

“By links of being past imagining”: Fernando Pessoa’s *The Mad Fiddler* and Sensationism

["By links of being past imagining":
The Mad Fiddler e o Sensacionismo de Fernando Pessoa]

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Keywords

English, Fernando Pessoa, *The Mad Fiddler*, Sensationism, Aesthetic convention, Intersectionism, Swampism, Modernism.

Abstract

Fernando Pessoa writes *The Mad Fiddler* according to the three principles of Sensationism he delineates in a letter to an unnamed British editor: Sensation, Suggestion, and Construction. This article examines the aesthetic reach of Pessoa’s threefold process to understand how the poet’s early work in English conceptualizes the abstract feelings and expressions that would eventually allow his heteronyms “to feel everything in all possible ways.” Analyzing the collection through each of these parameters reveals the breadth of Pessoa’s aspirations for sensationism as a literary movement. Grounded in new traditions within French symbolism and conceptualized in the English language, both *The Mad Fiddler* and Sensationism depart from the perceived insularity of Portuguese expression to affirm a more expansive artistic philosophy.

Palavras-chave

Inglês, Fernando Pessoa, *The Mad Fiddler*, Sensacionismo, Convenção estética, Interseccionismo, Paúlismo, Modernismo.

Resumo

Fernando Pessoa escreve *The Mad Fiddler* de acordo com os três princípios do sensacionismo que ele mesmo delineia numa carta a um desconhecido editor britânico: Sensação, Sugestão e Construção. Este artigo examina o alcance estético deste pouco conhecido projeto de Fernando Pessoa com o objetivo de compreender como os primeiros trabalhos do poeta, escritos em inglês, contribuem para o desenvolvimento das sensações e expressões que eventualmente permitem aos seus heterónimos “sentir tudo de todas as formas”. Tratar-se-á, portanto, de se analisar a coleção através de cada um dos três princípios do sensacionismo, revelando a amplitude das aspirações do poeta para com o sensacionismo como movimento literário. Com base nas novas tradições do simbolismo francês e conceitualizado inteiramente através da língua inglesa, tanto *The Mad Fiddler* como o sensacionismo partem para além da expressão portuguesa, afirmando uma filosofia artística mais ampla.

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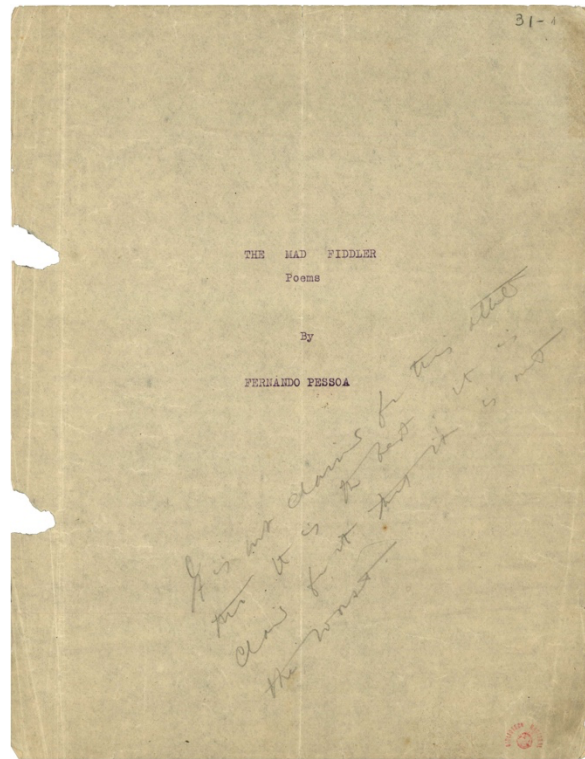


Fig. 1. Frontispiece of *The Mad Fiddler* by Fernando Pessoa (BNP/E3, 31-1^a).

"It is not claimed for this attitude that it is the best. It is claimed for it that it is not the worst," Fernando Pessoa¹ scrawls on a draft frontispiece of *The Mad Fiddler*. His ambivalence toward the collection is surprising; *The Mad Fiddler* boasts recognition as one of two literary projects the Portuguese poet managed to fully complete and attempt to publish in his lifetime (the other being his *magnum opus*, *Mensagem*). Written between 1911 and 1917, the collection features fifty-three poems, all in English, divided into eight sections, which Susan M. Brown describes as "referring to [stages] in the quest for a mystical experience of Nothingness" (BROWN, 2016: 77). While these poems do map out a fantastic journey, I posit they proceed with a Fullness of sensation unmatched elsewhere in Fernando Pessoa's English poetry. For when Pessoa later expounds "the central attitude of Sensationism" (PESSOA, 1999a: 234), he positions *The Mad Fiddler* at its vanguard.

