

Democratization and the aristocracy of the occult: Fernando Pessoa between Theosophy and Rosacrucianism

Steffen Dix*

Keywords

Theosophy, Rosacrucianism, avant-garde movements, Fernando Pessoa.

Abstract

Fernando Pessoa began at a very early age to show a marked inclination for the occult and it continued to develop until the end of his life. It's easily discernible that Pessoa's fascination was more than a passing curiosity although it was a relatively common one in artistic circles, especially in the European avant-garde, during the first decades of the 20th century. When we consider Pessoa's complete opus, we have to recognise that esoteric matters and the occult play an important part in his writing but, rather curiously, the number of texts written about these issues on his literary work indicate it remains a mere side interest in Pessoa studies to this day. In this article I intend to place this aspect within its sociocultural context, and I would also like to distinguish and identify his interests, especially with respect to Theosophy and Rosicrucianism.

Palavras-chave

Teosofia, Rosacrucianismo, movimentos de vanguarda, Fernando Pessoa.

Resumo

Desde muito cedo, Fernando Pessoa revelou uma forte inclinação para assuntos ocultos que se manteve até ao final da sua vida. Embora esta fascinação tenha sido, nas primeiras décadas do século XX., um fenómeno relativamente comum dentro dos mundos artísticos e sobretudo na *avant-garde* europeia, podemos verificar facilmente que a fascinação de Pessoa ultrapassou a curiosidade passageira. Olhando para a obra completa de Pessoa, temos de reconhecer que se trata de uma parte importante na sua produção literária e que suscitou, até agora, e em comparação com a quantidade de textos sobre este assunto, apenas um interesse marginal nos estudos pessoanos. Neste artigo pretendo, por um lado, encaixar este fascínio pessoano no seu contexto socio-cultural, e, por outro, diferenciar e identificar os seus interesses, nomeadamente no que respeita à Teosofia e ao Rosacrucianismo.

* Research Centre for Communication and Culture, Catholic University of Portugal.

Not being a "specialist" in esotericism studies, I would like to thank Marco Pasi, whose suggestions were very helpful in writing this article.

Early in February 1909, Max Weber wrote his famous letter to his friend and colleague Ferdinand Tönnies in which he claimed to be “absolutely unmusical religiously”. He said he lacked the necessity and capacity to establish “spiritual buildings of a religious character”, and many 21st-century Europeans are probably inclined to share Weber’s attitude. Weber is one of the first theorists of modern secularization or rationalisation, which he described as the frequently cited “disenchantment of the world” ([1919] 2002: 488). A few months earlier, Sigmund Freud published his first article about religion entitled *Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices (Zwangshandlungen und Religionsübungen, 1907)*. In this short article, Freud suggested that religion and neurosis are similar outcomes of the human mind. Religion with its repetitive rites and ceremonies is explained as a “universal obsessional neurosis” ([1907] 1989: 21). Twenty years later, Freud became more radical by arguing that no religion can – in the long run – “withstand reason and experience”. In his book *The Future of an Illusion (Die Zukunft einer Illusion, 1927)*, Freud was confident that the relationship between religion and modern civilization would undergo a fundamental revision. He thought, or rather he hoped, that religion would disappear and faith in God would be replaced by reason. Regardless of the subtleties of current sociological or psychological debates on secularization or modernization in Europe, both phenomena are now understood, broadly speaking, as an ongoing rationalization and devaluation of religion and mysticism, and it’s no coincidence that Max Weber and Sigmund Freud conceived their theories in industrially-developed and highly-urbanized European countries in the early twenty century.

Fernando Pessoa was a contemporary of Freud and Weber, but lived at a great distance from these hubs of modernisation. Portugal was a peripheral, rather backward and rural Catholic country, but Fernando Pessoa was surprisingly good as a witness of the secularization of Europe. This may at first seem somewhat strange considering that a great part of his still unpublished theoretical work shows that he struggled with religious questions. Nevertheless, it’s precisely his acute awareness of the decline of traditional religious systems and his numerous reflections on religion that can be understood as a kind of “religious experience of secularization”. Saying that secularization can be experienced religiously may seem an oxymoron. But let me provide a better explanation using Pessoa’s own thoughts and considerations, especially those in his esoteric writings.

Without a doubt, one of the most lucid and brilliant testimonies of the decline of traditional religious systems or convictions and the spiritual crisis during the first decades of the 20th century can be found in the *Livro do Desasocego* where Pessoa describes in various fragments his own generation as an age group who lost not only the possibility to have a profound and traditional Christian faith, but also the capacity to have any faith:

Pertenço a uma geração que herdou a descreça no facto christão e que creou em si uma descreença em todas as outras fés. Os nossos paes tinham ainda o impulso credor, que transferiam do christianismo para outras formas de illusão. Uns eram entusiastas da eguladade social, outros eram enamorados só da belleza, outros tinham a fé na sciencia e nos seus proveitos, e havia outros que, mais christãos ainda, iam buscar a Oriente e occidentes outras fórmas religiosas, com que entretivessem a consciencia, sem ellas ôca, de meramente viver.

(Pessoa, 2010: I, 142; BNP/E3, 6-13)¹

The Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno had already discovered this feeling in Pessoa's previous generation and described it as the "sentimento trágico da vida" ([1912] 2001). Antero de Quental, who was deeply admired by Pessoa, was in Unamuno's opinion the key representative of this feeling which means mainly the simultaneity of the loss of the traditional Catholicism – or any other religious faith – and of the impossibility to be satisfied with any other religious alternative by living only with reason and science (Dix, 2007). In a broader sense, Pessoa was – such as Quental – a victim of this feeling, looking during his lifetime always for spiritual alternatives. While Quental has been influenced deeply by the transcendental realism of the German philosopher Eduard von Hartmann and conceived a kind of Hellenic Buddhism, Pessoa started with paganism and ended with Gnosticism. It is well known that Pessoa was constantly in search of religious alternatives – though he was very aware of how hopeless the effort was – and developed a profound fascination for secret associations, esoteric movements and occult history, and it seems that two of his preferred branches of these esoteric phenomena were Theosophy and Rosicrucianism, but it continues highly controversial to what extent he really believed in those issues.

The tragic feeling of a lost religious faith was certainly the cultural background when Pessoa mentioned an intellectual crisis in his letter from December 6, 1915, addressed to his close friend Mario de Sá-Carneiro. From this letter, I should quote a longer part in order to describe clearly Pessoa's religious disquietude or metaphysic anxiety, and in particular his possible way out:

A primeira parte da crise intelectual, já V. sabe o que é; a que apareceu agora deriva da circunstância de eu ter tomado conhecimento com as doutrinas teosóficas. O modo como as

¹ This fragment was probably written in 1917; in other words, shortly after a period in which he was taken up with theosophical writings. The sensation of belonging to a generation that had lost faith in any religious orientation is an issue that emerges in numerous variations in Pessoa's writings. To mention only one (more ironic) example, see the writings entitled *A Educação do Stoico*: "Pertenço a uma geração – suppondo que essa geração seja mais pessoas que eu – que perdeu por igual a fé nos deuses das religiões antigas e a fé nos deuses das irreligiões modernas. Não posso aceitar Jehova, nem a humanidade. Christo e o progresso são para mim mythos do meu mundo. Não creio na Virgem Maria nem na electricidade" (Pessoa, 2007: 25; BNP/E3, 144Q-28^v). BNP/E3: Literary Estate of Fernando Pessoa.

