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Aesthetics and Autobiography: Emotion and Style in The Book of Disquiet by Fernando Pessoa / Bernardo Soars

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Abstract

At the beginning of *The Book of Disquiet*, Bernardo Soares writes: "In these random impressions, and with no desire to be other than random, I indifferently narrate my factless autobiography, my lifeless history. These are my Confessions, and if in them I say nothing, it's because I have nothing to say."

Written a century ago, these words illustrate a great distance from the traditional way of writing an autobiography. They confront, however, the same paradox, which is how can any of our lives, constituted by different and unrelated events, be structured as a linear story looking for a meaning, usually justificatory and self-indulgent? If understanding who we are today depends on the relationship established between present and past, we are forced to rely on an unchanging proper name, on a sequence of selected events, and the subsequent reworking of those events by the different subject who we are now.

This characteristic process of autobiographical works has led many to consider the fuzzy boundaries between fiction and reality, the demand for sincerity from the reader (the so-called *autobiographical pact*), the use of narrative strategies, and the understanding of autobiography as the textual presence of an implicit narrator without a clear relation to the empirical writer. However, Fernando Pessoa, and his heteronymous narrator Bernardo Soares, give us the novelty of a deep intimate text and the testimony of a life full of experiences without reference to events, dates, or personalities that may refute or corroborate his descriptions.

Key Words

autobiography, emotion, heteronymous, identity, style

This book is a single state of soul, analyzed from all sides, investigated in all directions.

Bernardo Soares

1. Introduction

A person who writes an autobiography is taking himself as an object of study. Therefore, motivations of the inner life and experiences of the protagonist emerge that are interesting to the reader only, however, if they are written with skill and style.

Narration seems plausible when compared with our personal experiences, with what usually happens, with what seems real, in short, with what is credible. The verisimilitude maintains the balance between mimesis, or imitation, of reality and invention, which is linked to the imagination and fiction. Therefore, verisimilitude can be constituted as a moment of truth verified by detailing, thanks to the aesthetic achievement, the individual ways of its being described in all its complexity. We solicit poets and creators for verisimilitude

and, therefore, sincerity in their creations.

The recourse to fiction allows us to illustrate some life experiences, and also to provide them with emotion and possibility, thus achieving a sense that allows us, authors or readers, to recognize them through these experiences.

2. Something about autobiographical texts

Since some developments in modern theory have argued for the disappearance of the author, betting on the liquidation of personal marks on the works, the paths traveled by the vanguard and theorists of literature and art have led us to a situation that I consider meaningless. Tzvetan Todorov has pointed this out clearly in his book, *Literature in Danger*.^[1] According to him, it could be said that theoretical discourses have replaced the pleasure of reading.

Post-structuralism and deconstructionism, in the manner of Paul de Man, have postulated the illusion of the subject because the textual self presents a missing "I," or one who covers his face with a mask. From this point of view, the autobiographical genre generates "the illusion of a life" as reference. In conclusion, literature based in experience would offer us the written word as a mask, an avatar that apparently speaks for the writer. If we endorse the deconstructionists' "theory of the complement," as suggested by Northrop Frye, what is important in the text is not what the avatar tells us. What is essential is what is not said, and that which is hidden.^[2]

This theory can be fruitful when we are interpreting a text but it is also paradoxical. If, on the one hand, it is impossible for the book to reflect the world accurately, on the other hand, the endless interpretations make the world a book in which we can read whatever we want.

