

## NICOLÒ GERMANO

PHILOSOPHY, LITERATURE, AND NIHILISM.  
BETWEEN KIERKEGAARD AND PESSOA\*

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*1. A brief introduction*

**K**ierkegaard and Pessoa share a common historical horizon in which the classical problem of the relationship between philosophy and literature – between ethics and writing – is critically re-examined. This horizon is marked by nihilism – disturbing, yet inescapable [Germano 2024; Stewart 2023]. In a certain sense, both authors undertake the task of confronting nihilism. However, while for Kierkegaard this resolution occurs through an internal overcoming of nihilism through a leap of faith in Christianity, and therefore a positive outcome, things are different in Pessoa's poetic thought. For the Portuguese poet, both in his more theoretical works and in his poetic compositions, the solid reality of nothingness and nihilism seems to have swallowed up everything around him, making it impossible to construct reality or his personality.

The self is fragmented, with no possibility of being reconstituted into a higher ethical or religious unity. The game of heteronomy is not a term, as in Kierkegaard's severe case of pseudonymy, in the achieved equilibrium between the aesthetic and the ethical, and the consequent leap into the sphere of the religious. On the contrary, Pessoa's orthony-

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my itself loses more and more space, and becomes weaker, allowing the crowd of heteronyms to advance freely. They even end up taking over and acting in the poet's real life.

This last emergence has its antecedent in the Kierkegaardian story, with the sophisticated construction of Chinese boxes that are his works belonging to what Cornelio Fabro convincingly called the «cycle of Regine» [Fabro 1993, xxiv]. These works, from *Enten-Eller* to the two twin writings, *Gjentagelsen (Repetition)* and *Frygt og Bæven (Fear and Trembling)*, conceal existential pain through philosophical literature, in which it becomes increasingly difficult – if not impossible – to distinguish where literature ends and philosophy begins [Mooney 2018].

However, the indistinctness between literature and philosophy that characterizes the first phase of Kierkegaard's writing, characterized by the use of indirect communication through the use of pseudonyms, is forced to dissolve to give place to the demand for honesty – i.e. for the *Redelighed*, the *παρρησία* [Rocca 2012, 276] – that characterizes and qualifies the last Kierkegaardian production, in which the Danish philosopher focuses more directly on the problems that, on closer inspection, had led him toward philosophy in the previous decade, namely the religious problem. In fact, Kierkegaard cannot call himself authentically Christian, he does not have the authority to assert himself as such, and he is forced to preach it only indirectly, through Anti-Climacus, the strictest ideality of Christianity. He can, however, fight the power of established Christianity, of State Christianity, which has now lost all its charge of truth and existence.

In this last phase of his literary production, all the Kierkegaardian actors that populated the scene of his philosophical dramatizations give way to the actual, hidden protagonist of those stories: Kierkegaard himself, that Individual – *den Enkelte* – who devoted himself entirely to the struggle to affirm the truth of Christianity against the Christianity constituted by the State Church, up to the supreme, necessary, test of martyrdom.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, the crossing of nihilism in Kierkegaard

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<sup>1</sup> It must still be kept in mind how Kierkegaardian communication is not resolved, even in the edifying writings, into a Christianly fulfilled communication. The Danish philosopher remains on the threshold of authentic Christianity (represented, in the pseudonymous writings, by Anti-Climacus) or full witness to Christian truth. This is a

is to be understood as a transit, a passage from nihilism to faith, with which to reach, beyond literature and philosophy, the truth of the religious: authentic life.

The mask of literature remains and is transformed by the poet's own life, as in the case of Pessoa. Here, the night of nihilism does not see the dawn of a new day. The specifically Christian religious solution, which allows the Danish philosopher, at least ideally, to realize and fulfill his existence by transferring it to a higher stage, cannot be pursued by Pessoa. For whom, on the contrary, if we can talk about a return to religion, this would rather take the form of neo-paganism, mediated by esoteric influences, from Rosicrucianism to theosophy, whose ultimate reference point is still late-antique Gnosis [Zambon 2016, 168-170].