conheci foi, como V. sabe, banalíssimo. Tive de traduzir livros teosóficos. Eu nada, absolutamente nada, conhecia do assunto. Agora, como é natural, conheço a essência do sistema. Abalou-me a um ponto que eu julgaria hoje impossível, tratando-se de qualquer sistema religioso. O carácter extraordinariamente vasto desta religião-filosofia; a noção de força, de domínio, de conhecimento superior e extra-humano que ressumam as obras teosóficas, perturbaram-me muito. Causa idêntica me acontecera há muito tempo com a leitura de um livro inglês sobre *Os Ritos e os Mistérios dos Rosa-Cruz*. A possibilidade de que ali, na Teosofia, esteja a verdade real me “hante”. Não me julgue V. a caminho da loucura creio que não estou. Isto é uma crise grave de um espírito felizmente capaz de ter crises desta. Ora, se V. meditar que a Teosofia é um sistema ultracristão – no sentido de conter os princípios cristãos elevados a um ponto onde se fundem não sei em que além-Deus – e pensar no que há de fundamentalmente incompatível com o meu paganismo essencial, V. terá o primeiro elemento grave que se acrescentou à minha crise. Se, depois, reparar em que a Teosofia, porque admite todas as religiões, tem um carácter inteiramente parecido com o do paganismo, que admite no seu Panteão todos os deuses, V. terá o segundo elemento da minha grave crise de alma. A Teosofia apavora-me pelo seu mistério e pela sua grandeza ocultista, repugna-me pelo seu humanitarismo e *apostolismo* (V. compreende?) essenciais, atrai-me por se parecer tanto com um “paganismo transcendental” (é este o nome que eu dou ao modo de pensar a que havia chegado), repugna-me por se parecer tanto com o cristianismo, que não admito. E o horror e a atracção do abismo realizados no além-alma. Um pavor metafísico, meu querido Sá-Carneiro!

(Pessoa, 1998: 182-183)

Following this statement, Pessoa’s intellectual crisis has sprung up directly from his Portuguese translations of Leadbeater’s *Compêndio de Teosofia* (1915), *A Clarividência* (1916), and *Auxiliares Invisíveis* (1916), of Annie Besant’s *Os Ideias da Teosofia* (1915), of Helena Blavatzky’s *A Voz do Silêncio* (1915), and of Mabel Collin’s *Luz sobre o Caminho* (1916). All these translations belonged to a book collection with the title “Theosophica e Esoterica”, edited by the bookshop and publishing house *Livraria Clássica Editora* which was located at that time in the heart of Lisbon, at Praça dos Restauradores, nº 17. The origin of these translations can be found in Pessoa’s acquaintance with João Antunes who was the first president of the Portuguese Theosophical Society (founded at July 8, 1921, under the designation “Secção Portuguesa da Sociedade Teosófica”) and the responsible person for the book collection “Theosophica e Esoterica”. Although there is only few personal information about João Antunes, we should be aware that he was perhaps a relatively central person who deepened, at least for a while and in an ambiguous way, Pessoa’s interest in esotericism. João Antunes published during the first decades of the 20th century a number of thematic books regarding the tradition of initiation, hermetic philosophy, theosophy and masonry. He was the editor of the theosophical journal *ISIS*, and we can find in Pessoa’s private library at least one of his books, entitled *Oedipus: A Historia e a Filosofia do Hermetismo*. There is no doubt that the book was read by someone, but it isn’t sure that the reader was Pessoa himself. And even the reading of this book appears somewhat curious, at least if we look at his underlines and marginalia. The book has about

200 pages and the first pages are full of underlines and marginalia (mostly question-marks) which disappeared abruptly after page 40. It seems that reader stopped his reading after that page and the marginalia reveal frequently an obvious sarcastic rejection, such as “que balburdia!” (“What’s a nonsense!”). The handwriting of this and other marginalia indicates that the reader was Pessoa’s close friend Raul Leal, who was – such as Pessoa – an acquaintance of João Antunes.

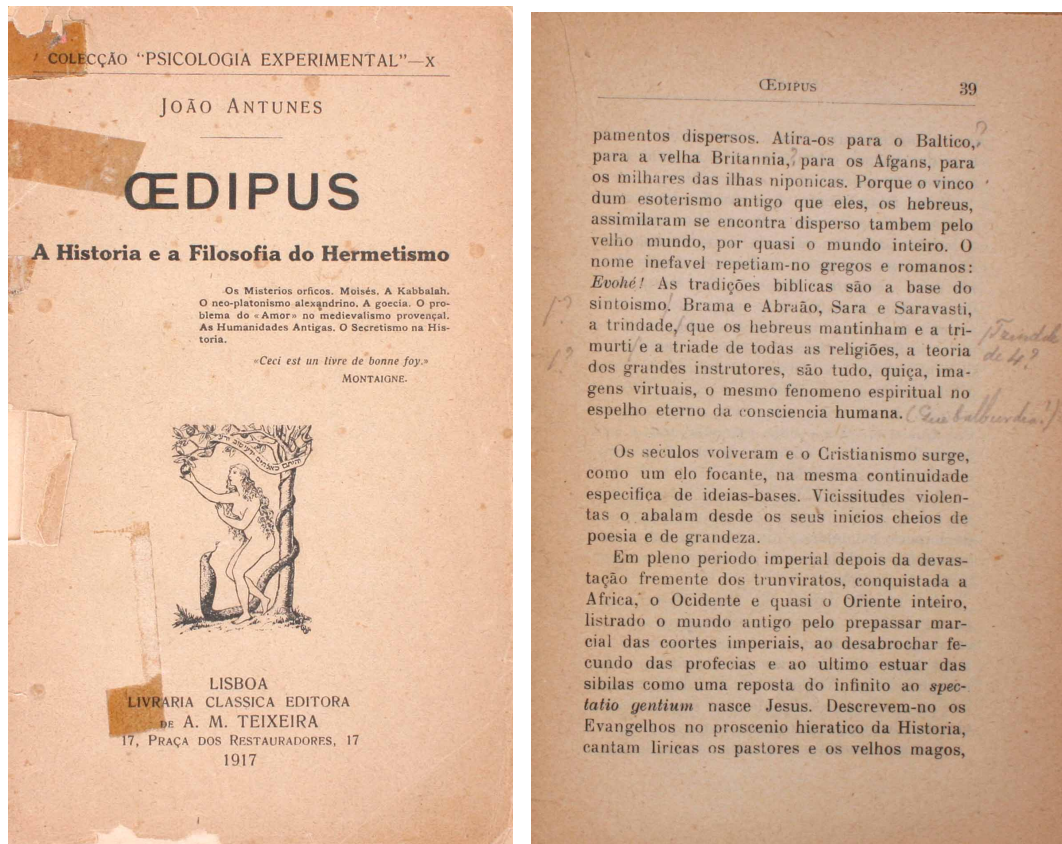


Fig. 1. ANTUNES, João (1917). *Œdipus: a história e a filosofia do hermetismo*.

Lisboa: Livraria Clássica Editora. 222, [2] p. 19 cm. «Colecção “Psicologia experimental” – X».

However, it is exactly this kind of rejection which has some similarities with Pessoa’s later statements about a phenomenon that he named the general mental confusion of the theosophists. Some years earlier, about 1913, João Antunes had already published another book with the eccentric title *Hipnológica Transcendental* and it is interesting to know that this book contains a long introduction by Raul Leal, who was – such as already mentioned – probably the real reader of the book *Oedipus: A História e a Filosofia do Hermetismo*. Nowadays, we find in Pessoa’s private library only an offprint of this introduction of more than 100 pages. This offprint, with the title *A Liberdade Transcendente* was dedicated to Fernando Pessoa as a spirit of beautifulness.

