

# **Between Iron and Flora: Ecocritical Views on the Sculpture of Narcissus in the Botanical Garden of Rio de Janeiro**

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## **Introduction**

The present study was inspired by a walk taken by the researchers through the lush Botanical Garden of Rio de Janeiro. In a marginal boulevard of this green oasis, in the middle of the city of Rio de Janeiro, stand two iron sculptures from classical mythology: the Hunter Narcissus and the Nymph Echo, both wrapped in a web of branches and leaves of vines that grew at their base. That seemingly irreconcilable scene mixes the organic and the mineral, the mobile and the static, life and death, revealing them as coexisting elements, with none requiring the destruction of another. Thus, between abstraction and materiality, the encounter of the mythical characters with vegetation, expressing the interplay of iron and flora, expands literature's encounter with nature. This interplay triggers questions about media relations between narrative and sculpture, narrative and vegetation, and sculpture and nature.

Before its display in the Botanical Garden of Rio de Janeiro, the sculptural ensemble was in another location, part of a historical landmark called Chafariz das Marrecas (Mallard Fountain). The place was envisioned and executed by the sculptor and urban planner Valentim da Fonseca e Silva (1745-1813), known as Mestre Valentim, an important figure in Colonial Brazil. He designed the Chafariz das Marrecas as a semicircle, housing in its center a fountain, next to which were iron mallards (*marrecas*) (figure 1). On the edges of the semicircle, two columns served as the basis of the sculptures of the hunter Narcissus (on the right) and the nymph Echo (on the left). The fountain was conceived as a complement to the urban project of Mestre Valentim, that of the construction of the park known as Passeio Público (Public Promenade), located in the central area of the city of Rio de Janeiro (figure

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2). Both the Chafariz das Marrecas and the Passeio Público were commissioned to Mestre Valentim by Luís de Vasconcelos e Sousa, viceroy of the colony of Brazil from 1778 to 1790, as part of the reforms in the city of Rio de Janeiro, which became the capital of the vice-royalty of Brazil in 1763 (the previous capital was the city of Salvador). The Passeio Público was built between 1779 and 1783 and the Chafariz das Marrecas was built in 1785 (Carvalho 1999, 17-35).

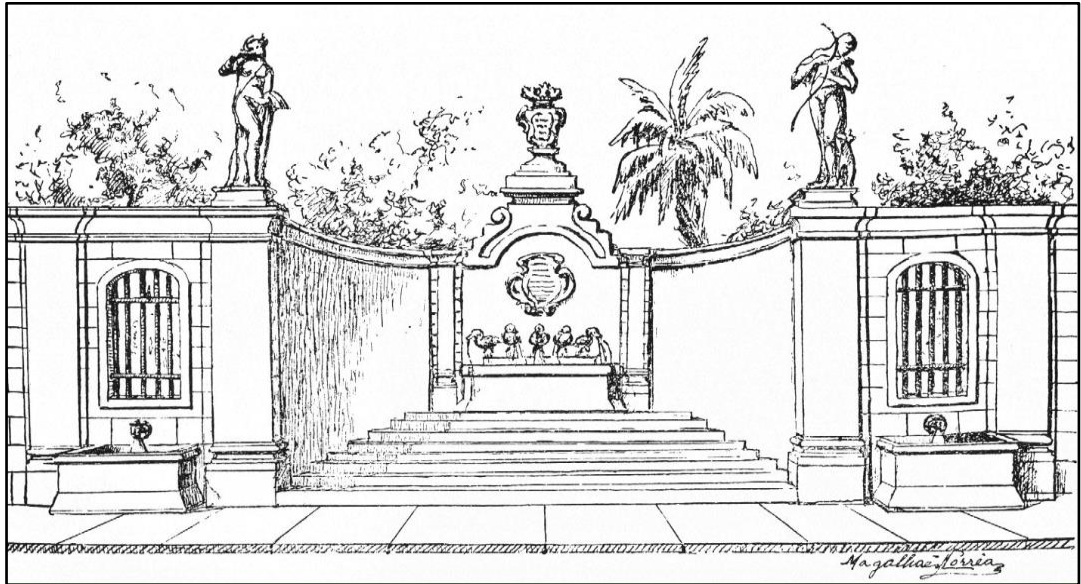


Figure 1: Chafariz das Marrecas in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil. (a drawing by Magalhães Corrêa in *Revista do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico*, vol. 170, 1939, 59).

