

An interview with Bernardina da Silveira Pinheiro, translator of Ulysses

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Close to her 97th birthday, Bernardina da Silveira Pinheiro, professor emeritus of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, received me in her apartment, on January 26th, for an interview about James Joyce.

“Speaking about Joyce makes me very glad” the translator said immediately, as I thanked her for her generosity in allowing me into her house. Responsible for the second translation of *Ulysses* (1922) to Brazilian Portuguese, she has a knowledge of the novel that dates from the 1970’s, when she taught *Dubliners* (1914) and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) to undergraduate students. She would later teach *Ulysses*, in the 1980’s, when she began teaching graduate courses. Her classes about *Ulysses*, in the university or in free courses, were always based on “chapter by chapter” readings, in order to show “Joyce’s work with the language and his extremely innovative narrative technique: the interior monologue, based on Bergson’s stream of consciousness — *la durée*”.

For her, the importance of translating *A Portrait* before *Ulysses* was momentous. She talks about the religious education Stephen received in Jesuit schools and the religious fanaticism of his mother, both responsible for the feeling of guilt that keeps haunting the character in *Ulysses*, where already in the first chapter Stephen is reminded of his failure to kneel beside her mother’s deathbed when she asked him to do it, and to pray for her together with other family members. The feeling created by this memory would be gradually erased in the development of the novel (“Circe”, chapter 15).

For Bernardina, *A Portrait* is also “the first psychological approach by Joyce. Stephen is the one who tells us everything. It is through his mind that we get to know what happens in the novel”. There are some personal connections between the translator and Joyce’s first novel as well. She too was a student in a Catholic school, and remembers very well the focus on “sin and hell that religious retreats adopted in the schools of those days”. She considers *A Portrait* “a masterpiece of technical narrative perfection and musicality, unrivaled by anything in Joyce’s oeuvre.” I ask her if she has revised her translation of *A Portrait* and she states that she already had revised it when the book left Editora Siciliano for the Alfaguara imprint of Editora Objetiva.

In 1995 began her connection with the psychoanalysis school Letra Freudiana, where she actively participates every year, to this day, of the Bloomsday celebrations. Because of her involvement in the school, she was invited to become a member in 1995, “although I’m not a psychoanalyst,” stresses the professor.

She affirms a fascination for Joyce’s language. Because of such a fascination, she has never read *Finnegans Wake* (1939): “I have the book, but I’ve never read it. I didn’t want to see Joyce undoing the language I love so much. But I still want to read it,” said she.

In answer to another question, she declared that she only met Antonio Houaiss once, and briefly, during a Bloomsday¹ organized by Peter O'Neill, who was then working for the Irish Embassy. She also heard him speak at the Academia Brasileira de Letras, when the philologist and first translator of *Ulysses* (in 1966) to the Portuguese language stated that the real protagonist of the novel was Molly Bloom, which surprised her, she reveals.

The translator affirms that the real difficulty behind Joyce's prose in *Ulysses* is not the language, but the allusions and the inner monologue technique. For her, "the problem with Houaiss's translation is that it has made "baroque, what in Joyce was a language that was ordinary, colloquial and erudite at the same time". And she doesn't think "colloquial" means something lesser, or simpler. "I employed the word 'colloquial' in an interview and people took it literally, turning something that was a quality of Joyce's language into a negative factor," she complains.

Bernardina believes that her translation of *Ulysses* was well received and that it had the proper attention in the media. "Surprising" is how she defines the reception of her work, which, among many other accolades, received the third place in the important Jabuti award in 2006, in the category of translation. On the table, she had the statuette and the official catalogue of the ceremony, which accompanied us during all the interview.

The first edition (2005), published by Objetiva, has been reprinted twice, with 2500 copies in each reprint. She stresses that the excellent work by the publishers in promoting the translation was "in large measure responsible for its surprising reception by the reading public". The translator explains that she made a full revision of the translation, but that these changes were only incorporated in the second reprint. For this reason, when the translation came to the Alfaguara imprint (2007), it already had been revised, generating what she considers to be a second and revised edition of the translation.

Her major concern was "not to alter a single word", as Joyce would have recommended to the Danish translator who was probably going to deal with *Ulysses*². "You can't create over the work of a genius," she said. Her translation started with Molly Bloom's inner monologue, something that not only fascinated her, but also made her laugh a lot. During the translation, she says she benefited hugely from her experience of reading with her students.

According to her, two of her former students, Maria Helena Carneiro da Cunha and Renata Salgado, were the ones responsible for suggesting that Roberto Feith, CEO of Editora Objetiva, should publish her translation of *Ulysses*. "He then invited me to translate the book and asked me if I would give the translation rights to the publisher. It was a quick negotiation."

