

Water and Rivers in the Poetry of João Cabral de Melo Neto. Reading Modernist Poetry in the Age of the Anthropocene

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Os rios, de todo o que existe vivo,
vivem a vida mais definida e clara;
para os rios, viver vale se definir
e definir viver com a língua da água.

Rivers, of all living things,
live the most defined and clear life;
for rivers, to live is to define themselves
and define living with the language of water.¹
João Cabral de Melo Neto, “Os rios de um dia”

“On the driest days our bodies remain full of water, as
does our planet even as both droughts and floods disrupt human
communities.”

Steve Mentz, “Bodies of Water” xiv

How can we take seriously the call to read literary works in the light of the urgent questions of the Anthropocene, without reducing our interpre-

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tations to the aspects of theme and content (Benedetti 114–115), as was often the practice in the so-called ecocriticism of the last decades, and without reducing literary works to an illustration of an ecological perspective that we are already convinced of at the outset? In the following, I propose that, in studying the environmental dimension of literature, we also need to pay close attention to aspects of literary, poetic form, and how these formal elements reiterate, interrogate or challenge the mental structures ingrained in modern (anthropocentric) thought (Benedetti 115).

In this essay, then, I am concerned with the question of how modernist poetry may provide an occasion to relate water and rivers both to current concerns of the Anthropocene as well as to questions of poetic form. In Romantic and modernist poetry, rivers are usually envisioned from the perspective of a lyrical self. This centrality of the lyrical self and its specific, uncodified verbal style has become current at least since the programmatic preface to William Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), and, as Guido Mazzoni has shown, is largely preserved even in many, if not all, varieties of modernist poetry (Mazzoni 65, 117). Take the case of Giuseppe Ungaretti's poem *I fiumi* [*The Rivers*, 1916], where the names of different rivers (the Isonzo, Serchio, the Nile, the Seine) are recalled within the context of the poet's autobiographical memory, "the epochs of my life" ["le epochhe della mia vita" (Ungaretti 81–82)]. In what follows I want to suggest that modernist poetry may also represent rivers and waters from an alternative, more communal or (seemingly) more objective perspective. I will try to develop this point with respect to the Brazilian poet João Cabral de Melo Neto (1920–1999). Cabral's programmatically non-subjectivist poetics allow for an approach to aquatic landscapes that brings to the fore the hydropolitical conditions and entanglements of the Brazilian Northeast, which, from today's paradigm of the Anthropocene, may be understood as post-anthropocentric. As we will see, Cabral's poetry aims not only at a literary representation of a concrete fluvial landscape, but—due to his distinctively visual poetics where words and letters build specific forms on the page—at becoming a sort of landscape in its own right, a poetic landscape.

Cabral is today widely regarded as one of the most important and influential poets of the second half of the twentieth century. He worked as a diplomat and hence lived in many different countries (France, Switzerland, Senegal, among others), and he had an especially deep connexion to Spain, where he was first posted in Barcelona in 1947.² Yet despite this extremely international experience and the many cosmopolitan influences on his poetry, from the works of Paul Valéry to the paintings of Picasso and Joan Miró, some of his most significant writings are intimately connected to the regional landscape of his early years in Brazil, namely the Northeastern state of Pernambuco, which is traversed by the Capibaribe river, and where Cabral was born on the outskirts of the city of Recife, on the sugar cane plantation of a wealthy landowning family.³ Pernambuco is "a former colonial outpost and, to this day, one of the poorest regions of the developing world" (Brandellero, *On a Knife Edge* 6). During the years 1952–1954 Cabral was temporarily removed from diplomatic service because of his expressed sympathies for the Brazilian Communist Party, although he was never politically active (Brandellero, *On a Knife Edge* 7). In the panorama of Brazilian literature of this period, Cabral left a deep impact by radically turning away from the idea of poetry as an expression of poetic subjectivity. This explains why landscapes and objects often present the point of departure for his poetry, a poetry that appears to be characterised by a strong sense of constructivism and depersonalization, radically opposed to the Romantic stance of the 'inspired' lyrical voice (Higa 100–101; Peixoto 12–13).

2 On the prominent status of Spanish landscape, culture, and literature in Cabral's work, see the superbly researched study by Souza de Carvalho.

