. It asks about being insofar as being enters into the intelligibility of *Dasein*. The meaning of being can never be contrasted with entities, or with being as the "ground" [*Grund*] which gives entities support; for a "ground" becomes accessible only as meaning, even if it is itself the abyss of meaninglessness [*Abgrund der Sinnlosigkeit*]. (*Being and Time* 152)

That is, meaning is not deep. It is not a question of looking behind what appears for some hidden meaning which structures appearance. Inquiry into the meaning of being is not deep either. It just sounds deep. It sounds like we are after a ground, something determinate but hidden, something behind the scenes that pulls the strings of the world's stage. This is what we might call a metaphysical misconstrual of both the meaning of meaning and the possible meaning of the meaning of being. The problem with being-talk is that it sounds as if being has some fantastic agency of its own, or that it is

“miraculously transcendent,” as Glaucon ironically replies to Socrates as he is about to introduce the three similes for the relation of the soul to the Good at the enigmatic centre of the *Republic*. One can easily be persuaded of the mistaken idea that being is pulling the strings behind the scenes, like some sort of puppet-master and doing amazing things like shaping human action in the world and producing various historical epochs. This is an error. Worse still, it succumbs to the sort of obscurantist temptation that continually seduces readings and readers of Heidegger. Too many readers of Heidegger see being as some kind of rabbit in a hat. There is no rabbit. The point is to learn to see the hat without wanting the rabbit.

Heidegger only asks (*can* only ask) about the meaning of being insofar as being enters into the intelligibility of Dasein. The latter is characterized from the first pages of *Sein und Zeit* by its possession of understanding of being (*Seinsverständnis*), although this is admittedly vague and average. So, meaning can only mean insofar as there is Dasein. That is, meaning is Dasein-dependent, or as Heidegger puts it, “Meaning is an existential of Dasein, not a property attaching to entities, lying ‘behind’ them, or floating somewhere as an ‘intermediate domain’” (151). As Heidegger says, meaning is the “upon which” “*das Woraufhin*” in terms of which something becomes intelligible *as* something. But this “upon which” is nothing other than Dasein itself insofar as Dasein lays itself out (*sich auslegt*) as that being that understands meaningfulness.

Of course, this is the meaning of interpretation or *Auslegung* in Heidegger, where interpretation is understood as the laying out (*auslegen*) of the understanding, or the act by which understanding becomes aware of itself. In interpretation, Heidegger writes in one of his characteristic tautologies, “understanding appropriates understandingly that which is understood by it [*eignet sich das Verstehen sein Verstandenes verstehend zu*]. In interpretation, understanding does not become something different. It becomes itself” (*Being and Time* 148). Of course, this is to say that the act of interpretation is retro-active, it is the retroactivity or reactivation of a prior understanding. Here we enter what Heidegger sees as the hermeneutic circle. Interpretation already understands, and what interpretation lays out is already understood and must have been already so understood. Heidegger suggests that interpretation differs from what we might call “normal” scientific proof, or the logic of discovery, where it is illegitimate to presuppose what it is our task to provide grounds for. With everyday human life in the world, or what we may call social being, it is precisely the other way around and we have to presuppose that which we provide grounds for, namely understanding. We are always stuck in a circle, and it is therefore a question of entering the circle in the

right way and not trying to get out of it. As may already have become clear, in my view, poetry also moves within the hermeneutic circle. The poet issues reminders of what we already know and interprets what we already understand but have not made explicit. Poetry takes things as they are and as they are understood by us, but in a way that we have covered over through force of habit, a contempt born of familiarity, or Caeiro's "sickness of the eyes." As Caeiro says, "To think is not to understand" (*Fernando Pessoa & Co* 58). Poetry returns us to our familiarity with things through the de-familiarization of poetic saying, it provides lessons in unlearning where we finally see what is under our noses. What the poet discovers is what we knew already, but had covered up: the world in its plain simplicity and palpable presence. In this way, we reach lucidity. But this lucidity is not a propositional explicitness, it is not the cognitive awareness that "water is everywhere and at all times two parts hydrogen to one part oxygen," or that "Benjamin Franklin was the inventor of the lightning rod." It is rather a lucidity at the level of feeling that the poetic word articulates without making cognitively explicit, as when Pessoa writes in a text on sensationism: "Lucidity should only reach the threshold of the soul. In the very antechambers of feeling it is forbidden to be explicit" (*Always Astonished* 33). Poetry produces felt variations in the appearances of things that return us to the understanding of things that we endlessly pass over in our desire for knowledge.

