The first book-length English translation of Mário de Sá-Carneiro's poetry

[A primeira tradução para o inglês em livro da poesia de Mário de Sá-Carneiro]

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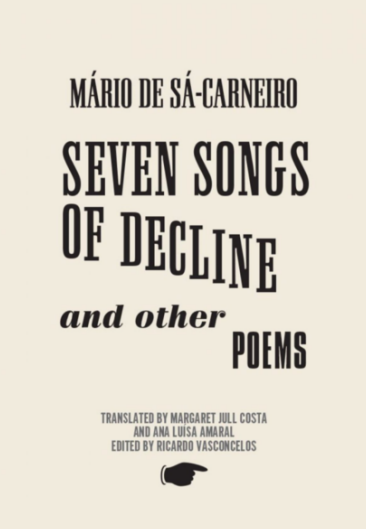
SÁ-CARNEIRO, Mário de (2021). ***Seven Songs of Decline and Other Poems*****. Translated by Margaret Jull Costa and Ana Luísa Amaral. Edited by Ricardo Vasconcelos. London: Francis Boutle Publishers. [ISBN 978 1 8380928 49]**



The publication of the first book-length English translation of the poetry of Mário de Sá-Carneiro marks an important event. Sá-Carneiro was the co-founder, with Fernando Pessoa, of the literary magazine *Orpheu*, which in 1915 launched Portuguese modernism. As Pessoa's prominence in the Anglo-American world continues to rise—witness this summer's blockbuster publication, in both the US and the UK, of Richard Zenith's biography—recognition of the work of his closest friend and collaborator should correspondingly grow. Readers of Pessoa, old and new, will naturally seek to increase their knowledge of the master by extending their attention to his cohort. Certainly, familiarity with the writings of Pessoa's fellow modernist deepens our understanding of their scandalous mission to renew Portuguese literature through absorbing and remaking the best of what was current on the broader European scene. Reading Sá-Carneiro's poetry also reveals its similarities with the poetry that Pessoa was writing at the time, as a brief comparison below will attest.

But the major justification for bringing out a book of Sá-Carneiro's poems done into English is to be found in the poems themselves. For Sá-Carneiro was a master in his own right and not just a satellite of Pessoa's or some musty character in a chapter of Portuguese literary history, due his measure of respectful notice. The symbolist verse of *Dispersão* [*Dispersal*] and *Indícios de Oiro* [*Traces of Gold*; published posthumously], from which the majority of the volume's 28 lyric poems are drawn, shows originality in both form and content. Included in the book's third section, devoted to uncollected poems, Sá-Carneiro's futurist-cubist-intersectionist "Manucure" demonstrates the readiness of Portuguese writers to seize the modernist moment through its deft deployment of the latest technical and thematic developments

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emanating from Paris and Milan. Indeed, the poem stakes a claim for Lisbon as another such meridian.

The sequins of his poetry glitter on all 132 pages of this slender, yet judicious florilegium (Sá-Carneiro's precious—read: symbolist—metaphors are catching). Chief among those sequins must be reckoned the lush and cascading imagery. A symbolist lexicon prevails here: "madness"; "mystery"; "escape"; "soul"; "dream"; "Distance"; "Height." Sphinxes, chimeras, and unicorns populate his poems. Longing [ânsia], nostalgia, spleen [tédio], alienation (both from himself and from others), despair, and disenchantment dominate the emotions of a riven or dispersed self. Catholic, medieval, and Oriental imagery are rife. The death of God no more stops the poet from enlisting Him in his quest for transcendence than the absence of an immortal, immaterial part stops him from embarking his soul on that quest in the first place. Opium and alcohol make their due appearance as vehicles of escape. Precious substances (silver, gold, ivory, jade) and textiles (tulle, crimson, silk, satin) serve to signify the beauty that is absent from the modern midst. Princesses, labyrinths, and imaginary lands round out the exotic imagery. Synesthesia screws the sensorium to fever pitch and gives to it a visionary cast; one sense crosses over into another much as poetry crosses over into music.

All this is par for the symbolist course, which favors the distant over the near, the unreal over the real. What the English critic and poet T.E. Hulme said of the romantic attitude—that it "seems to crystallize in verse round metaphors of flight"—applies equally to Sá-Carneiro's collected verse (cf. HULME, 2007: 113-140). Vertigo often accompanies this flight (from the mundane), this (failed) aspiration to the infinite.

