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"A Nonexistent Coterie": Pessoa's Names

A narrative begins at the end of a journey, at a place where "the sea ends and the earth begins. It is raining over the colorless city. The waters of the river are polluted with mud, the riverbanks flooded. A dark vessel, the *Highland Brigade*, ascends the somber river and is about to anchor at the quay of Alcântara."[1] A passenger disembarks, a certain Doctor Ricardo Reis, aged 48, born in Oporto and arriving from Rio de Janeiro, as we learn when he signs the register at the Hotel Bragança. He has returned to Lisbon after receiving a telegram from a fellow poet, Álvaro de Campos, informing him of the death of their friend Fernando Pessoa. Reading through the newspaper archives, Dr Reis finds an obituary that reports that Pessoa died "in silence, just as he had always lived," and it adds that "[i]n his poetry he was not only Fernando Pessoa but also Álvaro de Campos, Alberto Caeiro, and Ricardo Reis. There you are," the narrator continues,

> an error caused by not paying attention, by writing what one misheard, because we know very well that Ricardo Reis is this man who is reading the newspaper with his own open and living eyes, a doctor forty-eight years of age, one year older than Fernando Pessoa when his eyes were closed, eyes that were dead beyond a shadow of a doubt. No other proofs or testimonies are needed to verify that we are not dealing with the same person, and if there is anyone who is still in doubt,

the narrator persists, let him go to the Hotel Bragança and check with the manager, a man of impeccable credentials (23-24). Ricardo Reis then visits Pessoa's tomb, where the funeral urn proclaims "I am here," this is the resting place of "the decomposing body of a composer of poems who left his share of madness in the world" (28).

[1] José Saramago, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (London: The Harvill Press, 1992), 1.

Yet a day or two later, on New Year's Eve 1935, Reis returns to his room and finds sitting on the sofa a man whom he recognizes at once although he hasn't seen him for many years; nor does he think it strange that Fernando Pessoa should be sitting there waiting for him. "He said Hello, not expecting a reply, absurdity does not always obey logic, but Pessoa did in fact reply" (64). He explains to Reis that he is still allowed to leave "that place" and wander around as he pleases for nine months—a period symmetrical with that of gestation—since "apart from exceptional cases it takes nine months to achieve total oblivion" (ibid.). He is not a ghost, he explains at a later moment, but something else. "What are you then," asks Reis, and Pessoa answers: "I can't tell you, a ghost comes from the other world, I simply come from the cemetery at Prazeres. Then is the dead Fernando Pessoa the same as the Fernando Pessoa who was once alive. In one sense yes" (238). Although he has a shadow—his only possession now—Pessoa casts no reflection in the mirror, and no one can see the dead unless they wish to be seen. Reis notes that he is able to see him, and Pessoa replies: "Because I want you to see me, besides, if you think about it, who are you" (66).

Who indeed is Ricardo Reis? He is the author of a number of largely unpublished poems, some of which are quoted in part in this novel by José Saramago, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (1984). The poems are for the most part written in the forms of the classical ode in a "dense, intricate, and highly polished style" which "enables him to express the most profound concepts with elliptical concision."[2] Reis is one of the heteronyms of the poet Fernando Pessoa, and in a biographical note Pessoa writes that "Ricardo Reis, educated in a Jesuit high school, is, as I've mentioned, a doctor; he has been living in Brazil since 1919, having gone into voluntary exile because of his monarchist sympathies. He is a formally trained Latinist, and a self-taught semi-Hellenist." He "writes better than I, but with a purism I find excessive."[3]

[2] Peter Rickard, "Introduction," in Fernando Pessoa, *Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. Peter Rickard, Edinburgh Bilingual Library (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 33.

[3] Fernando Pessoa, Letter to Adolfo Casais Monteiro, 13 January 1935, *The Selected Prose of Fernando Pessoa*, ed. and trans. Richard Zenith (New York: Grove Press, 2001), 258, 259.