Under Pessoa's implacable verses, in *Chuva oblíqua*, the truths conquered by Western Christian civilization crumble, to return to a mythical time, in which the Latin of the mass is confused, due to the noise of the oblique rain, with the memory of the pharaohs of Egypt and their divinity. However, in this homonymous composition, the meaning of life that the protagonists of Pessoa's work (and therefore their demiurge) yearn for dissolves like a puff of smoke [Tabucchi 2019, 72-85]. Pessoa does not accompany the reader outside the dream, or nightmare, in which he immerses himself, but rather relentlessly delves into those depths, into those recesses of the human spirit. It is as if he welcomed into his home the most disturbing guest, as Nietzsche called nihilism [Nietzsche 2017, 15]. Ultimately, for Pessoa, life remains a mask.

In this essay, I aim to briefly reconstruct the complex interplay between philosophy and literature in Kierkegaard and Pessoa, through selected emblematic texts. I will show how this relationship either dissolves (as in Kierkegaard's case) or becomes increasingly entangled, as in Pessoa's, to the point of engulfing the very existence of the thinker. Both authors, I suggest, offer valuable insights for the renewal of moral philosophy, particularly about existence and its stages (*Stadier*), the tension between human and divine alterity, and enduring philosophical questions—such as the relation between eternity and temporality,

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very delicate knot, but one that directly affects the meaning of Kierkegaard's edifying production and, by extension, his general idea of communication: on this point, see Garff 2002.

necessity and freedom, meaning and meaninglessness, suffering and evil, love and beauty. Their contributions stem not only from what they thought, but also from how they wrote: from the stylistic and conceptual innovations they brought about in the constant cross-pollination between philosophy and literature.

## 2. Kierkegaard: towards authentic life

“And now, Dansker, do tell me what you think of it.”

(Melville 2016)

In the dialectical (anti-Hegelian) framework underpinning Kierkegaard’s thought, authentic life – Christian-oriented and understood as the ultimate telos of his reflection – is contrasted with another mode of existence, namely life which, following Heidegger’s indications, we can call inauthentic, *uneigentlich* [Heidegger 1927]. In fact, since in the stages of life, nothing follows a linear or secure path, instead, everything is fragmentary, circular, and a possibility of both losing and redeeming oneself,<sup>2</sup> the best way to understand the religious meaning of authentic existence is to follow the implications of its opposite.

This, as is well known, is exemplified for Kierkegaard by the aesthetic stage of existence. Unforgettable and widely recognized pages – now part of both philosophical and literary heritage – have conveyed the image of an aesthetic phase entirely resolved in the theme of seduction. From Don Giovanni to Faust and, indeed, to the Seducer, the sensual-amorous theme is significantly developed in this first section of *Enten-Eller*, the work with which Kierkegaard revealed himself to the Danish public in 1843. However, as with the modern notion of “aesthetics,” which goes beyond mere aestheticism or related forms of sensualism, but involves man and woman in their entirety, within this first part (*Enten*) it is also possible to isolate other figures, in whom sensuality certainly plays a role, but without wholly occupying their horizon of meaning.

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<sup>2</sup> See Kierkegaard 1988, 16: this page can well be understood as a metaphor for Kierkegaardian pseudonymous production itself.

Nevertheless, since we are dealing with the aesthetic, that horizon will also have to be occupied by something else that acts as a distraction, a Pascalian *divertissement*, a way to escape from the seriousness of ethics or the fullness of religion. Thus, from the beginning, literature and poetry appear in the *Diapsalmata* as a painful attempt to transcend the condition of unhappiness and existential boredom [Kierkegaard 1987a, 19-43], as a painful attempt to overcome the condition of unhappiness and boredom to which the man of the aesthetic stage is condemned, lacking as he is any foothold outside the circle of immanence in which he is enclosed. In these scathing aphorisms, to which critics have perhaps paid little attention, Kierkegaard entrusts to the pseudonym *A* the possibility of expressing what he feels, or at least has felt. Thus, *A* stages – the reference to theatrical activity is a constant in Kierkegaard’s work, and in the very structure of his thought – the philosophical initiation of its author, that is, of Kierkegaard himself.