Now, Heidegger's inquiry into the human being is phenomenological, it is concerned with trying to elicit Dasein's being-in-the-world phenomenologically. Crucially, this is also not a deep inquiry. Heidegger defines the Greek word "*phainomenon*" as "that which shows itself" and "*logos*" as "that which lets see." Therefore, phenomenology is that which lets us see what shows itself, which is a tautology, as Heidegger was perfectly well aware. Phenomenology also moves within the hermeneutic circle and this is not a matter of occult, hidden or deep meanings; it is a question of surfaces. The phenomena, as those surfaces that show themselves, have to be brought to appearance through the activity of *logos* or what Heidegger calls discourse, talk or *Rede*, which is perhaps the most important and elusive concept in *Sein und Zeit*. It is discourse that lets us see what shows itself; it is the activity of talking that reactivates our prior and *a priori* understanding of things.

Yet, if I say that phenomenology is not deep inquiry, then that does not mean that it is superficial. Phenomenology is the refusal of metaphysical or mystical depth and the cultivation of surfaces. It is a matter of opening one's eyes and seeing the palpably obvious fact of the world that faces one and that one faces. Human life in the world is two surfaces that touch and

resonate each with the other. Phenomenology gives lessons in unlearning that allow us to relearn how to see the world. Now, in my fancy at least, I want to imagine poetry as phenomenology, as an art of surfaces or the cultivation of what we might call *surfaciality*. The problem is that these surfaces only show themselves with great difficulty, they are enigmatic surfaces that come to appearance through the felt variations that flow from the poet's words. I think this is what Heidegger has in mind in the sentence from *Sein und Zeit* that I chose as my epigraph. Poetry, in the broad sense of *Dichtung* or creation, is the disclosure of existence, the difficult bringing to appearance of the fact that things exist. By listening to the poet's words, we are drawn outside and beyond ourselves to a condition of being there with things where they do not stand over against us as objects, but where we stand with those things in an experience of what I like to call, with a nod to Rilke, *openedness*, a being open to things, an interpretation which is always already an understanding (hence the past tense) in the *surfacial* space of disclosure. If this sounds a little mystical, then I'd like to say with Caetano, "*está bem, tenho-o.*" If there is a mystery to things, then it is not at all other-worldly, or some mysticism of the hidden. On the contrary, the mystery of things is utterly of this world and the labour of the poet consists in the difficult elaboration of the space of existence, the openedness within which we stand.

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I'd like to finish by turning to one poem by Wallace Stevens, in the hope of complicating rather than confirming what I have already said. The poem I have in mind is "Description without Place," which is a hugely complex late poem that I have always avoided in my writing on Stevens.⁶ Stevens begins with a characteristic qualification, a statement of possibility not actuality:

It is possible that to seem - it is to be
As the sun is something seeming and it is.

6. I have been emboldened to begin a partial reading of the poem by Judith Balso, who perceptively noticed its absence in my little book on Stevens, *Things Merely Are*, and criticized my approach to Stevens as being too Kantian, too romantic, too traditional and not engaging adequately with the ontological dimension of Stevens's verse. I now think she is right and I am beginning to revise my views, although what we each mean by ontology is rather different. I want to argue for a phenomenological ontology, where it is poetry rather than philosophy that describes the way things are, that transfigures the everyday world but returns us to it, that ennoble the plainness of the

The sun is an example. What it seems
 It is and in such seeming all things are.
 Thus things are like a seeming of the sun
 Or like a seeming of the moon or night
 Or sleep. It was a queen that made it seem
 By the illustrious nothing of her name.
 Her green mind made the world around her green.
 The queen is an example . . . This green queen
 In the seeming of the summer of her sun
 By her own seeing made the summer change. (*Palm* 270)

