

James Joyce's Ulysses in Ricardo Piglia's Respiración artificial

Cristina Elgue-Martini

Abstract: *The aim of this article is to analyse the presence of James Joyce's Ulysses (1922) in Respiración artificial, the first novel by the Argentinean writer Ricardo Piglia (1941-). Published in 1980, Respiración is a fictional representation of a near and tragic past, the last Military Dictatorship in Argentina, but it is also a literary re-assessment of earlier stages in the history of the nation, as well as a metatextual comment on western culture and on Argentine literature. James Joyce's Ulysses is present in Piglia's novel mainly through its main character, Emilio Renzi, who belongs to a literary genealogy that can be traced back to Stephen Dedalus and even Stephen Daedalus, the protagonist of Stephen Hero. The analysis will focus on the many allusions and quotations of Ulysses in Piglia's novel with the purpose of showing how they are resignified by Piglia in a different sociocultural context.*

Keywords: Ulysses; Respiración artificial; Stephen Dedalus; Emilio Renzi; historiographic metafiction.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to analyse the presence of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) in *Respiración artificial*, the first novel by the Argentinean writer Ricardo Piglia (1941-). Published in 1980, *Respiración artificial*, as suggested by the polysemy of the title itself, is a fictional representation of a near and tragic past, the last Military Dictatorship in Argentina, but it is also a literary re-assessment of earlier stages in the history of the nation, as well as a metatextual comment on western culture and on Argentine literature. James Joyce's *Ulysses* is present in Piglia's novel mainly through its main character, Emilio Renzi, who belongs to a literary genealogy that can be traced back to Stephen Dedalus and even Stephen Daedalus, the protagonist of *Stephen Hero*. Frustration, arrogance, anticonventionalism are some of the traits of these characters, through whom the authors achieve a parodic approach to themselves as writers. The analysis will focus on the many allusions and quotations of *Ulysses* in Piglia's novel with the purpose of showing how they are resignified by Piglia in a different sociocultural context.

Even if Piglia pays homage to James Joyce in most of his fiction, starting in some of his first short stories, and reaching his highest with the parody of *Finnegans Wake* in *La ciudad ausente* (1992)¹, the analyses of the presence of *Ulysses* in *Respiración artificial* has a special interest because it centers on Piglia's recreation of Stephen Dedalus, the aesthete *par excellence* of the western literary tradition, and on the concept of spiritual paternity developed in *Ulysses*. My analysis will therefore concentrate on Emilio Renzi, the central character of *Respiración artificial*. I will approach him taking as a background model not only the character of *Ulysses*, but also his embryonic manifestations in the Stephen Daedalus of *Stephen Hero* and the Stephen Dedalus of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*².

As many great works of fiction, *Respiración artificial* can be said to belong to different subgenres: it is an instance of the fictionalization of History, it is highly metafictional and it is also an enigma novel. It is divided into two parts. The epigraph of the first one, from T.S. Eliot, "We had the experience but missed the meaning, an approach to the meaning restores the experience", announces the enigmatic atmosphere that permeates the whole novel. The first part is mainly epistolary: it is made up of the letters exchanged between Emilio Renzi, Piglia's *alter ego*³ and a character present in most of his fiction, and Renzi's uncle, Marcelo Maggi, a professor of Argentine History that lives in Concordia, Entre Ríos. Maggi has inherited documents written more than a hundred years before and whose meaning might involve the possibility of deciphering not only of a family story but the enigma of the History of the country itself.

The title of the second part of the novel is "Descartes". Providing a formal contrast to the first part, this second one is mainly made up of the dialogues that develop during a day and a night between Renzi – who has travelled to Concordia to meet his uncle- and Tardewski⁴, a Polish intellectual and a close friend of Maggi's –though the commentaries of another well-known local intellectual are also included. This second part is strongly metafictional, since, through these dialogues, it provides a critical interpretation of Argentine culture and literature, and of the western cultural tradition, with an emphasis on modern philosophical thought. Maggi never turns up –he has "disappeared", a victim of the military regime, the reader can infer- but he has left Renzi the book he is writing on the bases of the old family documents and the documents themselves. Renzi is now responsible for interpreting Argentine History, which he eventually does through fiction, apparently the only means to make sense out of the fragmentary information available⁵.

