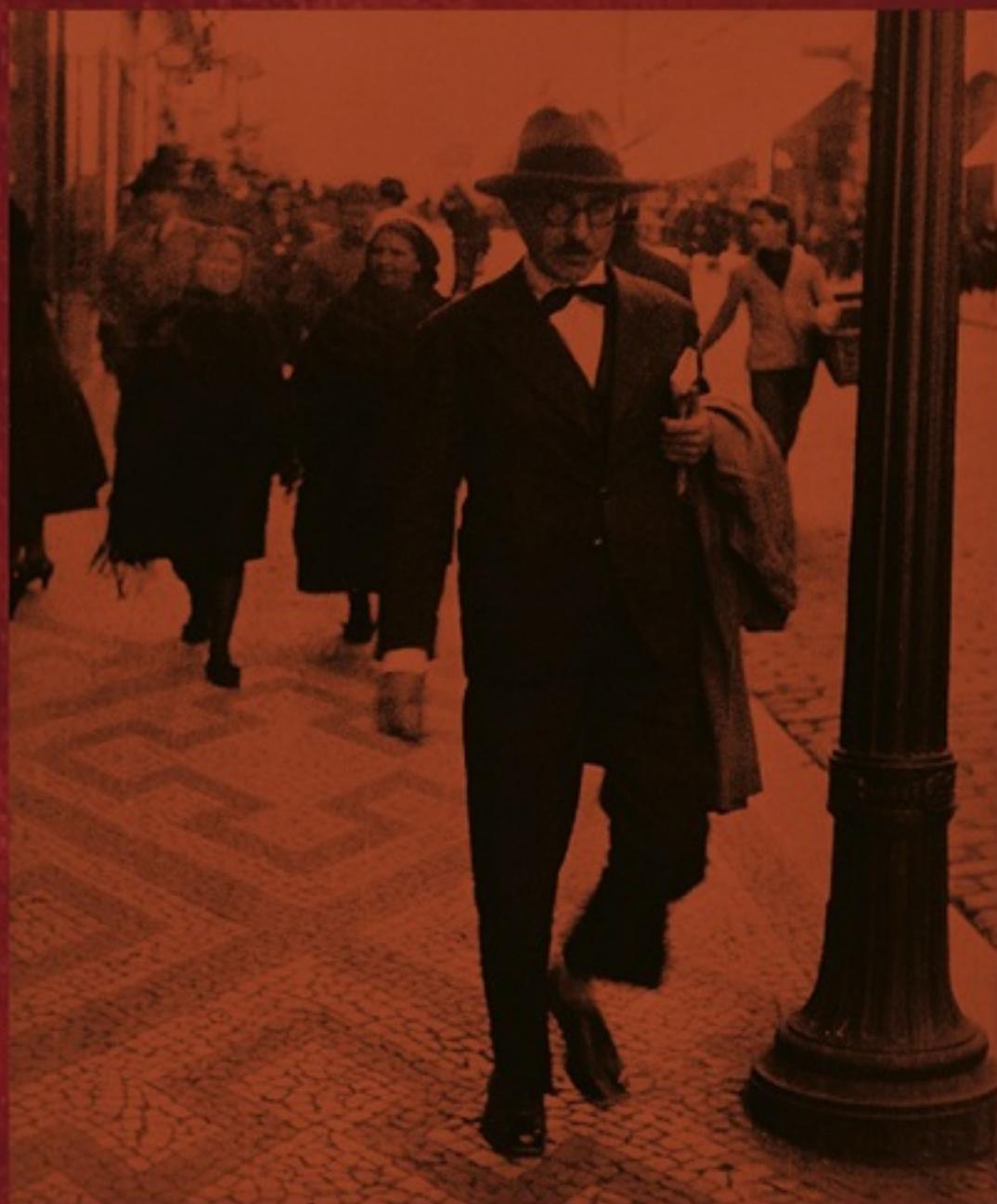


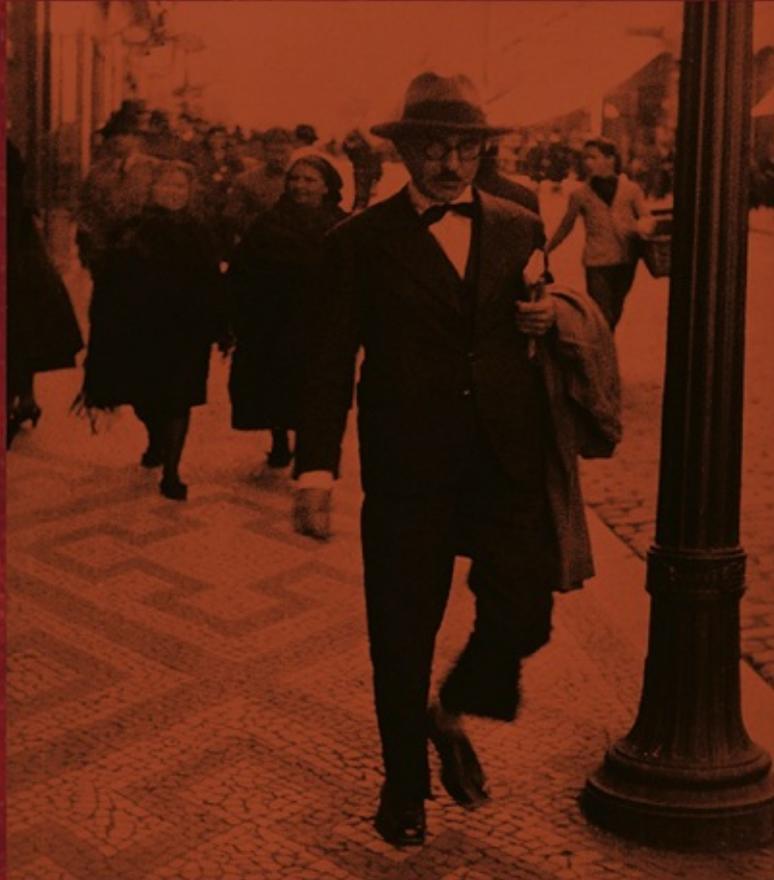
# An Unwritten Novel

Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet*



Thomas J. Cousineau

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The Book of Disquiet

by

THOMAS J. COUSINEAU



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For Charlotte, Sophie, Sebastien, and Madeleine

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## Preface

*An Unwritten Novel* offers the general reader, as well as students and teachers of modernism, an “Ariadne’s thread” that will help them to find their way through Fernando Pessoa’s labyrinthine masterpiece, *The Book of Disquiet*. The thread itself is woven from the double-stranded observation made by Bernardo Soares (its putative author) that “Anything and everything, depending on how one sees it, is a marvel or a hindrance, an all or a nothing, a path or a problem.”

The “marvel-hindrance” that pervades *The Book* from beginning to end (despite its having neither a beginning nor an end but, rather, an endlessly recurring middle) is the loss of a stable and reassuring vision of the world and of one’s place within it. Soares’s discovery that he is actually an “exile” where he had thought himself to be a “citizen” produces throughout *The Book* expressions of hopeless nostalgia as well as daydreams of a paradise regained. “Once upon a time” echoes repeatedly as its signature refrain, but the disquiet to which it gives expression remains as obdurate as ever.

One possible solution to this predicament is to attempt to fill the void left by the collapse of inherited beliefs with a substitute faith. This leads Soares’s contemporaries, who are incapable of worshipping the God of their ancestors, to erect a compensatory, yet bogus, “cult of humanity” and Soares himself to attempt, albeit with equally unconvincing results, to erect a cult of the “superior man,” which he readily joins. The other solution is to treat this misfortune as an opportunity to devise a new mode of writing that is not tainted with nostalgia. At first glance, Soares appears ill-suited to such an undertaking. A mere assistant bookkeeper in a commercial enterprise, he seems to lack the most rudimentary literary gifts. By his own admission, he can’t write poetry and, on the evidence of his “factless autobiography,” he can neither create believable characters nor write convincing dialogue and narration. As though that weren’t enough, his aesthetic ideal – which he can’t possibly duplicate – is found in such monumental achievements as Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

