

## *Writing One's Life: Budapest by Chico Buarque*

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**Abstract:**

Critics of Chico Buarque's third novel, *Budapest*, have focused on how the text problematizes questions of identity and authorship, generally within the context of postmodernity and globalization. José Costa, in these readings, is seen as a fractured subject for whom the novel's final outcome does not bring closure. The complexity and richness of Buarque's work, however, allow for what might be called a counter-reading: the view of the text as a quest narrative in which José Costa attempts to re-script his bankrupt existence in Brazil by becoming once again a linguistic blank slate in order to master Hungarian, "única língua do mundo que . . . o diabo respeita." Although his quixotic goal does not meet with perfect success, the by-product is the creation of genuine relationships and a new family.

Chico Buarque's significance as a cultural icon in contemporary Brazil can scarcely be overestimated. Although his fame initially rested on his status as a capital figure in MPB, in recent years he has produced four novels that have merited considerable critical attention. His latest literary work, *Leite derramado*, released in April 2009, may not yet have elicited as many critical studies as the first three—*Estorvo*, (1991), *Benjamim* (1995), and *Budapest* (2003). Yet the novel not only is rising to the top of best-seller lists in Brazil but as a further indication of Buarque's place in the national imaginary is currently being read by a character on the prime-time soap opera, *Caminho das Índias*. Of the three earlier novels, *Budapest* was the most favorably received<sup>1</sup> and critical analyses have revealed its sophistication and complexity. Scholars have noted particularly the metaliterary aspects of the work, as well as how the text problematizes questions of identity and authorship, generally within the context of postmodernity and globalization.

Among critical perspectives on *Budapest*, those of Sônia L. Ramalho de Farias, Andréia Dal Maschio, and Ilma da Silva Rebello deserve to be mentioned here as offering mutually complementary views of the novel as a portrait of a postmodern fractured subject. Sônia L. Ramalho de Farias's study examines the novel as a metafictional artifact that problematizes mimesis. Her placement of the work within the context of the tradition of self-referential literature from antiquity forward is particularly noteworthy. For Ramalho, the fractured identity of the narrator/protagonist destroys the "autobiographical pact": "A dupla e tensa encenação da diferença em *Budapest*—a que se dá por via da fragmentação do sujeito-autor e a que ocorre através do questionamento da identidade cultural via transculturação – atualiza-se em uma forma discursiva ela também fragmentaria. Escrita dúplice e ambivalente, marcada pelo desnudamento ficcional, pelo riso paródico e pela reflexão crítica, o romance de Chico Buarque assume a configuração do pastiche para tematizar a controversa questão da mimesis literária e da representação do sujeito no âmbito da ficção contemporânea" (407-08). Using the terminology of Fredric Jameson, Ramalho relates Buarque's fictional project to the condition of the subject within the context of late capitalism, characterized by "globalização" and "estilhaçamento" (408). Andréia Dal Maschio provides another interesting perspective on the metafictional aspects of the novel. Outlining the complex web of authorship that *Budapeste* creates, she astutely observes that Costa the ventriloquist becomes Costa the dummy in the hands of the character known only as "Sr...." Like Ramalho, Dal Maschio connects the text to contemporary society, relating Buarque's manipulation of the authorial function to contemporary issues regarding authorship and the marketing of literary works. Her interpretation of Costa—from ventriloquist to dummy—suggests that manipulation, a kind of dehumanization that is related to postmodernity, is at the center of the novel.<sup>2</sup> Finally, in her article "Sujeito e identidades: realidades labirínticas em Chico Buarque," Ilma da Silva Rebello asserts that in the three novels *Estorvo*, *Benjamim*, and *Budapeste*, Buarque's protagonists exhibit



characteristics of the late-modern *flâneur* as delineated by Walter Benjamin. They wander through “não lugares” without identity, unable to establish meaningful connections or to achieve self-understanding: “Nesses três romances de Chico Buarque, temos a impressão de que tudo está em fluxo, mas nada muda, pois a experiência não se converte em saber narrável. Isto nos remete para a figura do *flâneur* que, segundo Benjamin, seria uma chave alegórica da crise na transmissibilidade da experiência. Os personagens de Chico estão à deriva, não conseguindo extrair significados do passado, já que perderam a capacidade de aprender com a experiência.” José Costa, the protagonist of *Budapeste*, lives “entre-lugares,” but, in her view, “movendo-se entre realidades distintas, que não lhe oferecem identidade e o fraturam ainda mais” (16).<sup>3</sup> Though each of these three critics offers a unique perspective on the novel, they share the view that the work does not offer closure but rather ambiguity and lack of resolution, as well as a conviction that in *Budapeste* Buarque reflects a postmodern malaise of fractured identity and of non-belonging.

