

## The Case of Rubem Fonseca—The Search for Reality

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Don't say armpit. *Say axilla.*

Fonseca, 1973, 17.

If reality could establish direct contact with our conscious mind, if we could communicate immediately with things and with ourselves, art would probably be useless, or rather, we would all be artists.

Fonseca, 1973, 99.

There are more than enough reasons to highlight the importance of Rubem Fonseca (1925) within contemporary Brazilian literature. Fonseca is central to the trajectory of contemporary prose, with 18 titles ranging from novels to collections of short stories. However, it is not the purpose of this essay to praise the excellence of the writer's oeuvre, because national critics have already taken care of this task. It is more important, rather, to understand his innovative contribution to the mainstream trends of Brazilian literature. Among critics, there is a consensus that Fonseca has consolidated in prose the urban tendencies of the last three decades and thus represents the literary emergence of the literature of a modern, metropolitan Brazil. It is also usually agreed that the portrait of a new urban reality, as painted by Fonseca, privileges a marginal dimension of both violence and crime that allegorically represents a form of political resistance against the authoritarian regime that came to power after the "Revolution of 1964."<sup>1</sup>

In the 1970s, there were three tendencies that aligned literary approaches with the sociopolitical situation of the time. First, there was a new prose

addressing the theme of struggle against both the military regime and clandestine lives, with titles such as *A Casa de Vidro* by Ivan Angelo (1979), *O Calor das Coisas* by Nélide Piñon (1980) and *Os Carbonários* by Alfredo Sirkis (1981).<sup>2</sup> The second tendency that was becoming popular was documentary realism, inspired by press reports which denounced the repressive violence of the police and which avoided the censorship imposed on newspapers by using literature as the medium. This was exemplified by *Pixote, a Lei do Mais Fraco* and *Lúcio Flávio: Passageiro da Agonia* by José Louzeiro, or *A República dos Assassinos* (1976) by Aguinaldo Silva. The third trend has been called “brutalism” by Alfredo Bosi.<sup>3</sup> It had already exploded in 1963 with Rubem Fonseca’s short story collection, *Os Prisioneiros*.

“Brutalism” was characterized thematically by descriptions and recreations of social violence among outlaws, prostitutes, bouncers, corrupt policemen and tramps. Without making any concessions to a literary commitment, Fonseca created his own style, which was succinct, direct, and communicative. His themes focused on the Rio underworld, by appropriating not only its stories and tragedies, but also its colloquial language, which, in turn, became innovative within Fonseca’s “marginal realism.” Other writers—such as Ignácio Loyola Brandão, Roberto Drummond and, later, Sérgio Sant’Anna, Caio Fernando Abreu, as well as João Gilberto Noll—followed in the footsteps of both Fonseca and his friend, precursor and twin soul, the Paraná-born writer, Dalton Trevisan, by exposing a “human rawness” hitherto unseen in Brazilian literature.

Besides representing a realist element within an urban literature, it would seem that the exploration of violence also initiated a search for the renewal of national prose. City life, mainly the marginal life of *bas-fond*, had become a new backdrop for revitalizing literary realism. Violence was an element that was extremely difficult to represent, and this was, in turn, a challenge for writers’ poetic efforts. The literature of the last decades has been drawing a new image, both of urban reality and of the city, as a symbolic and socio-cultural space, attempting to overcome the limitations of either a memorial or documentary realism which, despite the fact that it has followed socio-cultural changes, has been unable to depict the city as a radically new condition for historical experience. In the prose of the 1960s and 1970s, the complex reality of the large Brazilian metropolis offers a new setting for the narrative of an emergent generation. The city as such no longer represents a universe ruled by justice and rationality, but rather a divided reality; the

symbolic division, which was formerly placed between “country” and “city,” is now placed between “official city” and “marginal city.”<sup>4</sup>

For the majority of critics and for certain state censors,<sup>5</sup> the revelation of the violent passions and of the de-humanization of urban life contained an implicit denouncement of the brutal reality under a repressive political regime. Not without reason, they perceived in Fonseca’s literature an implicit argument in favor of violence, inciting violent revolts against an illegitimate regime. It was like saying that if social reality is violent and self-destructive, it is only a consequence of a wider violence deriving from the system itself, which, in turn, ends up legitimizing social violence, provided that this same violence is directed against the powerful when guided in a politically correct way.

