

Tribute to Eduardo Portella (1932-2017) *Unus pro omnibus, omnes pro uno*

João Vicente Ganzarolli de Oliveira¹, Av. Pedro Calmon^{2*}

¹Senior Professor and Researcher of the Tércio Pacitti Institute of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

²Cidade Universitária, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

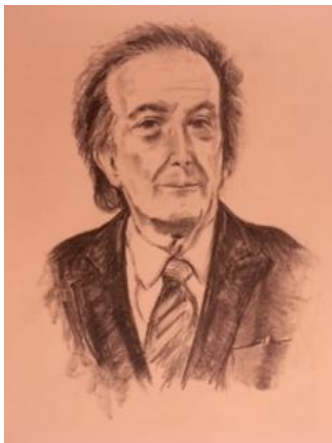
*Corresponding Author: Av. Pedro Calmon, Cidade Universitária, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

ABSTRACT

The following lines roughly transcribe the conference of the same title that I delivered at the premises of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, on September 6, 2017, during the celebrations of its 100th anniversary. The conference concerned the Brazilian intellectual Eduardo Mattos Portella (1932-2017), who was Professor Emeritus at this institution, as well as writer, literary critic, lecturer and researcher of world renown, Minister of Education of Brazil (1979-1980) and member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters since 1981. As if that were not enough, he was Secretary of Culture of the Brazilian State of Rio de Janeiro (1987-1988); in addition, between 1988 and 1993 Portella was vice-president of UNESCO, an entity which he chaired between 1997 and 1999. I had the privilege and the honour of having him as professor during my doctorate, research supervisor in my post-doctorate and, above all, as a friend during more than two decades.

Keywords: Eduardo Portella, University, Literature, Culture, Brazil

Silence is so freaking loud
Sarah Dessen



Eduardo Portella in his eighties
(Drawing made by the Author)

INTRODUCTION: “BEFORE READING PAULO COELHO, I PREFER TO REREAD SHAKESPEARE”

Eduardo Portella considered himself primarily a writer and an educator; he saw education as an “irreplaceable option” and regarded the practice of writing as an absolutely necessary craft. He wrote with both profusion and competence. His work is vast – more than a thousand smaller texts

(articles, reviews, speeches, presentations, prefaces, etc.) are added to the many books he authored – and consist mainly of essays, not forgetting that the essay is a literary genre as hybrid as free and unsystematic. The essay, as José Ortega y Gasset correctly defined it, is “science without unambiguous evidence”. Eduardo Portella also wrote some poems that, as he once vented, “have not yet dared to get out of the drawers”.

Portella was awarded several honorary degrees both in Brazil and abroad. Written assignments (notably dissertations, theses and books) about his life, work and ideas have been produced since at least 1985 and I hope such production will not lose momentum. He always considered that the essence of literature – *mutatis mutandis*, the same going for all other arts – consists in the way it deals with its subjects, regardless of these subjects themselves. Literature, being an artistic modality, is committed to verisimilitude, not to the veracity of the facts; what matters in a literary text is that its words and phrases, besides being arranged in a beautiful way, have the capacity of convincing of the truthfulness of its content. It is known, for

Tribute to Eduardo Portella (1932-2017)

example, that “A statement considered false in a judicial deposition can be regarded a simple artistic resource (and, therefore, not subject to real judgment by itself) in a poetry”.¹ In the mid-1990s, during a class ministered by Portella and at which I was present, a student asked him if he had already read Paulo Coelho’s books. To my ears the question sounded tricky, perhaps even pharisaic. In any case, Portella’s answer could not have been better: “Before reading Paulo Coelho, I prefer to reread Shakespeare”.²

“I WAS NOT BORN TO SELL BOOKS; I WAS BORN TO OFFER THEM AS GIFTS”

In the year 1962, Eduardo Portella founded the *Tempo Brasileiro* (“Brazilian Time”) publishing house, which became a benchmark in the field of literature and humanities in Brazil. Portella interpreted the concept of education in its literal sense (cf. Latin: *educere* = “lead forth”) and gave it immediate practical application *vis-à-vis* the formation of his pupils and readers; indeed, he was unceasingly and tirelessly encouraging us to get out of ourselves, so that he could lead us forth into wider worlds. What is more, he was always disposed to be both host and guide in this transition from the lack of knowledge to knowledge; Eduardo Portella has been the Virgil of more than one Dante.

Portella lived and studied in Spain during his youth. This helps to explain his admiration for Iberian authors, especially those of the *Siglo de Oro Español* (1492-1659/81), namely Luís de Camões, Quevedo, Saint Teresa D’Ávila, Saint John of the Cross, Calderón, José de Anchieta and António Vieira. He also had great affinity with the members of the *Generación del 98*; Menéndez Pidal, Pío Baroja, Juan Ramón Giménez and Miguel de Unamuno were among his favourites. Portella was a disciple of José Ortega y Gasset, certainly one of the brightest minds of the 20th century. No wonder that some glimmers of the Orteguitan informal style can be identified in Portella’s writing. For business and administration in general, he was not gifted, as he himself had the humility and the wisdom to

admit. Eduardo Portella was deeply affected by the passing of Franco Portella, his brother and his right-hand man at *Tempo Brasileiro*, which occurred some five years before his own passing away. Generous and altruistic, Portella adopted the habit of sharing the gifts God had bestowed on him along with the benefits achieved through his cultivation of them. He used to say: “I was not born to sell books; I was born to offer them as gifts”.

UNUS PRO OMNIBUS, OMNES PRO UNO

In the same context of Portella’s generosity, mention must be made of a fact that is as important for the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (in Portuguese, *Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro* [UFRJ]) as it is ignored by most of its current members. In the 1980s, it was necessary to relocate the UFRJ’s Faculty of Letters, which was in the center of the city Rio de Janeiro, to another campus; there, a brand new architectural complex was erected, which was partly funded by Portella himself.

