

Fernando Pessoa's ontological meditations: Dream, doubt, and the mystery of being in *The Mariner*

[As meditações ontológicas de Fernando Pessoa:
Sonho, dúvida e o mistério do ser em *O Marinheiro*]

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Keywords

Fernando Pessoa, *The Mariner*, Dream, Doubt, Mystery of being.

Abstract

This article proposes a philosophical reading of Fernando Pessoa's static drama *The Mariner*. The three watchers, protagonists of the play, navigate a maelstrom of doubts concerning dreaming and reality, ultimately perceiving their lives as a dream. The analysis suggests that this realization emerges when, questioning in a Cartesian manner whether their lives might be nothing but a dream, they undergo an experience that reveals the world in its absurd and mysterious existence. This perspective enables an exploration of a connection—never explicitly or systematically addressed in the history of Western literature and philosophy—between the experience of being and the experience that apprehends life as a dream.

Palavras-chave

Fernando Pessoa, *O Marinheiro*, Sonho, Dúvida, Mistério do ser.

Resumo

Este artigo propõe uma leitura filosófica do drama estático de Fernando Pessoa, *O Marinheiro*. As três veladoras, protagonistas da peça, navegam num turbilhão de dúvidas relativas ao sonho e à realidade, acabando por perceber as suas próprias vidas como um sonho. A análise sugere que esta tomada de consciência surge quando, interrogando-se de um modo cartesiano se as suas vidas não serão senão um sonho, vivenciam uma experiência que revela o mundo na sua existência absurda e misteriosa. Esta perspectiva permite explorar uma ligação – nunca abordada explícita ou sistematicamente na história da literatura e da filosofia ocidentais – entre a experiência do ser e a experiência que apreende a vida enquanto sonho.

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According to Heidegger, our fundamental possibility lies in awakening a sensitivity —always present but, for the most part, dormant in our daily interactions—that allows us to grasp the “wonder of all wonders” (HEIDEGGER, 1943: 234), namely, the fact that beings are. Reflections on being (and nothingness) are central to all of Western philosophical tradition, but it is particularly in the first half of the 20th century that we find explicit and engaged reports of that particular type of experience we undergo when we grasp—as if seeing the world for the first time—that what is, is, instead of not being.

While philosophical discourse often provides extensive *interpretations* and *analyses* of the experience of being¹, it is much rarer—even among authors working within the phenomenological tradition—to find direct *descriptions* of this experience. For this reason, those interested in understanding how the impact of the mystery of being is lived may often find it preferable to turn their gaze to literature, which, particularly in the early 20th century (though not exclusively), has provided some significant accounts of the experience of being.

The most famous literary account is undoubtedly Roquentin's epiphany in Sartre's philosophical novel *Nausea*. Far less known, at least in philosophical circles, are the numerous descriptions we find in Pessoa's works. Indeed, perhaps no one has described with such frequency and richness what we might feel and intuit when our gaze falls upon the absurd and mysterious existence of the world. The experience of being is, in fact, central to all of Pessoa's main heteronyms. While in Alberto Caeiro the experience of being seems to give rise to luminous and peaceful emotional tones, in the majority of Pessoa's works—in particular, but not exclusively, in *Faust*, *The Book of Disquiet*, in Álvaro de Campos' poems, and in the drama at the centre of this study, *O Marinheiro*—the mystery of being is predominantly perceived through a problematic pathos: Pessoa often speaks of terror, horror, nausea, and related emotional tones.

This richness and variety are fertile grounds for at least two major lines of inquiry. On the one hand, remaining within Pessoa studies, it provides a significant interpretative key for navigating Pessoa's fragmented corpus. What are the differences in how Pessoa's voices respond to the mystery of being? What are these differences rooted in? On the other hand, looking at the millennia-old philosophical investigation into being, as well as the more recent debate surrounding the experience of being², Pessoa's descriptions of the experience of being offer valuable insights into how our *pathos* (and the *logos* that attempts to express it) engages with

¹ Alongside Heidegger, who provides a rich description and analysis of this experience in *What is Metaphysics?* (HEIDEGGER, 1927), we find other important thinkers who have described their own encounters with the mystery of being, including SCHELER (2017), SARTRE (1965), and WITTGENSTEIN (1965).

² For an historically informed discussion of the experience of being in western philosophy, see: ARENDT (1978: 121-51), PAREYSON (1979, 1992). For recent works on the experience of being, see: ZANETTI (2022, 2023, 2024, 2025, forthcoming), BILLON (2023), BALASKA (2024), and CAPOBIANCO (2024).

the mystery of being. Why can we respond to the mystery of being in different ways? What is the proper philosophical interpretation of what happens to us when we open our gaze to the bare fact that the world exists? What is the connection between this gaze and existential suffering? Under what conditions can the experience of being lead to a peaceful vision, as in Caeiro? And under what conditions, instead, does it lead to the suffering of Soares, Campos, and Faust?

In this article, I aim to contribute to these lines of inquiry by offering a reading of *O Marinheiro*, according to which the metaphysical horror that animates the watchers in the play stems from the awakening of that gaze capable of seeing things in their bare existence. Within this reading, I propose to highlight the connection between the experience of being and two other central events in both the watchers' journey and philosophical reflection: dream and doubt. The watchers experience the Cartesian sceptical doubt that questions whether the present moment is real or a dream. However, from this doubt (and others that will be explored in what follows), they arrive at conclusions different from those of Cartesian metaphysical meditations—hence why I refer here to Pessoa's ontological meditations. They realize that, ultimately, there is no substantial difference between waking life and the life of dreams, as both are simply something rather than nothing. Since there is no foundation to the being of what exists, everything in the experience of being appears as mysterious, absurd, strange, and suspended. But these are also the characteristics we attribute to the events of dreams. Thus, in seeing the being of entities, the watchers also grasp a new meaning of the term “dream”, one that transcends the ordinary perspective that contrasts waking life and dreams, reality and unreality: from the perspective of being, life—whether real or dreamed—presents itself as a dream or an illusion. This is the greatness of the play: while many in literature—consider Calderón de la Barca and Shakespeare, to name the most famous—have given voice to the impression that life is like a dream, only in this play is such an impression explicitly connected to the experience of being³. These are, in essence, the core aspects of the reading of *O Marinheiro* that I will articulate in the following pages.⁴

³ Although in this paper I will focus solely on *O Marinheiro*, the larger project would need to include an investigation of the connection between dreaming and the mystery of being in all of Pessoa's works that explore these themes, primarily *Faust* and *The Book of Disquiet*, among others.

⁴ For other detailed interpretations of the drama—which, however, never emphasize the centrality of the experience of being—see: LOPES (1985), LOBO STERNBERG (1983), BARBOSA & BESSA (2007), JACKSON (2010), FERREIRA (2015), BECHARA (2018), and BORGES (2022). My interpretation is, in its general framework, shared by FREITAS & FERRARI (2017), who argue that the theme of the experience of being is also present in some of the other 13 partially written dramas by Pessoa, particularly in *Diálogo no Jardim do Palácio* and *A Morte do Príncipe*.

Structure of the Work

Written in 1913, later revised and published in 1915 in the first issue of *Orpheu*⁵, *O Marinheiro* is the only theatrical drama published from what, according to Pessoa himself, was meant to be at least a seven-part series of static or ecstatic dramas (PESSOA, 2017: 278). The work belongs to a genre inspired by Maeterlinck's symbolist theatre⁶, which Pessoa described as static theatre. In this genre, "the plot does not constitute action" (PESSOA, 2001: 20); instead, the focus is the protagonists' inner adventure, "the revelation of souls through words that are exchanged and the creation of situations" (PESSOA, 2001: 20).

No theatro dinamico as almas apresentam a sua forma social; no theatro estatico deverão apresentar a sua forma impenetravelmente individual. O theatro estatico usa o movimento inexprimivel, o vitalmente intraduzivel.

D'ahi o dever ser o theatro estatico absolutamente irreal e falso. [...]