The letter in which Pessoa describes the genesis and function of his major heteronyms is one of the great documents of modernist literature; Giorgio Agamben says of it that "[i]n twentieth-century poetry, Pessoa's letter on heteronyms constitutes perhaps the most impressive document of desubjectification, the transformation of the poet into a pure 'experimentation ground,' and its possible implications for ethics."[4] Before citing the core passages of this document, let me clarify the distinction that Pessoa makes between heteronymic and orthonymic poetry, on the one hand, and pseudonymic and autonymic poetry on the other. Marilyn Scarantino Jones puts it concisely:

> An author's pseudonymic work differs from his autonymic production only in so far as a different name is attached to it. A heteronym, however, is not merely a name different from the author's but also a separate personality who expresses what the author does not or cannot.[5]

In addition to the coterie of three major poetic heteronyms—Álvaro de Campos, Alberto Caeiro, and Ricardo Reis—there is a fourth member, who

> is not a heteronym but an orthonym, one who shares the name Fernando Pessoa yet is not the Pessoa who created Caeiro, Reis and Campos. In his notes and diaries, Pessoa carefully distinguished between "Fernando Pessoa himself" and the orthonymic Fernando Pessoa, the former being the creator of poet-characters while the latter is merely another member of the coterie. (ibid.)

Pessoa's heteronyms and his orthonym are thus not *personae*, masks through which the poet speaks; they are autonomous figures which allow him to take on quite distinct personalities in his writing. Alain Badiou writes in this sense that heteronymy can be construed as "a *dispositif* for thinking, rather than as a

[4] Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 117.

[5] Marilyn Scarantino Jones, "Pessoa's Poetic Coterie: Three Heteronyms and an Orthonym," *Luso-Brazilian Review* 14: 2 (1977), 254.

subjective drama."[6] In a passage which might perhaps have sparked Saramago's novel, Pessoa writes:

> In the vision that I call inner merely because I call the "real world" outer, I clearly and distinctly see the familiar, well-defined facial features, personality traits, life stories, ancestries, and in some cases even the death of these various characters. Some of them have met each other; others have not. None of them ever met me except Álvaro de Campos. But if tomorrow, travelling in America, I were to run into the physical person of Ricardo Reis, who in my opinion lives there, my soul wouldn't relay to my body the slightest flinch of surprise; all would be as it should be, exactly as it was before the encounter.[7]

The genesis of Pessoa's major poetic heteronyms is described in detail in the letter that he wrote to Adolfo Casais Monteiro in January 1935, the year of his own death. Ever since he was a child, he says,

> it has been my tendency to create around me a fictitious world, to surround myself with friends and acquaintances that never existed. (I can't be sure, of course, if they really never existed, or if it's me who doesn't exist. In this matter, as in any other, we shouldn't be dogmatic.) Ever since I've known myself as "me," I can remember envisioning the shape, motions, character and life story of various unreal figures who were as visible and as close to me as the manifestations of what we call, perhaps too hastily, real life. This tendency, which goes back as far as I can remember being an I, has always accompanied me, changing somewhat the music it enchants me with, but never the way in which it enchants me. (254-55)

As a young child he used to write letters addressed to himself from "a certain Chevalier de Pas," and there was another figure who was a kind of rival to the

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[6] Alain Badiou, "A Philosophical Task: To Be Contemporaries of Pessoa," *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 43.

[7] Pessoa, "Aspects" (the projected preface to the first volume of his collected heteronymic works), *The Selected Prose of Fernando Pessoa*, 4.

Chevalier. This tendency to create an alternative world peopled with imaginary figures persisted through his adult life. Thus, he writes, "I elaborated, and propagated, various friends and acquaintances who never existed but whom I feel, hear and see even today, almost thirty years later. I repeat: I feel, hear and see them. And I miss them" (255).

