

# Modernist temporalities: the *Orpheu* generation and the impact of history

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## Keywords

Fernando Pessoa, First World War, Modernism, Violence.

## Abstract

Taking the year 1915 as a reference, the essay analyses some aspects of the relationship of modernist writing with the Great War. In Portugal, this relationship appears in many cases in the form of an absence whose scattered traces can only be apprehended through ways of reading which are well aware of the complexities of the articulation between violence and discourse.

## Palavras-chave

Fernando Pessoa, Primeira Guerra Mundial, Modernismo, Violência.

## Resumo

Tomando como referência o ano de 1915, analisam-se aspetos da relação entre a escrita modernista e a Primeira Guerra Mundial. Em Portugal, esta relação assume em muitos casos a forma de uma ausência, cujos traços dispersos apenas podem ser captados por modos de ler suficientemente atentos às complexidades da articulação entre a violência e o discurso.

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(There is so much to do, My God!  
and these people distracted by war!)<sup>1</sup>  
José de Almada Negreiros, “A Cena do Ódio”

Let me start with a short reflection on the year 1915: it would seem that the mention of the year by itself points simply to the simultaneity of a variety of events happening synchronically in different locations. This is not so, however. Upon a closer look, it becomes apparent that 1915 is but the sign uniting what are in fact quite different temporalities. The figure of exile, surfacing metaphorically – e.g. in the introduction to the first issue of *Orpheu* by Luis de Montalvor –, but also taken literally, as exemplified by the paths taken by Mário de Sá-Carneiro or, later, José de Almada Negreiros, points at the non-coincidence of the time-frame of the Portuguese literary and artistic avant-garde with the temporality defined by the narrow horizon of a parochial cultural milieu. As a vital part of the endeavour to create “a [corrente] mais cosmopolita de quantas teem surgido em Portugal” [the most cosmopolitan current there has ever been in Portugal], to quote from Pessoa’s letter to Miguel de Unamuno of 26 March 1915 (PESSOA, 1999: 159; see also PESSOA, 2009: 372), *Orpheu* was seeking – one could say anxiously, as witnessed by Pessoa’s sustained efforts to establish *Orpheu* as part of a European cosmopolitan network – to connect with an imaginary European temporality that would be coincident with the emphatic notion of the contemporary put forward by the hard core of the initiators of the journal.

In 1915, however, as *Orpheu* was making its blasting appearance in the Portuguese literary landscape, this European temporality was not defined by cultural and literary production, rather, it was taking shape on the meeting ground of the battlefields of what was already being named the Great War – the “German war”, as Pessoa would consistently and significantly call it.<sup>2</sup> This is where, as Almada Negreiros writes in his “Ultimatum Futurista às Gerações Portuguesas do Século XX” [Futurist Ultimatum to the Portuguese Generations of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century] of 1917<sup>3</sup> “toda a força da nossa nova pátria” [all the power of our new fatherland] could be sought after, since, as Almada continues, “No *front* está concentrada toda a Europa, portanto a Civilização actual” [The front is where the whole of Europe,

<sup>1</sup> “(Há tanta coisa que fazer, Meu Deus! | e esta gente distraída em guerras!)”. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Pessoa’s unfulfilled project of a book that was to carry the title *A Guerra Alemã. Investigação Sociológica da Sua Origem e Sentido* (*The German War. A Sociological Investigation on Its Origin and Meaning*). Several fragments connected to this project have been published for the first time by Joel Serrão and his collaborators in the volume *Ultimatum e Páginas de Sociologia Política* (PESSOA, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> Almada’s manifesto, much in the vein of Marinetti’s definition of war in 1915 as “sola igiene del mondo”, opens with an overt praise of war which is, in its radicalism, is unique in the Portuguese context and stands in strong contrast with Pessoa’s ambivalent, convoluted perspective on the matter.

and therefore contemporary civilization, is concentrated] (NEGREIROS, 1917: 36). But the unifying moment of the new European contemporaneity, the mark of civilisation, had not much to do with the fictions of literary or intellectual discourse, rather, it was being defined by the whole array of the unheard of technology of destruction characterising modern war. Portugal would not be officially entering the war until March 1916 – soon enough, in a staggering travel not just in space but above all in time, the peasant from a remote village in Trás-os-Montes would no longer be handling the hoe or driving the ox-drawn plough, but would be operating the machine-gun instead.

