



# DANIEL JONAS

(Portugal, 1973)

[Sunday 1 November 2009]

**Daniel Jonas' eruption onto the Portuguese literary scene was delayed by the fact that his first two books were published by small presses. Recognition of his work only came with the publication of *Os fantasmas inquilinos* (Tenant Ghosts) in 2005. Although his first two collections (and *Moça formosa, lençóis de veludo* (Beautiful Girl, Velvet Sheets; 2002) in particular) may not therefore have received the attention they deserved, Jonas' delayed entrance into the Portuguese literary world did at least enable him to present himself to the public with a body of work, even if his poetry is not particularly compatible with the general drift of recent Portuguese poetry and has caused some surprise and resistance.**

The defamiliarising aspect of his poetry begins with his name, which reminds us of the prophet, and Jonas' work consciously echoes with theological resonances – not at all Catholic but rather those arising from the universe of Milton and Blake, or, where they are Roman and Greek, seeming to be filtered by those English poets.

Jonas is in the lineage of poets for whom the poetic word “lends unlikeness/ to the common usage”. He returns to this issue again and again, always with his rare mastery of theory, in poems like ‘Tenant Ghosts’, from the collection of the same name, in which it is said of reality, “The idea is to deform it, after an interval/ of time, and to pass to generalize/ or, like an escape capsule, to deform/ what was uttered, speech”. There is no illusion of mimesis, no desire for the programmatic avoidance of the sublime that the majority of Portuguese poets have shown in recent decades.

Instead there is diction in which the epic seems to co-exist with the experience of disillusionment, in moments such as “I am so sad that not even a Punic war would lift my spirits” in Jonas' second book. In addition, the *envoi* often adds a layer of literary memory over contemporary diction. For example, we are reminded of the poet Camões in Jonas' appeal to his watch in ‘Moça Formosa, Lençóis de Veludo’: “Get

going, my watch, make haste./ Why do you dawdle in this bed of hours/ when in the other bed of her delays/ absence makes me late and low-spirited?"

The defamiliarisation of this poetry extends over a vast chromatic spectrum, tending often towards saturation point, in moments when Romantic visions (always rare in Portuguese poetry) hypertrophy in an often parodic revisitation of Gothic themes.

The notable self-control with which the poet navigates the high-poetic, visionary tradition reveals what a *monster* of poetry technique Daniel Jonas is – probably the most impressive master of forms and metres in contemporary Portuguese poetry. We are dealing with a rhetorical art for which the practice of translation (Jonas translated Milton's *Paradise Lost*) has clearly been beneficial; in addition, it is a poetry that intermediates between languages (above all, Portuguese and English), between forms and between images, as if Jonas really lived in the belly of the whale of Western poetry. From this point of view, *Sonótono* (Somnotonous) is one of the most extraordinary books of Portuguese poetry published in the past decade, amazing the reader with how the sonnet form is, under the influence of Jonas' talent and deep reading of poetry, remodelled into unexpected new shapes.

It is easy, in a poetic culture such as that present in Portugal today, to reject or denigrate such poetry, precisely because of its merits and achievements. For in Jonas' work, links are renewed between poetry and vision, poetry and culture, and poetry and versification. The highly demanding nature of Jonas' poetry and its anti-mimetic attitude have a critical sharpness for which perhaps the best description is the ugly name that people have hastily given it: 'anachronistic'. Indeed, in the sense in which we are dealing with a poetry that does not want to be of its time, and which inhabits all eras of poetry, Jonas' poetry has a temporal and aesthetic profundity which cannot be read without recourse to the notion of 'late style': a style that shows us, as Adorno would say, that the truth of harmony is in dissonance. This dissonance is present in all Jonas' poems, even when they are rhetorically perfect (and for good reason), but most importantly, his poetry has achieved this dissonance, despite the harmony of ruling consensus, simply by being what it is: an absolutely singular presence in Portuguese poetry today – singular because it is *non-contemporary*.

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## POEMS

### GROTTO

### MY POEM HAD A NERVOUS BREAKDOWN

### PROBABLY IN ANOTHER TIME, IN OTHER CIRCUMSTANCES

### RESISTANCE TO THEORY

### THE ELECTRIC LIGHTS, IT MAY WELL BE THAT THE ELECTRIC LIGHTS

## Grotto

I don't want anything bright or Hellenic.  
I prefer commercial airplane turbines, their  
domestic soot  
to the alabaster sail of Ulysses' ship  
on the high seas.  
I prefer an eclipse to Calypso.  
I don't want anything truly white.  
I dismiss the herons' delta wing,  
its aero-dynamic flight,  
I swap it for the scurrying of sewage rats,  
their Chinese rush,  
their post-traumatic stress:  
I'm proud of such clean creatures.  
I also refuse the white page:  
I undertake its disfiguration  
with black blood, as a white man  
is disfigured in Harlem.  
I will not start to imagine how slaves  
might have felt in the cotton fields.

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## Grotto

Não quero nada claro ou helénico.  
Prefiro turbinas de aviões comerciais, a sua  
fuligem  
doméstica  
às velas de alabastro do veleiro de Ulisses  
lá em mar alto.  
Prefiro o eclipse a Calipso.  
Não quero nada de verdadeiramente branco.  
Dispensio a asa delta de garças,  
o seu voo aerodinâmico,  
troco-o pela arribação de ratos no esgoto,  
a sua pressa chinesa,  
o seu stress pós-traumático:  
orgulham-me criaturas tão limpas.  
Assim também recuso o papel branco:  
trato de o desfigurar  
com sangue negro, como se desfigura  
um branco em Harlem.  
Não quero começar a imaginar como se  
sentiriam  
escravos nos campos de algodão.

