

MODERNISM'S NOVEL APPROACHES TO THE NOVEL  
IN THE *BOOK OF DISQUIET* AND *ULYSSES*

Madalena Lobo Antunes<sup>1</sup> (IELT)

Can an unpublished book disturb the stability of a category? We know that there is a difference between the novel before *Ulysses* and the novel after it, but that is, in part, because James Joyce became a world-renowned author. To what extent is it useful to discuss the limits of a category in these terms? How can a text that disturbs the stability of a category find its place in the canon?

One of the texts that I will be discussing is not a novel. Nonetheless, it could be. Or more appropriately, it could have been. Its title is the *Book of Disquiet* and its author is Fernando Pessoa. Pessoa is an unusual author to say the least. First, the *oeuvre* of this Portuguese author overcomes and transfixes genre, then, it erupts into authorial confusion. Poets, editors, translators, prose writers, crime-fiction writers, characters constructed with various amounts of detail, have a word, a fictional word, in the literary universe created by Fernando Pessoa; some are authors with detailed biographies, some function simply as pseudonyms, others are proto-authors that never reach a stage of fictional embodiment. Kevin Jackson writes that: "Largely unnoticed by Britain and the rest of the Anglophone world, Portugal has quietly gone about the task of producing at least three of the century's greatest poets: Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, and Álvaro de Campos" (38). These are three separate

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authors and three separate literary projects with fictional biographies. Besides these three poets, protagonists in Pessoa's literary galaxy, there is also a prose-writer, the author of the *Book of Disquiet*.

Very few of Fernando Pessoa's literary projects were completed. The *Book of Disquiet* is the most obvious example of a megalomaniac undertaking that remains dispersed but has been fashioned into a somewhat solid literary object as a book by posterity. Editors have chosen to organize the texts chronologically or thematically<sup>2</sup>, however, Fernando Pessoa died without making a final decision as to what the book would be and how it would be organized. Even though it never acquired final form, some of the texts that the author indicated as being part of the *Book* were published in literary journals in Pessoa's lifetime. Many of them, however, were left in an envelope marked *Book of Disquiet* as finished texts or fragmentary notes. There is also the question of authorship. Initially destined to be the work of its real author, Fernando Pessoa (cf. Sepúlveda, *Livros*, 2014), the book acquired another authorial mark, that of fictional Vicente Guedes, a decadent aristocrat, prior to its final authorial unity and the signature of the also fictional, Bernardo Soares. In a note precisely about this transition – from Vicente Guedes to Bernardo Soares – Fernando Pessoa writes the following concerning this turning point:

The organization of the book should be based on a highly rigorous selection from among the various kinds of texts written, adapting the older ones – which lack the psychology of Bernardo Soares – to that true psychology as it has now emerged”<sup>3</sup> (*Prose*: 471).

In this way it becomes obvious that the authorial identification of each text is done after its composition.

As Pedro Sepúlveda has shown, Pessoa's character-authors are constantly producing editorial conundrums. Moreover, the creation of fictional characters could have been the natural consequence of Pessoa's desire to organize books and collections of books, a practical solution to bring together the creative chaos

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Zenith *Desassossego*, 2011, as an example of the first case and Pizarro *Desassossego*, 2010, as an example of the second.

<sup>3</sup> “A organização do livro deve basear-se numa escolha, rígida quanto possível, dos trechos variadamente existentes, adaptando, porém, os mais antigos, que falhem à psicologia de Bernardo Soares, tal como agora surge, a essa vera psicologia.” (Pessoa, *Desassossego*: 509)

forced by the writing of different projects in different genres (cf. Sepúlveda, *Livros* 2014). Pessoa occasionally created fictional editorial roles where fictional editors are to present the works of his fictional authors. In the case of the *Book of Disquiet*, the fictional editor has the same name as the actual author, Fernando Pessoa.

In one of the many prefaces Fernando Pessoa wrote for the *Book* he describes, how he met the fictional writer of the book, inserting himself in the work through a fictional paratextual role. Upon meeting this man, the fictional author of the *Book of Disquiet*, the fictional editor, named Fernando Pessoa, decides that he should publish the book and support Bernardo Soares' editorial endeavour. Fernando Pessoa describes Bernardo Soares in the following manner:

Fairly tall and thin, he must have been about thirty years old. He hunched over terribly when sitting down but less so standing up, and he dressed with a carelessness that wasn't entirely care-less. In his pale, uninteresting face there was a look of suffering that didn't add any interest, and it was difficult to say just what kind of suffering this look suggested<sup>4</sup> (5).