A peça que ora apresentamos pertence a esse genero e é a primeira de, pelo menos, uma heptalogia estatica. Gira sobre a intervenção, dentro das almas, de trez sentimentos – o tédio, a duvida e o sonho – que são, por sua natureza, incapazes de produzir nem acção, nem sequer desejo de acção.

(PESSOA, 2017: 277-278)

[In the dynamic theatre, souls present their social form; in the static theatre, they must present their impenetrably individual form. The static theatre employs the inexpressible movement, the vitally untranslatable.

Hence, the static theatre must necessarily be absolutely unreal and false. [...]

The play we now present belongs to this genre and is the first of, at least, a static heptalogy. It revolves around the intervention, within souls, of three feelings—boredom, doubt, and dream—which, by their very nature, are incapable of producing either action or even the desire for action].⁷

The drama unfolds in a single *quadro*, a term that, in contrast to *acto*, alludes to the immobility and stillness that characterize the play. It is set in a room of an ancient castle, at night. Three women—three watchers—are present in the room. They are positioned near a window through which, in the distance, between two far-off mountains, a strip of sea is visible. The only objects framing the watchers' experience

⁵ For a contextualization of the work within the editorial project of *Orpheu*, see: STEGAGNO PICCHIO (2004), BECHARA (2018), and BORGES (2022).

⁶ In the essay *Le tragique quotidien*, published in *Le trésor des humbles* (1896), Maeterlinck defines static theatre through the notion of "immobile life": "On me dira peut-être qu'une vie immobile ne serait guère visible [...]. Je ne sais s'il est vrai qu'un théâtre statique soit impossible. Il me semble même qu'il existe. La plupart des tragédies d'Eschyle sont des tragédies immobiles" (MAETERLINCK, 2012: 105). For a study of the relationship between Maeterlinck's static theatre and Pessoa's *drama em gente*, see BRANTSCHEN BERCLAZ (2018). On the direct influence of Maeterlinck's works on *O Marinheiro*, see also LOPES (1985), CASTRO (2011), FISCHER (2012), and SILVA (2018).

⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

are four candles placed at the corners of the room and a coffin with a young woman dressed in white. In the drama, consistent with the notes on static theater cited above, there is no visible action but only dialogue and the adventure of the soul that it allows us to intuit.

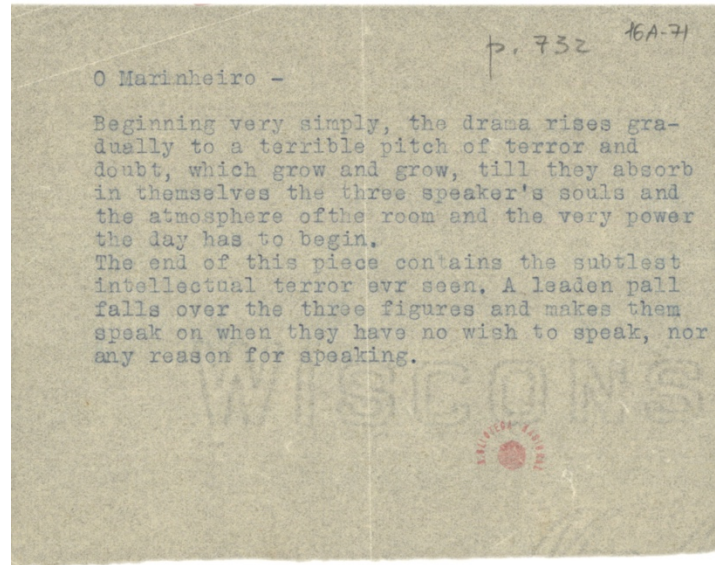


Fig. 1. *O Marinheiro* (BNP/E3, 16A-71^r).

Although Pessoa does not suggest any internal subdivision of this single frame, to provide structure to the close reading of the work, it may be useful to divide the drama into parts. For this purpose, a note by Pessoa on the drama (written in English) proves highly useful:

Beginning very simply, the drama rises gradually, to a terrible pitch of terror and doubt, which grow and grow, till they absorb in themselves the three speaker's souls and the atmosphere of the room and the very power the day has to begin.

The end of this piece contains the subtlest intellectual terror ever seen. A leaden pall falls over the three figures and makes them speak on when they have no wish to speak, nor any reason for speaking.

(PESSOA, 2017: 260; cf. Fig. 1)

Following these indications, we can divide the work into three parts. The first introduces the reader to the surreal and metaphysical atmosphere in which the dialogue between the watchers takes place. In the second part, the dream of the mariner—who gives the drama its title—is narrated. This section ends when it reaches the aforementioned “terrible pitch of terror and doubt”, namely when the second watcher considers the possibility that everything is nothing but a dream. In the third part, the experience of the three watchers is transfigured as a result of the vertiginous doubt triggered by the mariner's dream. In this section, the watchers voice their metaphysical perplexities until the long-awaited morning light approaches—a light that

seems to promise an end to the night's vertigo. It is in this section that, as we shall see, the "subtlest intellectual terror ever seen" begins to emerge within the watchers.

I will now proceed with a close analysis of each of these parts. The analysis will follow the development of the work from beginning to end, step by step. However, since the same themes are revisited at different points in the drama, I will occasionally revisit or anticipate passages and themes where this proves helpful for interpretation. The reading will also be interspersed with philosophical clarifications aimed at articulating the notions that are necessary for the analysis.

First part: Creating the conditions for ontological vertigo

First and foremost, we are generally unaware of the fact that, instead of nothing, something is or exists. That this is the case is, in a sense, natural, because, as Pessoa himself notes in a short entry entitled *Viagem Espiritual* ("O doido que viaja para a intuição do universo" [The madman who travels toward the intuition of the universe])—probably dated between 1908 and 1910 (thus prior to the writing of *O Marinheiro*)—for most of us (for Campos and Pessoa's Faust, but not for Caeiro), the vision of this mystery is unbearable:

Cada pedra do chão é um mysterio que o mysterio do nosso corpo, mysteriosamente andando, faz o mysterio de tocar. Vêr isto nitidamente é um symptoma de loucura...

(PESSOA, 2006: II, 511)

[Each stone on the ground is a mystery that the mystery of our body, mysteriously walking, makes the mystery of touching. Seeing this clearly is a symptom of madness...]

Thus, first and foremost, our mind is directed toward things, concerned with their modes rather than their existence. To put it in Wittgenstein's terms, we see *how* the world is, and not *that* the world is (WITTGENSTEIN, 1995: §6.44). For the sensitivity that perceives the being of things to awaken, certain conditions must be created to favour such a transformation.

Now, in the first part of the drama, the dialogue between the watchers creates precisely these conditions. Among authors who have focused on the experience of being—such as Scheler, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Sartre, some of the most explicit and self-aware in this regard—we find diagnoses aimed at elucidating these conditions. Therefore, to clarify how Pessoa succeeds in creating the conditions for the experience of being, I will refer to some of the diagnoses offered by these authors.

"But do we know, sisters, why anything happens?"

A condition that favours the experience of being consists in relaxing the grip of what Wittgenstein describes, in the *Lecture on Ethics*, as the "scientific way of looking"

(WITTGENSTEIN, 1965: 17) at the facts of the world. The scientific gaze perceives the facts in light of Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason, that is, as facts that, in principle, do possess an explanation. Even if we find ourselves witnessing an event that seems inexplicable to us, like (this is Wittgenstein's example) seeing a human head suddenly turn into a lion's head, the scientific way of looking at this event considers it inexplicable only *pro tempore*. This event, however extraordinary and miraculous it might seem at first glance, is actually completely normal, since, like all events, it has an explanation. We simply do not know it at the moment. This kind of miracle, which Wittgenstein calls *relative miracles*, since they are miraculous only relative to our knowledge (and ignorance) at a given moment, elicit a kind of awe or wonder in us, which we might call, indeed, relative. But, as Wittgenstein notes, looking at events in this way removes any sense of wonder. In fact, only what is, in principle, inexplicable deserves awe, wonder, and the title of "miracle". For this kind of miracle, Wittgenstein speaks of *absolute miracle*, in order to distinguish it from the events that appear as miraculous relative to our knowledge. In the *Lecture on Ethics*, Wittgenstein suggests that such an absolute miracle is precisely the existence of the world. To see the miraculous in the fact that the world exists—and that it exists exactly as it does—means to see the world as existing without reason, without explanation, without cause, or without foundation. On this point, Sartre agrees in *Nausea*. When Roquentin encounters the mystery of the existence of the chestnut tree's root, he writes that "the world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence" (SARTRE, 1965: 175).