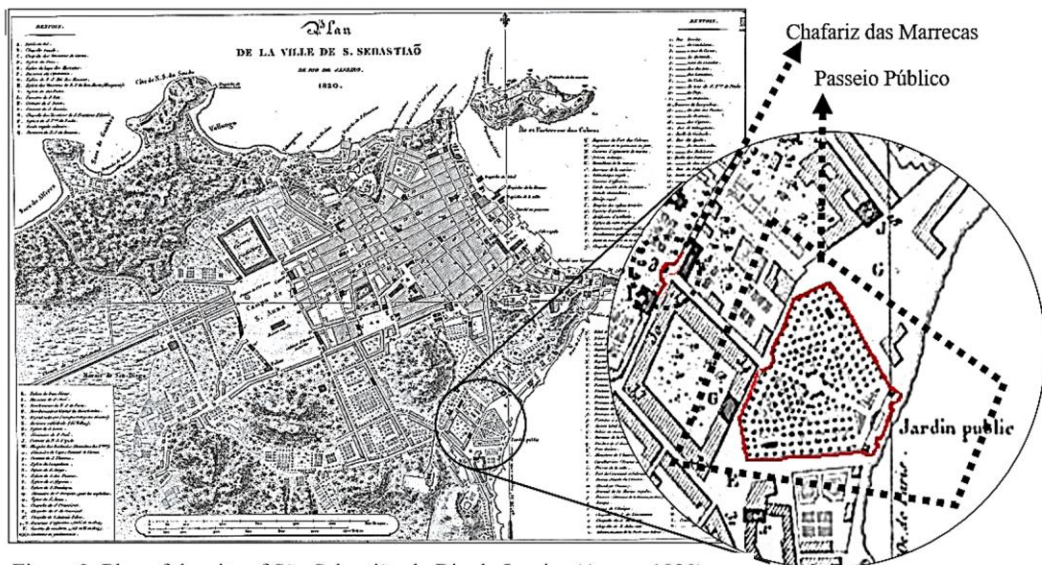


Figure 2: Plan of the city of São Sebastião do Rio de Janeiro (Arago, 1820). Image partially amplified by the authors.

The present intermedia study is centered on the interaction between the statue of the hunter Narcissus, as an integral part of the monument, and the Botanical Garden itself. It is important first to share the orientation we have adopted regarding the definition of “intermediality.” The term “intermedium” was coined by Coleridge in 1812 and was later revived and expanded by Dick Higgins in 1966, introducing intermedia to the characteristic work of the 1960s and developing a new critical way of engaging with art (Higgins 2012). According to Irina Rajewsky, “The concept of intermediality [...] must be differentiated from the American term ‘intermedia’...It therefore becomes necessary to define more precisely one’s own particular understanding of intermediality and to situate one’s individual approach within a broader spectrum -a goal that current studies have, for the most part, not sufficiently realized, thus impeding potentially fruitful intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary discussions” (2005, 43-45).

The act of designating or not designating a particular phenomenon as intermedial is conditioned by the disciplinary nature of the approach and its objectives. It is also important to investigate whether the approach is synchronic (addresses a typology of specific forms of intermediality) or diachronic (the perspective adopted by media researchers whose work focuses on the intersections between different media over time). There is also a combined approach that considers both the diachronic and the synchronic to analyze the historical changes in the form and function of intermedial practices in certain media products. The latter, which we have adopted in this work, presupposes an understanding of intermediality not as a fundamental condition or category intrinsic to the media being analyzed, but as a critical category for analyzing specific media configurations which, on the one hand, preserves something of their constitutive condition (origin), and, on the other hand, takes on a new domain, context or perspective. In other words, it represents a transformation under the action of history that, at the same time, preserves its constitutive elements even if reconfigured.

In this regard, our analysis considers elements of perception that activate the imagination and affect the identity of local citizens due to contextual factors such as place and history, intertextual aspects such as myth and art, and intermedial relations such as narrative and sculpture. Thus, the analysis explores the relationships between myth, literature, sculpture, and architecture/urbanism in past and present media forms of the work. The analysis is based on document records and historical studies of the sculptural ensemble, as well as on investigative sources regarding the myth of Narcissus and sculptural art. In an intermedial interaction between the sculpture and literature, literary texts also help us understand the artistic message of Mestre Valentim’s creation, which reflects the worldview of the time period of its construction as opposed to current perspectives. To analyze the current condition of this eighteenth-century work, the study draws upon Ecocritical Theory, also known as Ecocriticism (Garrad 2004), and concepts such as the Anthropocene (Crutzen 2000, 17) and Post-Anthropocene. The former indicates a period of massive human influence that destabilizes the non-human natural history and triggers the ongoing environmental crisis (Bruhn, 2023, 1034), while the latter suggests a future time of

overcoming the former. The term Green Humanism (Westling 2002) was coined to define the end of the period of human domination over the Earth in the Post-Anthropocene era.

