

“This was a dream of Parma”: towards a mad method for transcribing Pessoa

[“Isto foi um sonho de Parma”:
por um método louco de transcrição de Pessoa]

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Keywords

Fernando Pessoa, Transcription, Methodology, English drama, *The Duke of Parma*.

Abstract

Reacting to a reflection on transcribing Pessoa presented by Pizarro and Barbosa at the 2026 international conference *Unveiling The Duke of Parma*, this paper proposes a transcription method summarized by the acronym MADD: Map, Amplify, Dive, and Doubt. It opens with a meditation on the line “This was a dream of Parma,” questioning if Pessoa really questioned the word “Parma.” It then discusses some dilemmas and consequences of undecidable or hesitating transcriptions of Pessoa. It goes on to explain how the MADD method helps us map the boundaries of a transcription project, amplify the decipherment range with a biblio-filmography, dive into the archive with attention to correlations, and, lastly, accept doubt. In conclusion, the paper illustrates the usage of the MADD method by applying it to the case of one line from Pessoa’s *Duke*.

Palavras-chave

Fernando Pessoa, Transcrição, Metodologia, Drama inglês, *The Duke of Parma*.

Resumo

Em resposta a uma reflexão sobre transcrever Pessoa apresentada por Pizarro e Barbosa na conferência internacional *Unveiling The Duke of Parma* (2026), este ensaio propõe um método de transcrição resumível pelo acrónimo MADD: Map, Amplify, Dive e Doubt. O texto abre com uma reflexão sobre o verso “This was a dream of Parma”, questionando se Pessoa teria realmente questionado a palavra “Parma”. Em seguida, discute alguns dilemas e consequências de transcrições indecíveis ou hesitantes em Pessoa. Então, explica como o método MADD nos ajuda a mapear os limites de um projeto de transcrição, ampliar o alcance da decifração com uma biblio-filmografia, mergulhar no arquivo com atenção a correlações e, finalmente, aceitar a dúvida. Como conclusão, o artigo ilustra a aplicação do método MADD ao caso de um verso do *Duke* pessoano.

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1. Dream

Having been invited to discuss the paper by Pizarro and Barbosa (2026) on transcribing half¹ of *The Duke of Parma* (hereinafter *Duke*), I could not help feeling this was a dream: a chance to see the longest English work by Pessoa, which is also the one that remained unpublished the longest, finally materializing before my eyes! Admittedly, not a fully-formed Athena sprouting from the forehead of Zeus, but more like Picasso's sketches restlessly morphing into somewhat recognizable shapes (cf. CLOUZOT, 1955)... But restless plans have, more often than not, been the case with Pessoa's works, at least in my experience.

This too had been a dream of mine: after editing Pessoa's *Fausto* with the collaboration of Filipa de Freitas (PESSOA, 2018), I had planned to work on Pessoa's English dramas—and made it as far as publishing Pessoa's *Marino* in two dossiers (PITTELLA, 2020 & 2021), and identifying Pessoa not as the author but the translator of a 56-page typed play about one João de Alemquer (sic) preserved in Pessoa's archive (PITTELLA, 2022)... when the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted those plans.

Luckily, Parma kept dreaming that dream. So, when I encountered the following line from Pessoa's *Duke*, in a document transcribed by Pizarro and Barbosa, I was taken aback:

This was a dream of /Parma/.

The context for that line is a page of dialogue featuring a M[arquês] that first talks with the D[uke] and, later, with A[lberto]:

D — I am pleased to call *thee fool!

M — In that your lordship's pleasure is not mine.

D — How? Dost thou take these things wittily?

M — Silence would be discourteous.

A — I dreamed I saw □ with the ducal crown. **This was a dream of /Parma/.**

M — No, this was no dream of Parma, my Lord, it was a dream of Burgundy.

A — How of Burgundy, sir? I <do not> understand you not.

M — Pray you [↑ then] bend your wit to this low point, sir.

A — My wit did not bend here, <my lord> [↑ sir]; it bound up.

M — Dreamed you of *drapes, sir? (Did your lordship dr[eam] of *drapes then?)

[← A — What does it matter to you what I dream[,] sir?]

M — Why, nought. Even to a physician I take it to be a diversion.