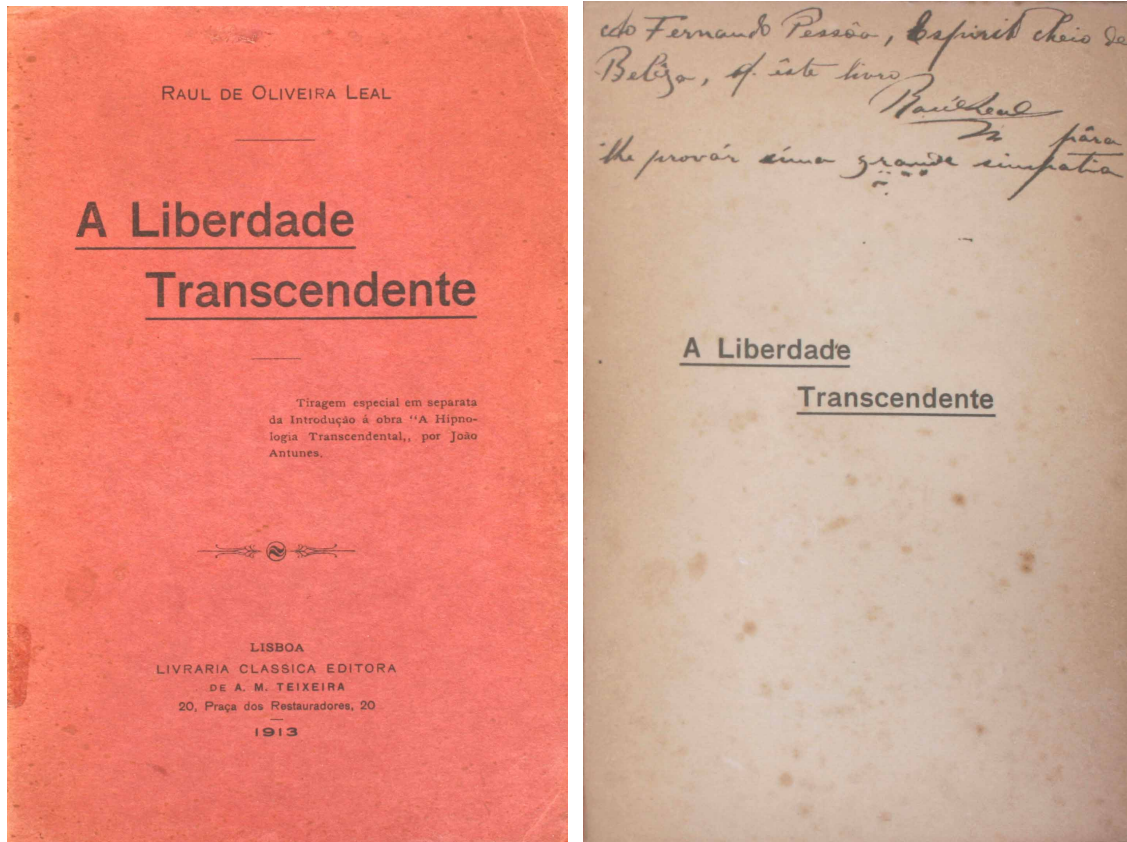


Fig. 2. LEAL, Raul (1913). *A Liberdade Transcendente*.
Lisboa: Livraria Clássica Editora. 132, [3] p. 19 cm.

Raul Leal's long introduction could be seen as a relatively reliable indication that João Antunes was at that time in Portugal one of the most active persons in the field of esotericism. Although there is no slight indication that Pessoa shared the esoteric viewpoints of João Antunes, it can be said again that he was at that time perhaps one of the main figures who awakened, or at least deepened definitely Pessoa's interest in these topics. Looking to Pessoa's translation of Blavatzky, Leadbeater, Besant or Mabel Collins, we have to ask which was the consequence of that labor, regardless of the above mentioned intellectual crisis. Compared with the numerous fragments about free-masonry, Rosacrucianism, or Kabala, there doesn't exist any really positive statement regarding theosophical teachings. Recognizing that theosophy was extremely popular in the first decades of the 20th century, Pessoa maintained a strong critical attitude especially towards four crucial points of theosophical teachings. These points correspond clearly to his own political and social opinions which he defended around 1915-1916; and they can be summarized by the following headwords starting always with the prefix anti-: 1) anti-democratic; 2) anti-humanist; 3) anti-feminist; 4) anti-oriental². First of all,

² This doesn't mean that Pessoa was some kind of "anti-orientalist". His "anti-oriental" attitude is only towards theosophical ideas and his own conception that the true occidental occult tradition should remain separate from oriental elements.

theosophy means for Pessoa the democratization of hermetic tradition, revealing in public the secret doctrines of occultism. Helena Blavatsky and her disciples represent, therefore, the absurd and abusive temptation to turn the invisible visible. In other words, theosophy tries to give a public access to the mysteries of being and nature, particularly concerning the nature of the divine. In Pessoa's own view, only some secret societies are able to work scientifically on that knowledge, which is reserved merely to some chosen or selected people. "A teosofia, como é próprio e de esperar da nossa época, é apenas uma democratização do hermetismo" (Pessoa, 1989: 54; BNP/E3, 54A-86). Or with the same meaning: "Aquelles antigos e singulares philosophos prohibiram a exhibição ou exposição dos seus principios á humanidade. Nada que se pareça com uma Sociedade Theosophica podia emanar desses (por assim dizer) estranhos espíritos (se espíritos se lhes pode chamar)" (Pessoa, 1989: 57; BNP/E3, 54-52). Secondly, we should bear in mind that theosophists defend the idea that all human beings are identical with the universal soul. Although the early theosophy contains some elements of racism or anti-Semitism, there is no doubt that one of the main objectives of the theosophical society consists in forming a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of humanity without distinction of race, faith, sex, caste, or colour. This kind of human fraternity was suspicious to Pessoa since he believed that the real esoteric tradition is concealed from the average man, providing only an aristocratic insight into nature, physical universe and spiritual realm. Pessoa stated that the theosophical understanding of brotherhood reminds of the well-known motto of French revolution, which means in Pessoa's opinion nothing different than a secular form of Christianity. Secular, theosophical and Christian humanism are based on the same religious roots, and precisely this common understanding of humanism is one of the main points where Pessoa discovered the "ultra-Christian character" of theosophy. However, this doesn't mean that Pessoa defended any form of anti-humanism. His rejection of a humanism, which is based on religious roots, consists of his conviction that the so called human rights are putting forward a certain dehumanization, bearing in mind that rights themselves are abstract, and the justice and equality they protect are also abstract. Pessoa's anti-humanism shouldn't be understood as a simple disdain of human ideals, but as an interpretation of humanism as a secular version of theism. In other fragments, he stated that humanism should be rethought in order to recognize the rights of individuals. On the other hand, humanism is against the aristocratic character of nature because it denies the natural inequality between individuals. Pessoa's own conception of humanism can be found in his writings about neo-paganism where he defends clearly that only the maintenance of human dissimilarities is enabling social life.