Fernando Pessoa's correspondence with English editors provides insight into the sensationist expressions interwoven throughout the collection. A letter to editor Harold Monro in the late summer of 1915² concerned "a small number of poems of

¹ I am most grateful to my advisor, Dr. K. David Jackson, for his support and encouraging comments throughout the drafting process.

² As Susan M. Brown elucidates, Harold Monro was then one of the members, editors, and reviewers for the Poetry Society in London, formerly known as Poetry Recital Society. Though this letter is undated, it was likely sent sometime in August or September 1915. See BROWN (2016).

[Pessoa's], in English" (PESSOA, 1999b: 192), which would eventually comprise some of the works included in *The Mad Fiddler*. Pessoa's reasons for writing to Monro are twofold: first, to inquire about "the quality and value of the poems" (PESSOA, 1999b: 193); and second, to thereby convey an idea of the "recent literary movement in Portugal with its complex inclusion and absolute fusion of elements drawn from the four quarters of the intellectual earth" (PESSOA, 1999b: 193). Shortly after, in an October 1915 plea to editor John Lane, Pessoa again includes a selection of his texts, "fifteen of which are representative of the work contained in a book of English poems" (PESSOA, 1999c: 174) he claims to have recently written. "Their chief merit, if they have one, is precisely in that they do not enter into the stream of any current poetical movement—except, perhaps, the Portuguese 'sensationist' movement" (PESSOA, 1999c: 175), Pessoa submits, announcing *The Mad Fiddler's* emphasis on lyrical unconventionality and artistic experimentation.

Subsequent written exchanges map out the elements of this "poetical movement." In a long letter to an unnamed editor, thought again to be Monro,³ Pessoa explains that sensationism emerges "from three older movements—French 'symbolism,' Portuguese transcendentalist pantheism, and the jumble of senseless and contradictory things of which futurism, cubism and the like are occasional expressions, though, to be exact, we descend more from the spirit than from the letter of these" (PESSOA, 1999a: 232). This new literary experiment simultaneously embraces and deconstructs the cosmopolitan style of art that is critical to Pessoa's avant-garde contemporaries. While contrasting in aesthetic structure, sensationism approximates comparable subjective transformations that allow the poet "to feel everything in all possible ways" (PESSOA, 2017: 387). This expansion of possibility achieves what Pessoa terms a "decomposition" of the modernist movement, which is grounded in the idea that poetry should express "*not things, but our sensations of things*" (PESSOA, 1999a: 234; italics in original).

Having identified the aesthetic roots of sensationism, Pessoa then proceeds to structure its poetic reach across four main principles, condensing a broader definition of art into three criteria:

The three principles of art are 1) every sensation should be expressed to the full, that is, the consciousness of every sensation should be sifted to the bottom; 2) the sensation should be so expressed that it has the possibility of evoking—as a halo round a definite central presentation—the greatest possible number of other sensations; 3) the whole thus produced should have the greatest possible resemblance to an organised being, because that is the condition of vitality. I call these three principles 1) that of Sensation, 2) that of Suggestion, 3) that of Construction.

(PESSOA, 1999a: 235)

³ It is likely that Monro would have been the one to receive two additional letters from Pessoa, one in 1912 and another in 1916, both regarding the perception and publication of his English poetry.

Marta Soares reminds us that these phases parallel Pessoa's investment in separate literary movements—swampism, intersectionism, and integral sensationism—, seeing them as different approaches to art (SOARES, 2018: 71). We might also understand these principles as extensions of Pessoa's preface to *The Mad Fiddler*, where he posits that "The activity of an artist, and the work of art it produces, involve the interpenetrated coexistence of three elements, which are the material, the medial, and the formal elements of art" (PESSOA, 2021: 4).

This enigmatic text presents a unique opportunity; it is a poetic work for which Pessoa's own theorization is documented, captured in letters to English editors on his failed attempts to publish it. I thus propose an analysis of *The Mad Fiddler* organized by the three principles Pessoa delineates—Sensation, Suggestion, and Construction—to reveal that the poet's approach to sensationism relies on the amplification of abstract feelings and experiences as well as on the structure of their artistic expression. Analyzing *The Mad Fiddler* through each of these aesthetic elements reveals the breadth of Pessoa's aspirations for sensationism, departing from the perceived insularity of Portuguese expression to reveal a more expansive artistic philosophy.

