

Thomas Crosse

## TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE [b]

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At first sight it seems that something of Whitman is present in these poems. I have no information as to Caeiro's knowledge of foreign languages, or of English and of Whitman particularly; yet, on the face of it, and after a very cursory reading of the poems, I suspect the first to have been, at best, very slight, and the second and third nil. However it may be, on close examination there is really no influence of Whitman here. There is at most an occasional coincidence and the coincidence is merely of tone, and more apparent therefore than real. The essential difference is enormous.

The traits common to the two poets are the love of Nature and simplicity, and the astounding acuity of sensation. But, whereas Whitman insistently reads transcendental meanings into Nature, nothing can be further from Caeiro's attitude than that; it is, as a matter of fact, the exact opposite to this attitude. And whereas Whitman's sensations are immensely various and include both natural and artificial, and the metaphysical as well as the physical, Caeiro's persistently exclude even the more «natural artificial» things and are only metaphysical in that extremely peculiar negative manner which is one of the novelties of his attitude.

Again, Caeiro has a perfectly definite and coherent philosophy. It may not be as coherent in word and phrase as might be wished from a philosopher; but he is not a philosopher, but a poet. It may not be coherent from the outset, but it grows more and more definite as we read on till, in the final poems of the *Keeper of Sheep*, it takes a definite and unmistakable shape. It is a quite perfectly defined absolute objectivism — the completest system of absolute objectivism which we have ever had, either from philosopher or from writer. There is philosophy in Whitman, but it is the philosophy of a poet and not of a thinker; and where there is

philosophy it is not of an original cast, the sentiment alone being original. Not so in Caeiro, in whom both thought and feeling are altogether novel.

Finally, though both are «sensationists», Caeiro's sensationism is of a type different from Whitman's. The difference, though it seems subtle and difficult

to explain, is nevertheless quite clear. It lies chiefly in this: Caeiro seizes on a single subject and sees it *clearly*; even when he seems to see it in a complex way, it will be found that is but some means to see it all the more clearly. Whitman strives to see, not clearly, but deeply. Caeiro sees only the object, striving to separate it as much as possible from all other objects and from all sensations or ideas not, so to speak, part of the object itself. Whitman does the exact contrary: he strives to link up the object with all others, with many others, with the soul and the Universe and God.

Lastly, the very temperaments of the two poets differ. Even when he thinks, Whitman's thought is a mode of his feeling, or absolutely a mood, in the common decadent sense. Even when Caeiro feels, his feeling is a mode of this thought.

This description of their differences might be prolonged indefinitely. Whitman's violent democratic feeling could be contrasted with Caeiro's abhorrence for any sort of humanitarianism, Whitman's interest in all things human, with Caeiro's indifference to all that men feel, suffer or enjoy.

After all, and all things considered, when we eliminate the superficial resemblance derived from nonrhythmical character of the poetry of both men, and the abstract revolt against civilization, the resemblances between them are exhausted.

Besides, Whitman has really a sense of metrical rhythm; it is of a special kind, but it exists. Caeiro's rhythm is noticeably absent. He is so distinctly intellectual, that the lines have no wave of feeling from which to derive their rhythmical movement.

What after all is Caeiro's value, his message to us, as the phrase goes? It is not difficult to determine. To a world plunged in various kinds of subjectivisms, he brings Absolute Objectivism more absolute than the pagan objectivists ever had it. To a World over-civilized he brings Absolute Nature back again. To a world merged in humanitarisms, in workers' problems, in ethical societies, in social movements, he brings an absolute contempt for the fate and the life of man, which, if it be thought excessive, is at last natural to him and a magnificent corrective. Wordsworth had opposed natural man to artificial man; «natural man» is for Caeiro as artificial as anything else except Nature.

Our first impression of Caeiro is that everybody knows that he tells us, that there is therefore no need to say it. But it is the old story of Columbus' egg. If everybody knows this, why has no one said it? If not worth saying, but true, why has every poet said the contrary?

s. d.

**Páginas Íntimas e de Auto-Interpretação.** Fernando Pessoa. (Textos estabelecidos e prefaciados por Georg Rudolf Lind e Jacinto do Prado Coelho.) Lisboa: Ática, 1996: 368.