

Light and Obscurity in *Tropical Truth*

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on Caetano Veloso.

Tropical Truth: A Story of Music and Revolution in Brazil.

Translated by Isabel de Sena. Edited by Barbara Einzig.

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.

One of the greatest champions of the cultural movement known as *tropicália* or *tropicalismo*, Caetano Veloso has been, since the mid-1960s, an artist whose thoughts and creations have influenced dozens of styles of music and various other forms of art, such as poetry, acting, and film-making. His compositions and performances bear such a mighty sense of uniqueness and sophistication that his profile as a musician or an intellectual affords no single definition (even that of *tropicalista*). If music has always been a dexterous mediator through different sectors of society, as anthropologist Hermano Vianna, in *The Mystery of Samba*, has cunningly pointed out, Veloso does this job more effectively than any other singer-songwriter in Brazil or, perhaps, much of the world, ever. Originally released in Portuguese in 1997 as *Verdade tropical* (with no subtitle) by São Paulo's acclaimed Companhia das Letras, and recently published in English (October 2002) by internationally famous Alfred A. Knopf, *Tropical Truth: A Story of Music and Revolution in Brazil* shows us, above all, how Veloso, an artist from outside the dominating centers of international mass culture, perceives and reacts to the baffling intricacies of art, philosophy, politics, and social behavior, through creative work and polemical commentaries.

A long piece of English prose with an insider's insight into the complex and multifaceted cultural movement called *tropicalismo* was overdue in the United States and Canada, despite the excellent academic research volumes launched by Christopher Dunn, Randal Johnson and Charles Perrone in the last two years (*Brutality Garden*, *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, and *Brazilian Popular Music and Globalization*). Other musicians, intellectuals and non-mainstream music lovers in this country have regarded Veloso as hipster or high-art icon since David Byrne's 1989 release of an anthological CD called *Beleza Tropical*. The Tropicalists in general (including Gilberto Gil, Tom Zé and Os Mutantes) have been construed by the well-informed in con-

temporary music as the late 1960s precursors of the most visible trend in world music in the late 1990s: the creative blending of music styles from all eras and all corners of the Globe. Critic Jon Pareles, for instance, contends that finally North-Americans are receptive to this trend, whereas "Brazilians were twenty years ahead of their time, from the United States perspective. They were mixing and matching things. They were taking from outside and drawing from their roots."

The New York Times critic adds that people growing up now are plugged into the Internet "and *tropicália* was like the original Internet. You can go surfing on *tropicália* and you can hear rock, you can hear reggae, you can hear all the Brazilian kinds of music." Pareles then concludes: "It makes sense now because our attention is so chopped off and fragmented, and far-reaching at the same time. *Tropicália* was ahead of all this." Other critics corroborate Pareles' view. The Tropicalists' "collagist approach to history, region, genre and nationality—not to mention their thoroughly contemporary idea of being at once local and global—have become as commonplace today as the nearest laptop," writes Paul de Barros, a jazz critic for *The Seattle Times*.

While *Alegria*, *alegria*, Veloso's first book (a collection of short prose pieces and poetry published 25 years ago), remains basically unknown anywhere on the face of the Earth, his second volume has been reviewed throughout Brazil and the United States with varied opinions: from flying colors to a considerable degree of negative criticism and controversy. After all, this is not any novelty, since polemics and provocations are nothing from which the Bahian writer shies away in his country or abroad. They have been recurrent phenomena ever since he took his first steps on Rio de Janeiro stages, in 1967.

Reactions to *Verdade tropical* in Brazil can be divided into three basic categories, according to Liv Sovik, from Universidade Federal da Bahia: those that accept Veloso's importance and write laudatory reviews; those that admit *tropicalismo* as watershed but criticise its results and the book itself; and "a small number that use the occasion to reflect on themes of Brazilian culture" (4). The first group, adds Sovik, includes assessments that regard *Verdade tropical* as a reference book "to join the fan literature that reproduces quotations from interviews and articles by him" (4). The second one focuses on the present and "attempt to reveal the reasons for the consensus and aura of power that surround Caetano" (4). The third group ponders over *Verdade tropical's* arguments in favor of Brazil's important role in the map of the

world's cultures. Such reviewers insert Veloso's critical legacy into that rich tradition of identity discourses developed by Gilberto Freyre, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, and Oswald de Andrade (5-6).