Now, at various points in the play, the watchers doubt that there are reasons or causes for why things happen the way they do. Right from the beginning of the play, the mind that sees according to the principle of reason is shaken (both in the watchers and in us readers). Looking at the flame of a candle, the first watcher says: "Às vezes treme, outras torna-se mais amarela, outras vezes empallidece. Eu não sei porque é que isso se dá" (PESSOA, 2017: 32) ["First: Sometimes it flickers, or turns yellow, or more white. I don't know why this happens. But do we know, sisters, why anything happens? ..."] (PESSOA, 2001: 21). A few lines later, the same ignorance is expressed by the third watchwoman:

TERCEIRA — Eu já não sei em que pensava... No passado dos outros talvez..., no passado de gente maravilhosa que nunca existiu... Ao pé da casa de minha mãe corria um riacho... Porque é que correria, e porque é que não correria mais longe, ou mais perto?... Ha alguma razão para qualquer cousa ser o que é? Ha para isso qualquer razão verdadeira e real como as minhas mãos?... (PESSOA, 2017: 34)

[Third: I don't know what I was thinking about... Perhaps about the past of others..., the past of wondrous people who never existed... Not far from my mother's house flowed a stream. Why did it flow, and why didn't it flow farther away, or nearer? ... Is there any reason for anything being what it is? Is there any reason that's true and real like my hands? ...] (PESSOA, 2001: 23)

To this, the second watcher replies, introducing for the first time the central theme of the play: “SEGUNDA — As mãos não são verdadeiras nem reais... São mistérios que habitam na nossa vida... Às vezes, quando fito as minhas mãos, tenho medo de Deus...” (PESSOA, 2017: 34) [“Second: Our hands are not true or real. They’re mysteries that inhabit our life... Sometimes, staring at my hands, I fear God...”] (PESSOA, 2001: 23). Here, as I will explain in more detail in a moment, the second watcher is not realizing that the hands are false or unreal compared to a supposed true reality that would be elsewhere. She is, in fact, seeing that the hands exist—she sees them as “mysteries”, because the existence of what is, to put it with Wittgenstein, is an absolute mystery, without possible explanation. This evokes a sense of fear and beyond, in the play, even terror and horror, the same emotional tones that characterize the experiences of Campos and Faust in front of the mystery of the existence of things. In this brief passage, the link between the idea of unreality (or dream) and the experience of being is already anticipated. The question we will soon have to address, then, is why things, when seen as being, are also seen as “false” or “unreal” or “like a dream”.

“What is anything?”

The not-knowing about causes and reasons is a particular aspect of a broader not-knowing that encompasses everything, the connections between things and events, as well as the correct way to name them. When Heidegger describes the experience of nothing in *What is Metaphysics?*—an experience that reveals, by contrast, that instead of nothing, there are beings—he emphasizes how, in that experience, the ordinary recognizability of entities is compromised, leaving us before existing things before the veil of recognizability (which is the veil of language) is placed over them, making them familiar and known. Similarly, in the play, the watchers constantly bring their minds into a state of not-knowing, of not-recognizability, and of not-understanding what happens and what might happen. This relaxes the grip of the ordinary mind and creates the conditions for the experience of being.

Right from the first lines, the scene opens on uncertainty and the impossibility of situating oneself temporally, spatially, and even metaphysically. The watchers do not know what moment of the night they are in, nor if they have ever been anything: “SEGUNDA — [...] De resto, fomos nós alguma coisa? PRIMEIRA — Talvez. Eu não sei” (PESSOA, 2017: 32) [“Second: (...) Besides, were we ever anything? First: Perhaps. I don’t know”] (PESSOA, 2001: 21). The same not-knowing also applies to the nature of dreams: “TERCEIRA — De quê? PRIMEIRA — Não sei. Porque o havia eu de saber?” (PESSOA, 2017: 32) [“Third: Of what? First: I don’t know. Why should I know?”] (PESSOA, 2001: 21).

There is also a very significant exchange that explicitly thematizes the impossibility of situating oneself temporally and highlights the consequences of this impossibility on the experience of things and time. “Terceira — Porque não haverá relógio neste quarto? Segunda — Não sei... Mas assim, sem o relógio, tudo é mais afastado e misterioso. A noite pertence mais a si-propria... Quem sabe se nós poderíamos fallar assim se soubessemos a hora que é?” (PESSOA, 2017: 33) [“Third: Why is there no clock in this room? Second: I don’t know... But this way, with no clock, everything is more distant and mysterious. The night belongs more to itself... Perhaps, if we knew what time it is, we couldn’t talk like this”] (PESSOA, 2001: 22). The clock marks time and allows us to place ourselves temporally. It allows us to give order and a veneer of familiarity to our lived experience, to know when we are, what happened before, and what will happen after. Yet, this very temporal placement suppresses the silent mystery that permeates everything. Losing the temporal connection, things become more mysterious (unknown, yet still stubbornly “there”, “present”, both vague words used to approach the more cutting meaning of the word “existent”). Furthermore, ordering things in time gives a structure to reality that in fact reality does not possess. This is a theme that will be central in the “Master” of all heteronyms, namely Alberto Caeiro (compare with PESSOA [2020: 174]). “The night belongs more to itself” if it is not filtered through the grid of time, just as everything, according to Caeiro, “belongs more to itself” if seen without the darkening interpretation of language (of which the temporal grid is only one aspect).

Giving names to things thus adds to reality something that, in fact, is not there. Before it is three in the morning, this moment is only... *that*. If we cease to name, we create openings for what is there—not “saying” anymore what our mind ordinarily, through the grid of language, makes it say—to finally say the most essential thing about itself, which is that it *exists*. In this sense, Heidegger argues, in the experience of anguish, which reveals the being of entities, the discursive reason that says “it is this” or “it is that” (e.g., “it’s three in the morning”, “the sun rises” etc.) is silenced; every predicative activity that articulates how the world is suspended. When every determination is silenced, however, one is not left in a state of total not-knowing, because it is precisely at that point that the conditions are created for the experience of being to unfold. To put it with Caeiro, when the darkening veil of language is silenced, then one intuitively feels that “As cousas não teem significação: teem existencia” [“Things have no signification: they have existence”] (PESSOA, 2020: 84-85), or further, that “as cousas não teem nome nem personalidade | Existem [...]” [“things have neither name nor personality: | They exist (...)”] (PESSOA, 2020: 64-65). The first exchanges in the dialogue of the watchers create the conditions for this fertile state of not-knowing.

There are two other very significant passages in the first part of the dialogue, where this state of not-knowing bursts forth. The first passage again concerns time,

which in this occasion is placed in relation to the theme of dreams and the burning need to distract oneself from too much metaphysical sharpness.

PRIMEIRA — [...] O passado não é senão um sonho... De resto, nem sei o que não é sonho... Se ólho para o presente com muita atenção, parece-me que elle já passou... O que é qualquer cousa? Como é que ella passa? Como é por dentro o modo como ella passa?... Ah, fallemos, minhas irmãs, fallemos alto, fallemos todas juntas... O silencio começa a tomar corpo, começa a ser cousa... Sinto-o envolver-me como uma nevoa... Ah, fallae, fallae!...

(PESSOA, 2017: 34)

[First: (...) The past is just a dream. I can think of nothing, for that matter, that isn't a dream... If I look closely at the present, it seems to have already moved on... What is anything? How does it move on from one moment to the next? How does it inwardly move on?... Oh let's talk, sisters, let's talk all together in a loud voice... Silence is beginning to take shape, to be a thing... I feel it wrapping me like a mist... Ah, talk, talk!...]