3 In his first volume of poetry, *Pedra do Sono* (1942), self-published by the author, the name 'Pernambuco' appears in the place usually occupied by the name of the publisher (see Mendes de Sousa 120). In a poem written while sojourning in Sevilla, he establishes a parallel between the Guadalquivir and the Capibaribe ("Sevilha em casa"): "que o Capibaribe e o Guadalquivir / são de uma só maçonaria" (Cabral, *Crime na calle Relator* 117) ["that the Capibaribe and the Guadalquivir / are of one masonry"]. For a concise summary of the biographical facts, see Brandellero, *On a Knife Edge* 1–6.

The landscape of the Capibaribe river, running from the drought-riden interior of the Northeast to the city of Recife bordering the sea, is not only the object of Cabral's poetry, but the river and water also have a genuinely poetic and formal significance for the author, who once suggested that what he perceived as two different phases in his poetic production might be referred to as the "two aesthetic waters."⁴ In a comprehensive collection of his works entitled precisely *Duas águas* [Two Waters, 1956] he thus distinguished between his earlier, often hermetic poetry (including his collection *O cão sem plumas* [The Dog Without Feathers]) and a second, more accessible phase, marked by his more 'popular' poems "O rio" ["The River"] and *Morte e vida severina* [Death and Life of a Severino], suggesting that the first is inclined towards silent reading, while the second favors auditory reception.⁵ In the first part of this essay, I will discuss how the river and the aquatic landscape enter the poetry of Cabral, suggesting that Cabral's insights into the ecology of the river resonate with the

4 In Brazil, the expression „(two) waters” refers to the division of roof tops (see Higa 130, 168). Moreover, as one critic noted, on the level of poetic composition “water interests him mostly as an element of displacement, of articulation, something akin to a metaphorical correspondent of syntax, the line that weaves the connexion between elements” (Secchin, quoted in Saramago, “The Sailor and the Migrant” 50).

5 In the flyleaf to the book Cabral writes: “Duas águas querem corresponder a duas intenções do autor e – decorrentemente – a duas maneiras de apreensão por parte do leitor ou ouvinte: de um lado, poemas para serem lidos em silêncio, numa comunicação a dois, poemas cujo aprofundamento temático quase sempre concentrado exige mais do que leitura, releitura; de outro lado, poemas para auditório, numa comunicação múltipla, poemas que, menos que lidos, podem ser ouvidos” (quoted in Mendes de Sousa 124). [“Two waters are meant to correspond to two intentions of the author and—consequently—two ways of apprehension on the part of the reader or listener: on the one hand, poems to be read in silence, in a two-way communication, poems whose concentrated thematic depth almost always requires more than reading, re-reading; on the other hand, poems for the audience, in a multiple communication, poems that, less than read, can be heard.”] However, as many critics have pointed out, this simple opposition is too schematic and belied by the poetry itself.

“contemporary Latin American hydrosphere amid neo-extractivist economics” (Blackmore 426). Secondly, I will highlight the relationship between river, water, and poetic form.

Time, Space: The River-Landscape in Poetry

The Capibaribe river enters Cabral's poetry first in his break-through, short volume *O cão sem plumas* [*The Dog without Feathers*, 1950]. The poem consists of four sections and it is concerned with the final part of the river's journey toward the destination of Recife and the sea. Partly, moving away from the surrealist and hermetic orientation of his earlier poetry, the social and ecological awareness that transpires in this collection was prompted by a newspaper article that Cabral read while in Barcelona, through which he was shocked to learn that “the life expectancy in Recife was 28, while in India it was 29.”⁶ The first part of the poem, “Paisagem do Capibaribe” [“Landscape of the Capibaribe”], begins like this: “The city is crossed by the river / like a road / is crossed by a dog; / a fruit cut by a sword / That river / was like a dog without feathers” [“A cidade é passada pelo rio / como uma rua é passada por um cachorro; / uma fruta / por uma espada [...] / Aquelle rio / era como um cão sem plumas” (Cabral, *O cão sem plumas* 137)]. The entire poem associates the river with metaphors and images that are often foreign to the fluvial environment, yet at the same time suggest its fundamental character of deprivation: “It had something, then, / of the stagnation of a madman. / Something of the stagnation / of the hospital, the penitentiary, the asylums” [“Ele tinha algo, então, / da estagnação de um louco. / Algo da estagnacão / do hospital, da penitenciária, dos asilos” (Cabral, *O cão sem plumas* 139)].

