

## **"Internal" Literary History**

### **Rubem Fonseca's "Intestino Grosso"**

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**ABSTRACT:** The term literary history has been understood in diverging contexts in the twentieth century, although, as Eduardo Coutinho points out, its practice in Latin America is increasingly subject to interrogations of the concepts that have traditionally defined critical interpretation. Building on Wendell Harris's distinction between external and internal literary history, this paper argues that Rubem Fonseca's short story "Intestino Grosso" (Large Intestine) rather than being only a textual artifact that critics utilize to impose their external readings upon literary events, also acts as a form of internal literary history as produced from within fiction to comment upon the state of contemporary Brazilian literary criticism.

**KEYWORDS:** Rubem Fonseca, internal literary history, mock interview, literary criticism.

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Eduardo Coutinho argues in "Rewriting Latin American Literary History" that if "one can no longer limit the field of literature to fictional or poetic written production, the corpuses which formed the basis of traditional literary histories lose their rigidity and become multiple and dynamic, giving way to the co-existence of distinct canons within the same context" (2003, 105). One of the challenges to establishing the parameters of literary history has been the wide variety of ends served by the term, having denoted anything from pure history to literary theory and even the sociology of literature, depending upon the practitioner (Pelc, quoted in Harris 1994, 436).<sup>1</sup> Roberto Schwarz's use of Machado de Assis's fiction as a lens through which to link contemporary and historical Brazilian culture in effect fuses such literary historical definitions. Equally concerned with the consequences of Latin American cultural imitation of foreign models, Silviano Santiago bridges the linguistic divide in Latin America by employing Borges's "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote" to serve as a model for his manifesto of scholarly and critical, as opposed to purely cultural, anthropophagy.<sup>2</sup> Schwarz and Santiago exemplify less traditional historical interpreta-

tions of literature, conceiving of fiction as a prism through which to elucidate contemporary critical concerns, yet they reiterate the interdependent text-critic relationship that Gilberto Teles claims literary history requires, namely the intervention of scholars in order to analyze elements both internal and external to historical works (2002, 13). Is the progress of the varied forms of literary history, then, the purview of critics and scholars alone who read history, theory, and sociology through literature, or can literary texts themselves transform from objects of study into cultural artifacts that enter into the historical dialogue on their own terms?

Harris suggests that diachronic literary histories that stress temporal sequences over authorial intention can be classified based on two tendencies: their focus upon relational influences that are either *internal* to the succession of texts (in other words, between author and author, text and text) or *external* (i.e., based on shifting historical contexts of production) (441–42). Yet self-reflexive texts that comment upon literary events might be considered to constitute a form of internal literary history in a different sense, as being organically generated from within literature rather than as narratives imposed upon the past from external positions. Rubem Fonseca's 1975 "Intestino Grosso" is one such text, and although its title alone playfully suggests that it details internal movements, it is Fonseca's attempt to critique the extraliterary from within the realm of fiction that attests to this story's status as internal literary history.

Less a short story than a dialogue that purposefully eschews plot development, the narrative consists of an interview between a first-person journalist and an Author, who, despite being nameless, would appear to share a similar philosophy to that of Fonseca, while the fictional references made to the Author's work parallel Fonseca's previous collections.<sup>3</sup> Biographical criticism is of limited value in this case, however, as Fonseca's fictional Author makes clear from the start that this is no realist, journalistic, or innocent confrontation; far from modestly agreeing to an interview, the Author requests to be paid per word. In fact, he wastes no time in mocking the debate on what constitutes the core attributes of Brazilian national identity, the same issues that preoccupy Schwarz and Santiago. He highlights the reluctance of literary criticism to embrace change, claiming to have struggled for years to be published because of market expectations imposed by critics constructing in the present supposedly historical national attributes: "Demorou. Eles queriam que eu escrevesse igual ao Machado de Assis, e eu não queria, e não sabia . . . Os caras que editavam os

livros, os suplementos literários, os jornais de letras. Eles queriam os negrinhos do pastoreio, os guaranis, os sertões da vida. Eu morava num edifício de apartamentos no centro da cidade" (1994, 461). That the farce of a simulated interview is approached through fiction is all the more ironic because at the time Fonseca explicitly refused to provide interviews, maintaining that "everything he has to say is in his books" (Lowe 1982, 110), and which he proves via his Author's textual deconstruction of public codes of morality.

