

The mystery of being in Fernando Pessoa's *Fausto*

[O mistério do ser no *Fausto* de Fernando Pessoa]

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Keywords

Fernando Pessoa, *Fausto*, Mystery of Being, Death, Love, Action.

Abstract

Fernando Pessoa's *Fausto* occupies a crucial place within his vast and fragmented body of work, extending from his earliest literary activity to the final years of his life. Composed largely before the emergence of the heteronyms, these texts already anticipate many of the themes that would later define Pessoa's writing. At its core, *Fausto* stages the horror before the mystery of being and of the world—a motif that recurs throughout Pessoa's oeuvre. Building on Pittella's recent chronological edition, this study examines how that central theme unfolds across the different texts of *Fausto*.

Palavras-chave

Fernando Pessoa, *Fausto*, Mistério do Ser, Morte, Amor, Ação.

Resumo

O *Fausto* de Fernando Pessoa ocupa um lugar crucial no seu vasto e fragmentado corpus, estendendo-se desde os primeiros momentos da sua atividade literária até aos últimos anos da sua vida. Composto em grande parte antes do surgimento dos heterónimos, estes textos já antecipam muitos dos temas que viriam a marcar a escrita de Pessoa. No seu núcleo, o *Fausto* encena o horror perante o mistério do ser e do mundo – motivo que atravessa de forma recorrente a obra pessoana. A partir da recente edição cronológica de Pittella, este estudo examina como esse tema central se desenvolve ao longo dos diferentes textos de *Fausto*.

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O segredo da Busca é que não se acha.
(#119; date: 20-10-33)

Fausto holds a place of great importance within Fernando Pessoa's vast and fragmented body of work. Its composition accompanied him from the earliest years of his literary activity in Portuguese—the first text is dated [1907-1908]—to the final years of his life—the last around [c. 20 October 1933]. Most of the texts were written before the emergence of the heteronyms and already contain many of the themes that would later become central to Pessoa's oeuvre. Moreover, the fundamental thematic nucleus of *Fausto*—namely, the horror before the mystery of the being of the world—is, in various forms, also central to the major voices of Pessoa's work. For these reasons, anyone seeking to understand Pessoa's trajectory as a whole must take into account the corpus of Faustian texts.

Since 2018, scholars have had access to the first chronological critical edition of *Fausto*, edited by Carlos Pittella¹. This edition makes it possible to trace the chronological development of the texts, to assess which themes are present from the outset and persist across the 26 years of composition, and to relate these writings to other works Pessoa produced during the same periods. In this study, I aim to contribute to this line of research by examining how the experience of horror before the mystery of being is articulated and developed in the *Fausto* corpus.²

As we shall see, the problem and suffering of Pessoa's *Fausto*—which in this regard distinguishes him from Goethe's *Faust* and, perhaps, from all other Fausts in the Faustian tradition³—lies in the fact that he, unlike the rest of us, is acutely aware

¹ The editions of Pessoa's *Fausto* are, in the order of appearance, by Eduardo Freitas da Costa (PESSOA, 1952), Duílio Colombini (PESSOA, 1986), Teresa Sobral Cunha (PESSOA, 1988), and Carlos Pittella (PESSOA, 2018). The latter critical edition presents a chronological organization of the Faustian texts. The texts attributed to *Fausto* are 123 (119 in Portuguese and 4 in English). An additional 84 texts are divided into four categories: "Clearly Fausto," "Maybe Fausto," "Maybe Non-Fausto," and "Clearly Non-Fausto." All quotes in this text come from this latest edition: I only mention the number in the case of the first 123 texts, and the number preceded by "A" for "Anexo" for the other 84 texts.

² In my view, most readings of *Fausto* fail to give due weight to the theme of the mystery of being. To cite just one well-known example, GUSMÃO (1986) accords no prominence to this theme and, in the few remarks he dedicates to it (p. 65), he misinterprets the mystery as concerning the "materiality" of the world, rather than its ungrounded existence. Likewise, he argues that *Fausto*'s horror stems from perceiving the "transience and precariousness" (p. 67) of existence, whereas, as I shall argue, it derives from the perception of the unfounded existence of what exists. In what follows, instead of engaging in further commentary on existing studies, I shall advance my own positive proposal. For studies on *Fausto* which, in my view, do not sufficiently underscore the importance of the mystery of being, see, among others, LOURENÇO (1988), SOUZA (1989), BALTRUSCH (1996), AURETTA (2006), MASSUNO (2013), XAVIER (2017), SCHWARTZ (2018). For exceptions to this trend, see GIL (1993) and CANDIDO (2019).

³ For the influences of Goethe's *Faust* on Pessoa's *Fausto*, see RIBEIRO & SOUZA (2017), PITTELLA (2018), PITTELLA & PIZARRO (2022), XAVIER, BOS & PITTELLA (2018). In the latter study, the authors conclude:

of the mystery of the being of all things. This awareness prevents him from participating in life, from loving, from acting, and from nourishing any kind of hope in his pursuit of knowledge. It is thus through the prism of the experience of the mystery of being that Pessoa's *Fausto* reinterprets the major themes of the Faustian tradition. With this study, I also intend to lay the groundwork for a broader evaluation of the role Pessoa's *Fausto* plays within the great artistic and philosophical tradition that has engaged with the myth of Faust.

Finally, the theme of the mystery of being is not only central to *Fausto*—as it is to much of Pessoa's oeuvre—but also to philosophical reflection from Parmenides to the present day. Many thinkers, especially in the twentieth century, have attempted to describe the experience of confronting the mystery of being and to articulate what is intuited in such encounters. For this reason, as we shall see, Pessoa's *Fausto* is a goldmine for any philosopher interested not in penetrating the mystery—which, as Fausto-Pessoa insists, is ultimately impenetrable—but in exploring our varying degrees of readiness to be visited by it.

What is the mystery of being?

The theme of horror before the mystery of the being of the world is already present in the earliest *Fausto* texts (those written between 1907 and 1909). In the first text, Fausto refers to himself as a “Christo negro”⁴, “O que não crê, nem ama – o que só sabe | o mysterio tornado carne” (#1 [1907-1908]). In the second, he states that “esta consciencia ôca | que de existir me resta” (#2 [1907-1908]) is the last thing that remains to him before death. In the third, a voice declares: “Silente, medonho, | embebido em sonho | de sombras profundo | é o mysterio do mundo” (#3 [21-11-1908]), while another sorrowful voice associates the mystery with a “silente horror”.

In the sixth text, “O Suspiro do Mundo” addresses Fausto, saying: “O mysterio | d’este mundo | teu profundo | olhar leu” (#6 [1908-1909]). The seventh presents a dialogue between Ser and O Suspiro do Mundo, in which the latter exclaims: “Tremo de mêdo. | Eis o segredo | aberto”, and the secret is that nothing can exist beyond being. In the eighth, the theme of being and the sense of horror it evokes re-emerges, and in the ninth, it is Existencia who speaks: “Em mim é visto nu | (e comprehende-o

“A influência de Goethe sobre o *Fausto* pessoano, embora inegável, não foi exclusiva. Desde o princípio da escrita do drama em questão, em 1907-1908, pareciam coexistir no pensamento de Pessoa as influências de Byron e Gomes Leal, além, obviamente, da de Goethe. A influência de Eugénio de Castro (mais acentuada a partir de 1908-1909), assim como a de Marlowe e Eça de Queiroz (a partir de 1912), embora secundárias em termos cronológicos, podem ter sido tão importantes para o desenvolvimento do *Fausto* pessoano quanto as suas influências iniciais” (XAVIER, BOS & PITTELLA, 2018: 115).

⁴ Fausto is compared to Christ in several other texts, e.g., #1, #16, #82, #88. Like Christ, Fausto bears the suffering of the whole world; but unlike Christ, Fausto is “Crucificado, | não como Christo n’uma mera cruz, | mas no mysterio do universo” (#16 [1908-1909]).

ninguem) | o Mysterio crú. | Que mondo e vida têm [...] Meu nome quem achou | não pode ir mais além” (#9 [1908-1909]).

In the first fragment that Pittella includes among those clearly attributable to *Fausto* (“Clearly Fausto”)—though excluded from the main texts due to their brevity or fragmentary nature—we read: “O que é haver haver? Porque é que o que é | é isto que é? Como é que o mundo é mundo? | Ah, o horror de pensar, como quem subito | desconhece onde está” (#A1 [1908-1909?]).

The same theme—the horror before the mystery of the being of the world—continues to resurface relentlessly throughout the texts from 1908 to 1909⁵ (as it will in those that follow). One particularly important passage⁶ is worth citing here, in which Fausto explicitly states that his problem, his suffering⁷, derives precisely from his acute awareness of the mystery of being:

[...] Objectos mudos
que pareceis sorrir-me horridamente
só com essa existencia e estar-alli,
odeio-vos de horror.
[...] Não posso mais, não posso, suportar
esta tortura intensa - o interrogar
das existencias que me cercam...⁸ [...]
Estremeço, como sinto
atrás de mim o mysterio! Já não ousou
voltar-me e vêr...
E ver! Delirio insano...
Ver? A que loucura, a que delirio
a sensação aguda do mysterio
me leva... nunca mais eu terei paz.
Ceos, montes, pedir-vos não poder
que entorneis na minha alma esse segredo
que vos faz existir e eu sentir-vos!