Pessoa's three principles build upon one another, stemming first from Sensation, which embraces feeling as a component of art that constitutes multiple emotions and senses. Pessoa's dimensions of feeling are all-encompassing, incorporating the sensorial experiences of the body as well as the inner workings of the mind. In his letter to the unnamed editor, the poet holds that "a poem [...] is a person, a living human being, belongs in bodily presence and real fleshly existence to another world, into which our imagination throws him, his aspect to us, as we read *him* in this world, being no more than the imperfect shadow of that reality of beauty which is divine elsewhere" (PESSOA, 1999a: 234-235; italics in original). Poetry takes on a tangibility of feeling inseparable from human experience. More than words on the page, a poem generates sensation and, walking alongside us, experiences that sensation as well. Pessoa here fractures the connection between art and its audience when he argues that "our imagination throws [the poem], his aspect to us, as we read *him* in this world" (PESSOA, 1999a: 234-235; italics in original). In that sense, a poem might be thought of as a mirror, reflecting not only the physicality of existing in a specific moment in time and of experiencing a particular piece of art but also of seeing oneself cast in a parallel and in some ways untouchable world. Poetry, as physical embodiment and conceptual mirror, penetratingly reflects "the imperfect shadow of that reality" to which we are often sensorially passive. Pessoa embraces this "imperfect shadow" by rendering it visible in his work; our sensations become poetically tangible in their beautiful and "divine" imperfection.

To open his collection of English poems, Pessoa creates an allegorical figure who acts as a guide throughout the divine imperfection of *The Mad Fiddler*. Sounding

"Not from the northern road, | Not from the southern way," (PESSOA, 2021: 9) the fiddler's music rises in a liminal space that dramatizes the poem's sensorial reality by playing a tune that "Replied to that longing | All have in their breasts, | To lost sense belonging | To forgotten quests" (PESSOA, 2021: 9). In performing the feelings "All have in their breasts," the eponymous first poem in *The Mad Fiddler* becomes a container for sensation and at the same time projecting its shadows out into the poetic world of the village in which the poem is set. Not content to merely express the sensations imagined throughout the collection, the fiddler becomes the harbinger of sensation; he strides into the village and awakens its citizens, stirring them from sleep and binding them to his tune. In much the same way, "The Mad Fiddler" embodies the figurative role of the guide who leads us, the readers, throughout the collection, revealing its purpose as a space for musings on life and its relational sensations. When we read the text and allow its words to penetrate our consciousness, the poem, in turn, conjures and holds up the mirror upon which we might see ourselves aesthetically reflected.

Still, to see ourselves reflected in the mirror is not necessarily to apprehend what is being shown to us; though we recognize our own face, we might not see it as others do. But it is precisely our lack of consciousness of ourselves that proves to us we are alive and immersed in sensation, as Pessoa articulates in his first principle of art: "every sensation should be expressed to the full, that is, the consciousness of every sensation should be sifted to the bottom." The mad fiddler embodies this expression "to the full," and if we allow ourselves to be lured by his tune, we might be immersed in the sensation Pessoa envisions.

Just as "The Mad Fiddler" becomes an allegory for the experience of sensation, so too do the villagers represent our experience as readers feeling these sensations while moving through the poem. It is important here to emphasize that, while reading is an action typically done individually, Pessoa here creates a village, a metaphor for the collective experience of reading a poem. In the mad fiddler's relationship to the hamlet and its villagers, we see how the poem illustrates the collective and individual valences of sensation:

As he came, he went.
 They felt him but half-be.
 Then he was quietly blent
 With silence and memory.

Sleep left again their laughter,
 Their tranced hope ceased to last,
 And but a small time after
 They knew not he had passed.

Yet when the sorrow of living,
 Because life is not willed,
 Comes back in dreams' hours, giving

A sense of life being chilled,
 Suddenly each remembers—
 It glows like a coming moon
 On where their dream-life embers—
 The mad fiddler's tune.

(PESSOA, 2021: 10-11)

The poem's traditional ABAB structure as well as its use of slant and imperfect rhyme amplify the varied sensations brought forth by the fiddler's tune. In these verses, the poet emphasizes the furtive nature of the mad fiddler to represent the transient sensations his music induces in the villagers. The first stanza deals directly with this representation, as the mad fiddler's musical absence—his "silence"—highlights an emotional stillness; "They felt him but half-be," the lyrical voice explains, "quietly" announcing the poetic figure's departure from the text, which the villagers all feel together. The absence of something—mad fiddler or sensation, which the villagers cannot pinpoint or explain—demonstrates how the poetic figure emerges from each subjective experience to become the affective carrier of sensation. The fiddler similarly integrates the poem's structural composition to deliver these ineffable sensations and experiences to the reader of *The Mad Fiddler*. The search for something more splendid, for something beyond immediate awareness, characterizes the fiddler's stimulating presence and unexpected absence within the poem and collection.