(PESSOA, 2001: 23)

The second passage is crucial because Pessoa has the watchers say that the cause of the sense of horror that envelops their experience of things depends precisely on the awareness of the being of things.

TERCEIRA — Tenho horror a de aqui a pouco vos ter já dito o que vos vou dizer. As minhas palavras presentes, mal eu as diga, pertencerão logo ao passado, ficarão fóra de mim, não sei onde, rígidas e fataes... Fallo, e penso nisto na minha garganta, e as minhas palavras parecem-me gente... Tenho um medo maior do que eu. Sinto na minha mão, não sei como, a chave de uma porta desconhecida. E toda eu sou um amuleto ou um sacrario que estivesse com consciencia de si-proprio. É poristo que me apavora ir, como por uma floresta escura, atravez do mysterio de fallar... E, afinal, quem sabe se eu sou assim e se é isto sem duvida que sinto?...

PRIMEIRA — Custa tanto saber o que se sente quando reparamos em nós!... Mesmo viver sabe a custar tanto quando se dá por isso... Fallae portanto, sem reparardes que existis... Não nos ieis dizer quem ereis?

(PESSOA, 2017: 35)

[Third: It horrifies me that I'll soon have said what I'm going to say. My words, spoken in the present, will belong immediately to the past, they'll be somewhere outside me, irrevocable and fatal When speaking, I think about what's going on in my throat, and my words seem like people... My fear is larger than me. I can feel in my hand, I don't know how, the key to an unknown door. And I'm suddenly, all of me, a talisman or tabernacle conscious of itself. That's why it so scares me, like a dark forest, to pass through the mystery of speaking... But who knows if this is really how I am and what I feel?...

First: It's so hard to know what we feel when we look at ourselves! Even living seems hard when we stop to think about it... Speak, therefore, without thinking about the fact you exist. Weren't you going to tell us who you once were?]

(PESSOA, 2001: 25-26)

Thus, the watchers begin their dialogue already in a state where they are aware of their own existence. And this ontological clarity already shows itself to be unbearable. Soon, with the mariner's dream, this vision will reach a new peak of intensity.

"What does it matter?"

The vital drive towards what is desirable (as well as the fear of what is undesirable) generates interest and curiosity about *how* the world is (thus putting aside the fact *that* it is). For this reason, the emotional tones that silence this interest—such as the deep boredom Heidegger talks about (HEIDEGGER, 1995), or the tedium that, as Pessoa himself says, is one of the silent protagonists of the drama—can create the conditions for the experience of being. The entire drama—as much of Pessoa's work, particularly *The Book of Disquiet*—is imbued with a sense of boredom and tedium, with an acute awareness of the impossibility of finding satisfaction in any possible future. What deep boredom understands is evoked from the first lines, not only when the longed-for elsewhere is described as incapable of providing any satisfaction, but also when, imagining the imminent arrival of the day—which will not come before the end of the drama—the third watcher says (speaking of the day): "TERCEIRA — Que importa? Elle vem sempre da mesma maneira... sempre, sempre, sempre..." (PESSOA, 2017: 33) ["Third: What does it matter? It always dawns in the same way... Always, always, always..."] (PESSOA, 2001: 22). The same idea is revisited a few lines later: "SEGUNDA — [...] Agora eu gostaria de andar... Não o faço porque não vale nunca a pena fazer nada, sobretudo o que se quer fazer..." (PESSOA, 2017: 35) ["Second: (...) I feel like walking right now. I don't do it, because nothing's worth doing, especially when it's something we feel like doing..."] (PESSOA, 2001: 24). And again, shortly afterward, in the second part: "PRIMEIRA — [...] Importa tao pouco o que dizemos ou não dizemos... Velamos as horas que passam... O nosso mister é inutil como a Vida..." (PESSOA, 2017: 41) ["First: (...) It matters so little what we say or don't say... We keep watch over the passing hours... Our task is as useless as Life..."] (PESSOA, 2001: 29).

Summing up, in the first part of the drama, the watchers find themselves in a state that is completely different from the ordinary one. They do not know when or where they are, they do not know who they are or if they were ever anything, they do not know if events have a reason, and they do not have a gaze animated by a projective drive towards a desired or feared future. These are the conditions that, by silencing the "how" of the world, can give voice to the fact that the world *is*.

These few opening lines prepare the ground for the second part of the drama, where the mariner enters the scene.

Second part: The mariner's dream and the "terrible pitch of terror and doubt"

The second watcher tells of a dream that happened in an indeterminate past, when the second she was in the same metaphysical suspension that surrounds the dialogue of the watchers. Speaking of the day she had that dream, she says: "SEGUNDA — [...] eu tinha esquecido que tinha pae e mãe e que houvera em mim infancia e

outros dias" (PESSOA, 2017: 38) ["Second: (...) having forgotten I ever had a mother and father, a childhood and other days besides that one"] (PESSOA, 2001: 26). She dreams of a mariner who, lost on a distant island, begins to dream of a past he had not lived. Constantly, for years and years, the mariner constructs a new past in his dream, down to the smallest details, to the point that the dreamed life becomes as vivid and certain as the memory of our own past. In short, as the second watcher says, "Breve tinha uma outra vida anterior..." (PESSOA, 2017: 41) [Soon he had another previous life...] (PESSOA, 2001: 28). Then one day the mariner grew tired of dreaming and wanted to remember his true past, but he realized that he remembered nothing, that it no longer existed for him. It is important to quote this passage in full, as it seems to be precisely this moment in the second watcher's inner adventure where she reaches the aforementioned "terrible level of terror and doubt".

SEGUNDA — [...] Toda a sua vida tinha sido a sua vida que sonhara... E elle viu que não podia ser que outra vida tivesse existido... Se elle nem de uma rua, nem de uma figura, nem de um gesto materno se lembrava... E da vida que lhe parecia ter sonhado, tudo era real e tinha sido... Nem sequer podia sonhar outro passado, conceber que tivesse tido outro, como todos, um momento, podem crer... Ó minhas irmãs, minhas irmãs... Ha qualquer cousa, que não sei o que é, que vos não disse..., qualquer cousa que explicaria isto tudo... A minha alma esfria-me... Mal sei se tenho estado a fallar... Fallae-me, gritae-me, para que eu acorde, para que eu saiba que estou aqui ante vós e que ha cousas que são apenas sonhos...

(PESSOA, 2017: 41)

[Second: (...) His entire life was the life he'd dreamed... And he realized he could never have had any other life... For he could remember none of its streets, none of its people, and not one motherly caress... Whereas in the life he thought he'd merely dreamed, everything was real and had existed... He couldn't even dream, couldn't even conceive, of having had any other past the way everyone else, for a moment, is able to imagine... O sisters, sisters... There's something, I don't know what, that I haven't told you... something that would explain all this... My soul makes me shiver... I'm hardly aware of having spoken... Talk to me, shout at me, so that I'll wake up and know that I'm here with you and that certain things really are just dreams...]

(PESSOA, 2001: 29)

Here, a transfiguration of ordinary experience has taken place, and it is signaled by the immediately following exchange. The first watcher writes: "Nao ousou olhar para as cousas..." (PESSOA, 2017: 42) ["I am afraid to look at things..."] (PESSOA, 2001: 29), as now she too seems to share in the terror of the second watcher. And the latter, struck by the bewilderment she is now inhabited by, gives voice to her not-knowing: in response to the first watcher's question about how the dream continues, the second watcher says she does not know how it continues or why it should continue. The first watcher insists: "PRIMEIRA — E o que aconteceu depois?" (PESSOA, 2017: 42) ["First: What happened after all that?"] (PESSOA, 2001: 29). And she replies: "SEGUNDA — Depois? Depois de quê? Depois é alguma cousa?..." (PESSOA, 2017: 42) ["Second: After all what? What is after? Is after anything?..."] (PESSOA, 2001: 29).

