

The Perfect Hour: an interview with Margaret Jull Costa and new translations from the Portuguese

In this installment, Claudia Serea interviews the celebrated translator Margaret Jull Costa, who, together with Colin Rorrison, has translated *The Perfect Hour* (Cold Hub Press, New Zealand, 2015) by the beloved Portuguese poet Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen. *The Perfect Hour* features translations from two of Sophia's poetry collections — *Dia do Mar* and *O Nome das Coisas* — translations made by Colin Rorrison before his sudden death in Argentina at the age of 28. Included are some of Margaret Jull Costa's favorite poems from the book. We hope you like them as much as we did.

—*Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman*



THE PERFECT HOUR

selected poems by

Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen

*translated from the Portuguese by
Colin Rorrison with Margaret Jull Costa*

1. How do you decide which poems or poets to translate? Do you have favorite poets that you like to translate?

MJC: I am mainly a prose translator and have been for the last thirty years, so translating poetry is something of a new departure for me, although I have since translated a collection of poems by another Portuguese poet, Ana Luísa Amaral, and would definitely like to do more. Translating poetry somehow allows you more freedom than translating prose, probably because a good poet plays so much with language and nuance and sound and rhythm, and the meaning is often oblique and condensed. This makes different demands on the translator, and I find those demands very liberating linguistically.

2. Do you have any translating rituals?

MJC: I do, in the sense that I do a couple of versions of, say, a chapter or a poem, on screen, then print it out, edit/read it through several times on paper, make those changes on screen, then leave that version to sit for a few days, before going back, editing again on screen, printing out and editing again on paper, until the whole text (whether prose or poem) is (I hope) working seamlessly.

3. Do you try to stay true to the poem, in terms of denotations, connotations, tone, imagery, lines, rhythms? What are the challenges a translator faces? What do you understand your primary jobs and/or goals to be when translating a poem? Does this ever conflict with someone else, or with a poem itself?

MJC: Fidelity for translators of poetry often involves infidelity in perhaps not rhyming when the original does rhyme or in changing the rhythm, when the rhythm of English is very different from the rhythm of the original language. A good translation is such a paradoxical thing in that it is exactly the same as the original except that everything is different. I think tone of voice is perhaps the key to any writer or writing, but that's not the hardest part to capture. Perhaps the hardest thing is keeping the density of denotations and connotations and sometimes (often?) losing one or more of those, but possibly adding other English connotations somewhere else. My primary goal when translating a poem is to give the English reader a real sense of the original in tone and imagery and colour. In poetry, I prefer my translation to be printed face to face with the original, which is slightly daunting, of course, but I don't feel the original poem and the translation should exist without each other. They are rather like not-quite-identical twins. I both like (and fear!) laying my translation bare like that. Some readers will inevitably disagree with my version, but my translation exists so that readers with no knowledge of Portuguese can at least have some access to the original version.

4. What is lost in translation? What is gained?

MJC: I think I have probably answered this question above.

5. *Can you give an example of an "untranslatable" word or phrase, and tell our readers how you brought it into English?*

MJC: As a translator, I can't really believe in "untranslatable" words! My job is to find a way to translate all the words, and that often requires quite radical decisions. Perhaps I could take one line from the brief poem "Oasis" and talk about the decisions Colin and I made about choice of words. "o canto/da flauta será nítido no liso/da penumbra" means literally: "the song of the flute will be clear/distinct/bright/clear in the softness/smoothness of the shadows/half-light/gloom". We chose to make the adjective "nítido" a verb, "shine", rather than a rather passive and clunky "will be", and while in translating "liso" as "softness", we have lost the repetition of sounds in the Portuguese ("nítido"/"liso"), we have replaced that with two nicely sussurating words in "shine" and "softness". And we chose "half-light" rather than "shadows" for "penumbra" because one can have too much alliteration! And "gloom" seemed wrong in a poem that promises sublime serenity. Every line of every poem involves such decisions and the translator cannot really afford to give in to the idea that certain words cannot be translated.

