

MURILO MENDES: FEW POEMS IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION[✓]

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[✓] Artigo recebido em 30 de março de 2017 e aprovado em 21 de abril de 2017.

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**MURILO MENDES:
FEW POEMS IN ENGLISH
TRANSLATION****ABSTRACT**

This article examines the translations of the poems of Murilo Mendes into English, published in books and filed on homepages of the internet. . It shows that there are only two of his many poems actually published in a book edited by Elizabeth Bishop, as well as one other poem published by Downes in 1954. The poems are "Horses" and "Map" in the book of Bishop and "I giver alms" in the little book of Downes. It also shows that they are three homepages that publish some of poems of Murilo Mendes in English: that of Antonio Miranda, with 16 poems of Murilo, including the two published by Bishop. There is also 105 poems published by a student, it would seem who calls himself, Berkeley, Neo-Baroque Gang of One. Finally on a homepage called PoemHunter; there are 14 poems of Murilo in English, all copied without acknowledgement from the previous two home pages

Keywords: Murilo Mendes. English translation.

**MURILO MENDES:
POUCOS POEMAS EM TRADUÇÕES
PARA O INGLÊS****ABSTRACT**

Este artigo examina as traduções dos poemas de Murilo Mendes para o inglês, publicados em livros e arquivados em homepages da internet.. Mostra que há somente dois de seus muitos poemas publicados realmente em um livro editado por Elizabeth Bishop, assim como um outro poema publicado por Downes em 1954. Os poemas são "Cavalos" e "Mapa" no livro de Bishop e "Eu dou esmolas" no pequeno livro de Downes. Mostra também que são três homepages que publicam alguns dos poemas de Murilo Mendes em inglês: o de Antonio Miranda, com 16 poemas de Murilo, incluindo os dois publicados por Bishop. Há também 105 poemas publicados por um aluno. Finalmente em uma homepage chamada PoemHunter; há 14 poemas de Murilo em inglês, todos copiados sem agradecimento das duas páginas anteriores.

Palavras-chave: Murilo Mendes. Tradução do inglês.

1 INTRODUCTION

Murilo Mendes like most of the great Modern Brazilian poets has been rather neglected when it comes to translations into English. He has been very well taken care of in Italian translation but he did live there for much of his life and he was an important cultural magnet in the city of Rome for many years. I looked at the translation of Carlos Drummond de Andrade into English on a previous occasion and found that there were only about a dozen poems published in English translation. But since that paper, it has been announced that an American publishing house in New York has commissioned the translation of all his poetry by the renowned American translator Richard Zenith, translator of the poetry of Fernando Pessoa. He has been working in Lisbon for about fifteen years after having working both in Brazil and Columbia in Latin America previously. His translation of Pessoa received the Pessoa Award in 2012. The book of translations of Drummond was published this year a little later than promised and was called **Multitudinous heart** by Farrar Straus & Girous with 432 pages and it is a bilingual anthology of 80 poems of Drummond. Unfortunately, the situation of the translations of Murilo Mendes continues unchanged. The aim of this page is to outline in detail the sad reality.

There was a small book of 84 pages published in 1954 by Leonard S. Downes by the Clube da Poesia of São Paulo entitled **An introduction to modern Brazilian poetry**. The index shows us that the authors selected to the book are still the recognized poets of the twentieth century. It includes Joaquim Cardozo, Henriqueta Lisboa, Vinícius de Moraes, Edgard Braz, Oswaldo de Andrade, Mura Mota, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Augusto Frederico Schmidt as well as Murilo Mendes. Since 1954 the perception of important names in modern Brazilian poetry has changed slightly and so some names might not be included this type of anthology in our twenty first-century. But Murilo Mendes was included and would be included at the present day.