Yet, what distinguishes his use of imagery is its density, as if the images so pressed on the poet's mind that he had perforce to resort to certain devices—many of them novel—to record them in their passing rush. These devices set Sá-Carneiro's poetry apart. One such method is the catalogue, as in this metonymic example: "Balustrades of sound, archways of Love, | Bridges of light, ogive windows of perfume…" (37). The fifth of the "Seven Songs of Decline" [Sete Canções do Declínio] is composed entirely of a catalogue of images dizzyingly disconnected from one quatrain to the next and often from one line to the next. In his expert, concise introduction, Ricardo Vasconcelos accurately calls "Seven Songs" "a dazzling stream of images and metaphors about the loss of self" (7). The onrush of that stream is swift indeed. A second method is the metaphorical compound: "tempo-Asa" (36) [Time-on-Wings]; "Noites-lagôas" (36) [Nights-like-lakes]; "Byzancios-Alma" (36) [Byzantiums of the Soul]. A third technique is the telescoping of imagery, as in this metaphor: "Cinza de brocado" (38) [brocaded ashes], or this metonymic compound: "Zimbórios-panthéons" (36) [Lantern-towered pantheons].

Even more interesting are the compounding of an infinitive and an adverb, "ser-quasi" (28) [almost-being], and that of an infinitive and a noun, "Catedrais de

Ser-Eu" (36) [Cathedrals of Being-Me]. Another example of neologism is "Inter-sonho" (36) [between-dreams]. Sá-Carneiro's nominalization of infinitives,

Caía Ouro se pensava Estrelas,	Gold rained down if I thought of Stars,
O luar batia sobre o meu *alhear-me*…	The moon beat down upon my *self-forgetting*…
—Noites-lagôas, como éreis belas	—Nights-like-lakes, how beautiful you were
Sob terraços-liz de *recordar-Me*!...	Shaded by lily-white terraces of *self-remembering*!...
(36; italics mine)	(37; italics mine)

is as noteworthy as his transitivizing of an intransitive verb: "Viajar outros sentidos, outras vidas" (14) [Voyage through other senses, other lives].

"Manucure" was the first Portuguese poem that was self-consciously avant-garde in both form and content. It originally appeared in the second and last issue of *Orpheu*, alongside Álvaro de Campos's "Ode Marítima" [Maritime Ode] and Pessoa's group of poems entitled "Chuva Obliqua" [Slanting Rain]. With both the Futurist-Whitmanian ode and the intersectionist poems "Manucure" shares affinities, just as it does with Marinetti's "wireless imagination" and "words-in-freedom," as well as with the cubo-futurism of Apollinaire and Cendrars. With his "eyes anointed with The New" (110), the poet scans and rhapsodizes over "innumerable intersecting planes" (107). By this, he means the motley signifiers of modernity, cast in spatial terms, swarming his field of vision, both internal and external. True to Sá-Carneiro's Symbolist roots, in the end the poet suffers "Defeat!" for he "will never be able to sing […] all that unattainable Beauty" reflected in the cubist mirror (123).

The poem is a specimen of modernolatry, and like all such specimens, it attests to the provincialism of its author, in ecstasy over the Parisian new.[1] It is a bravura piece, intended to show (off) its author as à la page with all that is à la mode. But "Manucure" is also a deft interweaving of intersectionist with futurist and cubist techniques and subject-matter, openly declaring, even flaunting, itself as such. The aim is to place the peripheral ism on a par with those leading isms radiating from the cultural center. The effect is to give a Portuguese accent to the cosmopolitan avant-garde. The confident assertions of mastery and the nimble blending of influences—still more, the self-deprecatory humor, which in Sá-Carneiro's poems

[1] Cf. "Recordo-me de que uma vez, nos tempos do *Orpheu*, disse a Mário de Sá-Carneiro: 'Você é europeu e civilizado, salvo em uma coisa, e nessa você é vítima da educação portuguesa. Você admira Paris, admira as grandes cidades. Se você tivesse sido educado no estrangeiro, e sob o influxo de uma grande cultura europeia, como eu, não daria pelas grandes cidades. Estavam todas dentro de si.'" (PESSOA, 2020: 93) [I recall, in the period of *Orpheu*, once telling Mário de Sá-Carneiro, "You are European and civilized save in one thing, and in that you are the victim of Portuguese education. You admire Paris, admire the great cities. If you had been educated abroad, under the influence of a great European culture, as I was, you would not place so great a value on large cities. They would all be contained within you."].

alternates with lachrymose self-pity—make "Manucure" unique and not derivative, a feat and not an imitation.

