



The reversed river and the poet on the bridge: Mário de Andrade's "A meditação sobre o Tietê" (1922)

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Abstract

"A meditação sobre o Tietê" is the last long poem of Brazilian modernist poet Mário de Andrade (1893–1945). Taking the particular geographic and historic situation of the river Tietê as a starting point, this article analyzes the role of the river in the poem as well as the special position of the poet standing on a bridge above the river. The fact that the Tietê river flows inland instead of leading directly to the ocean allows the poet to construct quite a singular poetic image of the river that contradicts traditional literary characteristics of rivers such as (creative) fertility and the irreversible linear passing of time. By adding a comparative reading of poems by Guillaume Apollinaire, Hart Crane, and Ingeborg Bachmann, to our analysis, we can show the close connection between the image of the poet on the bridge, and the poetic principles that underly each of these lyric texts.

Keywords Brazilian poetry · River · Bridge · Mário de Andrade · Poetics · Modernismo

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*je veux devenir un fleuve, un
long fleuve sans préface ni
épilogue, juste pour emporter dans
ma suite mes linges sales, un fleuve
qui se jettera une fois pour toute
dans l'océan sans faire des mioches
par ci, des mioches par là ...*

Le Fleuve dans le Ventre
(Mwanza Mujila 2013, p. 92).

Mário de Andrade (1893–1945) was one of the most brilliant figures of the Brazilian modernist movement in the first decades of the twentieth century. As poet, novelist and ethnomusicologist he was always concerned with the cultural heritage of Brazil and how to face the challenges of a heterogenous society emerging inexorably from a colonial past into the yet unshaped future of a modern nation. The unstoppable development of

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modern life, particularly in the big cities Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, where population grew significantly due to industrialization, as well as the ideas and concepts of European avant-garde movements that reached Brazil at the turn of the century, led to an important artistic production of Brazilian *modernismo*, although a wide majority of Brazilian modernists insisted on their individuality and independence from European influence. In February 1922, the “magic year” of vanguardism, when milestones like *Ulysses* by James Joyce, *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot or *Trilce* by Peruvian poet César Vallejo were published, the *Semana de Arte Moderno* in São Paulo was the starting point of the Brazilian modernist movement that included not only writers, but also visual artists and composers. Their main principles were.

a dessacralização da forma, a exploração do coloquial, o elogio do inconsciente, a incorporação do urbano como um espaço necessário, especialmente, no caso da lírica, e a necessidade de apontar o anacrônico que parecia muitas vezes este espaço no contexto literário brasileiro em geral. (Oakley 2000, p. 64).

[“the desacralisation of form, the exploration of the colloquial, the praise of the unconscious, the incorporation of the urban as a necessary space, especially in the case of the lyric, and the need to point out how anachronistic this space often seemed in the Brazilian literary context in general” (all translations are of mine, H.T.)].

Pauliceia desvairada (1922), Mário de Andrade’s first published volume of poetry, as well as his novel *Macunaíma* (1928) and the posthumous published *Lira paulistana* (1946) which includes “A meditação sobre o Tietê” show these main characteristics of modernist literature. Most of the poems are situated in an urban space, and also the hero of the novel, Macunaíma, travels from the Amazonas region to the big city. Throughout the novel, Mário de Andrade’s vision of a Brazilian society that builds on its past and integrates all heterogenous parts into a new and just way of coexistence becomes most clear. Hereby the poet and the language play an important part by providing a form of communication with a high potential for identification and for identity construction.