(#19 [1908-1909])

In the same years, in a note entitled *Viagem Espiritual (O doido que viaja para a intuição do universo)*—probably dated between 1908 and 1910—Pessoa links genius and madness to the very same experience of mystery that we find in the *Fausto* texts: “Cada

⁵ The same theme is also present in numerous fragments from the same years, classified by Pittella as *Maybe Fausto* and *Maybe Non-Fausto*: limiting ourselves to the years 1908-1909, see, for example, the following *Maybe Fausto* fragments: #A33, #A35, #A36, #38, #40; and the following *Maybe Non-Fausto* fragments: #56, #61, #65, #68, #69, #73, #74, #75, #76, #77.

⁶ Text #19 is, in my view, important because it is among the earliest writings, it is relatively long and complex, and in it we already find almost all the major themes of *Fausto*.

⁷ In a text, #36 [1908-1909], *Fausto* asserts that the suffering that arises when one grasps the mystery of being is the supreme form of suffering.

⁸ “Olhos horríveis e invisíveis de haver cousas! | Metaphysica angustia dos visíveis!” (#A3 [c. 27-6-1909]).

pedra do chão é um mysterio que o mysterio dos nosso corpo, mysteriosamente andando, faz o mysterio de tocar. Vêr isto nitidamente é um symptoma de loucura...” (PESSOA, 2006: II, 511; compare with: #A8 [c. 1909]). There is thus no doubt that the theme of the mystery of being is central, from the very earliest texts, in *Fausto*.

The interpretive hypothesis that places the mystery of being as the protagonist of the drama is, moreover, explicitly acknowledged by Pessoa himself in a plan for the work dated 1918:⁹

O conjuncto do drama representa a lucta entre a Intelligencia e a Vida, em que a Intelligencia é sempre vencida. A Intelligencia é representada por Fausto, e a Vida diversamente, segundo as circumstancias accidentaes do drama.

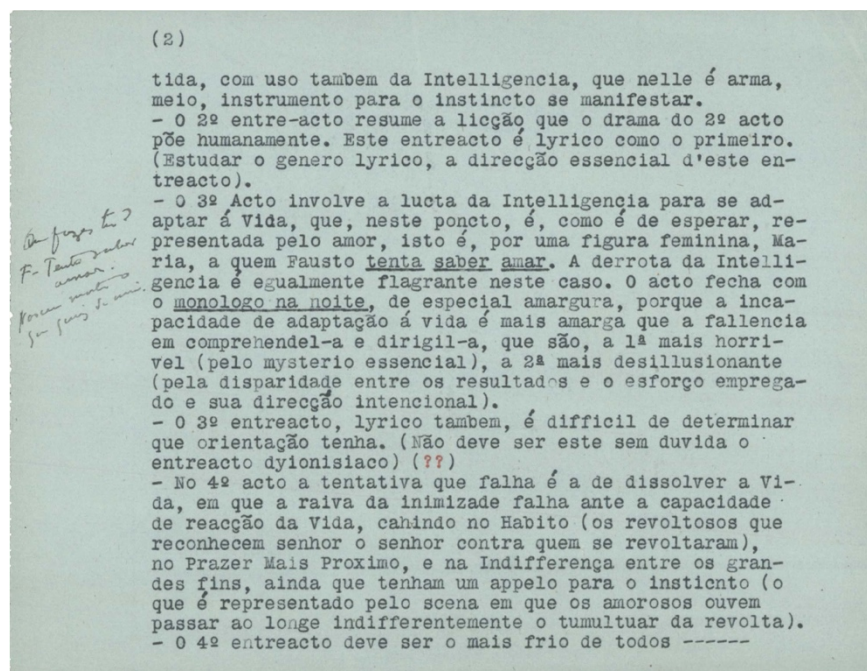
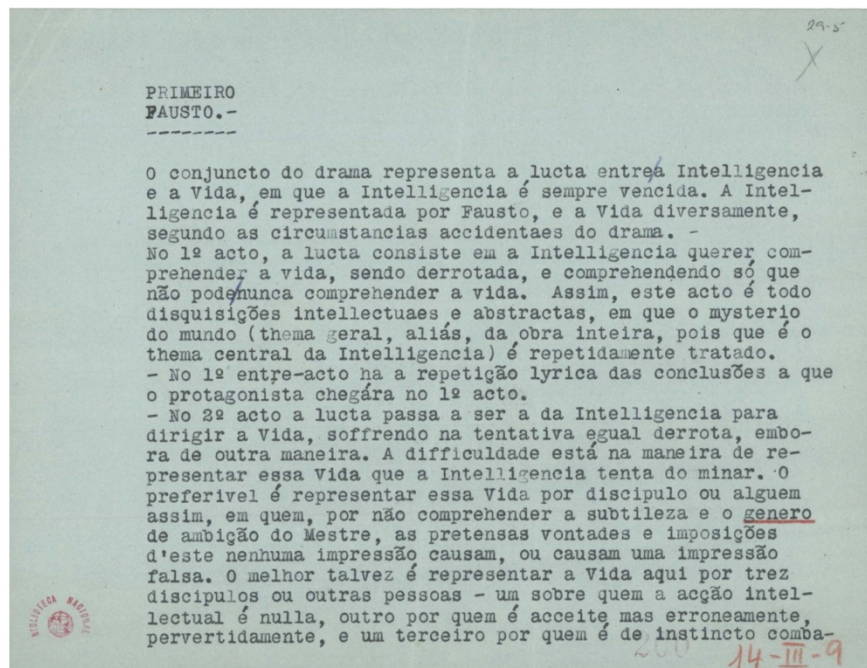
No 1º acto, a lucta consiste em a Intelligencia querer comprehender a Vida, sendo derrotada, e comprehendendo só que não pode nunca comprehender a Vida. Assim, este acto é todo disquisições intellectuais e abstractas, em que o mysterio do mundo (thema geral, aliás, da obra inteira, pois que é o tema central da Intelligencia) é repetidamente tratado.

(A87 [Nov. 1918?])

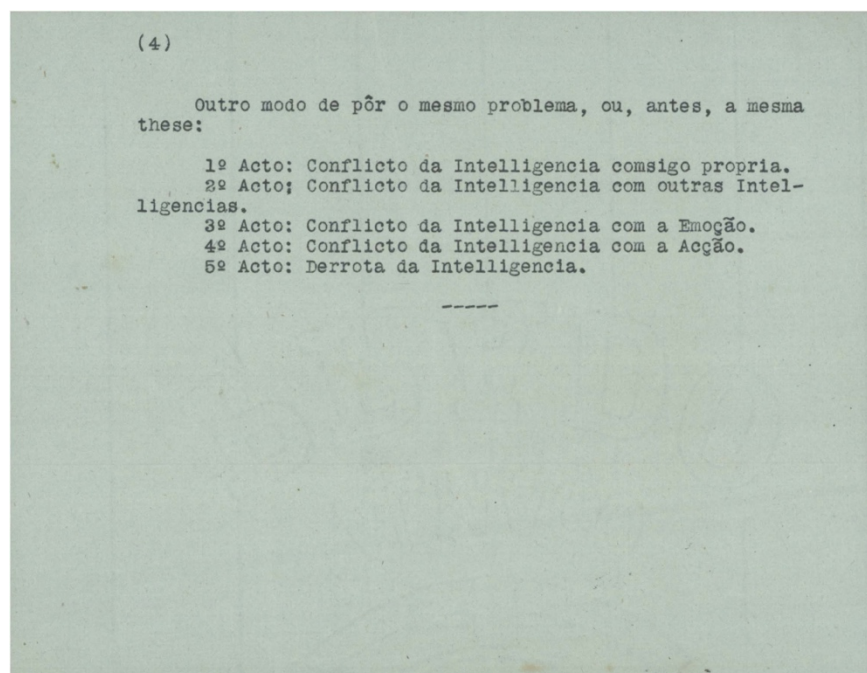
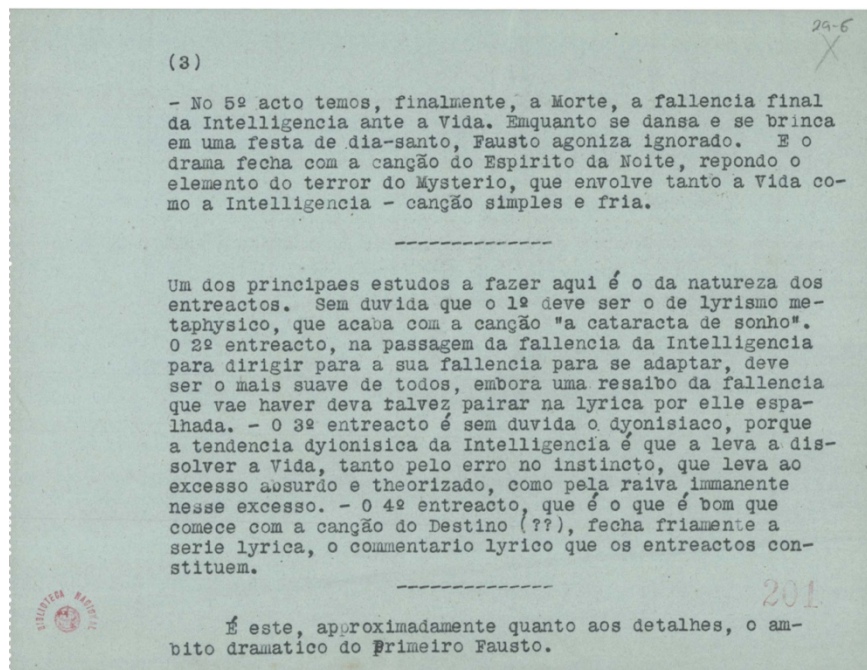
The central theme of the whole work and of Intelligence (which is what Fausto embodies) is the “mystery of the world” which—as we shall see—is more precisely the mystery of *the being or existence* of the world. And Intelligence (i.e., Fausto), in its struggle with the various forms of Life, is the protagonist of the drama. The theme of the mystery of the being of the world is, therefore, the true protagonist of the drama. As Pessoa himself writes in the same text, through his *Fausto* he wishes to present a “problema”, or rather a “tese”—namely, the thesis that there is, in fact, a conflict of Intelligence with itself (in its attempt to comprehend the mystery), as well as a conflict with “outras Intelligencias”, with “Emoção”—that is, love—and with “Acção”, that is, the forms of Life.

