

Have you noticed the phrase – I no longer know in which poem- “we will never escape the fate of being prisoners.” It’s things like that which people should find in what I’ve written and comment on....¹ (Peter Boyle)

Ghostspeaking, created by the Australian poet, Peter Boyle is an anthology of fictitious authors or heteronyms and builds on the work of the Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa to evolve a new tradition in poetry which breaks down the borders between languages, cultures, literary traditions, the living and the dead. The voices of his ‘translated’ poets are from backgrounds spanning Quebec, Latin America and France and are often escaping the burden of circumstance through their poetry. This anthology is a “Neverland” where these ghost- like poets can reside and evokes the question: what greater evidence is there of a poet’s existence than their poetry?

I was lucky- that’s all. Inside myself I’m a coward and I don’t think my existence or non- existence is a big deal. Tomorrow, next month, next year, I’ll vanish like mist. ²(Ricardo Xavier *Bousoño*)

This heteronymous poetic project is highly reminiscent of the work of one of the major proponents of this form: Fernando Pessoa, who like Boyle, was a poet and translator. Pessoa created many heteronymous prose writers and poets, his best known works of this nature being: Ricardo Reis, Alberto Caeiro, Bernardo Soares and Álvaro de Campos.³ The heteronymous poet is an uncanny figure: a haunting, disembodied voice, very like a ghost. However, like Pessoa’s heteronyms, Boyle’s could be conceived as masks:

The use of different masks appears thus for Pessoa as one of the most basic methods, or poetic modes, through which he translates his own fragmented and hybrid poetic voice into a heteronymic aesthetic totality.⁴

The idea of the “fragmented and hybrid poetic voice” is suggested in Boyle’s choice of names whose meanings are consistent with the heteronymous poet’s dominant themes,

¹ Boyle, Peter. “[Introduction].” *The American Poetry Review*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1999, pp. 20–20. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/27782915

² Boyle, Peter *Ghostspeaking* Vagabond Press 2016, page 47

³ <https://cordite.org.au/reviews/varatharajan-boyle/>

⁴ INFANTE, IGNACIO. “Heteronymies of Lusophone Englishness: Colonial Empire, Fetishism, and Simulacrum in Fernando Pessoa’s English Poems I–III.” *After Translation: The Transfer and Circulation of Modern Poetics Across the Atlantic*, Fordham University, 2013, pp. 22–50. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13wzw5v.6.

as it indicates artifice. Examples of this are: Maria Zafarelli Strega as “strega” means “witch” in Italian, which is consistent with her character indicated by her poem entitled, *Spells*; Frederico Silva is another, as ‘Silva’ is a surname in Portugal and Brazil and its meaning is derived from the Latin word for ‘forest’ or ‘woodland’ which suits his work as it has a bucolic theme running throughout it; another example is Robert Berechit as ‘Berechit’ comes from Hebrew and means “in the beginning,” the first word in the parashah⁵- his work conveys the devastation of war and the anxieties of a loner with a desperate desire to start again. Of course, Strega and Berechit chose their names but it is the neatness of them existing in an anthology that suggests that the names could be construed as Boyle’s word play as opposed to pseudonyms of “real” poets. In this sense, the heteronyms could be viewed as masks, however this word inadequately serves to describe the layers of conceit that Boyle employs to make his voices “real”.

A further conceit of the book is that Boyle is the translator of all these poets. The effect of this is that Boyle is present in the heteronymous works, while proclaiming them to be someone else’s, just as translators are a quiet presence in the works they translate.⁶

In Elena Navronskaya Blanco’s section, Boyle includes a transaction between them, displaying that he has “consulted” Elena for the accurate translation of words in Argentinismo into standard Spanish:

I am of course willing to help clarify the odd phrase or the occasional Argentinisimo in standard Spanish- as you know, I have virtually no English. Maria {the publisher} will have no doubt told you that I don’t do interviews or personal revelation. I am neither an actress nor a politician and, accordingly, detest biographies. The poems should stand on their own.⁷

The last line indicates the way that a poet wants us to read poetry, as voices on a page. So for us as an audience, it suggests that the poet is as “real” to us as their poem is. It asks the question, does the poem need a body? In *Ghostspeaking*, the body is a prison which the poets transcend by way of their imagination and their art:

⁵ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bereshit_\(parsha\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bereshit_(parsha))