The author is rather an elusive figure. He was working in Brazil as the British Council figure directing the Cultura Inglesa of São Paulo. He came to Brazil from Portugal where he was working for the same British Council after finishing his studies

in Modern Languages in the University of Glasgow. He published his book in São Paulo while working in the Cultura. He may have remained in Brazil but not as the British Council man in the big language organization because in 1984 a little book of his called **Palavras-amigas da onça: a vocabulary of false friends in English** was published by Ao Livro Técnico Publishing House and it is still available in a few booksellers and generously in Brazilian sebos (second hand bookshops). Searches on internet using google, yahoo and other search softwares produce no information on the writer. A copy of the book of Brazilian poetry was acquired via Amazon. The book gives little information on the translator of Brazilian poetry, but it does have a very interesting preface on the situation of Portuguese translation of modern Brazilian poetry into English.

2 EXISTING TRANSLATIONS OF THE POEMS OF MURILO MENDES

The anthology contains poems of fifty different poets of the Modernist movement and ten of the poets have two poems translated, and the rest only one. The texts chosen are short ones and most of them are contained in one page of the book. The date of birth is used to order the writers and based on this criterion, Murilo Mendes is number 18.

The poem translated is entitled “I give alms” and it has just 9 lines. Careful research does not locate this poem in the final edition of **Murilo Mendes: poesia completa e prosa** edited by the Nova Aguilar Publishers in 1995.

The translation reads well:

I give Thee alms of all that I have suffered
Since I was born.
I give Thee alms of all my humiliations
Of pride vanquished and aspirations vain.
I give Thee alms of my unused desire for righteousness
Of all the ill that I have done because Thou did'st permit.
I give Thee alms of all that poetry which overflowed my poems
Of all the lives that move me by their misery and wrong.
I give Thee alms of my own life which I accept but as a burden.

The fact that he uses the capital letter for Thou is a sign that the poem is a type of prayer to God and it is very ironical in the types of alms that he offers. There are no rhymes in the original probably since the translation does not have any. There is also a great liberty in the number of syllables in each line, again probably following the original.

But Leonard S Downes makes several interesting points in the five and a half pages of his Preface. He states clearly in the first sentence the stark reality: "Brazilian poetry is as unknown outside its country of origin as if it were written in an obscure African dialect transmitted orally". (DOWNES, 1954, p. 9).

Downes defends his decision to offer a collection of 60 poems in an anthology rather than offering a critical study on Brazilian Modernism.

He hopes that his introduction will help to extend an increased interest into the domain of poetry. It may be doubted whether that objective can best be achieved by an anthology in translation, but at least, as opposed to the critical essay. Downes states: "it does give the reader a chance of judging for himself whether he would like to follow up the introduction". (DOWNES, 1954, p. 9).

Downes points out that on the date of publication 1954: "plenty of poets writing in other Latin languages have achieved recognition in the English speaking world" (DOWNES, 1954, p. 9). He continues to try and find an explanation for this fact in the realities of Brazil and he finally opts for following reason: "Most Brazilian poets have to publish at their own expense and most of the small edition is given away to friends and colleagues". (DOWNES, 1954, p. 9).

It would seem that the situation has changed slightly in modern times and not all the books of poetry are produced in this way. With the great number of university courses in Brazilian Literature, there is now a reasonable market for books of poetry which the professors demand that the university students should read. The National entrance exam to Federal and most State Universities also increase the demand. But poets who have not made a reputation that suffices to be included in these types of preparation and poets are still in the phase of publishing at their own expenses their books of poetry and still distribute them among friends. Sales via Amazon and other giant booksellers in the exterior are, it would seem, still nonexistent.

Despite the limitations of the little book of Downes, it was extremely important in the history of anthologies of Brazilian twentieth century published in English and in the case of Murilo Mendes, it would seem to have been the first time that Murilo Mendes had a poem published in English translation.

