



The Poet and His Translator: An Interview with Salgado Maranhão and Alexis Levitin

By Michael Scott Doyle¹ with Cassidy Schenley²

Salgado Maranhão is one of Brazil's leading contemporary poets. His collected poems, *A Cor da Palavra (The Color of the Word)*, won Brazil's highest award, the Prêmio de Poesia da Academia Brasileira de Letras, for the year 2011. An earlier collection, *Mural de Ventos (Mural of Winds)*, won the prestigious Prêmio Jabuti in 1999. In addition to nine books of poetry, including *Punhos da Serpente (The Snake's Fists)*, *O Beijo da Fera (The Kiss of the Beast)*, and the recent *A Pelagem da Tigra (Tiger's Fur)*, he has written song lyrics and made recordings with some of Brazil's leading jazz and pop musicians.

Dr. Alexis Levitin, a Distinguished Professor of English at SUNY-Plattsburgh, has published 32 books in translation, among them Clarice Lispector's *Soulstorm* (New Directions), *Carioca Invitation* by Sandra Lopes (Escrita Fina Edições, 2010), and *Forbidden Words: The Selected Poems of Eugenio de Andrade* (New Directions), as well as translations in over two hundred literary magazines. His translation of Salgado Maranhão's *Blood of the Sun* was published by Milkweed Editions in 2012. It is Maranhão's first book to appear in English translation.³

The interview was conducted by Dr. Michael Scott Doyle (MSD) at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte on October 11, 2012, where Salgado Maranhão (SM) and Alexis Levitin (AL) gave a bi-lingual reading from *Blood of the Sun*. It was conducted in English and Dr. Levitin, Salgado Maranhão's literary translator, doubled as the Brazilian poet's interpreter during the unscripted interview, which was the looser, more spontaneous format preferred by

both poet and translator. About this particular collection of poems, *Blood of the Sun*, Luiz Fernando Valente, Professor of Portuguese and Brazilian Studies and Comparative Literature at Brown University, writes in the volume's Afterword that "The publication of *Blood of the Sun* (*Sol Sangüíneo*) 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" (147). Renowned translator Gregory Rabassa celebrates the slender volume as well, quoted on the book's jacket as follows: "In *Blood of the Sun*, Alexis Levitin has given us a perfect English rendering of Salgado Maranhão's deft expression of the tonality of this people and land [Brazil's northeast]."

MSD: Do you believe that poetry can *really* be translated?

SM: Yes, it is possible. Poetry is a kind of language open to various interpretations. Poetry is difficult even in the very language in which it is written. In fact, even in the native tongue in which it is written there is a question of interpretation—what is the poem really about—because poetry doesn't make use of the overworked commonplaces of our daily discourse. It uses a kind of sublimated language, or perhaps we could say a language that is *above* the quotidian. So, the result is that poetry makes itself available for various interpretations within its own language and also within the translated language. The richer the poetry, the more variable the interpretations, including the translated interpretation. Consider how many translations we have of Homer now in the 20th century. Poetry is very flexible. It is a little bit like water. When it is cold, water becomes ice; when it is warm, water flows; when it is hot, water evaporates. It adapts to its environment. Poetry is something like that. The biggest problem in translation is if the translator doesn't enter into the spirit of the original poem. Then, of course, the translation is prevented from conveying that spirit.

MSD: A poet like Neruda will emphasize the sound, the music, that a translation should retain.⁴

SM: I agree with Neruda. I grew up in a tradition where there was a lot of musical poetry. Some of it was set to music, some was accompanied by instruments, some was not. But musicality was an essential part of this tradition. And, I should say, of my poetry.

AL: I can assure you that, as his translator, musicality is central and that in fact when we work together we're almost always discussing the music of the two languages.

SM: For me the most important thing is the mellifluousness, the harmonic flow of my language as it is transferred or carried over into the foreign language. In this sense I have been very fortunate to have Mr. Levitin as my translator. We agree firmly with respect to the importance of sound and musicality in poetry. For me poetry consists basically of sound, rhythm, and image.

MSD: What makes the sound and the rhythm happen is the silence.

