

Living in the Moment: Boredom and the Meaning of Existence in Heidegger and Pessoa

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ABSTRACT

It was not only in his infamous speeches as NSDAP-approved *Führer-Rektor* of Freiburg University that Heidegger advocated what can be seen as an ‘activist’ understanding of human existence. To exist, according to this approach, means to be called upon to take charge of one’s life – *actively, responsibly, authentically* – whether mandated by *Volk* and *Führer* or not. Heideggerian resoluteness amounts to being active in a deep sense, a view articulated during the *Rektoratszeit* in the form of an outright equation of *dasein* and work. I will revisit Heidegger’s phenomenology of boredom in *Basic Concepts of Metaphysics*, and contrast it with passages from Fernando Pessoa’s *Book of Disquiet*. Pessoa presents a radical counterpoint to Heidegger, utterly at odds with his intellectual and political persona. Insofar as the early Heidegger still represents the sinister forces ruling on the death star of western metaphysics, Pessoa carries the light that can set us on a path toward very different horizons for thinking being.

I. Introduction: An antidote to philosophy

Philosophy requires an antidote, or else we are at risk of going crazy with what we read, write or think. One such antidote might be the *Book of Disquiet* by Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa. While it is (in part) a meandering meditation on human existence, and thus not entirely removed from philosophy, that book’s plotless and aimless ruminations, in all their beauty and playful aberration, can unsettle the certainty, determinateness and analytical rigor, the sense of direction that is a signature of mainstream philosophical thought. The sound of the *Book of Disquiet* is one of wakeful hesitation, and while it stirs up some unexpected insights from darkish corners of human existence, its exuberant aesthetics and fragmented arrangements amount to a counter image to philosophy. If philosophy is the attempt to state once and for all how things are and how they hang together, then the *Book of Disquiet* disturbs, perverts, ultimately silences this ambition. It disrupts the confident position of

epistemic sovereignty with which philosophy tends to speak. It undoes the authoritative voice of intellectual agency, opening the floodgates for sensibility, dreams, fragmented impressions and allowing chaos to seep in. In his book, Pessoa artfully – but often also painfully – enacts a mode of subjectivity that is at odds with the paramount format of the philosophical subject, especially the subject in its modern and modernist guise, i.e. the active, responsible, constructive, future-oriented, determinate, self-same, temporally hierarchized, resolutely committed subject of world-construction and world-appropriation.

In addition, and as importantly, Pessoa's book is also quite simply a testament to *style* – something that, we have to admit, can be painfully lacking in philosophical writings. Pessoa, like few others, masters the craft of composing with words – the art of making real by saying it right.

In this contribution, I will do something that might strike readers as rather simplistic: I will contrast Pessoa and Heidegger on the theme of boredom. More specifically, I contrast how these writers respectively construe the transition from a boredom-like state towards something else, how boredom, in their approaches, may be overcome, and to what end, with what orientation, within which existential horizon. What do these different ways of dealing with tedium reveal about the authors' underlying existential orientations, their ontological outlooks, their favoured 'images of being'?

In view of my introductory remarks, I am surely not surprising anyone when I say that Pessoa will come out on top in this fabricated face-off. I hope that my reflections – which will have to remain sketchy and tentative due to space constraints – will help re-awaken scepticism with regard to an activist, expansive, self-founding construal of subjectivity. Such a construal of subjectivity is still rampant in the early Heidegger, all his anti-Cartesian and anti-idealist avowals notwithstanding. With the help of Pessoa, we can disturb the troublesome alliance between philosophy and certain modes of 'constructive', rigorously anthropomorphic, let's say, ultimately Calvinist – or at any rate crypto-protestant – intellectual tendencies.

A mind like Pessoa's might steer us back into a tender alignment with chaos, and see the beauty in idleness, the repose that non-involvement and non-commitment may bring us. It is an anti-'activist' outlook, one that can be a welcome antidote to all too familiar modes of thinking that unceremoniously center on the subject and on a founding subjectivity, and that will not stop taking themselves more seriously than all else. Adorno said it best: *Philosophie*

ist das Allerernsteste, aber so ernst wieder auch nicht.¹ Shifting from Heidegger to Pessoa amounts to shifting the emphasis from the first half of Adorno's aphorism to the second part – where it belongs.

II. Boredom and Resolute Being in Heidegger²

Heidegger's remarks on boredom form an integral part of his lecture course *The Basic Concepts of Metaphysics. World, Finitude, Solitude* presented in Freiburg in 1929/30.³ In Heidegger's oeuvre, this lecture occupies a telling intermediate position between *Being and Time* and his fatal, self-demolishing stint as NSDAP-approved *Führer-Rektor* of Freiburg University in 1933/1934. We will soon see, at the tail end of Heidegger's reflections on boredom, an all too evident foreshadowing of this ruinous phase.

The 180 pages of the lecture script devoted to boredom do not merely offer a description of boredom. Rather, they present something like a performative evocation or enactive instalment of boredom. Heidegger calls boredom a 'Grundstimmung' (basic mood) of *dasein* – he sees in it a fundamental predicament that directly emanates from the being-constitution of *dasein* as such, thus potentially holding in store insights into *dasein*'s basic make-up.⁴ As such a fundamental attunement, boredom is always somehow 'there' in *dasein* but usually and for the most part 'lying dormant', it sleeps.⁵ Accordingly, the task for the existential phenomenologist is to make boredom 'wake up' within *dasein*, to prepare his listeners and himself, to dispose them so that their own boredom can lucidly manifest itself – that it might reveal itself ever more clearly to an adequately attuned phenomenological receptivity. As something that transpires within 'the very depth' of our being, boredom will

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1966, p. 26. The aphorism translates into English as "Philosophy is the most serious matter, but then again it is not all that serious."

² In what follows I take up some thoughts from an earlier paper of mine in which I also discussed Heidegger's lecture on boredom, albeit back then with more of a focus on issues in the philosophy of emotion. See Jan Slaby, "The Other Side of Existence: Heidegger on Boredom," in: *Habitus in Habitat II. Other Sides of Cognition*, ed. by Sabine Flach, Daniel Margulies and Jan Söffner, Bern: Peter Lang 2010, pp. 101-120.

³ I will mostly quote from the German original: Martin Heidegger, *Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt - Endlichkeit - Einsamkeit* (Wintersemester 29/30), ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, Gesamtausgabe 29/30, Frankfurt/M.: Vittorio Klostermann 1983; subsequently abbreviated as GA 29/30. As is common in Heidegger scholarship, I refer to the pagination of the German original also where I occasionally quote from the English translation.

⁴ 'Dasein' is Heidegger's substitute term for 'human being'; he introduces it in order to stay clear of the mentalistic, individualistic and above all objectifying tendencies of the modern Western philosophical tradition. A precise explication of the term and its adoption into English-language analytical philosophy is provided by John Haugeland; see his posthumous *Dasein Disclosed: John Haugeland's Heidegger*, ed. by Joseph Rouse, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2013, esp. pp. 76-90.

