

Devil to Pay in the Backlands and João Guimarães Rosa's Quest for Universality

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Almost thirty years after the death of João Guimarães Rosa, his major novel, *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (*GSV*),¹ is still considered to be an incomparable masterpiece. “Incomparable” in two ways: in the metaphorical sense of an unparalleled work of art, and as an effort for both a literary and intellectual elaboration of a Brazilian problem that has not been equaled since. This problem goes back to the end of the nineteenth century’s effort to consolidate Brazil’s identity as independent from European models, though not ignorant of universal intellectual and cultural frameworks. Euclides da Cunha’s *Os Sertões*² is one of the most important achievements in terms of addressing these issues. He describes and analyzes the material and spiritual conditions which led to the dreadful extermination, by the troops of the federal government, of a sect of *sertanejos*—inhabitants of the semi-arid highlands—who gathered around Antonio Conselheiro, driven by misery, social injustice and millennialist hopes. Euclides da Cunha’s essay was a real “revelation” to the Brazilian intelligentsia. It’s immediate, widespread success suddenly unveiled a region and a way of life that was previously almost completely unknown, namely that of the ethnic “minority” of the so-called *sertanejo*, i.e. the descendants of a typically Brazilian ethnic mixture of Europeans, Africans and Natives who herded cattle in the vast backlands, totally isolated from the culture of the coastal regions. This revelation of a surprising, shocking and admirable “otherness” was meant to be the starting point for a new way of conceiving of Brazil and Brazilianess.

It was understood thus by Guimarães Rosa, whose oeuvre is a rare (if not unique) successor to Euclides da Cunha’s integration of Brazilian particularity

into a set of universally shared concepts and thoughts.³ Written for the cultured public in the urban centers—for a reader who is paradigmatically present as the erudite (but ever silent) *Senhor* with whom the *sertanejo*-hero of the novel, Riobaldo,⁴ mono-dialogues—*GSV* very successfully bridges the imaginary gap between the educated, intellectual world of Brazilian cities and the universe of the still remote, rural backlands.

Like Euclides' essay, *GSV* rapidly achieved wide admiration and a very select status within literary criticism, due to the extraordinarily subtle conciliation of modern and traditional artistic claims (modernist phono-semantic techniques within a well-constructed epic frame). All this has not sufficed, however, to ensure a large popularity for the novel among the wider Brazilian public. Abroad as well, the German, North American and French translations have not had the response one might expect for this extraordinary novel. To a large extent this is due to the difficulty of Rosa's rather "Joycean" artistic language, based, on the one hand, on the musicality of popular dialects, and, on the other hand, upon clusters and incrustations of foreign idioms, scholarly elaborated charades, and philosophical puns. This well-balanced mixture of "native" and foreign languages, of the naive and the erudite, of extreme simplicity and utter subtlety, of common sense and philosophical rigor, locates this novel about an almost medieval "quest" in a rather hybrid literary position: somewhere between lyrics and epics, or between traditional folk tales and the modern novels of Joyce and Proust. *GSV* thus represents a quite unusual artifact which merges different Brazilian and universal imaginaries into a harmonious epic structure constituted by the most heterogeneous of elements: local everyday language, tales and myths, reminiscences of Brazilian nineteenth-century essays, fragments of romantic and popular poetry, Platonic dialogues, Freudian free association and Heideggerian reflections on pre-Socratic thought.

Riobaldo's Quest for "Nothing" and "All"

Nonada—"nothing," "it's not worthwhile," "trifle"—is the first word which opens the unending mono-dialogue of the hero, Riobaldo, who, as an old man, looks back on his life as a *jagunço*, one of the warrior-herdsmen who take care of their landlord's cattle and transform themselves into faithful gunmen in times of electoral conflicts between the proprietors of the vast regions of the *sertão*—the semi-arid highlands extending between the North of Minas Gerais, Goiás, Bahia, Pernambuco up to Piauí. Riobaldo

