

Joyce and Pessoa: Authors of Polyphony

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Introduction

At first sight, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) is the obvious candidate to place in fruitful comparison to his great Portuguese contemporary, Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935). This is not merely a question of the theatre of masks through which each voiced their intrinsically plural poetries. Both figures were deeply interested in their respective nation's historical identity and both inclined to a heroic view of myth, conceiving of history in terms of great, messianic cycles. Both authors were deeply immersed in the occult, and both inclined in later years towards an elitism that was tolerant of the rise of the far right. Or consider the following distinction, from Pessoa's *O livro de desassossego* (fragment 260):

A arte mente porque é social. E há só duas grandes formas de arte—uma que se dirige à nossa alma profunda, a outra que se dirige à nossa alma atenta. A primeira é a poesia, o romance a segunda. A primeira começa a mentir na própria estrutura; a segunda começa a mentir na própria intenção.

[Art lies because it is social. And there are only two great forms of art—one which is directed towards our profound soul, the other directed towards our attentive soul. The first is poetry, the novel is the second. The first begins to lie in its intrinsic structure; the second begins to lie in its intrinsic intention.]

At first sight, the understanding of the intensely personal poetic audience in such an observation suggests Yeats' much quoted assertion that "we make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry."

I have said at first sight, however, for once we begin to examine the men in more detail, and in particular the nature of the great theatre of the self that plays itself out in their respective poetries, we find that Pessoa has less in common with Yeats and much more with those expatriated precursors of post-modernism, James Joyce (1882-1941) and Samuel Beckett (1906-1989). When Beckett coins the term "vice-existers" in relation to his series of narrators, Molloy, Moran, Malone, Mahood etc., he comes far closer to Pessoa's conception of the "heteronym" than do any of Yeats' rhetorical masks. What is more, a comparable compulsion to write which is entirely vitiated by doubt is expressed by the two authors. Thus when Pessoa has the semi-heteronym Bernardo Soares declare: "Tenho de escrever como cumprindo um castigo. E o maior castigo é o de saber que o que escrevo resulta inteiramente fútil, falhado e incerto" ["I am compelled to write as though fulfilling a punishment. And the greatest punishment is the knowledge that what I write ends in futility, failure and incertitude" (fragment 231)], it takes no great leap of the imagination to hear Beckett's dry complaint concerning his aesthetic dilemma of having "nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express [...] together with the obligation to express" (from *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*). Pessoa also occasionally approaches Beckett in tone, as when he talks of the soul as "um poço sinistro cheio de ecos vagos, habitado por vidas ignóbeis, viscosidades sem vida, lesmas sem ser, ranho da subjectividade" ["a sinister well full of vague echoes, inhabited by ignoble lives, lifeless slime, slugs without being, the snot of subjectivity" (fragment 242)] Try to imagine Yeats saying that! However, it is with points of comparison between Fernando Pessoa and Beckett's first mentor, James Joyce, that the present paper is principally concerned.

Although Joyce and Pessoa were immensely eclectic authors who were widely read in everything from classical epic through Shakespeare, Whitman and Mallarmé to Italian Futurism, there can be little question of either author having a direct influence on his contemporary. There is no evidence that James Joyce was ever aware of the existence of Fernando Pessoa, an ignorance that has unfortunately tended to persist among Anglophone authors, and although Pessoa took an interest in the writing of Joyce, he tended to be somewhat dismissive of what he saw as its excessive formality. He wrote of *Ulysses* that "it is a hallucinatory delirium—the kind treated by psychiatrists—presented as an

end in itself," and felt that Joyce's writing was "an art preoccupied with method, with how it's made," thereby placing the Irishman's aesthetic squarely in the tradition of the *fin de siècle* French Symbolists.

