The Mad Fiddler in the context of Pessoa's Correspondence

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Keywords

English Poetry, Fernando Pessoa, Literary Tradition, Modernism, The Mad Fiddler.

Abstract

Among the hundreds of English poems written by Fernando Pessoa during his lifetime, the collection entitled *The Mad Fiddler* plays a vital role. In a manner unique to the circumstances of this particular body of poems, *The Mad Fiddler* sheds light on its own value while refracting light as well on various aspects of Pessoa's practice at the earliest stages of an emergent modernism. It is the surprising significance of these English poems for Pessoa himself in the light of his correspondence to British publishers and editors during the period 1912-1917 that will be the focus of this paper.

Palavras-chave

Fernando Pessoa, Modernismo, Poesia Inglesa, The Mad Fiddler, Tradição Literária.

Resumo

Entre as centenas de poemas ingleses escritos por Fernando Pessoa durante a sua vida, a coleção intitulada *The Mad Fiddler* tem um papel crucial. De uma maneira única, relacionada às circunstâncias deste grupo particular de poemas, *The Mad Fiddler* lança luz sobre a sua própria importância, ao mesmo tempo em que refrata a luz sobre vários aspectos da escrita de Pessoa – tanto heteronímica em Português, quanto ortonímica em Inglês, nos estágios preliminares de um modernismo emergente nas primeiras duas décadas do século XX. Este ensaio enfoca a surpreendente significância destes poemas ingleses.

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In a not so subtle allusion to Wallace Stevens, my first thought for a title was "Thirteen Ways of Looking at *The Mad Fiddler*." Unquestionably there are many ways of engaging with its fifty-three poems, organized into eight sections, the title of each section referring to a stage in the quest for a mystical experience of Nothingness. Yet my goal here is emphatically not to study the poems themselves but rather to explore the nature of the significance that this extremely elusive and complex body of English poems held for Pessoa. In this pursuit, his English correspondence to editors and critics from 1912 to 1917 is an invaluable source, offering a surprisingly rich vantage point for apprehending his desire to be recognized as an English-Language poet.

To discern (and comment on) indications of that desire within the context of each letter under discussion will be the central focus of this paper. It is hoped that this closer look at the letters provides new insight into the evolution of Pessoa's thinking about *The Mad Fiddler*, his initial persistent belief in it and the slow corrosive process that ultimately left him with a sense of defeat. The letters that I wish to examine are: (1) Letter to the Poetry Society (26 December 1912); (2) Letter to an English critic (Autumn, 1915); (3) Letter to John Lane (23 October 1915); (4) Letter to Harold Monro (August or September, possibly 1916); (5) Letter to an English editor (possibly 1916); (6) Letter to an English critic (possibly end 1916).

My starting point is Pessoa's 1912 letter to the Poetry Society in London.¹ Even though Harold Monro is not mentioned by name, it is very likely that he would have been the one to receive it. I will comment on (1) 1912 (date of letter) as a crucial year for Pessoa; (2) reasons for writing the letter; (3) the allusion to "1898, more or less" (Pessoa, 2007: 54) as the originating moment of the present poetic movement in Portugal and the unstated reference to two works by Guerra Junqueiro—"Pátria" [Country] and "Oração à Luz" [Prayer to Light]; (4) the self-referencing in a long paragraph essentially paraphrasing his 1912 essay on the new Portuguese poetry; (5) his offer to send some of his English poems, along with an emphatic insistence that it is only for his "personal appreciation"; (6) passages of ambivalence and complexity in Pessoa's tone of voice.

The importance of the letter's date cannot be overstated, nor can its significance for an understanding of *The Mad Fiddler*. The 1912 publication in *A Àguia* of Pessoa's three essays on the new Portuguese poetry in April, May,

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¹ By 1912 what had originally been known as the Poetry Recital Society (founded in February 1909 by Galoway Kyle) had been renamed the Poetry Society and Harold Monro was one of its members. By late 1911 the Society had accepted Monro's proposal to publish a monthly *Poetry Review*. Monro was editor of that review until sometime in 1913. At that point he went on to found a new journal, *Poetry and Drama*, which lasted less than two years (1913-1914). It was around this time that Monro set up his famous shop, The Poetry Bookshop, which lasted (died) in 1935, just as did Pessoa. See A. WALTON LITZ ET ALT. (2000: 60-61). For more on The Poetry Review, see GRANT (1967: 39-52); on the Poetry Recital Society, see GRANT (1967: 69-74).

