Seven quartets for Zé: memorial for a paragon poet

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“One can read the poetry of José Paulo Paes – short and sharp at each move in its constant tendency towards the epigram – as if it formed a single songbook of the entire life of a man who responded with poems to the appeals of the world and of his inner existence.”

(Davi Arrigucci Jr.)

This text addresses the reason for writing instrumental pieces for string quartets and the diverse poetry of José Paulo Paes. I must confess that I am virtually a self taught person on the subject of writing music, having come to this paroxysm of foraying into the area of quartets. Thus, any attempt towards virtuosity is promptly dismissed and what can be left to me is the self-taught, reverential gesture, fueled by a unerring sting of the poet, just in time, which cost me many sleepless nights mulling over notes, paths, measures and mismeasures.

To me, the musical transreading of a poem by José Paulo Paes has been for some years a pleasurable and challenging daily exercise, due to the absolute sharp and synthetic way in which he solves all situations proposed by the poem itself. I visited him and his wife Dora quite often in their delightful home at Vila Cruzeiro, in Santo Amaro. And it was around Dora’s cozy table that I had my good-humored and fruitful conversations with Zé Paulo. One of those times, standing next to his stereo, listening to the “String Quartet in F Major” by Ravel, one of his favorite composers, he suddenly said: “You should write for string quartets, which is the most perfect instrumental form.” That was definitely one of Zé Paulo’s approaching methods, that of the “patient craft”, and mulling over the task he had asked of me, I thought of the poem

poeta menormenormenormenormenormenormenormenormenormenormenormenormenormenorme...

I was not able to write the quartet songs for some time, but that idea kept on echoing in the compartment of the things necessary to my continuity, and ten years later, time went by with no quartets, and he was gone. The situation changed from minor to major and then to huge.

I was living with that feeling that I needed to revisit and honor Zé through
music. And in that revisiting find a place, a starting point, a literary-musical ‘Warehouse’, a meeting point with him, a trace of the Belas Artes Café:

No mármore das mesas
do Café Belas Artes
os problemas se resolviam
como em passe de mágica
Não que as leis do real
se abolissem de todo
mas ali dentro
Curitiba era quase Paris

(On the marble of the tables
of the Fine Arts Café
problems were solved as if by magic
Not that the laws of the real world
were abolished in full
But in there
Curitiba was almost Paris)

I can still hear the echoes of his laughter and brilliant tirades, his “Minimal Odes”, his incantatory narratives of trips to Greece, his “complicity” with Dora, in the surroundings of the house where what one found in the garden was art, if not poetry; of the soft reverberation of voices in the room. To write, I lined up with the Greek stone pendulum in dining room, with the sun clock in the garden naturally showing the time among the delicate white roses hanging in cascades over the wall, the multicolored impatiens and violets; the stepping stones in the short grass path between the house and the “Livraria e Papelaria, Casa Guimaraens Typographia”, a small white, olde enameled plate, written in beautiful blue letters, carefully placed at the entrance wicket ... it was the Poet’s workplace, the typographic memory of his grandfather in Taquaritinga, his hometown. I saw the cats coming down the wall, the statues of an all white Greek god, Pan!; the sideboard in the dining room, the favorite place for the flowers brought by visitors, often orchids; the heads of stone lions that watched us, protecting the garden; the owls that came up in the afternoon to the edge of the roof; Dora’s care for all the details, and the minimum is valued to the most. A discreet wall corner with the blue Portuguese ceramic plates that breathed a poetry-music so lively and diverse, a Portuguese folk song, all echoes of very low and soothing sounds coming from the kitchen, sounds delicately complemented with a nice cup of coffee in the afternoon. The first scribbles of the quartets began to emerge from reading his poems, from ideas exchanged with Dora, “... circulating memory and substance ...”, with the book *Poesia completas* as the main reference. Thus, at each measure written, some time to reflect, or to elabo-
rate on a feeling, an image, a verse, a trip, the key, the banging door, the flowing river, a “Canção do exílio”, “Canção sensata”, a “Carta de Guia”, from the drawers of José Paulo Paes, who “... did not submit to the consecrated”.

And so it was: Lento, Andante, Moderato, Allegro ma non troppo, Allegro con brio, Presto and finally Prestissimo! And Dora reminded me in time that he preferred odd numbers.

So the quartets were gradually being built, step by step, “... wearing the lyrical shoes ...” of José Paulo Paes.

