

Section: *Special articles*

## POETRY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY: THE CASE FOR FERNANDO PESSOA AS A THERAPIST. POETRY AS A TOOL IN PSYCHOTHERAPY



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### Abstract

Nossrat Peseschkian incorporated the use of stories as a key element of Positive Psychotherapy (Peseschkian 2016). Poetry has also been proposed as a powerful tool in psychotherapy and defined as “the use of language, symbol and story in therapeutic, educational and community-building capacities.” (Mazza 2016). Among great poets Fernando Pessoa is relatively unknown due to his writing in Portuguese and to the complexity of his multiple styles, personas and perspectives. Yet, this very complexity makes his poetry, alongside his unique prose, powerful tools to be used in psychotherapy. Finally, his poems are easily accessible in both Portuguese and English today. This article starts with a brief biographical introduction to Pessoa, followed by examples of his work under different voices that can be used by mental health professionals in supporting persons in the process of healing through psychotherapy.

**Keywords:** poetry, psychotherapy, narrative approach, positive psychotherapy

### Introducing Fernando Pessoa - 1888-1935

Born in Lisbon, Portugal, Fernando Pessoa lost his father to tuberculosis at the age of five. Soon thereafter his mother remarried and the family moved to South Africa where Fernando received his education in English. At the age of seventeen he returned to Portugal to attend college never to leave Lisbon again. Despite being a talented student Pessoa did not complete his college education in order to dedicate his life to writing poetry independently and supported himself financially by writing and translating commercial letters - he never married and had no children. Pessoa was part of the generation that introduced modernism in Portugal with the literary magazine *Orpheu*. In 1914 Pessoa started to write poetry as three different poets, literary personas he named his “heteronyms” to emphasize them being more than pseudonyms. Those three poets are: Alberto

Caeiro, Alvaro de Campos, and Ricardo Reis - each writing in their own style, with their own perspectives, and even opinions of each other. Despite his enormous talent and recognized mastery in poetry and prose, Pessoa only published a few chapbooks with some of English poems and one book of poetry in Portuguese. Upon his death, at the early age of 47, he left a trunk full of writings, both poetry and prose, that would be rediscovered in the 1950’s and since then considered a national treasure in Portugal and beyond. For a comprehensive account of Pessoa’s life and works see (Zenith 2021).

### Fernando Pessoa's own poetry

When writing poetry as himself, sometimes referred to as “ortonym” in opposition to his “heteronyms”, Pessoa had specific themes which can be used to give those in therapy a new perspective. One such theme was the opposition

between thinking and feeling exemplified in a poem titled "This" starting with:

***They say I fake or lie  
All I write. No.  
I just feel  
With my imagination.  
Not with the heart.***

This perspective of imagining feelings, or thinking feelings, can help persons overwhelmed by emotions and strong feelings gain some understanding and control over such emotions and feelings - an approach sometimes framed as "cognitive control of emotions" (Kohn et al. 2021). This approach can give a person a much needed distance to attain a sense of calm over these strong emotions. Another example of thinking instead of feeling - or of thinking over feeling - can be found in the poem starting:

***I feel so much  
That I'm often persuaded  
That I'm sentimental,  
But I recognize when I measure myself  
That it's all thought,  
That I didn't really feel.***

### Case example: Autism Spectrum Disorder and "imagining feelings"

The patient was an adult who had struggled his whole life with understanding feelings - both his own and others'. As described in the DSM-5 criteria for Autism Spectrum Disorder, he presented "deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back and forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect." (American Psychiatric Association 2021). The therapist shared Pessoa's line "I just feel with my imagination" which helped the patient work on imagining emotions that would be appropriate in specific social encounters and interactions.

