

Orpheu Ascending

[*Orpheu Ascendente*]

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AA.Vv. (2021). *Orpheu Literary Quarterly*, volumes 1 & 2. Translated from the Portuguese by David Swartz, with a Preface by Nuno Júdice. Philadelphia: New Meridian, 192 pp. [ISBN 978-1737249160].



On 24 March 1915, Portuguese literature took a massive leap into the 20th Century. Lisbon itself was still coming into the modern world, just five years after Portugal's First Republic was founded, and Portuguese literature at the time was characterized by overtones of melancholy, nostalgia, and provincialism—an artistic and philosophical ideal that came to be known as *saudosismo*. The publication of *Orpheu Literary Quarterly* on that day in March, in many ways a reaction to the revisionary movement known as *Renascença Portuguesa*, caused a literary scandal of outsized proportions for a publication by a group of then relatively unknown poets and artists.

Just three days after its publication, the newspaper *O Mundo* referred to the magazine as “a sort of summary of the various modern currents in literature” (SILVA, 2022). Modernity and novelty were the watchwords of its young editors and protagonists, Fernando Pessoa and Mário Sá-Carneiro. On 30 March, *A Capital* published a front-page review with the headline “Literature from the insane asylum,” a charge echoed by other Lisbon papers, as well as in Porto. “On the way to the madhouse,” “The poets of *Orpheu* and the maniacs,” and “*Orpheu* in the Inferno” were just a few of the headlines that SÁ-CARNEIRO (2022a) kept in scrapbooks, as ZENITH (2021: 447) recounts in *Pessoa: A Biography*. The magazine's first issue sold out within three weeks—while Lisbon's literati may have been scandalized by its publication, they were nonetheless fascinated by it, “and even those who normally had no interest in literature went out and bought the magazine” (2021: 447).

Pessoa's idea was to bring Portuguese literature up to date with rapid-fire succession, and he succeeded, including all the “isms,” including modernism and futurism, and creating a few new ones of his own: “Paulism,” “Intersectionism,” and “Sensationism.” For Pessoa, *Orpheu* was “*artes-todas-as-artes*” [*art-of-all-the-arts*],

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which “should end, alongside the subtlety of the Symbolists, and the speed of the Whitmanists, (I call this, to mark their origin, to cubists, to futurists and other moderns (from our time?) dynamists...” (SILVA, 2022). The result was not just a magazine, it was the beginning of a cultural movement, a generational shift whose impact would be felt throughout the next several decades; even into the 60s and 70s.

Orpheu was also unique in that it was decidedly both transnational and transatlantic, incorporating as it did the influence of Europe (when Portugal was still very much an Atlantic-facing nation) as well as the country’s former colony Brazil (two of the first issues’ editors had Brazilian connections). The magazine was also interdisciplinary, reflecting what one of its contributors, José de Almada Negreiros (GIRALDO GIL, 2016), later said was “the same thing that erupted a little earlier in Paris: the meeting of letters and painting” (SILVA, 2022). The authors of *Orpheu* saw themselves as “Portuguese who wrote for Europe,” and wanted to contribute to European modernism and, in some ways, take the lead in the era or at least make Portuguese modernism known internationally (SILVA, 2022).

Finally, *Orpheu* was significant for Fernando Pessoa himself for two reasons: the first, because of his relationship with Mário Sá-Carneiro, their friendship and collaboration were perhaps mutually motivating, as they pushed each other to produce high-quality work and to expand boundaries. It was Pessoa who also encouraged his friend from the Azores, Armando Côrtes-Rodrigues, to push another boundary and contribute work under the pseudonym of Violante de Cysneiros, a successful act of poetic cross-dressing (as Zenith calls it), which Anna KLOBUCKA referred to as a “transvestite performativity of gender identities,” identifying it as “one of the intentionally scandalous facets of the *Orpheu* era” (2015: 131).

Second, because several of Pessoa’s own most important and successful works were published in the pages of *Orpheu*, including poems by his heteronym Álvaro de Campos, “Triumphal ode” and “Opium” in the first issue, the former of which caused a scandal of its own with its verses “about the most unseemly and least poetic things of our time in shocking, sometimes pornographic language,” (ZENITH, 2021: 445) and, in issue two, what is perhaps Pessoa’s single greatest poetic achievement, “Maritime ode.” As Zenith points out, “It is a mystery how Pessoa, during one of the outwardly and inwardly busiest periods of his life, was able to muster the creative concentration needed to produce its more than nine hundred perfectly concatenated lines” (2021: 469). Pessoa had never before (and rarely after) completed a project on such a scale, which illustrates just how important *Orpheu* was to his artistic development. Indeed, *Orpheu* was, as Zenith points out, “Pessoa’s glorious coming-out as a creative writer” (2021: 445).

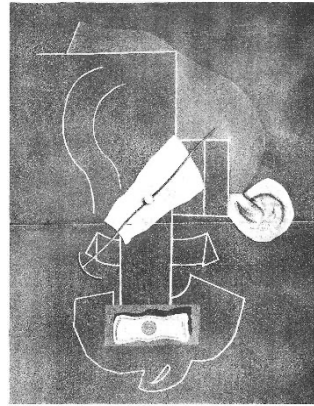
“*Somos o assunto do dia em Lisboa*” [We are the subject of the day in Lisbon], Pessoa wrote to Côrtes-Rodrigues, noting that the publication “*foi um triunfo absoluto, especialmente com o reclame que A Capital nos fez com uma tarefa na primeira*

página” (PESSOA, 2009: 373-374; italics in the original) [it was an absolute triumph, especially with the publicity that A Capital gave us with a beating on the front page].