All ordinary certainties seem to waver, to the point that it is no longer clear what meaning to give to ordinary temporal coordinates. In response to other questions from the first and third watchers about the fate of the mariner, the second watcher answers, before the pause that marks the end of the second part, as follows: "SEGUNDA — Porque é que m'ó perguntaes? Ha resposta para alguma cousa?" (PESSOA, 2017: 42) ["Second: Why do you ask me? Does anything have an answer?"] (PESSOA, 2001: 30).

Once again, we witness the eruption of a not-knowing that now concerns everything. The central issue, in order to decipher the entire drama, is to understand what freezes the second watcher's soul. What is the vision that unfolds in the moment when she considers the implications of the mariner's dream?

Third part: "The subtlest intellectual terror ever seen"

The peak of terror and doubt reached at the end of the second part is taken up by the second watcher, just a few lines later, at the beginning of the third part.

PRIMEIRA — Ao menos, como acabou o sonho?

SEGUNDA — Não acabou... Não sei... Nenhum sonho acaba... Sei eu ao certo se o não continuo sonhando, se o não sonho sem o saber, se o sonhal-o não é esta cousa vaga a que eu chamo a minha vida?... Não me falleis mais... Princípio a estar certa de qualquer cousa, que não sei o que é... Avançam para mim, por uma noite que não é esta, os passos de um horror que desconheço... Quem teria eu ido despertar com o sonho meu que vos contei?... Tenho um medo disforme de que Deus tivesse prohibido o meu sonho... Elle é sem duvida mais real do que Deus permite... Não estejaes silenciosas... Dizei-me ao menos que a noite vae passando, embora eu o saiba... Vede, começa a ir ser dia... Vede: vae haver o dia real... Paremos... Não pensemos mais... Não tentemos seguir nesta aventura interior... Quem sabe o que está no fim d'ella?... Tudo isto, minhas irmãs, passou-se na noite... Não fallemos mais d'isto, nem a nós-proprias...

(PESSOA, 2017: 42-43)

[First: Tell us, at least, how the dream ended.

Second: It didn't end... I don't know... No dream ends... How can I be sure that I'm not still dreaming it, that I'm not dreaming it without knowing it, and that my dreaming isn't this hazy thing I call my life? ... Say no more... I'm beginning to be sure of I don't know what... The footsteps of some unknown horror are approaching me in a night that's not this night... Who might have awakened with the dream I told you? ... I'm deathly afraid that God has forbidden my dream, which is undoubtedly more real than He allows... Say something, sisters. Tell me at least that the night is ending, even though I know it... Look, it's beginning to be day... Look: the real day is almost here ... Let's stop. Let's think no more... Let's quit pursuing this inward adventure... Who knows where it might lead us? ... All of this, sisters, happened during the night... Let's say no more about it, even to ourselves...]

(PESSOA, 2001: 30)

What, then, is the doubt of the second watcher? And what is the connection between that doubt and the sense of horror and terror that she feels? Where does this inner adventure lead?

To answer, we can refer to the classical models through which the relationship between doubt and dream has been developed. The *first* model is the sceptical doubt that Descartes elaborates in the first metaphysical meditation, when he asks whether it is possible to exclude with absolute certainty that what seems to be waking life is actually just a dream. With the exception of lucid dreaming, in which we know we are only dreaming, normally in a dream we believe that what we are experiencing is real, when in fact we are only dreaming. So how can we exclude with absolute certainty that this is not just a dream?

At the beginning of the mariner's story, the watchers proceed, like Descartes, by keeping the ordinary distinction between waking life and dream life. The meditation of the watchers, then, begins by taking for granted the ordinary distinction between a "real" world, that of waking life, and an "unreal," "false," or "illusory" world, namely the dream world. Even the mariner, while dreaming of a new past, seems aware that he is dreaming of a past he never actually lived. But what exactly perplexes him when he realizes he can no longer remember his true homeland?"

One interpretative possibility is that here the mariner (and with him, the second watcher and us, the readers of this meditation) is experiencing the same doubt as Descartes, that is, he is questioning whether the reality he now remembers is the only homeland he now remembers, or if it is actually the homeland he no longer remembers. Another possibility—and here we draw from a *second* classical way of understanding the relationship between doubt and dream—is that the mariner is experiencing a different kind of skeptical doubt, one that can be extracted from some passages in Sextus Empiricus (VEBER, 2021), which, unlike Cartesian doubt, has been largely overlooked in Western philosophical tradition: the question of whether the "true" reality is the one lived in the dream rather than the one lived in waking life (which the mariner now no longer remembers). Extending the scope of this second model, another possibility is that the watchers are asking themselves whether the true world is the one of their experience in the castle room, or some other experience altogether, be it the one of the night's dream life or the mariner's, as they suggest at one point: "Porque não será a unica cousa real nisto tudo o marinheiro, e nós e tudo isto aqui apenas um sonho d'elle?..." (PESSOA, 2017: 44) ["Second: Why can't the mariner be the only thing in all of this that's real, and we and everything else just one of his dreams? ..."] (PESSOA, 2001: 31)

It is difficult to decide, from the few lines of the play, what the correct interpretation is. What is certain is that the *outcomes* of the mariner's doubt and the second watcher's doubt are quite different from those of the doubts just described. The first type of doubt, the Cartesian sceptical doubt, which we could call *epistemological doubt*, concerns the possibility of knowing (with certainty) that the present moment

is not just a dream. The second doubt, however, concerns the nature of reality, and therefore, we could call it *metaphysical doubt*, since it asks which experience is real: the experience of wakefulness, that of the dream, that of the mariner, or that of any other conceivable experience. Both doubts keep the ordinary distinction between wakefulness and dreams intact, and maintain the distinction between the real and the unreal. But the outcome of the mariner's (and of the watchers') doubt (or doubts?!) go well beyond the questions (legitimate, interesting, and philosophically fruitful) that these doubts raise. They do not linger on epistemological and metaphysical doubt but suddenly find themselves acutely sensitive to the mysterious fact that everything, both in wakefulness and in dreams, exists. In other words, thanks to the whirlwind of doubts of the mariner, the watchers grasp the being of everything around them, and they grasp it in a particular emotional tone that shows how, in a certain sense, everything is like a dream or an illusion. With the words they themselves will eventually use, when life is seen as a dream, it is as if one can no longer "belong" (PESSOA, 2021: 31) to it.

To give substance to this interpretation, we can begin by reading the reactions of the watchers to the mariner's doubt.

SEGUNDA — Talvez nada d'isto seja verdade... Todo este silencio, e esta morta, e este dia que começa não são talvez senão um sonho... Olhae bem para tudo isto... Parece-vos que pertence á vida?...

PRIMEIRA — Não sei. Não sei como se é da vida... Ah, como vós estaes parada! [...]

SEGUNDA — [...] É tão estranho estar a viver... Tudo o que acontece é inacreditavel, tanto na ilha do marinheiro como neste mundo... Vede, o céu é já verde... O horizonte sorri ouro...

(PESSOA, 2017: 43-44)

[Second: Perhaps none of this is true... This silence, this dead woman and this rising day are perhaps nothing but a dream... Look closely at all this... Does it seem to you that it belongs to life?...

First: I don't know. I don't know how something belongs to life... Ah, how still you are! (...)

Second: (...) It's so strange to be living... Everything that happens is unbelievable, whether on the mariner's island or in this world... Look, the sky is already green. The horizon gold-only smiles...]

(PESSOA, 2001: 31)

PRIMEIRA — Se nada existisse, minhas irmãs?... Se tudo fosse, de qualquer modo, absolutamente cousa nenhuma?...

(PESSOA, 2017: 44)

[First: (...) Imagine if nothing existed, sisters... Imagine if everything were, in a way, absolutely nothing...]