Longing for lost childhood is another there in Pessoa's poems when writing as himself. This recurrent theme in Pessoa writing as himself sometimes point to a childhood that actually never was. This idea is embedded in the perception that time has passed and that the vision of the world through infant eyes is lost forever, only to remain as an idea or memory. One such poem starts:

***The child I once was cries on the road.  
Where I left him when I came to be who I am;***

***But today, seeing that what I am is nothing,  
I want to go and find who I was where he stayed.***

These longings - and sharing such perspectives - can be helpful to patients dealing with trauma and loss - what today we conceptualized as "adverse childhood events" and have been linked to a number of negative health outcomes (Harris 2018). The poem express a well-known longing for things past including an idealization of this lost past, with another example being the poem "Christmas" in which the poem imagine the snow over the little house - something that never happened:

***And how white with grace  
The landscape I don't know,  
Seen from behind the window  
Of the home I'll never have!***

### Pessoa writing as Alberto Caeiro

Of the three main "heteronyms" Alberto Caeiro is recognized by the others, and by Pessoa himself, as their "master." Caeiro's main work is a collection of poems titled "The Herd Keeper" - sometimes translated as "the keeper of the sheep." In this series of poems Alberto Caeiro exposes and explains his philosophical position of being an "sensacionismo" as Pessoa called the approach. Sensacionismo emphasizes the importance of sensory perception and the immediate experience of the world over abstract intellectualism. As such, Caeiro proposes a basic description of nature based on sensations alone, without the elaboration of metaphors or metaphysics. This approach can be understood as a variation of intellectualization, a defense mechanism that can best be referred either to a variant of the more basic defense of isolation of affect, or to the psychological translation of emotional issues into intellectual terms (Arnold 2014).

In these opening lines of poem 9, Caeiro introduces the central metaphor of the poem: the poet as the herd keeper, with the herd being his own thoughts. This metaphor underscores the idea that Caeiro's thoughts, like a herd, are simple and natural. He doesn't engage in complex philosophical ponderings but instead embraces the immediacy of sensory experience.

***I'm a herd keeper.  
The herd is my thoughts  
And my thoughts are all sensations.***

***I think with my eyes and with my ears  
And with hands and feet  
And with the nose and mouth.***

Caeiro continues to emphasize the primacy of the senses in his thinking process across his poetic works. He doesn't rely on abstract reasoning or intellectual analysis; instead, he engages with the world directly through his senses. This direct sensory experience is a fundamental aspect of his "sensacionismo" philosophy.

***To think of a flower is to see and smell it  
And to eat a fruit is to know its meaning.***

Caeiro suggests that true understanding comes from a direct engagement with the object or idea in question. Above he uses the example of thinking about a flower by seeing and smelling it. This tactile and sensory approach to thought underscores his rejection of abstract, detached reasoning. To truly understand something, he believes in immersing oneself in the sensory experience of it.

Caeiro paradoxically suggests that while his approach doesn't necessarily yield a structured intellectual understanding of a subject, it allows him to grasp it on a more profound, intuitive level. This aligns with his belief in the importance of immediate sensory experience over abstract analysis.

In "The Herd Keeper," Fernando Pessoa, writing as Alberto Caeiro, presents a poetic philosophy that celebrates simplicity, direct experience, and the beauty of the natural world. Through his sensory engagement with the world, he invites readers to embrace a more immediate and authentic way of perceiving and understanding life.

These poems can assist in therapy as reminders for patients - and therapists - about the importance of moments, directly experiencing the world without too much intellectualization or overthinking.

### **Pessoa writing as Alvaro de Campos**

Of the three full-fledged heteronyms, Alvaro de Campos is the favorite of many readers, being a modern, audacious, and direct poet, who despite considering Caeiro his master lives away from the idyllic fields as a naval engineer fully immersed in the city and its modern life and machinery. One of the famous poems as Alvaro de Campos describes the experience, so common among those with depression and anxiety, that everyone else seems perfect and "a winner" while the poet-narrator

describes himself as "so often lowly, so often piggish, so often vile." This poem is titled "poem in a straight line" and midway through it asks:

***Come on, I'm tired of demigods!  
Where are there people in the world?  
So am I the only one who is vile and wrong on  
this earth?***