Fortunately, however, the various “hindrances” by which Soares is beset go hand-in-hand with the “marvel” that is *The Book* itself. Like the “aged man” in William Butler Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium,” *The Book* is a “paltry thing” whose soul nonetheless manages to “clap its hands and sing, and louder sing/For every tatter in its mortal dress.” However, rather than finding consolation, as Yeats does, in the vision of himself as a “golden bird,” Soares, a self-described “building in ruins,” produces an incongruous masterpiece in which the diminishment that he experiences as a personal crisis coexists with an artistic achievement in the form of what he calls “greater completeness.”

Ordinarily, a novelist achieves the effect of completeness by assembling the various parts of his novel so that they contribute to an organized whole. Details of place, for example, are gathered in a way that creates a setting; episodes are arranged in a logical

sequence to form a plot; the protagonist is part of a larger human community; dialogue and narration each makes its distinct contribution to the novel as a whole; and the roles of the protagonist, who experiences events, and the author, who produces the work in which they are represented, are clearly distinguished as well. In *The Book*, however, all five of these narrative elements are “unwritten.” Lisbon is scarcely present as its setting and the three details that are mentioned—office, rented-room, and neighboring streets—are only minimally described. Plot dissolves into a series of events that do not cohere into a sustained action. Soares lives in nearly complete isolation from his fellow Lisboetas; both narration and dialogue virtually disappear, as does the distinction between the author and the protagonist.

Each of these “mutilations” of a properly written novel, however, prepares the way for a compensatory form of “greater completeness.” On the level of setting, the office, the room, and the neighboring streets become gateways to the infinite. The episodic events that never cohere into a unified plot achieve the intensity of “modest apocalypses” which acquire an aura of timelessness. Soares, an undistinguished bookkeeper who records his company’s accounts in a ledger, metamorphoses into a writer through whom the works of his great predecessors—including Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton—are uncannily revived, albeit in the incongruous form of an “unwritten novel.” The eclipse of narration and dialogue leads to the emergence of a form of writing—what Soares calls “the written voice”—that hovers uncannily between speaking and silence. Finally, the blurring of the distinction between the author and his protagonist produces a hybrid, indeterminate form of authorship that has led some readers of *The Book* to attribute it to Pessoa/Soares.