retired to his *padrinho's* properties that he inherited after the death of Selorico Mendes, who revealed his fatherhood only by leaving all of his *fazendas* to his son. This now wealthy *sertanejo* keeps talking to an invisible and mute *senhor*,⁵ explaining the inexplicable, i.e., the ever-changing qualities of the *jagunço's* life and the disconcerting experience of the mutability of things. His first words: "No, it's nothing, what you thought of importance means nothing at all"—are deliberately presented as a fragment of the conversation-monologue which constitutes the novel. Within the overall context of the never-ending mono-dialogue, the trifling and unimportant word *nonada* will assume other meanings: it can also mean "within nothing," "lost in non-being," recognizing the contradictions of equivocal experience. Riobaldo talks about this kind of experience through words and sentences that are equally ambiguous and dense, images evoking clusters of multiple significance. The name of Riobaldo's adversary, Hermógenes, for example, brings up the difficult question of natural language in Plato's *Cratylus*, apart from the connotations concerning the ambiguous beings engendered by the god Hermes (hermo-geneos) and their unlawful way of life. A weasel-like animal, the *irara*, associated with the names of Hermógenes and of Diadorim (Riobaldo's beloved companion of arms), is, in Brazilian myths, an emblem of burning desire, whereas the *tamanduá* ("anteater") refers not only to a common animal of the *sertão*, but means in popular language "a hard-to-tackle moral problem." What seemed to be, at first sight, a simple description of local colors or particularities, turns out to be a philosophical reflection on good and evil and on the essence of human existence.

These subliminal layers of signification are very difficult to translate and require not only a careful, sensitive reading, but also scholarly introductions and commentaries,⁶ which have been rare, particularly abroad. At a first reading, Rosa's language seems to be extremely modern and experimental, combining free associative techniques with melopaic, phono-semantic and pictographical devices—evidence of his familiarity with the modern poetry of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. However, Rosa is also an admirer of Homer and Dante, Goethe, Mann and Musil, and that means that he appreciates thoroughly epic construction.⁷ Like Eliot's *The Waste Land*, *Grande Sertão: Veredas* is not a mere "fragment," but "rhythmical grumbling."⁸ It is an anguished reflection that de-constructs—systematically and in a logically coherent manner—the elements of novelistic and lyric traditions, rearranging them in a new, harmonious constellation. The essentially lyrical form of this

novel, which is particularly noticeable when read aloud, is like a poem that evokes the intense beauty and the poetic “volume” of popular oral discourse. It does not exclude a well-elaborated plot, which emerges gradually, after some fifty pages of deliberately “free” associative roaming.

The Evil and the “Mutative Matter”

The initial, almost musical theme of the novel is a rather solipsistic conversation on evil. The old *fazendeiro* Riobaldo talks incessantly about his former life as a *jagunço*, trying to extract the secret meaning from his chaotic and multifarious reminiscences. In the Brazilian context, the traditional European imagery of devilish evil has been enriched by African and Native beliefs, thus creating hybridity between disparate traditions—Native and African, Indo-European and Greek, Roman and Christian. Rosa exploits this heterogeneousness in brilliant ways, questioning, through the clashes of different imagery and irreconcilable modes of being or behavior, the consistency of what we call “good” and “evil.” After introducing an avalanche of chaotic—that Rosa calls “magmatic”—thoughts and images, the protagonist’s ruminations conjure the faint outlines of an epic plot: the reminiscences of the childhood and of the adventures of the young man who seeks shelter in several *jagunço* clans; his intense friendship with the enigmatic and beautiful Diadorim makes him endure more of the violence and bloodshed than he normally would be inclined to experience, transforming the passive follower into the chief leader of war for the allied clans. The overall setting is the (very faint) horizon of rather traditional Brazilian conflicts: the local landowner’s lack of conformance to the laws of the federal government and the almost fratricidal clashes between rival clans of landowners.⁹

With the wonderful narrative concision of a popular storyteller (*contador de casos*), Rosa outlines the features of his hero. Riobaldo was born as the son of “Bigri,” a name suggesting the mestizo condition of his mother who lives and works as an *agregada* for different landlords after having had this only child from a father who is unknown to the son. After Bigri’s death, the boy is received like a son by rich Selorico Mendes, who, as he finds out later, is his real father. This origin, revealed accidentally by a third person, does not act as a revelation to Riobaldo of his “real” status; rather, it perpetuates his status as a *jagunço*: a being who is eternally precarious and “improvised,” undefined and undefinable, always in-between the insider and the outsider,

rich and poor, the cultured and the illiterate, civilized and savage. Rosa presents this ambiguity, characteristic of the social reality of a *jagunço*, as the essence of the human condition, giving it metaphysical significance and depth. Every second word becomes a pun or a Freudian slip, sentences conceal charades, images are of anamorphic consistency, names and concepts turn out to be anagrams. The father-figure Zé Bebelo becomes a demonic *trickster* (anagram of *Belzebub*), the angelic-motherlike *Diadorim* slips into diabolic *Diá* (“devil”), whereas the devilish *Hermógenes* assumes the role of a mother-like, sheltering protector. This kind of slipperiness is the essence of the *sertão*, of life within quicksilver “mutative matter” (*matéria vertente, azougue maligno*, “quicksilver”). Rosa’s artistic language spreads out this theme on different metalevels: in subliminal discussions about the essence of storytelling and writing or of philosophical thinking within aesthetic concreteness. “The evil dog possesses me again,” he once wrote to Eduardo Bizzarri, “the limitlessness of [artistic] invention is an ever-present demon!”¹⁰

