

Fernando Pessoa

## **Wit is common and generally human.**

Wit is common and generally human. If anyone doubt this, he need but buy a copy of "Answers", and read the winning phrases in a contest of wit, which they call "Nuggets". There quite obscure persons have flashes of wit which, as wit, could be cited to the honour of an acknowledged genius in it.

I have often reflected how wise are the sayings of Goethe in his conversations with Eckermann. But I have also often reflected how many sayings equally wise I have heard in the course of my life, in conversations with people who, however intelligent, were hardly candidates for Goethes.

Again, ideas are common, even brilliant ideas. The world is always overpacked with geniuses of the casual. It is only when the casual becomes the universal by intense concentration on it, by extensive working of it into consequences and conclusions, that right of entry is gained into the mansions of the future.

It is this consideration that does to a great extent stultify, in point of definite survival, the critical efforts of an Arnold, of a Lytton Strachey, of an Aldous Huxley. They are all extremely clever; they are all, more or less, impatiently incoherent. There is perhaps more wisdom, or worldly wisdom, as such, in a book by Aldous Huxley than in all Spencer. But Spencer will be remembered, though unread, a thousand years from now; and for Aldous Huxley there will be neither reading nor remembering.

Because we come ever to the central point of all triumph, be it against the adversity of circumstances or the inertia of the future: will, and will only, makes us win. Will only will convert our casual thought into a system and thus give it a body; will, and will only, will lift our happy phrase into a doctrine of that happiness. Many men throw out phrases which contain in germ great Kantisms; but only Kants expand the phrases into the greatness of worlds. The greatness of a phrase of Goethe lies in that it is not the phrase itself, but the consequence of genius.

There is a great Portuguese poet called Cesario Verde; he lived in the middle years of the nineteenth century. The whole attitude to life which makes him a great poet can actually be found in anticipation in two casual poems of Guilherme Braga, a poet ten years older than he. But what in Cesario is

gathered together into a whole concept of the universe was a mere chance in Braga's production. And, even if, as is quite probable, Braga's casual poems made Cesario find himself, even if by a plagiarism without plagiarism, the earlier man is nevertheless smaller. (It is the later man who is the earlier).

These things are generally rated quite accurately by posterity. That is why posterity registers Wilde's wit and forgets the equal wit of Jones or Smith in the train. One phrase is Wilde's, the other is anybody's. Why should I be poorer than that rich man, ask the innocents. Because he is organically born to be rich.

s. d.

"Erostratus". in Páginas de Estética e de Teoria Literárias. Fernando Pessoa. (Textos estabelecidos e prefaciados por Georg Rudolf Lind e Jacinto do Prado Coelho.) Lisboa: Ática, 1966: 187.