Cabral, as Luiz Costa Lima has aptly observed, creates striking images that invoke a geographical and human reality, but he does hardly present a portrait, or representation of a landscape (Costa Lima 296). The

6 See the allusion to this in *Morte e vida severina*, Cabral 92. See also Brandellero, *On a Knife-Edge* 7.

term 'landscape' does explicitly appear in the poem itself, yet in a context that estranges the Western conception of landscape to the point that the boundaries between humans and the non-human environment are dissolved:

Na paisagem do rio
 difícil é saber
 onde começa o rio;
 onde a lama
 começa do rio;
 onde a terra
 começa da lama;
 onde o homem, onde a pele
 começa da lama;
 onde começa o homem
 naquele homem.
 (Cabral, *O cão sem plumas* 145).

In the landscape of the river
 it's hard to know
 where the river begins;
 where the mud
 begins from the river;
 where the earth
 begins from the mud;
 where the man, where the skin
 begins from the mud;
 where the man
 in that man begins.

Significantly, the last section of the poem is entitled "Discourse of the Capibaribe." Although here the river is still referred to in the third person, the poem constantly assimilates humans, animals, and the river to each other: "To live / is to go between what lives. / [...] / What lives is thick / like a dog, a man / like that river" ["Viver / é ir entre o que vive. / [...] / O

que vive é espesso / como um cão, um homem / como aquele rio" (Cabral, *O cão sem plumas* 150–151)].⁷

At once more daring and more accessible is the subsequent, very long narrative poem, "O rio" ["The River", 1954], of varying meter,⁸ in which Cabral resorts to a new device, namely providing the river itself with a voice: it is the river that utters the poem.⁹ By reversing the common lyric scenario of a human subject contemplating a river (as, say, in Ungaretti), the river becomes now the imagined center of experience for the human and non-human beings that line its course. If the river becomes, as it were, the subject of poetic enunciation, it is by definition a subject in movement. In this capacity it doubles the human subjects that accompany its course to the Atlantic Sea, namely the so-called *retirantes*, that is, the poor migrants that escape the misery and drought of the backland region of the *sertão*—a landscape whose social and ecological problems have inspired a specific literature of drought as a form of "disaster writing" (Anderson 56–106), including some of the most significant novels in modern Brazilian literature, from *Os Sertões* by Euclides da Cunha, to *Vidas Secas* by Graciliano Ramos, to *Grande Sertão: Veredas* by Guimarães Rosa. As Victoria Saramago has suggested in her study *Fictional Environments*, such works of regionalist (or vernacular) modernism—and we may include here also a significant part of Cabral's poetry—use specific landscapes not only in the sense of the "setting" of a narrative, but they (re)create these landscapes for a cultural, potentially global imaginary (Saramago, *Fictional Environments*; see Saramago, "The Sailor and the Migrant"; see Ekelund).

The full title of the poem reads as follows: "O rio, ou a relação da viagem que faz o Capibaribe da sua nascente à cidade do Recife" ["The River, or the narrative of the journey made by the Capibaribe from its source to Recife"]. This apparently straightforward title is remarkable for

7 For an anthropocentric perspective along these lines, see Brandellero, "Journeys and Landscapes" 152–153.

8 Possibly molded on the Spanish romance, as Costa Lima points out (see 310).

9 As Niccolò Scuffai pointed out to me, Cabral's device of a river as lyrical first-person narrator has been anticipated by Rudyard Kipling's "The River's Tale" (1911).

its grammatical ambivalence. On the one hand, it announces the river as a speaking subject; on the other hand, the term “O rio” proposes the river as an object of discourse. In fact, the Portuguese “relação de viagem” is a term that has been widely used in colonial contexts and in numerous writings by European travellers, and which thus is intimately connected to the “discovery” and exploration of Brazil. This heritage translates into the chorographic organisation of the poem, which means that different textual sections of the poem are cued to different geographical areas or toponyms of towns and villages that the river traverses in its course (Saramago, “The Sailor and the Migrant” 51). This chorographic orientation of the poem corresponds with the idea of mapping, not only in the geographical sense, but in the sense that the poem itself—as is typical for Cabral—transposes poetic diction into a visual display and typographic pattern on the page (Costa Lima 51; Süsskind 648; Mendes Sousa 141).¹⁰ In fact, for the composition of “O rio” Cabral consulted maps, and he himself has characterised it as a geographical poem (“um poema geográfico”), a generic tradition with roots in Brazilian literature of the seventeenth century (Saramago, “The Sailor and the Migrant” 51).

