

Two Princes of Melancholy: Fernando Pessoa and Ludwig of Bavaria

“Of essentially what divine material
are castles which are not made of sand?”

Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

“To be here is itself splendid.”

Rilke, *The Duino Elegies*

Nothing would have allowed one to foresee that one day the very distant destinies of a blue-blooded prince and a modest employee of an office in a capital on the edges of Europe would be evoked together. A poet of all impossible dreams, Fernando Pessoa made of Ludwig of Bavaria a figure of his reign of melancholy, and Ludwig populated his actual reign with phantasmagoric castles in which he housed and exorcized an incurable melancholy. Do we find ourselves, in spite of the distance of state and time, in the presence of two brothers in melancholy?

We do not know exactly by which routes of destiny the exalted friend of Wagner, the virgin king previously praised in song by Verlaine, became for the young Pessoa an object of fascination that came to be an almost mystic identification. We can only confirm that such an encounter took place, and from it and as proof of it there is the extraordinary prose poem “The Funeral March for Ludwig II of Bavaria,” included today in the complex Post-Symbolist scheme that bears the name *The Book of Disquiet*.

In his poem, through which pass all the ghosts and colors of the funereal and erotic imagination of a Wagner opera re-imagined by Gustave Moreau, the young Pessoa represents death as the supreme seducer, offering to the elect all of the elixirs that we vainly seek in the realm of illusory pleasure and actual suffering that we call life:

Today, tardier than ever, Death came to my threshold with goods to sell. Before me, tardier than ever, she unfolded carpets, silks and damasks, of her forgetting and consolation. She smiled at them with praise, not caring if I should see. But when I attempted to buy, she spoke to me. She had not come so that I should desire what she showed me, but that I should desire her for what she showed me. And, of her rugs, she said that they were ones that one would enjoy in her faraway palace; of her silks, she said that no others of their kind were worn in her castle in the dark; of her damasks, she said that they were the best among the cloths used to cover scenes of her estate in the hereafter.

This presentation of death under the withered tinsel of Symbolism should not discourage us: death is more convincing when it gives voice to our immemorial reasons for denying life. Schopenhauer had played the part of evangelist of the century for these motives: whether those of Wagner or of the young Pessoa, who would never forget them, in spite of his dreams of neo-paganism and the Fifth Empire. This new form of pessimism — which goes beyond that of Romantic disenchantment — is translated into a genuine death wish, for annihilation, disguised by Schopenhauer's Buddhism or Antero de Quental, whom Pessoa admired so much and whose unmistakable mark is present in "The Funeral March." Before directly challenging Death, whom he loved and coronated in her gloomy splendor — which in this poem is the incarnation of pure nothing — he enumerates for her the reasons for his disdain for life after giving the reasons for loving her, Our Lady of All Consolations:

With a gentle gesture, she unbound the native fondness which fastened me to my naked threshold. "Your home," she said, "has no light: why do you want a home?" "Your home," she said, "has no bread: what good is this table to you?" "Your life," she said, "is attended by no one: why does your life seduce you?" "I am," she said, "the light of darkened hearths, the bread of deserted tables, the helpful companion of the lonely and the misunderstood. The glory that is lacking in the world is the ceremony in my black dominion. In my empire love never tires because of suffering for it; neither does it ache for never having had it. My hand gently rests on the hair of those who think, and they forget; against my bosom those who waited in vain lean, and finally trust."

We do not really know who is the recipient of the message of death, bearer of peace and quietude, romantically assimilated into "the vast and maternal night, the incorruptible splendor of the profound abyss." In real-

ity, she is the point of encounter in the word of Pessoa, who is fascinated by the appeal of nothingness, and that of his double this Ludwig of Bavaria who is the incarnation of death's perfect lover. The two voices are indistinguishable. By confounding himself with the king of dream, Pessoa can descend with him into the waters of a lake much deeper than that of Stannberg. The two forms of melancholy — convulsive in the case of Ludwig and dreamed and sublimated in the case of Pessoa — mutually interrogate one another, in a duo worthy of Wagner, who, better than anyone, had celebrated, in a song of poisonous sweetness, the marriage of melancholy and death.