This article offers a reading of Mário de Andrade’s last poem “A meditação sobre o Tietê”, a long poem with 334 verses that, as the title suggests, flow in free verse without a clear metric pattern, and that was written only weeks before his death in 1945. On the one hand, the paper will focus on the characteristics and functions that the poem ascribes to the river, and on the other hand it aims at highlighting the spatial position of the poet standing on a bridge over the river. This particular setting for a poet can be found in various poems written in the first half of the twentieth century, for example in the poems “Le pont Mirabeau” by Guillaume Apollinaire (Apollinaire 1969, p. 64), *The bridge* by Hart Crane (Crane 1970) and “Die Brücken” by Ingeborg Bachmann (Bachmann 1978, p. 60). A comparative reading might shed light on the relationship between poet and river and also on the poet’s function in his society. It will also help us to differentiate the stable space of the poet on the bridge from the flowing space of the river underneath the bridge and to understand their respective effects on the changing poetics throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

As a starting point for the analysis, I would like to cite the entry on “River” from Cirlot’s *Dictionary of Symbols*, which stresses right from the beginning the ambivalence of the river as a symbol:

An ambivalent symbol since it corresponds to the creative power both of nature and of time. On the one hand it signifies fertility and the progressive irrigation of the soil; and on the other hand it stands for the irreversible passage of time and, in consequence, for a sense of loss and oblivion. (Cirlot 1962, p. 262).

In the cultural context of superior naval power that was decisive for the history of Portugal and Spain, and consequently for Brazil, the rivers traditionally had two more major functions—first strategic and then also literary—which we could sum up under the category of “(creative) power”. Historically, the rivers that flow through the Iberian Peninsula to the sea, like the Tagus or the Guadalquivir, were the routes where the voyages of the seafarers and conquerors started. By leading them to the open sea, these rivers were a promise of freedom, new discoveries and glory, and of finding a seaway to India or for crossing the Atlantic Ocean to the shores of Brazil. From the perspective of the colonial conquerors, the inland flowing rivers of the American continent were a welcome way to move westwards and subjugate regions that otherwise would have been out of reach.

In this sense, the geography of the Tietê river worked directly to the advantage of the European conquerors. The river rises near São Paulo, only 22 km from the coast of the Atlantic Ocean and flows a thousand kilometers inland until it joins the Paraná River, which only after 5000 more kilometers reaches the Río de la Plata and finally the sea. While the name of Tietê in the tupi languages means “true, real water”, in a sense it betrayed the indigenous population by helping the conquerors to move with less effort through their territories. Nowadays the Tietê river runs through the city of São Paulo from East to West, sadly reflecting the consequences of industrialization, as it is considered biologically dead due to its high contamination levels. While in the first decades of the twentieth century the river was still used for sports competitions, the pollution in the 1940s already started impeding any kind of recreation in or next to the river. As Janes Jorge points out, the traditional “Travessia de São Paulo a Nado” was celebrated for the last time in 1944 (Jorge 2006, p. 190), because the water was contaminated to an extent that swimmers would become infected with typhus and other diseases. The history of the city and the history of the river ran parallel in the decades between 1890 and 1940 which preceded the publication of de Andrade’s poem about the river. The natural environment of the river with its flora and fauna, that offered a living space and also supplied the basis of life for the population, with the explosion of the number of inhabitants (31,000 in 1872, 1,326,261 inhabitants in 1940 (Jorge 2006, p. 46)) was converted in an urban space exploited for the urgent needs of a big city. Building material was extracted from the river banks, tons of garbage were deposited in and nearby the river, hydroelectric power stations were installed by foreign companies, the river was straightened and canalized. So while this river and the hills in its surroundings offered the perfect conditions for the urbanization (São Paulo still is the biggest city in Brazil) and the Conquista of Brazil (Jorge 2006, p. 40) and while the river till the 1930ies was considered by the inhabitants as a source of income and a space of recreation, the rapid growth of the city and the industrialization forced the once living and flowing space of the river into a biological dead mass of water being a source of deadly diseases, or as Jorge describes it, the Tietê could be the source of life or the cause of death depending on how the city would relate to its river (Jorge 2006, p. 26).

