The Pain of the Wound
And the Balm of Having Understood the Gods

Andrew Winer*


One of the more valuable artistic and humanistic enterprises that we have been privileged to inherit has come down to us in a most unprepossessing form: a trunkful of fragments written by a very singular loner. I’m referring to the individual pages, receipts, and other scraps containing the deeply private, lyrical thinking of the great Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa. The Book of Disquiet—as the many, differently-edited, posthumously-published compendiums of these thoughts have come to be called in English—has for some time been a favorite, even a sort of secret weapon, among sensitive souls fortunate enough to know about it. Its pages offer affirmation, if of the most painful sort, to readers for whom daily existence is intensely and emotionally registered, and for whom the inescapable termination of that same daily existence, i.e. of our lives, never appears far from view. As it turns out, earlier editions of The Book of Disquiet are not wholly representative of what was found in the trunk Pessoa left behind, and they were arranged at the benevolent whim of their respective editor’s aesthetic discrimination. In contrast, Pessoa scholar Jerónimo Pizarro, in New Direction’s glorious edition, superbly translated from the Portuguese by Margaret Jull Costa, has taken a less intrusive

* Chair of Creative Writing at the University of California, Riverside.

and arguably more reverential approach, largely by including many more of the fragments, all in chronological order. In so doing, Pizarro has pulled off the seemingly impossible feat of offering the reader more of an unknowable man, and, paradoxically, of bringing us into even closer personal contact with the most personal and private of minds.

That mind, in *The Book of Disquiet*, was decanted onto the page through the voices of two different personae: an office clerk named Vicente Guedes, whose thoughts, set down when Pessoa was younger, claim the first part of this edition, and a bookkeeper named Bernardo Soares, whose meditations and laments constitute the book’s second half and paint a portrait of Pessoa’s spirit in his mature years. Perhaps beholden to their first encounters with *The Book of Disquiet* (earlier editions of which focused on the notes by Soares, who, by many lights including Pessoa’s own, hews most closely in temperament and tone to the author himself), longtime fans of the book often tend to prefer Soares’ this-worldliness—his paeans to the streets of Lisbon that circumscribed Pessoa’s universe—to Guedes’ more disembodied, metaphysical and hectoring ruminations. But both Soares and Guedes are exiles in this world: reclusive, withdrawn, antagonistic toward life to the point, sometimes, of seeming Gnostic. And both offer up a dreaming mind in answer to the question that, I suggest, was the main preoccupation of Pessoa’s life: not “Who am I?” as many have written, but rather “How shall I endure?” And, in order to better appreciate Soares’ excursions down into the streets among the everyday people of Lisbon, in order to better understand his aliveness to the tension between what’s necessary to get through prosaic living and an honest awareness of much of the futility therein, the reader would be well-served to dip into, if not wholly imbibe, the Guedes section that Pizarro has generously included.

Presiding over the entire book is a strong sense of stagnation and ennui—Pessoa’s ennui, but also the ennui of the culture he finds himself in and one that isn’t much different than our own. The Second Coming never came and God no longer is an organizing principle; the religion of progress has, despite its believers, not proven to be a worthy successor. Meaning that humans find themselves in a predicament not unlike that unique moment in history between Cicero and Marcus Aurelius, when, as Marguerite Yourcenar, quoting Flaubert in a footnote to her novel *Memoirs of Hadrian*, wrote, “the gods had ceased to be and the Christ had not yet come, and man stood alone.” The italics are mine, for this really is the predicament that Pessoa diagnoses in the culture and in himself. He finds his generation foundering among the wild instabilities of a modern era in which man can no longer rely on the old verities. And Pessoa’s personal solution, one he admits to being ashamed of, is to completely abdicate from any relation to history.

What he gains with this abdication is time—but at a cost. The cost is eschewing the relative comforts of history, which is merely a man-made
fictionalizing of time, in favor of the big, murdering beast itself. The cost is no longer being able to inoculate the soul with the news. The cost is the pain of relentlessly, day after day, running one’s perceptions, and the emotions they entrain, up against time’s monstrous ongoings.