In terms of geography, the river poem moves from the dry, miserable backland, to a greener area closer to the coast, marked by the economy of sugar, to the capital of Recife. However, the poem is not only organized in spatial terms, it also conceives the landscape as marked by temporal and historical stages, referring to the history of colonial and economic exploration and exploitation, made possible precisely by human movement on the river.¹¹ Moreover, the river presents itself also in anthropomorphic terms, as undergoing a sort of personal development from birth to maturity, thereby connecting personal memory and collective history (Saramago, “The Sailor and the Migrant” 52).¹² At the beginning, speaking of its source, the river speaks of itself in terms of ‘human’ birth: “I was

¹⁰ On the early modern connexion between chorographic poetry, personification, and mapping, see Helgerson.

¹¹ As acutely observed by Saramago (“The Sailor and the Migrant”, 52). On temporal inscriptions of landscape, see generally Tauchnitz and Welge.

¹² For the idea of the anthropomorphic river, see also the epigraph of this essay.

born descending / the mountain range called the Jacará” [“Eu já nasci de-scendo / a serra que se diz do Jacará” (Cabral, *Morte e vida severina* 19)].

But how is it possible, we may ask, that the river assumes a sort of subject position, if the place from which it speaks is by definition an essentially unstable place-in-movement? In order to resolve this paradox of the subject position and the river's presumed capacity to 'observe' its environment, the poetic voice resorts to the device of comparing the river (or, rather, the river comparing itself) to a boat, which is to say, an object transported *on* a river:

Vou com passo de rio
que é de barco navegando.
Deixando para trás
as fazendas que vão ficando.
Vendo-as, enquanto vou
parece que estão desfilando.
Vou andando lado a lado
de gente que vai retirando;
vou levando comigo
os rios que vou encontrando.
(Cabral, *Morte e vida severina* 22)

I'm going like a river
like a sailing boat.
Leaving behind
the farms that remain.
Seeing them as I go
they seem to be on parade.
I'm walking side by side
with people who are retiring;
I'm taking with me
the rivers I come across.

Note how the end rhymes are gerunds (in '-ando') that emphasize the permanence in the movement. The reduced vocabulary, the repetition of nouns, the almost complete absence of adjectives, in combination with

the end rhymes, creates an effect of monotony—pointing less to a landscape *perceived* than to the words being *pronounced*.¹³ In the course of its movement, the river accompanies, and is accompanied by, the human migrants, so that it becomes, in an indirect way, also *their* voice, since the river listens to their stories: “Along the riverside road / towards the sea I go / Side by side with the people / in my silent travels” [“Na estrada da ribeira / até o mar ancho vou. / Lado a lado com a gente, / no meu andar sem rumor” (Cabral, *Morte e vida severina* 24)]. In this double role as landscape and agent, as colonial traveller and migrant, as object and subject, the river fulfills the double function already announced in the title of the poem. This double movement is in turn parallel to, but also differentiated from the modernity symbolized by train travel: “It moves towards the ocean / but it won’t be my companion / despite the many paths / that almost always move in parallel” [“Faz a viagem do mar / mas não será meu companheiro, / apesar dos caminhos / que quase sempre vão paralelos” (28)]. In contrast to the train, the river says, the voyage of rivers is connatural, today we would say “entangled,” with their environment: “They live with the things / between which they are flowing” [“convivem com as coisas / entre as quais sempre vão fluindo” (28)]. Although Cabral’s river poem invokes the notion of topographical overview, the actual unfolding of the poem stresses the idea of temporal flow and inter-species connexion, thereby suggesting that literary representations of fluvial spaces might amount to “sites of resistance to the stable subject position in spatio-historiographic narratives,” as connected to the history of colonial exploration in Latin America (Pettinaroli and Mutis 11).