Kierkegaard’s philosophy is part of an original scene, in a mediated theoretical plexus, fertilized by praxis, by the real existence of its author. As is well known, two protagonists occupy the stage from the beginning: his father and that «strange girl», Regine Olsen, with whom he will scandalously break off his engagement, only to regret it for the rest of his life. These two figures sanction the young thinker’s entry into the world of philosophical writing, determining his style, his topics, and the expressive possibilities of his subject matter.

Before 1843, the year in which he would publish some of his most significant masterpieces, what would turn out to be a tireless, indefatigable pen, bordering on neurosis, he had not yet had the opportunity to produce the torrents of ink that he would pour forth starting from the period in which he began writing *Either/Or*. His Socratic thesis, despite the importance that the figure of Socrates and the status of irony will always maintain in this work, was far from explicit in what would become the model of Kierkegaardian prose, for which he would become famous, and for which he would be loved or hated. However, for better or for worse, Kierkegaard’s literary philosophy cannot leave one indifferent. In this regard, we can use the request for an ultimatum, which is at the basis of his famous volume.

However, what happened between 1841 and 1843 was so important as to radically change Kierkegaard’s philosophical style,

representing almost a turning point in his thought. What happened is what the Danish philosopher tells us, behind the mask of pseudonymity, in the first section of *Enten-eller*, only to then contrast it, in the second, ethical section, with what could have happened, but did not. He got engaged (September 1840) and then broke off the engagement (October 1841) to Regine, the woman who would become his Muse [Garff 2017]. It is from this existential event that Kierkegaard's philosophical production flows impetuously. Although this philosophy cannot be reduced to the concrete events of its author's existential story, this story will always have to be kept in mind as the truest, clearest (even when it appears, and perhaps even is, cloudy), indeed, a most genuine source of his thought. Kierkegaard's philosophy – rightly interpreted by many as the father of existentialism – is a human philosophy, whose analyses always start from, are part of, and return to a life lived subjectively, and not only objectively theorized. This thought does not descend from the academic lectern (as Kierkegaard famously wrote in his polemics against Hegel), but from what he experienced and felt.

A philosophical reflection constructed, or deconstructed, in this way destroys the equivalence between Being and Thought on which Hegelian dialectic is based. The means, the medium that is inserted in place of the mathematical symbol of equality, is that of the reality of existence, thus unhinging any possible optimistically idealistic recomposition. The reality in which Kierkegaard immersed himself with Regine is a reality that no *Aufhebung* will ever be able to reconcile, because it only shows all the pain, all the suffering of the human condition, torn as it is by a contradiction that cannot be synthesized in any ideal.

Reality, as suggested in the epigraph Kierkegaard strategically placed at the beginning of *Either/Or*, is nothing more than «vent, que fumée:/ pour mieux dire, tout n'est rien», «All is only wind, only smoke:/ To say it better, all is nothing» [Kierkegaard 1987a, 18]. If, even in Hegel, the starting point is constituted by the negative, by the Nothing of the *Science of Logic*, this is only possible because that negation, according to Kierkegaard, has nothing to do with reality, and is such – i.e. negation – only in idea, not in existential concreteness. It

would therefore be nothing more than a sleight of hand, a clever card trick, or a confusion of words.<sup>3</sup>

Things are pretty different in Kierkegaard's thought, where contradiction is immersed in reality, impervious to any abstraction in the realm of intellect or reason. The nothing, the «rien» of Pellisson's verses, is much more radical than the Hegelian *Nichts* and its immediate convertibility into *Sein* (almost logical). This «nothing» is the nothingness of nihilism, the absurdity of the lack of meaning and purpose that dominates human existence when it is lived outside the religious stage, or even lived against Christianity [Germano 2022]. As I mentioned, the aesthetic stage is exemplary in this sense, a philosophical and literary translation of the nihilism against which (but within the horizon of which) Kierkegaardian thought fights.

Nevertheless, this stage remains crucial for understanding the relationship that is established in Kierkegaard between philosophy and literature. The first passage of the aforementioned *Diapsalamta* can help to clarify this:

What is a poet? An unhappy person who conceals profound anguish in his heart but whose lips are so formed that as sighs and cries pass over them they sound like beautiful music. It is with him as with the poor wretches in Phalaris's bronze bull, who were slowly tortured over a slow fire; their screams could not reach the tyrant's ears to terrify him; to him, they sounded like sweet music [Kierkegaard 1987a, 19].