⁵ Cf. Heidegger GA 29/30, p. 91.

thereby help reveal what our being ultimately consists in. What this is, however, is much easier to state in plain words than to fully grasp in all its ramifications. At a decisive passage late in his analysis, Heidegger puts it thus: “The more profound it becomes, the more completely boredom is rooted in time – the time that we ourselves are”.⁶

So time is said to be the essence of subjectivity, the ultimate ‘stuff’ out of which *dasein* is composed; lived time, in a peculiar modification – which is of course likewise the essence of boredom. Boredom must be intimately connected to time, as boredom is literally the affliction of *time’s becoming long*, explicit in the German term *Langeweile*. Lived time becomes oppressive as it is emptied of meaningful activity, and boredom is this gradual transformation of lived time – what Bergson’s famously described as *durée* – from the unremarkable, taken-for-granted background of our existence into a conspicuous foreground matter: The less there is to do or worth our doing, the more a dense, obtrusive, all-consuming temporal ‘emptiness’ takes hold of us – unbearable in its suffocating presence (or so Heidegger thinks).

Heidegger turns this into a long story indeed, thereby not only stating in plain terms what boredom is but also endowing his story with a performative dimension which *manifests* its very subject matter. An important part of that story concerns the fact that profound boredom is so catastrophically obtrusive, so shockingly unbearable that we – everyday *dasein* – will throw everything we have in its way in order to prevent it from even arising. Or, in case boredom *has* managed to arise, we will try everything to prevent it from becoming any deeper: all sorts of routine distractions and diversions – modes of *Zeitvertreib* – are mobilized so as to ensure boredom won’t get a good hold of us. That is why we for the most part won’t ‘find’ boredom simply occurring in our lives, as some mental state or mood among others – because all sorts of routine activities and engagements always already occupy the space on which it could manifest itself. Boredom is ‘there’ in being absent, by having all sorts of distractions stand in for it.

Heidegger wouldn’t be Heidegger if he didn’t dramatize this story to the point of suggesting that *most, if not all*, of what people normally do, think, feel or want – all the everyday activities and commerce of ordinary human lives – in fact consists of nothing but preventive measures to hold boredom at bay. According to him, we are all just inauthentic strugglers against deep boredom, and thus inauthentic strugglers against insight into and

⁶ Heidegger GA 29/30, p. 201. Here quoted from the English translation: Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. by William McNeill and Nicholas Walker, Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press 1995, p. 133.

enactment of the very essence of our own being. We're constitutively shallow, somehow 'living beside ourselves', missing out on what we truly are.

The flip side of this dramatization is clear enough. Something so profound and significant that we spent all our time suppressing it must be capable of revealing what is definite and essential about human existence: the very core of our being – its *Seinscharakter*, its being-constitution as *da-sein*. It must be something profound, and something veritably horrible at that. Thus goes the dramatizing back-story which Heidegger mobilizes in order to lend his account of human existence its proper weight and rhetorical force.

I am not recounting Heidegger's entire account of boredom here. Instead I will only zoom in on a few decisive points, mostly concerning the third and deepest form of boredom and how Heidegger envisions the way in which *dasein* is called upon to break free from the 'spell' that lies in its very being as *dasein*.

In the rare case of profound boredom – epitomized by the phrase '*it is boring for one*' – our being is modified to the point of an existential extreme; this will be the third and last of the varieties of boredom Heidegger discusses. In the second of the three forms of boredom, the one Heidegger had described in much detail previous to the third variety and glossed as '*being bored with something*', the bored person's existence is *temporarily* transformed into a circumscribed period of 'dead time'. Before turning to the third and deepest form, we should dwell a little on that second form of boredom, because it can help give us a relatively lucid grasp of what Heidegger is driving at. The *first* variety – '*becoming bored by something*' – is the mundane case where a thing, item, or narrowly circumscribed situation holds us up and thus bores us (Heidegger's example is a shabby train station in the middle of nowhere where one is forced to wait); I won't dwell on this first variety here in order to have more space for the two deeper manifestations. Heidegger's famous example for the second variety of boredom is a dinner party in which we outwardly participate in a lively and engaged way, but where nevertheless, afterwards, we will admit to ourselves that we were horribly bored. Let us check out this passage in the original, since Heidegger's own words are best suited to revealing the character of both his take on boredom and his intellectual persona:

Wir sind irgendwo abends eingeladen. Wir brauchen nicht hinzugehen. Aber wir waren den ganzen Tag angespannt, und für den Abend haben wir Zeit. Also gehen wir hin. Es gibt da das übliche Essen mit der üblichen Tischunterhaltung, alles ist nicht nur recht schmackhaft, sondern auch geschmackvoll. Man sitzt nachher, wie man sagt, angeregt beisammen, hört vielleicht Musik, man plaudert, es ist witzig und amüsant. Schon ist es Zeit wegzugehen. Die Damen versichern, und zwar nicht nur beim Abschiednehmen, sondern auch unten und draußen, wo man schon wieder unter sich ist: Es war wirklich

sehr nett, oder: Es war furchtbar reizend. In der Tat. Es findet sich schlechthin nichts, was an diesem Abend langweilig gewesen wäre, weder die Unterhaltung noch die Menschen, noch die Räume. Man kommt also ganz befriedigt nach Hause. Sieht noch mit einem kurzen Blick seine abgebrochene Arbeit am Abend, macht einen Überschlag und Vorblick für den Morgen - und da kommt es: Ich habe mich eigentlich doch gelangweilt, an dem Abend, bei dieser Einladung.⁷

As Heidegger then analyses, in this second variety of boredom, the activity of diversion (*Zeitvertreib*) has expanded to cover the entirety of our activities at the dinner party – our boredom and our diversions blend into one another: “das ganze Verhalten und Benehmen ist der Zeitvertreib – der ganze Abend, die Einladung selbst”.⁸ Heidegger then explicates that the bored person’s ‘self’ (understood dynamically as ‘lived time’), by superficially engaging in the shallow, basically pointless dinner party activities, ‘is abandoned’ – left dangling, as it were in an odd suspension: a portion of existence, a span of lived time – cut off from a temporal context essential for lending it meaning – from a past providing a reservoir of significance, and from a future providing direction for one’s current pursuits. Or put in cruder present-day terms: that bloody dinner party was a waste of my time! This is what engenders the obtrusive sense of ‘losing oneself’ to the situation, it is quite simply a lost span of lifetime.⁹ Consequently, in this state of being, one’s existence is put on hold and turned into a ‘standing now’ (*stehendes Jetzt*),¹⁰ that is, a state of existential futility – nothing happens that is *of relevance*, so nothing *matters*, nothing *fulfills* us during that span. Accordingly, time itself begins to oppress us: As unfulfilled, yet ours – after all, it is time we freely allocated in order to go to that party – this span of time becomes particularly obtrusive, arresting, suffocating. Like sand on the beach, this span of life-time slips idly through our fingers, no matter how eager we try to clutch onto it.

