

## The Story as Question Mark

### An Interview with Portuguese Writer Jacinto Lucas Pires

Jacinto Lucas Pires, born in Oporto in 1971, currently lives in Lisbon. He is the author of three novels written in Portuguese, *Do sol* (2004), *Perfeitos milagres* (2007), and *O verdadeiro ator* (2011); a short story collection, *Assobiar em público*; the novella *Azul-turquesa*, and *Livro usado*, a travel book about Japan. He has also written plays (*Writing, Speaking; Extras*; and *Sagrada família*) and film scripts. He is part of a new wave of younger Portuguese writers gaining international recognition. His story “L” (included in this issue) is thus far the only work that has been translated into English, anthologized in *From the Edge*, a bilingual edition of Portuguese short stories (Lisbon: Ulices/Ceaul, 101 Noites, 2006).

In June 2011 Pires gave a public reading of “L” (translated into English by Patricia Odber de Baubeta) at the Center for English and Anglo-Portuguese Studies at Universidad Nova de Lisboa for the first annual Disquiet conference, sponsored by Dzanc Books. Disquiet brought together Luso writers from all over the world for workshops and discussions with prominent Portuguese writers, including Richard Zenith, Fernando Pinto do Amaral, and António Lobo Antunes.

The name Disquiet was adopted from the poet Fernando Pessoa’s *Book of Disquiet*, in which Pessoa writes:

Once more I see you—Lisbon, the Tagus, and the rest—  
A useless onlooker of you and of myself,  
A foreigner here like everywhere else,  
Incidental in life as in my soul

Pires is an animated performer. His boyish charm mixes with a dark brooding aspect and his reading is punctuated with exuberant childlike gestures. As the protagonist in his story “L” walks the city streets, for example, Pires raises his hands and demonstrates playfully how the left and right hands flail about. “I take pains to move all of me. Not just my legs and one arm swinging at a time,

no, I don't like that, that's ugly, no, whenever I walk, it's so strange, I make the most of each inch and move all of me. A kind of walk that begins in the pelvis and spreads out, upward and downward, like a kind of dance."

Pires wears a light blue long-sleeve shirt that matches his eyes. There is a mischievous glint like a smile when he talks, as if life itself is a joy to him.

A Renaissance man, Pires is a writer, musician, actor, and filmmaker. He even sings with the band *Os Quais* and jokes with the audience that until that morning he wrote a column about soccer for a Portuguese newspaper.

During his talk, Pires discusses the craft of writing, explaining that there is a hidden danger in writing in Portuguese: "When you read and when you write it is almost too easy to make it sound beautiful. And this is a problem. . . . It has an extra difficulty because Portuguese is also a poetic-sounding language." And writing that is easily beautiful runs the risk of being precious and of calling attention to itself in a way that distracts the reader and takes away from the story.

"The great decision is what not to write," he says. What to leave out to make for a more powerful story is one of the most important tasks a writer can take on.

He feels that in writing, as in acting, one takes on a role and inhabits the characters: "Writing is to tell a story with people being there." Comparing his work to the film *Being John Malkovich*, Pires claims that "the only way to understand is being this guy. Being this guy waiting in this story." It is not enough merely to describe him. "I'm not talking about or commenting about a character but being him for eight pages," Pires says. He follows where the work takes him, because "the writing knows more than you do," and "good intentions do not make good literature." Writing, for Pires, is "imagining the truth," and a part of that truth is where you live. "Lisbon inspires me to be strange people."

Discussing how change is often difficult in writing and other arts, particularly *fado* music (a melancholy Portuguese style of folk song, often sung by peasants), Pires jokes about traditional *fado* being transformed slowly through the addition of new instruments and melodies. "*Fado* is a little like the Vatican. You cannot change it all at once—it's a religion. *Fado*, I mean."

"Ideas and images are the same thing," according to Pires. His tales often begin with an image or a place, rather than a plot. Pires got the idea for "L" from a house. "In Campolide there is a single house right in the middle of large buildings," he explains, "as if it does not fit in; and on the other side of the house is nothing—around it there's really just the waste ground that isn't really anything; that's why I say it's a house, like, in the middle of nowhere."