Sensation emerges as an abstract yet recognizable entity, taking on the ethereal qualities of the tune "Sounding" from the fiddler's instrument. The fiddler's "wild music" continues to echo throughout the collection, locating and building upon the purity of feeling that characterizes Sensation as a principle of art. The following verses from "The Island" demonstrate how music evokes immersive sensation in *The Mad Fiddler's* poetic world: "Violin, viol and flute. | Lo, the isle hangs in the air! | Through it I wander, mute | With too much loss of care" (PESSOA, 2021: 12). Like sound, the isle "hangs in the air," linking the sense of being in this place to the ethereal play of the "Violin, viol and flute." This world is still the lyrical subject given fully to music. Silence, for the speaker, is active; they "wander, mute, | With too much loss of care." To be far away and to witness everything around oneself, experiencing feelings in the moment and not quite knowing how to understand them—whether they even need to be understood—is the driving force behind the musicality expressed in similar poems, such as "Goblin Dance": "Left and right, belonging | To no place, they swayed. | A low pipe, like longing, | To their dancing played." (PESSOA, 2021: 17). The ethereal impressions of this fantastical scene are easy to visualize. Small creatures sway under the "moon | And the black-tramelled trees" (PESSOA, 2021: 16), feeling the music playing around them and simply enjoying the "delight" (PESSOA, 2021: 16) it awakens. The exquisite *pathos* of the moment is compounded by the imperfect rhyme "belonging/longing," also

witnessed in “The Mad Fiddler,” which consolidates the myriad sensations arising in between the real, external world of action—listening to the music, dancing to its tune—and the cognitive, inner world of feeling.

Sensation takes on a unique position within the other-worldly setting of *The Mad Fiddler*, for whatever is “expressed to the full” is nonetheless the conscious product of a fantastic world conjured by Fernando Pessoa. How, if consciousness must be “sifted to the bottom,” can the artist manifest the totality of sensation, when poetic creation is itself a purposeful act? Pessoa’s principle of Sensation borrows from the swampist literary experiment, which, in the words Richard ZENITH, is best “definable as an exacerbated symbolism, with suggestion, uncertainty, and mystery enveloping extravagant images in a shadowy world without time or geography” (2021: 346). Zenith describes the swampist effect as a symbolist composition that emphasizes clarity of sensation within ambiguous poetic structures. These structures are visible in poems like “Fever-Garden”: “Red living flakes of demon snow | Poison-relate the sinning air | To atom-clear red sick flowers who | Rootless jut out of Night and There” (PESSOA, 2021: 71). The principle of Sensation relies on observation, rather than conjecture, to understand surrounding elements. It involves the purity of sensation instead of the extraction of its metaphorical meaning. When a flower blooms, it blooms; when a low pipe plays, it plays; when a fiddler goes, he goes—that is, until he returns. The intense verses of “Fever-Garden” take up a similar opacity, as the unknowable signifiers of “demon snow” and “atom-clear red sick flowers” can only exist as sensations, with no signified to anchor them in reality. So too do the first verses of “Episode” call on us to simply accept the stirring of feelings, thoughts, and memories—“No matter what we dream | What we dream is true” (PESSOA, 2021: 65)—without requesting we understand from whence they came. This is the mechanism at work in Sensation.

Yet, as Jonardon GANERI insists, Pessoa’s use of feeling is in fact “much closer to what contemporary philosophers mean when they talk about the phenomenal character of conscious perceptual experience” (2021: 42). Here, Pessoa’s delineation of Suggestion might offer an extension of Sensation, bringing into view how individual feelings can build into a complete “conscious perceptual experience”: “sensation should be so expressed that it has the possibility of evoking—as a halo round a definite central presentation—the greatest possible number of other sensations.” Suggestion is an ideal for the aesthetic expression of sensation; sensations should be generative, expressed in a way that allows the production of other sensations. Whereas Pessoa frames Sensation as something that cannot be intentional or pre-meditated, Suggestion is a conscious enterprise. This may well be what the poet means when he writes that “The only reality in life is sensation. The only reality in art is consciousness of the sensation” (PESSOA, 1999a: 234). Put another way, the reality of art is sensation filtered through the artist’s consciousness.

