

Charles Rice-Davis translates Mário de Sá-Carneiro

Mário de Sá-Carneiro, as his famous friend and collaborator Fernando Pessoa understood it, never belonged in the world. For Pessoa, he was destined to be a misunderstood genius, a prophet, a Cassandra. And recalling his friend's 1916 death by suicide, Pessoa invoked the exiled Ovid: *In qua scribebat, Barbara terra fuit* (2005: 456). Forgive the poet's words. They were written in a foreign land.

The three poems produced here, two from Portuguese, one from French, are taken from letters Sá-Carneiro wrote to Pessoa. The poem titled here, "The End," is one of the better known poems of Portuguese modernism, though in the original letter, Sá-Carneiro gives it no title. Nor did he title the poem translated from French. The three poems touch on recurring thematic and stylistic features of his published work and private letters: ruins, fragments, the desire to inhabit the body of a woman (most famously as a plot point of *A Confissão de Lúcio*) and the anticipation of his own death (in Paris, for example, as imagined in the 1913 "Dispersão"). Likewise, all exhibit a signature practice of integrating wordless, dotted lines into poems, which he had done in earlier published and manuscript poems. These dotted lines have been restored, thanks to Ricardo Vasconcelos' exhaustive, monumental edition of Sá-Carneiro's poetry and correspondence with Pessoa. The lines are ruined, are ruins: inscrutable hieroglyphs that vex the poet's few, but devoted, readers.

Which brings us back to Ovid. Sá-Carneiro had indeed died in a foreign land, in a hotel room in the Pigalle section of Paris. But the two cases are different, as Pessoa well knew. Ovid mourned his decaying mastery of Latin, caused by speaking other languages in his years among the Scythians. He feared that his poetry had been corrupted, that he had been writing "barbarisms" (1924: 100, 238). But the concern for Sá-Carneiro's writing was that he always needed to barbarise himself, or that he couldn't, in order to translate his prophesy into words understood by worldly readers. He'd written about the feeling of *saudades*—nostalgia, longing—for "undreamt dreams."

Pessoa takes this seriously when he casts Sá-Carneiro as an otherworldly prophet standing at the transom between realms, translating—where possible, where the lines of the codex haven't faded into obscurity—for barbarians like us.

Ovid (1924), *Tristia. Ex Ponto*. A. L. Wheeler, translator. Revised by G. P. Goold. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924.

Pessoa, F. (2005), *Obras em prosa*. Cleonice Berardinelli, editor. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar.

Sá-Carneiro, M (2015). *Em ouro e alma: A correspondência com Fernando Pessoa*. Ricardo Vasconcelos and Jerónimo Pizarro, Editors. Lisbon: Tinta da China.

——— (2017). *Poesia completa*. Ricardo Vasconcelos, Editor. Lisbon: Tinta da China.

The End [from the Portuguese, originally untitled. Anthologised as 'Fim']

When I die, clang the cans,
Break out in leaps and bounds,
Crack the whips in the air,
Call in clowns and acrobats.

Let my coffin go out on a donkey
Adorned in the Andalusian style...
To a dead man nothing is denied,
I definitely want to go by donkey.

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Deposition [From the French, originally untitled.]

The Golden throne of the ever-lost I
Has fallen.
But the conqueror's vanished
Inside the palace.

I search in vain his armour,
His standards...
(Amidst the gilding, I evade Me:
—Have I slain the eagles of my Soul?...)

Around me all grew tarnished
In glory.
—Elsewhere, blood-soaked, my angst
Was Ivory.

All echoes intone Colour
In my silence,
And like a shooting star
I rose—on Wings of pain...

I was the emperor's chalice,
I was the queen's dagger...

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I've conjured myself in woven moments
With a Page's tender care.
Since I was the redhead of other phantoms
In my sharpened fever-dreams.

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Feminine [orig. Port. 'Feminina'; from same letter to Pessoa as 'Fim']

I want to be a woman so I can spread
Myself, on benches, with friends, in cafés.
I want to be a woman so I can spread
Rice powder on my face, for all to see, in cafés.

I want to be a woman to avoid thoughts of life
To know old men I can hit up for money—
I want to be a women to spend the whole day
Talking fashion, gossiping—all absentmindedly.

I want to be a woman to have many lovers
Bamboozling them all—to the point of obsession—
How I'll tease my svelte, blonde lover
With a fat, ugly, dandy, little boy-toy...

I want to be a women to excite all who see me,
I want to be a woman so I'll never say I'm sorry...

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