Elizabeth Bishop published in 1972, eighteen years later, her book **An anthology of twentieth-century Brazilian poetry** and offered translations of the poetry of fourteen Brazilian poets of the century. Elizabeth Bishop, who came down to Brazil for a quick visit of a few weeks on a boat trip up in the Amazon river and then down to São Paulo, stayed much more than initially planned and became an important figure, after her traumatic return to the USA, which was not a disaster, in projecting Brazil and Brazilian writers in the USA. In her book, she dedicated sixty pages of her 181 pages to João Cabral de Melo Neto. She did include two poems of Murilo Mendes but both of them end their entry with recognition that the translation of these two poems, **Map** and **Horses** were not by Bishop herself, but by W. S. Merwin. He in fact was a distinguished American poet and received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1971 for his book **The carriers of ladders**. He is also a distinguished translator, having translated not only from Spanish but also French, besides his translation from the Portuguese. The works of Merwin include **The poem of the Cid**, **Lazarillo de Tormes**, **The song of Roland** and well as **Voices** which are versions in English of the poems of Antonio Porchia and **Transparence of the world**, poems of Jean Follain. He is also responsible for some translations of other poets in the Anthology of Elizabeth Bishop.

The translations of Merwin of the two poems of Murilo Mendes deserve a special reading and it is indeed a translation worthy of a prominent writer of poetry of his own right into the English language. The first poem is "Horses":

Horses gallop over the vast plain.
Going where?
Going to look for the head of the Dauphin that is rolling down the stairs.
The spirited horses shake out their long blue manes.
One holds in his teeth the white dead actress he drew from the waters,
Others carry the wind's message to vanished explorers,
Others carry wheat to peoples abandoned by their leaders.
The lean blue horses whinny toward the airplane,
Pound the hard earth with their shining hooves.
They are the last of an old race, man's companion.

He will replace them with mechanical horses
And throw them into the abyss of history.
The impatient blue horses have closed off the curve of the horizon,
Wakening trumpets in the dawn.

The music of the poem is excellent and it reads in the same fluent way as the original. There are no rhymes in the original and this is also respected, probably with relief. One might question the word “plain” translating “campina deserta”. But those words refer to a special geographical reality of Brazil and there is probably no better word than the word “plain” to translate it. The “spirited horses” to translate “cavalos nervosos” though is questionable. Spirited normally refers to a constant in the behavior of the horses involved whereas “nervoso” is a more momentary situation. “Desaparecidos” has a wider meaning in Portuguese of Brazil and has connotations of those who vanish because of military or police violence. But it would be hard to find a better word than “vanished”, which refers more to the fact that they are no longer visible. “Fecham” translated as “closed off” is adequate for the text.

The translation used by Elizabeth Bishop in her **Anthology** is therefore excellent in quality.

The second poem is “Mapa” and the translation is the following:

They glued me into time, they dressed me up
In a live soul and a body in pieces. I am
Bounded on the north by the senses, on the south
On the east by St. Paul the apostle, by my education on the west.

This is an excellent translation of one of the finest Modernist poems of Murilo and except for the misplacing of “or what’s evil” on a separate line when it is on the same line as “what’s good” in the original, one must confess that the translation is faultless.

The importance of this anthology cannot be underestimated. In the 25th anniversary re-edition, recognition is given to the importance of the book in putting readers in the English language into touch with Brazilian poetry. Helen Vendler in the *New York Times Book Review* confirms this: “Brasil has long been discovered, but its spiritual cartography is only being begun and this anthology is a powerful atlas”. This is printed on the backcover. Just below this comment, there is another one from the

Library Journal, and it reinforces the importance of the book for English speaking readers.

The text states that the translated versions are uniformly excellent and the entire volume should stimulate exploration of one of the liveliest and most imaginative literary cultures of the Western Hemisphere. This is a very positive recognition of the importance of the anthology and it is splendid in its praise for Modernist poetry in Brazil.

There are three other sources of translations of Murilo Mendes that need to be examined. But there are no further sources from printed books. It seems that after the book of Elizabeth Bishop, nothing else has appeared in print.