As innovative as Fernando Pessoa's intent to poetically express states of consciousness might seem however, the poet builds upon these ideas alongside a wider network of modernist production. His work is certainly imbued with an authenticity of emotional amplification which Adolfo Casais Monteiro critically refines into "a expressão poética dum estado de consciência; ou com um pouco mais de precisão: a expressão intelectual duma emoção, a troca dos vocabulários da emoção e da inteligência, uma nova linhagem, que já não era a da razão, nem a do sentimento, que aludia a um plano até aí ignorado pela nossa poesia" (CASAIS MONTEIRO, 1954: 328). Within sensationism, the reproductive aspects of Suggestion are encoded within ideas of poetic lineage; the industrial valences of Filippo Marinetti's Italian Futurism, for instance, have been effectively drawn out in the poetry of Álvaro de Campos by such critics as Jerónimo Pizarro and Patrícia Oliveira Silva, not to mention Pessoa's admission of sensationism as an aesthetic descendent of "the Decadent and Symbolist movements" (*apud* PIZARRO, 2009: 215). To locate the principle of Suggestion alongside its ascendant movements of the modernist vanguard is thus to underline the continuous progression of sensation which its generative position suggests.

When Pessoa writes of sensation, "memories, hopes, and desires are explicitly included, not to mention pleasure and pain; anxieties and other moods and emotions" (GANERI, 2021: 42). Ganeri cites the poet's use of the bodily senses as modes of expression, for example in *The Book of Disquiet*: "What I have loved most have been sensations—the scenes recorded by my conscious vision, the impressions captured by attentive ears, the perfumes by which the humble things of the external world speak to me and tell me tales of the past (so easily evoked by smells)" (*apud* GANERI, 2021: 42). If for Fernando Pessoa the fullest expression of the five senses transforms abstract ideas into physical experiences that mingle with the imagination, then semi-heteronym Bernardo Soares broadens this notion to include the logic of memory, wherein acts of contemplation and the senses merge in new sensorial experiences. In either case, sensation is an act of bodily perception that works alongside other corporeal functions. Suggestion, as a concept, complicates the principle of Sensation because it involves not only the amplification of experience and feeling—for instance, the five senses as well as one's moods, feelings, and memories—but also a consciousness of there being a sensation at all.

The intermingling of the senses with memories and feelings culminates in a vast emotional experience, and capturing this vastness requires a metaphorizing impulse on the artist's part. Engendering sensations, the principle of Suggestion takes on a metaphorical tendency, as things that might objectively be perceived in one way take on—or are consciously made to take on—varied sensorial meanings. Consider the poem "Her fingers toyed absently with her rings": "There are fallen angels in the way you look | And great bridges over silent streams in your smile. | Your gestures are a lonely princess dreaming over a book | At a window over a lake,

on some distant isle" (PESSOA, 2021: 83). In these verses, the speaker is overtly aware of the bodily senses. So aware, in fact, that these are metaphorized to construct a specific poetic space—a palace, overlooking "a lake, on some distant isle." The poem adopts a simplicity of expression, as exemplified in the facile rhyme "look / book," emphasizing the vast possibilities of poetic experimentation. Sensations one might not yet fully comprehend, but of which one is aware and feels must somehow be expressed, abound in the metaphorical lines permeating the work. For instance, the bodily presence of a female figure, a "princess," is metaphorized such that her actions and sensorial expressions delineate the fantastical space in which she resides. Her gaze, reminiscent of "fallen angels," her reticent smile etched with the ease of a "silent stream," the gentle wave of her hand imagined with the precision of a noble passing her time languorously, "dreaming over a book." With a romantic tonality that evokes the distant music of "The island," in these verses the figure's presence rests on sensorial perception, bringing readers into the imagination of that experience in ways that feel fully absorbing through the visual, oral, and haptic senses, but most of all, through the act of reading.

Sensation finds its expression when consciously anchored in points of bodily contact, as in the final two stanzas of this poem:

Blossoms, blossoms, blossoms along the road of your going to speak.
 Eighteenth century gardens, so sad in the middle of our dreaming them now,
 Are the way you are conscious of yourself on your eyelids, by your lips, through your cheek.
 A sick child sees the rain blur through the window of what you allow.

Do not footfall the silence that is the palace where our consciousness
 Is living at seeing gardens our duplicate lives of one soul.
 What are we, in our dream of each other, but a picture which is
 The masterpiece of a painter that never painted at all?