Much scholarship remains to be done on the poetry of Sá-Carneiro, particularly in three areas. First, a comparison of his treatment of the image with that of his modernist contemporaries would reveal some of the similarities and differences among the various strains of that international movement. For example, around the same time that the symbolist Sá-Carneiro was writing "Balustrades of sound, archways of Love, | Bridges of light, ogive windows of perfume…," Ezra Pound was issuing the dictum "Don't use such an expression as 'dim lands of *peace*.' It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer's not realizing that the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol" (POUND, 1954: 5). The difference here between Imagism and modernist Portuguese poetry (at least of the Sá-Carneiran variety) is stark. While the former was reacting against the wordiness or windiness of Symbolism, the latter was still spelling out both terms of the metaphor. This is not to assume a Greenwich Mean Time, according to which Portuguese modernists lagged behind the technical advances of their Anglo-American confrères. The plane of comparison is not pacing or progress but rather techniques of artistic renewal. T.E. Hulme's distinctions between classical and romantic poetry, between "dry" and "damp" verse, and between "accurate, precise and definite description" and "vagueness" offer further terms of contrast (cf. HULME, 2007: 113-140).

Second, how did Apollinaire's and Cendrars's avant-garde aesthetics help shape Portuguese modernism? The calligramme threaded into "Manucure" is only the most visible trace of the former's influence. The single issue of *Portugal Futurista*, which in 1917 carried the modernist banner after the demise of *Orpheu*, brought together three poems by Cendrars, addressed to Apollinaire, celebrating that icon of modernity, the Eiffel Tower; Apollinaire's poem "Arbre"; and three poems by Sá-Carneiro. How did Sá-Carneiro's Parisian exposure to French cubo-futurism prepare him to decompose the work of art (understood as the subordination of parts to the whole) in "Manucure"? How, in turn, did the publication of "Manucure" blaze the trail for the dissemination in Portugal of Apollinaire's and Cendrars's poetry? More broadly, how do the planar intersections of cubist poetry and art compare with those of intersectionist poetry and prose?

Third, the poems of Sá-Carneiro and those of Pessoa offer a rich field of comparison. Vasconcelos does well to touch on the similarities between "Manucure" and "Maritime Ode." But the many resonances—linguistic, structural, tonal, imagistic, and thematic—between these poems and between many others by the two poets require sustained exploration. I will limit myself to mentioning just the similarities, in persona, tone, and voice, between the Sá-Carneiro of such poems as "Cinco Horas" [Five o'Clock], "Serradura" [Sawdust], and "Caranguejola" [The Contraption] and the Álvaro de Campos of such poems as "Poema em linha reta"

[Straight-Lined Poem] and "Dobrada à moda do Porto" [Porto-Style Tripe] (cf. PESSOA, 2014). The same self-deprecatory humor that I remarked above in "Manucure" is found in many of Campos's poems. Criticism too rigidly divides his poems into pre-modernist, modernist, and late modernist categories, when the fact is that this strain of self-ridicule is as present in the breezy Decadent quatrains of "Opiário" [Opiary] as it is in the grouchy free verse of "Lisbon Revisited (1923)." What distinguishes this self-mocking humor and links it to that of certain of Sá-Carneiro's poems is the waggish, woe-is-me note. The conversational voice and mildly misanthropic persona sounding this note further link the poetry of Campos and Sá-Carneiro.

