

“Mercury’s hat” (*U* 1.601): Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Its Traces in J. M. Guelbenzu’s *El Mercurio*

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Abstract

This paper analyses the influence of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) on J. M. Guelbenzu’s *El Mercurio* (1967). Similarities between both include, among others, writing habits, direct allusions, characterization, plot and stylistic strategies. These evidences make it clear that Joyce has had a major impact on Guelbenzu.

Keywords: comparative studies, Guelbenzu, Joyce, *Ulysses*, *El Mercurio*.

Stating that James Joyce’s *oeuvre* has been one of the most significant influences in the Twentieth Century Novel is a commonplace. As a logical consequence —it has happened with most great authors of world’s literature— Joyce’s literary production has frequently been imitated in most European languages. However paradoxical it might appear to be, and though it is difficult to prove, Spain is the country where there is the greatest number of Joycean imitators. We do not only have the well-known case of Luis Martín Santos and his *Tiempo de silencio*, an influence that has been fully researched and today is even found in high school textbooks,¹ but also the early case of Ramón Otero Pedrayo, an imitator of *Finnegans*

Wake in Galicia.² Other authors who followed Joyce's style are usually studied in the yearly meetings of the Spanish *James Joyce Society*.³ This paper intends to add some remarks on the influence of Joyce's *Ulysses* in a Spanish writer, Jose María de Guelbenzu and his novel *El Mercurio*. Although this influence has already been studied, in particular by Ana Rodríguez Fischer in her introduction to the Cátedra edition from 1997, where she includes a good number of similarities,⁴ we can add here some additional comments.

José María Guelbenzu is a well-known author in Spanish contemporary literature and has received several awards. He was born in Madrid on April 14th, 1944. Incidentally, we can point out that he attended high school in "Colegio Cañameros," ruled by the "Society of Jesus," a first connection to Joyce, who attended Conglows School and whose early years with the Jesuits are well reflected in his *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.⁵ Guelbenzu has received several prestigious awards: he won the reputed "Premio de la Crítica" for novels in 1981, and the Plaza & Janés award for the best international novel in 1991. Furthermore, Cátedra Publishers included *El Mercurio* in "Letras Hispánicas," a collection that gathers only important literary landmarks. However, as it happens in other artistic fields, *El Mercurio* did not get the same attention among readers as it did among critics. In *El Mercurio* (1967) and *Antifaz* (1976) he was an avant-garde novelist, but he then changed his style in his following novels. In *El pasajero de ultramar* (1976), *La noche en casa* (1979), *El río de la luna* (1981), *El esperado* (1984), *La mirada* (1987), *La tierra prometida* (1991), his style is fairly traditional while he shows his preference for writing detective novels.⁶

Guelbenzu has never denied his Joycean influence. As a matter of fact, he has published some comments in the press alluding to the Joycean elements in his work, and always acknowledging his admiration for Joyce. As far as the composition process is concerned, we can also find some similarities. Joyce was fond of jotting down annotations from which he elaborated his novels.⁷ Joyce's notebooks, especially

used for the interpretation of *Finnegans Wake*, are well known in this respect. Although this way of working has been carried out by many authors, we find a similar process in Guelbenzu's work. Thus, he answered a question in which he explains his process of composition:

¿Cuáles son sus hábitos de escritura?

Normalmente, suelo tomar notas en un cuaderno de tapa de hule, si es posible, pero son notas sueltas. Cuando me he hartado de tomar notas, estoy tan obsesionado por empezar a escribir que me siento delante del ordenador y ahí comienza la novela propiamente dicha.
www.elmundo.es

What are your working habits?

I usually take notes in a notebook, if possible, but they are loose notes. When I am fed up with note-taking, I am so obsessed with starting writing that I sit at the computer and the novel itself begins. (translation mine)

Pedro, Guelbenzu's main character, is an avid reader and states that he has finished reading *Ulysses*, something that many readers cannot be proud of (*El Mercurio* 198-99). The author's admiration for Joyce is also stated by means of

Pedro's words: "Imagínate, escribir una novela de seiscientos folios, una cosa tan gigantesca como esta. Debe ser algo inenarrable, fantástico" (*El Mercurio* 197) ("Imagine writing a novel with six hundred sheets, such a gigantic work as this one. It has to be something untold, fantastic" [translation mine]). In the same way, this character is aware of the problems that Joyce had both with censorship and to make his work known, even in his own country: "¿Estás leyendo al gran blasfemo Joyce por casualidad?" (*El Mercurio* 259) ("Do you happen to be reading Joyce, the great blasphemous one?")