September, November, and December marked his literary debut among the Iberian intellectuals and literati of the time.

Furthermore, Teixeira Pascoaes, editor of the journal (which was the mouthpiece, in turn, for the Portuguese Renaissance movement) was himself a well-respected poet known primarily for his leadership role within the mystical saudosista movement. In his essays on the newly emerging modernism in Portugal, Pessoa refers more than once to Pascoaes, particularly towards the end of his final essay where he seems to translate his mystical ideas and the saudosistas into self-aggrandizing and logical terms. Pascoaes' prediction, for example, of the imminent arrival of a messianic poetic figure capable of lifting Portugal to a higher, more ethereal level of civilization becomes, in Pessoa's system, the looming figure of (himself) the Supra-Camões. A subtle but important connection, in this sense, can be made with the overall direction of the poems as one organic whole within The Mad Fiddler. Even though the idea of a "mad fiddler" had not yet visibly surfaced in 1912—the first draft of a poem with that title is 18 August 1915— these "purely metaphysical and therefore religious ideas," inextricably woven into the very fabric of the fifty-three poems, were already evolving from the irrational notion (that Pessoa would attempt to define in rational terms) that spirit and matter must merge for there to be a real reality. In terms of significance for *The Mad* Fiddler, the last essay, "A nova poesia portuguesa no seu aspecto psicológico" [The new Portuguese Poetry from a Psychological Point of View] is crucial reading for an understanding of the new Portuguese poetry in terms of its "new religiosity," its characteristic ability to "seek an elsewhere in every thing," its transcendental pantheism, its origins in Spinoza and its capacity to see that "matter and spirit are unreal manifestations of God, [...] of the Transcended [...] of the illusion [...] of the dream of itself" (PESSOA, 2000: 36-67 [p. 59]).

The first stanza of the following poem, "Spell," one of *The Mad Fiddler* poems that already existed by 1912, may illustrate the new aesthetic, alluded to above, in the way it rises through the merging of opposites to build a new state, a new emotion:

O angel born too late
For fallen man to meet!
In what new sensual state
Could our twined lives feel sweet?

What new emotion must
I dream, to think thee mine?
What purity of lust?
O tendrilled as a vine
Around my caressed trust!
O dream-pressed spirit-wine!

(PESSOA, 1999: 35)

This poem, one of only two English poems to be published in Pessoa's lifetime, appeared in the May 1923 issue of *Contemporânea*. George Monteiro calls it Pessoa's "gesture of farewell to an English audience he never had" (MONTEIRO, 2000: 8).²

Pessoa writes to the Poetry Society in order to learn the "precise scope and purpose" of their organization, including the date of its foundation, any publications it has issued, the date since which the *Poetry Review* has existed, its "Manifesto" or "declaration of faith and works." (PESSOA, 2007: 52-53). His "special purpose" is to "obtain a nearer knowledge of such currents as must exist in the contemporary English poetry, and which are thrown out of daily evidence and, newspaper fame by the very extensive, very characteristic and very inferior novelproduction of the international movement." His hope is to "obtain a channel of some sort through which to carry into some approach to internationality the extremely important and totally ignored movement represented, exclusively as yet, by contemporary Portuguese poetry." His allusion to Portuguese poetry creates a segue to a discussion of the new literary movement in Portugal, beginning with a reference to "1898, more or less" as the moment when the "totally ignored movement" was born. The movement is exceedingly productive, of the highest quality, and "astonishingly new," making a reference to "Pátria" and "Oração à Luz" by Guerra Junqueiro without ever mentioning his name or the works themselves. From time to time he reveals ever so slightly the complex web of ambivalent feelings roiling around inside of him and seemingly associated with feeling victimized as an "ununderstood" Portuguese poet who is part of a "totally ignored movement," writing with hopes of gaining some recognition from a major figure within the publishing world in London:

This may seem to you a calm and harmless species of insanity; but you will excuse the impertinence of all this explanation, considering that it is the irrepressible outburst of a man whose country, though at present standing foremost in the foremost activity of the mind (though perhaps in nothing else), is constantly, not only ignored, which were tolerable, but insulted and insultingly ununderstood by the totality of such people as constitute international literary, and other, opinion. I cannot expect you to attribute to anything but to enthusiasm and to a kind of literary Jingoism the position stated as being that of the two works mentioned above. But I can do no more than no more.