There are on the other hand a number of similarities and symmetries between the authors that are immediately apparent. The two bespectacled men, who bore an uncanny resemblance to one another, accumulated an inordinate number of addresses in the course of their lives, an uncertainty of abode that was established from early childhood and whose trauma informs much of their subsequent writing. Partly as a corollary of their migratory lifestyles, both felt at home in a number of European languages, and each took a keen interest in the problem of translation. If Joyce is the self-exiled writer whose art is eternally obsessed with the city from which he is absent, Pessoa is the internal exile who becomes an absence at the heart of the city to which he has returned. Curiously, the name of this city, Lisbon, is said to derive from the Latinized form of that archetypal wanderer, Ulysses.

The purpose of comparative literature must be to draw out such similarities and contrasts so as to throw new light on the concerns of authors rather than to dwell on coincidental trivia, no matter how Joycean they may appear. With a view to this, the remainder of the present paper will examine the art of Joyce and Pessoa under four categories, none of which can rightly be understood in isolation: (i) the Recourse to Myth; (ii) the City as a Labyrinth; (iii) Language as a Labyrinth and, to borrow from the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, (iv) the Dialogic Imagination. The central contention to be tested is that Pessoa's extraordinary poetic project and Joyce's masterpiece, *Ulysses*, are informed by a comparable aesthetic of authorial absence. This is perhaps best summarized in the following position, advanced by Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

The personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood and then a fluid and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalises itself, so to speak. [...] The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.

The quote could almost be taken as a commentary on Fernando Pessoa, the salient features of whose life the Mexican Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz famously described as "the footprints of a shadow" ("*El desconocido de sí*

mismo”). For a figure such as Pessoa, Paz suggests that “his history could be reduced to the passage between the unreality of his daily life and the reality of his fictions.”

(i) The Recourse to Myth

“Ah, curse you! That’s Saint Augustine.”

In his well-known but somewhat misguided essay of 1923, “Ulysses, Order and Myth,” T. S. Eliot accredits Joyce’s reworking of Homer’s *Odyssey* as having “the importance of a scientific discovery,” and goes on to suggest that “in using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him.” It has become something of a commonplace that Eliot’s view was colored, to say the least, by the publication of “The Wasteland,” which appeared in the same year as *Ulysses*, and which is perhaps the definitive exemplar of what Eliot terms the “mythic method.” What is of interest to the present paper is not so much the extent to which Joyce manipulated the Homeric myth as the fact that he should have recourse to myth in the first place.

Although *Ulysses* is justifiably considered to be a flagship of modernism, revolutionary, irreverent and iconoclastic, there is a deep paradox running through the mind of its author. In his 1962 study entitled “The Aesthetics of Chaosmos,” the Italian medievalist Umberto Eco has perceptively characterized Joyce as “the node where the Middle Ages and the avant-garde meet.” I would argue that the same is essentially true of Pessoa, although the form of the encounter between the scholastic and the modernist in each author is distinct. Joyce’s medievalism extends beyond the aesthetics of the scholastically minded Stephen Dedalus and rubs shoulders continually with a fragmented modernism. As Eco comments in regard to the deep structure of the 1922 text, “the characteristics of an organism arranged according to the most rigorous criteria of a traditional formalism are found in that reverse *Summa* which is *Ulysses*.” What Eco terms a “medieval *forma mentis*” orchestrates the continual clash of contemporary voices throughout Joyce. By contrast, the generation of a number of heteronyms allows Pessoa to distinguish between his variety of affective and seemingly incompatible sensibilities, and to give each a distinct voice. The explicit nominalism of Alberto Caeiro, the pagan classicism of Ricardo Reis, and the millennial “Sebastianismo” of the Fernando Pessoa who authored

Mensagem are all manifestations of a “medieval *forma mentis*.” Indeed, the cast of mind of the last mentioned bears certain formal similarities to the cyclical view of history, derived in part from Vico’s *La Scienza Nuova*, that informs the later Joyce. It is also of interest, though beyond the scope of the present essay, that it should be precisely a maritime myth that shapes both *Ulysses* and *Mensagem*. But what of their authors’ respective modernisms?