The river equates the other rivers and the people it encounters, for “their lives are interrupted when the rivers are interrupted” [“a gente cuja vida / se interrompe quando os rios” (Cabral, *Morte e vida severina* 22)]. The speaking river embraces these other rivers as “friends,” rivers who

13 I owe this observation to Costa Lima, who insists that the poem does not “represent” the reality it refers to: “Enquanto a fisicalidade de um objeto é apreendida ao ser êle percebido, a fisicalidade da frase reporta ao ser ela pronunciada” (Costa Lima, 311) [“While the physicality of an object is apprehended when it is perceived, the physicality of the sentence reappears when it is pronounced.”]

have little water and who are completely dried out during the summer. The larger movement from the *Sertão* to the sea is predicated not only on the movement from the backland to the pull of urban modernity, from dryness to the sea, but on a relation of possible homology that Cabral has explored in various other poems. In “O rio”, the river-subject, in order to reach the sea, has to traverse a metaphorical sea: “As I had accepted / the sea as my destiny / I chose that path / they call the riverside / to get there / and to the coast it’ll lead / and this ocean of ash / goes toward a sea of sea” [“Como aceitaria ir / no meu destino de mar, / preferi essa estrada, / para lá chegar, / que dizem da ribeira / e à costa vai dar, / que deste mar de cinza / vai a um mar de mar” (Cabral, *Morte e vida severina* 29)].

Paradoxically, then, in this part of the poem, the extreme drought of the interior, that is, the absence of water, is designated as an “ocean of ash,” and, ironically, this is uttered by the voice of a river. This constant theme in Cabral, the dialectical relation between drought and water, illustrates what Steve Mentz has called a planetary poetics of water: “The felt opposition between wet immersion and dry terrestrial living operates in tension with a broader sense in which water touches everything” (xiv). Following this metaphorical overlapping of land and sea, the voice of the river speaks also about the expansion of sugar cane plantations, which, since the old mills [“engenhos”] have been replaced by modern industrial plants [“usinas”] (Cabral, *Morte e vida severina* 30)], threaten to overtake, to engulf large parts of the landscape and to “expel” the population: “But the sea obeys / a destiny unseen / and the greater cane-sea/ like the real one, one day / will be all one water / in all this common region” [“Mas o mar obedece / a um destino sem divisa, / e o grande mar de cana, / como o verdadeiro, algum dia, / será uma só água/ em toda esta comum cercania” (32)].¹⁴

The speaking river is also friends with those rivers who lend their “hard service” [“duro serviço” (30)] to the industrial mills, and at the same time it reports the same history told by all rivers, the history of the dying

14 Yet, as Mendes de Sousa notes, the sea in this poem is often associated with a vague idea of “hope” (142).

old mills, the “engenhos” (31). The industrial mills, set up by foreign capital [“moedas estrangeiras” (35)], are the forces that propel the sugarcane plantations to occupy and “devour” the territory and disturb the environmental balance: “The sugarcane plantation is the mouth / with which they first devour / woods and thickets, / pastures and paddocks; / with which they devour the land / where a man planted his fields” [“O canavial é a boca / com que primeiro vão devorando / matas e capoeiras, / pastos e cercados; / com que devoram a terra / onde um homem plantou seu roçado” (33)]. Jens Andermann has referred to this sort of phenomenon as the “entranced landscape,” that is, a landscape that is radically marked and transformed by the temporal rupture introduced by the extractivist practices of capitalist economy.¹⁵ The people thus expelled from their traditional habitat are joining that other “river of people” coming from the drought-ridden North, so that this “river” is now flowing parallel to the Capibaribe, “everyone to his own sea” (39). The human and the non-human are thus constantly juxtaposed and assimilated: the river as person, the people as river.