(PESSOA, 2007: 54-55)

We will hear this same tone of voice in other letters, each time giving the impression of an Álvaro de Campos whose flywheel is beginning to spin out of

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² "Spell" (though its title was simply the first line of the poem at that time: "From the moonlight brink [...]") was written on 22 November 1912, a little less than a month before Pessoa would write his letter to the Poetry Society. In addition to "Spell," there are seven other poems that had been written by the end of 1912, and that would eventually become part of *The Mad Fiddler*: the first draft of "Monotony," 1910; "Suspense," 1911; "La Chercheuse," 1912; "To One Singing," 1912; "The Bridge," 1912; "A Summer Ecstasy," 1912; "The End," 1912.

control and will self-explode at any moment. His self-description echoes much of what he had previously written in his essay on the new Portuguese poet, the Supra-Camões. He states:

The state of mind of what is high and poetic in contemporary Portuguese souls being precisely similar to the Elizabethan state of mind [...], it is clear that a contemporary Portuguese, not altogether a foreigner to more than the vestibule of the house of the Muses, who should possess in an equal degree the English and the Portuguese languages, will, naturally, spontaneously and unforcedly, lapse, if he writes in English, into a style not very far removed from the Elizabethan, though, of course, with certain marked and essential differences. I am, as far as I can confess, in this position, and should you be in any way interested in having at your critical disposal the only tolerably sure element for an appreciation, not of the nature, but of the intensity and the quality of the contemporary poetic movement in Portugal, I could submit to you (not in any way for publishing, but for your personal appreciation) such English poems I may have written as can be more aptly held to be representative in the way mentioned.

(PESSOA, 2007:55-56)

This passage reminds us what Pessoa was trying to do in his more serious English work, like the sonnets, like Antinuous, and certainly like The Mad Fiddler. He was putting into practice what many of the moderns would be doing roughly ten years later;3 namely, to revive the great metaphysical tradition of John Donne, Richard Crashaw, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, George Vaughn and, to quote Pound out of context, to "make it new." Viewing the poet in The Mad Fiddler as "a Donne raised to the Shelleyth power" (PESSOA, 1999: 12) implies that Pessoa had a metaphysical poet in mind, even if he wanted to merge that voice with the sensibility of a high romantic poet like Shelley.

The first thing to note in the letter to an English critic, dated October 19154 is its mention of *The Mad Fiddler*. It is not known how many poems were sent to this critic, but the letter he sent John Lane (very likely soon after this letter) contained sixteen poems, fifteen from The Mad Fiddler and the other a poem that begins, "Her fingers toyed absently with her rings" (PESSOA, 2007: 133-134). We can conjecture therefore that Pessoa may have sent the same sixteen poems in this letter of October 1915. The second paragraph is poignant in its description of his situation, his need for feedback. The tone has changed, the mask is off. It is worth quoting in full:

I am a Portuguese-thoroughly a Portuguese-but educated in an English Colony so that the two languages are equally familiar to me. I write in both, though I have only published,

³ George Monteiro refers to Jorge de Sena's comments on this matter (MONTEIRO, 2000: 9).

⁴ Zenith tells us that the date of this letter is not absolutely certain, and that is could be 1914 or even as late as 1916 (PESSOA, 2007: 455).

and very little, in the less known one. For my Portuguese work I can find critics, though I am still persuaded I am the best one. In reference, however, to my English work, I do not see why I should not avail myself of the circumstance that competent critics exist to inflict upon [them] the request whose consequence I am making you undergo.

(PESSOA, 2007: 133-134)⁵

Pessoa stipulates the kind of criticism he needs in the next paragraph. His specific concern is: (1) do the poems possess originality; (2) can one ascribe quality to them; (3) what kind of acceptance would the poems have "at the hands of the English public" (PESSOA, 2007: 134). Seemingly simple questions yet they indicate a certain degree of uncertainty about his work in English. The sense of isolation and the need for feedback only increase over the next few years. Pessoa asks that he keep their communication confidential and ends his letter with his typical brand of absurdist humor: "I am quite aware that I have no right to intrude on your time which, as I am glad to be aware, is valuable. But our times are these passing times and I am casual enough to be brash enough to identify myself in this respect with the spirit of our epoch" (PESSOA, 2007: 134).