Yet, as is the case with so much art and literature worthy of the name, the cost Pessoa incurred is our gain. Dear reader, call his retreat a form of apathetic indolence, call it escapism or decadence or even, to use our contemporary parlance, depression—you would nevertheless be hard-pressed to find more poignant sentences, in all of literature, concerning a person’s encounter with time than in Fernando Pessoa’s *The Book of Disquiet*:

> Before summer ends and autumn arrives, in that warm interval in which the air weighs heavy and the colors soften, the afternoons tend to wear a suit redolent of false glory. They are comparable to imaginative artifices in which one feels a nostalgia for nothing, and they drag on like the endlessly snaking wakes of ships. On such afternoons… I feel that I have lost an omnipotent God, that the Substance of everything has died. And the tangible universe is, for me, a corpse that I loved when it was life; but everything has turned to nothing in the still-warm glow of the last colorful clouds. My tedium takes on a horrific aspect; my boredom becomes fear… I don’t know what I want or don’t want. I no longer know what it is to want, or how to want, or how to recognize the emotions or thoughts by which we usually know that we do want something or want to want something. I don’t know who or what I am. Like someone buried under the rubble of a wall, I lie beneath the fallen vacuity of the entire universe.

If this were merely a case of Gnostic hatred of the created realm, *The Book of Disquiet* would have been consigned to dustbin of, yes, history. But, in passages like this and a thousand others, Pessoa is actually praising the world, if negatively. He is one of those writers, so valuable to us, who loves the world by hating it, or hates it by loving it. “I never considered suicide a solution,” Pessoa writes, “because I only hate life out of love for it.”

To be clear, Pessoa is no Platonist who feels that reality is all shadows. Instead of giving up on the material world, Pessoa uses his writing to find a path from it toward the great garden he is cultivating in his thoughts, for “everything is a point of departure” and “each thing suggests to [him] not the reality of which it is the shadow, but the reality to which it is the path.” Neither is his solution psychological. “To know nothing about oneself is to live,” Pessoa opines. A larger grasp of oneself only comes in flashes, and then even that is gone, leaving a residue of tiredness but little meaning. And about other people, including friends, Pessoa remains ambivalent at best, and nearly misanthropic at worst, and in any case hurt. “I never doubted for a moment that they would all betray me,” writes Pessoa, “and yet I was always shocked when they did.”

All of these nostrums Pessoa considers to be crutches, false paths; the correct path, the only one for him, is to remain free of them. “To subordinate oneself to nothing,” he writes, “be it another human being, someone we love, or an
idea—to maintain that aloof independence that consists in not believing in the truth nor, were such a thing to exist, in the usefulness of knowing it: that, it seems to me, is the proper condition of the intellectual life of thinkers. To belong to something—that’s banal.”

How does one walk the path then? Pessoa gives us a clue when he writes, “Compared with the supreme reality of my soul, sovereign grandeur of my most original and frequent dreams, everything that is useful and external seems frivolous and trivial. As far as I’m concerned, my dreams are far more real.” Pessoa calls this path an ascension into oneself, and few Western writers outside of Buddhist literature have thought through the consequences of such a practice so deeply; Pessoa is well aware of the dangers of elevated the imaginary senses to the heights of our physiological ones: our emotions are greatly aroused, often swerving us toward pain. But he cautions us not to avoid this pain “as a stoic or an epicurean might do, by unsettling [oneself] as a way of hardening [oneself] against pleasure and pain.” We should, “on the contrary, try to find pleasure in pain.”

And the way Pessoa ultimately finds pleasure in pain is to see, and to write about seeing. Even after his most despairing soliloquy about not knowing even what to want, Pessoa writes: “And yet, if I allow my vulgar eyes to receive the dying greeting of the bright day’s end, what a longing I feel to be no one else but me! What a grand funeral for hope in the still-golden silence of the lifeless skies.”

Pessoa sees—but he also says what he sees in a style that conquers the pain with the pleasure of beauty: “To know how to say things! To know how to exist through the written voice and the intellectual image! That’s what life is about: the rest is just men and women, imagined loves and fictitious vanities, excuses born of poor digestion and forgetting, people squirming beneath the great boulder of a meaningless blue sky, the way insects do when you lift a stone.”

In one of the finest passages in The Book of Disquiet, Pessoa writes of observing young couples out strolling by the river: he watches them without envy, enjoying them as he enjoys a truth. He ends the observation with the idea that seeing in this way can, at least in moments, provide flashing illumination that can penetrate to the very depths of existence: “If I compare them with myself,” he admits, “I still enjoy them, but like someone enjoying a painful truth, combining the pain of the wound with the balm of having understood the gods.”