

Science, astronomy and *taedium metaphysicum*: An investigation into the boredom of Giacomo Leopardi and Fernando Pessoa

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Keywords

Pessoa, Leopardi, Boredom, Science, Astronomy, Illusion, Time and Space, Infinity, Relativity.

Abstract

Giacomo Leopardi and Fernando Pessoa seem to share an unusually complex metaphysics of boredom, a trace which is strikingly modern. This metaphysics partially feeds upon science and, more specifically, astronomy. This paper looks at the similarities in Leopardi's and Pessoa's intricate philosophies of boredom, which are interwoven with their views on reality and illusion, space and time, relativity and the role of humans in the universe.

Palavras-chave

Pessoa, Leopardi, tédio, ciência, astronomia, ilusão, tempo e espaço, infinito, relatividade.

Resumo

Giacomo Leopardi e Fernando Pessoa parecem compartilhar uma metafísica do tédio involuntariamente complexa, um aspecto notavelmente moderno. Essa metafísica alimenta-se parcialmente das ciências e, mais especificamente, da astronomia. Este artigo enfoca as similaridades entre as intrincadas filosofias do tédio de Pessoa e Leopardi, que se encontram entrelaçadas às suas respectivas visões sobre realidade e ilusão, espaço e tempo, relatividade -- e sobre o papel do ser humano no universo.

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Pessoa écoutant une voix, celle de Leopardi [...] se donne une identité et un hétéronyme de plus [Pessoa, in listening to a voice, that of Leopardi [...] gives himself an extra identity and heteronym.

(RAVOUX-RALLO, 1997: 39)

Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837) and Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) seem to be bound by an elective affinity, in spite of the different epochs in which they lived. Both were poet-philosophers of poor health but rich minds, prolific and precocious writers and thinkers, innovative but *maudit*. Prisoners of their own reason, they fell prey to the worst possible condition that they could imagine: boredom. In the writings of both poets we find boredom in many interstices, overtly mentioned or laid down as a fine dust on their closely-written pages. Both, I will argue, have constructed a complex metaphysics of boredom, bound to their ambiguous stance towards science and the idea of progress. There are remarkable similarities in their stance on the interwovenness and inextricability of reality and illusion, science and myth. Their method of interrogation comprised a very similar compound of poetry and philosophy, of feeling and thinking – what Leopardi called ‘ultrafilosofia’. It is therefore not all that surprising that Pessoa possessed two volumes of Leopardi’s works, one in French and one in Italian (LEOPARDI, 1909; LEOPARDI, 1924).

Nevertheless, even though both writers have been compared to many poets, writers and philosophers, there seems to have been fairly little critical attention to the intertextual connections between the pluri-personal, dispersed writings of Pessoa and the equally fragmented, labyrinthic non-whole that constitutes Leopardi’s literary heredity. Except for a few articles and contributions of several critics, mostly in French, and a brief comparison by the Italo-Portuguese writer Antonio Tabucchi, I have found only a book about the Portuguese and Brazilian reception of Leopardi’s works by Mariagrazia RUSSO (2003) and rather cursory remarks in articles and books that treat other themes.¹ In this article, I propose to provide material for this potentially fruitful comparison between Leopardi and Pessoa, arguing that there is a specific, analogous relationship between their respective philosophies about boredom and their interest in science, and more specifically astronomy.

It goes without saying that there are many possible complications for a comparison of their boredom. First of all, there is a linguistic problem, in the sense that Pessoa and Leopardi wrote in different languages and thus did seldom use the same words to express their boredom; and even if they did use the same words, these words certainly had different cultural and historical connotations at the

¹ Cf. DAROS (1997), LARUE (1997), RAVOUX-RALLO (1997), RUSSO (2003); A comparison between Pessoa and Pirandello has seemed, for instance, more logical for critics (especially with Antonio Tabucchi as ‘intermediator’), although much of Pirandello’s poetics can be traced back to Leopardi. Contemporaneity seems a strong guiding principle here.

moment they used them. My interest in this article is however not so much philological, but more thematic, thus not paying too much attention to the intricacies of verbal differences, but more to the constancies that can be distilled from repeated semantic foregrounding of boredom in the context of a philosophy on life and literature.²

Another problem is the lack of a centre in the philosophical poetry and poetic philosophy of both writers. Leopardi's *Zibaldone* is a non-linear, rhizomatic collection of annotations about all kinds of subjects, in which he weaves and unweaves like a writerly equivalent of Penelope. The same is even more emphatically true for Fernando Pessoa, whose literary heredity presents the added complexity of a heteronymous constellation of authorial personae. This loss of self and dispersal of authorship have to be taken into account and can in my view be partially explained through the effects of the specific boredom that both 'non-existent' authors embodied. This is not an attempt to deny the complexities of such a decentred authorship, but rather to acknowledge it by studying possible if partial reasons for its existence. On the whole, however, I agree with the reading of Paulo de Medeiros, who maintains that, even though the implications of Pessoa's heteronomy are complex and theoretically interesting, they have tended to dominate critical attention for Pessoa's works in a way that is not wholly desirable (MEDEIROS, 2013). Furthermore, in this paper marginalia will be an important tool in delineating the figure of the writer-reader Pessoa, since I agree with Patricio Ferrari when he states that "to think of this author outside the context of his personal library would mean to neglect a longstanding connection that both provoked and generated literature" (FERRARI, 2008: 69-70), just as "the critical normativization of the *Zibaldone*'s fragmentariness tends to dismiss its burden of potentiality" since Leopardi's text is "annotated with thousands of marginalia, interlinear and inline additions, and underlining" (STOYANOVA, 2014).

A last methodological, or rather epistemological, premise to be made is that – also taking into consideration the authorship without a centre that is attached to both names – I do not envisage to point out a unidirectional 'influence' of Leopardi on Pessoa. By pointing to shared themes, philosophical and poetical constancies (which exist even in the most paradoxical reasoning), I merely intend to examine the literary and historical sources that have helped to shape their peculiar, but at the same time very similar, literary crystallizations of so unclear a phenomenon as boredom. I also investigate the way this specific construction of boredom interconnects with scientific discourses and interests, and more specifically with discoveries and divulgations within astronomy: the connection of boredom and astronomy is, to my knowledge, very rare and sets Pessoa and Leopardi "apart

² However, on an earlier occasion I did delve deeper into the matter of linguistic, cultural and historical similarities and differences, in a master thesis entitled "Pien di quella ineffabile noia. La noia metafisica nelle opere di Giacomo Leopardi e Fernando Pessoa".

together”, one might say. Moreover, in this article it is argued that the boredom of Leopardi and Pessoa was strikingly modern, as can be said of many other aspects of their writing (CORSINOVI, 2001; MEDEIROS, 2013).

Boredom and modernity

Arthur Schopenhauer wrote about Leopardi (in Thomas Kuhn’s English translation): “He is completely filled with ennui and steeped in it; everywhere the theme of his work is the derision and wretchedness of this existence; he depicts it on each and every page of his work, but in such a multiplicity of forms and aspects, with such a wealth of images, that he never becomes boring” (KUHN, 1976: 286). This statement suits Pessoa equally well: he molds images around the theme of boredom incessantly and repetitively, but at the same time manages to present such a monotonous subject in a wide range of colours and forms. Boredom, for both, is dreadfully close to being the essence of life, and presents a palette of the greatest subtlety and diversity. But what important elements does their boredom share?

When it comes to boredom, Leopardi and Pessoa are generally not referring to a normal “what-the-blooming hell-is-a-chap-to-do-hereability” (Pessoa, cit. in SADLIER, 1998: 145). Both rather experience a tedium that is inextricably interwoven with the burden of consciousness, which explains their jealous statements with respect to animals (who, in their view, do not experience boredom) and inanimate objects. All creatures below a certain level of consciousness have the advantage of being fully present to the world, in whatever form they encounter or register it. This explains the paradoxical jealousy that Pessoa and Leopardi experience vis-à-vis all those who are “metaphysically younger” than they are, be it for historical reasons (earlier human beings) or reasons of age (children).