If we follow these indications, then, to grasp the meaning of *Fausto* we must understand how the intuition of the mystery of the being of the world—which lies at the heart of Intelligence—comes into conflict with the great forces of Life: relations with others, love, and action. This is precisely what I will attempt to explore in the following pages. But before doing so, it is important to clarify what, in its essential traits, the mystery of being consists of in *Fausto*.

⁹ Pittella edited four plans attributed to *Fausto*, all of which were written long after the majority of the Faustian texts. “Nota-se, ainda, que 96 dos 119 poemas portugueses, três dos quatro poemas ingleses e 64 dos 82 textos nas primeiras três seções de anexos (Clearly Fausto, Maybe Fausto e Maybe Non-Fausto) seriam, na cronologia aqui proposta, anteriores ao primeiro plano, donde se pode questionar a adequação desses projectos pessoanos, elaborados *a posteriori*, aos textos fáusticos já existentes” (PESSOA, 2018: 341). I agree with this observation and therefore, with Pittella, I believe that the organization of the texts into works attempting to follow these plans—such as in Teresa Sobral Cunha’s edition—cannot truly reflect the author’s intentions. Nevertheless, I think these plans may still be used, if not to organize the texts, at least to identify certain thematic nodes shared across the various writings.



Figs. 1-2. First Fausto, dated 1918.

Figs. 3-4. *First Fausto*, dated 1918.

In 1914, we find an explicit formulation that dispels any possible doubt about *what*, for Fausto, is truly mysterious.

O mysterio supremo do Universo,
o unico mysterio, tudo e em tudo
é haver un mysterio do universo,
é haver o universo, qualquer cousa,
é haver haver. Ó forma abstracta e vaga
que tão corrente haver em mim demora
que pensar isto é-me no corpo um frio
que sopra d'além-terra e d'além-tumulo
e vae da alma a Deus

(#90 [c. 1914])

What is mysterious is the existence of what exists, and the name for what exists is “Universe.” In what follows, to avoid possible misunderstandings, we will also refer to it as the Whole or the other-than-nothing, since it includes, precisely, everything that is not nothing (where “nothing,” or “nothingness,” denotes absolute nothingness, which does not exist). In this passage, the explicit connection between the awareness of mystery and the feeling it evokes also emerges: “um frio”, that is, what in other texts is more frequently described by the word “horror”. This horror extends from the soul to God, because the mystery of being encompasses every possible entity—from the self to God (if God exists). “God also is mystery” is written in text #120 [c. Jul. 1908]. “Tudo isto | desde os ceus e as estrellas | até ás pequenezes intimas | me horrorisa por ser”¹⁰ (A6 [c. 1909]).

Now, Fausto says that existence is mysterious. But why should the existence of the Whole be mysterious in the first place? Pessoa does not answer this question in text #90, but he does so explicitly in text #108, written between 1918 and 1921.

O unico mysterio no universo
é haver um mysterio do universo.
Sim: este sol que sem querer illumina
a terra e as arvores, e as estações todas;
as pedras em que eu piso, as casas brancas,
os homens, o convivio humano, a historia,
o que se passa – tradição ou falla –
entre alma e alma – as vozes as cidades –
tudo não traz consigo a explicação
de existir, nem tem bocca com que falle.

Porque razão não raia o sol dizendo
o que é? Porque motivo sossegado
existem pedras sob meus passos, e ar

¹⁰ “Os mysterios profundos e horrorosos: | Haver isto que ha, este ser | E haver um ser, maior horror ainda | De poucos, ou d’um so, comprehendido” (#A12 [c. 1909]).

que eu respiro, e eu preciso respirar?
 Tudo é uma machina monstruosa e absurda.
 Com todo o corpo e o uso, terra da alma,
 ignoramos.

Porque ha? Porque ha um universo?
 Porque é um universo que é este?
 Porque é assim composto o universo?

Porque ha? Porque ha o que ha?
 Porque ha mundo, e porque é que ha mundo assim?
 Porque ha *aqui, dois*, consciencia e differeça?

(#108, [1918-1921])

The existence of the Whole is mysterious because it does not “carry with it the explanation” for its existence. In other words, the existence of the Whole is mysterious because no possible explanation can be given for its existence. When Fausto intuitively perceives and feels everything as “a monstrous and absurd machine”¹¹. This clarification of why the existence of the Whole is mysterious is entirely consistent with what Pessoa-Campos writes in an untitled poem (dated [c. 1928]), which is central for deciphering the theme of the mystery of being in Pessoa’s work¹². We will return to this poem frequently throughout this article, but here we can begin by quoting its opening, where he explains—coherently with *Fausto*—that the existence of the Whole is mysterious precisely because it cannot receive an explanation.¹³

Ah, faced by this one reality, which is the mystery,
 Faced by this one terrible reality—that there is a reality,
 Faced by this horrible existence, namely that there is existence,
 Faced by this abyss of the existence of an abyss,
 The abyss of the existence of everything being an abyss,
 Being an abyss simply by virtue of being,
 Of being able to be,
 For being itself to exist!
 —Faced by this, everything, as with everything men do,
 That men say,
 That they build or undo or that is built or undone through them,
 Everything shrinks!
 No, it doesn’t shrink . . . it becomes something else—
 A single formidable, impossible, black thing,
 A thing that exists beyond the gods, God, Fate—
 The thing that causes gods, God, and Fate to exist,
 That causes there to be being so that beings can exist,

¹¹ “Um cansaço violento e desmedido | de existir e sentir-me aqui – e um odio | nascido d’isto vago e horroroso | a tudo e todos por não saber | a causa exacta de tudo” (#47 [c. 1909]).

¹² For an insightful commentary of this crucial poem, see (BORGES, 2016: 71-9).

¹³ On the same point, see in Campos (PESSOA, 2023: #49).

That subsists through all forms
 Of all lives, abstract or concrete,
 Eternal or contingent,
 True or false!
 The thing that when it embraced everything still remained outside,
 Because when it embraced everything, it did not embrace an explanation as to why it is an everything,
 Or why there is anything, why there is anything, why there is anything!

(PESSOA, 2023: #57)

At this point, one might ask: why can the existence of the Whole not have an explanation? Pessoa never addresses this question directly (at least not in *Fausto*), but the answer can be inferred from what he writes in various Faustian texts and in the just quoted passage. Any possible explanation would have to invoke, as its *explanans*, some entity—that is, something that exists—which could serve as a cause, reason, or ground. But if the supposed *explanans* must exist in order to function as such, then, insofar as it exists, it is part of the Whole whose existence it is supposed to explain. Yet a part of the Whole cannot explain the existence of the Whole. (Nor can the Whole explain its own existence.) Therefore, no explanation is possible: there is no cause, reason, or possible ground for the existence of the Whole. In this sense, the existence of the Whole is an absolute mystery.

This is the mystery that runs throughout *Fausto* and that, as we will see, plays a central role in the various thematic knots that traverse the work. Let us already note, before delving into the analysis of the conflicts between Intellect and Life, that the account of the mystery of being as outlined by Pessoa thus far is fully in harmony with what other philosophers, in the same period, have written regarding the same experience. Wittgenstein says that to perceive the existence of the world is to see it as an *absolute miracle*—which is equivalent to an absolute mystery—and thus as something fundamentally inexplicable (WITTGENSTEIN, 1965)¹⁴. To perceive this is to be struck by wonder—that wonder which, in *Fausto*, is tinged with fright and horror, whereas in Wittgenstein the dominant emotional tone remains one of wonder¹⁵. Heidegger, in *What Is Metaphysics?* (HEIDEGGER, 1929), states that the being of beings is disclosed in the experience of *Angst*, thus evoking emotional tones closer to those of *Fausto*. Of all the accounts, perhaps Sartre's *Nausea* most closely resembles Fausto's experience: when Roquentin awakens to existence, he finds the beings around him nauseating, absurd, strange, monstrous—and he sees them in this way precisely because he perceives their existence as groundless, as a mystery that is, in principle,

¹⁴ For the theme of the absolute miracle and the mystery of being in Wittgenstein, see ZANETTI (2023, 2025d, forthcoming2).