However, he will change his mind later, especially after 1925 when he started again with an intensive reading of books about Rosacrucianism and

freemasonry. And thirdly, theosophy means for Pessoa an important impetus to the development of feminism, bearing in mind that theosophy gave women the opportunity to lecture and to rise to prominent positions in the organizational structure of the theosophical society. The best examples of that are Blavatsky and Besant themselves, and therefore “A Theosophia é um systema creador de mulheres.” (Pessoa, 1989: 56-57; BNP/E3, 54A-74). And finally there is an incompatibility between traditional esotericism and theosophy, concerning the oriental influences. This means that traditions of oriental esotericism or eastern religions are not really understandable for a mind created by occidental values. It would be rather a kind of translation of occidental thought into a foreign culture, or for example the use of a Buddhist terminology in order to describe western values, social or individual ideas. Pessoa understood this western interpretation of Buddhism only as a mental confusion, and it seems that he used sometimes the words theosophy and neo-Buddhism as synonyms. And at that point we can also find a similarity to W.B. Yeats who left the theosophical society and joined the Golden Dawn around 1890, exactly because the hermetic students and followers of Samuel Liddell “MacGregor” Mathers emphasized the European tradition of Kabalistic magic rather than the wisdom of the East.

Generally speaking, theosophy was for Pessoa nothing else as a “indizível mistura de charlatanismo e de mera drogaria social” (Pessoa, 1989: 53; BNP/E3, 54-1). It may be a bit controversial, but we can suppose that these opinions, which could be dated around 1916, were Pessoa’s final judgment regarding theosophy, and it seems that he was in fact afraid of the possibility that theosophy could contaminate negatively the real hermetic tradition of the occident:

A propria tradição hermetica, por assim dizer intellectual e aristocratica, como era logico que fosse, foi invadida pelo theosophismo hindu (↑ indi/c/o), □, estruturalmente seu inimigo, fortemente emotivo e passivo, e trazendo consigo a doutrina repugnante e impia da egualdade dos sexos e das raças. (e das classes em que a sociedade se divide). Nem os sanctuarios do Occulto (apparentemente) escaparam á souilloure romantica.

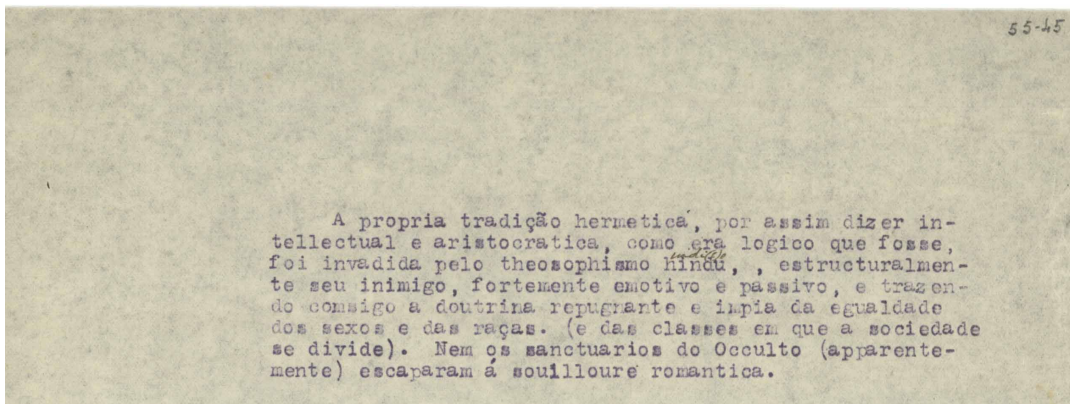


Fig. 3. BNP/E3, 55-45^r (detail).

Pessoa understood theosophy as a democratic, humanistic, feminist, and oriental usurpation of the true western hermetic tradition which he thought it is preserved only in the aristocratic and noble attitude of Rosacruzianism. Written in his typical ironic style, he stated:

A Rosicrucian is a kind of occultist[,] a man our mind can understand. He cannot understand a neo-buddhist. The detestable Indian net jugglery called Theosophy, so despicably taken far from the great, thought obscured beauty of the Buddha of the East, by its mixture with western movements. And a man like Mr. Leadbeater, who has at home the keys to all the mystery, has forgotten to put unto the bunch the key to English Grammar.

(Pessoa, 1989: 54)

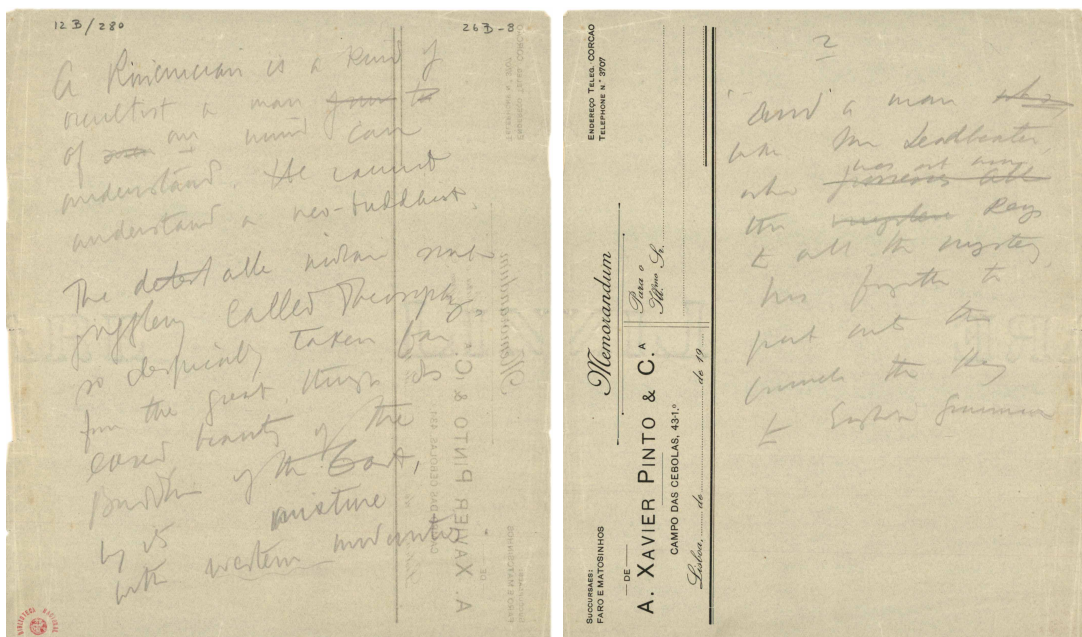


Fig. 4. BNP/E3, 26B-8.

Although he has declared in his letter to Sá-Carneiro a certain intellectual attraction concerning theosophy, Pessoa shows in the following years a clear negative attitude against theosophy, underlining his rejection of theosophical attempts of making compatible western and eastern hermetic traditions, or declaring his refusal of the open defence of the equality between gender or generally between human beings. He was deeply irritated by the humanitarian aspirations of theosophy, and even Raphael Baldaya, Pessoa's astrologer, expressed openly his contempt for theosophy which is, in his own understanding, nothing else than a democratization or Christianization of the hermetic tradition.