In 1912 Pessoa sketched out a few poems with irregular verse patterns and written from a pagan perspective—and then forgot about them. But "a hazy, shadowy portrait of the person who wrote those verses took shape in me. (Unbeknownst to me, Ricardo Reis had been born.)" (256) A year and a half or so later he tried to invent "a rather complicated bucolic poet" and spent a few days trying to envision him. Then:

> One day when I'd finally given up—it was March 8th, 1914—I walked over to a high chest of drawers, took a sheet of paper, and began to write standing up, as I do whenever I can. And I wrote thirty-some poems at once, in a kind of ecstasy I'm unable to describe. It was the triumphal day of my life, and I can never have another one like it. I began with a title, *The Keeper of Sheep*. This was followed by the appearance in me of someone whom I instantly named Alberto Caeiro. Excuse the absurdity of this statement: my master had appeared in me. That was what I immediately felt, and so strong was the feeling that, as soon as those thirty-odd poems were written, I grabbed a fresh sheet of paper and wrote, again all at once, the six poems that constitute "Slanting Rain," by Fernando Pessoa. All at once and with total concentration… It was the return of Fernando Pessoa as Alberto Caeiro to Fernando Pessoa himself. Or rather, it was the reaction of Fernando Pessoa against his nonexistence as Alberto Caeiro.
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> Once Alberto Caeiro had appeared, I instinctively and subconsciously tried to find disciples for him. From Caeiro's false paganism I extracted the latent Ricardo Reis, at last discovering his name and adjusting him to his true self, for now I actually *saw* him. And then a new individual, quite the opposite of Ricardo Reis, suddenly and impetuously came to me. In an unbroken stream, without interruptions or corrections, the ode whose name is "Triumphal Ode," by the man whose name is none other than Álvaro de Campos, issued from my typewriter. (256)

Thus, he continues, "I created a nonexistent coterie, placing it all in a framework of reality. I ascertained the influences at work and the friendships between them, I listened in myself to their discussions and divergent points of view, and in all of this it seems that I, who created them all, was the one who was least there" (257).

Now, this account is partly mythical—there is manuscript evidence that the Caeiro poems were written over several weeks rather than in one ecstatic sitting—but it goes to the heart of the radical enunciative strategy that Pessoa develops in that body of work that was largely unpublished at his death and in which something like seventy-two distinct heteronyms have been identified. The names of these heteronyms, I should note, are no more arbitrary than those of Pessoa's English and French alter egos, Alexander Search, C.R. Anon, and Jean Seul. The "rather complicated bucolic poet" who turned out to be Alberto Caeiro, author of the volume entitled *The Keeper of Sheep*, began his journey into being as a joke on Pessoa's friend Mario Sá-Carneiro; "carneiro" in Portuguese is "sheep," and "Caeiro," as Richard Zenith points out, is "Carneiro" without the "carne," the flesh. (We might note too the play of these two names in the title of the collection of poems that Pessoa planned for his orthonym, *Cancioneiro*, "songbook.") Alberto Caeiro died at the age of 26; Sá-Carneiro committed suicide just short of his 26th birthday. The name of Caeiro's disciple de Campos means "from the fields"—"where Alberto tended his imaginary or metaphorical sheep."[8] And the surname of the monarchist Ricardo Reis means, in Portuguese, "kings." There is thus a certain magical fusion of names and persons in Pessoa's heteronymy.

I want now to begin exploring the significance of Pessoa's relation to his heteronyms by citing three commentaries on his account of that moment of ecstatic otherness in which—like Rilke hearing the voice that dictated to him the opening lines of the Duino elegies, or waking up one morning to find that his handwriting had completely altered—he is possessed by the spirit of Alberto Caeiro. The first is that of Agamben, who focuses on the alternation, in this

[8] Richard Zenith, "Introduction: The Birth of a Nation," in Fernando Pessoa, *A Little Larger Than the Entire Universe: Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. Richard Zenith (London: Penguin, 2006), xxi.

