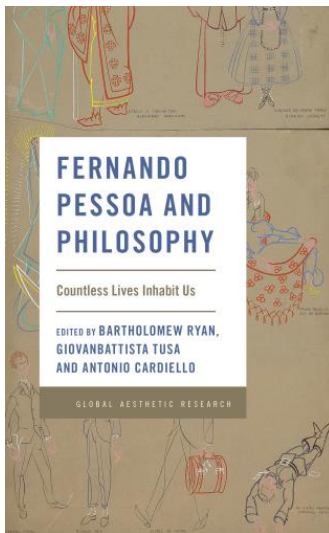


# The interpreter of crisscrossing subjectivities

[O intérprete de subjetividades entrecruzadas]

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PESSOA, Fernando (2021). *Fernando Pessoa and Philosophy: Countless Lives Inhabit Us*. Edited by Bartholomew Ryan, Giovanbattista Tusa, and Antonio Cardiello. Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2021, 416 p. [ISBN: 9781538147498].



It would not be too much to say that ours is a time in which identity has become a battleground, and a complex and contradictory one at that. In fighting some outdated essentializations of identity, there are those who have essentialized new identities and re-essentialized the old ones. In the name of liberation, a great simplification and reduction of identity—to only a few, easily grasped characteristics—has either been deemed necessary or occurred without much reflection, in certain milieus. At a cultural level, the focus has been almost entirely on defining or labeling what a self is; a fierce attachment has been forged to defending the self, proclaiming it, insisting on its rights in the world. Underlying all this, evidently, is the assumption that a *single* self exists. Already, this would seem to bring up a conflict, largely ignored, with the group identities to which so many of the new identities happily or resentfully claim allegiance: what does it mean to have a single and singular identity when all the others in your group claim the same identity? Of course, there have been attempts to escape or solve this conundrum, nearly all of them involving the adding of more and more specificity to identity—more categories and sub-categories from which to choose, as you build out your own identity. But where will it end, this calculus-like exercise in filling the self with ever more, ever smaller boxes in order to delineate its shape? Are there other mathematical approaches, other ways of drawing our contours?

It turns out that the great Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa asked these very questions more than a hundred years ago. In part, this was a response to the crises of his day, namely: the death of God, in which people were loosened from a whole set of values that had previously been lit up by religion; the alienation of the individual in the modern, industrial, and capitalist West; and a rising political instability. It would be impossible, having read Pessoa, to ignore the fact that his

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questioning of the self also arose from a highly personal and idiosyncratic psychology (or soul, if you will). Yet it also emerged from a part of Pessoa that may be less well-known to his general readership: his fathomless philosophical curiosity. Pessoa enjoyed a serious, lifelong immersion in the history and problems of philosophy, and not just Western philosophy. He was a poet, but one who was philosophically-minded (“I was a poet animated by philosophy,” he writes) and who indeed often suffused his poetry and prose with philosophical inquiry, insights, questions, and assertions.

It is to this aspect of the great poet’s work that a new collection of scholarly essays, *Pessoa and Philosophy*, is devoted. Written in or translated into English, these diverse, smart, and engaging considerations of Pessoa’s relationship to philosophy together represent an undertaking that is both welcome now—by a contemporary intellectual and popular culture that is no less fragmented and lost than that in Pessoa’s day—and warranted by the depth, quality, and quantity of Pessoa’s philosophical writings. At a fundamental and practical level, the arrival of an English-language textbook about Fernando Pessoa’s thinking should go a great deal of the way toward expanding and encouraging Pessoa scholarship in the Anglophone world, and not just in comparative literature departments but also in philosophical disciplines. In Portugal, clearly, Pessoa has started to receive the interdisciplinary attention his work deserves—with this thorough and beautifully put-together book, editors Ryan, Tusa, and Cardiello have sent a gift, then, to the rest of the world. And, as Jerónimo Pizarro makes clear in his enticing appendix, there is plenty more scholarship to be done on Pessoa’s philosophical explorations, which are many and multiform.

After an admirable introduction by Bartholomew Ryan that considers the ways in which philosophy informs Pessoa’s poetry, *Pessoa and Philosophy* is divided into four parts—Spiritual Traditions, Metaphysics and Post-Metaphysics, Philosophies of Selfhood, and Contemporary Problems and Perspectives. I would argue that the entire book, most of it anyway, could fall under both of the last two headers. Not that there isn’t plenty of richness and specificity when it comes to Pessoa’s encounters with wisdom traditions and with metaphysics. As Antonio Cardiello reveals in his highly illuminating essay that opens the book’s first part, Pessoa’s heteronyms constituted a sort of “pagan brotherhood” (19) through which Pessoa sought, like Nietzsche before him, to “rediscover the contemplation of beauty, the love of life and the affirmation of existence,” (26) with the hope of overcoming two-thousand years of a morality based on an ascetic interpretation of life. As with Nietzsche, Pessoa saw his work as transformational, directed toward helping humans to reclaim a healthier, naturally-formed selfhood, one that is joyful about life and that participates in it creatively.

But how are humans to do this? Well, one way, as Paulo Borges writes in an essay that considers Pessoa’s work in light of Daoism, seems paradoxically to follow

an ascetic path, not back toward Christian asceticism but instead toward non-Western versions in which the goal is to empty out the self, or to simply not have a self. This is in fact a rather consistent theme for Pessoa, who, as we learn in essays by Jonardon Ganeri and Fabrizio Boscaglia, was familiar with Indian and Islamic philosophies, and who, under the heteronym Soares, writes, “I can imagine myself everything, because I am nothing.” Still, what is the relationship between imagining oneself to be *everything* and saying that one is *nothing*? In his substantial and substantive essay considering Pessoa’s “The Tobacco Shop,” João Constâncio explores precisely this, placing it in the context of nihilism and Nietzsche’s ideas about willing.