It was at that time, or even a little bit earlier, that his interest in theosophy disappeared and that he deepened his own choice in occult matters which was going clearly in direction to Rosacruzianism: "Que diferença, mesmo de mero tom, entre a pobreza de espírito dos theosophistas e a magnífica misteriosidade dos

scriptos dos Rosa-Cruz! Nestes, mesmo quando nada compreendemos, sentimos a força e a sienza dos Mestres da Sabedoria” (Pessoa, 1989: 56-53; BNP/E3, 54-1). And at least, it is also well possible that lack of money was another important factor behind Pessoa’s intensive preoccupation with theosophy. A quick glance at the short diary-entries of November and December 1915 indicates that money was at that time a really sensitive issue in Pessoa’s daily life. Only two days before reading the last proofs of the translation of Besant’s *Ideals of Theosophy*, in the evening of November 14, Pessoa wrote, for example, in his diary the following comment: “at home without dinner, because no money; but almost not worried thereby, since had taken some wine at Pedro de Lima’s exhibition” (Pessoa, 2003: 160; 2009: 329). This was written only some days before the above mentioned letter was sent to Sá-Carneiro, but it can be seen as evidence that there was no clear frontier between the commercial and intellectual side of Pessoa’s interest in theosophy. However, in the last days of November 1915, another event occurred which is maybe less important, but interesting. Pessoa met during these days the eccentric Spanish writer Iván (or Juan) de Nogales who is nowadays completely forgotten, but who was considered by Pessoa as “the theosophist, likes of *Orpheu*”, or at least as somewhat provocative and apparently absurd. Except for mentioning of Nogales’ name in one project on sensacionismo (Pessoa, 2009: 331; 438), we don’t have any information about a possible cooperation between Pessoa and Nogales, but we know that Nogales was a genuine theosophist. In this sense, it is very likely that some common interest had existed between both, even if Pessoa never mentioned any serious discussion with Nogales about theosophical issues.³ In any case, it seems certain that Pessoa, at least in 1916, began to dissociate himself from theosophy and to transfer his interest to Rosacrucianism. Only some years later, around 1924 or 1925, his negative opinion against theosophy will be slightly challenged when he read a long chapter in Fr. Wittemanns *Histoire des Rose-Croix* where the author declared that there are some important similarities between Rosacrucianism and theosophy, especially concerning a complete and sophisticated cosmology of both. I will come back to this book shortly.

Concerning Rosacrucianism, Pessoa’s first profound knowledge of that branch of esotericism comes some times before 1915 and almost certainly from Hargrave Jennings classical book *The Rosacrucians: Their Rites and Mysteries* which Jennings himself understood as “a history of the alchemical philosophers written with a serious explanatory purpose, and for the first time impartially stated since the days of James the First and Charles the First” (Jennings, 1907: xi). Just a short look at that book will give us an exact idea of the fascination and enthusiasm of Pessoa’s readings. In many pages we can find enthusiastic marginalia such as “Note!” or “Note all This!”, and there is no doubt that Jennings book was exactly

³ About the relationship between Pessoa and Nogales, see Pérez López (2011).

that book which Pessoa mentioned in his letter to Sá-Carneiro (see again: “Cousa idêntica me acontecera há muito tempo com a leitura de um livro inglês sobre *Os Ritos e os Mistérios dos Rosa-Cruz*”). Hargrave Jennings played an active role in the Rosicrucian revival of the late 19th century and he was befriended with Edward Bulwer Lytton, the author of the remarkable novel *Zanoni*, which is about the love story of a timeless Rosicrucian brother and which was written with the desire to get acquainted with the “true origin and tenets of the singular sect known by the name of Rosicrucians”. It should be said that the book was deeply criticized and it could be understood rather as a study in comparative religion than a genuine historical introduction to Rosacrucianism. Instead of giving a real explanation of the Rosicrucian Brotherhood, Jennings is searching the origin of all religions which he found in the primitive worship of the principle of Light or Fire as the animating force of the universe. However the book was the most important starting point for Pessoa’s interest on this branch of esotericism. It could be a little bit strange, but Jennings book was not only important for Pessoa’s theoretical studies on Rosacrucianism. During some months, it influenced also his daily life, at least indirectly. In the foreword to the second edition of Jennings book, we can find a list of early Rosicrucians, and one of them was the Cambridge Platonist Henry More (1614-1687). He becomes in 1916 and 1917 Pessoa’s most significant mentor from the astral world, and it seems that Pessoa followed during some time the commands of his friend from the otherworld. In his automatic writings, Pessoa had received advice about how to get rid of his virginity and his habit of masturbation. This spiritual master is from time to time a somewhat harsh critic of Pessoa, but he also promised Pessoa money and fame, and he had foreseen that our young poet would find a girlfriend soon, that he would have three children from different mothers, and that he would spend some time in prison during 1917. On the other hand, Henry More was also a real spiritual guide who sometimes recommended Pessoa’s readings, such as on the June 29, 1916, when he told him that one of the essential books he should read is *The Rosicrucians: Their Rites and Mysteries*.⁴ And in order to make us more familiar with Pessoa’s esoteric preferences, it is important to know that in the same automatic writing one of Henry More’s astral instructions was summarized in a short phrase: “Read no more theosophical books.” (BNP/E3, 138-39). Such as indicated above, it seems that Pessoa followed this order to the letter. But besides this recommendation, there is one really amazing surprise in these automatic writings, especially when Henry More revealed that Pessoa himself was a genuine member of the Order of Rosy Cross: “You are a R + C”.

⁴ There’s proof here that even our masters from the astral world are sometimes not up to date bearing in mind that Pessoa had already read the book some time before, as he said in the letter to Sá-Carneiro. However, it could also be seen as a sign that Pessoa read the book twice, as we will explain further ahead.