SM: You're absolutely right, because silence is the companion to sound, just as white empty space is the companion to colors. For sound and rhythm to function, and to create a beautiful weave, they always have to be in some sort of relationship to silence. The text cannot be too over-rich, too over-burdened with sound, because then it will trip over itself, you could say. It also cannot be too empty, too filled with silence, because then understanding will again be interfered with in the opposite direction. So, in fact, silence is an essential concomitant or companion to the word, as is white space to color, let us say in painting. We can think of the written text of poetry as the realm in which the word reaches its maximum potential or possibility. So in a way, poetry is a text of seduction that is trying to lead you beyond itself.

MSD: Like an ecology of seduction, in a sense self-contained, but reaching out beyond itself to draw you into its own ecosystem.

SM: We don't know exactly how a poem becomes marvelous, but if you show me a marvelous poem, I will applaud it. We do not know exactly how we want to be seduced by a poem, but we *want* to be seduced by a poem. Newness isn't born from nothing; it is born when it actually

appears. Theory disappears when you have the moment of epiphany, when the beauty of the poem simply reveals itself.

MSD: So what kind of pressure does this place on you as Salgado Maranhão's translator? You know each other very well, you know his psychology of seduction, which is a kind of methodology for making poetry. Do you share this psychology, do you think in the same or similar ways?

AL: Yes, we think in similar ways. In fact, when poetry is *not* a weave of sounds and music, I'm not very interested in it. Poetry purely of ideas generally doesn't interest me. So both of us are firmly linked by our love of the sound of poetry. When we work together, we both listen to the poem in Portuguese and to the translation in English. And, if you go through this book, *Blood of the Sun*, you probably will find a number of places where the translation may not be true to the literal lexical meaning of the original, but I hope you won't find too many places where the music of the original is totally abandoned and lost. I have striven to retain a music in the English. This is created both by alliteration, assonance, slant rhyme, internal rhyme, end rhyme, but also by a constant attentiveness to rhythm. Let's say *rhythm* rather than *meter*. I think that all my translations are marked by an attentiveness to the need of rhythm. I think without rhythm you don't really have poetry, and Salgado feels exactly the same way about that.

MSD: Can you give us a sense of how you collaborate when you work together? Since English is not Salgado's native language, what type of feedback or input or veto power exists, if any? *How do you work together?*

SM: To begin with, we translated *Blood of the Sun* word by word and verse by verse. It is true, I don't know the English language but I know the language of poetry, the music of verse, the music of poetry.

AL: And that's what he listens for in my translations.

SM: When I'm writing a poem, I read it aloud to myself or recite it to myself at least a hundred times. That's how I learn some of my poems by heart, just by reciting them again and again. So

even though I don't speak the foreign language, I think that I can feel the rhythmic success of the poem in the target language because of my musical sensibility.

AL: As for myself, it is a lot of fun for me to try to create a weave of sounds that in its totality is as effective as the weave of sounds in the original. However, it can never be an identical weave of sounds. The tapestry of the English poem can never be identical to the tapestry of the original poem in Portuguese. Sometimes I think that what I am is a transposer of music from one instrument to another.

MSD: What is Salgado's initiating instrument in *Blood of the Sun*, and what is your answering instrument?

AL: His instrument, of course, is Portuguese, mine is English. In depth, I think vowels are very, very powerful in Portuguese and these are less readily available to the English language translator because any vowel in an unaccented position in English becomes a schwa, which is not a very interesting sound. However, what is really available in English is alliteration. Alliteration and consonance are very easy to work with in English. So, I have to say that when I am unable to retain the assonantal effects of the original, I very often fall back upon on what is easier in English: an alliterative effect.

MSD: Is there a danger of "overcooking" this alliterative effect when you're translating, that it might lend itself too readily as a solution?

AL: That's a great question. I think there's a danger of overcooking the translation just as there is the danger of overcooking the original for the poet. In fact, I think that your question is a perfect question to ask any artist in any realm: painting, dance, music. Because the artist probably is dancing along the edge of a precipice, and if he dances too far he falls over the edge.

MSD: Do you then rein in that alliterative effect during the oral readings you do as you translate, when you hear yourself and what is emerging?

AL: I don't rein it in, on the contrary, I tend to emphasize it. If there is a reining in, it is simply that I give the words and the sounds a little space to breathe.

MSD: That silence again. . .

AL: Absolutely. In a reading, one of the most important factors is the pause. And I have to say, I think I pause more than Salgado does. I don't control his reading, but I control my own. I make a lot more space, a lot more silence around the words.

MSD: Can you give us a sense of this, an example of replicating pauses?