In order to keep “pure” poetry and aesthetic invention within formal limits, Rosa inscribes his fragmentary language experiments into an epic structure and a social practice of capital imaginary weight. Contrary to the tendencies of Brazilian modernism, he chooses for his novel the frame of popular storytelling (“*casos*,” “*causos*”) anchored in the powerful Brazilian modes of informal, conversational intercourse that tend to blur the limits between public and private life, between purely subjective intimacy and factual objectivity. A series of formal characteristics indicate that Rosa intended to prolong and re-elaborate in a novelistic form Euclides da Cunha’s half-dramatic, half-essayistic analysis of the geographical and anthropological specificity of the Brazilian highlands, thus adding to Euclides’ essay the dimensions of contemplative poetic thought.

Euro-Brazilian Transpositions

The well-read author who spoke seven idioms fluently and another half-dozen fairly well, loved to play language games by transposing lexical, syntactic and imaginary structures from one context to another. This may be a normal modern practice, but in Rosa’s case this art achieves an extraordinarily high level of integration with the specific Brazilian local colors; a naive reader may not even perceive that the system of proper names is almost always over-determined with foreign or erudite significations. Names and titles often seem to be thoroughly authentic, popular creations,

even though they carry intentionally foreign significations. An example is the title “Cara de Bronze,” alluding to the idiomatic English expression of “brazenfaced,” boldness, or the name of a love-song, “canção de Siruiz,” which, at first sight, seems to be one of the frequent reminiscences of medieval sagas, while “siruíz” is in fact the way a Romanian man addresses his woman-lover as “my well-beloved.”

The same thing happens with narrative structures, as exemplified in one of the most strikingly enchanting scenes of the novel: the encounter of the fourteen-year-old Riobaldo with a miraculously beautiful and courageous boy of his age, with whom he crosses the river São Francisco in a canoe. It inscribes the opening structure of a medieval epic—the crossing of the frontier between familiar, civilized life and adventure, the Percival theme—into the mold of Brazilian popular narrative. Rosa’s incomparable art lies in his way of making the reader absorb intertextual references without even noting their depth and their complexities. Their semantic tissue is developed within local narrative practices, like the *casos*—small stories about practical problems with moral or spiritual implications, like the medieval *exemplum*. Rearranging these miniature narratives like musical variations on a theme, Rosa achieves constellations of images and thoughts with a highly philosophical potential. Apparently naive questions about the devil, about deliberate or unconscious violence and gratuitous evil, start to crystallize alongside coherent conceptual axes, such as the theological and philosophical questions surrounding radical or relative evil. The insidious presentation of apparently naive and unconscious forms of sadism evoke in an absolutely indirect and secret way the recent contemporary experience of the banality of evil,¹¹ of the infinite slips and nuances which cause originally “good” intentions to slide into inexplicable malignity.

When Riobaldo tries to abandon the terrible violence he observes while living as a teacher in Zé Bebelo’s clan, he re-encounters the marvelous boy of his childhood, Reinaldo-Diadorim, who introduces him to the clan leaders Joca Ramiro, Medeiro Vaz and Hermógenes. Fleeing their war, he subsequently becomes actively involved in the *jagunços’* warfare. Diadorim’s fascinating aura makes Riobaldo remain, adopting the habits of violence and abjection that he would normally have rejected. At the same time, however, the narrative investigation of the past shows that these customs, apparently against his free will and moral convictions, are based on the logic of subliminal needs and desires, which subvert and usurp the structures of

