

*Fernando Pessoa —  
Selected English Poems*

**The Pessoa Edition from Shearsman Books:**

*Selected English Poems*

*Message / Mensagem*

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(translated by Chris Daniels)

*The Collected Poems of Álvaro de Campos Vol. 1*

*The Collected Poems of Álvaro de Campos Vol. 2*

(translated by Chris Daniels)

*Lisbon – What the Tourist Should See*

**Zbigniew Kotowicz: *Fernando Pessoa – Voices of a Nomadic Soul***

**Fernando Pessoa**

*Selected English Poems*

edited by  
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## Introduction

By now the extraordinary story of Fernando Pessoa's creative life is well-known to readers outside Portugal, thanks to a number of indefatigable translators and editors, and much scholarly work on the manuscripts – over 30,000 of them – left in the author's apartment after his death, all stored in a single large trunk.

Less well-known perhaps is that Pessoa began his poetic career writing in English, that his first publications were in English, and that he continued to write in English throughout his life, albeit on a more occasional basis once he had found his voice(s) in Portuguese. Pessoa's Portuguese *alter egos* – or heteronyms, as he termed them – have become recognised as some of the greatest writers of the 20th Century in Portuguese – not only the poets Ricardo Reis, Álvaro de Campos, Alberto Caeiro, but also the prose-writers Bernardo Soares and the Baron of Teive, with the former's *The Book of Disquiet* now widely regarded as being amongst the greatest modern prose works in the language. However, before these heteronyms were created, and indeed before the other sixty or so that have been discovered, Pessoa adopted the personae of two English poets: Charles Robert Anon, and then Alexander Search, a persona that rapidly took over from Anon and to whom some of Anon's poems were reassigned.

Pessoa was born in Lisbon in 1888, but after his father's early death, his mother remarried a military man who was Portuguese Consul in Durban, South Africa. Pessoa was then educated in South Africa until, in 1905, he returned to Lisbon where he enrolled at the University. He dropped out after less than a year of studies and thereafter made his living translating for commercial firms, from and into English and French. At the same time he developed a reputation as a poet, the major Portuguese heteronyms first appearing in 1914, and as an editor of the magazine *Orpheu*, a futurist (or

‘sensationist’) journal which was to have an enormous impact in its brief life – two issues were published, and a third was banned – presenting the work of several Pessoaan heteronyms, as well as major new figures such as Mário de Sá-Carneiro and José de Almada Negreiros.

Pessoa would become recognised as a talented writer in his various guises – their status was not known to the wider reading public – and indeed went on to win a major prize in 1934 with his patriotic verse sequence *Mensagem* (Message), which was to be the author’s only collection of poems published in Portuguese during his lifetime. Pessoa’s publishing career began much earlier however, in 1918, when he self-published two chapbooks, *Antinoüs* and *35 Sonnets*. These were sent to England and the latter received some reviews, but not enough to generate the interest for which Pessoa had hoped. In 1921 Pessoa used a small inheritance to found his own small press, Olisipo, which in December of that year issued two books of the author’s English poems, including ‘Antinoüs’, ‘Inscriptions’ and ‘Epithalamium’, a long poem dating from 1913, which had not previously been published. A large collection of Pessoa’s shorter English poems, apparently written in the years 1911–1917, *The Mad Fiddler*, has also been preserved in typescript: it was clearly intended for publication, but the reason for its remaining unpublished remains unclear, unless the closure of Olisipo after a scandal prevented it.

The selection here offers the two early long poems complete, along with the contemporaneous *Inscriptions*, and selections from *35 Sonnets* and *The Mad Fiddler*, as well as poems from later manuscripts and a small selection from the poems of Alexander Search. The Search poems are clearly juvenilia, but there is a great deal of it: 131 poems and a few fragments are presented in Luisa Freire’s edition of Search’s output (Lisbon: Assirio & Alvim, 1999). Pessoa grew out of this persona, just as he had grown out of C. R. Anon (who “existed” from 1904–1906), but Search is the last significant persona before the convulsion that brought forth Caeiro, Campos and Reis.

In all honesty, one cannot make great claims for Pessoa as an English poet: his diction is archaic, and many of the poems are fatally influenced by the Elizabethan and Jacobean verse that he had come across as a student in Durban. His English work remains however a fascinating prelude to the mature work, and it certainly affected his later writing in Portuguese. Pessoa remains a somewhat *foreign* poet in his native language but he and his friends – Sá-Carneiro and Negreiros – were to be the writers who modernised Portuguese poetry and set a new course for the rest of the century. The poems offered here are therefore something of a byway on the impressive road that is the work of Fernando Pessoa and his constellation of *alter egos*.

Pessoa's thinking with regard to his poetry in English may be gleaned from a few stray quotes drawn from his correspondence. In a letter of enquiry to the Poetry Society in London, dated 26 December 1912, Pessoa says with regard to contemporary Portuguese verse [the emphasis is mine. *Ed.*]:

To give by translations an idea of contemporary Portuguese poetry, in special reference to peculiarities of style and idea, involves a difficulty precisely parallel to attempting the same thing with the *highest* English (that is, Elizabethan) style in reference to any foreign language.<sup>1</sup>

Then, in a letter from 24 July 1915 addressed to Alfred H. Braley, editor of *Modern Astrology*, Pessoa seeks the horoscope of Francis Bacon — who was, according to a then-fashionable theory, the real author of Shakespeare's works:

... [My] chief interest arises from a desire to see what in Bacon's horoscope registers his peculiar characteristic of being able to write in different styles (a fact which even non-Baconians admit) and his general faculty of transpersonalisation.