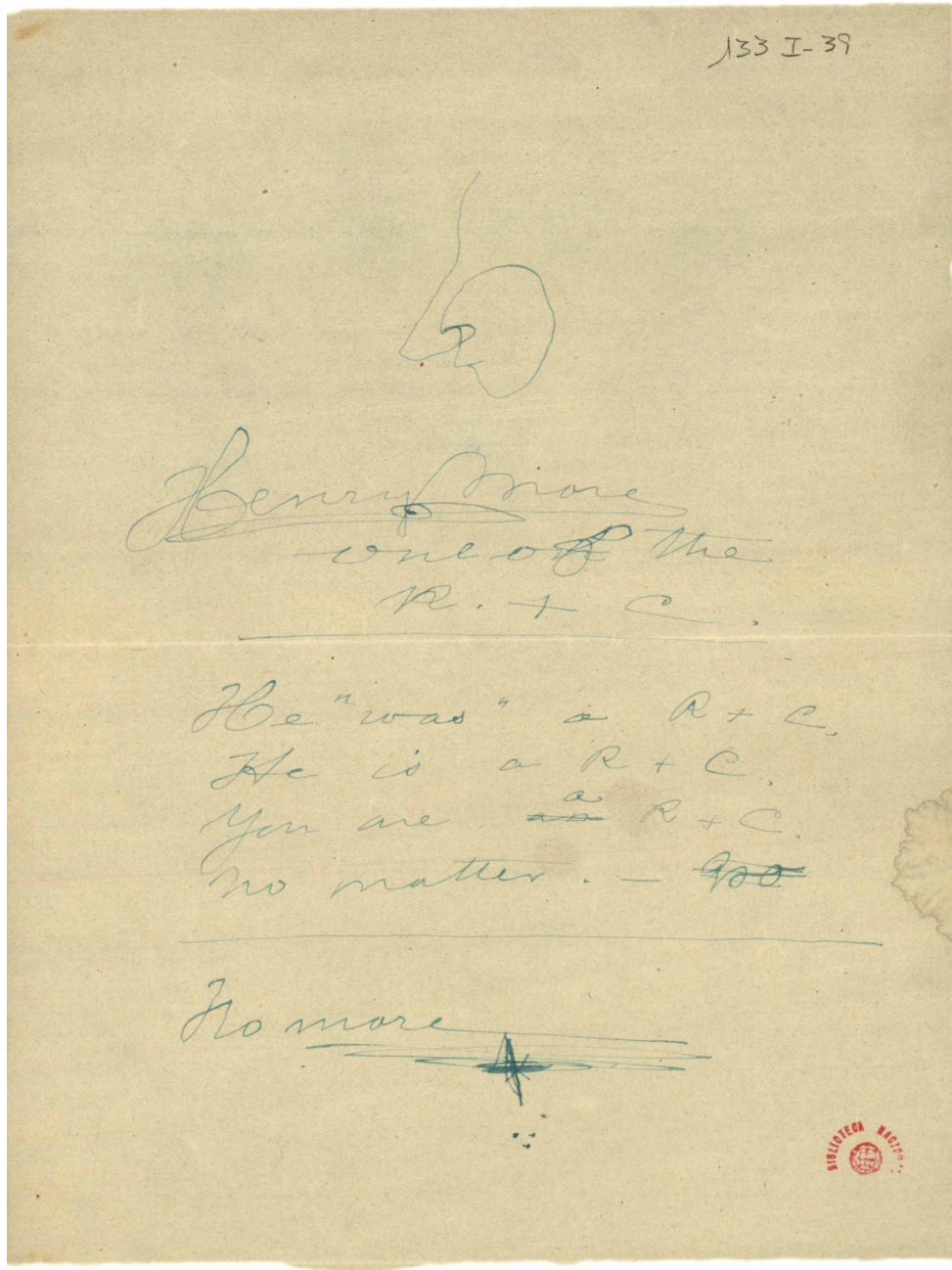


Fig. 5. BNP/E3, 133I-39.

One of Henry More's astral instructions in Pessoa's automatic writings.

We know nothing about Pessoa's reaction to that statement, but we know his opinion that a real Rosicrucian will never declare his membership in public. To sum up, it is likely that around 1916 or 1917, Pessoa broke up definitely with theosophy and psychic mediumship, and it is almost sure that from that period on we can date some fragments where this break is obvious, such as "A Theosophia" (BNP/E3, 54A-74), "Um caso de mediumnidade" (BNP/E3, 54A-78), and "Principios da Metaphysica Esoterica" (BNP/E3, 54A-85). As we have seen before, it is relatively easy to understand Pessoa's esoteric interests until 1917, but we have less

information about what happened between 1918 and 1925. If we take a look at his private library, we will see that the most essential books on Rosacrucianism (or even Masonry) were published only after 1925. Concerning the years between 1918 and 1925, it is difficult to find any key-points which reveal an intensive interest in theosophy or Rosacrucianism. In May 1919, Pessoa wrote a letter to the English publisher and writer Herbert Jenkins asking if the book *Secret Shakespeare Seals*, published by “Fratres Rosea Crucis”, is still obtainable (Pessoa, 1998: 282). This book was the attempt to show individual seals or marks which can prove the real authorship of Shakespeare. As we know, Pessoa was deeply interested in that issue, especially concerning the Bacon-Shakespeare-Question. One of the Fratres Rosea Crucis, Frank Woodward, answered Pessoa that he was quite sure that Francis Bacon was not the real author of Shakespeare’s plays, but that he was a very important member of the Rosicrucian movement. Nowadays, the book can be found in Pessoa’s private library, but it can’t be seen as a real source of Pessoa’s studies on Rosacrucianism. 1920 was the year of the first part of the love-affair with Ophelia Queiroz. In 1921, Pessoa tried to establish a mining business; an attempt that was unsuccessful. Between 1922 and 1924, Pessoa was involved in the publication of the journal *Contemporanea*, and in that time, he was in close contact with some Spanish Ultraístas such as Rogelio Buendía, Adriano del Valle or Isaac del Vano-Villar. In 1924 and 1925 he launched his own journal *Athena*, accompanied by the unsuccessful attempt to make it known in England via the Literary Supplement of the *Times*.

Perhaps in the last days of August or the first days of September 1924, Pessoa got some advertising material from the still existing publishing house *Adyar* in Paris. As the name already suggests, the main attempt of this publishing house was and still is the dissemination of theosophical teachings or esotericism. On September 25, Pessoa wrote a letter to this publishing house asking if they could still send him the book *Histoire des Rose-Croix* of Fr. Wittemanns which was mentioned in the advertising material (Pessoa, 1999: 47-48). Nowadays, we can find in his private library the third edition of this book and at least the marginalia reveal that Pessoa had read the book with some enthusiasm. However, in Pessoa’s own writings there are only few or almost no references to this book, and maybe he thought it was a little bit suspicious because the author defended the theory that the theosophical society should be understood as the direct maintenance of Rosacrucianism in western world (Wittemanns, 1925: 177-202). It could be possible that exactly this book-order was the starting-point of a renewed interest on Rosacrucianism, and later on also on Freemasonry. During these months Pessoa also ordered some other books which appear later in his own writings or comments. For example *An Introduction to the Study of the Kabalah* (1924), by Golden Dawn co-founder William Wynn Westcott, but especially the books *The Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross* (1924) and *Emblematic Freemasonry* (1925), by Arthur Edward

Waite, who was an extremely creative author with many works about Rosacruicism, Freemasonry, Alchemy or Cabalism. Arthur Edward Waite was well received in the academic circles and he joined the Hermetic Order of Golden Dawn in 1891. It is an indisputable fact that many of Pessoa's writings on Rosacruicism and Freemasonry have sprung up after his readings of Waite's books. For example, when Pessoa was thinking about Waite's observation that the opening of the tomb of Christian Rodencreutz in the *Fama Fraternitatis* necessarily implies a kind of "seguimento symbolico" (Pessoa, 1989: 210-211; BNP/E3, 54A-57), we can be sure that this observation cannot have been written before Pessoa had read at least the fifth chapter of Waite's book on Rosacruicism (Waite, 1924: 113-142). Since it's very likely that a great part of the fragments with the titles "Occultism", "Essay on Initiation", or "Cabala" were written at the same typewriter and on the same paper, it is almost certain that the greatest part of Pessoa's writings on esoteric issues was produced in the late 1920th or at the beginning of the 1930s. Besides, it could be added that the most important part of the books on Masonry in Pessoa's private library were printed only in the 1930s. On the other hand, if we look carefully at the different kinds of marginalia or underlined words in his copy of *The Rosicrucians* by Hagrave Jennings, we understand that Pessoa must have read it at least twice: first, as we have already mentioned, before he wrote to Sá-Carneiro in the winter of 1915, and later on Henry More's recommendation in the summer of 1916. But it isn't also impossible that Pessoa read the book again in the 1930s, and especially if we admit that Jennings' volume was one of the most important sources of Pessoa's frequent reflections about Robert Fludd or the cabala. Some other fragments give us the strong impression that they were written only after Pessoa's meeting with Aleister Crowley in September 1930, especially when he refers to the hermetic order A.:A.: (Pessoa, 1989: 81; BNP/E3, 53A-36), to the meaning of the true will, or to the law of Thelema. And finally, it isn't a simple coincidence that most of Pessoa's so called esoteric poems were written in the 1930s.⁵ Overall, it is absolutely clear that Pessoa's writings on Rosacruicism, Freemasonry or Cabala were very often a direct and critical confrontation with his own readings, but further studies will be necessary in order to determine the correct relationship between his writings and readings.

