

● José Cardoso Pires: 'The Ballad Of Dog's Beach'. Translated by Mary Fitton. (Everyman, £4.50)

Winner of Portugal's highest literary award and with the film rights to his novel already sold, Cardoso Pires looks set to be packaged here, alongside Calvino, Marquez and Borges as yet another Latin darling of the literary postmoderns. Such status would belie the scruples of a writer whose work is both self-consciously 'intertextual' and allusive, but whose interests are firmly rooted in the recent turbulent history of his country.

Pires' novel echoes back to 1960—the days when the tensions latent in a military regime unable to bear the economic burden of a vast army and empire were beginning to become apparent; tensions which erupted 14 years later

Subtitled 'dossier of a crime', it draws on the documentary evidence in the case of Major Dantas Castro, whose decayed body was found on a beach after his escape from military prison. Dantas and his three accomplices had conspired to undermine the Salazar regime and had been in hiding, vainly awaiting instructions from their *commandore*.

Inspector Elias Santana heads the enquiry, he 'figures in the record of this investigation as he figures in it personally'—a double meaning, since Elias' childhood memories, fantasies and fetishistic desires are as central to the narrative as the bare facts he assembles. The novel is less a whodunnit—hingeing on a truth to be revealed—than a contemplation on what is in excess of that truth, what is always censored from the official version. Through his interrogation of the woman conspirator, Elias becomes priest and voyeur, lingering over the details of her sexual relationship with the Major, fetishising her as a mystery, both saint and whore. Confession is indeed 'music to a policeman's ears'.

As he weaves his web, speculation about the murder is rife—hints of the major's connections with the PIDE (secret police), the conspiracy theories of the underground rebels, the fascination of the popular press with the 'blonde spy'. The woman's statements testify to the desperation of the fugitives and the despotic paranoia of the (impotent) major, the portent of his death marked in the text of 'The Sea Wolf'.

Yet doubts creep in. The boundaries of fact and fantasy blur in a mass of contingent detail—references to actual events, cultural

heritage, poetic metaphors which link sex, death and fascism to a doomed masculinity 'marooned in the domain of knife and gun... immune from ripple, from inflow and overflow'.

Pires' voice remains deliberately elusive—'no resemblance between fact and fiction is purely coincidental', he remarks. Put another way, meaning is always deferred. I found it fascinating on second reading, but a foreword, introducing him to an English readership would have been useful. (Helen Birch)