We are in the territory of mere artificial calligraphy, the text by the text, which is located in the place of subjects. Thus, deconstructionism's formalism or, in other words, some "consecration of the aesthetic," leads to an understanding of literature as the "voice of the dead," as Paul de Man said:

To the extent that language is figure (or metaphor, or prosopopeia) it is indeed not the thing itself but the representation, the picture of the thing and, as such, it is silent, mute as pictures are mute. Language, as trope, is always privative.^[3]

Therefore, the text is open to different interpretations. This thought about autobiographical texts may hold a grain of truth, since memory is built as a narrative, and a lot of excess. If the self doesn't exist, why write so many words about this emptiness?^[o1]

As Antoine Compagnon said, these authors claim for:

...the impossible (the perfect communication), to conclude in the impotence of language and the isolation of literature. Desolated by the lack of certainty in a domain where it is unachievable, they prefer a radical skepticism and one reasonable probability on the relationship between the book and the world.^[4]

Despite the fact that is impossible for one to present him or herself as a transparent identity, I think that a writer is able to

create a truthful character of him or herself. We could say that the writer is built into the unreality of fiction, a construction that fascinates the creator and his or her readers.

In the same way, by using fiction and metaphors, the writer is not misrepresenting the truth but, rather, showing its complex character. The world cannot be expressed objectively and literally, hence the presence of the regular use of metaphors in our everyday speech. According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors are based on physical and cultural experiences that decisively structure the cognitive dimension of a human being.^[5] Our languages are essentially metaphorical and, therefore, creative. Language is not an instrument to reveal the secret, the hidden words of the world, or *the thing itself*, as Paul de Man said.

Thus, the work of metaphor is to understand one thing in terms of another, a process linked with our experience of the world and our imaginative intuition. In other words, it is a creative activity that, born of experience, symbolically shapes our subsequent experiences of the world. Sometimes we believe that we can reduce these metaphors to a literal explanation, sometimes they are irreducible to consistent clarification, and sometimes they can be grasped in a flash. If they are present everywhere in our daily lives, they appear even more in narrative and poetic creation.

Perhaps tired of the abstractness of some theories, the subject's intricate identity has begun, in recent years, to regain territory conquered by the avatars. Not in vain, we are witnessing everywhere the emergence and success of autobiographical and testimonial literature. The general recognition of books denouncing cruelties, extermination, genocide, and totalitarianism authorizes us to maintain this assertion. The same can be said about cinema. But, to be honest, abuses of these theories have brought about the current inflation of personal testimonies and, what is worse, a morbid demand for gossip.

While the connection between literature, and other arts, and expression raises grave philosophical problems, it must be said that serious autobiographical literature is not trying to communicate the truth, an objectively unrecoverable past experience, or the split between the narrative of the experience and the intensity of lived experience. Rather, assuming the subjectivity of the narrator, this genre of work intends to compel us to engage in the game of recognition. So, thanks to the aesthetic pact between, on the one hand, the author or the self of the narrative and, on the other hand, the reader, a story written by one person also belongs to the individual readers. We read something about us in the text of another. There is no other truth than what we make sense of and try to share with others. By any means, it is clear that this attempt at communication presents difficulties because it is based upon a circuit of subjectivities. Thus, the narrator tries to achieve a level of truthfulness to provide the reader with some knowledge of others' experiences. We know that in this kind of testimony the truth is an impossible demand and we also know that lies about the past send the entire text to the trash.

The usefulness of art should not be a problem, in the same way that the discovery of a deep interest in aesthetics, denying Kant, is not. The artist's work is to bring order to the story, to make sense of it, and to provide a living example to his or her social environment. Thanks to the illusion of art, thanks to that game or pact, we move into an aesthetic of recognition.

Fictional resources give meaning and coherence to certain events that we consider relevant. Thus, we give value and meaning to our lives by reaching a deeper understanding of ourselves. We build the story, and the story makes us what we are. There may be inaccuracy in details but they are true in the expression of the narrator. A false and irrelevant detail is, in many cases, a test of the will of truthfulness in the story. In short, it enhances the storytelling aesthetically.

The more a proper style is developed in these autobiographical works, the more identification or credit is granted by the reader. The art, in short, has to fight its way to build shared values and meanings for us. Art and literature must possess the ability to interest people at any time and place.

Understanding reality becomes more convincing thanks to the literary narrative, which should attend, as Doris Lessing proposed, to the atmosphere that allowed its emergence rather than to the facts themselves.^[6] Hence, although literature works closely with memory in some cases, it is more important to accurately remember, since an excess of memory often disparages thought and generates, on many occasions, seeing old facts as a seminal offense, disagreement, or violence.

