

Introduction to “A Very Original Dinner” by Fernando Pessoa

ABSTRACT: “A Very Original Dinner” is a horror short story written in 1907 by Alexander Search, a fictional author created by Fernando Pessoa around 1906. In the story, Herr Prosit, a coarse but merry man, president of the Gastronomical Society of Berlin, invites all the members of the society to a very original dinner. Each member is challenged to discover the originality: Is it in a sauce? Is it in a new ingredient? Is it in the lighting of the room or arrangement of the tables? Originality could be in anything. The members, barely containing their fever of expectation, take each detail into account as they try to discover the originality in the banquet. Even though they have some hypotheses—sufficiently ridiculous—none of them imagines how far Prosit’s joke has gone this time.

KEYWORDS: Alexander Search, short story, originality, banquet

In June 1907, under the name Alexander Search, Fernando Pessoa wrote a short story titled “A Very Original Dinner”¹ about a very special banquet. The story is divided into two parts: the first concerns the invitation to this dinner, and the second describes how the dinner unfolds.

The first part introduces the main character of the story, Herr Prosit, president of the Gastronomical Society of Berlin, who invites all the members of the society to dine at his home. The purpose of the dinner is stated at the beginning by the president, who proclaims it will be a dinner like no member has attended before.

Prosit is quite a character; he is clever and cheerful, and has a unique sense of humor. At the same time, he can be coarse and impulsive, but he never behaves like a brute: he is impervious to anger and is always ready to please everyone. These features make him very popular among the members of the Gastronomical Society and his friends.

Prosit’s characterization is essential to the facts presented in the second part of the story, the celebration of a *very original dinner*, during which the guests must

discover where the originality lies. Every aspect of the banquet—the dishes, the way the table is laid, the servants, the lightning, and so on—is taken into consideration by the members of the society in order to find an answer to Prosit's challenging test. Some of the guests put forward their hypotheses, but the president just laughs, proud of his ability to ensure that the mystery remains unsolved. On this occasion, Prosit's joke goes much farther than anyone expects.

With detailed descriptions, dialogues, and discussions about society, the arts, and mankind, Pessoa presents a story of mystery, suspense, and horror—certainly a very original one.

The story was first published in 1988 in Portuguese by Maria Leonor Machado de Sousa, even though it was written in English. It first appeared in English in 2010, in David Jackson's book *Adverse Genres in Fernando Pessoa*.

The present version was compared with Jackson's transcription and revised, including some unpublished sentences,² and was published in 2014 by Tragaluz Editores in Medellín, Colombia, as part of the bilingual anthology of Alexander Search's texts *Un libro muy original (A Very Original Book)*.

NOTES

1. BNP/E3, 79A-1^r to 70^r; Pessoa, *Um jantar muito original seguido de A porta*, ed. Maria Leonor Machado de Sousa (Lisbon: Relógio d'Água, 1988).

2. For instance, Jackson makes changes to the punctuation of the text by adding or deleting commas, separating paragraphs, and eliminating quotation marks throughout the text; and he substitutes some words from the manuscript, such as "appearing" (BNP/E3, 79A-4^r), which is replaced by "seeming" in his transcription (191). In these cases, the substitution of the words does not affect the reading of the story in a broad sense due to the use of synonyms; but in other cases, this substitution is more problematic because it subtly alters the author's prose, as when changing from "it is as of ought impossibly true" in the manuscript (BNP/E3, 79A-65^r) to "it is as of a sight devily seen" (203) in his version (emphasis added). Besides this, in Jackson's version of the manuscript, several omissions of phrases are particularly confusing. One of these is what is written in the middle of the front and back of page 52 of the manuscript: "The elaborate seasoning of the dishes, their superficial newness of presentation—if that these were not legitimate in the President as culinary artist apart from the end of the dinner—[. . .] (52^v) No one, I may add, after considering them, really took them for important" (BNP/E3, 79A-52^r and 52^v). Another example of these omissions can be found at the end of the story, on page 69 of the manuscript: "They had been in everything the President's coadjutors"; the word *coadjutors* was very difficult to read, and Jackson's version eliminated the phrase entirely.

WORKS CITED

Jackson, K. David. *Adverse Genres in Fernando Pessoa*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Pessoa, Fernando. *Um Jantar muito original seguido de A porta*. Edited by Maria Leonor Machado de Sousa. Lisbon: Relógio d'Água, 1988.

NATALIA JEREZ QUINTERO earned a BA in literature from University of Los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia. Since 2011, she has been working in the publishing industry as a copyeditor and a professional grammar and stylistic proofreader. Her areas of interest are Portuguese and Latin American literature. She has selected and translated into Spanish Alexander Search's texts included in *Un libro muy original (A Very Original Book)* published by Tragaluz in 2014.

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