

Salgado Maranhão: Poetry and Resistance

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ABSTRACT: *Blood of the Sun* introduces English-speaking audiences to the work of one of the outstanding contemporary poets from Brazil, Salgado Maranhão. An Apollonian poet in the tradition of Drummond, Cabral and Faustino, Salgado relies on a highly crafted poetic diction, whose idiosyncrasies are preserved in Alexis Levitin's wonderful translation. But Salgado's poetry is not primarily about language games. There is a correlation between Salgado's intricate syntax and imagery and the poet's readiness to delve into the deepest and most paradoxical layers of being, in a never-ending struggle with the mystery of human existence in an often-indifferent world. For the poet, literature occupies a liminal space, a *threshold of possibility* pointing to a new, transformative consciousness about the world, which calls into question binaries such as body and spirit, and resists social practices that have led to historical forms of oppression.

KEYWORDS: Apollonian, Dionysian, liminal, transformative, resistance

RESUMO: *Blood of the Sun* [Sol Sanguíneo] apresenta ao público leitor de língua inglesa a obra de um dos mais extraordinários poetas contemporâneos brasileiros, Salgado Maranhão. Um poeta apolíneo, na tradição de Drummond, Cabral e Faustino, Salgado é um verdadeiro artesão da linguagem, cujas idiosincrasias são preservadas na excelente tradução de Alexis Levitin. Não se trata, porém, de um mero jogo com a linguagem. Há uma íntima correlação entre a complexa sintaxe e imagística do poeta, e seu desejo de mergulhar nas camadas mais profundas e paradoxais do ser, numa perene luta com o mistério da existência face a um universo indiferente. Para o poeta, a literatura ocupa um espaço liminar, um *limiar de possibilidade*, apontando para uma consciência transformativa do mundo que coloca em questão dicotomias como o corpo e o espírito e resiste a práticas sociais que resultaram em formas históricas de opressão.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: apolíneo, dionisíaco, liminar, transformativo, resistência

The publication of *Blood of the Sun* [*Sol Sanguíneo*] is the felicitous outcome of a spectacular collaboration between one of the most influential and innovative contemporary Brazilian poets and one of the most accomplished English language translators from the Portuguese. I am honored to be a godfather of sorts to this stunning new volume, as I had the pleasure of bringing Salgado Maranhão and Alexis Levitin together during "A Moveable Feast," a festival of poetry in Portuguese, held at Brown University in the spring of 2007. That introduction was far from fortuitous. I had known and worked with Alexis since the early 1980s, and had always been impressed by the combination of precision, elegance, and creativity displayed in his superb translations from the Portuguese, both in prose and in verse. And I had been an early admirer and, indeed, the first person in the United States to have taught and written about Salgado's poetry. I believed that it was high time Salgado's poetry became available to English language audiences. And I was convinced that only a translator with deep sensitivity to the nuances of *both* Portuguese and English poetic diction would be able to do justice to the intricate syntax and imagery that is the hallmark of Salgado's poetry.

It is important to clarify from the outset that in underscoring the intricacy of Salgado's poetic diction, by no means am I suggesting that Salgado's poetry is formalist or hermetic or primarily about language games. Rather, Salgado Maranhão is an unabashed humanist, in whose poetry converge a range of feelings, emotions and quests – love, loss, pain, desire, loneliness, generosity, brutality, longing, sensuality, sexuality – while dialoguing with the best in the Luso-Brazilian poetic canon – Camões, Pessoa, Drummond, Cabral, and Faustino, among others. For Salgado form is never gratuitous. As Salgado Maranhão and Geraldo Carneiro stated in their joint 2009 manifesto "Os Desmandamentos" ["The Uncommandments"],

For us poets the problem isn't just to make poetry well-constructed, but to make it distinct (in the double sense, implying both difference and elegance). It is an exercise that is vital for maintaining the vigor of the word. Poetry is not just a question of truth, but of ecstasy. That's why we are poets of ecstasy: the ecstasy of language, the ecstasy¹ of life. (Maranhão/Carneiro 2009)

[O problema da poesia não é só fazer bem feito, mas fazer distinto (no duplo sentido, que implica tanto em diferença, como em elegância). Ela é um exercício vital para manter o vigor da palavra. A poesia não é só questão de verdade, mas de vertigem. Por essas e por outras, é que somos poetas da vertigem: vertigem-linguagem, vertigem vida.]