The most intriguing aspect of the relationship between the mutilation which is, for Soares, a personal predicament and the dismemberment of inherited novelistic conventions that leads to greater completeness is that it cannot be interpreted as the expression of a conscious authorial intention. This is partly because we are not quite sure who actually wrote (or didn’t write) *The Book*, but also because neither Pessoa nor Soares actually wanted to produce a work that was merely a hodge-podge of fragmentary texts. Pessoa admired the architectural perfection of the great epic poems and achieved something resembling it, albeit on a much smaller scale, in his symbolist epic entitled *Message*. Curiously, it was when they renounced—or, more accurately, were deprived by a combination of their sheer inability to write a novel and the circumstance of Pessoa’s untimely death at age forty-seven—the brilliant mastery of one’s materials that they admired in Virgil and Dante and which Pessoa had displayed so impressively in *Message*, that Pessoa/Soares created—or, more accurately, had created for them—if not the most perfectly constructed of modernist masterpieces, then certainly one of the most sublime.

“I wonder if my apparently negligible voice might not embody the essence of thousands of voices, the longing for self-expression of thousands of lives, the patience of millions of souls resigned like my own to their daily lot, their useless dreams, and their hopeless hopes.”

*-The Book of Disquiet*

## Introduction: *The Sheltering Ruins*

“In your ruins, I find shelter.”  
-Samuel Beckett to E. M. Cioran

BERNARDO SOARES, WHOM Fernando Pessoa would eventually designate as the author of *The Book of Disquiet*, describes himself as “the ruins of buildings that were never more than ruins.” One cannot imagine a more apt description, not only of Soares himself, but also of the “factless autobiography” that he wrote. Soares provides an historical context for the verbal ruins that Pessoa’s editors would assemble following his death when he tells his readers that “I was born in a time when the majority of young people had lost faith in God, for the same reason their elders had it – without knowing why” (11). He elaborates on the emotional and practical consequences of this loss in Text 175, which begins “The generation I belong to was born into a world where those with a brain as well as a heart couldn’t find any support” (156).

This historicizing of his predicament takes on a more personal cast when Soares relates his experience of abandonment to the death of his parents. Of his mother, he says: “She died when I was one year old. My distracted and callous sensibility comes from the lack of that warmth and from my useless longing after kisses I don’t remember. I’m artificial. It was always against strange breasts that I woke up, cuddled as if by proxy” (32). To this experience of loss, he adds the suicide of his father: “My father, who lived far away, killed himself when I was three, and so I never met him. I still don’t know why he lived far away. I never cared to find out. I remember his death as a grave silence during the first meals we ate after learning about it” (32). He casts the loss of his father as an event having cosmic resonances when he declares: “I feel as if I’d lost a benevolent God, as if the Substance of everything had died” (163). As he repeatedly laments throughout *The Book*, Soares no longer feels that he occupies a clearly defined and secure place within the order of creation or, for that matter, in the city of his birth: “In this moment of seeing, I suddenly find myself isolated, an exile where I’d always though I was a citizen” (40).

Soares’s predicament leads to frequent attacks of nostalgia; so susceptible is he to them that they can be provoked by his losing even the most insignificant things: “The miserable rented room where I lived for a few months, the dinner table at the provincial hotel where I stayed for six days, even the sad waiting room at the station where I spent two hours waiting for a train – yes, their loss grieves me” (173). The extremity of his suffering is perhaps best illustrated by the curious form of sadness caused by his reading Charles Dickens’s *The Pickwick Papers*: “One of my life’s greatest tragedies is to have already read *The Pickwick Papers*. (I can’t go back and

read them for the first time.)” (234). He likewise admits that nostalgia can even be aroused by losses that he did not sustain—“I feel sad because of whom I never was, and I don’t know with what kind of nostalgia I miss him” (171)—as well as by those that he does not remember: “What cortèges from my past cause a tedium of unremembered splendours to cradle my nostalgia?” (333).

At one point, his experience of loss leads Soares to wonder “if we weren’t in fact other beings, whose *greater completeness* we can sense today, incompletely, forming at best a sketchy notion of their lost solidity in the two dimensions of our present lives, mere shadows of what they were” (172; my emphasis). In Text 198, entitled “Holiday Notes” and describing a walk along “the forever deserted beach,” something resembling his own “other being” seems to return to him when he observes “a tremulously slanting blue in the distance [ . . . ] gathering into itself all undertows, all return journeys to that original freedom, all nostalgias for God, all memories (like this one, shapeless and painless) of a prior state, blissful because it was so good or because it was different, a body made of nostalgia with a soul of foam, repose, death, the everything or the nothingness which—like a huge ocean—surrounds the island of castaways that is life” (174).