While the other stories that constitute Fonseca's third collection of short stories, *Feliz ano novo* (1975), bear the writer's trademark mixture of violence and ironic understatement,<sup>4</sup> the ironic gaze of "Intestino Grosso" is leveled at the factors informing the institutionalization of social codes rather than social confrontation.<sup>5</sup> As the short story ends, the first-person journalist complains to his editor, "Esta entrevista parece um Dialogue des Morts do classicismo francês, de cabeça para baixo" (469), and this experience of defamiliarization parallels the reader's own frustration of expectations in a story that appears to better fit the genre of literary criticism, although the diegetic Author's critique is leveled not at nineteenth-century France but rather at the state of contemporary Brazilian scholarship and the publishing market. Indeed, while "Intestino Grosso" is not one of the five stories that caused the collection to be banned in 1976,<sup>6</sup> it metafictionally comments upon the very issues of morality and censorship that were directed against the book, almost as if in anticipation of those charges, or, as Lowe suggests, an "ironic rebuttal" against the censors who had previously accused Fonseca of being pornographic (1982, 110). Indeed, the fictional Author discusses the pornography in his work, although the end result is not that the short story is pornographic but rather that it transforms into a dialogue about theories of pornography (Sá 146).

Can a short story, then, intrude upon the territory of the essay? Most essays about literature ultimately touch upon literary history whether it is their primary intention to do so or not (Harris 436), although David Perkins has a different kind of definition in mind when he poses a provocative question in the title of his monograph *Is Literary History Possible?* (1992).<sup>7</sup> While the field has evolved from traditional narrative history of the nineteenth century to what he terms the "postmodern encyclopedia"—a series of separate essays on distinct authors or works—the former mode lacks complexity while the latter lacks coherence. For Perkins, the act of writing literary history presumes that the past is relatively unified, while to accurately represent that past, scholars must perceive it as ex-

tremely diverse (1992, 27). This conundrum leads him to a conclusion whose paradox he suggests is symptomatic of contemporary debates regarding knowledge: "we cannot write literary history with intellectual conviction, but we must read it" (17). Yet, by creating parameters based on conceptions of totality and coherence, Perkins presupposes certain formal constraints about the practice of reading and writing about the past, for the critique of flawed attempts at totalization need not itself be either totalizing or book-length in order to constitute literary history.

As Hayden White has argued in texts such as *Metahistory*, the internal critique of conventional discursive practices forms an essential part of the exercise of the discipline of historiography. Perkins may well not agree with such a stance, for he takes issue with White's suggestion that the emplotment and narrativity inherent in historiography borrow from literary tropes, arguing instead that "narrative history differs fundamentally from fiction because, in constructing a novel, the 'plot' takes precedence over the 'story' . . . That we can make many different narratives out of the same events does not mean that the structure of events in our narrative is not true of the past" (34-35). Despite his rebuttal of White, however, it is noteworthy that the objections Perkins raises against the possibility of literary history, namely the inherent distortion and partiality of any narrative about the past, in addition to the subjectivity of the author, discrediting any pretense to scientific objectivity, in fact rehearse the very same concerns being concomitantly discussed in new or postmodern historical fiction in North and Latin America.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to Perkins, Coutinho notes that within the last two decades, Latin American literary history has become characterized by its disassociation from the European models and values upon which it has historically been predicated, a process of interrogation that has included anything from challenging the viability of the terms *literary* and *history* to deconstructing the traditionally defining concepts of historical linearity, evolution as progress, and the nation as the default unit of measure. This shift has, in turn, led to a rethinking of the ability of umbrella terms such as *Latin America* to account for the Americas' regional varieties of culture as well as the issues of inclusion of historically marginalized groups, leading to a new, unavoidably comparative form of literary history, which quite simply entails "the narrativization of literary events" (103). Indeed, it is within "this complex net of relationships [that] two distinct temporal and spatial instances are confronted, and it is in the intercourse between these two



instances of production and reception of texts that the discourse of literary history is woven, no longer as a supposedly objective report of facts, but as story, as fiction" (104). "Intestino Grosso" is emblematic of this shift from facts to fiction as a strategy to narrativize Latin American literary events. If, as Coutinho suggests, the notion of linearity in literary history has been replaced by an emphasis upon dialogue (103), then a dialogue—which does not allow plot to take precedence over story, as Perkins fears—is precisely what Fonseca offers as a method to critique the very same issues of Western values and national metanarratives that Coutinho identifies.