In 1912, precisely two years before Joyce began to commit to paper the evolving text that he was already calling *Ulysses* and Fernando Pessoa conceived of his project of the heteronyms, Guillaume Apollinaire published his extraordinary collection *Alcools*, in which the poem “Zone” makes the claim:

Tu lis les prospectus les catalogues les affiches qui chantent tout haut
Voilà la poésie ce matin et pour la prose il y a les journaux

It is a celebration of mass media and the transient, in which posters and catalogues are to be the new poetry, while for prose, there are newspapers. Within the decade, James Joyce’s great flagship of modernism, *Ulysses*, would elevate an advertising canvasser to the role of latter-day Odysseus, condemned to wander the semantic urban labyrinth of newspaper headline, music-hall refrain, evangelical flier, nationalist catch-phrase and advertising jingle. But as much as a newspaper, *Ulysses* is a compendium of noises. There are trams, whistles, farts, gas-jets, hooves, printing-presses, squabbling gulls, marching boots, jingling harnesses, all the noise of the modern metropolis. Much the same can be said, and indeed has been said, of “Ode Triunfal” (1914), the text written “in one fell swoop, without hesitation or correction,” with which Pessoa launched the career of Álvaro de Campos. It has been called the noisiest poem ever written, and ends in an onomatopoeic flourish not unlike that of the “Sirens” chapter of *Ulysses*:

Eia! e os rails e as casas de máquinas e a Europa!
Eia e hurrah por mim-tudo e tudo, máquinas a trabalhar, eia!
Galgar com tudo por cima de tudo! Hup-lá!
Hup-lá, hup-lá, hup-lá-hô, hup-lá!
Hé-la! He-hô! H-o-o-o-o!
Z-z-z-z-z-z-z-z-z-z!
Ah não ser eu toda a gente e toda a parte!
Prprpr.

Must be the bur.

Fff! Oo. Rrpr.

Nations of the earth. No-one behind. She's passed. *Then and not till then.* Tram kran kran kran. Good oppor. Coming. Krandrkrankran. I'm sure it's the burgund.

Yes. One, two. *Let my epitaph be.* Kraaaaaa. *Written.*

I have.

Pprprffrrppffff.

Done.

I will be arguing in Part IV below that the relentless collage of noises and voices is part of a dialogic impulse that takes the art of Joyce and Pessoa far beyond similar orchestrations of sound in Whitman, Mayakovsky or Marinetti. At one level, however, they are manifestations of the increasing mechanization of urban life, and the art of both Joyce and Pessoa is entirely inseparable from the cityscapes which they evoke.

(ii) The City as Labyrinth

Cidade da minha infância pavorosamente perdida...

Cidade triste e alegre, outra vez sonho aqui...

The wanderings of Odysseus are by no means the only, nor indeed the first classical myth to give shape to a Joycean text. As early as 1904, when the first three stories of *Dubliners* were published in the *Irish Homestead*, Joyce chose Stephen Dedalus as what one suspects was to have been a quite literal *nom de plume*. The flight of Daedalus and Icarus from Minoan Crete would later form a framing narrative for *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the Icarus aspect of which is wryly alluded to by Stephen Dedalus in the later *Ulysses*. But the Daedalus aspect was equally important to Joyce, for Daedalus was the builder of the great labyrinth at Crete that was to house the Minotaur, and it is this oppressive labyrinth that he later flees. When, towards the end of the second chapter of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the young Dedalus has taken to playing truant from Belvedere College and wandering the tenements of the north inner city in search of sin, the bestial and labyrinthine are evoked in equal part:

His blood was in revolt. He wandered up and down the dark slimy streets peering into the gloom of lanes and doorways, listening eagerly for any sound. He

moaned to himself like some baffled prowling beast. He wanted to sin with another of his kind, to force another being to sin with him and to exult with her in sin. [...] He had wandered into a maze of narrow and dirty streets.

It will not be the mythical Daedalus, “old father, old artificer,” who allows the young artist egress out of the notorious “Nighttown” area into which he has wandered. Rather, it will be the humanitarian impulse of Leopold Bloom, that latter-day Odysseus, in the climactic “Circe” episode of the novel to follow.

