

Rewriting *The Book of Disquiet*

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Abstract

Celebrated by the UK newspaper *The Guardian* as one of its top 100 books of all time, Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa’s *Book of Disquiet* has become celebrated as a modernist classic far beyond the borders of Portugal and the Lusophone world. Translating the work into English and adapting it for the stage provokes questions for theatre-makers as well as translators that serve to underscore the temporality and location of the source text in new and interesting ways.

Keywords: *Fernando Pessoa, translation, adaptation, theatre*

*I’m beginning to know myself. I don’t exist. I am
the space between what others have made me and
what I’d like to be.*

(Álvaro de Campos)

Álvaro de Campos, a quizzical soul with postmodern preoccupations, and one of Portugal’s most prestigious poets, was born in the sleepy Algarve town of Tavira on the 15th October 1890. An engineer by trade, he studied at Glasgow University but lived for most of his life in Lisbon. He learnt Latin from his uncle and was a seasoned traveller. Probably gay and certainly bisexual, De Campos’s works are characterised by a metropolitan lyricism which reveals an enduring interest in sex, drugs, and, as his work evolved, an increasing fascination with the beauty of technology, of levers and gears, as well as death which would, the poet hoped, bring with it an end to the awful disquiet or *desassossego* of life. This article, however, is not really about De Campos or translations of his lyrical poetry from Portuguese into English, which are published widely and readily available. Nor is it a treatise on his Freudian fascination and instinctive longing for the tranquillity of mortality. In fact, it is not about De Campos at all but another poet entirely: Fernando Pessoa, and his only novel *Livro do Desassossego – Book of Disquiet* – its translation into English and adaptation into a piece of theatre. In reflecting on this process of both translation and adaptation, I want to address the specific problems that arise from adapting a modernist literary work into the live medium of performance and explore the improvisational and performative solutions that can be found to address these.

But why begin with a description of the poet De Campos when the focus of this article is clearly on the translation of another poet entirely? Campos’s paradoxical statement quoted at the beginning of this piece that declares self-knowledge on the one hand (“beginning to know myself”) and the total absence of self on the other (“I don’t exist”) is typical and reminiscent of Fernando Pessoa. Indeed, it is true to say that the poets, who were contemporaneous, actually knew each other although are probably

better thought of as associates rather than good friends. When Pessoa published an article on the Portuguese aesthetic, it was De Campos who followed up with swift critique taking Pessoa to task and he even wrote critical reviews of Pessoa's work¹. The "space between" that De Campos occupies is not only the locus that sits between personal ambition and social control but also between Fernando Pessoa and the rest of the world – for Pessoa and De Campos are in fact one and the same person. De Campos is but one of more than 70 "heteronyms" or pseudonymic personalities created by Pessoa who himself existed as a poet in his own right. Indeed, Fernando Pessoa spent his entire literary life in the early part of the twentieth century devoted to the construction of this multiplicity of authors, each with their own unique personalities, writing styles and biographies. These heteronyms included English writers Alexander Chancellor and David Merrick, French writers Jean Seul and Claude Pasteur, and even a woman, Maria José.

While Pessoa enjoyed little attention during his forty-seven years where he earned his living as a clerk and translator, he has become nothing short of a literary giant in Portugal, Brazil and throughout the Lusophone world, his work accruing accolades that have seen him enter the literary canon in a way he might never have imagined during his own lifetime. Typically of Pessoa, however, thoughts of the elusive possibility of fame and notoriety are reflected in his writing and in particular in *The Book of Disquiet* (whose translation inserts the definite article making it *The* book rather than simply *Book of Disquiet*), his indefinable work that is at once part novel, part memoir, and part literary chronicle and paradoxically none of these. Pessoa died in 1935 and the *Book* was only discovered many decades later in a trunk in his Lisbon apartment. The text was gradually assembled and re-assembled in various versions which have been published and translated thereafter in a constant search for an assemblage that is authentic despite the very concept being antithetical to the principles of the writer and his modernist tendencies.