The river in “A meditação sobre o Tietê”

Against this historical and geographical background as well as with the general symbolic value of the river in mind, I will proceed to analyze the highly individual image that Mário de Andrade draws from “his” river in “A meditação sobre o Tietê”. Already in the epigraph of the poem the poet addresses the river directly: “Água do meu Tietê,/Onde me queres levar?/—Rio que entras pela terra/E que me afastas do mar...” [“Water of my Tietê,/where do you want to take me?/—You, river, entering the land/And taking me away from the sea...”].¹ From the beginning, the poet expresses an intimate relationship with the river by using the possessive pronoun “meu” [“my”], and by establishing the river as his interlocutor. The question “onde me queres levar?” is sort of programmatic for the whole meditation, whereas the second part of the epigraph states from the start that this particular river will not take the poet anywhere close the sea. In this respect it resembles the famous metaphor of the river in Jorge Manrique’s *Coplas a la Muerte de su padre*: “Nuestras vidas son los ríos / que van a dar en el mar / que es el morir” (Manrique 1993, p. 150) [“Our lives are the rivers / that flow into the sea / that is dying.”]. If Mário de Andrade’s river does not enter the sea, the question of where it may take the poet becomes even more existential. After this opening question, the meditation starts, and the reader is able to grasp the nocturnal atmosphere in the following eight verses:

É noite. E tudo é noite. Debaixo do arco admirável
Da Ponte das Bandeiras o rio
Murmura num banheiro de água pesada e oliosa
É noite e tudo é noite. Uma ronda de sombras,
Soturnas sombras, enchem de noite tão vasta
O peito do rio, que é como se a noite fosse água,
Água noturna, noite líquida, afogando de apreensões
As altas torres do meu coração exausto. (v. 5–12)

[It is night. And everything is night. Under the admirable arch
Of the Ponte das Bandeiras the river
Murmurs in a swirl of heavy and oily water.
It is night and everything is night. A round of shadows,
Gloomy shadows, fill with night so vast
The breast of the river, that it is as if the night were water,
Nocturnal water, liquid night, drowning with apprehensions
The high towers of my exhausted heart.]

The night takes over the whole setting and the reader is reminded of the omnipresence of the night various times throughout the poem, with refrain-like repetitions of the sentences “É noite e tudo é noite”. These refrain-like repetitions also underline the meditative character of the whole poem, where thoughts and verses flow freely inspired by the constant flowing of the river. The water of the river is heavy and oily, maybe not only because of the darkness of the night and the reflections of the city lights, but also because of the pollution.

¹ All quotes from the poem follow the edition of de Andrade (2013, pp. 531–543). From here on we will only indicate the verses.

After first introducing night and river separately, the poet then in verse 11 merges the night and the river right into each other in a sort of chiasm construction (“Água noturna, noite líquida”). The night is filling the “chest” of the river and at the same time it is suffocating the heart of the poet with apprehensions, so that there is from the beginning an indirect identification between the river and the poet, although the poet is still standing on the bridge above the river.

The bridge he is standing on is no other than the “Ponte das Bandeiras”,² a clear allusion to the colonial past, as the words *bandeiras* and *bandeirantes* referred to the settling expeditions and their participants—adventurers, slavers, explorers and fortune hunters—in Early Colonial Brazil. Then suddenly on the surface of the river appears the reflection of the city lights, and in a very short instant the poet recognizes the city life in all its dimensions: the corruption, the falseness, the self-centeredness of its inhabitants, in short “a emaranhada forma/Humana corrupta da vida que muge e se aplaude” (v. 20–21) [“the tangled human corrupt form of life that moos and applauds itself”]. Thus while the river opens up this projection surface where the poet has sudden insight into the structures of the social surroundings he is living in, it also opens more room for doubts about its real nature. As soon as the reflections disappear again, the poet is struck with the certainty, that this river signals “um caminho de morte” (v. 25) [“a way towards death”] and thus has no fertile characteristics at all. Repeating the question from the epigraph, the second stanza tries to examine where the river leads, and starts reproaching the lack of romantic literary potential of this particular river:

Meu rio, meu Tietê, onde me levas?
 Sarcástico rio que contradizes o curso das águas
 E te afastas do mar e te adentras na terra dos homens,
 Onde me queres levar?...
 Por que me proíbes assim praias e mar, por que
 Me impedes a fama das tempestades do Atlântico
 E os lindos versos que falam em partir e nunca mais voltar?
 Rio que fazes terra, húmus da terra, bicho da terra,
 Me induzindo com a tua insistência turrone paulista
 Para as tempestades humanas da vida, rio, meu rio!... (v. 28–37)

[My river, my Tietê, where are you taking me?
 Sarcastic river that contradicts the course of the waters
 And turns away from the sea and enters the land of men,
 Where are you taking me?
 Why do you forbid me beaches and sea, why
 Forbid me the fame of the Atlantic storms
 And the beautiful verses that speak of leaving and never returning?

² Interestingly, this bridge, the “Ponte das Bandeiras”, was inaugurated in 1942, in the same place where before another bridge arched over the river, the “Ponte Grande”. Due to the changes and the displacement of the riverbed, the old “Ponte Grande”, a favorite spot for the population and tourists to enjoy a panoramic view of the river and the city, had to be demolished. In the poem “Tietê”, written in 1906 by Baptista Cepellos and surely known by de Andrade, the poet still stands on “Ponte Grande” and overlooks the river (Kimori 2018, p. 107).

River that makes land, humus of land, worm of land
 Inducing me with your stubborn paulistano insistence
 To life's human storms, river, my river!...]]

This sarcastic, reversed river (“que contradiz o curso das águas”) does not evoke grandiloquent verses of heroes, adventures, voyages and survived threats in the storms of the Atlantic Ocean. On the contrary, the Tietê is an earthly river, in the literal sense that it enters the Continent and can only be a symbol of the “tempestades humanas”, of the misery of the Brazilian population, a hopeless and cruel mirror of the condition of modern men (de Carvalho 2019, p. 80). As Pedro Brum Santos summarizes in a few sentences, the social and political changes between 1920 and 1940 in São Paulo were drastic and dramatic for the whole city:

[O] Brasil experimentava a crise dos anos vinte, a revolução e a ascensão da burguesia dos anos trinta, tornando o estado mais intervencionista e centralizador e representando objetivamente as necessidades de reordenamento geral do capitalismo, e, por fim, o abrandamento do Estado Novo, a partir de 1942. Muito legado à terra em que nasceu, o poeta presenciou a transformação urbana de São Paulo desde o início do século, até chegar, depois dos anos 30, ao clima de cidade grande, onde, no coletivo da rua, o traço de desumanidade, de solidão e miséria tomava feição rapidamente. Tudo isso regado pelas manifestações operárias e comunistas anti-Vargas e pela infatigável presença dos militares na cena política. (Santos 1993, p. 36).

[Brazil was experiencing the crisis of the 1920s, the revolution and the rise of the bourgeoisie of the 1930s, making the state more interventionist and centralist and objectively representing the needs of the general reorganization of capitalism, and, finally, the loosening of the Estado Novo from 1942 onwards. Deeply attached to the place of his birth, the poet witnessed the urban transformation of São Paulo from the beginning of the century, until arriving, after the 1930s, at the climate of the big city, where, in the collective of the street, the traces of inhumanity, of loneliness and misery quickly took shape. All of this was accompanied by anti-Vargas demonstrations by workers and communists and by the permanent presence of the military on the political scene.]

The poet's disappointment about the evolution of Brazilian society³ could not be more serious, but at the same time he cannot help but keep identifying with it, bearing all the consequences. He, who was born from the waters of his river (v. 50) and thus defines himself by his Brazilian identity, feeling deeply connected to his people, is not able to leave his roots behind. Even more, his poetic voice adapts to the river, and is described in the following verses by the same adjectives (“pesadas e oliosas”) as the water of the river:

Eu me reverto às tuas águas espessas de infâmias,
 Oliosas, eu, voluntariamente, sofregamente, sujado
 De infâmias, egoísmos e traições. E as minhas vozes,
 Perdidas do seu tenor, rosnam pesadas e oliosas,
 Varando terra adentro no espanto dos mil futuros,

³ In verses 136–159 we can find a caricature of the society represented by all kind of fish in the roles of all members of an emerging capitalist and globalized world order.