In contrast to these spontaneous, unprompted returns of his “other being,” Soares’s conscious efforts to repair his mutilated self prove, on the contrary, to be inadequate, thus leaving him in the frustrating predicament of a man who “clings to his bed as to the mother he lost, and fondles the pillow as if his nursemaid could protect him from people” (358). He detects signs of comparable futility in the effort of those members of his generation who strive to build a new myth that will stand in place of the now-ruined certainties that had been provided by traditional religious belief:

I reasoned that God, while improbable, might exist, in which case he should be worshipped; whereas Humanity, being a mere biological idea and signifying nothing more than the animal species we belong to, was no more deserving of worship than any other animal species. The cult of Humanity, with its rites of Freedom and Equality, always struck me as a revival of those ancient cults in which gods were like animals or had animal heads. (11)

Despite his misgivings about the atavistic practices of his contemporaries, Soares himself naïvely indulges in a bit of delusional myth-making when he constructs a cult of the “superior man.” In Text 149, after recalling some of the classic definitions of human beings, he launches into a lengthy discussion of the hierarchical distinctions among men, in the course of which he quotes approvingly Haeckel’s misanthropic remark that “while it’s difficult to formulate a definition of what distinguishes man from animals, it’s easy to differentiate between the superior man and the common man” (132). He then applies this observation to himself in a highly gratifying way: “Between me, whose rank is low among thinking men, and a farmer from Loures, there is undoubtedly a greater distance than between the farmer and, I won’t say a monkey, but a cat or dog” (132–3). In a similar vein, he dismisses humanity itself “as merely one of Nature’s latest schools of decorative painting” (144) and expresses his

contempt for a workers' demonstration, which he judges to be the work of "a teeming and rowdy group of animated idiots" (146).

Intriguingly, it is not the effort to regain his lost eminence but his readiness to "lose" it even more, as it were, that leads to some of the most compelling and persuasive writing in *The Book*. By further diminishing his already diminished self, rather than struggling rather pathetically to refashion himself as a superior man, Soares experiences the uncanny return of his "other being"; self-deprecation succeeds, in effect, where self-glorification had failed. We notice this reciprocity between diminishment and what Soares had called "greater completion," for example, in his admission that "All I've had has amounted to my not knowing how to search, like a feudal lord of swamps at twilight, solitary prince of a city of empty tombs" (189) and that "My castles were made of old, grubby playing cards from an incomplete deck that could never be used to play anything; they didn't even fall but had to be knocked down by the impatient hand of the old maid [ . . . ]" (54). In such passages as these, we experience—not his personal effort to hide his dereliction behind the dubious assertion of his superiority—but his aesthetic decision to use loss itself as the material he transforms into an ironic form of expression that is more complete precisely because it is also more ruined.

In obedience to the principle of reciprocity that is at work here, Soares alludes to his magnificent prose in incongruously self-diminishing fashion when he tells us that "In my arranging and rearranging of images I'm like a child using newspaper to dress up as a king, and in the way I create rhythm with a series of words I'm like a lunatic adorning my hair with dried flowers that are still alive in my dreams" (169). The self-effacing aspect of this alternative path to greater completeness—obviously apparent in his mocking comparison of himself as a writer to a would-be king and a lunatic—emerges again in his dismissive references to his writing as "random impressions" (20) and "haphazard musings" (21) as well as in the more extended appraisal of its putative insignificance that he offers in Text 155:

Lost and idle words, random metaphors, chained to shadows by a vague anxiety  
. . . Remnants of better times, spent on I don't know what garden paths . . .  
Extinguished lamp whose gold gleams in the dark, in memory of the dead light .  
. . Words tossed not to the wind but to the ground, dropped from limp fingers,  
like dried leaves that had fallen on them from an invisibly infinite tree . . .  
Nostalgia for the pools of unknown farms . . . Heartfelt affection for what never  
happened . . . (139)

It is precisely such slightings of both himself and his writing, rather than his spurious claims of superiority, that qualify Soares for inclusion in a group whose members, like himself, combine marginalization with greatness:

Some govern the world, others are the world. Between an American millionaire, a Caesar or Napoleon, or Lenin, and the Socialist leader of a small town, there's a difference in quantity but not of quality. Below them there's us, the unnoticed:

the reckless playwright William Shakespeare, John Milton the schoolteacher, Dante Alighieri, the tramp, the delivery boy who ran an errand for me yesterday, the barber who tells me jokes, and the waiter who just now demonstrated his camaraderie by wishing me well, after noticing I'd drunk only half the wine."  
(28)

The idea of a loss that produces an experience of greater completeness is perfectly illustrated by a poem written in 1929 entitled "Note" and attributed to Alvaro de Campos:

My soul has broken like an empty vase.  
It has fallen exceedingly downstairs,  
Fallen from the hands of the careless maid,  
Fallen, smashed into more pieces  
    than there was china in the vase.  
Nonsense? Impossible? Who knows?  
I have more sensations than I had when I felt my old self.  
I am a scattering of shards on a doormat to be shaken.

I made a noise on landing like a vase breaking.  
The gods that there are lean over the banister,  
And stare at the shards their maid has made of me.

Don't let them be angry with her.  
They are tolerant with her.  
What was I but an empty vase?

They look at the shards, foolishly conscious,  
But self-conscious, not conscious of them.

They look and smile,  
Smile tolerantly at the maid who could not help it.

The great stairway stretches, carpeted with stars.  
A shard glitters, turned shiny side out, among the planets.  
My work? My chief soul? My life?  
A shard.  
And the gods look at it especially,  
    for they don't know why it is still there  
(*A Centenary Pessoa* 98-9).