"incomparable phenomenology of heteronymic depersonalization," between Caeiro and the Pessoa who responds to him. Agamben writes:

> Not only does each new subjectification (the appearance of Alberto Caeiro) imply a desubjectification (the depersonalization of Fernando Pessoa, who submits himself to his teacher). At the same time, each desubjectification also implies a resubjectification: the return of Fernando Pessoa, who reacts to his non-existence, that is, to his depersonalization in Alberto Caeiro. It is as if the poetic experience constituted a complex process that involved at least three subjects—or rather, three different subjectifications-desubjectifications, since it is no longer possible to speak of a subject in the strict sense.[9]

The context for this argument in *Remnants of Auschwitz* is Agamben's discussion of the constitution of subjectivity in the double movement (active and passive) of auto-affection and its underlying form as shame; the analogue he cites is Keats's description of the "poetical Character" as "not itself—it has no self—it is every thing and nothing—It has no character"; and of the poetic experience as fundamentally shameful, since "not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature—how can it, when I have no nature?" "Even now," Keats adds, "I am perhaps not speaking from myself: but from some character in whose soul I now live."[10] In the case of Pessoa, says Agamben, what happens in the process of successive depersonalizations is the emergence of "a new poetic consciousness, something like a genuine *ēthos* of poetry" in which the poet understands "that he must respond to his own desubjectification," and yet does so in a way that goes beyond the simple assertion of a subject form that has now become problematic.[11]

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[9] Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 119.

[10] John Keats, Letter to John Woodhouse, October 27th, 1818; cited in Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 112-13.

[11] Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 119.

The second commentary is Pessoa's own, in a prelude to the account of the moment of genesis of Caeiro. This account is clinical—Pessoa uses the term "psychiatric." "My heteronyms," he writes,

> have their origin in a deep-seated form of hysteria. I don't know if I'm afflicted by simple hysteria or, more specifically, by hysterical neurasthenia. I suspect it's the latter, for I have symptoms of abulia [that is, lack of will, indecisiveness] that mere hysteria would not explain. Whatever the case, the mental origin of my heteronyms lies in my relentless, organic tendency to depersonalization and simulation. Fortunately for me and for others, these phenomena have been mentally internalized, such that they don't show up in my outer, everyday life among people; they erupt inside me, where only I experience them. If I were a woman (hysterical phenomena in women erupt externally, through attacks and the like), each poem of Álvaro de Campos (the most hysterically hysterical part of me) would be a general alarm to the neighbourhood. But I'm a man, and in men hysteria affects mainly the inner psyche; so it all ends in silence and poetry…[12]

Hysteria and neurasthenia, as these terms are used at the time, are gendered versions of the same neurosis, the former flamboyant and manifested on the body, the latter more diffuse and taking the form both of nonspecific aches and pains and of more deep-seated psychological disorders. Pessoa is describing both a pathology and the work of sublimation that keeps it turned inward and productive of poetry, and this sublimation involves both a loss of self and a deep identification with his alter egos. Asking himself how he writes "in the name of these three," Pessoa answers:

> Caeiro, through sheer and unexpected inspiration, without knowing or even suspecting that I'm going to write in his name. Ricardo Reis, after an abstract meditation that suddenly takes concrete shape in an ode. Campos, when I feel a sudden impulse to write and don't know what. (My semiheteronym Bernardo Soares, who in many ways resembles

[12] Pessoa, Letter to Adolfo Casais Monteiro, *The Selected Prose of Fernando Pessoa*, 253.

> Álvaro de Campos, always appears when I'm sleepy or drowsy, such that my qualities of inhibition and logical reasoning are suspended; his prose is an endless reverie. He's a semiheteronym because his personality, although not my own, doesn't differ from my own but is a mere mutilation of it.) (258-59)

In each case it is a form of suspension of consciousness that makes possible the sudden, unexpected event of poetic creation.