À Espera angustiada do ponto. Não do meu ponto final!
 Eu desisti! Mas do ponto entre as águas e a noite,
 Daquele ponto leal à terrestre pergunta do homem,
 De que o homem há-de nascer. (v. 53–61)

[I return to your waters thick with infamy,
 Oily, I, voluntarily, greedily, soiled
 Of infamy, selfishness and treachery. And my voices,
 having lost their tenor, growl heavy and oily,
 Sweeping into the land in wonder of a thousand futures,
 Waiting in anguish for the point. Not my final point!
 I have desisted! But the point between the waters and the night,
 Of that point loyal to man's earthly question,
 From which man shall be born.]

As we can observe here, the voice of the poet takes the same direction as the river (“varando terra adentro”). So while on the one hand the poetic voice commits itself entirely to the fate of the Brazilian people, on the other hand the reader is invited to read on a meta poetic level the poem itself as a flowing river inquiring into the secrets of human existence. The formal structure of the poem also mimics the river in motion: The free verse and the many enjambments contribute to a continuous movement that corresponds both to the flow of the river and to the flowing thoughts of the meditating poet, while repetitions of certain syntactical structures might resemble whirls in the river. Only a few verses later the poet identifies himself completely with the river (“Me sinto o Pai Tietê”; v. 88). At this point of the poem there is no doubt about the devastating nature of the water of this poem-river. These waters are not for drinking, they are damned and they cause death, “e é por isso / que elas se afastam dos oceanos e induzem à terra dos homens” (v. 82–84) [“and that is why / they move away from the oceans and towards the land of men”].

So far, three identifications appeared, namely between river and society, river and poem, and river and poet, all of which deny the river even the smallest sign of fertility or “creative power”. The particular geographic situation of the river thus serves as a starting point for the metaphoric constructions that Mário de Andrade builds up around the real Tietê. The poem's suggested connection between river and death seems much more direct than the traditional connotation of rivers with the passing of time and the consequent processes of loss and oblivion.

Especially the last of these three identifications, the one between river and poet, needs further clarification. In my understanding of the poem, the mechanism behind this unity between the river Tietê and the poet works mainly because of the prior link between river and society, which in the end makes the poet abandon his privileged position on the bridge and disappear into the waters.

Poets on bridges

As already mentioned above, however, Mário de Andrade is not the only poet standing on a bridge in modern poetry. I suggest to read his poem in the context of three other poems whose speakers find themselves in similar positions, but, as we will see, with different consequences regarding the relation between river, bridge and poet. To do so, I will try to sketch a line of

evolution in poetic thought from 1912, date of the publication of Apollinaire's "Le pont Mirabeau", to the first publication of Bachmann's "Die Brücken" ["The bridges"] in 1952.

"Le pont Mirabeau" by the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire is one of his most famous poems and was published in his book *Alcools* in 1912. The great musicality of the text inspired various composers, such as the French-born Monégasque poet and composer Léo Ferré, to set the poem to music. In four stanzas all separated by the same refrain, the poem develops its main theme of the passing of time metaphorized through the constant flowing of the Seine river (Apollinaire 1969, p. 64). This rather classical image of the river as a reminder of the transitoriness of love, life, joy and pain, nevertheless finds a strong contrast in the unchanging and immovable position of the speaker standing on the bridge and repeating in every refrain "Les jours s'en vont je demeure" ["The days go by while I remain"]. Only in this short affirmation ("je demeure") does the speaker reveal himself directly with the pronoun of the first person singular, which he does four times in total, always graphically on the exact same position. Since we are concerned here with the author of the *Calligrams*, we could also think about the refrain as the rigid bridge pillars that stand between the free-flowing four stanzas. Although everything around him is subordinated to the merciless passing of time, the poet here remains invariably on top of his bridge observing and reflecting the river, without being swept away by the water. This power of observing the changes that time brings and of being able to put it into words, combined with the special position on the bridge,—as in between worlds and yet capable of maintaining the connection and guarantee the transition from one side to the other, from one time to another—can be read as an integral task of the poet in society. Consulting once more Cirlot's *Dictionary of Symbols*, it also points in the direction of the connecting and communicative meaning of the bridge: "And there are a great many cultures where the bridge symbolizes the link between what can be perceived and what is beyond perception. Even when it lacks this mystic sense, the bridge is always symbolic of a transition from one state to another—of change or the desire of change." (Cirlot 1962, p. 31).