The attitude of Leopardi and Pessoa towards their boredom is highly ambiguous: although they know no pain or evil worse than boredom, at the same time they are convinced of its sublime nature. One could even argue that Leopardi has nobilitated boredom as “noia” in Italian, which before him could hardly be sublime, whereas after Leopardi someone like Alberto Moravia can write a novel about an artist and call it *La noia*. Nonetheless, regarding this one should point out that in his *Canti* (poetry) Leopardi adopts the traditionally “higher” terms, such as “affanno”, “fastidio” and “tedio”, words that stem from a tradition that comprises Francesco Petrarca, Marsilio Ficino and Vittorio Alfieri (to name only a few of an important tradition of melancholy writers and thinkers in Italy and outside of Italy that goes back to the classics). However, in his *Zibaldone* (prose), Leopardi writes often about “noia”, without feeling the need to choose a more “elevated” expression (cf. DALLE PEZZE and SALZANI, 2009: 9).

But the sublimity of Leopardi's and Pessoa's boredom does not merely rest on a (literary) tradition that endows it with an aura of nobility. Even though both of them undoubtedly can be inserted in a longer tradition, they are also attributing to a renewal and modernization of that tradition. It seems therefore appropriate, in their case, to speak of "boredom", a word with a far more "modern" connotation than "melancholy". What their boredom has in common with earlier melancholy is that it encompasses their view on the world, representing therefore not merely a mood but a continuous state of being. Part of the reason for this ubiquity of their boredom is the fact that their philosophy is imbued with boredom (and vice versa), which (as in Heidegger's case) forms the key to the revelation of the painful truth. Boredom is "*amica della verità*" [the friend of truth]³ as well as the most reasonable thing that exists, "*quanto la vita degli uomini ha di sostanzievole e di reale*" [that which is substantial and real in the life of men] (LEOPARDI, 2011: 1691; LEOPARDI, 1982: 248).

To establish the modernity of Leopardi's and Pessoa's boredom, the following passage of a study on boredom by Awee Prins, Dutch professor of philosophy, can be enlightening:

The imprint of boredom on the eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought is inversely proportional to the persuasiveness of metaphysics. After the romantic, the cosmic and the grim boredom, in the twentieth century the 'bored boredom' presents itself. Is this boredom not the basic mood and final accomplishment of metaphysics; of the experienced nihilism and her material countenance, technology? In the completion of metaphysics in the worldwide reigning technology, or, to be more precise: in the *perseverance* of that completion and the *self-evident course* of that technological manipulation, a deep boredom delineates itself. *Fear*, basic mood of the 'discovered' nihilism that is at the basis of Western philosophy and ground theme of a philosophical and literary generation reaching from Kierkegaard to Sartre, has been replaced by the perpetually *ongoing* nihilism of *boredom*: the as yet hopeless persistence of the nihilism that has *breached* the fear. The *horror metaphysicum* has become *taedium metaphysicum*. After the abolition of the Hereafter we have ended up in a perennial 'Still-here'.

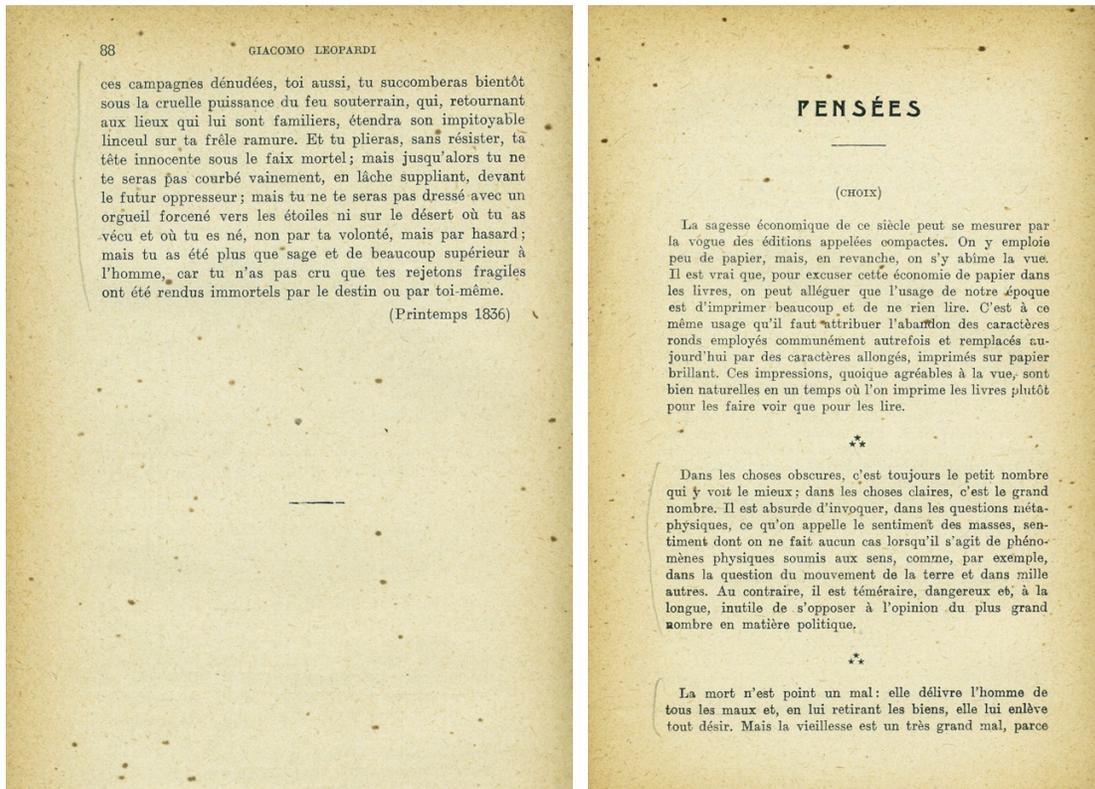
(PRINS, 2007: 19, translation mine)

Even though Leopardi's boredom is often claimed to be "romantic" or "cosmic" – a logical consequence of the period in which he lived –, I would argue that the description of Prins is certainly applicable to Leopardi's *taedium metaphysicum*. His writings, and those of Pessoa, offer a convincing example of boredom filling the void that has been left by metaphysics, because the "truth" of boredom for them is, in fact, inversely proportionate to the persuasiveness of metaphysics. To explore this, we should consider the way in which their boredom is bound up with illusions.

³ All translations from the *Zibaldone* come from Giacomo LEOPARDI (2013).

Boredom and illusion

There is a logic of loss to Pessoa's and Leopardi's boredom. Every loss brings boredom more prominently to the fore. Their boredom is constituted by a series of absences which bring them close to nothingness, but fail to nullify completely (which would be itself a blessing, because for both non-life is preferable to life) (cf. Pessoa's – or a previous owner's? – underlined passages in LEOPARDI, 1909: 88, 114).



Figs. 1 & 2: Giacomo Leopardi, *Poésies complètes* from 1909, from volume in Pessoa's library (CFP 8-316), p. 88 & p. 114.

There is, also, a Faustian undercurrent in the writings of the two poet-philosophers: Pessoa explicitly takes up the Faustian theme by writing his own *Fausto*, whereas the work of Leopardi presents clear thematic affinities with the Faust myth (D'INTINO, 2001). The fascination to "sentir tudo de todas as maneiras" and "viver tudo de todos os lados," is especially present in Álvaro de Campos, the heteronym of Pessoa who strives to be all at the same time (RAGUENET, 1997). Like in Puskin's version of Faust, Pessoa's Faust embodies boredom because nothing satisfies him mentally, he stays the same self no matter how many horizons he explores. Interestingly, for Pessoa (or rather, for Bernardo Soares) the Persian poet, mathematician and astronomer Omar Khayyam fulfills a similar role within the framework of a theory on boredom: "O tédio de Khayyam não é o tédio de quem não sabe o que faça [...] É mais profundo e mais nobre o tédio do sabio persa. É o tédio de quem pensou claramente e viu que tudo era obscuro: de quem mediu

todas as religiões e todas as philosophias e depois disse, como [...] Septimio Severo: 'Omnia fui, nihil...', 'Fui tudo; nada vale a pena'' (PESSOA, 2009: 78; BNP/E3, 1-5^r).