To conclude this brief overview, I will try to give a short indication about Pessoa's own thinking about Rosacruicism. The most reliable approach to his own thinking can be found maybe in his writings about initiation which he divided into three types. First of all, we have the exoteric initiation which is the lowest one and

⁵ Regarding Crowley's influence on Pessoa, there is no doubt that Pessoa made use of the English occultist writings. This influence is convincingly proved in Marco Pasi's excellent studies (2001, 2006). However, it isn't clear if this influence was a direct result of Crowley's enigmatic journey to Lisbon, as was argued by Dix (2012).

analogue to the Masonic initiation. In the exact meaning of the word it isn't a true initiation, it is rather limited to give only a slight idea of the occult knowledge. The only purpose of the exoteric initiation is to show the correct conditions if somebody tries to take the right esoteric path. In Pessoa's view, Freemasons, members of theosophy or even anthroposophy are only initiated exoterically. The second form is the esoteric initiation which means that the candidate is truly wishing and searching for the initiation. Esoterically initiated is a member of the Rosy-Cross, and as an example Pessoa mentioned Francis Bacon. The third form of initiation is finally the divine initiation where the candidate is appointed by God. The highest form of that kind of initiation was that of Jesus when he becomes Christ. Another holder of a divine initiation is, for example, Shakespeare. At first sight, this interpretation seems to be a kind of oversimplified understanding of Rosacrucianism, but the three forms of initiation can metaphorically also mean the three phases of initiation. In other words, it means the start of initiation, the progress of initiation, and finally the realization of the *purissimus homo*, of the *Quinta Essentia*, or the final steps of transmutation. And there is no doubt that one of the main reasons of Pessoa's interest in Rosacrucianism is the search for ethical and spiritual maturity beyond everyday life, or beyond the world of material needs. That means mainly the development of existing human potentials or the individuation of the human being, and it means last but not least the real self-knowledge. The recognition that this ideal of Rosacrucianism corresponds completely to Pessoa's own ideals, leads directly to Pessoa's understanding of liberty, equality and fraternity: "Liberdade, quere dizer não se subordinar a nada, nem ao próprio ideal nem à própria personalidade, nem à lei de Thelema que nos dá a nossa liberdade como nossa limitação. Igualdade quere dizer que, tendo cada um esta liberdade, cada um será igual a qualquer outro, desde que cada um seja o que é. Fraternidade é o que segue: ninguém se pode oppor a outrem desde que seja o que é, porque ser o que é é ser irmão de quem também é o que é" (Pessoa, 1989: 71; BNP/E3, 26C-52). In this sense, the famous motto liberty, equality and fraternity is universal. It exists in Rosacrucianism as well as in French Revolution, Christianity or theosophy. But it exists in Rosacrucianism without any propagation and with a different meaning. The most important and highest aim is the self-realization of the individual. And exactly this self-realization without social constraints justifies the aristocracy of Rosacrucianism: "Os Rosa Cruz, transmissores da velha tradição aristocrática adentro do occultismo" (Pessoa, 1989: 61).

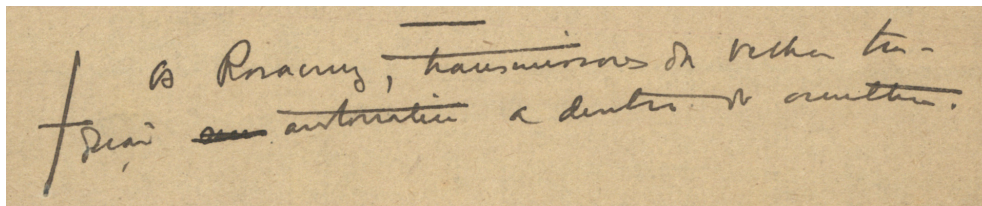


Fig. 6. BNP/E3, 24-71^v.

As far as Pessoa's occultist interests and writings are concerned as a whole, we are often confronted with difficulties to understand his own path, and we are from time to time inclined to say that these writings are somewhat confused, contradictory, inconsequent, or that he speaks sometimes in parables, or that the real information is hidden. Bearing in mind that Pessoa in many occasions has considered himself as a profound religious spirit, there should be no doubt that his interest were deeply associated with his own crisis of religious belief, provoked mainly by an enforced secularization at first decades of the 20th century and as well by his own anticlericalism. Besides on his early neo-paganism – which should be seen more as an aesthetic *Weltanschauung* rather than a real religious orientation –, different occultist traditions exerted lifelong influences on Pessoa.

Insofar, the uncertainty and puzzlement of his writings lies in the very nature of things. Until 1917, and mainly due to with his translations of writings of Blavatsky, Besant or Leadbeater, Pessoa reveals, albeit for a short period of time, a certain admiration for the Theosophical Society. Nevertheless, he showed soon an open aversion especially against the evident consonance of theosophy with the rising feminism at that time. On the other hand, Pessoa defended always an aristocratic attitude in the ancient Greek sense of the word, believing that only some chosen people can be freed from the shadows and the cave, and come to perceive the true form of reality. In Pessoa's understanding, one of the main theosophical objectives consists in an open revelation of the secret forces of nature. This means that theosophy claims to offer an access to the divine things for all human beings (or for the universal brotherhood of humanity), and it was exactly these democratic approach of theosophy which comes in a direct contradiction with Pessoa's aristocratic inclination. In other words, after his first contact with theosophical writings, Pessoa got the conviction that beyond pure reason and the physical sciences exists perhaps a hidden knowledge, but he was always aware that the revelation of divine secrets means their destruction. As the consequence, he abandoned soon his short sympathy for "democratic" theosophical teachings and searched for more aristocratic ways of searching the ultimate true. Independent of his early contact with Jennings book of Rosacrucianism, it seems that finally he found in the end of the 1920s his own esoteric preference which provides an insight in the spiritual realm – and which were, at the same time, concealed from the average man. Pessoa's deep occupation, during his later years, with Rosacrucianism and other esoteric issues such as initiation, Kabala or different secret association, can be interpreted negatively as a kind of elitism, or associated to right-wing political sympathies.⁶ However, it should be also clear that Pessoa maintained always an extreme individualism which make it impossible to

⁶ Regarding a reasonable and justified correction of the one-sided and partial visions of occultism see Pasi (2009), in *The Modernity of Occultism*.

see any intrinsic relation between his occult preferences and any fascistic regime that find themselves on the eve. We could also argue that Pessoa's thoughts on esotericism during his last years have something in common with the short novel *Die Morgenlandfahrt* (*Journey to the East*) of Hermann Hesse which were published in 1932, and where the protagonist H.H. becomes a member of a timeless religious and/or artistic order with many similarities to Rosacrucianism. A part of "The League", whose members include some well-known real personalities, such as Plato, Mozart, Paul Klee or Don Quixote, goes on a pilgrimage to the east, looking for the definitive wisdom. It seems sometimes that Pessoa shared a similar conception of a timeless poetic order, whose members include Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, Alberto Caeiro and, of course, himself. However, to confirm that speculation, a lot of further investigation will be necessary in the almost unknown field of Pessoa's esoteric writings.