(PESSOA, 2001: 32)

Here something happens that cannot be found in Descartes, nor in the epistemological tradition inspired by him. At the beginning of the marine's story, the watchers proceed by keeping the ordinary distinction between the life of wakefulness and the

life of dreams. Even the mariner, while dreaming of a new past, is aware that he is dreaming of a past he never actually lived. Indeed, at one point, he wanted to remember his true homeland. But at the moment when he can no longer remember his true homeland, and the only thing that remains is the dreamed homeland, the veneer of illusoriness and non-belonging that characterizes what we know to be a dream *extends* to embrace, in a new sense of the terms “dream” and “illusion”, every possible experience, both what we (eventually) know to be wakefulness and what we (eventually) know to be a dream or illusion. In a certain sense, it feels as though nothing is “true”, everything is like a dream, and to life, which continues—whether it be dream or wakefulness—one can no longer “belong” (PESSOA, 2001: 31) (just as one doesn't truly belong to the life of a dream). It's as if a veil of taken-for-grantedness has been broken (SCHELER, 2017, 100-2): the veil which covers and normalizes all our relationships with things and makes us feel a full, immediate identification or participation in the events of life. When things are seen this way, everything is “strange” and it is so, crucially, both in the mariner's island and in our world, that is, both in the dream with the mariner as its protagonist (remember, the mariner's dream narrative is itself a dream that the second watcher recalls having lived), as well as in the experience of the watchers. Every entity, both the entity presumed to be “real”, and the entity presumed to be “unreal”, is equally strange.

This, then, is the passage that occurs in the watchers: from epistemological and/or metaphysical doubt, which maintains the distinction between the real and the unreal, to an experience in which both what is wakefulness and what is a dream are equally seen as a dream. The crucial question to ask, both for the interpretation of the play and for understanding in general the phenomenology of the everything-is-like-a-dream experience (and thus its manifestations in the history of thought), is the following: why and how does this passage happen? Why, that is, do doubts that maintain the distinction between the real and the unreal give way to an experience that sees every possible experience (even those supposed to be real) as a dream?

Before attempting an answer, it is important to understand that this question and the passage it thematizes are by no means obvious. First of all, many have considered the epistemological doubt (and perhaps also the metaphysical doubt), but this has not led them to feel that everything is like a dream. Therefore, there must be conditions that, if present, either facilitate or hinder such a passage. Secondly, it is by no means clear whether experiencing life as a dream is experiencing it truthfully. If such an experience aims to be more than a simple literary fantasy, then it is important to ask what may ground or justify such an impression.

I would now like to provide, in a few words, my answer to these questions. In order to articulate it, I will contrast it with two other possible answers (which I shall discard). Afterward, I will return to the text to show how this answer aligns with what Pessoa himself writes.

One might think that through Cartesian doubt, the subject simply grasps that wakefulness and dreams are *phenomenologically indistinguishable*. From this perspective, therefore, the subject could say that life is “like a dream” because, in the end, there is no phenomenological difference between the two — and, as far as they know, they could indeed be dreaming. This is a possible outcome of Cartesian doubt, but it is *not* the outcome in *O Marinheiro*. To see life as a dream does not mean, in the sense here explored, to see it as phenomenologically indistinguishable from a dream (as ordinarily understood). Rather, it means seeing that, even though life is, in the ordinary sense of the word, real, in relation to a dream, it is still *like* a dream, because in some way, it is enveloped by a veneer of unreality (which still needs to be clarified) that goes beyond its phenomenological indistinguishability from the dream. Even if waking life and dreams were phenomenologically distinguishable, still the latter might somehow appear like a dream.

The second view is the one found in the philosophy underlying the practice of dream yoga and sleep in Tibetan Dzogchen Buddhism (WANGYAL RINPOCHE, 1988). Without going into details here⁸, according to this perspective, one can see life as a dream because one can realize that, *metaphysically* speaking — thus not just phenomenologically — there is no substantial difference between the experience of wakefulness and the experience of a dream, since both are merely mental projections. Correctly grasping this, in such a tradition, is a path to liberation. Now, while such an experience is possible — and although the underlying philosophical vision may also be true — this does not seem to be the experience in *O Marinheiro*. Indeed, in the drama, the emphasis is not so much on the fact that reality and unreality are both mental projections, but rather on the fact that seeing life as a dream shows how horrifying life itself is, even if it were not a mental projection, a possibility that the watchers do not recognize as something they can verify (whereas in the tradition under consideration it is indeed possible to know that even the waking life is a mental projection).

The third answer — my answer — refers to the experience of being. While considering epistemological and metaphysical doubts, if one does so by fully immersing oneself in questioning (“Could I really be just a dream?!”), then at some point, one may realize that, even though we may never know what is real and what is unreal, still the present experience exists. When this happens, the things around us — and life as a whole — are no longer simply seen as *real* things (thus contrasted with unreal things), but are seen as *existing* things. These are two radically different experiences. In the first case, things appear normal because they find a placement within our reading of the world. In the second case, however, since the being of entities cannot have any possible foundation — it is an absolute miracle or mystery — everything is seen as absurd, strange, abnormal, suspended. This loosens the immersive, taken-

⁸ See, on this, BORGES (2018), who, according to this second interpretation, reads the discourse on dreams in *The Book of Disquiet*.

for-granted relationship we ordinarily have with life: the relationship that makes us feel that it is “normal” to live, to have hands, projects, thoughts, a sense of identity, etc. All of this is, indeed, not normal: it is absurd. To feel this creates a sense of estrangement, of disorientation, as if one could no longer belong to life. But this does not happen because one belongs to some *other* region of being. Every possible region, in this experience, is seen as being, and thus every possible region is seen as equally strange, absurd, and suspended. It is felt that even though there is no other “true” life, this very life is, in a certain sense, like a dream—it is no longer just life (unconscious of itself and its existence), but rather life that also knows its own absurd existence. This is, in my view, what can happen to us, what happens to the watchers, and what explains and justifies the intuition of life as a dream in *O Marinheiro*.

Relative and absolute

To deepen and clarify the analysis of the feelings of the watchers in the interpretation just provided, it is now useful to introduce the distinction between two categories of emotional tones and corresponding evaluations. To introduce this, we can reconsider the distinction between relative and absolute miracles introduced in Wittgenstein's *Lecture on Ethics*. We have seen that events can be evaluated and felt as miraculous or marvellous in a relative sense when they differ from the way we expected things to unfold. In this sense, it is a miracle if I suddenly grow a lion's head. However, as Wittgenstein notes, the “scientific way” of looking at events involves believing that, in principle, there must be an explanation for that event. So, even if I don't know how it happened that I grew a lion's head, I know well that there is some explanation, it just needs to be sought and eventually found. An event is instead evaluated and felt as miraculous or marvellous in an absolute sense when, in principle, there can be no explanation for that event. From this point of view, that the world exists—rather than nothing—is an absolute miracle, just as, ultimately, every event and every thing is absolutely miraculous because it is inexplicable not only that the world exists but also that it is as it is.

This distinction can be extended. First, note that the distinction between relative and absolute applies both to *emotions* and to the *evaluations* that express them. For example, when Wittgenstein finds the sky marvellous, the sense of wonder is a feeling, which can then be expressed by evaluating that, in a certain sense, the sky is marvellous. Now, as Wittgenstein himself notes, here one can feel and speak of wonder concerning the sky in two fundamentally different senses.

I could of course wonder at the world around me being as it is. If for instance I had this experience while looking into the blue sky, I could wonder at the sky being blue as opposed to the case when it's clouded. But that's not what I mean. I am wondering at the sky being whatever it is.

(WITTGENSTEIN, 1965: 12)

If I leave the house and, expecting to find the sky covered in clouds, instead find it clear, I can feel surprised and marvel at the absence of clouds. In this case, my surprise and wonder are rooted in a contrast felt between the way things are and one or more alternative ways in which things could have been. In other words, there is an expectation—the sky should be covered with clouds—and things differ from those expectations. The surprise or wonder, therefore, in this sense, is relative to possible alternatives concerning the modalities of the world.

It is different when I feel wonder while looking at the blue sky not so much because I am surprised that it is different from what I expected, but for the simple fact that, instead of nothing, there is a blue sky. In this latter case, what is marvellous is indeed the blueness of the sky—because the sky is indeed blue—but if it had been covered in clouds (or green, or stormy, etc.), I would have felt the same wonder. The reason is that what marvels in this case is the simple existence of the sky, “however it may be.” In this case, we can say that the feeling (wonder) and the associated judgment of value (“marvellous!”) are absolute, in the sense that they do not depend on the contrast felt between how things are and how (one judges) they could have been. To summarize and fix the terms of the distinction, we can call those emotions and evaluations relative that are rooted in a contrast felt between how things are and how they could have been, while we can call those emotions and evaluations absolute that are rooted in the simple existence of what is, independent of how things are or could have been.