The complexity and richness of *Budapeste* invites us to tease out counter-interpretations that challenge the view of José Costa as a fractured protagonist who remains fractured. In the pages that follow I would like to offer a reading that differs from the two cited above in that I consider the novel as an allegory of becoming that draws heavily on mythic formulae of quest.<sup>4</sup> Not only Costa's perpetual motion between countries and hotels but also the figurative journey he undertakes alone evoke quest patterns, as do the trials and hardships he undergoes and his encounters with helpful and hostile creatures in strange guises. The purpose of his activities is not always clear even to him and the process is frequently shrouded in mystery and expressed through imagery that has other-worldly, oneiric, or archetypal overtones. Central to the interpretation of the novel as quest are the indications that José Costa is not simply going in circles but has achieved a new and more rewarding state of being at the end of the novel.



Chico Buarque puts language at the center of his protagonist's quest, making the word as vital a life force as sex or food. As a hack ghost writer whom his partner terms a "genius," his protagonist, José Costa, is initially passive and unreflective about his unrewarding existence. But the invitation to attend the "Encontro anual de autores anônimos" (18) in Australia, which arrives at his office out of nowhere, for some inexplicable reason activates him, setting him on a path that will change his life. (Not surprisingly, he will later liken the convention to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.) Returning home from his second congress, held in Turkey, he lands in Hungary, after unknown forces in the form of an anonymous bomb threat ground his flight. Having left behind a life in Brazil in which communication has broken down almost completely—if he hears his news-anchor wife's voice at all, it is usually mediated by the television set or the answering machine—he leaps to embrace the seemingly gratuitous challenge of learning Hungarian. With an intensity that suggests a matter of life and death, he assumes a task that requires almost superhuman powers: mastering the "única língua do mundo que . . . o diabo respeita" (6). This endeavor is indeed daunting in the strange enchanted world of the hotel, where the bellboy's speech resembles that of a deaf-mute and where simply to distinguish where words begin and end is like trying to cut a river with a knife ("como pretender cortar um rio a faca" [8]).

The martial terminology José uses underlines his sense of mission. Watching television in his room, he is more concerned with unraveling the mysterious Magyar language than in hearing news of his interrupted flight home. In speaking of his linguistic undertaking, he employs terms of high intrigue: "Lufthansa," a "clandestine" German word that "infiltrates" the "parede de palavras húngaras," becomes his first key to unraveling the secrets of Hungarian (8). He portrays the possibility of even hearing a language other than Hungarian as a serious threat to his delicate and vital task ("Aí entrou na tela uma moça de xale vermelho e coque negro, ameaçou falar espanhol, zapeei no susto" [9]). His appetite for the language is in fact stronger than his hunger



for food; in the restaurant he would rather taste the sound of the word “pumpkin bread” than eat the bread itself (10). Its language a tantalizing puzzle, Hungary in all its insularity contrasts pointedly with the “país de lingua nenhuma, patria de algarismos, ícones e logomarcas” that is the international airport.

Much as the protagonists of other literary quests must overcome encounters with evil forces, José Costa confronts protean strangers who present linguistic problems and who turn menacing before his eyes. The pair of Hungarian lovers who befriend him early in his second stay in Budapest but then invade his hotel room and subject him to a terrifying forced game of Russian roulette are actually Romanian gypsies, he realizes after starting to decode their language. Much later, when he has returned to Brazil only to find his personal history all but erased and his native language unsettlingly evolved beyond what he remembered (155), he is stalked by a pair of tattooed skinheads, one of whom – a youth with enigmatic hieroglyphics on his bare chest – raises his fist to punch him in the liver. Scrutinizing the boy’s face, José discovers the eyes of his wife, Vanda. By deciphering the identity of his own estranged son, he is forced to confront the total absence of father-son affiliation between them. In each of these incidents, both with the gypsies and with Joaquinzinho, José evades his persecutors and escapes the danger of physical harm by merging into a crowd that fortuitously appears to swallow him up. These crowds, like other individuals and events throughout the book, suggest the forces of good that, according to quest conventions, help the hero accomplish his goal.