As stressed in the introduction, *Ulysses* is constructed as an intertext of *Respiración artificial* mainly through Piglia's recreation of one of the protagonists of Joyce's masterpiece. I said that Piglia builds his character Emilio Renzi in the tradition of Stephen Dedalus. As we know, the germ of Stephen Dedalus is Stephen Daedalus, the protagonist of *Stephen Hero*. Piglia has affirmed more than once⁶ that these characters are "aesthetes". As already mentioned, this distinctive feature of Stephen's personality appears in *Stephen Hero* and is further developed in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young*

Man and in *Ulysses*. Towards the end of *Stephen Hero*, the character says that the function of a writer is to register the epiphanies with great care, since they are the most delicate and evanescent moments. He understands by epiphany “a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself” (211). As Joyce himself, Stephen has been influenced by Walter Pater, whose famous conclusion of *The Renaissance* stresses the capacity of art to allow a direct access to experiences of great intensity. It would be also necessary to stress at this point, that Daedalus, according to the classical mythology, was a famous artist that worked as an architect and sculptor in Athens. He was the one that built Minos’ Labyrinth in Crete and suggested Ariadna the way to save Theseus. When king Minos knew about this, Daedalus was closed in the labyrinth together with his son Icarus. But Daedalus made wings for both, which he stuck with wax, and they flew away. Stephen’s surname, as we can see, also alludes to the aesthetic activity. Even if it is true that together with the transformation of the surname in *A Portrait of the Artist*, there were important transformations in the character himself, and, that, the same as Joyce, Stephen Dedalus⁷ was capable of becoming independent from Pater, he is still the aesthete that looks at the world from art and is absolutely conscious of this aesthetic look. This is the way in which Stephen explains this approach to Lynch in *A Portrait of the Artist*:

In order to see that basket, said Stephen, your mind first of all separates the basket from the rest of the visible universe which is not the basket. The first phase of apprehension is a bounding line drawn about the object to be apprehended. An esthetic image is presented to us either in space or time [...] But, temporal or spatial, the esthetic image is first luminously apprehended as selfbounded and selfcontained upon the immeasurable background of space or time which is not. (212)

The aesthetic look is substantially different from the ordinary look. As stated a few lines below:

The instant wherein that supreme quality of beauty, the clear radiance of the esthetic image, is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony is luminous silent stasis of esthetic pleasure. (213)

In *A Portrait of the Artist*, there is also a scene on the beach in which the narrator expresses Stephen’s thoughts in a paterian style. The third episode of *Ulysses* includes another scene on the beach, which the reader cannot but relate with the one in *A Portrait*: Joyce’s Mother has died between the two episodes⁸ and the presence of death is overwhelming in the scene: “Remember your epiphanies on green oval leaves, deeply deep, copies to be sent if you died to the great libraries of the world, including Alexandria? Someone was to read them there after a few thousand years, a mahamanvantara”(37).

There is here an allusion to the importance that the epiphanies had had for him and on which he now ponders sarcastically.

Yet, the influence of the epiphanies of his first literary experiences persists in Stephen, at least from Piglia's point of view. In 1989, in an interview on the relationship between literature and life, referring to Renzi, Piglia says. "(...) there is here a whole literary genealogy that comes from Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, Faulkner's Quentin Compson, the young aesthete, fragile and romantic that tries to be unmerciful and lucid" (*Crítica y ficción*, 189). The same parodic approach to himself that Piglia expresses through Renzi is present in the Stephen Dedalus of *Ulysses*. Dissatisfaction, a critical attitude towards the recalcitrant aspects of Irish culture at the beginning of the XX century –its antisemitic attitudes, its provincial conventionalism, its narrow catholicism, censorship- these are all variants of the same mentality recreated in Piglia's novel. Joyce's attitude towards Irish culture compares with Piglia's with respect to Argentinean culture: They both write in an attempt to decode their cultures and in this attempt they both achieve a profound revolution of the narrative forms.