This distinction is useful for understanding a variety of emotions and evaluations. Before continuing to see how the distinction takes shape in the feelings and words of the watchers, it may be useful to make a couple of additional examples. In Wittgenstein, we find another example in *Lecture on Ethics*. In order to explain to his audience what he means by absolute value – as opposed to relative values – in addition to mentioning the experience of wonder at the existence of the world, Wittgenstein mentions the experience that he describes with these words: “the experience of feeling *absolutely* safe. I mean the state of mind in which one is inclined to say “I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens” (WITTGENSTEIN, 1965: 11). Ordinarily, we feel and judge something as dangerous, such that it can cause harm, relative to situations that appear non-dangerous. It is dangerous to play Russian roulette because it risks the life of the player, and it is dangerous compared to not playing. But even if in a certain sense, relative, it is true that such a game is dangerous, there is another, absolute sense, which Wittgenstein perceives, where, no matter what happens, and thus however the world is, I am safe, nothing can happen to me, nothing is dangerous. In other words, it can happen that we feel that, in an absolute sense, everything is perfect, or fine as it is, even though we well understand that, ordinarily speaking, i.e., in a relative sense, it is reasonable to distinguish things between more or less perfect and imperfect, more or less safe and dangerous. In Wittgenstein, we also find the distinction between two senses of “beautiful,” one relative,

where it makes sense to distinguish between beautiful and ugly things, and an absolute sense, in which it makes sense to say that, by virtue of simply being, everything is marvelous, that sense of marvel which, for Wittgenstein, is the heart of the deepest aesthetic and artistic experience: "Aesthetically, the miracle is that the world exists. That what exists does exist" (WITTGENSTEIN, 1961a: 86).⁹

The same distinction appears in Sartre's *Nausea*¹⁰. When Roquentin experiences the epiphany that makes him discover the bare existence of the chestnut tree root—and, from that, the bare existence of all the entities around him—he says that the existence of what exists is absurd. Ordinarily, absurd things are felt and judged as such relative to an alternative context, which is seen as normal. For example, it would be absurd if a newly elected president started tap dancing during the inauguration speech. But it is true that, from the point of view of existence, everything and every event is equally absurd, out of context, even if there is no possible context against which to measure its normality or abnormality (except for the non-context, which is the non-alternative to the being of what is, i.e., nothingness). Sartre expresses this idea as follows:

The word absurdity is coming to life under my pen [...]. I understood that I had found the key to Existence, the key to my Nauseas, to my own life. In fact, all that I could grasp beyond that returns to this fundamental absurdity. [...] I wanted to fix the absolute character of this absurdity here. A movement, an event in the tiny coloured world of men is only relatively absurd: by relation to the accompanying circumstances. A madman's ravings, for example, are absurd in relation to the situation in which he finds himself, but not in relation to his delirium. But a little while ago I made an experiment with the absolute or the absurd. This root—there was nothing in relation to which it was absurd. [...] Absurd, irreducible; nothing—not even a profound, secret upheaval of nature—could explain it. Evidently I did not know everything, I had not seen the seeds sprout, or the tree grow. But faced with this great wrinkled paw, neither ignorance nor knowledge was important: the world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence.

(SARTRE, 1965: 154)

Here we find the same distinction and diagnosis that we find in Wittgenstein: the existence of what exists is miraculous and absurd because it is rather than not being, and not because it is as it is in another modality of the world.

The same distinction applies, to give another example from a literary context, to the sense of strangeness and disorientation (emotional tones that bring us closer to *O Marinheiro*). When Gregor Samsa, the protagonist of *The Metamorphosis* by Kafka, wakes up in the body of an insect, he finds this new condition strange. The

⁹ The same insight—that something is "beautiful," "wonderful," or "perfect" simply because it exists—can also be found in several of Caetano's poems. To name just a few examples, cf. PESSOA (2020: 155, 158).

¹⁰ For a more detailed comparison between Wittgenstein and Sartre on the experience of being, see: ZANETTI (2022) and ZANETTI (forthcoming2).

strangeness of the condition is measured relative to what is ordinarily considered not strange, namely, the fact of being in a human body. This is a sense of relative strangeness. But, as Roquentin sees in *Nausea*, and as the watchers see in *O Marinheiro*, everything is equally strange when perceived in its bare existence. Having a human body is no less strange than having an insect body. The life dreamed by the mariner and the experience of the watchers in the castle are equally strange. Both the supposed “reality” and the supposed “unreality” of the dream are equally strange, simply because impossibly (without reason or possible explanation) they are something rather than nothing.

Like a dream

The same distinction between the relative and the absolute applies to another central concept in *O Marinheiro* and, indeed, in Pessoa's entire work¹¹: the notion of *dream*. Ordinarily, we say that something is like a dream (or unreal, or illusory, or false) in relation to conditions that, in contrast, are felt and considered as real. For example, I can say that when I am daydreaming, I live in a world that, compared to ordinary clarity, is like a dream. This is a *relative* use of the expression “like a dream”. But experiences occur—like those seen earlier in the three possible interpretations of the expression “like a dream”—where one is tempted to say that, in a certain sense, everything is like a dream, or everything is like an illusion. When this happens in the experience of being (the third model), the strangeness and absurdity that pervades everything creates a sense of not belonging to the entities that makes us feel and say that everything is like a dream.

Now, returning to the text, after this conceptual clarification, it is easier to see how the feeling of the watchers precisely concerns the simple fact that things are, regardless of the ways in which they are. The passage that expresses this point with the greatest strength and clarity is the following: “TERCEIRA (para a SEGUNDA) — Minha irmã, não nos devieis ter contado essa historia. Agora extranho-me viva com mais horror” (PESSOA, 2017: 45) [“Third (to the Second): You shouldn't have told us that story, sister. Now I marvel at being alive with even greater horror”] (PESSOA, 2001: 33). After the story of the dream, the third watcher awakens, so to speak, from the lethargy in which we ordinarily fail to see the astonishing fact that we are alive, that is, in philosophically rigorous terms, that what we call “life” exists. One might say, therefore, that the same distinction between reality and unreality (dream) serves as a sedative for the ontological sensitivity that inhabits us: by distinguishing the two spheres of being, we normalize wakefulness by considering it real, and so we only see one aspect of its modality - namely, that, compared to the nightly dream, it

¹¹ For an overview, see: MARTINS (2008). For an analysis of the notion of the dream in *The Book of Disquiet*, see BORGES (2018).

is real—but we do not see the fact that life just is, regardless of whether it is real or not. Therefore, a (absolute) feeling of surreality is unleashed, in which things are seen both as more real than real (and thus as surreal) or, which is the same, less real than real (and thus as a dream). And an (absolute) feeling of horror is also unleashed, because we find ourselves, in the words of the first watcher, facing “qualquer coisa de grande e pavoroso como o haver Deus” (PESSOA, 2017: 45) [“something huge and frightful like the existence of God”] (PESSOA, 2001: 32).

This interpretation resonates with what Pessoa himself writes about static drama in a note titled *Occult or a Static Drama*.

Os acontecimentos são homens. As circunstâncias são gente. Uma batalha, um jantar, um olhar, um beijo – cada um d'estas cousas, porque é uma coisa é um ente, uma pessoa, de certa maneira de carne e osso.

Nos-próprios, os homens, não passamos de *acontecimentos*, lentos relativamente a outros, compostos de cellulas, e cada cellula é um *acontecimento* entre os elementos que a compõem... e assim até ao infinito interior.

Tudo é separado e tudo é uno. Todos os acontecimentos fundem-se no grande acontecimento chamado o Universo.

Nada *existe*, tudo acontece. é a Deus que acontece tudo.

