

Beyond the Anarch – Stirner, Pessoa, Junger

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When he died on 30 November 1935, at the age of forty-seven, the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa had already been over eighty different people. Writing and living through heteronyms since the age of six, Pessoa led an existence that far exceeded the limits imposed over the life of a normalised self. Pessoa jealously guarded his existential autonomy, to the point of structuring himself around an abundant void, which had much more in common with Stirner's idea of a 'creative nothing' than with the tidy demands of social conformism. As one of his incarnations wrote – the shepherd Alberto Caeiro, to whom we shall return:

If, after I die, somebody wants to write my biography,
there's nothing simpler.
It has just two dates – the day I was born and the day I died.
Between the two, all the days are mine.²

Yet, we shouldn't imagine that such an unbridled internal autonomy corresponded to an equally extravagant display of external freedom. Similarly to Italo Svevo – the Italian writer of his same generation, who spent his life quietly working in a paint factory – Pessoa's visible life unfolded over the grey tones of a career as a translator for an import-export firm. As it will be argued in the rest of this essay, Pessoa developed a practice of deep – yet invisible – existential anarchism, which is as distant from traditional anarchism, as it is close to a Stirnerian, Jungerian vision of the anarch.

When asked to explain his understanding of the figure of anarch, as opposed to that of the anarchist, the German writer Ernst Junger replied:

The anarchist is a man with plans, for example to kill the tsar or something to that effect, while this is less so with the anarch. The anarch is more established

within himself, and the condition of the anarch is in reality the condition which every man carries within himself. [...] An anarch can for example work calmly in an office, but when he leaves in the evening, he plays quite another role. And aware of his own superiority, he is able to take a complaisant view of the political system currently in power. Stirner said that the anarch is a man who [...] perceives what can be of use to him and to the world at large, but he does not involve himself in ideologies. With this in view, I'd like to call the condition of the anarch quite natural. First there is man, then comes his environment.³

Commenting on the reactive character of anarchism, the young Pessoa also remarked: 'The anarchist is a product of civilization. Very much as smoke is the product of fire'.⁴

It is clear how the vision of the anarch can lean both towards a proudly detached existential nobility, as well as towards an Ayn Rand-esque complicity with the existing economic and political status quo. Pessoa faced this issue in the dryly satirical short story 'The Anarchist Banker', published in May 1922 on the first issue of the Portuguese journal *Contemporanea*. In this story, resembling the structure of a Platonic dialogue, a wealthy banker defends his lifelong commitment to the anarchist cause, portraying his career as the natural outcome of a clever practice of radical individual freedom:

'I had established that, in the true anarchism, each person had to create freedom and to combat social fictions by his own efforts. [...] What does combating social fictions means in practical terms? It means war, it is war. [...] How do you conquer the enemy in war? By one of two ways: by killing him, that is, by destroying him; or by imprisoning him, that is, by subjugating him, by rendering him powerless. I couldn't destroy all social fictions; that could only be carried out by a social revolution. [...] I would have to subjugate them, I would have to overcome them by subjugation, by rendering them powerless. [...] The most important [social fiction], at least in our day and age, is money. How could I subjugate money, or to be more precise, the power and tyranny of money? There was only one way forward, I would have to acquire money, I would have to acquire enough of it not to feel its influence, and the more I acquired the freer I would be from that influence. When I saw this clearly, with all the force of my anarchist convictions and all the logic of a clear-thinking man, only then did I enter the present phase – the commercial and banking phase – of my anarchism.'⁵

Pessoa's banker resembles the protagonist of Junger's short novel *Aladdin's Problem*.⁶ Having escaped from Communist Russia to West Germany, Junger's protagonist begins an astonishing career as funeral director, quickly rising to the role of CEO of a visionary multinational funeral firm. Like Pessoa's banker, Junger's character passes through the jaws of a capitalist society with the sharp ruthlessness of a pure egoist. However, unlike Ayn Rand's heroic characters, neither Pessoa's nor Junger's creations believe for one moment in the intrinsic value of their success or of their wealth. For the anarchist, submitting to the outer demands of society – to that point of utter submission which is the achievement of social success – is only a way to vanish, to further withdraw from society. Yet, as we shall observe later, both these characters lacked what constitutes the core quality of the true anarchist.