The third commentary is that of Greg Mahr, who writes that Pessoa "became a great poet only after a powerful dissociative experience involving the creation of other identities, an event strongly reminiscent of dissociative identity disorder. In this case, though, dissociation appeared to resolve for Pessoa certain tensions implicit in the modernist sensibility, and allowed him new possibilities of creative freedom."[13] Specifically, the welling up in Pessoa of the unreflexive, "naïve" poet Alberto Caeiro offers a solution to the modernist compulsion to reflexivity and to "sentimentality" in Schiller's sense of the word. Caeiro's "vigorous lyrical voice seems to come from a different sensibility than that of the self-critical, diffident, and painfully self-aware modernist" (29): the painful self-awareness (or rather awareness of the absence of self) that characterizes both the orthonymic Fernando Pessoa of *Cancioneiro* and the semi-heteronym Bernardo Soares to whom the authorship of the extraordinary collection of fragments that make up *The Book of Disquiet* is attributed.[14]

Let me suggest, however, that it is possible to think about the use and function of the heteronyms in another way, one that would see them not as an episode in the history of the subject or as a more or less resolved or mitigated pathology but rather as a rhetorical strategy. On this reading, the work that they do is to provide a solution to the modernist problem of the impossibility of speaking *in propria persona*, of speech that would not at once be caught up in the already-said, in the

[13] Greg Mahr, "Pessoa, Life Narrative, and the Dissociative Process," *Biography* 21: 1 (1998), 24.

[14] Jerome Maunsell describes it as an "intensely self-aware wreck of a book"; Jerome Boyd Maunsell, "The Hauntings of Fernando Pessoa," *Modernism/modernity* 19: 1 (2012), 125.

clichés of expression or representation. The speech of the heteronyms is language to the second degree, belonging neither to the figures who author them nor to the poet standing behind those figures but to the floating space of a metapoetics which is yet not distinct from the poems: the space within which the multiple voices of *Ulysses* or the fragmented voices of Eliot take place, for example, or the unauthored voices of surrealist automatic writing, or the language of infelicitous translation through which Pound makes his Propertius speak.

In this sense, Pessoa's heteronyms belong very specifically to the history of modernist depersonalization: a history that includes, say, Eliot's claim that "[p]oetry […] is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality"; [15] or Borges's attack on "the exceptional pre-eminence now generally awarded to the self" and his counter-claim that "[t]here is no whole self," the self is a mirage, no more than a rhetorical move, "a few muscular sensations," and the sight of the branches that the trees place outside his window.[16] Depersonalization, in this history, is not a psychological phenomenon, a matter of the Zeitgeist, but a rhetorical strategy, a strategy of writing in and through the names of others; and this, I suggest, is how we should read the thematization of the absence or fragmentation of self throughout Pessoa's work. In an alternative account of this moment of genesis of the heteronyms and of his relation to them, Pessoa writes:

> Today I have no personality: I've divided all my humanness among the various authors whom I've served as literary executor. Today I'm the meeting-place of a small humanity that belongs only to me.
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> I subsist as a kind of medium of myself, but I'm less real than the others, less substantial, less personal, and easily influenced by them all. I too am a disciple of Caeiro.[17]

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[15] T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1961), 21.

[16] Jorge Luis Borges, "The Nothingness of Personality," *The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922-1986* (London: Penguin, 2007), 3-4.

[17] Pessoa, "Another Version of the Genesis of the Heteronyms," *The Selected Prose of Fernando Pessoa*, 262.

And elsewhere he adds that "[t]he human author of these books knows no self whatsoever within himself. When, for whatever reason, he senses a self within him, he quickly sees that it's a being very different from himself although having some resemblances."[18]

Numerous passages from *The Book of Disquiet* pick up this topos of the fragmentation of the self under its reflexive scrutiny. Let me quote a few, almost at random:

> as an ironic spectator of myself, I've never lost interest in seeing what life brings… I am, in large measure, the selfsame prose I write. I unroll myself in sentences and paragraphs, I punctuate myself.[19]

> How often I feel, as if hearing a voice behind intermittent sounds, that I myself am the underlying bitterness of this life so alien to human life—a life in which nothing happens except in its self-awareness! […] I've made myself into the character of a book, a life one reads. Whatever I feel is felt (against my will) so that I can write that I felt it. Whatever I think is promptly put into words, mixed with images that undo it, cast into rhythms that are something else altogether. From so much self-revising, I've destroyed myself. From so much self-thinking, I'm now my thoughts and not I. I plumbed myself and dropped the plumb; I spend my life wondering if I'm deep or not, with no remaining plumb except my gaze that shows me—blackly vivid in the mirror at the bottom of the well—my own face that observes me observing it. (170)

