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O III Congresso Internacional Fernando Pessoa
Lisbon, 28-30 November 2013

“Children Still Weaving Budded Aureoles’: Ancestral Hands in *The Book of Disquiet*”

Introduction

I’ll start with a few preliminary statements that will serve as the foundation of my talk:

1. The English title of our panel is “To feel is to create.”
2. “To feel” in *The Book of Disquiet* means ultimately to feel the fear of death (what the Romanian writer Emil Cioran calls “the most ancient of human fears”).
3. The link that joins this feeling to creativity is found in the concept of catharsis, used by Aristotle in his *Poetics* to designate the process of obtaining relief from the tragic emotions of pity and fear.
4. There are essentially two distinct ways of achieving this relief:
 - a. Either you impose your suffering to someone else
 - b. Or you write about it
5. First technique (what we call “scapegoating”) is described in the passage from *A Disquiet Anthology*, entitled “Sentimental Education.” There we learn that, among the various methods for avoiding suffering, one of “the more

subtle and more difficult is to develop the habit of incarnating the pain in an ideal figure. . . . we must create another I, charged with suffering . . . everything we suffer.” This method, we are told, involves “an inner sadism” on the part of the creator.

[“Outro método, mais sutil esse e mais difícil, é habituar-se a encarnar a dor numa determinada figura idea. Criar um outro Eu que seja o encarregado de sofrer em nós, de sofrer o que sofremos.”]

6. The second technique – writing about it – is referred to in Text 12 of *The Book of Disquiet*, in which Bernardo Soares tells us, “If I write what I feel, it’s to reduce the fever of feeling . . . I make landscapes out of what I feel. I make holidays of my sensations. I can easily understand women who embroider out of sorrow or who crochet because life exists”

[“Se escrevo o que sinto é porque assim diminuo a febre de sentir. . . Faço paisagens com o que sinto. Faço férias das sensações. Compreendo bem as bordadoras por mágoa e as que fazem meia porque há vida.”]

Part One: Catharis through Scapegoating

With those remarks as background, I’ll begin the talk itself by pointing out that “incarnating the pain in an ideal figure” (or “scapegoating”) perfectly describes Fernando Pessoa’s strategy in fashioning the figure of Bernardo Soares. In an often-quoted letter to Alberto Casais Monteiro, Pessoa explains of Soares that “his

personality, although not my own, doesn't differ from my own but is a mere *mutilation* of it." As though to confirm the accuracy of Pessoa's explanation, Soares compares himself (and I'm quoting) to "a disease that's foreign to me," to which he adds that he's just "the sick part" of another person (Text 467).

In his introduction to *The Book*, Richard Zenith documents the various ways in which Pessoa has mutilated Soares. He calls Soares "a mutilated Pessoa, with missing parts," points out that he lacks Pessoa's irony and sense of humor and that he is condemned to working the fixed hours of a bookkeeper, while Pessoa, who wrote business letters in English and French, came and went as he wanted. To these we may add that Pessoa has condemned Soares to writing prose rather than poetry and that he has inflicted upon him a crippling – indeed an incapacitating -- form of self-consciousness:

To wish someone a good day sometimes intimidates me. My voice gets caught, as if there were a strange audacity in saying these words out loud. It's a kind of squeamishness about existing. (Text 135)

[“Dar a alguém os bons-dias por vezes intimida-me. Seca-se-me a voz, como se houvesse uma audácia estranha em ter essas palavras em voz alta. E uma espécie de pudor de existir – não tem outro nome!”]

Pessoa's portrayal of Soares's physical appearance in the "Preface" to *The Book* contributes as well to this fashioning of him as the "ideal figure" upon whom he displaces his own suffering:

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. It seemed to suggest various kinds: hardships, anxieties and the suffering born of the indifference that comes from having already suffered a lot. . . . dejection – the stagnation of cold anguish – so consistently covered his face that it was hard to discern any of his other traits. . . . His voice was hesitant and colourless, as in those who hope for nothing because it's perfectly useless to hope.

[“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 – parecia indicar vários, privações, angústias, et aquele sofrimento que nasce de indiferença que provém de ter sofrido muito.”