In summary, ahead of literary deconstructionism and its belief in the avatar, autobiographical literature has to recover the subject and all its subjectivity. That subjectivity can be achieved thanks to the aesthetics pact and, fortunately in this case, it makes a claim to the universality of art and the pleasure of the match with the other.

3. Fernando Pessoa's world

To elucidate the previous words about autobiography, the example of the Portuguese writer, Fernando Pessoa, may be interesting. Pessoa is well known all over the world, especially for his heteronyms or creative personalities:

I have a world of friends inside me, with their own real, individual, imperfect lives.^[7]

Each of us is several, is many, is a profusion of selves.^[8]

Indeed, he was complex and diverse, composing in his creative carrier one "drama in people," according to Pessoa's words, and making a comparison with a Shakespearean tragedy:

I never know if what I feel I am is what I really am or merely what I think I am. I'm a character of my own plays.^[9]

The most famous heteronyms with the greatest number of poetic and literary productions are, among the certain quantity that José Paulo Cavalcanti put at 127, without taking into account another eighty minor personalities: Alberto Caeiro, Alvaro de Campos, Ricardo Reis, Fernando Pessoa himself, Antonio Mora, and Bernardo Soares, the author of *The Book of Disquiet* (the *Book*).^[10]

Pessoa had problems finding an author for this book. First, it was attributed to Pessoa himself, according to two letters sent to Armando Côrtes Rodrigues and Mario de Sá Carneiro, and, second, it was attributed to heteronym Vicente Guedes. Eventually, after many vacillations, the book is considered written with subsidiary Bernardo Soares, who is not merely a heteronym but also a literary character.

Also referred to as a semi-heteronym, Soares is very close to Fernando Pessoa in many respects, such as his job and feelings. When introducing the *Book of Disquiet*, Pessoa talks about Soares. He had met him in a restaurant having supper and, after some additional dinners and greetings on the street, he concludes that the author of the *Book*, an office worker and writer like Pessoa, always surrounded by loneliness, was only finding someone as an inheritor of his *Book*. Pessoa, in another letter sent to Adolfo Casais Monteiro, added:

He's a semi-heteronym because his personality, although not my own, doesn't differ from my own but is a mere mutilation of it. He is me less reasoning and emotions.[\[11\]](#)

4. *The Book of Disquiet*

The *Book* was published posthumously in 1982, forty-seven years after Pessoa's death, and it has had different editions and editions not in accord with each other, the last in 2010, which showed it as an unfinished book. The reason for this is that it is a reconstructed book, with texts and fragments left by Pessoa in his famous trunk of unpublished works. In sum, this fragmentation and impossibility to definitively close the *Book* adds more sides to the plurality of Pessoa's character.

If Pessoa is hard to find among the many people who he is, the ideal *Book of Disquiet* neither exists and it could never exist. Surely there will be new editions in the future, thereby ensuring a long life for the *Book*.

At the beginning of *The Book of Disquiet*, Bernardo Soares writes:

In these random impressions, and with no desire to be other than random, I indifferently narrate my factless autobiography, my lifeless history. These are my Confessions, and if in them I say nothing, it's because I have nothing to say.[\[12\]](#)

These words illustrate a great distance from the traditional mode of writing an autobiography. They confront, however, the same paradox, which is how can any of our lives, constituted by different and unrelated events, be structured as a linear story looking for a meaning, usually justificatory and self-indulgent? If understanding who we are today depends on the relationship established between the present and the past, we are forced to rely on an unchanging proper name, on a sequence of selected events, and the subsequent reworking of those events by the different subject that we are now.