Leopardi describes how this Faustian ambition can bring an individual of high sensibility and imagination close to boredom:

Egli resta vuoto, disingannato profondamente e stabilmente, perchè ha tutto profondamente e vivamente provato: non si è fermato alla superficie, non si va affondando a poco a poco; è andato al fondo, ha tutto abbracciato, e tutto rigettato come affettivamente indegno e frivolo: non gli resta altro a vedere, a sperimentare, a sperare.

(LEOPARDI, 2011: 1071-1072)

He remains empty, profoundly and enduringly disenchanted, because he has experience everything intensely and profoundly. He has not paused at the surface, he does not proceed to immerse himself in it gradually, he has gone straight to the bottom, he has embraced everything, and rejected everything as in reality unworthy and frivolous.

(LEOPARDI, 2013: 757-758)

It is illusions that give life, but if there are no illusions left, all that remains is boredom. The problem, in Leopardi's view, is that desire is intrinsically infinite, so that nothing can satisfy it completely (LEOPARDI, 1982: 66-67). A powerful poetic expression of the inevitability of boredom that derives from the intrinsically insatiable nature of desire is to be found in the *Canto notturno d'un pastore errante dell'Asia*, in which Leopardi daydreams in the end in famous verses:

Forse s'avessi io l'ale
Da volar su le nubi,
E noverar le stelle ad una ad una.
O come il tuono errar di giogo in giogo,
Più felice sarei, dolce mia greggia,
Più felice sarei, candida luna,
O forse erra dal vero,
Mirando all'altrui sorte, il mio pensiero:
Forse in qual forma, in quale
Stato che sia, dentro covile o cuna,
È funesto a chi nasce il dì natale.

(LEOPARDI, 1987: 84)

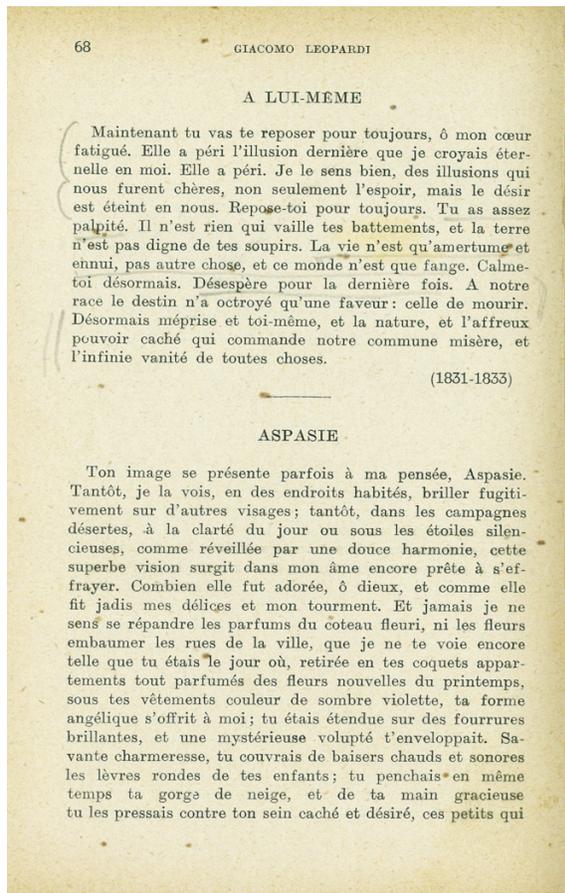
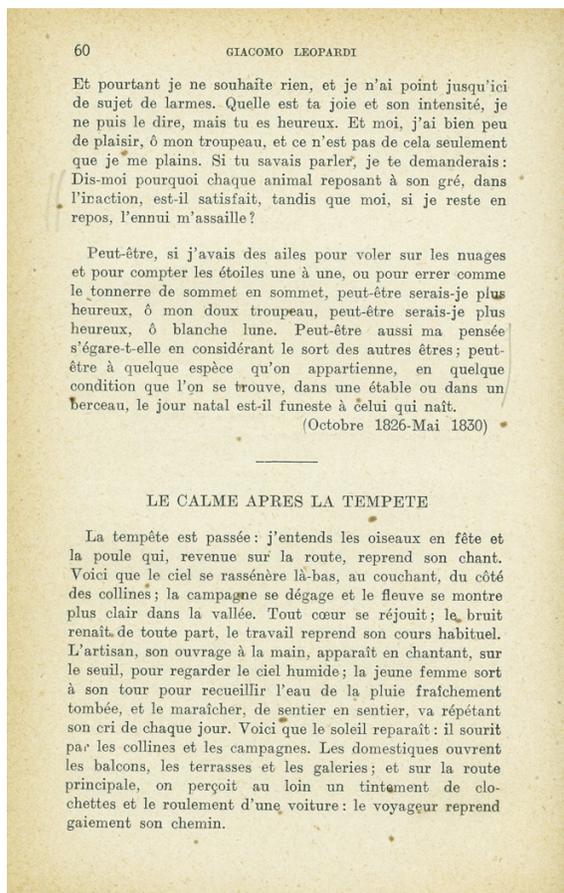
Maybe if I had wings
to fly above the clouds
and count the stars out one by one,
or, like thunder, graze, from peak to peak,
I'd be happier, my gentle flock,
happier, bright moon.
Or maybe my mind's straying from the truth,
imagining destinies of others.
Maybe in whatever form or state,
be it in stall or cradle,
the day we're born is cause for mourning.

(LEOPARDI, 2010: 201, 203)

The rhyme in "ale" traverses the whole poem that is written under the aegis of boredom. With the "ale" (wing), desire is ubiquitous in the poem, as if the wish to fly elevate oneself above the "fango" (mud), in a clear reference to predecessors such as Noël Antoine Pluche (MARTINELLI, 2005: 234). This dialectics of boredom and desire, characteristic of man, is present throughout the canto. Revealingly, the desinence "ale" appears in words like "male" (bad/evil), and this "male" is not only tied through rhyme to "ale" but also to "natale" ("of birth", as well as "christmas"), thus revealing the drama of birth (PERELLA, 1990: 69).

This rather Freudian standpoint *avant la lettre* indicates in a straightforward manner that man is not made for happiness. If the capacity to delude oneself dries up, what remains is a boundless desert of boredom: “Numa cella ou num deserto está o infinito”, writes Bernardo Soares; but it is an infinite which is “tornado interior e apertado” in a night without stars (PESSOA, 2010: I, 251; BNP/E3, 3-34^r).

Interesting in this respect is Pessoa’s *Canto a Leopardi* in which he responds, with a dialogue, to a dialogue of Leopardi: both are ‘conversing’ with their heart, but Pessoa is speaking at the same time with Leopardi, over the grave, through his verses that echo Leopardi’s (but every echo comes with a difference). The clear intertextual reference is to Leopardi’s canto *A sé stesso*, in which the poet from Recanati laments the loss of sweet metaphysical deceptions, and therefore of all desire, which leaves life as “amaro e noia” and the earth, again, as “fango”. Leopardi’s last line is “e l’infinita vanità del tutto” (LEOPARDI, 1987: 190-191) The French translation of the poem in Pessoa’s library is almost entirely underlined (LEOPARDI, 1909: 68).



Figs. 3 & 4: Giacomo Leopardi, *Poésies complètes* from 1909, from volume in Pessoa’s library (CFP 8-316), p. 60 & p. 68.

Pessoa responds with his own canto, which ends with the following verses:

Assim, na noite abstracta da Razão, inutilmente, majestosamente,
 Dialoga consigo o coração,
 Fala alto a si mesma a mente;
 E não há paz nem conclusão,
 Tudo é como se fora inexistente.

(PESSOA, 2000: 97)

Many recurring elements of the boredom-bound philosophy of both are to be found in these lines: reason creates its own abstract night, which is as useless as it is majestic, and which brings no peace or conclusion. The last line is very significant: everything is as if it were inexistente. The implication is that reason reveals the illusory façade that we weave around what we are used to call the world. This is precisely the common element that Antonio Tabucchi points out in the boredom of these two writers: “un ennui qui provient d’une discordance entre le virtuel et l’actuel, entre le réel et le concept du réel” [a boredom which derives from a discrepancy between the virtual and the actual, between the real and the concept of the real] (TABUCCHI, 1998: 104).