It is certainly not difficult to recognize in the figure of the poet a disguised transposition of the situation in which Kierkegaard must have found himself in the months following the break-up of his engagement to Regine [Garff 2005, 173-178; 228-229]. His cry, however, must immediately appear as «beautiful music», thereby enabling a fundamental misunderstanding: that of confusing the most unhappy – to quote a later section of the work – with a poet satisfied with being a poet. This confusion between the external and the internal, based in this work's section on Lessing's *Laocoon* [Harries 2010, 19-20], is the same confusion that

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<sup>3</sup> See, for Kierkegaard's critical discussion of Hegel, in particular Kierkegaard 1992a, 301-314.

reverberates in Kierkegaard's writing, in the indissoluble interweaving that is formed with the aesthetic form of existence, as well as with the attempt to overcome this from within towards the religious stage.

The poet of the *Diapsalmata*, Mozart's Don Giovanni [Kierkegaard 1987a, 94-104], the unfaithful lovers of the heroines of *Silhouettes* [Kierkegaard 1987a, 165-215], the Seducer of the homonymous *Diary* [Kierkegaard 1987a, 303-312] are and at the same time are not Kierkegaard.<sup>4</sup> They are undoubtedly Kierkegaard because he draws on his own experience to construct these literary portraits, these medallions in which an entire existential possibility that the Danish thinker has, for a specific period, made his own, is condensed. Nevertheless, he is not Kierkegaard either. He subjectively resolved, from within, the failure to which the aesthetic conception of life leads, projecting himself with all his strength towards the religious, which, as he will not fail to recognize, he must limit himself to describing poetically, because he did not succeed in reaching it. However, for there to be a leap, for at least the (real) possibility of a leap to present itself during Kierkegaard's lifetime, he is forced to abandon the union between philosophy and literature that so significantly characterizes the first part of his production. Initially, in order to dedicate himself more specifically to philosophy, and finally to leave even this in favor of edifying production.

The use of pseudonyms that characterize Kierkegaard's most celebrated and well-known works, therefore, has an intrinsic link with his philosophical proposal, as well as with the style that this proposal takes to be put forward. Kierkegaardian philosophy is linked (since his degree thesis) to an experiential, practical conception of thought, whose symbol *par excellence* is Socrates. By reconnecting, in an era dominated entirely by abstract thought, to the great Athenian philosopher and

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<sup>4</sup> The Danish philosopher acknowledges and defends this sort of duplication precisely in the voluminous *Postscript*, in the final section that he significantly calls *A First and Last Explanation*. Here he clearly states that «My pseudonymity or polyonymity has not had an *accidental* [*tilfeldig*] basis in my *person* [...] but an *essential* [*væsentlig*] basis in the *production* itself» [Kierkegaard 1992a, 625], thus explicating both the essential anchorage of his philosophical production to the practice of indirect communication through pseudonymity, but also the randomness, the accidentality of this in relation to his person, as if it were possible to abstract it from the latter, and thus fall back into a sort of re-proposition of the objective.

his maieutic conception of philosophical exercise, he also adopts his communicative cautions: you cannot communicate the same message to everyone with the same means of expression.

One can only try to establish a dialogue between individuals, centered on a problem (which in Kierkegaard is essentially the Christological problem) that both interlocutors feel deeply. To begin such a transformative journey, where Socrates' example is illuminated by the truth of Christ, the Danish philosopher must initially resort to a process of masking the essential (Christianity), which he hides both in the category of the aesthetic, especially in the interesting (the exact opposite of eternal truth!) of the *Seducer's Diary*, and in that of the ethical.

The balance between the aesthetic and the ethical, which for the Councillor would represent the center of aggregation and significance of the Individual, does not correspond at all to the radical decentralization operated by the religious, the only stage in which, through its excess, unfathomability, and gratuitousness, one can fully speak of the Individual. Like a set of nested Chinese boxes, within the various sections of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard (or whoever for him) unobtrusively inserts the possibility of the religious, hidden between the showy folds of the aesthetic and the iron ones of the ethical. Religious communication begins with the *Ultimatum*, and then has to refine itself over long, intense years before rediscovering its genuine expression outside pseudonymity – and also outside literature and philosophy in the strict sense. A close reading reveals that the very structure of the *Ultimatum* mirrors that of a sermon, and it is by its belonging to the edifying genre that it can directly express Kierkegaard's religious position: «About God We Are Always in the Wrong» [Kierkegaard 1987b, 339].