When we turn from the second to the third and most profound form of boredom (*‘it is boring for one’*), we see that not just a limited period of life invested in one specific activity, but rather the entirety of existential temporality is modified insofar as not only all entities – everything there is – at once cease to matter, but also we ourselves are literally transformed into a ‘no one’. ‘It is boring for one’ – not me as me or you as you, but this ‘indifferent no one’ that is pure, emptied-out existential temporality. In this third variety of boredom, there is no longer a boundary around the futility and emptiness of a present span of time. There is no

⁷ Heidegger GA 29/30, p. 165.

⁸ Heidegger GA 29/30, p. 170.

⁹ Cf. Heidegger GA 29/30, p. 180.

¹⁰ Cf. Heidegger GA 29/30, p. 189.

longer such a thing as a discernible ‘span’ of time. It is our *entire* temporal horizon that now stretches out indefinitely, rendering everything equally indifferent.

[M]it einem Mal ist alles von dieser Gleichgültigkeit umfassen und umhalten. Das Seiende ist – wie wir sagen – *im Ganzen* gleichgültig geworden, wir selbst als diese Person nicht ausgenommen. Wir stehen nicht mehr als Subjekte und dergleichen ausgenommen von diesem Seienden diesem gegenüber, sondern finden uns inmitten des Seienden im Ganzen, d.h. im Ganzen dieser Gleichgültigkeit.¹¹

Das Seiende, das uns umgibt, [bietet] keine Möglichkeit des Tuns und keine Möglichkeit des Lassens mehr [...] Die *Leergelassenheit* in dieser *dritten Form* der Langeweile ist die *Ausgeliefertheit des Daseins an das sich im Ganzen versagende Seiende*. In diesem ‚es ist einem langweilig‘ finden wir uns – als Dasein – irgendwie ganz im Stich gelassen.¹²

In terms of temporality, profound boredom equals the loss of the lived present, as the three dimensions past, present and future that jointly constitute the temporality of existence are now fused together indifferently, forming an unstructured, frictionless melange of tangible futility. The melody of duration has ceased, the rhythm of life given way to just one monotonous low-pitch tone, ever the same – obtrusive and horrible.

In his next explicative manoeuvre, Heidegger attempts to persuade his listeners of the possibility of a ‘message’ being thrust upon one in this state of profound boredom. Exactly at this deepest point of all-consuming lack of sense and meaning, a specific possibility suddenly emerges. This extreme transformation of existence creates a situation of heightened responsiveness in which the very features of existence that have been so radically modified in profound boredom are suddenly rendered salient. A ‘message’ is issued by boredom: “[D]iese eigentümliche Verarmung, die mit diesem ‚es ist einem langweilig‘ bezüglich unserer Person einsetzt, *bringt* das *Selbst* erst in aller Nacktheit *zu ihm selbst* als das *Selbst*, das *da ist* und sein *Da-sein* übernommen hat.”¹³

In this way, Heidegger suggests, profound boredom might facilitate *dasein’s waking up* again – which he glosses as a ‘waking up to ourselves’.

[Es] geschieht das Aufdämmern der Möglichkeiten, die das Dasein haben könnte, die aber gerade in diesem ‘es ist einem langweilig’ brachliegen, als brachliegende uns im Stich lassen. Wir sehen [...]: Im [Sich-]Versagen [des Seienden im Ganzen] liegt eine Verweisung auf anderes. Diese Verweisung ist das *Ansagen der brachliegenden Möglichkeiten*.¹⁴

¹¹ Heidegger GA 29/30, p. 208.

¹² Heidegger GA 29/30, p. 210.

¹³ Heidegger GA 29/30, p. 214.

¹⁴ Heidegger GA 29/30, p. 212.

Profound boredom, as it were, *calls dasein back* into the present-moment in order to take charge of existence again. Profound boredom has the potential to stir awake nothing less than our freedom by forcing us back into our existential present – into the *lived presence of the Augenblick* – translated into English as the ‘*moment of vision*’: it is that ‘format’ of temporality that equals resolute and responsible agency, the very temporality of the *act* itself – its focal point, its moment of truth: “Nur im sich Entschließen des Daseins zu sich selbst, im Augenblick, macht es von dem Gebrauch, was es eigentlich ermöglicht, nämlich der Zeit als dem Augenblick selbst. Der Augenblick ist nichts anderes als der *Blick der Entschlossenheit*, in der sich die volle Situation des Handelns öffnet und offenhält.“¹⁵

Time is key to everything here. In deep boredom, lived time flattens out into vast expanse of all-consuming insignificance – while by contrary, in the moment of vision, the present moment, *dasein* is concentrated again into this one focal point, into an *extreme* of the self-enabling act, here and now. In colloquial terms one might speak of ‘getting one’s act together’, pulling oneself out of the slumber of futility into the resolute act. Rising to the occasion – *living in the moment*.

In many of his formulations, Heidegger leaves little doubt that he thinks not heeding the ‘message’ of profound boredom equals falling short, somehow missing out on a fundamental existential possibility, that of a resolute existence.

Consequently, the state resulting from *not answering* the call of profound boredom – *not* ‘re-starting’ resolute existence in the moment of focussed action – is construed, at least implicitly, as a defective, inauthentic mode of being. For example, this can be seen in a lengthy passage in which Heidegger condemns the cultural climate in 1930 Germany; words that give a clear premonition of the soon-to-unfold self-demolition of Heidegger’s thought in his *Rektoratszeit*:

[Wir haben] vergessen [...], dass der Mensch, wenn er werden soll, was er ist, je gerade das Dasein sich auf die Schulter zu werfen hat; dass er gerade nicht ist, wenn er sich nur gerade im Geschiebe, und sei es noch so „geistig“, treiben lässt; dass das Dasein nichts ist, was man gleichsam im Wagen spazieren fährt, sondern etwas, was der Mensch eigens übernehmen muss. Weil wir aber der Meinung sind, es nicht mehr nötig zu haben, stark zu sein und uns der Gefahr entgegenwerfen zu dürfen, haben wir uns auch schon alle zusammen aus der Gefahrenzone des Daseins fortgeschlichen, in der wir vielleicht beim Übernehmen des Daseins uns überheben. Dass die Bedrängnis im Ganzen heute ausbleibt, zeigt sich vielleicht am

¹⁵ Heidegger GA 29/30, p. 224. The seminal passage on the ‘*Augenblick*’, on resoluteness and its relation to existential temporality is of course § 65 of *Being and Time* – Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag 1993 [1927], see esp. p. 328 and also § 68, p. 338.

schärfsten darin, dass vermutlich heute sich niemand mehr am Dasein überhebt, sondern dass wir es allenfalls noch zu Klagen bringen über die Misere des Lebens. Der Mensch muss sich erst wieder zu dieser Zumutung entschließen. Die Notwendigkeit dieses Entschlusses ist der Inhalt des versagten und zugleich angesagten Augenblickes unseres Daseins.¹⁶