The artificiality of internalizing outdated European logic in a Brazilian context is made evident when the Author explains that he doesn't write exclusively about marginal individuals attempting to enter bourgeois society through violence, summarizing a novel, *O anão*, of his own that was written in the style of Proust. Although discussed in serious terms, the satire is an absurd amalgam of dukes and duchesses who marginalize a newly married wife because her family tree is inferior, leading the woman to seek psychoanalytic help as the story develops into tragedy. In leading up to the discussion of the European-influenced novel, the Author's equally absurd initial definition of pornography in literature is that it contains individuals without any teeth. The young duchess keeps most of hers in the book, which the Author explains via a parodic reference to the excess of authorial allusions made to foreign canonical texts, in this case T. S. Eliot's modernist poetry: "Bem, alguns são postigos. Mas isso não é dito muito claramente . . . Apenas, numa passagem, eu me refiro à dificuldade que ela tem de comer um pêssego, uma citação poética—do I dare, etc.—para bons entendedores" (Fonseca 462).

In fact, these jabs at literary criticism form the central means of understanding the text's metacritical scope in relation to pornography. The Author's book *O anão* has been criticized for being pornographic, but as the Author points out, the book doesn't actually feature a midget in its pages, although "mesmo assim alguns críticos afirmam que ele simboliza Deus, outros que ele representa o ideal de beleza eterna, outros ainda que é um brado de revolta contra a iniquidade do terceiro mundo" (465). In the same fashion, Fonseca's short story does not provide pornography, nor does it actually feature the large intestine promised by the title. Instead, Fonseca's Author utilizes these subjects as points of departure to reverse the traditional focus of the critic upon the artist to that of the artist upon the critic's sense of aesthetics: "Ao atribuir à arte uma função

moralizante, ou, no mínimo, entretenedora, essa gente acaba justificando o poder coativo da censura, exercido sob alegações de segurança ou bem-estar público" (466).

The story's title provides the two keys to breaking down the narrative, already signaling the subversive attitude of the text by pointing to "a dissolução das antíteses alto/baixo, sublime/grotesco, aludindo à dimensão corporal inferior quando se aborda um tema 'elevado' como a literatura" (Figueiredo 2003, 26). Without implying profanity, the image of the large intestine invites association with human feces, deployed cynically in the story. Similarly, the Author's comments about literature and the publishing market are tongue in cheek in calling out the manner in which euphemism has itself become a dominant discourse in the name of good taste. Additionally, it turns out that "Intestino Grosso" is not only the name of the story the reader experiences but also one of the Author's previous novels. Pornography, the Author explains, is linked to the organs of excretion and reproduction, but in "meu livro Intestino Grosso eu digo que, para entender a natureza humana, é preciso que todos os artistas desexcomunguem o corpo, investiguem, da maneira que só nós sabemos fazer, ao contrário dos cientistas, as ainda secretas e obscuras relações entre o corpo e a mente" (466). If literary history has been conceived as the privileged space of critics, Fonseca understands the exploration of the relationship between mind and body as being accessible by art alone.

The Author demonstrates that pornography is not neatly quantifiable when the journalist shifts the theme of the discussion. The Author simply repeats the fairy tale of "Hansel and Gretel" (João e Maria), a narrative taught to children the world over. Yet, with its celebration of thievery and murder, it is "uma história indecente, desonesta, vergonhosa, obscena, despudorada, suja e sórdida. . . . Mas quando os defensores da decência acusam alguma coisa de pornográfica é porque ela descreve ou representa funções sexuais ou funções excretoras" (463).

In other words, the judgment of pornography does not reflect a social norm but a construct imposed upon the public, and as the example of the fairy tale illustrates, its exercise is hypocritical at best. In fact, based on arguments of morality, life itself would be pornographic, since it is dependent upon reproduction and excretion. Yet it is not only artists who are pornographic but also those critics who attempt to control the artist, and this is perhaps the most critical claim of Fonseca's Author. His fear is that as world populations rise, a lack of

resources will turn communities into cannibals, an issue that Jonathan Swift brought up in satirical context centuries ago, and which the Author wishes to capitalize upon in order to propose “mystic cannibalism” as a new religion. The reference to anthropophagy is no accident, of course, given its foundational importance as a national trope in twentieth-century literature, film, and criticism. Exercised in any of these modes of production, the celebrated activity of cannibalizing foreign models is a pornographic behavior of which both writers and critics are guilty, whether established as a Brazilian or a farther-reaching Latin American critical strategy.