It is against the background of this perverse dialectics of modernisation that the literary production of the period has to be assessed. In other words, what is the relation between literary modernity and the violent temporality of war, in what ways does the European experience of war reflect upon the literary production of the modernist generation? This is a topic that has to this day not attracted the attention it deserves and, as a matter of fact, is still waiting for thorough Europe-wide comparative analysis.<sup>4</sup> Concerning Portuguese modernism, despite a few relevant studies,<sup>5</sup> reflection on the topic has been rather scarce. It is symptomatic in this regard that the *Dicionário de Fernando Pessoa e do Modernismo Português*, published in 2008, has no entry for the First World War or the Great War. True, in the case of Portuguese modernism the Great War does not play by far the same role as in the case of the countries that were directly involved from the start and had a central part to perform. There is no national patriotic mobilization at a large scale in the form of what I have called elsewhere the literary front (RIBEIRO, 2014). However, in the course of time, with the increasing perception of the inevitability of Portugal's entry into war and the growing anti-German resentment, one can find a large number of literary interventions taking a stance towards the War. In the journal *A Águia* e.g. one can find regularly, starting in November 1914, a growing body of political-literary essays and poems testifying as a rule to a fervent alignment with the cause of the Allies. Teixeira de Pascoaes figures prominently in this regard, starting with the essay "Portugal e a Guerra e a Orientação das Novas Gerações" [Portugal and the War and the Orientation of the New Generations], published in December 1914. The issue of June 1915 features a poem by Pascoaes simply entitled "A Bélgica" [Belgium]. This poem, actually an ode of praise for Belgium as "Pátria do infinito sofrimento" [Fatherland of infinite suffering], but singing as well the "soldados de França e de Inglaterra! | Multidões de heroísmos" [soldiers of France and England | Heroic crowds], is a most interesting piece concerning the literary imagination of war and is indeed quite representative of the

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<sup>4</sup> SCHNEIDER & SCHUMANN (2000), SHERRY (2003), BUELENS (2014), among a few others, are relevant references in this regard.

<sup>5</sup> See LIND (1981), MONTEIRO (2000), RIBEIRO (2005), LEAL (2011), BARRETO (2014), DIX (2015). On the representation of Germany in Pessoa's work, see also PIZARRO, 2006.

mythical heroic vision dominating the literary and intellectual discourse on the Great War.

Such direct pronouncements are not to be found in Pessoa or, better, as we now may know, they would only find their way into print form long after the death of the poet. Indeed, Pessoa's fragments on the "German War" testify to a close attention to European politics and to the development of what he would later refer to as "a desolação mortífera da guerra europeia" [the deadly devastation of the European war] (PESSOA, 1980: 335; BNP/E3, 92C-100<sup>6</sup>). I will not dwell here upon these fragments which I have dealt with briefly elsewhere (RIBEIRO, 2005). Instead, keeping the year of 1915 as the frame of reference, I will explore, under a comparative perspective, some more oblique references. What I would like to show, although I can do so only fragmentarily in this context, is that in Portugal the relation of modernist writing with the Great War takes in many cases the form of an absence whose scattered traces can only be apprehended through ways of reading which are well aware of the complexities of the relationship between violence and discourse.

Let me provide two relevant examples, circumstantial as they may be. The figure of the ultimatum, prominently represented in 1917 by the manifestos of José de Almada Negreiros and Álvaro de Campos published in *Portugal Futurista*,<sup>7</sup> is usually, and quite rightly, interpreted as echoing the British ultimatum of 1890, an event that triggered extensive shock waves in Portugal, leaving a lasting imprint on Portuguese public opinion. I would not refrain from speculating, however, that that figure has also a lot to do with the immediate context of the War and is inseparable from it. Let us not forget that the pretext for plunging Europe into the carnage was the infamous Austro-Hungarian ultimatum against Serbia. It is, it seems to me, not at all far-fetched to bring also the potential of this allusion into play regarding Campos' and Almada's interventions.

Another relevant example may be provided by one of orthonymous Pessoa's most famous poems, "O menino de sua mãe" (Fig. 1), published for the first time in 1926 in *Contemporânea*.<sup>8</sup> Many current readings of this poem – under

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<sup>6</sup> As already mentioned, these fragments were published for the first time only in 1980, in *Ultimatum e Páginas de Sociologia Política*. Additional fragments appeared subsequently in print form, e.g. the quite relevant "Considerações em Tempo de Guerra" [Thoughts in a Time of War] published for the first time in 1993 in the volume *Pessoa Inédito* by Teresa Rita Lopes. See also PESSOA (2002; 2013), for the extensive fragments attributed to António Mora. Key to abbreviations: BNP/E3 Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal / Espólio 3 [National Library of Portugal / Archive 3].