From the outset, Joyce’s Dublin is very much the inner city of working-class tenements in which he had grown up, a landscape of crumbling Georgian façades still haunted by their ascendancy past:

A horde of grimy children populated the street. They stood or ran in the roadway or crawled up the steps before the gaping doors or squatted like mice upon the thresholds. Little Chandler gave them no thought. He picked his way deftly through all that minute vermin-like life and under the shadow of the gaunt spectral mansions in which the old nobility of Dublin had roistered. (“A Little Cloud”)

Pessoa’s engagement with Lisbon is by no means as meticulous as is Joyce’s in his exposition of the human geography of Edwardian Dublin. If the Irishman could say of *Ulysses* to his friend Frank Budgen that he desired “to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book,” Pessoa would never have inclined to such a boast. Indeed, his terrain is very much the generic city, and the garret overlooking the street with the tobacco-shop in “Tabacaria” could be in almost any Mediterranean town.

When history does impinge on the present, it is as often as not the history of the imagined past: “O Tejo tem grandes navios / E navega nele ainda, / Para aqueles que vêem em tudo o que lá não está, / A memória das naus.” [“The Tagus has large ships, / And still navigating on it, / For those who see in everything that which isn’t there, / The memory of caravels.”] It is no coincidence that, as with Joyce, the river should be a central axis of the imagined city. Lisbon becomes a far more tangible presence, not unlike the Paris of Rilke’s *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1906), in the prose fragments penned under the name Bernardo Soares, which have been assembled to form *O livro do desassossego*. Soares, the petty clerk who dreams of escape from the drudgery of his office, is in some ways the counterpart of such trapped fig-

ures as Little Chandler and Farrington of *Dubliners*, although, unlike these two, he has decidedly no familial commitments:

Hoje, em um dos devaneios sem propósito nem dignidade que constituem grande parte da substância espiritual da minha vida, imaginei-me liberto para sempre da Rua dos Douradores, do patrão Vasques, do guardo-livros Moreira, dos empregados todos, do moço, do garoto e do gato. (fragment 7)

[Today, in one of those reveries with neither purpose nor dignity which constitute a large part of my spiritual life, I imagined myself free forever from the Rua dos Douradores, from my boss Vasques, from Moreira the bookkeeper, from all the employees, from the porter, the office boy, the cat.]

But of course the city is as much a part of Soares as he is a figure in the cityscape: “Não há diferença entre mim e as ruas para o lado da Alfândega, salvo elas serem ruas e eu ser alma” [“there is no difference between myself and the streets by the side of the Custom House, except that they’d be streets and I a soul”] (fragment 3). In this he is not unlike Bloom, who might idly dream of escape to the “orange groves and immense melonfields north of Jaffa” or the country mansion idyll he names “Flowerville,” but who remains ineluctably wedded to the city of his birth and berth.

(iii) Language as Labyrinth

“A minha pátria é a língua portuguesa”

The Dublin that Joyce resurrects for us is very much a city of jostling argots, a forum in which slang and swear-word rub shoulder with flier, advertisement, headline and official proclamation. Words are not merely sounds. They are inscribed on the city as text. No sooner does Bloom appear in *Ulysses* than this tangibility is suggested by the detail of the partly erased label “*Plasto’s high grade ha.*” Pessoa’s Soares writes that “as palavras são para mim corpos tocáveis, sereias visíveis, sensualidades incorporadas” [“Words for me are touchable bodies, visible sirens, embodied sensualities”] (*O livro do desassossego*, fragment 260). Words are touchable, visible, embodied. This is precisely the experience of the young Stephen Dedalus at Clongowes Wood College: “Suck was a queer word [...] the sound was ugly. Once he had

washed his hands in the lavatory of the Wicklow Hotel and his father pulled the stopper up by the chain after and the dirty water went down through the hole in the basin. And when it had all gone down slowly the hole in the basin had made a sound like that: suck. Only louder" (*Portrait* 8-9).