However, seen from another point of view, this literature represented an attempt to comprehend both an excluding social reality of the time and the urban middle-class reaction against growing social inequalities, or rather armed robberies, kidnappings and murders. In this sense, the fictionalization of the criminal world can be understood in terms of a re-symbolization of the violent reality deriving from social confrontations in the underworld of the big cities. The literary re-creation of a coarse, colloquial language, unknown to the reading public, the large majority of whom were middle class, represented a will to overcome the barriers of social communication; at the same time, it gave literary language itself a new vitality in order to be able to get out of the deadlock of traditional realism vis-à-vis modern urban reality. Fonseca’s prose created a successful symbiosis between, on the one hand, a literature with a clear political-social concern, and on the other, an artistic search for an expression which could solve representative impasses which were noticeable in historical and regional realism.

In “Intestino Grosso,” the final short story of *Feliz Ano Novo* (1975), the plot is built by means of an interview with a writer who has been accused of being “pornographic,” hinting that the character may be the author’s own alter ego. Running the risk of being taken in by Fonseca’s fictional game, it is relevant to consider some of the character’s opinions as keys to an understanding of the author’s oeuvre. To begin with, the writer reports how, at the beginning of his career, he was harmed by the expectations of the publishers, critics and newspaper’s literary supplements, for they all insisted that he “write like Machado de Assis.” For someone who “lived in a block of apartments in the center of town,” listening to the “noise of motorcar engines,” this did not make much sense. Next, the critique of the character-

oriented Brazilian literary tradition manifests itself in opposition to both Naturalism and Historical Realism, as well as to folklore-oriented Regionalism. These tendencies are rejected as inadequate vis-à-vis the new urban experience, paving the way for the sordid life stories of the marginal underworlds that are excluded from the large metropolis. Accused of being a pornographic writer, the interviewed author challenges this criticism by admitting positively that his books are “peopled by toothless destitutes” (1994, 461). Thus, the notion of pornography—fiercely defended by the character in order to reject the censors’ favorite justification—does not correspond to a traditional definition. Instead of identifying his literature as within the characteristics inherent to the genre, the author-character claims that “pornography” is that literature which seeks a new expressive economy of literary language, by revealing both forbidden and excluded themes. According to him, the problem with the present-day naturalist and realist novel is that it no longer offers a representation of reality that is capable of arousing the reader’s emotions. This happens, in the first place, because of a lack of thematic focus in which “typical landscapes,” which used to serve as a backdrop for historical narratives, have long moved away from the new urban reality within which the majority of the population lives. Secondly, it means that the conventional representational language of realism, when used as a tool for fictional identification, no longer reflects reality, nor is capable of provoking an affective and sensual effect equal to contemporary passions and emotions.

According to the fictional author, this loss of expressive force has been affecting literature’s ability to convey the symbolic vis-à-vis a new reality. Despite the fact that realism is still directed at the historical world and still seeks to maintain an imitative fidelity, it has ceased to extract valuable plots from social themes due to the absence of a literary language that could express living experience. Given this impotence, one option for contemporary authors is to choose those themes and objects that are excluded and banned from their culture. Such themes focus not only on sex—no longer branded with the same cultural stigma today—, but also misery, violence, madness and death.

Confronted with forbidden themes, literary language may recover an important cultural role by confronting, in an indirect way, an exclusionary discursive regime that dominates Brazilian society and which, materially, perpetuates itself through modes of communication, cybernetic structures

and other ideological apparatuses. When in search of an expressive innovation, literature confronts the limits of representation; it manages to express, in the defeat of transgression, the most concrete form of its own prohibition. In this way, the struggle takes place within language, swinging between subversive literature and affirmative discourses, whose main objective is to define what deserves to be regarded as real or otherwise. At the core of literary creation, the poetic aims to create, fictionally, certain "effects" of reality through more violent emotions, and not to search for illusive pleasures. For the author-character this means searching for a "real four-letter word," because only the four-letter word can create the right shock. For him the four-letter word is different from the well-behaved word. The latter derives from the expression of human shame as confronted with its own nakedness and animal nature. He claims that "[m]etaphors appeared so that our forefathers did not have to say 'fuck,'"<sup>6</sup> at the same time highlighting the "word" as the focal point of artistic struggle with society.