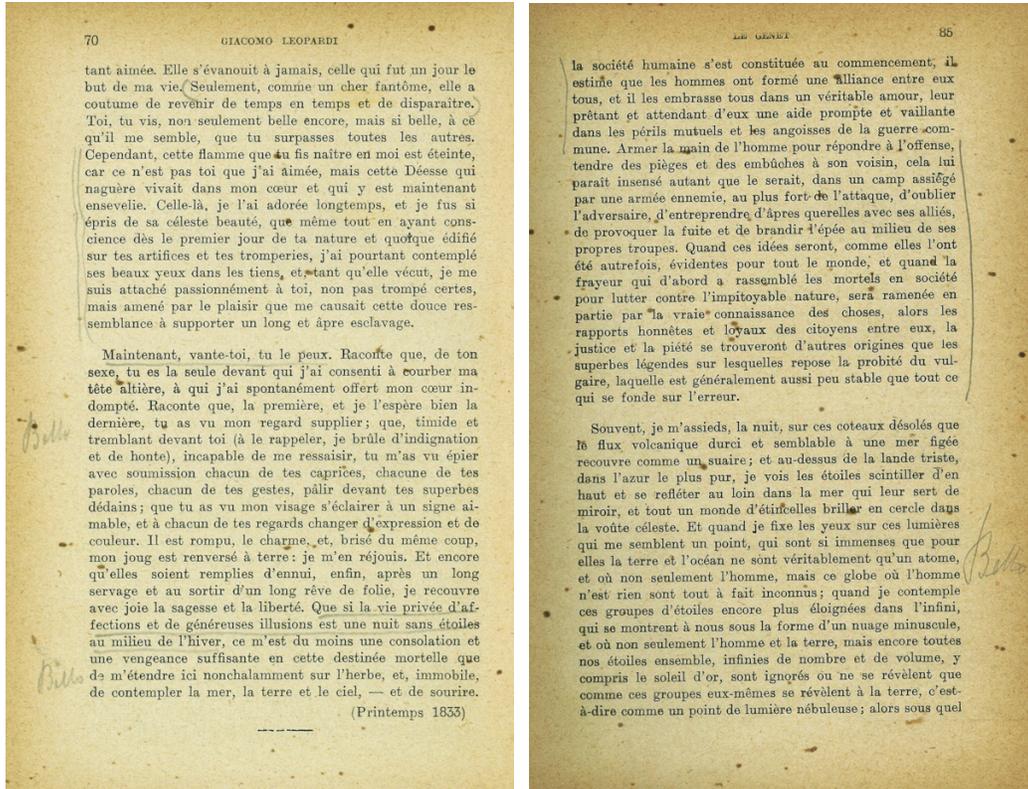
Most of Pessoa’s more well-known heteronyms and semi-heteronyms, such as Álvaro de Campos and Bernardo Soares, share a core of boredom. One of the heteronyms, Alberto Caeiro – who is revered as a master by many other heteronyms – has a quality that is envied by almost all his “colleagues”: to live in simplicity, accepting the world for what it is, without forcing one’s own illusions upon it, preferring existence above significance, looking above thinking. He strives to be as close as possible to “o primeiro olhar do primeiro homem”, to a perpetual newness that can only be reached by “uma aprendizagem de desaparecer” (PESSOA, 2012: 76, 66). Caeiro is convinced that objective reality is, in fact, the only reality and that lies lie only within the brains of human beings, and therefore he is content to live by the exact opposite of the philosophy of Leopardi and most of Pessoa’s heteronyms, he is the poetical incarnation of the metaphysical infancy the others strive for in vain.

The shepherd

Caeiro’s poetical oeuvre repeatedly foregrounds the poet who regards himself as a shepherd. In his relation to the world, Caeiro is therefore closer to the experience of a herd of animals (and even feels a sort of solidarity with trees, plants and stones) than to most human beings. There are striking similarities between Caeiro’s ruminations and Leopardi’s *Canto notturno di un pastore errante in Asia* (present twice in Pessoa’s library, with several verses underlined) (LEOPARDI, 1909: 57-60; cf. Fig. 3). However, Leopardi’s shepherd is jealous of his herd, which goes through life on the verge of unconsciousness, existing instead of living, and therefore

oblivious to that terrible tedium that the shepherd can never shed. As Ricardo Reis explains, Caetano's poetry ultimately means not only a liberation of desperation, but also of hope, the shedding of which is just as important in keeping illusion and, as a consequence, boredom at bay (PESSOA, 2012: 17). The motif of the shepherd is also present in the writings of Pessoa, who in his poem "Ó pastora, ó pastorinha" envies shepherds for their capability of simply having "ovelhas e riso", and for craving no more than that (PESSOA, 1997: 86). Another heteronym – Campos? – interestingly includes science in the equation, when he writes: "Deus anti-científico [...] Dá-nos a paz e admite | Nos valles esquecidos dos pastores ignotos [...] A paz que é dos que não conhecem e esquecem sem querer" (PESSOA, 2014: 364-365; BNP/E3, 66A-76).

The image of the shepherd is an important one in Leopardi's philosophy and poetry, and can be traced back to a very early occasion, namely to the history of astronomy which Leopardi wrote at the age of 15, and it returns in an early poetic fragment from 1819, *Odi, Melissa*. Astronomy is, for Leopardi, the most sublime and noble of the physical sciences (MARTINELLI, 1999; MARTINELLI, 2005: 190). Part of this sublimity is due to the fact that astronomy (like boredom) makes us feel our nullity, our smallness in comparison to the universe (as a marked passage of Leopardi in Pessoa's library explains, next to which we can read "Bello"; LEOPARDI, 1909: 85).



Figs. 5 & 6: Giacomo Leopardi, *Poésies complètes* from 1909, from volume in Pessoa's library (CFP 8-316), p. 70 & p. 85.

In his astronomical history, Leopardi explains that the first shepherds already contemplated the stars and that this first contemplation constituted the first step of mankind on the road to progress, in the march towards consciousness and (the later Leopardi would add) unhappiness (MARTINELLI, 2005: 217-234; POLIZZI, 2015: 4, 17-19). The infinite desire that makes us unhappy is thus brought back by Leopardi – even if he does not refer to this explicitly – to its etymological roots, to the Latin “*de-sidera*”, a condition in which the stars are absent, and one cannot think anymore simply, as Caeiro does, that “*as estrelas não são senão estrelas*” (PESSOA, 2015: 50).

Science and the boredom of too much knowledge

Progress and knowledge seem to be thus, for Leopardi and Pessoa, the road to loss, loss of life-giving innocence. Pessoa’s copy of *Poésies completes* has the following passage underlined: “*La vérité sans imposture ne peut rien*” [Truth without imposture can do nothing] – and “*Bello*” at the margins of the following statement of the poet from Recanati: “*vie privée de affections et de généreuses illusions est une nuit sans étoiles au milieu de l’hiver, ce m’est du moins une consolation et une vengeance suffisante en cette destinée mortelle que de m’entendre ici nonchalamment sur l’herbe, et, immobile, de contempler la mer, la terre et le ciel*” [A life devoid of affections and generous illusions is a mid-winter night without stars, it’s my solace and my revenge for a fate that’s hard enough for me, that idle and immobile on the grass I can gaze at sea and land and sky, and I can smile] (LEOPARDI, 1909: 117, 70; Fig. 5).

This rupture of illusions results in an imprisonment within the perpetual sameness of a conscious self that can never be “other”, and especially no happily unconscious other. The following lines from “*Ela canta, pobre ceifeira*” of Pessoa seem to point to the complex and contradictory relation between science and consciousness (as we have seen before in the case of Leopardi’s echoing rhyme in “-ale”):

Ah, poder ser tu, sendo eu !
 Ter a tua alegre inconsciência,
 E a consciência disso! Ó céu!
 Ó campo! Ó canção! A ciência
 Pesa tanto e a vida é tão breve!