Pires's stories are often derived from a lyrical impulse rather than from the requirements of narrative, as in this description of the boy's journey in "L": "I carry on along the shoulder of the road to the big avenue with tall buildings. I want to see if I can find something to eat or drink but all I can see are pages from magazines with photographs of famous people."

With respect to Portuguese being read globally, Pires believes that Portuguese and Portuguese-American writers should "put big ideas in small places, small stories," rather than promote a political agenda or write for a particular cause. He's seen many great writers get lost in the web of writing for the government or to push a particular opinion or agenda, a wrong turn, in his view, that undermines the writing, making it uninteresting and artificial. "It's very political, how a society takes care of their dead," Pires observes, explaining that each culture is responsible for the living and the dead, and that how the dead are cared for is a political choice.

When asked to comment on the inherent challenges of translation, Pires admits, "Translations are the shadow of the original"; they follow the story around very closely but they are not the original. They are connected; they mirror it, but they cannot by definition be the same thing.

Asked where he gets ideas for his fiction, Pires talks about the boys he sees on the streets and in the metro stations of Lisbon, who hand out business cards for Professor Mamadu, an alleged psychic and astrologer. "Do they believe in this shaman or are they just doing it for a living?" he wonders. The place, the motivation of people—that is what fascinates Pires and informs his work.

Q: When I heard you read your story "L," the reading was more of a performance, with gestures, and your delivery was animated, with even some physical comedy. How has your experience with theater affected your public readings and your writing? Has it informed it or enhanced it?

A: Yes, theater—writing plays but also participating in rehearsals, discussing scenes, and dialogue with actors and directors—is a great school for writers of any genre, I think. Because, on one hand, it forces you to be in the character's shoes, to be the character in order to really get his point of view, his specific voice, and on the other hand because theater is the territory of clarity and stylization. It's a paradox, maybe, but a true one: if you want to write complex, nuanced, even ambiguous novels or short stories, you have to know the lesson of clarity and stylization.

Q: You mentioned that your work has not been translated into English. Yet you speak English very well. Is there a reason why you do not translate your own work?

A: English is not my first language, and that makes a difference. Also, I think that what is great about translation is the idea of an encounter. Like traveling or playing. Someone who comes from a different language, a different culture, arrives at a text, and this distance is actually a good thing, it's what makes it possible to really see all the things written in the text, to see it through the fresh eyes of a new language.

Q: Both Portuguese and Portuguese-American writers seem to suffer from a lack of exposure or popularity in the United States. Perhaps an identity crisis? There are great writers, but very few people know about them in America. Do you think this is true, and what can we do to spread the word?

A: It is true. And yes, we've been living in an identity crisis for ages now, since we "came back" from the "whole world" to our little Atlantic, European rectangle. . . . But, honestly, I think this "lack of exposure" says more about the United States than about Portugal. I love America, don't get me wrong, but I'm afraid there are no magical solutions. The only way would be to show some of these stories (translated versions, of course, and that costs money) to American editors. I'm sure that if some of these writers were published in the U.S., they would find an audience.

Q: Does language affect your stories?

A: It doesn't only "affect"—language becomes the story. When I think about a story, I don't think of it in a neutral, blank, synopsis way; I think of it more as a "charged mass," where what you tell and how you tell it are really the same thing.

Q: If your stories were written in English, would they be different? If so, in what ways?

A: Definitely. Because of what I just tried to explain above. The world in Portuguese just happens differently. In English I would be a different person and a different writer. In Portuguese, I try to write "against" the tics of "poetic" Portuguese. I try to cut the load of adjectives and adverbs that sound "beautiful" but tend to cliché-zise (is this an actual word?) your vision. I try to be honest and to write all these mysteries that surround us in day-to-day life in the most transparent possible way. But one never knows, that's part of the joy. I guess in English I would write lyrical, hard, comic, sci-fi stuff.