Pessoa underlines Bernardo Soares' inability to impress. Furthermore, he explains why he became the person responsible for publishing this author's work:

Nothing ever prompted him to have friends or lovers. I was the only one who was in some way his intimate. But even if I always felt that I was relating to an assumed personality and that he didn't really consider me his friend, I realized that he needed someone to whom he could leave the book that he left<sup>5</sup> (6).

This socially inept nobody, a scrivener like Melville's *Bartleby*, meets Fernando Pessoa in a restaurant and by chance takes

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<sup>4</sup> "Era um homem que aparentava trinta anos, magro, mais alto que baixo, curvado exageradamente quando sentado, mas menos quando de pé, vestido com um certo desleixo não inteiramente desleixado. Na face pálida e sem interesse de feições um ar de sofrimento não acrescentava interesse e era difícil definir que espécie de sofrimento esse ar indicava (...)." (Pessoa, *Desassossego*: 43)

<sup>5</sup> "Nada o aproximou nunca nem de amigos nem de amantes. Fui o único que, de alguma maneira estive na intimidade dele. Mas – a par de ter vivido sempre com uma falsa personalidade sua, e de suspeitar que nunca ele me teve realmente por amigo – percebi sempre que ele alguém havia de chamar a si para deixar o livro que deixou." (Pessoa, *Desassossego*: 45)

him to visit his house where the assistant-bookkeeper hands him his book. Fernando Pessoa not only takes an interest in the book, but he offers to become its patron. Bernardo Soares is a solitary figure, a discrete writer that scribbles and comments on the events that take place in his insignificant life and random self-analytical thoughts. Fernando Pessoa is the publisher of a recent obscure literary review that Bernardo Soares not only knows but also has read and admires. On meeting Pessoa, Soares is impressed and responds to their literary connection by sharing his otherwise secret book. According to Pessoa-the editor, the book would have perished in nothingness, had it not been for this meeting, due to its author's inability to establish social connections with anyone. There are many incongruities in Fernando Pessoa's description of Bernardo Soares. Pessoa is, in that fictional context, like the narrator in *Bartleby the Scrivener*, an outsider observing an odd man, in this case, one with literary inclinations.

The timeline of the *Book of Disquiet* is a long one. The first-person narrator, the voice that speaks of his attempt to write the book, reiterates his insignificance. Written from 1913 to 1934 as separate texts, some acquiring finished form, others remaining as fragments, the *Book of Disquiet* is under constant revision and transformation throughout Pessoa's life. The earlier texts appear closer in tone to the decadence related to end of century symbolism and to aristocrat Vicente Guedes, whereas the later ones come together as the musings of the narrator-author that I have already mentioned, Bernardo Soares. These are of a particular aesthetic tone that drifts away from symbolism, representing a different kind of personal decadence, the solitude of someone who has almost nothing besides writing, a solitary activity. Bernardo Soares is the character of his own book wherein he repeatedly declares his inability to finish or give substantial form to "his" book. This, of course, mirrors Fernando Pessoa's own problems in giving shape to the *Book of Disquiet*. So, to make this clearer – the character and his creator face the same problem simultaneously – experiencing constant defeat from their writing.

In one of the texts of the book, the narrator claims that it is composed of "his" confessions and in another he describes it as his "factless autobiography". The narrator enables the confusion as to how the book should be characterized in terms of genre.

Returning to my initial questions: seeing as one book or text is not sufficient to trigger the creation of a new literary genre, how can one examine the possibility of the *Book of Disquiet* in