intentional thought, of communicative language and of action. At this level of deep structures, seemingly opposed figures such as beautiful Diadorim and ugly, disgusting Hermógenes—the traitor and assassin of Joca Ramiro—become chiasmic “doublets.” Under the spell of Diadorim’s inexplicable charm, Riobaldo becomes more and more deeply enmeshed with the *jagunço*’s habits and, although the aggravating reproduction of hostilities becomes progressively senseless and abhorred by him, he is unable to separate himself from his friend. By and by, he adopts—against his own will—Diadorim’s request to assume the leadership position in the fight against the traitor Hermógenes. This campaign is marked by almost carnivalesque, intuitive gestures and ideas, extravagant and almost mad behaviors, eccentric and seemingly unrealizable projects. These entirely unreasonable, deviant and strangely instinctive steps finally lead to the long-desired confrontation with the enemy. The two final battles repeat the reversive structure of the novel (and of life): the first one ends in heroic victory. During the second one, however, Riobaldo experiences again—and in a most awful and tragic way—his passive dependence on infinite, half-concealed mechanisms whose lawful interlocking become perceptible only *ex post facto*, after the tragic occurrences. Waiting for the second battle, invincible Riobaldo-Urutu Branco (“White Snake”) is possessed by a desire for rest and refreshment. Giving way to a tendency concealed in the etymology of his first name—Riobaldo is linked to Dante’s *baldanza*, lazy, passive enjoyment—, he is surprised by the enemy’s attack, loses control of the battle and watches, in a state of feverish alienation, the mortal single combat Diadorim forces on Hermógenes. Wailing over his friend’s corpse, he discovers a woman’s body, and Hermógenes’ wife reveals to him that this girl-warrior was Joca Ramiro’s daughter Deodorina.

Riobaldo’s grumbling is provoked by these enigmatic reversals of the purely apparant and “mutative” value of all things or experiences. They manifest themselves through surprising changes that reveal that things are entirely different from what we thought them to be; nevertheless, their reversal makes us perceive that we might have recognized their real significance had we been able to interlock the diverse “insignificant” details involving their appearance.

The gap between finite and infinite comprehension is what provokes the narrator’s grumbling: telling the story of the *Grande Sertão* is an effort to re-articulate “quicksilvery” reality, shaping and giving form to the “devilish”

ambiguities of experience. Like Plato's *Cratylus*, Riobaldo tries to reconstruct possible links which may (or may not) give us the idea that even utter contingency may rest on firm universal laws. He sums up the precarious results of his grumbling in a paradoxical formula, saying that the devil—just like the *sertão*—does not exist... even though both always tend to reappear.

Notes

¹ First published in 1959-60; translation published as *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*.

² First published in 1902.

³ Lourenço 19-24. The critic stresses the importance of Rosa's avoiding certain modernistic tendencies and his successful integration of modern realism into universal thought and metaphysical claims.

⁴ The novel's setting is based on a rather speculative (or mystic or metaphysical) concept of dialogue—such as Blanchot's *L'Entretien Infini*—for whom “distance, interval and recognition of otherness” are the fundamental characteristics of dialogue. Within this framework, there is no problem for the “dialogue” taking place between the two terms of the subject's own otherness (present, in the novel, as Riobaldo-jagunço and as Riobaldo-storyteller). In Freudian terms, one could say that otherness is “introjected.”

⁵ This *Senhor* may be his own cultured, educated self or *the Senhor*—“God,” the ideal of metaphysical Order.

⁶ Brazilian secondary literature has mainly studied the socio-economic and political context of the novel and the importance of “oral discourse” in Rosa's art, as it can be seen in well-known essays by Antonio Candido, Luiz Costa Lima, Walnice Nogueira Galvão, Bento Prado Jr., David Arrigucci Jr. The role of Brazilian folklore in Rosa's work has been analyzed, for instance, by Leonardo Arroio. For the metaphysical dimension and the philosophical contexts privileged by the author, see Rosenfield, *Os Descaminhos do Demo*. Other approaches mix Rosa's “metaphysics” with hermeticism and esotericism.

⁷ We are currently preparing a detailed study of the Brazilian and universal intertextuality in Rosa's work for a forthcoming book: *The Work of Guimarães Rosa: An Introduction*.

⁸ That was the way in which Eliot defined *The Waste Land*. See Rosenfield, “Poesia em Tempo de Prosa” 144.

⁹ For these anthropological aspects, see Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões* (1902) and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's *Raízes do Brasil* (1936).

¹⁰ João Guimarães Rosa, *Correspondência com Edoardo Bizzarri* 67-8.

¹¹ Rosa, who saved several lives while he worked as a diplomat at the Brazilian Embassy in Hamburg during the Nazi regime, may have transposed Hannah Arendt's idea of “the banality of evil.”

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