(PESSOA, 1987: 108)

The combination of “*inconsciência*” with “*alegre*” is often to be found in the writings of Pessoa and several of his heteronyms. What is of special interest in these verses, however, is the threefold repetition of “*ciência*”, first as part of “*inconsciência*” and “*consciência*” and then apart, in an increasing triad from unconsciousness to science. This echo engenders a strong phonetic as well as poetic

emphasis on the word “science” and suggests a semantic interconnection between science and consciousness. The suggestion seems to be that science contributes to the demystification and demythification of the world, which is deprived of its illusions and shows its real face. This does not mean that the poet strives for this demystification: Pessoa here seems to agree with Caeiro that the “ceifeira”, and the world of “sciencelessness” that he inhabits, is more (or at least equally) appealing. The seeming progression from “inconsciência” to “ciência” is contradicted by the loss of lightness that Pessoa denounces (comparable to the lightness that Leopardi poetically captures with the “ale”-motif). Science can be construed as a medium that propagates the profound but burdensome, weighty truths that were already intuitively known to those in prey of *taedium metaphysicum*. However, as opposed to the *taedium metaphysicum* that Awee Prins describes, both in Leopardi’s and Pessoa’s case it is not so much technology, but science that accompanies and feeds their perpetual boredom.

In his famous *Discorso di un italiano intorno alla poesia romantica* of 1818 the young Leopardi writes:

Che natura o che leggiadra illusione speriamo di trovare in un tempo dove tutto è civiltà, e ragione e scienza e pratica e artifizii [...] quando gli affetti i moti i cenni i diversi casi del cuore e della volontà umana si prevedono e predicono come fanno gli astronomi le apparenze delle stelle e il ritorno delle comete;

(LEOPARDI, 1957: 23)

What nature or lovely illusions do we hope to find during a time in which all is civilized, all is reason and science and practice and artifice [...] when the affections, impulses, gestures and various situations of the human heart and the will are foretold and preordained in the same way in which the astronomers read the appearance of the stars and the return of the comets.

(*apud* CAMILLETI, 2013: 124)

Again, we encounter a reason that destroys the illusions which bring life, and this reason is linked to astronomy through an analogy. The implication seems to be that telescopes make us look inside ourselves far more than they give us a new world of wonder: to be able to peer and even predict with such precision forms our predicament. Not only can astronomy alter our view of the world, it can also alter the *perception of our perception*: this was precisely an important effect of the discoveries of Copernicus and Galilei, something which made those discoveries very unsettling for many. Not only did their “unearthing” accelerate the departure of God from the heavens, but it unveiled the unpleasant truth that our senses often “lie” (BUCCIANINI, 2012: XX-XXI; cf. LEOPARDI, 1982: 76). In the theatrical rendition of Bertolt Brecht, Galileo even goes as far as to state explicitly: “Today is 10 January 1610. Today mankind can write in its diary: Got rid of Heaven” (BRECHT, 1980: 24). In concordance with these discoveries, Pessoa sustains that “o universo objectivo é uma hallucinação simultanea dos sensorios, uma media abstracta entre illusões”

(in LOPES, 1993: 270; BNP/E3, 88-11^r). Similarly, he writes in his project *Chronicas Decorativas* about the constitution of a “Liga Anti-Scientifica” to protect all those parts and worlds that are “forçados a entrar nas campanhas da realidade.” In the same text, Pessoa writes, and arguably not coincidentally, about the purported discovery by Newton of the “leis dos astros” (in BOSCAGLIA, 2016b: 169-170).

Time, space and infinity

Science, as squire of reason, thus contributes to uncovering the evanescent vanity of illusions (even though it offers its own illusions in replacement). One of the most important among these vanities (and poetic *topoi*) is time. Boredom as a mood is very much bound to time, but the way in which this occurs can differ significantly. Modern boredom is constituted mostly by absences and denials and this is also true for the concept of time: not the slowness or speed of time is cause for modern boredom, but the non-existence of it (SVENDSEN, 2005: 127). Leopardi overtly denies the existence of time in his *Zibaldone*, and – almost casually – obliterates space in the same purging gesture: “Insomma l’esser del tempo non è altro che un modo, un lato [...] del considerar che noi facciamo l’esistenza delle cose che sono, o che passano o si suppongono poter essere. Medesimamente dello spazio” [In short, the existence of time is none other than a mode, an aspect (...) of our consideration of things that are, or may be or are supposed to be. The same in relation to space] (LEOPARDI, 2011: 4233). Likewise, Pessoa is convinced that neither time nor space can exist as more than conceptual, Kantian categories, which are inside our brains and not “real” (PESSOA, 1968: 45). And, like Leopardi, he writes, in *Sakyamuni*: “Nunca houve tempo nem espaço” (PESSOA, 1986a: 229). Significantly, we find a note – though not by Pessoa – to the same effect, on the bottom of page 281 of his copy of *Les énigmes de l’univers*, a book “to read” – according to Pessoa – “on the train” (FERRARI, 2008: 69). This volume explains the effects of (then) new scientific discoveries for our world view. In that note, we read that the “noção subjectiva” of space is “intenção da dimensão”, whereas time is an “intellectualização da consecução phenomenal” (HAECKEL, 1899: 281).

Leopardi’s boredom has often been termed “cosmological” or even “romantic”. Pessoa himself, at least in the guise of the Baron of Teive, calls Leopardi a “victim” of the “romantic illusion” together with Quental and Vigny, although none of them had the “romantic temperament” (PESSOA, 2007: 88). Even though Leopardi’s boredom undoubtedly shares elements – such as the relation to the sublime – with these strands of boredom, it is important to point out that there is a significantly modern, existential aspect to his “noia”. Nicholas Rennie has argued, in concordance with a cosmological explanation of Leopardi’s “mal de vivre”, that the boredom of the poet from the Marche was due to his consciousness of the infinity of the universe, of the eternal, petrified, non-human non-life of

matter that encapsulates decaying life. This, according to Rennie, constituted the most destabilizing effect of the Copernican revolution for Leopardi (RENNIE, 2005: 144). It is undoubtedly true that Leopardi's boredom shares many facets with that of important precursors like Blaise Pascal (SAVOCA, 1999). But Leopardi does not stop at this "cosmological boredom", because he does not leave the illusion of infinity (temporal or spatial) untouched. He knew all too well that, in the end, also the sun would consume itself and stop existing, and that the same even holds true for the whole universe. Let us consider for example these lines from "Cantico del gallo Silvestre" (not present in Pessoa's library):

Solo l'universo apparisce immune allo scadere e languire [...] Tempo verrà che esso universo e la natura medesima, sarà spenta [...] ma un silenzio nudo, e una quiete altissima, empieranno lo spazio immenso. Così questo arcano mirabile e spaventoso dell'esistenza universale, innanzi di essere dichiarato né inteso, si dileguerà e perderassi.

(LEOPARDI, 1982: 215)

Only the universe itself seems immune from decay and enfeeblement [...] The time will come, when the universe, and nature herself, will be snuffed out [...] but a naked silence, and a most lofty calm, will fill the immensity of the space. And so this wondrous and terrifying mystery of universal existence, ere ever it be declared or understood, will perish and pass away.

(LEOPARDI, 1983: 173).

Similarly, in the *Frammento apocrifo di Stratone di Lampsaco*, Leopardi writes of the "distruzione di esso universo e dei detti ordini" [the cause of its own destruction and of the destruction of such natural order] (LEOPARDI, 1982: 221). Leopardi's boredom thus did not spring so much from his conception of a universe that nullifies mankind while being itself infinite. On the contrary: we as humans are nothing, but we nonetheless invent infinity, which therefore becomes nothing itself (ROSELLI, 2014).

This is why, for Leopardi, the *Storia del genere umano* is "la storia di una vera e propria nostalgia dell'illusione dell'infinito" [the history of a true and proper nostalgia for the illusion of the infinite] (DI MEO, 2001: 90). Both in Leopardi and Pessoa we find an urge to regain infinity, even if only as an illusion: to fake infinity and to let yourself be fooled, even briefly, by your own imagination. As Leopardi explains in his *Zibaldone*, in the minds of great men a sort of battle between titans is continually fought between imagination that offers palliative illusions and cold reason (LEOPARDI, 2011: 136-137; 213-217). Illusions are vital, in the sense that they bring life, but reason proceeds mercilessly and systematically to their destruction. Significantly, Leopardi combines "reason" in his *Zibaldone* with a whole range of negative adjectives, from "destructive" to "miserable", from "corrupting" to "unhappy", that leave little room for doubt about the troubled relationship he had with reason and which can be confronted with Pessoa's stance in the "Ceifeira" poem (SANTI, 2011: 66). But the "original sin" of looking at the stars to ponder

instead of simply seeing them has irrevocably brought us in the current of futile progress. The frequency with which Leopardi commences a “dialogue” with the stars, questioning them in anguished, poetic manner, is telling in this respect. Emblematic examples are to be found in his canto *Le ricordanze* as well as in *Il Risorgimento* (both present in Pessoa’s library), in which he declares “Spente le stelle in ciel” [the stars in heaven were lost] (LEOPARDI, 1987: 48). Pessoa echoes in his *Fausto*: “Estrellas-nadas, sóes irreaes” (PESSOA, 1988: 112; spelling according to manuscript BNP/E3, 29-28^v).