(PESSOA, 2021: 84)

The repetition of "Blossoms, blossoms, blossoms" emphasizes the rising intensity of the female figure's speech and, on a structural level, textually enacts the road upon which she moves. Each of the princess's bodily aspects is thematized along this road, as her conscious movement affects others: "[...] you are conscious of yourself on your eyelids, by your lips, through your cheek," Pessoa writes, adding that the world is only visualized through the sensorial "window of what you allow." Providing insight into the external world of experience, the princess creates "gardens" and a "window" which we might perceive but not enter. That the female figure should hold such power through the sensorial objectivity of her body is crucial, as experiences of sensation become anchored in a body. In a subsequent verse, the speaker asks the female figure to use the sensorial power of her body to consciously explore a totality of feeling: "Do not footfall the silence that is the palace where our

consciousness | Is living," the speaker begs, aware that this very "soul" exists within the princess's active consciousness.

The phenomenological experience of reality is that of sensation, so when the poet says that the reality of art relies on a consciousness of feeling, he differentiates embodied experience from artistic representation. This idea is visible in "The broken window," where the speaker metaphorizes the body—specifically, the heart—as a room on a faraway hill: "Now there are great stains in my heart. | They are like blood-stains on a floor. | Now there are great stains in my heart. | And my heart lies upon the floor" (PESSOA, 2021: 73). Sensations of pain, delight and feeling take on spatial awareness, as sensation is literally closed off and consciously visualized along the planes of time and space. The speaker stands within the room that contains their heart and watches it in pain, closing the door to feeling and sensation when stating "My heart is closed for ever now. | The whole room is buried alive" (PESSOA, 2021: 74). Still, the conscious expression of sensation must be thoughtfully organized in such a way that renders sensorial perception more complete, such as in the first two verses of the poem "Mood": "My thoughts are something my soul fears. | I tremble at my very glee" (PESSOA, 2021: 121), Pessoa writes. An inversion occurs: while the experience of feeling "glee" connects to the mental processes of "thoughts," a physical "tremble," typically a visceral reaction to internal fear or external cold, arises as a response to the "soul." The soul creates a physical externalization of sensation that is felt at its core and not necessarily consciously thought. Despite this, each reaction leads to another; the principle of Suggestion finds its ultimate expression as sensations proliferate through a cluster of bodily actions that range from the concrete to the abstract and from the spiritual to the material.

If Suggestion requires that artists amplify sensation through their work, the principle of Construction beseeches them to recreate emotional expression in a structured and organized manner to facilitate such amplification. Construction posits that once a work of art has fulfilled the initial two criteria—those of Sensation and Suggestion—"the whole thus produced should have the greatest possible resemblance to an organised being, because that is the condition of vitality." Pessoa is unclear as to what he means by "vitality," though the sentences that follow this definition may offer insight. He expands his argument to clarify that the last of his principles of art derives from "the great principle of the Greeks—whose great philosopher did indeed hold the poem to be 'an animal'" (PESSOA, 1999a: 235). Here, Pessoa refers to Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which the philosopher argues that "a beautiful object, whether it be a picture of a living organism or any whole composed of parts, must not only have an orderly arrangement of parts, but must also be of a certain magnitude; for beauty depends on magnitude and order" (ARISTOTLE, 2010: 31). Pessoa approximates Aristotle's argument in his proposition that a poem can be conceived of as a "living human being," though Pessoa's formulation does not require "an orderly arrangement of parts." In a letter to Jaime Cortesão in January

1913, Pessoa further hints that Construction entails “aquilo a que se pode chamar a *organicidade* de um poema, aquilo que nos dá, ao lê-lo, a impressão que ele é um todo vivo, um todo composto de partes, e não simplesmente *partes compondo um todo*” (PESSOA, 1999d: 7; italics in original). Within Aristotle’s fuller conception of living, moving poetics, we find the crux of Construction: the need for artwork to have a structure that can support life, to have sensation created or replicated aesthetically such that it can live beyond its textual expression—in other words, possessing “vitality.”

In *Poetics*, Aristotle further argues that “the greater the length, the more beautiful will the piece be by reason of its size, provided that the whole be perspicuous.” While Pessoa critiques the poetic drive towards an Aristotelian ideal in his later writings,⁴ here he seems to have taken at least one aspect of this advice to heart, as evidenced in Álvaro de Campos’ sensationist epic “Maritime Ode,” and in certain poems of *The Mad Fiddler*, such as “Fiat lux” and “Summerland,” all of which are lengthy, sensationist poems. Yet Aristotle’s requirement of perspicuity is somewhat lost in the latter, as Pessoa’s poetic constructions contradict cartesian conceptions of time and space. Consider the opening lines of “Summerland”:

One day, Time having ceased,
Our lives shall meet again,
From Place and Name released.
Only that shall remain
Of each of us that may
Seem natural to that Day.