The three stages of life, therefore, require very different communications and communicative styles [Pattison 2018]. This is because they convey messages and positions that are very different from each other, even to the point of being impossible to relate to each other, if not at the risk of falling into misunderstanding. A striking example of this ambiguity is the comparison between the aesthetic and religious stages through the lens of secrecy: interpreted in the light of this, the aesthetic stage seems much closer to the religious stage than the ethical stage, assumed especially in *Fear and Trembling* as a moment of generality and exteriority, as in Hegel's thought. In reality, the secret that we find

in the aesthetic moment is very different from that which we find in the religious, which is the suppression of the aesthetically connoted secret interiority.

This stratification of Kierkegaardian communication, divided in itself into different moments, raises profound questions for both readers and interpreters, such as «what it means to be an author, what is a book's impact is an impact of its author, and what “essential” moral or religious truth (if any) authors and books can convey» [Mooney 2013, 191; Davini 2014]. These questions remain essentially unanswered in the pseudonymous works of the Danish philosopher, but not because Kierkegaard ultimately failed to escape the hall of mirrors he had created, but rather because he practically resolves the question, destroying that fiction and revealing the living reality of direct communication, proper to religion.

### 3. Pessoa: *life as fingimento*

[...] tudo o que fomos — lixo de estrelas e de almas.  
(Pessoa 2015)

While Kierkegaard provides a favorable resolution to the impasse of nihilism – masterfully articulated through his use of pseudonyms in his aesthetic works – the same cannot be said for Pessoa. While many interpreters have emphasized the «stellar friendship» that seems to bind the Portuguese poet to the Danish philosopher, the actual points of contact reveal themselves, upon closer scrutiny, to be relatively few and more apparent than real. Chief among these was undoubtedly the parallelism between pseudonymity and heteronymy. In turn between direct communication and orthonomy, that was most successful in secondary critical literature as well as in the collective imagination. Nevertheless, are their respective theories of communication truly comparable? Moreover, Kierkegaard's pseudonyms<sup>5</sup> and Pessoa's heteronyms can be

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<sup>5</sup> For which see Kierkegaard 1992a, 625 and Kierkegaard 1992b, 143-156, but also Kierkegaard 2000.

meaningfully equated, as if they were shadowy forces summoned from a dream and transfigured into reality?

Thanks to the work of Richard Zenith, we now have an extraordinarily detailed account of Fernando Pessoa's life. Nevertheless, the interpretive challenges posed by Pessoa's work, particularly for those attempting a philosophical reading, remain largely unresolved, much as they do with Kierkegaard, despite J. Garff's equally thorough biography. As previously noted, while biographical knowledge is undoubtedly crucial to understanding authors like Kierkegaard and Pessoa, it cannot by itself account for the full complexity of their literary and philosophical production. In both cases, there exists a surplus, a projection beyond mere historical or psychological data, which demands a specifically philosophical inquiry—albeit one that does not disregard the biographical dimension.

Regarding Pessoa's theory of heteronymy, we possess a retrospective account in which the poet reconstructs the initial emergence of a heteronym within his restless inner world. Pessoa was only five years old when his father died; the family, burdened by financial hardship, was forced to relocate to a modest apartment, where they lived with his mentally ill grandmother. It was in that attic on Rua de São Marçal – reminiscent of other well-known rooms and apartments evoked in Pessoa's writings – that his first heteronym, the Chevalier de Pas, made its appearance. In an important undated note, found among his papers and long known as a passage from a 1935 letter to his friend Adolfo Casais Monteiro, Pessoa recalls the genesis of this pseudonymous fiction:

Ever since I was a child, I've felt the need to enlarge the world with fictitious personalities – dreams of mine that were carefully crafted, envisaged with photographic clarity, and fathomed to the depths of their souls. When I was just five years old, an isolated child and quite content to be isolated, I already enjoyed the company of certain characters from my dreams, including Captain Thibeaut, the Chevalier de Pas, and various others [...]. This may seem merely like a child's imagination that gives life to dolls. But it was more than that. I intensely conceived those characters with no need for dolls. Distinctly visible in my ongoing dream, they were utterly human realities for me, which any doll – because unreal – would have spoiled. They were people [Zenith 2022, 41].