Passages like this reveal Heidegger's attitude towards mundane boredom and comparable predicaments. His analysis is tacitly driven by the nervous unrest of the activist, the maker, the committed leader who can hardly bear even a brief instant of futility, idleness or dead time. The tone, the drive of the relevant passages is expressive of an urge toward recentering and refocusing everything on dasein, spurning it back to determined action. What looks like a fundamental insight, capable of rendering existence and subjectivity profoundly questionable, becomes immediately re-absorbed into a mobilizing appeal, a call to arms. What might be construed as an open dimension, enabled but not determined by time, is formulated by Heidegger as an existential imperative, with no leeway for alternative construals: a command issued by being itself, one that must be heeded by dasein. In fact, from about section 38 onward, Heidegger's lecture crashes down from the heights of existential ontology into what sounds like an odd mixture of philosophy and the convoluted eyewash of an aspiring Nazi party leader.¹⁷

It never seems to occur to Heidegger that lingering in a state that resembles profound boredom might present quite different insights – that existing, as it were, as an 'undifferentiated no one' in the empty expanse of a world devoid of meaning, moreover confronting this void in a mode of 'utter unrelatedness', might be a predicament worth exploring in its own right. What world, what being might await us there? Might there even be a certain bliss, a rare 'peace of mind' in such a state of depersonalized detachment – in the pure, disinterested beholding of one's surroundings, unstirred by the vicissitudes, the rushes of the *vita activa*? Why not submit wilfully to the bliss of indifference?

At this decisive point of his boredom lecture, it is quite evident that Heidegger attempts to impose an activist ideal upon human existence – inscribing a relentless demand to stay focused on 'what matters', narrowly construed, calling upon us to load dasein onto our shoulders, to make our own life 'wesentlich' again (no matter what it is that will give a concrete life its meaning). This is so even at a point where he had just exposed the fundamental insight that nothing *really* matters in and of itself. Even in the utter absence of meaning, manifested in profound boredom, existence remains tied to existential significance.

¹⁶ Heidegger GA 29/30, p. 246f.

¹⁷ Cf. Heidegger GA 29/30, p. 245 and p. 255 for clear examples of this tendency.

By having profound boredom force a message upon us, by pulling us back into resolute being, into attentive and relentless caring, significance-yielding projections and into a way of life that, like that of Sisyphus, must continue to create and sustain those projections even against one's own better judgment.

So it is questionable that this is really the only route open to us at this juncture. Why couldn't one revel, if just for a brief span of time, in the vicinity of that utter emptiness and meaninglessness so as to absorb the full depth of it and let it unfold in all its vastness? Heidegger wants none of this. He jumps right back from profound boredom onto the armoured vehicle of self-determining agency – as he mandates bored *dasein* to press ahead into self-enabling possibilities. With hindsight, we know well where this will lead him just a few years on, and Heidegger himself, in this very lecture from 1930, is explicit enough about what he hopes for: “Wir müssen erst wieder rufen nach dem, der unserem Dasein einen Schrecken einzujagen vermag.”¹⁸

*III. Interlude: The collapse of *dasein* and work in the Rektoratszeit*

It makes sense to follow this fatal route and see where this tendency did in fact lead Heidegger. That is, we must briefly put on hard hat and safety gloves and take a look at Heidegger's stint as NSDAP-approved *Führer-Rektor* of Freiburg University (1933/1934). What did 'living in the moment' concretely amount to for Heidegger at that time, when he briefly but resolutely joined the national socialist movement and its party? Literary critic Werner Hamacher, who has provided a lucid demolition of Heidegger's *Rektorats-Philosophie*, is a competent tour guide for this purpose.¹⁹

The gist of what Heidegger gabbled in that fatal year between the spring of 1933 and the spring of 1934 – and how it connects to key strands of his pre-1933 thought – comes tellingly to the fore in his “Rede an Arbeitslose” (*Speech to the Unemployed*) on 22 October 1933 at Freiburg University: A key feature in employment-creating measures, according to Heidegger in this address, is that work “allererst wieder *daseinsfähig* machen [muß] im Staat

¹⁸ Heidegger GA 29/30, p. 255.

¹⁹ Werner Hamacher, „Arbeiten Durcharbeiten,“ in: *Archäologie der Arbeit*, ed. by Dirk Baecker, Berlin: Kadmos Kulturverlag 2002, pp. 155-200. The following all too brief thoughts are also inspired by Erich Hörl's recent re-working of some of Hamacher's thoughts in the context of a reflection on technology. See Erich Hörl, “Das Arbeitslose der Technik. Zur Destruktion der Ergonomie und Ausarbeitung einer neuen technologischen Sinnkultur bei Heidegger und Simondon,“ in: *Prometheische Kultur. Wo kommen unsere Energien her?* ed. by Claus Leggewie, Ursula Renner, Peter Risthaus, Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink 2013, pp. 111-136.

und für den Staat und damit für das Volksganze.”²⁰ In short, and befitting the National Socialist German Worker’s party (NSDAP), *dasein* is and has to be *Arbeit* – quite readily, Heidegger inscribes his existential analytic into the activism, dynamism and pan-workerism of the Nazi workers’ state. In his 1934 Logic Lecture – of all places – Heidegger is particularly explicit about this, and we find here the all too characteristic move of ontologizing a mode of existence so as to expose it as unquestionably essential (*‘wesentlich’*):

Arbeit – Gegenwart... “Arbeit” *ist* die ausgezeichnete Bestimmung der Bestimmung, ihre Bestimmtheit. (...) Doch was bedeutet hier Bestimmtheit?

Unsere Bestimmung erwirken, je nach Umkreis des Schaffens ins Werk setzen und ins Werk bringen – das heißt *arbeiten*. (...) Arbeit ist hier die zur Bestimmtheit unseres Wesens gewordene Bestimmung, die Prägung und das Gefüge des Vollzuges unserer Sendung (...). – Die Arbeit ist die *Gegenwart* des geschichtlichen Menschen. (...) Geschichtliche Gegenwart erwächst als Arbeit aus Sendung und Auftrag, und so erwächst die Gegenwart aus Zukunft und Gewesenheit.”²¹

Notably, ‘work’ is here positioned exactly at the place occupied by the *Augenblick*, the present-moment, in both *Being and Time* and in the *Boredom* lecture. The decisive moment of the resolute act – from which the ownmost possibilities of *dasein* are said to spring – has now become the place of work in the service of the *NS-Arbeitsstaat*, mandated by *Volk* and *Führer*. It can be sobering indeed for those friendly to Heidegger’s thought to see how readily and seamlessly even the deep layers of the existential analytic are recruited to serve this dire remnant of a philosophy, how Heidegger readily and with gleeful precision planted the political watchwords of his day – in this case: *Arbeit* – right at the pinnacle of his conceptual edifice.

