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Mythologising the Exiled Self in James Joyce and Fernando Pessoa

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Keywords

James Joyce, Fernando Pessoa, myth, exiled self, nightbook, periphery, plurality, Ireland, Portugal.

Abstract

This article brings together contemporaries James Joyce and Fernando Pessoa in articulating the idea of mythologising the exiled self. There are interesting points of convergence between Joyce and Pessoa which are very fruitful to delving deeper into the works of both authors and reading them anew to open up fresh perspectives and horizons. Pessoa most likely only scanned quickly through Ulysses and read little else of Joyce; and Joyce probably never even heard of Pessoa. Nevertheless, Pessoa’s small critical synopsis of Ulysses with the fascinating descriptions of it as a “literatura de antemanhã” and “sintoma de intermédio” are worthy of attention. I focus on three themes in mythologizing the exiled self: first, that of the peripheral landscape via motifs of defeat, homelessness, language, and the sea; second the expression of plurality of the subject rather than “death of the subject”; and third, the creation of the “nightbook”, giving the exiled self a way to see in the dark, the freedom to dream infinitely, and to embrace the life of repetition that is the passport to eternity during one of the darkest chapters in twentieth century history.

Palavras-chave

James Joyce, Fernando Pessoa, mito, o “eu” exilado, livro nocturno, pluralidade, Irlanda, Portugal.

Resumo

Este artigo reúne os contemporâneos James Joyce e Fernando Pessoa, articulando a ideia de mitificação do “eu” exilado. Existem interessantes pontos de convergência entre Joyce e Pessoa; pontos muito úteis para investigar mais profundamente as obras dos dois autores e lê-los novamente, abrindo novas perspetivas e horizontes. Provavelmente, Pessoa nunca leu Uliisses nem qualquer outro escrito de Joyce, e Joyce provavelmente nunca ouviu falar de Fernando Pessoa. Não obstante, a pequena sinopse crítica que Pessoa escreveu sobre Uliisses, com as descrições fascinantes de uma “literatura de antemanhã” e “síntoma de intermédio” é digna de atenção. Irei concentrar-me em três temas na mitificação do eu exilado: primeiro, a paisagem periférica através dos motivos de derrota, do mar, a língua, e do estar à deriva; segundo, a expressão da pluralidade do sujeito em vez da “morte do sujeito”; e terceiro, a criação do “Nightbook”, oferecendo ao “eu” exilado uma maneira de ver no escuro, a liberdade de sonhar infinitamente e de afirmar uma vida de repetição que é o passaporte para a eternidade durante um dos capítulos mais escuros da história do século XX.

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If one has the stomach to add the breakages, upheavals and distortions, inversions of all this chambermade music one stands, given a grain of Goodwill, a fair chance of actually seeing the whirling dervish, Tumult, son of Thunder, self exiled in upon his ego a nightlong a shaking betwixtween white or reddr hawrors, noondayterrorised to skin and bone by an ineluctable phantom (may the Shaper have mercery on him!) writing the mystery of himself in furniture.

James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (Joyce, 1992b: 184)

O mito é o nada que é tudo [Myth is the nothing that is everything]

Fernando Pessoa, *Ulisses* (Pessoa, 1979: 27)

**Introduction**

The exiled self articulates for many an essential feeling that pervaded the twentieth century. It is a self that is banished, scattered and multiplied. The etymology of the word “exile” comes from the Latin _ex_, “away”, and “ile”, deriving from “al”, meaning “to wander”, which in turn comes from the Greek _alaomai_ to wander, stray, or roam about. In using the term “exiled self”, I am also thinking of the self as plurality which incorporates multiplication and othering of the self when reading James Joyce and Fernando Pessoa. “Othering” pertains to becoming someone else, an alter ego of oneself who exists only in the world of literature, such as the othering of Joyce into Stephen Dedalus or Leopold Bloom or Pessoa into Bernardo Soares¹ or Álvaro de Campos. Here are creations who either see from a multiplicity of perspectives or seek to multiply themselves – and this is what it is to be a complex and infinitely curious human being in modernity. The evolution of the exiled self in the case of Joyce and Pessoa is manifest through their childhood, landscape, and life choices – all of which are embodied in the literature they produce. Except for perhaps Montaigne or Kierkegaard² (who do so in