Eighteen years after the publication of "Le pont Mirabeau", the American poet Hart Crane publishes his poem *The Bridge*, a long and monumental poem about the Brooklyn Bridge that crosses the East River between Manhattan and Brooklyn. In this poem, the aim of the poet could not be more ambitious, as Durmus and Yildiz state:

Hart Crane's search is the one for the real American past and the characteristics of present America that will determine her future. By going backwards in time and westward in direction he assumes the identities of Columbus, Rip van Winkle, railroad tramps and derelict sailors to equate his quest with seekers of the past and present, for instance. The poem also dramatizes the poet's quest for a synthesis of the conflicting forces within America's present and he strives to create an apocalyptic vision for its future. [...] As the main symbol of the poem, the bridge joins the shores of the temporal world to the invisible shores of the spiritual one. The essential point about the bridge as the central symbol of the poem is that it suggests a multidimensional meaning. It becomes a symbol of a triumph of human vision for Crane. (Durmus and Yildiz 2014, p. 82).

Thanks to the power of his poetic imagination, Crane is able to overlook the greater contexts of history and society and to "direct man's timeless impulse for discovery toward truly human achievement" (Durmus and Yildiz 2014, p. 89). In a journey of purification, the poet travels through "The tunnel"—the subway that runs underneath the river—in

order to reach his “Atlantis” where in the second stanza the arc of the bridge now spans the whole river of time:

One arc synoptic of all tides below –
 Their labyrinthine mouths of history
 Pouring reply as though all ships at sea
 Complighted in one vibrant breath made cry, –
 “Make thy love sure – to weave whose song we ply!” (Crane 1970, p. 73).

A deep trust in the fundamental role of the poet as a “bridgebuilder” in society resonates in this construction of a poetic bridge by Hart Crane, as to generate a hopeful future, although the present might not show any signs of hope. While in Apollinaire’s “Le pont Mirabeau” the poet on the bridge was more concerned by universal human themes such as the loss of love and life, Crane’s poem focuses more on specific American questions. But both assume the general ability and even responsibility of the poet to stand still on the bridge and to be a mediator between different worlds, the modern prophetic link between diverging parts of human life and experience, just like “the Roman *pontifex* was literally a builder of bridges” (Cirlot 1962, p. 31).

Mário de Andrade’s novel *Macunaima* published two years before Crane’s *The bridge* still followed similar objectives. In this novel he represents a synthesis of Brazil, by opening up a cultural space for history and language, “[um] espaço para a cultura, a história e a língua brasileiras, nacionais” (Oakley 2000, p. 65). This enthusiasm and optimism dramatically change in “A meditação sobre o Tietê”. In the second half of the poem the poet meditates on himself and compares himself to the useless beauty of the peacock:

Eu me vejo sozinho, arrastando sem músculo
 A cauda do pavão e mil olhos de séculos,
 Sobretudo os vinte séculos de anticristianismo
 Da por todos chamada Civilização Cristã...
 Olhos que me intrigam, olhos que me denunciam,
 Da cauda do pavão, tão pesada e ilusória.
 Não posso continuar mais, não tenho, porque os homens
 Não querem me ajudar no meu caminho. (v. 193–200)

[I see myself alone, dragging without muscle
 The peacock’s tail and a thousand eyes of centuries,
 Especially the twenty centuries of anti-Christianity
 Of the so-called Christian Civilization...
 Eyes that intrigue me, eyes that denounce me,
 Of the peacock’s tail, so heavy and illusory.
 I cannot go on, I have no more, because men
 Don’t want to help me on my way.]