For the sake of all our sanity, I will spare us from delving into what Heidegger said in the same lecture about the “werkgerechte Bindung”, about the “Entrücktheit” enabled by work and on joy as “Grundstimmung... der echten Arbeit”.²² Suffice to say, in case any doubt remains in the matter, it is abundantly clear that this is where the trajectory laid out in the *Boredom* lecture leads. The point for present purposes is that work – and the activism and uncritical obedience to ‘higher orders’ it entailed – was also brought forth by Heidegger as the

²⁰ Here quoted from Hamacher 2002, p. 165. The original speech tellingly appeared in print in the NS journal *Der Alemanne. Kampfblatt der Nationalisten Oberbadens*, February 1, 1934. Of course, the seminal text in this phase of Heidegger’s works is his infamous *Rektoratsrede*: Martin Heidegger, “Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität,” in: ders. *Reden und andere Zeugnisse seines Lebenswegs (1910-1976)*, ed. by Hermann Heidegger, Gesamtausgabe 16, Frankfurt/M.: Vittorio Klostermann 1983.

²¹ Martin Heidegger, *Logik als die Frage nach dem Wesen der Sprache* (Sommersemester 1934), ed. by Günter Seubold, Gesamtausgabe 38, Frankfurt/M.: Vittorio Klostermann 1998, p. 128, as quoted in Hamacher 2002, p. 170.

²² See Hamacher 2002, p. 170.

adequate answer to the predicament of boredom. In this phase of his oeuvre, Heidegger sees in work the prime source of existential sense and meaning, and the point in responding to boredom, as we have seen, is an aggressive jump into meaning-yielding commitments. This jump, this resolute decision to have something matter to one – no matter what it is – is in this particular phase of Heidegger’s thought outrightly equated with work.

Finally, it might be important to remind ourselves of the fact that of all the things from Nazi Germany that German society and culture abandoned after WWII, *Arbeit* surely was not one of them. Hamacher diagnoses a worrisome continuity in the prizing and praising of work between the NS period and postwar Germany. This problematic is worthy of further consideration. To be sure, Heidegger saw this himself. Soon after he self-presented as a great mobilizer and motivator of the German workers’ state, and shortly after his stint as principal of Freiburg University, he reversed his views on the matter radically, now seeing in work the metaphysical epitome of modern subjectivity posited as an absolute. His notes on Ernst Jünger’s *Der Arbeiter* are instructive in this regard,²³ and likewise many of his writings on technology. One is surely right to chastise Heidegger for the horrific aberration of his philosophy during the early 1930s, and for his failure to ever address this phase later in a straightforward and accountable way. However, to what extent the rampant workerism of this phase and the krypto-authoritarian ethics it was packaged with actually resonated within main currents of 20th century Western philosophy remains a matter for further exploration.

It is now high time for us to finally seek out the antidote – we need a robust corrective to this delirious devotion to work as the paramount value in human existence, an antidote likewise to an austere work ethics and to the meagre vision of philosophy that has flourished in its adjacency.

IV. Pessoa, or the Ecstasy of Not-Being

When we cast our gaze on a page of Pessoa, we rapidly acquire the conviction that he will always hold us captive, that it is useless to read other books, that *it is all there*.
Alain Badiou²⁴

²³ Martin Heidegger, *Zu Ernst Jünger "Der Arbeiter"*, ed. by Peter Trawny, Gesamtausgabe 90, Frankfurt/M.: Vittorio Klostermann 2004.

²⁴ Alain Badiou, “A Philosophical Task: To Be Contemporaries of Pessoa,” in: Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. by Alberto Toscano, Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press 2005, pp. 36-45, p. 44.

Get ready for an abrupt change of scenery. We will now make the jump to the Baixa district, downtown Lisbon, Portugal. We stay in or around the 1920s to early 1930s, give or take a few years. In the following, we take a closer look at the musings of an outwardly unremarkable assistant bookkeeper in the lower town of Lisbon's Rua dos Douradores, a man who goes by the name of Bernardo Soares. He is the narrating voice and the author's semi-heteronym in Fernando Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet* – that wonderful collection of endless undated fragments.²⁵ Pessoa invented a significant number of heteronyms, some of which stayed on as constant alter egos throughout his life, and some of the names, such as Alvaro de Campos, Ricardo Reis, and Alberto Caeiro reached the status of veritable poetic voices – “each of them constitutes a complete artistic configuration on its own”.²⁶ You may have encountered the following famous passage from *Book of Disquiet*, in which Pessoa states in a programmatic way his view on personal identity and on the foundation of his attitude toward authorship:

Each of us is several, is many, is a profusion of selves. So that the self who disdains his surroundings is not the self who suffers or takes joy in them. In the vast colony of our being there are many species of people who think and feel in different ways.²⁷

Bernardo Soares is a semi-heteronym, presumably because he is the alter ego most closely resembling Pessoa himself.²⁸

In this semi-fictional ‘autobiography without facts’, written continuously between 1913 and 1934 and published posthumously only in 1982, we find the abundant poetic confessions of a person who seemingly *has no life* – that is, no active, biographical existence that would be fit to fill the pages of a conventional autobiography:

I envy – but I'm not totally sure that I envy – those for whom a biography could be written, or who could write their own. In these random impressions, and with no desire to be other than random, I indifferently

²⁵ All quotations from Pessoa are taken from Richard Zenith's English translation: Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, ed. and trans. by Richard Zenith, New York: Penguin Classics 2002. Zenith's competent Introduction to this edition (pp. vii-xxxi) provides information on how the book came about and on the constitutively unsolvable task of bringing its unordered fragments into some order (see esp. p. xvi and xxviii).

²⁶ Badiou 2005, p. 38. Badiou makes much of the “device of heteronymy” in Pessoa's oeuvre, not least a veritable quasi-philosophical strategy, namely that it functions as a “dispositif for thinking” (p. 43) that can “establish the contingency of the multiple” (p. 44).

²⁷ Pessoa 2002, fragment 396, p. 327f.

²⁸ In his letter to Adolfo Casais Monteiro of January 13, 1915, Pessoa explains the terms heteronym and semi-heteronym: “My semi-heteronym Bernardo Soares, in many ways similar to Álvaro de Campos, appears when tired and half asleep my natural impulse to reason and to control slackens; his prose is an ongoing reverie. He is a semi-heteronym because even though he is not my own personality, he is not so much different from myself as he is a mere distortion of that personality. He is me without my rational and emotional aspects.” (Pessoa 2002, p. 474).

narrate my factless autobiography, my history without a life. These are my Confessions, and if I say nothing in them it's because I have nothing to say.²⁹

Soares' confessions testify to a stance towards all-encompassing tedium and existential futility that is, despite some important parallels, in its major gist and substance strikingly different from the stance adopted by Heidegger. Instead of breaking the spell of boredom in a resolute decision to act, Soares/Pessoa basically *settles down* in his state of passivity, tedium and existential exhaustion. For him, this state – though still obtrusive and a source of some suffering – becomes a wellspring for poetic production.