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¹ As is well known, *Livro de Desassossego* has another heteronym – Vicente Guedes – who was later replaced by Bernardo Soares. Vicente Guedes was conceived in 1909, and it was probably around 1915 that he became the first author associated with *Livro do Desassossego* before being absorbed into Bernardo Soares in 1929 for the second phase (which has almost twice as many pages as the first phase) of the writing of the book. I will take the position in this article of citing Soares for the whole of the book as I see him as the more developed version of Guedes, and final version and heteronym of the book. Both heteronyms have the same job, a very similar biography, and both live in the Baixa district of Lisbon although their street addresses are different. For more on Vicente Guedes, see: Pessoa (2012b: 74-75; 2013, 331-332; 2012a: 495-496; 2001a: 465-466).

² In regard to Kierkegaard, I have recently published articles bringing Pessoa and Kierkegaard and Joyce and Kierkegaard together. The first, “Into the Nothing with Kierkegaard and Pessoa”, looks at the idea of the “nothing” as the space in the interval, as that corresponding to anxiety, and how the two writers attempt to confront this “nothing” (Ryan, 2013). The second, “James Joyce: negation, kierkeyaard, wake and repetition”, explores the bourgeois, urban writer, the ghost of the father, the
different ways via essays and philosophical writing), few authors in European modernity can rival Joyce or Pessoa in the transference of one’s own self into their work so brilliantly (in the examples of Dedalus and Soares) in such detailed fashion while at the same time maintain the masterful distance of the artist.³

This idea of the exiled self is explored in various European philosophical and political texts for the twentieth century such as, amongst others, Walter Benjamin’s *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Maurice Blanchot’s *The Writing of the Disaster*, Theodor Adorno’s *Minima Moralia and Aesthetic Theory*, Claudio Magris’ *Danube*, Gillian Rose’s *Broken Middle*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, and most recently Yuri Slezkine’s *The Jewish Century*. These are all examples of texts that displace disciplinary identity from one field to the next, and by focusing on the marginal, supplementary and seemingly banished elements of European modernity shed light on how to understand the twentieth century and its hidden history in Europe. This was a century of displacement, individualism, ideology, the triumph of technology and rapid growth of a mobile, homeless, job shifting, and broadly educated people. Joyce and Pessoa’s central heteronyms and characters embody this description.

Before going directly to the concept of mythologising the exiled self, I will show a direct link between Joyce and Pessoa in looking at the single comment on Joyce made by Pessoa. The last three sections will demonstrate the parallels between the two writers in the idea of mythologising the exiled self via three themes: first, through appropriating their peripheral landscapes into their writing; second, by transforming the exiled self into a plurality; and third, by showing the culmination of mythologising the exiled self in what I call their “nightbooks” – most specifically *Finnegans Wake*, *Livro do Desassossego*, and what makes up almost the entire second half of *Ulysses*.

There already has been some work done in linking Pessoa and Joyce such as, for example, in the short article by Alfredo Margarido (who also translated *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* into Portuguese) called “Fernando Pessoa, James Joyce e o Egipto” (1990), Carlos Ceia’s “Modernism, Joyce, and Portuguese Literature” (2006), and David Butler’s “Joyce e Pessoa: autores da polifonia” (2004)⁴. Margarido begins his article by stating that the relation between Joyce and Pessoa is in the indirect use of Joyce’s school experience that helps illuminate some information regarding Pessoa’s education in Durban, and in the ethical and 

³ For a detailed account of the various otherings of the self in heteronymic form in Iberia in Pessoa’s time, see Rosell (2004).
⁴ See also Guimarães (2002), and Salgado (1998).