

Fernando Pessoa

[Carta a um editor inglês —1916]

Sir,

The purpose of this letter is to inquire whether you would be disposed to publish an Anthology of Portuguese «sensationist» poetry. I am aware of how enterprising you are in this case of new «movements» and this emboldens me to make this inquiry.

It is possibly not very easy to explain in such a number of words as may legitimately be contained in a letter, precisely what the movement called sensationism is. I will try, however, to give you some idea of its nature; the extracts which I am enclosing, and which are translations of sensationist poems and parts of poems, will probably fill in the inevitable blanks of this cursory explanation.

First as to derivation. It would be idle to pretend of Sensationism that it comes direct from the Gods or dates only from the souls of its creators, without the human concourse of forerunners or influences. But we claim for it that it is as original as any human movement — intellectual or other — can be. That it does represent, both fundamentally (in its metaphysical substance) and superficially (in its innovations as to expression) a new species of Weltanschauung, we have no hesitation in claiming. As, I will not say founder, (for these things must never be said), but at least chief responsible for it, I owe it both to myself and to my fellow-sinners to be no more modest over the matter than social usages absolutely require.

As to derivation, then; the enumeration of our origins will be the first element towards anything like an integral explanation of the movement. We descend from three older movements — French «symbolism», Portuguese transcendentalist pantheism, and the jumble of senseless and contradictory things of which futurism, cubism and the like are occasional expressions, though, to be exact, we descend more from the spirit than from the letter of these. You know what French symbolism is, and are of course aware that being at bottom a carrying to extremes of romantic subjectivism, it is besides a carrying to extremes of romantic liberty of versification. It was further an extremely minute and morbid analysis ([er] synthetised for the purposes of

poetical expression) of sensations. It was a «sensationism» already, though a rudimentary one, in relation to ours. It threw the world out of focus in obedience to those mental states the expression of which would have been incompatible with the normal equilibrium (balance) of sensations.

From French symbolism we derive our fundamental attitude of excessive attention to our sensations, our consequent frequent dealing in ennui, in apathy, in renouncement before the simplest and sanest things of life. This does not characterise all of us, though the morbid and probing analysis of sensations runs through the whole movement.

Now as to the differences. We reject entirely, except occasionally for purely aesthetical purposes, the religious attitude of the symbolists. God has become for us a word «which can conveniently be used for the suggestion of mystery, but which serves no other purpose monal or otherwise — an aesthetic value and no more. Besides this, we reject and abominate the symbolist incapacity for prolonged effort, their inability to write long poems and their vitiated «construction».

Portuguese «transcendentalist pantheism» you do not know. It is a pity, because, though not a long-standing movement, yet it is an original one. Suppose English romanticism had, instead of retrograding to the Tennysonian-Rossetti-Browning level, progressed right onward from Shelley, spiritualising his already spiritualistic pantheism. You would arrive at the conception of Nature (our transcendentalist pantheists are essentially poets of Nature) in which flesh and spirit are entirely mingled in something which transcends both. If you can conceive a William Blake put into the soul of Shelley and writing through that, you will perhaps have a nearer idea of what I mean. This movement has produced two poems which I am bound to hold among the greatest of all time. Neither is a long one. One is the *Ode to Light* of Guerra Junqueiro, the greatest of all Portuguese Poets (he drove Camoens from the first place when he published *Pátria* in 1896 — but *Pátria*, which is a lyrical and satirical drama, is not of his transcendental-pantheist phase). The *Prayer to Light* is probably the greatest metaphysico-poetical achievement since Wordsworth's great *Ode*. The other poem, which certainly transcends Browning's *Last Ride Together* as a love-poem, and which belongs to the same metaphysical level of love-emotion, though more religiously pantheistic, is the *Elegy* of Teixeira de Pascoaes who wrote it in 1905. — To this school of poets we, the «sensationists», owe the fact that in our poetry spirit and matter are interpenetrated and inter-transcended. And we have carried the process further than the originators, though I regret to say

that we cannot as yet claim to have produced anything on the level of the two poems I have referred to.

As to our influences from the modern movement which embraces cubism and futurism, it is rather owing to the suggestions we received from them than to the substance of their works properly speaking.

We have intellectualised their processes. The decomposition of the model they realise (because we have been influenced, not by their literature, if they have anything resembling literature, but by their pictures), we have carried into what we believe to be the proper sphere of that decomposition—*not things, but our sensations of things*.

Having shown you our origins, and, cursorily, our use of and differences from those origins, I will now more expressly state, as far as that is possible, in a few words, what is the central attitude of Sensationism.

1. The only reality in life is sensation. The only reality in art is consciousness of the sensation.

2. There is no philosophy, no ethics and no aesthetics even in art, whatever there may be in life. In art there are only sensations and our consciousness of them. Whatever love, joy, pain, may be in life, in art they are only sensations; in themselves, they are worthless to art God is a sensation of ours (because an idea is a sensation) and in art is used only [when?] the expression of certain sensations — such as reverence, mystery, etc. No artist can believe or disbelieve in God, just as no artist can feel or not-feel love or joy or pain. At the moment he writes he either believes or disbelieves according to the thought that best enables him to obtain consciousness and give expression to his sensation at that moment. Once that sensation goes, these things become to him, as artist, no more than bodies which the souls of sensations assume to become visible to that inner eye from whose sight he writes down his sensations.

3. 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.

4. The three principles of art are 1) every sensation should be expressed to the full, that is, the consciousness of every sensation should be sifted to the bottom; 2) the sensation should be so expressed that it has the possibility of evoking — as a halo round a definite central presentation — the greatest possible number of other sensations; 3) the whole thus produced should have

the greatest possible resemblance to an organised being, because that is the condition of vitality. I call these three principles 1) that of Sensation, 2) that of Suggestion, 3) that of Construction. This last, the great principle of the Greeks — whose great philosopher did indeed hold the poem to be «an animal» — has had very careless handling at modern hands. Romanticism has indisciplined the capacity of constructing which, at least, low classicism had Shakespeare, with his fatal incapacity to visualise organised wholes, has been a fatal influence in this respect (you will remember that Matthew Arnold's classical instinct guided him to an intuition of this). Milton is still the great Master of Building in poetry. Personally, I confess that I tend ever more and more to put Milton above Shakespeare as a poet. But —I must confess — in so far as I am anything (and I try hard not to be the same thing three minutes running, because that is bad aesthetic hygiene) I am a pagan, and I am therefore rather with the pagan artist Milton than with the Christian artist Shakespeare. All this, however, is *passim*, and I hope you will excuse its insertion into this place.

I sometimes hold that a poem — I would also say a painting or a statue, but I do not consider sculpture and painting arts, but only perfected artisans' work — is a person, a living human being, belongs in bodily presence and real fleshly existence to another world, into which our imagination throws him, his aspect to us, as we read *him* in this world, being no more than the imperfect shadow of that reality of beauty which is divine elsewhere. I hope some Day, after death, I shall meet in their real presences the few children of these I have as yet created and I hope I shall find them beautiful in their dewy immortality. You may perhaps wonder that one who declares himself a pagan should subscribe to these imaginations. I was a pagan, however, two paragraphs above. I am one no longer as I write this. At the end of this letter I hope to be already something else.

I carry into practice as far as I can that spiritual disintegration I preach. If I am ever coherent, it is only as an incoherence from incoherence. (. . .)

1916?

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