1 Madrigal. 2 O aluno (The student). 3 Canção de exílio. (Song of exile) 4 Canção sensata (Sensible song). 5 A fuga (The Escape). 6 À televisão (To television). 7 Carta de Guia (Guide Letter)

MADRIGAL

Meu amor é simples, Dora,
Como a água e o pão.

Como o céu refletido
Nas pupilas do um cão.

(My love is simple, Dora, Like water and bread.

Like the sky reflected
In a dog’s pupils.)

To write this quartet I committed the small sin of “saying too little in too many words” (paraphrasing a letter from Dalton Trevisan to Zé Paulo, in which he mentions “Anton Pavlovich’s secret: he was able of saying much in just a few words”). Literally, this composition is the “saying too little in too many words.” But since the poem reveals his “incommensurable love for his Dora, “I thought it would be possible for me to go further, something that, unlike poets, musicians like to do. I also thought that the form of the poem is as precise as that of an escape, but lasting only long enough. I came from the escape through the back door, so as to speak through the eyes of the dog, which led me to a hasty and cheerful run across the yard, just like Duína does.

O ALUNO (THE STUDENT)

São meus todos os versos já cantados;
A flor, a rua, as músicas da infância,
O líquido momento e os azulados
Horizontes perdidos na distância.

(All verses already sung are mine;
The flower, the street, the childhood songs,
The liquid moment and the bluish
Horizons lost in the distance.)

Intacto me revejo nos mil lados
De um só poema. Nas láminas da estáncia,
Circulam as memórias e a substância
De palavras, de gestos isolados.

(Intact, I see myself again in the thousand sides
Of a single poem. On the blades of the stanza,
The movement of memories and substance
Of words, of isolated gestures.)

São meus também, os líricos sapatos
De Rimbaud, e no fundo dos meus atos
Canta a doçura triste de Bandeira.
Drummond me empresta sempre o seu bigode,
Com Neruda, meu pobre verso explode
E as borboletas dançam na algibeira.

(Mine are also the lyrical shoes
Of Rimbaud, and at the bottom of my actions
Sings the sad sweetness of Bandeira.
Drummond always lends me his mustache,
With Neruda, my poor verse explodes
And butterflies dance in the pouch.)
The poet and translator José Paulo Paes (1926-1998).
This song is meant to recall the classroom. A morning hymn to be sung every morning before the classes began. And this would be required by law of every student, so as to teach him to blow up a verse; to ask for permission every morning to put on Rimbaud’s shoes; to borrow Drummond’s moustache and call in Neruda to dance along with the students and the butterflies picked up in the morning ...

**CANÇÃO DO EXÍLIO (SONG OF EXILE)**

*Um dia segui viagem  
sem olhar sobre o meu ombro.*

*Não vi terras de passagem  
Não vi glórias nem escombros.*

*Guardei no fundo da mala um raminho de alecrim.*

*Apaguei a luz da sala  
que ainda brilhava por mim.*

*Fechei a porta da rua  
a chave joguei no mar.*

*Andei tanto nesta rua  
que já não sei mais voltar.*

One day I left on a trip  
Without looking over my shoulder.

(I saw neither passage lands  
Nor glories or wreckage.

At the bottom of the bag,  
a sprig of rosemary.

I turned off the living room light  
Which was still shining for me.
I locked the front door  
threw the key into the sea.

I walked so long along this street  
That I have lost my way back.)

This poem touched me deeply by referring directly to the situation of Lu-
cian, my partner. It is so representative of his story since he fled Romania and
took refuge in an exile camp in exile in Germany. Without looking back, he left
everything and years later came to Brazil with his family, Cristina and Vitória, all
musicians. He brought his “sprig of rosemary”, his violin, and his documents.
To this day, Lucian, now a Brazilian, no longer wants, or rather, would not find
the way back to his homeland, not even in a dream. The thought was cloistered
in the past. Lucian was exiled in space-time, “threw the key into the sea” and
can no longer go back. This poem inspired me a Romanian “hour”, a musical
thing of its nature and of the nature of many exiles who are, in humanity, mil-
lions of people waiting for a place of peace.

So I was able to read this poem immediately and materialize it in music,
because I live with a person whose soul has been wounded. Once again, Zé
Paulo hits the target and speaks of something huge and heavy that is exile, in
very few words.

**CANÇÃO SENSATA (SENSIBLE SONG)**

*Dora, que importa*  
*O juiz que escreve Exemplos na areia*  
*Se livres seguimos*  
*O rastro dos faunos, A voz das sereias?*

(*Dora, why should it matter*
*The judge who writes*  
*Examples on sand*  
*If free we follow*  
*The trail of the fauns*  
*The voice of the mermaids?)

