

ALBERTO CAEIRO – PRESOCRATIC MEDITATIONS

The idea for this communication goes back to the time of my first encounter with Fernando Pessoa a little over 15 years ago. On reading Alberto Caeiro's *O Guardador dos Rebanhos*, I was immediately struck by a certain consistency of thought that would unfold like a philosophical treatise, although of an unusual kind.

Of course, I was not the first to note this consistency and we are alerted to the fact that some kind of philosophy is being expounded in Caeiro's verses by Pessoa himself. But I want to begin with a somewhat unexpected reading that came from the Trappist American monk Thomas Merton, who later in his life became attracted to Eastern religions. He was responsible for the first translation of Caeiro into English and the circumstances were unusual; he found in Caeiro a Zen sensibility and translated a dozen poems from *O Guardador dos Rebanhos* to show to Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, the great exponent of Buddhism in the West that in Europe there was also a Zen poet. Since then the notion of Caeiro the Zen poet has been quite often repeated. However, if we compare Caeiro with Basho, for example, the great 17th century Japanese Zen poet, it quite quickly becomes apparent that the comparison does not really stand up to scrutiny. It is not the question of how the poetry is formally structured as all of Basho's poetry is written in the *haiku* form, and, anyway, it is not what Merton would have had in mind. It is the matter of the tone, Caeiro is at times too agitated, polemical, not always sure of himself, and the purity of sensations that he preaches is something that he attains only momentarily; as Ricardo Reis points out, after the cycle of poems in *O Guardador dos Rebanhos* Caeiro loses his certitude. Reis also thought that falling in love did not do him much good either; Thomas Cross, Álvaro de Campos were of the same view. Reis went as far as to

say that it left behind ‘a wake of destruction. Never again, save in fleeting poetic moments, would Caeiro return to that eminently serene godlike vision that he, as a poet, [...] attained along the road he called *O Guardador dos Rebanhos*.’ (*Ficou o rasto viciado. Nunca mais, salvo em evanescentes episódios poéticos voltou aquela serenidade suprema, aquela visão de deus a que [...] o poeta se havia liberado no decurso do caminho a que chamou O Guardador dos Rebanhos.*)

It should be noted that Merton himself was aware that Caeiro is somewhat too self-conscious to pass for a real Zen person, but his comparison should not be dismissed too quickly for it is sensitive and, in fact, a number of Caeiro’s lines would sit comfortably in an anthology of Zen poetry. It is also not fair to compare Caeiro to Basho. Basho achieved the mastery of his *haiku* verses after some 20 years of experimenting, following the teachings of earlier Masters; he also practised Zen meditation intensely. And, further, these lines from Basho, not from a poem but from his description of a Basho tree to which he was greatly attached (and from which he took his final pen-name), make one realise that Merton did have a point:

The big trunk of the tree is untouched by the axe, for it is utterly useless as building wood. I love the tree, however, for its very uselessness... I sit underneath it, and enjoy the wind and rain that blow against it.

I would not be surprised to find lines like these in Caeiro verses.

Still, Caeiro is not really a Zen poet. So what kind of philosophy is Caeiro expounding? Well, others that knew Caeiro personally have recorded their impressions of him. Crosse described his as ‘purely or anciently a

primitive Greek’; Pessoa himself spoke of the poet’s ‘profound genius of a Greek feeling and seeing all’ (*profundo génio de um grego sentindo e vendo tudo*), he also said that ‘He is a metaphysician à la Greek, writing in verse purely metaphysical theories’ (*É um metafísico à grega, escrevendo em verso teorizações puramente metafísicas*) But the most comprehensive account of Caetano’s way of seeing the world that goes into some detail comes from Álvaro de Campos, we find it in his *Notas Para a Recordação de Meu Mestre Caetano*.

Here are some of Campos’s recollections:

‘Everything is different from us. That’s why everything exists.’
(*Tudo é diferente de nós, e por isso é que tudo existe.*)

‘Nothing exists that doesn’t have limits. Existing means there is something else, and so everything has limits.’
(*O que não tem limites não existe. Existir é haver outra coisa qualquer, e portanto cada coisa ser limitada.*)

‘What I mean is being real means other things are real, because you can’t be real alone, and since being real is being a thing that is not anything else, it means being different from everything else. [...] There always has to be a difference, even if it’s really small. That’s what being real is.’