Stevens's initial qualification must be respected: it is *possible* that seeming is being, and that it is in and through their seemings that things are the things that they are. The statement of possibility points in two directions at once, as both the declaration of the fragility and uncertainty of what is being proposed and the elevation of possibility over any form of actuality. As Heidegger famously writes of his conception of phenomenology, "Higher than actuality stands possibility" (*Being and Time* 38). Both directions point together in Stevens's declaration in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction": "It is possible, possible, possible. It must / Be possible" (*Palm* 230). The movement of the above stanzas turns around a series of *examples*, a word with a highly charged meaning in the poem: the sun, the moon, night and especially the queen. Through what we might call the primal baptism that is "the nothing of her name," the queen makes all around her green because of her green mind. The queen's green seemings make all around her green. The queen names things, she produces her seemings and through them the sun and summer themselves are changed, transfigured, subject to a felt variation. It is clear that these seemings are not mere things of fancy, fantasy seemings without an anchor in the way things are. Stevens says at the beginning of the second section of the poem: "Such seemings are the actual ones: the way / Things look each day . . ." (270). The poem then moves on to an extraordinarily rich series of variations and examples over the next sections, offering teasing discussions of Nietzsche and Lenin in Basel and their interactions, or lack of them, with swans: "Lenin on a bench beside a lake disturbed / The swans. He was not the man for swans" (274).

obvious without giving us anything back but the obvious seen through the lucid estrangements of the poet - an enigmatic obviousness.

I'd like to turn to the final two sections of the poem, where these seemings are called "description without place." What does Stevens mean by description? He writes:

Description is revelation. It is not
The thing described, nor false facsimile.
It is an artificial thing that exists,
In its own seeming, plainly visible,
Yet not too closely the double of our lives,
Intenser than any actual life could be . . . (275-76)

There is much to say and to call this verse oblique is to risk considerable understatement. But description is the revelation of the thing that is neither "the thing described," by which I understand the thing-in-itself, *Ding an sich* in Kant's sense as the hard kernel of material nature; nor is it a "false facsimile," a simulacrum like those images that flicker on the wall of Plato's cave. Rather, it reveals "an artificial thing that exists in its own seeming" (271). The thing is not a hallucination, it is visible through our seeming and yet not the double or replica of our lives. It is what I called above a *real* appearance. As the nameless interlocutor puts it in "The Man with the Blue Guitar":

But play, you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,
A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are. (*Palm* 133)

Things upon the blue guitar are things exactly as they are, that is, as they are described; but they are turned around, subject to a felt variation, played in a tune that is at once beyond us and yet ourselves. This is the revelatory role of description: it gives us things as they are, but transformed in a felt but enigmatic lucidity, "Intenser than any actual life could be." Higher than actuality stands possibility.

This line of thought is continued in the stunning last section of the poem:

Thus the theory of description matters most.
It is the theory of the word for those
For whom the word is the making of the world,
The buzzing world and lispings firmament.
It is a world of words to the end of it,
In which nothing solid is its solid self.

As, men make themselves their speech: the hard hidalgo
 Lives in the mountainous character of his speech;
 And in that mountainous mirror Spain acquires
 The knowledge of Spain and of the hidalgo's hat -
 A seeming of the Spaniard, a style of life,
 The invention of a nation in a phrase,
 In a description hollowed out of hollow-bright,
 The artificer of subjects still half night.
 It matters, because everything we say
 Of the past is description without place, a cast
 Of the imagination, made in sound;
 And because what we say of the future must portend,
 Be alive with its own seemings, seeming to be
 Like rubies reddened by rubies reddening. ("Description Without
 Place," *Palm* 276-77)

The theory of description is the theory of the word to those for whom the word is the making of the world. This can be linked to two other thoughts in Stevens's verse. Firstly, from "The Idea of Order at Key West," when the poet and his silent interlocutor, Ramon Fernandez, remark of the female persona described in the poem:

Then we,
 As we beheld her, striding there alone,
 Knew that there never was a world for her
 Except the one she sang and, singing, made. (*Palm* 98)

Namely, that poetry is the enchantment of the world, the incantation of reality under the spell of poetic imagination. In other words, the world is what you make of it. The second passage is from "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," where he writes:

The endlessly elaborating poem
 Displays the theory of poetry
 As the life of poetry. A more severe,
 More harassing master would extemporize
 Subtler, more urgent proof that the theory
 Of poetry is the theory of life. (*Palm* 349)

It is a world of words, a world where things are through the seemings in

which we baptize them into being. Stevens always hesitates to push this thought to its logical conclusion, namely that if there never is a world for us except the one given in words, and poetry is the highest use of the words, then poetry is the theory of our life in the world. In occasional moments of light-headed transport, such is my belief. Stevens always qualifies himself by saying that this is what a more severe, harassing master would demand, perhaps a master like Caeiro. Yet it remains possible, possible, possible: in each of the double directions of possibility.