Alvaro de Campos also talks about being "weary", a feeling so prevalent among those with depression and anxiety. Suicide is another topic brought on by Alvaro de Campos when he asks at the start of a poem: *If you want to kill yourself, why don't you want to kill yourself?* The poem continues with a description of the futility of life and how others will forget those who died. There are some lines however in which the poem talks about the feeling of being important and elaborates that:

***You're important to you, because you're what  
you feel.***

***You are everything to you, because you are the  
universe,***

***And the universe itself and the others  
Satellites of your objective subjectivity.***

***You are important to you because only you are  
important to you.***

Calling attention to the subjective importance each of us have for our own selves can remind our patients - and ourselves - of the need to center ourselves in our unique point-of-view to the world. It also reminds us not to depend on others, on their approval or their affection, to be well.

In that which is among Brazilian readers possibly the best known of poems by Pessoa as Alvaro de Campos, *The Tobacco Store*, the poem starts with a powerful contrast between what he is - we are - and what he contains - we contain - in terms of aspirations:

***I am nothing.***

***I will never be but nothing.***

***I can't wish but to be nothing.***

***Aside from this, I have in me every dream in the  
world.***

The poem goes on for many pages contrasting the subjective world of the poet with the concrete, outside world exemplified by the tobacco store. At some point the poet, who writes verses, and the tobacco store owner are contrasted as follows:

***He will die and I will die.***

***He will leave the sign, I will leave verses.***

***At a certain point, the sign will die too, the verses too.***

***After a certain point, the street where the sign was located will die,***

***And the language in which the verses were written.***

***The rotating planet on which all this took place will then die.***

***In other satellites of other systems, anything like people***

***will continue to make things like verses and live under things like signs,***

Which can be read as a short ode to the eternity of poetry - and the effort of the concrete world - thought the poem rapidly returns to his vision of futility:

***Always one thing facing another,***

***Always one thing as useless as the other,***

***Always the impossible as stupid as the real***

These are some examples of how the poems written by Pessoa as Alvaro de Campos can assist in giving patients - and therapists - opportunities to ponder on some of the deep existential matters brought on by depression and anxiety.

### Case example: not relying on others for your own happiness

Patient was a woman in her mid-40's. She was single and although her core depressive symptoms decreased with treatment she continued to complain about not having a partner or a family. At times her loneliness was the main motive of the psychotherapy sessions - in those sessions she would proclaim: "if only I had a partner for life, things would be perfect!" After supporting the patient and developing a strong therapeutic alliance the therapist mentioned Pessoa's lines:

***You're important to you, because you're what you feel.***

***You are everything to you, because you are the universe,***

***And the universe itself and the others***

***Satellites of your objective subjectivity.***

Upon hearing this the patient repeated the sentence "you are the universe" and modified it to "I am the universe!" She appreciated the perspective of being, as she described, "self

contained" and her beliefs that she would only be happy if she had others around her decreased - without ever completing subsiding.

### Pessoa writing as Ricardo Reis

The third full-fledged heteronym is a physician who writes classic odes: Ricardo Reis. The American literary critic Howard Bloom, in his *Western Canon*, while calling Campos and Caeiro "great poets", calls Reis "an interesting minor poet." (Bloom 2014). Given his background on classical education and form, it is not surprising that Ricardo Reis's poetry from a philosophical perspective lean towards two schools from classic antiquity: Epicureanism and Stoicism. From Epicureanism Reis brings in the perspective of the importance of joy repeated in poems like:

***Every day without enjoyment wasn't yours***

***You only lasted in it. How long you live***

***Without enjoying it, you're not living.***

From Stoicism Reis brings the idea of living "placidly" which can be interpreted as the "ataraxia" idea of the Stoics:

***To the night that comes in doesn't belong, Lydia,***

***The same ardor that the day asked of us.***

***Let us placidly love***

***Our uncertain life.***

From the Stoics you can also identify the resignation facing the world and facing death, as in:

***Nothing is left of nothing. We are nothing.***

***A little in the sun and the air so we lag behind***

***The unbreathable darkness that weighs us down***

***The damp earth imposed on us,***

***Postponed corpses that procreate.***

In one poem he merges the two philosophical perspectives and calls himself a "stoic without hardness."