the literary canon? This gesture necessarily implies turning the term 'novel' as category inside out. This can be substantiated by the research begun by Kenneth David Jackson concerning his theory of adverse genres in Fernando Pessoa: "By practicing adverse genres, which are historical literary forms with a diverse or estranged content, Pessoa makes a revolution in the way language is understood, leading a radical revision of Western literary practice" (18). This is Jackson's hypothesis, a theory of everything, so to speak, that could explain Fernando Pessoa's authorial universe. For the same critic it is the *Book's* similarities with the autobiographical genre that bring it closer to the novel: "When read in its totality, the 'Book' as a journal or diary takes on characteristics of the modern novel through character development and becomes an open work of art through its indeterminacy." (167). This inevitably creates instability in the novel as genre and brings about questions as to the novel's capacity for verisimilitude prior to the modernist transfiguration of the genre. The other example that produces a similar effect of bringing instability to the category of genre, *Ulysses*, is held together by a backbone of chapters divided into episodes, with a classical parallel. However, in the *Book of Disquiet* there is no such backbone. In a single novel, *Ulysses*, James Joyce explores several genres, subgenres and styles. Prose, poetry, drama, stream of consciousness, so-called female literature, psychodrama, in a gesture that brings together novelistic characteristics often as parody, as one can see, for example, in the 'Nausicaa' episode in Gerty Macdowell's narration. One could argue, therefore, that Joyce also explores "adverse genres" and makes different genres equivalent, bringing them together in an epic novel and thereby dismissing their hierarchical structure. In *Ulysses* there is a route that can be traced, one can imagine that, if the Odysseus parallel runs its course the novel will eventually end in a space that will very likely resemble Ithaca. In *Ulysses* there is a multiple universe of perspectives, even though it is clear that there is one protagonist, Leopold Bloom, and another very important character, Bloom's desired son, Stephen Dedalus. However, one can also observe a sort of collective abstract protagonist in Leopold and Molly Bloom's relationship. If one accepts this possibility then this could be another one of James Joyce's innovation to the novelistic genre. The novel ends with the voice of Molly Bloom's inner thoughts, even though she is a character with a mostly silent role. Up to that point she is mentioned, described, and even judged, but only in the final pages does she enlighten us as to the problematic issues in her marriage. Molly and Leopold's relationship and the way it intertwines

with Stephen Dedalus' family life (his difficult relationship with Simon Dedalus, his siblings' poverty) is the main topic explored from different characters' perspectives.

James Joyce explores family dynamics and the way they are transformed. In the beginning of the novel, Stephen is struggling to accept his mother's death and the fact that he refused to pray at her deathbed. Her death triggers the alcohol fuelled emotional downfall of her husband, Simon, and Stephen's rejection of his father. This is the Dedalus family's drama. Simon Dedalus, however and unlike Leopold Bloom, has a fascinating public persona and attracts the admiration of his fellow Dubliners. Leopold and Molly Bloom have their own family crisis because they have not had a successful sexual relationship since the death of their son, Rudy. We know this because Leopold Bloom says at one point: "Could never like it again after Rudy" (Joyce, *Ulysses*: 213). Even though this does not mean that he is not a sexual being, it is a burden he carries and one he cannot escape.

*Ulysses* is constructed around social experiences and the expectations created by social conventions and this is brought about by urban coexistence. Desmond Harding considers that:

As Bloom traverses the city (...) the centripetal force of his empathetic consciousness engages with the life of the city; indeed his odyssey evokes and contains life-sustaining memories and desires and much as it chronicles the ambivalent and complex life-work of a metropolis" (134).

James Joyce leads us to interpreting the possibility that Leopold Bloom could become a surrogate father to Stephen Dedalus, and the "Ithaca" episode is the final test of this possibility, but Stephen does not want Bloom to play that role in his life.

As I mentioned before, Bernardo Soares' defining characteristic is insignificance. This becomes the justification for the book never becoming something concrete. He speaks of himself in such terms: "I'm the character of an unwritten novel wafting in the air, dispersed without ever having been, among the dreams of someone who didn't know how to complete me"<sup>6</sup> (Pessoa, *Disquiet*: 227). Here one can see that Bernardo Soares is describing a creator outside of himself, an abstraction, but

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<sup>6</sup> "Sou uma figura de romance por escrever, passando aérea, e desfeita sem ter sido, entre os sonhos de quem não me soube completar" (Pessoa, *Desassossego*: 265)

there is a clear space between the character and its creator, and the creator is an abstract entity. It's as if his insignificance is the natural result of his creator's indecisiveness, his failure. In another text, however, this is not the case:

How I envy those who produce novels, those who begin them and write them and finish them! I can imagine novels by chapter, sometimes with the actual phrases of dialogue and the narrative commentary in between, but I'm incapable of committing those dreams of writing to paper<sup>7</sup> (Pessoa, *Desassossego*: 250).