The most extraordinary linguistic risk in the last section of “Description without Place” is the solitary “As” followed by a comma. If things *are* through their seemings, then the way in which we take things *as* things defines the things that they are. This can be linked to Heidegger’s notion of interpretation discussed above, where the way in which we take things *as* the things they are consists in the act whereby we lay out our prior understanding of the world. This is what Heidegger calls the “existential-hermeneutic as” distinct from the “apophantical as” which is a feature of propositional descriptions. To parody the early Wittgenstein, it is poetry and not propositions that gives us a picture of the world, a picture that we take in the personal camera of our seemings. Poetry is the existential-hermeneutic taking of things as things, which reveals the fact that things exist in the act that transfigures them. Human beings make themselves in their speech and through their speech. The Spanish gentleman (if not quite the Portuguese personage) in the above stanzas invents Spain in a phrase. The hard hidalgo carves out a seeming in words that mirror the mountains. And, to return to the last lines of the poem, this is also true of the past and the future; they are also descriptions without place. For Stevens, the poetic task for the future is the reddening of rubies by rubies reddened. That is, the precious jewels of any future creation are the work of the seemings that baptize those things into being. The task of poetry is giving birth to being through seemings.

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Or at least, so it seems. Can what I have said in this paper be taken as a description of the goal of poetry *überhaupt*, once and for all time and for all genres? Not at all. I have tried to read a few stanzas of just one poem by Stevens and, to return to Caeiro, we must not forget that although he is the master, he is only one of the many heteronyms in Pessoa’s work. Besides the four-headed poetic enigma that is Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, Ál-

varo de Campos and Pessoa himself, we also find the anguished prose personae of Bernardo Soares and the Baron de Teive, as well as the philosophers António Mora and Raphael Baldaya, three possibly related characters with the name Crosse - Thomas, I.I and A.A, the Anglophone brothers Charles and Alexander Search, the Francophone Jean Seul de Méluret, and the sole female heteronym Maria José. It's quite a crowd. Many of the voices flatly contradict the thoughtless anti-metaphysics of Caiero. Consider, for example, Álvaro de Campos on the metaphysics of chocolate:

Eat your chocolates, little girl,
 Eat your chocolates!
 Believe me, there's no metaphysics on earth like chocolates,
 And all religions put together teach no more than the candy shop.
 Eat, dirty little girl, eat!
 If only I could eat chocolates with the same truth as you! (*Obra Poética* 364)

Apart from chocolate poetry, there is also love poetry, hate poetry, political poetry, apolitical poetry, narrative poetry, epic poetry, dramatic poetry and a great inward swathe of lyrical introspection, some wonderful, some decidedly not. What I have been concerned with is the poetry of things, a poetry of enigmatic surfaces that tries to describe our openedness to the world, and I have begun to adumbrate a poetic ontology by leaning on Caiero, Stevens and Heidegger. As we all know - although I will not engage the topic here for reasons of space and good taste - Heidegger had his issues with other people. Pessoa tended to project his personal despair onto his personae, notably Soares in *The Book of Disquiet* and the suicidal Baron de Teive in *The Education of the Stoic*, who kills himself after completing his only extant manuscript. And, as others have noted before me, Stevens is a hugely impersonal poet. He writes in his *Adagia* that "Life is an affair of people and places. But poetry for me is an affair of places, and that's the problem." For the most part, I have talked about places and not people and tried to give some sense of the ontological ambition of poetry. But this should not be confused with any pronouncement on the ethical claims of poetry. That, as they say, is another story for another occasion. Maybe it is not a story that I can tell.

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