José’s encounter with the now adolescent Joaquinzinho seems to foreclose the possibility of a genuine father-son relationship and adds decisively to the evidence that casts doubt, either figurative or literal, on José’s paternity with respect to this monster/child.<sup>5</sup> Thus their brief run-in allows José to turn a psychological page. A series of mysterious events ensues, a constellation of forces guiding him toward a goal of which he is not aware. In



this last stage of his life in Brazil, he is stripped of his national, professional, and familial identity. Professionally, he is the ghost of a ghost—a bookstore he visits can find no trace of the erstwhile bestseller *O Ginógrafo* (160).

Out of money, he is reduced to a bare-bones existence. To avoid incurring laundry expenses, he resorts to living naked (emblematic of this process of “stripping”) in the hotel room he cannot pay for, eating leftovers from others’ room service trays and hoping against hope that all traces of his existence have been deleted from the hotel computers. When the phone starts ringing incessantly one night, he imagines he is being called to account by the hotel management. Downstairs, however, he discovers only an unconcerned night clerk. He slips outside and without intending to finds himself outside Vanda’s building. He attempts to elude the painful site only to end up there again as if led by some inexplicable force: “Esgueirei-me, segui para o hotel, mas devo ter perdido o rumo, porque depois de umas voltas fui parar de novo em frente ao prédio onde morei com a Vanda” (163). Like his encounter with Joaquinzinho, this experience provides him with psychic mirrors that help him grasp his situation and signal the closing of the door to his Brazilian past. A glowing cigarette reveals an alter ego—his replacement?—smoking in Vanda’s window. When an automobile arrives (recalling earlier moments when he waited fruitlessly for Vanda’s car to appear), he sees nothing through its darkened window, only the disheveled reflection of himself on the surface, before the vehicle enters the garage and disappears. Looking up, he sees the blinds to Vanda’s apartment are now closed.

Back in his hotel, José receives a “rescue call.” He will be flown back to Hungary and given a permanent visa, because “o Sr....” , Kriska’s former husband, has ghost-written his autobiography and made him a celebrity. Critic Leilson Zeni views José’s change in fortune as a cheap “deus ex-machina” solution. The agent of his rescue, Kriska’s ex-husband, o Sr..., is indeed somewhat God-like; distinguished from other characters by the omission of his name, he is apparently all-knowing and all-seeing, to judge by the accuracy of



his account of José's life. But in the context of quest literature, this rescue constitutes a final supernatural intervention that rewards the hero's efforts and the sacrifice, purification, and penance he has undergone. José, for his part, receives the notice of his new status with an elation that contrasts with his usual timid, morose demeanor ("minha cabeça já alçava vôo, meus pensamentos vinham em versos" [165]). His euphoria belies the notion, suggested by Ramalho, Delmaschio and Da Silva Rebello, that Hungary, for José, is simply a mirror image of Brazil or another "não lugar" that reflects the fragmentation of his postmodern subjectivity.

The forces of fate that engineered his encounter with Joaquinzinho and his nocturnal return to Vanda's neighborhood conspire again in favor of Hungary when he arrives at the airport in Budapest. He feels an impulse to remain a man without a country but suddenly he has no choice: the custom doors slam shut behind him. He is welcomed by Kriska's son, whose reception contrasts with that of the hostile, estranged, and aggressive Joaquinzinho in Rio. Pisti greets him "risonha" – "Pisti que nunca sorria." Pisti's joy underlines the fact that José's return to Hungary is a triumph and a homecoming.