The presence of Stephen Dedalus becomes stronger through allusions, quotations and commentaries. At the end of the first letter addressed to Renzi, Maggi writes: "History is the only place where I can get some alleviation for this nightmare from which I am trying to awake"⁹ (18-19). Piglia has explained the meaning of this encoded message. In his essay "Novela y utopía", he says about this utterance:

Of course, it is the inversion of Joyce's phrase, Stephen Dedalus's phrase, really, "history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake". Maggi transforms it to Renzi, he sends him a sort of coded message, because the nightmare, of course, is in the present, in 1976 [which is the date of Maggi's letter to Renzi]. History becomes the place where things can change and be transformed. In those moments when there seems that nothing changes and everything is closed and the nightmare of the present seems eternal, history, Maggi says, proves that there were identical closed situations and that finally a way out was found. The traces of the future are in the past, the tame stream of the water of history erodes the firmest stones. (*Crítica y ficción* 161)

There is another instance in which Piglia evaluates Joyce by referring to *Ulysses*, through a quotation, this time. Again, Joyce and *Ulysses* appear in relation to the theme of history in the context of the conversation between Renzi and Tardewski. Renzi says that he does not believe that adventure can have a place in the world of today (110). He thinks that parody has "stopped being, as Tinianov's followers believed at a time, the mark of literary change, to become the centre itself of modern life" (110); he insists that "parody has completely taken the place of history" and ends with a rhetorical question: "Or is not parody the negation itself of history?" (110). Immediately after these words Renzi quotes, cryptically, the beginning of the third episode of *Ulysses* "Ineluctable Modality of the Visible", which he attributes to "the Irish dressed up as Telemachus, in

Trieste's Carnival, in 1921". It is not difficult for the competent reader to relate the phrase to *Ulysses*, since the clues are very clear. Joyce spent many years of his life in Trieste¹⁰ and wrote part of *Ulysses* there; Stephen Dedalus is, on the other hand, a re-elaboration of Telemachus¹¹. The words undoubtedly belong to Stephen.

Immediately afterwards, Renzi asks Tardewski if he really met Joyce. Tardewski answers that he saw him a couple of times, and adds: "He would have accepted, I suppose, your version that today only parody exists (because, as a matter of fact, what was he but a parody of Shakespeare's) (110). Renzi will then confirm that Stephen is a kind of Jesuit Hamlet, undoubtedly alluding to Joyce's and his character's education, and he will express what Piglia has repeatedly stressed in his interviews: "There is a sort of continuity: the young aesthete that only lives in his dreams and that, instead of writing, spends his time expounding his theories (...) I see like a line (...) let's say Hamlet, Stephen Dedalus, Quentin Compson" (144). The circle has been completed: Renzi belongs now not only to the tradition of Quentin Compson and Stephen Dedalus, but also to that of Hamlet's.

On the other hand, even if Tardewski's characterization of Joyce's novel as a parody of *Hamlet* might sound rather pejorative, from the point of view of a reader acquainted with the new meanings that the term "parody" has acquired in contemporary theory, the comment opens new possibilities of interpretations for *Ulysses*. Shakespeare is precisely the main theme of the episode of the Library in *Ulysses*, the best one for Piglia (*Crítica y ficción*, 16) and the one that is commented in *Respiración artificial*.