After this brief summary of Pessoa's writings about Theosophy and Rosacrucianism, I would like to give a short explanation of what I have in mind when I argue that Pessoa's esoteric writings – or his writings on religion generally – can be seen as a religious experience of secularization. Secularization can mean a variety of things and remains a very sensitive issue in sociological debates, but in Europe it generally means the decline of religious authority in social life due to the progress societies make in modernization and rationalization. However, this hasn't resulted in the complete disappearance of religion. Levels of individual religiosity sometimes remain high. The core argument of the secularization thesis can be described as a functional differentiation of modern societies between the religious and secular spheres. In contemporary European societies, religion has grown more individual, and a person may nowadays be considered a kind of spiritual wanderer between multicolored worlds of religious suppliers. This spiritual wanderer can pause and rest at one place before wandering to another place. In some places, they may even sit down and stay longer than in other places, depending on their own preferences. By wandering from one place to another, they may take with them some elements from the first place to the next, and later look back with regret at certain elements that they might have once enjoyed at an earlier time and place. They eventually create their own patchwork religiosity, or else perhaps lose all religious feelings. In terms of religious inclinations, Fernando Pessoa never managed to arrive at the end of his own way. He was a lifelong spiritual wanderer and early on in life he became convinced that the traditional religious system of his forebears failed to make sense in a modern world. In Pessoa's work and contemplations on the modern world, God and gods oscillate between visibility and invisibility, between presence and absence, between significance and insignificance. On his own spiritual journey, he experienced religiosity as the modern social phenomenon of secularization: he was indirectly beholding Weber's "disenchantment of the world" and Freud's "future of an

illusion", while also challenging our master narratives of secularization by pointing to its limits. That is to say, Fernando Pessoa's work – written in a peripheral and backward Catholic country – is an excellent guide to help us to understand clearly the changing attitude to religion in the early 20th century.⁷

But to provide clear answer to all these problems, further studies are necessary. Although it's a commonplace to say, Pessoa's real vocation was always poetry. And as an attentive reader of Matthew Arnold's books, Pessoa was aware that poetry has the capacity to replace religion, as that great English poet and cultural critic had already predicted in 1880: "[...] most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry. [...] The day will come when we shall wonder at ourselves for having trusted to them, for having taken them seriously; and the more we perceive their hollowness, the more we shall prize 'the breath and finer spirit of knowledge' offered to us by poetry" (Arnold, 1925: 8).⁸

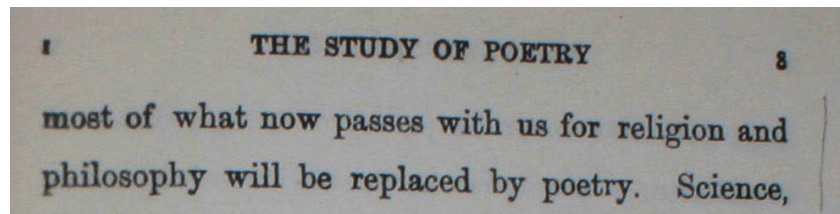


Fig. 7. ARNOLD, Matthew (1925). *Essays in Criticism: First Series*. First pocket edition. London: Macmillan and Co., Limited. 379 p. 18 cm.

⁷ That there are few studies that explore the ambiguous relationship between modernism and religion is rather strange. For more on the special relationship between secularization and modernism (or modernist novels), see the interesting chapter "God's afterlife" in the outstanding book by Pericles Lewis (2010). As for the occult experiences of modernist artists, see Wilson (2013) or Loers (1998).

⁸ Nevertheless, I have to reiterate that many further studies are still necessary to achieve a deeper and proper understanding of Pessoa's attitude to religious issues, which shouldn't be reduced merely to his anticlericalism esotericism. His own attitude to religious phenomena is still a blind point in Pessoa studies, seeing that a great deal of his writings on religion remains unpublished. Pessoa's work seems to be a strict falsification of Nietzsche's death sentence of God and a living verification of William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

Bibliography:

- ANTUNES, João (1917). *Oedipus: A História e a Filosofia do Hermetismo*. Lisboa: Livraria Clássica Editora.
- ARNOLD, Matthew (1925). "The Study of Poetry," in *Essays in Criticism: First Series*. London: Macmillan and Co.
- DIX, Steffen (2012). "Die Rationalisierung eines Mysteriums: Detektivroman und esoterische Wahlverwandtschaft bei Fernando Pessoa," in Fernando Pessoa, *Boca do Inferno: Aleister Crowley's Verschwinden in Portugal*, edited and translated by Steffen Dix. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer-Verlage.
- ____ (2007). "Miguel de Unamuno und Antero de Quental: Iberische Religionskritik, einbrechende Moderne und die Tragik des Verlustes," in *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, vol. 59, n.º 4, pp. 311-330.
- FREUD, Sigmund ([1907] 1989). "Zwangshandlungen und Religionsübungen," in *Studienausgabe VII*, edited by Alexander Mitscherlich *et al.* Frankfurt am Main: Fischer.
- JENNINGS, Hargrave (1907). *The Rosicrucians: Their Rites and Mysteries*. 4th Edition. London: George Routledge & Sons.
- LOERS, Veit (1998) (org.). *Okkultismus und Avantgarde. Von Munch bis Mondrian 1900 – 1915*. Stuttgart: Edition Tertium.
- PASI, Marco (2009), "The Modernity of Occultism: Reflections on Some Crucial Aspects," in W. J. Hanegraaff and J. Pijnenburg (eds.), *Hermes in the Academy: Ten Years' Study of Western Esotericism at the University of Amsterdam*. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam.
- ____ (2006). *Aleister Crowley und die Versuchung der Politik*. Graz: Ares Verlag.
- ____ (2001). "The Influence of Aleister Crowley on Fernando Pessoa's Esoteric Writings," in Richard Caron *et al.* (eds.), *Ésoterisme, Gonses & Imaginaire Symbolique: Mélanges offerts à Antoine Faivre*. Leuven: Peeters.
- PÉREZ LÓPEZ, Pablo Javier (2011). "Fernando Pessoa e Iván Nogales: claves simbólicas, literárias e ibéricas de un encuentro," in *Suroeste*, n.º 1, pp. 135-152.
- PESSOA, Fernando (2010). *Livro do Desasocego*. Critical edition by Jerónimo Pizarro. Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda. 2 vols.
- ____ (2009). *Sensacionismo e Outros Ismos*. Critical edition by Jerónimo Pizarro. Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda.
- ____ (2007). *A Educação do Stoico*. Critical edition by Jerónimo Pizarro. Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda.
- ____ (2003). *Escritos Autobiográficos, Automáticos e de Reflexão Pessoal*. Edited by Richard Zenith. Lisboa: Assírio & Alvim.
- ____ (1998). *Correspondência 1905-1922*. Edited by Manuela Parreira da Silva. Lisboa: Assírio & Alvim.
- ____ (1999). *Correspondência 1923-1935*. Edited by Manuela Parreira da Silva. Lisboa: Assírio & Alvim.
- ____ (1989). *Rosea Cruz*. Edited by Pedro Teixeira da Mota. Lisboa: Edições Manuel Lencastre.
- UNAMUNO, Miguel de ([1912] 2001). *Do Sentimento Trágico da Vida*. Coimbra: Quarteto.
- WAITE, Arthur Edward (1924). *The Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross*. London: William Rider & Son.
- WEBER, Max ([1919] 2002). "Wissenschaft als Beruf," in: *Schriften 1894-1922*, edited by Dirk Kaesler. Stuttgart: Kröner Verlag.
- WILSON, Leigh (2013). *Modernism and Magic: Experiments with Spiritualism, Theosophy and the Occult*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- WITTEMANN, Frans (1925). *Histoire des Rose-Croix*. 3rd Edition. Paris: Éditions Adyar.