¹⁵ Wittgenstein speaks of miracle and wonder in the *Lecture on Ethics*. Elsewhere, however, he also speaks of fear (WITTGENSTEIN, 1998 [1980], 7-8 [5-6]) and of the *uncanny* (WITTGENSTEIN, 1998 [1980], 6-7 [4-5])—emotional tones that are closer to those found in *Fausto*.

impenetrable (SARTRE, 1965, 151-161). Many other accounts could be mentioned that resonate with those found in *Fausto*.¹⁶

These convergences allow us to highlight two important points: first, Fausto's experience is not the product of Pessoa's literary imagination, but is instead the testimony of a fundamental possibility—indeed, one might claim, following HEIDEGGER (1929), the fundamental possibility—of human experience; and second, *Fausto* is rich in insights for a phenomenology of the experience of the mystery of being, and thus, like many of Pessoa's texts, it is a work of great significance not only from a literary perspective but also from a philosophical one.

Mystery of being and symbolic visions

In *Fausto*, the experience of the mystery is, for the most part, direct and raw. At times, however, Fausto is seized by ecstatic visions in which the mystery of being reveals itself in a symbolic-analogical form. To illustrate this point, we may consider texts 77, 79, and A29 (which, not by chance, Teresa Sobral Cunha places close together, in the order 79, 77, A29). In #79 (1912-1913), we read:

Appareceu-me o Universo intimo
do misterioso avesso... E eu vi, ◇,
o outro-lado das cousas, não das cousas
apparentes apenas, mas o outro
lado até do Essencial, do Inapparente,
do além-divino e do divino em Deus... [...]
Tinha a forma sensível aos meus olhos
do espirito d'um imenso ceu estrellado.
Mas eu com nitida visão de dentro
via que era infinito, come se visse
em corpo e forma ◇ se *nota.
E sob o meu olhar apavorado
vi o nosso systema de universo
mais perto... A ideia abstracta e núa,
a vida extrema e ultima de nós.
O Sêr, o ser-abstracto e ◇
Era um sol – sol de ◇ se *erguera
como da circumferencia para o centro [...]
Eu vi, e cada sol e seu systema
ia em outros soes e outros systemas,
na orbita de soes mais interiores
(o circulo de cuja circumferencia
eu via em infinito para dentro,

¹⁶ For an historically informed discussion of the experience of the mystery of being in western philosophy, see ARENDT (1978: 121-151), and PAREYSON (1979, 1992). For recent works on the experience of being, see ZANETTI (2022, 2023, 2025a, 2025b, 2025d, forthcoming 1, forthcoming 2), BALASKA (2024), and CAPOBIANCO (2024).

não para fóra como infinito mesmo)
 E o nosso mundo como um Deus real
 era um mero satellite ◇
 de um sol do só primeiro systema
 raizando a idéa sobre o seu mundo.
 Infinito interior ao interior!
 Pavorosa agonia do Profundo!
 Vacuidade e realidade negra
 de tudo!

(#77 [1912-3])

Here, Fausto's mind seeks a foundation for the existence of what exists. This search becomes, in the analogy, as a search for a center. The starry sky, the infinite space, represents analogically the Whole. The search for the foundation is thus configured as the search for a sun that is the center of infinite conferences and infinite rays, whose infinite points are in turn the centers of infinite conferences and infinite rays, and so on infinitely. In this cosmic interpenetration, Fausto seeks a center. Since the center represents, in the analogy, the foundation, in this vision our world is shown as a mere satellite of the supposed "first sun" of the supposed "first system"¹⁷. However, at a certain point, Fausto intuits—without articulating, at least in this passage, the source of his intuition—that such a foundation cannot exist. Hence, we read: "Infinite interior to the interior!" The flight of the mind, in this ecstatic-intuitive gallop, cannot stop at the supposed first sun (God), because it too is seen as the satellite of another sun, and so on infinitely. When he intuits this, the theme of horror returns: "Terrifying agony of the Deep". But why cannot there be a first sun, a foundation? Because, as we have already seen, every supposed first sun or foundation is still something rather than nothing, no matter how one may think of its nature or essence. But it is precisely the fact that there is something rather than nothing that represents the abyssal mystery that a supposed foundation should ground, sublimating through foundation the abyssal character into divine and luminous comprehensibility. This foundation cannot exist. And because Fausto intuits this, at the end of the passage, his mind sees the Whole (which now appears without foundation) as a vacuous and black thing. These are the same characteristics we will find, about fifteen years later, in the already cited poem by Campos, where, when the Whole is seen as unfounded, it appears as "A single formidable, impossible, black thing" (PESSOA, 2023: #57).¹⁸

¹⁷ Compare with #94 (c. 1915).

¹⁸ The same intuition can also be found in text #77 [6-11-12], as a fall into the abyss, and in #110 [c. 1924], where every abyss is the abyss of another abyss, and there is no final link in the infinite chain of mystery. See also #112, #113, A29.

Is there an escape from Faustian suffering?

The myth of Faust is rooted in lack and desire: in its many forms, Faust seeks something so profoundly and restlessly that he is even driven to make a pact with the devil. Although the theme of the diabolical pact is not central to *Fausto* (a point to which we shall return), the presence of suffering and the search for remedies to it is undoubtedly essential. We have seen that Fausto's suffering stems from his acute awareness of the mystery of being. What, then, are the paths he considers to resolve this suffering?

If the problem lies in the awareness of the mystery of being, it is natural to imagine the solution as a suppression of this awareness. All possible ways out of Faustian suffering are therefore strategies that promise, in one form or another, either the oblivion of the mystery or the discovery of a truth capable of eliminating it. Yet—as already anticipated (and as we shall see again)—the latter path, which seeks a truth that saves by dissolving the mystery, proves impossible for Fausto, since the truth is precisely that everything is mystery, and Fausto knows this truth.

As for the path that seeks to forget the mystery—by far the most explored in the Faustian texts—it is possible to identify at least seven (perhaps eight or nine) variants: the return to childhood, the desire for a great sleep, recourse to a magic potion, abandonment to faith, immersion in life through love (and relationships with others) and through action (and the enjoyment of sensations), and finally, the total extinction of awareness through death. Let us now examine them in detail.

Childhood

Childhood is often represented as a time of unconsciousness and, therefore, serenity. This can refer to childhood in a literal sense or to the childhood of the great sage who knows how to play, like a child, with the world—as in the poems of Caetano de Oliveira. In *Fausto*, there are also references to childhood as a time when the awareness of the mystery has not yet awakened and is not capable of causing sorrow. On this point, there is a very important passage, because in it, Fausto tells us the first moment when he experiences the mystery of being. Although, as Heidegger explicitly argues (Heidegger 1929), sensitivity to the mystery of being is constitutive of every experience¹⁹, it is mostly dormant, and only in very rare, prodigious moments does it ignite with the intensity capable of bringing to light what we always, in some way, know in the dark. Thus, Pessoa has his Fausto narrate the moment when he discovered existence, a moment that marks the end of the joyful time of childhood.

¹⁹ Fausto also gives voice to this thesis: “Every man has within himself—I feel it, and you, Plato, dreamed of it—the truth, without being aware of possessing it. Then does the ineffable feeling of living, of existing, of existence and the existent not contain truth within itself?” (#39 [c. 1908-1909]). On the same thesis, see also #A80.

Sahido apenas d'uma infancia
incertamente triste e diferente
◇

Uma vez contemplando d'um outerio
a linha de collinas magestosa
que azulada e em perfis desaparecia
no horizonte, contemplando os campos
◇
ci de repente como que ◇
◇ tudo
desaparecer, tomando ◇

E um abysmo invisivel, uma cousa
nem parecida com a existencia
occupar não o espaço, mas o modo
com que eu pensava o visivel.

E então o horro supremo que jamais
deixei depois, mas que augmentando e sendo
o mesmo sempre, ◇
occupou-me...

Oh primeira visão interior
do mysterio infinito, em que ruiu
a minha vida juvenil n'uma hora!

(#58 [end of 1909])

A form of Pessoa's Faustian desire is, therefore, a kind of return to the joyful time of childhood²⁰. It is not possible, of course, to return to being a child; nor is it possible, for Fausto, to become a child-sage – as is the case with Caeiro, who in many passages praises the childhood experience of which he is somehow a guardian²¹; what form, then, can Oblivion take for Fausto?

Sleep

One form could be that of sleep, which is a recurring theme in *Fausto* (and in Pessoa's work in general, for example in *O Marinheiro* or *Livro do Desassossego*). There are many texts in which Fausto longs for a great sleep or in which other voices promise him the peace of sleep. The theme emerges right away in one of the first Faustian texts.

Uma Voz
Dorme, grande inconsolavel,
[...]

²⁰ On childhood, see also #17, #23, #A60.

²¹ Consider, for example, the poem about the child Jesus (PESSOA, 2020: #8) – but see also poems #2 and #60 in PESSOA (2020).

Dorme, e que a noite te conte
 ilusões ao coração!
 [...]
 Dorme e apaga o pensamento...
 Se pensar é um tormento,
 ninguém como tu soffreu.

(#4 1908-1909)

In another text, while Fausto sleeps, voices promise him the return to “illusion” — the illusion lost after awakening to the mystery of everything—a kind of eternal sleep (which is not yet the sleep of death, as we will see shortly):

No meu seio de luar
 ganharás como um perdão
 por tanta magua. Teus olhos
 dormirão, e ao acordar
 outra vez se cerrarão.