<sup>7</sup> It may be reminded that these texts could not achieve any palpable resonance at the time, since, following a denunciation, this first issue of *Portugal Futurista* (the only one ever to be published), was seized by the police immediately after leaving the presses. In a fragment in English published for the first time in 1966, Campos' "Ultimatum" is referred to as "quite the cleverest piece of literature called into being by the Great War" (PESSOA, 2009: 275).

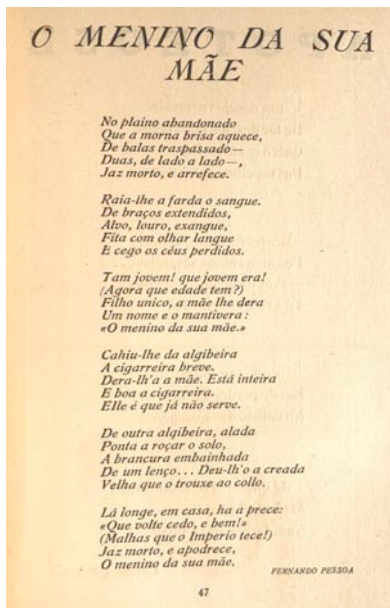
<sup>8</sup> For an English translation, see Keith Bosley's "His mother's little boy" (PESSOA, 1997: 36). George MONTEIRO (2000: 129-44) provides a fine analysis of the poem, including some relevant intertextual references.

the influence of the interpretation by João Gaspar Simões in his Pessoa biography, originally published in 1954 (SIMÕES, 1981) – tend to disregard the framework of war, leaning towards a private-existential, biographist interpretation based on the personal grief due to the loss of a mother who had “betrayed” the poet as a young child. “O menino de sua mãe”, Simões bluntly states, is none other than Pessoa himself (SIMÕES, 1981: 46). This line of argument may perhaps explain why Georg Rudolf Lind could state his dislike for a poem he finds distinctly sentimental (being imbued with “sentimentalismo fácil”) and at odds with Pessoa’s poetics of impersonality (LIND, 1981: 440-441). Now, the poem, I would argue, is certainly a fine example of a poetics of compassion (indeed, very much at odds with the bulk of Pessoa’s writing), but by no means sentimental. The harsh contrast between the image of death, on the one hand, and the recollection of private images of happiness, on the other, gives individual shape to an otherwise anonymous death, contrasting individual death and concrete suffering with the impersonality of the soldier's fate and the abstract demands of the State (“o Império”).<sup>9</sup> As such, the poem is in line with a long tradition in war poetry that can be traced back as far as to Homer’s allusions to the personal biography and the family bonds of warriors he names individually and whose violent death he describes in anatomical detail in the *Iliad*. It is also perfectly in line with one of the fragments of Campos’ “Ode Marcial”<sup>10</sup>, written between 1914 and 1916, where the grief of the mother whose son has been killed by a German bullet is given concrete expression through a series of images recollecting a happy childhood and the intimate bonds between mother and son now irretrievably torn apart by senseless violence. Similar images surface in other fragments of the ode, particularly in a fragment where the following question is asked: “Que é feito d’aquelle que foi a creança que tiveste ao peito?” [What has become of he who was the child who sucked at your breast?] (PESSOA, 1993: 136; PESSOA, 2014: 162; BNP/E3, 66B-24).

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<sup>9</sup> Such a vindication of concrete suffering, in contrast with the universalist abstractions of a rhetoric of heroism as sacrifice for a greater cause, is at the core of some of the finest examples of critical war poetry, starting with one of the certainly most famous World War I poems, Wilfried Owen’s “Dulce et decorum est”. It should be noted that, as is quite clear in the case of Owen, this implies a radical reformulation of the very notion of lyrical poetry, which is led by the confrontation with concrete violence to rethink its conventional premises and to take on the task of incorporating violence as a means of disruption of any traditional notion of representation.

<sup>10</sup> Fragment j of the critical edition by Teresa Rita Lopes (PESSOA, 1993: 136-137; BNP/E3, 66C-37); fragment 14g of the critical edition by Jerónimo Pizarro and Antonio Cardillo (PESSOA, 2014: 161-162).