It may seem useless to attempt this type of scandalous effect, but it is also part of an old tradition whose origin may have a significant kinship with the modern notion of literature. Michel Foucault claimed, in 1963, that the real precursors of modern literature included the English gothic novel and the work of the Marquis de Sade. The French philosopher argued that the gothic novel, which soon gave rise to fantasy in literature, as well as the intriguing work of de Sade, which was in its own way also a type of gothic literature, constitute the first time that there was a conscious effort by writers to create a sensorial effect beyond the message that the narrative could convey to the reader.<sup>7</sup> Fear, terror, restlessness and excitement are no more than a sampling of the feelings that a text could provoke. Literature thus went beyond a means of representing realities within conventional classic molds by creating its own receptive reality.<sup>8</sup> The "new" in modern literature, as seen in the examples provided by Foucault, meant that the sensory effect here did not necessarily corroborate the content of the message. It did, however, indicate a limit for this content, while it pointed towards a meaning beyond itself, or rather towards non-meaning. Within this limit, the language of modern literature faced its opposite, its unnamable or its ineffable.

Fonseca's first novel, *O Caso Morel* (1973), represents a clear example of the author's literary project as well as a relative exception. In harmony with the textual and discursive criticism of the 1970s, the novel appears exceptional as a formal experiment which mixes various fragments of genres



such as the novel, the diary, the police report, apocryphal citations, an autopsy report, and letters, to name a few. Within a pseudo-academic metadiscussion of how to represent reality,<sup>9</sup> the plot develops as a search for the truth about Joana's death (or Heloisa's), the lover of Morel, and Morel himself, who is the main narrator and who is accused of murder. In Fonseca's later novels, this type of intertextual staging is not as common.<sup>10</sup> But here narration retains a double articulation; on the one hand, the narration of a crime, and on the other, the story of the future of narration. Thus, for the narrator and main character, the musician-painter-photographer Paul Morel (or Morais), writing serves as an explicit means of remembering the facts that led to Joana's death, a kind of Freudian *Durcharbeitung* ("working-through"), in which the narrator tries to relive those facts through the artistic process of creation. In this way, the words in the narrator's conscience seek their origin within an enigma which, albeit articulated as the conventional secret of the detective genre—i.e., who's done it—hides a more fundamental enigma about the relationship between writing and events. During the narrator's search, the facts around Joana's death are revealed. However, at the same time, writing appears to be, for the narrator, the means by which reality emerges, an event that embodies that which is real and can be felt. As a narrative, the novel reconstructs events through an immersion in Morel's occulted memory. From the point of view of reading, events emerge between various textual explanations in a growing intertwining of words and things. The real enigma is conveyed as an insurmountable distance that, despite the characters' and the readers' efforts, remains undiluted, like the silence of the victim Joana. The key question about what really happened between Morel and Joana remains unanswered.

In a first version, Morel writes:

We spent the afternoon drinking, in silence. Afterwards we went out and Joana lay down on the sand. We gazed at the sunset. Afterwards, I kicked Joana, as if she were an empty tin can.

"You see what you've made me do?"

She didn't answer.

"I hate cruelty," I said, almost in tears.

Joana opened her eyes and calmly looked at the sky. Her mouth was stained with blood but she did not appear to be in pain.

"I never want to see you again," I said.

I went home. (1973, 111)

Soon after this, a second version appears:

I kicked Joana. She laughed. I kept on kicking her while she laughed and I looked at the sunset. It was a beautiful thing, indescribable.