The French Captain and the Chevalier de Pas – whose very name already hints at Pessoa’s fascination with the negative, shadowy aspects of existence – were, for the poet, «utterly human realities»; they were people. Thus, he immediately conceives these figures not simply as childish fantasies or mental overexcitement, to which he also, in his famous letter to Monteiro, dated January 13, 1935, makes explicit reference to, defining it as a «hysterical trait», but as real people (*peessoas*). They are so real to the child that he ends up exchanging letters with them and inventing their signatures. This last practice was a constant in the heteronymous production of Pessoa, who not only conveniently adapted his literary style to the heteronyms used (also using different languages, especially English), but even practiced changing the spelling of different authors – hence Pessoa’s interest in graphology: quite a few sketches and attempts have been preserved, and they are still available to scholars today [Lancastre 1988, 44; 81].

This early tendency toward isolation, compounded by the profound sense of *saudade* [Antunes 1983; Lupi 1987], deepened following the death of his brother Jorge in 1894 and his mother’s subsequent remarriage, which led the family to relocate to South Africa. There, Pessoa received a rigorous Anglo-Saxon education, excelling in the humanities. During this period, his heteronymous practice continued to develop: his two most prolific English-language heteronyms, Charles Robert Anon and Alexander Search, were conceived in Durban.

However, the real turning point in Pessoa’s heteronymous production was found in 1914, when he had been back in Portugal for years. Here he was already well integrated in the country’s poetry and criticism scene, collaborating with the most important and widespread literary magazines of the time. That year marked the emergence of Pessoa’s three principal alter egos – Alberto Caeiro,<sup>6</sup> Álvaro de Campos, and Ricardo Reis – along with a renewed focus on the notes that would even-

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<sup>6</sup> The day of its appearance was a real «triumphal day» for Pessoa’s literary career: on March 8, 1914, Pessoa-Caeiro composed the famous poems of the *Guardador de Rebanhos* [Pessoa 2006, 11-12], as well as the response to that composition signed by the poet himself (therefore called orthonymic poems, from the Greek ὀρθός, exact, contrary to ἕτερος, other, different), and entitled, as I have already mentioned, *Chuva oblíqua* [partially in Pessoa 2006, 281-284]: the latter will soon become the poetic manifesto of Intersectionalism.

tually culminate in his posthumous masterpiece, *Livro do Desassossego* (*The Book of Disquiet*) [Pessoa 2015]. It will be the latter, including the author of the *Book of Disquiet* Bernardo Soares, who will represent – in the eyes of critics and the author – the perfection of Pessoa’s heteronymy as completely as possible. In these author-fictions, and particularly in Campos, it is also possible to identify the closest resemblance to the ideas personally held by Pessoa, which are always presented with deviations, imperceptible but fundamental *détournements*, such that ultimately there is no precise correspondence between Pessoa’s authorship and the positions of his literary creations.

It is worth highlighting the religious dimension raised by heteronymy, which may appear, at least superficially, to align with Kierkegaardian pseudonymity. However, while Kierkegaard acknowledged the mask of pseudonyms as a device to be eventually removed in order to enter the religious sphere, in Pessoa the mask is multiplied in an endless, circular play of mirrors, in which to multiply the masks to infinity, and thus to confuse, to make the face behind it unrecognizable, even confusing it with a mask, with fiction, with a pretense. Nevertheless, the link with religion also exists in Pessoa, who, again in his 1935 letter on the genesis of heteronyms, recalls how this is mixed in his memory with the poet’s perceived need to write some pagan-themed compositions. Pessoa dates this ancient need to around 1912, and he will satisfy it thanks to yet another product of his imagination. Thus, it was António Mora who constructed an almost delirious philosophical system, centered on a radical critique of Christianity and grounded in a return to paganism. At the same time, his poetic *côté* was sung in many of Alberto Caeiro’s compositions.