It is here that we can begin to understand what Pessoa might mean by “imagining oneself everything,” for, according to Nietzsche, the “I” doesn’t issue commands from some singular, centralized self; rather, a multiplicity of processes—ones that we can hardly pretend to know of or name or comprehend—occur that lead to our acting, and it is generally our *ex post facto* recognition of our actions that lead to our sense of being a self. To the degree that we are constituted by this plurality of processes we can more accurately say, with Nietzsche, that we are a “subject-multiplicity” (90). Pedro Duarte implicitly takes this up in his fascinating essay on the varying ideas of time held by those heteronymic representatives of Pessoa’s multiplicity of selves, Caeiro, Reis, and Campos. The idea of a plurality of selves—which, to return to where I began, indeed offers a counter-idea to today’s multiply-categorized single self—is opened up in felicitous ways by Benedetta Zavatta in an essay that traces it back to Emerson via Whitman; though I would add that Nietzsche took crucial inspiration from Emerson, and so the transmission of this idea to Pessoa could easily have also occurred via his absorption of Nietzsche’s thinking. Like Pessoa, Emerson, Zavatta points out, sought to widen and attenuate the boundaries of individuality, claiming that we can “enter into an empathetic relation” (157) with others, even sort of become them, since “every individual latently contains in himself or herself the seeds of an infinite number of different personalities” (160). Again, it’s worth noting that this idea is the opposite of one that is very much in vogue today, where the boundaries between selves are deemed impenetrable or, as the more trenchantly political would have it, uncrossable. Part two of *Pessoa and Philosophy* closes with a terrific essay by eminent philosopher José Gil, who takes Pessoa’s more open (and, I would argue, humane) idea of the dissolution of the self further, into the terrain of *The Book of Disquiet*’s landscapes. Here, as Gil shows us, the self is emptied, turned to nothing, so that it can become the landscape, become language itself—a process in which the “I” and its personal emotions cease to exist, and in which the landscape itself is no longer soulless, no longer defined in terms of who is or is not in it. All that is left are “cosmic or meteorological sensations” (177).

Part three of *Pessoa and Philosophy*, *Philosophies of Selfhood*, opens with Bartholomew Ryan's involving and enjoyable essay on the resonances between Kierkegaard and Pessoa, with particular emphasis on the way they both create alternate writing personas, offering us a model of imagination, of thinking our way into other selves. This resonates with an incisive essay by Maria Filomena Molder, who returns us, for a spell, to Nietzsche's assertion that the "I" is conditioned by thought. Molder points out that, for both Pessoa and Nietzsche, "the word 'subject' is a 'grammatical habit,'" hence Nietzsche's famous formulation of overcoming: becoming *what* one is (not *who* one is). And there is a certain surprising passivity in becoming what one is, Molder suggests, one that runs counter to our typical ideas about becoming: Nietzsche didn't *decide* to undergo the process; rather, for him it was the "germination of his artistic instinct." In this, if not necessarily in other aspects of their thought, Pessoa and Nietzsche are alike: what we are can consist of multiple selves, each of which must be created, articulated, seen. Part three finishes with an illuminating consideration, by Gianfranco Ferraro, of Pessoa's notions of the subject, and of writing the self, in light of Foucault's genealogy of philosophy. Ferraro concludes, beautifully, by writing that *The Book of Disquiet* is "a work that calls one to oneself and to experimentation of oneself in revealing the many beings that lie dormant in our forms of life" (255).

Part four, *Contemporary Problems and Perspectives*, is appropriately launched with J. D. Mininger's fascinating reading of Pessoa's "The Anarchist Banker" as a mediation on the way in which value, a socially constructed thing, became naturalized. Pessoa casts a playful light on the fictitious aspect of human (in this case, monetary) valuations, to which Mininger draws useful parallels with Nietzsche's provocative assertion that truths are actually lies that we have forgotten are lies. I might add that, for Nietzsche, this isn't a bad thing: all of our values exist in a space of reasons that *had* to be created by us. Pessoa's work calls our attention to the value of such fictions, indeed to the value of literature itself. Bruno B eu's meditation on Pessoa's seeing is a complicated gem of an essay, one that deserves far more attention than I can give to it here; let me just say that I am grateful to B eu for showing me how Malevich's concept of *White on White* provides a way of understanding Pessoa's use of disappearing, of nothing and no-thing, as a way of seeing the world in language. Michael Marder extends this idea of disappearing in Pessoa with an ecological reading of his heteronyms, arguing that Pessoa turns himself into a dwelling for others to inhabit. I love this as an affirmation of both an open-door version of personhood and of writing: by not knowing, as Pessoa's Ricardo Reis writes, "who it is that thinks and feels," by being "merely the place | where things are thought or felt," (308) our way of being in the world becomes fluid and invitational. Giovanbattista Tusa's consideration of the relationship between poetry and philosophy expands on these ideas, and I will end with the conclusion of his wonderful essay, for Tusa gets to the heart of what's good about Pessoa's work

and indeed this winning collection of essays on it: “For Pessoa, writing is this foreign language that is the history of no one and nothing, the non-place that allows itself to be conquered by no one and nothing. It is the space of the others” (321).

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