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Euclides da Cunha the Poet

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Cunha, Euclides da. *Euclides da Cunha: poesia reunida*. Eds. Bernucci, Leopoldo M. and Francisco Foot Hardman. São Paulo: UNESP, 2009. 492 pp.

The very title of this book may come as a surprise: *Euclides da Cunha: poesia reunida*. For those who think of him as an investigative journalist and civil engineer, Euclides da Cunha and poetry seem like odd bedfellows. Although critics – including Augusto and Haroldo de Campos – have underscored the poetic characteristics of Euclides’s prose, the verbosity in *Os sertões* is a far cry from most poets’ verbal restraint. When one adjective would suffice, he provides four (“os infelizes baleados, mutilados, estropiados, abatidos de febres” (357)).

Moreover, much of the dynamism of the writing in *Os sertões* derives from the suspenseful buildup of action, a characteristic more common to prose than poetry: “Um rumor indefinível avassalara a mudez ambiente e subia pelas encostas. Não era, porém, um surdo tropear de assalto. Era pior. O inimigo, embaixo, no arraial invisível – rezava” (288). Yet, as Leopoldo M. Bernucci and Francisco Foot Hardman eloquently capture in their preface, poetry always was a part of Euclides’s life in serious, playful, and personal ways. Euclides had extraordinary literary range, spanning further into the realm of poetry than might be expected.

The breadth of this volume is also remarkable. No previous collection has included even 40 poems by Euclides, while here Bernucci and Hardman have compiled 134. The editors meticulously transcribe the poems with notes about crossed-out and illegible words. Also included are alternative versions of certain poems and other writers’ poems that Euclides wrote down in his notebooks. Moreover, the editors thoughtfully include a glossary of antiquated words found in the poems and an index of the people and events referenced by the author. The preface and notes unveil the formidable treasure hunt of finding this poetry in disparate locations (listed in one index and elaborated upon in another index about where each poem was found), deciphering words on decaying paper, and catching the apparently frequent mistakes made in previous compilations.

Bernucci and Hardman have gone to great lengths to transcribe the poems accurately and explain the literary and historical references at play within them.

The anthology is organized into four substantive sections, and each section begins with an introduction by the editors explaining the origin of the poems, the reasons for organizing the poems into a given section, the overarching themes and influences, and the poems' relationship to the poetic genres then in vogue in Brazil.

The first section, "Ondas," has the same title of Euclides's notebook in which he kept poems he presumably wrote around the age of 18. With exclamation points galore, these poems parade the young Euclides's political and personal passions: admiration of the French Revolution, rural Brazilian workers, Byron, Victor Hugo, love interests, and freedom. Words repeated throughout these impassioned, idealistic poems are *bálsamo, lágrimas, sonho, prantos, flor, Revolução, Glória, cismar* and *sublime*.

The second section, "Dispersos," includes poems that Euclides published or desired to have published, which largely is not the case with the poems in "Ondas." The section "Dispersos" brings forth a Euclides bent on questioning ideology and the clergy, concerned about social exclusion and the future of his country, and fascinated by what he views at the "duas épocas primordiais na História: uma é aquela em que Cristo morreu pelas ideias do povo – a outra, a em que o povo se ergueu pelos ideais de Cristo," his synopsis of the French

Revolution (295). One of the many captivating photographs in the collection shows an image of Euclides's anticlerical poem "Entrei – grave – na Igreja – a turba ajoelhada" in a notebook alongside mathematical equations, an illustrative juxtaposition, displaying various facets of the writer-engineer and emphasizing the content of his poem, which attacks a priest's diatribe against science and mathematics.

The most intriguing section is the third: "Poesia Postal," which enticingly aligns typeset versions of poems next to images of the front and backside of the picture postcards and photographs on which Euclides originally scribbled the poems in his sprawling cursive. This section includes poems written from 1902 to 1906, during a time when sending a *post karte* was in fashion, as the editors mention in the section introduction (303). The poem "Lê?...Não lê. Aquele ar não é por certo" masterfully conflates a dual attraction to the sea and to a woman on the beach. While the original postcard mysteriously disappeared from the Grêmio Literário Euclides da Cunha, the editors' section introduction describes that the postcard included an image of a woman reading on the beach and was sent to Euclides's friend Reynaldo Porchat.

In another postcard poem, Euclides sent his portrait, to his good friend Coelho Neto, on the back of which he wrote a humorously self-effacing joke poem, assuring that his heart would be a more beautiful thing to behold than his face, hence diluting any arrogant interpretation of his sending a portrait of

himself to a friend. Euclides mastered this style of self-effacing joke poem in the sonnet “Se acaso uma alma se fotografasse” (1905), which Manuel Bandeira included in his 1946 *Antologia de poetas bissextos brasileiros contemporâneas* under the title “Dedicatória” (15). The poem was written on a photograph of men in the bi-national Alto Purus commission that Euclides ran and that was charged with delineating the border between Brazil and Peru. The octave, which mixes curiosity about modern technology and expressive emotion, contemplates what it would be like if a photograph could capture an image of the soul, thus displaying a person’s dreams and ideals. Then the sestet completes the if-statement begun in the octave and title, connecting it to the actual Alto Purus photograph (with Euclides at the center), thus delivering the joke:

Poeta! tu terias com certeza
 A mais completa e insólita surpresa
 Notando, deste grupo bem no meio,

 Que o mais belo, o mais forte e o mais ardente
 Destes sujeitos, é precisamente
 O mais triste, o mais pálido e o mais feio... (324)

The editors observe that Euclides, pleased with this sonnet, sent the photograph-poem combination to at least four different recipients (305). The correspondence

synthesizes many sides of Euclides: the engineer, the adventurer, the writer, and the loyal friend.

The final substantive section of the collection, “Principais Variantes & Cotejos,” brings Euclides’s writing process to life by providing a clean version of each variation of a poem and at least one marked-up version with insertions made in a red font. In this way, the process of refining, and at times significantly lengthening poems, is evident by reading the various drafts. While this section may prove tedious for the casual reader, it will be instrumental to scholars who plan to analyze Euclides’s poetic process.

The materiality of the book and its images enliven the reading experience. The poems themselves are generously spaced and skillfully typeset. High quality images of manuscript pages, newspapers, photographs, and postcards pepper the compilation. The reproductions of how the published poems looked are a snapshot of an era in which poetry appeared above the crease in Brazilian newspapers.

Beyond capturing Euclides’s poetic talent more thoroughly than any compilation to date, *Euclides da Cunha: poesia reunida* – thanks to the editors’ thorough annotations and contextualization – offers a glimpse of the aesthetic and political concerns prevalent in Brazil at the turn of the century, through the personalized lens of one of its prominent public intellectuals and men of letters.