It is important to point out that the river speaks not only about such hard conditions of the natural environment, but that its aquatic condition has in fact promoted or made possible the forms of settlement that it now describes. In this sense, the *telos* of the poem and of the river is the journey back to the South, including the migrants whose condition is caused by both natural and economic causes, all connected to the presence or absence of water:

Ao entrar no Recife
não pensem que entro só.
Entra comigo a gente
que comigo baixou
por essa velha estrada
que vem do interior;
entram comigo os rios

¹⁵ On Latin American rivers generally as sites of modernization processes, as “commercial and industrial infrastructures” (Blackmore 422–423).

a quem o mar chamou,
 entra comigo a gente
 que com o mar sonhou,
 e também retirantes
 em quem só o suor não secou;
 e entra essa gente triste,
 a mais triste que já baixou,
 a gente que a usina,
 depois de mastigar, largou.
 (Cabral, *Morte e vida severina* 38)

Entering Recife, don't think I come alone
 There enter, too, the people
 that came down with me
 on that ancient road
 that comes from the interior;
 there enter with me rivers
 that the ocean called
 there enter with me the people
 that with the ocean dreamed
 and also migrants
 on whom only the sweat didn't dry
 and those saddened people enter
 the saddest that did come down
 the people that the plant
 after chewing, spat out.

The river's discourse, then, projects a forward movement, yet in this process it also traverses and recapitulates the history that the river itself has made possible. For instance, in approaching its endpoint, the city of Recife, the river recalls various strata of colonial history and international penetration, starting with the Dutch invasion of Pernambuco in the seventeenth century: "that Recife / founded by the Dutch. / There hang bridges / of Portuguese strength / shining notices / with many English words" [“aquele Recife / de fundação holandesa. / Nele passam as pontes / de robustez portuguesa, / anúncios luminosos / com muitas

palavras inglesas" (Cabral, *Morte e vida severina* 44)]. The river and its discourse thus move forward in time, and the river becomes slower as it approaches Recife:

Vou ainda mais lento,
que agora minhas águas
de tanta lama me pesam
Vou agora tão lento
porque é pesado o que carrego:
vou carregado de ilhas
recolhidas enquanto desço;
(Cabral, *Morte e vida severina* 44)

I now move even slower
for now my waters
with so much mud they weigh me down
I move so slowly now
for what I carry is heavy:
I move weighed down with islands
gathered while I descend;

Thereby the poem suggests the ending of a life cycle that has begun with the river's birth. Here, in Recife, the river observes an eminently international environment (the Dutch foundation; Portuguese bridges; luminous signs with English words; Cabral, *Morte e vida severina* 44); the "amphibian city" ["cidade anfíbia" (43)] on the outlying islands, where people live "undecided between water and land" ["entre água e terra indecisa" (43)]. The river-speaker's gaze on this new environment seems like a tourist entering a city that is described as "picturesque, sentimental, historic" ["pitoresco / sentimental, histórico" (41)]. Yet at this point the river suggests also a reversal of the gaze, for there was a boy, who "in the afternoon looked at the river / as if it was a movie; he saw me, river, move along / with my varied cortege / of things that are alive and dead, / rubbish and discarded things" ["de tarde olhava o rio / como se filme de cinema; via-me, rio, passar / com meu variado cortejo/ de coisas vivas, mortas, / coisas de lixo e de despejo" (42)]. This is an important in-

dication, since the fleeting appearance of the boy is most likely an autobiographical reference. In another autobiographical poem Cabral refers to the Capibaribe river as “my reading and my cinema” [“minha leitura e cinema”].¹⁶ This reference to the visual representation of the cinema suggests that we as readers in turn ‘see’ the fluid succession of poetic images as if in a film, as images-in-movement.¹⁷

The long poem *Morte e vida severina* [Death and Life of a Severino, 1954–1955] is even more accessible than “O rio”. It is indebted to the popular theatrical form of the *auto* with its theme of nativity, and judging from the more than fifty editions, it has been enormously popular (Mendes de Sousa 123). Like the previous text, this is also a very long poem, which in this case is not spoken by the river Capibaribe, but by the migrant Severino, who is following it as his “best guide,” even though this “very poor” river is sometimes dried out and interrupted (Cabral, *Morte e vida severina* 98). Especially in these two poems, then, Cabral models the poetic discourse in the form of a travel narrative. Perhaps here the author points at something that Alexander Beecroft has referred to as “epichoric literature,” ideally a very early stage of literary production, in which texts “both embody and construct a sense of place for the community in question, marking boundaries and imbuing rivers and other natural features with meaning” (33). The term ‘epikhoriōs/khora’ is traced back at least to the ancient Greek poet Pindar, where it means “in/out of the land/landscape” (Beecroft 53).