Ecocriticism, originally based in literary studies, is defined as the study of the relationship between the human realm and non-human dimensions across human cultural history and its literary and artistic productions, owing to their great ability to communicate the complexities of our relations with nature (Garrad 2004, 5; Bruhn 2023, 1038). Because Ecocriticism is a recent field of study, boosted by current environmental problems, the concepts and terms associated with it are still being developed and updated by researchers, which is why its perspectives and terminology are manifold. This theoretical background will allow us to take a critical-analytical look at the intermedial relationship between literature/sculpture (human elements) and nature/location (non-human elements), communicated by Mestre Valentim's work at the time of its construction and today. Our analysis highlights the relationship with nature and the anthropocentric aspects operating on the work itself, its mythical theme, and its public facility structure.

For historical contextualization, the first part of the article will examine Mestre Valentim's original project and the artistic-urbanistic ideals of the time, which reveal a specific mode of perceiving and interacting with the city and the citizens in the nineteenth century. The second part will highlight the intermedial reading of narrative/sculpture, analyzing the mythical content and studying the sculptural ensemble in relation to contemporary readings of the myth. The contemporary reception of these elements will be addressed below, taking into consideration the massive artistic-literary reinterpretations of the mythical narrative, which influence the public perception of the sculptural ensemble. Finally, ecocritical concepts will be integrated and applied to the conclusions drawn.

### **In illo tempore**

The Passeio Público and the Chafariz das Marrecas were constructed when Brazil was a colony of Portugal, governed in 1778 by a viceroy based in the city of São Sebastião do Rio de Janeiro (today simply called Rio de Janeiro). Luís de Vasconcelos e Sousa and his government were notable for a series of urban reforms in the capital of the vice-royalty, aiming to “civilize” it, following the model of the metropolis of Lisbon. The association of the urban with the “civilized” is highlighted by Father Perereca, chronicler of colonial Brazil, in his 1821 book *Memórias para servir à história do Reino do Brasil (Memories to Serve the History of the Kingdom of Brazil)*. As he states, “the city of Rio de Janeiro has made the greatest progress in buildings, organization of the streets, and civilization of its residents” (quoted in Santos 2013, 37). Among the works promoted by Vasconcelos and Sousa, the Passeio Público and the Chafariz das Marrecas precisely stand out.

According to art historian Anna Maria Monteiro de Carvalho, for the design of these two urban facilities, the chosen model was one of the most representative of the ideal of civility instituted in modern European cities of that time: a monumental public garden, as a synonym for good taste, luxury, and entertainment – an

expression of nature dominated by human reason –, which was opposed by an imposing fountain for popular use (Carvalho 1999, 15).

Fountains, always present in this kind of garden, were also a symbol of human control of nature and, consequently, of the power of those who built them (Almeida 2006, 2-3). From an ecocritical perspective, the fountains are cultural products that represent the anthropocentrism of the late eighteenth century. The use of iron in their manufacture can also be regarded as representative of human domination since the mastery of iron was one of humanity's greatest achievements and the creation of a new technology of iron structures coincided with the construction of iron bridges at the end of the century.

Although the geography of the city of Rio de Janeiro favored maritime transit, its topography, squeezed between hills and sea, hampered the city's development. Thus, nature presented itself as an obstacle to urban expansion. Over time, several of these hills were destroyed, and their debris was used to landfill lagoons and bays. Those actions were addressed by medical-hygienist theories, which emerged in the early eighteenth century, associating the miasma emanating from decomposing organic materials on land or in water with prevalent diseases, and attributing epidemics to the lack of circulation of pure air and the stagnant water of lakes, lagoons, and swamps (Costa 2014).<sup>1</sup>

One of the hills demolished was the hill Morro das Mangueiras (Mango Trees Hill). Its debris dust was used to landfill the Lagoa do Boqueirão (Boqueirão Lagoon), the area where the Passeio Público was built. The construction followed a design of geometric boulevards open from all directions, as this was believed to be necessary to “ensure the circulation of the air, avoiding the stagnation that facilitates the exhalation of miasma, [by building] vast squares...wide streets, avenues and boulevards” (Costa 2014, 24). Mestre Valentim's conception of a long structural axis connecting the Chafariz da Marrecas with the Passeio Público favored a geometric path for wide and free airflow. The visitors could walk in a straight line from end to end, starting from the Chafariz das Marrecas, located at the beginning of an avenue (Rua das Marrecas – Marrecas Street), and ending in front of the entrance gate of the Passeio Público, where a central avenue began. The walk would culminate in the Fountain of Love, or the Fonte dos Amores, also known as Chafariz dos Jacarés, or the Alligator Fountain, located before a balustrade overlooking the sea. A Latin inscription at the center of the Chafariz das Marrecas reads as follows:

In the reign of Maria I and Pedro III, a once pestiferous lagoon was dissected and turned into the layout of a promenade; a wall was built to contain the waters of the immense sea. When the springs were led by the gushing bronze and the walls were torn down, the garden became a street; houses were built with admirable symmetry under Luís de Vasconcelos and Sousa vice-royalty, under whose auspices these works were executed. Thus, the people of Rio de Janeiro are happy on the day before the kalends of August 1785 (Julião 2019, 89).