(*O que eu quero dizer é isto: ser real é haver outras coisas reais, porque não se pode ser real sozinho; e como ser real é ser uma coisa que não é essas outras coisas, é ser diferente d’ellas; e como a realidade é uma coisa como o tamanho ou o peso – senão não havia realidade – e como todas as coisas são diferentes, não ha*

coisas eguaes em realidade como não ha coisas eguaes em tamanho e em peso. Ha de haver sempre uma diferença, embora seja muito pequena. Ser real é isto.)

‘what we should really do, is to give each rock a different proper name, like we do with people; if we don’t, it’s because it would be impossible to find so many words, not because it would be wrong...’

(na verdade a gente devia dar a cada pedra um nome different e proprio, como se faz aos homens; iso não se faz porque seria impossivel arranjar tanta palavra, mas não porque fôsse erro...)

a table is a necessary hallucination of our will that manufactures tables.

If even for an instant in our lives we were able to *see* the table as wood, *to sense* the table as wood – to see the table’s wood without seeing the table – we’d be happy. We would go back to ‘knowing’ it’s a table, but for all our lives we’d never forget it’s wood. And we would love the table that much more, just for being a table.

(a mesa é uma allucinação necessaria de nossa vontade que fabrica mesas.

Feliz de quem, um momento que fosse na vida, conseguir vêr a mesa como madeira, sentir a mesa como madeira – ver a madeira da mesa sem ver a mesa. Volte depois a “saber” que é mesa, mas toda a vida não esquecerá que ella é madeira. E amará a mesa, mesa como mesa, melhor.)

‘What am I to myself?’ ‘I am one of my sensations’ (182)

(O que sou para mim mesmo? Sou uma sensação minha.)

its [material world's] one and only advantage is its visibility. [...] All told, the physical is worth more than the metaphysical. (186)
(...quando o mundo material não tivesse outra vantagem tinha a de ser visível [...] em fim de contas, mais vale o fisico que o metaphisico.)

‘Everything we see, we should see it for the first time, because it really is the first time we see it. So then each yellow flower is a new yellow flower, even if we say it’s the same one we saw yesterday. We aren’t the same and flower isn’t the same. Even the yellow itself can’t be the same. It’s a pity people don’t have the right eyes for knowing it; otherwise we’d all be happy.’ (165)
(Toda a coisa que vemos devemos vê-la sempre pela primeira vez, porque realmente é a primeira vez que a vemos. E então cada flor amarela é uma nova flor amarela, ainda que seja o que se chama a mesma de ontem. A gente não é já o mesmo nem a flor a mesma. O próprio amarelo não pode ser já o mesmo. É pena a gente não ter exactamente os olhos para saber isso, porque então éramos todos felizes.)

And here are a few lines from *O Guardador dos Rebanhos*

I feel myself born in each moment,
 In the eternal newness of the world... (II)
*(Sinto-me nascido a cada momento
 Para a eterna novidade do mundo...)*

I'm the size of what I see. [...] our only wealth is seeing. (VII)
(...eu so do tamanho do que vejo [...] a nossa única riqueza é ver.)

Nature doesn't have an inside. (XXVIII)
(...a natureza não tem dentro)

Things don't have meaning: they only have existence. (XXXIX)
(As cousas não têm significação: têm existência.)

The sun is always right on time, every day. (XLII)
(...o sol é sempre pontual todos os dias.)

I saw there's no Nature
 Nature doesn't exist,
 There are hills, valleys, plains,
 There are trees, flowers, weeds,
 There are rivers and stones.
 But there isn't a whole all this belongs to
 And a real and true wholeness
 Is a sickness of our ideas. (XLVII)
*(Vi que não há Natureza,
 Que Natureza não existe,
 Que há montes, vales, planícies,
 Que há árvores, flores, ervas,
 Que há rios e pedras,
 Mas que não há um todo a que isso pertença,
 Que um conjunto real e verdadeiro
 É uma doença das nossas ideas.)*

... the only hidden meaning of things
 Is that they have no meaning at all (XXXIX)
 (... *o único sentido oculto das cousas*
É elas não terem sentido oculto nenhum.)