The beautiful tail of the peacock seems here rather like a denunciatory obstacle than like a fascinating piece of art. The Christian symbolic value of the peacock representing immortality is converted into a terrifying image of “mil olhos de séculos” [“thousand eyes of centuries”] that stare, paralyzed with suffering from the injustice of twenty centuries of “anticristianismo” in the name of Christian civilization, while the poet also recognizes his

inability to produce (poetic) beauty as long as nobody supports him. Consequently, the poet in Mário de Andrade's poem loses faith in his prophetic power:

Porque os homens não me escutam! Por que os governadores
 Não me escutam? Por que não me escutam
 Os plutocratas e todos os que são chefes e são fezes?
 Todos os donos da vida?
 Eu lhes daria o impossível e lhes daria o segredo,
 Eu lhes dava tudo aquilo que fica pra cá do grito
 Metálico dos números, e tudo
 O que esta além da insinuação cruenta da posse. (v. 239–246)

[Why do men not listen to me! Why do governors
 not listen to me? Why do they not listen to me,
 All those plutocrats and all those who are bosses and feces?
 All the masters of life?
 I would give them the impossible and give them the secret,
 I would give them everything that lies beyond the metallic
 scream of numbers and everything
 That is beyond the raw insinuation of possession.]

Even though the poet's voice would have the power to be the bridge between the material and spiritual world "pra cá do grito/Metálico dos números", this voice is no longer heard, neither by "os homens" in general nor by the upper classes ruling the country, and therefore disappears mixing with the sounds of the wind and water:

Eu me sinto grimpado no arco da Ponte das Bandeiras,
 Bardo mestiço, e o meu verso vence a corda
 Da caninana sagrada, e afina com os ventos dos ares, e enrouquece
 Úmido nas espumas da água do meu rio (v. 280–283)

[I feel pretentious at the arch of the Ponte das Bandeiras,
 Mestizo bard, and my verse overcomes the string
 Of the sacred caninana, and tunes with the winds of the air, and becomes hoarse
 Moist in the foaming water of my river.]

The poet calls himself "bardo mestiço" in order to identify with all the different parts of Brazil's multiethnic society. The inner despair of the poet, who used to have a clear vision of how to construct an inclusive Brazilian identity and yet fails because of the ignorance and lack of humanity of the leading classes, is expressed by the antithetical verses 318 and 319:

Estou pequeno, inútil, bicho da terra, derrotado.
 No entanto eu sou maior... Eu sinto uma grandeza infatigável!

[I am small, useless, earthworm, defeated.
 Yet I am bigger... I feel an untiring greatness!]

The only solution for the poet's inner conflict is to leave the bridge and to dive into the waters of the river, allowing the dissolution of his own individuality in the name- and powerless

masses of his country. The privileged position of the poet standing above on the bridge has become useless, as from up there he is even more aware of his own insignificance:

...e tudo é noite. Sob o arco admirável
Da Ponte das Bandeiras, morta, dissoluta, fraca,
Uma lágrima apenas, uma lágrima,
Eu sigo alga escusa nas águas do meu Tietê. (v. 331–334)

[...and everything is night. Under the admirable arch
Of the Ponte das Bandeiras, dead, dissolute, weak,
Only a tear, a single tear,
I am from now an alga in the waters of my Tietê.]