⁶ <https://cordite.org.au/reviews/varatharajan-boyle/>

⁷ Boyle, Peter *Ghostspeaking* Vagabond Press 2016, page 51

For a whole month during the bitterest winter of my memories, in a hovel near the docks I would unfold my map of Paris. The two working girls who let me stay there marvelled at the joy I took in my map. I would say out loud, I will write this novel on this street, on this street I will write a poem, at a bar near this corner I will begin my most famous book. (Maria Zafarelli Strega)⁸

In the case of the poet, Ricardo Xavier *Bousoño*, who left Argentina in 1976, fearing for his life, poetry is an escape from oppression, again reinforcing the idea of the poet being in defiance of the human condition of being tethered to a body which is slow and has restrictions placed upon it:

The poem sits and waits,
warms the room,
arranges all to make it welcoming.
Sometime after midnight
the traveller turns the key
and the glow of some
unfathomable beauty
dries the anguished moisture
on his skin.⁹

For Boyle, the true adventurer is the one who creates their adventures as it reflects an exciting inner life:

For me, to find myself in a port is to enjoy everything my senses and my mind can feel and judge in a port. That's all. I don't make up romantic images. I once wrote- the only adventure, the one which lasts, namely life, for heaven's sake, the secret inexpressible life...¹⁰

The rich inner lives of the heteronyms indicated by the short biographies, the prose poems, letters and pieces of prose further create a sense that the heteronyms are real

⁸ Boyle, Peter Ghostspeaking Vagabond Press 2016, page 95

⁹ Boyle, Peter Ghostspeaking Vagabond Press 2016, page 25

¹⁰ Boyle, Peter. "[Introduction]." *The American Poetry Review*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1999, pp. 20–20. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/27782915

poets, as opposed to Boyle wearing different “masks”. Also, the authors are all “deceased”, so “masks” fails to express the inherent creepiness of the uncanny voices, for this reason too, “ghosts” seems like a more apt description. Boyle, or the master author should also be treated like a ghost as a reference to the role of the translator who is ‘quiet presence’ in a text- serving a text. In this anthology, the translator acts like a psychopomp leading us into this underworld populated by poetry and poets. This function is hinted at in passages such as, Ricardo Xavier *Bousoño’s Ghostspeaking*:

And I, a ghost led by a ghost
on the white road where autumn is
and the tim-tam drumming of the dead...

The sections containing prose poetry create an intimacy between the ghost poets and the reader, as it expresses an interior voice unlike verse or lyric poetry which suggest an “elevated” or “raised voice¹¹. The prose poem creates the illusion that they are speaking to us alone and not to a crowd¹². The prose poem also doesn’t make grand, sweeping statements but “urges us to return to the original perception, before the conclusion rushed in, provided by the mind.”¹³ Even though the scenes described in the prose poems are surreal, there is a suspension of disbelief as the reader is seduced by the language, drawn into the poet’s world. We want them to be real.

An ordinary evening in the park near Paseo de Florida. She was invited by two mice to accompany them and she tracked her way across the park into a deserted building, the two mice constantly looking back to make sure she was following. (Maria Zafarelli Strega) ¹⁴

Boyle, as he is in the text, is fluent in multiple languages and has translated French and Spanish poets, including Federico Garcia Lorca, Cesar Vallejo, and Pierre Reverdy. The translator is a trustworthy character who allows us insight into the works and lives of

¹¹ BLY, ROBERT. “What The Prose Poem Carries With It.” *The American Poetry Review*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1977, pp. 44–45. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/27775627

¹² BLY, ROBERT. “What The Prose Poem Carries With It.” *The American Poetry Review*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1977, pp. 44–45. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/27775627

¹³ BLY, ROBERT. “What The Prose Poem Carries With It.” *The American Poetry Review*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1977, pp. 44–45. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/27775627

¹⁴ Boyle, Peter *Ghostspeaking* Vagabond Press 2016, page95

poets who speak languages other than English. The translation makes it possible for poetry to be considered universal.