*Dora, que importa*  
*A herança do avô*  
*Sob a pedra nua,*
Se do ar colhemos Moedas de sol, Guirlandas de lua? Dora, que importa
Esse frágil muro
Que defende os cautos, Se além do pequeno
Há horizontes loucos,
De que somos arautos? ‘ De maior beleza
É, pois nada prever E à fina incerteza
De amor ou viagem Abrir nossa porta.
Dora, isso importa.

(Dora, why does it matter
The legacy of the grandfather
Under the bare rock,
If from the air reap
Sun coins,
Moon wreaths?
Dora, why does it matter
This fragile wall
That defends the cautious,
If beyond the small one
There are crazy horizons
Of which we are the harbingers? ‘
The greatest beauty
Is, thus, nothing predict
And to the fine uncertainty
Of love or travel
Open our door.
Dora, that is what does matter.)

A FUGA (THE ESCAPE)

Tendo a espada renegada
De Napoleão, sem medir
O desmedido da afronta, Picado nosso fundilhos,
Havemos por bem partir

Houvemos e nos partimos, Erário, corte e monarca, Deixando o povo no cais.
Não há lugar para o povo Nas galeotas reais.
(Having Napoleon’s
Abusive sword,
Without measuring
The immeasurable offense,
Kick the seat of our pants,
We shall see it fit to leave.

And we saw it fit and left,
Treasury, court and monarch,
Leaving the people on the pier.
There is no place for the people
Aboard the royal galliots.

_Fizemos longa viagem Sobre mar tempestuoso Topando muitos escolhos._
_As damas da comitiva Sofreram muitos piolhos._

We long trip we took
Over a stormy sea.
Coming across many a rock
The ladies in the entourage
Struggle with many a lice.

_Arribamos finalmente_
_A porto certo e destino,_
_As gentes se jubilando_
_Desta Colônia, em que temos_
_Firme assento e inteiro mando._

We finally arrived
At the right port and destination,
The proud people of this Colony
Where we have a firm seat
And full command.

_Houve folgança nas ruas, Minueto no palácio,_
_Salvas, missas, bandeirolas, Com rara munificência Distribuiram-se esmo-

_las._
There was revelry in the streets,
Minuet in the palace,
Fireworks, masses, pennants,
With rare generosity
Alms were distributed.

_Sendo nossa volta ao reino Coisa do arbitrio divino, Houvemos então por bem
Fundar aqui paço digno
De tão subido inquilino._

Since our return to the kingdom
Was at divine discretion,
We then so it fit
To found here a palace
Worthy of so noble a tenant.

_Abrimos os portos à
Mercancia universal,
Que a ceifá de impostos cobre
E paga o luxo devido
Ao nosso fausto de nobres._

We opened the ports
To the universal trade,
Which the reaping of taxes covers
And pays for the luxury due
To our noble pageantry.

_(Posto que muitos barões
E inumeráveis viscondes
Devorem todo o orçamento
Haveis de convir que são
Fonte de extremo ornamento!)_

_(Since many barons
And countless viscounts
Devour the entire budget
You shall agree that they are
A source of extreme ornament!)_
Por esses ralos cruzados
Que vos custamos, ganhais Benefícios de tal monta, Deles prestar boa conta.

For these meager cents
That we cost you, you earn
Benefits of such magnitude,
For which you must account.

Ganhais bancos, onde a renda, Bíblicamente avisada,
Se cresce e se multiplica. E liceus de sapiência Onde a mente frutifica.

You have banks, where the income,
Biblically advised,
Grows and multiplies.
And lyceums of wisdom
Where the mind thrives.

E mais: doutores, legistas
E mestres de muito ofício.
E o áureo clarim da imprensa, Cujo som, de forte e grave
Não há mordaça que trave.

And more: doctors, coroners
And masters of many crafts.
And the golden trumpet of the press,
Whose sound, strong and deep
No gag shall silent.

A estrela da liberdade
Ao cabo tendes na mão. Lembrai-vos, pois, desse rei Gordo, pávido, risonho,
Que fugiu de Napoleão.

The star of freedom
At the end you have on hand.
Remember, for, this king
Fat, timid, frolicsome,
Who escaped Napoleon’s sword.)
This poem is somewhat facetious, without being completely so, because Zé Paulo never loses his composure, even in the most hilarious moment of historical humor, as is the case of this poem when it addresses the flight of the Portuguese royal family to Brazil.