(#13 [1908-1909])

In this text, it is Fausto himself who explicitly gives voice to his desire for oblivion in the form of sleep.

Eu queria era dormir, dormir, dormir,
 longo dormi sempre, sem consciencia ter
 do tempo, só do somno somnolento
 e da vacuidade do meu ser;
 dormir sem vir a morte, nem sonhar
 mas dormir, só dormir, sempre dormir,
 que hoje já a dormir desaprendi.

(#18 [1908-1909])

Sleep is therefore a form of Fausto’s desire for Oblivion²². However, just as one cannot return to childhood, Fausto cannot find rest in sleep. So, how can he achieve Oblivion?

Magic Potion

In one of the very rare texts in which there is any action—text #70 [1909]—Fausto kills an old man in order to obtain from him a serum capable of extinguishing the consciousness of the mystery. Fausto tells the old man he wants to live life “sem saber que a vivo”. Referring to the serum, he asks: “Atordoar-me-ha isto a alma toda— l toda até dentro, muito dentro, velho?”. The old man gives him a first potion, but it is not strong enough for Fausto:

²² See also #85, #96, #112, A33.

Sou demais
 em consciencia para os philtros frageis
 de que o teu tosco engenho te fez sabio.
 [...] Ha ainda l memoria e consciencia de existir
 por demais em minha alma. O teu philtro
 não foi feito para entes como eu.
 [...] Não tens outro, diz-me... Tu que filtros
 pousses, não tens venenos mais subtis
 para a existencia?

The old man says he has another, more powerful poison:

Em vez
 de apagar, ♦, adormecer,
 faz, com terrivel excitar da vida,
 nascer n'alma um conflito de desejos,
 um desejo de tudo possuir,
 de tudo ser, de tudo ver, amar
 gozar, odiar, querer e não querer,
 reunir vicios e virtudes – tudo
 como que na ancia fervida d'um trago
 de taça do existir.

This potion, then, seems to promise another way out of Fausto's suffering—a path that closely resembles the sensitivity that will become central in Campos (and which we will soon see in the path of action and sensation). In order to obtain the potion, Fausto kills the old man—but we are not told whether he drinks it, nor what its effects might be. Thus, even this form of Oblivion remains undeveloped in the drama.

Faith

Another form that the path of Oblivion takes is that of faith. In one text, Fausto says:

Assim cheguei a isto: tudo é erro.
 De verdade ha apenas uma ideia
 á qual não corresponde realidade.

(#A39 [1908-1909])

The unattainable truth is the one that would be capable of eliminating the mystery. Given this awareness, faith—understood as belief in an all-encompassing truth that can provide a foundation to existence—appears as a form of oblivion that is as pacifying as it is illusory. The passage continues:

A crença é o somno e o sonho do intellecto

cançado, exausto [...]
 Á fé é isto: o pensamento
 a querer enganar-se eternamente [...]

(#A39 [1908-1909])

This diagnosis of faith is consistent with what Pessoa has Christ say in the same years, when Christ speaks of himself as a madman, a delirious one, the one who, with his great dream, has created a faith, a great illusion to soothe the horror of existing.

A sonhar eu venci mundos,
 minha vida um sonho foi.
 Cerra teus olhos profundos
 para a verdade que doe.
 A Ilusão é a mãe da vida;
 fui doido e tido por Deus.
 [...] Cheio de dor e de susto
 toda a vida delirei [...]
 De hallucinada
 minha alma a si se envolveu
 na Inconsciencia profunda
 que nunca deixa infeliz
 ser de todo – e assim se funda
 uma fé – vê quem o diz. [...]
 Um Deus – supremo renome,
 e doido! – summa abjecção.

(#26 [1908-1909])

Christ himself, in Pessoa's imagination, knows that it is madness to believe in a God capable of founding and thus normalizing the mystery—and it is madness because even God, if He exists, cannot explain His own existence and that of the Whole. Therefore, this path is also not a viable one for Fausto.

Love (and Alterity)

As is well known, in Goethe's *Faust*, love is one of the forms in which Faust seeks and finds, at least temporarily, some relief or solution to his problem. In Pessoa's *Fausto*, however, not only is love (and, in general, the relationship with alterity²³) never seriously considered by Fausto as a potential solution to his problem, but it is explicitly treated with contempt and, in the end, as an impossible path for someone like him.

Now, what is particularly significant in Pessoa's drama—and, as far as I know, absolutely unique in the rich history of literature on love—is the reason Pes-

²³ "O horror metaphysico de Outrem!" (#114 [c. 1926]).

soa gives to explain why Fausto cannot love: because his acute and inhuman awareness of the mystery is incompatible with love²⁴. To illustrate the point, we can begin by reading a piece of text #62 [end of 1909?].

A vida é o esquecer-se continuamente
 mas eu, n'esta minha intensa vida,
 vivi em mim tão solitariamente,
 que não sei esquecer-me, nem tirar
 de mim meus olhos d'alma; e em cada gesto
 de amor analysal-o
 até lhe descobrir o horror e dor
 da essencia do mysterio; e ao ver tão perto
 como entre minhas mãos o revelado
 horror de tudo, logo deixarei
 a possibilidade de amar
 cahir d'ellas, tremendo. Do universo
 a alma mysteriosa eu sempre attento
 em toda a parte vejo; se já estas
 inanimadas cousas que me cercam
 me dão, nas muitas horas em que as fito,
 não com os sentidos mas com a alma logo
 directamente como com a vista,
 me torturam no auge do terror
 pelo mysterio que não são e são;
 quanto mais – oh horror de conceber! –
 ao ouvir vozes intimas da alma
 de um ser amante – minhas ou para mim –
 ao ouvir assim perto, ao ver assim
 proxima da minha alma sempre attenta
 uma voz do mysterio feito vida -
 quanto mais come se a solucao
 do mysterio mesmo me turbasse
 até á morte de terror e espanto,
 não se me esfriaria em mêdo a alma!
 ao ver em um olhar brilhar o horror
 de haver consciencia e existencias [...]

(#62, [end of 1909?])

The same idea is explicitly revisited in several passages that address the path of love in *Fausto*. In some of these, Fausto speaks explicitly of the horror he feels in front of the mystery of his own and others' bodies, the mystery of the body that loves. This is particularly significant, since Pessoa rarely places the body (let alone the loving

²⁴ For an alternative reading, see XAVIER (2017).

body) at the center of his fervent poetic imagination. Let's take a look at a couple of these passages.²⁵

Ó corpo! Antes entrega-te! talvez
te salves entregando-te e amando!
Mas não! A consciencia do mysterio [...]
mantêm-me isolado e em horror
perante tudo.
Ah não poder
arrancar de mim a consciencia!

(#21 [1908-1909])

... Mas eu não ousou. Ó horror e tortura!
O transcendente horror de um sêr humano
beijar na bocca uma consciencia, um sêr,
o mysterio incarnado em nú e solido. [...]
Nem tenho gestos para saber amar,
nem alma p'ra tirar ao mero-ôco
pensar aquelles gestos, o horror
que vêm de elles saberem a mysterio.

(#83 [c. 1913])

All these texts confirm that what blocks Fausto's path to love is the acute awareness of the mystery. Moreover, these texts were written between 1908 and 1913, which places them in the early phase of the composition of *Fausto*, thus reinforcing once again the importance and centrality of this intuition in Pessoa's work.

There are other important themes related to the connection between love and the mystery of being. In a later text (#114, [c. 1926?]), Fausto speaks of the "meta-physical horror of the Other," which is the horror of being seen by another consciousness, but is also, more deeply, the horror that arises when considering that there may be another conscious opening onto the world and its mysterious being. Fausto says:

Sou como um Deus supremo que se houvesse
reconhecido em mim o unico,
e a cujo olhar innumero se abeira
o horror de mais innumeros olhares.

(#114, [c. 1926?])

In this text, another nuance of the connection between Faustian awareness and love emerges, namely how Fausto struggles even to conceive the existence of other consciousnesses beyond his own, casting him into a sort of solipsistic prison where, in his solitude, he finds himself as if he were a God: not only because he is the only inhabitant of the prison but also because he recognizes in himself a divine power,

²⁵ On the same theme, see also #18, #46, #92, #109, A13, A74.

the ability to know the deepest truth, the truth of being. The text, in fact, ends with this sublime exclamation: “Ah, se em mim se reflecte o transcendente | brilho além de Deus!”. As we will see more extensively in a moment, the truth of being is beyond God because even God, if He exists, is something rather than nothing, and thus, like everything, God also participates in the same, unique, dazzling mystery.

Another set of texts to comment on includes dialogues between Fausto and Maria. Pittella, in his critical edition of *Fausto*, organizes them into two moments: three texts written in 1909 (#64-6), and one in 1919 (#106), of which only two texts, #65 and #106, include Maria’s voice (but we find other appearances of Maria among the fragments). Let’s briefly examine the themes that emerge from these exchanges, always keeping the focus on the mystery of being.

In the first, chronologically, #65, Fausto asks Maria to pray for him. In this context, the central theme of incommunicability returns, which now takes the form of the tragic impossibility of making the beloved understand the nature of his pain.

Dize: “Fazei feliz esse a quem amo
e que, qual condenado pela vida,
arrasta a grilheta da dor,
cujos olhos não choram por não ter
na alma, já lagrimas paraa chorar,
que tendo erguido o seu pensar ao cume
do humano pensar...” Não, não importa, [...]