Seven Songs of Decline and Other Poems, then, introduces English readers to the work of a great and important Portuguese poet, too long unknown in the Anglosphere.[2] The book unites the efforts of the world's leading scholar of Mário de Sá-Carneiro, Ricardo Vasconcelos; one of the world's leading English translators of Spanish and Portuguese literature, Margaret Jull Costa; and one of Portugal's leading poets, co-translator Ana Luísa Amaral. The results are commensurately impressive. The book was put out by Francis Boutle Publishers, which counts among its titles a translation, also by Costa, of selected poetry by Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen. The volume is bilingual, and each poem helpfully carries the time and place of composition. Only two punctuation typos on pp. 55 and 117 (and possibly three more on pp. 15, 31, and 47, depending on the translators' intentions) and the omission of the time and place of composition from the penultimate poem mar its otherwise clean and handsome pages.

The fine translation merits praise, especially considering the difficulty of translating Sá-Carneiro's fantastic (Hulme would say "inaccurate") imagery:

Forçar os turbilhões aladamente, (16)	Stir up whirlwinds, so wild and wingèd, (17)

his frequent comparison of disparate things:

Ah! que as tuas nostalgias fossem guisos de prata—	Ah, if only your yearnings were silver bells—
Teus frenesis, lantejoulas;	Your deliriums sequins;

[2] Prior to its publication, only a scattering of translated poems had found their way into print. Working off of a literal translation, Ted Hughes freely rendered three poems into exquisite English. (cf. HUGHES, 2006). *Lisbon Poets* included a selection of eight poems alongside translations of Camões, Cesário, Florbela, and Pessoa (cf. *Lisbon Poets*, 2015). The centennial celebration of *Orpheu* saw the translation of an anthology of texts, including Sá-Carneiro's poems "Manucure" and "Sete Canções do Declínio" (cf. *Nós, os de "Orpheu,"* 2015).

E os ócios em que estiolas, Luar que se desbarata…	And the enervating indolence in which you lie Mere squandered moonlight.
(40)	(41)

and his mixture of concrete and abstract (and often-synesthetic) imagery:

Num sonho d'Iris, morto a ouro e brasa, Vem-me lembranças doutro Tempo azul Que me oscilava entre véus de tule— Um tempo esguio e leve, um tempo-Asa.	In an Iris-blue dream laid low by gold and flames, Memories come to me of another bluer Time That lulled me to sleep among veils of tulle— A light, limber time, a Time-on-Wings.
(36)	(37)

One can quibble, of course. The use of the diacritic in "wingèd" is unnecessary and anachronistic (and repeated throughout the book). "[A]ladamente" modifies the verb "forçar" (as in "Stir up whirlwinds with beating wings"); the translators misplace the modifier, attributing wings to whirlwinds, and in the process, lose the poet's comparison of himself to Icarus). In the second excerpt, the parallelism ("estiolas," "desbarata") grows tenuous in the pairing of "enervating" with "squandered." In the third excerpt, "gone down in" might make more sense than "laid low by," since it is easier to imagine colors displacing colors than colors killing dreams.

Again, Sá-Carneiro's slurry of unreal images is tough to translate, and Costa and Amaral deserve kudos for managing the feat. Likewise, they earn plaudits for maintaining the poet's voice, which alternates from poem to poem between exhilarating despair and playful jaundice. I counted many more coups than gaffes in their translation. For example, the emphasis in the second of these two lines

—Água fria e clara numa noite azul, Água, devia ser o teu amor por mim…	—Cold clear water on a blue night, Yes, water, that is what your love for me should be…
(40)	(41)

appears simple but is actually the mark of a veteran translator (collaborating with a premier poet). And this is a fine translation of a difficult quatrain:

Me erga imperial, em pasmo e arrogância, Toldado de luar—scintil de arfejos: Imaginário de carmim e beijos, Pierrot de fôgo a cabriolar Distancia.	May I rise imperial, half haughty, half amazed, Canopied in moonlight—scintillating, panting: Reverie bursting with crimson and with kisses, Fiery Pierrot capering over Distances.
(46)	(47)

The difficulty—typical of Sá-Carneiro's poetry—lies in the laconic, abstract image in the third line. The translators must first wrap their minds around this sparse—not to say vague—image, before seeking an equivalent concrete enough to be grasped

immediately in English. "[B]ursting with" is their admirable find that gives fuller shape to the image.