Borrowing from Mark Schorer's influential essay, we could say that Salgado's poetry exemplifies "technique as discovery": "Technique is the only means [the writer] has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning, and, finally, of evaluating it" (Schorer 1948: 9). There is an inextricable correlation between Salgado's intricate poetic language and the poet's readiness to delve into the deepest and most paradoxical layers of being, in a never-ending struggle with the mystery of human existence in an often-indifferent world. Salgado's poetry is "difficult" because it boldly tackles difficult issues and asks difficult questions. Schorer's observations about Faulkner's style are largely applicable to our author's: "The involutions of Faulkner's style are the perfect equivalent of his involved structures, and the two together are the perfect representation of the moral labyrinths he explores" (Schorer 1948: 27). An Apollonian poet in the mainly Dionysian Brazilian poetic tradition, Salgado epitomizes a rejection of Wordsworth's quintessentially romantic definition of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", which, according to the English poet, would supposedly have taken "its origins from emotions recollected in tranquility" (Wordsworth 1969: 740):

Escrita ascética (quase sem palavras)	Ascetic script (almost without words)
visando a sinergia do sign	seeking synergy with its sign
(O dribble dança à borda	(The dribble dances on the edge
na linha do gol olímpico).	the perfect base-line goal).
Escrita cítrica, exata:	Citric script, exact:
rímel de ouro sobre a pauta	golden mascara on a blank sheet
Pinçadas ao papel as palavras	Placed precise on paper, words
(sem alarde) falam	(without bravado) speak
diamante: o raio sem a pedra.	a diamond's brilliance without the stone.

Although the above quotation might initially be viewed simply as a description of the poetic method of Sebastião Uchoa Leite, to whom the poem is dedicated, its title, "Sinergy"

["Sinergia"] acknowledges a connection with Salgado's own poetic practice. Rather than pretend that it can be an unmediated expression of individual feelings, Salgado's poetry is a highly crafted invitation for the reader to join in a labyrinthine process of reflection and questioning.

Indeed, Salgado's poetic diction could be said to resonate with the following marvelous lines by Galician poet Chus Pato (1955---): "language is a labyrinth of pathways / a traffic" ("a linguaxe é un labirinto de camiños / un tráfico"). The history of mythology teaches us that the labyrinth was an elaborate structure, constructed by that greatest of all artificers, Daedalus. Moreover, in our time, the labyrinth has become a commonly used image for the anomie, silence² and loss of self that are often associated with the modern human condition, and with much modernist and post-modernist literature. As is the case with Pato, however, the "labyrinth of pathways" that lies at the foundation of Salgado's poetry embodies a refusal to be silenced, that is, a refusal to capitulate to the so-called modern condition. In other words, it stands for resistance against, rather than surrender to the dehumanizing forces of modernity. In this sense, Salgado's poetry also evokes the early Italo Calvino's vision of an affirmative role for literature in the modern world, as presented in the well-known essay "The Challenge to the Labyrinth":

What literature can do is to define the best procedure to find the exit, even if this exit proves to be nothing but the passage from one labyrinth to the other. It is the *challenge to the labyrinth* that we want to preserve; it is a literature of *challenge* that we want to formulate and distinguish from the literature of the *surrender to the labyrinth*. (Calvino 1962: 99)

