

TIME'S SENTINEL

By Sérgio Mattos

Translated by Maria Luisa Nunes

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PREFACE

Most critics of Brazilian literature in the United States are aware of those Brazilian writers who are adopted by literary circles in the rather limited area between Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. This is not to say that such writers are without merit or that historically, the Northeastern writers such as Jorge de Lima, João Cabral de Melo Neto, José Lins do Rêgo, Jorge Amado, and many others have not received their due recognition. It is almost by accident, however, that a North American critic gains access to the poetry of one the younger Bahian poets such as Sérgio Mattos, author of *O Vigia do Tempo*.

This book of poems focuses on the contrasts between the traditional and the modern, the lyrical and the pragmatic and the whimsical, humor and seriousness, and the personal and God. The poet views his creativity and his anxiety to achieve self-expression as a challenge. This invocation to his verse initiates a series of meditations on the writing of poetry, which include the poet's self-doubt as well as the pride he takes in his verses. Linked to his desire to sing his poems to the world is a contrasting humility expressed in the impulse to bury them or throw them into the sea.

Mattos' imagery has the simplicity of stark modern forms with certain religious and lyrical overtones. He fully and beautifully explores the poetic qualities of children and flowers and is particularly effective in his metaphors about the purity of water and the incorruptibility of nature as seen in the

rain cycle. His poems about children and nature are of a sparkling freshness.

In contrast to these pure subjects, Mattos express ironic comments on the state of things, compassion for the poor, and the idealism of fraternal love. His most specific object of political concern is related to artistic freedom and can be placed in the context of the present system of government in his native Brazil. I refer to the censorship that has often been a part of this regime.

Mattos' major preoccupation, however, would seem to be the rapid modernization of the world at the expense of some priceless traditional values. Thus he contrasts the wooden horses of our childhood with television. He juxtaposes technology to man's perennial problems of poverty and the unfathomable mystery of life and death. Pollution is the guise of modernity is destructive but the poet does not lose his sense of humorous irony in contrasting man's religious past and modern life.

Mattos is a poet who is concerned with issues but is not *engagé* in any dogmatic or ideological sense. He cares about peace within the framework of traditional Christian values. On the other hand, modern man in the poet's view fears nothing, not even God. Man's nature is dual, angelic and demonic and most of the time, he seems to be in a quandary about his true identity.

Apart from the pleasure achieved from the reading of Sérgio Mattos' poetry, it is most instructive for the foreign

critic of Brazilian literature to have contact with the younger Brazilian writers. Through such meetings, the student of Brazilian literature and culture learns a great deal about the attitudes, values, hopes, and aspirations of the inheritors of a Brazil that has undergone many transitions in the twentieth century and promises, as it has in the past, a great future. This critic shares some of the poet's concern about the modern erosion of traditional values and hopes that Brazil will never lose its love for and appreciation of literature.

Maria Luisa Nunes
(University of Pittsburgh)

Because we live

In a world without custodians

And the poet is time's sentinel

(Sérgio Mattos)

CHALLENGE

I write with silent shock
my fingers possess a common feeling:
They seek simple forms.

My anxiety and secrets rest
in my hands:
stack of sentimental reflexes.

The mysteries were bled
And my pen is my soul.
Who will be able to detain life
That runs through my hands?

REQUEST

Of the gardener they ask for the rose

Of the judge they ask for justice

Of the poet they ask the truth

Why does one ask for a rose

when one knows that off the branch

it will live for a short time?

Why does one ask for justice

when one knows that h who owes

will pay yet during his lifetimes?

Why does one ask for the truth

when everybody knows how to ask

and few know how to answer?

(December/1975)

PST! DA SILVA

“Blessed is he who gives
to drink to the thirsty”

Poor tatters

That at night tremble.

Poor you

because the wind is cold

and the rain falls.

Your name? I don't know.

Maybe Chico, maybe Xavier,

Pst! Da Silva

or a João nobody at all.

IT WOULD NEVER BE TOO MUCH

One day I would like
to make time stop
and put everything in place:
nobody would ever suffer
and love would never be too much.

If that day comes,
everybody will embrace,
everybody will love,
everybody will hear the lament of the sea.

February/1976

POETA FROM THE PROVINCE

The poem was born in the provinces

– And now, poet, what is left to you?

– The challenge of a choice only:

Bury, ashamed, your verses

or throw, into the world, the seed.

September/ 1974

DAYDREAMING

Because I don't have a tree
on which to engrave your name,
with smoke
I wrote it in space.
And with gracefulness
it floated to the corners of the city,
like in a fairy tale: full of liberty.

Zurich, February /1976

DISTURBANCE

In the passage of time

child's wooden horse

Became a television film.

July/1975

BIRTH BY SECOND

A child was born

It died in the difficulty

A star shone

indicating the way.

They departed from far

Joseph and Mary

A child was born

in a stable.

Is there PEACE in twenty four hours?

No, but in every second

a child is born in the world.

PREVISION

The poet's provincial verses

One day will know the world:

– I will cast all of them into the sea.

1975

WHO am I?

Am I the midnight angel
or the morning devil?

The angel that announces love
and liberty
or the dilacerating devil
of hearts and agent of evil?

Am I a man looking for libertinage
or a poet looking for liberty?

REPORTAGE POEM

For Florisvaldo Matos

Fact

Price

– News –

A bill?

Full

Ugly

or colored

– Technique –

Technical Notice

Hunger-full

Live-dead

It's a headline

look at the report.