The Author scoffs when the journalist asks whether a Latin American literature exists, echoing Coutinho’s critique of the influence that European models have maintained upon Brazil. The author quips in response to the notion of a regional literature, “Só se for na cabeça do Knopf” (468), a reference to the North American publishing house and the role that English translation has had in inventing a Latin American canon for international export. Yet in addition to drawing such attention he criticizes the tendency of intellectuals to conform to foreign ideals, continuing, “Não me faça rir. Não existe nem mesmo uma literatura brasileira com semelhanças de estrutura, estilo, caracterização, ou lá o que seja. . . . Passamos anos e anos preocupados com o que alguns cientistas cretinos ingleses e alemães (Humboldt?) disseram sobre a impossibilidade de se criar uma civilização abaixo do Equador” (468).

“Intestino Grosso” is certainly not a far-reaching historical study. If anything, as a fragmented and uneven diatribe against critical tendencies, it is more akin to an essay in Perkins’s “postmodern encyclopedia.” The story is not superior to traditional forms of literary history but rather, as an alternative, demands to be read in a different context. It is firmly rooted in the present as a journalistic activity of interviewing, yet as Coutinho maintains, “Literary History is, thus, the history of both the production and the reception of texts, and for the historiographer these texts are at the same time documents of the past and experiences of the present time” (104). Fonseca’s Author is a product of those processes, and in addition to being aware of the processes that have formed his trajectory and shaped the reception of his work, he is extremely interested in opening the debate on how these practices control society.<sup>9</sup> Far from constructing a linear or narrative progression, Fonseca attempts to offer no conclusion to the Author and journalist’s dialogue—the latter simply turns off the recorder when he can

stand to listen no longer—nor is the social realist writer portrayed as a privileged defender of public justice. The editor's response to the journalist's dismay may prove analogous to the story's relation to critical theory:

"Esses escritores pensam que sabem tudo," eu disse, irritado.

"É por isso que são perigosos," disse o Editor. (469)

Despite offending the elements of good writing, or perhaps precisely because of its offenses, "Intestino Grosso" reaffirms the role of the literary in "literary history." At the same time, its overt self-reflexivity calls attention to the conventions that have historically structured critical approaches, as Fonseca's mock interview illustrates one approach to the "rewriting" of literary history (in the sense that Coutinho details), one that shifts away from universal frameworks to analyze the confluences of overlapping approaches to literary renewal.

#### NOTES

1. Gilberto Mendonça Teles, for example, refers to the subtle distinction among "história literária," "história de literatura," and "historiografia literária," as the field of critical theory continually develops new methods and practices (2002, 11).

2. See, for example, Schwarz's *Que horas são?* and Santiago's "O entre-lugar no discurso latino-americano."

3. The fictional author discusses the degree of pornography in a supposed book of his entitled *O anão que era negro, padre, corcunda e míope*, which, as Vidal points out, forms an echo of Fonseca's "Os graus" from his second collection of short stories, in 1965, *A coleira do cão* (1994, 68).

4. Silva explores this dynamic in great detail in *O caso Rubem Fonseca: Violência e erotismo em Feliz ano novo*.

5. As Sá notes, Fonseca has returned to the device of reflexive writers-as-characters in a variety of later stories and novels at various points in his trajectory, including *Bufo & Spallanzani* (1985) and *E do meio do mundo prostituto só amores guardei ao meu charuto* (1997).

6. For a thorough discussion and critical interrogation of the processes surrounding the censorship of *Feliz ano novo*, see "A proibição: Os bastidores da censura" in Silva's *Rubem Fonseca: Proibido e consagrado*. In *The Muffled Cries*, Baden provides a more cursory look at the ban, but he helpfully explores it in relation to the larger rubric of artistic censorship during the military dictatorship.

7. René Wellek first asked the same question in *Theory of Literature* (1956), noting the difficulty in creating a product that is both literary and historical at once. Perkins revisits the question in the context of what he sees as the recent revival of literary history determined by quite distinct concerns about production (1992, 9–12).



8. Early examples include Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Fernando Aínsa's "La reescritura de la historia en la nueva novela histórica" (1991), and Seymour Menton's *Latin America's New Historical Novel* (1992).

9. Although the expression "Feliz ano novo" later became a protest slogan against the regime of Ernesto Geisel, Fonseca's concern regarding censorship of ideas is not necessarily directed at the dictatorship under which he wrote the piece but rather at the gatekeepers of art. Baden suggests that Fonseca had supported the regime in its early years and, thus, that the banning of the book came as a surprise (1999, 104, 107).

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