**Fig. 1. Fernando Pessoa, “O Menino da sua Mãe”**  
*Contemporânea*, Lisboa, 3<sup>rd</sup> series, n.º 1, May 1926.

As already mentioned, Pessoa's essays and fragments on the “German war” were part of a book project entitled *A Guerra Alemã. Investigação Sociológica da Sua Origem e Sentido* [*The German War. A Sociological Inquiry into Its Origin and Meaning*], which, like most his other projects, remained unfulfilled (PESSOA, 1980: 203 *et seq.*). Pessoa's stance in these texts is that of the self-appointed “political sociologist” and is definitely a pro-German stance. His main line of argument is intricate and often contradictory or nebulous, but it can perhaps be summed up in the following sentence:

Germanófilos nós, porque não há nada que construa lá fora e ao menos a Alemanha encarna superiormente o Espírito de Destruição.

[We are Germanophile, because there is nothing out there that builds and Germany incarnates at least the Spirit of Destruction in a superior way]

(PESSOA, 1980: 130-131; Pessoa, 2014: 674; BNP/E3, 92D-69r; Fig. 2)

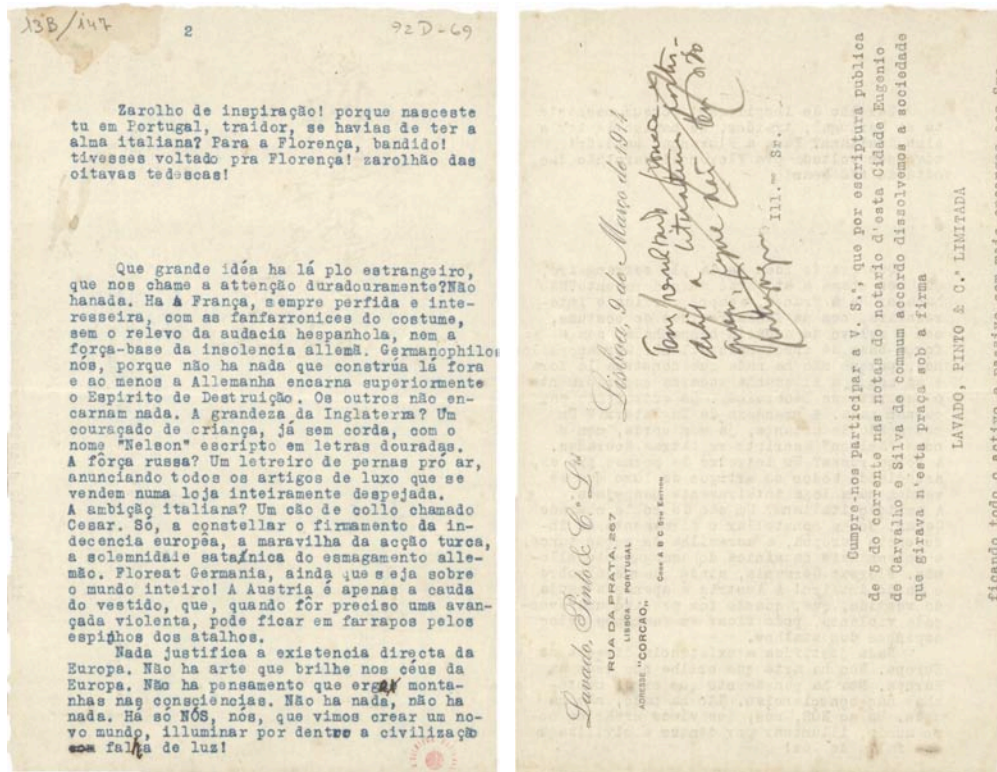


Fig. 2. BNP/E3, 92D-69, "We are Germanophile" (11<sup>th</sup> line).

The fascination with the "spirit of destruction" goes a long way towards explaining Pessoa's own ambivalent relation to the question of war and violence. That fascination corresponds entirely to an aesthetic gesture remindful of Friedrich Schlegel's romantic idea of the artist as someone who gives himself away to the "enthusiasm of destruction" [Begeisterung des Vernichtens]. Unlike Schlegel, however, for whom that enthusiasm corresponds to the revelation of the "meaning of divine creation" [der Sinn göttlicher Schöpfung] (SCHLEGEL, 1988: § 131), Pessoa's fascination goes hand in hand with a keen perception of the senselessness and indeed the horror of war. It is such an ambivalence between the fascination and the horror of destruction that underlies the vision of chaos generated in the "Martial Ode" by the powerful accumulation of images of killing and violence. At times, it would seem that the poetic voice is intent on giving salience to that "pity of war" that is conjured up in Wilfried Owen's famous preface to his war poems:

Desenterrei o comboio de lata da creança calcado no meio da estrada,  
 E chorei como todas as mães do mundo sobre o horror da vida.  
 Os meus pés pantheistas tropeçaram na machina de costura da viuva que mataram à bayoneta

[I dug out the tin train of the child trampled in the middle of the road,  
 And I wept like all the mothers of the world over the horror of life.  
 My pantheist feet stumbled over the sewing machine of the widow bayoneted to death]

(PESSOA, 1993: 134; PESSOA, 2014: 154; BNP/E3, 70-62r; Fig. 3)

But the glimpse of compassion is overshadowed by the fact that there seems to be no sense at all in the violent chaos portrayed by the poem. In the end, the paradoxical possibility of meaning lies in the poetic voice assigning for itself a sacrificial role and eventually going so far as to take on the identity of the guilty perpetrator:

Sim, fui eu o culpado de tudo, fui eu o soldado todos elles  
 Que matou, violou, queimou e quebrou, [...]  
 Christo absurdo da expiação de todos os crimes e de todas as violencias, [...]  
 Deus tenha piedade de mim que a não tive de ninguém!

[Yes, I was to blame for it all, I was the soldier – all of them –  
 Who killed, raped, burnt and smashed, (...)  
 An absurd Christ atoning for all the crimes and all the acts of violence, (...)  
 May God have pity on me who had it on nobody!]<sup>11</sup>

(PESSOA, 1993: 134; PESSOA, 2014: 154-155; BNP/E3, 70-62; Fig. 3)

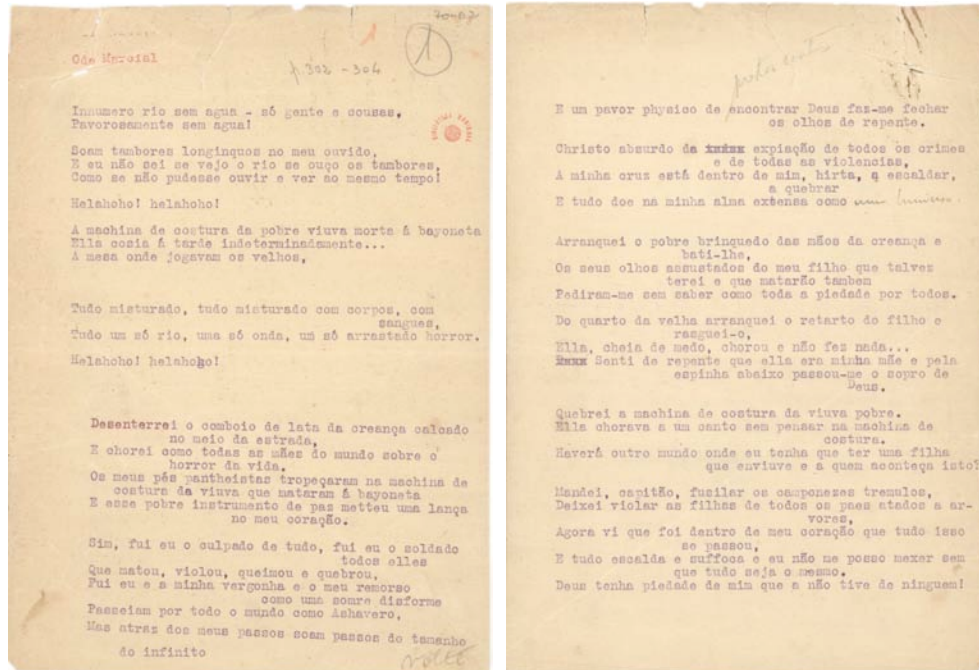


Fig. 3. BNP/E3, 70-62, “Martrial Ode”.

The several versions and fragments of the ode – a total of 15 of various lengths in the critical edition by Teresa Rita Lopes and of 8 in Jerónimo Pizarro’s and Antonio Cardiello’s proposal – amply testify to the poet’s difficulty in grappling with the subject matter. They probably represent the most ambitious attempt by Pessoa to come to terms with the question of violence and war, an attempt which is clearly inseparable from the European context of the Great War.

<sup>11</sup> I am quoting the English version by Keith Bosley (PESSOA, 1997: 106-107). Lines from fragments not included in this version are given in my own translation.



