



Intentional Tense: Caeiro's Present and Past Thoughts

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This article explores the connection between Alberto Caeiro's use of tense in his poetry and his meaning. The author focuses on "The Keeper of the Sheep." Through the exploration of tense, the author concludes that the form of Caeiro's poetry enforces Caeiro's philosophical ideas and his aversion to thinking.

“The only hidden sense of things / Is that they have no hidden sense at all. ... Things do not mean: they exist. / Things are the only hidden sense of things” (“XXXIX” 8–9, 16–17). These statements are typical of Alberto Caeiro’s poetry and philosophy. Throughout his poetry we see that his philosophical beliefs focus on nature and reject organized religion. But rather than trying to speculate on the meaning of nature, Caeiro states simply, “I don’t know what Nature is: I sing it” (“XXX” 6). This simple declaration tells us much about his approach to life: he lives in the present and invites others to do the same. The imagery and subjects of Caeiro’s poems lead us to believe that he lives the philosophy he advocates, and they emphasize his lack of meditation about the deeper meaning of things.

It is easy to recognize Caeiro’s criticism of meditating about deeper meanings by looking at his poems’ arguments. In this article, however, I will focus on the mechanics of his poetry—especially the tenses of the words he uses—to show that the form of his poetry matches the meaning. In exploring the use of tense in Caeiro’s poetry, I focus on *The Keeper of Sheep*. I propose that the form of Caeiro’s poems reinforces his philosophical ideas (especially his aversion to thinking), subtly leading the reader to believe that Caeiro manages to communicate his ideas and arguments without contradicting his vehement rejection of thought.

Good Thinking

In order to understand how Caeiro’s use of tense relates to his philosophy, we must first understand what Caeiro means when he criticizes the act of thinking. Many could misread the following lines in Caeiro’s poem “XXIV”:

What matters is knowing how to see,
Knowing how to see without stopping to think,
Knowing how to see when it is obvious,

And neither thinking when it is obvious
Nor seeing when it is unthinkable. (5–9)

In this passage, Caeiro seems to be downplaying the importance of thought and highlighting the need for people to see things without thinking about them. While this is true, it would be an exaggeration to suggest that Caeiro rejects thinking altogether. He recognizes that translating the images of nature into joyful feelings requires thought; for him to produce the sounds we recognize as words, he needs to speak, and we (as listeners) need to think. Thus, Caeiro is not rejecting every kind of thinking; he simply spurns the kind of thinking that entails “[meditação] sobre Deus e a alma” or “consider[ing] about God and the soul” (“V” 7) or thinking about the “inner sense of things” (“V” 40). Thinking is necessary to register what is going on around us.

Notice that Caeiro does not condemn thinking about the outer meaning of things, only the inner meaning of things. To illustrate this point he says, “not as one who thinks but as one who breathes” (“XXXVI” 9; my translation). Breathing is an automatic process—we don’t forget to breathe when we are tired or sleeping. In some cases, however, we choose to hold our breath (such as when swimming underwater) or to accelerate our breathing (such as when engaging in vigorous exercise). Similarly, there is one level of thinking that is automatic. Consider walking, for example. Our brains communicate with our leg muscles almost subconsciously when we want to begin walking in a certain direction. But beyond this level of natural thought, we may also ponder about life or speculate about the meaning of a song. It is against this meditative thinking that Caeiro argues.

Verb Tense

There is not room in this article to examine every single occurrence of verbs in the past tense, but we will look at a few of the most notable

and seemingly problematic ones. In reading through forty-nine poems of *The Keeper of Sheep*, we find something simple but critical: although Caeiro occasionally uses the past and future tenses and sometimes puts verbs in the subjunctive mood, the overwhelming majority of verbs appear in the present tense. This fits with his philosophy that we should not waste time thinking about the inner meaning of things—that we should appreciate things for what they are and live in the present rather than get stuck on a past event. Caeiro chooses to do this (at least in part) because, as he puts it, “I try to say what I feel / Without thinking about what I feel” (“XLVI” 9–10). His focus on enjoying the present causes him to rarely look back into his past. Many of Caeiro’s contemporaries use the past tense in their poems, but he chooses not to (with a few exceptions). In this respect, he breaks from tradition in order to practice what he preaches. This genuine action leads readers to identify with and trust Caeiro in profound ways, whereas they would be less apt to trust what he says if they sensed a tension between his philosophy and his actions.

Apparent Exceptions

In poem “XXXII,” Caeiro describes an encounter he had with a “townsman” (1). Of the thirty-three conjugated verbs that appear in the poem, fifteen are in the imperfect or preterit tenses. For one who advocates living in the present, this appears to be a problem. It does not, however, violate his focus on breathing-like thinking. These verbs describe the man who was talking to Caeiro and the feelings that were going through Caeiro’s mind during their one-sided conversation. Furthermore, Caeiro urges us to believe that “things are really what they seem / And there is nothing to understand” (“XXXIX” 13–14). Here he instructs us to take things as they are and not try to figure out what else they could mean. In the description of his conversation with the “townsman,” Caeiro does not attempt to guess what the other man

was actually thinking—he contents himself with telling us what the man “said he felt” (“XXXII” 11). Thus, Caiero adheres to his philosophy and shows the reader that it is possible to remember some things without actively thinking about them.

Another instance in which Caiero uses many verbs in the past tense is poem 8. There, he describes the dream he had of the Christ child and the image he had of religion. Although this poem includes the kinds of philosophical musings Caiero decries, he avoids the accusation of having thought and reflected on his beliefs because he is simply telling a dream—describing the “dream that was like a photograph” (“VIII” 2).

Reconciling Inconsistencies

Throughout the rest of his work, Caiero includes similar parenthetical explanations and asides that reconcile the presence of philosophical thoughts in his work. One such example is poem “XXXI,” in which Caiero explains why he sometimes utilizes what he so boldly condemns:

If sometimes I say that flowers smile
And if I should say that rivers sing,
It’s not because I think there are smiles in flowers
And songs in the rivers’ flowing . . .
It’s so I can help misguided men
Feel the truly real existence of flowers and rivers.

Since I write for them to read me, I sometimes stoop
To the stupidity of their senses . . .
It isn’t right, but I excuse myself [. . .]. (1–9)

In these lines, Caiero explains that sometimes he intentionally goes against his principles in order to teach the masses, who would not understand nature without his help. This poem serves as a defense for

the rest of his poems. If Caeiro didn't think that other people would read his poems, he would be out enjoying nature rather than writing about nature. His understanding is evident when he says in poem "XLVIII", "I wave farewell with a white handkerchief / To my poems going out to humanity" (2-3). A few lines later Caeiro says, "That is the fate of poems" (5)—that destiny is to teach people what to think (or what not to think, as it were). Caeiro willingly violates some of his own principles in order to help his readers see "the truly real existence" of the things around them ("XXXI" 6). With this understanding in mind, we can analyze the rest of Caeiro's apparent trespasses against his own philosophy.

Conclusion

In analyzing Caeiro's poetry, some might argue that the very act of writing his beliefs down constitutes the kind of thinking he condemned. Others may analyze the data provided in this paper and find evidence that Caeiro had to think about and plan his poems in order to harmonize with his philosophy. We can recognize, however, that the rare appearance of "meditation" is in fact Caeiro intentionally departing from his views to teach us, and that the infrequent use of the past tense is evidence that Caeiro really lives what he describes in his poems—that he lives in the present and takes things for what they appear to be, and not for what he could construe them to be. In this respect, as in others, he embodies his beliefs and shows that, "I have no philosophy, I have senses" ("II" 19).