I will now turn the word over to Soares/Pessoa himself, at least for the most part, and I will do this in three stages. I will begin with passages that relate to the basic existential predicament expressed in the text. Second, I give some impressions of what should be read as initial moves towards somewhat more self-asserting stances adopted by the book keeper. However, these are stances that do not transform the original predicament of the narrator, but rather have him embrace and inhabit it more fully, more self-consciously. Third, I discuss fragments that more explicitly express an aesthetic self-understanding of the narrating ego, and thus a (more or less) consciously adopted orientation in and to the world after all. Finally I draw some conclusions. Given the abundance of material available and the consistently outstanding quality of Pessoa's prose, the following must inevitably remain sketchy and selective. It is an assembly of text fragments that I have selected and arranged for specific philosophical purposes. I stay in the register of philosophical analysis, and read Pessoa as providing crucial hints to an answer to the *philosophical* issue of boredom, of existential meaning and existential temporality. But of course Pessoa is brought in also as an exponent of a certain *style* of writing, inextricable from a style of thought, and from a mode of existing – an existential orientation with a quite pronounced character.³⁰

Stage 1 – *I am the outskirts of some non-existent town*

For us to get a sense of this book and its peculiar narrating voice, it is best to truly *immerse* ourselves in this text. Accordingly, I will now quote extensively from the book, mostly uninterrupted by commentary or analysis. It will be a lot of quoted text – reader, be warned.

²⁹ Pessoa 2002, fragment 12, p. 20f.

³⁰ With this orientation, my project differs in important respects from Badiou's attempt to enroll Pessoa – in his 'entirety' rather than just the author of the *Book of Disquiet* – within the philosophical tradition, as a masterful voice whose philosophical modernity – neither Platonic nor Anti-Platonic – remains to date unreached by all of 'official' philosophy (cf. Badiou 2005, esp. p. 44n). Badiou's project is orthogonal to mine as it is focused on specific philosophemes and a philosophical 'logic' whereas my reading construes Pessoa's text as deconstructive of the authoritative voice of a homogeneous and self-assured philosophical subject. Our views converge most in the assessment of the role of Pessoa's heteronyms.

These first passages, subsumed under “stage 1”, belong to those that are most characteristic for the *Book of Disquiet*; their sound and style will prepare the ground for all that follows. Although in the book itself the various fragments appear in no discernible order, I have brought them into a tentative succession, reflecting my way of working towards a specific reading.

I'm dazed by a sarcastic terror of life, a despondency that exceeds the limits of my conscious being. I realize that I was all error and deviation, that I never lived, that I existed only in so far as I filled time with consciousness and thought.³¹

There's a thin sheet of glass between me and life. However clearly I see and understand life, I can't touch it. (...) I can't even renounce those banal acts of life that I so abhor. To renounce is an effort, and I don't have it in me to make any effort.³²

Today, suddenly, I reached an absurd but unerring conclusion. In a moment of enlightenment, I realized that I'm nobody, absolutely nobody. When the lightning flashed, I saw that what I had thought to be a city was in fact a deserted plain and, in the same sinister light that revealed me to myself, there seemed to be no sky above it. I was robbed of any possibility of having existed before the world. If I was ever reincarnated, I must have done so without myself, without a self to reincarnate.

I am the outskirts of some non-existent town, the long-winded prologue to an unwritten book. I'm nobody, nobody. I don't know how to feel or think or love. I'm a character in a novel as yet unwritten, hovering in the air and undone before I've even existed, amongst the dreams of someone who never quite managed to breathe life into me. [...]

And when I leaned out my high window, looking down at the street I couldn't see, I suddenly felt like one of those damp rags used for house-cleaning that are taken to the window to dry but are forgotten, balled up, on the still where they slowly leave a stain.³³

Today I woke up very early, with a sudden and confused start, and I slowly got out of bed, suffocating from an inexplicable tedium. No dream had caused it; no reality could have created it. It was a complete and absolute tedium, but founded on something. The obscure depths of my soul where the battleground where unknown forces had invisibly waged war, and I shook all over from the hidden conflict. A physical nausea, prompted by all of life, was born in the moment I woke up. A horror at the prospect of having to live got up with me out of bed. Everything seemed hollow, and I had the chilling impression that there is no solution for whatever the problem may be.³⁴

To cease, to end at last, but surviving as something else: the page of a book, a tuft of dishevelled hair, the quiver of the creeping plant next to a half-open window, the irrelevant footsteps in the gravel of the bend,

³¹ Pessoa 2002, fragment 39, p. 40.

³² Pessoa 2002, fragment 80, p. 78.

³³ Pessoa 2002, fragment 29, p. 31n.

³⁴ Pessoa 2002, fragment 98, p. 94.

the last smoke to rise from the village going to sleep, the wagoner's whip left on the early morning roadside ... Absurdity, confusion, oblivion – everything that isn't life...³⁵

I don't want to say much to interpret these confessions. Soares/Pessoa articulates the distance from and lack of life that he is saddled with, and speaks about his inability or unwillingness to act, his existential exhaustion, lack of hope, everlasting monotony, disgust and tedium, his lack of control over being. He gives voice to a predicament consisting of emptiness, of being cut off from all others, he feels like being a 'non-entity'. And he begins to express his longing for a totally different kind of existence than that of an ordinary human being – to exist as an object or even as part of a work of art, such as a figure in drawing. He is on a path of 'becoming non-human'.

Stage 2 – *Living off vestiges and the ill-defined*

Let's move on to what I tentatively call the second stage of Bernardo Soares' confessions. Again, I will present several chunks of text from the *Book of Disquiet* that I have arranged according to a rough order that helps me steer us toward a certain reading of the material.

Everything useful and external tastes frivolous and trivial in the light of my soul's supreme reality and next to the pure sovereign splendour of my more original and frequent dreams. These, for me, are more real.³⁶

To shrug off all duties, even those not assigned to us, to repudiate all homes, even those that weren't ours, to live off vestiges and the ill-defined, in grand purple robes of madness and in counterfeit laces of dreamed majesties... 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...³⁷

... I promenade my destiny that goes forward, though I don't go anywhere, and my time that advances, though I stay put. And the only thing that alleviates my monotony are these brief commentaries I make with respect to it. I'm grateful that my cell has windows inside the bars, and on the dust of the necessary that covers the panes I write my name in capital letters, my daily signature of my covenant with death.

With death? No, not even with death. Whoever lives like me doesn't die: he terminates, wilts, devegetates. [...] we, these vegetable manifestations of both truth and life, dust on both the outside and the inside of

³⁵ Pessoa 2002, fragment 31, p. 33n.

³⁶ Pessoa 2002, fragment 35, p. 37.