(BNP/E3, 11⁴D-3a^v; bolding added)

¹ The other half was transcribed by a team from the University of Lisbon, comprising João Dionísio and Maria Sousa. Even though I am reacting to the paper by Pizarro and Barbosa, I'm also indebted to Dionísio and Sousa's work—and I cite transcriptions made by both teams, which ended up revising each other's work, thus arguably becoming one and the same team.

In the convention adopted by Pizarro and Barbosa (used in various critical editions of Pessoa's works, such as the Tinta-da-china collection), a term transcribed between slashes indicates authorial hesitation (as opposed to editorial uncertainty, which is signaled by a prefixed asterisk, such as in "**drapes*"). When unsure of a term, Pessoa would sometimes circle it, other times underline it then cross that underline with a short vertical stroke; if second-guessing entire lines, Pessoa would often leave a marginal vertical cross beside them. In the case of "This was a dream of /Parma/," we can see a circle, suggesting the first kind of those hesitation marks.

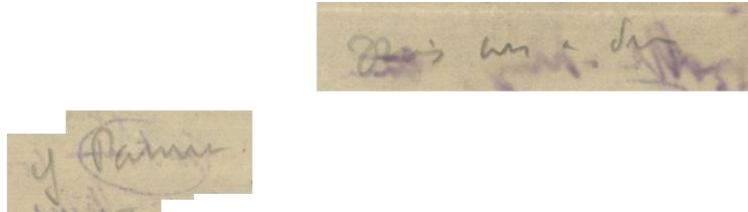


Fig. 1. Detail, with an apparent circle around "Parma" (BNP/E3, 11^aD-3a^v).

But wait: the circle in question seems to be of a different color from the rest of the line. In fact, when we look at the other side of the paper (FIGURE 2), we can see the circle more clearly, because... it was drawn on the other side of the paper! It bled through the thin material, only coincidentally appearing as if Pessoa had circled (and therefore questioned) the word "Parma" when he had not.

Thus, we may say "this was a dream of Parma," without hesitation. Save for the hesitation about having hesitations—which too is a feature of editing Pessoa.

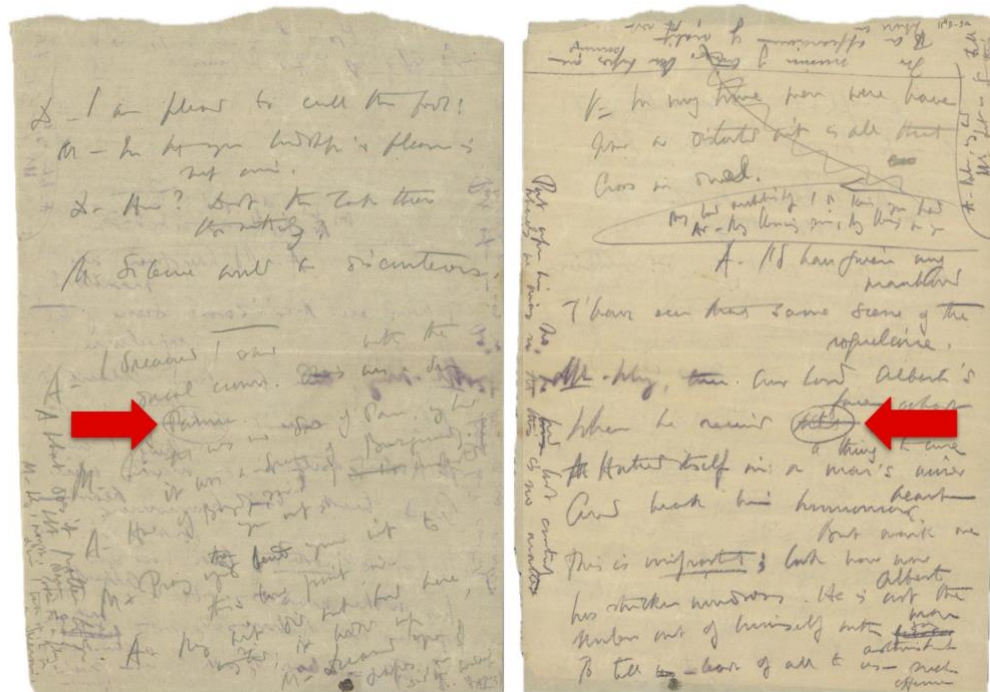


Fig. 2. Arrows indicating the circle visible on both sides of the paper (BNP/E3, 11^aD-3a^v & 3a^r).