Since October, 2002, *Tropical Truth* has received excellent appraisals in the United States, but almost all of them have something to say about its readability problems. It is a formidable book, "even a vexing one at times," contends Gerald Marzorati, the editorial director of *The Times Magazine*. To him, this weakness has less to do with the translation than with the editing. Readers "only casually familiar with Brazilian music," adds Marzorati, "will find the narrative by turns too thin on context or too thick with it." Perhaps some of the harshest criticism of *Tropical Truth* comes from Bondo Wyszpolski, from the *Easy Reader*, a weekly newspaper based in the South Bay of southern California, and *Brazzil*, a Los Angeles-based printed and web-based magazine that often provides a wide international audience with serious, well-written pieces on Brazilian music. *Tropical Truth* is not a terribly compelling book, writes Wyszpolski: "The passion we find in the music here seems lacking, nor is there anything approaching the lilt and the rhythm of his greatest compositions." Wyszpolski's reaction is, in part, one of the two forms of unmatched expectations that Veloso himself feared. According to the singer-songwriter, people who liked music would find too much of a complicated book in *Tropical Truth*; and people who liked books would get discouraged by the excessive space reserved to pop music in it (8-9).

Several critics, including Marzorati, assume that most problems with *Tropical Truth* result from the translator's and/or editor's flaws. For the reader who is also capable of reading the English and Portuguese versions of the text, the critics' assumption becomes partially unsustainable, especially if they are attributing translation issues to Isabel de Sena alone, and, likewise, editing deficiencies to nobody but Barbara Einzig. Any translator is faced with two major choices: to create the new text as objective and clear as possible, according to the reader's point-of-view, or make the writing run as faithfully as possible to the author's original aesthetic vision. Translation jobs may also mix both attempts at various ratios of preference. As far as the translation and editing processes of *Tropical Truth* are concerned, there seems to be a somewhat unbalanced mix of both choices, but to ascribe faults and merits to specific names would probably be an impossible task, since the translated text must have been touched by very many hands (including those of the author himself, who is well versed in English). To make the matter even more complex, the original text

itself is a "translation" of sorts. The book, commissioned by New York editors in 1991 (after Veloso published an article on Carmen Miranda, in *The New York Times*), is clearly written for an international audience. Furthermore, the Portuguese text is not devoid of obvious editing flaws. (By the way, how many would have dared to openly confront self-assured Veloso on this issue?)

One is tempted to wonder, therefore, how much input into the English translation and editing might have come from the author himself. On the one hand, it is fair to say that a great number of sentences remain just as long, obscure and labyrinthine as they are in Portuguese. On the other hand, the official translator and editor may be the ones responsible for splitting and, to some extent, improving the clarity and cohesion of sentences and chapters (or whatever we may want call the individually titled segments of the book). One of the longest sentences in *Verdade tropical* appears in its first chapter, "Elvis e Marilyn." In the Portuguese version, the sentence speaks of samba and bossa nova for nothing less than 36 lines without a period (35-36). In the English-translated version, the chapter itself is split into three, and the content of that extra-long sentence spreads out into eight shorter ones at the onset of a new chapter entitled "Bossa Nova" (22). While many translated paragraphs remain as long as their Portuguese counterparts, almost all chapters in *Tropical Truth* display white spaces that are not present in *Verdade tropical*. There are also other marks of positive editorial changes. The division of the original text into four uneven parts (with 3, 15, 1, and 7 chapters each) has been eradicated. The differences between the two versions also include the two sections of black-and-white photographs and a glossary of Portuguese/Brazilian terms; all this is added to the English edition.

It is curious to note that a hint of Veloso's hand in the process of editing actually emerges in the note of "Agradecimento," in the Portuguese version, and in "Acknowledgments," its English correlative. At first the author thanks Cristiana Lavigne, who read his "increasingly intractable fragments" and would, then, "point out connections, make editorial suggestions, and in so doing she rekindled the hope" that he could write a book (*Tropical Truth* ix). The next word of gratitude goes to well-known editor and writer Rubem Fonseca, who read the manuscript in its "organized form, made encouraging remarks [...] and suggested (in fact imposed) three cuts, short and precise like the sentences that have made him famous" (ix). Veloso then confesses that two of the instructions were immediately followed to the letter; "the other—after much hesitation—only in part" (ix). Maybe the English ver-

sion's early cuts have something to do with the part of Fonseca's suggestions that was previously declined. At any rate, in both versions of his introduction Veloso is candid about his own style, or his "tendency toward digression and ellipsis that confounds my thinking, my conversations, and my writing" (*Tropical Truth* 8).

In sum, the ongoing controversy over *Tropical Truth* is much less focused on content than form, and one may argue that the book's shortcomings are mainly two. First, it displays rather long and confusing sentences, especially on its first 93 pages. Second, there are too many fragments of cultural information that either need further explanation or overexpose the reader to too many contexts and unknown names.