(#65 [c. 1909])

Fausto does not continue because he knows it is futile to try to communicate his pain; and Maria confirms: “Eu choro apenas de te ver | triste e ♦ sem que eu compreenda | tua tristeza, meu amôr” (#65).

In #106, another central theme emerges strongly, one that Pessoa himself places at the heart of one of his plans for writing *Fausto*, namely the conflict between thought and feeling²⁶. Maria speaks at length about her love for Fausto, then begs him: “Amor, diz qualquer coisa que eu te sinta!” Fausto begins his answer by saying: “Compreendo-te tanto que não sinto”. Maria replies (and here the text ends): “Para que queres compreender | se dizes qu’rer sentir?” Tragically, Fausto wants to experience love, but something prevents him. In the diagnosis that Pessoa himself offers, a decisive factor is the acute sensitivity to the mystery of being that seems to freeze every amorous impulse before it can even begin.

²⁶ The connection between thought and suffering appears in *Fausto* (e.g., texts 11, 112, 113, A59, A61), but it appears—retrospectively—as central and decisive when one considers that, for Caetano, the master of Pessoa and of the main heteronyms, the source of existential suffering lies precisely in thought (or at least in a certain use of the faculty of thought). On this, see ZANETTI (2025c).

To summarize, the originality of Pessoa's *Fausto*, in relation to the theme of love, central in the various versions of the Faustian myth, is that for Pessoa it is precisely the awareness of the mystery of being that bars the way to love. The question remains open, as to whether Pessoa-Fausto is right in believing that there is truly an irreconcilable incompatibility between Intelligence and Love.

Action (and Sensation)

Participation in life—through work, projects, or the pursuit of pleasure—is a classic and much-developed path in the literature of the Faustian myth. In Pessoa's *Fausto*, however, it is virtually absent. Why? If, as Pessoa suggests, the conflict is between Intellect and Life, then something in the awareness of the mystery of being seems to undermine the very impulse to act. Why does an acute awareness of the mystery render action impossible?

One hypothesis may be advanced. Action always presupposes a goal. Yet when confronted with the mystery of being, everything appears devoid of meaning, and thus every possible goal loses its attraction. As Álvaro de Campos writes in his experience of being: "Faced by this [the mystery of existence], everything, as with everything men do, | That men say, | That they build or undo or that is built or undone through them, | Everything shrinks! | No, it doesn't shrink . . . it becomes something else—| A single formidable, impossible, black thing" (CAMPOS, 2023: #57). For Fausto, then, action is impossible because action requires the attribution of meaning, and he can no longer attribute meaning to anything.²⁷

In light of this, it is unsurprising that one of the few actions Fausto undertakes in the drama is precisely to pursue what seems the only goal still available to him: release from the source of his suffering, namely his awareness of the mystery of being. Thus, in text #70 [1909], Fausto kills the old man in order to obtain the potion that might lead him to the peace he longs for. Beyond the search for relief, no other desire sustains the path of action in Fausto—apart from the already mentioned path of love, since both love and action are forms of adherence to and participation in life.

In other texts²⁸, the link between the mystery of being and action is established differently. In these, Fausto seems to imagine a possible escape from the mystery of being through total immersion in every possible sensation (particularly those that bring pleasure), in ways that seem to anticipate (with some differences in emphasis) the sensibility of Campos. As an example, we can read the following text (written between 1908 and 1909, thus before the birth of Campos).

²⁷ On this, see also #122.

²⁸ These are texts #32–39, grouped by Pittella in the section "Na Taberna" [1908-1909] (see also #86–87). On the same theme, see also #115 [c. 1926?].

Beber a vida n'um trado, e n'esse trago
 todas as sensações que a vida dá
 em todas as suas formas, boas, más,
 trabalhos, e prazeres, e officios,
 todos logares, viagens, explorações
 crimes, lascivias, decadencias todas.

D'antes, eu queria
 embeber-me nas arvores, nas flores,
 sonhar nas rochas, mares, solidões.
 Hoje não, fujo d'essa ideia louca:
 tudo o que me approxima do mysterio
 confrange-me de horror. Quero hose apenas
 sensações, muitas, muitas sensações,
 de tudo, de todos n'este mundo – humanas
 não outras delirios pantheistas
 mas sim perpetuos choques de prazer,
 mudando sempre a personalidade
 para synthetisal-as n'um sentir.

Quero
 affogar em bulicio, em luz, em vozes,
 – Tumultuarias coisas usuais –
 o sentimento da desolação
 que me enche e me avassala.
 Folgaria
 de encher n'um dia, n'uma hora, n'um trago
 a medida dos vicios, inda mesmo
 que fôsse condemnado eternamente
 a um inferno real.

(#32 [1908-1909])

It is impossible not to read in this passage the diagnosis common in the literature on the spirit of nihilism that pervades both twentieth-century and contemporary consciousness: if nothing has meaning, then the only option left is to lose ourselves in sensations, prioritizing the pleasurable ones, naturally! (In another text, #33 [1908-1909], around the same theme, we read: “Cantamos que a vida | de nada nos serve | que em nós a garrida | canção desmedida do vinho referve!”). The desire for calm contemplation of nature is impossible for Fausto, as contemplation means for him contemplating the horror of being of what is contemplated. (It is worth noting in passing that it is this calm contemplation of nature that seems to represent, in Caeiro, the way out of Faustian suffering!). Therefore, it is better to immerse oneself, lose oneself, shipwreck in the intensity of sensations, drowning in them in order to forget their mystery. Text #32 ends with words that echo the pact between Goethe's Faust and Mephistopheles: Fausto is willing to accept eternal damnation in order to fulfill, in an instant, all his thirst for pleasure.

If, in the passage just cited, the enjoyment of sensations is presented as an antidote to Faustian suffering, in the following one, it is more explicitly action that represents a path of Oblivion of the mystery.

Sinto um tropel esfusiente e quente
 de propositos-sombras, e de impulsos
 transbordando do calix da consciencia
 para cima da vida... Sinto em mim
 gritos de impulsos, ◇
 sinto que qualquer cousa vae fazer-me
 conceber o horror da açao e ousio
 em que dispersarei em fim o resto
 da minha alma já ôca.
 Cesse, cesse
 para sempre a minha alma de ser minha,
 abafe-lhe a consciencia de existir
 a minha voz. Acorde a minha voz
 ao gritar os propositos de sangue
 e horror cujo ◇ não concebo
 e é forçoso que deixe fugir...
 (*alto*)
 Eia!
 Camaradas! A orgia inda vai lenta!
 Vamos mais! Vamos a pôr no berço
 as orgias romanas e a fazer
 os nossos feitos d'esta noite rir
 de Nero e de Tiberio! Vá que a vida
 é pouco para ◇. Eia, vamos!
 Quem vive além na cidadella? O rei?
 Bom. E a rainha? Melhor é... Quem mais?
 As damas, os donzeis e os nobres todos
 da côrte? Vamos á obra ◇

(#2 [1907-1908])

In this context, we must ask ourselves why this path is not viable for Fausto. Why couldn't the abandonment to sensations (especially pleasure) and the enthusiastic participation in action represent a viable way to silence the horror of the mystery? In Teresa Sobral Cunha's edition, the curator inserts, after the texts just cited, a text that seems to provide the answer to this question.

Ah, o horror meaphysico da Acção!
 Os meus gestos separam-se de mim
 e eu vejo-os no ar, como as velas d'um moinho,
 totalmente não-meus, e sinto dentro
 d'elles a minha vida circular!
 Sou sempre o mesmo, sempre o mesmo, sempre!
 Sempre o que tudo vê e tudo sente

no seu sentido misterioso e enorme,
 nas minhas veias o mysterio é o sangue...
 Sempre... Nada me cura nem me apraz!

◇

Ah qualquer cousa
 que annulasse meu ser e m'ó deixasse! ...

(#81, [1912-1903?])

In this text, we encounter a diagnosis of the conflict between Intelligence and Action that aligns perfectly with what we observed in the case of Love. Every action is always *something* rather than nothing—an entity. Yet because Fausto perceives the being of entities, even actions themselves appear monstrous. Gestures are suspended, “not mine,” since this is how entities manifest in the experience of being. Fausto’s burden is that he is always himself—that is, an entity who, unlike others, remains acutely aware of the being of every entity, and thus of the absolute mystery that permeates everything.

As Sartre illustrates in *Nausea*, it is difficult to act when things reveal themselves as absurdly existent: “I was going to throw the pebble, I looked at it and that was when it all began: I felt that it existed. And then, after that, there were other Nauseas; every now and then objects started existing in your hand” (SARTRE, 1938: 147). For this reason, even the path of action cannot provide Fausto with the oblivion he seeks.

Death

If the horror of the mystery of being is the primary protagonist of the drama, then death is perhaps its second most recurrent and significant theme. At times, it is longed for as the possibility of extinguishing the consciousness of mystery. More often, however, Fausto suspects that death will not bring about a total annihilation of this awareness. Here we witness a revealing oscillation: on the one hand, death is feared (or desired) because it might unveil the ultimate truth that dissolves the mystery; on the other hand, Fausto seems to intuit that no such truth exists, that nothing can eliminate the mystery. When this intuition prevails, death can neither terrify nor console, for its promise—to reveal a truth capable of normalizing the mystery—proves impossible to fulfill.