2. Sonho

This dream full of hesitations made me remember the work of Luís Prista, a Portuguese educator, researcher, and editor of several volumes of Pessoa's poetry for the collection published by Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda (INCM). In a seminal article reflecting on transcription challenges he faced, PRISTA (1998) noted a series of dualities that seemed unstable regarding certain words handwritten by Pessoa: "Fui / Foi," "Teu / Tens," "riso / siso"... and—perhaps the most glaring—"sombra / sonho," two signs so similar in Pessoa's cursive that, on one occasion highlighted by Prista, the poet morphed "sombra" (*shadow*) into "sonho" (*dream*) by a mere alteration of the final letter:



Fig. 3. detail: *Sombra* > *Sonho* (BNP/E3, 39-23').

Writing about my own editorial dilemmas in an article about undecidable transcriptions (PITTELLA, 2017), I reflected on that case flagged by Prista (and here I expand on a passage from that article): "Sombra" or "Sonho," shadow or dream? We can imagine the path of Pessoa's writing: first he inscribes the word "Sombra" in red ink, then transforms it into "Sonho" by using black ink to overcorrect the final "a" into an "o"—a gesture that effectively re-interprets also the rest of the word. This suggests that Pessoa himself was aware of his calligraphic ambiguity regarding the roots *sonh-* and *sombr-*. And hence we have, as Prista puts it, "the rare situation in which the philological approach yields to the need for a 'literary' judgement" (PRISTA, 1998: 205, my translation).

But just how rare is it? The paper presented by Pizarro and Barbosa makes us suspect that the general precedence of philology over literary judgement may not be so general—or the exception not very exceptional. When those fault lines become exposed, such as in the *Sombra* > *Sonho* case, we confront the evidence of our own interpretation influencing the supposedly objective transcription. Yet, isn't our interpretation an active force always at play during transcription work? Pizarro and Barbosa posit that the literary interpretation doesn't follow the act of transcription, but rather makes it possible.

The implications of reinterpreting / retranscribing a single word in Pessoa's editions are well documented. To revisit an example from my article on undecidable transcriptions (PITTELLA, 2017), the attribution of the sonnet "O Bibliófilo" [*The Bibliophile*] (BNP/E3, 57-16^r) to Pessoa's heteronym Álvaro de Campos or to Pessoa himself depended solely upon the transcription of one word, on line 7, as either "passado" [*past*] or "pecado" [*sin*]:

Sorriria a um arcaico **passado**

Sorriria a um arcaico **pecado**

(PESSOA, 2005, ed. Silva *et al.*)

(PESSOA, 1999, ed. Berardinelli)

Should we follow Silva *et al.*'s reading of "passado" and edit the unsigned poem as part of the orthonym's corpus, or give reason to Berardinelli, who saw "pecado" and wondered if the sonnet would rather befit Campos, who was Pessoa's usual mouthpiece for sonnets with more than a hint of sarcasm? Even if we deem Berardinelli's conjectured attribution as merely "interpretative" (lacking material arguments and not addressing the fact that the 1911 sonnet preceded Campos), her transcription gains philological support when we compare the word in question with non-controversial occurrences of "pecado" and "passado" in Pessoa's archive:



Fig. 4. From the left: details of BNP/E3, 63-48^r (pecado), 57-26^r (???), & 144X-78^r (passado).

Therefore, either we accept that Pessoa's orthonym, usually known as a symbolist sonneteer, has at least one unsigned sonnet that winks at an archaic sin, or that the heteronymous attribution to Campos may depend on the interpretation of a single word. In either case we alter the configuration of the corpus.

How, then, may we decide objectively? What is the "true" writing by Pessoa, and what is our reading of a Rorschach inkblot? Should our doubts be resolved at all costs, or are they inevitable? In a passage about the stages of irony as signs of higher intelligence, Pessoa argues that there is a level superior to Socrates's "I only know that I know nothing"—the one represented by Francisco Sanches, who said: "I don't even know if I know anything" (BNP/E3, 3-88^r, my translation).

3. Mad

Perhaps a mad method (meta-mad, mad to the square) could cope with such uncertainty and comfortably inhabit this state of unknowing. After all, Pessoa's *Duke* is a play about madness and the meta-madness of judging madness... Any transcriber who believes they could make sense of it all must be mad too.

