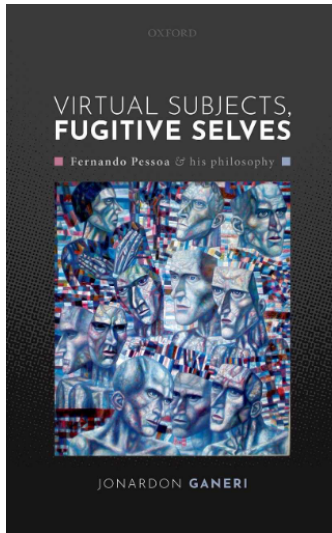


# A new vocabulary for the Self

[Um novo vocabulário do Eu]

Bartholomew Ryan\*

GANERI, Jonardon (2020). *Virtual subjects, fugitive selves. Fernando Pessoa & his philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 192 pp. [ISBN 9780198864684].



Jonardon Ganeri's heady, innovative, and highly condensed monograph on the great Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) concludes with these words: "Pessoa provides us with a new vocabulary for the self, a new repertoire of conceptual tools for interpreting and analysing subjectivity: heteronymy, the fugitive, landscapes, dreaming, intersection, orthonyms, and much else besides" (150). The reader encounters this sentence in the 'Postscript' on the last page, but we could just as easily have found it on the first page. More and more books and essays are now finally emerging in the English-speaking world on Pessoa and philosophy. What Ganeri proceeds to do in his book, called *Virtual Subjects, Fugitive Selves: Fernando Pessoa & his Philosophy*, is to bring to light the extremely pioneering work that Pessoa has done for the philosophy of the self—which Ganeri seeks to demonstrate; while also introducing many new texts that numerous Pessoa scholars I am sure would not have been aware of; and, finally, creating and introducing new vocabulary and offering new perspectives on passages from Pessoa to help us deepen our understanding of what Pessoa has done in his writings. Pessoa had read and understood the main tenets of Ancient Greek philosophy, Spinoza, Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, amongst others; and exploring various ideas in non-Western philosophy and poetry; and proceeded to celebrate and dismantle both Platonic and anti-Platonic visions through his disparate poetry and to grafting new possible horizons for philosophy. Hence, the subtitle of Ganeri's work—'his philosophy', and that is what Ganeri seeks to penetrate and show the reader. And, yet, in his scintillating analysis, Ganeri still manages to leave Pessoa intact as first and foremost a poet.

Let us begin with the cover of the book, it sucks the reader in immediately and brilliantly reflects the actual contents of the book. The title is fantastic in capturing an essence of Pessoa as a philosophical-dramatic poet and cosmic artist of the twentieth century. The first four words that grace the jacket cover—'virtual',

---

\* Universidade Nova de Lisboa, IFILNOVA.

'subjects', 'fugitives' and 'selves'—appear throughout the nineteen short chapters. I find myself asking why someone hadn't come up with the term 'virtual subjects' before in thinking about Pessoa, this to me is a very good sign for what lies inside this new book. The strength of this book is that Ganeri is traversing a path that is trying to show us a new philosophy, and as well as revealing Pessoa in a new light—that for Ganeri was always there. In chapter twelve, Ganeri explains the virtual subject as "the occupant of a field of experience whose centrality is not explained in terms of facts about embodiment" (90), as an "abstract entity" (90) and as "the derived nominative of manifestation" (91). We have entered a work that skilfully combines analytic and critical theory insights.

The term "field of experience" is crucial here and also highlights one of the many paradoxes in Pessoa's oeuvre. Ganeri writes at the beginning of chapter twelve (called 'Virtual Subjects') that the self "is grounded in features of fields and experiences" (87). Ganeri is firstly showing us that Pessoa has moved way beyond Descartes' subjectivity, but also and more originally that Pessoa has created an immense field of experiences for the self far deeper than most other previous philosophers have done. But Pessoa's supreme rationality is often disturbed by intense feeling; while his poetry of overflowing sensations is often interrupted by philosophical reasoning. Pessoa's 'virtual subject' is abstract, but—and this is where the paradox comes in—it is deeply grounded in experience (an experience of the multiplicity of the 'I'). This is achieved most explicitly through the famous invention of the heteronyms—most prominently in Pessoa's three great poets: Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos, and Ricardo Reis. And heteronymy is the kernel of Pessoa's achievement to be placed as a foremost thinker of the philosophy of self. Hence, the first line of Ganeri's book reads: "Fernando Pessoa's invention of the heteronym represents a singular moment in the history of subjectivity" (3).

