

Book Review

Leminski, Paulo. *All Poetry*. Translated by Charles A. Perrone and Ivan Justen Santana, New London Librarium, 2022.

Brazilian poet Paulo Leminski (1944–89) holds a special position in literary history. Hailed as a transcultural poet, he is deeply connected to multiple cultures and languages, and to experimental forms, visually and semantically. To put quite simply, his poems are not easy to translate. With their formal experimentation, subtle contextual hints, and masterful humor, Leminski’s poetry may even be considered closely to impossible to translate. It rather invites poetic interpretations by brave translators. Charles A. Perrone and Ivan Justen Santana accomplished the mesmerizing and impeccable feat of translating Leminski’s book of collected poems, *Toda poesia*, published in Brazil in 2013 by Companhia das Letras. The translators addressed Leminski’s poetic challenges head on and lived up to the challenge as though possessed by the poet’s spirit, or at least deeply inspired by one of Brazil’s greatest poetic geniuses (and I don’t use this word lightly). The translations are meticulously composed, upholding the “heavy levity” of Leminski’s poetic oeuvre without missing a beat. Not only does the original poems’ high energy remain, but the translators added the sum of their own talents to Leminski’s.

Paulo Leminski was from Curitiba in the Southern Brazil, and, according to Charles A. Perrone, remains “ever-relevant” and “widely regarded as the most important Brazilian poet born in the 1940s” (Perrone, *Brazil* 88). A talented poet, novelist, polyglot translator, lyricist, and literary critic, Leminski was erudite and at the same time attuned to the pulse of popular culture. He is often associated with the international Concrete Poetry movement, which considered poetry as a multi-sensorial project that took into consideration the visual, graphic aspects of the poem, as well as sound and simultaneity of meaning. Leminski was initially involved with Concrete Poetry events and publications and later became associated to other literary tendencies, such as Poesia Marginal in Brazil. In many senses, however, apart from any literary movement, Leminski embarked on his own experimental projects, even though he was “adopted” as a second-generation

concrete poet, addressing similar thematic and formal concerns. His interest in experimental and modernist poetry (harking back to Oswald de Andrade, for example), synthesis, brevity, linguistic research, translation as transcriation (in Haroldo de Campos's sense of criticism and creation), and global forms such as the haiku.

To Haroldo de Campos, in his seminal collection of essays *A arte no horizonte do provável* (1969), Concrete Poetry was a poetic exercise in search of synthesis, invention and pluralistic transformation, and the haiku represents an ultimate poetic synthesis because it concentrates language with malleability. He called the haiku an apex of effect (*ápice de rendimento*), the “mais extrema economia de meios,” or a poetic agglutination, which serves to discuss impermanence and transformation associated with Zen Buddhism (Campos, *A arte* 57). Leminski, as a post-concrete poet, deepened this interest in haiku. He was a black belt in judo, learned Japanese, and adapted haiku in his own concrete versions of the form. He also wrote a biography of seventeenth-century Zen poet Matsuo Bashō (1644–94), and translated Bashō's poems, in addition to Yukio Mishima's book *Sun and Steel* (1925–70) about the body and martial arts. Leminski also translated James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, John Fante, John Lennon, Alfred Jarry, Petronius, among others, including Lawrence Ferlinghetti, bringing Leminski into conversation with the Beat poets of the United States, alongside the countercultural interests in Zen Buddhism of Jack Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* (1958). Cristina Rocha, for instance, claims that Leminski became a source of ideas on Zen for intellectuals in Brazil. Perrone and Santana's translations certainly uphold Leminski's Zen tenets of “beginners' mind” (*shoshin*), or the invitation to see the world as though for the first time, with openness, curiosity and attention.

The translated poems in the volume offer ludic transpositions of Leminski's most complex poetic creations. The translations masterfully transpose Leminski's linguistic quirks and virtuoso intellect to the English language that the poet also knew well. Some of the most visually experimental poems in the volume are printed in their original form with an accompanying translation, rendering integrity to the original project. One can only imagine that Leminski himself would be extremely pleased with the results the translated volume offers. This is, without a doubt, a monumental project that honors not so much the notion of an original, but that pursues Leminski's lifelong dedication to the playful and existential aspects of language, to visual, philosophical and spiritual pursuits, and to obtaining Zen

poems to transcend all cultural amalgamations, reflections on impermanence and poetic practice of “not-doing.” In that sense, Perrone and Santana could have embodied a meditative state to “channel” what Leminski’s poems became in English, to great success.