The positive reception of Veloso's book in the United States, in turn, reiterates the notion that there is much intellectual wit, cultural knowledge, and historical significance to it. What *Tropical Truth* misses in terms of orderly chronology, says Will Hermes of *The Village Voice*, "it makes up for in charm and smarts. Even when he veers into an academic thicket, you're happy to follow, like the moments in a great bar conversation that let you fondle your drink stirrer or admire the speaker's mouth." The Bahian, explains Mike Quinn, "weaves a captivating tale of artistic evolution alongside an important moral: The arts are just as political and inflammatory as any 'serious' social issue, and an artist with conviction and depth has to be enormously strong to stay true to his or her ideals" (*Tropical*).

For Gerald Marzorati, if one approaches it as one might "an adventurous Caetano album—that is, as an unconventional work combining autobiography, cultural criticism, deep musical wisdom and original, sweet riffs—the book is rather extraordinary." In terms of autobiography, for instance, "Narcissus on Vacation" (the chapter on Veloso's prison experience) stands out. Swift and precise language conveys the power of honest self-criticism, a well-balanced tone of suspense, and the opportunity for unabashed intimacy with the author's plight without a drop of sentimentality.

As it happens to most memoirs penned by poets, musicians and other artists, *Tropical Truth* sheds light on the contexts and motivations behind the creation of many of Veloso's works. This is the case of classic tunes like "Irene" and "Terra". The former, a concrete musical poem of ironic joy, was written within the confines of a dark and dirty cell in Rio de Janeiro (250–251). The latter, a marvelous piece of cubist contours, was composed several years later, but in direct connection with the memories of such appalling jail

circumstances. One day Dedé, Veloso's first wife, brought him the weekly magazine *Manchete* with photos of the Earth taken from outer space:

These were the first in which the entire globe was visible, and there was a strong emotion provoked by the confirmation of what we had until then known only through deduction and abstract representation. I considered the irony of my situation: a prisoner in a tiny cell, I looked in admiration at images of the whole planet, seen from the wide open of space. (249-250)

With regards to musical and cultural criticism at large, the list of topics brilliantly discussed is enormous. African diaspora, concrete poetry, cultural cannibalism, existentialism, globalization, music styles in/of Brazil and abroad, national identity, pragmatic philosophy, sebastianism, and vanguard cinema are but a few of them. One of the major contributions, though, is the priceless insight into the features and meanings of *tropicalismo* from the chapter entitled "Anthropophagy." Just like his lyrics and recorded interviews, Veloso's prose highlights a peculiar way of looking at every aspect of living or every detail of cultural behavior and representation. Combining logic and symbolism through a partially Nietzschean and a partially carnivalesque mode of operation, he will disclose a plurality of ironic or otherwise provocative images of the same issue, even if such an approach may cause him to sound cryptic or contradictory. He contends, for example, that in *tropicalismo*

there is a tendency to make Brazil exotic as much for the tourists as for Brazilians. No doubt even I myself reject what seem to me ridiculous attempts to neutralize the strangeness of this Catholic tropical monster, in the hunt for the crumbs of ordinary international respectability. Of course I recognize that a headdress of bananas is not particularly useful when used by a nuclear physicist or a classicist born in Brazil. But "Brazil" can liberate the creative energies that will enable the proliferation of research (or the invention of new disciplines) only if Brazil refuses to feel intimidated by itself, and if it places its narcissistic pleasure above sensible submission to the international order. (159)

The late arrival of *Tropical Truth* in English (five years past its release in Brazil) must be celebrated, even if the writing of such a lengthy and complex piece had to be done from scratch (suggesting the phenomenal scope of

Veloso's memory), on the road and, quite often, through the small hours at a hotel room, after exhausting stage performances. It was perhaps a price that Veloso had to pay, then (and the readers, now, in the unedited course of his prose), so that more of his music could be written and performed at the same time he wrote the book of his life. After all, it was worth it, as many of us would agree with Mike Quinn: "Brazil's Caetano Veloso is one of the world's most accomplished and conscious pop artists. Anywhere. Period" (Omaggio).

Whether in a tropicalist language of evasive imagery or in a supposed pursuit of global truth about his art and his era, Veloso's occasionally chaotic and anarchist prose defies all purist labels and all Cartesian sensibilities. While ranging from personal memoir to cultural history, media analysis, philosophical inquiry, literary theory, or popular music and cinema criticism, *Tropical Truth's* assets undoubtedly compensate for its apparent lack of contextual congruity and syntactic clarity. Caetano Veloso's newest release in English is indeed not music, but food for thought and social awareness; it is not an analytical thesis, but a priceless tool for understanding music and culture. Love it *and* do not leave it just because of some obscurity in your path through *Tropical Truth*. Even in its shadowy passages one may find scattered bits or hidden pots of precious enlightenment.

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