One of the explanations for the improbable encounter between the young Pessoa and the ghost of Ludwig of Bavaria in fact directs us into the orbit of Wagner. We should not forget that the father of the poet was a music critic for the principal newspaper in Lisbon, at the time that Wagner and Wagnerism were still a kind of aesthetic religion. We should add to this Pessoa's profound knowledge of Symbolism, so closely linked to Wagner and to his mythology, the mythology that Ludwig lived as a religion. Be that as it may, it is through the staging of Wagnerian tonality, softened by the evocation of Maeterlinck, that death, at last, directly addresses itself to the king of melancholy:

In my arms you will forget the painful path itself that brought you to them.
 Against my breast you will no longer feel the love itself that made you seek it!
 Sit yourself beside me in my throne and you will forever be the undethronable
 emperor of the Mystery and of the Grail. You will coexist with the gods and
 with the fates, in being nothing, in not having a hither or yon, in not needing
 even what remains for you, nor what you lack, nor even what is sufficient.
 I will be your maternal spouse, your twin sister discovered. When all your anx-
 ieties are married to me, when you reserve for me everything you seek in your-
 self and did not have, you will lose yourself in my mystical substance, in my
 refused non-existence, in my bosom where things are erased, in my breast
 where souls sink to the depths, in my bosom where the gods vanish.

There is much one could say concerning this "bosom of Death" evoked with an ecstatic and morbid insistence. Fernando Pessoa will never completely liberate himself from this black circle. Would he want to liberate himself? The author of this "Funeral March" is not only the same as the creator of the other great texts of *The Book of Disquiet* ("Our Lady of Silence" and "Symphony of a Restless Night"), or those of the same vein

and style (*The Mariner*, naturally, or the Symbolist plays such as *The Death of the Prince* or *Salomé*), but also the dammed-up river of fragment which is this entire “false book.” More than the “Book of Sadness” that Fernando Pessoa saw in it, *The Book of Disquiet* is a summary, in many respects unequalled, of the nihilistic drive of the first century in which the West is disenchanted with itself to the point of vertigo. Pessimism is an old figure in our culture, as Pessoa notes in recalling *Ecclesiastes* and the *Book of Job*. But, against this immemorial backdrop, the pessimism of the nineteenth century is of another kind, a species of pessimism of the superlative degree. We find it, exacerbated in Leopardi and Vigny, slightly softened in Nerval, but perhaps no other poet of the century expressed it with such determination as Antero de Quental, of whom “Funeral March” is a Post-Symbolist echo. Pessoa’s text revisits, in allegorical and fictional terms, the essence of the vision of life or of the universe and its relationship to consciousness that Antero condenses in a single verse, at the end of the sonnets entitled *In Praise of Death*: “Non-being that is the only absolute being.”

There is no gloss in the sphere of ideas that can add anything to this verification, which takes the shape of a metaphysical guillotine. The “Funeral March,” as a word about death or word-death, converts with mastery and a degree of irony the abstract metaphors of Antero into figurations as scintillating as a landscape. We are in another poetic world where the relationship between image and idea is inverted. But the base of this vision is the same. Let us recall Antero’s sonnet “What Death Says”:

Let them come to me, those who struggled
 Let them come to me, those who suffer;
 And those who, full of tedium and sorrow, face
 Their own vain works which they themselves mock [...]

In me, the Sufferings that have no cure,
 Passion, Doubt and Evil, vanish
 The torrents of Pain, that never cease,
 As in a sea, in me disappear.

Our relationship with death is a fiction. Death in itself imposes on the word two inexhaustible and symmetrical necessities: silence and the infinite reworking in fiction that takes death as its object. In a strict sense, fiction arises from the impossibility of saying what death “says” or “does not

say." We cannot "speak" of it without turning over the tapestry of life. It is (our) life, read inside out, which fills this lack, this gaping breach in the hollow of existence, "unthinkable" by nature, in every sense of the word. In "Funeral March," Pessoa offers Ludwig of Bavaria the only crown that cannot be lost: the crown of nothing. And naturally, this dreamed-up crown, the most fantastic of all crowns, is made only of golden recollections of life. What is new in this post-Wagnerian evocation of death is the coronation of Ludwig as the emperor of death presented not only as a celebration, but as the supreme celebration. Its form, its rituals, must make of annihilation — or, at least of conceived annihilation — an apotheosis. From this comes the litany, with the odor of sacrilege, that celebrates the marriage of Ludwig II with death:

His Majesty of Disattachment and Renunciation, Emperor of Death and Shipwreck, living dream wandering, exuberant, between the ruins and the roads of the world.

