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Seven Songs of Decline and Other Poems by Mário de
Sá-Carneiro (review)

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Sá-Carneiro, Mário de. *Seven Songs of Decline and Other Poems*. Translated by Margaret Jull Costa and Ana Luísa Amaral. Edited by Ricardo Vasconcelos. London: Francis Boutle Publishers, 2020. 131 pp.

“Beat the tin drums, / Skip, hop, yell and somersault, / Have the ringmaster crack his whip, / Summon the clowns and acrobats,” writes Mário de Sá-Carneiro in a widely cited untitled poem, calling for fanfare at his funeral. The poet’s reemergence, over a century after his suicide, in Margaret Jull Costa and Ana Luísa Amaral’s luminous translation—the first book-length selection of Sá-Carneiro in English—surely warrants some kind of raucous celebration.

Although the gods may love those who die young, as Fernando Pessoa commented upon Sá-Carneiro’s passing, they have not always conferred a loving posthumous readership on the writers of whom we have been prematurely deprived. Such had been the case of Sá-Carneiro, one of Portugal’s finest modernist poets, who, alongside best friend Pessoa, spawned several of the intellectual trends that would turbocharge the writers of *Orpheu*, the literary magazine that he launched with his father’s money. While Sá-Carneiro could long claim a coterie of devoted readers in Lusophone circles, he is a virtual unknown in the English-speaking world, having appeared most notably in translation by the English poet Ted Hughes, who freely rendered three of his poems using crib literals provided by Helder and Suzette Macedo.¹ Sá-Carneiro’s long absence from world literature has much to do with the unique challenges his poetry poses for the translator, strung through as it is with nonce images and slippery syntagms: verbal opulence of an obsessional quality. Jull Costa, in a moving translator’s note, recalls that the “sheer complexity” (9) of Sá-Carneiro’s poetry had deterred her from the project earlier in her translator career.

Aiding our translators in their Herculean task is the excellent work of the bilingual volume’s editor and prefator. In Ricardo Vasconcelos, Sá-Carneiro has found a critic willing to make a case for his poetry on the merits, rather than engage in the critical rubbernecking at “a life doomed to end in suicide” (6) that has marred Sá-Carneiro’s legacy. Cognizant of a debut translation’s outsized ability to mold a writer’s reception, Vasconcelos introduces Sá-Carneiro succinctly, yet humanely, in his intellectual specificity. After sketching the poet’s family and life, from his short stint at the University of Coimbra to his dandified final years in Paris, Vasconcelos situates Sá-Carneiro’s surprisingly vast *œuvre* in early twentieth-century Portuguese letters. To that end, Vasconcelos underscores the poet’s heady alloy of self-satire and ontological angst, a key component of the literary *blague* that would sweep Lisbon under the triumvirate of Mário de Sá-Carneiro, José de Almada Negreiros, and Fernando Pessoa.

Comprised of two dozen poems presented *en face* with the Portuguese text, *Seven Songs of Decline and Other Poems* offers a representative medley of Sá-Carneiro’s poetry, encompassing both the greatest hits—including “Partida/

Departure,” 14; “Quasi/Almost,” 28; “Sete canções de declínio/Seven Songs of Decline,” 50; “Aquele outro/The Other,” 98; “Manucure,” 104)—as well as personal poems in a lower key, such as “Abrigo/Refuge” (64) and “De repente a minha vida/Suddenly, my Entire Life” (128). The selection affords readers old and new a glimpse of Sá-Carneiro’s poetry as it evolved past its ultra-symbolist origins in *Dispersão* (*Dispersal*, 1913) and into the boldly futuristic “Manucure” (1915) as well as the intersectionist suite *Indícios de ouro* (*Traces of Gold*, published posthumously, in 1937). One wishes there had been space enough for poems like “Salomé” and “Como eu não possuo,” which—given their memorable treatment of sexuality, gender, and the visual arts—highlight the subversiveness and multimodality at the heart of Sá-Carneiro’s poems and prose alike. Perhaps Vasconcelos’s most noteworthy editorial decision was that of preserving Sá-Carneiro’s early twentieth-century Portuguese orthography. The choice not to modernize spelling has, fascinatingly, resulted in the sort of typographic alienation, as well as the heightened sense of linguistic renewal, that contoured Sá-Carneiro’s literary modernity, particularly in the futurist masterpiece “Manucure.”

Margaret Jull Costa and Ana Luísa Amaral have succeeded most spectacularly by recreating Sá-Carneiro’s iridescent poetic idiom in a language inclined towards concretion. Their translation is as sumptuously shaded and synesthetic as its Portuguese counterpart, and the pair’s maximalist approach has amplified resonances that might otherwise go unnoticed in a straight literal. Take, for instance, the semantic rhyme of “Ah, to be contented with *the here and near*”—the duo’s solution for “Se ao menos eu permanecesse aquem,” (Quasi/Almost, 28–9, emphasis mine)—with “The remote for me, far nearer / than *any here and now*,” their answer to “Pra mim o longe é mais perto / Do que o presente lugar” (Sete canções de declínio/Seven Songs of Decline, 52–53, emphasis mine). With discreetly expansionist lines like these, the translators are able to render more completely Sá-Carneiro’s tics, which are not only verbal but also thematic in nature. There being no better way to evaluate a poetic translation than to vivisection a stanza, let us consider the second quatrain of “Pied-de-Nez/The Snub”:

O Erro sempre a rir-me em
destrambelho—
Falso misterio, mas que não se
abrange . . .
De antigo armário que agoirento
range,
Minh’alma actual o esverdinhado
espelho . . .

My Mistake’s still there guffawing
at me—
The false but uncontainable
mystery . . .
Of an ancient wardrobe groaning
with omens,
My present-day soul the tar-
nished mirror . . .
(78–9)

Through the first line’s doublet of guttural Rs and the rapid, alliterative sweep of lines three and four, the stanza enacts sonically the very distortion that the poet’s soul has wreaked on his self-image: representative Sá-Carneiro. The path

our translators take is different—they opt for the onomatopoeic “guffaw,” and, naturally, the vocalic quality of the alliteration has been altered—but the impact of their lines is no less forceful. On occasion these phonetic reveries go further than the Portuguese text would have it—say, “Seeps and creeps inside me” for “Me penetrou vagamente” (24–25). Yet if one believes, as I do, that on the level of soundscape, there can be no holds barred when translating a poet like Mário de Sá-Carneiro, then solutions of this sort become essential to sustaining the work’s kinetic energy across many pages.

Vasconcelos invites us to remember Sá-Carneiro not for the life he took, but for the life he gave to an entire generation of Portuguese writers—to remember him as somebody who “blew the dust off Portuguese poetry” (6). Now, thanks to Vasconcelos’s compelling frame narrative and the translators’ electric rendering of even the most arcane verses, we can clear away once and for all the dust that had gathered on Sá-Carneiro’s poetry. And, at long last, English-speaking readers may turn to the *Orpheu* poet for a much-needed jolt to their literary consciousness.

Note

1. See Ted Hughes’s *Selected Translations*, ed. Daniel Weissbort, Faber and Faber, 2006, pp. 19–21, 208.

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