In my view, Fausto (and with him Pessoa) reaches his most lucid moment when he intuits that the mystery is truly inescapable, that the being of what exists is without foundation, and that death cannot open onto a truth capable of erasing this. Let us now examine more closely how the texts articulate the relation between death, the mystery of being, and the elusive promise of a resolution to Fausto’s suffering.

We begin with the passages in which death is a desired goal because it seems to promise, perhaps through annihilation, to free us from pain. In a text that Cunha

places at the end of the drama (#11 [1908-1909]), Fausto dialogues with death, who appears motherly, as one who loves Fausto and takes care of his pain. Fausto says, “O, Morte, vem-me levar!” Again, in #111 [c. 1924], Fausto says, “Vale-me, ó morte.” Death can only give Fausto relief if, with it, the consciousness of the mystery disappears. This happens if death is understood as total annihilation, or if it is the annihilation of the mere awareness of existing. Neither of these hypotheses are endorsed in *Fausto*. Fausto always seems to assume that after death, Fausto’s life (even if radically transfigured) will continue; moreover, the consciousness of the mystery seems to be exactly what, even in the most radical post-mortem transfiguration, nonetheless persists from life to life as an indelible trace. Death, therefore, cannot simply annihilate the awareness of the mystery.²⁹

Another idea explored in *Fausto* is that of death as frightening precisely because after it, we will be transported into an experience capable of revealing to us the ultimate truth. Exemplary, in this regard, is this brief text.

A ilusão da vida é horrorosa
mas o horror de pensar que a morte quebra
essa ilusão n’uma realidade
reveladora da verdade certa!
Oh, esse horror!

(#71 [c. 1909])

There are many other passages that express the same fear.³⁰

What remains unclear in these passages, however, is what kind of truth might await us after death. On the one hand, such obscurity is unsurprising: if we already knew it, there would be no need to wait for death. On the other hand, Fausto must at least gesture toward some idea of the kind of perplexity or question that a post-mortem experience could resolve. Given the broader context of *Fausto*, it seems that what he fears is precisely that death might reveal something capable of dispelling the mystery of the being of the world. Yet if the mystery exists because no explanation can account for the existence of everything, then the supposed “truth” that awaits us would have to name the cause or foundation of existence itself. But Fausto (and with him Pessoa) already knows that such a cause or foundation is impossible—for if it existed, it too would fall within the very mystery it was meant to resolve.

Thus Fausto-Pessoa already knows that no such truth awaits us. This insight is echoed in other reflections on death, where Fausto intuitively feels that no experience—not even a post-mortem one—can provide the key to eliminate the mystery. That everything is a mystery—this is the truth, and Fausto, far from being the one who does

²⁹ Pessoa, in a note (#A86 [1917?]) outlining the plan for three Faustos, considers the possibility that the second and third Faustos are reincarnations of the first.

³⁰ See, e.g., #39, #89, #116.

not know, is in fact the only one who knows the fundamental truth, although this truth concerns precisely the abyssal nature of not knowing³¹ (not only of *our* not knowing, since even God, if He exists, does not know why He exists—see #80 [1912-1903?]). Let's look at some of these remarkable passages.

Mas ha! se a morte, sem ser nada o noite,
 não explicasse nada, e eternamente
 vagabundos conscientes do erro eterno,
 nossas presenças pavidas girassem
 na eterna circumferencia do mysterio
 exues do abstracto centro! Ah! que nos diz
 que aquelle horror, que toda a vida fita
 e não quer vêr, nos não conduz a outra
 specie de vida, sem ser está salvo
 em não saber mais nada da verdade?
 Quem diz que quando a vida cessa acaba
 a illusão, o que a morte, libertando
 da limitada personalidade,
 em outra nos lança, sempre longe
 do ignoto poncto onde já nada é falso?

(#102 [13-6-17])³²

And again:

Quero fugir ao mysterio
 para onde fugirei
 ella é a vida e a morte
 Ó Dôr, aonde me irei?

(A40 [27-6-1909])

In this passage, Pessoa articulates the reason why death cannot be the solution. Because even death (and what follows it) is as mysterious as life. This intuition is expressed once again more clearly in the already cited poem by Campos, where he speaks in this regard of the "Prison of Being."

Prison of Being, is there no escape from you?
 Prison of thinking, is there no escape from you?
 Ah, no, none—neither death, nor life, nor God!
 We, twin brothers of the Fate in which we both exist,
 We, twin brothers of all the Gods, of all species,
 Sharing the same abyss, the same shadow,
 Then, whether we are shadow or whether we are light, it is always the same night.
 Ah, if I confidently confront life, the uncertainty of fate,

³¹ "Ho in me la Verità sentita e compresa" (#19). On this, compare with CANDIDO (2019).

³² Compare with #93.

Smilingly, heedlessly, the quotidian possibility of all possible ills,
 Unthinkingly confront the mystery of all things and all gestures,
 Why should I not face Death too equally smilingly and heedlessly?
 I don't know? But then is there anything I do know?
 The pen I pick up, the words I write, the paper on which I write,
 Are they any less mysterious than Death? As if everything were the same mystery?
 (PESSOA, 2023: #57)

Once again, the point is that everything, both life and death, is the same mystery simply because it exists. Therefore, death cannot reveal an entity capable of extinguishing the mystery.

And here we must mention, concluding this long examination of the ways to liberate oneself from Faustian pain, a path that Pessoa does not explore in *Fausto* (but perhaps it is subtly present in *Caeiro*): not the path of Oblivion, nor the path of truth that eliminates the mystery; rather, *the path of truth that allows us to make peace with the mystery*, that is, a path that, without eliminating the mystery (which is impossible!) or the awareness of the mystery (impossible, if reincarnation exists), can still resolve our problematic relationship with the mystery³³. This is the titanic task that *Fausto* left us (and with which perhaps Pessoa struggled throughout his life).

Lucifer and the Beyond-God

We have seen that to perceive being is to grasp a truth that transcends not only every individual entity but also the totality of being itself. Whoever perceives the being of the whole thus perceives, as it were, beyond the whole—even though, of course, beyond the whole there is nothing. It is striking, then, that in three fragments (#A53, #A54, #A55, dated [1924–25] and classified by Pittella as *Maybe Fausto*), it is Lucifer who gives voice to the same fundamental intuition of being that animates *Fausto*. These fragments are crucial for understanding the relation between the thought of God and the thought of being in *Fausto*, as well as for clarifying why knowledge of God cannot satisfy *Fausto*'s desire for wisdom.

In the first fragment (#A53), Lucifer describes with remarkable precision the path of a consciousness that, after reaching the intuition of the identity between totality and God, takes a further and terrifying step: it perceives that even the Whole-God exists—seeing, so to speak, beyond God (although, if God is indeed the Whole, then beyond God there can be nothing). The journey begins with Lucifer's description of the "mortal" who contemplates the infinite of space and time (as Pascal does

³³ This, I believe, is the path that best characterizes the "febre de além" (famously emphasized by Cleonice BERARDINELLI, 1958), which defines *Fausto*—if not Pessoa's entire oeuvre: a search for a truth that transcends the realm of entities and has the power to reconcile us with the mysterious fact that entities exist at all.

in one of his famous *Pensées*). At a certain point, “um abysmo se lhe abre na consciencia | e uma realidade incrivel gela | seu sentimento da existencia, | e um novo ser-de-tudo se revela.” In contemplating the infinite, one arrives at the idea of the Whole; yet this immediately opens an abyss felt in one’s being. At this stage, the abyss consists in realizing that what mortals call God is only one among many gods: “E vi que Deus, se é tudo paro o mundo, | se a substancia e o ser do nosso ser, | não é o unico Deus mais que profudo. | ha infinitos de infinitos.” Lucifer thus sees infinite gods, but he also sees that they constitute a whole—for if they exist, they belong to the only other-than-nothing that encompasses everything. He therefore concludes: “Porisso, Deus é eterno e infinito,” since the Whole is God. At this point the inner journey might seem complete: Lucifer has reached the truth, namely, that God is identical with the Whole (and that the Whole contains infinite gods). Yet Lucifer takes one further step³⁴—and in doing so, he signals the step that Fausto has taken.

Porém muita sciencia a mais ascende
que a esse unico Deus que a tudo excede. [...]
E ergui então a voz amargurada,
porque o conhecimento transcendente
deixou a alma exanime e gelada
e clamei contra Deus o além-Deus,
disse aos meus pares o segredo imenso.

(#53 [1924-1925])

What is this “segredo imenso”? What does in this context³⁵ “além-Deus” mean? Let’s now read fragment A54:

Sou morte, porque sei que o infinito,
é limitado, e assim Deus morre em mim.
Deus sabe que é uno, um e infinito,
mas eu sei que Deus, sendo-o, não o é.
Mais longe que Deus vae meu ser proscripto.

(A55 [1924-1925])

Where does Lucifer arrive? Why is the infinite (that is, the All, God) limited? Why is God, though knowing Himself to be one and infinite, known by Lucifer as not one and not infinite?

Finally, in the last fragment, in which Lucifer is speaking, we read:

Ha um mysterio maior que Deus em tudo

(#55 [1924-1925])

³⁴ See also A34 [1908-9].

³⁵ Compare with GIL (1993) and BORGES (2008).