His Majesty of Hopelessness among the pomp, pained owner of palaces that do not satisfy him, master of the corteges and of the apparatuses that fail to extinguish life!...

[...]

His Majesty of whom death sanctified his, pallid and absurd, forgotten and unknown, reigning between dull stones and worn velvet, on my throne at the end of the Possible, with his unreal court surrounding it, shadows, and his fantastic militia, guarding him, mysterious and empty.

[...]

The King goes to dine with Death, in her ancient palace, beside the lake, between the mountains, far from life, alien to the world.

[...]

Death is the triumph of Life!

Through death we live, because we only are today because we died yesterday. Through death we hope because we can only believe in tomorrow through the confidence in death today. Through Death we live when we dream, because dreaming is denying life. Through Death we die when we live, because to live is to deny eternity! Death guides us, death seeks us, death accompanies us. Everything we have is Death, everything we want is Death, and death is everything we wish to want.

Sound the heralds, from the heights of the battlements, greeting this great dawn!

The King of death is arriving in his dominion!

[...]

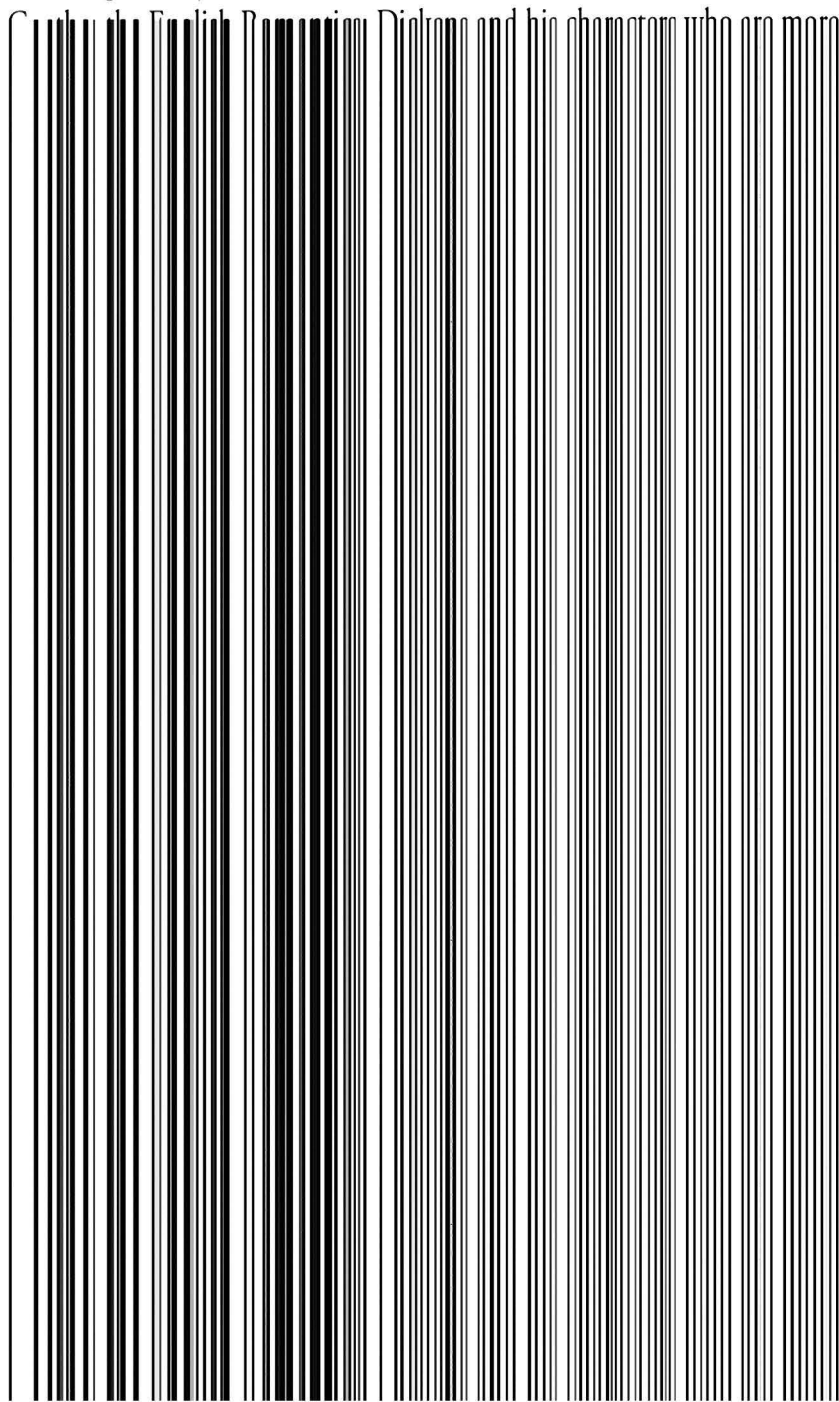
Your love for things dreamed was your scorn for things lived.
Virgin King who scorned love,
Shadow King who disdained the light,
Dream King who did not desire life!