Notwithstanding his many accomplishments, or rather because of them, Portella was a very humble and simple man, which is a sign of coherence, given the fact that humbleness and simplicity are the two fundamental pillars of true knowledge.³ Portella used to submit his own ideas to the opinion of his students; just like the Brazilian philosopher Gerd Bornheim (1929-2002), who happened to be his personal friend, Portella made his class a laboratory of that ideas, which, sooner or latter, would more times than not be put into written form.⁴ If should not be forgotten that “Writing is a form of communication, and all communication involves a sender, a receiver, and an intervening space that has to be bridged. When you sit down to write, however, that intervening space often seems large and formidable”.⁵

Portella followed to the letter the primitive sense of the word “university”, which represents this noble institution invented in the medieval West. As the North American historian Thomas Woods Jr. points

¹ João Rinaldi, Antonino Romeo et alii. *Introdução à Leitura da Bíblia* (translated from English into Portuguese by J. Mendes de Castro), Porto, Tavares Martins, 1970, p. 28.

² “The genius by means of which he (Shakespeare) is able to describe a vast range of humans, and to make us feel that we know what it is like actually to be them, and moreover to convey this in language of unrivalled beauty, is unique in history” (Theodore Dalrymple. *In Praise of Folly. The*

Blind-Spots of Our Mind, London, Gibson Square, 2019, p. 145).

³ Cf. Maria de Lourdes Ganzarolli de Oliveira. *A verdade que liberta*, Rio de Janeiro, Agir, 1987, p. 13 et passim.

⁴ Cf. João Vicente Ganzarolli de Oliveira. *Arte e beleza em Gerd Bornheim*, Rio de Janeiro, EdUERJ, 2003, p. 26 et passim.

⁵ Martin Manser & Stephen Curtis. *The Penguin Writer’s Manual*, London, Penguin Books, 2002, p. 181.

Tribute to Eduardo Portella (1932-2017)

out, “The university was an utterly new phenomenon in European history. Nothing like it had existed in ancient Greece or Rome”.⁶ It must be said that the word “university” stems from the Latin substantive *universitas*, and refers to a certain type of cohesive group – in this case, a group of different branches of knowledge which are in inextricable link among them: *unus versus alia > universal > universitas*.⁷ It is easy to notice that we are not far from the Latin phrase *unus pro omnibus, omnes pro uno* (“one for all and all for one”), which has become the unofficial motto of Switzerland – made famous in its French version (“*un pour tous, tous pour un*”) thanks to Alexandre Dumas’ novel *The Three Musketeers* (“*Les Trois Mosquetaires*”). Anyway, it may be safe to assume that the modern concept of *interdisciplinarity* has its roots in this almost millenary context; putting it another way, the interdisciplinarity is the twin sister of the university, and Eduardo Portella had always stood up for the dynamic of cooperation that is in the very essence of what one may call the *corpus universitarium*.⁸

CONCLUSION: THE VOICE OF SILENCE

Besides having contributed with his own ideas in the field of literary theory, Portella was also an eminent commentator. Within this context is included his essay on the life and work of Father José de Anchieta (1534-1597), who was Spaniard by birth and Brazilian by choice, and became the pioneer of

literature in Brazil, with his plays, his epistles, poems (among them the famous *De Beata Virgine Dei Matre*) and his epic. Besides, Anchieta was nurse, teacher, philologist, shoemaker and historian, let alone a polyglot (he spoke and wrote in Portuguese, Spanish, Latin and *Brasilica*). He also distinguished himself for his pioneering description of the fauna and flora of the Atlantic Forest, as well as for the defence of its preservation. The first grammar of the Tupi language ever written in Brazil came out of Anchieta’s pen.⁹ In 1736, the heroic nature of Anchieta’s virtues was approved by Pope Clement XII; in 1980, he was beatified by Pope John Paul II and in 2014, Pope Francis declared him a saint.¹⁰

At UNESCO, Portella formed friendship with many a senior figure of the academic world, namely the Mexicans Octavio Paz (1914-1998) and Miguel León-Portilla (1926-2019) – with whom he was often mistaken by the UNESCO’s mail, and vice versa, due to the similarity between the names “Portella” and “Portilla”. In his later years, Eduardo Portella preferred to give his classes and workshops at the headquarters of the *Tempo Brasileiro* publishing house. I remember that the classroom housed a small, albeit select, private library. Perhaps those were Eduardo Mattos Portella’s favourite books, faithful and inseparable friends of that man who could recognize the voice of silence in many different idioms.

⁶ *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization* (with a new foreword by Cardinal Antonio Cañizares), Washington, Regnery, 2012, 47-66.

⁷ Cf. Ib.

⁸ “Interdisciplinarity or interdisciplinary studies involves the combining of two or more academic disciplines into one activity (e.g., a research project). It draws knowledge from several other fields like sociology, anthropology,

psychology, economics etc. It is about creating something by thinking across boundaries” (Tanya Ausburg et alii. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interdisciplinarity>).

⁹ Cf. Eduardo Portella. *José de Anchieta*, in *Nossos Clássicos*, Rio de Janeiro, Agir, 2005.

¹⁰ Cf. Padre Paulo Ricardo. “A vida de São José de Anchieta”, in <https://padrepaularicardo.org/episodios/sao-jose-de-anchieta>.

Citation: Av. Pedro Calmon, “Tribute to Eduardo Portella (1932-2017)”, *Annals of Geographical Studies*, 3(3), 2020, pp. 33-35.

Copyright: © 2020 Av. Pedro Calmon. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.