

Fernando Pessoa

Sensationism: [b]

Sensationism differs from common literary currents in that it is not exclusive, that is to say, it does not claim for itself the monopoly of right aesthetic feeling. Properly speaking, it does not claim for itself that it is, except in a certain restricted sense, a current or a movement, but only partly an attitude, and partly an addition to all preceding currents.

The position of sensationism is not, as that of common literary movements, like romanticism, symbolism, futurism, and all such, a position analogous to that of a religion, which implicitly excludes other religions. It is precisely analogous to that which theosophy takes up in respect to all religious systems. It is a well-known fact that theosophy claims to be, root a religion, but the fundamental truth that underlies all religious systems alike. As such, theosophy is in opposition, of course, to those parts of religious systems which exclude other systems and also to those parts of religious systems which seem to it to vitiate the fundamental attitude called religious. That is why theosophy, while it does not oppose protestantism as such, opposes it insofar as it is opposed to catholicism; and why it cannot accept such theories as that of eternal penalties, which vitiate, in its opinion, all that is fundamental and true in the sense of the worship of God's creation.

Even such the position of sensationism is relatively to all artistic movements. It holds, of them all, or of almost all (for we must not allow this term «artistic movements» to be applicable with a universal generosity to every snake that raises its head above that of others in the literary pitcher of modern confusion) that, in their essence, they are right. Spinoza said that philosophical systems are right in what they affirm and wrong in what they deny. This, the greatest of all pantheistic affirmations, is what sensationism can repeat in relation to aesthetic things. Though supreme perfection which is unattainable) is only one, yet relative perfection is several. Homer is as perfect in his way as Herrick in his, though the homeric way is a far superior one. The sensationist admits joyfully both Homer and Berrick to the great brotherhood of Art.

There are three central tenets of sensationism. The first is that art is supremely construction and that the greatest art is that which is able to visualise

and create organised wholes, of which the component parts fit *vitally* into their places; the great principle that Aristotle enunciated when he said that a poem was an «animal». The second is that all art being composed of parts, each of those parts must be perfect in itself; as the former was the classic principle of unity and structural Perfection, this is the romantical principle of «fine passages» in what it contains of truth, and excluding the error that makes this all, without attending to the higher classical principle, that the whole is greater than the part. The third tenet of sensationism, quâ aesthetics, is that, every little fragment which builds up the part of the whole should be perfect in itself; this is the principle which is insisted on by exaggeration by all those artists of which the symbolists are part, who, being temperamentally incapable of creating neither great organised wholes, nor even (as the romantics) large eloquent stretches, put their activity into the eggshell (nutshell) of producing beautiful individual lines, or very short perfect lyrics. That is beautiful indeed, when it is beautiful; but it is dangerous to fall into the impression that that is anything but the lowest part of art.

These are the tenets of sensationism, quâ artistic philosophy. That is to say, these are the tenets it upholds in so far as it accepts all systems and schools of art, extracting from each that beauty and that originality which is peculiar to it.

But sensationism is not only a philosophy of art; besides its attitude of universal acceptance of what is beautiful, it presents an originality of its own. If it were only an aesthetic attitude, it would have no right to call itself anything — sensationism for instance —, anything but a bald, though lucid, artistic philosophy.

Quâ novelty, sensationism has three other tenets, and it is here that it begins to be sensationism proper.

It holds, first of all, that society is spiritually divided into three classes, which sometimes coincide, and more often do not coincide, with «classes» cammonly socalled. It divides those classes into aristocracy, middle class and the people, but the division, as will be seen, has no (necessary) relation with the common division of society into these elements. For the sensationist, the aristocrat is the person who lives for art, and for whom all things, material or spiritual, have value only in so far as they have beauty. Religion, morality, spirituality, — all these things are worth the beauty they have, or that can be extracted from them. They are neither true nor false; they have no interest for the aristocrat, apart from their aesthetic interest.

For the middle-class person, in this classification, the basis of interest of

anything is political. The value of everything, for him, is in the relation of the political value he sees in it. It does not matter what his idea of politics is; it may be high or low, just as the aristocrat's idea of art and beauty may be high or low, the essential thing being that art is the one important thing to him. So for the middle-class man: politics is the one important thing for him, whether he may be a Herbert Spencer or John Jones, a common voter.

The plebeian attitude involves no direct interest except a material one. All socialists and most anarchists are structurally plebeians, because they are preeminently occupied with economic considerations. The age of economists is the evil age of art, because the age of plebeian feeling must perforce be the evil age for aristocratic sentiment.

Sensationism stands for the aesthetic attitude in all its pagan splendour. It does not stand for any of those foolish things — the aestheticism of Óscar Wilde, or the art for art's sake of other misguided people with a plebeian outlook on life. It can see the loveliness of morals just as it can understand the beauty of the lack of them. No religion is right for it, nor any religion wrong.

A man may traverse all the religious systems of the world in one day, with perfect sincerity and tragic soul-experiences. He must be an aristocrat — in the sense in which we use the word — to be able to do it. I once stated that a cultured and intelligent man has the duty to be an atheist at noon, when the clearness and materiality of the sun eats into all things, and an ultramontane catholic at that precise hour after sunset when the shadows have not yet completed their slow coil round the clear presence of things. Some people thought that this was a joke. But I was only translating into rapid prose (this was written in a newspaper) a common personal experience. Having accustomed myself to have no beliefs and no opinions, lest my aesthetic feeling should be weakened, I grew soon to have no personality at all except an expressive one, I grew to be a mere apt machine for the expression of moods which became so intense that they grew into personalities and made my very soul the mere shell of their casual appearance, even as theosophists say that the malice of nature-spirits sometimes makes them occupy the discarded astral corpses of men and frolic under cover of their shadowy semblances (substances).

This does not mean that every sensationist should have no political opinion; it means that, as artist, he is bound to have none and all. That excuse of Martial's, which has roused the ire of many people alien to the [essence] of art: «*Lasciva est nobis pagina, vita proba*», that, though his art was impure, his life was not, reproduced after by Herrick, who wrote of himself «His muse was jocund, but

his life was chaste», is the exact duty of the artist towards himself.

Sincerity is the one great artistic crime. Insincerity is the second greatest. The great artist should never have a really fundamental and sincere opinion about life. But that should give him the capacity to feel sincere, nay to be absolutely sincere about anything for a certain length of time — that length of time, say, which is necessary for a poem to be conceived and written. It is perhaps necessary to state that it is necessary to be an artist before this can be attempted. It is of no use to try to be an aristocrat when you are a born middle-class man or plebeian.

1916?

Páginas Íntimas e de Auto-Interpretação. Fernando Pessoa. (Textos estabelecidos e prefaciados por Georg Rudolf Lind e Jacinto do Prado Coelho.) Lisboa: Ática, 1966: 204.