Joana stopped laughing. (1973, 113)

The account comes to an end without easing the doubt about what really happened on that day. Whether Joana died as a consequence of Morel's kicking; whether Francisco, her caring admirer, or the poor couple of caretakers, who had hidden her body, were responsible for her death. Who is guilty of Joana's death if she seemed to search for it and provoke it in sadomasochist rituals?

The novel includes a typical characteristic of Fonseca's detective novels, that of the enigma without resolution, without hermeneutic relief for the reader. In the detective's frustrated search, Fonseca copies a *noir* feature from the *Maltese Falcon*, but also draws attention to the appearance of reality vis-à-vis the meaning of language. With the same impetus as Morel, who searches for an affective communication with an alienated world, a search that culminates in the explicit violence against Joana, the novel tries to penetrate palpable reality by taking the "word" to the verge of an eclipse in the silence of death. The unnamable and incommunicable facts thus transpire in the text like the underside of an expression that is impossible to represent.

In conclusion, the thematic option for violence in Fonseca's prose may be understood as reflecting an expressive search aimed at innovating traditional literary languages. Fonseca has been labeled a "post-modern" author due to the fact that, for example, the presence of media reality can be detected in his characters' conscience. However, Fonseca's literature should not be identified as a skeptical de-stabilization of reality and of the meaning of reality. The main objective of his prose appears to be the search for a language or for a literary expression that is adequate to urban reality vis-à-vis the impotence of historical realism, on one side, and modernist experience on the other. The prose is best described as *neo-realist*, with the safeguard that the labels neo-, hyper- or trans-realism qualify his work in a singular manner within the thematic perspective of violence. Historical realism searched for an "illusion of reality" by means of direct mimesis, which was, in turn, distinct from

conventionally common language, or, in Barthes' words, an "effect of reality."<sup>11</sup> Fonseca's *realism* resides in the sensorial concreteness of his language, which appears, in turn, to contain the direct experience of the event—an "affect of reality"—in which the representation of violence becomes the violence of representation.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The "Revolução de 64" was the name received by a military coup d'état which ousted democratically elected president João Goulart and led to the military control of Brazil which lasted for 20 years. (Translator's note)

<sup>2</sup> This was a literary genre that resembled autobiographical memoirs, along the same lines as *O Que é Isso Companheiro?* (1981), by Fernando Gabeira.

<sup>3</sup> Bosi 18.

<sup>4</sup> The idea of a divided city underpins Brazilian urban sociology, especially in the books by Carvalho (1994) and Ventura (1994).

<sup>5</sup> In 1976, Fonseca's short-story collection *Feliz Ano Novo* was confiscated by state censors for "offending public morals." The writer appealed the decision, but in 1980 the Court of Appeals upheld the sentence, claiming that the book "incited violence." It was only in 1988 that the Courts decided to judge in favor of the writer, thus allowing the reprinting of the book, as well as granting him indemnity for material losses.

<sup>6</sup> "Certain anthropologists attribute these restrictions on the so-called four-letter word to the ancestral taboo of incest. Philosophers claim that what disturbs and alarms are not events themselves, but human beings' own opinions and fantasies about them. This is the case because human beings live in a symbolic universe, which contains language, myth, art, religion as varied threads which weave the close web of human experience." Fonseca, *Contos Reunidos* 463-4.

<sup>7</sup> See Foucault, "Language to Infinity;" essay originally published in 1963 in *Tel Quel*.

<sup>8</sup> This literary function has obviously been acknowledged since Antiquity. For example, in the Aristotelian notion of *catharsis* in Greek tragedy, the ritualistic and symbolic role of drama is emphasized, always in close connection with the universality of plot, or rather, content.

<sup>9</sup> "Thanks for the encouragement. We have, therefore, what can be called the reality of image on one side, and the reality of *l'image*, on the other" (163).

<sup>10</sup> Despite a certain generic experimentation in the short stories "Lúcia McCartney" and "Romance Negro."

<sup>11</sup> Barthes explains the description of apparently insignificant details in the fiction of Balzac as a kind of mimetic redundancy which only significance is that "this is real." See Barthes, "L'Effet de Reel."

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