

Juan Carlos Paz, *Alturas, tensiones, ataques, intensidades* (Memorias I, II, III) (1972-1994)

Alturas, tensiones, ataques, intensidades (*Memorias I*) was published in Buenos Aires by Ediciones de la Flor in 1972, a few weeks before the death of Juan Carlos Paz, whose portrait adorns the cover. According to one account, Paz corrected the printed book while on his deathbed, as if it were a proof—or, as if the text, beyond its concrete manifestations in manuscript or print form, remained infinitely amendable. This suggests that for Paz, writing these *Memorias* was less an objective goal than an activity—its unfinished nature the very aim—which continued to be nourished by penultimate thoughts sometimes noted at random in cafés and meetings. *Pitches, tensions, attacks, intensities*: these terms from contemporary music betray at once the project's roots in a musician's reflections, and, by their metaphorical potential, the desire to take a step back and consider the world through music. And also to take hold of time itself—as illustrated by the infinite projection of the project into the future, a perfection in the absurd, informed by Jarry and pataphysics: “March 39, 9730. Today I’m working on revising this *Memorial, Diary, Chronicle*, whatever you want to call it, in which I find an apparent excess of contradictions. I’ll have to invent many others still” (*Memorias II*, p. 264).

However, Paz eventually had to stop correcting in order to get his work published—the first volume at least, because the other two would only appear posthumously, in 1987 and 1994, once the military dictatorship of 1976-1983, which had seen his publisher Daniel Divinsky imprisoned and then forced into exile, had finally passed. The work is 941 pages long, forming a huge collage of small disparate texts, ranging in size from aphorisms to 4- or 5-page commentaries. Most of them, however, fit into two or three paragraphs, a format perhaps inherited from journalism, which had provided Paz with his first writing experience. For the most part, they are rather like essays—non-narrative commentaries on events, works, or personalities—except that they are gathered in a fragmented form, like a spiral, or a sort of stardust, perhaps. In addition, personal memories, anecdotes, and travel accounts—evoking (or replacing) the autobiography that he never wrote—often spontaneously interrupt the fabric of pure discourse about reality. In the realm of music, only Erik Satie’s *Memoirs of an Amnesiac* bear any resemblance to Paz’s *Memorias*, less because of their contents than because of their common ethos of eccentricity.

The *Memorias* bask in a perpetual present, where the events of today coexist alongside the earliest reminiscences, and where the horrors of the Vietnam war resonate adjacent to the virtues of solitude or the singularities of Bach’s counterpoint. On the other hand, lists or sequences of names or titles, disparate enumerations, evocations of alternative or utopian locales, often give form to a unique topography of a universal culture. Each volume is divided into “books”, but

it would be hard to say why one moves from one to another. There is no beginning or end; or else, my end is my beginning. (Isn't that exactly how the unconscious works, as psychoanalysis has always said?) Even so, in the *Memorias* as in the rest of his writings, Paz always places music history at the center of his reflections. Without being a historian in the strict sense of the word (for lack of documentary sources), his thought is invariably rooted in the notion of a great modernist narrative, in which individual works act as milestones along a trajectory that extends beyond them. As a faithful disciple of Arnold Schoenberg and an attentive reader of René Leibowitz, Paz adopted the historicist perspective of the Viennese School on the emancipation of dissonance, as well as its collateral logics—such as the rejection of Igor Stravinsky and Paul Hindemith, or the distrust of Béla Bartók. It is in this narrative, of western art music as a whole, that Paz places his own compositions, without seeming to care about the peripheral status of the city from which he writes—in this respect, he is entirely in tune with the universalist vision of literature espoused by his illustrious contemporary and compatriot, Jorge Luís Borges.

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Further reading

Esteban Buch, « Les *Memorias* de Juan Carlos Paz, ou comment écrire une galaxie », *Écrits de compositeurs : Une autorité en questions*, dir. par Michel Duchesneau, Valérie Dufour et Marie-Hélène Benoit-Otis, Paris, Vrin, 2013, p. 185-204.

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