6. *Do you have a metaphor you use to explain the translation process and the role of the translator in bringing a piece from one language into another?*

The simile I usually use is that of actors or musicians who, like literary translators, are interpreters of someone else's words or notes. Just as no two Hamlets and no two interpretations of a Bach cello suite will be the same, so no two translations of a poem will be the same. The interpreter's personality will inevitably come through, but always clothed in that other sensibility and always imbued with a desire to be faithful to the voice and imagination of the original creator of those words or notes.

7. *How and why did you decide to translate the poems in The Perfect Hour by Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen? What attracted you to it? What were the challenges?*

MJC: I was the Portuguese tutor on a translation summer school in London in 2011. Colin Rorrison was one of my students. During the classes, we tried our hand at translating a couple of poems. Afterwards, he got in touch to say that he was keen to translate more poetry and could I suggest a Portuguese poet. I suggested Sophia. Unbeknown to me and to his parents, he translated a large number of her poems (as well as some short stories by other writers), and these were only discovered after his death at the tragically young age of 28. His parents, Helen and Hugh, wrote to me with the sad news of his death, but also to say that they had discovered all these wonderful translations. I read them and immediately felt we should find a publisher. I did, however, feel that these were not finished versions and, with Helen and Hugh's permission, I drafted and re-drafted, always trying to keep close to Colin's versions, but occasionally departing from them quite radically. In the end, after further editing sessions with Helen and Hugh (both of whom are translators from German), I sent the finished poems to Roger Hickin, who really liked them and offered to publish them. The challenge in translating Sophia's poems is to keep the pellucid clarity of the language as well as the

sometimes oblique meaning behind the words, and to resist the temptation to make the oblique and tantalising explicit.

8. Do you have a few favorite poems from this book that you could share?

MJC: Yes: I particularly love ‘This is the perfect hour’ (from which we took the title). ‘Shipwreck’ (with its Shakespearean overtones), ‘Oasis’ and ‘When.’

9. Do you have any advice for the young translators just starting out? What should they do? What should they avoid?

MJC: My advice is always read, read, read the best novelists and poets in your own language and in the languages you translate into – and, of course, translate and experiment and see what you and your language can do.

10. What's next?

MJC: The collection of poems by Ana Luísa Amaral is going to be published by Oxbow Press in the UK, but Ana Luísa and I plan to continue working together. Otherwise, my next two projects are translating a novel by the Basque author Bernardo Atxaga and another by the wonderful nineteenth-century Portuguese novelist Eça de Queiroz.

É esta a hora...

É esta a hora perfeita em que se cala
O confuso murmurar das gentes
E dentro de nós finalmente fala
A voz grave dos sonhos indolentes.

É esta a hora em que as rosas são as rosas
Que floriram nos jardins persas
Onde Saadi e Hafiz as viram e as amaram.
É esta a hora das vozes misteriosas
Que os meus desejos preferiram e chamaram.
É esta a hora das longas conversas
Das folhas com as folhas unicamente.
É esta a hora em que o tempo é abolido
E nem sequer conheço a minha face.

This is the perfect hour

This is the perfect hour, when a hush descends
On our muted human murmurings
And inside us finally there speaks
The grave voice of indolent dreams.

This is the hour when roses are the roses
That flowered in the Persian gardens
Where Saadi and Hafiz saw and loved them.
This is the hour of the mysterious voices
Chosen and summoned by my desires.
This is the hour of the long conversations
Held between leaf and leaf.
This is the hour when time is abolished
And I do not even know my own face.

Navio naufragado

Vinha de um mundo
Sonoro, nítido e denso.
E agora o mar o guarda no seu fundo
Silencioso e suspenso.

É um esqueleto branco o capitão,
Branco como as areias,
Tem duas conchas na mão
Tem algas em vez de veias
E uma medusa em vez de coração.

Em seu redor as grutas de mil cores
Tomam formas incertas quase ausentes
E a cor das águas toma a cor das flores
E os animais são mudos, transparentes.

E os corpos espalhados nas areias
Tremem à passagem das sereias,
As sereias leves dos cabelos roxos
Que têm olhos vagos e ausentes
E verdes como os olhos de videntes.