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So what do we have? There is Caeiro's sensationism, where everything is stripped to the senses; he rejects the idea of wholeness, of Nature; he has what one could call an ontology of difference ('Everything is different from us. That's why everything exists.' (*Tudo é diferente de nós, e por isso é que tudo existe.*)), and he propounds the idea of the instantaneity of existence (I feel myself born in each moment, / In the eternal newness of the world... (*Sinto-me nascido a cada momento, / Para a eterna novidade do mundo...*)). He may notice some regularity in nature ('The sun is always right on time' (...*o sol é sempre pontual*)). But this does not really add up to a Pre-Socratic programme. We could try to find more pre-Socratic elements and point out that his comment about the yellow flower always being different brings to mind the Heraclitus fragment 'It is not possible to step twice into the same river' (91), However, in another fragment (123) Heraclitus states 'Nature likes to hide', which, there is no doubt, Caeiro would consider an aberrant idea. Furthermore, there are a number of elements missing to make Caeiro a Pre-Socratic philosopher. The Greeks cultivated rationality; it is not for nothing that it is to these thinkers the birth of European scientific thought is traced. Caeiro also reasons, but he reasons with his senses ('It's a pity people don't have the right eyes for knowing it; otherwise we'd all be happy.' (*É pena a gente não ter exactamente os olhos para saber isso, porque então éramos todos felizes.*)); and, on another occasion, responding to Campos's 'Now suppose' (*Ora supponha que...*) Caeiro interrupts tersely 'What's there to suppose with? The eyes? The ears? (*Com que hei*

de suppor? Com os olhos? Com os ouvidos?). The Ancients' rationality involved a great deal of speculation, they sought to find first principles, and the idea of a wholeness of the Universe is also present in their thought. We do not find any of these preoccupations in Caeiro, and some of them he would consider outright metaphysical folly.

So it turns out that the title of this communication, which I thought of before I prepared it, is misleading and for a moment I felt something like embarrassment. But then I realised that, in fact, I was misled by the insistence of Cross, Campos and Pessoa himself that Caeiro has a 'Greek feeling', that he was 'a metaphysician à la Greek' (. I took for granted this must be Pre-Socratic Greek as obviously none of the Aristotelian or Platonic sentiments would be admissible in Caeiro's world (and we do find in one of Pessoa's texts the view that 'Plato is the decadence of the Greek ideal' (*Platão é a decadência do ideal grego*)) Perhaps one could think of the Epicurean *ataraxia* (best translated as peacefulness) when reading his verses, but then there is nothing of what one could call the Epicurean 'system'. Maybe one could try to save face by saying that just as Thomas Merton saw a Zen sensibility in Caeiro, there is something of the Pre-Socratic innocence of a mind that did not know what infinity was. As Campos said 'He does not conceive of anything as infinity'. (*Não concebo nada como infinito*).

Still, in all, it turns out that Caeiro is neither a Pre-Socratic thinker nor a Zen poet. And this leaves me a little dissatisfied. My first encounter with Caeiro, years ago, and the recent second serious reading left me feeling that there is something stronger that holds this cycle of poems together, it does not seem good enough to speak of something as vague as Zen or Greek 'sensibility'. As I was mulling over this problem the question of Buddhism returned to my mind, not just the Zen version, but

in a larger sense and the answer presented itself quite quickly; I will return to it in a minute.