³⁷ Pessoa 2002, fragment 41, p. 42.

the panes, grandchildren of Destiny and stepchildren of God, who married Eternal Night when she was widowed by the Chaos that fathered us.³⁸

Pessoa here comes remarkably close to expressing something like Heidegger's understanding of death as developed in the second division of *Being and Time*.³⁹ Those who have 'no life' in the sense of an existence constituted at least potentially by resolute care, are not capable of dying in the existential sense of the term. Instead, they merely perish, in about the way a biological life process comes to its natural end. To die, according to Heidegger, means the constant possibility of the impossibility of one's engaged mode of being – the potential ending of a mode of life that is itself the condition of its own being, an *existential commitment* to a specific possibility-to-be. Not existing as a being that truly cares in this sense disqualifies one from being capable of this kind of existential ending. One might say that the form of 'life' that expresses itself in the *Book of Disquiet* has long checked out of the game that is Heideggerian dasein, or has never checked into this game to begin with.⁴⁰

While Heidegger articulates his account of death with undertones of contempt at those who fail to qualify for existential death, Pessoa embraces this predicament readily. Heidegger, one might say, again alluding to the line from Adorno quoted above, takes dasein too seriously, even when death is all that it ultimately dwindles to – why not just let it go, roll with it, hang a little loose? For Soares/Pessoa, opting out of the 'earnest game' of human existence amounts to an adventurous aesthetic exploration of the peculiar zone between life and non-life, he explores even this darkest and haziest interval between a proper life and a vegetable simmering in a spirit of aesthetic discovery. It is this spirit of aesthetic discovery that can set us on a path to a certain reading of Soares'/Pessoa's confessions. Let's go right back to the *Book*, then:

Certain sensations are slumbers that fill up our mind like a fog and prevent us from thinking, from acting, from clearly and simply being. As if we hadn't slept, something of our undreamed dreams lingers in us, and the torpor of the new day's sun warms the stagnant surface of our senses. We're drunk on not being, and our will is a bucket poured out on to the yard by the listless movement of a passing foot.⁴¹ (78)

³⁸ Pessoa 2002, fragment 42, p. 44.

³⁹ Cf. Heidegger 1993 [1927], pp. 235-267.

⁴⁰ I elaborate on some of these points in the following article: Jan Slaby, "Affectivity and Temporality in Heidegger," in: *Feeling and Value, Willing and Action*. Phaenomenologica 216, ed. by Martha Ubiali and Maren Wehrle, Dordrecht: Springer 2015, pp. 183-206.

⁴¹ Pessoa 2002, fragment 78, p. 76.

My happiest moments are those when I think nothing, want nothing and dream nothing, being lost in a torpor like some accidental plant, like mere moss growing on life's surface. I savour without bitterness this absurd awareness of being nothing, this foretaste of death and extinction.⁴² (461)

What we see in these fragments are several beginnings of the articulation of a mildly emancipated stance, tentative attempts at establishing some sort of self-assertion, of the narrator's positioning himself and of actively distancing himself from other people and from conventional life. Passivity, inability-to-act, being at a remove from life's day-to-day business now seem to begin to provide a resting place for the narrating voice – a position to consciously occupy for the refined artistic sensibility. Something like a *stance* begins to take shape. It is the stance of a thoroughly aestheticized subjectivity – the posture of a life devoted to dreaming and writing, however directionless, not in any way resembling mundane striving (such as striving for recognition or fame). Out of a predicament that at first appears as a form of suffering, loneliness, tedium, listlessness, even manifest depression, a hovering between life and non-life, a different form of life now begins to find expression in these fragments. It is a dreaming, poetic, fragmented exploration of being at the boundary between the human and the non-human, between the personal and the de-personalized. Calmly recording impressions and feelings, without letting oneself be pulled into activities, not succumbing to the conventionality and routine activities of civilized life – that is what Soares/Pessoa finds himself instinctively drawn to, and this is what gives him another, a different kind of 'hold' over his life, however tentative.⁴³ Some subtly focused modality of existence takes shape, slightly different from the one that has the narrator figure merely as a plaything of the surrounding flows, worldly happenings, impressions and atmospheres.

Obviously, in this awakening towards a somewhat autonomous and slightly more self-assured stance, *writing* plays an all important role. It is all about writing, really. The predicament of the narrator comes to life, gains reality and substance in and through writing. Writing is his sanctuary, his citadel. Often, Soares/Pessoa seems to literally 'write himself' into a discernible, remotely stable, even at times confident position out of an initial state of chaos, confusion or suffering. One can sense in many passages how the act of writing literally 'builds up' his composure, his stance and posture; it all morphs into shape, assumes form,

⁴² Pessoa 2002, fragment 461, p. 379.

⁴³ In fragment 124 – one of the rare passages to which Soares/Pessoa assigned a headline: *Chapter on Indifference or something like that* – the narrating voice comes close to providing something like the 'official philosophy' for this stance, which is a stance of "total renunciation, formal and complete abstention, whereby [this soul] transfers to the sensible sphere whatever cannot be wholly possessed in the sphere of activity and energy; better to supremely not act than to act spottily, inadequately and in vain, like the superfluous, inane, vast majority of men" (Pessoa 2002, p. 113).

takes on character in writing.⁴⁴ The practice of writing thus serves an emancipatory function, but obviously not in the standard way of a linear life narrative being spun and reflected upon, but by way of putting entirely different kinds of being into words, and thus bringing them to life, making them real: “All literature is an attempt to make life real.”⁴⁵ (117)

Stage 3 – *The art of making real*

This leads to what I construe as a tentative ‘third stage’ of articulation in the *Book of Disquiet* – passages that contain more fully elaborated expressions of the narrator’s self-understanding. Here, we have more than just initial stirrings of something resembling an emancipated position – we see the contours of a more explicitly articulated mode of being.

If I were to give in to life, I'd be destroyed. I want to be a work of art, at least in my soul, since I can't be one in my body. That's why I've sculpted myself in quiet isolation and have placed myself in a hothouse, cut off from fresh air and direct light – where the absurd flower of my artificiality can blossom in secluded beauty.⁴⁶

To live a dispassionate and cultured life in the open air of ideas, reading, dreaming and thinking of writing – a life so slow it constantly verges on tedium, but pondered enough never to find itself there. To live this life far from emotions and thought, living it only in the thought of emotions and in the emotion of thoughts. To goldenly stagnate in the sun, like a murky pond surrounded by flowers. To possess, in the shade, that nobility of spirit that makes no demands on life. To be in the whirl of the worlds like dust of flowers, sailing through the afternoon air on an unknown wind and falling, in the torpor of dusk, wherever it falls, lost among larger things. To be this with a sure understanding, neither happy nor sad, grateful to the sun for its brilliance and to the stars for their remoteness. To be no more, have no more, want no more...⁴⁷

In some respects, this may be a point of greatest contrast to Heidegger’s understanding of existence. Although we do see here some sort of ‘identity’ of the narrator taking shape – a deliberately styled form of aesthetic self-consciousness – it is not the kind of identity, not the basic structure of existence prized by Heidegger: the narrator is not ‘loading dasein onto his shoulders’; there is no substantial, meaningful task to which his existence is devoted, no ‘Aufgabe’ to commit to and not much of a ‘Bürde’ to carry – and this dasein is

⁴⁴ Badiou makes a related point specifically about Pessoa’s heteronymy, namely that rather than pointing to a drama within the poets subjectivity, “[i]t is *delivered* [*livrée*] in the writing, in the effective diversity of the poems” (Badiou 2005, p. 40). Still, my focus throughout is on the auctorial subjectivity as it becomes manifest through Pessoa’s writing in the *Book of Disquiet*.