Seeing inside or looking beyond the veil?

Nevertheless, the ultimate and most precious illusion (that of infinity) is worth trying to save, and the placebo, the substitute for infinity is that which *seems* infinite to our senses, the indefinite (CALVINO, 1993: 69-71). Leopardi and Pessoa navigate between extreme precision and blurred lines, in a continuous oscillation between finding and denying limits and precise delineations. Leopardi understood that precisely when our view is blocked by a hedge (the famous “sieve”), the mind can imagine infinity beyond that hedge: it can *fake* infinity. This is explained by Leopardi himself in a note from the *Zibaldone*, which he famously translated into a verse of the poem “L’infinito”: “nel pensier mi fingo” [in thought I imagine/fake myself], which brings to mind Pessoa’s “O poeta é um fingidor” (LEOPARDI, 2011: 171; PESSOA, 1995: 235). This hedge works, as does poetry itself, as an illusory consolation, however brief it may be: “nel ritirarsi, assume la forma del ‘lampo’ che cancella mostrando, cioè illumina e oscura, o piuttosto illumina l’oscuramento delle illusioni che distrugge” [retreating, it assumes the form of the ‘flash’ which erases whilst showing, or illuminates and obscures, or rather illuminates the obscuration of the illusions that it destroys] (MUÑIZ MUÑIZ, 1991: 62). It is interesting to note here that in 1933, the year before his “Canto a Leopardi”, Pessoa wrote the poem “Contemplo o que não vejo”, in which a strikingly similar scenario to that of Leopardi’s *Infinito* is depicted, with a wall instead of a hedge, but the same impossible contemplation of unseen, endless skies, the same contrast between “this side” and “beyond”, a similar stress on the contrast of an inward and outward form of “seeing” (PESSOA, 1995: 171). Sydney T. Klein already notes in a volume that is to be found in Pessoa’s library that we can search infinity outwards, but also inwards (KLEIN, 1917: 140). And in fact, Bernardo Soares notes in his *Livro do Desassossego* (in a passage that is entitled “Via láctea”) that it is precisely scientists who understand this truth and adopt a scientific approach towards our own illusions:

O homem de sciencia reconhece que a unica realidade para si é elle proprio, e o unico mundo real o mundo como a sua sensação lh’o dá. Porisso, em lugar de seguir o falso caminho de procurar ajustar as suas sensações ás dos outros, fazendo sciencia objectiva,

procura, antes, conhecer perfeitamente o seu mundo, e a sua personalidade. [...] É muito diferente já da sciencia dos antigos scientificos, que, longe de buscarem as leis da sua propria personalidade e a organização dos seus sonhos, procuravam as leis do “exterior” e a organização d’aquillo a que chamavam “Natureza”.

(PESSOA, 2010: I, 75; BNP/E3, 7-37^v)

The master of non-boredom, Alberto Caeiro, was not bothered by the fact that infinity is the same as nothingness: since both of them are non-existent, it is simply not worth to occupy oneself with them. One cannot *see* if something is unlimited, and therefore to comprehend infinity we need the falsity of thought, Caeiro explains to Campos. Sadly, Campos cannot accept this with the same light-heartedness, and instead is stuck with the stalemate of reality being an illusion and illusion being impossible (PESSOA, 1980: 267). Caeiro is practically immune to such paralyzing thoughts, because of his “sciencia de ver, que não é nenhuma” (PESSOA, 2015: 101). But, for those who see within as well as without, it is impossible to *unsee* certain things, to forget a surplus of learning (which is precisely what Caeiro teaches). One cannot artificially become a shepherd again, metaphysical growth being just as irreversible as normal, physical growth.

The impossibility of “simply seeing” is to be found also in semantic distinctions in the terms that are being used by both Leopardi and Pessoa. In Leopardi’s works we find the quasi-synonymous pair “vedere-mirare”, which for him tend to denote different things: “vedere” is a form of seeing which tends to be outwardly directed, whereas “mirare” displaces sight, redirecting it inwards: it is seeing inside, reflecting (GIOANOLA, 1991: 213). Although Pessoa does not make a constant distinction between semantic twins, he does occasionally draw upon a similar semantic shift, as we can see in *A Morte do Príncipe*: “Vejo, vejo... Vejo através das cousas... As cousas escondiam... As cousas não eram senão um véu... Ergue-se o pano, ergue-se o pano do teatro... Tenho medo, tenho medo... Ah vejo, vejo enfim... Vejo enfim tudo... Olhai... Olhai... Agora vejo” (PESSOA, 1986a: 222). This passage reveals clearly the importance and irreversibility of the shift from “olhar” to “ver”. Also, arguably, the resonance and suggestive (phonetic) similarity between “vejo” and “véu” is significant here: what is usually *seen* is a *veil*, nothing more, and the echo suggests that the connection is more than casual. This is corroborated by other instances in which the combination is foregrounded by Pessoa, such as in the poem “Visão”, in which “céu”, “vê” and “véu” form a triangle, in a poem that is about meaning behind the veil of vision, behind the veil of the sky that we ourselves project (PESSOA, 1986b: 160).

Not coincidentally, we find the motif of the veil which covers a deeper truth or further horizon very often in Omar Khayyam, as well as in Leopardi, forming a sort of semantic web which is confirmed in the FitzGerald translation of Khayyam’s *Rubaiyat* that is contained in Pessoa’s library (KHAYYAM, 1928; TARANI, 2011). The references in FitzGerald’s translation and annotation quite possibly

constituted a privileged gateway for Pessoa towards Leopardi's poetry and philosophy: Khayyam, in FitzGerald's reinterpretation, propounded a philosophy that was a mixture of "pessimism, nihilism, Epicureanism, fatalism, tedium and agnosticism", and Pessoa worked intensively on Khayyam between 1926 and 1935 (years in which also his "Canto a Leopardi" is composed) (BOSCAGLIA, 2016a: 54-55). In the edition of FitzGerald's translation that is introduced and annotated by Edward Heron-Allen, Leopardi is mentioned frequently (KHAYYAM, 1908). Even though Pessoa possessed another volume of Heron-Allen in his library, he does not seem to have possessed this version of the *Rubaiyat*. One would venture a guess, though, that Pessoa did not need Heron-Allen's annotations to notice the patterns and similarities that bind Leopardi's reflections to (FitzGerald's and) Khayyam's.

In his *Textos Filosóficos*, Pessoa on several occasions refers to the distinction between the indefinite and the infinite, the first being an aspect of the world of the senses, the second a fabrication of our minds. The most concise definition is the following: "*o indefinido, que se torna o infinito quando abusivamente tido por concreto*" (PESSOA, 1968: 197). Leopardi and Pessoa both, on various occasions, point to the fact that when infinity is caged in ourselves, it is no longer infinite. Both argue that, in fact, infinity and nothingness are simply the same, instead of opposites (LEOPARDI, 2011: 4098; PESSOA in LOPES, 1993: 413, 417). But if our dearest illusion and prime source of (ephemeral) pleasure reduces itself to nothing, what do we have left? Boredom, as the psychological and phenomenological translation of abstract nothingness, fills the void, like air automatically fills all interstices. The gap between the purportedly objective, real world and the infinity to which desire is necessarily directed, provides the natural habitat of apparent nothingness, in which boredom thrives (GALIMBERTI, 1973: 52-53; ALOISI, 2010: 248).