Shipwreck

It came from a world
Sonorous, brilliant, dense,
And now the sea keeps it in its depths,
Suspended and silent.

The captain is a white skeleton,
White as the sands,
He holds two shells in his hand
He has seaweed for veins
And a jellyfish in place of a heart.

Around him the caves of many colours
Take on vague, evanescent shapes,
And the water turns the colour of flowers,
And every creature is dumb, transparent.

And the bodies scattered on the sands
Tremble as the mermaids pass,
Weightless mermaids with purple hair,
With distant, absent eyes,
Green as the eyes of visionaries.

Oásis

Penetraremos no palmar
A água será clara o leite doce
O calor será leve o linho branco e fresco
O silêncio estará nu – o canto
Da flauta será nítido no liso
Da penumbra

Lavaremos nossas mãos de desencontro e poeira

Oasis

We will enter the grove of palms
The water will be clear the milk sweet
The air will be balmy the linen white and fresh
The silence will be naked – the song

Of the flute will shine in the softness
Of the half-light

We will wash our hands of disagreement and dust

Quando

Quando o meu corpo apodrecer e eu for morta
Continuará o jardim, o céu e o mar,
E como hoje igualmente hão-de bailar
As quatro estações à minha porta.

Outros em Abril passarão no pomar
Em que eu tantas vezes passei,
Haverá longos poentes sobre o mar,
Outros amarão as coisas que eu amei.

Será o mesmo brilho, a mesma festa,
Será o mesmo jardim à minha porta,
E os cabelos doirados da floresta,
Como se eu não estivesse morta.

When

When my body falls sick and I die
The garden will still be here, the sea and the sky,
And the four seasons, just as they do today,
Will dance at my door.

In April, others will stroll in the orchard
Where I so often walked.
There will be long sunsets over the sea,
Others will love the things I loved.

The same glow, the same celebration,
The same garden at my door,
The same golden-haired forest,
Just as if I hadn't died.

Poet and storyteller **Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen** (1919–2004) is one of Portugal's best-loved writers. Her poems express her deep connection with the natural world, her main subjects being childhood and youth, nature and, above all, the sea. She was also steeped in classical literature, and some of her Greek-inspired poems are present in *The Perfect Hour* (Cold Hub Press, New Zealand, 2015) which features translations from two of her poetry collections — *Dia do Mar* and *O Nome das Coisas* — translations made by Colin Rorrison before his sudden death in Argentina at the age of 28, and edited by the celebrated translator Margaret Jull Costa.

Dia do Mar was published in 1947, when the poet was 28. Its subjects are gardens, the sea, the beach and the house, and its central theme, the search for perfection, purity and harmony. The poems have all the intensity of childhood memories, but are imbued, too, with an adult awareness of mortality. *O Nome das Coisas* was published thirty years later, after the Carnation Revolution of 1974 and the overthrow of the Salazar/Caetano regime after almost fifty years of repression. Many of its poems are political and refer to a particular time and place and situation, and yet they remain strikingly bracing and fresh.



Colin Rorrison was born in Leeds in 1983 and died suddenly on 8th September 2012, at age 28, in Lomas de Zamora, Buenos Aires Province on his first visit to Latin America. He studied Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Edinburgh and also attended university and college in Coimbra in Portugal and in Málaga and Barcelona in Spain. He left behind a substantial body of poetry and prose translations from the Portuguese and Spanish, some of which have been published posthumously.



Margaret Jull Costa has been a literary translator for nearly thirty years and has translated novels and short stories by such writers as Eça de Queiroz, Fernando Pessoa, José Saramago, Javier Marías and Bernardo Atxaga. She has won various prizes, including, in 2008, the PEN/Book-of-the-Month Club Prize and the Oxford Weidenfeld Translation Prize for *The Maias* by Eça de Queiroz, and, most recently, the 2012 Calouste Gulbenkian Translation Prize for *The Word Tree* by Teolinda Gersão, for which she was also runner-up with her translation of António Lobo Antunes' *The Land at the End of the World* (*Os cus de Judas*). In 2013 she was invited to become a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and in 2014 was awarded an OBE for services to literature.

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