In light of the quest metanarrative described above, the issues of authorship and identity that critics have associated with *Budapeste* acquire a new layer of meaning. José's fixation with Hungarian can be interpreted in the light of the importance accorded, throughout the book, to language. The life and death intensity of José's desire to master Hungarian is only one of numerous references to language usage as an activity as vital as eating or procreating. Early in his marriage to Vanda, José has a figurative affair with the written word. Staying late in his office re-reading his own writings, published under someone else's name, he feels erotic pleasure: "eu me sentia tendo um caso com mulher alheia" (17). In the fictional memoir Costa ghost-writes for Kaspar Krabbe, the act of writing becomes a sexual act.<sup>6</sup> He portrays Kaspar Krabbe as physically writing his autobiography on women's bodies. Teresa, the first Brazilian lover José invents for Krabbe, doesn't voice the usual complaint



that he only wants her for sex, instead protesting that he only seeks her out in order to write on her. In Costa's version of Krabbe's life, young women students line up to enjoy the pleasure of being written on, and, as if words were semen, "meu livro se dispersava por aí" (40). Finally one woman finds a way of possessing him and his words; she teaches him to write backward so only she can read what he writes; and in a gesture that recalls Scheherazade, thus underlining the connection of writing with life itself, she erases herself every night so he will never stop writing his book on her. Their relationship is apparently a fecund one: "E engravidou de mim, e na sua barriga o livro foi ganhando novas formas, e foram dias e noites sem pausa, sem comer um sanduíche, trancado no quartinho da agência até que eu cunhasse, no limite das forças, a frase final: e a mulher amada, cujo leite eu já sorvera, me fez beber da água com que havia lavado sua blusa" (40). (This "frase final, which" José (and Buarque) uses again to end his narrative, foreshadows the final outcome of José's relationship with Kriska, suggesting the power of the imagination, like dreams, to capture unconscious desires.)

For José, whose discourse has merged with that of his client, the act of writing Krabbe's story signifies his own life and vitality. He hands his completed manuscript over to his boss, Álvaro, only reluctantly, feeling that he has just completed his last book. Writing the title on the envelope that contains the manuscript, he notes that the ink is pale, almost as if he himself is running out of vigor. Significantly, it is at this moment that he buys two airline tickets to Budapest "seguro de que voaria só" (43), i.e., knowing full well that Vanda won't really accompany him. Sure enough, she exchanges her ticket for one to London, and at the airport, they drink champagne, exchange only the word "tintim," and go their separate ways (42). That they have run out of words signifies that the lifeblood of their relationship has run dry.

José's flight from Brazil comes at a point when the degradation of words, of communication, of creativity, of paternity, have plunges him into an abyss from which he is at pains to escape. In psychological terms, he has failed



miserably in love, work, and parenthood – in short, in “writing” his life. Given the equation of words and life that Buarque has established in the novel, and considering the total bankruptcy of his protagonist’s personal and professional life in Brazil, José’s subsequent behavior – his arrival in Hungary, his settling in with Kriska, his arduous apprenticeship as a clandestine ghostwriter at the Clube das Belas-Letras, his abandonment of Kriska to return to his life with Vanda – makes perfect sense as a manifestation of a repetition compulsion, the phenomenon in which someone attempts to understand or master past traumas. Having failed to “write his life” successfully in Brazil, he decides to “start over” linguistically, choosing the most difficult language he can find to perfect. (His subsequent returns to Brazil, for which he gives flimsy excuses, suggest that his aim, at least unconsciously, is to go back to Brazil as a new, improved, José and to overcome the failure, rejection, and alienation he had experienced there with Vanda.)

Although he doesn’t attach too much importance to the fact, his act of starting over linguistically coincides with a new start sexually. When he contemplates Kriska’s naked body for the first time, he can only stammer “branca, bela, bela, branca, branca, bela, branca” (46). Her white body suggests a page to be written on, recalling the women in the story he ghost-wrote for Kaspar Krabbe. He anticipates both making love to her and learning the names of the most intimate parts of her body. He will map this new terrain, map-making becoming an analogy for acquiring an understanding of physical space. This approach to Kriska’s body continues the book’s ongoing association between words and sexuality. José’s discovery of new terrain will ultimately change his life.