The first of these sources is the homepage of Antonio Miranda. He informs us in some opening information of his homepage link that he was born in Maranhão in 1940, that he is a member of the National Writers Association and he has been at times a collaborator of the *Suplemento Dominical* of **Journal do Brasil** as well as two newspapers in Spanish, **La Nación** in Argentina and **Imagen** in Venezuela. Surprisingly, he is a professor and ex director of the Post Graduation studies in Computer Sciences in Brasilia and has given courses expensively in Brazil and other Latin American countries. He was also an organizer and the first Director of the National Library of Brasilia for four years. He has a doctorate in Communication Sciences from the University of São Paulo (USP) and a master's degree in Library Studies from Loughborough University of Technology in England.

His homepage offers 16 poems of Murilo Mendes in English translation. It also has other poems of Mendes in Portuguese without translations into English and it is important to say, there are translations into Spanish. His homepage also offers the same type of information on other poets from Brazil. Among the 16 poems in English of Murilo Mendes, the last three with the translations attributed to the people responsible for the translations. There is a translation of "Horses" by Merwin and so it is the same version as that offered by Elizabeth Bishop in her book. There is also "Dead men" by the poet from Belo Horizonte and one of the founders of the *Cultura Inglesa* in that city, Abgar Renault, with his version into English. There is also a translation entitled "Psalm" by Dudley Poore. The section of the homepage offering English translations ends with a picture of the book of Leonard S. Downes together

with the translation of “I give thee alms”. He tells us the original of the book is available in the National Library of Brasilia, where, of course, the owner of the homepage works and was director.

His homepage contains the following poems: Ussr, Final judgement of the eyes, Look, Timeless, Half bird, The culprit, The three circles, Spiritual poem, Poem seen from the outside, Destruction, anonimity, Gambling, Newest Prometheus, Horses, Dead man, Psalm, I give alms. Examining the quality of the translations of the first ten unattributed translations, one can see that they are more than adequate. Considering that Profesor Antonio is a Professor Emerito in the Federal University of Brasilia and the coordinador of the post graduation in Computer Studies, and also taking into consideration the fact that he did prolonged post graduate studies in the UK at Loughborough and has published books of poetry himself, one might be tempted to say that the translations might be of Antonio himself. Undoubtedly, this homepage does a real service to the memory of Murilo Mendes and one has to lament the fact the following two homepages do not have the precision, the honesty and the obvious dedication of this homepage of Miranda.

The final collections of poems of Murilo Mendes in English is found on quite a different type of homepage. But it remains a homepage and in modern times, especially for younger people, homepages are often consulted much more that books hard to find in local libraries. The book of Downes is long unavailable and that of Elizabeth Bishop is rather pricey and on sale from the Wesleyan University bookshop in the New England area of the USA.

The author of the homepage presents himself as *Berkeley, Neo-Baroque Gang of One* and has the date of March 14th 2006. The city where he says he resides (or is from) suggests a place of academic excellence but the name of the author of the homepage, Neo-Baroque Gang of One suggests a rebellious young man who found no collaborators to work with him on the homepage. He states at the end of the translation that: “Translation based on the critical edition by Luciana Stegnano Picchio, which is the best source possible. He also assures us that the translations are “under continual revision, augmentation and correction”. That is reassuring. He also tells us that “Reproduction rights granted upon request” which suggests his generosity and his aim of a cultural homepage without interest in profit.

We are told too that there has been “No blogger since September 2010” which is strange since the blog is in English and this message is in Portuguese. We are also told that there have been “359 visualizations” over the four years of its activity. The information is a little vague and it would be necessary to enter one of those pages which give full details of the traffic on homepages. But that takes time and a specialized knowhow.

What is surprising is that the homepage contains 105 poems translated into English and they are not placed side by side on the page with the original but they offer the titles in English as well as the translation. There are also 8 texts from the prose of the author. Therefore, it is by far the most substantial homepage with poems of Murilo Mendes in English and offers many more poems and prose texts of Mendes than anything else available.