This is at times explicitly signalled, as in the opening lines of another fragment – “Ruido longinquo e proximo não sei porquê | Da guerra europêa” [Distant and close noise I don’t know why | Of the European war] (PESSOA: 1993: 129; PESSOA, 2014: 156; BNP/E3, 57A-45). The explicit references, including quite explicit images of the means of destruction available in modern, technological war, help situate the concrete temporality of the Great War as the framework of reflection. This reflection, however, is projected onto a more general level, becoming in the process a reflection on violence as a determining factor in social relations. In the end, the individual body and the concrete reality of death, of “the deaths of those who died, who really died” (“mortes de quem morreu, na verdade” [PESSOA, 1993: 138; PESSOA, 2014: 159; BNP/E3, 64-76a]) become almost indifferent and are accepted as the common fate of humankind within the nightmare of history: “Elle que foi tanto para ti, tudo, tudo, tudo, | Olha, elle não é nada no geral holocausto da historia” [He who was so much to you [i.e. the mother], everything, everything, everything... | Look, he is nothing in the general holocaust of history] (PESSOA, 1993: 136; PESSOA, 2014: 162; BNP/E3, 66B-24]). In the end, the poem itself thus becomes a part of the very scenario of violence it sought to convey in drastic images and apocalyptic visions – and that is why the poetic subject himself, whose soul, as one can read in the “Martial Ode”, has the cosmic dimension of the universe, has to take on his guilt, caught in the paradox of being himself a part of the violence he wanted to describe. Thus, the artist as a destructive personality ends up turning destruction upon himself – “Deus tenha piedade de mim que a não tive de ninguem!” [May God have pity on me who had it on nobody!] (*supra*). In this, he is a figure that is quite distinct from Walter Benjamin’s “destructive character”, carried along by a utopian, messianic drive that is fundamentally absent in the “Martial Ode”.

The notion of history as a nightmare is, significantly, also the guiding thread of the first direct pronouncement by Pessoa on the Great War. I am referring to an ode in English written in January 7<sup>th</sup> 1915 and published for the first time by Georg Rudolf Lind in 1972.<sup>12</sup> In this ode, the attitude towards war is strikingly distant and, at times, overtly critical. It is tempting to compare Pessoa’s poem with the pronouncement by another great European poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, who, in the beginning of August 1914, had written his “Fünf Gesänge” [Five Chants], enthusiastically greeting the outbreak of war as an opportunity for regeneration and the bringing into motion of a stagnated world. Under the direct influence of his reading of Hölderlin’s patriotic poems, whom Rilke was discovering at the time through the volumes edited by Norbert von Hellingrath, the “Five Chants” are written in the form of hymns and are framed by the prophetic voice of a poetic

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<sup>12</sup> Pessoa’s ode is included in LIND (1981), a first version of which was published in 1972 in the journal *Ocidente* (“Poesias inglesas inéditas de Fernando Pessoa sobre a Primeira Guerra Mundial”, *Ocidente*, n.º 405).

subject who assumes the stance of the interpreter of the profound essence of the community. War is for Rilke a moment of *kairós*, the irruption of a totally different temporality bringing with it a moment of decision. The experience of war is thus set into a distinctly metaphysical framework as the coming of a new God, the God of war – “Endlich ein Gott” [A God, at last], as one can read in the first chant.<sup>13</sup> On the whole, the mythical transfiguration in Rilke's poem corresponds to a – no less than revolting – aesthetization of war which is in sharp contrast with Pessoa's ode. In the latter, there is no coming of a God, on the contrary, modern war signifies the demise of the gods, be it the gods of Antiquity or the Christian god: “No God that lives in us survives | The winter in us, that snow kills God and Fate | And has iced o'er the rivers of our lives” (LIND, 1981: 450; BNP/E3, 49A<sup>4</sup>-4<sup>r</sup>). There are several interconnections between the “Martial Ode” and this poem which I will not be able to go into in detail in this context. There is also a sharp contrast, above all regarding the poetic subject's stance, which, in the latter case, is above all the stance of the somewhat detached observer. In the end, however, the ode, which is structured in the form of a nightmare, amounts to the apocalyptic vision of a world where in reality no centre can hold. The most powerful image in the poem is a stream of blood which, at a given moment, becomes “a mighty river full of strange things – dead | men, children, wrecks of bridges, cities, thrones” (LIND, 1981: 454; BNP/E3, 49A<sup>4</sup>-5<sup>r</sup>). Not the new world of Rilke's enthusiasm is coming into being, on the contrary, the world is falling apart. What remains, as the poem concludes, is “again in the dark infinity | My pity and my dread alone with me | And my dream's meaning like a paling night” (LIND, 1981: 456; BNP/E3, 49A<sup>4</sup>-6<sup>r</sup>).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The first line of the second chant overtly expresses the exhilaration felt in view of the patriotic enthusiasm of the masses – “Heil mir, dass ich Ergriffene sehe!” [What a joy to see people who are possessed!] (RILKE, 1966: 107).