The choice to translate the edition organized by Hans Walter Gabler came from the translator herself. It was a decision based on the work that was behind that edition. Although she knew of the existence of translations of *Ulysses* to other languages, the Brazilian translator tried to keep away from them during her work: "I avoided reading them in order to be able to translate only Joyce."

When we came to the question about the supposedly male chauvinist perspective in *Ulysses*, Bernardina exclaimed that the novel is "an ode to Woman, to Molly, to Nora". The idea sounded impossible to her. She remembers how Bloom feels guilty for having masturbated in the presence of Gerty MacDowell, a pure and innocent girl, something that was considered an unforgivable lack of respect ("Nausicaa", chapter 13); and also Molly Bloom's monologue ("Penelope", chapter 18), written through the mind of a woman, and not as a man trying to imitate a woman; and the kiss Molly gives Bloom when she surrenders to him, making him think, as if receiving a gift: "All yielding she tossed my hair. Kissed, she kissed me. Me. And me now." ("Lestrygonians", chapter 8). All of this, according to Bernardina, "is the opposite of

macho”.

Bernardina describes as “marvelous” her relationship with Richard Ellmann, whom she met in 1985, in England, while she was in a post-doctoral research period in London, studying Joyce and feelings of guilt in *Ulysses*. She got in touch with him by telephone, having obtained his number through the British Council. They met in Oxford three times, and thus was born a friendship that would last till Ellmann’s demise in 1987.

She thinks the brothers Campos³ had a very positive impact in Brazilian Joyce studies. But she feels sorry that this influence did not have the same importance in Rio de Janeiro, as it had in São Paulo.

About Joyce’s stories, Bernardina points the presence of the idea of epiphany (revelation) in all of them, but highlights Mr. Duffy’s revelation in “A Painful Case” as the one that has left a deeper mark in her. For her, “A Painful Case is “his most beautiful and most painful story, emotionally, because of the solitude it creates.” Nevertheless, the most important story in *Dubliners* is “The Dead”, which, “not only is beautiful, but also foreshadows in a thrilling way the novel Joyce would write next: *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. She highlights in “The Sisters” the fact that the revelation does not belong to the protagonist, a small kid, but to the reader: “the boy does not know why he feels relieved by the priest’s death, but the reader does”, explained the professor, who prefers not to compare Joyce to other English-language writers, but points to Swift as one of her favorites.

By the end of our talk, a surprise: she tells me that her husband, Caio César de Menezes Pinheiro, the owner of Editora Universal, was responsible for the publication of the first edition of *Sagarana*, by Guimarães Rosa, in 1946. Soon enough I have in my hands a copy of this first edition, signed and dedicated by the author, brought to the room by her son, Antônio Carlos da Silveira Pinheiro. Given the presence of literature in this family, it seems that translating *Ulysses* was no accident.

Notes

- 1 O’Neill, an Irishman who’s been living in Rio de Janeiro since 1973, informed me in two e-mail messages from January 27th, 2019, in English, that “The first Bloomsday commemoration in Rio was held at Restaurante Garden (R. Visconde de Pirajá, 631 B, Ipanema), at 6 pm on 16 June 1998”. O’Neill, who “never had any position at the Irish Embassy”, worked together with Ambassador José Olympio Rache de Almeida, former Brazilian Ambassador to Ireland, and decided to organize the event as a measure destined to “bring the Bloomsday tradition to Rio de Janeiro”. Invited by the Ambassador, Houaiss, already in poor health, was there. He would die on March 7th, 1999. O’Neill does not have photographic documentation of the evening. [Interviewer’s note].
- 2 Martins Forlag’s publishing house was interested in a Danish *Ulysses*. Joyce travelled to Copenhagen in 1936 and, there, the name of Mrs. Kastor Hansen was floated as a possible translator for the novel. With no previous notice, Joyce went to her and said: “I am James Joyce. I understand that you are to translate *Ulysses*, and I have come from Paris to tell you not to alter a single word” (Ellmann, Richard. *James Joyce*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 691-692). [Interviewer’s note].
- 3 Haroldo de Campos (1929 - 2003) and Augusto de Campos (1931 -) are two poets and translators who introduced many ‘avant-garde’ authors to Brazil since the early 1950’s. Their translation of fragments of *Finnegans Wake* (*Panorama do Finnegans Wake*, 1962) was one of the largest projects of translating Joyce’s last novel at that moment. [Translator’s note].