The commentary is a coded one. It develops in the Club Social in Concordia in a dialogue between Renzi and Marconi, a friend of Tardewski's who is a poet and literary journalist. After a long discussion on Argentine literature, Marconi says: "this sounds like a novel by Aldous Huxley", to what Renzi replicates: "Huxley? (...) I prefer the chapter in the Library, Scylla and Charybdis, in the Gaelic Telemachiad" (130). The episode of the Library is then explicitly presented as a term of comparison in the discussion on Argentine literature the characters have embarked on. Deciphering Renzi's cryptical message, Marconi replies: "Let's then discuss about Hamlet" and he adds "Or aren't we going to demonstrate through algebra that Hamlet's grandson is Shakespeare's grandfather and that he himself is the spectre of his own father? Eh, Buck Mulligan?" (130). This is the end of the quotation that from the episode in the Library has passed to the conversation of the first episode between Stephen, Buck Mulligan and Haines in the Martello Tower. Haines asks Stephen about his idea of Hamlet. And it is Mulligan who answers the question in the words quoted by Marconi. Curiously enough, Stuart Gilbert, in his famous study of *Ulysses*, begins his analysis of Scylla and the Charybdis with this reference to Mulligan's words. Let's remember that Gilbert's study on the parallelisms between *Ulysses* and the *Odyssey* is based on the correspondences given by Joyce¹². From this point of view, each episode is given a time, space, symbol, colour, organ of the human body, literary technique and subtext of the *Odyssey*. Scylla and the Charybdis has the Library as a place, the time is two o'clock in the afternoon, the organ is the brain, the art, literature, the symbol, Stratford, London and the technique dialectics.

The quotation of Mulligan's words by Gilbert has as a purpose to put emphasis on the paternity motif, which according to the author plays a central role in the chapter (211).

Though the participants in the conversation -Stephen Dedalus, Mr. Best, John Eglinton, Mr. George Russell and the "Quaker-lyster" (the librarian), later joined by Mulligan- discuss the whole western tradition in literature and philosophy, from Socrates to contemporary writers, Synge, for instance, the discussion is centered on Shakespeare's and, especially, Hamlet's personality. Stephen's hypothesis, that he supports in a *quasi* Platonic dialogue, is that Shakespeare, who wrote *Hamlet* some months after his father's death, identifies himself with Hamlet's father more than with the protagonist himself. Marking a difference with the Socratic model, Stephen's aim is not truth. As Gilbert has pointed out, for Stephen, what really counts, more than the conclusion, is the intellectual interest, the aesthetic value of the dialogue. This interpretation coincides with the technique stressed by Joyce in the letters he gave to Gilbert. As we know, in these letters Joyce put a lot of emphasis on dialectics¹³.

Eglinton's conciliatory solution, "He [Shakespeare] is the ghost and the prince. He is all in all" (200), accepted by Stephen, can be superficially interpreted in Mulligan's humorous comment: "Cuckoo! Cuckoo!" (201) alluding to Anne Hatheway's adventures mentioned during the conversation¹⁴, but they also point to a serious reading, as stressed by Gilbert: "The mystery of paternity, in its application to the first and second person of the Trinity, to King Hamlet and the Prince, and, by inference, to the curious symbiosis of Stephen and Bloom is always at the background of Stephen's exegesis of Shakespeare" (221). The central motif of the chapter is then paternity in its broadest sense: Promethean, Christian, human.

There is one last symbol to be analysed: Stratford, London, which can be connected with the title of the episode. Scylla is in fact the name of a geographic place in the Strait of Messina, which has suffered important changes if compared with the Homeric descriptions, due to the earthquake of 1783. In times of Homer, Scylla was an impressive stone cliff with a cavern at the top where Scylla lived. In front of Scylla was the great whirlpool of Charybdis, what turned the strait into a very dangerous place for seamen. Gilbert explains the symbology of the stone cliff by relating it to the stability of Dogma, Aristotle and Stratford, and the whirlpool, to Mysticism, Platonism and Elizabethan London. Shakespeare, Jesus and Socrates, the same as Ulysses, go through the trial with strength and courage, though not without scars (224). Let's add to the symbolism of the chapter, that Shakespeare left Stratford for London; Joyce, Dublin for Paris.