The letter to John Lane is dated 23 October 1915.⁶ As said before, it is very likely that the poems sent to Lane are, with one exception, poems belonging to *The Mad Fiddler*. Pessoa's tone throughout this letter seems markedly different. No (heteronymic) urge to play a role takes over the writing. He wants nothing more than to adequately describe the fifteen poems (out of a total of thirty-four at this point) so that Lane can "rightly measure what probabilities attach to a publication of them" (PESSOA, 2007: 135). As in the other letters, however, the need for an outside opinion is paramount, and it is the first thing he broaches. He states that he

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⁵ In terms of *The Mad Fiddler* he has produced a corpus of thirty-four poems at this point, including the eight poems already mentioned. Here is a breakdown of what he wrote during the course of these three years, 1913-1914 and 1915. In 1913: "Fierce Dreams of Something Else"; "Sunset"; "The Butterfly", "The Foreself"; "Ennui"; "The Lost Key"; "Inversion"; Sonnet"; "The King of Gaps"; "Rivers"; "The Ruined Cloister." In 1914: "Nothing" (first version of "Emptiness"); "The Abyss" (sometime after 4 October 1914). Finally, in 1915, his most productive year of all: "Isis"; "Summer Moments"; "Elevation" (first version entitled "Fiat Lux"); "The Mad Fiddler"; "The Shining Pool"; "The Labyrinth"; "Song After Slumber" (other versions later the same year); "Mood"; "Awakening"; "Fever Garden"; "The Poem"; "Lycanthropy"; "The Loophole" (first version is found in the Isis poem).

⁶ John Lane (1854-1925). Along with Charles Elkin Mathews, he founded The Bodley Head, a firm that originally dealt with antiquarian books in 1887. He later became known as a publisher of controversial texts. Interesting to ponder is whether Pessoa would have known that Lane published audacious, controversial material and, if so, whether he might have considered showing him his *Epithalamium* or *Antinous*. I say this because at one point in the letter he mentions, in a seemingly offhanded manner, that he has some longer poems in English but they are unprintable in a country with "an active morality." He assumes they could not be of interest "so I do not think of mentioning them in this respect—that is to say, in respect of a possibility of their being published in England." Yet he is asking!

cannot have any idea, objective or temporal, as to the value of the poems and he cannot therefore judge them properly. "You will be best judge of this," he begins, in the third paragraph, "and, seeing that you have extensively published modern English poetry, I send you these poems as a sort of inquiry whether you would be disposed to publish a book the substance of which is precisely on the lines which these poems represent." He refers to the short-lived late nineteenth century poet Ernest Dowson (1867-1900)⁷ as a way of suggesting that his book would cover, like his, about 200 pages.

He assures Lane that the book would include no poem longer than the enclosed "Fiat Lux." Here is the first stanza of that poem:

Before light was, light's bright idea lit
God's thought of it,
And, because through God's thought light's thought did pass,
Light ever was,
And from beyond eternity became
The living flame
That trembles into life and reddens with
Our life's soul-width.

(PESSOA, 1999: 102; cf. 218)

This one eight-line stanza, with its rhyme scheme of AABBCCDD and alternating short- and long-line stanzas gives some idea of the kind of poems Pessoa also included in *The Mad Fiddler*. His poems were increasingly abstract in content and experimental in terms of form. On one of the manuscripts of one of the many extant Table of Contents of *The Mad Fiddler* Pessoa had scribbled: "A Donne raised to the Shelleyeth power," referred above. This is, indeed, the poetic voice that Pessoa painstakingly worked to create for the poems—particularly the poems in the last few sections which, to a large extent, were poems written in 1915.

One section of the letter strikes me as particularly significant. Pessoa claims that "the chief merit" of his poems is their not belonging to any movement other than the sensationist movement (PESSOA, 2007: 136). He goes on to say that:

[...] these poems contain, here and there, certain eccentricities and peculiarities of expression: do not attribute these to the circumstances of my being a foreigner, nor indeed consider me a foreigner in your judgment of these poems. I practice the same thing, to a far higher degree, in Portuguese. If, however, you prefer to consider these modes of strangeness as the wild cats of the imagination, I hope you will let me lay claim to sowing them consciously.

(PESSOA, 2007: 136)

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⁷ Not to be confused with Edward Dowden, who appears on some of Pessoa's lists of people to send *The Mad Fiddler* to. See, for example (PESSOA, 1999: 15). Dowden's book on Shelley is in Pessoa's private library.

He then explains what these "modes of strangeness" are:

The fact is that these are forms of expression necessarily created by an extreme pantheistic attitude, which, as it breaks the limits of definite thought, so must violate the rules of logical meaning. The poems I am sending you (and others I have referred to) are, however, the mildest in this sense; I'll spare you reference to the poems which properly represent what I call the "sensationist attitude," save that, to give you one idea of the thing meant, I add to the fifteen poems a sensations poem in English. This, as stated, does not belong to the book.