Between the deaf rumble of cymbals and kettledrums, the Shade acclaims you
Emperor!

In the face of this excessively oneiric text, for us intentionally archaic, but in perfect consonance with the fruition of himself as “dead king,” it is reasonable to think that this apotheosis is directed less to the actual Insane King, Ludwig of Bavaria, than to the author himself, saturated in the literature of decadence, and tempted in this epoch by the idea and the ghost of suicide and insanity. He need not have invented in third person the voluptuousness of this trip within the labyrinth outside time, of dreamed death, and less still the familiarity with anguish that, despite the immersion in precious Symbolism, spews forth in “Funeral March.” The transference of his anguish and of his taste for death to the figure of Ludwig of Bavaria leaves no room for doubt. Reading the poem, however, we are struck by the fact — more banal but no less enigmatic — of the revelation of an unusual knowledge not only of the myth of Ludwig as king of melancholy but also of his actual story. Through the shining images we discern the king — bizarre, solitary, lover of the woods, of the mountains, of absurd horseback rides — the dream king much more than the king of dreams, in the same sense as Syberberg or Visconti revived him for us.

It remains to discover how, and why, a young man of English education, at the beginning of the twentieth century, in a country removed from Middle Europe, was so well acquainted with this character and so sensitive to his exterior and personal tragedy. We can, as a last resort, imagine that this fictional familiarity is owed to a mysterious cultural communication — that of Symbolism — with its code, echoes and irradiations. But, it remains, finally, inexplicable, especially since there is no evidence of such an interest for Ludwig’s personality or his legend in Portuguese culture of the period. When Pessoa wrote his poem (around 1913), Ludwig’s tragic and extravagant end belonged to the past. And his story does not seem to be connected to any of the myths of the end of the century which we are able to discern in the Portuguese cultural imaginary. This passionate encounter of a legend and a young poet is, in every sense, a personal myth of Fernando Pessoa.

In a general sense, the mediators of his poetic creation are literary figures — authors and texts or characters from these texts: Shakespeare and his cortege of creatures, Lear or Hamlet; Milton and his Satan; Rousseau;



measure the distance that separates their dreamed-of body — that of an almost absolute power, when compared with that of mere mortals — from their actual body, which is submitted to the demands of embodied power and to the rites that make them possible. Ludwig of Bavaria's melancholy was not of this type. He had a deplorable upbringing and only very late, at the edge of insanity, did he become acquainted with the weight of his obligations. When he was still a child, he was installed in the "position of king," or was allowed to install himself in it. Afterwards, when he was king, his protégés maintained him in this golden cage, putting up with his extravagances beyond tolerable

limits. Never would duty dethrone him from this "position of king," a position that assures that between drive and act there would be no brakes — that is to say, real brakes. In a strict sense, Ludwig of Bavaria never entered into life. He thought of himself as king and performed the role with realism at times, as Bismarck verified, but as if in a play — he who was the king of an opulent reign in the heart of Europe. He never understood, as was the case with his Hapsburg relatives (with the exception of his cousin Elizabeth), that for a long time royalty had only been able to be lived as the death of ancient royalty. Since he could not perceive this fact, his insanity confirmed the diagnosis described here.