<sup>14</sup> Both the several fragments of the “Martial Ode” and the ode “Now are no Janus' temple-doors thrown wide...” directly contradict the statement in a text (signed “FERNANDO PESSOA, sensationist”) on the sensationist movement and the war dated 1915 by Paula Cristina Costa and Teresa Rita Lopes (LOPES, 1993: 263-264; BNP/E3, 88-5<sup>r</sup>; see also PESSOA, 2009: 198; Fig. 4). Here, “o campo da literatura superior” [the field of superior literature], represented by the sensationists, is assigned the task of bringing to completion “a obra doentia iniciada pelos simbolistas” [the morbid work initiated by the symbolists]. Pessoa lists as the landmarks of that literature “desdem pelo povo” [contempt for the people], “aversão pelos velhos temas do amor, da gloria e da vida” [aversion to the old themes of love, glory and life], “indiferença pela patria, pela religião, pela humanidade, por todas as cousas com que a sinceridade dos ignobeis se preocupa” [indifference towards the fatherland, religion, mankind, all those things with which the sincerity of ignoble persons is concerned]. This overtly esoteric attitude, summed up in the formula “anarchismo dos superiores, sem explicação, sem utilidade e sem desculpa” [anarchism of the superior, with no explanation, no utility and no excuse], seems to be at odds with the actual involvement in current events, but is totally coherent with the general framework of simultaneous programmatic distancing and inevitable practical entanglement with politics in the shape of the contemporary history of violence, which is a common feature of the European modernist generation. In any case, the common perception of Pessoa as an essentially apolitical writer stands in need of correction (on political

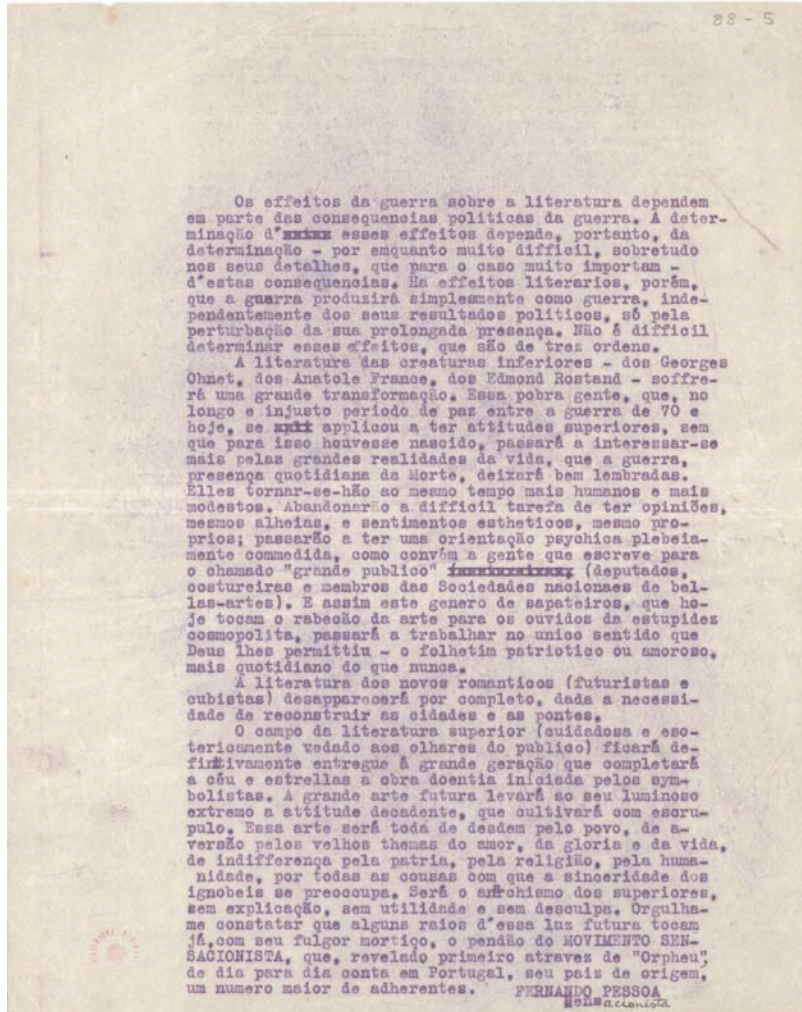


Fig. 4. BNP/E3, 88-5r, a text signed "FERNANDO PESSOA, sensationist".

