

I Got U(lysses) under My Skin

Caetano Galindo

Sometimes people ask me how many times I have read *Ulysses*.

Of course they don't really want a mathematically precise answer, I think they just need to confirm the suspicion that my engagement with the book is something permanent in my life. Different than any other relation they might have with other books, or with this book. Different than any other relation I might have with any other books.

And it's fair to say it is so.

I have translated more than fifty books by now, read bog knows how many hundreds (thousands?). But none of them is so deeply connected to me, to who I am as a person; and certainly no other book has had such a profound impact on me, as a translator, as a scholar, as a human being. As a collection of me's.

I've committed to this relationship in my late twenties, and I have meant it. For decades now I haven't been able not to think about *Ulysses*. Both because the book has really shaped the way I see the world, and my place in it, and because people have never (mercifully) stopped asking me things about it. And among those questions, yes, there is always place for that one: how many times I have read it.

I think it's fair to say that when you translate a book you have to "read" it at least three times in the process. Once (on the left side of your screen) like a regular reader, then once as you jot down your first draft on the right side of your screen (and this is of course reading-*cum*-writing, but reading nonetheless), and a third time (at least a third time), when you close the original and read once more what you have done, in order to polish it up. With a book such as *Ulysses*, this method would simply not do. You would have to add a fourth, and a fifth reading, and so on... just to get things to a good start. So it's not absurd to suppose that simply in the course of the translation of the book the translator would have read it more times than most people will read any books in their entire lives.

Even if you don't count the times you may have read it beforehand, and all the times you will get back to it, in the original or in your own translation, for classes, research, or fun. Good old unalloyed fun.

What may I answer those eager questioners then, when I have in fact, by now, translated the book three times? And, more to the point, Is there any point in keeping score?

*

My first time was in 2002-2003.

I was a PhD candidate in the Universidade de São Paulo, writing about “reported speech” in *Ulysses*, and I had somehow managed to convince my tutor it was a good idea to include a new translation of the novel in the finished thesis. I set aside two of the four years I had to get my PhD and devoted them to this first task. Let’s translate *Ulysses*.

This translation was then entirely revised, of course, for the final version, that went to the jury in 2006. But it’s not absurd to think all those visions and revisions, versions and reversions constituted only “one” turn of the loose screw people thought I had. Not many people saw this translation, as it was not uploaded with the thesis afterwards, since we chose to keep it still “unpublished”, hoping for a commercial release in the future. I have here with me the only “book” version of it that still exists, printed and bound by a friend.

The commercial edition came to be only in 2012, after the end of the copyright. But what was published then was not that first version I wrote. What was published was my second *Ulysses*.

In the meantime I got to work with Paulo Henriques Britto in a post-doctoral research. Britto is undoubtedly one of the greatest translators to ever have worked in Portuguese, and a Joyce aficionado to boot. He read my translation with a loupe and fiddled with it with tiny tweezers, sending me document after document with tons of suggestions and alterations. I read them one by one and discussed each of them with him, online or in his beautiful apartment in Rio de Janeiro. By late 2011 we had a new *Ulysses*, and this is what Brazilian readers found, bound in beautiful black spine Penguin garb.

But that was early 2012. A long time ago.

Since that, this incarnation of “my” *Ulysses* has been very well received (thank you), has sold tens of thousands of copies, has received three of the four main prizes awarded to literary translation in the country and has earned the companionship of a Companion: my book *Sim, eu digo sim* (Yes, I say yes), which we chose to describe as a “guided tour” of Joyce’s novel, and which was the first book solely written as an aid to the readers of *Ulysses* in Portuguese; and is still the only one of its kind.

So, a lot happened.

But as I taught the book, read it with my students, talked about it and listened to what readers (colleagues and the general public) had to say about the translation... and, above all, as I myself kept changing my ways of seeing the book and the whole process of translation, and kept being changed by the book I read (both as a teacher and as a

translator), it started to dawn on me that there was still some things I felt I needed to do with that translation. And in the same way as the magical copyright-destroying date of 2012 had so much to do with the publication of that first version, now another big date, the centenary of the original *Ulysses*, came to dictate the terms and to give the opportunity for a new take on our black penguin.

Late 2020 we began conversations, and during 2021 the publishers designed an entirely new version of our *Ulysses*, ready to be launched for the celebrations in 2022. A new cover, amazing illustrations, a whole new roster of commentators selected among the very cream of Brazilian and international joyceans to write us a series of afterwords to the book, and, from my point of view, an entirely revised translation: thousands upon thousands of changes to the text we had published ten years earlier.

In a way, therefore, this will be my third shot at writing a Brazilian *Ulysses*.

What may have effectively changed from one version to the other, during this twenty years of my involvement with this (ongoing!) project, is something for other people to find, and even to analyse if they see it fit.

I am reasonably certain it is now “better” than it was. But the me who uses his own criteria to evaluate translations simply did not exist before all this. So, what’s now my “best” could conceivably be considered worse when seen by that younger me. After all, who’s the me who was me and still is, for me to ever be able to count how many times “I” have read *Ulysses*. And even how many times I may have written it.

I don’t know if I’ll ever retranslate the novel. Maybe not. I think it’s just fine as it is now. At least the me that’s me today thinks it is. But I’ll certainly keep reading *Ulysses*.

How many times?

Well... Probably just the one, with a book that (even though it’s still not made of water, as *Finnegans Wake* might be) has so much of the fluvial, of the riverlike in it. It is still there, and will be as kingdoms and entire civilizations might come and go, but every time I dip my toe into it, I meet another book, always for the very first time, and am also greeted as a soon to be othered me.