What is most interesting about Ludwig's melancholy is not that it was an extreme case of Romantic melancholy — that of Kleist is of this type more pungent and truly sublime — but that it should be linked to the imaginary of power and the imaginary of the nineteenth century. Without having wanted to, Ludwig determined that he would play a role on these two levels. One of these games, that of power, he played like a dream: the other, that of creation, he was not given the opportunity either to play or to make use of. He knew, however, to the point of madness, the spell of the only power of the century — that of dreaming for all of humanity and making them dream. He thus lost his mind and finally his life. He wished to save himself, dreaming that he was Lohengrin and Parsifal, who, each in his turn, was already a figure of a dream of sublimated madness, conceived to regenerate the world. Since being a real Lohengrin or Parsifal was not his fate, he chose to live his life like an opera, the theatre of the world as pure dream. Like a swan that parades its silent beauty to the song of the stage scenery, Ludwig played his part in the opera which his delirious passion for Wagner helped him to compose. Wagner, the object of his adoration, was for him, above all, the most cruel of gods. Ludwig offered himself up, with painful naiveté, to the one who had introduced him to a still

more fantastic and inaccessible world than the most Wagnerian of his palaces, that which nothing could fill up except the nameless melancholy of remaining outside of the real castle where Wagner reigned alone.

His insanity is the reality of his life as a king who knows that he can never be Louis XIV or Louis XV, whose portraits or escutcheons adorn the ballrooms, the bedrooms, the alcoves of his useless castles, since for a very long time *Le roi est mort!* And forever. To reign, the real kings must pretend that they are not authentic kings. He wishes to have in the world in which the kings have already died — and, very shortly, God — the impossible role of real kings. He is, already, without knowing it, the character of *Henry IV*, of Pirandello, and also of *Roi se meurt*, by Ionesco. All of the kings are dead, but the position of king is not empty. The king's place is not that of power, but that which gives sense to power. After the French Revolution, the philosophers, the poets and the artists are the ones who became priests and kings, guardians, wizards and emperors of reason. No other, not even Victor Hugo, assumed this role with the determination and great success of Wagner. No one realized, at that time, that the religion of art would turn into the only religion and that even its basest officiates would be taken for imaginary kings. The madness of Ludwig, his pathetic devotion to the search for the new Wagnerian grail, is worth little beside the will to power incarnated in each and every creator at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Symbolism was an oneiric orgy of power which no king would ever dare suppose to be legitimate. With increasing superciliousness and insanity, the creators crowned themselves, like Napoleon. And it is at this point that Pessoa and his melancholy truly intersects with that of Ludwig. There is neither chance nor miracle in this encounter between a king dethroned of his interior royalty and a poet of genius who is unable to convince himself that, beneath his cloak of anonymity, he is a hidden king predestined to be acknowledged by God.

Nevertheless, these two melancholies do not, apart from the human weight of deep sadness, anguish and insanity — real or simulated — intersect with one another. That of Ludwig is entirely phantasmagoric, like his castles. That of Pessoa has the reality of a dream, which for him is the very essence of reality. The melancholy of Ludwig is a suffering that is simultaneously provoked by excess and imperfection. It does not dive into its roots, like that of Pessoa, in lived experience, so to speak, of time as such. Even in his most “solar” poems, destined to repress, oneirically, the idea of time and of the melancholy lodged within it — such as those by Caeiro

— Pessoa never ceased to be obsessed by time. All of his poetry, beyond its deliberate staging, is a game with various lived times, as much lost time as time revisited.

Melancholy that is neither insanity, like that of Ajax, nor sadness tightened into painful silence, like that of Ludwig, can be none other than the consciousness of time, simultaneously understood as unreal and as a unique substance of our existence. It was in his “ecstatic” drama “The Mariner” that Pessoa best configured, as only music can do, pure melancholy, this desire to return, once and again, perpetually, to the construction of a house resembling the one he lost, and in so doing detaining the river of forgetting. Access to the path of creation was forbidden to the one whom Pessoa evoked as the prefiguration of death. All that separates him from the tomb where Ludwig lies, in his place and in the place of all insane dreamers, is this power to return to oneself, to repress the time of death with the living time of remembering:

[...] I feel time with an enormous ache. It is always with an exaggerated commotion that I abandon anything. The poor rented room where I passed several months, the table of the provincial hotel where I passed six days, the sad waiting room itself of the railroad station where I spent two hours awaiting the train — yes, the good things of life, when I abandon them and think with all the sensibility of my nerves, that I will never again see or have them, at least in that precise and exact moment, pain me metaphysically.

Thus is the melancholy of *The Book of Disquiet*. Melancholy stripped of the false jewelry with which Pessoa adorned the melancholy of the legendary king. Melancholy of the absolute dreamer of the Rua dos Douradores, real not royal melancholy, like that of all humanity.