Entropy

When Miguel de Unamuno writes his philosophical treatise about the tragic sense of life, one of the authors that figures in his book is Giacomo Leopardi. Unamuno was a great admirer of Leopardi, and mentions him already several times in a book that is also present in Pessoa's library: *Por tierras de Portugal y España* of 1911. Two years after this, in his *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida en los hombres y en los pueblos*, Unamuno writes about Leopardi's "Cantico del gallo Silvestre", in which Leopardi, as we have seen, gives a clear indication of the fact that he does not believe even the universe itself to last infinitely. Unamuno comments on this in modernizing scientific terms, adopting the term "entropy", which had become one of the keywords of science in his (and Pessoa's) time. Unamuno writes: "This eventuality [of the regress of the universe into nothing, described by Leopardi and quoted on page 26] they now label, using a scientific and most rationalist term, "entropy". Very well then, this entropy is a kind of ultimate homogeneity, a state

of perfect equilibrium. For a soul avid for life, it is the closest to nothingness that can be imagined" (UNAMUNO, 1977: 137). In the French translation of Leopardi in Pessoa's library we find the following marked passage: "à qui plait ou à qui est utile cette vie profondément malheureuse de l'univers, qui ne se perpétue que par la ruine et la mort des éléments qui la composent?" (LEOPARDI, 1909: 98) [who is gladdened or who is benefited by this most unhappy life of the universe, preserved by the injury and death of all those things that go to make it up?] (LEOPARDI, 1983: 104).

In spite of the undeniable interest that both Pessoa and Leopardi showed in science, they could not believe in progress in the sense that progress would bring an end to suffering and boredom. That is why the concept of entropy seems so appropriate for describing their view on life. In Pessoa's library we find the above-mentioned book of Haeckel, which contains a passage on Rudolf Clausius, the "inventor" of entropy. In this passage a phrase has been underlined – though not by Pessoa – which states that the entropy of the cosmos tends to a maximum (HAECKEL, 1899: 283).

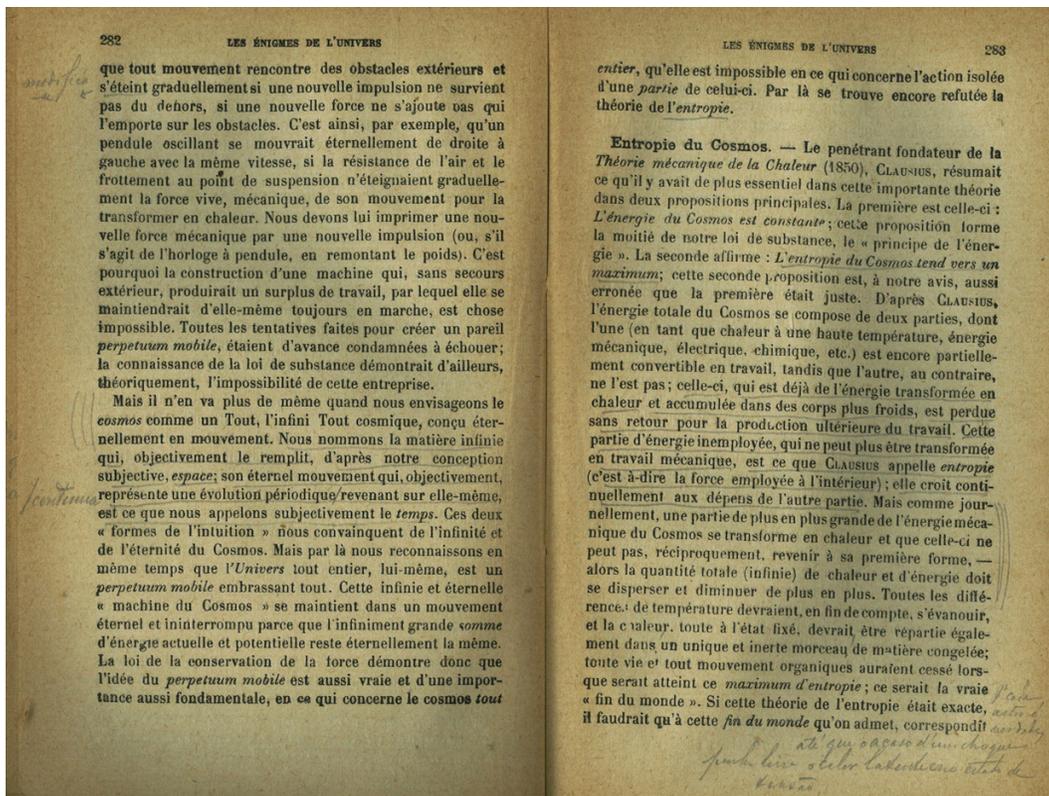


Fig. 7. Ernest Haeckel, *Les énigmes de l'univers* in Pessoa's library (CFP 1-64), pp. 282-283.

In another book in Pessoa's library, on the consequences of the discoveries of Albert Einstein, we find the following – again underlined – passage:

En résumé, la configuration des étoiles, telle que nous la voyons, n'est qu'une apparence fallacieuse, provenant de la rencontre, sur notre rétine, d'impressions impossibles à classer dans le temps et dans l'espace. Le spectacle du ciel étoilé, que poètes et théologiens vantent comme l'exemple de l'harmonie parfaite, est celui de l'incohérence la plus désordonnée.

(MOCH, 1922: 53)

[In short, the configuration of the stars, as we see them, is nothing but a fallacious appearance, deriving from the encounter on our retina of impressions that are impossible to classify in time and space. The spectacle of a starry sky, which poets and theologians flaunt as example of the perfect harmony, is one of the most disordered incoherence.]

These scientific insights provided all the more reason (even if not Reason with a big "r") for Pessoa to reconfirm his belief in the ultimate chaos (a word that is very often to be found in his writings, and the combination of "caos" and "ser" is a frequent one), disorder and entropy of nature and the world as a whole. Interestingly, this sentiment is also a defining one for Pessoa's boredom: "O tédio é a sensação física do caos, e de que o caos é tudo" (PESSOA, 2010: I, 398; BNP/E3, 4-51^r). Even without these discoveries, Leopardi came to similar conclusions, becoming more and more disillusioned with positivistic, mechanistic, orderly, linear science, preferring his own "ultrafilosofia" as an alternative (BINI, 1997). Leopardi's ultrafilosofia is a state of intrinsic and intricate interwovenness between feeling and thought, which chimes with Soares' "emocões do pensamento" or Pessoa's contention that "O que em mim sente stá pensando" (PESSOA, 2010: I, 251; PESSOA, 1987: 108).

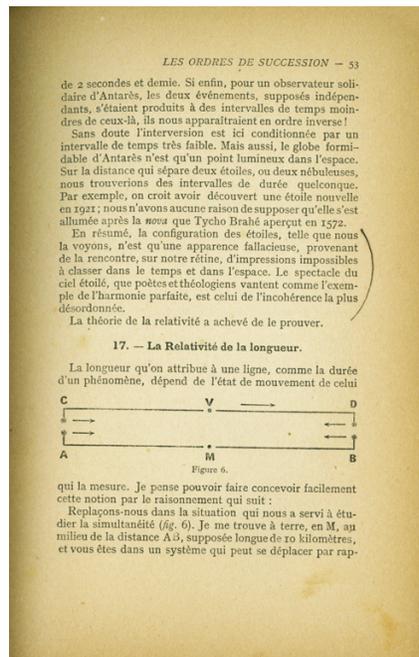


Fig. 8. Gaston Moch, (1922). *Initiation aux théories d'Einstein*. Paris: Larousse (CFP 5-23), p. 53.

Relativity

The reflection above on the intrinsic chaos of life can lead to the contention that *everything* becomes relative, up to the most fundamental categories underlying our thinking and world view. In fact, Leopardi explains in a note from the *Zibaldone*:

Quest'è un osservazione vastissima che distrugge infiniti sistemi filosofici ec.; e appiana e toglie infinite contraddizioni e difficoltà nella gran considerazione delle cose, massimamente generale, e appartenente ai loro rapporti. Non v'è quasi altra verità assoluta se non che *Tutto è relativo*. Questa dev'esser la base di tutta la metafisica.