Thus, Salgado's poetry exemplifies the *transformative*, as opposed to the merely *representational* function of literature, as theorized by Dominick LaCapra. Wondering how "a text relate[s] in symptomatic, critical and possibly transformative ways to its pertinent contexts of writing and reading", LaCapra concludes that "particularly significant texts . . . are not only worked over symptomatically by common contextual forces (such as ideologies) but also rework and at times partially work through these forces in critical and at times potentially transformative ways" (La Capra 1987: 4). Even though LaCapra is concerned primarily with the novel, his words can be extended to poetry like Salgado's: "And it may

have transformative effects more through its style or mode of narration than in the concrete image or representation of any desirable alternative or polity” (*Ibidem*). Conceived in this manner – as transformative, rather than as merely representational – literature assumes an intrinsically mediating, liminal quality. Salgado’s poems may start with the most commonplace objects from the quotidian, but they allow us to glimpse into something that wasn’t there at the outset, the kind of “terceira margem” (“third bank”) evoked in Guimarães Rosa’s archetypical short story. As suggested by the epigraph from Francis Ponge to the section “Ornaments for an Eclipse” [“Adereços para um eclipse”] in *Blood of the Sun*, from which the following poem has been taken, for Salgado, as for his French counterpart, “it is a matter of making things speak” [“il s’agit pour moi de faire parler les choses”]:

Fáscas sutis emanam dos objetos frios, insólitos.	Subtle sparks emanate from objects cold and strange.
Secretas impressões incidem feito ranhuras no osso:	Secret impressions advance like grooves in bone:
o malho da mão no lapso provisório	the hand’s work in the slippage of time
Dispersos em toda parte insistem os inutensílios a nos assediar:	Scattered everywhere non-utensils importune us:
arrulham no sopro que acorda as coisas mudas	they coo in the breath that awakens speechless things

At this point it would be useful to return to Salgado Maranhão and Geraldo Carneiro’s words in “The Uncommandments”: “that there be space for and faith in poetry. And that it continue to manufacture futures and, like phoenix, destroy and reconstruct itself for all eternity and one more day” [“que haja espaço e fé na poesia. E que ela continue a fabricar futuros, e, como fênix, se destrua e reconstrua por toda a eternidade e mais um dia.”] (*Ibidem*). Rather than merely representing or celebrating outside reality, Salgado’s poetry stands on what could be described as an exhilarating *threshold of possibility*.

In keeping with the conception of poetry as occupying a liminal space, the third section of the volume consists of a cycle of six poems, which, in a way or another, call into

Though a diffuse, Zenlike spirituality permeates Salgado's poetry, many poems remind us that ultimately and inevitably as human beings we *are* our bodies:

Lentamente a carne exorta	Slowly the flesh exorts
ao poema	the poem,
sua memória de cactos.	Its memory of cactuses.

But rather than a limitation or constraint, the body may be a source of liberation:

Sangue	Blood
é no que ardo	is where I burn
vivido de fonemas	alive with phonemes
e lascívia	and lascivious
sã.	Health

That our humanity is framed by the materiality of our bodies, rather than the abstraction of our souls, is suggested by the very title of the collection, *Sol Sanguíneo*, i.e., *Blood of the Sun*, in Levitin's marvelous rendition, which imagines even inanimate nature as possessing a "body".

But does this emphasis on the body contradict the characterization of Salgado's poetry as Apollonian? Wouldn't it be more appropriate, then, to call it Dionysian? First of all, the commonly held, strict association of the Apollonian with the mind and of the Dionysian with the body is the product of a hierarchical view of the superior mind and the inferior body that Salgado's poetry resists. Besides, as I pointed out in an earlier essay on Salgado Maranhão, taking my cue from Friedrich Nietzsche, the Apollonian and the Dionysian should not be viewed as mutually exclusive: "Tragedy is an Apollonian embodiment of Dionysian insights and powers, and for that reason separated by a tremendous gulf from the epic" (Nietzsche 1956: 56-57). This statement is particularly relevant when we consider the original connections between lyric poetry and the tragedy in ancient Greek literature. Furthermore, Nietzsche reminds us that the best lyric poetry, similarly to the best tragedy, merges Dionysian ecstasy and Apollonian contemplation. This is why, in Nietzsche's view, the best lyric poetry is never an immediate expression of the poet's subjectivity but a more

profound sounding – embodied in the case of Salgado’s poetry in the recurring image of *magma* – of the relationship between being and the world, mediated by images:

The lyrical poet . . . himself becomes his images, his images are objectified versions of himself. Being the active center of that world he may boldly speak in the first person, only his “I” is not that of the actual waking man, but the “I” dwelling, truly and eternally, in the ground of being. It is through the reflections of that “I” that the lyric poet beholds the ground of being. (*Idem*: 39)

Unlike those of us, imbued with a post-Bakhtinian belief in the transgressive power of carnivalization, might suppose, Nietzsche also associates the capacity to dream, and, as such, to postulate an alternative to the imperfect and impermanent everyday reality, with the Apollonian and not with the Dionysian:³

The perfection of these conditions in contrast to our imperfectly understood waking reality, as well as our profound awareness of nature’s healing powers during the interval of sleep and dream, furnishes a symbolic analogue to the soothsaying faculty and quite generally to the arts, which make life possible and worth living. (*Idem*: 21)

Salgado’s Apollonian poetry yearns exactly to take us to that dimension, where we may be able to see things in reverse and the usual oppositions may be transcended:

Em tudo entalha-se	In everything a carving
ao revés	on the other side
coisas que se mostram	of things that show themselves
e não se dão,	but don’t surrender,
que só no verso veem-se,	that only in a verse are seen
no <i>peeling</i> pelo avesso.	in the peeling of the underside.

Although throughout this essay I have been emphasizing the existential and aesthetic dimensions of resistance in Salgado’s poetry, *Blood of the Sun* also deals with resistance in a social, political and historical way. In this sense the present volume modulates an important facet of Salgado’s poetry since he first came into the literary scene as a participant of the

1978 anthology *Ebulição da Escrivatura: Treze Poetas Impossíveis*, published at the very moment when questions of race and gender began to be more openly discussed in Brazil, while the country embarked on a path to full redemocratization, the gradual, ten-year-long process known as the *Abertura*. Salgado’s universal humanism by no means whitewashes the poet’s concrete situation as an Afro-Brazilian man. Racial and historical issues are not marginal concerns but, instead, constitute an intrinsic element of his poetry and worldview. In fact, in the long first poem of the collection, entitled “Blood of the Sun (Flat Lands) [“Sol Sanguíneo (Terra Chã)”], a *summa* of the themes that will be developed in the volume, the poet boldly states that “my home is my skin” (“minha terra é minha pele”), and proceeds to evoke the history of subjugation and discrimination to which he is inescapably linked:

Das rinhas	From cockfights
em que o sal	in which salt
dá músculos à água	gives waterer muscles
vieram o sol –	Comes the sun –
e o azeviche	and the blackest black
conjugado à carne;	mated to the flesh;
e vieram moendas de açúcar	and mills for grinding sugar cane
e súplica;	and men in supplication;
e vieram demandas de açoite e séculos	and impositions of the whip
a desatar fonemas	and centuries
à fervura.	untangling phonemes
	to add to the boil.
A mim que cingiram caminhos	To me with whom they sailed their way
ao mar	to the sea of
de Antilhas laceradas.	Antilles, lacerated.

Being Black is an unavoidable mark of distinction, understood here as difference but also as a badge of honor. In “Deepest Black”, [“Tinta Forte”] the poet combines a poignant lament for the historical oppression of people of African descent with defiant pride in their African heritage:

O magma da raça	The magma of the race
infenso	hostile
ao mangue	to the marshy shack
transluz	erupts
da canga	from the brute
bruta:	yoke:
lavas de sol	lava of primeval
primal	sun
<i>renga</i> de tambor	<i>renga</i> of the tribal
tribal	drum
cateretê	<i>cateretê</i>
babá.	<i>babá.</i>
Árduo de transe	Ardent in trance
e (extrema)	and the (endless)
espera	wait
desespero	desperate
num <i>rap</i> réptil	in a reptile rap
num latir	the in can
de latas	yap
reino	I reign
à flor da pele	on the surface of my flesh
da tinta forte	of depest black
em que me negam.	which they deny.