The translations show a person with a sound knowledge of Portuguese and one who puts his translation into a style which we could call slightly less literary. This might cut him off from the literary quality of a book publication of renowned publishing houses of the translated poems of Downes and Merwin and also from those of the poems offered by Antonio Miranda. One has the feeling that he might have been an undergraduate studying Latin American literature and since the blog seems to have been active for only four years, it could have been a type of activity which was used to accompany studies in Brazilian and Latin American Literature.

A comparison of Berkeley Neo-Baroque’s translation of “Map” compared to that of Merwin is revealing. It looks like this side by side:

<p>Map</p> <p>I get glued into time, my living soul’s crammed into this clunky body. I’m limited to the north by my senses, to the south by my dread,</p>	<p>Map</p> <p>I get glued into time, my living soul’s crammed into this clunky body. I’m limited to the north by my senses, to the south by my dread,</p>
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to the east by St. Paul the Apostle, to the west
by my education.

There I was all nebulous, roiling away, a fluid,
and

then I become conscious of the earth, start
walking like everyone else

and get nailed to a cross in my one and only
life.

High school and rage. I get a number, can't
stand the hierarchy,

get a sign hung on me, Man, I start laughing,
walking, in fits and starts,

I dance, laugh and cry, I'm here and there, all
out of whack,

loving everybody and nobody, battling with
spirits of the air,

someone on earth waves me over, I don't
know

what's good or evil anymore.

My head's flying over the bay, I'm suspended
in ether, in anguish,

reeling with lives, smells, motions, thoughts,
and I don't believe in any technique.

I'm with my ancestors, teetering on Spanish
sand,

to the east by St. Paul the Apostle, to the
west by my education.

There I was all nebulous, roiling away, a
fluid, and

then I become conscious of the earth, start
walking like everyone else

and get nailed to a cross in my one and only
life.

Highschool and rage. I get a number, can't
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someone on earth waves me over, I don't
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what's good or evil anymore.

My head's flying over the bay, I'm
suspended in ether, in anguish,

reeling with lives, smells, motions, thoughts,
and I don't believe in any technique.

I'm with my ancestors, teetering on Spanish
sand,

<p>so sometimes I'll rush around in the street, fighting with imaginary characters, then go hang around with my crazy uncles, we're cracking up, in the farm in the country, watching sunflowers in the garden, I'm on the other side of the world, a hundred years from now, inciting populations..</p>	<p>so sometimes I'll rush around in the street, fighting with imaginary characters then go hang around with my crazy uncles, we're cracking up, in the farm in the country, watching sunflowers in the garden, I'm on the other side of the world, a hundred years from now, inciting populations...</p>
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When I first found the homepage of the blog, I was a little suspicious about the quality I would find. After all, a blog called “Chaos Window” written by a rebellious young man called “Berkeley Neo-Baroque Gang of One” might not suggest the highest quality. But as the above passage shows, the blogger understands perfectly the text of this wonderful poem of Murilo Mendes and translates it competently and the translation reads well and being without rhyme, it avoids the great difficulty often found by the translator. One remembers the translation of the text of Elizabeth Bishop “One art” rendered as “A arte de perder”. The poem of Bishop plays on the word disaster and the translator uses “não sério”. It kills dramatically the strength of the poem since the loss of Lota in her strange death after a flight from Brazil in New York in a hospital was an awful disaster for Elizabeth though the list of other losses so great were not accepted by the writer as disasters. But personally I thought long about the poetic situation and think of no way to keep in translation the idea of disaster because of the lack of adequate rhymes in the Portuguese language.