This process, characteristic of autobiographical works, has led many of us to consider the vague boundaries between fiction and reality, the demand for sincerity from the author or the so-called autobiographical pact, the use of narrative strategies, and the understanding of autobiography as the textual presence of an implicit narrator without clear relation to the empirical writer.[\[13\]](#) However, Fernando Pessoa and his heteronym narrator Bernardo Soares give us the novelty of a deep and intimate text and the testimony of a life full of emotions and impressions filtered by his radical consciousness. We know that the contents of memory are not a literal copy of the past but are reconstructions influenced by our values and beliefs, and by schemes that are rooted in our lived experiences.

Structured as a diary, these fragmentary texts, often repetitive, obsessive about boredom, dreams, sensations,

sight, unconsciously, failure, emotions, and so on, constitute a clear example of autobiographical literature. Pessoa/Soares worked with his personal experience, his intimacy, and his desire to reflect and write about his emotions. In this case, far from creating a text that reflects on the past and historical events or personalities, he wrote about the immediate visualization of life surrounding him.

I see, and that's quite enough. Who can understand anything?[14]

I'm riding on a tram and, as usual, am closely observing all the details of the people around me. For me these details are like things, voices, phrases.[15]

Consequently, Bernardo Soares is always fighting with impressions and feelings, and seldom with memories, or with dated or relevant events throughout his life:

I realize that I was all error and deviation, that I never lived, that I existed only in so far as I filled time with consciousness and thought.[16]

For the ordinary man, to feel is to live, and to think is to know how to live. For me, to think is to live, and to feel is merely food for thought.[17]

The lack of reference to events, dates, or personalities that may refute or corroborate these descriptions could support a weakness in assuring the *Book's* autobiographical value. Indeed, it seems a triumph of nonsense if we demand autobiographical references. This appears to be a victory of fiction, with no relationship to real events. It is the success of textual strategies over the truthfulness of testimony.

Nevertheless, if the main challenge in all autobiographical works is to maintain the connection of truth between facts and narrative, this *Book*, nearly stripped of any events, constitutes a capital example, if we are looking for something to meticulously detail our emotions, sensations, feelings, and life:

The life of my emotions moved early on to the chambers of thought, and that's where I've most fully lived my emotional experience of life.[18]

The *Book of Disquiet* constitutes a break from linear narrative strategies that often display the canonical vision of one personality. Soares, offering deep impressions without connections to the subsequent facts, seems to be that real self who is living his present life yet ignoring the next moment. There is no continuity or causality as a formula to understand or build our life but only "random impressions," in Soares' words.

Soares' style as a narrator, while trying to find appropriate new words to translate his emotions, offers a sense of sincerity as he works within the boundaries in which imagination serves as a source of clarification and rebuilding of feelings:

Lying is simply the soul's ideal language. Just as we make use of words, which are sounds articulated in an absurd way, to translate into real language the most private and subtle shifts of our thoughts and emotions (which words on their own would never be able to translate), so we make use of lies and fiction to promote understanding among ourselves, something that the truth—

personal and incommunicable—could never accomplish.[19]

In other words, without a solid style it is better not to fall into a mannerist effort, always suspicious of forgery. In these circumstances it would be better to write in a simple way where facts and dates only demand truthfulness.

Nevertheless, the aesthetic dimension can capture the reader and make the experience of the narrator more vivid. The aesthetic appeal lends credibility to the related facts and provides pleasure brought about by writing and formal composition. The conjunction of the cleverly chosen events and the control of narrative techniques promote the success and truthfulness of the text that is available to the reader.

Style is the most difficult thing to find, autobiographically speaking, but when this happens, as in Soares' *Book*, these profound reflections, exposed with incredible talent and imagination, are far from lies touching the reader's soul:

...to say is to renew....Impressions are incommunicable unless we make them literary.... To say! To know how to say! To know how to exist via the written voice and the intellectual image! This is all that matters in life.[20]

Let's make the receptivity of our senses purely literary, and let's convert our emotions, when they perhaps prefer not becoming apparent, into visible matter that can be sculpted into statues with fluid, glowing words.[21]

In this moment when I'm bursting with feeling, I wish I had the gift of ruthless self-expression, the arbitrary whim of a style as my destiny.[22]