In Junger and in Pessoa, the anarchist has a social dimension and this runs deeper than the bonds of nationality and of society; but both remained highly sceptical of the emancipatory possibilities of any revolutionary strategy.

My egoism is the surface of my commitment. My spirit constantly lives in the study and the care of Truth, and in the concern of leaving, once I will have dismissed the clothes that bind me to this world, an opus which will be useful to the progress and the good of Humanity.⁷

The group that makes a revolution has the same mentality and the same character of the group that is beaten and substituted by that revolution. Thus, we can define a revolution as 'a violent way to leave everything as it was before'.⁸

As with Max Stirner, the desire for universal emancipation withdraws from mass struggle, towards the actions of the individual. Differently from Stirner, however, both Pessoa and Junger see the small group of individuals who might take up such task, more as an enlightened elite – almost a vanguard – than as a pure 'union of egoists'.

According to Pessoa:

How to reform society? It is simple: with a non-collective movement, that is with a purely individual impulse. [...] All social reforms have always originated from one man of genius. From this man of genius, they pass to a small minority, from this small minority to a larger minority, and finally to the whole of society.⁹

While for Junger:

There is still someone who has not ceased to seek a breach in the armour of today's Leviathans – and this is something which requires a caution and a bravery which are as yet unseen. These elites will give battle for a new freedom.¹⁰

The true problem is that the majority does *not* want freedom, on the contrary they are scared of it. One must *be* free in order to desire to become it, because freedom is existence – most of all, it is a conscious accord with existence, it is the desire – which one perceives as his destiny – to realize it.¹¹

But this internal freedom, this autonomy which is at the heart of Junger's work, and even more so of Pessoa's life, should not be considered as a given. Creating one's existential autonomy is in itself the task of a lifetime, and it can be hindered by external circumstances, as well as by the weaknesses of the human condition. Pessoa went dangerously close to a complete existential catastrophe a few times throughout his life, which was plagued by recurrent cases of grave depression. During one of them, he employed the universe of his heteronyms as a barrier against the suicidal whirlpool which had recently swallowed his friend, the Portuguese poet Mario de Sa-Carneiro. By writing 'The Education of the Stoic' under the heteronym of the Baron of Teive, Pessoa used a semi-autobiographical character – whom he would later define as a 'mere mutilation' of his personality – to issue a suicide note and finally to commit suicide on his behalf.

The Baron of Teive is perhaps the most dangerous of Pessoa's heteronyms. Through the words of his only surviving manuscript, the Baron described an existential paralysis which still sounds as timely today, as when it was written in the late 1920s.

I belong to a generation – assuming that this generation includes others beside me – that lost its faith in the gods of the old religion as well as in the gods of modern unreligions. I reject Jehovah as I reject Humanity. For me, Christ and progress are both myths from the same world. I don't believe in the Virgin Mary, and I don't believe in electricity.¹²

What made me furious at myself was the disproportionate weight of the social factor in my decision. I was never able to overcome the influence of heredity and my upbringing. I could pooh-pooh the sterile concepts of nobility and social rank, but I never succeeded in forgetting them. They're like an inborn cowardice, which I loathe and struggle against but which binds my mind and my will with inscrutable ties.¹³

While the Baron of Teive had lost his faith both in religion and in 'unreligion', the negative freedom which he achieved had not yet developed into the positive freedom

which can finally lead to true existential autonomy. It almost seems to be hearing the Baron's analyst speaking, when we read Stirner's distinction between freedom and ownness:

What a difference between freedom and ownness! [...] Ownness is my whole being and existence, it is I myself. I am free of what I am rid of, owner of what I have in my power or what I control. [...] To be free is something that I cannot truly will, because I cannot make it, cannot create it: I can only wish it and – aspire toward it, for it remains an ideal, a spook.¹⁴

Stirner's notion of ownness is the culmination of a progress which, from radical atheism – that is, a disbelief, or a 'forgetting' all ideologies and 'spooks' – through self-discipline, leads all the way to unleashing the potential of the Ego – which in its correct translation should be rather called 'the Unique' – as the 'creative nothing'.