À TELEVISÃO (TO TELEVISION)

Teu boletim meteorológico
Me diz aqui e agora
Se chove ou se faz sol.

(Your weather report
Tells me here and now
Whether it will be rainy or sunny.

A comida suculenta
Que pões à minha frente Como-a toda com os olhos. Aposentei os dentes.

The succulent food
That you put before me
I eat all with my eyes.
For my teeth I have retired.

Nos dramalhões que encenas
Há tamanho poder
De vida que eu próprio
Nem me canso de viver.

In the melodramas you stage
There is such power
Of life that I myself
Am never tired to live.

Guerra, sexo, esporte
— me dá tudo, tudo.
Vou pregar minha porta: Já não preciso do mundo.

War, sex, sport
- You give me all, all.
I will nail shut door:
I need the world no more.)

I feel as if were ‘peeping’ when I look at Zé Paulo’s poems and start writing bars after bars of musical narrative. “To ‘peep’ was to go out looking for a house (in Curitiba) where there was still some light on and peep inside through the keyhole, the crack on the door or the half-shut window.”

Sometimes I feel like a voyeur who “returns from her night hunt telling creepy stories, which naturally come more from a fertile imagination than from sharp eyes.” But I could “peep” through Zé Paulo’s imaginary door nailed shut with a hundred nails, and translate the imaginary sound produced by the poem, hear the imaginary sound of the television echoing the weather report; the soundtracks of melodramas (with no over-derangement); the news and the imaginary food: that was how was able to narrate, through music, with all the imaginary hype which the “peeper” is allowed, that there, that one-inch space of poem, contains the necessary whole.

**CARTA DE GUIA (GUIDE LETTER)**

I
*Nossa vida Construímos
*\A cada passo,\n*\A cada minuto,\n*\A cada esquina,\n*\De mãos unidas.*

(Our life
We build
At each step,
At every minute,
At every corner,
Hand in hand.)

II
*Sempre teu rosto e o crepúsculo,
*\Em teus olhos a viagem das nuvens\n*É um estranho presságio*
Que evito decifrar.

(Always your face and dusk,
In your eyes the trip of the clouds
It is a strange omen
Which I avoid to decipher.)

III
Caminhemos sem perguntas
Como os suicidas
Que jamais indagam
A profundidade do abismo.

(Let us walk
Without questions
Like the suicides
Who never ask
How deep the abyss is.)

IV
Sob a chuva de verão,
Contra as colunas da lei,
Sobre o corpo do soldado,
Com o estandarte rasgado
De qualquer revolução.

(Under the summer rain,
 Against the columns of the law,
 Over the soldier’s body,
 With the torn flag
 From whatever revolution.)

V
Vivemos, Dora, na certeza
De sermos amanhã
O que ontem não fomos.

(We live, Dora, in the certainty
That tomorrow we will be
What we yesterday we were not.)

This poem speaks for itself.
Some explanations of the music written are provided below.

Notes
TN - The free translation of the texts contained herein aims at helping the reader capture the idea of the source text; it does not aim at a correspondence in words. (TN)
3 José Paulo Paes (Taquaritinga – SP, 1926 – São Paulo – SP, 1998). He published his first poetry book, O aluno, in 1947. The following year he got his degree in Industrial Chemistry in Curitiba (PR). During that period, he collaborated with Joaquim magazine and participated in the II Brazilian Congress of Writers in Belo Horizonte (MG), as a member of the Paraná delegation. In subsequent decades he collaborated with a number of periodicals, including Folha de S. Paulo and Jornal de Noticias newspapers and Revista Brasiliense. In 1967 he organized, with Massaud Moisés, the Pequeno dicionário de literatura brasileira. He was a prestigious translator, having translated into Portuguese works of writers like Laurence Sterne, Lewis Carroll and Nikos Kazantzakis. In 1987 he became director of the poetry translation workshop at the Institute of Language Studies (IEL), State University of Campinas (Unicamp). He published several essay books, as well as children’s books; he received awards such as the Jabuti de Literatura Infantil (Children’s Literature), awarded in 1991 for his book Poemas para brincar. His poetry includes the books Meia Palavra (1973), Resíduo (1980), A meu esmo (1995), and Socráticas (2001), among others. About José Paulo Paes’ poetry, which is of a contemporary trend, said the critic Alfredo Bosi: “The short meter, the fast rhythm, the cut syntax and the minor key text protect the text against any epic inflection. [...] Simple voice of the rebels, epitaph of the untamed, he discovers the underground side of satire and the bitter vein of his pathos”.

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