What is most striking here is the way that an initial impression of loss—which then continues as the dominant note throughout the greater part of the poem—coexists with the implication that the dropping of the vase has led not only to loss but also to a

reshaping of space into a pattern—conveyed by the images of the staircase as “carpeted with stars” and of the shard itself as “glitter[ing], turned shiny side out, among the planets”—whose completeness exceeds the finished form that the vase possessed before it was dropped. What had hitherto been just an ordinary vase has now—thanks to its being “smashed into more pieces than there was china in the vase”—become the scattered parts of a sheltering pattern. This ambiguous reciprocity between ruins and shelter is also at work in the conjectured identification between the broken shard and an encircling triad: “My work? My chief soul? My life?”

We may think of *The Book* itself as also having resulted from a comparable kind of shattering. The earliest of the writings that would eventually be included in it were in the form of a comparatively coherent prose poem entitled “In the Forest of Estrangement.” When considering the direction in which *The Book* evolved from these early writings, we notice the tendency to incorporate the sort of realistic details drawn from daily life that would not have found their place in the work that Pessoa originally conceived. Brief evocations of “this sorrowful world” (420), “life and its ways” (421) are replaced by accounts of a dinner in a neighborhood restaurant, during which he observes a fist-fight in the street below, and evocations of the nondescript street on which the equally nondescript rented room where he spends his solitary evenings is located. In addition, we notice that *The Book* contains any number of commonplace prosaic sentences that would not have been at home in the loftier linguistic realm inhabited by “In the Forest of Estrangement.”

Soares himself argues on behalf of the greater amplitude of prose—its ability to incorporate experiences that poetry would exclude—in Text 227, which begins with his admitting the personal nature of his bias in favor of prose: “I have no choice, because I’m incapable of writing in verse” (197). He then shifts to a more objective and universal justification, arguing, for example, that the rhythmic requirements of poetry are “checks, constraints, automatic mechanisms of repression and censure” while “In prose we speak freely. We can incorporate musical rhythms, and still think. We can incorporate poetic rhythms, and yet remain outside them. An occasional poetic rhythm won’t disturb prose, but an occasional prose rhythm makes poetry fall down” (197). He continues by claiming that “prose encompasses all art,” that “in a perfect, civilized world there would be no other art but prose,” and that prose embodies “gestural subtleties carried out by a great actor, the Word, which rhythmically transforms into its bodily substance the impalpable mystery of the universe” (198).

Soares stresses the appealingly unsystematic quality of his prose style when he remarks that, although he had the “perverted desire to adopt a system and a norm,” he actually wrote “before having the norm and the system.” This reflection is then immediately followed by the statement of two principles that elaborate on his rejection of system, including, presumably, the formal constraints of poetry: “1) to express what one feels exactly as it is felt—clearly, if it is clear; obscurely, if obscure; confusedly, if confused—and 2) to understand that grammar is an instrument and not a law” (81). This leads him to speculate that the novel—the freest and most prosaic of literary genres—“is a more perfect life and reality, which God creates through us. Perhaps we live only to create it” (171).

The additional freedom that Soares achieved by resorting not only to prose but to fragmentary prose—“the ruins of buildings that were never more than ruins,” as it

were—may remind us of the role played, throughout history but especially in the modernist period, by literary works that were intentionally—rather than accidentally—created as fragments. In her *The Unfinished Manner: Essays on the Fragment in the Later Eighteenth Century*, Elizabeth Wanning Harris provides some useful details regarding this practice. As Harris reminds us, the fragmentary style is by no means Pessoa's own invention. Both Friedrich and August Wilhelm von Schlegel as well as Novalis were writing fragments in the 1790s. She also includes in her survey such unfinished and, perhaps with even greater pertinence to *The Book*, unfinishable poems as Wordsworth's *Recluse*, Keats's *Hyperion* poems, and Byron's *Don Juan*.

Likewise, Harris's inclusion in her survey of Petrarch's *Rime Sparsa*, of which she says that "although incomplete, with no narrative frame, they are classical fragments of a novel" (14) encourages us to think of their author as a precursor to the heap of fragments that are Soares's "unwritten novel." Yet another intriguing precedent emerges in Harris's discussion of the legend according to which Orpheus continued to sing after he had been decapitated, which, as she rightly observes, implies "a connection between poetry and the shattering of the self, between song and disintegration" (15). Although Petrarch never refers explicitly to the scattering of Orpheus's body, Harris maintains—in a remark that fits *The Book* perfectly after, *mutatis mutandis*, we have replaced "poems" with "prose"—that he reenacts this dismemberment implicitly in the scattered poems that he has left behind: "Collecting them in a manuscript or a volume is the only reintegration he can achieve, a poetic gathering that simultaneously acknowledges the persistent scattering of poems, bodies, and selves" (20).