Soares identifies himself as someone who desires to write a novel but is too inept to conclude it. He is a failure at literature just as he is a failure at life. Nonetheless, he is less of a failure than he claims to be – that is the irony of it all – by writing the book, his book, he proves himself wrong. In another text he explains how at times he feels less real than his surroundings:

Sometimes, when I'm actively engaged in life and have as clear a notion of myself as the next man, my mind is beset by a strange feeling of doubt: I begin to wonder if I exist, if I might not be someone else's dream. I can imagine, with an almost carnal vividness, that I might be the character of a novel, moving within the reality constructed by a complex narrative, in the long waves of its style<sup>8</sup> (Pessoa, *Disquiet*: 245).

In this case lucidity brings uncertainty and a clear notion of self generates doubt. The reader can interpret this as a character coming to terms with his fictionality or a human being accepting his social insignificance. In this case, metaphors are constructed around their literal potential, references destroyed and then reconstructed but in a slightly different manner, and language reiterates the character's ambivalence to reality and the ambiguity of his place in fiction. The more one collects information and reads on the more puzzling it all becomes, most

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<sup>7</sup> “Como invejo os que escrevem romances, que os começam, e os fazem, e os acabam! Sei imaginá-los, capítulo a capítulo, por vezes com as frases do diálogo e as que estão entre o diálogo, mas não saberia dizer no papel esses sonhos de escrever (...)” (Pessoa, *Desassossego*: 285).

<sup>8</sup> “Às vezes, em plena vida activa, em que, evidentemente, estou tão claro de mim como todos os outros, vem até à minha suposição uma sensação estranha de dúvida; não sei se existo, sinto possível o ser um sonho de outrem, afigura-se-me, quase carnalmente, que poderei ser personagem de uma novela, movendo-me, nas ondas longas de um estilo, na verdade feita de uma grande narrativa” (Pessoa, *Desassossego*: 280).

metaphors about the act of writing become litotes. Fernando Pessoa uses fictional layers and language indeterminacy to bemuse the reader's natural desire for coherence.

In fact, the texts of the *Book of Disquiet* are often constructed around *reductio ad absurdum* and the narrator even claims in one of the texts that: "*Reductio ad absurdum* is one of my favourite drinks"<sup>9</sup>. This just adds another layer of irony to an already ironic construction, an inward spiral of doubt. Or, as Álvaro de Campos, one of the heteronyms, described Fernando Pessoa, "a ball of yarn wrapped in on itself"<sup>10</sup>. On one hand, what holds together the texts is an aesthetics of negation, on the other, the fact that the book exists proves that that negation is dubious. As Paul de Man explains, irony can expand and develop as *vertige*:

Irony possesses an inherent tendency to gain momentum and not stop until it has run its full course; from the small and apparently innocuous exposure of a small self-deception it soon reaches the absolute. Often starting as litotes or understatement, it contains within itself the power to become hyperbole (215).

The narrator of the *Book of Disquiet* claims that "novelistic figures, as we all know, are as real as any of us"<sup>11</sup> (344). Evidently this is not true for us, but in Soares' case it might well be. He exists in a fictional universe where he is constantly questioning his own reality and doubling his nonexistence. However, it is his insignificance, his ability to construct himself in his nothingness that has made the *Book of Disquiet*, Fernando Pessoa's most popular book in the Anglophone community. He is the antihero of the office desk fighting a dreary life of routine by failing to write a book. Leopold Bloom is a man with an extremely interesting life in comparison.

The *Book of Disquiet* could be interpreted as Fernando Pessoa's attempt to overcome the novel that he could never have written. Nonetheless, its existence brings up questions as to what the novel is and how one can outline the boundaries of prose-fiction's first-person narratives. If it is not a novel then

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<sup>9</sup> "A *reductio ad absurdum* é uma das minhas bebidas predilectas" (Pessoa, *Desassossego*: 290).