We should note that certain usages of "mad" (aplenty in the *Duke*) can be ableist (especially when thrown at others without implicating the self). However, *Merriam-Webster* reminds us that both anger and folly have long inhabited that

word, so much so that "the principal meanings of *mad*, 'crazy', 'foolish', 'enthusiastic', and 'angry', all date back to the 1300s—so far back in the history of the English language that it's difficult to tell which one came first" (MERRIAM-WEBSTER, 2016).

A mad-to-the-square transcription method would need a fitting acrostic:

MAP
AMPLIFY
DIVE
DOUBT

To start any transcription venture in Pessoa's archive, it's helpful to **MAP** the boundaries for the various levels of the project:

- macro: what's the corpus and the parameters for inclusion / exclusion?
- mezzo: are there plans, outlines, and character lists left by Pessoa, and what importance should we give them?
- micro: are there formal limitations for the texts identified as part of the project, such as regular meter, rhyme, stanza patterns?

At the macro level, Pizarro left us lessons from mapping the corpus of Álvaro de Campos: it was necessary to create categories of (un)certainty and classify texts as "Clearly Campos," "Clearly non-Campos," and "Maybe Campos":

In my view, many Pessoaan editions in the future will have to have a section like this, not because Pessoa often enters "the skin of Campos", or of another figure, but because texts that do not have an exact attribution may or may not always be attributable to a particular figure, or may or may not be at the frontier between two or more universes.

(PIZARRO, 2021: 65)

To map the mezzo level, we list and date (even if approximately) all plans, outlines, and character lists connected to a Pessoaan project (as I attempted for *Marino*). However, bear in mind the danger of lending too much weight to any given plan. As I have argued regarding *Fausto* (PESSOA, 2018), those plans are seldom final in Pessoa's world and should perhaps be taken as just another fragment in a sea of fragments... Caution is needed to avoid the "anxiety of unity" that often afflicts editors of Pessoa (PIZARRO, 2016).

When it comes to micro-level mapping, formal elements are good friends. The importance of metrics for editing Pessoa's poetry has long been demonstrated (FERRARI, 2012). For example, only by recognizing the poem "Tell me again..." as a Shakespearian sonnet—with specific meter, rhyme scheme, and indentations—were we able to find a complete text inside the apparent chaos (FERRARI & PITTELLA, 2015). Another example: the realization that *Fausto* was primarily written in decasyllables

offered a stable frame to investigate any hyper- or hypo-metric lines as possible errors (by Pessoa or by previous transcribers?). Similarly, the realization that the *Duke* tends to follow a Shakespearian iambic pentameter surely helps resolve a number of transcription problems.

Nevertheless, diligent mapping is not enough to navigate all transcription challenges. It is also useful to compile a bibliography of what Pessoa himself read, as he was often in dialogue with other authors—and the language used by those others influenced him. A transcriber of the *Duke* could, thus, AMPLIFY their reading horizons. For instance, when encountering one character of the *Duke* instructing another on how to act...

Draw close your net of questions unto her.
 — Why close?
 = Mayhap the greed of power & fear
 Of peril of its loss may lift its shield [↑ cuirass]
 *Against truth. Therefore question close & near
 And read the answers more in what they say not
 Than in their □ assemblances of words.

(BNP/E3, 11⁴D-13a^r)

...we may remember Hamlet's advice to actors ("Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you...") and that Pessoa often dialogued with the Bard (cf. CASTRO, 2010 & FILIPE, 2018 & 2019). Not only do we hear Shakespearian echoes in the *Duke*, but also find precedent for Pessoa's use of archaic words such as "Mayhap."

As Pessoa crisscrossed languages and cultural contexts, our bibliographic amplitude should also include texts in Portuguese. For example, when the *Duke* sanely describes being at the brink of insanity...

My brain is all in turmoil in a darkness
 Insatiate hunger to shriek!
 Oh what approaches? Stay one moment off!
 Spare me the instant to see clearer the <next> horror
 O' th' next □ to feel me sane at madness' brink
 Yet feel me sane, sane yet.

(BNP/E3, 11⁴D-48^v)

...we recall the sonnet in which *Orpheu*-contributor Ângelo de Lima describes his own border-crossing into madness ("Pára-me de repente o pensamento"; cf. LIMA, 1935), a sonnet that Pessoa praised as "extraordinary—among the greatest of Portuguese language" (PESSOA, 1935, my translation).