Christine Froula's analysis of the prominence of fragments and unfinished drafts in modernist writing provides a useful transition from the historical period that is the focus of Harris's study to the one in which Pessoa wrote *The Book*. As Froula observes, many of the major artists of this period created "forms that oppose [however artfully] the monumentality of traditional forms" (114). She illustrates the emergence of indefiniteness as a characteristic feature of modernist writing by taking the example of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, of which she observes that the titles of early volumes—*A Draft of XVI Cantos* (1925), *A Draft of the Cantos 17-27* (1928), and *A Draft of XXX Cantos* (1931)—"suggest that Pound initially intended to complete a finished work" but that his "assumption that his experimental modernist form would evolve toward the monumentality and stability of classical epic art was probably defeated" (115). She concludes with a remark that implies an intriguing parallel between *The Cantos* and the posthumous fate of *The Book*: "the history of the *Cantos* is full of contingencies that are not foreclosed by Pound's death but continue through the agency of editors, publishers, heirs and literary executors" (117).

Despite the fragmentary form in which he was to leave *The Book*, however, Pessoa himself frequently stressed the fundamental importance of *construction* to the value of a literary work. He claimed, for example, that the structure of the Pindaric Ode is not merely a literary convention, but, rather, an axiom of the human spirit and complained that the structured literary forms inherited from Pindar "has had very careless handling at modern hands." He specifically blamed the romantic movement for this state of affairs because it "has indisciplined the capacity of constructing which, at least, low classicism had." He likewise has construction in mind when he observed

Shakespeare's "fatal incapacity to visualize organized wholes" and praised Milton, as "the great Master of Building in poetry" (*Always Astonished* 35). Soares, in his turn, resorts to the metaphor of building when he praises the "structure, which the architect must make out of given, hard, external things, and which we build with rhythm, hesitations, successions, and fluidities" (198). So pleased is he with his own (purely imaginary) feats of organization that he claims:

I've undertaken every project imaginable. *The Iliad* composed by me had a structural logic in its organic linking of epodes such as Homer could never have achieved. The meticulous perfection of my unwritten verses makes Virgil's precision look sloppy and Milton's power slack. My allegorical satires surpassed all of Swift's in the symbolic exactitude of their rigorously interconnected particulars. How many Horaces I've been! (249)

His close attention to aspects of construction both large and small is clearly implied by the three tenets of his doctrine of "sensationism":

The first is that art is supremely construction and that the greatest art is that which is able to visualize and create organized wholes, of which the component parts fit vitally into their places . . . The second is that, all art being composed of parts, each of those parts must be perfect in itself . . . The third tenet of sensationism, qua aesthetics, is that every little fragment which builds up the part of the whole should be perfect in itself. (*Always Astonished* 40)

In a remark having obvious pertinence to his own failed project, Pessoa criticizes those symbolist poets who, "being temperamentally incapable of creating either great organized wholes or even (as the Romantics) large eloquent stretches, put their activity into the eggshell (nutshell) of producing beautiful individual lines or very short perfect lyrics." His overall judgment of their achievement is, quite dismissively, that it "is beautiful indeed, when it is beautiful, but it is dangerous to fall under the impression that that is anything but the lowest part of art" (*Always Astonished* 40).

Echoing Pessoa's praise of construction, Soares offers a number of tributes to the ideal of a completed work and to the "ambivalent envy, a disdainful admiration, an incoherent mixture of mixed feelings" (82) that its achievement by others arouses in him. He invokes this goal in especially compelling terms when he exclaims: "Ah, to be able to construct a complete Whole, to construct something that would be like a human body, with perfect harmony among all its parts, and with a life, a life of unity and congruency, uniting the scattered traits of its various parts!" (248). He marvels at the complete sentences that he was once able to write in French (188), and, in a mocking allusion to his now-diminished powers of construction, he complains that he's floating "among the dreams of someone who didn't know how to complete me" (227).

Pessoa and Soares's ambivalent attitude toward wholeness and harmony—their

wanting a “dome” that is, as it were, both sheltering and ruined leads, in the case of *The Book* to a work that manages to imbue its scattered fragments with subliminal forms of construction. We notice the blurring of the distinction between ruins and shelter, for example, when Soares, thinking about the words that he writes, says that they “make me smile, but my heart is ready to break—to break like things that shatter into *fragments, shards, and debris*” (347; my emphasis), a remark in which he combines the breaking of things with the shaping of a pattern in the form of a verbal triad created by a sequence of nearly synonymous words.

Soares achieves a similar effect when he says of those who, like himself, suffer the predicament of having to “live without knowing how to have life” are—in obedience to the principle whereby everything must coexist with its opposite—are compensated by the gift of what he calls “esthetic contemplation,” which makes them “*Impassive* to the solemnity of any and all worlds, *indifferent* to the divine, and *disdainers* of what is human” (11; my emphasis). Various of Soares’s faltering bodily parts are shaped into yet another completed triadic pattern when he alludes to “my odiously impressionable *brain*, in my thin *skin*, in my hypersensitive *nerves*” (233; my emphasis). He once again enlists his body as the setting in which ruins and a sheltering form will coexist when he compares his sense of the futility of life to “an indisposition originating in some organic abyss such as the stomach, liver or brain” and then, a moment later, declares: “All of me hurts: memory, eyes, and arms” (369).