The blogger’s translation shows a perfect understanding of the meaning and the connotations of the original and keeps that absurdist nature of the text of the original. It is a very competent effort and from the start I was suspicious that maybe the writer was not an American as the name and place of the homepage suggests originally since the address of the blog has the br of Brazil in its internet address. Maybe he was a Brazilian doing post graduate studies there. Maybe? With the recent

information about the college maintained by a Brazilian billionaire who lives in Switzerland and makes his money out of beer, one might suggest another type of person behind the blogger. It could have been a post-graduation student doing advanced courses in California. But there again, it would be rare for a speaker of Portuguese working on a translation of Brazilian poetic texts into English.

Berkeley Neo-Baroque starts more colloquially with “I get glued into time” and the “live soul and a body in pieces” of Merwin becomes “crammed into this clunky body” which is not really what Mendes is saying, but it is in the language of the age group. In the text of Merwin, we find “There, I am in a nebula” whereas Neo-Baroque writes “There I was all nebulous, roiling away, a fluid”. The text is less literary but perhaps much more accessible to the undergraduates which the name of blogger would imply were his age group. But it certainly keeps much of the surprising element of the original in Portuguese. In general the tone of the translation of Neo-baroque is a little more colloquial but nonetheless competent.

It is interesting that while Merwin uses the word “voodoo” to translate “carjarês” of Mendes and the blogger’s translation keeps the word of the original. Perhaps for the American reader, voodoo would be more meaningful. “Brincam de cabra cega com a vida” becomes “play hide and seek with life” in the Merwin translation and in Neo-Baroque’s version, it is “play pin the tail on life”. Both might bridge the cultural gap equally well.

For completeness sake, it is necessary to mention a homepage called **Poemhunter** which contains 14 poems of Murilo Mendes together with many other poems of a vast ranch of poets. It is a sort of read a poem a day page and prefers it seems shorter poems. There is a good general presentation of the poet Murilo with a short biography and a full list of his works. There is a link at the bottom of all the pages “about us” and a form opens and reads “Sitemizle ilgili önerilerinizi bu form aracılığıyla bildirebilirsiniz”. I must confess that this is beyond my meagre recognition of foreign languages. The poems included are “USSR”, “Final judgment of the eyes”, “Look timeless”, “Half bird”, “The culprit”, “The three circles”, “Spiritual poem”, “Poema seen from the outside”, “Destruction”, “Anonymity”, “Two-edged sword”, “Gambling”, “Newest Prometheus”, and “Horses”. “Poema seen from the outside” is written this way on the homepage, as if “poema” was a proper name. It is also

necessary to point out that the poems were all imported from the homepage of Antonio Miranda on the same day and nowhere did I find any recognition of this fact. But not being well informed on copy right rules on the internet, I hesitate to fault them on the fact.

There is an acknowledging that “Horses” is a translation by Merwin. The others are without a name of the translator and end with the name of the writer Murilo Mendes. Undoubtedly, this type of page does help to promote the name of Murilo outside of Brazil and since it is all in English, it opens it up to an international audience. The page has a generous array of publicity on the two sides and while reading over the poems to Murilo, I was treated to the latest promotions of FAST and also Evangelical Dresses with the name in Portuguese. The address of the homepage page is also Brazilian, ending in br.

3. CONSIDERAÇÕES FINAIS

The general conclusion is that while Merwin’s translation is in an epoch making book which offered translations into English of some poems of the greatest writers of Brazilian modernism is also true that, because of its academic publishing background, it would be limited to an academic reading community. The same is true of the book of Downes and since it was published in São Paulo, it would have had even less penetration on the international level. The blog of Neo-Baroque would have a much larger reading public and possibly would have been more widely read and more efficient in spreading the word on the great poetry produced by this Brazilian modernist, Murilo Mendes, still very much unknown outside the national borders unfortunately. The homepage of Antonio Miranda is a much more professional online space produced by a very competent computer science genius and will help to spread news about Murilo Mendes and other Latin American writers to the outside world and it aims to do this without the help of annoying publicity to sustain it.

It is therefore urgent that a competent translation like the man behind the recently translated poems of Carlos Drummond de Andrade be found and a book

published by a printing house that has coverage, outlets and sales in the English speaking countries.

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