Although it is not particularly emphasised by Stirner – who confined it mostly to the issue of dealing with one's own desires – the problem of self-discipline as the exertion of one's will remains at the heart of the passage from existential paralysis to ownness.

In his early writing, the young Pessoa remained highly sceptical of the possibility of freely exerting one's will:

We can only be responsible and free if we are responsible for that brain being as it is. That is to say to be responsible for our state, to be free we must have created our own [self] ourselves. But to create oneself is nonsense. [...] Free-Will is the mode of existence of an Infinite Being (if such there be). It may, with incoherence or absurdity attributed to God. To man, only absurd and unthinkingly.¹⁵

Yet, in his lifetime, Pessoa seemed to have found a way to finally reach the state of an 'Infinite Being' able to create itself. By giving life to his army of heteronyms, while at the same time remarking that 'Pessoa, properly speaking, doesn't exist', the Portuguese poet established within himself a space in which creation – and thus free will – could finally be possible.

Once again, it is as if Max Stirner was commenting on Pessoa – and at the same time, bitterly, on the failings of his heteronym the Baron of Teive – when he wrote:

I am not nothing in the sense of emptiness, but I am the creative nothing, the nothing out of which I myself as creator create everything.¹⁶

I am owner of my might, and I am so when I know myself as unique. In the unique one the owner himself returns into his creative nothing, of which he is born. Every higher essence above me, be it God, be it man, weakens the feeling of my uniqueness, and pales only before the sun of this consciousness. If I concern myself for myself, the unique one, then my concern rests on its transitory, mortal creator, who consumes himself, and I may say: all things are nothing to me.¹⁷

It would be tempting to conclude here this discussion of existential anarchism in the works of Pessoa, Junger and Stirner, but the genius of the Portuguese poet and of the writer from Heidelberg wouldn't allow us to do so.

If Stirner verged towards nihilism, with his claim that 'all things are nothing to me', both Junger and Pessoa successfully managed to move 'beyond the line' of nihilism – to paraphrase the title of Junger's book of 1949.¹⁸

Once again, it was through one of his heteronyms that Pessoa reached a perspective which allowed him to rediscover and to re-appropriate 'all things'. During one 'unrepeatable night', Pessoa gave life to the young shepherd Alberto Caeiro, who is perhaps the exact specular image of the Baron of Teive. In Pessoa's production, as well as in his life, Caeiro remains almost as a conceptual limit: he is a non-autobiographical character, who acts as the spiritual guide of many of Pessoa's other heteronyms. It might not be a coincidence that Alberto Caeiro died young of tuberculosis, the same disease which killed Pessoa's father when the poet was just five years old.

Pessoa repeatedly said that Alberto Caeiro wasn't just a wise young man with a pagan character: he was the very embodiment of Paganism itself. Differently from Pessoa and from all of the other heteronyms, Caeiro seemed to have found a solution to the existential anxiety and paralysis which plagued the early modern generation, as well as our post-postmodern one. As if providing an answer to Wallace Stevens' dilemma on the possibility of seeing things as they 'merely are',¹⁹ Caeiro wrote:

Only Nature is divine, and she is not divine ...

If I sometimes speak of her as a person
It's because I can only speak of her by using the language of men,
Which imposes names on things
And gives them personality.

But things have no name or personality:
They just are, and the sky is vast, the earth wide,
And our heart the size of a closed fist

Blessed am I for all I don't know.
That's all I truly am ...
I enjoy it all as one who lies here in the sun.²⁰

Caeiro pushes the existential autonomy of the anarchist one step further outside of society and of social conformism, towards a state of unmediated contact with Nature's essential core – which closely resembles Stirner's definition of the Ego/Unique, in its transcendence of any possible definition.