The Book of Disquiet does not move form very easily. Even within the literary domain of the novel it occupies a rather unique position in that it barely has a narrative and can appear to be quite random in its sequencing of ideas. The strongest through-line to the work lies in the occasional narrator (or semi-heteronym) of Bernardo Soares a lowly book-keeper who works in a Lisbon office and spends his days lost in his thoughts about the seemingly mundane lives of those around him. But even Soares does not remain a constant presence and holds a position that is unstable, open to question as does *The Book of Disquiet* itself as it exists in different editions, with different sequences of its entries presented in each incarnation.²

Trans-Locating *The Book of Disquiet*

In a work that has no fixed order, no fixed author, and exists in English in a number of different translations of variously different source texts, *Livro do Desassossego* is

¹ Darlene J. Sadlier, *An Introduction to Fernando Pessoa: Modernism and the Paradoxes of Authorship* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 1998), 103.

² The translator Richard Zenith has produced a revised translation of the work into English (published by Penguin in 2001) and it is this particular assemblage which has become the most widely accepted and authoritative, as indeed are the collections Zenith prepared in Portuguese editions. However, while it may be almost universally recognised as so, Zenith's work should not be viewed as the definitive text as such a notion is in direct opposition to the heteronymic nature of Pessoa's enterprise altogether.

unified by one single element: location. Fernando Pessoa, whose early life was spent in South Africa, lived almost exclusively in Lisbon from the age of 17 and even wrote a tourist guide about the city entitled simply *Lisboa*. The life of the heteronym Bernardo Soares (as well as Guedes and the other heteronymic writers of *The Book of Disquiet*) centres for the most part around the Rua Dos Douradores where Soares works and lives. The Lisbon cityscape is vital to the writing where the author's thoughts on life arise from the closely observed detail of those he scrutinises both at work and out and about in the city. Text 74 in the Zenith editions is a typical example:

A cold silence. The sounds from the street seemed to be cut by a knife. Then there was a long, cosmically held breath, a kind of generalized dread. The entire universe had stopped dead. Moments, moments, moments... Silence blackened the darkness.

All of a sudden, live steel....

How human the metallic peal of the trams! How happy the landscape of simple rain falling on the street resurrected from the chasm!

Oh Lisbon, my home!³

The city is part of its very fabric, its atmosphere (meteorological and psychological) and its sounds compounding to make the book a piece of psycho-geographical response to the emerging urbanity of southern Europe.

When I first worked on a translation/adaptation of *Livro do Desassossego* with four actors and a director in 2009, an early decision was made by the group to locate the play into a different time and space altogether from the Lisbon of the 1930s of Pessoa's text(s). Eager to find resonances from Pessoa's past world with the contemporary and our own, we found ourselves focussing on our city and more specially the City of London and Canary Wharf, London's financial districts which had just suffered the intense catastrophe of the financial crisis that has become one of the defining characteristics of the twenty-first century, thus far. The process of translating for the stage where theatre-making is by its very essence collaborative, involving a range of artists at different stages of its development (such as set, lighting and costume designers), is far removed from the work of a literary translator working on a single end product such as a novel. Performances are constantly remade, happening only in the present, and the process of developing a performance even in relation to an existing text is one that always opens up questions of possibility that can begin to be rationalised and resolved through a process of rehearsal. In this sense it is convenient to think about the translation process as itself a kind of performance on the source text, constantly making sense of and evaluating it, in relation to the here and now as well as the past. Here it is more convenient to try to move away from the slippery terms 'translation' and 'adaptation' altogether and to use the term re-writing, a term popularised in *Translation Studies* by André Lefevere.⁴

Bernardo Soares, the lowly assistant book-keeper at the epicentre of *Livro do Desassossego*, in our theatrical piece was re-imagined across four different characters (our own version of Pessoa's heteronyms): two men and two women, who worked together in an office and struggled to come to terms with daily events which, while in

³ Fernando Pessoa and Richard Zenith, *The Book of Disquiet* (London: Penguin, 2002), 73.