> Any nostalgia I feel is literary. I remember my childhood with tears, but they're rhythmic tears, in which prose is already being formed. I remember it as something external, and it comes back to me through external things; I remember only external things… I feel nostalgia for

[18] Fernando Pessoa, unpublished preface to the heteronyms, in *Poems of Fernando Pessoa*, trans. Edwin Honig and Susan M. Brown (San Francisco: City Lights, 1998), 149.

[19] Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, ed. and trans. Richard Zenith (London: Penguin, 2001), 169.

> scenes. Thus someone else's childhood can move me as much as my own; both are purely visual phenomena from a past I'm unable to fathom, and my perception of them is literary. They move me, yes, but because I see them, not because I remember them. (183-84)
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> Each of us is several, is many, is a profusion of selves. So that the self who disdains his surroundings is not the same as the self who suffers or takes joy in them. In the vast colony of our being there are many species of people who think and feel in different ways… my entire world of all these souls who don't know each other casts, like a motley but compact multitude, a single shadow—the calm, bookkeeping body with which I lean over Borges's tall desk, where I've come to get the blotter that he borrowed from me. (327-28)

"Borges" here is presumably no more than a fellow clerk, not the writer who speaks in remarkably similar ways of the division of the self, who is "not sure which of us it is that's writing this page";[20] but we shall return to that Borges. This thematization of the unhappy consciousness in its specific relation to writing is equally to be found in the work of all of Pessoa's major heteronyms; it is present by way of its negation in Caeiro's calm refusal of reflexivity and his rigorous nominalism; in the later, more introspective poetry of Álvaro de Campos; in the measured anguish of the orthonym Fernando Pessoa; and even in the calm classicism of Ricardo Reis, in a poem such as this, written shortly before his return to Portugal following Pessoa's death:

> *Countless Lives Inhabit Us*
> Countless lives inhabit us.
> I don't know, when I think or feel,
> Who it is that thinks or feels.
> I am merely the place
> Where things are thought or felt.

[20] Jorge Luis Borges, "Borges and I," *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Viking, 1998), 324.

I have more than just one soul.
There are more I's than I myself.
I exist, nevertheless,
Indifferent to them all.
I silence them: I speak.

The crossing urges of what
I feel or do not feel
Struggle in who I am, but I
Ignore them. They dictate nothing
To the I I know: I write.[21]

One of the ways in which the heteronyms and the orthonym are distinguished from "Fernando Pessoa himself" is that the heteronyms cannot themselves have heteronyms: there can be no infinite spiral of multiplying and named selves. (This is also true for the orthonym "Fernando Pessoa.") The description of the "countless lives" of Reis's poem takes one step towards that possibility, although it is met with a philosophical refusal. The same step is taken more firmly in *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, where the heteronym Ricardo Reis starts both to take on a life of its own and to become aware of the other selves it contains. Unpacking his documents when he arrives at the Hotel Bragança, Reis comes across a recent manuscript—the one just quoted, but in this translation the first lines read "*Innumerable people live within us. If I think and feel, I know not who is thinking and feeling, I am only the place where there is thinking and feeling*"; and the narrator continues, "though they do not end here, it is as if everything ends, for beyond thinking and feeling there is nothing" (13). Reading over these lines, Reis reflects: "Who is using me in order to think and feel, and among the innumerable people who live within me, who I am […] what thoughts and feelings are the ones I do not share because they are mine alone?" The answer to the first of these questions is that the one who is using Ricardo Reis to think and feel is Fernando Pessoa, but also the reader who occupies the position of his "I" in the act of reading; and the second question is answered towards the end of the book, when Reis asks Fernando Pessoa: "Is there anything that belongs only to

[21] Fernando Pessoa & Co., *Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. Richard Zenith (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 137.

me," and is told, "Probably not" (313): again, both because Reis is a creature of writing and because he is possessed (perhaps in both senses of the word) by those who read him.