We also see the words 'fugitive selves' in the title. This is a crucial addition to the overall title and to Ganeri's insight. The selves (breaking radically from Cartesian philosophy) are decentred. The 'I' is a collection of selves, a fugitive, or as Ganeri discloses in the chapter called 'The Multiplicity of the I', there is "the *fugitive* use of 'I'" (29) which "is a particular use of the first person" (29), and which in a later chapter he designates "the 'I' of the *Book of Disquiet*" as "the 'I' of the fugitive" (74). Ganeri then goes on to immediately quote from the *Book of Disquiet*: "I'm a nomad in my self-awareness" (74). Thus, in the title, we are shown the keys to Pessoa's uncentred philosophical kingdom, and the four words (virtual, subjects, fugitive, selves) interpenetrate, where the heteronym is a 'virtual subject', a 'virtual self', a 'mental self', a 'simulated subject', and a 'simulacrum.' At the end of chapter nine (called 'Being at the Centre'), Ganeri says it much better: "The shifting, unfixed, contingent inhabitation of the subject position is phenomenologically linked with a sense of oneself as estranged, as a fugitive, and it is this sense of oneself as phenomenologically fugitive which is the basis of Pessoa depersonalization" (71).

I think it is worth making a final comment regarding the cover of Ganeri's book, and that is on the painting that is chosen. It is by the Russian artist Pavel Filonov and the painting is called *Shock Workers*. For me, alongside the title (let us not forget that the second half of the title reads "Fernando Pessoa and *his* philosophy"), the image grabbed my attention and haunted me as I was reading the monograph. Of course, we can see here on view a plurality of the subject or multiplicity of selves in identifying at least eleven faces (are they all self-portraits?) interwoven with different colours in rectangles and squares. The painting was created in 1934-1935—the last two years of Pessoa's life. But unlike Pessoa, Filonov's life as 'field of experience' was extremely vivid, visceral, and consumed by brutal history and change in motion. While Pessoa had his invention of and company of the remarkable heteronyms; Filonov fought in World War One, was active at the forefront of the Russian Revolution, exhibited his art regularly, became a professor of St. Petersburg Academy of Arts, was an idealist Marxist revolutionary evidenced in his refusal to sell his art to private collectors and instead wanting all of it to be given to museums, and was more or less starving for the last nine years of his life before finally dying during the Siege of Leningrad in World War Two. I find it worth mentioning the painting and the artist behind it, because, by choosing this image, Ganeri could be making a statement both explicitly and implicitly—on the multiplicity of the 'I' and at the same time the expansiveness and profundity of Pessoa's philosophy of the virtual subject to reach and link fields of experience that touches and can provoke both concrete and abstract existence (which can often also switch roles)—from Filonov's revolutionary Russia to Pessoa's '*marcha da derrota*'<sup>1</sup> and 'life as literature' in Lisbon.

Speaking of provoking, Ganeri divides his book up into three parts: 'Pessoa Presented', 'Pessoa Paraphrased', and 'Pessoa Provoked.' With the first two sections containing seven chapters and the final section containing five chapters, the monograph is bookended by a 'Preamble' and a 'Postscript.' The chapters sometimes read like condensed philosophical acts with direct and memorable titles, with each chapter a bridge to the next one, and most of them are short (under ten pages). This indicates that Ganeri is brimming with ideas, and we will probably hear more from him on Pessoa in the future because there are so many thoughts, new words, and surprising interlocutors introduced throughout the chapters that still need to be unpacked. In an explicit move away from classical philosophy, both Ganeri and Pessoa are revealing (and this is Ganeri's argument) an analytic phenomenology as well as taking very seriously non-Western philosophy—such as the Upanishads and contemporary Indian philosophies of the self—both in their explorations and

---

<sup>1</sup> Álvaro de Campos' famous poem "Tabacaria" [The Tobacco Shop] for a long time was called "*Marcha da Derrota*" [March of Defeat], before Pessoa decided to change the title for publication in 1933 with the magazine *presença*. See PESSOA (2014: 633).

discoveries and in Pessoa's writings already, to help shed light on subjectivity and radically redrawing first-person perspectives. Before discovering Pessoa, Ganeri published a formidable book called *The Self: Naturalism, Consciousness, and the First-Person Stance* (OUP, 2012). In this work, Ganeri explored a wide range of ideas about the self—from Augustine to Avicenna through analytic philosophy and deep into Indian thought. It seems that when we read *Virtual Subjects, Fugitive Selves: Fernando Pessoa and his Philosophy*, Ganeri has found a missing piece to his philosophical investigations—and that is the heteronymic universe of Fernando Pessoa. There is excitement felt in the writing as the short chapters leap from one to the next, speeding up and slowing down, as Ganeri has much to say as he tries to condense his ideas into his first book on Pessoa.