⁴⁵ Pessoa 2002, fragment 117, p. 107.

⁴⁶ Pessoa 2002, fragment 114, p. 106.

⁴⁷ Pessoa 2002, fragment 45, p. 46.

not striving to become in any way ‘essential’ (*wesentlich*). What is thus most striking is that the gravity, the seriousness, the sheer weight that Heidegger associates with a fully realized human existence is absent from Soares’ self-fashioning. Soares/Pessoa seems to *wilfully* dwell in a peculiar lightness of being, consciously hovering on the verge of non-being, as he dreams of existing as a work of art, leads a passive, ‘happily stagnating’ life – a life that is the opposite of striving, of involvement, or caring. ‘Wilful’ is the right term here as its meaning oscillates between the poles of ‘intentional’ (i.e. what is *willed*) and ‘stubborn’ with undertones of ‘wantonly’, so that one might wonder whether the narrator is in fact actively orienting himself or whether he just lets a certain development run its course in almost wanton disregard.⁴⁸

Then again, there is literature. Literature itself, as the great medium of being, the realizer of life, is the guiding orientation of Soares’ existence – his existential commitment of sorts. With literature, a deep value emerges after all, something worth devoting one’s life to.

Literature – which is art married to thought, and realization untainted by reality – seems to me the end towards which all human effort would have to strive, if it were truly human and not just a welling up of our animal self. To express something is to conserve its virtue and take away its terror. Fields are greener in their description than in their actual greenness. Flowers, if described with phrases that define them in the air of the imagination, will have colours with a durability not found in cellular life.⁴⁹

All literature is an attempt to make life real. As all of us know, even when we don't act on what we know, life is absolutely unreal in its directly real form; the country, the city and ideas are all absolutely fictitious things, the offspring of our complex sensation of our own selves. Impressions are incommunicable unless we make them literary. [...]

To say! To know how to say! To know how to exist via the written voice and the intellectual image! This is all that matters in life; the rest is men and women, imagined loves and factitious vanities, the wiles of our digestion and forgetfulness, people squirming – like worms when a rock is lifted – under the huge abstract boulder of the meaningless blue sky.⁵⁰

Literature is the art of making real by saying it right – it is about a more than cellular or organic reality, and accordingly those who possess the gift of literary writing bear a specific

⁴⁸ A seminal recent study on willfulness is Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2014. Apropos Sara Ahmed, the feminist activist philosopher: It might be helpful to remind ourselves that the issues here negotiated between Heidegger and Pessoa are chiefly problems of privileged white men, i.e. authors that for historical and socio-political reasons are by default free to let their philosophical and aesthetical sensibilities run their course. The world and the self – and surely the stakes of philosophical reflection – take on a different guise when seen from the wrong side of a constellation of structural oppression.

⁴⁹ Pessoa 2002, fragment 27, p. 30.

⁵⁰ Pessoa 2002, fragment 117, p. 107n.

responsibility, no matter what or who they are in their prosaic existence. Their paramount task is to *render real*, to endow the world with substantive sensuous reality, to create poetic images that last, that intensify and solidify and conserve impressions; images that have an impact and efficaciousness not found in the unwritten universe. Accordingly, Pessoa does assume an existential orientation and agentive ‘role’ for himself – namely, that of a literary existence, one devoted to this high art of endowing creation with reality. However, as also these last quotations make clear, this is a far cry from an earnest, bourgeois commitment to a career or to a conventional form of ‘passionate dedication’. Rather, the form of existence these passages bespeak is one that is entirely given over to art and craft – to such an extent that it can seem that it assumes human form only contingently. This is also evidenced by the fact that Pessoa seemingly did not write for others, for concretely envisioned readers (after all, Pessoa hid the pages that would comprise the *Book of Disquiet* in a closet, where it was only discovered decades after his death so that the book could first appear only in 1982). The stance that finds expression is a *becoming non-human* in the form of turning oneself into a medium for literary writing, serving literature’s purpose purely, way beyond the confines of mundane, all too human involvements.

Still, these last passages complicate the contrast between two distinct models of human existence expressed by Heidegger and Pessoa. Maybe they are not all that far apart after all, not in all relevant respects. In Heidegger’s philosophy, there is more openness towards alternative ways of being and also to forms of dedication that deviate sharply from the personalized, career-like quest of a subject to ‘become someone’, than my coarse reading suggests. And in the *Book of Disquiet*, we *do* find the avowal of a commitment to a specific way of life and to the values sustaining and driving it, namely to the art of literature, and to an aesthetic existence more generally. And surely this is not just *any* literary existence, not a broad, undifferentiated commitment to the poetic arts, but a way of being that adheres to a quite specific and quite rare stylistic vision, one that issues unrelenting demands concerning highest artistic qualities.

Nevertheless, there are enough differences between the two authors for the *Book of Disquiet* to serve as the basis of a critique of Heidegger’s paramount articulations of his existential ontology, if at times more in tone, in style, in existential orientation than in all aspects of its content. But style, tone and displayed existential orientation are all important, and surely they are not readily separable from content, and so the difference between the two authors is massive after all. It is unthinkable that Pessoa’s carefully crafted thoughts would degenerate into a Nazi-style call to arms or call to join ‘work service’. There is nothing in him

that reeks of the self-aggrandizing habitus of Heidegger. In his early phase, Heidegger often displays an essentialist attitude toward human existence that is at odds with his own fundamental insight, namely that human beings are the poetic co-creators of themselves and their world, that we are free, within limits, to reinvent ourselves – and thus that there are vastly more ways and formats of being than we might yet dream of. When contrasted with Pessoa, it becomes evident how fake and inauthentic much of Heidegger's celebration of openness and freedom is in this early work phase. Put next to Pessoa's prose, Heidegger's writings of that phase begin to look like a rather unceremonious, humourless and stylistically flat orientation towards what makes existence 'wesentlich'. And we all know in hindsight how easy it was for Heidegger to simply add to this line of his thought addendums to the effect that what makes existence 'wesentlich' above all else was 'Dienst', 'Arbeitsdienst' – laborious and unthinking *service* for 'Volk' and 'Führer'. While we should take this as another firm reminder of the deeply troublesome currents in Heidegger's thought, we are well-advised to apply the broader message also to contemporary philosophy more generally. Philosophy's habitus of assuredness, determinateness, analytical superiority and all too clear sense of direction contrasts unfavourably with Pessoa's craft, wit and existential sensibility. Maybe a good dose of Pessoa's careful art of living and writing could work wonders also in philosophy.

In a sense, novelists and poets, and great imaginative geniuses like Pessoa in particular, are the true 'shepherds of being'. What I hope my contribution has shown is that it might be helpful to bring their writings to bear on philosophy some more: as a corrective for all too self-assured accounts of what it is to be human, as a dissolving agent for overly stable, homogenous, unitary and hierarchical construals of the subject, and as a reminder of the art and efficacy of style. Or, quite simply: As a friendly antidote to philosophy.