Such a tension equally shines through Ernst Junger's writing, especially in his later work. In a text largely dedicated to investigating the timeless essence/uniqueness of any individual human being, and particularly in a section focusing on Hesiod's account of the 'Golden Age' which preceded historical time, Junger remarked:

Holderlin defines [the Golden Age] as a world 'without cities', which mainly signifies: without the State. [...] We should hint here to the question if man, in his becoming a State-maker, *zoon politikon*, hasn't taken a line which is secondary to authentic human formation, and whether, since then, completeness, genius and happiness haven't become possible only as isolated episodes, and no longer as a permanent condition.²¹

Although Junger's position seems at times to verge towards mysticism, the German author took care of clarifying the nature of his message. According to Junger, if we seek an example of the perfect completion of the existential autonomy of the anarchist, we shouldn't look towards the mystic, but towards the poet:

There is *only one* freedom, which can put all this under checkmate: the freedom of the poet. It is for this reason that there isn't any space for it in Plato's State.²²

For its part, Alberto Caeiro is even more firm in rejecting any accusation of mysticism:

Today I read nearly two pages
In the book of a mystic poet,
And I laughed as if I'd cried a lot.

Mystic Poets are sick philosophers,
and philosophers are lunatics.²³

Or, at least, to accept mysticism only on his own terms:

If you want me to have a mysticism, then fine, I have one.
I'm a mystic, but only with my body.
My soul is simple and doesn't think.

My mysticism is not wanting to know.
It's living and not thinking about it.

I don't know what Nature is: I sing it.²⁴

Much more so than Junger, Caeiro managed to combine a refusal of nihilism, with the highest form of materialism:

As for me, I write the prose of my verses
And am satisfied,
Because I know I understand Nature on the outside,
And I don't understand it on the inside,
Because Nature has no inside.
If it did, it wouldn't be Nature.²⁵

If Junger belongs to the 'Age of Bronze' – in which, according to the German writer, myths and miracles replaced the loss of an immediate connection with Nature – Caeiro fully embodies the spirit of the Golden Age, as described by Hesiod. Perhaps, it is only in the spirit of the Golden Age, that the suicidal existential impasse of the Baron of Teive can be resolved through Stirnerian means, while at the same time pushing Stirner's vision beyond the line of nihilism.

If, earlier, we compared Stirner to the Baron of Teive's analyst, we might now add that Junger and Pessoa could be seen as two of the closest, most understanding friends of this analyst. However, like any analyst, even Stirner needs to have his own, and that is a job that only the poet Alberto Caeiro can take upon himself. After all, if Socrates was deemed the wisest of men, since he admitted not to know, then Caeiro should be seen as the wisest of poets:

I have no ambitions nor desires.
To be a poet is not my ambition,
It is my way of being alone.²⁶

To him belongs the autonomy and the ownness of the anarch, beyond the anarch.