⁴ Lefevere's use of the term [André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Frame* (London, New York: Routledge, 1992)] was largely conceptualised around the political uses of translation through various systems such as patronage to manipulate literature for its own ends.

conversation with each other appeared to be potentially catastrophic, were privately held to be worthless, irrelevant and utterly tedious. This rewritten *Book of Disquiet* found its own local references that reverberated with Pessoa's, such as Text 298 which recounts a ride on a Lisbon tram:

Vou num carro elétrico, e estou reparando lentamente, conforme é meu costume, em todos os pormenores das pessoas que vão adiante de mim. Para mim os pormenores são coisas, vozes, letras. Neste vestido da rapariga que vai em minha frente decomponho o vestido em o estofado de que se compõe, o trabalho com que o fizeram — pois que o vejo vestido e não estofado — e o bordado leve que orla a parte que contorna o pescoço separa-se-me em retrós de seda, com que se o bordou, e o trabalho que houve de o bordar.⁵

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. Taking the dress of the girl in front of me, I break it down into the fabric from which it's made and the work that went into making it (such that I see a dress and not just fabric), and the delicate embroidery that trims the collar decomposes under my scrutiny into the silk thread with which it was embroidered and the work it took to embroider it.⁶

In our version, Text 298 is re-imagined as the interior monologue of the character Andrea who suffers panic attacks on the London Underground on a regular basis as she travels to work on a crowded train:

ANDREA. I'm on the underground. As usual, I'm looking around at everyone, closely observing them with forensic detail. For me these details are really *things* – they are voices, whole phrases. I look at the dress of the girl sitting in front of me. I take it back a stage to the fabric from which it's made and the work and the people that went into making it. The delicate embroidery that trims the collar decomposes under my gaze into the silk thread with which it was embroidered and the work it took to embroider it. Or maybe it was a machine. Or perhaps a child. In one of the illegal factories you hear about in documentary films. Then, as in a textbook of basic economics, factories and jobs unfold before me: the factory where the cloth was spun, the factory's various divisions: the machines, the workers, the seamstresses. I see the companies. The managers. The accountants of the companies in their offices balancing their books with their recently upgraded accountancy software. But that's not all. I see beyond all this into the private lives of those who live their existence in factories and offices. The whole world opens up before my eyes just because in front of me on the nape of a tanned neck, whose other side has I don't know what kind of face, I see a regularly irregular dark-green embroidered, light-green dress.

All humanity's social existence lies before my eyes.

And I go further. Deeper. I see the loves, the secrets, the souls of all who laboured so that the woman in front of me on the Jubilee Line to Canary Wharf could wear, around her mortal neck, the sinuous banality of a dark-green silk trim on a darker green dress. I start to feel dizzy. A panic attack. It's hot and overcrowded and the tube has been too long stopped in the tunnel. I wonder why no message has been relayed from the driver. And I start to look at the seats of the train. The close-woven, hard-wearing synthetic material. And then this takes me to distant places and these thoughts proliferate in the form of industries and workers and their houses and their lives and their lovemaking and their fights and their realities and –

I get off the tube. Dazed. Exhausted. I have just lived all of life.

⁵ Fernando Pessoa and Richard Zenith, *Livro Desassossego* (São Paulo: Assírio & Alvim, 2006), 288-289.

⁶ Pessoa and Zenith, *The Book*, 253.

Fade to black.

The source text provides a basis for what might be called dramatic improvisation – an improvisation that arises on the page before it becomes embodied on the stage, a textual playfulness that later becomes reconstructed and embodied. The process of adapting and translating⁷ is one that privileges the translator/adaptor over the actor and director to some degree in that it operates in marked contrast to approaches which have gained increasing popularity in recent years – where actors improvise in response to a given text and their responses are then recorded and honed down to forge a script.

Through a constant process of rehearsal, reflection, rehearsal and rewriting, the play eventually opened in London in 2011 with two relatively late but significant changes to the version of the text that was used at the outset of collaboration. Firstly, rather than situate the piece in the contemporary world of an office in London, two further locations were added: a beach in Portugal (several decades before) where a couple come to believe they are all alone in the world and the Lisbon of Pessoa where all four actors embody Pessoa, reciting a letter to his mother (included in Zenith's collection) among other entries. The interweaving of these locations and times throughout the play echoed the freeform multiplicity of the source text in new and exciting ways and allowed for the text to offer itself to audiences as a site for playful encounter with actors embodying characters that transcend time and space.