¹⁶ I owe this connexion to Cardeal (188). The poem is “Prosas da Maré na Jaqueira,” from the collection *A escola das facas* (1980), as included in the anthology *O artista inconfessável* (Cabral, *O artista inconfessável* 55–60).

¹⁷ I cannot develop here how this ‘fluid’ compositional principle is dialectically countered by the anti-fluid, concretist, ‘stony’ poetics that is otherwise highly characteristic for Cabral. See, for instance, “Pequena ode mineral” (in the series *O engenheiro* (1945), as included in *O cão sem plumas*, 104). On the dialectic of stasis and movement as generally characteristic for Cabral’s poetics, see Süsskind: “Cabral’s method of composing demands a simultaneous exchange of giving configuration to what is sequential and making what is static move.” In this context, Süsskind refers also to Miro’s “treatment of time applied to a texture usually seen as static” (654; my translation).

Water, River, and Poetic Landscape

We have seen, then, that the river and its local landscape and ecology occupy an extremely prominent position in the poet's work. Yet Cabral, a poet highly concerned with literary form and often discussed under the label of constructivism, surely transcends the idea of regionalist literature. In what many consider his masterwork, the collection *A educação pela pedra* [*The Education of the Stone*, 1966], Cabral explores in a dialectical fashion the relation between the sea and the sugarcane fields—without any apparent indication of a lyrical subject:

O MAR E O CANAVIAL

O que o mar sim aprende do carnaval:
 a elocução horizontal de seu verso;
 a geórgica de cordel, ininterrupta,
 narrada em voz e silêncio paralelos.
 [...]

O que o carnaval sim aprende do mar:
 o avançar em linha rasteira da onda;
 o espalhar-se minucioso, de líquido,
 alagando cova a cova onde se alonga.
 [...]

(Cabral, *A educação pela pedra* 14–15)

THE SEA AND THE CANE FIELD

What the sea does learn from the cane field:
 the horizontal elocution of its verse;
 the uninterrupted georgic of *cordel* literature,
 narrated in parallel voice and silence.
 [...]

What the cane field does learn from the sea:
 the creeping line of the wave;
 the meticulous spreading of liquid,
 flooding pit after pit where it stretches.

Although I have quoted only parts of the poem, it should become obvious that, firstly, the poem suggests a symmetry between the sea and the sugarcane field,¹⁸ secondly, that these two natural entities are assimilated to a meta-poetic register (“verse”). Finally, the two stanzas of the poem suggest a symmetry also on the level of its form, in the parallelism of its construction and the ‘horizontality’ of its corresponding lines. The poem is also a good example of the fact that Cabral’s poetry transcends the schematic duality of the ‘two waters.’ While this poem displays a rigorous construction and calls attention to its own material inscription on the page, the expression “the georgic of *cordel* literature” alludes at the same time to a form of popular, oral literature. This may suffice here as an indication that both the individual poems and the volume as a whole display a strong sense of composition, permutation, and internal correspondences. Although the poems derive from a section within the volume called “Northeast”, they cannot be reduced, unlike the regionalist literature of the 1930s, to an attempt to represent landscape in a documentary or realist sense.¹⁹ Let me quote from yet another poem from the same collection, which proposes another kind of analogy, calling up the notion of the water in a dry landscape, where it is precisely the absence of water that calls forth its idea:

18 This symmetry recalls the often-quoted prophecy by Antonio Conselheiro, the spiritual leader of the Canudos revolt, as reported in *Os Sertões* (1902), by Euclides da Cunha: “então o certão virará praia e a praia virará certão” [(162); “then the sertão will turn into sea and the sea into sertão”]. On the surprising use of “nautical metaphors” in the literature about the landscape of the sertão, see Galvão. Cabral repeatedly made use of this analogy, for instance in “O rio”: “as últimas ondas / de cana” (*Morte e vida severina* 39) (“the last waves / of the sugar-cane field”).

19 *A educação pela pedra* consists of four sections, two of them called “Northeast” (aA), two “Not Northeast” (bB).

FAZER O SECO, FAZER O ÚMIDO

[...]

A gente de uma Caatinga entre secas,
 entre datas de seca e seca entre datas,
 se acolhe sob uma música tão líquida
 que bem poderia executar-se com água.
 Talvez as gotas úmidas dessa música
 que a gente dali faz chover de violas,
 umedeçam, e senão com a água da água,
 com a convivência da água, langorosa.