In the *Book of Disquiet*, different strategies are followed in order to express a solitary and unstable life. On the one hand, Soares attends to physical events, such as weather changes (with fear and horror when the storm and thunder start), he describes people who work in the same business in the little office located in the *Rua dos Douradores*, or he meticulously describes common people walking on the street or eating in a restaurant. In other words, his first procedure is connected by a representation of the external world. In this sense, some passages in the *Book* are dated, although this practice was never systematic:

Today my boss, Senhor Vasques, closed a deal that brought a sick man and his family to ruin. As he negotiated the deal he completely forgot that this man existed, except as the opposing commercial party. After the deal was closed, he was touched by sensibility. Only afterwards, of course, since otherwise the deal would never have been made. 'I feel sorry for the fellow', he told me.[23]

On the other hand, Soares closely observes his feelings and soul, and he writes with incredible depth about one of the most important reflections on human emotions:

Life is the hesitation between an exclamation and an interrogation. In that doubt, there is a final point.[24]

Life is what we make of it. Travel is the traveler.

What we see isn't what we see but what we are.[25]

To sum up, we could say that, in both ways, Soares is first attending to an external clock connected with dates or facts that our social history produces and, second, he is observing his internal clock absolutely disconnected from the usual or practical time, something anonymous, building his personal little history. In scientific terms, we know today that our internal or biological clock may even influence our mood and, consequently, it seems that Soares had his internal clock connected to instability, fear, and disquiet.

But Soares also establishes another distinction between life and art:

Ah, I understand! Vasques, my boss, is Life—monotonous and necessary, imperious and inscrutable Life. This banal man represents the banality of Life. For me he is everything, externally speaking, because for me Life is whatever is external.

And if the office on the Rua dos Douradores represents life for me, the fourth-floor room where I live, on this same Rua dos Douradores, represents Art for me. Yes, Art, residing on the very same street as Life, but in different place. Art, which gives me relief from life without relieving me of living, being as monotonous as life itself, only in a different place. Yes, for me the Rua dos Douradores contains the meaning of everything and the answer to all riddles, except for the riddle of why riddles exist, which can never be answered.[26]

Consequently, Soares shows in many of his written fragments his perturbation or dislocation as he tries to fit this both ways, social and personal, external and internal, and life and art into many of his fragments, and always concludes with a profound sense of emptiness, tedium, failure, or break with identity:

My humble attempt to say at least who I am, to record like a machine of nerves the slightest impressions of my subjective and ultra-sensitive life—this was all emptied like a bucket that got knocked over, and it poured across the ground like the water of everything. I fashioned myself out of false colors, and finished in an attic thought to be an empire.[27]

Soares represents an estrangement from life similar to that of the daily office worker, Fernando Pessoa. He is an observer of himself, a spectator of life, who translates his emotions and his powerful insight to aesthetics' creativity:

...not being more nor wanting to be more than a spectator of myself, I have to put on the best show I can.[28]

Actually, the only way to represent his empty life is to dream it (*to dream is to find ourselves*), a hard work connected with the imagination (*I think with my imagination*), eventually producing his plural creative personalities (*I'm, in large measure, the selfsame prose I write*). All heteronyms build their stylish own world and also, funnily and peculiarly, with aesthetic disagreements among them. Finally, these great works of literature, processing all kind of human emotions,

constitute a self-portrait as a mirror for each reader. Or, in other words, we have the feeling that Soares, Pessoa, and all his company were writing for us, for each individual reader.

5. Conclusion

Bernardo Soares, in breaking the timeline and listening to the vagaries of his tiny soul, builds a personal and different style for autobiographical works. The commitment to truth leads him to abandon historical details and any type of event. But these fragmentary texts, a mirror of his and our multiple identities, show us, through the aesthetic and emotional pleasure of reading them, the traces of a personal experience that reaches universal value.

Art consists in making others feel what we feel, in freeing them from themselves by offering them our own personality.^[29]

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[21] *Ibid.*, p. 388.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 225.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 303.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 375.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 451.

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