Let us now turn briefly to another major piece in the poetic production of the year 1915. I am referring to José de Almada Negreiros' "A Cena do Ódio" [The Scene of Hatred], the long poem that was scheduled to appear in the third issue of *Orpheu*, which was already set and ready to go into print, but never saw the light of day. The poem was published for the first time in a partial version in 1923 in *Contemporânea* and would appear in its complete form only in 1958, in the anthology *Líricas Portuguesas* edited by Jorge de Sena. It is well known that the immediate context and the triggering factor for the writing of "A Cena do Ódio" were the bloody events of the "14<sup>th</sup> of May", the date of a political upheaval in Lisbon leading to the demise of the Pimenta de Castro dictatorship and causing in the process hundreds of wounded and dead. The poem, however, escalates into a furious, unstoppable series of destructive visions that reach far beyond this immediate context and pretext and amount to a general indictment: "Há tanta

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Pessoa, see most recently PITTELLA, 2016).

coisa que fazer, Meu Deus! | e esta gente distraída em guerras!” [There is so much to do, my God! / and these people distracted by war!] (NEGREIROS, 1971: 28). But the point is that Almada himself is at war. Ana Luísa Amaral has drawn attention to the fact that the text itself is structured like a round of artillery fire sparing nothing and no one (AMARAL, 1990). The sheer violence of the poem itself mimetizes the violence of war, prefiguring the verbal violence of Campos’s and Almada’s “Ultimatums” of 1917. In so far, war does not remain as an external reference, it becomes an immanent condition for the text, thus testifying to its inextricable entanglement with history in the very act of asserting the autonomy of the poetic text.

A much broader comparative survey along the axis of the year 1915, of which I could offer here but a few fragmentary pieces centred in the main in the Portuguese modernist scene, would have to include several other relevant references. I will add just two additional reminders of how much remains to be done. In 1915, Franz Kafka had just completed his narrative “In der Strafkolonie” [In the Penal Colony], written during the first months of the War, a central piece for an analysis of the intertwining of violence and the modernist text.<sup>15</sup> Kafka was an author who once wrote that his whole business as a writer was about torturing and being tortured (KAFKA, 1998: 290). In this much quoted sentence in a letter to Milena, the simultaneous use of the active and the passive form of the verb is worth highlighting: the writer is not just the one who suffers, he is also the one who inflicts suffering. On another level, in October 1915, in a journal edited and written by one of the fiercest opponents to war in European literature, Karl Kraus’ *Die Fackel* [*The Torch*], there appeared a short dramatic scene signalled as belonging to the tragedy *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit. Ein Angsttraum* [*The Last Days of Mankind. A Nightmare*]. Eventually, this tragedy would grow to over 700 hundred pages featuring 210 scenes set as a most violent representation of what Kraus consistently names the tragic carnival of the war.<sup>16</sup> In this drama, the central character, The Grumbler, also takes upon himself the guilt for the bloody carnage as a gesture of redemption.

To conclude: it is a tragic irony that the cosmopolitan utopia of the literary project of Pessoa and the *Orpheu* generation should have found itself projected onto the European temporality of violence and war. Along with the retreat into different versions of what might be called a cosmopolitan or universalist nationalism (RIBEIRO, 2007), that temporality builds a unifying thread invisibly connecting the European literary scene of the time. As was apparent from the short analysis of some central poems offered above, the open confrontation with the violent panorama of the time projects the poetic gesture into the arena of history

<sup>15</sup> For a brief analysis of Kafka’s narrative from this point of view, see RIBEIRO, 2013: 21-24.

<sup>16</sup> For my Portuguese translation of the full text of Kraus’ drama, see KRAUS, 2016. The first full English translation, by Fred Brigham and Edward Timms, was published in 2015.

and forces the poetic imagination to enter the grounds of real conflict. Indeed, the irruption of history fully exposes the dilemmas the different European laboratories of modernist writing had to face upon being confronted with the sheer facts of modern warfare and the politics of war. Such an exposure results in new modes of reflecting the complex entanglements between violence and representation, building a trans-European invisible dialogue which it is the as yet unfulfilled task of comparative criticism to bring to the fore.

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