AL: Salgado enjoys *hearing* my translation of his poem *Ecstasy*, but he feels that the pleasure he is taking is actually in hearing somebody else's poem. That's kind of interesting. I would say in response that any translator who claims that translation can be objective is lying, or is disingenuous.

MSD: Objective in the sense of "exact"?

AL: That's right. There is no objective way. No, even in intention, there is no way to be an objective translator of poetry because the translator is an interpreter, not like an interpreter at the United Nations, rather an interpreter who reads something and has a personal reaction to it. With the personal reaction, the living poem in English isn't an objective translation, it's your subjective response to the poem *you* read, *you* heard, and *you* loved. I can give you examples of how the English language poem inevitably introduces elements that could not have been in the original, and yet those elements I think function very well in the English. For example, in one poem I end the poem with a rhyme that I have borrowed directly from Blake's poem *The Tyger*. And that rhyme, which seals one of Salgado's poems in English, that rhyme that every English language speaker knows, is not there in the original. But the tiger is there in the original.

MSD: And the verse is?

AL: It is in a poem [Tigre de Origami / Origami Tiger] about how important paper is to Salgado, because he still writes poems on paper, and this is a poem taking some vengeance on the world of computers. I will read the last part of the poem:

And if the modern monitor
denounces paper as a dinosaur

the blank page—in its nullity—
spells out silence in proximity

to chaos. And fire cannot scatter,
nor can water splatter

to prevent it turning to a bright
origami tiger in the night. (129)

Now for the American or English reader, that rhyme of “bright” and “night” leads them right back to Blake. In the original poem there was no Blake, but there was the importance of the origami tiger, which is for Salgado, in a whimsical way, a little bit of salvation for paper. It can become something creative as opposed to the monitor, the screen of your computer which is condemning paper to be a dinosaur, to be something from the past.

MSD: What you have just illustrated is how you as a translator of poetry enlist literary convention, or what is already there through precedent, as part of your method. Does Salgado do the same in Portuguese when he’s writing? Is there a similar intertextual resonance at work? As he is transferring ownership of the poem through the translation to you, is this something new that you’re bringing, or something that you see and hear that he is already doing?

AL: From my point of view it’s something new that I’m bringing to the poem and that I find inevitable because poets like Emily Dickinson, Shakespeare, and Blake are part of my heritage and part of my life and part of *me*.

MSD: Would Salgado agree with you? Does he similarly draw from his own conventions and tradition?

SM: I lived in a little part of Brazil that was practically medieval. The language of the people around me, my family, my extended family, and even the ellipses, the things that were left out, the silences in the languages, no doubt entered into my poetry and became part of it.

AL: He also feels connected somehow to the verse of poets that came from the Baroque because the language spoken around him in his youth wasn't exactly today's modern urban Brazilian tongue. He lived in a Baroque era of reality, in a little section of Brazil.⁵

MSD: Earlier, we alluded to ownership. The poem starts by belonging to the poet, and Salgado has said is that he has no trouble relinquishing ownership to the translator. Did I misunderstand that?

AL: Wonderful question! The moment a poet produces a poem it no longer belongs to him. I hope you remember that in his poem *The Death of William Butler Yeats*, as soon as Yeats was dead, Auden says "the words of a dead man are modified in the guts of the living."

MSD: But if Salgado is monitoring your translation, he has not completely relinquished, or he is unwilling to relinquish, his ownership.

SM: Poems are like children. They are ours, but they also belong to the world. Sitting side-by-side with my translator as he translates the poem is accompanying my child as the child is making its way into the world. I am helping to prepare my child to be in its best possible relationship with others. I'd like my child to be well dressed, with the best words in English, so that he can make a good presentation of himself when his hour arrives.

MSD: So he's preparing the poem for independence?

AL: He's preparing the poem for... exactly.

SM: If you keep your child permanently at home he can never grow up, he can never have any exchange with other people. Birds are born to fly, children are born to have their own destiny. You have to be willing to open the poem so that others can have an exchange with the poem. What translation does is bring the poem to a position where it is both ours, belonging to the original writer, and also something for others.

MSD: A shared ownership.