Ganeri is comfortable in coming up with new terms to help us (and himself!) understand and read Pessoa and his philosophy and its contribution to the philosophy of the self, which is a rare but very welcome endeavour in academic writing. Introducing words and bringing in new terms in reading Pessoa is refreshing, thought-provoking and courageous. We are taken on a trip via analytic phenomenology, as we encounter words and terms, such as 'cosmopsychism' and 'heteropsychism' (the latter of which Ganeri explains as a "new solution to the problem of subject constitution, and that it is the apparatus of Pessoa's heteronymic philosophy of self which makes it available to us" 137), 'forum', 'attention' (as 'introspective', 'analytical', and 'inattentive' attention), 'uncentered minds', 'simulation' (which is to say: "I am a subject other than the subject I am" [18]), 'dative of manifestation' (from Dan Zahavi), and 'heteronymic nesting' ("the possibility of assuming a heteronym which itself assumes a heteronym" [123]), in order to help us navigate Pessoa's thought. We have regularly witnessed this kind of approach in contemporary French philosophy in engaging with and attuning to literature, such as, for example, in Derrida, Deleuze, and Badiou (the latter two having written on Pessoa), so it is good to see it happening with Ganeri—as a philosopher officially trained in the English-speaking analytic tradition. In this book, Ganeri is enacting and reminding us of the vital role of the philosopher as someone who sometimes needs to find a new vocabulary, and whose vocation is to create concepts through the field of experience.

Another positive and strong component of this book is that Ganeri introduces the reader of Pessoa to a wide array of thinkers and authors (and visual artists such as Yayoi Kusama, Yasumasa Morimura)—many of which have not been linked to the Portuguese poet until now. While engaging with complex philosophy, the reader also comes away with a list of books to investigate, such as *Waking, Dreaming, Being* by Evan Thompson; *First Person Plural* by Stephen Braude, *Simulating Minds* by Alvin Goldman, *Thought in Action: Expertise and the Conscious Mind* by Barbara Montero (reminding me of Kierkegaard's brilliant and overlooked essay called "A crisis and the crisis in the life of an actress" dealing with anxiety before going on the

stage, existential transformation, and time); *Dream, Death, and the Self* by Jerome Valberg; *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* by Kodwo Eshun; *Surviving Death* by Mark Johnston; *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity; Empathy and Shame* by Dan Zahavi; and *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* by Giorgio Agamben. He also manages to weave in the great religious thinker and activist Simone Weil, and literary works such as the short story “The circular ruins” by Jorge Luis Borges (where the reader will encounter the line: “in the dreamer’s dream, the dreamed one awoke”) that perhaps inspired chapter seventeen called ‘Dreams inside dreams’; and “the serial first-person narration” (24) in the novel *My Name is Red* by Orhan Pamuk. And then of course there is the presence of Indian writings—literary, spiritual, and philosophical—from the *Mahabharata* to the *Upanishads* to contemporary thought. Ganeri attains a fine balance between bringing in other philosophers and authors from different schools of thought and disciplines, while articulating his own philosophy and explorations. And, at the same time, he manages to keep Pessoa at the forefront of the book—both as we thought we knew him and as we had not envisioned him before in such careful detail, through the lens of analytical phenomenology and philosophy of self.

Final thoughts on Ganeri’s new book on Pessoa is that perhaps it might have been worthwhile to look at the text “Notes for the memory of my Master Caeiro” by Álvaro de Campos, which is a profoundly philosophical and often hilarious meeting and conversation between the principal heteronyms and the orthonym Fernando Pessoa himself (as Campos declares in this unfinished text: “The strangest case is that of Fernando Pessoa, who doesn’t exist, strictly speaking”). Or the final passages by Campos in his manifesto “Ultimatum” (published in 1917)<sup>2</sup>, where the vociferous heteronym defines the role of the philosopher and the poet as both having multiple viewpoints, and it is a point in Pessoa’s oeuvre where these two disciplines or vocations explicitly interpenetrate. Also, if Ganeri is to go on to write another book on Pessoa, it would be fascinating to read something of his expansive critical analysis and approach in getting inside some of the poems of Caeiro, Campos, and Reis, and not just *The Book of Disquiet*, and see where that might take him. Also, on a minor aside, in chapter ten, Ganeri presents an entire poem (beginning with “I’m a fugitive” [the original line is actually “*Sou um evadido*” – which could be translated as escapee /evader/ aluder or avoider]) and attributes it to the famous poem “Autopsychography” (72). But this cited poem is actually a different poem altogether which Pessoa left without a title. But Ganeri is right to follow the word ‘fugitive’ as the poem ends with the lines “I’ll live as a fugitive | But live really and truly”, which in Portuguese read as “*Viverei fugindo | mas vivo a valer.*” And as Ganeri writes on this poem (displaying another one of his brilliant stand-alone sentences