When speaking of his new tradition for poetry, Boyle emphasises the importance of breaking down the boundaries between traditions, for a new tradition to evolve. The anthology itself is written by an Australian poet, evoking the heteronymic structure of a Portuguese poet and references French, English, Spanish and Russian writers:

...there is a broad literary tradition I see my poetry as coming out of, a tradition or a merging of traditions from international poetry from the twentieth century. It is certainly not “Language” poetry, nor is it narrowly Australian poetry. ...At the least the language is fresh, dense, rich, pushed towards the limits, the heart is open, with the political and the personal spilling into each other in a constant rich and urgently serious dialogue.¹⁵

The heteronyms cite a diverse range of authors and with disregard, borrowing “codes”, which Badiou refers to as the “heteronymic game”¹⁶. Thalassa, for instance, is cited by the translator to reference Shakespeare in *Of Fate and Other Inconveniences* and in another text to reference Malory¹⁷, he goes on to say, delighted: “Where else but in Lazlo Thalassa would Dostoyevsky brazenly I usurp a line of Ezra Pound’s?”¹⁸ This lack of reserve, picking and playing with a variety of texts is in essence Boyle’s ambition. This merging of genres, texts, languages and cultures is abundant in Thalassa’s poetry:

A butterfly flutters in and out of a sarcophagus filled with honeydew melons.
Small birds ride the air like cowboys on hallucinogens. The Petit Larousse
Dictionary of Avian Sign Language offers no translation. (Thalassa)

There is an abyss of language that is awe inspiring. It suggests a sublime that is internal as the outside world is small compared to the poet’s interior, replete with language and imagination.

¹⁵ http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/cou_article/item/19018/Interview-with-Peter-Boyle/en

¹⁶ INFANTE, IGNACIO. “Heteronymies of Lusophone Englishness: Colonial Empire, Fetishism, and Simulacrum in Fernando Pessoa’s English Poems I–III.” *After Translation: The Transfer and Circulation of Modern Poetics Across the Atlantic*, Fordham University, 2013, pp. 22–50. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13wzw5v.6.

¹⁷ Boyle, Peter Ghostspeaking Vagabond Press 2016, page 70

¹⁸ Boyle, Peter Ghostspeaking Vagabond Press 2016, page 70

Say to yourself the word “Perfection.” Be confident. All the stars of the universe were placed millenia ago far inside you.” (The Montaigne Poet)

This is consistent with Pessoa’s sense of the sublime. Unlike the English tradition of the sublime which is often associated with the immense power of nature that evokes both awe and terror, Pessoa’s version doesn’t elevate but is instead profound:

His sublime of the inner abyss (rather than the lofty heights) emerges from a poetics divested of any transcendental signified, and it interrogates what de Bolla refers to as ‘the self-determined subject’. Yet, in the end, the sublime as reimagined by Pessoa and his heteronyms paradoxically arrogates greatness by subverting the sublime of eighteenth- century literary history.¹⁹

The concept of breaking down borders is also extended to that between life and death, the real and the unreal:

I remember, oh some Saturday afternoon at the cinema: a pirate had just dived from an immense height into the white stillness of ice-clear water. And I remember how it felt as if I had dived down with him. And I could still feel the water breaking open as my head passed beyond the surface, down into the blue silence of an altered world.

The idea that reality is fluid is a recurring theme in this anthology. The very act of translation implies the existence of a “real” or “original” text. However, in Ghostspeaking, there are just texts, there are no “original” texts, subverting the idea of the real.

It’s a true book,’ he’d say, ‘it doesn’t dissolve in the rain.’ Somehow we all guessed it was a single long poem tracing the true story of an imagined place, maybe in Argentina or Brazil or Paraguay. ...I asked him once but he said I wasn’t ready yet. Never ‘it’ wasn’t ready- just me. That’s how he always was.²⁰ (Ricardo Xaviar Bousono)

¹⁹ THOMPSON, TIMOTHY A. “‘Pórtico Partido Para o Impossível’: Fernando Pessoa and the Portuguese Sublime.” *Portuguese Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2009, pp. 151–168. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41105317

²⁰ Boyle, Peter Ghostspeaking Vagabond Press 2016, page46

As far as the reader is concerned, the “translated” text is the real text as it is all that is available and comprehensible to them. For Baudrillard, in his theory of the simulacra, in contemporary society the real and the unreal are constantly interwoven and cannot be discerned from each other and therefore the simulation displaces the original text.²¹

This conception of the simulacrum is consistent with Pessoa’s works which emerged with the intention of replacing the work of English canonical poets with heteronymous modernist versions of “their respective poetics”.²²

However, Boyle, like the Montaigne poet, is not trying to replace anything, but rather his intention is to evolve the work. Boyle’s translations correspond with the Deleuzian conception of the simulacra which is in a constant state of becoming. *Ghostspeaking* discusses the effect of multiple translations on poems, suggesting that a text is in a constant state of flux:

...the simulacrum, is an uncanny spot of the neutral. It is neither a self-contained or self-containing ontology nor merely a reflection of an a priori ontology; it is neutral, neither one thing nor another: the simulacrum is a liminal space of process and becoming.