The triadic patterns that we notice on the level of individual phrases and sentences—in which the co-presence of form and formlessness contributes to what Soares calls “the geometry of the abyss”—also appear in the general design of *The Book* as a whole in the sense that the otherwise scattered fragments that it comprises tend to recompose around the symbiotic processes of experiencing, thinking, and dreaming. Soares alludes to all three of them when he speaks of his having “a profound awareness of *feeling* . . . A *sharp mind* that only destroys me, and an unusual capacity for *dreaming* to keep me entertained” (21; my emphasis). Certain texts are devoted to a single one of these activities. Text 26, for example, is devoted to the *feeling* aroused by his watching and listening to a group of girls: “The girls came around the bend in a large group. They sang as they walked, and the sound of their voices was happy. I don’t know who or what they might be. I listened to them for a time from afar, without a feeling of my own, but a feeling of sorrow for them impressed itself on my heart” (29).

Texts devoted exclusively to *thinking* are especially abundant. Text 11, for example is in the form of an epigrammatic reflection: “We never know self-realization. We are two abysses—a well staring at the sky” (20), and Text 207 offers a brief yet penetrating demystification of romantic love: “It’s not love but love’s outskirts that are worth knowing . . . The repression of love sheds much more light on its nature than does the actual experience of it. Virginity can be a key to a profound understanding. Action has its rewards but brings confusion. To possess is to be possessed, and therefore to lose oneself. Only the idea can fathom reality without getting ruined” (235). Text 273 subjects history to an equally ironic examination: “Nothing is ever sure in history. There are periods of order when everything is contemptible and periods of disorder in which all is lofty. Decadent eras abound in mental vitality, mighty eras in intellectual weakness. Everything mixes and criss-crosses, and truth exists only in

so far as it is presumed” (235).

Text 156 records a *dream* in which Soares imagines himself as “the pageboy of tree-lined paths that weren’t enough for the soaring moments of my blue peace” and then continues with a vision in which “ships in the distance completed the sea that lapped my terraces, and in the clouds towards the south I lost my soul, like an oar dropped in the water” (139–40). In Text 272, he dreams of a “Pantheon” in which “there’s room for all the gods that mutually exclude each other; all have their throne and the sovereignty. Each one can be everything, for here are no limits, not even logical ones, and the mingling of various immortals allows us to enjoy the coexistence of diverse infinities and assorted eternities” (235).

The interweaving of experiencing, thinking, and dreaming within the same text likewise imbues the ruins that Pessoa left behind at the time of his death with a virtual completeness that contributes, in its turn, to the effect of “sheltering ruins.” Text 41, for example, begins with Soares attempting to find within himself “the sensations I *feel* before these falling threads of darkly luminous water that stand out from the grimy building façades and especially from the open windows” (42; my emphasis). His mood then induces in him the disillusioned *thought* that “All the pent-up bitterness of my life removes, before my sensationless eyes, the suit of natural happiness it wears in the random events that fill up each day. I realize that, while often happy and often cheerful, I’m always sad.” This leads him to find relief from self-awareness in a compensatory *dream*: “To be something, anything that doesn’t feel the weight of the rain outside, nor the anguish of inner emptiness . . . To wander without thought or soul—sensation without sensation—along mountain roads and through valleys hidden between steep slopes, into the far distance, irrevocably immersed . . . To be lost in landscapes like paintings . . . A coloured non-existence in the background . . .” (42).

Text 51 begins with the *feeling* provoked in Soares by an impression: “The black sky to the south of the Tagus was an evil-looking black in contrast to the vividly white wings of the gulls that flew around restlessly” (50). It then turns to a *thought*: “At empty and imponderable times like this, I like to employ my thoughts in a meditation that’s nothing at all but that captures, in its void transparency, something of the desolate chill in the cleared-up day, with the black sky in the background, and certain intuitions—like seagulls—which evoke by way of contrast the mystery of everything shrouded in darkness” (51). It shifts once again, this time to “the graphic clarity” of a *dream* in which he sees “A landscape for hunters and anxieties” which eventually transforms into “nothing but a slow falling of night, with the whole of space gradually turning the colour of the darkest clouds, which little by little would vanish into the abolished mass of sky” (51). The text then concludes with a return to a variant on the impression with which it began: “I gasp and wake up. The man who passes me under the arcade by the Stock Exchange stares at me warily, without knowing why. And the black sky, closing in, pressed even lower over the southern shore” (51).

Text 29 offers a variant of this pattern in the form of a feeling-dream-thought sequence. It begins, as did Text 51, with an impression that leads to a *feeling*: “As the last drops of rain began to fall more slowly from the rooftops and the sky’s blue began to spread over the street’s paving-stones, then the vehicles sang a different song, louder and happier, and the windows could be heard opening up to the no longer forgetful sun.” He then shifts to *dreaming*: “I paced from one side of the room to the

other, dreaming out loud incoherent and impossible things—deeds I’d forgotten to do, hopeless ambitions haphazardly realized, fluid and lively conversations which, were they to be, would already have been.” Recognizing, however, that his dream is nothing more than “this reverie without grandeur or calm ” and that the words he spoke “multiplied in the echoing cloister of my inglorious isolation” leads him to *think* with ironic lucidity on his risible condition: “Seen from the outside, my human figure was ridiculous like everything in its intimacy. Over the pyjamas of my abandoned sleep I’d put on an old overcoat, habitually employed for these morning vigils. My old slippers were falling apart, especially the left one” (31).