Since Leminski was of Polish and Afro-Brazilian origin, the poet’s ancestry combined with a love for multiple cultures became a mark of his poetic identity. Literary critic Leyla Perrone-Moisés paradoxically claims Leminski was “era transcultural: polonês, caboclo e ‘japonês’, malandro e samurai, provinciano e internacional. Jogava na várzea e falava latim. Eclético e autodidata, era o mais brasileiro dos poetas (Perrone-Moisés 402–03). Given the poet’s multiple identity explorations, and because Leminski’s boundless creativity engages with pluralistic poetic subjectivities, translations of his work could lead to cultural misunderstandings or miscalculations. Perrone and Santana’s translations, however, may be considered a labor of love and dedication to explore Leminski’s multiple facets. To translate an irreverent poet, a bard trickster with an acute sense of humor regarding his own poetic inadequacies, is testament to Perrone and Santana’s remarkable poetic achievement. The translated volume stays away from facile literal translations, re-elaborating Leminski’s most challenging poetic acrobatics, alluding to multiple subjectivities. The translators reached further through visual, semantic and syntactic intersemiotic layers, and managed to spin transformed poetic gems without compromising Leminski’s sustained exploration of poetic possibilities. After all, the poet reflected that it is “only by saying through another” that we find our multiple selves.

Moreover, to Haroldo de Campos, in Leminski’s poetry “As fronteiras são móveis, podendo tornar-se mais e mais rarefeitas,” observing the transitory quality of the poet’s work (Campos, *Metalinguagem* 218). I have noted elsewhere how critics defined Leminski’s work with words pertaining to displacements, disorientation, crossroads, crossings, and decentralization—terms that refer to surpassing limits, exploding barriers, and to poetic ruptures. It is as though Leminski’s work aims to free words from the poem itself, in explorations and displacements. He commented on the limits of writing in Portuguese, claiming that, “Em termos planetários, escrever em português e ficar calado é mais ou menos a mesma coisa” (Leminski, *Anseios* 111). Nevertheless, the interest in Leminski’s poetry in North America has existed in the last few decades, with several poems translated and published in collected books and magazines, including Charles A.

Perrone's translations previous to this volume, which may be the culmination of this critic, poet and translator's dedication to Leminski's oeuvre and to Brazilian poetry. It is as though *All Poetry* is a parallel creation to Leminski's, when Perrone and Santana manifest and reveal another dimension of Leminski's originals. The English versions also surpassing limits, exploding barriers, and breaking poetic walls.

The book is organized in the order of Leminski's poetry book publications in seven sections, followed by a concise but detailed translator's afterword, illuminating the translation process and choices. This volume is a testament of how to maintain integrity regarding the impressive playfulness of Leminski's original poems in all their complexity, while also elevating the translations to a phenomenal level. This book of translated poems is recommended for students, critics, and poetry lovers everywhere. Those familiar with Leminski's poetry in Portuguese will be truly delighted to encounter the poems in English, perhaps for the first time, as a renewed opportunity to see his poetry with new eyes. Those who are unfamiliar with the poet are in for a fantastic ride, simultaneously imaginative in form and meaning, occasionally cynical, and almost always playful and funny. In their brevity, Leminski's poems pack great punches, and as such, they are meant to be read over and over, each reading offering new perspectives. Perrone and Santana gifted us translations as brilliant as the originals, and those who speak English are lucky to have Leminski's all poetry. My humble suggestion is for Perrone and Santana to tackle Leminski's experimental novel *Catatau* next.

Alessandra Santos

University of British Columbia

References

- Campos, Haroldo de. *A arte no horizonte do provável*. Editora Perspectiva, 1969.
- . *Metalinguagem & outras metas: ensaios de teoria e crítica literária*. Editora Perspectiva, 1992.
- Leminski, Paulo. *Anseios crípticos*. Criar Edições, 1986.
- . *Toda poesia*. Companhia das Letras, 2013.
- Lima, Manoel Ricardo de. *Entre percurso e vanguarda: alguma poesia de Paulo Leminski*. Editora Annablume, 2002.

Book Reviews

- Perrone, Charles A. *Brazil, Lyric, and the Americas*. UP of Florida, 2010.
- . *Seven Faces: Brazilian Poetry Since Modernism*. Duke UP, 1996.
- Perrone-Moisés, Leyla. "Leminski, o samurai malandro." *Toda poesia*, by Paulo Leminski, Companhia das Letras, 2013, pp. 397–403.
- Rocha, Cristina. "Zen in Brazil: Cannibalizing Orientalist Flows." *Orientalism & Identity in Latin America: Fashioning Self and Other from the (Post)Colonial Margin*. Edited by Erik Camayd-Freixas, U of Arizona P, 2013, pp. 200–16.
- Santos, Alessandra. "O que quer dizer diz': Paulo Leminski ao Norte do Equador." *A linha que nunca termina – Pensando Paulo Leminski*. Edited by Fabiano Calixto and André Dick, Lamparina Editora, 2004, pp. 323–44.