The beautiful work by the Montaigne Poet *On Translating a Line By Virgil* demonstrates that the evolution of the text and its translation does not mean its erasure but rather that it becomes subsumed into the modern, sustaining the relevance of the text and its dead language:

Ibant obscuri sola sub nocte per umbram

And dark they travelled under the night’s silent loneliness

There is no true sense of a text²³. This is clear in the case of the Montaigne Poet and the scandal of the summer of 2003 where a work was published under this pseudonym, suggesting different language origins:

²¹ Boulter, Jonathan Stuart. “Partial Glimpses of the Infinite: Borges and the Simulacrum.” *Hispanic Review*, vol. 69, no. 3, 2001, pp. 355–377. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3247067

²² INFANTE, IGNACIO. “Heteronymies of Lusophone Englishness: Colonial Empire, Fetishism, and Simulacrum in Fernando Pessoa’s English Poems I–III.” *After Translation: The Transfer and Circulation of Modern Poetics Across the Atlantic*, Fordham University, 2013, pp. 22–50. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13wzw5v.6.

The Spanish edition stated on its cover that it was a translation from the French, the French that it was translated from the Spanish. No one ever claimed authorship of the book and the publishers in both my countries stood by their agreement to preserve the anonymity of the purported author or authors.²⁴ (The Montaigne Poet)

The scandal becomes truly amusing when the argument then goes on to contend with the hierarchy of the texts:

Several experts claimed that the French version was superior and undoubtedly the original, minor irregularities in tense formation confirming their opinion.²⁵ (The Montaigne Poet)

Paradoxically, language in this sense behaves both as liberator and concealer of the true or the real, or to put it another way: “language is both “true” and a simulacrum of this truth, simultaneously.”²⁶ Although the production of poems in multiple languages seems to have the effect of freeing the text from being confined to a single group of people, the poem is still better read in some languages- regardless of origin:

I have chosen to use the Spanish version- not because I believe it to be more authentic but because some how it feels superior as poetry in Spanish. I might add that Jorge Zalameya’s Spanish translation of Sain John Perse’s *Oiseaux* immediately felt to me more convincing, more satisfying as poetry than the French original. (The Montaigne Poet) ²⁷

The origin of the poet, which is a constant theme throughout this anthology, is also discussed in this “scandal” as it reveals theories about who the poets might be, questioning the relevance of the poet in the context of the evaluation of a poem. There is a suggestions that the poems were written by two authors:

The author was not one but two people: identical twins, one living in Auteuil, the other in Valladolid, children of Spanish immigrants from the 1950s. The twin

²³ Paul Valery, “Il n’y a pas vrai sens d’un texte Paul Valéry By Harold Bloom, page 585

²⁴ Boyle, Peter Ghostspeaking Vagabond Press 2016, page 207

²⁵ Boyle, Peter Ghostspeaking Vagabond Press 2016, page 207

²⁶ Boulter, Jonathan Stuart. “Partial Glimpses of the Infinite: Borges and the Simulacrum.” *Hispanic Review*, vol. 69, no. 3, 2001, pp. 355–377. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3247067

²⁷ Boyle, Peter Ghostspeaking Vagabond Press 2016, page 207

sisters wrote alternate sentences of each essay: the one in Auteuil in French, the one in Valladolid in Spanish.

If the poet hasn't a body (as in the case of the heteronym) and no identity, what effect does this have on the poem? The theories are never substantiated and the author or authors' true identity is never revealed but as the translator states: "Personally I enjoy these prose poems or micro-essays whoever wrote them."

Ghostspeaking subverts the hierarchy of the real vs unreal and the original vs the translated text. Reading the poetry of these ghost-like authors, guided by a ghost-like narrator, we leave a world that places restrictions on the imagination, that is too concerned with trivialities such as origins, and we are plunged into worlds which are rich in language and culture. The only real thing of value is the poem. Boyle's work expresses the sense that the translated work is not seeking to replace the original text, nor is it a pale copy but a moment of evolution for the text. The idea of the poet's prison being the body, identity and limitations of language is explored. However, the profound depths of the imagination suggest that if we are to be imprisoned, then let our confines be the poet's mind.

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