. . . A sua voz era baça e trêmula, como das criaturas que não esperam nada, porque é perfeitamente inútil esperar.]

I'm reminded as I read this passage of Emil Cioran's assertion that “Cruelty is a sign of distinction, at least in a literary work. The more talented the writer, the more pleasure he takes in devising for his characters situations from which there is no escape. He pursues them, bullies them, and imposes on them countless insurmountable obstacles, including, ultimately, death itself.”

Having fashioned Soares as his scapegoat, Pessoa then resorts to the practice – which was devised ages ago by ancestral hands -- of inflicting intense physical pain

on him: In Text 80, for example, Soares tells us (courtesy of his creator's "inner sadism") that the skin of his soul is cut, that harsh things wound him, and that objects weigh heavy on him. He concludes by lamenting, "It's as if my life amounted to being thrashed by it." ["A minha vida é como se me batessem com ela."]

As though this were not cruelty enough, Pessoa takes the further step of inflicting upon Soares the suffering of everyone else:

"I suffered in me, with me, the aspiration of all eras, and every disquietude of every age walked with me to the whispering shore of the sea. What men wanted and didn't achieve, what they killed in order to achieve, and all that souls have secretly been – all this filled the feeling soul with which I walked to the seashore."

["Sofri em mim, comigo, as aspirações de todas as eras, e comigo passearam, à beira ouvida do mar, os desassossegos de todos os tempos. O que os homens quiseram e não fizeram, o que mataram fazendo-o, o que as almas foram e ninguém disse – de tudo isto se formou a alma sensível com que passei de noite à beira-mar."]

As yet an additional stage of this scapegoating process, Pessoa devises ritual punishment for Soares in the form of a prison. We see this most *concretely* in the interlocking enclosed spaces that consist of the office in which he works, the room in which he lives, and the narrow, confining street which is his neighborhood. He

likewise imposes upon him the *subjective* experience of being confined to a boundless prison:

- “life has given us no more than a prison cell” (Text 261).
- The bored live in a narrow cell, those who abhor the narrowness of life live inside a large cell.
- “But those who suffer tedium feel imprisoned in the worthless freedom of an infinite cell.” [“Mas o que tem tédio sente-se preso em liberdade frusta numa cela infinita.” (Text 381)

[I will mention just briefly that the archetypal prison fashioned by ancestral hands is the labyrinth from classical legend in which the “mutilated” Minotaur was incarcerated]

Imprisonment in “the worthless freedom of an infinite cell” is paralleled in *The Book* by banishment:

- “I suddenly find myself isolated, an exile, where I’d always thought I was a citizen.” (Text 39)
- [“Sou, neste momento de ver, um solitário súbito, que se reconhece desterrado onde se encontrou sempre cidadão.”]
- “Perhaps it’s finally time to make this one effort: take a good look at my life. I see myself in the midst of a vast desert.” (Text 17)

[São horas talvez de eu fazer o único esforço de eu olhar para minhar vida. Vejo-me no meio e um deserto imenso.”]

[Briefly: the archetypal for this ancestral form of scapegoating is the driving of the scapegoat into the desert as prescribed in *Leviticus* 16, which details the ritual to be observed on the day of atonement.]

Part Two: Catharsis through Writing

Soares says, in Text 65, that he would like to establish the same scapegoating link between feeling and creativity [to return to the title of our panel] as the one that led to his own creation:

“How I’d love to infect at least one soul with some kind of poison, worry or disquiet! This would console me a little for my chronic failure to take action. My life’s purpose would be to pervert.

But do my words ring in anyone else’s soul? Does anyone hear them besides me?”

[“Ah, mas como eu desejaria lançar ao menos numa alma alguma coisa de veneno, de desasossego e de inquietação. Isso consolar-me-ia um pouco da nulidade de ação em que vivo. Perverter seria o fim da minha vida.”

“Mas vibra alguma alma com as minhas palavras? Ouve-as alguém que não só eu?”]

The answer to his question is presumably “No”. In other words, we never actually see Soares displacing what he calls his “fever of feeling” upon another person.