Therefore, a structural link between heteronymy and religion, which is assumed – at least from 1912 – in a decidedly anti-Catholic, if not anti-Christian key, for recovery of ancient wisdom: pagan, cabalistic, gnostic, hermetic or esoteric, but in any case, critical and dissolving the established order. The rich cultural syncretism that permeated Pessoa’s life and work is reflected in these diverse and far-reaching interests, only enriched by an increasingly insistent reference to esotericism, which, combined with the almost psychiatric invasion of heteronyms in his life, will end up characterizing Pessoa’s poetics and biography.

In this regard, the break with Ofélia Queiroz, his girlfriend (yet another parallel that links him to the Danish philosopher), is famous. After having called on his heteronym Reis, he explains his choice invoking a «different Law», and unknown «Masters» who govern the reins of our Destiny [Raña Lama 1986]. Traces of this break can be found in many of Pessoa's poems, as well as in various fragments of his *Livro do Desassossego*, where he even goes so far as to suggest the impossibility of love itself, portraying it as nothing more than a projection of the love we feel for ourselves: «We never love anyone. [...] It is our concept – our selves – that we love» [Pessoa 2015, 112; see also Lourenço 1985].

The anarchic tendency of Pessoa's religious criticism, with its increasingly marked esoteric connotations, is also reflected in his ambiguous political positions, close to dictatorship and radically opposed to any form of modern democracy. By bringing poetry, religion, and politics together, he came to describe his political position as «mystical nationalism» (a position, however, that has many parallels among other European intellectuals). Religion is reduced, in this return to nationalistic paganism, to mythology and the propensity, already quite marked in Pessoa, to the conception of literature as a demiurgic act, totally voluntaristic and situated in a region governed by other laws, unknown to the profane. Here, in this complicated and inextricable tangle, we can perhaps also grasp the retrospective sense that the continuous creation of heteronyms has in this creative position (which ends around 1930, in order to better concentrate on the authors already created or, as Pessoa would have preferred, encountered by the poet). They present themselves as a desperate attempt to «embody a possible position of Western metaphysics» [Perrone-Moisés 1997, 55], as different and specific embodiments of the various philosophical, ethical, and religious visions that have succeeded one another from antiquity to the present day, in a continuous clash that has never led to a deeper agreement. Philosophy, both in heteronyms and in orthonymic statements, «must ultimately be an art [...] that can intercross and interconnect different and even contradictory philosophical ideas» [Dix 2010, 84-85].

This is why the positions assumed by heteronyms, in their difference and their contradiction, are all, in a certain sense, actual. It is the truth of fiction that they embody, and it is the only truth to which Pessoa can adhere. It is no coincidence that he would come to use his name as

yet another pseudonym, for the highest achievement of a poet, according to Pessoa, is to feign so perfectly that he erases his real identity, diffusing it across multiple fictitious selves. This is precisely the point of maximum distance that can be indicated by Kierkegaard, where all extrinsic parallelisms are resolved in an intrinsic divergence, so much so that the questions I mentioned above – on the possibility of identifying the two communicative theories, Kierkegaard’s pseudonymy and Pessoa’s heteronymy – will undoubtedly have to be answered in the negative.

Kierkegaard and Pessoa never met. Not on a biographical level, because Pessoa never read the Danish philosopher, nor (in all likelihood) ever heard of him,<sup>7</sup> nor on a theoretical level – philosophical or literary. Even philosophy – and with-it religion – for Pessoa is nothing more than play, storytelling, narration, and poetry, of course; indeed, to be precise, as he writes in the poem *Autopsicografia*, from 1931, which for good reason is considered a manifesto of his literary theory, it is nothing more than fiction: «The poet is a faker/Who is so good at his act/ He even fakes the pain/ Of pain he feels in fact» [Pessoa 2006, 314].

After all, in the most important (anti-)metaphysical composition by his alter ego Campos, *Tabacaria* (1933), he was perhaps even clearer, when he did not hesitate to have his engineer-poet declare that «Não sou nada./ Nunca serei nada./ Não posso querer ser nada» [Pessoa 2023; Zenith 2002], to be read in parallel with the last verse of all his literary production, the one with which he closed, on November 19, 1935, his career as a writer that had begun early and ended early. There, in *Há doenças piores*, an orthonym Pessoa could conclude, overcome by melancholy and nihilism, that «a vida é nada» [Pessoa 2006, 367], and that the only thing left to do – in line with what Baudelaire stated in his famous verses, who in turn referred to famous ancient models – was to drink wine («Dá-me mais vinho») [*Ibidem*].