Words are also slippery affairs, and both authors make much of the homophone, the neologism and the pun. One thinks of coinages such as "infinítupla" [*O livro do desassossego*, fragment 269, dated Dec. 1931] which seems to combine "infinita" and "dupla" in much the way César Vallejo's "Trilce" of 1922 conflates "triste" and "dulce." Pessoa's most translated poem is the brief "Autopsicografia" ["Autopsychography"], the title of which nods to the term autobiography. It begins:

O poeta é um fingidor.
Finge tão completamente
Que chega a fingir que é dor
A dor que deveras sente.

The poet's a man who feigns.
He feigns so completely
That he comes to pretend pain
For pain that he actually feels.

The point of the poem is contained in the epigrammatic first line, and centers on the word "fingidor," the final syllable of which is itself the term "dor," or "pain." As the third line seems to suggest, the pun could be written "O poeta é um *'finge-dor'*"; perhaps a Joycean translation might read "the poet is a man who *f-aches*."

The facility with which Joyce and Pessoa move between not only language-registers—what post-structuralists like to term discourses—but equally between a number of European languages is, perhaps, the most obvious point of comparison. Indeed it was a source of immediate income, Joyce as a teacher of English and Pessoa as a translator of business correspondence. Pessoa, who was adept in French and English in addition to Portuguese, produced bodies of poetry in both these languages, but his fascination with languages pales a little in comparison to that of Joyce.

That Joyce wrote letters in Italian, French and German is well known. While still a teenager, he privately studied German and Dano-Norwegian

specifically with a view to translating the plays of Gerhard Hauptmann and Henrik Ibsen into English. During his sojourn in Trieste, he chose the opposite course, and in 1909 translated J. M. Synge's play *Riders to the Sea* into Italian. Then, in 1921 Paris, he actively collaborated with Jacques Benoist-Méchin in the task of translating the "Penelope" episode of *Ulysses* into French. Indeed, a true Europhile *avant la lettre*, Joyce was also active in helping Georg Goyert revise an unsatisfactory 1927 translation of *Ulysses* into German, and in 1936 he traveled to Copenhagen to aid Tom Kristensen with a Danish version. This openness to linguistic pluralism would culminate in the colossally difficult Babel of his final work, *Finnegans Wake*.

It can hardly be doubted that this intense exposure to a plurality of tongues led directly to an interest not only in the possibilities and restraints within a single language but also in the problems of voicing within that language. No monolithic discourse can possibly be adequate to the multiplicity of experience within the modern metropolis. Bernardo Soares puts this difficulty very succinctly when he asks: "mas que linguagem estilhada e babélica falaria eu quando descrevesse o Elevador de Santa Justa, a Catedral de Reims, os calções dos zuavos, a maneira como o português se pronuncia em Trás-os-Montes?"—"But what splintered Babel-like language would I speak when I would describe the Elevator of Santa Justa, the Cathedral of Reims, the trousers worn by the Zouaves, the way in which Portuguese is pronounced in Trás-os-Montes?" (fragment 123).

The attempt to solve this problem is not only the basis of the recourse to onomatopoeia and citation in Álvaro de Campos but should also be understood to be fundamental to the entire project of the heteronyms. For Joyce, too, the impulse lies far deeper than the onomatopoeia of, for instance, the "fourworded wavespeech, seesoo, hrss, rsseeiss, oooo" or the "thump, clank, sllt" of the printing presses in the offices of the *Freeman's Journal*. It also lies behind his radical decision "to allow each adventure [...] to condition and even to create its own technique."

(iv) The Dialogic Imagination

"Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself."