(PESSOA, 2017: 278-279)

[Events are men. Circumstances are people. A battle, a dinner, a glance, a kiss—each of these things, because it is a thing, is an entity, a person, in a certain way made of flesh and bone.

We ourselves, human beings, are nothing more than events, slow in relation to others, composed of cells, and each cell is an event among the elements that compose it... and so on to the infinite within.

Everything is separate, and everything is one. All events merge into the great event called the Universe.

Nothing exists; everything happens. It is to God that everything happens.]

In this passage, Pessoa perceives every event as part of the only great event called the Universe—that is, more rigorously, the event *that* the Universe *exists*. From this point of view, the relative distinction between dream and wakefulness is overcome by a broader vision that can see both as events of a single great “mind”, that of God, and in this sense, it is *to* Him that everything happens. This single event, the Universe, or God, is described by Campos, in his experience of being, as “a single, formidable, impossible black thing” (PESSOA, 2023, 180-182)¹². For Campos, existence lacks any underlying ground, and even God, if He exists, would be merely another event within this unfounded totality (or indeed identical with this unfounded totality). This absence of foundation creates a sense of suspension, an awareness that everything floats without ultimate justification. This existential weightlessness is not merely a metaphysical idea but a lived experience, shaping Campos’ poetic vision and its confrontation with the void. Now, because this sense of suspension is analogous to that of events thought to be unreal in a dream, we (like the watchers) feel

¹² For a reading, with which I agree, of this rarely discussed poem by Campos, see: BORGES (2016, 71-79).

the need to say that everything is like a dream. Every event is, like the events in a dream, suspended, without origin (since there is no cause), without end (since there is no coherent terminus for the only existing thing), and therefore itself strange, absurd, surreal, just like events in a dream. Furthermore, feeling this creates a sense of disconnection from events—just as one feels disconnected from the events (judged unreal) in a dream—and thus one would want to say that when life is seen in this way, one cannot “belong” (PESSOA, 2001: 31) to it. But there is no other “true” life to belong to, because even that supposed true life would be something rather than nothing, and thus it too would partake in the same dazzling mystery.¹³

In the concluding parts of the drama, we see how this sense of disconnection is experienced. In these passages, we discern the phenomenology of seeing everything as a dream. These are important passages because they address a fundamental aspect of the human experience, rarely rigorously investigated in Western philosophical tradition¹⁴. Here I will just point them out, reserving a more in-depth analysis for another occasion.

TERCEIRA [...] Contaveis e eu tanto me distrahia que ouvia o sentido das vossas palavras e o seu som separadamente. E parecia-me que vós, e a vossa voz, e o sentido do que dizíeis eram trez entes diferentes, como trez criaturas que fallam e andam.

SEGUNDA — São realmente trez entes diferentes, com vida propria e real.

(PESSOA, 2017: 45)

[Third: (...) Your story so engrossed me that I heard the meaning of your words and their sound separately. And it seemed to me that you, your voice and the meaning of what you said were three different beings, like three creatures that walk and talk.

Second: They really are three different beings, each with its own life.]

(PESSOA, 2001: 33)

¹³ Tabucchi is therefore right when he writes that the “problem that forms the foundation of the drama” is the “equation between illusory appearance and hidden truth” (TABUCCHI, 1988, 59; my translation). However, the hidden protagonist of the drama is not some hidden elsewhere, but rather the always manifest but unseen truth that every entity, whether real or unreal, *is*. And this truth is not itself some entity (this is Heidegger’s ontological difference), and thus it is not elsewhere. It is this truth that allows us to perceive every possible experience as illusory or a dream, in an absolute sense of the term, which does not admit a contrast with an elsewhere that is not illusory or dreamlike.

¹⁴ The situation is different in the Eastern philosophical tradition, which, through the expression “like a dream” or “like an illusion” has sought to express the ultimate truth that leads to liberation from the deepest suffering. I cannot in this context touch upon the vast variety of uses of the expressions “dream” and “illusion” in Eastern traditions. For references to these ideas, with explicit reference to the work of Pessoa, see the work of Paulo BORGES (2016, 2018). The project undertaken in this paper aims to be, in a certain sense, complementary to Borges’ work. In my view (ZANETTI, 2025), the experience of non-duality and emptiness thematized by Buddhism, which Borges rightly identifies in Pessoa’s work, is closely related to the experience of being discussed by twentieth-century Western philosophy. This is why I think that through the study of Pessoa’s reactions to the mystery of existence it is also possible to contribute to the dialogue between Pessoa and Eastern philosophies.

PRIMEIRA [...] Que estranha que me sinto!... Parece-me já ão ter a minha voz... Parte de mim adormeceu e ficou a vêr....

(PESSOA, 2017: 46)

[First: (...) How strange I feel! ... It seems I've stopped speaking with my voice... Part of me fell asleep and just watches...]

(PESSOA, 2001: 33)

SEGUNDA — Não sinto nada... Sinto as minhas sensações como uma cousa que se não sente... Quem é que eu estou sendo?... Quem é que está fallando com a minha voz?... Ah, escutae...

(PESSOA, 2017: 46)

[Second: I feel nothing... My sensations feel like a tangible thing... Who am I being in this moment? Who is speaking with my voice?... Ah, listen...]

(PESSOA, 2001: 34)

In these cases, it is evident how, at the same time, while continuing to be themselves, the watchers also see themselves with a sense of strangeness and not belonging. This is the place to turn one's gaze to delve into the phenomenology of seeing everything like a dream.

The excessive ontological clarity reached throughout the drama pushes the watchers to try in every way to distract themselves from the intuition just awakened. In truth, this need to escape from clarity pervades the entire drama (as it does all of Pessoa's work). Escape takes place by talking, narrating, remembering, or dreaming. The day represents the longed-for goal that promises to free the vigilantes from horror. With the coming of day, the dialogue between the vigilantes ends, and thus the drama.

Conclusions

It is important to note at least two important ways in which this reading diverges from those found in the literature on *O Marinheiro*.

As is well known, the issue of heteronomy is central—and rightly so—in the vast majority of studies on Pessoa. However, the question of the *self* of the watchers is never central in the drama and plays no role in explaining the pathos awakened in the experience of being¹⁵. More precisely, if the question of the self enters the scene in the drama, it is not because the self appears fragmented or multiplied, but because it too is revealed, like everything else, as a dream. In light of the blinding mystery of being, I myself, and my life, are like a dream.

¹⁵ For a reading that emphasizes the question of the self, see: LOBO STERNBERG (1983). Other interpretations argue that in *O Marinheiro* the seeds of the subsequent heteronymic adventure are present in embryo: e.g., LOPES (1985: 119, 124-125), BARBOSA & BESSA (2007), JACKSON (2010), and FISCHER (2012).

Secondly, unlike what has been emphasized by readers of *O Marinheiro* who insist—rightfully so—on its affinity with Maeterlinck's static theatre¹⁶, *death* does not play a fundamental role in the drama. It is indeed mentioned—at the beginning of the play, as well as *en passant* in various parts of the dialogue—but it is not necessary to invoke death to explain the ontological doubt and terror of the watchers.

What makes *O Marinheiro* remarkable, in my opinion, is that this drama highlights the connection between two fundamental experiences of human adventure: the experience that reveals everything as a dream and the experience that reveals the being of everything. As is well known, there are many pages in Western literature that give voice to the impression that life is like a dream¹⁷. But never has this impression been explicitly connected to the experience of being. On the other hand, among the philosophers who have explored the experience of being, this experience has never been explicitly tied to the experience that sees life as a dream.

Therefore, if the interpretation provided in this article is on the right track, *O Marinheiro* points to an important line of inquiry, between philosophy and literature, both within and beyond Pessoa's work. This line of inquiry promises to lead us to a place where, at the same time, we perceive the source of the most radical existential suffering and, perhaps, glimpse meanings capable of liberating us from it. For, if everything is indeed like a dream, isn't our own suffering also like a dream? And if so, how can we really "belong" to it?

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¹⁶ See the works cited in footnote 6 above.

¹⁷ For an overview, with reference to Pessoa's work, see: BORGES (2018).

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