However, it is precisely in these declarations of metaphysical despair, of complete and total nihilism, that the faint light of hope also creeps in. Alternatively, it is here that light becomes more evident, and even the reader can perceive it. In fact, in the three opening lines of

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<sup>7</sup> Zenith 2022, XXIX. See also Bellaiche-Zacharie 2009 and 2017 and Santos Jorge 2005.

*Tabacaria*, no one could doubt that the third line, with its declaration that one cannot want, cannot accept being anything, serves rather as a negation than as a reinforcement of the first two lines, in which the nihilistic alternative of the nullity of all existence is defended with forceful imagery. For a moment, however, in the third verse, the heteronymic destruction of the self seems momentarily to halt, as if pausing before the indestructible foundation from which even that very deconstructive impulse ultimately originates. It is only a brief interruption, a short-circuit of Pessoa's poetic production itself. However, it is such as to reveal the true face that hides behind the endless production of masks that is his work. In the same way, the last verse of the last poem I quoted above can be illuminated, to grasp better the implicit despair-hope dialectic that sustains it, by the last words written in English on a piece of paper on his deathbed by the poet, now aware of his imminent death: «29-11-1935 I know not what tomorrow will bring»,<sup>8</sup> which stands as the only conceivable response to the earthly certainty of an end that so deeply haunted Pessoa's entire existence.

#### 4. *Some concluding remarks*

In conclusion, it is worth reaffirming the fundamental distance that separates Kierkegaard and Pessoa – a distance that persists despite any superficial parallels or analogies that may be drawn from their respective theories of communication [Santos Jorge 2005, 82-92]. While it may be possible to detect a final convergence in the dialectic of despair and hope that subtly undergirds Pessoa's work, any comprehensive interpretation must acknowledge the radically different and ultimately irreconcilable orientations that shape their respective projects.

In Kierkegaard, the use of literature and pseudonymous fiction is aimed at a transition of an entirely different kind, that is, towards the edification and awakening of the reader, who must be led to abandon the path of the aesthetic (but also that of the ethical) in favor of the choice for the religious, in which the work of the Danish philosopher is ultimately summarized.

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<sup>8</sup> See Lancaster 1988, 166 and Zenith 2022, 925-927; 1018.

On the contrary, in Pessoa's theorization as in his creations, whether in poetry or prose, the author's aim does not seem to be to abandon the conception of life that those fictions inform, but rather to take it to its extreme consequences. Not even the Pauline verse found among his papers – «I became all things to all men, that I might save all» [Zenith 2022, XXIX] – finally seems to open up to a positive result in which nihilism resolves itself into an affirmative response regarding the meaning, or the meaninglessness, of existence.

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## Keywords

Søren Kierkegaard; Fernando Pessoa; nihilism; moral philosophy; philosophy and literature

## Abstract

In this essay I introduce the problematic relationship that in the Western tradition has linked and separated philosophy and literature. In order to do so, I focus in particular on two thinkers who have constantly reflected on this topic, S. Kierkegaard and F. Pessoa, emphasizing, beyond easy parallels, the profound differences that distinguish their respective thoughts. I focus the analysis on the communicative theories developed by Kierkegaard and Pessoa, to highlight the essential difference between pseudonymy and heteronymy.

In questo saggio introduco il problematico rapporto che nella cultura occidentale ha legato e insieme separato filosofia e letteratura. Per farlo, mi concentro in particolare su due pensatori che hanno costantemente riflettuto su questo tema, S. Kierkegaard e F. Pessoa, sottolineando, al di là di facili parallelismi, le profonde differenze che

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contraddistinguono i rispettivi pensieri. Nello specifico, prendo in considerazione soprattutto le teorie comunicative elaborate da Kierkegaard e Pessoa, con i loro immediati risvolti etico-religiosi, per evidenziare così la differenza essenziale che corre tra pseudonimia ed eteronimia.

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