Selves are innumerable, discontinuous, and virtual. After falling asleep one afternoon, Reis wakes up to find on the table a sheet of paper with two lines of poetry he had written earlier ("*All I ask of the gods is that I should ask nothing of them*," 35). Annoyed, he reflects that "[i]t never occurs to people that the one who finishes something is never the one who started it, even if both have the same name, for the name is the only thing that remains constant" (37). This is Alberto Caeiro's position: names designate a contingent and discontinuous content. They contain multitudes. On another afternoon,

> Ricardo Reis did not go out to dine. He had some tea and cakes on the large table in the living room surrounded by seven empty chairs. Under a chandelier with seven branches and two bulbs he ate three small sponge cakes, leaving one on his plate. He counted again and saw that the numbers four and six were missing. He soon found the four, the corners of the rectangular room, but for six he had to get up and look around, which resulted in eight, the empty chairs. Finally he decided that he himself would be six, he could be any number if he was innumerable. (204)

Later, when his idealized beloved, Marcenda, visits him, he has to decide which room to take her to, "into the dining room would be absurd, in which of the chairs around that long table would they sit, side by side or facing, and how many would be seated there, he being innumerable, and she is certainly more than one" (209).

If one's selves are innumerable, they also exist—as the heteronym Ricardo Reis does—independently of their author or of whatever might be designated as a primary self. At one point Reis reflects that "already Rio de Janeiro is like a distant memory, perhaps of some other life, not his, one of those innumerable lives. Yes, at this very moment another Ricardo Reis may be dining in Oporto or lunching in Rio de Janeiro, if not farther afield" (197). The best way of explaining this actualization of virtual selves in an endless set of other possible

worlds is by reference to the primary intertext of *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, a novel by Herbert Quain called *The God of the Labyrinth* which Reis has accidentally taken with him from the ship's library, where

> [t]he tedium of the voyage and the book's evocative title had attracted him. A labyrinth with a god, what god might that be, which labyrinth, what labyrinthine god. In the end it turned out to be a simple detective story, an ordinary tale of death and investigation, the murderer, the victim, and finally the detective, all three accomplices to the crime. In my honest opinion, the reader of a mystery is the only real survivor of the story he is reading, unless it is as the one real survivor that every reader reads every story. (12)

Reis reads this novel intermittently, struggling to make sense of it and at times falling asleep over it; he finally takes it with him when, at the end of the novel, he departs this world along with Fernando Pessoa, whose nine months are now up. Now, *The God of the Labyrinth* is one of the texts that Borges describes in his story "A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain," recalling from memory—since he has lost his only copy—a plot which contains "an incomprehensible murder in the early pages of the book, a slow discussion in the middle, and a solution of the crime toward the end."[22] But then a long paragraph in the novel's final pages introduces the sentence: "*Everyone believed that the chessplayers had met accidentally*," which forces the reader to infer that the proposed solution is erroneous and so to discover another solution – just as it is left to the reader, in the story of the numbers in Reis's dining room, to work out that the unmentioned number five is that of the branches of the chandelier which have no bulbs. Even more directly relevant, however, is the next work of Quain's described in this story, *April March*, in which successive chapters describe an event and then a series of preceding events each of which is an alternative version of what might have led up to it, and each of which in turn has a series of virtual antecedents; the structure is precisely that of the Chinese novel described in Borges's story "The Garden of Forking Paths," a novel which is literally a labyrinth where each of the ramifying branches of any event is simultaneously actualized within "an infinite series of times, a growing, dizzying web of divergent, convergent, and

[22] Borges, "A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain," *Collected Fictions*, 108.

parallel times."[23] It is within such a universe, and only such a universe, that Pessoa's heteronyms can in turn generate heteronyms in a nesting of reality and fiction that extends to infinity.