Furthermore, in the novel *El Mercurio*, there are some intertextual references to Joyce's novel *Ulysses*. First of all, the

main character, Pedro, quotes psychiatrist Jung's work on Joyce. On page 193, he opens *Ulysses* and mentions two of the main characters of *Ulysses*: "Dedalus Molly." Below, he remembers the novel as a means to criticise the situation of Spanish Literature: "No cuenta para nada que Joyce haya escrito el *Ulises*, en España todo está sumido en un éxtasis larvario" (*El Mercurio* 194) ("It is irrelevant that Joyce has written *Ulysses*, in Spain everything is a larva ecstasy"). In addition to this, some chapters from *Ulysses* are alluded to, as chapter 9, which takes place in Dublin National Library in Kildare Street (*El Mercurio* 195). The girl whom Bloom observes in chapter 13, Gerty MacDowell, is also mentioned (*El Mercurio* 193), as well as the episode in Dublin Nighttown in chapter 15. (*El Mercurio* 197)

We can also compare the nature of the titles. In both works, the title makes little reference to the matter of the action. If we bring to mind other works like *Tom Jones*, *Don Quixote*, *Moll Flanders*, etc, their titles show the people on which the plot is based. Other times, as in Kafka's *The Trial*, C. J. Cela's *Viaje a la Alcarria*, Verne's *20,000 Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, we are told the place where the action takes place or something concerning the plot. But, on the one hand, who is *Ulysses* in Joyce's novel? On the other hand, why "mercury"? It is simply the title of a novel that Guelbenzu's main character is writing and readers do not get to know it until the end of the novel. Both structures are also similar, since chapters appear without a title.

As far as the plot is concerned, there are several similarities. First, the place where the action takes place is reduced to a single city. We have Dublin, on the one hand, and Madrid in *El Mercurio*. That is the reason why there are so many references to their streets. Regarding time, both novels have more than one beginning, which enables the reader to compare different points of view. In relation to the main characters, we find that they are people who want to become writers. If we take the case of Blasco, he is someone who tries

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to write a novel, in particular *El Mercurio* (206, 209). The clearest parallel in Joyce's case is Stephen Dedalus, although Leopold Bloom, we may also remember, despite being a canvasser, says a couple of times that he wants to be a writer.

The following tables show some other common features shared by both novels.

Both works include many literary quotations:

<i>Ulysses</i>	<i>El Mercurio</i>
-There are many Shakespearean quotations, like "Elsinore. <i>That beetles o'er his base into the sea</i> " (U 1.567-68)	-literature quotations (118) -Pavese on pain (228)

Similarly, we find lengthy digressions about literature in the two novels:

<i>Ulysses</i>	<i>El Mercurio</i>
-Chapter 9	-on literature (126)

Characters from other works written by the authors appear in several of their texts:

<i>Ulysses</i>	<i>El Mercurio</i>
-Stephen Dedalus is the protagonist in <i>A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man</i> .	-Chéspir will be the protagonist in <i>La noche en casa</i>
-Some characters had already appeared in <i>Dubliners</i> .	

On occasion people drink too much:

<i>Ulysses</i>	<i>El Mercurio</i>
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-Stephen speaks about alcohol already in the first chapter.

-He appears drunk in chapter 15.

-Characters point out that they have drunk too much. (115).

The inclusion of extensive, almost excessive, lists is employed by both authors:

Ulysses

-lists in Cyclops
(U 12.569-67)

-the library of Bloom
(U 1361-98)

El Mercurio

-guide of shows (134-35)

-litany of "I love you"
("te quiero") (241)

Contemporary writers are spoken about in the two novels:

Ulysses

-Authors are quoted like Lady Gregory, Synge, Yeats or Russell (chapter 9)

El Mercurio

- Rafael Conte, Manuel López Estremera or Guelbenzu himself (263-64)

Nevertheless, other real characters appear in both texts:

Ulysses

-A.E. Russell, Lyster and Eglinton (chapter 9).

-We have to add here Joyce's usage of *Thom's Directory*, guide of Dublin, from Joyce took many real characters.

El Mercurio

-Preminger, Boetticher, Ford, Goddard, Pasolini (134-35)

-Rafael Conte (375)

-Javier del Amo (374)

Popular songs are frequently quoted in the two novels:

Ulysses

seaside girls (U 4.282)

El Mercurio

-fragment of a song
by Jacques Brel (238)

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'in old Madrid (U18.736-37

love is sighing I am dying
shall I wear a white rose
(U18.768)

As far as language is concerned, parallels are also abundant. First of all, the syntax is disrupted; we find long sentences and short ones. The use of punctuation is occasionally arbitrary and not always the expected one. The stream of consciousness technique, which makes these disruptions possible, is recurrently used. There are also language coinages, compound words that do not appear in a dictionary. It is a process common in Germanic languages, as is the case of English, but in Spanish it seems and sounds strange, and it makes the reader somewhat shocked:

<i>Ulysses</i>	<i>El Mercurio</i>
snotgreen sea (U1.78)	yesosponja sorbegoteras (137)
scrotumtightening sea (U1.78)	ensaladilla-con-mucha-mayonesa (143)
dogsbody (U1.137)	pícarosatisfecha (158)

Both authors recurrently include onomatopoeic words:

<i>Ulysses</i>	<i>El Mercurio</i>
<i>Heigho!</i> ... <i>Heigho</i> (U 4.546-48)	cuaccuac (138)
	zzz (236)

To put a further example, of the linguistic playfulness employed by both writers, we can mention the inclusion of foreign words:

<i>Ulysses</i>	<i>El Mercurio</i>
<i>Introibo ad altare Dei</i> (U1.5)	high society (106)
	previously (120)

Epi oinopa ponton (*U1.78*)
Thalatta! Thalatta! (*U1.80*)

cést fini (149)

As said above, these are only some examples of the numerous parallels in the treatment of plot as well as in the use of linguistic resources, however we consider them enough to show that there are many coincidences in both novels and to conclude that *El Mercurio* has succeeded in incorporating Joycean innovations.