I possess . . . the characteristic to which I am alluding. I am an author, and have always found [it] impossible to write in my own personality; I have always found myself, consciously or unconsciously assuming the character of someone who does not exist, and through whose imagined agency I write. I wish to study to what this may be due by position or aspect and am therefore interested in the horoscope of the man who is known to have possessed this faculty in an extraordinary degree.<sup>2</sup>

In 1915 Pessoa sought publication in England, writing to the publisher John Lane, and enclosing fifteen sample poems from a proposed collection of his work, including ‘Fiat Lux’, although it is not clear which other poems were included. It is clear that ‘Epithalamium’ and ‘Antinoüs’ were not sent, as ‘Fiat Lux’ is described as being the longest of the poems in the complete manuscript and also:

I have indeed longer poems written in English, but these could not be printed in a country where there is an active public morality; 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.<sup>3</sup>

This reference to morality undoubtedly alludes to the blatant sexual references in ‘Epithalamium’ and ‘Antinoüs’.

Later that year, in an undated – and unsent – letter to Harold Monro of the Poetry Bookshop, publisher of the Imagists (and Pessoa specifically mentions his familiarity with publications by Aldington and Flint), he says of his own work:

Though in my own language, Portuguese, I am far more “advanced” than the English Imagists are, yet the English poems I send you are the nearest I have, in English, to a conventional standard of poetry.<sup>4</sup>

Replies have not survived, but it is clear that Pessoa's attempts to be published in London met with failure. In truth, his work was out of step with contemporary English currents, whether Georgian or Imagist, and his often exotic diction – clearly the work of someone writing in a second language – will also no doubt not have worked in his favour. Pessoa actually intended to send his own translation of one of his Portuguese poems ('Chuva Obliqua' or 'Slanting Rain'), as a further sample of his work, but it would appear that this translation was never made, fascinating though it would have been to have it. There are however some translations by Pessoa of poems assigned to the Álvaro de Campos heteronym, which have been included in the critical edition of the Campos poems published by Imprensa Nacional – Casa da Moeda in Lisbon.

Pessoa's almost-juvenilia in English is worth reading as background to his poetry in Portuguese – to which four companion volumes in this series are being devoted. Such is the fascination that Pessoa exerts, some seventy years after his death, that each scrap from his trunk is poured over, and these English scraps are worth more than a cursory glance: they are an introduction to one of the oddest and most compelling voices in international literary modernism. We anglophones cannot claim him for ourselves, but we have a small part of him, and that is no bad thing.

Tony Frazer  
Exeter, 2007

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Fernando Pessoa *Correspondência 1905-1922* (ed. Manuela Parreira da Silva. Lisbon: Assirio & Alvim, 1999): p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p. 169.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p. 175.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p. 193.



*from*

**English Poems I-III:**

**from 35 Sonnets**

*Epithalamium*

*Antinoüs*

*Inscriptions*

#### IV

I could not think of thee as piecèd rot,  
Yet such thou wert, for thou hadst been long dead;  
Yet thou liv'dst entire in my seeing thought  
And what thou wert in me had never fled.  
Nay, I had fixed the moments of thy beauty –  
Thy ebbing smile, thy kiss's readiness,  
And memory had taught my heart the duty  
To know thee ever at that deathlessness.  
But when I came where thou wert laid, and saw  
The natural flowers ignoring thee sans blame,  
And the encroaching grass, with casual flaw,  
Framing the stone to age where was thy name,  
    I knew not how to feel, nor what to be  
    Towards thy fate's material secrecy.

## VII

Thy words are torture to me, that scarce grieve thee –  
That entire death shall null my entire thought;  
And I feel torture, not that I believe thee,  
But that I cannot disbelieve thee not.  
Shall that of me that now contains the stars  
Be by the very contained stars survived?  
Thus were Fate all unjust. Yet what truth bars  
An all unjust Fate's truth from being believed?  
Conjecture cannot fit to the seen world  
A garment of her thought untorn or covering,  
Or with her stuffed garb forge an otherworld  
Without herself its dead deceit discovering;  
    So, since all may be, an idle thought well may  
    Less idle thoughts, self-known no truer, dismay.

X

As to a child, I talked my heart asleep  
With empty promise of the coming day,  
And it slept rather for my words made sleep  
Than from a thought of what their sense did say.  
For did it care for sense, would it not wake  
And question closer to the morrow's pleasure?  
Would it not edge nearer my words, to take  
The promise in the meting of its measure?  
So, if it slept, 'twas that it cared but for  
The present sleepy use of promised joy,  
Thanking the fruit but for the forecome flower  
Which the less active senses best enjoy.

Thus with deceit do I detain the heart  
Of which deceit's self knows itself a part.

## XI

Like to a ship that storms urge on its course,  
By its own trials our soul is surer made.  
The very things that make the voyage worse  
Do make it better; its peril is its aid.  
And, as the storm drives from the storm, our heart  
Within the peril disimperilled grows;  
A port is near the more from port we part –  
The port whereto our driven direction goes.  
If we reap knowledge to cross-profit, this  
From storms we learn, when the storm's height doth drive –  
That the black presence of its violence is  
The pushing promise of near far blue skies.  
    Learn we but how to have the pilot-skill,  
    And the storm's very might shall mate our will.

### XIII

When I should be asleep to mine own voice  
In telling thee how much thy love's my dream,  
I find me listening to myself, the noise  
Of my words othered in my hearing them.  
Yet wonder not: this is the poet's soul.  
I could not tell thee well of how I love,  
Loved I not less by knowing it, were all  
My self my love and no thought love to prove.  
What consciousness makes more by consciousness,  
It makes less, for it makes it less itself.  
My sense of love could not my love rich-dress  
Did it not for it spend love's own love-pelf.  
    Poet's love's this (as in these works I prove thee):  
    I love my love for thee more than I love thee.