Orpheu didn’t last—one might argue it couldn’t last—yet it served its purpose as a catalyst and provocateur. While a third issue was planned, even designed, the magazine lost its financial backing from Sá-Carneiro’s father, as it also lost a few contributors. By April 1916, it also lost Sá-Carneiro himself, to suicide. The spirit of *Orpheu* lived on, however, with the publication of *Portugal Futurista* in 1917, a magazine that included many of *Orpheu*’s contributors and could be considered the magazine’s heir apparent. (It’s worth noting that a facsimile edition of all three issues of *Orpheu*, including the uncorrected page proofs of the planned issue No. 3, was published by Tinta-da-china, in Lisbon, to mark the magazine’s 100th anniversary; cf. AA.VV., 2015)

David Swartz, the translator of Nuno Júdice’s *The Religious Mantle* (New Meridian, 2020), has rendered the two published issues of *Orpheu* into English for the first time. As Swartz writes in his Translator’s Note, his “initial motive was simply to read it; to do so, [he] needed to translate it” (AA.VV., 2021: vii). He has done an admirable job. The book is faithfully rendered, including reproductions of the original covers and all the front matter, and even its advertisements (mostly for books by the magazine’s contributors, some planned but never executed).

And this is no mean feat. There are the usual intricacies of translating poetry from one language to another, for which Swartz offers the caveat, “the exquisite rhymes and onomatopoeic reality of these poems will be completely lost on English readers” (AA.VV., 2021: vii). He tried, as he notes, “to capture their spirit as a whole” (AA.VV., 2021: vii), to the best of his ability. The publication of the two volumes of *Orpheu* in English is an important contribution to Portuguese letters. To have this groundbreaking, revolutionary magazine available to English-language readers—the magazines have previously been translated into Spanish by Ana Lucía de Bastos and into French by Patrick Quillier—allows non-Portuguese readers to better understand the roots of Portuguese modernism and just how influential Fernando Pessoa was.



SANTA RITA PINTOR – Static interpenetration of a head – absolute congenital complementarity
(GALLERIE SUVAUT, 1913)

Fig. 1. *Static Interpenetration of a Head*, by Santa Rita Pintor, Paris, 1913.

New Meridian has also managed to reproduce some of the typographical innovations of Mário Sá-Carneiro's "Poems without support," as well as decent black and white reproductions of Santa Rita Pintor's "futurist" portrait collages (see Fig. 1), and the context-setting Preface by Nuno Júdice, written specifically for this book, is a good primer toward understanding the impact of what follows in the book's pages.

Swartz's translation of Pessoa/Campos's "Maritime ode" strikes a contemporary note compared to earlier translations, bringing new life to the poem for 21st-century readers (the latest, previous version of the poem is Zenith's from 2006; PESSOA, 2006). Compare Swartz's version of the fourth stanza, a stanza which was the subject of an insightful exegesis by Filipa Freitas in *Pessoa Plural*, n.º 8 (FREITAS, 2015):

Ah, todo o cais é uma saudade de pedra!
 E quando o navio larga do cais
 E se repara de repente que se abriu um espaço
 Entre o cais e o navio,
 Vem-me, não sei porquê, uma angústia recente,
 Uma névoa de sentimentos de tristeza
 Que brilha ao sol das minhas angústias relvadas
 Como a primeira janela onde a madrugada bate,
 E me envolve como uma recordação
 [duma outra pessoa
 Que fôsse misteriosamente minha.

(PESSOA, 2014: 73)

[Ah, the whole pier is nostalgia in stone!
 And when the ship leaves the pier
 And suddenly one notices that a space has opened up
 Between the pier and the ship,
 A new anguish comes over me, I don't know why,
 A fog of sad feelings
 That shines in the sun of my grassy anguish
 Like the first window hit by the dawn,
 Surrounds me with the memory
 [of another person
 That has been mysteriously mine.

(AA.VV., 2021: 132)]

with Pessoa's own translation:

Ah, every quay is a regret made of stone!
 And when the ship leaves the quay
 And we note suddenly that a space is widening
 Between the quay and the ship,
 There comes to me, I know not why, a recent anguish,
 A mist of feelings of sadness

That shines in the sun of my mossy anguishes
 Like the first window the morning strikes on,
 And clings round me like someone else's remembrance
 Which is somehow mysteriously mine.

(FREITAS, 2015: 142)

A contemporary note, yes, but closer in spirit to Whitman, albeit a Whitman viewed through Marinetti's futurist lens, freeing the poet's voice to come forth on the page in all its violent imagery.

The Pessoa/Campos translations alone would make this publication worth having on one's shelf; add to that, Swartz's renderings of Sá-Carneiros's "Hints of gold" and "Poems without support," as well as Pessoa's "static drama in one scene," "The seafarer," [Pessoa used the title "The sailor"--*Ed.*] and poems by the more obscure voices that appeared in the pages of *Orpheu*, many of whom have never been translated into English, and this is an important volume indeed.

"Independently of the evolution that each of the magazine's collaborators would undergo after 1915," as Júdice writes in his Preface,

the generation of *Orpheu*, with all its diversity of expressions, from the most conservative to the most radical, represents one of the most profound revolutions in the language and themes of Portuguese literature, with traces that extended [well into] into the 20th century and which remain both alive and unmatched up until this day.

(AA.VV., 2021: vi)

Along with the publication of the various translations of Pessoa's own *The Book of Disquiet*, this translation of such an important and influential magazine provides English-language readers with a fuller picture of the impact of Pessoa and the *Orpheu* generation.

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