(PESSOA, 2007: 136-137)

It is significant that he calls it a book. And his explanation of how the pantheistic attitude effects the language and the forms of expression as it breaks the limits of definite thought and so, of necessity, must violate the rules of logic is highly significant—indeed, it is essential as a basis for judging *The Mad Fiddler*. This is the aesthetic behind the fifty-three poems and Pessoa seems correct in stating all this, as Master Caeiro might have stated it, had he been interested in trying to get his work published.

Unlike so often with Pessoa's letters—which either never get completed, never get sent or get sent but never get a response—the letter to John Lane elicited a response. In a diary entry 3 November 1915 Pessoa wrote "Rather good day; began w[ith] reception of J[ohn] Lanes's card (insignificant but agreeable)" (PESSOA, 2009: 328).

Three things stand out in the short letter to Harold Monro (most likely written in August or September of 1916). Pessoa makes it very clear at the outset of the letter that he will incur the cost of publication if Monro decides to publish it. In discussing what the book would entail, he refers to Richard Adlington's *Images* and F.S. Flint's *Cadences*, both small books of thirty-one pages. This alone shows a shift in Pessoa's thinking about his book of poems. Rather than suggest Ernest Dowson's two-hundred-page book, his thinking seems to be changing in terms of what a book of poems should entail, and he seems to be aligning himself more with the early modernist aesthetic of small publications. Clearly, Pessoa's choice of Flint and Adlington may have been influenced by Monro's just having published both *Images* and *Cadences*.⁸

In a notebook annotation datable to January 1917 we read

⁸ Pessoa owned copies of the two books of poems, each published in 1915. Pessoa wrote this note to himself a little after the time of his letter to Monro, after he had seen the two books of poems and begun to rethink the organization of his own book of poems.

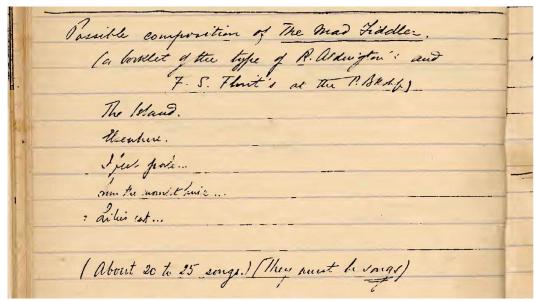


Fig. 1. Unpublished notebook annotations datable to January 1917 (BNP/E3, 144Y-32^r). Detail.

Possible composition of The Mad Fiddler.

(a booklet of the type of R. Aldington's and F. S. Flint's at the P[oetry] B[oo]kshop)

The Island.9

Elsewhere.

I feel pale...

From the moonlit brink...

? Lilies cast...

(About 20 to 25 songs.) (They must be *songs*)

The last word "songs" is underlined two times. What these five poems have in common with each other is this: they show a range of meter and rhyme scheme, all contain a musical image, with the exception of "Spell," at that time still referred to

⁹ Although it is not in Pessoa's private library, it is possible (I would argue very likely) that Pessoa was aware of the Collected Poems of Edmund Gosse, published in London by William Heinemann in 1911. This would explain a few things: (1) their great similarities in terms of an unusual range of poetic techniques and rhyme schemes and (2) the slightly disguised but nevertheless reappearance of the phrase "On viol and flute" (title of Gosse's first collection of poems) in the first two lines of "Island," the second poem in *The Mad Fiddler:* "Weep, violin and viol, | Low flute and fine bassoon" (PESSOA, 1999: 33). Edmund Gosse figures in one of the lists of authors and scholars Pessoa intended to send his English poems to. See list included in the Introductory Note to this Special Issue. There is a draft of a letter headed "Sir" that opens "I am sending you, with this letter, several typewritten pages of poems from which I should appreciate an opinion altogether frank and sincere" (BNP/E3, 1141-461; doc. referred in PESSOA, 2007: 455). On the top right corner of this document, Pessoa scribbles the names of the following men of letters: "[George] Saintsbury; [Edward] Dowden; [Theodore] Watts-Dunton; Stopford Brooke; Sir W[alter Alexander] Raleigh; Edmund Gosse."

as "From the moonlit brink [...]." A comparative study of *The Mad Fiddler* with these two Imagist books of poems would be well worth doing.