According to Keith Thomas, at that time, the ideal “human civilization was an expression almost synonymous with the conquest of nature” (2010, 33). The trapped and controlled water flow towards the fountains and the trees and plants organized

in flowerbeds, constantly trimmed and, therefore, prevented from growing freely, characterized the model of the French gardens, popularized throughout Europe, adopted in Lisbon, and transferred to the colony of Brazil.

The Chafariz das Marrecas thus was the starting point on the path of civilization that would lead to the Passeio Público, the “civilization” brought through the sea by those arriving in boats. It was a symbol of human ingenuity and a source of water supply through the fountain that was itself supplied with water by a complex system of pipes:

The maps of the city of S. Sebastião of Rio de Janeiro, even the oldest ones, from 1750, have the drawings of the aqueduct above the arches of Carioca and a branch that descends from Morro de S. Antônio, to the Chafariz das Marrecas. Behind the fountain, a large water deposit served for distribution to the Convento da Ajuda, the Hospício dos Borbônio, built in 1742, and other buildings nearby. A channel from the water deposit supplied the five yellow metal mallards, whose beaks poured water. Water fell into a large stone tank that encompassed all the little mallards. From the ever-empty tank, the channeled water flowed again, under the stairs, running along Rua das Marrecas, crossing the entire Passeio Público and appearing in the alligator bronzes – and from there to the suspended lake, always full (Sanmartin, 1929, 41).

Water, plants, and animals that once dominated the environment were therefore controlled or “civilized” and, by extension and analogy, so were the city’s inhabitants.

In 1896, the Carioca aqueduct, which supplied water to the Chafariz das Marrecas, was transformed into a viaduct through which the cars (trams) that connected downtown to the Santa Tereza neighborhood began to run. Without water, the fountain was eventually demolished during the expansion works of the contiguous Military Police Headquarters in 1905 (Santos 2013, 243). The sculptural pieces of the place were dismantled, and only the figures of Narcissus and Echo were transferred to the Botanical Garden to be integrated into the Memorial of Mestre Valentim established there.

The two historical moments that delimit the existence of the Chafariz das Marrecas –its construction in 1785 and its shutdown in 1896– coincide with the times highlighted by the narrative of the writer Machado de Assis in his novel *The Alienist*, published as a book in 1882 (Pesavento, 1996). In the context of the post-proclamation of the Republic, which occurred in 1889, the narrator mentions episodes from Colonial Brazil, when small towns copied the old-fashioned European urban rationalization, as well as their outdated scientific and medical theories. Living in a small town in the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro, the protagonist’s wife, dazzled by the Passeio Público, accomplishes her dream to go to Rio de Janeiro. The narrator describes the wife’s feelings towards the place, seeing it as “a veritable paradise, [which] had finally opened.” “[T]he main streets were so impressive; and ... the Mallard Fountain! Real mallards, made of metal, with water coming out of their mouths,” [are] “unbelievably lovely” (Machado 2013, 168).

The character’s admiration for the metal mallards pouring water from their mouths gives us an idea of how euphoric the Carioca structures that mirrored the

European Enlightenment ideals were. With the double temporality of *The Alienist*, Machado shows us how nineteenth-century positivism, which has roots in the eighteenth century, is informed by previous projects and future perspectives. After the dazzling compliments to Rio's urban rationality, through wordplay and other discursive strategies of a *hypokrités*, the narrator expresses the wife's opinion of her husband's "scientific" outbursts as he begins to lock everyone up in his sanatorium as a lunatic: "the terror mounted. One no longer knew who was sane and who was crazy. *Positively* terror<sup>2</sup>" (Machado 2013, 171-172; emphasis added). Subtly, Machado problematizes the scientific and points out the dangers of adopting a harmful rationality that – little did he know – would be more damaging than the actions of an imaginary doctor who controlled, with his "science," a town in the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro.

Mestre Valentim's project of the Chafariz das Marrecas stayed "in illo tempore." It was caught between the fabulous and exemplary ancient times of fairy tales and Biblical passages in which this Latin expression "in illo tempore" appears, on the one hand, and the rationality that, from the eighteenth century, increasingly dominated the world in its unbridled and arbitrary eagerness to control men and nature, on the other. Ironically, such rationality in reality reveals itself in the current environmental and civilizational terror.