- Q: Is Portuguese an inspiration to you? What do you like about the language?
- A: It's much more than that. I feel, I think, I dream in Portuguese. When I write, Portuguese is the place I'm in—there's the famous saying by Fernando Pessoa: "my homeland is my language." When I write, Portuguese is the tool and the matter, it's the air I breathe. In that sense, yes, I guess you can say it is an inspiration. What do I like about it? Portugal's Portuguese is a very elegant language on paper that becomes very shy out in the world. When it is spoken, its vowels shut down and suddenly it's like a beautiful young nun trying to dance at a worldly party. It is the language of "fado" in a time when "fate" is so out of fashion.
- Q: Do you have a favorite Portuguese saying? And what is it? Like "only the good die young" or "all's well that ends well."
- A: A good one is "Mais depressa se apanha um mentiroso do que um coxo" (literally: it's easier to catch a liar than a limping man). It's a good thing for fiction writers to remember.
- Q: Describe your writing routine (or nonroutine). Do you write in the morning, for example? Do you write at a desk or outside? Do you play music or prefer silence?
- A: I prefer to write in the afternoon and through the night. I like mornings to read what I've been writing—and cut, cut. I need silence, but I'm getting used to having children going around asking, "Dad, do you know this Beatles song?"
- Q: What other writers do you admire?
- A: I'll name three: DeLillo, Bolaño, Chekhov.
- Q: What ability would you like to steal from another writer?
- A: DeLillo's precision, Bolaño's boldness, Chekhov's wisdom.
- Q: Does writing matter? Do you feel that writing makes a difference in the world?
- A: It's a good question. That's the difference writing makes in the world: asking questions.
- Q: What are you working on now?
- A: I've just published my third novel and I am reading it across the country (next stop, Coimbra). I'm also working on a nonfiction book collaboration with a photographer, Tiago Cunha Ferreira, sponsored by the Gulbenkian Foundation, about young, talented Afro-Portuguese men and women.
- Q: What books or stories of yours have been published in English?
- A: None. Well, there's that story, "L," in the anthology *From the Edge*, a bilingual edition of Portuguese short stories (a showcase for Portuguese writers, really).

Q: Some of your images are dreamlike. What role, if any, do dreams play in your work?

A: You're right, but I'm not sure I know the answer to that question! My last novel, called *O verdadeiro ator* (The True Actor, in a literal translation), is actually full of dreams. I tend to write dreams as actual scenes, as "facts," and sometimes "factual" scenes become dreamlike. As if dreams and reality weren't exactly different countries. A Fellini-type of hyperrealism?

Q: You play in a band. How does music inform or affect your writing? Do you listen to music when you write?

A: No, not at all. I need silence to write, though I'm getting used to have my kids interrupting me with questions about soccer or whatever. I wonder if that's changing my work in some way. I like to play music in between my writing. Music as a kind of refresh button; it empties my head in a wonderful way. After music, I can go back to my work and read what I'm doing with new, clean eyes.

Q: What was the first story you remember writing?

A: It was about a man on a bus that went around Lisbon. I don't remember what happened, I just remember this idea of movement and my will to characterize the man through what he saw in the glass (the city, his reflection, the passing of things, et cetera).

Q: How do you revise? What is your revision process?

A: I revise as I am writing and then I revise the whole thing when I get to the end. After that, I get away from it for a time—weeks, months, it depends—and then I go back to rewriting it. It's a coming and going process.

Q: Do you consider your stories fables or tales that teach a lesson?

A: No. I think of them as question marks.

MILLICENT BORGES ACCARDI is the author of three books: *Injuring Eternity*, *Woman on a Shaky Bridge*, and *Only More So* (forthcoming from Salmon Press Ireland). Accardi is the recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, CantoMundo, the California Arts Council, Barbara Deming Foundation, and Formby at the Special Collections Library at Texas Tech. Research interests include Portuguese fairy tales, Kay Boyle. She is an independent scholar with a BA in English from California State University, Long Beach, an MA in literature (ABT) from CSULB, and a Master's in Professional Writing from the University of Southern California. She may be reached at millb@aol.com.