In Text 299, he implies, rather surprisingly, that he does resort to this technique :
 “I’ve so externalized myself on the inside that I don’t exist except externally. I’m the empty stage where various actors act out various plays” (Text 299).

In his introduction to *The Book of Disquiet*, however, Richard Zenith, rightly describes this declaration as “strange.” He then asks, “are we supposed to believe that he [Soares], who is one of the actors who played on the stage of Pessoa’s life, had his own troupe of heteronyms?” To which he replies: [Soares] is clearly describing Pessoa’s own *method of survival*. That method is, precisely, the one described in “Sentimental Education”: the sado-masochistic one of “incarnating pain in an ideal figure.”

My own idea is that Pessoa’s “troupe of heteronyms” disappears from The Book but then returns in the words of the text itself, which replace Bernardo Soares as the ideal figure in whom pain is incarnated. I’ll preface my discussion of this point by quoting three passage in which Soares talks about writing:

First, one in which he speaks of his identification with the words that he writes:

- Text 193: I am in large measure, the selfsame prose I write. I unroll myself in sentences and paragraphs, I punctuate myself.”

[“Sou, em grande parte, a mesma prosa que escrevo. Desenrolo-me em períodos e parágrafos, faço-me pontuações, . . .”]

Second, his description of the cathartic effect of writing:

- Text 4: “And at this table in my absurd room, I, a pathetic and anonymous office clerk, write words as if they were the soul’s salvation.”
[“E na mesa do meu quarto absurdo, reles, empregado e anônimo, escrevo palavras como a salvação da alma . . .”]
- Text 221: “When the right words were said, all was done.”
[“Com a frase dita estava tudo feito”]

We notice that, as a first step in this process, Soares explicitly projects (or displaces) himself upon objects (NOT upon persons). For example, he describes himself as:

- an indissoluble residue at the bottom of a glass from which only water was drunk. (Text 13)
[um pó indissolúvel no fundo do copo de onde se bebeu só água.”]
- An object tossed into a corner, a rag that fell on to the road . . . (Text 37)
[“Coisa arrojada a um canto, trapo caído na estrada . . .”]
- “. . . dead matter fallen in the rain and mourned by the howling wind.”
(Text 69)
[“. . . matéria morta, caída na chuva, gemido pelo vento.”]

- "... one of those damp rags used for house-cleaning that are taken to the window to dry but are forgotten, balled up, on the sill where they slowly leave a stain." (Text 29)

["... um daqueles trapos úmidos de limpar cisas sujas, que se levam para a janela para secar, mas se esquecem, enrodilhados, no parapeito que mancham lentamente."]

- "... ready to break like things that shatter into fragments, shards and debris, hauled away in a bin on somebody's shoulders to the eternal rubbish cart of every City Council. (Text 419)

["... partir como as coisas que se quebram, em fragmentos, em cacos, em lixo, que o caixote leva num gesto de por cima dos ombros para o carro eterno de todas as Câmaras Municipais."]

As a second step in the process of achieving catharsis through writing, Soares uses these mutilated objects to create, as it were, "mutilated" verbal patterns.

[I'll mention parenthetically that the entire *Book* is, in the words of Bernardo Soares's self-description In Text 193 "the ruins of building that were never more than ruins." Scattered throughout *The Book*, however, we find passages that illustrate this "structural principle" (if we can call it that) by embedding "ruined" words within especially "ruined" syntax". This is a somewhat poetic way of saying that many of the most intense moments in our reading of *The Book* involve passages

that are written in a protactic style (words are put together without any subordination or coordination).

Examples:

“Lost and idle words, random metaphors, chained to shadows by a vague anxiety. . . Remnants of better times, spent on I don’t know what garden paths. . . Extinguished lamp whose gold gleams in the dark, in memory of the dead light. . . Words tossed not to the wind but to the ground, dropped from limp fingers, like dried leaves that had fallen on them from an invisibly infinite tree . . . Nostalgia for the pools of unknown farms. . . Heartfelt affection for what never happened. . .” (Text 139).