### **Another time, another way, another sense: intermediality**

The perception of the Chafariz das Marrecas as a sign of civilization was superimposed on classical culture through the mythical figures of Narcissus and Echo. Myths deal with the incomprehensible or the unfathomable, addressing these dimensions in relation to nature -which cannot be grasped by humans except in an enigmatic way, similar to art (Ribas 2022, 130)- along with its anthropocentric cultural perspective. Though the characters of classical mythology are usually gods, demigods, and heroes, which are figures beyond ordinary human beings, they still represent the human world (as opposed to the natural world). Accordingly, even if mythical narratives are not about common people (humanity), their enigmatic messages are certainly directed at them. From the Renaissance on, a relationship was established between Greco-Roman anthropocentrism and the appreciation of the human as an exponent of rationality in contrast to the rest of nature. Classical considerations about the natural world were then revisited, but their vivid and oracular mythical dimension was gradually excluded, especially from the eighteenth century onwards. The contrast or polarization between man and nature has been accentuated ever since, although it has acquired many facets throughout history (Mattos 2022).

According to French studies of mythology which developed in the twentieth century, since myth is "a living tradition that can be modified and reinvented" (Villagra 2017, 16), the view we have today of myths – such as those of Narcissus and Echo in the sculptures of the Chafariz das Marrecas – could be attributed to "a concept created by eighteenth-century scholars who approached the study of history and mythology from a rationalist perspective" (17). In line with the spirit of the

eighteenth century, Mestre Valentim took from antiquity the mythical confrontation between the human and non-human, adopting the Greek concept of *hybris* or human inordinateness to express not the limits between men and gods, but between man and nature, at a time of increased anthropocentrism now seen as the beginnings of the Anthropocene.

The case of the mythical pair chosen by Mestre Valentim is emblematic of eighteenth-century thought. The Greek sources about the pair are scarce – almost always narrating Narcissus and Echo in separate and unrelated stories. However, the version of *Metamorphoses* by the Roman poet Ovid that brings them together has established itself as the prime reference due to the canonical status it has achieved over the centuries (Pena 2017, 18). Master Valentim's knowledge of Ovid's version of the myth is certainly due to the wide dissemination of the Portuguese translation of the *Metamorphoses* by Bocage, the most famous Portuguese poet of the period. In 1791, Bocage also wrote a poem that had an intertextual relation with the myth in which Echo repeats the cries of the historical character Inês de Castro while the naiads carve a fountain formed by their tears. Although Pausanias also had a version of the myth of Narcissus, undoubtedly, Ovid's version was better known and certainly was Master Valentim's major reference. The extreme appreciation of classical mythology in eighteenth-century cultural productions and the multifaceted dimensions of the myth lead us to the hypothesis that Chafariz das Marrecas has creatively and ambiguously referenced the two versions of the myth mentioned below.

According to Ovid, before falling in love with Narcissus, the nymph Echo was punished by the goddess Hera for trying to cover up Zeus' infidelities by distracting Hera with lengthy conversations. Echo's punishment was her inability to say anything other than to 'echo' her interlocutor's last words. Losing her individual voice and doomed never to express herself, Echo strived to express her love for the handsome young hunter Narcissus but was cruelly rejected by him. She was thus consumed by passion, leaving only the breath of her voice echoing through the mountains. Other nymphs and young men who fell in love with Narcissus for his sublime beauty were also rejected and cried out for Rhamnusia or Nemesis, the goddess of retribution. Thus, the text suggests that Narcissus' love for his reflection in the water – which leads him to death as he drowns gazing at his own reflection – is a punishment for his excessive pride and 'narcissism' (Pena 2017, 21).

In the work of Pausanias, in the section dedicated to the city of Thespieae where Narcissus came from, there are two versions of the myth "with a clear critical and rationalist component" (Villagra 2017, 24). In the first version, Narcissus could not identify his image on the surface of the water and his frustration led to his death. In the second version, the young man's mourning of his dead twin sister left him to contemplate his own image by the margin of a lake until he died as he wanted to remember his sister. Both in the work of Ovid and Pausanias, a flower bloomed where Narcissus died (Pena, 2017). These are the classic versions of the myth in which the two characters appear together and, therefore, were the inspiration for Mestre Valentim to envision the fountain.