AL: I wanted to return to sound and alliterative effect with an example of how important the “ah” sound is in “*Voltar aos limitrofes da palavara / (larva fulminante / e alarde)*” (verses 4-6 of “*Sol Sangüíneo,*” 2]. That’s a lot of “ah,” “ah,” “ah.” If I can get it, I will try. If I cannot, I’ll try to find something else to compensate. For instance, in the English I replaced a lot of the “l” sounds with r’s. I instead have: “To return to the borders / of the word (larva ravenous, / a repressed roar” (verses 4-6 of “*Blood of the Sun,*” 3). Return, border, word, larva, ravenous, repressed, roar. You have ten r’s in only thirteen words, so I have a weave of sounds holding it together. But, it isn’t exactly the “l,” it’s the related “r,” the other liquid sound.

MSD: John Felstiner might say that what you have just described is where literary translation resides. In other words, that translation occurs in the space of difference between two languages such as Portuguese and English, it is where the translator works, compensates in the space of that difference.

AL: First of all, I was asked many years ago to write an article on my theory of translation, and in that piece called *Apologia of a Translator*, I argued that I don’t believe in theory, I believe in practice. And then I wrote that if I have to come up with a word that is theoretical, that word would be *compensation*. That article was published more than twenty years ago. In any case, I would completely agree with him that compensation is the name of the game, if what we mean by compensation is in the end to give equal value. Equal value emotionally, musically. I mean, the real question is how does poetry work? That’s the real question.

MSD: You’re talking in a sense about the coin of the realm, “in equal value.” There are different realms to consider.

AL: Exactly, but what is the coin of the realm of poetry? Not of Portuguese and English as language, but of poetry itself? And that’s not easy to answer. I think it is more emotional than intellectual. Poetry is more related to listening to a Schubert quartet than it is to reading *The New York Times*. And some people might say that’s absurd, poetry and *The New York Times* both consist of words. And I would say no, poetry and Schubert both consist of music. It is the

music that moves us in poetry, more importantly than the idea. And of course images are part of all this and I try to capture the images as well. The question is with what sounds are those images accompanied? With what sounds are those images conveyed? That is what I like to emphasize. I always try to tell my students how important sound is by giving them one word in English: "ooze." It's interesting that the word "ooze" takes two or three times longer to say than the words stab, kick, stick, hit, prick, and all those other plosive words. They're all one syllable, but that one syllable of "ooze" is like blood slowly trickling under a door and oozing into the next room. The very feeling of what ooze is, is conveyed by that verb. I think language is much more onomatopoeic than most people acknowledge.

MSD: In compensating your way through *Blood of the Sun*— "poems brilliantly textured and layered," integrating "socio-political thought with subjects abstractly metaphysical," "a collection varied as well as unified, an aesthetic at once traditional and postmodern (...)" in forms both fixed and free"⁶—what were your most salient challenges?

AL: The fixed form in a way is easier for me because if Salgado has rhymes, rhymed couplets, I feel obliged to have them as well. I already know where I stand, what I have to strive for. If he has free form, that freedom is a greater challenge for me because I have to ask myself, "what exactly am I trying to do with the freedom?" And most of the time what I try to do is create a weave of sounds *and* rhythm that are satisfying in English. I want my poem to be alive in English, and if it is not alive in English, it is a dead poem, even if every word is correct in the dictionary. The greatest challenge for me personally, and I feel I have not overcome this challenge, is that Salgado includes and mixes a great deal of abstract terminology in his poetry. When he is using sharp images, I feel at home and I feel safe and I know what I want to do. Conceptual terms trouble me. I think that they are more evasive in English than in a Latin-based language. Most conceptual terms are Latin-based, and English is a down-to-Earth, Anglo-Saxon language. When we start using Latinate words, we start getting distanced from the hard reality, *madeira, terra, água, sol, vento*. I'm as at home with these as is he, but when he has large polysyllabic conceptual words, I feel obliged to translate them, but I start to get nervous.

MSD: Does an example come to mind?