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NOTES

1. *Al mio maestro, Stefano Baia Curioni*.
2. Fernando Pessoa, untitled 8 November 1915 from 'Uncollected Poems', in Richard Zenith (ed.), *A Little Larger than the Entire Universe*, Penguin, London, 2006, p. 61.
3. Ernst Junger interviewed by Julien Hervier in 1985, from the documentary 'Neunzig Verweht - der Schriftsteller Ernst Jünger', 1985 – translation by Stefan Jarl.
4. Fernando Pessoa, in Nuno Ribeiro (ed.), *Philosophical Essays*, Contra Mundum Press, New York, 2012, p.35.
5. Fernando Pessoa, 'The Anarchist Banker' (translated by Margaret Jull Costa), in Eugenio Lisboa (ed.) *The Anarchist Banker and other Portuguese stories*, Volume 1, Carcanet Press, Manchester, 1997, pp. 107-110.
6. Ernst Junger, 'Aladdin's Problem', J.G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung Nachfolger, Stuttgart, 1983.
7. Fernando Pessoa, in Georg Rudolf Lind and Jacinto do Prado Coelho (eds), *Paginas Intimas e de auto-interpretacao*, Atica, Lisbon, 1966, p. 68 – my translation.
8. Fernando Pessoa, in Teresa Rita Lopes (ed.), *Pessoa por conhecer*, Volume 1, Editorial Estampa, Lisbon, 1990, p. 63 – my translation.
9. Fernando Pessoa, in Teresa Rita Lopes, *Pessoa por conhecer*, Editorial Estampa, Lisbon, 1990, vol. II, p. 72 – my translation.
10. Ernst Junger, 'Der Waldgang', Ernst Klett, Stuttgart, 1980 – my translation from the Italian edition, Ernst Junger, *Trattato del Ribelle*, Adelphi, Milano, 2007, p. 39.
11. Ernst Junger, 'Der Waldgang', Ernst Klett, Stuttgart, 1980 – my translation from the Italian edition, Ernst Junger, *Trattato del Ribelle*, Adelphi, Milano, 2007, p. 120.
12. Fernando Pessoa as the Baron of Teive, in Richard Zenith (ed.), *The Education of the Stoic - the only manuscript of the Baron of Teive*, Exact change, Cambridge, 2005, p. 14.
13. Fernando Pessoa as the Baron of Teive, in Richard Zenith (ed.), *The Education of the Stoic - the only manuscript of the Baron of Teive*, Exact change, Cambridge, 2005, p. 10.
14. Max Stimer, *The Ego and Its Own*, David Leopold (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p.143.
15. Fernando Pessoa, in Nuno Ribeiro (ed.), *Philosophical Essays*, Contra Mundum Press, New York, 2012, p.41 – in English in the original.

16. Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, David Leopold (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 7.
17. Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, David Leopold (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 324.
18. Ernst Junger, *Über die Linie*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart, 1980. Martin Heidegger responded to Junger's book with the text 'Zur Seinsfrage', published in English as *The Question of Being*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham Maryland, 1958.
19. See Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' and 'On Mere Being', in John Burnside (ed.), *Wallace Stevens*, Faber and Faber, London, 2008, respectively pp. 28-44 and p. 129.
20. Fernando Pessoa as Alberto Caeiro, XXVII from 'The Keeper of Sheep', in Richard Zenith (ed.), *A Little Larger than the Entire Universe*, Penguin, London, 2006, p. 30 – I corrected the last line of Zenith's translation, which rendered incorrectly 'Gozo tudo isso como quem esta aqui ao sol' as 'I enjoy it all as one who knows that the sun exist'.
21. Ernst Junger, 'An der Zeitmauer', Ernst Klett, Stuttgart, 1981 – my translation from the Italian edition *Al Muro del Tempo*, Adelphi, Milano, 2000, p.140.
22. Ernst Junger, 'An der Zeitmauer', Ernst Klett, Stuttgart, 1981 – my translation from the Italian edition *Al Muro del Tempo*, Adelphi, Milano, 2000, p.145.
23. Fernando Pessoa as Alberto Caeiro, XXVIII, from 'The Keeper of Sheep', in Richard Zenith (ed.), *A Little Larger than the Entire Universe*, Penguin, London, 2006, p.31.
24. Fernando Pessoa as Alberto Caeiro, XXX, from 'The Keeper of Sheep', in Richard Zenith (ed.), *A Little Larger than the Entire Universe*, Penguin, London, 2006, p. 33.
25. Fernando Pessoa as Alberto Caeiro, XXVIII, from 'The Keeper of Sheep', in Richard Zenith (ed.), *A Little Larger than the Entire Universe*, Penguin, London, 2006, p. 32.
26. Fernando Pessoa as Alberto Caeiro, I, from 'The Keeper of Sheep' – my translation from the Italian edition, I, from 'Il Pastore di Greggi' in Piero Ceccucci (ed.), *Un'Affollata Solitudine*, BUR RCS Libri, Milano, 2012, p. 25.