Painting the Nails with a Parisian Polish
Modern Dissemination and Central Redemption
in the Poetry of Mário de Sá-Carneiro

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Keywords

Mário de Sá-Carneiro, Modernism, Fragmentation of the subject, Semiperiphery, Paris, Eiffel Tower.

Abstract

This study analyzes the ways in which the city of Paris contributes to the definition of a modern fragmented identity in the poetry of Mário de Sá-Carneiro. Sá-Carneiro’s poetry demonstrates how the experience of the modern Parisian life leads to the fragmentation and dissolution of his poetic subject, at the same time that this dissolution in the city is the very condition for the subject’s existence. Moreover this identity largely owes to the perspective of an individual who is a member of the semiperipheral Portuguese society. Ultimately this subject finds a form of redemption both from his ontological deferment and that semiperipheral condition in the utmost cosmopolitanism of Paris and, as happens with other avant-garde discourses, in the technical modernity of the French capital.

Palavras-chave

Mário de Sá-Carneiro, Modernismo, Fragmentação do sujeito, Semiperiferia, Paris, Torre Eiffel.

Resumo

Este estudo analisa de que forma a cidade de Paris contribui para a definição de uma identidade moderna fragmentada na poesia de Mário de Sá-Carneiro. A poesia de Sá-Carneiro demonstra como a experiência da vida moderna parisiense leva à fragmentação e à dissolução do sujeito poético, ao mesmo tempo que esta dissolução na cidade é a própria condição necessária à existência do sujeito. Esta identidade é devedora do ponto de vista de um indivíduo membro da sociedade semiperiférica portuguesa. Em última análise, o sujeito encontra a redenção tanto para o seu diferimento ontológico como para essa condição semiperiférica no cosmopolitismo absoluto de Paris e, tal como acontece com outros discursos vanguardistas, na modernidade técnica da capital francesa.

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A central figure in Portuguese literary Modernism, Mário de Sá-Carneiro was born in 1890 and committed suicide in Paris in April 1916. Along with Fernando Pessoa, Mário de Sá-Carneiro was one of the main figures of the magazine Orpheu, the central Modernist journal published in Lisbon in 1915, which caused public outrage in the Portuguese literary field and beyond. The period between October 1912, when Sá-Carneiro leaves for Paris, and his death, with intervals of time spent in Lisbon, corresponds to the development of an original collection of Modernist poetry that starts off with strong affinities with fin-de-siècle Symbolism and comes to encompass incursions into avant-garde literary experimentation.

Mário de Sá-Carneiro’s works have often been read in highly mythical ways. This reality partly owes to the fact that so many elements of his texts parallel or coincide with aspects of his own biography, and namely that these overlaps include suicide itself, a topic addressed often times theatrically in his writings. To these more mythical interpretations of Sá-Carneiro’s works have contributed the biographical insights provided by the collection of his letters to Fernando Pessoa, which are in themselves highly valuable Modernist textual constructions and a locus of literary experimentation. By focusing on Sá-Carneiro’s biography, these approaches have only partially contributed to the understanding of why and how Paris is a protagonist in Sá-Carneiro’s poetry and moreover how the city is central in the very definition of Sá-Carneiro’s literary modernity.

Adopting a perspective that rejects calling to discussion Mário de Sá-Carneiro’s life or death, this article studies the ways in which the city of Paris permeates Mário de Sá-Carneiro’s poetry and decisively contributes to the definition of a modern fragmented identity, one which often times is presented as disseminated in the city. Sá-Carneiro’s poetry evidences a poetic subject whose experience of the Parisian life leads to his fragmentation and dissolution in the city,

1 The central characteristics of a veritable Sá-Carneiro “myth,” as Fernando Cabral Martins has synthetized, include “the reference to Pessoa as a major poet, and a relation between [Sá-Carneiro’s] prophecy-poems and his suicide” [“Os dados centrais do mito estão aqui: a referência a Pessoa como poeta maior e a relação entre os poemas-profecias e o suicídio”] (Martins, 1994: 16). Fernando Cabral Martins demonstrates how Mário de Sá-Carneiro evolved from a figure of public scandal early after the publication of Orpheu – more so than Fernando Pessoa –, to that of a literary icon immediately after his suicide in 26 April 1916. In fact Mário de Sá-Carneiro became emblematic for literary groups as diverse, and frequently opposed in their literary views, as the first Modernists, the writers of the second Modernism, associated with the journal presença, Neo-realist or Surrealists, all authors who chose to focus on specific aspects of his work and life, and oftentimes on his death (Martins, 1994: 39; see also Martinho, 1989). The fact that the author’s suicide occurred in Paris directly influenced a tradition of highlighting Sá-Carneiro’s biography to read his works and vice-versa. This is visible, for example, in the early obituaries of May 1916, which attribute a hypothetical moral dissolution and the death of Mário de Sá-Carneiro to the Parisian spleen (apud Martins, 1994: 21), or in the imagery of an almost poète maudit that developed throughout the twentieth century.