(PESSOA, 2021: 125)

The poem imagines an endless summer where time stands still. These verses abstract themselves from linear spatial and temporal boundaries, releasing the speaker from the confines of “Time,” “Place” and “Name.” That “Day” should be capitalized alongside these other fixities seems important; these are concepts that, usually well-defined, become unbounded in their possibility. A “Day,” abstracted as these other concepts, might be something we sense and experience and not a fixed duration. A poem can be a space, a day can be a summer, and so, “Summerland.” Pessoa constructs the poetic space to embody this sensation of endless summer, giving it vitality and allowing the reader to share in the limitless possibility of the feelings he captures. Summer, and the wish that it may never end—a feeling we all know too well.

Worth pointing out is how Pessoa deals with limitless concepts in the extended length of his poetic work, though he also curtails their boundless possibility through poetic structure and theme. A “Name,” for example, can refer to

⁴ Fernando Pessoa later critiques the Aristotelian aesthetic via heteronym Álvaro de Campos, who in his “Apontamentos para uma estética não-Aristotélica,” writes against the idea that the purpose of art is to be beautiful or to emerge as a sensationist response to beautiful things or experiences. Art, instead, should emerge from such elements as force, disruption, and integration. See CAMPOS (1924-1925).

anything, but the concept of a “Name” still holds a delimiting function. Similarly, a poem can free us from limits through sensation, though it is still a poem. Poems can capture sensation, engender it, and clarify it, but they can never be sensation. “Fiat lux” also leans into this harsh reality by embodying its own sensationist potential, as evidenced by its second stanza: “Each thing was linked into each other thing | By links of being past imagining, | But visible, as if the skeleton | Were visible and the flesh round it, each one | As if a separate thing visibly alone” (PESSOA, 2021: 115). The poem is an embodied metaphor; it is constructed like a living human being, as the poet enumerates the different components of its fleshly body: a “skeleton,” “visible and the flesh round it,” with each of its tendons, muscles, and skins made apparent not as a cohesive whole, but “As if a separate thing visibly alone.” Fernando Pessoa emphasizes the linkage between these disparate poetic structures in the preceding verse—“Each thing was linked into each other thing”—with the repetition of the casual word “thing” emphasizing the cyclicity and the linkage of its lines, with the verse “linked into each other” serving as a figurative, poetic tendon. The stanza emphasizes how “The outward and the inward became one” through the aesthetic meaning of poetry, though it also intends to examine how to best portray this paradoxical relationship.⁵ In the stanzas that follow, however, the lyrical speaker questions the function of this poetic embodiment: “How to express what, seen, is not expressed | To the struck sight that sees it? How to know | What comes to senses’ threshold to bestow | A visible ignorance upon the knowing?” (PESSOA, 2021: 116). Questioning takes on corporal significance, as the lyrical subject wonders how to best “express what, seen, is not expressed.” In some ways, we can see the poet developing in these poems his three principles of art, as its aesthetics requires structure to be significant.

Pessoa does allude to the impossibility of fully comprehending sensation, for, as he states in his letter to the unnamed editor, “Once that sensation goes, these things become to him, as artist, no more than bodies which the souls of sensations assume to become visible to that inner eye from whose sight he writes down his sensations” (PESSOA, 1999a: 234). After the poem is written and read, it becomes nothing more than the carcass of a sensation that once was. Holding on to sensation is an impossibility. Capturing and containing sensation within an artistic format such that it may “become visible to that inner eye” merely leads to visible constructions, “no more than bodies,” containing the promise of sensation. No matter how fully it may attempt to enact sensation, art shall seldom transmit its totality of feeling. This is what Fernando Pessoa means when he states that “The only reality in art is consciousness of sensation”—art is not sensation.

⁵ These verses might also gesture toward the poet’s emerging interest in paganism and his strategies for disseminating this new spiritual ideal through poetry. See ZENITH (2021; chapters 36 and 37).

The Portuguese poet is undoubtedly aware of the limiting potential of sensationist Construction when describing *The Mad Fiddler* in his 1915 letter to Harold Monro: “for in those poems it has been my intention to register, in intersection, the mental simultaneity of an objective and of a subjective image, such as the room a dreamer is in and the image his dream contains” (PESSOA, 1999b: 193). It feels apt that Pessoa would describe these poems along the lines of a “dream.” As Anne TERLINDEN writes in *Fernando Pessoa: the Bilingual Portuguese poet*—the very work that first drew attention to *The Mad Fiddler* as an integral element of the poet’s oeuvre—, dreams were “the obsessive preoccupation of the bilingual Pessoa” because they emulate the tenuous line between “us and the consciousness of us” (1990: 41). Dreams exist beyond the figurations of the immediately apparent and thus “can come close to the true inner reality of things” (TERLINDEN, 1990: 41), producing a coherent, if impermanent, vision of the poet’s aesthetic ideal. Such is the nature of poems like “Fierce dreams of something else!”:

Fierce dreams of something else!
 Frenzy to go away
 (O wave in me that swells!)
 From life, where life must stay—
 Life ever at to-day!