(LEOPARDI, 2011: 281)

This is a vast observation that destroys countless philosophical systems etc., and resolves and overcomes countless contradictions and difficulties in the broad consideration of things, especially in general, and concerning their relationships. There is almost no other absolute truth, except that All is relative. This must be the basis for all metaphysics

(LEOPARDI, 2013: 256)

Leopardi is describing here a hypothetical metaphysical foundation – everything is relative – that has become, *de facto*, our most important “truth” after Einstein, whose discoveries can be said to have brought us into a period of *absolute relativity*, a most disturbing and paradoxical reality. As Bertrand Russell stated in 1926: “It would be disappointing if so fundamental a change as Einstein has introduced involved no philosophical novelty” (RYCKMAN, 2005: 4). Pessoa, who in his library had several books which explained the discoveries of Einstein, certainly responded to this new demolition of the fundamental laws of nature as well as the accompanying deconstruction of our vision. Already in 1906, Pessoa agreed with Auguste Comte saying that “the Relative alone exists”, but he extends this into the question: “Or does he mean the relative alone has absolute existence?” (PESSOA, 1968: 126) This very question was at the heart of many philosophical reappraisals that Einstein’s discoveries evoked at the time, many pertaining to Kantian imperatives, by (then) neo-Kantians such as Ernst Cassirer, Hermann Cohen, Rudolf Carnap and Paul Natorp (RYCKMAN, 2005: 13-52). In Pessoa’s library, we find the following passage underlined: “il restait trois idées fondamentales auxquelles on s’accordait à attribuer un caractère absolu, si bien qu’on ne songeait même pas à se demander si cette opinion était fondée. Ces idées sont celle d’espace, de temps et de masse [...] Or, Einstein a démontré qu’il n’en est rien.” [three fundamental ideas remained to which one agreed to attribute an absolute character, so much so that one did not even dream of asking oneself about the foundations of this opinion. These ideas are those of space, time and mass [...] Well, Einstein has proved that there is nothing of the kind] (MOCH, 1922: 13; cf. KLEIN, 1917: XII, 16-17).

The main problem for Pessoa (and, in a very different scientific, cultural and historical context, for Leopardi) remained, however, that this relativity regarded science itself as well, which is a socially valid construction, that “só vale humanamente”, and can therefore not only show how everything is “nullo e vão”, but itself becomes, of necessity, “pobre e nada” as well (PESSOA in LOPES, 1993: 409; PESSOA, 2000: 173-174). In this respect, Leopardi and Pessoa anticipate both Popper (more specifically his insight that science can only falsify and not verify) and Kuhn (because they privilege the epistemological nature of science, which cannot offer absolute truths) (CORSINOVI, 2001: 256). In spite of their vivid interest in science, both poet-philosophers could not believe that it offered ultimate truths. Like boredom, science uncovers truths, but it cannot replace the truth, become itself the “only truth”, such as boredom seems to be for Leopardi and Pessoa: “E si può dire che, essendo tutto l’altro vano, alla noia riducasi, e in lei consista quanto la vita degli uomini ha di sostanzievole e di reale” (LEOPARDI, 1983 126) [And we may say that, since all the rest is vain, whatever is substantial and real in the life of men is reduced to boredom and consists of nothing else] (LEOPARDI, 1982: 274). It should be added here, as a parenthesis, that Leopardi developed from a fairly positivistic and positive view of science to the much more complex and ambivalent stance that I am describing here: thus, in a way, mirroring the societal development he theorizes from thoughtless admiration of the starry skies to disturbing thoughts that go beyond the veil (GRECO, 2009: 220-221, 226; ROMEO *et al.*, 2000). The paradox that relativity is absolute suits Leopardi’s and Pessoa’s philosophical standpoint well. At the same time they would certainly have agreed with Arthur Koestler’s view on Einstein’s discoveries (a view that is also propounded more generally by G. H. Lewes, author of another volume present in Pessoa’s library):

Einstein’s Space is no closer to reality than Van Gogh’s sky. The splendor of the exact sciences originates in no deeper truth than that of Bach and Tolstoj; it starts from the very act of creation. The discoveries of a scientist imprint his own order on the chaos, and depend on the system of reference of the observer; it changes from century to century like a nude by Rembrandt and one by Manet.

(KOESTLER, 1970: 253; cf. LEWES, 1904: 14; POLIZZI, 2015: 12)

Science has contributed to the nullification of illusions, providing only temporary substitutions. The dearest of those illusions, infinity, has turned out to be the same as nothingness. For Leopardi and Pessoa only the non-existent can be infinite, which means that the infinite is coterminous with nothingness (LEOPARDI, 2011: 4178; PESSOA in LOPES, 1993: 413, 417). The infinite enters the realm of the relative, just as in Sydney Klein’s volume, which calls upon its readers to recognize that: “our present conditions, our conceptions of the immense and minute [...] are purely relative [...] from this arise those pseudo-conceptions which we call the infinitely extended and the infinitely lasting” (KLEIN, 1917: 13).

Man and poetry: *almost nothing*⁴

Nonetheless, even this seemingly simple (albeit negative) solution of the infinity-nothingness enigma does not convince Leopardi or Pessoa of the fact that nothing remains – which would be a good thing, since in their view non-existence is always better than existence. Both have a very ambivalent and problematic relation to nothingness and infinity: both concepts are curiously attractive and frightening at the same time. Nothingness morbidly attracts, but is in itself impossible to attain. The problem is that human beings cannot actually be nothing, we are rather *almost nothing*. This “almost” is a crucial difference and might well explain the attraction of poetry, the fact that both poets continued to write poetry even if they considered it all to be in vain. Poetry can serve as a consolation to those who write and read it, because, as Leopardi explains:

Hanno questo di proprio le opere di genio, che quando anche rappresentino al vivo la nullità delle cose, quando anche dimostrino evidentemente e facciano sentire l'inevitabile infelicità della vita [...] tuttavia ad un'anima grande che si trovi anche in uno stato di estremo abbattimento, disinganno, nullità, noia e scoraggiamento della vita [...] servono sempre di consolazione, raccendono l'entusiasmo.

(LEOPARDI, 2011: 259-260)

It is a property of works of genius that, even when they represent vividly the nothingness of things, even then they clearly show and make you feel the inevitable unhappiness of life [...] nevertheless to a great soul that finds itself in a state of extreme dejection, disenchantment, nothingness, boredom, and discouragement about life [...] such works always bring consolation, and rekindle enthusiasm

(LEOPARDI, 2013: 177)

Poetry is often associated with its eternal quality, but it also has a very ephemeral side, of words that are heard (and read) and then disappear, it is in fact ‘almost nothing’, always on the verge of non-existence, existing through its being read, repeated, worded. In his famous “Tabacaria”, Álvaro de Campos recognizes this: “Mas ao menos fica da amargura do que nunca serei | A calligraphia rapida d'estes versos, | Portico partido para o Impossivel” (PESSOA, 2014: 202). This is the “essencia musical dos meus versos inuteis” (PESSOA, 2014: 204). Pessoa himself suggests the comparison between poetry and life, when he writes about the rhythm of poetry: “O ritmo consiste numa graduação de sons e de faltas de som, como o mundo na graduação do ser e do não ser” (PESSOA, 1966: 75)

According to Tabucchi, Pessoa has learned from Leopardi the vital lesson to bring infinity within a domestic setting, in the small confines of a house

⁴ My use of ‘almost nothing’ is suggested and informed by a reading of Davide Rondoni: http://www.daviderondoni.altervista.org/public2/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=248:giacomo-leopardi-the-almost-nothing-the-extreme-hook-prosa&catid=21:inglese

(TABUCCHI, 1998: 52). Again, this is confirmed in the crucial poem “Tabacaria” of Álvaro de Campos, who writes of himself: “E cantou a cantiga do Infinito numa capoeira” (PESSOA, 2014: 201). Both poets feverishly write and desire without hope that their illusions can be saved from reality. They study the shimmering “cinzento azulado” (PESSOA, 2015: 106) of the non-white moon, or the diffuse splendor of the stars that “mentem luz” (PESSOA, 2010: I, 489), that irradiate an old light which symbolizes the unattainability of the present, a light that can better be seen when one does not look directly at it, a false and hypothetical light (cf. KLEIN, 1917: 6). “Desconheço-me a luz e tédio”, Soares writes (PESSOA, 2010: I, 293). In this approximate phrase of the sleep-deprived, he tries to contain all the nothingness that does not belong to him, which excludes and escapes him. Leopardi was already happily nullified by then, lying bedded in the non-bored non-life of stones and trees.

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