To conclude, it is necessary to consider the meaning of this bitextual structure in *Respiración artificial*. First, let us remember that the reference to the Library episode is introduced by Piglia in the context of the discussion about literature at the club in Concordia. On the basis of this comparison, it can be inferred that Piglia also considers that the importance of the discussion lies to a great extent on the originality of the ideas developed, on the aesthetic value of the dialogue, as expressed by Gilbert. Piglia, from an inevitable postmodern standing, does not aim at a unique and true evaluation of

Argentine literature, in spite of the strength with which Renzi develops his hypothesis. Renzi's look, the same as Stephen's, is that of the intellectual, the aesthete. Though this is for me the most important function of Joyce's intertext, I cannot disregard the motif of spiritual paternity. According to Piglia, *Respiración artificial* narrates a sort of sentimental education experienced by Renzi, a political and historical education at the same time (*Crítica y ficción*, 165). The discussion of the Library episode of *Ulysses* stresses this theme and Maggi's central role in the process. At the same time, Renzi is Maggi in many senses. To continue the topic of the "symbiosis of Stephen and Bloom", marked by Gilbert, Tardewski, as everybody in Concordia, says Renzi resembles Maggi (142). Considering their literary tastes, they both celebrate Joyce, and Renzi ultimately becomes the heir of his uncle's papers and, as such, he is going to complete the task Maggi had started. In this sense, Renzi is finally forced to place himself in History. This means to say that Renzi changes through the novel but remains faithful to himself, the same as Hamlet.

With this context as a background, we can conclude that at the beginning of the novel Renzi belongs to the genealogy of Stephen Dedalus, the young intellectual that approaches the world through art, but by the end of the novel, he is also Maggi, his spiritual father, "a man of principles that can only think from History" (*Respiración artificial*, 110).

Notes

- 1 See Elgue-Martini, Cristina. "Finnegans Wake in Ricardo Piglia's *La ciudad ausente*". ABEI Journal N°10, November 2008, pp.67-73.
- 2 As I stressed in my critical analyses of the presence *Finnegans Wake* in *La ciudad ausente*, Anglophone Literature and, more specifically, American fiction have been powerful influences in Piglia's writing. In several interviews and in an autobiographical *nouvelle*, "Prisión perpetua" (1988), he has referred to how, as an adolescent, he was initiated into literature by an American writer called Stephen Ratliff. "Prisión perpetua" is his tribute to Ratliff and to American literature; in *Respiración Artificial* Piglia pays homage to Henry James and William Faulkner, but more strongly to James Joyce.
- 3 Piglia's complete name is Ricardo Emilio Piglia Renzi.
- 4 This character points in many senses to the Polish writer Witold Gombrowics, who was exiled in Argentina between 1939 and 1963.
- 5 It is necessary to remember that the novel was published in 1980, under the Military Dictatorship, when this sort of cryptic fiction was the only way to refer to what was going on in the country when the novel was written.
- 6 *Crítica y ficción* 164 and 187.
- 7 It is necessary to point out with respect to the surname of the character of *Stephen Hero* and the presence of the autobiography of Joyce as an intertext of the three works I am referring to that on some occasions Joyce used the pseudonym Stephen Daedalus when he published some of the stories of *Dubliners*.
- 8 Joyce's mother died in August 1903 and *Ulysses* narrates the events of June, 16th, 1904.
- 9 All translations from Piglia's works are mine.

- 10 In 1905, between 1907 and 1915, and in 1919.
- 11 Let's remember that when the episodes of *Ulysses* were originally published in *The Little Review*, they had the Homeric titles. The first three, collectively known as the Telemachiad, had as titles: Telemachus, Nestor and Proteus, respectively.
- 12 Joyce also gave a scheme of the correspondences to Carlo Linati, that vary with respect to the ones developed by Gilbert, though they both have Joyce's "guarantee".
- 13 Let's remember that as practised in the Platonic tradition, till the emergence of scientific language, dialectics had as an objective to prove hypotheses, to reconcile apparently opposing points of view, more than the search for truth. On this issue, the wonderful study by Northrop Frye on the Bible and Literature, especially his characterization of heroic or noble language, would be enlightening.
- 14 In French, "cocu" means cuckold.

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