Some other place and thing!
 Not a life! not mine so!
 O to be a wind, a wing.
 A bark me there to bring!

Whither? If I could know,
 I would not wish to go.

(PESSOA, 2021: 29)

The lyrical structure of each stanza varies: first a quintet, then a quatrain, and finally a couplet. At first, the poem seems organized like a ballade, using an ABABB rhyme scheme, but the second and third stanzas deviate into CDCDD, adding an additional line. “Fierce dreams of something else!” attempts a clear poetic organization only to abandon it *in lieu* of the full expression its moment requires. In these verses, exclamations emphasize the deconstructed nature of sensation—the poet is writing fully, at the moment of experiencing the sensations, allowing each verse to be carried away by “dreams of something else” which cannot quite be pinpointed. What is especially interesting about this work is that the lyrical subject expresses that neither the sensations nor the bodily enactments expressed are their own: the poem belongs to “Some other place and thing | Not a life! not mine so!”. The speaker abstracts physical presence from sensation at the same time as it is felt, knowing that the mere act of rendering sensation visible is a recognition of the sensation ever having been there at all. It is with these thoughts that the lyrical voice wishes to be “a wind, a

wing” so to follow this untenable sensation away from the confines of the page. Still, the speaker qualifies this desire with the poem’s final couplet: “Whither? If I could know, | I would not wish to go.” To know where one is going—and where the sensationist expression of the poem is going—is to lose the actuality and mystery of its feeling. Sensation must wander and allowed to be whatever it may be. To structurally capture it through poetry and art is also to set it free.

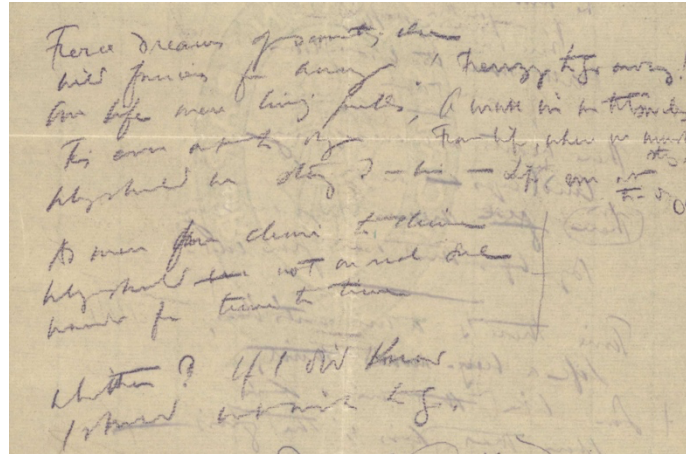


Fig. 2. Manuscript of “Fierce dreams of something else!”
(BNP/E3, 31A-11v; detail).

Analyzing Pessoa’s *The Mad Fiddler* through the poet’s own aesthetic principles proves a necessarily complex undertaking. It is difficult to assess with finality how far he developed his ideas of Sensation, Suggestion, and Construction, and to what extent this work was an attempt to put these principles into action. After all, it would be a misjudgment to discount the poet attempting to sell his work or to make it sound more intriguing in his letters to English editors. Still, as Patrícia Oliveira Silva reminds us, “*The Mad Fiddler* rehearses analogous aesthetic and philosophical ideas in his poetry in English to those Pessoa was developing in Portuguese, and becomes the English face or expression of Sensationism” (SILVA, 2016: 104).

In Pessoa’s poetic theory, the profound connection between consciousness, aesthetic image, and poetic representation is essential for developing the sensationist movement. The letters and poems here analyzed provide important context for his sensationist undertaking, as, so applied, they circumscribe our understanding of what the poet may have been trying to accomplish with this work more precisely and with Sensationism more broadly. These texts describe parameters of thought and composition present in other works—both in the English poetry of Alexander Search that preceded *The Mad Fiddler* and the contemporaneous heteronymic universe—in which the fraught relationship of consciousness and representation is itself fragmented into multiple sensations. In *The Mad Fiddler*, this relationship generates possible universes that detach the author from any obligatory reality where Sensations, Constructions, and Suggestions represent real experiences or

moments in time. In doing so, the collection creates its own universe of full, unrestrained sensationist expression. To echo the words of Pessoa himself, *The Mad Fiddler* is thus, perhaps, not the best example of sensationism, but it is also, certainly, not the worst.

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