

The Eye (I) of José Pedro Leite's Poetry

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*Por vezes a poesia é uma remota casa imensa
água ancorada à beira-mar
a guardar da quietude da morte sua suprema sede
de absoluto . . .
-O Conhecimento dos Vulcões*

*Poetry is sometimes an immense and remote house
water anchored at the seaside
keeping from death's calm a supreme thirst of the
absolute . . .
-Excerpt from Knowledge of Volcanoes*

There is nothing timid about José Pedro Leite's engagement with words or his imposing poetic vision. He is the center of an already considerable literary production that abounds in sensorial imagery and erotic impulses where poems emerge on the page as nearly fetish-like expressions, carefully shaped piece by piece, in an intense flux and fire of imagination.

Haiku-like miniatures are amongst the preferred forms in the 2011 collection *Respiração Vertical* (*Vertical Respiration*), while sonnets and long free-form verse predominates in more recent publications such as *M* (2013). The tone in Leite's insistent verse varies from oriental contemplation to rhapsodic ecstasy as he explores recurring themes of eroticism, nature, memory, and the relentless passing of time.

"The work of writing comes quickly," José Pedro Leite says. "What takes a great deal of time is the preparation. I work for extended periods on themes, form, structure, details, and the various perspectives of a project . . . how I will shape the text, for example. When it's actually time to write, I mostly have the work in my mind." He adds that writing involves a long process of refinement in which all the elements are evaluated until a poem finds its perfect balance of sound and meaning. However, a reader of his most recent collection, *O Conhecimento Dos Vulcões* (*The Knowledge of Volcanoes*, 2015) will find verses spewing from the pages as if produced at a furious and seemingly spontaneous rate from a molten core. Three categories subdivide this collection: Volcanoes, Time, and Words, objects of poetic contemplation that also summarize Leite's sensual obsessions.

Depois de mim

Escuto

No teu corpo

O secreto e silencioso rumo do orvalho

-Do Respiração Vertical

*Then from me
Listen
In your body
The dew's secret and silent path
-From Vertical Respiration*

“In fact, I think that each poem is like a painting,” continues José Leite. “The question is how to find a form that will provide interesting results.” When asked about how he imagines the reader of his poems, he answers, “We write for ourselves, the creator, who is a reader. We think of the reader, but in an abstract way. We need to be clear for ourselves as writers. Poetry has an enormous element of subjectivity.” Of course he is happy when someone likes his work, but he doesn’t write for an audience. The thought doesn’t even occur to him, he says.

Unsurprising then that Jose Pedro Leite forges poetry primarily from a world of intimate sensations. There are no family anecdotes or casual references to the quotidian in his verse, no observations while standing in line at a supermarket, inspirations from the daily news or historic events. His poems all emanate from the sensitive interior (I) that captures and translates sensations into poetic vision.

José Leite has been a compulsive reader since childhood and earliest memory. A list of his literary influences includes major Portuguese and Brazilian writers such as Sophia Mello Breyner, Vinicius de Moraes, Eugenio Andrade, Manuel de Barros, Antonio Osorio, and Gaston Cruz. He notes admiration for Basho, the Japanese Haiku poet, and considers contemporary Portuguese poet Herberto Helder his master. Lines from Helder’s “*Sobre um Poema*” (“About a Poem”)

could easily be Leite's manifesto: *A poem grows insecurely / in flesh's confusion . . . / perhaps as blood / or the shadow of blood in the channels of being.*

José Pedro Leite has been visually handicapped since infancy. This is significant in that he has never actually seen the bodies, trees, houses, gardens, and seascapes he describes in poems with his own eyes. Reading the vivid descriptions his verse offers leaves one to wonder how he writes what he cannot see. Leite's response to such questions is without mystery. "As artists, we are always products of the circumstances and surroundings in which we live. My visual deficiency is an integral part of my work and of my poetic conception. Of course, my perception of the world is different and thus the images that I create fit with my idea of reality."

One catches only glimpses of this acute presence, alluded to in such lines as *Even with obscurity on the other side of the eyelids / knowing to open the eyes to the most intense brightness / and maintain the vivid consciousness of days / of months of weeks / and river water's current / passing always through the seasons.* (Excerpt from "Knowledge of Words.")

"Basically, the big difference in the conception of my images resides in the fact that I have no sense of vision. Because of this, the body probably has a kind of organic compensation mechanism that expands the other senses in order to overcome the lack of vision. In this way my different perception of reality results in metaphors and images that are always very sensorial."

This is how Leite connects intensely to the world he offers the reader, through a vivid consciousness that forms images first into words then into poems. Perhaps in a unique manner, this pure sensation "sees" for him.

(. . .) *No quintal do passado*
Onde a laranjeira nua
Tremendo quem sabe se de frio
Espero que a venham cobrir
De súbitos sinos de prata
E que enfim ao longe
Se possa voltar a ouvir o mar
- Do M

(. . .) *In the garden of the past*
Where the naked orange tree
Trembling who knows if of cold
I hope they come cover it
With sudden bells of silver
So finally in the distance
You can hear the sea again
-From M

At the end of our conversation, I read several translations of José Pedro Leite's poems from Portuguese to English to him and ask questions about the accuracy of my translation choices. He listens for the music, for the new images his words make in English and offers the opinion that the translator should have free interpretive reign over rendering his verse in another language. "It's yours to make again. Necessarily it will be different. I don't want a translation faithful to my own interpretation of the poem."

When leaving the office of Estrategias Criativas on the rua de Sá de Noronha in downtown Porto where José Pedro Leite works, he turns off all the lights and inserts a key in the lock in exactly the right place on the door. We move from the intimate zone of our conversation out into the Friday evening

bustle of passing cars, bar sounds, and pedestrians. I guide him across the street and over to a tiny bar on the third floor a few buildings away from Lello, Porto's famous and exquisite bookstore. Inexplicably, the world somehow feels changed to me: by night that has fallen while we talked, by this poet holding my arm as we walk, and by his poems that remain swirling in my mind even as we climb the stairway to his favorite bar.

Contemporary Portuguese writer José Pedro Leite is the author of five poetry collections and two forthcoming prose works that include a novel and a children's book. Born in the northern city of Porto, he is under forty and part of an impressive generation of young Portuguese writers who have much to say and does so without hesitation. Trained in law and a secondary school teacher for a short time, Leite currently devotes himself entirely to his writing projects and work for the Porto Editor Estrategias Criativas where I recently spoke with him. In 2009, he won the Polímio Gomes dos Santos literary prize for his second book *As Mãos E O Lume* (*The Hands and the Flame*).