1968

JET PRESS

The rumor of the past,
the meeting on the corner
and curiosity transformed
the news into necessity.

From the friendly communication
or of any notice
a new item must come forth,
rich in facts and full of haste.

It ages quickly
– It is a consummate necessity
– In the newspaper and on television,
– In the super market and at the bars.

1974

REMINISCENCE

Childhood goes by

Nostalgia remains

It doesn't retain

Nostalgia comes,

It doesn't go by.

RUNNING WATER

In a deep well
I caught running water
soiling its purity.

It fled in a white cloud
and, like rain, it remained pure.

NAVIGATING

I made a little boat of paper
Where I wrote my feelings.

When the rain came
It navigated
through flooded streets of the city
– With the rain I lost my feelings –

CANNONS OF AMARALINA

For Ruy Espinheira Filho

Of Rui's, Marinha
appeals to me.
I would like it to be mine
such beautiful poetry, that creates tenderness.
Reading his verses,
the water nymphs appear,
the fine sand
and the cannons of Amaralina.

May/1974

KOHOUTEK

May your figure
not profane the poetic temple
or the poet lose the truth.

In the labrynth of the Universe
may your light not serve as an adventure
or be dogma of a new era.

May your light serve to eliminate
The shadows of man.

May the insidious sweetness
of your popular image
liturgical and little seen,
return to men
the dignity that was affronted
and leave us that peculiar taste
of PEACE that the world is forgetting.

THE OPENING

In unforeseen life
I found verses and smiles,
doubts, debts
and the promise of an opening in Paradise.
I don't find, it's a fact,
an adequate opening for the car bought
out of sight.

DILUTED VERSE

On a deserted street I found a verse
In order not to lose it in the palm of my hand
I wrote it.
Rain without importance
washed my hand and diluted my verse
that ran on the asphalt and disappeared.

PERFECTION

For Guido Guerra

I felt the poem

I calculated the feelings

but I didn't write:

It was too perfect to exist.

SAD SUICIDE

Piu, piu, piu.

The Tanger's offspring
tried a solitary flight
towards the sun.

It fell in a pan of honey.

Honey, sticky, molasses.

Poor Tanger,

it died

From all the honey it drank.

I WILL LOVE YOU WITHOUT PANIC

It's suitable to love
while I live
fragile mortal
without forces to think.

I will love without fury,
Like one who isn't in a hurry and whispering,
like one who asks pardon.
I will love without panic.

INCOHERENCE

I planted a rose garden
and the rose buds blossomed.
Why did I plant a rose garden
if life is full of thorns?

ANONYMOUS PURITY

(for Julieta Isensée)

From the peaks

flow the fountains

of fresh water.

I will drink of this transparence

in the hope of restituting to my soul

the anonymous purity

of the first beating of my heart...

OF A UTOPIAN VISION

(for Jorge Amado)

The morning sun liberated me
with its shining rays
and I killed my thirst
in the forest of wisdom.

I drank the sap of its trees
and I grew roots
in the unpolluted earth.

December/1973

PAULA'S SMILE

(my daughter)

A smile

long

without artifice

or vice.

A smile

pure,

of enchantment,

of child.

It is the smile

that I have in memory

of distant moments,

in the hour of embrace

From the encounter and from weariness.

URBANIZED

The urban poet
no longer sings, he cries.
He cries the bell, the whistle,
the scream and the hymn,
the fair and the prayer,
haste and stress

October/ 1974

VERTICALITY

In the vertical growth
of a city
the humility is buried of the universal man.

I cried drops of inspiration
because of the lack of humanity
of this theatrical life.

POLLUTION

Full of fear and enchantment
I smelled a broken lily,
thrown, lost in the corner
of that garden, of thorns
and roses, next to the street.
Quivering I breathed its perfume
and the scent of the poet,
already polluted, smelled nothing...

INVERTED VALUE

Pass, pass

little bird.

If you no longer are
afraid of the scarecrow,
who will man fear?

July/1975

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sérgio (Augusto Soares) Mattos was born in the Brazilian city of Fortaleza, Ceará, in 1948. In the late 50's, he moved to Salvador, capital of the state of Bahia, where his father held an important position at IBM. Mattos attended the schools of Salvador, including the university, and today continues to play an active role in the cultural life of this city.

In 1968 he and a fellow poet Ivan Doria Soares founded and directed the poetry review *Experimental*. From that time until the present, Mattos has contributed to many Brazilian literary supplements and reviews. In 1971, he received his Bachelor's degree from the Federal University of Bahia, where he now is a professor in the Department of Journalism.

His first book of verse, *Nas Teias do Mundo* (Empresa Gráfica da Bahia, appeared in 1973). In 1974, his poems were included in the collection *Cinco Poetas Contemporâneos* (Edições Contemp). In 1975 he contributed to another anthology of poetry entitled *Retina*.

In December, 1977, *O Vigia do Tempo* (Gráfica Universitária, Salvador) appeared and met with immediate success. This book of poems was subsequently translated to English by Maria Luisa Nunes and published in the United States. In May, 1978, the Editorial and Didactic Center of the Federal University of Bahia published *Batalha de Natal*, which includes "crônicas" by Sérgio Mattos. The author wrote these short prose pieces for young readers.

Sérgio Mattos has been living in the United State since May, 1978. After being awarded a Laspau-Fullbright scholarship, he studied English at the University of Pittsburgh and is now at the University of Texas, where he is completing a Master's program in the Department of Radio, Television, and Films.

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