The epigraph is a quotation from Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." That the American poet was a major influence on Fernando Pessoa is well known, and opening lines such as Ricardo Reis's "Vivem em nós inúmeros"—"A multi-

tude lives in us" might almost be translations of Whitman. However, the above quotation is taken, not from any of the various poetic manifestations of Pessoa, but from the opening chapter of *Ulysses*. The fact that it is recited by Buck Mulligan should not distract us. Joyce's multifarious opinions have a tendency of appearing in the most unlikely mouths, very often with ironic or self-deprecatory intent, as when the citizen articulates a number of Joyce's own positions on the vexed question of Irish nationalism.

We began this paper by making reference to Stephen Dedalus's aesthetic of the dramatic form:

The personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood and then a fluid and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalises itself, so to speak. [...] The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.

This agenda is most fully realized by Joyce in *Ulysses*, which might be described as a drama in three main voices, with a supporting cast of dozens. It is impossible to locate the author's position or voice within this polyphony, still less to privilege it. Thus, writing from a post-colonial perspective, Irish critic Declan Kiberd has noted "the refusal of *Ulysses* to ground itself in a narrating subject or an identifiable author: instead [Joyce] offered a text without any final authority."

In this regard, the Russian cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin made a number of claims for the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky that might equally be applied to *Ulysses*:

A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels [...] a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event. Dostoevsky's major heroes are, by the very nature of his creative design, not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse. ("Dostoevsky's Polyphonic Novel," *italics in the original*)

Personalities in Joyce are not differentiated merely in terms of their perspectives, their trajectories, their biographies, their opinions and their emotions

as might be true, say, of the cast of characters in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. What differentiates is rather the entire *Lebenswelt* or lived-world of their language.

I would like to suggest that, with the project of the heteronyms that constituted his life, Fernando Pessoa achieved precisely this form of polyphony. Let us now turn to a claim that Bakhtin makes in regard to poetry:

The language of the poetic genre is a unitary and singular Ptolemaic world outside of which nothing else exists and nothing else is needed. The concept of many worlds of language, all equal in their ability to conceptualize and to be expressive, is organically denied to poetic style.

The world of poetry, no matter how many contradictions and insoluble conflicts the poet develops within it, is always illumined by one unitary and indisputable discourse. Contradictions, conflicts and doubts remain in the object, in thoughts, in living experiences—in short, in the subject matter—but they do not enter into the language itself. In poetry, even discourse about doubt must be cast in a discourse that cannot be doubted. ("Discourse in the Novel" 286)

Bakhtin had clearly never encountered Fernando Pessoa! If we accept Bakhtin's claim that "the poetic genre is a unitary and singular Ptolemaic world" as having a validity prior to the appearance of projects such as that of the heteronyms, then Pessoa is cast in the light of a Copernicus, wrenching the unitary self from the gravitational center of the poetic solar system. Put less grandly, one might say that the poetic project that involved Pessoa for his entire life was just as deserving of those Bakhtinian accolades "polyphonic" and "dialogic" as was anything that Dostoevsky, or for that matter Joyce, put pen to.

Octavio Paz says of the heteronyms that they were "los héroes de una novela que nunca escribió Pessoa" ["the heroes of a novel that Pessoa never wrote"]. In a variation, Pessoa (or is it Soares?) writes: "Sou os arredores de uma vila que não há, o comentário prolixo a um livro que se não escreveu" ["I am the outskirts of a town that doesn't exist, the wordy commentary on a book that was never written"]. Perhaps Bakhtin would accept our claim if we couched it in the following terms. Fernando Pessoa was the author of a polyphony of discourses, and these were in constant dialogue, in a forum from which his own finalizing voice was absent. What differentiates Pessoa from Joyce and Dostoevsky is that he dispensed with the framework of a novel within which to frame the encounter between these voices.

David Butler completed his doctoral research at Trinity College, Dublin in 2002. His *Selected Pessoa* was published by Dedalus Press, Dublin (2004), and *James Joyce / Fernando Pessoa: "A Máscara e o Espelho,"* co-authored with Richard Zenith, by Instituto Camões, Lisbon (2004). He is currently Education Officer at the James Joyce Centre, Dublin, and is working on a translation of the poet Alexandre O'Neill.