<sup>10</sup> "(...) o próprio Fernando Pessoa seria um pagão, se não fosse um novelo embrulhado para o lado de dentro" (Campos, *Notas*: 42)

<sup>11</sup> "As figuras de romance são – como todos sabem – tão reais como qualquer de nós" (Pessoa, *Desassossego*: 378).

what is it? Clearly it cannot be an autobiographical literary form as there is no possibility of an autobiographical pact with a fictional author. The question will remain unanswered with each new reading raising new questions, making the *Book of Disquiet* an open work of art *par excellence*.

Looking closely now on the initial comparison I made between the *Book of Disquiet* and *Ulysses*, and after having established that the *Book* is a self-referential piece of writing, one can look back on *Ulysses* and observe Joyce's, more subtle than Pessoa's, references to writing. A large part of Joycean exegesis examines "Penelope" as an example of stream of consciousness writing, or as a paramount model for how writing can resemble the "flow" of the mind (Cf. Attridge, 1989). Derek Attridge, however, demonstrates quite clearly, how James Joyce uses graphic marks to illustrate the relationship between writing and thinking in this episode:

"Penelope" is a text that exploits readerly habits to fuse speech and writing, or more accurately to demonstrate the inseparability and interdependence of speech and writing in a literate culture. Though its visual techniques it is able to suggest the unceasing passage of thoughts, impelled by strong opinions, desires, and memories, while at the same time revealing that thought, far from being a pure realm of subjectivity is traversed by the material, differential, and cultural properties of language (552).

That this characteristic of "Penelope" evaded most criticism for so long (Attridge's study dates from 1989) proves how subtle and hidden away some of Joyce's literary innovations really can be.

I will examine now what Fernando Pessoa had to say about *Ulysses*. Only one note on Joyce and on *Ulysses* in particular has been found so far in his literary estate. This being so it can still help us to understand his apparent rejection of it and even to consider the difficulties and prejudices that came about in subsequent criticism. Pessoa writes: "The art of James Joyce, like that of Mallarmé, is an art preoccupied with method, with how it's made. Even the sensuality of *Ulysses* is a symptom of intermediation. It is a hallucinatory delirium – the kind treated by psychiatrists – presented as an end in itself"<sup>12</sup> (*Prose*: 222).

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<sup>12</sup> "A arte de James Joyce, como a de Mallarmé, é a arte fixada no processo de fabrico, no caminho. A mesma sensualidade de *Ulysses* é um symptoma do intermedio. É o delirio onirico, dos psychiatras, exposto como fim" (Pessoa, *Apreciações*: 148).

One can argue that the *Book of Disquiet* is also an example of “an art preoccupied with method” it is a book conceived of texts without a stable organizational principle, most of them concerning the writing of said book. Now taking Pessoa’s ambiguous evaluation of Joyce even a little bit further: is not heteronymy a form of “intermediation”? Is the term “hallucinatory deliriums” so far off from Álvaro de Campos’ sensual and sexual rants in the “Ode Marítima” (“Naval Ode”)? The conclusion one can take from this note on Joyce written by Pessoa is that the Portuguese poet fails to see a point in Joyce’s experimental artistic gestures. Nevertheless, if one analyses the tone that characterizes other texts and notes written by Pessoa on other authors, one realizes that contradiction is an authorial mark of his appreciations of literary texts, especially those of those that could be considered his “rivals”. Pessoa’s possible intentions behind this note on Joyce require a more in depth comparative study, but his desire to manipulate posterity’s evaluation of his own work can not be an excluded factor. One recalls Joyce’s famous declaration on *Ulysses*: “I’ve put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant and that is the only way to insure immortality” (Ellmann: 501), an intention that Pessoa might have shared with Joyce but that the Portuguese poet never admitted with such blatant honesty.

This study only sheds a light on some of the ways which James Joyce and Fernando Pessoa overcame the boundaries of the novel. To this day one cannot affirm with complete certainty that the *Book of Disquiet* is a novel, nevertheless, its implications into the transfiguration of the genre cannot be ignored. *Ulysses* is more widely accepted as a novel, a consensus that the exegesis has had to admit so that it could move on to the more hermeneutically demanding, and therefore more “open” to new readings and innovative interpretations, *Finnegan’s Wake*. One can, nonetheless, accept that both Pessoa and Joyce were pioneers in the destruction of the mostly plot-oriented novel of the past, giving birth to an age of the character. Exploring character through language in its most human dimension: by depicting incoherent minds reacting to life and social conventions as they appear: a life of social improvisation and survival.

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