The eventual outcome of José’s Hungarian fixation is the final reunion with his new Hungarian family, which fulfills an earlier dream of his imagination, as the repetition of the final phrase of Krabbe’s memoir suggests. To view the ending of *Budapeste* in this light contradicts other readings of the novel that do not see positive progress for José. A close look at how Rio and



Budapest are portrayed in the book, however, confirms that the two cities are not mirror images but rather sites that mark the allegorical phases of José's quest narrative. The two women, Vanda and Kriska, embody the difference between the two environments. Vanda, on the one hand, evades communication with José and uses their son as a shield to keep him distant, while Kriska shares her son and her space with him. Kriska's love is the motor behind his ultimate retrieval from his final abject state in the Brazilian hotel. The fruitless calls José repeatedly places to Vanda are finally replaced with the calls from Hungary that are so insistent that José eventually answers, and which signify that he is wanted in Hungary. Other aspects of the two countries underline fundamental differences. The Brazil of the novel is a globalized, capitalistic place where José, once called a "genius" by his boss, is expendable and liable to be replaced at any moment by the set of new geniuses hired by Álvaro, who is fond of international marketing terms like "demanda reprimida" (25) and "terceirizar" (23). Family life is fractured and riddled with deception. Hungary, on the other hand, is not globalized but rather provincial and insular. The anachronistic Club das Belas-Letras, with its daily meetings and frequent events, is a more human environment than its Brazilian counterpart, Álvaro's agency. In Hungary, José continues to ghost-write, but his motivation becomes more altruistic when he pens a book of poetry for Ferenc out of compassion for the elderly washed-up writer. (Later, "Sr...." will perform a similar task, writing José's autobiography out of his concern for his ex-wife, Kriska.) Unlike in Buarque's globalized Brazil, in his insular Hungary, people look to their roots and especially their linguistic heritage, and they communicate face-to-face instead through answering machines and television screens.

Hungary thus represents, in my reading, not a city on the global map of today but a psychic space of personhood and relationship for José Costa. As a fantasy of hope, the novel recalls a much earlier text by Chico Buarque, "A Banda" (1966), his first "grande sucesso" (Werneck 45). Carlos Drummond de



Andrade's comments on "A Banda," in fact, might be said to apply to *Budapeste* as well: "O jeito, no momento, é ver a banda passar, cantando coisas de amor. Pois de amor andamos todos precisados, em dose tal que nos alegre, nos reumanize, nos corrija, nos dê paciência e esperança, força, capacidade de entender, perdoar, ir para a frente. Amor que seja navio, casa, coisa cintilante, que nos vacine contra o feio, o errado, o triste, o mau, o absurdo e o mais que estamos vivendo ou presenciando. . . . Viva a música, viva o sopro de amor que a música e banda vem trazendo, Chico Buarque de Hollanda à frente, e que restaura em nós hipotecados palácios em ruínas, jardins pisoteados, cisternas secas, compensando-nos da confiança perdida nos homens e suas promessas, da perda dos sonhos que o desamor puiu e fixou, e que são agora como o paletó roído de traça, a pele escarificada de onde fugiu a beleza, o pó no ar, na falta de ar." *Budapeste*, like "A Banda," speaks of the contagion of love and the possibility of change. Buarque creates a protagonist whose Quixotic pursuit of linguistic perfection is doomed to failure, but who along the way becomes part of a community, forges deep affective bonds and becomes part of a genuine family. While pursuing his unattainable goal of total perfection in Hungarian, he played soccer with Pisti, he communicated with Kriska, he engendered their son, and he became a necessary part of the family. Pisti's biological father is willing to share his son and to help José write his life in Hungary. In a more humanized environment, the idea of exclusive authorship, exclusive paternity, and individual genius become unimportant and positive outcomes depend on collective effort.



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1 Alves de Carvalho, for example, mentions the first two novels but highlights the impact of *Budapeste*: "Em 2002, o estrondoso sucesso *Budapeste* confirma a maestria do autor no campo da literatura."

2 See Júlio Cesar Valladão Diniz for another perspective on Buarque's concern with authorial ownership.

3 Da Silva Rebello cites as follows the theories of Marc Augé: "o lugar antropológico é substituído pelo não-lugar, pela provisoriedade e pela redução dos códigos de convivência social. O não-lugar não constrói laços tradicionais de identidade, mas relações pragmáticas com indivíduos que são tomados como meros passageiros, clientes, usuários, entre outros" (8).

4 In regard to quest narrative, I am indebted to the seminal ideas of Northrop Frye.

5 Joaquinzinho as a young boy is never a typical child, at least for José, who portrays him as abnormally oversized and slow in using language.

6 The connection between sexuality and the blank page, like that the between analogy between pen and penis, is not new. See, for example Susan Gubar's study of "The Blank Page" by Isak Denisen.