© 2005, Daniel Jonas  
From: *Os fantasmas inquietos*  
Publisher: Cotovia, Lisbon

## My poem had a nervous breakdown

My poem had a nervous breakdown.  
It cannot bear words any longer.  
It tells the words: words  
go thither,  
to another poem  
where thou can live.

This sort of thing can happen to my poem  
from time to time.  
I can picture it: spread all over  
the white linen bed  
without prospect or desire

locked into silence  
pale  
like a chlorotic poem.

O meu poema teve um esgotamento nervoso.  
Já não suporta mais as palavras.  
Diz às palavras: palavras  
ide embora,  
ide procurar outro poema  
onde habitar.

O meu poema tem destas coisas  
de vez em quando.  
Posso vê-lo: ali distendido  
em cama de linho muito branco  
sem perspectivas ou desejo

quedando-se num silêncio  
pálido  
como um poema clorótico.

I ask: can I do anything for thee?  
but it just stares at me;  
it sits there looking empty-eyed  
dry mouthed.

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### **Probably in another time, in other circumstances**

Probably in another time, in other circumstances  
we would reach similar results  
so there's no use imagining an almagest  
or tables of parallaxes for this  
that we conventionally call love,  
nor should we engage in the calculation of the angle  
between us and the centre of the earth,  
for we would gain nothing, you and I,  
dejected centres of irregular gravitation.

But this didn't prevent me from seeing the Pleiades  
every time I saw you (only I didn't tell you), the Pleiades lighting up my Hades  
with its flashing little goats  
grazing  
in the valley of the shadow of death.

And now the question is: *who's gonna drive you home tonight?*  
when the gloomy radio  
keeps distilling some other questions, but none as hard as the one

like: why does water tend to rise inside narrow tubes  
unlike quicksilver?  
This is *view-master* and things I do in your absence.

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Pergunto-lhe: posso fazer alguma coisa por ti?  
mas apenas me fixa o olhar;  
fica a li a fitar-me de olhos vazios  
e boca seca.

© 2005, Daniel Jonas  
From: *Os fantasmas inquietos*  
Publisher: Cotovia, Lisbon

Provavelmente noutro tempo, noutras circunstâncias  
chegaríamos a iguais resultados  
pelo que de nada adianta imaginar um almagesto  
ou tabelas de paralaxe para isto  
a que convencionalmente chamamos amor,  
nem calcular o ângulo  
entre nós e o centro da terra,  
de nada nos aproveitara, tu e eu  
centros escorraçados de irregular gravitação.

Porém, isso não me impediu de ver plêiades  
cada vez que surgias (só não te dizia nada) plêiades iluminando meu Hades  
com suas cabrinhas coruscantes  
pascendo  
o vale da sombra da morte.

E a questão hoje é: *who's gonna drive you home tonight?*

quando o melancólico transístor  
destila também outras perguntas, mas nenhuma tão dura quanto essa,

por exemplo: porque é que a água tem mais tendência  
a subir em tubos estreitos  
ao contrário do mercúrio?  
Isto é *view-master* e são coisas que faço na tua ausência.

© 2005, Daniel Jonas  
From: *Os fantasmas inquietos*  
Publisher: Cotovia, Lisboa

## Resistance to theory

I'll be waiting for the grapes  
of my vineyards  
to ripen  
in the luminousness of the word  
day

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## A resistência à teoria

Eu ficarei à espera de que as uvas  
das minhas videiras  
amadureçam  
à luminosidade da palavra  
dia

© 2005, Daniel Jonas  
From: *Os fantasmas inquietos*  
Publisher: Cotovia, Lisbon

## The electric lights, it may well be that the electric lights

The electric lights, it may well be that the  
electric lights  
will prevent the autumn fall  
and the bird call at the window,  
grey as an overcoat.

The jaw squeezes a verb  
and no bird appears,  
nothing happens: it's the autumn  
of the falling leaves, that's all –  
no verb can thus fall.

Only the bent,  
welded, muffled, cold sound  
of a tolling bell,

it may well be that the electric lights  
and the stone blocks for example  
may well prevent  
the irregularity of pavements or the crushing  
of hours against each other

it may well be that the shells  
of the umbrellas that blur the city  
may well draw your name  
like in a musical

As luzes eléctricas, pode ser que as luzes  
eléctricas  
impeçam o outono de cair e a ave  
de à janela surgir  
na sua gabardina cinzenta.

A mandíbula aperta um verbo  
e ave alguma surge  
e coisa alguma acontece: é o outono  
das folhas que caem, só –  
nem um verbo cai assim.

Só soldado  
e um sino entortado, toldado  
badalamento frio,

pode ser que as luzes eléctricas  
e os paralelepípedos por exemplo,  
pode ser que impeçam  
a irregularidade no pavimento ou as horas  
de se chocarem umas contra as outras

e as conchas dos guarda-chuvas  
que toldam a cidade  
pode ser que desenhem o teu nome  
como num musical

pode ser que as lojas fiquem  
e as lajes vão,

it may well be that the shops will stay  
and the stone slabs will go  
and it may well not be  
that the rain will insist  
in such an iniquitous way.

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pode ser que não seja assim  
dessa forma tão iníqua  
que a chuva insista.

© 2005, Daniel Jonas  
From: *Os fantasmas inquilinos*  
Publisher: Cotovia, Lisboa

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### **Theatre**

*Nenhures*, Cotovia, Lisbon, 2008

### **Links in Portuguese**

Daniel Jonas reading his poetry on [YouTube](#)