

JOSE CARDOSO PIRES:

O Delfim

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"If one had to define the state of the Portuguese mentality in one word, that word would be provincialism", wrote Fernando Pessoa. The quotation served José Cardoso Pires as the text for one of the chapters of his *Cartilha do Marialva*, a treatise on the *macho* and the libertine, and he takes it up again as a theme of his most recent novel, *O Delfim*. The *marialva* (the Portuguese equivalent of the *macho*) was seen by Sr. Cardoso Pires as essentially a provincial type, whose anachronistic and defensive attitudes had their roots in a feudal society and in the supposed biological inferiority of women. He was thus completely different from the urban and urbane libertine who was essentially a metropolitan type, anti-establishment and progressive rather than reactionary in his attitudes.

In *O Delfim* an engineer, Thomás Manuel Palma Brava, embodies the characteristics of the *marialva*. He is the dauphin (or the dolphin) of the title, the inheritor, like the dauphin, of a kingdom but also, like the dolphin, neither fish nor fowl. His mind is ridden by the clichés of the past and his anachronistic attitudes precipitate a Portuguese tragedy as surely as Clyde Griffith's ambition precipitated an American tragedy. This is not to say that the survival of primitive attitudes in a technological age is only a Portuguese problem, but it is certainly a central problem

of a nation which is living, according to Sr. Cardoso Pires, in the "ruins of its History".

However, the author is not simply concerned with presenting a problem but also with achieving "density of specification". If the abstract and polarized protagonists recall the *nouveau roman* the narrator through whose consciousness the events are filtered bestows on the novel a Conrad-like opaqueness. This comparison is not fortuitous for Sr. Cardoso Pires shares Conrad's moral passion. And the real focus is the narrator's growing awareness as much as the fate of the people he observes. The novel is thus a dynamic process in which memory, conversations, perception, things read and seen, relationships present themselves haphazardly but are gradually shaped into new states of understanding. Reconstruction of the past and understanding of the present are interconnected.

The narrator's vantage-point is the window of a village boarding-house to which he has returned after a year's absence for the opening of the shooting season. He learns that the engineer, Palma Brava, who owns the shooting rights over a lake, had disappeared, leaving behind him a scandal—a manservant, Domingos, dead in the matrimonial bed and a wife mysteriously drowned. The incongruity of the events is no greater than the incongruities of the village of Gafeira in which the modern is grafted on to the medieval. The shooting season is itself a feudal survival with its ritual of guns and dogs; and the ancient chronicle which the narrator reads in his spare

time is a more accurate guide to the village mind than the television programmes on Vietnam and satellite-launching which he occasionally glimpses.

This is a community in which the Palma Bravas could continue to live within the structures of the past, the husband with his mistresses in the city, the "untouchable" wife at home, the mulatto servant, the guns on the wall and the hunting dogs. The childless wife has no role other than that of an anachronistic lady of the manor who dispenses clothes once a year to the villagers. But the feudal structures are parasitic on the modern world. The charity clothes are knitted on a machine. The wife reads her horoscopes in *Elle*, the engineer drives off in a Jaguar to visit his mistresses. The villagers, no longer dependent on the big house, work in factories, as does the engineer; and the village women live on money and presents sent to them by their emigrant husbands who work in France or Germany. The destiny of Gafeira is controlled from without and real history is elsewhere.

The engineer's tragedy is its irrelevance. The manservant, who according to the *macho* code is not a man, dies of heart failure apparently after making love to the engineer's wife and the wife drowns while running away. The incongruous persistence of primitive social codes in a modern society produces these bizarre fruits. "A lizard between sun and stone" is Sr. Cardoso Pires's symbol of a dormant society which is being metamorphosed by outside pressures as much as by internal contradictions.