AL: Yes. "My home is the name / that blossoms the indomitable" (verses 1-2, "Blood of the Sun: 2," 7). I like "my home is the name" and I like "blossoms," but I really am not happy with the "indomitable." But I hope that my readers will be happy. It is what he wrote. "*Minha terra é o nome / que desabotoa o indomável*" (verses 1-2, "Sol Sangüíneo," 6). That's what he wrote. But I'm less happy with the "indomitable" than he is. I just think there is a vagueness in that word in English because all of these polysyllabic Latinate words are kind of distant from our daily life of monosyllabic things—skin, blood, eyes, nose, mouth—everything that's important in our existential, not philosophical, existence. They're almost all monosyllabic in English. Water is one of the very few words that isn't. I have to admit, by the way, that I did not translate it as "My home is the name / that unbuttons the indomitable." That would sound ludicrous in English. But it is indeed what he wrote. When he says "*Minha terra é minha pele*" (verse 29, "Sol Sangüíneo," 6), I have no problem with the English. "My home is my skin." The only problem is should I say that "my home is my flesh"? But because he is an Afro-Brazilian poet, and he is aware that he is Afro-Brazilian, I thought that the correct translation was "my home is my skin," since the word *pele* is, after all, skin.

MSD: "Flesh" and "skin" are different anatomically.

SM: Yes and no. I have behind me a story that identifies me wherever I go, even if I have no home, and that is my skin, my phenotype. You cannot get away from that. Whether I am an African or North American or a Brazilian, I have an identity that is always with me. In any case, I am black.

MSD: Is this identity present throughout your poetry? Is this a signature of yours?

SM: Only now and then, and depending on the circumstance of the poem. In this particular poem ["Sol Sangüíneo"], I'm looking back at my past and my historical past, and trying to ransom from it things of value through the word. Inevitably, my skin enters into this poem as part of my identity and part of how I am, in a way, saving myself.

AL: He's not saying it's a signature in all his poems, it appears in several of them. But even in this poem, what he wants to say is that the poem isn't just about being black, the poem is about discovering language. For him, language is really important and helps you to create an identity for yourself. Obviously, this signature of being black is inseparable from his life, his identity.

MSD: **But your translator is not black.**

SM: Yes, of course, but he entered, he dove in toward, or immersed himself in that aspect of my being.

AL: Your question is a great provocation. Constance Garnett translated all of Tolstoy, most of Dostoyevsky, and she never was a man. Do we ever say about Constance Garnett, "How could she possibly translate Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky since she wasn't a man?" Nobody says that. Yet, when I translated Clarice Lispector, and came to campuses right here in North Carolina (Greensboro) twenty, thirty years ago, a student demanded: "What right do you have to translate Clarice Lispector? You're not a woman." So these are interesting philosophical and political questions.

MSD: **Final question: How do you, Salgado Maranhão, weigh or view the importance of having your poetry, *Blood of the Sun*, now available in English? What does that mean to you as a poet?**

SM: It means a lot to me. Especially to have arrived into the English language in the best manner possible. Of course English is a great language of translation. In a certain sense, I feel related to English poetry to begin with because of the rigor of my poetic language and approach. So to find myself translated into English is actually a way to find myself back home, at least back home to one of my reference points. One of the first poets who showed me the importance of the word, in English poetry, was Ezra Pound. Then I moved on to reading Wallace Stevens, who also had a great effect on me. And of course I read and enjoyed Allen Ginsberg and others, as well as the great poets Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman.

MSD: And now *Blood of the Sun* is available in American English, in the words of Alexis Levitin.

SM: It is an incomparable honor.

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² **Mr. Cassidy SCHENLEY** is a graduate student in the Translating and Translation Studies track of the Master of Arts in Spanish at the University of North Carolina. He transcribed the interview for editing by Dr. Michael Scott Doyle, who then invited Dr. Levitin to make final modifications. This final product is the result of five draft revisions.

² This introductory information is taken from the publicity material provided by Alexis Levitin for his October 11, 2012 visit to UNC Charlotte.

³ This introductory information is taken from the publicity material provided by Alexis Levitin for his October 11, 2012 visit to UNC Charlotte.

⁴ In *Translating Neruda*, John Felstiner writes that "Neruda laments the loss in translation of the very thing that makes him love to write: a poem's blend of sounds and rhythms, of tones and overtones" (26). Neruda himself emphasizes this when, "At one point during his last days, [he] talked with a guest about Lithuanian translations of his poetry, saying that 'The rhythm is all right. . . . For a poet, that's what counts'" (29-30).

⁵ In his Afterword, Luiz Fernando Valente writes of Maranhão's "dialoguing with the best in the Luso-Brazilian poetic canon—Camões, Pessoa, Drummond, Cabral, and Faustino" (147).

⁶ Description quoted from http://books.google.com/books/about/Blood_of_the_Sun.html?id=pxDkqxF-HYC.