Nevertheless, his personal history as a Black man is inseparable from his larger concern that any inhumane action detracts from our collective humanity and diminishes us all as human beings. There are other examples in the volume: the strong feelings of disgust and fear evoked by the drawing of a swastika on a wall in the poem ironically titled “Mural”; the jeremiad for the genocide of indigenous people in “Yanomami”; the dirge for pre-Columbian culture in “Ornaments for an Eclipse” [“Adereços para um Eclipse”].

Influenced by *Zen* Buddhism, Salgado’s poetry conveys a calm acceptance of the paradoxes of being human, as revealed, among others, in *Rage* [“Fero”]: “Nothing ransoms me. / Am I the one who dies / or the one who kills?” [“Nada me resgata / Não sei se sou

quem morre / ou quem me mata.”]; or in “Limítrofe 7” / “Boundary 7”: “Before what suffers / and what sleeps / just dust / and reticence” [“Ante o que dói / e o que dorme / apenas pó / e reticências”]; or in “Coda”: “In the solitude of being without belonging / only the impermanent endures” [“No ermo de ter-se sem se pertencer / só o impermanente permanece”]. In Salgado’s view, even if the raw material of poetry is transience and impermanence, from fleeting time to our mortal bodies, combined with the pervasiveness of suffering, loss and cruelty, embodied in such images as *magma*, *lava* and *mud* [*magma*, *lavas* and *lama*], the aesthetic experience, defying all odds, can bring us at least to a more lucid and generous understanding of our common humanity. It is in this sense that art becomes a “Zen weapon” (or “Zenarm” in Levitin’s translation), and the poem may metamorphose into an “Origami Tiger”. For, ultimately, poetry’s main achievement is to bring us back home to the origins of the word, and as such, to our own origins as human beings. Pleading guilty to my inability to express these thoughts as eloquently or poignantly as Salgado Maranhão, I finish, therefore, with the poet’s own words:

Voltar ao desolado abrigo da terra chã.	To return to the desolate shelter of the flat lands.
Voltar aos limítrofes da palavra (larva fulminante e alarde) que assiste da despensa ao rapto da existência.	To return to the borders of the word (lava ravenous, a repressed roar) that witnesses from the pantry the raping of existence.
Voltar ao solo atávico onde os loucos riem-se à sombra da neblina.	To return to the atavistic soil where madmen laugh in the shadows of the mist.
E – bardo – romper a borda, rasgar o hímen da linguagem que capta	And – the bard – to break the border, tear the hymen of language that traps

em sua teia,
os inquilinos do assombro.

O que move a lenda é
o fulgurar do incêndio,
o raio invicto
a fecundar a pedra.

Falo do que se inscreve
no inabordável
como a lua no lago
alada.

Falo do que falam
caninos num tempo de *crotalus*.

Voltar ao fulminante alarde
da palavra.

in its web
the tenants of astonishment.

What moves the legend
is the fire's blaze,
the undefeated ray
fertilizing the stone.

I tell of what is inscribed
on the unapproachable
like the moon flying
with the lake.

I tell of what the canines
Tell in the time of *crotalus*.

To return to the ravenmous
roar of the word.

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NOTES

¹ Although the Portuguese word “vertigem” literally means “vertigo” or “dizziness,” the poets’ use of “vertigem” recalls John Donne’s (1572-1631) concept of “ecstasy” in the sense of a communion at a deeper level of what is superficially separate: “This ecstasy doth unperplex / (We said) and tell us what we love; / We see by this, it was not sex; / We see, we saw not, what did move: / But as all several souls contain / Mixture of things they know not what, / Love these mix'd souls doth mix again, / And makes both one, each this, and that.” Thanks to Alexis Levitin for assistance with the translation of this excerpt from “The Uncommandments.”

² Ihab Hassan’s description of what he has named “the literature of silence” is pertinent here: “Literature, turning against itself, aspires to silence, leaving us with uneasy intimations of outrage and apocalypse” (Hassan 1967: 3).

³ In “the Apollonian dream state . . . the daylight is veiled and a new world—clearer, more comprehensible, more affecting than the first, and at the same time more shadowy—falls upon the eye in ever changing shapes” (Nietzsche 1956: 58).