With the water tank between the two iron sculptures serving as a lake, the sculpture of Narcissus as a young hunter, carrying a bow and arrows, and accompanied by a dog, is placed to the right of the observer. With a twisted torso, and head slightly inclined downward toward the outside of the fountain, Narcissus seems to look at the dog at his feet. Such posture and look away from Echo may signify disdain towards the passionate nymph. In contrast, the sculpture of Echo, with its torso slightly turned to the inside of the fountain towards Narcissus, is placed to the left of the observer. Echo's head is seen tilted to the left towards its hand which holds the tip of a ribbon wrapped around its body, indicating perhaps some inhibition. Nonetheless, Echo holds a blooming narcissus flower. It should be noted that the physical traits of the sculptures of the two characters are very similar that, when they were transferred to the Botanical Garden, they were mistakenly recorded as hunter Diana and nymph Naiad, as both statues portrayed delicate feminine features (Corrêa 1939, 58). Thus, the sculptural ensemble can be related to either of the two versions mentioned.

When the fountain was shut down and the two sculptural pieces were installed in the Botanical Garden, the positions of the two statues changed, with Narcissus now on the left and Echo on the right. While previously looking away from each other, both now face each other with a tilted head (figure 5). This makes Narcissus' posture seem less cruel, although he still keeps his gaze down. A small mirror of water has been positioned between the two statues, amid vines that, depending on the time of year, get entangled with the sculptures (figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3: Narcissus in the Botanical Garden of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, entangled in the vegetation. Picture by the authors



Figure 4: Narcissus (another angle) in the Botanical Garden of Rio, Brazil, entangled in the vegetation. Picture by the authors.

The message of the sculptural ensemble now changes with the change in the position of the sculptures and the presence of plants growing freely in their surroundings. The project of controlling nature by superimposing human rationality on it, as mentioned earlier, is subverted. This new Chafariz das Marrecas was laid out for a long time in the Botanical Garden, even at the cost of exposing the sculptures to the weather. The consequent deterioration forced the restoration of the place, and that is why the two iron figures were later kept indoors in a place made to honor Mestre Valentim.



Figure 5: Narcissus and Echo in the Botanical Garden of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil - dry weather with little vegetation.



Figure 6: Narcissus and Echo in the Botanical Garden of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil - rainy weather with thick vegetation.

It should be noted that the current situation of the Botanical Garden, to a large extent, also subverts the conditions of its inauguration in 1808, when the arrival of the Portuguese Royal family to Brazil sparked a strong commitment to the Europeanization of the city of Rio de Janeiro. The arrival of D. John VI – Prince Regent of Portugal and King of the United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil, and the Algarves – was the greatest impetus for the development of the natural sciences as advocated by the scholars of the Enlightenment. The first scientific institutions installed in the city were the Horto Real (Royal Garden) and later the Botanical Garden (which incorporated the Royal Garden) to acclimatize plant species of agricultural and commercial interest and to search for medicinal plants (Domingues 2001, 36).

The initial idea of D. John VI was to acclimatize plant species originating from various regions of the world. The first challenge was to acclimatize the so-called oriental spices: vanilla, cinnamon, pepper, and others. Parallel to the technical-scientific studies on the flora taking place, the space was expanded to also function as a place of entertainment and learning, which is why the Botanical Garden was adorned with lakes and waterfalls. In addition, a swamp drainage system was introduced in the place to allow visitors to circulate between its alleys, especially the Imperial Palm Alley, which is located at the main entrance. Like the initiative of the viceroy mentioned earlier, the Botanical Garden also gave Rio de Janeiro, now the Court of Portugal, an atmosphere of “civilization” and contributed to disseminating the image of beauty and exuberance of Brazilian nature, especially to foreigners who

arrived in the country. More rationality and civilization were conveyed by adding to the initiative the scientific and commercial aspects.

Among the prince regent's initiatives of Europeanization or "civilization" was the arrival of famous French artists from the recently deposed Napoleonic regime. The so-called French artistic mission arrived in Brazil in 1816, supported by the Portuguese government. Sculptors, painters, architects, engravers, and masters of sawmills, and carpentry came to implement a project to teach crafts, industries, and arts in the country through the Royal School of Sciences, Arts and Crafts. Its most representative artists include the painter Jean-Baptiste Debret (1768-1848), author of books documenting his travels in Brazil and some aspects of Brazilian society at the beginning of the nineteenth century and whose canvases show scenes of the Brazilian court, slaves, and indigenous people. Other artists were the sculptor and painter Auguste-Marie Taunay (1768-1824), who worked on the city's ornamentation project to acclaim the emperor Dom John VI; and the architect Grandjean de Montigny (1776-1850), an artist who built one of the gates of the Botanical Garden and, among other works, constructed a Palace that bears his name and that stands today as a university museum on the campus of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro. This artistic work extended the development of neoclassical art in nineteenth-century Brazil. The use of classical standards in architecture – such as the *Petit Trianon* building at the Brazilian Academy of Letters – and the cult of Hellenism, with a strong presence of Greek mythology as an image and literary standard, was a model acclaimed by the Rio elite, who admired European forms of 'civilization,' as portrayed by Machado in the episode mentioned above. As in the two moments narrated in Machado's *The Alienist*, in 1779, when reforms were implemented to reconfigure the region of the Passeio Público and the Chafariz da Marrecas, in 1816, when the French Mission arrived, their project concentrated all efforts on integrating urbanism, sculptural art, and classical literature under the same rationality that highlights the human being at the expense of nature, which is either ordered or eliminated<sup>3</sup> (Santos 2013, 37; Squeff 2005, 566).