Besides intertextual relationships with English and Portuguese literary works, the transcriber could add films to their references. Pessoa's relationship with cinema is well documented, and, for a poet who created his own *Fausto* and *Duke*, it would

have been hard to resist watching Murnau's 1926 film *Faust*. Released in Portugal in April 1927, Murnau's masterpiece included a scene in which Mephistopheles and Faust crash the wedding of the Duchess of Parma, whom Mephistopheles deemed the most beautiful woman in Italy. Faust proceeds to seduce the Duchess, while Mephistopheles murders the Duke.



Fig. 5. Still from Murnau's *Faust*: Duchess of Parma in her wedding dress, sitting between the Duke and Mephistopheles, facing Faust (standing, with turban).

Preliminary maps and biblio-filmography in hand, the transcriber is ready to DIVE into the web of Pessoa's manuscripts. We witness words gradually become legible and resonate with other parts of Pessoa's archive, a truly rhizomatic process that Pizarro and Barbosa call "correlation"—a networking aspect of transcription that complements direct decipherment.

Some correlations are noticed through paleography (word X looks like Z already deciphered), others by resonance with nearby words (word X should fit the semantic field of Y+Z already deciphered), but some through a nebulous process of analogic interpretation. For example, upon encountering V's admonition to not complicate the sun's light:

[V]: Those who distinguish much can complicate
The sun's light into many shades.

(BNP/E3, 11⁴D-43^r)

...we may hear Alberto Caeiro's praise of sunlight over reason:

Mas abre os olhos e vê o sol,
E já não pode pensar em nada,
Porque a luz do Sol vale mais que os pensamentos
De todos os philosophos e de todos os poetas.

(Caeiro, Poema V; PESSOA, 2015: 34)

While transcribing a Portuguese fragment found among *Duke's* papers...

Ora a unica cousa
Supra-racional que
o mundo contem
é <a>/o\ <sua> facto da sua
propria existencia

(BNP/E3, 11⁴D-6^v)

...we may spot resonances with both Caeiro and *Fausto*:

O unico mysterio é haver quem pense no mysterio...

(Caeiro, Poema V; PESSOA, 2015: 34)

O mysterio supremo do Universo,
O unico mysterio, tudo e em tudo
É haver um mysterio do universo,
É haver o universo, qualquer cousa,

(*Fausto*, Poema 90, 30A-21^r; cf. PESSOA, 2018: 202)

In scenes when the Duke is no longer recognizable...

<This> What is this man? Do I know him aught?

(BNP/E3, 11⁴D-14^r)

Enter Duke, attired in
motley, with cap & bells.
General astonishment.

(BNP/E3, 11⁴D-80^v)

...we may remember the fate of a ragged Marino, brought before a King and equally objectified as a "what" instead of a "who":

K.	— Why what's this
1 st courtier	A man, my lord
2 nd courtier	*Behind dirt. Dirt & a man, my lord
K	What a creature.

(BNP/E3, 11¹⁰MA-5^r; cf. PITTELLA, 2021: 253)

To give a final example of reverberations noticed while diving into Pessoa's archive, the transcriber may clock formulations of heteronymism scattered throughout the *Duke*:

[...] I feel
A lack of oneness in my mind

(BNP/E3, 11⁴D-51^r)

Until I lose myself within myself.

(BNP/E3, 11⁴D-60^r)

I'm not at home in my soul

(BNP/E3, 11⁵D-11^r)

Now, having gathered maps, biblio-filmographic amplitudes, and correlations from diving into the archive, what is left for the meta-mad transcriber to do? Surely, we need **DOUBT** itself. No transcription of Pessoa would ever be complete without accepting its intrinsic incompleteness. This sounds like a Zen koan, but it is practical advice—and comes from a passage in our very *Duke*, meta-appropriately titled "Council on Duke's insanity":

The intimate question that we here are at
Is that the duke is too sane to be mad
And <that he is> too mad to be sane. All we doubt is
If this state, contrary unto itself,
points a □

(BNP/E3, 11⁴D-56^r)

So here we are, transcribers of Pessoa, reasonably doubting if what we read is really there or our own irrational projections, slowly bringing to focus a scene in which councils discuss if their Duke is mad or not...

4. MADD

No one should believe a method without testing it, so let's test it with a case study.