Each of the chapters that follow explores the ways in which Soares produces a parallel effect of greater completeness by un-writing the elements of a conventionally written novel—including setting, plot, character, and narration—in such a way as to create reciprocities between the actual ruins that result from this operation and the sheltering, albeit virtual, wholeness with which they become interchangeable. The first chapter, entitled “Paradise Remade,” contrasts the reliance on hierarchical order that underlies the “remaking” of Lisbon as a magnificent imperial city in Pessoa’s guidebook, *Lisbon: What Every Tourist Should See* and the return to “sacred beginnings” from which the setting of *The Book of Disquiet* emerges. In his guidebook, Pessoa begins by offering a panoramic view of the city as a whole and then details the specific contribution made to its overall harmony by each of the distinguished monuments and public spaces that he singles out for special mention. In *The Book*, on the other hand, Soares subverts the distinction between the whole and its subordinate parts in a way that allows such details of setting as the undistinguished neighborhood that he never leaves to become, as it frequently does, interchangeable with the infinite. The Tagus River becomes “a boundless Atlantic” (178), the street on which he lives becomes the setting in which, as Soares tells us, “[I] have my infinity” (103), and a sunny day transforms a narrow street into an open field (35). Such *partial* things as the shadow of a tree, the sound of water falling into a pool, and the grass of a trimmed lawn become “the *whole* universe” (97; my emphasis).

The chapter entitled “A Show without a Plot,” begins by pointing out that, like setting, a coherent main action relies on the subordination of individual episodes to the plot as a whole. After briefly mentioning Pessoa’s fundamentally non-Aristotelian concept of “static theater”—as well as its usefulness to our understanding of his one completed play, entitled *The Mariner*—I point out that Soares’s apparent dismissal of this kind of vertical ordering prepares for the emergence in *The Book* of a virtual double-plot: one pointing towards the immobility of death, the other towards the stasis of art. As was true with the setting of *The Book*, so also with its plot, Soares’s originality consists in his making interchangeable what is normally kept distinct. The tiniest—most momentary and otherwise most negligible—detail will suddenly expand into a boundless vision of the ultimate end of things. This vision will ambiguously illustrate both Sigmund Freud’s assertion, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, that “the goal of all life is death” and Stephan Mallarmé’s complementary claim on behalf of art that “Life exists to become a book.”

The chapter on character, entitled “Shadows of Gestures,” begins by noticing that, the actual human community of which Soares is a part—the commercial enterprise in which he works as an assistant bookkeeper—plays only a marginal role in his “factless

autobiography.” Much more central to *The Book* are two comparatively boundless groups: first, the multitude of unnamed “other people” whom he envies for a variety of reasons, ultimately because “he is not them” and, second, his literary predecessors whose monumental works provide the inspiration that will lead to the construction of his “sheltering ruins.” In the first of these relationships, Soares’s struggle to achieve a variously embodied prize (the simplest illustration of which is the “nubile girl” that he imagines encountering on the streets of Lisbon) leads him into fruitless competition with superior adversaries (the nubile girl has, he assumes, a boyfriend whom she prefers to him). It follows that relationships in this group are *reciprocal* (Soares’s desire is mirrored by someone else’s) but also *adversarial* (the prize goes to only one of them). With respect to the second of these groups—comprising a virtually limitless host of precursors that includes, most notably, Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Antonio Vieira, Walt Whitman, etc., etc.—relationships are *both* reciprocal *and* cooperative; Soares acquires the prize of literary achievement from his precursors by imitating them in a way that produces a strikingly individual work.

The fourth chapter, entitled “The Untrammelled Word,” begins by noticing that Soares almost entirely dispenses with dialogue and narration as he writes his “factless autobiography”; he rarely speaks to anyone and hardly ever has a story to tell. On the other hand, the words that communicate his “factless autobiography” to his readers tend to coalesce around three reciprocal pairings: writing and speaking, prose and poetry, and the universal and the particular. Writing is not simply an alternative to speaking in *The Book*; rather, it joins with it to create a kind of “silent monologue,” which, as Soares recognizes, is not only his own individual voice, but the larger voice of humanity as a whole. Prose, in its turn, rather than simply replacing poetry as the medium in which *The Book* is written, mingles with it to create a more “sheltering” form of writing than poetry alone is capable of offering. Finally, the antithesis between what Soares calls the “Babelish” language of particularity and the “Adamic” language of universality gives way to an alogical symmetry.

The final chapter, entitled “The Daedalus Complex,” begins by presenting the story of Daedalus as the classic illustration of the godlike artist who displaces a form of suffering that could potentially be his own upon a surrogate (successively the Minotaur and Icarus) and then successfully completes an undertaking (the building of the labyrinth in which the Minotaur will be imprisoned and the fashioning of the wings with which he returns to his home in Athens) that distances him even further from his surrogate. After discussing the presence of this scapegoating pattern in Canto XXVI of Dante’s *Inferno*, which tells the story of Ulysses’s doomed journey, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” I point to two crucial ways in which *The Book* departs from it. First, Pessoa deprives the artist of his superiority over his surrogate in such a way that the creativity of the one and the suffering of the other become indistinguishable. Second, by failing to bring this major project of his literary career to a successful completion, Pessoa has left behind an unwritten masterpiece which replicates, rather than distancing itself from, his surrogate’s unlived life.