While the city of Lisbon is central to *Livro do Desassossego*, there are occasional mental and physical forays out of the city. But Pessoa's work certainly contains no beach scenes with a solitary couple as appeared in our stage rendition. Pessoa mediates, for example, on the routines of "old aunts" in "older country houses" demonstrating that the anomie of everyday life is the constant that runs through the collection of texts that make up the disquieted book. The beach scene explores this anomie through the fractured relationship of a couple that communicate in words but are barely able to connect with each other. As these scenes are replayed through the piece they act like a score or recurring theme that served as the basis for dramatic improvisation that occurred at the point of writing or rewriting the work for the stage:

He continues building the sand castles and looking around.

SIMON. I can see someone now.

REBECCA. *Disinterested.* Really? Who?

SIMON. A woman. Walking her dog. I think it's a dog. Might be a child.

REBECCA. Well, which is it?

SIMON. No, it's no-one. It's a rock. Or maybe a bit of wood.

REBECCA. Are we really the only ones here?

Fade out.

The possibility of not being alone is soon thwarted as is the paradoxical notion that while together, they remain as always very much alone. The only comfort for the character of Rebecca lies in reading her book – a translation of *Livro do Desassossego*.

⁷ These terms are used in full acknowledgement of the considerable work of Translation and Adaptation Studies in recent years at quantifying, clarifying and seeking to question their viability and stability. In simple terms, "translation" here refers to the interlingual transfer of Portuguese to English and "adaptation" to the intersemiotic transfer of writing to performance.

The Role of the Spectator

The adaptation process which sees the re-creation of a fictional text such as *The Book of Disquiet* into the three-dimensional form of theatre that occurs in time and space in the present necessitates a new and different relationship between writer/reader contract to that of actor/spectator. Spectators in the theatre can be just as passive as readers – they often sit in darkened auditoria remaining seemingly invisible to the cast of actors where these two worlds co-exist but rarely experience any interface. In rewriting *The Book of Disquiet*, I was anxious to explore the popular notion of Dante's hell - proximity without intimacy – which invoked the presence/absence paradigm of Pessoa's writing. A central means of doing this was to take out all of the seating in the auditorium of the theatre and run the play as a promenade piece with the audience free to roam around the space as they wished. In doing so, the audiences could get as close as they wished to the four actors but were nevertheless set apart from the action and the different worlds of the play as they became established.

In responding to the modernist impetus of Pessoa's text, I also took this a stage further with a decision to invite a different member of the audience each night to participate more actively in the performance by playing one of its central (but formerly absent) characters: a character the office had sought to blame for financial misdemeanours. In doing so, a number of scenes were constructed where "Jeff" would interact with actors in an improvisational way that retained the established structure of the piece as a whole. As translators, we are often caught in the gap between the perceived constraints that a source text offers us and the potential of our own creativity as we bring it to bear on the translation enterprise. Adaptation, too, offers its own constraints in relation to its form as well as its inherent and intractable relation to a pre-existing source. By approaching the modernist text of *The Book of Disquiet* in this way, by involving a different member of the audience each night directly as a participant in the performance, the translation/adaptation event became a site of re-translation, re-adaptation each night as within the obvious constraints of the staged play, a new individual became empowered to dispel their own creativity, to forge a completely new performative experience for themselves, for the audience, and for the actors in the piece. The approach to the making and staging of translations offers new possibilities for translators working in the theatre which seeks to register and engage with notions of location in playful and performative ways that can produce creative and unpredictable solutions.

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Rescrierea *Cărții neliniștii*

Inclusă de către ziarul britanic *The Guardian* în propriul clasament al celor mai importante 100 de cărți din toate timpurile, *Cartea neliniștii* a poetului portughez Fernando Pessoa e considerată un clasic al perioadei moderne, a cărei faimă a depășit cu mult granițele Portugaliei și ale lumii lusitane. Traducerea ei în engleză și adaptarea ei pentru scenă sunt o provocare pentru regizori și traducători deopotrivă, reliefând într-un mod nou și interesant caracterul temporal și spațial al textului sursă.