In summary, the civilizing ideals that motivated both Mestre Valentim's work in the eighteenth century and its reconfiguration in the nineteenth century were the result of a Eurocentric anthropocentrism implemented by colonial empires like the Portuguese in non-European territories like Brazil. As an essential concept of the Anthropocene, progress as a growing human domination over nature, took place in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century in the midst of its Industrial Revolution. Meanwhile, the Brazilian colony of Rio de Janeiro was incorporating the founding ideas of the Anthropocene with the reforms of Viceroy Luis Vasconcelos de Sousa. In the following century, when it became the capital of the Portuguese Empire, the city once again made changes to ally itself with European anthropocentric ideals, through the actions of the French Mission and the Botanical Garden.

We can infer that these nineteenth-century ideals were still in force when the sculptures of Narcissus and Echo were transferred to the Botanical Garden in 1905, at the beginning of a new century. However, the images taken in the first decade of the twenty-first century show a great change, as the man/nature opposition, so dear

to the eighteenth century, would never have allowed the cultivation of plants or the disorderly expansion of plant species across the place, covering the construction – and even the sculptures – as did the vines (figure 6). Nowadays, the Research Institute of the Botanical Garden of Rio de Janeiro is a federal agency linked to the Ministry of the Environment and is one of the most important research centers in the world, in the fields of botany and biodiversity conservation, with about 6,500 species (some of which are endangered) distributed over an area of more than 130 acres, outdoors and in air-conditioned greenhouses. Instead of researching how to take advantage of the agricultural and commercial nature of the place, the Botanical Garden is now dedicated to preservation. The focus is currently on nature.

### **The myth-mirror of the Anthropocene**

Myth, as a category of analysis, did not exist in antiquity, as it was culturally integrated in daily life (Pena 2017, 17). Its allegorical value was instituted in the medieval period, and it later acquired rationalist or symbolic value. The myth of Narcissus has been relevant throughout history in a way that has mirrored human longing in many periods. Narcissus was portrayed by Caravaggio, Poussin, and Salvador Dalí. He inspired Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, Paul Valéry, Camões, and Fernando Pessoa. He inspired psychoanalysts to systematize traumas and complexes and to approach the human *psyche*. In all these works, the reflection of oneself, mirroring, self-representation, and projective behaviors are highlighted. Freud developed the concept of narcissism further. Since the days of ancient Rome, with its treatises on catoptrics to the stage of Lacan's mirror, mirroring has been the object of questioning values, the search for self-knowledge, notions about oneself, and the limits of the self in relation to the other and to nature. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the beginning of Narcissus' account already highlights this:

... that lovely nymph  
gave birth to one so handsome that, just born,  
he was already worthy of much love:  
Narcissus was the name she gave her son.

And when she asked the augur  
if her boy would live to see old age, Tiresias replied:  
“Yes, if he never knows himself.” (Ovid 1993, 90-91)

And then, Narcissus, contemplating himself on the surface of the lake  
waters, talks to his own reflection:  
I stretch my arms to you, and you reach back in turn.  
I smile and you smile, too. And, often, I've seen tears upon your face  
just when I've wept, and when I signal to you, you reply;  
and I can see the movement of your lovely lips,  
returning words that cannot reach my ears.  
Yes, yes, I'm he! I've seen through that deceit:

my image cannot trick me anymore.  
I burn with love for my own self: it's I  
who light the flames—the flames that scorch me then. (Ovid 1993, 95-96)

Oscar Wilde, in the insightful poem-tale *The Disciple* (1894), recounts the myth of Narcissus from the point of view of the lake. Wilde proposes a symmetrical projection of the ego, provoking the reader to think of (self)-reflection as chain mirroring, calling into question, to the laughable surprise of readers, the originality of the image and the truthfulness of the reflection:

When Narcissus died the pool of his pleasure changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, and the Oreads came weeping through the woodland that they might sing to the pool and give it comfort.

And when they saw that the pool had changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, they loosened the green tresses of their hair and cried to the pool and said, "We do not wonder that you should mourn in this way for Narcissus, so beautiful was he".

"But was Narcissus beautiful?" said the pool.

"Who should know that better than you?" answered the Oreads. "Us did he ever pass by, but you he sought for, and would lie on your banks and look down at you, and in the mirror of your waters he would mirror his own beauty."