In 1952, 7 years after Mário de Andrade's death, Ingeborg Bachmann first publishes her poem "Die Brücken", and although we have no indication that these two writers may have known of each other, their poems seem to build a bridge between the continents and, at the same time, share a certain distrust in the monumental images of bridges that we observed with Apollinaire and Crane. We agree with Gözl that Bachmann's poem "consciously positions itself as a deconstructive reading of the type of poetics exemplified by "Le pont Mirabeau". In her poem, the attempt to "bridge" is replaced by an exploration and opening up of a divide at the heart of her poem" (Gözl 2004, p. 85). Already the title—"Brücken" ["bridges"] is plural—announces that this poem is not going to poetize one singular bridge, and what follows is indeed in our reading a meditation on poetics. The poet's voice in the beginning and in the end focuses on both banks of the river ("hüben und drüben" ["over here and over there"]); "Besser ist's, im Auftrag der Ufer/zu leben, von einem zum andern," ["It is better to live in the application/of the riverbanks, from one to the other"] (Bachmann 1978, p. 60)). In the middle part, however, it expresses various times doubts about the reliability (of the image) of the bridge, that seem to be in a direct dialogue not only with Apollinaire's poem, but also with Mário de Andrade's abandonment of the bridge as a suitable place for the poet:

Pont Mirabeau... Waterlooobridge...
Wie ertragen's die Namen,
die Namenlosen zu tragen?

Von den Verlorenen gerührt,
die der Glaube nicht trug,
erwachen die Trommeln im Fluss.

Einsam sind alle Brücken,
und der Ruhm ist ihnen gefährlich,
wie uns, vermeinen wir doch,
die Schritte der Sterne
auf unserer Schulter zu spüren.
Doch übers Gefälle des Vergänglichen
wölbt uns kein Traum. (v. 6–18)

[Pont Mirabeau... Waterlooobridge...
How do the names bear it
to bear the nameless?

Sounded by the lost ones
 who were not borne by the faith
 the drums in the river awaken.

Solitary are all bridges,
 and fame is dangerous for them
 as it is for us, for we presume
 to sense the strides of the stars
 on our shoulders.
 But over the slope of transitoriness
 we are arched by no dream.]

Crucial for the understanding seems to me the direct comparison of the bridges with the speaker of the poem (“wie uns”), a speaker that only reveals himself three times, and every time as being part of a larger group referred to by the pronoun in the plural form. The poem itself does not clarify the identity of this collective (“us”), but in a coherent reading of the poem as a reflection on poetics I would like to propose to read this “us” as the group of like-minded poets. They are lonely, like all bridges, and are tempted by dangerous fame, but there is absolutely no possible dream, no poetic principle, that could bridge the fast-downhill flowing waters of transitoriness, while it is equally unbearable for them to be the linking element for all the Nameless (“die Namenlosen”). To the monotonous sound of the drums, the river mercilessly carries away all the lost ones, like the poet in Mário de Andrade’s poem, that were not borne by the bridge of faith. While Mário de Andrade was already aware that the rigid space of the bridge did not longer serve as the center of his poetic thinking, and consequently changed sides to join the flowing space of the river that here represents the suffering masses in Brazilian society in the 1940s, Bachmann goes a step further with her approach to consider no longer the bridge but the two river banks as the constituting parts of her poetics, and therefore to allow a wider separation and differentiation, maybe even fragmentation, of poetic thought instead of burdening the poetic voice with the responsibility of providing the prophetic words of connection and transcendence.

Mário de Andrade’s artistic trajectory started with the enthusiasm of renewal that was characteristic for the avant-garde movements in the early decades of the twentieth century, and that was not only concerned with the renewal of artistic principles, but was also committed to the renewal and development of modern societies. By analyzing the relationship between river, bridge, and poet in his last poem “A meditação sobre o Tietê” I can affirm that towards the end of his life and artistic career the enthusiasm was replaced by a deep resignation. The inland flowing river Tietê thus is the perfect symbol of the desolate perspectives for Brazilian society in the 1940s. A departure into a bright future is just not possible with a river that enters “a terra dos homens” instead of leading to the immense freedom of the ocean. With a “reversed” river there is no possibility to assimilate the cruel past, and the only option for the poet is to leave behind his claims for a prophetic and uniting, bridging voice, in order to dissolve into the nameless drumming of the river.

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