***Deny me anything, Luck, but to see her,***

***That I, 'stoic without hardness,***

***In the engraved sentence of Fate***

***want to enjoy letters.***

This Stoic stance written so many decades ago fits well with the current interest in this philosophical school as a precursor to



psychotherapeutic interventions (Robertson 2018). Another philosophical perspective not frequently mentioned when discussing Ricardo Reis' odes is Buddhism. One of the "four noble truths" of Buddhism is:

***Suffering is caused by craving.***

In Ricardo Reis we find time and again the notion that it is key to life is "not to want", as in:

***But to those who expect nothing  
Everything that comes is grateful.***

And again in:

***Want little: you will have everything.  
Want nothing: you will be free.***

Furthermore, in several Odes we see Pessoa, writing as Ricardo Reis, develop the Buddhist theme of impermanence as in the verses above stating that "Nothing is left of nothing. We are nothing." As with Stoicism and its relationship to psychotherapy, Buddhism too has been recognized as dialoguing with psychotherapy (Mathers, Miller, and Ando 2013).

Examining Reis' poetry from these different philosophical perspectives can enrich the reader, and the therapist, in two ways: first, it gives the reader a complex philosophical background on which to refer back on the ideas posed by each poem; second, it makes one realize how contemporaneous Pessoa/Reis can be today when we are ready to embrace a multicultural, multilingual and multi-tradition existence. In that sense reading Pessoa/Reis is as much enriching today as it was one hundred years ago when these verses were penned - or thousands of years ago when those philosophies of Buddhism and Stoicism were first proposed.

For therapists, and their patients, the Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Buddhism reflected in these poems can serve to minimize anxiety and the many dreads brought on by mental illness and trauma.

### Case example: Taking Reis' Stoic perspective into action

The patient was a middle-aged woman questioning her achievements in life - both professional and material. After establishing a strong therapeutic relationship, the therapist mentioned Reis' lines:

***Want little: you will have everything.***

***Want nothing: you will be free.***

The patient paused and elaborated on how liberating it would be not to want too much and that led to a discussion about how much she already had achieved. In this instance the poem served as inviting the patient to question her own norms and expectations, as proposed by Remmers when using traditional stories (Remmers 2022).

### Conclusions and Summary

The poetry of Fernando Pessoa, in each of his many voices, can assist therapists and their patients in the process of healing by addressing universal themes such as: the nature and place of feelings; the many facets of the self; how to deal with suffering in the world; how to consider our existential position in the face of death. Pessoa's deeply honest while still aesthetically elegant view of life as this collection of impression, sensations, and fleeting emotions can certainly help patients appreciate their own struggles with these same emotions and feelings. Finally, Pessoa's brutally honest assessment of himself and others is also a call to re-evaluate the weight we give to others' opinions and the proper place of these opinions in our mind, our attitudes and our behaviors towards the self and others.

The life of Pessoa itself can also serve as solace to patients living alone in pursuit of their dreams and aspirations. To see one immerse one's life in the language, to the point of proclaiming "my motherland is the Portuguese language" like Pessoa once wrote, as a means to produce art can also inspire others to immerse themselves in their own medium for creation and creativity.

The ideas, and the expression of such ideas as poetry by Fernando Pessoa and his heteronyms, correlate well with the balance model in Positive Psychotherapy (Messias, Peseschkian, and Cagande 2020). One can see Caeiro, the poem of essence, as the "body" or physical area of life. Campos, the poem of modernity, can be read as the poet of achievement and work. Reis, the philosopher poem, can be read as the "spiritual" area attached to meaning. Finally, Pessoa writing as himself, can be associated with the area of relationships and contacts given his longing for lost childhood and connection with others.

Reading Pessoa's poems - and his prose which is not addressed in this paper - can not only make us better therapists but also more complete and compassionate human beings to ourselves and

towards others.

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