(Cabral, *A educação pela pedra* 32–33)

TO MAKE THE DRY, TO MAKE THE HUMID

The people of a Caatinga between droughts,
 between dates of drought and drought between dates,
 welcome each other with music so liquid
 that could well be played with water.
 Perhaps the humid drops of this music
 that we make rain from our guitars,
 moisten, if not with the water of water,
 with the languorous coexistence of water.

The poem obviously calls up the longing for water, by invoking the ‘musical’ sound of rain and water—with the poem itself, as customary for Cabral, rejecting the option of lyrical musicality.²⁰ This idea is also evident in the remarkable poem “Rio sem discurso” [“Rivers without discourse”], which proposes the image of the rivers ‘combating’ the drought in the Northeast and provides a sustained analogy between, on the one hand, the flow of discourse (as the flowing together of individual words and phrases) and, on the other hand, the swelling of a river out of isolated sources; conversely, the drying out of a river into single remnants and units, as mimicked by the very syntax of the first stanza of the poem:

²⁰ See the classic study by Luiz Costa Lima, *Lira e antílira. Mário, Drummond, Cabral*. On the “absolute primacy of visuality and spatiality” in Cabral’s poetics, see also Mendes de Sousa (141). On Cabral’s general “indifference toward music,” see also Süsskind (648).

RIOS SEM DISCURSO

Quando um rio corta, corta-se de vez
o discurso-rio de água que ele fazia;
cortado, a água se quebra em pedaços,
em poços de água, em água paralítica.
Em situação de poço, a água equivale
a uma palavra em situação dicionária:
isolada, estanque no poço dela mesma,
e porque assim estanque, estancada;
e mais: porque assim estancada, muda,
e muda porque com nenhuma comunica,
porque cortou-se a sintaxe desse rio,
o fio de água por que ele discorria.

(Cabral, *A educação pela pedra* 70)

RIVERS WITHOUT DISCOURSE

When a river cuts off, it cuts off for good
the discourse-river of water that it used to make;
cut off, the water breaks into pieces,
into pools of water, into paralyzed water.
In a well situation, water is equivalent
to a word in a dictionary situation:
isolated, watertight in its own well,
and because it's watertight, it's stagnant;
and what's more, because it's so stagnant, it's mute,
and mute because it communicates with nothing,
because the syntax of that river has been cut off,
the thread of water through which it flowed.

This is a poem, then, where landscape and language have become interchangeable, where the written text becomes an effect of the landscape and the landscape a visual effect of the text. We have seen, then, that a significant portion of Cabral's poetic production is thematically informed by the harsh Northeastern landscape of his youth. Yet this landscape is not only the referent of his poetry, it is also translated into an oral performance (in his two long narrative poems) and into the very spatiality and construction of his poems. The poetological

function of landscape is evident in numerous titles and passages of his work (Cardeal 186). For instance, in the poem “Fábula de Anfion” [“Fable of Anfion”] the lyrical self speaks of “the landscape of his vocabulary” [“paisagem de seu / vocabulário” (Cabral, *O cão sem plumas* 113)]. Another poem is called “Paisagem tipográfica” [“Typographical Landscape”], in the collection *Paisagem com figuras* [Landscape with figures, 1956]. Or, in the volume *O cão sem plumas* [The Dog without Feathers], there is a poem entitled “Paisagem pelo telefono” [“Landscape by telephone”].

As we have seen, Cabral’s poetic obsession with the river and water typically does not ‘represent’ landscape in a conventional manner, but rather suggests a sense of landscape in which different agents and beings are entangled, irrevocably transforming, and being affected by, the environment. While the long narrative poem “O rio” embodies the river as an agent of temporal movement and memory, the more ‘constructivist’ poems from the 1960s (from *O cão sem plumas*) privilege the idea of a poetic landscape, where language and landscape mirror each other in their qualities both material and performative, mineral and fluid. In this sense, Cabral’s work speaks to concerns of our own time: as modernist poetry it experiments with non-anthropocentric perspectives, even as it proposes a strong sense of poetic form, which (despite the author’s anti-subjectivist stance) is ultimately a ‘human’ and deeply personal way to condense the ‘lessons’ Cabral has learned from his experience of a specific fluvial landscape.

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