Notes

¹ See Alberto Lázaro and Marisol Morales Ladrón, "Técnicas narrativas en James Joyce y Luis Martín Santos: estudio comparativo de *Ulises* y *Tiempo de Silencio*." *Joyce en España* I. Eds. Francisco García Tortosa y Antonio Raúl de Toro Santos. (La Coruña: Universidade da Coruña, 1994) 101-112; Marisol Morales Ladrón, "Gonzalo Torrente Ballester, ¿el nuevo Joyce del Finisterre?," in *Silverpowdered Olivetrees: Reading Joyce in Spain*. Eds. Jefferey Simons, José M^a Tejedor Cabrera, Margarita Estévez Saá y Rafael I. García León. (Sevilla: Publicaciones Universidad de Sevilla, 2004) 66-76; Marisol Morales Ladrón, "El *Bildungsroman* y sus múltiples formas: de James Joyce a Luis Martín Santos" in *El relato literario: tempestades y naufragios, escritura y reelaboración*. Actas del XII Simposio de la Sociedad Española de Literatura General y Comparada. Eds. Miguel A. Márquez, Antonio Ramírez de Verger y Pablo Zambrano. (Huelva: Universidad de Huelva, 2000) 591-96; and Marisol Morales Ladrón, "Joycean Aesthetics in Spanish Literature," in *The Reception of James Joyce in Europe*. Eds. Geert Lernout and Wim Van Mierlo. (London and New York: Thoemmes Continuum [2004]) 434-44.

² See Antonio Raúl de Toro Santos, "An Approach to the Influence of Joyce in *Devalar* by R. Otero Pedrayo." *Papers on Joyce* I (1995): 85-90; and "La huella de Joyce en Galicia." *Joyce en España* I. Eds. Francisco García Tortosa y Antonio Raúl de Toro Santos. (La Coruña: Universidade da Coruña, 1994) 31-37.

³ See for instance Alberto Lázaro, "James Joyce and Juan Goytisolo: Echoes from *Ulysses* in *Reivindicación del conde don Julián*." *Papers on Joyce* II (1996): 25-33; M^a Luz Suárez Castiñeira & Olga Fernández Vicente, "James Joyce and Pío Baroja: Common Sources." *New Perspectives on James Joyce. 'Ignatius Loyola, make Haste to Help me!* Eds. M^a Luz Suárez Castañeira, Asier Altuna García de Salazar and Olga Fernández Vicente. (Bilbao: Publicaciones de la Universidad de Deusto, 2010); Antonio Ballesteros González, "Controversias, exilios, palabras y cegueras: Joyce en Borges." *James Joyce: Límites de lo diáfano*. Eds. Carmelo Medina Casado, Jesús López-Peláez Casellas, Nieves Pascual Soler y Pilar Sánchez Calle. (Jaén: Publicaciones de la Universidad de Jaén, 1998) 61-71; Antonio Ballesteros González, "La digresión paródica en dos modelos narrativos: *Rayuela* y *Ulysses*." *Joyce en España* I. Eds. Francisco García Tortosa y Antonio Raúl de Toro Santos. (La Coruña: Universidade da Coruña, 1994) 93-100; and "Retratos del artista adolescente: James Joyce y Ramón Pérez de Ayala." *The*

Grove: Working Papers on English Studies 5 (1998): 19-30.

⁴ See José María Guelbenzu, *El Mercurio*. Ed. Ana Rodríguez Fischer. (Madrid: Cátedra, 1997).

⁵ We can learn about this in Bruce Bradley, “Allude to me as a Jesuit’: James Joyce and His Educators” *New Perspectives on James Joyce. ‘Ignatius Loyola, make Haste to Help me!’* Eds. M^a Luz Suárez Castiñeira, Asier Altuna García de Salazar and Olga Fernández Vicente. (Bilbao: Publicaciones de la Universidad de Deusto, 2010).

⁶ He explained his change in “Entrevista concedida a *El Mundo*,” 18 Septiembre 2001. 15 Mayo 2010. www.elmundo.es

⁷ For *Ulysses*, we can see that in Robert Scholes and Richard M. Kain, eds., *The Workshop of Daedalus: James Joyce and the Raw Materials for “A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man.”* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1965).