4.1. Problem:

The transcribing team did the following reading of document BNP/E3, 11⁵D-70^r, including two conjectural readings:

Duke of Parma
Act I Sc[ene] 1

Which was, my lord, the *thing—
A – I'll *fill'f to you

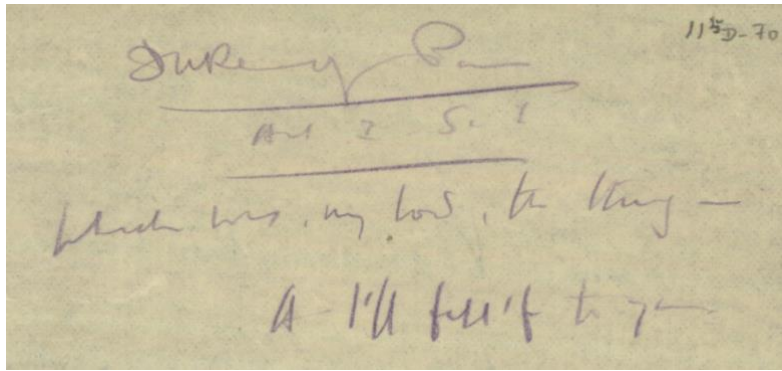


Fig. 6. Passage planned for Act I, Scene 1 (BNP/E3, 11⁵D-70^r, detail).

Besides doubting the nonsensical "fill'f," the transcribers questioned "thing," which they thought could also be "theory."

4.2. Initial MADD considerations before the problem:

MAP: This may be a line in iambic pentameter. The indentation right before character "A" speaks suggests a metrical line split between different voices.

AMPLITUDE: If the line is metrically complete (i.e., if it has 10 beats), the nonsensical word in question could be an abbreviation, so we should check for abbreviations in Shakespeare.

DIVE: That indentation splitting metrical lines when a new voice speaks often appears in *Fausto*, so we have precedents.

DOUBT: What other words could "fill'f" be?

4.3. Thinking process:

4.3.1. In the opening word ("Which") Pessoa did not seem to have dotted the "i." If we assume all lowercase "i"s could have implicit dots here, then:

a) the mysterious word could also have an implicit lowercase "i":

b) the mark on that word would more likely be an apostrophe than a dot:

Substituting the letters we don't know for underscores, we have:

A - I'll * __ill'__ to you.

4.3.2. If we read the indent as indication not of two metrical lines but of a single one (split because of the changing speakers), then we find support to consider the apostrophe as mark of abbreviation. The poet had to abbreviate to gain one syllable and abide by the pentameter. Therefore, the mysterious word would consist of only 1 syllable (2 abbreviated into 1 by the suppression of a vowel):

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 Which was, my lord, the *thing—
 A – I'll *__ill'__ to you.

- 4.3.3. Considering such an incentive for compression, "thing" is more plausible reading than "theory," so we can remove that asterisk.

Which was, my lord, the thing—
 A – I'll *__ill'__ to you.

- 4.3.4. Can we find, in the corpus of Shakespeare's tragedies (created by copy-pasting the text from the 1993 MIT online edition into a .txt document)...
- Q: Any infinitives with ≥ 2 syllables ending in "-f"? A: No.
- Q: Any infinitives with ≥ 2 syllables ending in "-th"? A: No.
- Q: Any cases of "I'll *__ill'__"? A: Only "fill'd," which doesn't work for us.

- 4.3.5. Even if "fill'd" doesn't work, it gives us an idea: what if the initial and last letters of the mysterious word are not the same? If the initial looks like an "f," could the last be a "t"?

- 4.3.6. If the first speaker asks "A" a question, then "A" could be responding with "I'll fill't [= fill it] to you" — an unorthodox way of saying "I'll let you know what happened" by filling the blanks for someone.

Which was, my lord, the thing [?]
 A – I'll *fill't to you.

- 4.3.7. First counterargument: Unfortunately, that's an archaism, for the expression "fill someone in" only became current after Pessoa's lifetime.
- 4.3.8. Second counterargument: returning to the document, the initial and last letters do appear to be the same symbol.
- 4.3.9. But what if they are not "f...f," but "t...t"? What other verb could be used to inform someone of something? Finally, if we reconsider the lack of dot to mean, not "i" but "e," we arrive at:

Which was, my lord, the thing [?]
 A – I'll tell't to you.

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