The insanity that seems to characterize the narrator of *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, a novel in which "absurdity does not always obey logic," is perhaps a necessary corollary of the novel's literalization of Pessoa's dissociative vision. At its mildest this madness takes the form of a supposition that the world is shaped according to human need: "Fortunately," the narrator notes at one point, "he cannot see himself in the mirror clouded by steam, this must be the compassion shown by mirrors at certain critical moments" (247); and again:

> If all the seconds and minutes were exactly the same, as marked on the clock, we would not always have time to explain what takes place in them, the substance they contain, but fortunately for us the episodes of greatest significance tend to occur in seconds of long duration and minutes that are spun out, which makes it possible to discuss at length and in some detail without any serious violation of the most subtle of the three dramatic unities, which is time itself. (181)

That charming confidence is matched by moments of radical uncertainty when the narrator accuses himself of saying something untrue, or puzzles over how much detail the reader will require, or—more frequently—alternates between blunt assertions of fact and a disclosure of ignorance, the former often masking the latter, as when he describes Marcenda in passing as a virgin, for

> although this has not been mentioned and she herself does not declare it, Marcenda is a virgin, a wholly private matter, even a fiancé, should she ever have one, will not dare to ask, Are you a virgin. For the time being and in this social ambiance one assumes that she is. Later, at the opportune moment, we may discover with some indignation that she wasn't after all. (110)

[23] Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," *Collected Fictions*, 127.

But the madness of the narrator is perhaps above all a matter of our inability to distinguish his commentary from the fantasies of the characters he describes. At one point, for example, the police informer Victor encounters Ricardo Reis and his invisible dead creator, and "as Ricardo Reis crossed the street followed by Fernando Pessoa, the police informer had the impression there were two shadows on the ground. These are the effects of reflected light, an illusion, after a certain age the eyes are not capable of distinguishing between the visible and the invisible" (237). Just as the novel's dialogue, which lacks quotation marks and any demarcation of speakers, often can't be precisely allocated, and just as its lack of interrogation marks makes it hard to distinguish question from statement, so sentences like this are free-floating: they might be the comment of a naïve narrator, or they might be Victor's thoughts; there's no way of knowing.

That multiply layered enunciative force is a component of the novel's strategy of layering the opposition of the fictive to the real through a series of hierarchically ordered levels, none of which is final and definitive. Reflecting on theatrical mimesis, Ricardo Reis concludes that "only a different reality, whatever it is, may be substituted for the reality one wishes to convey. The difference between them mutually demonstrates, explains, and measures them, reality as the invention it was, invention as the reality it will be" (89). Reality is, as the narrator puts it, "all false and at the same time all true" (168). Consider this dialogue between Reis and Pessoa:

> Soon you will be telling me that life and death are the same. Precisely, my dear Reis. In the space of one day you have stated three quite different things, that there is no death, that there is death, and now that life and death are the same. There was no other way of resolving the contradiction of the first two statements. And, as he said this, Fernando Pessoa gave a knowing smile. (239)

For "life" and "death" in this dialogue we can substitute the words "reality" and "fiction": that is surely the meaning of Pessoa's "knowing smile." The real and the fictive meet in that paradoxical area that Winnicott called transitional, an area "which is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that

it shall exist as a resting place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet inter-related."[24]

At the very end of the novel Ricardo Reis finds himself beginning to fade away physically: "In the morning he cannot rise without first identifying himself with his own hands, line by line, what he can still find of himself, like a fingerprint partially obliterated by a large scar" (309): he identifies himself "line by line" because he is made of writing, his "I" inhabited and possessed by his creator Fernando Pessoa (whose name in Portuguese means "person") and by the reader, by whatever reader is left for his unpublished poems, locked away in a trunk in Fernando Pessoa's rooms. In this drama of mirrors and names, of heteronyms and orthonyms and of an author who is doubled between them, observing himself observing himself and all his others, the reader, finally, is the only true other, "the only real survivor," the only character without a name.

[24] D.W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena," *Collected Papers: Through Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis* (London: Tavistock, 1958), 230.