[“Palavras ociosas, perdidas, metáforas soltas, que uma vaga angústia encadeia a sombras . . . Vestígios de melhores horas, vividas não sei onde em áleas . . . Lâmpada apagada cujo ouro brilha no escuro pela memória da extinta luz . . . Palavras dadas, não ao vento, mas ao chão, deixadas ir dos dedos sem aperto, como folhas secas que neles houvessem caído de uma árvore invisivelmente infinita . . . Saudade dos tanques das quintas alheias . . . Ternura do nunca sucedido . . .”]

#31 “To cease, to sleep . . . To cease, to be the ebb and flow of a vast sea . . . To cease, to end at last, but surviving as something else: the page of a book, a tuft of disheveled hair, the quiver of a creeping plant next to a half-open window, the

irrelevant footsteps in the gravel of the bend, the last smoke to rise from the village going to sleep, the wagoner's whip left on the early morning roadside. . . Absurdity, confusion, oblivion – everything that isn't life . . ." (Text 31)

["Cessar, passar fluido e ribeirinho, fluxo e refluxo de um mar vasto, em costas víveis na noite em que verdadeiramente se dormisse! . . . [. . .] Cessar, acabar finalmente, mas com uma sobrevivência translata, ser a página de um livro, a madeixa de um cabelo solto, o oscilar da trepadeira ao pé da janela entreaberta, os passos sem importância no cascalho fino da curva, o último fumo alto da aldeia que adormece, o esquecimento do chicote do carroceiro à beira matutina do caminho . . . O absurdo, a confusão, o apagamento – tudo que não fosse a vida . . ."]

Conclusion

Richard Zenith concludes his "Introduction" to *The Book of Disquiet* with the lapidary observation that it "is the world's strangest photograph, made out of words, the only material capable of capturing the recesses of the soul it exposes." I would offer as a possible companion to this remark Soares's own comparison of himself to an empty stage – but a stage on which, according to his own self-description in Text 12 -- he "unrolls [himself] in sentences and paragraphs" rather than producing an actual play.

Returning to the ancestral practices alluded to in the title of my talk, we may remember that Greek tragedies were performed in theaters that had two distinct spaces – the raised stage on which the tragic action unfolded and an space beneath

the stage in which the chorus performed. This spatial division recalls my preliminary observation about the two ways of achieving catharsis:

- On the stage itself, suffering is displaced upon the figure of the tragic hero who will be subjected to a ritual form of punishment
- Below the stage, suffering is transformed into singing and dancing by the chorus.

The purpose of the choral performance was – as Oliver Taplin reminds us in his *Greek Tragedy in Action* -- to “move [us] into a different world, a different register, distinct from the specific events of the plot.” With this idea in mind, we notice that that *The Book of Disquiet* does, indeed, contain vestiges of ancient sacrifice:

- A scapegoat is designated in the person of Bernardo Soares
- Ancestral punishment is alluded to in the form of imprisonment and banishment
- But the figure of the tragic hero and the enactment of his ritual punishment in the form of the tragic plot is consigned to the margins of *The Book*.
- In place of the *tragic hero*, we find a *one-man chorus* named Bernardo Soares and in place of the *tragic plot* we have his *mutilated lamentation*.

This may remind us of Soares’s desire to speak, not only for himself, but for a *countless multitude*:

“And I wonder if my apparently negligible voice might not embody the essence of thousands of voices, the longing for self-expression of thousands

of lives, the patience of millions of souls resigned like my own to their daily lot, their useless dreams, and their hopeless hopes” (Text 6).

[E penso se a minha voz, aparentemente tão pouca coisa, não encarna a substância de milhares de vozes, a fome de dizerem-se de milhares de vidas, a paciência de milhões de almas submissas como a minha ao destino quotidiano, ao sonho inútil, á esperança sem vestígios.”]

The nearest equivalent that we have in modern theater to this “empty stage” of *The Book of Disquiet* are the plays of Samuel Beckett – both his radio plays, in which invisible voices “unroll themselves in sentences and paragraphs,” and in his late plays – one thinks especially of *Not I* or *That Time* -- in which mutilated texts are performed to the visual accompaniment of dismembered bodies.