Pessoa's interest in writing Monro goes beyond his desire to see his *Mad Fiddler* book in print. He is hopeful as well that Monro will show an interest in the uniquely Portuguese form of modernism called Sensationism, and he therefore asks him "whether the public you have would be at all interested in a small anthology." (PESSOA, 2007: 150). He promises to send him a copy of the second issue of *Orpheu* along with a translation of his poem, "Slanting Rain" ("Chuva Obliqua" appeared in the second issue) so that he can get an idea of the movement.

It seems probable that the letter to an English Editor, dated as most likely 1916, is addressed to Harold Monro again, since Monro was known for being interested in "new" movements and that is what Pessoa intends to discuss with him. The most stunning part of the letter occurs in the description of transcendental pantheism, where the concept of the new poet is defined as a "William Blake inside the soul of Shelley" (PESSOA, 2007: 160). As he had previously done in his letter to the Poetry Society, he refers to "Prayer to Light" and "Pátria," this time attributing them to Guerra Junqueiro. He also mentions the "Elegy" of Pascoaes. He makes these references, as before, in order to identify the Portuguese roots of this uniquely Portuguese movement called Sensationsim. It is a long, highly theoretical and rationally presented account in which the main attitude of Sensationism is broken down into four separate principles, and the fourth of those principles is further broken down into the three principles of art. The letter ends on a very different note, a poetic note. Perhaps it was Pessoa's way of suggesting that a Portuguese sensationist, a genuine one, would always see the world in a poetic manner regardless of the particular medium.

Sadly, there is no evidence of a response from Monroe. What we do have in the letter to an English critic, dated most likely the end of 1916,¹⁰ is Pessoa's complaint that the typescript he is sending had just been rejected even though he, Pessoa, had offered to pay for the cost of publication. This letter, more than any other, reveals Pessoa's desperate need for feedback. I will quote one section to give a sense of his despondency:

The summary kind of rejection which the poems thus offered received, has led me to a very hesitating attitude towards them. Though I never conceived them to be good, I have never thought they would have been so deserving of an absolute contempt [...]. I am secluded and deprived of all kinds of relationships that might exert some criticism on what I write. I am neither so proud as to despise altogether an opinion other than my own, nor so humble as to accept it altogether [...]. I have no one on whom I can depend for an impartial criticism of what I write. It is difficult enough to obtain it for what I write in Portuguese,

¹⁰ Zenith dates the letter end of 1916; Manuela Parreira da Silva dates it 1915.

and I live in Portugal; it is far more difficult to obtain it for anything written in English. Will you do me the favor of giving me your opinion?

(PESSOA, 2007: 166-167)

Months later the letter of 6 June 1917 arrives from Constable & Company Limited:

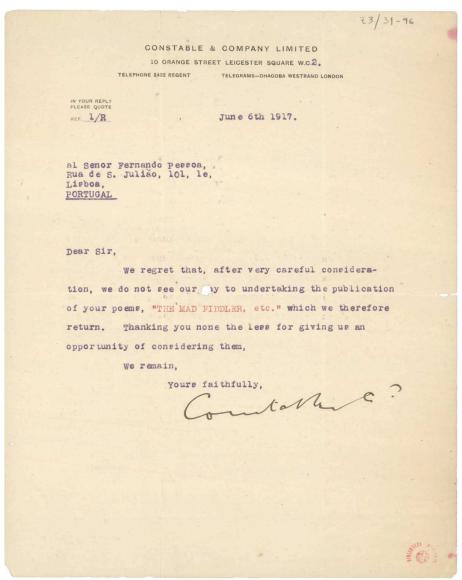


Fig. 2. Typescript rejection letter dated 6 June 1917. (BNP/E3, 31-96; PESSOA, 1999: 16).

In the summer of 1935 Pessoa's half-brother Luís Miguel and his wife visited Portugal on their honeymoon. During that visit they spent time with Pessoa. Later, after they had returned to England, Pessoa sent "Lhi" (Luís Miguel's nickname) a copy of his alcoholic or post-alcoholic poem called "D.T." In their ensuing correspondence Luís Miguel made himself available as a literary agent for his brother in the hopes of being able to help him become better known in England. In

one of his letters to Pessoa, he wrote: "The English market is tremendous and once you have become at all established you will find it immensely profitable." And he urged Pessoa to come visit him and his wife Eva. Apparently the idea pleased him, he thought about it, even thought seriously about such a trip a few times. But it didn't happen, and he died soon after, in the same year (MARTINS, 2008: 740-741).¹¹

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¹¹ This is a rough translation of part of the entry on Luís Miguel Rosa.

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