What mystery can be greater than God Himself?

Only the appeal to the intuition of being enables us to answer these questions fully and coherently, in a way consistent with the rest of the work. Lucifer comes to see the Whole, and the Whole is God. Yet it is possible to take one further step: to intuit that even God *is*, rather than *is not*. To grasp this intuitively is to grasp the being of God. In this sense, one goes beyond God—for it is as if one were to see the Whole-God from the outside (though such an “outside,” conceived as a place or entity, does not exist). It thus becomes clear why even God is limited: because He too simply *is*, rather than *not being*. And it also becomes clear why there is a mystery greater than God: because God Himself—i.e., the Whole—is a mystery (and a mystery to Himself), insofar as there is no reason or foundation for God’s own existence. This intuition, voiced here by Lucifer, also emerges in a striking, though rarely cited³⁶, passage of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where Kant speaks of the abyss of reason in a manner closely akin to Pessoa’s *Fausto*.

The unconditioned necessity, which we need so indispensably as the ultimate sustainer of all things, is for human reason a true abyss. Even eternity [...] does not make such a dizzying impression on the mind; for eternity only measures the duration of things, but it does not sustain that duration. One cannot resist the thought of it, but one cannot bear it that a being that we represent to ourselves as the highest among all possible beings might, as it were, say to itself: “I am from eternity to eternity, outside me is nothing except what is something merely through my will; but whence then am I?” Here everything gives way beneath us, the greatest perfection as well as the smallest, hovers without support before speculative reason, for which it would cost nothing to let the one as much as the other disappear without the least obstacle”.

(KANT, A613/B641)

The truth of being, therefore, transcends even God—for even God *is*, instead of *not being*. As Campos explicitly states in the aforementioned poem, “the possible existence of existence is greater than all the Gods” and we and the Gods are in a sense “twin brothers”, for we are on the same level as beings that exist. For this reason, as we know, Pessoa’s *Fausto* cannot find peace in God. But neither can it be found beyond God, for beyond God there is nothing. As existence itself says in #9 [1908-1909], “Meu nome quem achou | não pode ir mais além” for any “além” would still have been something existing. And again, *O Suspiro do Mundo* says in #7 [1908-1909] that beyond being, which has neither essence nor existence³⁷, there can be nothing, for

³⁶ For an analysis of this passage and a comparison with similar experiences in authors such as Heidegger, Sartre, Wittgenstein, and Scheler, see ZANETTI (forthcoming 1).

³⁷ Here, Pessoa seems to assert the Heideggerian thesis of the ontological difference. Being is not a being, nor does it exist (as beings do), nor does it have an essence (for if it had one, it would still be something—a being).

once again, if there were something, it would indeed be something other than nothing. The fact that something exists always transcends each particular entity, but it does not transcend it by being identical to another entity. And so, peace from Faustian tension cannot be found in the adherence to any particular entity.

To conclude, then, in Pessoa's *Fausto*, Fausto and Lucifer see the same abyss and mystery³⁸. Pessoa could have presented Lucifer as someone who, while seeing as Fausto does, is also able to come to terms with this fact (or at least maintain a relationship with it that differs from Fausto's). Or he could have portrayed Lucifer as someone who at least knows how to play with the world's mysteries, and thus knows how, with his actions and tricks, to seduce and entertain Fausto, distracting him from the painful awareness of the mystery. Had he explored this path, there might have been room for a pact with the devil. However, in the texts of *Fausto*, nothing of this kind is found.

Symbol and dream

Before concluding this study on Pessoa's thought regarding the mystery of being in *Fausto*, we must briefly explore the connection between the theme of the mystery of being and the pervasive experience, found in *Fausto* and many other parts of Pessoa's work, of seeing everything as a dream. This is particularly important because this theme intertwines with another aspect that has intrigued several readers of the work: the idea, which is also pervasive in Pessoa, that everything is a symbol. Let's start with the latter.

The edition by Teresa Cunha Cabral has perhaps been the most fortunate and widely read edition of Pessoa's *Fausto*. In it, the editor places at the beginning of the work two texts in which the theme of the symbol emerges (thus orienting many readers to give this theme great importance), while, it should be noted, the true theme of the work, the mystery of being, does not appear.

Ah, tudo é symbolo e analogia!
 O vento que passa, a noite que esfria
 são outra coisa que a noite e o vento –
 sombras de vida e de pensamento.
 Tudo que vemos é outra cousa.
 A maré vasta, a maré anciosa,
 é o echo de outra maré que está
 onde é real o mundo que ha.

³⁸ It should also be noted that Fausto says of himself in a famous passage from *Fausto*: "Eu sou o inferno. Sou o Christo negro" (#88, [1913-1914]). Regarding the theme of the pact with the devil, Pessoa could have added that there is no hell that can truly frighten Fausto, because Fausto is hell itself, as he is the host of the deepest suffering—the suffering that consists in seeing the horror of being in everything (therefore, both in heaven and in hell, since if they exist, they partake in the same mystery).

Tudo que temos é esquecimento.
 A noite fria, o passar do vento
 são sombras de mãos cujos gestos são
 a illusão madre d'esta illusão.

(#117 [9-12-32])

Tudo transcende tudo
 E é mais real e menos do que é

(A17 [1909-1910] – si veda anche A16)

These texts appear to develop the following theses: our experience is in some sense illusory and therefore does not grant us access to truth; truth lies beyond this illusion and can be found in another world, distinct from that of ordinary experience; and in ordinary experience everything functions as a symbol or analogy pointing toward this “true” world, where illusion is overcome. Now, it is well known that the theme of the symbol and of the “true world” behind the “apparent world” is central in much of Pessoa’s writing, particularly in the work of the *Pessoa ortónimo*. This might lead the reader to assume that in *Fausto* Pessoa affirms not only the existence of a “more real” or “authentic” world but also the possibility that access to this world could resolve Fausto’s problem.

Yet such an interpretation, as this study has shown, entirely misses the point of the drama. Even if one accepts the distinction between an illusory and a “real” world, both worlds would remain subject to the same impenetrable mystery: both are something rather than nothing. For this reason, Cabral’s reading is misleading, since it directs us down an interpretive path that is wholly antithetical to *Fausto*’s central intuition.

The same considerations apply to the many texts in which *Fausto* develops the pervasive Pessoaan motif that life is like a dream (e.g., #3, #116, A33). On Cabral’s interpretation, ordinary experience would be dreamlike because a real world exists where the dream dissolves and truth is finally revealed. But this is not the role of the dream in *Fausto*. Sometimes Pessoa writes that life is dreamlike because in that state we fail to perceive that everything is absurd and impossible (hence Fausto’s recurring desire to dream or to sleep, in order to soften the painful lucidity of consciousness). At other times, however, everything appears dreamlike precisely because, in its absurd and mysterious existence, reality discloses itself as such. This second sense, as is well known, will later become central in the static drama *O Marinheiro* (see ZANETTI 2025a), but it already finds expression in numerous *Fausto* texts.

In conclusion, it is mistaken to believe that Pessoa’s *Fausto* endorses the thesis of a “true” or “real” world that would offer repose in the contemplation of truth. No such island of peace exists, for every world—regardless of whether it is deemed illusory or real—remains something rather than nothing, and therefore a dark, unfathomable mystery.

Conclusions

As I have tried to argue in this study, the horror before the mystery of being is the central theme of *Fausto*, and it is in light of this mystery that Pessoa develops all the other great themes of the work, which will then be central in his entire subsequent production³⁹. This suggests a series of important research questions. How is the mystery of being taken up in the texts following *Fausto*? What role does the mystery of being play in the heteronymic adventure⁴⁰? Does the mystery of being remain central—and if so, how—in all of Pessoa's thought, or is it downplayed or even abandoned in the later writings? In my view, the theme remains central and essential for understanding the entire Pessoa corpus, but further studies are needed to defend this thesis and to explore all its implications.⁴¹

I believe that Pessoa's *Fausto* leaves behind a fundamental question that, in conclusion, is worth highlighting once again. If it is true that there is no cause or foundation for the existence of the Whole; if it is true, in other words, that the being of the Whole is truly an absolute and in principle impenetrable mystery; and if it is true that being aware of this is the cause of supreme suffering (the Faustian suffering); then we must ask ourselves: is there a truth and a path capable not of eliminating the mystery, but of allowing us to make peace with the mystery?

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³⁹ For reasons of space, I was unable to discuss the connection between the mystery of being and other important recurring themes in *Faust*, such as, among the most significant, the nature of the self, the limits of language in understanding the mystery, and the feeling of hatred that characterizes *Fausto*.

⁴⁰ Although I do not have the space to fully articulate and defend the thesis here, I believe that most of Pessoa's post-Faustian writings (i.e., those roughly after 1909) can be understood as attempts to resolve Faustian suffering. In this respect, *Fausto* should not be seen merely as one step among others in Pessoa's "échelle de la dépersonnalisation" (as suggested by LOPES, 1985), but rather as a voice independent of the heteronomic adventure—one that shapes the various ways in which the main heteronyms relate to the mystery of being.

⁴¹ For a partial execution of this research project, see ZANETTI (2025a), in which I show how the mystery of being is central in the play *O Marinheiro*, and ZANETTI (2025c), in which I explain how the experience of being (purged of the horror and sense of mystery that characterize *Faust*) is central in the poems of Caetano.

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