---

<sup>2</sup> See “Ultimatum”, translated by John Pedro Schwartz and Robert N. Schwartz. Annex of an article by SCHWARTZ and PIZARRO (2022).

throughout the book): “The way to live truly is to embrace the contingency in that position’s inhabitation” (72).

This book certainly made me think about Pessoa differently. It was a challenge to read, and it is a book to return to as it valiantly opens up new pathways to what a dense, creative, philosophical analysis of a poet can do and to what Pessoa does—as an ‘argonaut of sensations’—as he continues his deep-sea diving into the shadows and chaos of the self as subjects and subjects as selves. This monograph is not hagiography; it is a deep philosophical excavation and celebration of an extraordinary poet of modernity that is exercising some profound philosophy. In the process, the reader follows a creative philosophical conversation and encounter between the philosopher Ganeri and his own work, and the virtual subjects and fugitive selves that make up Pessoa’s heteronymy and/or philosophy of the self.

## Bibliography

PESSOA, Fernando (2014). *Obra Completa de Álvaro de Campos*. Edição de Jerónimo Pizarro e Antonio Cardiello, Lisboa: Tinta-da-china.

SCHWARTZ, John; PIZARRO, Jerónimo (2022). "Pessoa's *Ultimatum*: A Manifesto for a New Civilization" [with an Annex]. *Crisis: The Avant-Garde and Modernism in Critical Modes* (European Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies: 7). Edited by Sascha Bru, Kate Kangaslahti, Li Lin, Iveta Slavkova, and David Ayers, Berlin / Boston: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110773637-026>; but also: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110773637-028> & <https://doi.org/10.17613/xh1m-dm31>

**BARTHOLOMEW RYAN** is a philosopher, musician, and researcher of CultureLab at IFILNOVA, Universidade Nova de Lisboa. He was coordinator of CultureLab in 2017-2022 and is currently the coordinator of the research group 'Forms of Life and Practices of Philosophy.' He has published various books and essays interpenetrating philosophy and literature, the most recent book being *Fernando Pessoa and Philosophy: Countless Lives Inhabit Us* (co-editor, 2021); and he is the author of *Kierkegaard Indirect Politics: Interludes with Lukács, Schmitt, Benjamin and Adorno* (Brill, 2014). He is currently an invited editor for ABEI Journal for a special edition on James Joyce to be published in 2022; and is now writing a book on James Joyce and philosophy for Oxford University Press and another on Pessoa for a Critical Lives Series. He has taught at universities in Brazil, Berlin, Oxford, Aarhus, Dublin, Lisbon, and Bishkek. In music, he released a solo album called *Jabuti* (under the name *Loafing Hero*) in 2022; leads the international band *The Loafing Heroes* (six albums released in 2009-2019); and is a member of the experimental audio formation *Headfoot*.

**BARTHOLOMEW RYAN** é filósofo, músico e investigador do CultureLab no IFILNOVA da Universidade Nova de Lisboa. Foi coordenador do CultureLab em 2017-2022 e atualmente é coordenador do grupo de pesquisa 'Formas de Vida e Práticas de Filosofia'. Publicou vários livros e ensaios interpenetrando filosofia e literatura, cujo livro mais recente se chama *Fernando Pessoa and Philosophy: Countless Lives Inhabit Us* (co-editor, 2021); e é o autor do livro *Kierkegaard Indirect Politics: Interludes with Lukács, Schmitt, Benjamin and Adorno* (Brill, 2014). Atualmente é um editor convidado do ABEI Journal para uma edição especial sobre James Joyce que vai ser publicada em 2022; e, neste momento, está a escrever um livro sobre James Joyce e filosofia para Oxford University Press e outro sobre Pessoa para uma Critical Lives Series. Ensinou em universidades no Brasil, e em Berlin, Oxford, Aarhus, Dublin, Lisboa e Bishkek. Em música: lançou um álbum a solo chamado *Jabuti* (sob o nome *Loafing Hero*) em 2022; é líder da banda internacional *The Loafing Heroes* (seis álbuns lançados em 2009-2019); e é membro da formação de áudio experimental *Headfoot*.