If I have a criticism to make, it is of two unsupported claims made by Costa in her Translator's Note. "Our first decision was to abandon rhyme," she writes, "which, in translation, so often forces one to distort meaning" (9). This is a cliché of Translator's Notes, one that particularly afflicts those connected with Pessoa's poetry. There may be a good argument to make in favor of abandoning rhyme, but neither Costa nor any other Portuguese poetry translator whose note I have read bothers to flesh it out. The obvious rebuttal that abandoning rhyme also distorts meaning goes unanswered. No effort is made to weigh the merits of rhymed translation vs. translation that avails itself of "internal rhymes, accidental rhymes and alliteration to make up for the loss of end-rhymes" (9). In consequence, the assertion reads like a dodge.

Costa continues, "We did, however, do our best to keep the rhythm of the poems […]" (9). She is to be commended for at least acknowledging rhythm as an element to be grappled with. Too many Translator's Notes pass blithely over the matter, as if oblivious to rhythm—as if oblivious to poetry. Yet, Costa offers no explanation of what that "best" involved; no account, no defense of the exact methods she and Amaral employed to recreate the hepta-, octo-, and decasyllables favored by Sá-Carneiro. For example, did they aspire to a loosely accentual, a loosely syllabic, or a loosely accentual-syllabic meter? As far as I can discern, they attempted none of the above.[3]

Just once I would like to read a translator's perspective on the comma (for or against the serial comma? use one to parse the images or only where the rules demand it?), on the dash (use it to charge a line with drama or use a comma instead?), or on the exclamation mark (use it to punctuate heightened emotion or only where it appears in the original?). What criterion governs the translator's choice of register? What is the translator's position on alliteration, consonance, and assonance? On internal rhyme? On line breaks (hew to the original or deviate from it where the translation has displaced the pause)? Where the original line opens with a dash, what is the translator's stance on following suit vs. observing convention? (Costa follows suit, but why?) What is the translator's stand on capitalizing common nouns, where these are capitalized in the original? (Costa keeps the capitals, but why?) What is the translator's rule on Gallicisms—preserve them or Anglicize them? (Costa opts for the former, but why?)

Costa declines to say. Surely, after translating so many books of poetry (and prose), Costa knows her mind on these issues and knows, too, that they are anything but minor. The reader, I argue, has a right to pick that mind. It is not my intention

[3] For a discussion of rhyme, rhythm, and related issues in poetry translation, see my article "Problems in Translating Pessoa's Poetry into English" (SCHWARTZ, 2020).

to make Costa the scapegoat for a reticence that, in fact, vitiates nearly all Translator's Notes. My aim is to expose and displace this convention of reticence, to prod translators into articulating principles too tacitly assumed, and to encourage demand for Translator's Notes worthy of the name. The point, bluntly, is to rescue the genre from the pit of vacuity in which it is too often steeped.

Is there any part of a translated book that makes for more lugubrious reading than the Translator's Note? This should not be. It should at least edge out the colophon in terms of readerly interest… and aspire to vie with the translation itself. And why not? The Note has the potential to be a riveting affair, wherein the translator recounts the travails and itinerary of the voyage completed. It should give readers a glimpse into that most opaque (because least limned) of processes, namely, the connoting in one language today what was connoted in another language yesterday. This last is a quixotic enterprise, of course (we have all read "Pierre Menard"), but surely the attempt is worth a tale, if not a *ficción*. Let these words be a rallying cry—and end, lest they become a manifesto.[4]

And let the landmark publication of *Seven Songs of Decline and Other Poems* serve as an impetus for further translation of Sá-Carneiro's poetry. The Complete Edition of his poetry counts some 55 mature poems, meaning that many have yet to be Englished, while those translated here call for fresh attempts at bodying forth their images (cf. SÁ-CARNEIRO, 2017). Sá-Carneiro's poetry calls especially for the sort of rhymed and metered translation that so little modern Portuguese verse enjoys (no doubt due to its difficulty). Rhyme and rhythm are integral both to his comic self-abasement and his recherché gestalt. Also needed is a translation into American English (Costa and Amaral's British English can occasionally sound a bit stiff to American ears). The troika of Vasconcelos, Costa, and Amaral are to be saluted, then, on their fine production worthy of the principal, that ist of many isms, Mário de Sá-Carneiro.

[4] I try to heed my own call in the Translators' Note in *Message*, my rhymed and metered translation (with Robert N. Schwartz) of Fernando Pessoa's *Mensagem*, due out in 2022 (Lisbon: Tinta-da-china).

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