And the pool answered, "But I loved Narcissus because, as he lay on my banks and looked down at me, in the mirror of his eyes I saw ever my own beauty mirrored". (1894)

Wilde's work leads us to think of contemplation as a two-way street: the self contemplates itself and, erroneously, assumes that the mirror is null, just a surface reflecting light. However, Narcissus' mirror is nature, which shows itself alive in Wilde's text. Allegorically, we can understand that the ideal of civilization announced in Greco-Roman anthropocentrism is problematized in this text because everything we took from nature was Gaia, a living source providing life. After the Renaissance, when a real power to dominate nature arose with the development of science and the possibilities of mastering natural resources, the anthropocentrism of exacerbated rationality that has taken impulse from the eighteenth century onwards began to consider raw materials, resources, flora, and fauna as objects of its domain and possession without any "voice".

If in Wilde nature has a "voice," contrastingly, in Mestre Valentim, there is no contact with water. Channeled and dominated by human ingenuity, water was looked at with the same pride as Narcissus's look towards Echo, who is not by chance identified as part of nature with sound and stone. Almost giving his back to both, the fountain and Echo, the sculpture of Narcissus in the original construction is armed

with his weapons to hunt and dominate the animals, and with a dog to follow and serve him. Consciously or unconsciously, the reassembly of the Chafariz das Marrecas in the Botanical Garden placed the *personae* of the sculptures in such a way as to talk to each other and to the water because it is this multidimensional dialogue that has been missing in our interaction with nature. The rearrangement of the sculptural ensemble reflects the ecocritical vision that understands anthropocentrism as the origin and essence of the Anthropocene and the climate problems that came with it.

### Conclusion

The myth of Narcissus has been incorporated in various ways across time in various media. Since its origins, it has established synchronic intermedial dialogues with each cultural and media context. It has transitioned intermedially from mostly oral ancient narratives to written literature, pictorial art, and sculptural art, among others, in the diachrony of artistic expressions. It allowed the "civilizers" of the eighteenth century to assert their mastery over nature and inspired Oscar Wilde, in the nineteenth century, to question it. More than a century later, Wilde's critique sounds today like an old warning about the dangers of silencing nature. From the ecocritical perspective, regarding the human power to subjugate nature, we can conclude that human dominion over nature proves to be as transitory as the colonial empires' dominion, which had their heyday, crisis, and decline. The current climate imbalances indicate that we are probably in a post-apogee crisis.

In this sense, as the philosopher Peter Pál Pelbart (2023) said, we are a little beyond Wilde's questioning "mirror," and we are facing the "broken mirror of Narcissus" which no longer reflects the superb figure of the human being. To use the expression of Isabelle Stengers, we are facing "*l'intrusion de Gaïa*" ("the intrusion of Gaia") (2009, 48), or the violent manifestation of nature in its relations with humanity, as a consequence of the destruction of the environment carried out in the Anthropocene.

In the reassembled Chafariz das Marrecas, Gaia's intrusion can be seen, at first, in the branches and leaves that exceed the limits planned to contain them (at the beginning of the twenty-first century) and, currently, in the extreme heat and cold, torrential rains or prolonged droughts that have hit not only the Botanical Garden region in Rio de Janeiro but many places around the world. Nature no longer accepts serving as an object to reflect the human being. It has its own strength. Perhaps, as Bruno Latour stated, it is time to accept the idea of a dialogue of "Humans on the one hand (the so-called moderns) and Terrans on the other (the people of Gaia)" (Pelbart 2023) or, at least, it is time to start thinking about a negotiated solution possibly manifested by the concepts of Post Anthropocene or Green Humanism.

Although the concept of the Anthropocene has been conceived as a global one, since the environmental problems caused by it affect the entire planet, our analysis leads us to think of an anthropocentrism of mostly European origin transferred to colonial regions such as Brazil and Mestre Valentim's Rio de Janeiro. This can give us hope that the Anthropocene is not some kind of natural offshoot of man's presence

on earth, but a matter of history. Just as Mestre Valentim's work went from an iron creation mastering nature to an artifact integrated with the surrounding flora, it is possible for us to find other paths for mankind on Earth.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Costa (2014) dedicates an entire chapter of his research to demonstrating this issue.

<sup>2</sup> In the original text: “Positivamente terror”. The play on words - between positivism and positively - suggests a subtle criticism.

<sup>3</sup> The eighteenth-century reforms in the city of Rio de Janeiro to which we refer here are the initiatives of Viceroy Luís de Vasconcelos e Sousa (Santos 2013, 37). The French Mission to Brazil, which began in 1816, as Squeff (2005, 566) points out, gave French artists the role of continuing the civilizing process in America - begun by the Portuguese.

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