Since then I have come across texts that do compare Caeiro's thought to Buddhism. These usually deal with questions that have been posed by the developments of Buddhism's second great school known as *Mahayana*, (The 'Great Vehicle' or 'Middle Path') which was first formulated by Nagarjuna in the 2nd century CE and today Dalai Lama is an eloquent exponent of the system. And, indeed, there are a number of elements in Caeiro's poems which point in this direction. For example, when he says we should have a proper name for each rock, it brings to mind the rejection of universals in the great logical system of one of the later Buddhist schools developed between 6th-8th century (by Dignaga, Dharmakirti and Dharmottara). However, the most pronounced was the notion of the void or emptiness (*sunyata* in Sanskrit), which is at the core of Nagarjuna's text. Thinking about this, I was particularly impressed to come across this comment from Campos, which is as good as anything in drawing the distinction between the frightening deadly nothingness of existentialism à la Sartre or Heidegger and the nothingness (void) we find in Buddhist thought:

When Reis speaks of death, he seems to foresee being buried alive... The sentiment [of nothingness] which in Caeiro is an empty field, for Reis is an empty tomb. He adopted Caeiro's nothingness but did not know how to keep it free of decay. (184) (*Quando Reis falla da morte, parece que anticipa ser enterrado vivo... O sentimento [de nada] que em Caeiro é um campo sem nada é em Reis em tumulo sem nada. Adaptou o nada de Caeiro mas não tinha a sciencia de o não deixar apodrecer.*)

Now, to return to the answer that presented itself to me first, and to which I alluded earlier. Buddhism has two main branches, the earlier *Hinayana* ('Small Vehicle' or *Theravada* 'way of the elders') and *Mahayana*, and within these there are many very different schools (Zen belongs to the *Mahayana* system). Yet throughout these different strands one preoccupation remains constant, it is the doctrine of *Anatta* or *Anatman* (in Pali and Sanskrit respectively), which we would render 'no-ego' or 'no-self'. All Buddhists, whether they are followers of *Hinayana* or of *Mahayana*, deny that there is such a thing as the ego-substance behind our consciousness, as a concrete, ultimate and independent unit, a closed off interiority, which we call a self. The *Mahayanists* also denied the existence of any substance in the transcendent realm, that is, they denied the existence of God. Both these can be found in Caeiro's thought. Not believing in God is hardly exciting news, and as Cross noted to Caeiro it was logical

a pure and integral sensationist like Caeiro has, logically enough, no religion at all, religion not being among the immediate data of pure and direct sensation.

The 'no-ego' doctrine is of more interest. First of all, we will not find this problem aired by the Greeks for the simple reason that they never developed the concept of the self, the Greeks did not have a psychology of a kind we have today. Thinking about this, I was struck by these lines from the 43rd poem, in which Caeiro rejects memory:

Recollection betrays Nature
 Because yesterday's Nature isn't Nature.
 What was is nothing and to remember is not to see.

*(A recordação é uma traição à Natureza
 Porque a Natureza de ontem não é Natureza.
 O que foi não é nada, e lembrar é nao ver.*

I was struck because our image of memory as something locked inside our psychical interiority is one of the bedrocks around which the Western concept of ego, or self, is constructed. And if one were to recount the history of this construction, St Augustine's meditation on memory in Book 10 of *Confessions* would be a good place to start. (The Hindu concept of the self is based on the eternal *Atman* and follows a very different line of thinking. ('It is not born, nor does it ever die: Nor having come into being, will it ever cease to be' we read in Bhagavad Gita))

The Buddhists developed a sophisticated logic to demonstrate the doctrine and they developed meditation techniques to achieve the state of *Anatta/Anatman*. Caeiro's way is different. He strips the self down to sensations

'What am I to myself?, 'I am one of my sensations'
(O que sou para mim mesmo? Sou uma sensação minha.)

I'm the size of what I see. [...] our only wealth is seeing. (VII)
(...eu so do tamanho do que vejo [...] a nossa única riqueza é ver.)

Further, the words, 'We aren't the same and the flower isn't the same.' (*A gente não é já o mesmo nem a flor a mesma.*), which brought to mind Heraclitus, would seem to me closer to the doctrine of impermanence (*Anicca/Anitya*), which is another of the roots of all of Buddhist thinking and is the basis of *Anatta*, as to Caeiro not only the flower (or to Heraclitus the river) is never the same but we ourselves are

Basho *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*
(translated Noboyuki Yuasa), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books,
1966